

# An ethnography of advice

between market, society and the declining welfare state

Professor Deborah James

d.a.james@lse.ac.uk +207 955 7215/7202



This 2½-year study, conducted by LSE researchers and funded by the ESRC, explores how conditions of continuing economic crisis are reshaping assumptions about who receives assistance and who funds and arranges it. Where the usual targets of welfare and benefits were the poor or destitute, they now include those who work but cannot make ends meet, and who experience increasing numbers of complex problems for which they need advice. And where the usual provider of such things has been the state, this is increasingly not the case. As the economic crisis proceeds and the state's role is being eroded, being able to get help from experts is nonetheless increasingly essential. The project will explore innovations in advice giving provided by existing offices (under more traditional state-funded regimes), by new sources and novel agencies (under non-governmental and market-driven schemes), and by the social movements, self-help and informal network-based arrangements to which many are increasingly having to turn for counsel and support.

The project investigates selected sites and cases in the UK (specifically England where a very particular set of legal/welfare arrangements is in operation), 'drilling down' to examine specific institutional settings, themes and topics different scales and levels. Particular attention will be given to the three specific areas of housing, debt and immigration advice (both within and beyond particular institutional settings), and law courts where litigants have started to engage in self-representation. It also uses two cross-national comparisons in order to illuminate, and gain a critical perspective on, aspects of UK welfare-related advice processes which are often taken as natural/inevitable by local policy-makers.

Across these different settings, the project will:

- document the ongoing effects on advice giving of the withdrawal of legal aid funds, including the rise of self-litigation;
- explore the new roles assumed by bureaucrats, intermediaries and self-help groups, who are increasingly important in the advice encounter;
- investigate whether funding cuts have caused the dwindling of the much-vaunted empathy that advice-givers are often required to deliver and whether, in the process, advisers are becoming less effective at shaping the behaviour of those they counsel;
- explore variations between selected national settings, to illuminate the changing and context-dependent character of advice in the UK.



Our approach is collaborative, and we aim not only to produce academic articles but also policy-relevant reports geared towards MPs, advice sector and general audiences, which will be disseminated widely and shared with participants at various events. We abide by the ethics code of the ASA, including its commitment to informed consent and to keeping names and other data confidential <http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml>

Department of Anthropology, LSE  
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE