

## ***Advice Agencies: Translating Private Issues into Public Matters***

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This paper is the beginning of an exploration that will attempt a theoretical understanding of the role played by advice agencies in what we term the 'administrative justice' environment in the UK. Central to this exploration is an understanding that advice agencies are not seen as legal advisers for poor people, but are critical to the formation of emerging 'publics'; that they are involved not simply in the delivery of individual advice, but in a collective concern that translates the private disputes and grievances into *public matters*.

I argue that to see advice agencies as simply advice *givers* misses out their important location as *active, campaigning* organisations concerned to influence social policy. For organisations such as Shelter and Citizens' Advice, whilst the provision of advice and information to individuals is an end in itself, it is also a tool in a wider strategy of promoting the need for social change. Situating advice organisations within the context of campaigning places advice organisations in the position of being *translators* in a double sense. First, in the daily interactions between advisor and client, a central part of their task is to translate the many complex procedures and mechanisms by which citizens can attempt to achieve justice into a language and format that can be understood by 'ordinary people' without any specialist knowledge. In this first sense of translation, advisers are involved in enhancing 'legal consciousness' in the narrow sense, as part of a project for developing 'public legal education'.

The second sense in which advice agencies engage in processes of translation is in transforming these individual, essentially private grievances, complaints, actions and appeals into very public concerns. I argue that the strength of advice organisations is that they are able to translate individual cases that are their daily case-load into evidence of the need for change. This translation can happen through the aggregation of cases into statistics, or it can be in the use of individual stories as illustrations of the pain, hardship and abuse that can be caused by particular policies, or lack of policies. In the sense that campaigning advice organisations can translate *private* grief into *public* demands, advice organisations can be seen as translators of the private into the public sphere. This provides a new theoretical lens through which to examine the role advice agencies play. At a time when the demise of the public sphere is a frequent claim, this lens engages us with empirical and theoretical exploration into 'emergent publics'.