



Should we pay research participants? Feminist political economy for ethical practices in precarious times

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Abstract

Questions of paying research participants have taken on a new urgency as contemporary geographies of precarity, inequality and austerity affect both potential participants and, to varying extents, early-career researchers, while universities place greater emphasis on public engagement and research impact. Here, we offer reflections and recommendations that come from our experiences as PhD students in London, as precarious researchers researching precarious lives. We make a case for paying participants based on ethics of care and readings of precarity informed by feminist political economy. We discuss how and how much to pay. We recommend changes to institutional norms that have treated payments with suspicion, to research design and funding, and to ethical approval procedures and publishing practices.

KEYWORDS

care, compensation, feminist political economy, payment, precarity, research ethics

1 | INTRODUCTION

Questions about paying research participants have become more prominent for several reasons. Contemporary geographies of precarity and austerity have exacerbated the ethical complexities of research and intensified the practical difficulties of recruiting participants who struggle with the demands of everyday life (Hall, 2017). Crisis conditions have also squeezed institutional funding for project costs and heightened pressures on postgraduate and early-career researchers; hard times have made emerging researchers especially aware of the need for change in funding practices. And across British universities, emphasis on public engagement and impact beyond the academy has sharpened the responsibility for ethical relations between researchers and the communities they study.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that paying participants is becoming more common (Cheff, 2018; Head, 2009). Few now share historical expectations of disinterested, unpaid participation by individuals in a sharply hierarchical relationship with expert researchers (Thompson, 1996). Yet payment practices are not standardised and are rarely transparent. More precise justifications and stronger institutional backing are needed.

We propose an approach based on ethics of care and readings of precarity informed by feminist political economy (FPE). This synthesis provides an ethical framework for respectful research. First, by emphasising universal *interdependence*, care ethics help us recognise both researchers' reliance on participants, and the caring responsibilities that might

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be affected by participation. This is not an idealised view of interdependence: radical care ethics are attentive to power disparities (Tronto, 1993). Similarly, FPE approaches precarity from an ethics of earthly cohabitation, where intersubjective vulnerability is amplified by cascading neoliberal insecurities (Butler, 2004; Worth, 2019). Recognising the financial insecurities experienced by many researchers and respondents reflects our precarious interdependence – calling, therefore, for an ethics of care and carefulness.

Second, care demands *contextual* decision-making that responds to particular embodied needs and relationships (Clement, 1996). As we discuss, this approach justifies differential compensation for participants. Questions of difference are of course key to geographical scholarship, including on varying meanings of care (Raghuram, 2016) and practices of compensation (Hammett & Sporton, 2012; Wesche et al., 2010). This resonates with FPE approaches to the *contingent* dimensions of precarious economic life (Meehan & Strauss, 2015): the unevenness with which precarity is experienced by situated subjects requires contextually specific inquiry and compensation. The differentiated burdens of labour produced by neoliberal precarity – where a predictable wage has been rendered increasingly elusive – make this issue urgent.

Third, radical readings of care ethics extend beyond the direct encounter, tracing *interscalar* responsibilities (Lawson, 2007), such as the role of funding bodies in providing resources. Within FPE, the dependence of economic activity on unpaid labour is also a central concern. Although commodification is not a clear solution (Held, 2005), if survival depends on private resources, then compensation must be provided (Dalla Costa & James, 1975). This is also a matter of respecting research participants as a principle of ethical research; as scholars have shown, one way of demonstrating respect is through payment (Head, 2009; Thompson, 1996). While this does not remove power imbalances, respect for the value of participants' time and expertise goes some way to ensuring mutual benefit (Cheff, 2018).

We first examine the context of precarity for emerging researchers and participants. We then turn to existing perspectives on paying participants: benefits for recruitment, what payment might mean for power relations, and risks. We make a case for payment based on ethical practices informed by feminist political economy. What this means in terms of deciding the amount and form of payment is far from simple, so next we offer reflections on these practical dimensions. Certain frameworks distinguish between *reimbursement* for expenses, *compensation* for time and/or burdens and *incentives* for participation (Gelinas et al., 2018). Here, we use the term “payment,” as compensation and incentives cannot be objectively defined, especially in the relatively modest amounts involved for most social science research (unlike medical trials). Finally, we recommend changes in institutional norms, research design and funding, ethical approval procedures and publishing practices.

2 | PRECARIOUS RESEARCHERS, PRECARIOUS RESEARCH?

