Cambridge ESRC DTP Interdisciplinary Studentship 2021: Early-life and intergenerational effects on later-life outcomes over the long-term

The University of Cambridge ESRC Doctoral Training Partnership [DTP] is pleased to offer an interdisciplinary studentship available for admission in October 2021. The studentship will be a three-year doctoral programme and will be co-supervised by Dr Alice Reid (The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, Department of Geography) and Professor Susan Ozanne (Wellcome-MRC Institute of Metabolic Science - Metabolic Research Laboratories). DTP students will acquire a unique set of skills that will equip them for high-profile careers as leading social scientists, in academia or in other government, industrial, commercial and third sector organisations, either in the UK or elsewhere.

Project description

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased public awareness of disparities in vulnerability, underlying health conditions, and ultimately survival. Some of these disparities are affected by differential exposure linked to structural inequalities in society, but vulnerability is also shaped by an individual's early-life conditions and possibly by their parents' circumstances. Understanding such influences have therefore never been more important.

The study of how, why, and in what circumstances conditions in early life affect fertility, health and survival in adulthood/old age and how these are passed across generations is studied by many disciplines from the medical to the social sciences. The idea that conditions in utero can trigger developmental switches that shape long term health, originated from epidemiological studies carried out around 30 years ago by. This has been termed the Developmental Origins of Health and Disease. For example social scientists have examined whether cohorts exposed to exogenous shocks such as the 1918-19 influenza pandemic during early life end up with lower educational attainment, income and health in later life, while biological scientists have investigated the mechanisms governing how these might operate, often taking an evolutionary perspective. While many of these studies reference relevant work in other fields, there is considerable scope for better integration and interdisciplinary knowledge exchange. On the one hand studies in the medical sciences are constrained in the questions they can ask by the paucity of long-term and intergenerational longitudinal studies, and on the other hand, social scientists could pay deeper attention to the mechanisms driving the correlations they investigate. There is much still to be learnt. In particular the existence of such effects in past populations with different demographic regimes has rarely been investigated, and the different contexts of such studies could help further elucidate mechanisms.

The project will bring a scientific understanding of the mechanisms for early life and intergenerational effects to the demographic study of existing historic datasets to investigate the existence and patterning of these effects over the long-term. These datasets include the Cambridge Group Family Reconstitutions (reconstructions of families from 1528-1850 using baptism, marriage and/or burial records) which have un-tapped potential for studying intergenerational patterns, and Health Visitor records for Derbyshire which include cohorts of children exposed to the 1918-19 influenza pandemic in utero and infancy who were followed through early childhood. The latter provide an extremely rare individual level data set for topical research into the effects of pandemic exposure. The precise research questions will be developed by the successful candidate, under the guidance of the supervisors, however such

questions might include the effect of economic and environmental shocks at key life stages on later health, survival and childbearing; the possible intergenerational transmission of fertility and of survival patterns; and the way these effects differed across time and space.

Cambridge ESRC DTP studentships are open to all students who meet the required academic conditions. For this position, a masters degree in a relevant discipline (eg demography, epidemiology or similar) is required.

An ESRC DTP studentship will cover Home rate fees and provide £15,285 p.a. in living costs (current rates). DTP students also receive a personal allowance for additional training costs, and can apply for further funding to pursue fieldwork, academic exchange, and collaboration with non-academic partner organisations.

What to do next

You can find out more about the Cambridge ESRC DTP at: https://www.esrcdtp.group.cam.ac.uk/about/onoffer and read about some of the opportunities that will be available to you.

You can find out more about the Department of Geography at https://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/, The Cambridge Group for the History of Population at https://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/ and the Wellcome-MRC Institute of Metabolic Science, Metabolic Research Laboratories at https://www.mrl.ims.cam.ac.uk/.

Please address any questions about this studentship to Dr Alice Reid at amr1001@cam.ac.uk.

Applications for this studentship should be made to the Department of Geography. Please go to our Graduate Admissions Portal to start your application and make sure you indicate that you wish to be considered for funding (tick both UK Research Councils and Cambridge Trusts) in the Funding section of the online application form. Please also make clear in your application that you wish to be considered for this particular studentship.

The closing date for applications will be Thursday 7th January 2021.