Meeting 1

An ethnography of advice: between market, society and the declining welfare state

Meeting of team 19th January 2015

1   Aims

Main aim, to give you each a chance to do a further tranche of research, as much as possible under terms of your own choosing. To ensure you're employable at the end of it.

The work you do in the project itself must make sense to you intellectually.

You must also have time to do your own work (stuff that might be left over from previous projects)

You'll be mentored and have career development meetings in the department, and you'll be a member of the dept – attend Friday seminars etc. (though this won't be mandatory).

2   Intellectual development/project cohesion

Broadly speaking, our project will fit into the Anthropology of Economy stream of research in the department, though it might connect to other themes too (eg religion and non-religion).

We can seek connections to the people in Sociology, specifically the Inequality Institute.

What will be our key guiding texts? And how do we bring a specifically anthropological perspective to bear?

1   The 'empirical legal studies' by Genn and Moorhouse.
2   Theses by members of the team
3   Vincent du Bois book/articles
4   David Graeber (2015) *Utopia of Rules*
5   John Hills and other social policy writers.
6   Literature on the judicialisation of politics: Comaroffs *Law and Order in the Postcolony*, Joao Biehl *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. Lois Waqant. Wendy Brown or Judith Butler – Introduction on social welfare etc.

3   Workshops/meetings

(1) Regular/frequent interactions for project participants:

Aim - to build a kind of mini-research proposal before heading off to the field.

We discussed how to frame this:

have a stripped down writing up seminar, plus some public events.

when project begins (before everyone is in the field) have a more concentrated focus, with fortnightly meetings to discuss readings, logistics, share findings. The nature of the meetings will change in accordance with what stage we're at.

(2) a workshop held after conducting some basic research and before returning to do more in-depth research,

(3) a workshop after in-depth research has been completed.

(4) an impact/dissemination workshop, possibly combined with

(5) advisory board meeting – we need to figure out who they are and how to bring them into the frame.

4   Impact is of key importance to ESRC – it means building up relationships with informants from early on with a view to identifying what kind of information – and delivered in what form - might benefit them. This is less easy than it sounds: so far we've found that people don't have a very clear idea of what they might want or what might be of benefit.

One needs to balance the needs of rigour in research (i.e. publishing papers that will advance your career as an anthropologist) against the needs of impact (being attentive to more pragmatic needs – and perhaps even doing advocacy for a specific organisation. EG the people at Advice Portsmouth – and other organisations - who are keen *to see us endorse their work*.

Tobias; I have mixed feelings. I did workshops in individual offices, giving summaries of my main findings. One office has been using it, re: organisational change. This has been a good experience, after the fieldwork telling people, asking them what they think etc. It doesn't take that much time – not too much of it has to change.

Federal project on immigration offices – two of the ones I looked at, my results are being used to counter, people are being asked to do 'field days' etc. there are ways and means.

AF. Organisations now have research needs.

RD. Interesting that there is this direct connection to the offices you did research among. This is like consultancy.

AF. I went to an impact event – all the people in question had been 'invited' to do policy related work. It might be worth thinking of ways to do this. MPs are getting more and more involved – as more and more aspects of advice start going wrong.

TE. The vantage point of this project is different from most policy – it's about entanglements of not-for profit etc. – far more complex. So where we might contribute is not to engage in numbers-related stuff.

MW. What about contested forms of advice? If I work with housing activists, positioned against NGOs, you have 3 competing areas. It could get complex ethically – but that is what makes it interesting.

MW. We always rely on the fact that informants are far away – perhaps the greater accountability is important.

AT. It won't be interesting or worthwhile if it is too bland.

RD. I am anticipating being a 'critical friend' to the organisations I work with. EG 'Why do people put off seeking debt advice?' Maybe some of this is too close to the bone – eg people always say 'you must pay your debts', and one is not going to speak against this.

AT. Depending on the audiences one will write different kinds of things; anonymise as appropriate, etc.

5   Timing

Resolution that, if project starts in August, participants begin by doing reading and proposal-preparation on their own, with possible fieldwork start in November.

