Researching austerity

Royal Geographical Society
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning

Authors
Elizabeth Ackerley, Santiago Leyva Del Rio,
Laura Fenton and Sarah Marie Hall
(University of Manchester).

Introduction to the guide

In this Doing Geography guide, we discuss ways of thinking about and researching how the socio-economic context impacts upon past, present and future lives. Specifically, we explore ethical, methodological and practical questions for researching on, with and during austerity. Our guide also illustrates how social change can be created in the doing as well as in the results of research.

The term 'austerity' is used to describe policy decisions involving funding cuts to public services including health, welfare, education, local government and transport. The Austerity and Altered Life-Courses research project, on which this guide is based, uses in-depth interviewing and creative methods to explore how austerity has shaped the lives and futures of young people across Europe. With this guide, we therefore reflect on this research - carried out in the UK, Spain, and Italy from 2021 - and cover the following topics: the ongoing nature of austerity across Europe, relationships and partnership working, ethics of living in and working on austerity, creative and participatory methods, sharing research findings and insights, and keeping well whilst researching austerity.

The ongoing nature of austerity across Europe: Understanding the context

Austerity can be approached in many ways and has different implications across different contexts. In this section we explore empirical approaches to austerity that situate it not as a policy of the past, but as an ongoing, relational condition. We also explore how concepts and understandings of austerity vary geographically. We provide examples of this variation across three places in Europe – the UK, Italy and Spain – and what this means for research across different contexts.

Researching austerity

As the research team of the Austerity and Altered Life-Courses project, based at the University of Manchester, we are investigating the enduring impact of austerity on young people across Italy, Spain and the UK. Austerity – a political choice by government to cut public finances in order to pay off national debts – has profoundly impacted life trajectories, prompting changes in family relationships, work, and housing. In this context, we investigate the relationship between socio-political change and lived experiences of austerity, including how austerity can shape imaginaries of the future and the ways in which innovative research methods can inform policy approaches. Our approach is to consider austerity not a disruptive moment but a prolonged condition in people's lives.

To do this, we draw on vibrant discussions across feminist, economic and social geographies investigating the lived effects of austerity. Feminist geographers have been key in developing a grounded understanding of austerity (i.e. one based on lived experiences), illuminating how the financial and social costs of the 2008 crisis have been offloaded onto the gendered economy of the family, the home, the community and third-sector organisations. This has been exacerbated by the erosion of social infrastructures, encompassing not only essential services such as healthcare, social care, eldercare, childcare and community spaces but also the often-unrecognised work of informal and formal work of care workers and volunteers, which is disproportionally performed by women.

Drawing on this feminist and relational geographic approach to austerity, we build on perspectives that view austerity as a fluctuating condition that permeates everyday life in enduring ways. We understand austerity as influencing everyday life in lasting and diverse manners, extending beyond the mere presence of austerity policies and politics. It also recognises that, on both individual and societal levels, austerity leaves enduring marks on the fabric of daily life, reshaping individuals' self-perceptions, aspirations, ideas, and visions for the future.

Contexts of austerity

In Europe, austerity has significantly affected three key facets of daily life – housing, work, and family – reshaping people's life trajectories and imaginaries of the future. In this context, human geographers have departed from notions that consider the life-course as a linear progression of pre-determined stages, to recognise increasing plurality and instability in life trajectories, particularly those of young people. Expectations and imaginations of the future, such as concerning housing, employment and relationships, can be reshaped by economic change such as austerity. Our approach to austerity therefore aims to develop a detailed understanding of how geographically varied austerity policies affect people according to their material, emotional, temporal and social needs.

For instance, everyday and future stability and material security have been foreclosed for many people but also how experiences of precarity are geographically varied across different European contexts. For instance, while youth underemployment is pervasive across Europe, in southern Europe, youth unemployment takes on a more prominent role. In the domain of housing, rent has become the fastest-growing form of tenure in most major European cities, with rental prices sharply increasing. However, tenant rights vary widely across countries, with tenants being notably vulnerable in England and enjoying more protection in other European contexts. Similarly, factors such as the severity of austerity-driven welfare cuts, the number of young adults living with their parents, the prevalence of boomerang transitions, fertility rates, and the average age for first-time parenthood exhibit significant variations across European contexts.

