

Your PhD proposal

And how to structure it

SCHOOL OF APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY UCC

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You want to be called ‘Dr’

If you are reading this document you are likely interested in pursuing an advanced degree in Applied Psychology, probably at the University College Cork, Ireland. More specifically you are looking to undertake a PhD. This document sets out what our School expects from potential PhD candidates’ proposals. This document is important because it highlights what is minimally expected of prospective PhD students’ proposals. One of the first academic impressions you create is based partly but quite strongly on your ability to put together a PhD proposal.

The PhD proposal

The PhD proposal is not a quick-and-dirty summary of basic ideas. It is not, however, a fully developed plan of action either. We do not expect a full summary of the end product because it is likely that aspects of your research plan will change along the way. This is why it is called a ‘proposal’ because things can and very often do change, especially in the first year of your research programme. Although we acknowledge that change is likely, the proposal must still represent your intentions, and have sufficient detail to indicate the value, fit and feasibility of the work within the context of the School. Outlined below is what we expect to see when we read your PhD proposal.

The structure

The following headings are generic but at this early stage of your PhD research these headings should help you structure your proposal. Typically a proposal should be around 2500-3000 words in length. There is no hard-and-fast rule about this. A snappy proposal (1000 words) can be just as good as a longer one (3000 words). The important thing to ensure is that you are clear and unambiguous about what it is you wish to say and do. You must have the following headings in your proposal, preferably populated quite substantially.

Title

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Background and context**
- 3. Research question**
- 4. Research Objectives**
- 5. Methods**
- 6. Indicative content**
- 7. Scope of and Limits to the research**
- 8. Timeline**

References

An example

Title (A title that is clear and concise)

1. **Introduction** (roughly 500 words)
2. **Background and context** (roughly 500 words)
3. **Research question** (roughly 25-50 words)
4. **Research Objectives** (roughly 100 words)
5. **Methods** (roughly 150 words)
6. **Indicative content** (roughly 400 words)
7. **Scope of and Limits to the research** (roughly 120 words)
8. **Timeline** (roughly 100 words)

References (roughly 20-30 references)

Total word count is roughly 2000 words.

Here is an example of a typical PhD proposal.

Reference:

Sample PhD proposal - University of East London, United Kingdom. (url:

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/search/general/index.htm?q=Sample%20PhD%20proposal%20-%20University%20of%20East%20London>).

PhD Dissertation Proposal

“Everyone matters”: Why northern Non-Governmental Development Organisations engage with the socially excluded in their own communities.

15 June 2009

1. Introduction

In 1999 Gaventa concluded, as a result of his study of the links and learning between Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in the North and South, that many northern-based CBOs had not engaged with issues of power and poverty in their own communities in the global North. This would need to be rectified, he contends, for more equal partnerships to develop between northern and southern CBOs and if the views of each were to be “de-mythologized”.

Likewise, Malhotra (2000, p.663) issued a similar warning, proposing that if northern NGOs were to survive in the twenty-first century they must be:

“seriously and more substantially engaged with the poverty and social justice problems of their own countries, especially as these continue to escalate and become more explicit and visible”

Three subsequent events demonstrate that this advice has been taken up, whether or not as a direct consequence of it. Firstly, In 2003 Red Barnet (SCF Denmark) launched a ground-breaking report on child poverty in Denmark which called for the Danish government to undertake more research into child poverty and to end the different levels of benefits for refugees and Danish citizens (Red Barnet, 2003).

Secondly, in January 2008, I was working for Muslim Aid when it agreed to organise a joint sponsored walk for Oxfam and Muslim Aid supporters during Ramadan in aid of the global food crisis. It was made quite clear that the reason they were interested in work with Muslim Aid was that they needed to create a greater diversity in their support base in order for their advocacy and campaigning work to have greater legitimacy and representational force¹. Muslim Aid’s support base is particularly strong among the Bengali community in London, considered to be one of the poorest and most socially excluded communities in London measured according to indicators relating to child poverty, education, employment and housing (Greater London Authority, 2004 & 2006). Oxfam’s decision to work with poor communities in the UK is cited by Fowler (1995) as originating in its 1994 “assembly” of stakeholders and was clearly controversial at the time, leading to media comment that government policies had turned the UK into a developing country (Fowler, 1995).

