

## [Gift economies in a context of welfare state crisis: new infrastructures of solidarity between strangers?](#)

Dr Ellie Jupp *ISRF Political Economy Fellow 2021-22*

*NOTE: The Political Economy Fellowship application form may have been updated since this proposal was submitted.*

### **Abstract**

The project seeks to understand a rapidly growing phenomenon: localised gifting practices, both online and face to face, that enable sharing of food, clothes, hygiene products and other goods between strangers in need. At the same time, in a context of austerity, there seems to be a crisis in the underlying politics and ethics of the welfare state, and solidarity within communities seems to be under threat. In order to consider these issues together, this project will break with existing ways to conceptualise gifting practices within social sciences, and frame them instead as experiments in collective welfare, solidarity and care. Drawing inspiration from Titmuss (1970), a study that proposed that welfare states should be underpinned by an understanding of gift economies between strangers, the project will bring these contemporary case studies of gifting into dialogue with debates about how we provide welfare for society at a far wider scale.

The project will involve ethnography and interviews of gifting practices in two disadvantaged areas of the UK (East Kent, and Stoke-on-Trent), in order to understand whether new 'infrastructures of solidarity' are emerging. Ethnographic research will focus on the affective, material and interpersonal qualities of these infrastructures, in terms of both potentials and problematics. Interviews will enable the production of narratives about involvement in gifting. Particular attention will be paid to the role of mediators and moderators of gift-giving between strangers, and how far trust and solidarity is generated. Participants' experiences in these practices will be brought into dialogue with debates about welfare provisioning, through an innovative participatory workshop.

Overall, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, the project will open up new ways of thinking about both gifting infrastructures and the future of collective welfare.

## **The Research Idea** *The innovative thesis of the project*

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## **Background** *Current research reference points and their limitations*

There has been a proliferation of localised gifting practices in the UK, taking place in online and offline spaces including digital sharing platforms around food or clothes, cafes and restaurants asking customers to 'pay forward' meals for those that need them, to food, hygiene and 'period poverty' initiatives. Whilst there is an emergent body of research on a number of specific practices (especially food banking, Caplan 2017, Gall 2017, Strong 2018, Williams et al 2016), research has not yet brought these practices

together, nor employed an 'infrastructure' perspective, as combining material, digital, ethical, interpersonal and emotional dynamics.

Conceptually, existing research has framed these practices as either forms of 'diverse economies' (Gibson-Graham 2008), linked to notions of circular or sharing economies (Ince and Hall 2017, Holmes 2018) that provide alternatives to unsustainable capitalism, or they have been framed as existing in the shadows of the welfare state – forms of crisis or 'meanwhile' provisioning as conventional welfare recedes (Cloke et al 2017).

This project begins from a new conceptual starting point, framing these practices as potentially representing 'diverse welfare economies' that can be thought of as prefigurative practices or infrastructures (Cooper 2017) involving questions of care, ethics, solidarity and relationality between both 'near' and 'distant' strangers. Such a perspective will enable detailed empirical data from the case studies to be brought into dialogue with ethical and political questions about solidarity between strangers, inspired by Titmuss (1970), and drawing on theories of gifting from anthropology and economics.

**The Focus** *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

Against a background of sustained austerity cuts to the welfare state (Hastings et al 2015), there is anxiety about a collapse of solidarity within communities in UK, especially linked to rising anti-immigration sentiments (Virdee and McGeever 2018). There are also concerns about the failures of state bureaucracy to engage citizens on a human level, including a loss of trust (Lavalette 2017). The ethical and political basis of the welfare state therefore seems to be in crisis (Taylor-Gooby 2016).

At the same time, the last decade has also seen a proliferation of community sharing networks and forms of collective provisioning in the UK and elsewhere, based on care, reciprocity and generosity. The extent and reach of these initiatives is not yet known, especially in deprived areas.

The project will bring together these concerns, researching in two disadvantaged areas of the UK, to address the following:

- a) What is the extent and reach of local gifting infrastructures? What do they provide, to whom, and what needs are being met?

b) What are the interpersonal, material, ethical and political qualities of these sharing infrastructures? How is trust and reciprocity between 'close' and 'distant' strangers negotiated? What is the role of mediators and moderators?

c) What can these emergent networks contribute to debates about the future of the local and national welfare state? Can we understand these networks as 'infrastructures of solidarity'? What can the wider welfare state learn from these 'diverse welfare economies', in terms of the practices, ethics and politics of welfare?

**Theory & Methodology** *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at, and how different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry – specific methodological examples are often helpful for non-specialist readers*

By framing localised gifting economies as pre-figurative experiments in collective care and welfare, the central innovations of the project will be to develop notions of 'diverse welfare economies' and 'infrastructures of solidarity', foregrounding gifting as potentially generating ethical and political orientations towards strangers, as well as providing goods and services in alternative ways. This will involve drawing on social science research on 'infrastructures' as affective, digital, material resources and networks (Berlant 2016, Larkin 2013) and therefore attending to diverse qualities of such practices together.

The innovative focus on gifting, inspired by Titmuss (1970), will enable diverse theoretical perspectives on gifting economies, especially from anthropology (Mauss 1924, Rozakou 2016) and wider social sciences on gift giving (eg Schrift 1997, Komter 2005, 2007, Elder-Vass 2015, 2016, Romele and Severo 2016) to be brought to the centre of discussions about the welfare state. This body of work demonstrates both the social (and economic) complexity of gift-giving. Gifting can generate hierarchical webs of obligation, inequality and reciprocity, but also potentially community and solidarity between strangers (Arampatzi 2017, Gomez-Gorrindo et al, 2019, Rozakou, 2016). The role of the mediators and moderators of gift giving between strangers is a point of particular interest (Alborough 2019), both in online and face-to-face spaces.