Life-courses of austerity

The phenomena above are all connected by the common thread of austerity. However, far from engendering coherent standardised life trajectories, geographically specific austerity regimes animate varied forms of everyday life, imaginaries of the future, longings, frustrations, uncertainties, and anxieties. A relational perspective in human geography is necessary here – one that considers how people, things, spaces and times are interconnected and must be understood in context (see Hall 2019 cited below). Our intention is to progress empirical research that roots prevalent references to increasing fluidity in life trajectories to contextual lived experiences, affective responses and changing temporalities in life-courses.

Our understanding of austerity as a process lived long beyond the implementation or reversal of specific austerity policies also has implications for policymaking. Building on our approach to austerity as a lived, enduring process, we advocate for long-term policy approaches (rather than quick fixes) that consider the social life of policy in different contexts. We believe in a co-production approach to policy that actively involves ordinary people with lived experiences of austerity, academics, third-sector organisations and policymakers to co-develop experience-led policy recommendations. As we illustrate below, fostering relationships and collaborations with partners, adopting an ethics of care, employing participatory methods, democratically disseminating findings, and prioritising solidarity and mutual support are fundamental tenets of our collaborative ethos.

Summary points

- Austerity is an enduring lived process that alters life trajectories extending beyond the implementation or reversal of specific policies.
- Austerity is geographically varied process that engenders diverse forms of daily existence, future visions, desires, challenges, uncertainties and apprehensions.
- Given our perspective on austerity as a persistent process, we advocate for long-term policy solutions based on a collaborative approach involving diverse stakeholders to develop experience-led recommendations.

Further reading

- Hall S. M. (2019) Everyday austerity: Towards relational geographies of family, friendship and intimacy. Progress in Human Geography 43(5): 769–789.
- Hall, S.M. (2022) The Social Life of Crisis, ISRF Bulletin. Available at: https://www.isrf.org/2022/02/23/the-social-life-of-crisis.
- Van Lanen, S. (2017) Living austerity urbanism: space–time expansion and deepening socio-spatial inequalities for disadvantaged urban youth in Ireland, Urban Geography, 38:10, 1603-1613.

Relationships and working in partnership

Research that is conducted in partnership requires thought, preparation, time and shared aims. Here we build on the previous section by reflecting on the importance of partnership working for undertaking research ethically and meaningfully in context. We discuss building relationships, collaboration, and managing challenges when working in collaboration.

Building relationships

Good relationships are key to collaborative research projects. This includes relationships with project partners, gatekeepers, participants, and team members. At the start of our Austerity and Altered Life-Courses project, we made time to talk through as a team how we wanted to work together and what our shared values are. These centred around care and solidarity towards each other and towards project partners and participants. We talked together about the importance of always prioritising the wellbeing of ourselves and others involved in the project, as well as a shared commitment to the aims of the work; namely creating space for people to talk about their lives and the ways these are altered by a context of austerity in a supportive and caring space. Furthermore, we discussed a commitment to ensure these experiences are fed into policy and practice discussions to highlight the impact austerity has on young people's present and future lives, and to try and push for progressive change.

Building upon this foundation of shared priorities and values, we built and strengthened relationships with project partners; some of whom were involved from the start of the research bid, others we met along the way. We worked with third sector and academic partners in all three sites, although the way these relationships developed and the form they took looked different across the different places. For example, in one site we engaged in regular volunteering, in another we attended events and used project resources to rent rooms to support organisations, and across all three sites we have continually sought opportunities to highlight and sustain the work of our partners. Keeping in regular contact with partners is key, as well as seeking informal opportunities to get to know them. In the context of our project, collective visits to all three sites were really important to put faces to names and spend time together getting to know one another and discussing the project.

