

## Lived Experiences of Childbearing in Contemporary Austerity: Advancing Feminist, Geographical and Political Economy Approaches

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

### **Abstract**

Childbearing in austerity represents a considerable concern in contemporary Europe. The demographic and generational composition of society has huge implications for economic productivity, human rights, wellbeing, migration and social infrastructure. Recent reports from Eurostat (2013), European Commission (2013) and Eurofound (2014) identify an accelerated drop in birth rates across Europe following the Global Financial Crisis (2008-2010), especially in countries where austerity policies have been vigorously imposed, such as the UK. Despite these significant changes to contemporary family life, there remains a dearth of in-depth empirical research that investigates lived experiences of childbearing in presently austere times.

This innovative, interdisciplinary scoping study aims to address this very issue, by applying feminist concepts of intersectionality - currently underdeveloped within geography and political economy (Hopkins 2017, Valentine 2007) - to account for the complexity of social and economic factors in decision-making processes around reproduction (Colen 1995). The project also presents methodological innovation, by experimenting with oral history methods and asking participants to reflect not only on their lives to date but also into the future, to unpack lived realities of contemporary austerity.

I will undertake thirty 'oral history and future' interviews with individuals aged 20-45 living in North-East England; an area significantly impacted by austerity policies (Hastings et al. 2015) and with the UK's lowest birth rates (ONS 2017). By actively engaging in real-life experiences of socio-economic barriers, findings are anticipated to provide fresh insights about the relationship between childbearing and austerity. Bringing together feminist intersectional theory and geographical political economy, and experimenting with oral history methods, the project has transformative potential for interdisciplinary understandings and real-world applications concerning socio-spatial economic inequalities. As such, the project realises many aims of the ISRF, by

creating new conversations between theoretical and methodological approaches and disciplines, to address an important and complex contemporary issue.

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

Concerns about childbearing in austerity strike at the heart of contemporary political economy, uncovering the role of the state, political regimes and economic upheaval in the lives of citizens. With a correlation observed between fertility and austere economic policies, it also speaks to three key tenets in feminist theory: the place of government in family life, gender relations within households and society, and politics of the body and reproduction (Silvey 2012). Using intersectional feminist theory to deconstruct this complicated subject is therefore befitting, since it identifies how social positions (e.g. class, gender, race, generation) intersect to shape socio-economic inequalities (Colen 1995).

To advance critical scholarship in this field, I propose an in-depth qualitative study, since most research to date acknowledges this as a demographic trend using statistic data, on a national or regional rather than personal scale (Bettio et al. 2013). There is also limited research within geography concerning the socio-economics of childbearing, where the focus remains on life-courses, pregnancy and parenthood (Bailey 2009). Going beyond statistical data, the research asks: how and why does austerity impact on decisions to have children, and with what repercussions at the personal and familial scale?

This project illustrates my commitment to innovating with interdisciplinary concepts and techniques to understand how socio-economic processes are shaped by gender relations, lived experience and social difference. It represents a shift in my conceptual focus and methods, having developed from the 'Everyday Austerity' project which explored everyday life in austerity in Greater Manchester, UK (Hall 2017).

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

Recent statistical data from a host of European-wide policy and research organisations identify an accelerated drop in birth rates across Europe since the 2008-2010 Global Financial Crisis, with stark results in countries where austerity policies have been widely imposed (see Eurostat 2013, European Commission 2013, Eurofound 2014). These reports also reveal that some countries, such as the UK, are simultaneously experiencing

historically low marriage rates, and unprecedented numbers of young people living at home.

Despite these significant changes to everyday family life, there remains a dearth of in-depth empirical research investigating lived experiences of childbearing in contemporary austerity, and resulting socio-spatial inequalities. While it is suggested that this sharp drop in birth rates is a direct result of austerity (Bettio et al. 2013) - sometimes referred to as 'stratified reproduction' (Colen 1995) - such analysis is superficial, does not consider lived experiences and voices, and may only reflect correlation rather than causation. A detailed empirical study will certainly reveal more complex reasons for this apparent relationship.

There are some examples of research on fertility and economic crises, though most are historical (Becker 1960), associated with a qualitative turn in fertility studies, or lack empirical research (Sobotka et al. 2010). Moreover, there is a deficiency of research concerning childbearing in the current period of austerity - which is ostensibly different from previous periods, couched in a credit boom and crisis, not post-wartime (Hall 2017) - and especially research that adopts an intersectional analysis (Bassel and Emejulu 2017, Hall et al. 2017).

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

The research is founded on the core aim to invigorate, innovate and extend current scholarship on childbearing in austerity, bringing together and experimenting with interdisciplinary theories and methods. Fleshing out statistical data using in-depth empirics, the project actively engages with real-life experiences of childbearing in austerity. Going beyond numbers, it investigates the multi-scalar and very real intersectionalities, negotiations and impacts of austerity on childbearing. Furthermore, the project represents an important statement that correlation is not causation; multiple factors may lead to a decrease in birth rates in austerity, underlined by complex social and spatial processes and intersectional issues.

Bringing together feminist intersectional theory with geographical political economy, and innovating with oral history techniques, has transformative potential for understandings and real-world applications concerning socio-spatial economic inequalities, uniting key thinking across the social sciences and humanities. The impact

of austerity on childbearing is a current issue affecting the lives of many, particularly women and those belonging to marginalised groups most heavily impacted by austerity (Bassel and Emejulu 2017, Hall 2016, Hall et al. 2017).

