

Sample Research Proposals

You will find here two examples of proposals for postgraduate research from the Department of Social Policy and Criminology. They both give good indication of the sorts of things that need to be included. The first, on fathering after divorce or separation, represents first thoughts on the proposed topic, but sets out some clear interests and demonstrates how it will relate for existing debates. The second, which is focused on police governance, represents a fuller proposal that was developed after the student had registered and had spent time with the supervisor working up the ideas and the methodology. It gives you some idea of the level you should aim for (but obviously the better developed a proposal is, the better, regardless of any changes that you may wish to make in discussion with your supervisors after registration). Please include a reference list at the end of every proposal.

Research Proposal: Example One

‘Working At It’

An exploration of the perceptions and experiences of negotiating employment and caring responsibilities of fathers in post-divorce/separation co-parenting situations.

Introduction:

Despite some thirty years of social scientific research into fatherhood and masculinity, and the recent increase in the public and political ‘visibility’ of fathers, key researchers such as Lamb (2004), Morgan (2002) and Lewis (2000) continue to argue that our understanding of men’s experiences as fathers remains limited. “There are substantial gaps in our current knowledge about fatherhood” (Lewis, 2000). One such gap is in the relative lack of empirical insight into the experiences of working class fathers. In theoretical terms fatherhood is increasingly recognised as complex and dynamic, as an identity and a ‘practice’ which is played out in a range of social contexts and which is both enabled and constrained by (often-contradictory) social institutions and norms. More research is needed that attempts to chart the processes by which men perceive and negotiate their identity and activity as fathers. In addition, a growing recognition of the importance and ‘reality’ of post-divorce parenting has focused both academic and political attention on the roles, involvement and identity of fathers after divorce or separation.

My research will contribute to a growing sociology of ‘family practice’, building on existing fatherhood research and adding to the insightful and innovative work on post divorce parenting developed by sociologists such as Rosalind Edwards, Simon Duncan, Jane Ribbens McCarthy, Carol Smart and Judith Glover. In different ways such writers have sought to present a more accurate and grounded knowledge of family life together with a critical investigation into both contemporary parenting and, importantly, the social policy and legal frameworks which surround this. Their research emphasises the complex, often moral, dilemmas involved in making and re-making families (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards & Gillies, 2003) and asserts the creativity of family members in such processes. Also offered is an arguably more constructive approach to divorce/separation

suggesting that it may provide a catalyst for thinking and acting differently about parenting and about gender roles. In this way it could be that divorced/separated fathers, together with many lone-mothers, have the potential (not necessarily by choice) to challenge the enduring gendered model for organising earning and caring, and are therefore sociologically and politically significant. My study seeks to investigate the practice and processes of negotiating employment and caring responsibilities for divorced or separated fathers who have regular physical care of their children. It will focus on the experiences and perceptions of fathers' in relation to their roles and identity as fathers, their relationships with their children and their working lives.

Research Questions:

In the light of the above discussion my work aims to contribute to the process of more accurately documenting what families and family members actually 'do' as a basis for more appropriate and egalitarian social policy and to offer an analysis of the experiences and practice of post-divorce/separation fatherhood. Broadly, my research questions will be organised to investigate three main areas:

1. Fathering work: How do fathers' describe and experience the work of being a father after divorce/separation? What aspects of their roles and relationships with their children generate satisfaction or dissatisfaction? How does post-divorce fatherhood compare with pre-divorce experience?

These questions will involve an engagement with, and evaluation of, current research on fatherhood and on post-divorce parenting.

2. Role adaption/perception: How do fathers negotiate and manage carrying out the work of fatherhood after divorce/separation and what are the factors influencing such negotiations? To what extent do such processes involve questions of moral identity, rationalisation or presentation?

These questions will involve a consideration and application of theoretical and moral philosophical literature on gender, rationality, and ethics.

3. Orientation to Paid Employment: To what extent and in what ways do men negotiate their orientation to paid employment alongside their position as fathers? Is divorce or separation a catalyst for thinking/acting differently about combining paid employment and unpaid caring work?

These questions will require consideration of the impact of differing occupational positions of men together with an examination of the range of sociological and non-sociological literature on 'life-work balance'.

Data Collection:

Because insight into post-divorce/separation fatherhood is limited and because of a commitment to a grounded approach to knowledge production in policy-relevant areas, my research will be inductive and iterative. It will consist predominantly of individual semi-structured interviews with fathers in post-divorce/separation situations, in a range of

occupations, who have regular physical care of their children. It will also involve more ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, informal group discussion and reflexive interviewing, as a mechanism to disseminate information about, and generate interest in, the research. An ethnographic approach offers particular opportunities to 'get close' to fatherhood as a routine activity and as an aspect of identity, and could provide the tools to explore father's perspectives in some of the contexts in which they are lived.