Paying research participants is especially crucial in an age of precarity, as casualised employment becomes more prevalent across class backgrounds. Increasingly, workers face high costs of living but are paid at low rates per task, journey or interaction (Dowling, 2021), so giving time for free is not always an option. We offer reflections and recommendations based on researching fragile forms of social reproduction as PhD students and early-career researchers in London. Rosalie Warnock's research examines how parents of autistic children navigate and access special educational needs and disability (SEND) services in London, using narrative interview methods with parents and practitioners. Faith MacNeil Taylor's research on intimacy and relational reproduction among millennial renters involved in-depth interviewing a cross-section of private and social tenants. Amy Horton's research with social care staff and housing campaigners involves interviews and focus groups.

A common assumption is that researchers are more financially secure than participants and better able to absorb the costs of payments (Descartes et al., 2011; Hammett & Sporton, 2012; Head, 2009). Yet at PhD and early-career level, we are often precarious researchers researching precarious lives. While this is a spectrum – and we do not mean to minimise our privilege nor imbalances between ourselves and people we work with – PhD and early-career researchers are the most proximate to precarity and hold the least power to address it. In London, the official doctoral studentship equates to about half of median pre-tax earnings.¹ Trainee academics therefore rely on hourly-paid teaching and other jobs, forcing us to account for our time and inspiring challenges to un(der)paid academic labour, as well as solidarity with those beyond academia. These experiences are shared with many taught students and growing ranks of casualised academics, and they are relevant to those who are responsible for them. A 2016 report by the University and College Union found that 54% of all academic staff and 49% of all teaching staff are on insecure contracts, and nearly half of British universities employ teaching staff on zero-hours contracts (Collini, 2020; UCU, 2016). Such staff cannot always access research support funds but beyond that, they also receive paltry wages. PhD students, too, often have multiple jobs on top of the commitments of everyday social reproduction.

Moreover, not all PhD students are funded, and where they are, there is wide variability.² At the time of writing, the main publicly funded stipends equate to £8.39 per hour nationally and £9.49 per hour in London, broadly comparable to the real living wage.³ Funded PhD students often struggle to support themselves and dependants on stipends alone, but unfunded or part-time funded students can be particularly precarious and face severe constraints in balancing study with employment. Most funded PhD studentships include a yearly grant to cover fieldwork, training and conference costs. However, this varies by funding body, with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) awarding £750 per year (ESRC, 2020, p. 18).^{4,5} Alternative funds are shrinking (Cloke, 2002; Hall, 2017; Valentine, 2005), so doctoral research decisions often rest on personal resources. In short, precarious times can undermine researchers' capacity to pay participants. The next section examines different rationales for paying or not paying, and develops our argument for compensation to avoid additional unpaid labour that can further deplete social reproduction.

3 | PAYING: PRACTICALITY, COMMODIFICATION OR AVOIDING UNPAID LABOUR?

The practical benefits of paying research participants have been widely recounted by scholars, albeit largely anecdotally (Cheff, 2018). Researchers report smoother, more successful recruitment processes upon introducing payments, especially among respondents who are constrained by time and/or finances (Descartes et al., 2011; Head, 2009). Faith MacNeil Taylor's research with renters similarly highlighted the practicality of payment, particularly for reaching a broader socio-economic spectrum of participants. Time constraints were a factor here; she had initially chosen to pursue a recruitment process that privileged "invitation" via gatekeepers, a fruitful but time-consuming process. Consequently, mid-way through her nine-month fieldwork period, Faith began advertising participation as compensated with a gift voucher, gleaned numerous respondents and leading to successful interviews.

Nonetheless, a common objection to paying participants is the implicit "commodification" of research (Anwar & Vigar, 2017; Hammett & Sporton, 2012). Offering payments does indeed create risks that researchers must guard against. On consent, the concern is that "the attractiveness of the offer causes participants to unreasonably discount or fail to appreciate risks related to research, which would threaten the validity of consent" (Gelinias et al., 2018, p. 767). In terms of research integrity, risks include participants feeling greater pressure to provide the data that they perceive researchers to be seeking, or falsely claiming to meet the study's eligibility criteria (Head, 2009). There are practical solutions to these issues, to the extent that they can be resolved in a capitalist context where survival depends largely on private resources. It is important that "participants should know before they start the research that they can withdraw from the study without losing their payment" (ESRC, n.d.a). Comprehension of risks must be carefully verified (Gelinias et al., 2018). Though little researched, the limited data available suggest that "payment may actually increase caution and perception of risks among prospective participants" (Gelinias et al., 2018, p. 767). Checks on eligibility and open questioning will also help to ensure research integrity.