Communities and marginalised groups in the UK have been significantly and adversely affected by austerity policies (Person and Elson 2015), and the recent EU referendum result has created further socio-economic and political instability (Team Future et al. 2017). North East England is a highly appropriate case study for a scoping project on childbearing in austere times, with the lowest birth rates in the UK and a local economy heavily impacted by austerity (Hastings et al. 2015, ONS 2017).

**Theoretical Novelty** *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

The research proposes to generate original data, using intersectional theory to unpack contemporary socio-spatial economic inequalities of childbearing, family-making, intimate relationships and austerity, as a currently under-studied and under-theorised field. In doing so, it seeks to create new lines of conceptual interdisciplinary dialogue between feminist, geographical and political economy.

The concept of intersectionality as theory and method was first introduced by critical race scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and Angela Davis (1981). They sought to destabilise the category of 'woman' by identifying the role of race and class - and later other factors, such as disability, sexuality and age - and how these social positions intersect and shape inequalities. Intersectional theory remains the reserve of feminist and social theorists, and is largely removed from most economic analysis, though has been recently explored within heterodox economics (Brah et al. 2015, Hall et al. 2017). Human geographers have been notably slow to engage with the concept (Hopkins 2017, Taylor 2010, Valentine 2007), which is surprising considering the focus that intersectional theory places on power, identity and difference.

An investigation into everyday negotiations about childbearing in austerity requires a consideration of multiple and intersecting social, political and economic changes that can impact on day-to-day practices and relationships. Deeper understanding of the interconnections between class, gender, race, and inter-generationality can reveal fresh insights about these contemporary socio-economic inequalities, as well as engaging with political and civic movements regarding reproductive rights.

## **Methodology** *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry*

Experimenting with interdisciplinary approaches for in-depth, ethically sensitive, experience-centred research into childbearing in austerity, I propose using oral history interviews to unpack these lived experiences. Oral histories involve drawing out personal, biographical details, wherein participants tell the story of their ordinary lives in retrospect. A technique developed by historians, it aims to capture undocumented and marginalised histories (Riley and Harvey 2007), and despite numerous calls remains significantly underused within human geography, political economy and the wider social sciences (Andrews et al. 2006). This method is especially compatible with a feminist approach, empowering and enabling people to voice their own experiences through extended accounts (Hall 2014). I will innovate with traditional techniques by enquiring about recent histories and experiences, asking participants to reflect on their imagined futures; more of an 'oral histories and futures' approach.

Thirty interviews will be conducted, with individuals aged 18-45 in North-East England. These data will be triangulated with policy documents (e.g. Office of National Statistics data, Joseph Rountree Foundation reports), to examine the extent of the relationship between childbearing and austerity in this UK case study. Participants will be self-selecting, identified via community groups, gatekeepers and networks (Hall 2017). I intend to recruit evenly across three age brackets (18-25; 25-35; 35-45) to account for fertility differences. Recruitment is an iterative process, and an intersectional sample is key (including race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability). Data will be analysed using a grounded theory approach, whereby themes emerge from the data, rather than being imposed (Hall 2014).

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

A detailed and structured programme of work has been developed for the 12 month award period:

Months 1-3: Literature review of research and policy documents on childbearing in the UK, and on austerity and intersectionality; undertake Oral History training; gain approval from the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee (which involves developing all fieldwork documents e.g. consent forms, information sheets); write agenda-setting conceptual paper and submit to journal.

Months 4-9: Conduct empirical research across four fortnights (one fortnight to recruit participants via community, gatekeepers, groups and networks, and three fortnightly visits to carry out oral histories and futures interviews i.e. 10 per field visit); transcription and anonymisation of interviews for analysis and website upload; write methodological innovations paper and submit to journal.

Months 10-12: Analysis of oral histories and futures data; triangulate qualitative data with policy documents; write policy briefing; write empirical findings paper and submit to journal; develop project website.

The fellowship will therefore result in a wealth of in-depth data, producing a policy briefing and at least three sole-authored papers for high-impact journals: an agenda-setting conceptual paper (for *Feminist Theory*), an empirical findings paper (for *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy & Society*) and a methodological innovation paper (for *Gender, Place & Culture*). These will be written and submitted for review during the fellowship. The PI will also develop an interactive website (similar to [everydayausterity.wordpress.com](http://everydayausterity.wordpress.com)) for the dissemination of findings, featuring anonymised audio sound-bites. An ERC starter grant, building on this work, will be developed immediately following the fellowship.

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

A key outcome of the fellowship is the development of a new research agenda on intersectionality, childbearing and austerity, expanding geographical and feminist political economy scholarship in new and exciting ways. This includes synthesising and innovating with geographical, political economy and feminist intersectional theory, alongside advancing methodological possibilities for 'oral histories and futures'. The project thus holds both conceptual and empirical value, as well as personal value for the applicant as an early career researcher.

Given the subject matter, there is similar potential for real-world engagement and application, advocating experience-centred data for policy-making. This is especially the case for UK-wide policies regarding economic productivity, human rights, wellbeing, migration and social infrastructure, all of which are impacted by rates of childbearing in austerity. Bringing innovative qualitative techniques together with policy analysis will enable the communication of findings to the wider policy-making

community. I will disseminate a policy briefing via the Women's Budget Group, whereby my findings will be useful to policy-makers in other austere European contexts, and where austerity programmes are being considered. An interactive Wordpress website will also be a space for public engagement and to disseminate papers and policy briefings.

I will use key findings and experience from this scoping study to develop a large grant proposal to the ERC, involving empirical research across up to four European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece and UK) and collaboration with international partners. Evidence that the topic and methods are not risky but grounded in empirical and conceptual rigour is, therefore, essential.