Collaboration

From the start of our research project, our approach has been to seek out and make space for new relationships and partnerships as the work progressed. Outside of fieldwork we've also worked with a number of different organisations to build new connections and solidarities on issues closely related to our project. These have included working with community groups to co-design and co-deliver creative methods training, working with the local council and third sector organisations on anti-poverty initiatives, and with third sector organisations on gender and homelessness. In approaching partnerships and working with third sector organisations we have prioritised listening and learning from those doing frontline work and thinking carefully together about how our work and resources can support the work of grassroots organisations. This is with the aim of leading to meaningful collaborations between research and practice. Ensuring our approach to collaboration has been equal and reciprocal, rather than extractive, has also been paramount.

Managing challenges when working in collaboration

Understandably, timeframes and priorities differ between and within different organisations and therefore it is important to build flexibility into collaborative research projects and relations. Grassroots or frontline organisations often work in ways that are much more reactive and immediate than academic research, and tensions can arise when timeframes don't necessarily align. Furthermore, third sector organisations are often managing complex and challenging situations that understandably come above the research in terms of priorities, particularly within a context of austerity when resources are stretched.

Within our project we have found it has helped to be open and honest about timescales and expectations from the start. We have also built flexibility into the timeframes of certain activities to allow for holdups or shifting priorities. We have had to think creatively about solutions to various problems and prioritised listening to and learning from organisations, knowing when to

step back and communicating clearly and honestly.

Summary points

- Building strong relationships with partners involves time, care and honesty to build trust and meaningful collaborations.
- Listening and learning always, but particularly at the start of relationships and collaborations, is key.
- Honesty, understanding and forward planning can help with managing challenges and tensions within partnership working as they arise.

Further reading

- Austerity Alters and Inspire Women Oldham (2023) NCRM Impact Prize Entry. https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/about/impact/AALC.php
- Mason, W. (2023) On staying: Extended temporalities, relationships and practices in community engaged scholarship. Qualitative Research. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211049318
- The Care Collective (2020) The Care Manifesto. London: Verso.

Working in partnership – image by India Joseph

The ethics of living in and working on austerity

Research into the impact of austerity must be sensitive to the devastating consequences it has had on people's lives – past, present and future. In this section we reflect upon ethical and praxis-led approaches to research that takes place in and on austerity. This includes: learning from and working with grassroots organisations; thinking carefully about payment for people's time and sharing resources to pay for community spaces; ensuring interview contexts feel comfortable and accessible for participants; considering reciprocity of time, energy and commitment, as well as financial reciprocity; and ongoing consent for accessible dissemination of findings.

Reciprocity and sharing resources

As detailed in the above section, we have sought to ensure our research is conducted in collaboration and solidarity and to avoid extractive practices. Reciprocity within this project has meant different things at different stages and in different places. For example, one of the ways we have sought to share our project resources is through hiring space from third sector organisations for interviews and events. We have also delivered free training and a free seminar series open to all. For participants, we costed in funding to pay for travel, as well as a thank you voucher for taking part. For long interviews or interviews that took place near to mealtimes we sometimes bought lunch and/or drinks for participants to ensure they were comfortable and not out of pocket.

Space and accessibility

To make taking part in interviews accessible to everyone who was interested and met the study's inclusion criteria, interviews were scheduled for a time that suited participants. We also offered participants the choice of the setting that was most comfortable for them, whether this was their home, online or a public space such as a park or library. However, at times it was necessary to balance this latter choice with the requirements of maintaining a safe working environment for researchers. For instance, when male participants asked to be interviewed alone at their homes, female researchers might instead offer to interview them online or in a university venue. In this way, we strove to maintain a safe and comfortable environment for both participants and researchers alike.

To ensure participation in the study was accessible and meaningful for participants, we also took time to explain the contents of the participant information sheet and the format of the interview over the telephone, email and via text messages in the days leading up to the interview, as well as face-to-face just prior to the interview. Adopting an ethic of care throughout the interview process was key. This involved checking with participants prior to the interview about whether there were any topics they did not want to discuss. It also meant making sure that participants knew they could skip questions and end the interview at any time. As we explain below, participants were given a choice of creative tasks to do during the interview, which they were told about in advance. It was made clear to them that they could opt to do none of these, or as many as they liked. Given the sensitive nature of the research, it was vital interviewers were responsive to non-verbal cues, such as signs of agitation or stress. To support this processes, the team understood specialist collective training to prepare for the fieldwork. Lastly, it also meant providing participants with a list of support services that they could access before or after the interview if required, and checking in with participants following the interview to ask how they were feeling.

