



Abortion stigma and the workplace

**Faculty of Wellbeing Education
and Language Studies (WELS)**

Call for PhD projects starting in October 2024

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Project description

School

Health, Wellbeing and Social Care

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Research areas

The project to which the PhD will be aligned has two areas of focus:

1) Challenging Abortion Stigma

Challenging Abortion Stigma is central to normalising abortion. Our vision is to normalise abortion in all four UK nations and inform global anti-stigma

activities. Challenging deeply entrenched abortion stigma is difficult but important. Undergoing abortion is not unusual, with approximately 180,000 abortions occurring annually in England and Wales. However, abortion is often shrouded in secrecy and silence. While 1 in 3 UK women undergo abortion in their lifetime, many do not discuss their experiences openly, both evidencing and exacerbating stigma and shame. Our earlier research indicated that UK women feel isolated around abortion and are unaware of its ordinariness. We formed a consortium of academics, charities, and abortion providers, which has taken initial steps toward our vision.

2) Early pregnancy endings and the workplace

Our vision is to tackle workplace inequalities for people experiencing early pregnancy endings. We want to see workplace policies in place that ensure employees receive equitable support regardless of the type of early pregnancy ending. We aim to improve such organisational support by providing evidence-based guidance and resources for employees, line managers and HR professionals. Abortion and miscarriage are common experiences, with one abortion and one miscarriage for every three live births in England and Wales. Moreover, as our research has already shown, dividing these two experiences is unhelpful, particularly when thinking through the impact on working lives.

Methodology

For area 1 on abortion stigma, we co-develop workshops using qualitative participatory research. Our proposal is to work in partnership with people affected by stigma, and with artists, community partners on a programme of

research, engagement, and creative outputs. We aim for our work to produce a new methodology for understanding and addressing 'sensitive' issues which challenge assumptions about these sensitivities and unpicks the norms which frame them this way. The project draws on the strengths of a highly experienced research team and wider collective, with expertise spanning sociology, linguistics, education, healthcare provision, medical humanities, social policy and visual arts. At present the project does not include in-work abortion stigma and we would be very interested in a PhD to work alongside this project on abortion stigma as a workplace issue.

For area 2 on early pregnancy endings, we have undertaken a pilot survey with respondents from the Four Nations (n = 309) who had had a miscarriage/abortion whilst in employment. We are now planning the development of practitioner-oriented guidelines as outlined above; and an online Knowledge Exchange (KE) event to disseminate our findings and garner feedback on the first good draft of the guidelines. Our project would greatly benefit from additional research on abortion stigma as a workplace issue as there is such limited available evidence on this issue.

Contribution

Bringing both these studies together is key in tackling workplace inequalities. At present, where workplace policies exist in relation to early pregnancy endings, these often relate to miscarriage policy, which does not account for abortion and centres around bereavement. The framing of leave entitlement in this way leads to stigmatisation around 'deserving' and 'undeserving' pregnancy endings. The physical process of miscarriage and abortion are similar with

heavy bleeding and often considerable pain. We know from research that individual responses to both miscarriage and abortion vary greatly, but that internalised stigma is amplified by secrecy and silence.

As noted above, the second study has already undertaken a survey of experiences of miscarriage and abortion in the workplace with, unsurprisingly, women experiencing abortion being less likely to disclose at work and to take medically certified time off. Women experiencing abortion also took fewer days leave than those experiencing miscarriage. We have also published a [journal article](#) which analyses the way in which legislation on employment leave in England and Wales creates different categories of personhood for parents and the embryo or foetus and what the implications are of each of these categories.

Websites

Challenging Abortion Stigma: <https://societal-challenges.open.ac.uk/challenges/challenging-abortion-stigma-/211>
<https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FS011587%2F1>
<https://www.open.ac.uk/research/news/demystifying-contraception>
<https://folklore-society.com/event/fertility-folklore-and-the-reproductive-body/>

Early pregnancy endings and the workplace: <https://societal-challenges.open.ac.uk/challenges/early-pregnancy-endings-and-the-workplace-/140>

PhD project

We invite applications for a PhD project to support our work on challenging abortion stigma in the workplace. We envisage the doctoral researcher would undertake a qualitative study on experiences of abortion while in employment. At present, there is only one known published study in this area in the UK, which focusses on abortion as a trade union issue. A dedicated doctoral researcher has the opportunity to make a significant contribution to this under-researched area.

