

Case Study – Hiding in the Pub to Cutting the Cord? Fatherhood and Childbirth in Britain from the 1950s to the present

On: Public engagement and research activities.

Purpose: Enhance the skills of an early career academic within a Research Centre to develop skills in public engagement activities, external partnerships and publication.

Funding: Wellcome Trust Strategic Award

Report written by: Lisa Lavender

Date: March 2012.

Dr Laura King, a Wellcome-funded postdoctoral fellow in Warwick's Centre for the History of Medicine (CHM), has taken an innovative and engaging approach to her research. In the words of her project advertising and website:

Over the last fifty to sixty years, a complete transformation has taken place in the role of fathers in their children's births. Once it was seen as unmanly to be there – now it's believed to be essential. This research examines the causes and consequences of this shift, and we need parents to get involved.

The Centre has been at the forefront of creative public engagement research at Warwick since 1999, and this project is an excellent example of effective research development enhanced by exciting and direct interaction with the public and collaboration with external organisations.

Wellcome Trust Strategic funding for this post is about developing the CHM's public engagement activities and partnerships with external organisations and individuals, which was a definite attraction to the position for Laura. This remit allowed her to focus on public engagement as a primary rather than just a secondary part of academia, enabling a very direct approach to her research on fatherhood in twentieth-century Britain. Laura has worked with Nine Arches Press, a local independent publisher, to offer creative writing/poetry workshops for fathers of all ages: the resulting material will be published in a booklet and exhibited at Coventry Mysteries Festival and the Warwick Arts Centre in June 2012. An additional output of the project is also involving Warwick Arts Centre, China Plate

Productions and Babakas Theatre Group to stage a new piece, 'Our Fathers' over two nights in June, with accompanying panel discussions.

As well as meeting funding needs, the appeal of public engagement for Laura includes publicising her research to a whole new audience. In her work she has connected with a variety of organisations and individuals through events and the use of social media such as twitter. The impact has been two-way. Laura has gained experience with the media, arts and publishing alongside the development of her research. China Plate, Babakas Theatre and Nine Arches Press were paid for their involvement but have also greatly benefited more long term from developing a stronger relationship with Warwick University.

Laura has a number of points to offer as advice to those considering similar undertakings:

1. It is crucial to really boil down what the key aims are in any public engagement project. Whilst working with external partners, they often want to know what you want to achieve – it's vital that you're able to sum this up clearly and concisely.
2. On a related note, it's important to consider which 'public' you're engaging with. The term is so broad that you need to consider the 'who' as well as 'why' in terms of engagement.
3. I've found twitter a really useful way to immediately engage with a different type of public, and has yielded all sorts of interesting contacts and opportunities.

The one thing that Laura would have done differently with hindsight is to use more IT support for website design. Unless you are particularly technically-minded it can be easier, and save a lot of time to spend money on buying in website construction. There are options, but e-Lab provides an in-house website design service. Returning to Laura's own words, "In short, spend time doing the things you're specialised in!"

The success of the project's underlying research so far has led to Laura organising a conference in September for academics, practitioners and policy-makers.

More information about the project can be found at:

www.go.warwick.ac.uk/chmfatherhood ... or join Laura on twitter: @FathersAtBirth