¹ Conversation between author and key Oxfam personnel, meeting January 2008.

Thirdly, on 6 April 2009, Save the Children Fund UK launched a new fund and campaign to help families in the UK struggling to cope with the rising cost of food. This was closely followed on 8 April by Oxfam UK launching a report *Close to Home: UK Poverty and the Economic Downturn* and a nationwide campaign claiming that the UK is becoming a nation of the “forgotten, ripped-off, excluded and debt-ridden”.

The study will look at how the “project” of international development is now broadening to include more than the post-colonialist approach of development of the “other”, to an approach which incorporates the ethical imperative for change in communities globally. It will use case studies of three NGOs to answer questions such as: what does this decision say about the process of institutional change and policy development in Non-Governmental Development Organisations (NGDOs)? What types of development ethic underpinned the decisions? What has been the reaction to this decision by Southern partners?

2. Background and context

This study will examine the drivers that have contributed to northern based NGDOs taking up the recommendations of Gaventa and Malhotra: organisations whose core mission has more usually been interpreted as working with poor communities in the global south. The central research question for this study is, therefore, located at the junction of several academic, philosophical, NGO praxis-based and international development policy debates.

The study will take as its starting point the debates on northern NGDO futures and roles (Edwards & Hulme, 2002; Fowler, 2000; Gaventa, 1999; Malhotra, 2000; 2008) and will ask how these ideas and debates influenced NGO decisions. It will also consider whether current debates on development ethics and notions of cosmopolitanism can assist in understanding their decisions about this work closer to home. Parfitt’s call for an ethical for an ethical system based on “alterity” (2002) and Appiah’s contention (2006) that “everyone matters” with three caveats: a) nation state is primary mechanism b) fair share for all c) consistent with being partial to those closest, will be considered alongside development ethics that question the privileging of the local (Yanacopulos & Ballie Smith, 2008). Likewise, the notion that some lives are expendable as “bare lives” and others are not needs to be considered alongside current development theories, such as capability theory (Parfitt, 2009; Tiwari 2007). The study will make use of John’s (1998) policy analysis framework in which ideas are a major driver of policy.

The working thesis for the study is that northern-based NGDOs who have begun to work with socially excluded communities in the north, are driven by multiple internal and

external factors culminating in unclear goals. As NGOs deepen this engagement, issues of representation, accountability and foundational development ethics will need to be made more explicit if the relationship between NGOs and socially excluded communities is not to be perceived as exploitative at worst or instrumental at best and if relationships with stakeholder communities of the poor in the global South are to remain intact. Large NGOs will also run the risk of beginning to tread on the policy and service delivery “space” occupied by domestic northern NGOs and CBOs and will have their development ethics questioned by poor communities in the global South.

Other sub-literatures to be reviewed will include the following: typologies of northern Non-Governmental Development Organisations; north-south NGO partnership; NGO futures with/without aid and alternative development financing; NGO “alternatives”; global movements; social exclusion and poverty in the global north, specifically the UK, US and Denmark; development ethics; theories of social justice; organisational policy development and decision-making analysis. The central research question below is located to some degree at the intersection of all of these literatures and debates.

This research will move forward current scholarly debates around the future roles of northern-based NGOs in relation to their core missions, their relationships with their funding public, with their southern NGO partners and global anti-poverty movements and campaigns. It will also attempt to provide material from which northern NGOs can learn in planning and evaluating future work with domestic socially excluded communities.

3. Research question

Why and with what impact on northern and southern partners do northern Non-Governmental Development Organisations engage with the socially excluded in their own communities?

4. Research Objectives

- a. To describe and provide evidence of work by northern NGOs with the socially excluded in their own communities.
- b. To select one case study NGO for further investigation.
- c. To interrogate the relevant sub-literatures for considerations of why this work is now taking place, including considerations of development ethics.
- d. To understand the main policy drivers contributing to these decisions to enter this area of work.