Innovative qualitative methods of research and analysis will be employed in order to generate the conceptual innovation planned. To access the experiential qualities of gifting infrastructures, the project will involve periods of ethnography to allow for mapping and immersion in the affective, material and inter-personal dynamics of sharing practices. This will include spending time in online and face-to-face spaces and

participating as appropriate. Unstructured narrative interviews will then be undertaken with a sample of those involved in gifting practices in different ways. This will develop an innovative method I previously used to explore community activism (see Jupp 2020, forthcoming) that produces participant 'stories', enabling participants to narrate their motivations, experiences and trajectories of involvement in gifting infrastructures.

A selection of these narratives will then be used within an innovative 'structured dialogue' workshop (Labonte, 2011) in order to bring experiences of gifting infrastructures into direct dialogue with those involved in social policy and welfare state research and policy design, and co-produce new knowledge. Structured dialogue involves the presentation of a narrative and then a form of collaborative analysis from workshop participants on key themes and questions raised by the analysis. Researchers and policy makers engaged with questions of welfare state futures will be invited and a facilitator from a policy organisation will be involved in this workshop to ensure its success. The workshop itself, as well as the narratives and ethnographic data, will form the basis of my analysis. This will draw on research themes and questions around 'infrastructures of solidarity' and 'diverse welfare economies', using the geographic, social policy, anthropological and economics literatures discussed above, as well as animated by the concerns of the Titmuss study (1970).

**Work Plan** *How the work will be organised over the award period and what outputs are intended.*

Months 1: The first phase will involve an interdisciplinary literature review focusing on themes of gift exchange; circular and sharing economies and moral economies.

Months 2-7: Initially, fieldwork will involve scoping gifting practices and infrastructures in two post-industrial areas with significant deprivation in the population. These are firstly, East Kent in the South East of England, focusing on two adjoining districts -Thanet and Dover. These areas have a mix of urban, coastal and rural communities. Current research means I am already aware of some of the provisioning organisations in the locality. Secondly, Stoke-on-Trent is a city in the Midlands where I have already undertaken two rounds on the changing landscape of welfare and austerity, in 2004-5 and 2012-13. It comprises a dispersed urban area with distinct towns. Following a period of ethnographic immersion in gifting infrastructures, ten-twelve key individuals will be selected in each area for interviews, chosen for varying social characteristics (eg

age, gender, ethnicity), but also different positions within gifting infrastructures (eg moderator, participants).

Months 8-9: Initial analysis will be followed by a workshop on 'Revisiting the Gift Relationship': what can contemporary gifting communities tell us about social policy today?' involving policy-makers and researchers as well as research participants. Four research participants will be chosen to present their 'stories' to workshop participants which will then be discussed via a 'structured dialogue' approach, bringing everyday lives and experience into dialogue with researchers and decision makers. Academic outputs will then be produced

**Outcome** *What further steps and what longer-term outcome are envisaged.*

The project will allow me to bring my expertise on care, emotions and affect in community action and activism across human geography and social policy disciplines into dialogue with conceptual and theoretical approaches from anthropology and wider social sciences, and make ambitious contributions to debates about the future of the welfare state.

The data produced will illuminate the practices of gifting within disadvantaged communities, and contribute to a longitudinal data set about welfare and communities in each locality.

The 'structured dialogue' workshop will enable the co-production of knowledge between those active in such communities and policy-makers and researchers. With participants' permission, this event will be recorded and discussions disseminated to further audiences via the University of Kent website.

In terms of academic outcomes, the research will form the basis of two high impact journal articles, one in a social policy journal, setting out the case for the importance of gifting economies to the ethics and politics of the welfare state. The other will be in an economic geography journal, to make the case for a focus on the political and ethical implications of 'diverse welfare economies'. These papers will be presented at relevant international academic conferences.

Via such dissemination and the project workshop, a wider network of researchers with an interest in this field will have been developed, with whom I will collaborate on a

larger grant examining gifting economies in other welfare states experiencing similar political and economic challenges to the UK, either to ESRC or ERC.

**Ethics Statement** *Any measures required for ethical conduct of the research.*

My approach to ethics will be informed by my considerable previous experiences of researching in disadvantaged communities. The detailed methods will be designed to ensure that involvement in research is based on informed consent, and that the rights, safety, dignity and wellbeing of participants is respected at all times. I am aware that some participants in the gifting practices may be vulnerable in terms of poverty and related disadvantage. I will ensure that their involvement in the research is not harmful and they are not in any way compelled to take part. Shopping vouchers will be offered to those participating in interviews. During the scoping stage of the fieldwork I will begin to discuss ethical issues with participants, as approaches to consent and confidentiality will vary depending on the different gifting practices and spaces. In relation to online platforms which pose particular ethical challenges, I will draw on new guidelines such as the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice in relation to Digital Research. In relation to the 'structured dialogue' workshop I will work to ensure that participants are supported to take part in ways that are appropriate. Ethical review and approval will be sought from the Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics Advisory Group at the University of Kent. Research Ethics Advisory Groups (REAGs) are convened in accordance with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics. All research, staff or student, funded or unfunded, that involves human participants, their tissue or data must undergo ethical review by a REAG before initiation