Seed Corn Competition Winning projects

***2018:***

***Churching: The Revival of a Ritual for Mothers in the Church of England,* Dr Dawn Llewellyn, University of Chester**

This project qualitatively examines the reasons why the women in an Anglican church in the North-West of England have reintroduced ‘Thanksgiving for Women after Childbirth’, or ‘churching’, to their Parish. The ritual, rooted in Jewish and Christian rites of purification after birth, was usually held 40 days after childbirth to mark a mother’s return to the community after surviving the dangers of pregnancy and delivery (Cressy, 1993). Formalised in English liturgy in the twelfth century, its emphasis shifted away from purification towards blessing and thanksgiving. Although it features in the Book of Common Prayer, and it was once widespread and an active part of church life in the twentieth century, it is thought to have been abandoned; considered superstitious, misogynistic, and out-dated (Houlbrooke 2011).

However, despite its apparent disappearance and current unpopularity, it has recently been reintroduced by a group of women belonging to a Church of England parish, ‘St James’, in North West. In 2010, Beth, a Reader in the church, along with other volunteers, organised and oversaw a churching service. Without a priest but using the formal church space, Beth organises and leads four services a year for church members and non-members, writing liturgy and leading prayers for women who have requested the service - to acknowledge the times they have given birth. Family and friends are also welcome and take part, and once the service has ended the attendees move to the back of church, rearrange the furniture, and have a celebratory lunch in time for the mother and toddler group to join in.

Through the genorosity of the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group, I have been funded to trace the re-emergence of churching at St James; to examine the women’s motivations for initiating and participating in the service; and to investigate the processes through which the women are adapting, using, and remaking churching, and what meanings it offers those involved. I will undertake participant observation of the services during one liturgical year and conduct interviews with the women, their guests, and the clergy team. I am awaiting ethical approval from Chester (pending, December 2018) and I plan to attend the first service on 2019 (scheduled for February). I will report on my progress during SOCREL’s annual conference in 2019.

***2017:***

***Religion and Intimate Life*, Dr Sarah-Jane Page, Aston University**

I am currently undertaking a pilot project called ‘Religion and Intimate Life’ with the seed corn funding Socrel generously awarded to me earlier this year. This project is using qualitative methods to explore religious attitudes to sexuality, in particular, attitudes to abortion and homosexuality. The key question posed by this pilot project is: What is the relationship between religion, intimate life and opinion-formation? This project will assess how religious individuals experience intimate life and formulate their views and opinions on intimate life, to ascertain the extent to which qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews can be utilised for a more detailed understanding of opinion- formation, particularly in relation to how opinion is constituted and the extent to which opinion alters over time. The pilot study is a methodological test, used to inform the construction of a large bid to a major research council, and is based on in-depth interviews and questionnaires with 15 individuals of various religious affiliations. I am currently in the middle of data collection. The second part of the funding is concerned with fostering connections with research teams and scholars around the world who are willing to collaborate on the aforementioned research bid. This connection-building is going very well; there is currently a lot of interest in this topic area within the discipline. This project is running over 18 months (the lengthy gestation due to my currently high administrative load as an Associate Dean). I will be reporting findings from the research at the Socrel conference in 2018.

Dr Sarah-Jane Page, August 2017