

## **“Can you give it to someone who needs it more?”:**

### **Remunerating people who participate in research**

In this short commentary, we reflect critically on the practice of remunerating people for their participation in qualitative research by drawing on our own ongoing research exploring ‘working mums’ experiences of mothering during economic crisis.

#### **Guidelines and policies**

Providing remuneration to those who participate in research has become an increasingly normalised and expected practice in psychology, the social sciences, and health-related research more broadly. Qualitative researchers may offer monetary payment as inducement, compensation, or reimbursement. Yet, discussions regarding potential ethical issues are limited – especially within psychology. The British Psychological Society’s *Code of Human Research Ethics* (2021) includes a section on Reimbursement, Payment, Incentives and Coercion (4.12) which each of these practices being placed on a continuum of increasing ethical concern. Whilst reimbursing participants’ expenses (such as travel costs to attend an interview) is described as “common practice” and as “ethically required”, paying participants for the time they spend on participating is treated as more problematic. Somewhat contradictorily, the guidance states that payment “should be offered (while it may not always be accepted) where participants are giving up substantial amounts of their time”, discussion about the ethical dilemmas might raise centres on *who* should be paid *how much* for their time (i.e., whether people who earn more should be paid more – they suggest that all participants should be paid the same to avoid being seen as discriminatory!). Incentives, which are designed to encourage people to take part in research, “can be ethically acceptable so long as they are not so large that they run the risk of compromising a persons’ freely made decisions to participate”. In other words, the incentive must not be so large as to override a person’s inclination not to participate – this would violate the principle of autonomy and nudge the incentive into coercion. By making explicit reference to coercion, the BPS guidelines hint towards the power relationships at play in research, but perhaps inevitably, in an

oversimplified way. These guidelines, while offering a crude ‘rule of thumb’ for researchers, do little to reflect the complexities of navigating the dilemmas of remunerating participants which become enlivened during research interactions and the *doing* of research. It is to these complexities that we turn our attention.

Elsewhere, discussions regarding remunerating people for participating in research reflect a more radical reimagining of the (power) relationships between researchers and participants, including: the reframing of participants (especially in health-related research) as ‘experts by experience’ (Horgan et al., 2018); the increasing imperative within health service policy to ensure that the ‘patient voice’ informs service delivery (Johnson et al., 2016); the professionalisation of research participation (including the growth of organisations which seek to facilitate or broker participation – like INVOLVE<sup>1</sup>); and the move towards more collaborative approaches to research as reflected in the policy and practice of major research funders. These policy shifts reflect years of hard work, campaigning and advocacy across a range of different sectors of the population arguing for the need for research to include the voices and experiences of those of whom they speak (‘Nothing about us, without us’), and for those who are the subjects of research to be involved in setting the agendas for research. Within this approach then, remunerating participants plays a small role in reconfiguring power relationships by acknowledging the ‘cost’ to individuals of participating (in terms of time, emotional labour etc.), and to recognise and thank people for the contribution they have made to the research.

Here, financial incentives are an ethical and respectful way of thanking the research participants for sharing their expertise (Bell & Salmon, 2012; O’Brien & Madden, 2007; Seddon, 2005), but more than this, recompense for taking part in research is a way of ‘beginning to equalise’ the uneven power relationships that exist between interviewer and interviewee (Thompson, 1996, p. 3). Head (2009) argued that from a feminist perspective, gift-giving is a sound ethical practice that, even though problematic, should be part of the research process. Nonetheless, providing remuneration is not without ethical controversy (Head, 2009; Vanderstaay, 2005), especially in research involving vulnerable participants, or where researchers are in a socially and economically privileged position in relation to the participants (Collins et al., 2017; Morrow, 2013; Vanderstaay, 2005). There are two main ethical concerns related to financial payment, which are discussed in qualitative and medical research: undue influence on voluntary consent (Head, 2009; Tyldum, 2012; Zavisca, 2007)

and the risk that some vulnerable participants, particularly individuals who misuses substances, in turn, misusing cash payment (Fry et al., 2006; Seddon, 2005).

### **Researching mothering during economic crisis**

We want to be honest, here, about the development of this project. As academics with a genuine interest in the lived experiences of women, and at a time when the economic crisis was a major news topic, and there was a sense of things only getting worse, it seemed that the focus was on the material and not the psychological. Combining our own experiences as mothers, recollecting the ongoing stresses of mothering and working and those times of the year when financial strains and juggling work seemed particularly difficult (school uniforms, Christmas parties and presents, children at home over the summer holidays), and recognising that the stigma of class and ‘being poor’ are understudied in the UK from a psychological perspective, we wanted to understand how the economic crisis unfolded in women’s everyday experiences of mothering. We both felt strongly that this research was important, and worthy of sustained attention, but that there was a pressing need to start the research immediately as the economic crisis was taking hold. So, we found ourselves in that ‘sticky’ starting point, which can become a vicious cycle in academic research - the need for funding to get research done, but the need for published research to strengthen funding applications, and the slow lead-in for applications to funding bodies. [Author 1] was able to access a small internal fund for Early Career Researchers. As this was limited, choices had to be made. Much of the funding bid was focused on ensuring participants were recompensed and thanked for their contribution, with enough funding remaining to present at the POWES conference to start the process of ‘getting our research out there’. We were conducting research-on-a-shoestring.

