

WELFARE AND IDENTITY IN BRITAIN

Anthropology of Britain Workshop

*Jointly hosted by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth and
Oxford University Anthropology Society*

12 January 2012, University of Oxford

9.00 – 9.30 Registration at Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology (ISCA), University of Oxford, 64 Banbury Road, OX2 6PN Oxford

I Session: Work and Worklessness

9.30 – 10.00 Ryan Foley, University of Oxford
A new generation of challenges for working class Brits

10.00 – 10.30 Gillian Evans, University of Manchester
Worklessness: a family portrait

10.30 – 11.00 Kayleigh Garthwaite, Durham University
Incapacitated? Exploring health and illness narratives of Incapacity Benefit recipients

11.00 – 11.15 tea break

II Session: Voluntary Work, the Flexible Economy and the ‘Big Society’

11.15 – 11.45 Rosie Read, Bournemouth University
Counselling young people, altruism and performance management; an anthropological study of volunteers and staff at Child Line

11.45 – 12.15 Krzysztof Bierski, Department of Anthropology, Goldsmith
Social Responsibility and recovery: mental health services in the age of austerity

12.15 – 12.45 Karenjit Clare, University of Oxford
Creative ‘young’ labour: project organisation, networks and insecurity in advertising firms

12.45 – 1.45 Lunch break

III Session: State Power, Policies and Labelling Processes

- 1.45 – 2.15 Judith Okely, University of Oxford
Gypsies and Travellers: the negative consequences of government policies
- 2.15 – 2.45 Barbara Holler, University of Sussex
The Violence of policy: The realities of welfare reform
- 2.45 – 3.15 Malcolm Cumberbatch, Sheffield Hallam University
'There is no excuse for this sort of behaviour': how the authorities identify protesters
- 3.15 – 3.30 Tea Break

IV Session: Local Discourses of Identity and Belonging

- 3.30 – 4.00 Camilla Lewis, University of Manchester
'People want jobs, they want a life! These areas have been redeveloped but they are dislocated': exclusion and identity in East Manchester
- 4.00 – 4.30 Insa Koch, University of Oxford
'They are failing us': 'White' working class victimhood and narratives of state betrayal on a council estate in Oxford
- 4.30 – 5.00 Lisa McKenzie, University of Nottingham
Belonging and exclusion: council estate life in Nottingham
- 5.00 – 5.30 Final Discussion chaired by Ben Rogaly, University of Sussex



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LONG ABSTRACTS

I Session: Work and Worklessness

1. A New Generation of Challenges for Working Class Brits (Ryan Foley, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford)

This paper looks at the economic life of a small group of working class men in their early twenties in Oxford. All have worked approximately five years since their GCSE's, mostly in manual labour. While seeking to be financially independent, they continue to rely on family and friends when paycheques do not stretch far enough. Rather than representing a 'culture of dependency' on government hand-outs, these men reject the notion of government support and are disillusioned by politics – generally dismissing political conversation because it is seen as pointless and not participating in elections. All live at home with family; despite frequent conversations about moving out of home, the disproportionate rise in rents compared to wages has prevented them from turning this goal into reality. While their parents' generation was able to buy into the property ladder in the 1980's when housing prices were relatively low, these young men risk being excluded from this milestone of adulthood and independence as property prices have climbed so quickly over the last 30 years. The impact of inflation on purchasing power has also made saving nearly impossible. The coping strategies that these young men employ and their visions of the future will be explored.

2. Worklessness: a Family Portrait (Gillian Evans, University of Manchester)

Following up on one of the case study families from my earlier work, this paper gives an ethnographic analysis of 'worklessness' and thereby interrogates government rhetoric about 'Broken Britain'. The paper explores the young adult lives of three sisters living in relative poverty and explores what is distinctive about the challenges posed by the post-industrial moment in British cities.

3. Incapacitated? Exploring health and illness narratives of incapacity benefit recipients (Kayleigh Garthwaite, Department of Geography, Durham University)

Incapacity Benefit (IB) receipt is a particularly relevant topic at the moment with candid political, public and media attention. Reducing the number of people receiving IB has long been a priority of successive governments and remains a high priority under the Coalition government's agenda. Through semi structured interviews with both IB recipients and key stakeholders who work alongside IB recipients on a daily basis, this study explores the lived biographical reality of long term IB receipt. Narratives suggest that instead of a 'culture of dependency', in fact IB recipients have a strong desire to work but are prevented from doing so largely due to chronic health problems and disabilities. This study questions how identity formation and reformation are affected by the onset of a chronic health narrative, and also how identity is affected by discourse that labels IB recipients as 'scroungers'. The study highlights how strong undercurrents of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' weave throughout both the IB recipients and the stakeholders' narratives, often resulting in stigma and shame for those receiving the benefit, resulting in a rejection of a 'claimant identity'. What's more, it

seems likely that this will only be exacerbated further by ongoing welfare reform and increased conditionality.

II Session: Voluntary Work, the Flexible Economy and the ‘Big Society’

1. Counselling young people, altruism and performance management: an anthropological study of volunteers and staff at Child Line (Rosie Read, Centre for Social Work and Policy, Bournemouth University)

Since its foundation by Esther Rantzen in 1986, ChildLine has been well known as a charity championing children’s rights, protection and wellbeing. From the outset the charity has attracted large corporate donations and high profile endorsements from politicians, celebrities and members of the royal family. ChildLine offers a free and confidential telephone listening service to all children and young people up to the age of 19 in the UK. Most of its telephone counsellors are trained volunteers, who are supervised by paid staff. Based on an ethnographic study of staff and volunteers at ChildLine’s Birmingham base, this paper will explore how recent attempts to improve efficiency within ChildLine are negotiated in the course of relationships between staff, volunteers and callers. For instance, in the past few years ChildLine has received considerable sums of government money to improve and modernise its communications technologies as well as its procedures for handling and processing calls. Various performance management practices typical to call centres have been pioneered at the charity, including recommended call times and stronger management of volunteer counsellors. Yet as the paper will demonstrate, these innovations have to be negotiated in and through the language and ideology of the free gift (Parry 1986, Laidlaw 2000), which continues to provide an underpinning rationale for volunteers’ involvement and contribution. The paper will explore the tensions and challenges which emerge from this process and draw out their broader implications for critically understanding current government-driven policies promoting volunteering as ‘Big Society’ as well the role of charities as providers of welfare in contemporary Britain.

2. Social Responsibility and Recovery: Mental Health Services in the Age of Austerity (Krzysztof Bierski, Department of Anthropology, Goldsmith)

From the summer 2009 users of the mental health services in one of the London’s South West boroughs faced rapid closing of social centres, some of which have been operating for several decades. In the midst of resulting conflict between users and service providers there emerged a new strategy for organising the services, so-called peer-volunteering. As a number of paid employees were made redundant, users were encouraged by the providers to participate in running of groups and events. In their accounts of becoming peer-volunteers individuals expresses a ‘sense of social responsibility’. Meanwhile, users of the services asserted that being a member of a ‘community of people affected by mental health problems’ has direct, positive influence on their recovery.

Peer-led services scheme begun prior to the 2009 general elections and, arguably, can be seen as an extreme form of New Labour’s policies of users’ involvement in decision making. However, peer-volunteering fits equally well to the Conservative discourses and projects, which encourage social and individual responsibility in what has been proclaimed as the Big Society. In the light of these ideological frameworks and through an ethnographic account I explore the importance of responsibility in processes of recovery from mental health problems and in ‘rebuilding of community spirit’.

3. Creative ‘young’ labour: project organisation, networks and insecurity in advertising firms (Karenjit Clare, School of Geography, University of Oxford)

The ‘creative industries’ have acquired a new significance within both policy and academic spheres in recent years. These industries and their practitioners are regarded as ‘cool, creative and egalitarian’ by policy makers and academics, noting youth, energy, and informality as main attractions. This article aims to disrupt the positive narratives and propagated images of creative workers and instead focus on the relationship between project forms of organization and ‘new’ forms of employment, insecurity and exploitation in the advertising industry, and the ways these are embedded in social networks and place. In exploring these themes, I provide evidence of the working practices of young people employed in London whose fragmented lives require them to be flexible, passionate, to work unpaid or for little pay, and constantly be ready and willing to network, socialise and work irregular hours.

III Session: State Power, Policies and Labelling Processes

1. Gypsies and Travellers: the negative consequences of government policies (Judith Okely, Social Anthropology, University of Oxford)

Within weeks of the Coalition government, Minister Pickles abolished Prescott’s policy to encourage local authorities to continue Gypsy site provision. The immediate and long-term effects for the well-being of Gypsies and Travellers are pessimistic. The eviction of Dale Farm residents, at the cost of £20 million, attracted massive, negative and ill-informed media publicity. Such evictions are commonplace, with little consideration of their social and psychological effects. Educationalists still ask me if there is intergenerational tension when it is presumed that Gypsy children want to join the dominant society.

Tracing decades of changing legislation and its mixture of positive, then negative consequences, it is argued that, even in minimal costing terms, the current policies are counter-productive. Although my research influenced government policy, the recognition of the Gypsies’ nomadic lifestyle was later transformed. The 1994 Criminal Justice Act abolished councils’ duty to provide sites. Gypsies were advised to buy their own land, despite the state’s sedentarist hegemony, with severe planning legislation. Additional travelling restrictions have ended Gypsies’ major seasonal, agricultural contribution, now done by migrants. Local reports reveal depression and ill health among those trapped in ‘bricks and mortar’. Government policy has created its own avoidable problems, while ignoring anthropological knowledge.

2. The Violence of Policy: The Realities of Welfare Reform (Barbara Holler, Social Anthropology, University of Sussex)

In 1948 the Beveridge Report was introduced in the United Kingdom transforming and challenging the payment of welfare. Yet since the abolition of the Poor Law, remnants of the Poor Law's mentality still permeate the modern welfare system and the delivery of its services. With the election of New Labour in 1997 the delivery of the modern benefits system

in the United Kingdom has increasingly focused on the importance of cultural rather than structural causes of poverty.

Based on 36 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted with single mothers on benefits on a Housing estate and across offices of service providers in a city in the South-East of England, the principle objective of this paper is to present the interface between policy expectation and lived realities of single mothers on benefits, and the implications this might have for the future of service provision. With the rise of an ever-increasing punitive welfare system service providers along with benefit recipients have found themselves exposed to differing levels of symbolic violence that pose specific challenges in the context of welfare provision.

This paper argues that deconstructing the hegemonic discourse on welfare restructuring through a critical re-evaluation of certain analytical concepts such as class, culture and identity are necessary in order to address these varying degrees of symbolic violence currently inherent in welfare policies and provision

3. 'There is no excuse for this sort of behaviour': how the authorities identify protesters affected by policy failure (Malcolm Cumberbatch, Sheffield Hallam University)

In most towns and cities across Britain, marginalised communities were already harshly treated or neglected prior to the recent economic downturn. These groups lived on the edge, either permanently in poverty or hovering on the line, dipping in and out of that bleak situation, never secure. Things have now got decidedly worse. Identity and belonging are challenged to the limit. This process is not only perceived and realised by those suffering the deprivation. The authorities are also engaged in labelling any protester, unhappy with his or her lot. Irrespective of the mode of protest – whether they take the form of riots, marches or 'occupy Wall Street' type – the protesters are seen as 'outsiders' threatening an otherwise harmonious, contented society. Labels range from underclasses, dysfunctional families, to scum, mindless thugs, anarchists and the like. Hence, Jenkins (2008) observes that those who have never come into contact with the labelled group (or experienced the conditions they face), are able to speak about them with some authority. As the economy collapses, regeneration programmes fail, work which gives us some form of self-esteem and identity, is taken away and many feel hard done by. One Somali group in Sheffield told me recently that prolonged unemployment, difficulties with the police, schools and local authority have left their young people wanting 'revenge'.