However, the assumption that payment distorts consent can underestimate participants' capacity to make decisions (see Hall, 2017). Scholarly qualms regarding recompense often seem rooted in value judgements about the detrimental impact of money on respondents' lives. This runs throughout bioethical scholarship on clinical research payments (Belfrage, 2016; Largent et al., 2019; Malmqvist, 2019; McNeill, 1997), as well as the humanities and social sciences (Descartes et al., 2011; Hammett & Sporton, 2012). Here, concerns range from whether money will be used for intoxicants to whether money will lead to misrepresentation and thus a loss of integrity. These concerns speak to broader, undeniably classed discomfort with monetary payments to precariously situated and/or criminalised people (Abadie et al., 2019).

It is problematic to claim that the quality of our labour – including research participation – is necessarily undermined by payment, even when labour cannot be fully accounted for monetarily (Boris & Klein, 2006). Theorists of care and social reproduction have long resisted claims that tensions between market and non-market values are best handled by pretending that the latter circulate in a vacuum, outside the need for survival. Payment for participation at least avoids research further depleting reproductive capacities by adding more unpaid labour (Rai et al., 2014). In Rosalie Warnock's research with parents of autistic children, it was recognised from the outset that many would be full-time carers or have part-time work alongside caring responsibilities, *because* their caring responsibilities made it challenging to work full-time. Therefore, non-payment of parents for participation in a short-term activity which they *could* fit around caring responsibilities would have been unjustifiable. In Amy Horton's research with social care assistants, it seemed equally unjustifiable to critique inadequate pay and recognition – often requiring extra shifts and juggling personal caring responsibilities – while requesting additional unpaid participation labour. Paying participants for their time may influence

their relationships with researchers, but it does not preclude the development of trust and rapport – and can in fact be a precondition for these (Anwar & Viqar, 2017). Crucially, however, payment does not entitle the researcher to participation nor a certain “quality” of data, and will not dissolve power disparities. Reflexivity and care are required to avoid the “tyranny of participation,” often associated with the neocolonial logics of participatory development (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

4 | FORMS AND LEVELS OF PAYMENT

As care ethics suggest, context matters for decisions about the extent and nature of payment (Goodman et al., 2004). Here, we advocate financial payment for discrete, time-limited involvement in projects; for example, interviews or oral histories. Recognising that not all methods lend themselves to discrete payment – for example, ethnography (see Hall, 2017) – we also discuss the place of compensation “in kind” as an alternative. Where a sample is drawn from a close-knit community, there may be a case for collective rather than individual payments (Hammett & Sporton, 2012).

In calculating payments, some guidance suggests that this should reflect participants' time and the “burden” of research activities (Sullivan & Cain, 2004, in Head, 2009). Others link payment to prevailing wage rates – in some cases for “unskilled” labour (Gelinias et al., 2018). However, benchmarking payment for participants' contributions against their value in the labour market risks reinforcing the devaluation of certain groups and forms of work, like care. Treating interviewees' expertise gained through lived experience as “unskilled” labour also suggests that their insights are of limited importance. One alternative is to provide reasonable compensation for the costs of social reproduction, calculated through the local real living wage. While far from straightforward, this approach offers what is generally considered to be a fair minimum payment.

Differentiating between participants in payments has been a point of controversy. Some argue it is “unacceptably unfair” and that there should be “equal pay for research participants' equal ‘work’” (Belfrage, 2016, p. 79; Gelinias et al., 2018, p. 769). We certainly wouldn't advocate paying *more* to some, “based on participants' particular earning potential outside of research” (Gelinias et al., 2018, p. 769). However, care ethics point us towards contextual responsiveness, rather than the rigid application of universal rules (Clement, 1996) and could justify paying precarious participants but not the more advantaged (see Thompson, 1996). For those who can take time during paid work to participate in research or who have sufficient resources not to account for their income on an hourly basis, payment is less critical, although the consequences for participants' workload and impacts on caring responsibilities should be considered. For example, Rosalie Warnock paid parent participants but not SEND practitioners who undertook interviews during core work hours. However, as Faith MacNeil Taylor's research highlighted, we might not have prior knowledge of participants' income, wealth or caring labour at the individual or household scale, if these are not recruitment criteria. In an ongoing project with housing campaigners in London, Amy Horton offered all participants a payment, suggesting the money could be donated to a campaign group or charity if wished. Some interviewees said payments were unnecessary, but it was unclear whether that was because they were not in need or felt ashamed accepting it. Everyone was encouraged to accept payment without saying whether they would keep or donate it. Passing on payment potentially avoids the need for additional disclosures and opens up care relations beyond direct reciprocity among researchers, participants and wider communities.