Based on [Author 1’s] previous research and connections, the setting for this research is Blackpool, a seaside town in the North of England. UK seaside towns have been in decline since the rise of the package holiday in the 1980s (Centre for Social Justice, 2013). Once referred to as the ‘Vegas of the North’, Blackpool has rated in the Top 10 of the multiple deprivation indices since these measures were introduced. In 2019 Blackpool was identified as having Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the top 10 of deprivation in the following domains: income, employment, health and disability, and crime. Income

deprivation has been associated poorer outcomes for children and older people (JSNA, 2022). Blackpool is ranked as having the highest number of LSAOs in England and Wales. So, given that we were planning to conduct multiple interviews, with working mothers, in an economically deprived setting, during an economic crisis when household costs were rising rapidly, it felt important to be able to offer some remuneration to people who volunteered to talk to us about their experiences.

Our research is focused on the economic crisis which is a time of precariousness for many. Currently the UK has been identified as being in an economic crisis. Inman (2022) identified six key indicators of the economic crisis. The first being inflation, which has risen from under 1% to over 9% from 2021 to 2022 (it has now fallen to just over 7%). The impact of rising inflation has affected all individuals and families in the UK in numerous ways: food prices have increased (19.1% inflation, BBC, 2023), and fuel prices have increased by 54% (de Hoog et al., 2022). This has led to 60% of low-income families being unable to afford, and over half are in arrears with bills, to manage 25% of families are using credit to pay essential bills. This has impacted on families, with 70% of families going without, and 50% spending less on their own food, and 40% of families are spending less on their children's food (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023). Recent reports show that 1 on 6 children have gone to bed hungry over the summer break (ITV News, 2023). Families also reported having fewer showers, leading to hygiene poverty for 9 million people in the UK. Families are also going without heating, which may have health implications over the winter months.

As our study was framed around the current economic crisis, we felt that there was a need to reimburse our participants for their time, which as mothers who work, is limited and valuable. Based on an estimate of one hour for an interview, and the current minimum wage, a voucher of £10 was offered to participants for each interview. We framed this not as an incentive, but as a demonstration of our appreciation for the time participants gave to the study. Of course, we acknowledge that this could have been an incentive for participants, and that the longitudinal design could mean that vouchers received after the first interview could incentivize participants to take part in subsequent interviews. Indeed, we very much hoped that participants would be retained in the study. This is slippery – and participants (especially if they were desperate) might consider this money an incentive. Therefore, this lack of clarity may be problematic when conducting follow-up interviews. The ethical issues of paying participants for their time are seen as heightened in instances where

participants could be deemed vulnerable (in this case, due to poverty or low-income) since the power differences between the researchers and participants may be greater, leaving participants more susceptible to harm. The vulnerability of participants can compound what we are asking of them in qualitative research. We move on, then, to discuss how remuneration was received by our participants.

### **Remuneration, stigma and poverty/identity threat**

Although we had given some consideration to the need to remunerate people for participating, a need which we felt was sharpened by the deprived geographical location of the research and the economic crisis, we had (naïvely) not really given much thought to how this might be interpreted or received by participants. Indeed, researchers' experiences and understanding of providing remuneration in action (rather than in principle) is rarely explicitly addressed. We had made it clear in our information sheets and recruitment information that there would be a £10 voucher given as a 'thank you' for taking part in the research. At the end of the interviews, which were conducted online, [Author 1] thanked the mothers for their time and talked with about how participants would receive their voucher. However, most participants were clear that their motivation for taking part in the research was not to receive the voucher. It was clear that the vouchers were not expected and, in some cases, not wanted. Although initially taken aback, we came to reflect on this response in relation to managing identity threat in the context of poverty.

A lack of economic security for some families in the UK currently means a lack of dignity (Cooke, 2023). Research examining the use of food banks and food vouchers, indicates that there is a sense of shame attached to poverty or not managing financially (de Souza, 2019; Möller, 2022). There is a psychosocial impact of living in deprivation, in that it is a source of discrimination (Evans & Tilley, 2015). Poverty can, then, be understood as a source of identity threat as theorised by Breakwell (1983; 1986), where individuals may face situational challenges to the legitimacy of their social group (in this case, living in and economically deprived area like Blackpool; Author 1, 2022). In a discourse analysis of media coverage of Blackpool, [Author 1] found that social representations of the 'undeserving poor,' that poverty is the fault of the individual and not a societal problem, were prevalent (Author 1, 2022). Furthermore, interviews with young women living in Blackpool showed

that these social representations were a source of identity threat that needed to be managed.