IV Session: Local Discourses of Identity and Belonging

1. 'People want jobs, they want a life! These areas have been redeveloped but they are dislocated': exclusion and identity in East Manchester (Camilla Lewis, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester)

Marked by the effects of deindustrialisation, and subsequent deprivation, East Manchester is undergoing an intense period of urban regeneration attempting to create a new landscape and in turn, a cohesive community. Accounts of de-industrialisation are well known. They depict a narrative of decline; from Manchester being a productive hub in the industrial revolution to a redundant wasteland in post-industrial Britain. This paper draws on twelve months ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2010 to explore how ideas about class, gender and

ethnicity have been reconfigured by these economic transformations. The loss of manufacturing industries has led to more than 'deprivation', a term which flattens the complex social space which is East Manchester. The restructuring of work has led to feelings of difference and competition within communities where a majority were employed within similar industries at one time. 'White working class' local residents tended to lament the demise of industrial employment and describe that 'there is no future, without work.' This paper examines how within the current climate of welfare reforms, fractures and feelings of dislocation and exclusion have become heightened, leading individuals to fear for the future of communities in East Manchester.

2. 'White' Working Class Victimhood and Narratives of State Betrayal (Insa Koch, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford)

Based upon sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper explores the production and nature of popular narratives of victimhood among the residents of a council estate in Oxford. These narratives refer to a widespread sense of unfair treatment and exclusion from public resources in favour of 'others' who are seen as the beneficiaries of preferential treatment. In much of the current media and political discourse, popular victimhood has been treated in ethnicised terms as a particular 'white' working class phenomenon which indicates the existence of ethnic conflicts in Britain today. The purpose of this paper is to advance an alternative account for Oxford's post-war estates. My suggestion is that, rather than analysing narratives of victimhood as an expression of 'white' identity and entitlement, they are best understood as a local narrative of state betrayal which is borne out of everyday failures to mobilise the state in the struggle for security and survival. Moreover, ethnic narratives of victimhood co-exist alongside many other vernacular accounts reflecting on the workings of state power. By shifting the focus from 'whiteness' and ethnicity to narratives of state failure, this paper also points beyond the specificities of an ethnographic situation to the ideological nature of current media and political representations of 'white' victimhood.

3. Belonging and Exclusion: Council estate life in Nottingham (Lisa McKenzie, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham)

This paper discusses the importance of 'belonging' relating to life on a council estate in Nottingham. The initial four year ethnographic research set in St Anns, an inner city neighbourhood focused upon white mothers who have mixed-race children. However a Leverhulme Fellowship has allowed a further two years to include a re-study of the original St Anns poverty study during the 1960's (Coates and Silburn 1970).

Although the initial research focused upon mothers who were white and had mixed-race children, the last two years has been engaged in an ethnographic study with a group of men who live on this council estate, and the transient relationships they have with their families, but the fixed relationships they have with each other, and to the estate itself. The paper aims to open up discussion relating to working class men's roles within family relationships and also within the local community.

The paper discusses the importance of status, and value within the lives of the men and women who live on this council estate in Nottingham and also the sense of belonging which has always been noted relating to working class family life. However the paper hopes to raise discussion relating to the shift in recent years to how 'belonging' is understood particularly in poorer neighbourhoods, neighbourhoods, families and communities can offer havens of

safety, resources of value, and identities which offer local status. This seems especially important in light of the recent incidences of social unrest throughout the UK in August 2011.