My sample will only include fathers' who have been divorced/separated for at least one year, in order to be attentive to the emotional distress involved in adjustment to post-divorce roles (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). Occupation, organisational culture and employment status will also be key variables in order to explore orientation to work, father identity and levels of control over organising earning and caring responsibilities. There will be a specific focus on self-employment as it applies to a wide range of occupations, with arguably different (gendered) organisational cultures, and may present particular constraints or flexibility for working life. Overall I will be developing a theoretical sample from the geographical region of East Anglia

There are a number of possible contexts for obtaining participants for this research. I intend to approach a range of organisations/places of work formally, but also to try and develop a snowball sample through work-related or informal contacts. This may allow me to engage fathers via social or leisure settings. This strategy, in itself, I feel would be revealing in terms of the extent to which fatherhood is experienced or negotiated between men's own social and contextual networks. I have also established some initial contacts with Fathers' Workers in agencies such as 'Sure Start' which are likely to be particularly helpful in reaching working class fathers.

Data Analysis:

In general terms, the three main research questions will provide an important analytical framework for studying the data collected. This will entail exploring the structural, cultural and subjective dimensions and implications of the interview material. Given that my research is largely exploratory and is committed to an inductive approach, the data analysis will require an open and reflexive engagement with existing literature in order to allow for the emergence of concepts or participant terms, rather than a 'theory-testing' strategy. My analytic approach then, will involve many of the processes described as 'grounded theorising' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I aim to produce an account of the personal & practical processes involved in adjusting to post-divorce/separation fatherhood, and to develop a typology of strategies and/or orientations towards earner and carer roles. Whilst I may not be able to make highly generalised claims, I will offer a model(s) for understanding post-divorce/separation fatherhood and its wider social and political significance, which could be expanded or developed. However, because of its experiential nature, I cannot treat my data only as a resource or as a reflection of an 'objective reality'. My analysis will need to involve coding on different levels, about both the phenomenon being described (fatherhood) and the perspective(s) shaping the account given. Treating the interviews as both a resource and a topic is another aspect of a reflexive research style, which I believe to be important and valuable.

Research Proposal: Example Two

Force to Service? Consumerist Identities in Contemporary Police Governance

Introduction

One of the fundamental issues in contemporary social policy is the changing relationship between the state, in its effort to meet social needs and tackle social problems, and the recipients of state welfare.

The shifting discursive boundaries between state and citizen form part of a general process through which the public arena is being reconfigured (Lewis, 2000). Shaped by the ideology of managerialism – as first made manifest in the 1980's in the form of a New Public Management and, more recently, through the auspices of New Labour's 'modernisation' agenda – the provision and delivery of welfare has become increasingly structured in terms of efficiency, competition, partnership and markets (Clarke, Gewirtz and McLaughlin, 2000; Clarke and Newman, 1997; Newman, 2000).

The reconstruction of state-citizen relationships is resulting in the welfare subject being reinvented as a 'consumer' of services. The image of the consumer is of recent origin in relation to social welfare arrangements (Clarke, 1998) and yet as a form of representation – the *homo oeconomicus* of neo-liberal theory – it has attained a position of dominance.

One of the main purposes of this PhD proposal is to examine the changing imagery of 'the people' and their place in relation to social welfare.

The intersection of 'welfare reconstruction' and 'consumerism' may be explored via a number of policy areas (e.g. health services, education, social work, and so on). This proposal shall focus on one particular area, namely policing. The research aims to examine the development of consumerist relations in policing. It is conceived as an exploration of how 'the consumer' as a form of imagery functions symbolically, representing a series of relations that link the police to 'the people' and state. The issue of the reconstruction of policing identities through consumerist imagery, articulated by New Public Management and modernisation ideologies, represents one of the most central questions for policing and yet has received far less attention than its significance deserves (McLaughlin and Murji, 2001).

The empirical focus of the research will be strategies of restorative justice, as articulated by Thames Valley Police. Recent developments in restorative justice constitute a radical realignment in police practices, resulting in a more holistic and multi-level approach (involving all forms of police 'consumer', including victims, offenders, families, local authorities and members of the business community). In this regard, Thames Valley offers a unique case of a self-styled 'model' of modern policing and is considered to be one of the most innovative forces in the country (see, for example, their *Restorative Justice* programme, 2001). Concerned with these recent reforms in policing organisation – with political, practical and policy changes – this research project is necessarily interdisciplinary in approach, involved in the terrain where social policy, political science and criminology meet.

Theoretical Contribution

This proposal is concerned with the nature of policing as a form and site of governance, involved in the construction of consumerist identities. It will analyse the shift from *police* to *policing*. These reforms, resulting from New Labour's strategy of statutory crime prevention partnerships, have led to the emergence of a new typology of policing (Loader and Walker, 2001). In this new 'service' led, 'community safety' model the police share expertise, information and resources with a network of local authorities, probation services and health authorities, in co-ordination with local business and community groups. Such new relationships – shaped by a neo-liberal discursive environment in which crime control services have become increasingly commodified (Johnson, 1992; Loader, 1999) – have led to difficulty in the identification of something distinctly marked out as 'policing'. A number of authors have examined the theoretical underpinnings of this new approach to policing, yet little by way of actual empirical research has been done in this area.

With the idea of "partnership" emerging as central (i.e. as a result of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998), this proposal is concerned with policing as a strategy of 'joined-up government'. Following the work of Foucault (1975, 1994), the research will stress the importance of thinking about policing as a form of governance; that is, as a complex, contested and fragile ensemble aimed at shaping forms of conduct among the broader population. Most importantly, as an investigation into the network of power relations, the research will examine the multi-level governance of policing: the interconnected structural and institutional aspects of police organisation and practice (e.g. in terms of national policy and local providers, and by way of design, management and implementation).

Research Aims and Objectives

Overall Aim:

This research seeks to investigate techniques through which contemporary policing create, regulate and link subjects as consumers, and the particular combinations of power, knowledge and expertise on which such policing techniques rest (Neocleous, M., 2000).

Specific Objectives:

- To analyse tensions in police governance, focusing on conflicting forms of imagery in the realignment between policing as a 'force' and as a 'service' (Waddington, P., 1999).
- To examine policing as a mode of multi-level governance, considering the effects of recent reforms in terms of the police's own sense of identity as a form of consumption.
- To empirically explore the interrelations between the police, 'the people' and the state through the workings of restorative justice.

Method:

This project will advance an ethnographic methodology, combining a number of in-depth qualitative approaches (Hammersley, 1995; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In the first phase: (1) policy documents, (2) relevant legislation and (3) the political impetus behind the emergence of new forms of policing will be analysed. Next, a number of focus groups in Milton Keynes, and other Thames Valley Police areas will be held in order to ascertain the level of cultural acceptance and beliefs about the service-led, consumerist approach (Westmarland, 2001). An extensive series of ‘open’ interviews will then proceed with senior police officers and other key players, such as members of the Local Police Authority (Sapsford, 1996). The final phase of the research will consist of substantial periods of observational research of police work, through investigation of Thames Valley Police Restorative Justice programme.

Opportunity:

There is currently a specific window of opportunity for this project. The work is not only timely in its own terms, in that the changes it examines are in need of rigorous analysis, but also in terms of access to a key police force with a Chief Constable with a reputation for being highly innovative and forward thinking. The new Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police, Peter Neyroud, in addition to local police chiefs at Milton Keynes and Aylesbury are willing to allow the research applicant access to data and observations of officers and other resources needed to complete the project. As such it would be useful to make the most of this unique offer before other universities / researchers seize the opportunity.

Ethical Issues:

Given the nature of this project, there are certain ethical considerations that need to be taken into consideration. In the first instance, all participants will be treated with respect and courtesy. A strategy of ‘informed consent’ will be adopted, with the aim and methods of the research being made clear to all participants. The confidentiality and anonymity of individual respondents will be assured, and consent will be sought for the interviews to be audio-recorded. Finally, a report – detailing certain results of the project – will be provided to Thames Valley Police.

Thematic Categories:

The proposed research fits into the Social Policy Discipline’s thematic priorities (see the Open University web-site, 2003). The theme multi-level governance is central to this research whereby the interrelationships between policing structures and processes will be considered in terms of the realignment in the fluidity of power networks involved in the design, management and provision of police services. Multi-level governance will be explored through analysis of the politics of ‘partnership’, which forms part of New Labour’s commitment to the modernisation of public services (see, for example, the White Paper Modernising Government, 1999). In this regard, multi-level governance serves as a narrative for understanding the changing relations in social welfare generally (Newman, J., 2001) and more specifically, the complex tensions within and between the various tiers in the apparatus of ‘police government’. This research will also enable a greater understanding of how the control of police organisational design and co-

ordination is being subjected to the ideology of consumerism, in the social context of the remaking of the British welfare state.

Timetable

October 2003 – May 2004: (1) Extensive literature review on governance, consumerism, and current reforms in policing; (2) Arrange specifics in relation to access.

June 2004 – September 2005:

(1) The undertaking of a series of focus groups in Thames Valley Police areas so as to ascertain the level of cultural acceptance and beliefs about the consumerist approach to policing;

(2) Interviews with key individuals related to their views on the nature, applicability and desirability of consumer-oriented policing;

(3) Observation of police work, through investigation of Thames Valley restorative justice strategies.

October 2005 – September 2006:

Writing up of research.

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