In this context, then, offering reimbursement for research participation may occasion a sense of identity-threat for the women we interviewed. We outline three ways that women navigated the identify-threat that remuneration evoked.

Firstly, to distance themselves from this threat, several participants refused to accept the voucher and asking instead “Can you give it to someone who needs it more?” This is not unique to our participants. Examining charity giving during a natural disaster, Fothergill (2003) found that, regardless of class, although participants appreciated the generosity of charity givers, they did not like the feeling of accepting charity. One woman stated that they felt ‘humbled but embarrassed’ (p, 675). Like the women in our research, they drew on the idea that there were ‘others worse off’ to distance themselves from the idea that they were in need of money. A rare study exploring researcher’s experiences of remunerating participants, indicated that some were concerned that financial compensation for participation might violate the social and cultural norms regarding money for participants (Surmiak, 2020). As one researcher stated, “I would not insult them and show them how low they are on the [social] ladder by giving them money. I know one thing, these people are very ashamed that they are poor, unemployed and use a lot of techniques to conceal their situation” (p. 4470). This resonates with our own experience of remunerating participants. Therefore, as Warnock et al. (2022) argue, there is a need to show care and carefulness when considering how to ethically incentivise or remunerate participants.

Secondly, these women described themselves as financially ‘savvy’. What emerged from the interviews was a sense of agency and empowerment, women who despite several challenges, were creative in their coping strategies, one stating ‘I am like Del girl’ a reference to summarise her approach to managing financially – a reference to the television character Del Trotter from *Only Fools and Horses* known for his financial deals. Others displayed a drive for financial independence for themselves as individuals, and a desire to break free from reliance on benefits or partners. Presenting themselves as fiscally responsible, knowledgeable and resourceful may have served to distance themselves from common stereotypes which position poverty as being the fault of the individual in ways which made it difficult the accept financial remuneration for participation.

Finally, our participants indicated that financial gain was not their motivation for taking part in the research. Rather, they spoke to a deep-seated desire to empower women. Participants stated that their reasons for being involved in research were to highlight and give a voice to the under-represented in research, especially as the research is based on the economic crisis. Experiencing their own challenges, and hearing about the challenges faced by others led to their involvement. One explained that she wanted to challenge existing stereotypes of young, lone parents, another wanted her voice to be heard as it was missing from other studies she was familiar with, and others discussed their participation in the context of other work around female empowerment (such as encouraging women into science and technology). Arguably, although participants expressed reasoning for taking part in the research, motivations for being involved in research can be complex and far from singular. Therefore, placing a monetary value on participation may not reflect the complex decision-making of participants. Some researchers have expressed concern about monetary reimbursement contributing to the commercialisation of the researcher-participant relationship in ways which might belittle or undermine their more altruistic motivations for taking part in research (Surmiak, 2020). We echo this concern.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In their insightful and provocative discussion about the ethics of paying research participants, Warnock et al. (2022) draw on scholarship on the ethics of care and on feminist political economy discussions of precarity, to argue for an understanding of the precarious interdependence of researchers (they are writing as PhD students with limited resources to pay participants) and participants, and the need for carefulness in deliberating the issue of payment. They advocate for institutional change which better recognises the labour of participation and the need for respectful acknowledgement of the labour of qualitative research. We agree. Our research sits at the precarious intersectionality of gender, geography and class, indicating the need for care and carefulness in decision-making around participant payment – as reflected in our participants responses. Commodification of participation can incentivise some, but may equally be undermining, threatening or insulting to others. Working towards thoughtful consideration of the complexity of researching under conditions of precarity and economic stress and flexibly taking into account the

intersectionality and potential vulnerability of participants, will move us towards caring and careful research relationships.

This will require institutional and potential structural changes to the ethics process. Currently, ethical approval arguably occurs in an academic 'vacuum'. There is a need for a more creative, flexible and understanding approach to the ethics of payment. It is now becoming increasingly common to involve participants in the research. There are any parts of the research process where funding is not clear-cut, where we assign monies with a guidance as to how this can be spent. With finance departments administering and managing finances, as long as there is transparency that this is to remunerate participants, does it need to be clearly set out prior to research commencing? Afterall, Nelson et al (1998) ascribe to a participatory approach to research, and the title of their research, 'Nothing about me, without me', is perhaps an ethos that needs to be incorporated into not only the point at which research begins, but prior to this. The cornerstones of BPS (2021) ethical guidelines are responsibility and integrity, can we not be trusted to delay this decision and negotiate this with participants? We ultimately have to respect participants, reflect on power differentials, potential stigma and the multi-faceted reasons they may choose to take part in research. If the aim of our research is social change, that starts with ensuring our participants have agency over the process. Maybe the way forward is to simply just ask them what they want!

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<sup>i</sup> INVOLVE is a public participation charity which works with governments, parliaments, civil society, academics and the public to support and campaign for new ways to involve people in decisions that affect their lives. <https://www.involve.org.uk/>