Consent as an ongoing process

Building a meaningful, enduring legacy and sharing findings with audiences beyond academia have been key priorities from the inception of this project. Our approach to this is multi-pronged: we are archiving interviews; creating an online exhibition, as well as crafting a theatrical production in partnership with a professional playwright; and running co-production workshops with policymakers and practitioners in each of our three fieldsites to embed learning at a local level. Participants were given a choice about what, if anything, was shared from their interviews, and whether they wanted to be named or given a pseudonym. As creating this legacy meant making data available for many years to come, participants were recontacted several months after their interviews to ensure they were still comfortable with their data being shared. For example, those who had chosen to have the audio-recording of their interview archived were given the

option to change their minds, or to have to have parts of the recording not included in the version sent to the archive. This was at times a labour-intensive endeavor, involving extensive communication with participants. However, we felt it was vital to uphold the principle of consent as an ongoing process.

Summary points

- To avoid extractive practices, it is important to ensure organisations and participants are renumerated for their time and their contributions to the research.
- Giving interviewees a choice of time and setting and taking time to explain and answer questions about the research are key to making the interview accessible and comfortable to those who wish to participate.
- Obtaining consent is an ongoing process that should be revisited are shared, especially when the research creates a legacy that extends well into the future.

Further reading

- Budworth, P. (2023). Care, comfort, and capacity: The importance of being flexible in research with Disabled and chronically ill people. SSM - Qualitative Research in Health. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2023.100352
- Hall, S. M. (2017). Personal, relational and intimate geographies of Austerity: Ethical and Empirical Considerations. Area. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12251
- Warnock, R., Taylor, F.M. and Horton, A. (2022). Should we pay research participants? Feminist political economy for ethical practices in precarious times. Area. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12790

Creative and participatory methods

Creative and participatory methods can support people to share and reflect on how the economic context impacts upon their lives in sensitive, thought-provoking and open-ended ways. Here we outline and reflect upon the use of creative and participatory methods across different research projects carried out within the context of austerity, related to themes of social relationships and social reproduction, food insecurity, communities and care, and life-courses and futures. We explore practical, as well as ethical aspects of using these methods.

Sensitivity

Austerity and socio-economic crises affect people in intimate ways, shaping and interacting with their relationships, their emotions, their confidence, their plans for and imaginings of their futures. Sensitive approaches to researching how people experience austerity and socio-economic crisis are therefore required. For example, in the context of qualitative interviews, a direct line of questioning may be unsuitable for ethical reasons, and may also fail to capture the fleeting, ephemeral, and half-formed character of people's ideas, experiences and imaginings. More generally, extractive approaches – in which researchers prioritise answering research questions over and above looking out for the welfare of research participants – are especially inappropriate for research on these topics. Austerity's status as a political choice (i.e. cutting state spending as opposed to other measures to pay national debt, such as raising taxes) means that the question of 'what could have been' is rarely far from the surface in research encounters. As we described earlier, building relationships with partners, gatekeepers and participants is key to crafting a sensitive approach to the research.

Lived experience

Creative and participatory methods are particularly well suited to research on lived experiences of austerity, as well as research on imagined futures. Curating space for creative expression in response to topics discussed in the research allows participants to communicate their experiences in their own terms, potentially using metaphor, allegory or other devices when facing an experience head-on feels unbearable. Creativity can be vital when engaging with the topic of the future. As a time that has not yet come into being, the future may seem like a blank unknown, or worse yet, it be the source of considerable anxiety. Having the freedom to fashion the future as a fictional story, sketch or other artistic modality enables a playful approach, one in which the story-teller or sketch-artist is not obliged to set out a vision of a pre-determined reality, but to instead craft an impression of what may be, to give form to untold possibilities that may or may not come to pass. In doing so, participants are more likely to feel comfortable to catch and to share the ephemeral and the fleeting – half-formed thoughts and feelings that feel too feather-light to put into speech when responding to an interview question.