- e. To understand how the impact of this work and how it has been assessed to-date by:
 - i. The case study NGDO
 - ii. NGDO southern partner organisations
 - iii. External agencies
 - iv. Scholarly opinion
 - v. Programme/project beneficiaries

5. Methods

This will be an ethnographic study with a focus on one case study organisation. Understandings as to why the case study organisation has embarked on new areas of work – in this case, addressing poverty and social exclusion in their own communities – and to what effect, will be generated by the following strategies.

- Use of secondary sources or *capta* (strategic planning documents, meeting minutes) from the case study organisations and external agencies.
- Use of primary sources or *generata* (semi structured interviews and observation) from the three organisations and external agencies.
- Use of scholarly literature.

A purposive sampling strategy will be adopted, for example, using data from documents related to Oxfam's UK Poverty programme and semi-structured interviews with the Head of UK Poverty programme. A snowball strategy may emerge subsequently. Primary data will be gathered from the case study organisation through visits and/or skype interviews.

6. Indicative content

Introduction - This will provide definitions of the key terms, a life history of the central research question and an outline of the content of each chapter.

Chapter 1: Methodology – The epistemological approach and logic of the research method will be set out here, defining the theory questions. Issues of data validity will be discussed, including sampling and case study strategy, data collection techniques and coding. An interpretive model will be introduced. Challenges, risks and assumptions faced by the research will be discussed in detail, including issues of situated knowledge, access to data, reflexive considerations, ethical considerations around data collection and limitations to data availability.

Chapter 2: Background – This chapter will review the relevant literatures and scholarly debates, with particular reference to development ethics. It will also provide evidence of northern NGDO work in the north beyond the three case studies and the national policy and organisational context for the three case study NGOs in UK, US and Denmark.

Chapter 3: Case Studies – This chapter will describe and analyse the work of the three case study NGDOs with socially excluded communities in UK, US and Denmark in detail.

Chapter 4: Why do northern NGDOs say they work “closer to home”? This chapter will detail the findings of the research in relation to the three case study NGOs. It will use primary data generated for and by this research and internal and public organizational documents. It will conclude with outlining the main policy drivers for these decisions in each case study NGDO.

Chapter 5: With what results? – This chapter will attempt to answer the second part of the central research question in the light of evidence collected by the case study NGDO, its southern partners, by external agencies, project and programme beneficiaries.

Chapter 6: Does Everyone Matter? – This chapter will bring together the findings of Chapters 4 and 5 and the scholarly debates reviewed in Chapter 2 to address Appiah’s (2006) question and move forward the debate on “ethics in a world of strangers” and what this has to say about the role of northern NGDOs in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion – This will summarise the conclusions of the research, define where and how it has moved forward debates and set out new research agendas which have merged as a result.

7. Scope of and Limits to the research

The provisional selection of the case study NGDO has been based on considerations of:

- *my access to material;*
- *a wish to understand future trends which may be indicated by NGDOs in the US and Denmark. Denmark is unique in its political consensus around the commitment to 0.8% GNI for ODA (DAC 2007);*
- an interest in understanding the dynamics behind policy decisions in a major UK NGDO with a very high media profile.

The study will focus on the period 1999 – 2009 and the processes, decisions, policy drivers, ideas and debates that led to the case study NGDO working in its own communities. The policy environments in which the organisation is located will be limited to UK.

8. Timeline

This research is expected to take up to 40 months from 1 June 2009 as follows:

- June – December 2009 – survey of literature & interpretive models
- January – December 2010 - data collection at 3 case study NGDOs
- January – March 2011 – collate and code data. Agree interpretive model
- April – September 2011 – develop & present preliminary findings and analysis
- October 2011 – January 2010 – first draft
- February – October 2012 – final write up.

References (examples only not a citation match)

Appiah, K. A. (2006). *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton & Co.

Carroll, T. F. (1992). *Intermediary NGOs: The Supporting Link in Grassroots Development*. Connecticut: Kumarian Press.

Tiwari, M. (2007). Chronic Poverty and Entitlement Theory. *Third World Quarterly*, 28 (1), 171-191.

John, P. (1998). *Analysing Public Policy*. London: Continuum.