Our own rates of payment varied in each study and sometimes took the form of vouchers. As Hall (2017) cautions, cash payments can exacerbate inequalities within recipients' households and may influence benefit payments in Britain, where any additional income can affect entitlements. Cash payments can also jeopardise migrant respondents, who are at risk of detention and deportation if they lack the “right to work”. Unlike cash, vouchers do not compromise social security payments or immigration legislation as they do not have to be legally declared. This is crucial for avoiding harm to potentially vulnerable participants. In terms of our experience, Rosalie Warnock paid participants in Love2Shop vouchers at a rate of £10 per hourly session (£40 total⁶), roughly equivalent to the London living wage rate at the time. Amy Horton and colleagues are giving all participants £25 vouchers, to recognise time spent setting up an interview and the value of wider benefits (such as holiday pay) that would be added to an hourly wage. Both have received grant funding to cover participant payment costs. In contrast, once she realised that a financial incentive was required to recruit a wider range of participants, Faith MacNeil Taylor started to offer a £20 Amazon voucher per one-hour interview, funded from her PhD stipend and savings. This is neither a sustainable nor fair benchmark for qualitative researchers. However, Faith found that that this rate reaffirmed a sense of respect towards participants by valuing their time at almost double the London living wage. Administrative communications between herself and paid respondents were rendered more transparent, formalising the pre-interview dynamic while providing a talking point that fostered relatability in the interview itself.

When payment is not possible or appropriate, compensation “in kind” might be – although payment in kind should not be chosen simply on the assumption that cash or vouchers are “unethical”. There are two possible forms of compensation “in kind”: the provision of small gifts (for example, a hot drink), or the exchange of labour by researchers. As Hall (2017) shows, with regular visits and sustained attention to caring, gifting can help to develop relationships and, in turn, lead to the successful continuation of research activities. Researchers might accompany participants to appointments, provide a friendly ear or offer to do household chores (Anwar & Viqar, 2017; Hall, 2017). Gifting of this sort might also be considered common courtesy rather than formalised compensation. For example, in Faith MacNeil Taylor’s research, there were instances of informal childcare across interviews; she watched babies while parents took toilet breaks, and distracted children with crayons. Arguably, these labours are part of living in a society and may not require transactional thinking. Payment in kind may be preferred for research in cultures with established gifting economies, providing researchers remain cautious of the expectations attached to gifting, particularly in “over-researched” places, as we discuss above (Nabobo-Baba, 2008, pp. 144–145).

There are a number of other considerations when offering reciprocal labour. Without sustained relationship-building work, researchers may not be well situated to gauge what respondents would like in kind. Without adequate foundations, offers of labour might be experienced by participants as themselves laborious: humouring researchers’ gestures may add another “mental load” (Emma, 2018). Moreover, while non-monetary exchanges may be justifiable, they raise questions of equivalence – should the same amount of time be given by both parties? And questions of unequal and unpaid labour apply too. As Hall (2017) emphasises, supportive activities such as childcare are often gendered and may not be suggested equally by male and female researchers, with participants themselves potentially expecting more of women than men. Offers of additional work impact researchers’ own responsibilities, especially for those on time-limited funding or contracts. For example, when Faith MacNeil Taylor told participants she was a music tutor, interest among the group led her to propose free tuition to attendees’ children – but this is labour for which she would normally earn necessary income.

5 | RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on Arendt’s attention to the “ordinary evil” of thoughtlessness, Paul Cloke (2002, pp. 594, 598) called for human geographers to cultivate a sense “for” the other. Two decades on, we have drawn on feminist perspectives to argue that this sense “for” the research subject should incorporate attention to the often unjust conditions of the researcher herself. To demand participant payment without engaging with the potentially shared precarity between researcher and researched is as unhelpful as ignoring compensation altogether. Thus, where funding limits drive decisions on whether to pay participants, we call for greater resourcing of research, with funding bodies and institutions fulfilling their roles to care at different scales (Lawson, 2007).

As set out in this paper, there is an ethical and feminist imperative to pay participants for their role in research. Ultimately, these funds (should) come from funding bodies and universities. We recognise this is a challenging context to call for additional research funding, amid cuts and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we suggest three ways that the principle and practice of paying participants can be encouraged without the burden of responsibility falling on precarious researchers.

First, we must reduce suspicion around payment in social sciences research, reflecting on institutional prejudice towards those motivated to participate on financial grounds, and crucially, suspicion of financial compensation of low-income participants and how they might spend money awarded for participation (Descartes et al., 2011; Hammett & Sporton, 2012). Of course, we have a duty as researchers to avoid “undue inducement” – “where an individual is compelled to participate in a study that they consider to be against their values or principles as a result of financial payments” (ESRC, n.d.a) – but in practice, this concern often has an “outsized influence” (Largent & Lynch, 2017). We must also act responsibly to avoid exacerbating financial inequalities within families, jeopardising benefits claims or immigration statuses (Belfrage, 2016; Hall, 2017; Largent & Lynch, 2017). We have shown how financial incentives can be beneficial where they increase people’s ability to participate in research. Reducing the stigma around compensation would partially address power imbalances between researcher and researched, and encourage researchers to think about participant payment as a respectful practice. This attitude must also be adopted by research and funding bodies.

Second, we suggest that funders and supervisors support emerging researchers to consider, at the design stage, the resources available to compensate participants at a respectful level. Where research addresses issues of intimacy, social reproduction or trauma, this is particularly pertinent, and is especially important for PhD research and smaller-scale studies. However, paying participants is equally dependent on adequate institutional or grant funding: we are not

advocating calculations according to what researchers can afford to pay themselves. While we do not intend to limit the scope of research, we encourage researchers and institutions to ensure they are not causing harm by exploiting financially vulnerable people for the sake of a larger sample size.

Third, we propose a shift in institutional culture by making the justification of participant payment or non-payment compulsory in applications for ethical approval and grants, with a statement included in journal articles. For this to be effective, however, institutions and funding bodies must commit to, first, funding the costs of paying participants, including for PhD students and early-career researchers; second, recognising the ethical necessity of doing so; and third, peer reviewers holding researchers to account if they do not address participant payment in their applications and publications.

6 | CONCLUSION

If our demands are ambitious, it is because narrowing accessibility to research institutions is an urgent issue. In the wake of successive economic crises, pathways to research funding, academic jobs and the means of scholarly production are increasingly bordered. On the one hand, the result is a more siloed ivory tower, insulated from widening precarity but resistant to recompense; and on the other, casualised positions fraught with insecurity. Our calls for participant payment reflect, then, our wider call for academic compensation. While the politics of financial incentives appear to dog bioethical scholars, to us, failing to pay respondents will result in data that are skewed towards the experiences of the resourced. Similarly, inadequate recompense for PhD students engaged in ethical research will result in scholarship remaining the province of the middle and upper classes. To this end, our call to pay participants is part of a broader commitment to challenging the neoliberal erosion of higher education; this call for payment is a call, too, for official acknowledgement of researcher precarity.

A feminist ethics of care engages with the qualitative research process as always-already precarious, where slippage between researcher and researched produces moments of intensity and fragility as well as identification. Perhaps research payments not only formally recognise the precarious labour of participation but are also a means of intersubjective acknowledgement that times are, frankly, hard. In this paper, we asked: if your methodology cannot logistically incorporate a caring praxis, should it be implemented? Braiding payment with feminist attentiveness to care and precarity raises broader questions of scale in qualitative research. As our localised experiences with care workers, parents and renters demonstrate, rich datasets at least partly reflect steps taken to acknowledge the labour of their production.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In April 2020, median London annual employee earnings were £33,280 (Office for National Statistics, 2020). The annual PhD stipend paid by one of the major funders, the ESRC, was worth £17,009 in London and was not taxable (ESRC, n.d.b).

² The fees plus maintenance studentships increase yearly and in 2020/2021 the ESRC and Arts and Humanities Research Council pay £15,285 annually plus a £2,000 London weighting (AHRC, n.d.; ESRC, n.d.b).

- ³ From November 2020, the real living wage rate is £9.50 per hour UK-wide and £10.85 per hour in London (<https://www.livingwage.org.uk/what-real-living-wage>). After tax, this equates to £8.46 per hour UK-wide and £9.38 per hour in London (calculated on the basis of a 35-hour working week, 52 weeks per year, using <https://www.moneysavingexpert.com/tax-calculator/>). UKRI studentships are tax-free.
- ⁴ ESRC students undertaking overseas fieldwork may receive a further £450 (ESRC, 2020).
- ⁵ The ESRC and Arts and Humanities Research Council state that Research Training Support Grant (RTSG) allocations should be considered as a shared “pool” of funding, rather than each student being entitled to a set amount (ESRC, 2020, p. 19). Depending on how Doctoral Training Partnerships administer funding, students at some universities may find they are unable to access the whole amount.
- ⁶ All participants received £40 in vouchers in recognition that they had covered all four “topics,” even if this took fewer than four sessions to cover.

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