Flexibility, choice and time

Flexibility, choice and time are all key if using creative and participatory methods is to be a positive experience for participants. In the Austerity and Altered Life-Courses project, we gave interviewees the opportunity to choose any of the four techniques we proposed: , life mapping, photo elicitation, futures storytelling and postcards to a future self (for more information, please see Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016, and Hall 2024 – both are cited in this guide). We made it clear that, like their wider participation in the study, using these techniques was entirely voluntarily. They could choose to do as many or as few as they liked, or none at all. Moreover, interviewees were encouraged to take their time, share their reflections on the process and ask questions. As the techniques could bring up some unexpected responses and emotions, researchers ensured they had additional time beyond when the interview was scheduled in case interviewees wanted to speak about their experience of the interview and the reflections it raised afterwards.

Summary points

- Austerity and socio-economic crisis affect people in intimate ways, shaping their relationships, and their hopes and plans for their futures; therefore, it is important to adopt a sensitive approach to researching these topics.
- reative and participatory methods are well suited to research on lived experiences of austerity, as well as research on imagined futures.
- Being flexible and providing participants with choice and time is key to using these methods sensitively.

Further reading

- Cuzzocrea V. & Mandich, G. (2016) Students' narratives of the future: Imagined mobilities as forms of youth agency? Journal of Youth Studies, 19(4): 552–567.
- Fenton, L. & Ravn, S. (2021) Working creatively with biographies and life histories. In: N. Benzon, M. Holton, C. Wilkinson & S. Wilkinson (Eds.) Creative Methods for Human Geographers. London, UK: Sage, pp. 229–241.
- Hall, S.M. (2024) Oral histories and futures: Researching crises across the life-course and the life-course of crises. Area, 56, e12904. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12904

Researching austerity – image by India Joseph

Sharing austerity findings and insights

In this section we discuss different dissemination methods as an ongoing, collective and change-making practice. We consider the role of sharing findings and insights as a means of resisting austerity, ways of amplifying diverse voices and experiences, and the role of research legacies.

Sharing as an ongoing practice

Just as prioritising and sharing opportunities to take part in research on austerity are important, so too are sharing findings and results as they emerge. Sharing findings about austerity can take lots of different forms, though we recommend thinking about sharing as an ongoing practice. This is part of understanding austerity as an enduring condition with both personal and societal impacts, meaning that sharing findings should also be ongoing to challenge the uneven outcomes of austerity. Rather than assuming that research projects follow a neat and orderly exercise of ideas, methods, empirics and findings, it is helpful to instead see this as a messy (and fun!) process. For instance, preliminary findings can come quite early in the research process, and if they do, researchers may benefit from sharing them with interested parties. Furthermore, and in line with the ethical issues discussed in section 3, there are imperatives for researchers to share their findings about austerity with participants as well as with wider groups to elicit change.

Sharing ongoing research findings should ideally be achieved through accessible means and by offering various ways for audiences to engage with them. For example, we have curated our project website as a key infrastructure for sharing ongoing findings in the form of writing, talks and events, which are then uploaded regularly, with full details provided. We see this as important in terms of the transparency of our work, as well as for ensuring that we can influence discussions and processes within public, policy and practice with the most up-to-date information. Our project is also funded by UKRI (a public research funding body), which means that we are committed to providing our findings in an open access format. Sharing findings without financial barriers to access is especially important given austerity as the context of our research. On our website, and promoted further via social media, readers can find a tab specifically for our sharing of research results, which includes papers, books or reports written that communicate some of our findings (with links to these materials), talks and lectures where we discuss our findings (including video links where possible), media engagements where we have drawn upon findings, and a tab for public sharing of blogs, zines, and podcasts using our findings. Some of these are also provided in alternative languages (such as Italian and Spanish, to ensure a wider readership). This means that participants and audiences do not have to wait until the end of the project to learn about our findings.

