

## Sample research proposals

Here you will find two examples of postgraduate research proposals from the Department of Social Policy and Criminology. They both give good indications of the kinds of things to include. The first, on the father after divorce or separation, represents the first thoughts on the proposed topic, but lays out some clear interests and shows how it will relate to existing debates. The second, which focuses on police governance, represents a more complete proposal that was developed after the student had enrolled and spent time with the supervisor working on ideas and methodology. This gives you some idea of the level you should be aiming for (but obviously the better a proposal is developed the better, regardless of any changes you may wish to make in discussion with your supervisors after registration). Please include a reference list at the end of each proposal.

### Research proposal: First example

#### 'work on it'

#### **An exploration of fathers' perceptions and experiences of negotiating employment and caregiving responsibilities in post-divorce/separation co-parenting situations.**

#### **Presentation:**

Despite nearly thirty years of social scientific research on fatherhood and masculinity, and the recent increase in the public and political 'visibility' of fathers, leading scholars such as Lamb (2004), Morgan (2002) and Lewis (2000) continue to argue that the meaning of our knowledge of men's experiences as fathers remains limited. "There are substantial gaps in our current knowledge about fatherhood" (Lewis, 2000). One such gap is the relative lack of empirical knowledge on the experiences of working-class fathers.

In theoretical terms, fatherhood is increasingly recognized as complex and dynamic, as an identity and a 'practice' which plays out in a variety of social contexts and which is enabled and constrained by (often contradictory) social institutions and norms. More research is needed that attempts to describe the processes by which men perceive and negotiate their identity and activity as fathers. Furthermore, a growing recognition of the importance and 'reality' of post-divorce parenting has focused academic and policy attention on the roles, involvement and identity of fathers following 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 various ways, such writers have sought to present a more accurate and grounded knowledge of family life, together with a critical inquiry into both contemporary parenting and, more importantly, the social policies and legal frameworks that underpin it. Their research highlights the complex, often moral, dilemmas involved in making and remaking families (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards & Gillies, 2003) and affirms the creativity of family members in such processes. An arguably more constructive approach to divorce/separation is also offered

suggesting that it may provide a catalyst for thinking and acting differently about parenting and about gender roles. It may thus be that divorced/separated fathers, along with many single mothers, have the potential (not necessarily by choice) to challenge the stable gender model for the organization of income and care, and therefore are sociologically and politically important. My study aims to investigate the practice and processes of negotiating employment and caregiving responsibilities for divorced or separated fathers who have regular physical care for their children. It will focus on fathers' experiences and perceptions of their roles and identities as fathers, their relationships with their children and their working lives.

### **Research questions:**

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

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

These questions will include an engagement with and evaluation of current research on fatherhood and parenting after divorce.

**2. Role adaptation/perception:** How do fathers negotiate and manage fathering work after divorce/ separation and what are the factors that influence such negotiations? To what extent do such processes involve issues of moral identity, rationalization or representation?

These questions will include an examination and application of the theoretical and moral philosophical literature on gender, rationality and ethics.

**3. Orientation towards paid employment:** To what extent and in what ways do men negotiate their orientation towards paid employment alongside their position as fathers? Is divorce or separation a catalyst for thinking/ acting differently about the combination of paid employment and unpaid care work?

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

### **Data collection:**

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

professions, who have regular physical care for their children. It will also include more methods ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, informal group discussion and reflexive interviews, as a mechanism to disseminate information and generate interest in research. An ethnographic approach offers special opportunities to approach fatherhood as a routine activity and as an aspect of identity, and may provide the means to explore father's perspectives in some of the contexts in which they live.

My sample will only include fathers who have been divorced/separated for at least one year, so that they are attentive to the emotional distress involved in adjusting to roles after divorce (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). Profession, organizational culture and employment status will also be key variables for it explored work orientation, father identity, and levels of control over the organization of income and responsibilities of care.

There will be a particular focus on self-employment as it applies to a wide range of occupations, with different (gendered) organizational cultures and may present particular constraints or flexibility for working life. Overall, I will develop a theoretical sample from the geographical region of East Anglia. There are a number of possible contexts for recruiting participants for this research. I intend to approach a number of organizations/workplaces formally, but also try to develop a snowball sample through work-related or informal contacts. This can allow me to engage fathers through social or leisure settings. This strategy, in itself, I think, would be revealing in terms of the extent to which fatherhood is experienced or negotiated within men's social and contextual networks. I have also made some initial contacts with fathers' workers in agencies such as Sure Start which are likely to be particularly useful 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 require exploring the structural, cultural and subjective dimensions and implications of interview material. Since my research is primarily exploratory and committed to an inductive approach, data analysis will require an open and reflexive engagement with existing literature in order to allow eliciting participants' concepts or terms, rather than a 'theory testing' strategy. . My analytical approach then, it will involve many of the processes described as "grounded theorizing" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I aim to create an account of the personal and practical processes involved in adjusting to fatherhood after divorce/separation and develop a typology of strategies and/or orientations towards the roles of earner and caretaker. Although I may not be able to highly generalized claims, I will offer a model(s) for understanding post-divorce/separation fatherhood and the importance of its wider social and political context, which can be expanded or developed. However, due to its nature experimentally, I cannot treat my data only as a source or as a reflection of an 'objective reality'. ANALYSIS mine will have to include coding at different levels, both for the phenomenon being described (fatherhood) and for the point of view(s) that shape the narrative given. Treating interviews as a source and a subject is another aspect of a reflexive research style, which I believe is important and valuable.

