

Thesis Proposal Example

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

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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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