Sharing as collective practice

Sharing research findings, like the findings themselves, can be a collective practice. This collective response to austerity can help to mobilise others to learn from our findings, or even to share their own findings. Sharing findings in collective ways can also increase the audience and oversight of our research and strengthen the arguments we propose if there are similarities with others' findings. This can be especially important when speaking truth to power, as it were; when pushing back against established practices, policies and social norms. Austerity is a good example of this, considering how normalised it has become in certain political contexts. This then means that collectively sharing findings about austerity can also serve as a form of enabling people to access resources denied by austerity policies.

Sharing as a collective practice can also be a way to ensure that a diverse range of experiences, opinions and voices are included and amplified. For our project, we have created a seminar series to promote and showcase some of the most cutting-edge research in the field, and especially to support the work of early career scholars. The seminars have all been online to ensure accessibility, including a panel of speakers to develop a sense of collectivism and community, and we have also recently introduced a blog series (hosted on our website) to share austerity-related researching findings further.

Sharing to create change

Sharing research findings about austerity can also be one way to elicit change, at a range of scales and across different sectors. We have found that sharing

our ongoing and emerging findings with policymakers has meant that our work can shape policy as it is being made, debated or revised. Examples can include feeding into public calls for policy consultations, such as to the House of Commons, All Party Parliamentary Groups, or for regional government strategies. In our case, we have responded to calls for evidence from a parliamentary committee, leading to our findings being published online and used in the revision of current policy concerning young people and the urban environment. We have also engaged closely with regional and local governments, which enabled us to comment on anti-poverty strategies as they were being devised, having a direct impact on their focus, shape and contents.

Changes might also be created in practice, whether by sharing examples of best practices (such as with this guide!). Methods how-to-guides can also be an excellent way to share how change is created in the doing as well as in the results of research. There are many ways to get involved in sharing research findings with practitioners, such as sharing materials, tools and skills. We have delivered free community training, created resources, and also supported community researchers to co-develop programmes for future research. Alongside this, public views and understandings can also be shared by, and in turn shape, research findings. As a team, we have experience in various ways of sharing our research findings creatively, such as through exhibitions, animations, illustrations, gifs, podcasts, and more. For our current project, we are creating an online exhibition, working with a playwright to develop a theatrical production, and investigating ways of sharing our data via archives. We will also be working to develop fun ways for the public to feedback on these outputs, as well as to feed into their development where possible.

Summary

- Sharing research findings on austerity can be an ongoing process, where insights can be gleaned from early in the process, rather than only at the end of a project.
- haring research findings can be done in collective ways, whether through consolidating findings or by amplifying and supporting the findings of others. This can be especially important when resisting the impacts of socio-economic change, such as austerity.
- Sharing research findings with policymakers, practitioners and public audiences can be a way to create change and offers ways to ensure that insights are engaged with across different scales.

Further readings

- Austerity Alters and Inspire Women Oldham (2023). Collaborative Zine-Making How-To-Guide. Methods for Change Library, Aspect. https://aspect.ac.uk/about/aspect-funded-projects/methods-for-change/methods-for-change-research-methodologies/
- Hall, S.M., Ackerley, E., Briggs, A., Fenton, L. and Leyva del Rio, S. (2023) Geographies of, in and with austerity. RGS-IBG Research Guides. https://www.rgs.org/research/research-publications/guides-for-researchers/all-guides-for-researchers/geographies-of-in-and-with-austerity
- Sou, G. and Hall, S.M. (2022) Comics and Zines for Creative Research Impact. ACME. https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/2120

Image: Sharing findings and insights as project legacy - Image by India Joseph

Solidarity and care: Keeping well whilst researching austerity

Within a context of neoliberalism permeating many aspects of everyday life, not least university structures, in this final section we reflect on relationships of solidarity and care, and praxis within and outside of the research team. We give examples of working in solidarity and centreing an ethics of care and we reflect here on how this works in practice, including sharing specific examples.