Research proposal: Second example

Duty to serve?

Consumer identities in contemporary police governance

presentation

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

The shifting of discursive boundaries between state and citizen is part of a general process through which the public arena is being reconfigured (Lewis, 2000). Shaped by the ideology of managerialism – as it first emerged in the 1980s in the form of New Public Management and, more recently, through 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 relations is resulting in the reinvention of the welfare subject 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 economicus of neoliberal theory - it has achieved a position of dominance.

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

The intersection of 'welfare reconstruction' and 'consumerism' can be explored through a range of policy areas (eg health services, education, social work, and so on). This proposal will focus on a specific area, namely policing. The research aims to examine the development of consumer relations in the police. It is conceived as an exploration of how the 'consumer' as a form of image functions symbolically, representing a series of relationships linking the police to 'the people' and the state. The issue of reconstructing police identities through consumer images, articulated by New Public Management and modernization ideologies, represents one of the most central issues for policing and yet has received much less attention than its importance deserves (McLaughlin and Murji, 2001).

The empirical focus of the research will be restorative justice strategies as articulated by Thames Valley Police. Recent developments in restorative justice constitute a radical reorganization of policing practices, resulting in a more holistic and multi-level approach (including all forms of police 'consumers', including victims, offenders, families, local authorities and members of the business community). In this regard, Thames Valley provides 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 , 2001). In relation to these recent reforms for example, their Restorative Justice program in the organization of the police – with political, practical and policy changes – this research project terrain where social policy, political science and criminology is necessarily interdisciplinary in approach, involved in the meet.

### Theoretical contribution

This proposal is about the nature of policing as a form and place of governance, involved in the construction of consumer identities. It will analyze the transition from police to police. These reforms, resulting from New Labour's strategy of legal partnerships for crime prevention, 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 coordination 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 difficulties in identifying what clearly marked as 'police'.

A number of authors have examined the theoretical underpinnings of this new approach to policing, yet little in the way of actual empirical research has been done in this area.

With the idea of 'partnership' emerging as central (ie as a result of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998), this proposal is about policing as a 'joint government' strategy. Following the work of Foucault (1975, 1994), the research will emphasize the importance of thinking about policing as a form of governance; that is, as a complex, contested and fragile ensemble that aims to shape forms of behavior among the wider population. More importantly, as an inquiry into the web of power relations, the research will examine the multi-level governance of policing: the interrelated structural and institutional aspects of police organization and practice (eg in terms of national policies and local providers , and by way of design, management and implementation).

### Aims and objectives of the research

#### **General purpose:**

This research seeks to investigate the techniques through which contemporary policing creates, regulates and binds subjects as consumers, and the particular combinations of power, knowledge and expertise on which such policing techniques rely (Neocleous, M., 2000).

#### **Specific objectives:**

- To analyze the tensions in police governance, focusing on conflicting forms of imagery in the realignment between policing as 'force' and as 'service' (Waddington, P., 1999).
- To examine policing as a mode of governance at multiple levels, taking into account the effects of recent reforms on the understanding of police identity awareness as a form of consumption.
- Empirically explore the interrelationships between the police, 'the people' and the state through the operation of restorative justice.

#### **Method:**

This project will advance an ethnographic methodology, combining a range 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 analyzed. Subsequently, 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 consumer approach (Westmarland, 2001). An extensive series of 'open' interviews will then follow with senior police officers and other key players, such as members of the Local Police Authority (Sapsford, 1996). The final phase of research will consist of significant periods of observational research into police work, through the investigation of Thames Valley Police's Restorative Justice programme.

### **Opportunity:**

There is currently a specific window of opportunity for this project. The work is not only timely in its terms, in that the changes it considers need 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, as well as local police chiefs in Milton Keynes and Aylesbury are willing to allow the research applicant access to the records and observations of officers and other resources necessary to complete the project. As such, it would be beneficial 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 several ethical considerations that must be taken into account. First and foremost, all participants will be treated with respect and courtesy.

An 'informed consent' strategy will be adopted, with the purpose and methods of the research being made clear to all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity of individual respondents will be ensured and consent will be sought for interviews to be audio recorded. Finally, a report - detailing some of the outcomes of the project - will be provided to Thames Valley Police.

### **Thematic categories:**

The proposed research fits into the thematic priorities of the Social Policy Discipline (see Open University website, 2003). The theme of multi-level governance is central to this research, where the interrelationships between police structures and processes will be considered in terms of reorganizing the fluidity of power networks involved in the design, management and delivery of police services. Multi-level governance will be explored through analysis of 'partnership' policy, which is part of New Labour's commitment to modernizing public services (see, for example, White Paper on Government Modernisation, 1999). In this regard, multi-level governance serves as a narrative for understanding changing relationships in social welfare in general (Newman, J., 2001) and more specifically, the complex tensions within and between different levels in the apparatus of 'police government' '. This research will also enable a greater understanding of how police organizational design control and co-

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

business hours

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October 2003 – May 2004: (1) Extensive literature review on governance, consumerism and current police reforms; (2) Set specifics regarding access.

#### **June 2004 – September 2005:**

(1) Undertaking a series of focus groups in Thames Valley Police areas to determine the level of cultural acceptance and beliefs about the consumerist approach to policing;

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

(3) Observing the work of the police, through investigating the restorative justice strategies of the Thames Valley.

#### **October 2005 – September 2006:**

Research writing.

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