AG, MW need to end LSE fellow contracts - DJ to check with HR. RD's post is 26 months – when best to start? DJ will get back to everyone.

6 Room/space

A five desk facility as a base, together with printing facilities, a place to come back to, a place to collect documents.

Discussion of intellectual aims arising from AF paper

Tobias: I'm unsure how far we need to co-ordinate what central aspects of advice we're looking at. How do we position ourselves in relation to the existing research by AF and DJ?

1   There seem to be two different ways of seeing advice givers: as mediating between the state/individuals, and/or as themselves entangled. That is, are they state actors, or non-state actors who are responsible to clients? In immigration too there are big agencies dependent on state funds, and smaller more individual things that have a different role and positionality. How far might the differences between these two be a theme that runs throughout?

2   The 'problem clusters' – by definition these are not about one specific problem, but about many, interrelated ones. Since a lot of us are looking at *specific* areas, how do we deal with the fact that they all interlock?

[AG. In Spain the state has disappeared. There are so many things happening at the community level. Squatting and taking over public spaces. These initiatives cross-cut all aspects – housing, health etc.

AT. We need to stay in touch re our findings – to establish how these problem clusters overlap in people's lives, yet are defined distinctly in relation to the state.]

3   The question of individual autonomy. In terms of language – there are different ways of seeing this: the neoliberal 'empowerment' idea (actually all about the agency denying all responsibility) vs the other apparently more beneficial one.

4   Symbolic dimension: the issue of 'lawyering up', the issue of having a person who supports you. Is this something we're going to look at in the project overall?

[AF – it's increasingly difficult to do this. At AP they could in theory start a legal review but it usually doesn't happen. Though the advisers do get the training. All the organisations we speak to are 'specialist' in one way or another. Because there is less and less 'law', there is more and more 'let's help the individual.'

Ana. Richard gets referrals from legal aid cases. His firm got the contract, and they get referrals. NGOs who have no legal advice contract send their cases to him – especially family law (including domestic violence issues) and immigration.

There are recent books on pro bono in the US.

AF. See the ASAP (Asylum advice project) – Maurice Wren. They train people up to gain expertise in very specific areas of expertise.

TE. Re: the private law firms having legal aid decisions: how far will this impact who goes to court etc.? In a common law system this is what sets the agenda for further decisions.

RD. How SLC developed a specialism. With debt advice, a person could go into a CAB, get told to contact Stepchange (for example), so we're looking at things in the area of state-funded services, how far will we be able to - or should we – look at these issues?]

5   How to differentiate between caseload and workload? In your article and in my research, most cases are fairly standard; but the majority of work can be spent on a small minority of specific cases. The more protracted situations seem to be more dominant in the narrative – but how far is there a trade-off between these and the ones which turn out to constitute the majority?

6   How best to cross the divide between starting out with a formal advice agency and starting in a community?

RD. Impossible to cross the divide between residential setting and the debt advice offices. I try to make the two parts speak to each other – I managed to get to know people via the social club.

AT. In my Italian fieldwork, it was through the migrants who ended up volunteering in some of these offices that I ended up talking to people. I'd ask people to do an interview, and this could lead to friendships.

AG. I offered help with people who were visiting advice offices (eg the big religious one near Victoria).

AT. If you're in an office and they see you outside that office, they still see you as official (but then are disappointed when it turns out you can't help them).

MW. Ryan, would you advise trying to get access to someone in a social club, and say 'do you know the housing office'?

RD: one advice office, state funded, staffed by employees, only saw a client once. Another had some very long running cases and I got to know some people.

AT. This is possible if it's a place with a space and a waiting room etc.

DJ. On the attempted audit trail – getting numbers etc.

TE. There are some numbers but not yet used in order to do audits. The pilot project funded by the state is attempting to find out how it's going, but have now moved away from creating performance indicators because they've figured that this is inappropriate. (In this case, in the pilot project, it's in response to my input – but also because of their creativity in subverting. Interesting – in what ways are people creating performance measures?)