

# How do recessions and austerity impact everyday family life? An ethnography of family, consumption and morality following the recent economic crisis

Sarah Marie Hall

Geography, School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester

## Introduction

In 2008 the UK economy officially entered into a recession until the third quarter in 2009, emerging under the looming threat of further economic downturns and to the introduction of a series of austerity policies. The effects of the recession are still being felt today in the form of job losses, reduced house prices and the increased costs of everyday living.

Despite the deep and on-going significance of economic recession on the lives of ordinary people in the UK, 'the geographical study of economic crises and crashes, both past and present, is an area calling for more research' (Martin 2011, 589). To date, academic analysis of the recession has focused on the failures of the banking system, problems of financial globalisation and the lack of regulatory controls over banks, whilst very little is known about the impacts of the economic downturn, and the subsequent period of economic austerity, on families. These everyday impacts of economic recession and the climate of austerity are highly relevant within political economy research, for when thinking about ordinary people as economic actors, how recessions can reconfigure meanings of family, and how recessions become politicised.

## Aims

This research project aims to explore:

- i) if and how families and family practices have been re-shaped as a consequence of the recession and austerity, in response to both anticipated and actual effects
- ii) if and how the recession and austerity have impacted on everyday consumption practices, ethics/morals, and wellbeing
- iii) how best to conduct research with families that most adequately and ethically captures experiences of austerity

## Families and Austerity

Previous research on family practices has shown that families rely on unremarkable, everyday practices to give them structure and form. As David Morgan (2011) argues, family practices are interpreted and acted upon by others – they develop in a context of shared meanings and tacit knowledge, defined by legal prescriptions, economic constraints and cultural definitions. Likewise, Smart (2007) has also argued that personal lives are shaped by relationality, interwoven with imagined or remembered relationships.

These ideas about the fluidity of family, and also changing family practices and responsibilities, need to be captured in research on families and austerity, given that the impacts of recession are felt very differently by family members, both between and within families, and that past experiences of hardship and austerity – such as World War II and previous recessions – are used for when making sense of, and coping with, the recent economic downturn.

Further research is required that acknowledges, and compares, varied family experiences of recession and austerity, from families living in real decline already, to those who have experienced job loss or change, and the multiple pressures on everyday family life. There is also the need to develop research methodologies that are sensitive to research such topics but which can also effectively gather relevant data.

## The Research Project

The focus of this research is on exploring how families cope during times of economic recession, how family life has changed as a result of the recession, and how these experiences are shaped and change over time.

There is an added focus on a) geographies of family and family practices during austerity, b) changing consumption practices and associated moral dispositions, and c) doing research with families during times of austerity.

The project is therefore arranged into the three strands described below:

### Strand 1: Geographies of Family and Family Practices

Although household structures have changed in recent years, research shows that kinship still matters with regard to everyday (financial and emotional) support networks – especially in the context of a retreating welfare state and increasing financial insecurity – alongside other relationships such as with friends and intimate others. However, we know little about how periods of austerity can impact on these relationships.

*Research Questions:*

*Does how we conceptualise 'family' alter during times of austerity? Such as who we regard as family, and the role of significant others such as friends, grandparents, care workers etc.*

*How does where people live and where they perform their everyday practices, in relation to their family, impact on experiences of recession and austerity?*

*What role do proximity and propinquity play in everyday family (and intimate) geographies, and how might these change during times of austerity?*

*Do relationships and responsibilities within families change during times of austerity? If so, how?*

### Strand 2: Austerity, Consumption and Ethics

The current economic climate has brought about new challenges to the articulation and practice of moral identities, whereby family members may have experienced changing moral dispositions, relationships and responsibilities, as a result of changes to their family circumstances, practices and routines.

Consumption is also often theorised as an avenue for the expression of ethics and responsibility, although much research on consumption has been carried out during times of relative economic prosperity.

*Research Questions:*

*Have consumption practices and decision-making/negotiations changed for families as a result of austerity?*

*How does 'getting by' vary within and between families in times of austerity?*

*What (and whose) experiences of consumption do family members draw upon during times of economic recession? What role do past experiences of financial hardship play in coping with and making sense of recessions?*

*How can these experiences be used and adapted to cope and consume in other times of crisis?*

## Strand 3: Researching Families and Austerity

Within this vacuum of research on family experiences, practices and coping strategies during times of economic recession, there is a distinct lack of research exploring how we do research with families during such turbulent times, and the ethical implications of researching under these conditions. Previous research has shown that researching families requires sensitivity and insight, and the experiences of recession and austerity may offer researchers new challenges for doing family-based fieldwork.

*Research Questions:*

*How do we research families during a difficult economic climate? What methodologies are most appropriate and why?*

*What are the ethical implications of researching under such conditions?*

*Do family experiences of recession offer researchers new challenges for doing family-based fieldwork?*

## Methodology

The research design consists of an in-depth, multi-sited and episodic ethnographic study, in order to thoroughly explore everyday family geographies of the recession and austerity. Conducting ethnography with families allows for an in situ perspective of everyday practices to be developed, with methods that are sensitive to inter-family tensions.

The research design involves traditional and innovative ethnographic, qualitative methods, utilising a mixture of observations, interviewing techniques and participatory tasks, such as photographs and participatory diagramming.



*Figure 1: 'Getting by in the economic crisis'; created specifically for this research project, this image has been used on all recruitment documents*

Recruitment for the project started in September 2013. The fieldwork will take place over 12-18 months, involving c12 families from two field sites. This multi-sited approach allows for diversity in the socio-economic characteristics of the families, as well as comparative analysis. The field sites are situated in the Greater Manchester region, as a large and diverse urban area.

## References

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Email: [sarah.m.hall@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.m.hall@manchester.ac.uk)