Solidarity in neoliberal contexts

In the contemporary British landscape, austerity's pervasive influence extends into all facets of life. Notably austerity measures are characterised by severe cuts to public sector funding, affecting our academic work environments. Within the academic sphere, these cutbacks manifest as reduced research funding, deteriorating infrastructure, declining real wages and a rise in precarious employment. These conditions mirror broader societal challenges of precarity, insecurity, and individualism, deeply affecting both staff and students. As researchers examining the impact of austerity across Europe, we recognise how these neoliberal logics shape our daily experiences within academia and beyond.

In response to these challenges, we advocate for fostering solidarity and care within academic institutions. By prioritising reciprocal networks of support, we aim to enhance well-being, belonging, and purpose both within academia and in the broader community. In this sense, we believe that it is important to share our experiences navigating institutional pressures while nurturing solidarity and care within our research team. This includes solidarity through relationships, ideas, and practices, and acknowledging that while these initiatives may not bring about radical change on their own, they offer a framework for cultivating solidarity within the constraints of an austere environment.

Mutuality

Solidarity thrives within relationships characterised by mutual support, unity, and trust. At the outset of our project, we prioritised building connections and fostering a sense of community among team members. Through open dialogue and shared activities, we created space for individuals to express their values and experiences. By openly discussing challenges and committing to collective action, we try to challenge the competitive ethos perpetuated by neoliberal academia. This inclusive approach helped alleviate feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, particularly for early-career researchers navigating a precarious job market. By promoting transparency and fairness in resource allocation and opportunities, we established a supportive environment conducive to collaboration and mutual growth.

Solidarity is also cultivated through the exchange and development of shared ideas. Collaborative planning and co-production of project goals allowed us to contribute meaningfully and shape the direction of our research. Shared experiences, such as field visits and retreats, provided opportunities for reflection and collective growth. By creating space for creativity, feedback, and personal development, we challenged the productivity-driven culture of academia and emphasised the importance of relationships over outputs. Encouraging personal development alongside collective endeavours fostered a sense of purpose and belonging among team members, enhancing the quality of our work and overall well-being.

Institutionalising solidarity and care

Mutual support and care play a crucial role in institutionalising solidarity and care within academic settings. Despite institutional constraints, we have implemented measures to prioritise mental health and well-being, such as designated half-days, project pause weeks and collective coaching sessions. By normalising self-care and advocating for flexible policies, we sought to create a supportive environment that values the well-being of team members. These practices underscored the importance of community care and solidarity in mitigating the adverse effects of austerity and neoliberalism.

In navigating the challenges of neoliberal academia, fostering solidarity and care is essential for both challenging the structures that erode our working conditions and wellbeing. While systemic change is necessary to address underlying inequalities, small-scale initiatives can serve as building blocks for a more equitable and compassionate academic

environment. By placing emphasis on relationships, ideas, and practices rooted in solidarity and care, we strive to create a more inclusive and supportive academic community. As we continue our work, we remain committed to challenging oppressive structures and advocating for transformative change within our institution.

Summary points

- In academia persistent austerity manifests into reduced research funds, declining infrastructure, stagnant wages, and precarious employment, impacting our material conditions and mental health.
- Fostering solidarity through relationships, ideas, and practices, acknowledging can help us keep well while navigating austere constraints.
- While systemic change is essential for addressing structural inequalities in academia, small-scale initiatives are vital for nurturing a caring and fair academic environment.

Further reading

- Ackerley, E, Briggs, A, Fenton, L, Hall, SM and Leyva del Río (2023) Solidarity and Care in Neoliberal Universities, Agora. https://agora-magazine.org/solidariteit-en-zorg-in-neoliberale-universiteiten/
- Maisuria, A., & Cole, M. (2017). The neoliberalization of higher education in England: An alternative is possible. Policy Futures in Education, 15(5): 602–619. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210317719792
- Puãwei Collective (2019) Assembling disruptive practice in the neoliberal university: an ethics of care. Geografiska Annaler: Series B, 101(1): 33 – 43. 10.1080/04353684.2019.1568201

Thank you for reading this guide. For more information on our project, see: https://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgan-centre/research/austerityalters/

Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)
1 Kensington Gore London SW7 2AR

T +44 (0)20 7591 3000
E rhed@rgs.org
W www.rgs.org