Workshop

„Exploring Expertise – Uncertainty, Knowledge, and Trust in Democracies"

June 15—16, 2012

Abstracts

Goals: This workshop explores the social forms of expertise and the institutional frameworks in which it functions (or fails to). In the process we hope to discuss improvements within the various normative frameworks of both "good academic practice" and "democratic society". Of course, we are aware of the limited scope for normative discussions within the social sciences. But at the same time, we are frequently asked to provide (expert) input to normative processes. As social scientists we eagerly give such inputs within academia (evaluation panels, letters of recommendation, peer reviews), but we are more reluctant to provide it as soon as other areas of society are addressed. This tension provides us with a starting point for exploring how academics might best contribute, critically and practically, to improving social institutions. How can we turn our fieldwork, our own experience, and our reflection on both into suggestions for improving the use of expertise in society?

Steering between the "academic point of view" and the applied and policy worlds in which a few of us operate, we propose a set of questions for joint reflection in the hopes of reaching both insight and propositions for further exploration.

What makes expertise different from categories such as advice? Guidance? Instruction? Connoisseurship? What is the difference between specialization and expertise? What can be gained by differentiating such categories in terms of their implied competencies of actors? What differences might be evident in how these different capacities are performed? Or is it conversely helpful to extract similarities from all these categories in order to clarify the role assigned to the expert in the present?

Is there a historical juncture where culturally familiar notions such as "advice" become formalized as expertise? And in what settings and societies?

How does the switch occur from individual expert status (commanding desirable insight for a particular field or process) into a plethora of professions that can be grouped under expertise-fields? Often with role reversals: younger people as experts/optimizers, whereas advice may once have been the prerogative of elders? What is the relationship between individual and institutions in the expert-dynamic? What role do institutions play in conferring expert-status?

Are there common characteristics of expertise across fields in terms of extracting content from academic insight into transferable bits of advice/guidance?

Are there common ingredients of expert performance? Or is the commonality simply the need to find the right performative key for a given setting in order to be convincing or credible?

The event falls into three conversations:

I. The social forms of expertise
How does expertise perform to the expectations of outsiders (Gingrich)? How is it created in new domains of practice by the communal shaping of standards of evaluation – and in performances at least in part focused on insider audiences (Jones)? How does it adapt to new media ecologies (Boyer)? How does expertise emerge from experience (Beck)?

II. Institutional frameworks
How are experts and certainty necessary to the functioning of institutions (Lebow), and how do institutions choreograph expert performance (Bizer)? How do experts within institutions manage their conflicting obligations of loyalty and objectivity (Hertz), and how do they manage to blind themselves to their institutional constraints and opportunities (Born)?

III. Revising and fixing expertise
How do we reconcile--rhetorically or otherwise--the modern culture of expertise with norms of democratic or collegial deliberation (Brenneis) and dialogic practitioner-client relationships (Carr)? Looking back at the failures and unintended consequences of expert interventions, how do we go forward (Lea)?

Abstracts, part I:

ANDRE GINGRICH (University of Vienna): The 'Wild' and the Anthropological Expert

My contribution will consider a number of recent experiences with invitations for anthropological expertise in central Europe. They include, among others, bankers, theologians and unsuspecting ERC panelists – and the expertise in question includes anthropological concepts as much as methods of enquiry such as ethnographic fieldwork. After going through some of these examples, I'll discuss

- the transformation of knowledge into expertise via a label that is popularly recognizable (here: "anthropologists study uncivilized people" through the term "wild" with which is less embarrassing for anthropolo-gists than others such as "uncivilized" and which neo-Eco business people and desperate theologians likewise can endorse as a promising category;
- the transformation/broadening of self, the scholar, into self, the expert - including what, if any, adaptations to one's performance this includes, depending on the audience; likewise, the reduction of academic research results into the much more shallow, and more applied, sphere of "expert opinion";
- the contrast between expertise in non-academic and "applied" environments, against input in funding institutions and research policy forum such as the ERC, where widely differing qualities and skills are required from an anthropologist;
- the specificity of anthropological knowledge in the service of expertise: how does it/does it? differ from knowledge in international relations, psychology, economics?

GRAHAM JONES (MIT, Cambridge): Entertainment Magic as a Culture of Expertise

This talk examines dimensions of expertise in entertainment magic, a performance practice involving the miniaturist virtuosity of imperceptible gestures, ingenious mechanical gimmicks, and a rigorous grasp on the spectator psychology. Drawing on nearly two years of fieldwork among magicians in contemporary France, my talk examines the production, circulation, and display of secret skills. I focus particularly on behind-the-scenes occasions of craft sociability, with an emphasis on the verbal practices through which French magicians constitute expertise as a discursive arena.

DOMINIC BOYER (Rice University): Digital Expertise in News Journalism and Anthropology

My remarks will focus on the forms of expert practice and expertise associated with digital communication and informational technology and will explore certain homologies between the impacts of "digital expertise" in news journalism and anthropology. I will discuss specifically how my recent research with German news journalists has helped to surface what I describe as an "informatic unconscious" in post-war American anthropology.

STEFAN BECK (HU Berlin): Ecologies of expertise

The paper takes its departure from the intuition that dominant ways of conceptualising experts and expertise are only partially helpful for anthropological research: science studies, the sociology of scientific knowledge or political science either ask what an expert / what expertise is, or ask what counts as „legitimate contributors to decision-making“ (Collins/Evans 2002: 252), hence inquire into the organizational or social fields (in the sense of P. Bourdieu) where expertise is contested and applied. Or social or political scientists inquire how „expertise“ succeeds or fails to better social processes, how expertise is fed into political or institutional processes (P. Weingart). These questions are important but - as will be argued - somewhat miss core anthropological research interests (however (ill) these might be defined in socio-cultural anthropology / European ethnology).

Instead of following these well established paths of inquiry, I suggest to follow a practice theoretical approach. And I suggest to start from scratch: How do certain abilities, skills, capabilities and aptitudes emerge in actors, how are they stabilized (using which technologies?) and how are they put into a form of practice that necessarily involves improvisation and creativity (to cope with known and unknown knowings)? How is experience turned into expertise? What distinguishes experience / skillful practices from expertise? How is expertise done so that its specific performances are judged by others as constituting expertness? From that might follow a symmetrical analysis of how non-(yet-)experts make use of expert performances.

Such a practice theoretical turn on expertise and experts implies several theoretical as well as methodological re-adjustments: instead of knowledge, knowings become central (Dewey & Bentley), instead of „knowledge“ or „information transfer“ the question of what constitutes favorable environments for re-producing knowings will be in the focus (Ingold). And instead of classifying expertise as either interactive or contributory (as Collins/Evans have it) the main interest will be in ethnographic analyses of situations where actors successfully participate in the expertness of others.

Yet while this practice theoretical perspective resonates well with anthropological views on „apprenticeship“ or „situated learning“ (Lave 1991), „communities of practice“ (Wenger 1998), „embodied knowledge“ (Barth 2002) etc., it is unclear whether it is scalable: the perspective is biased on a pertinacious methodological as well as theoretical individualism and a cognitivist heritage that can only partially be alleviated by interactionist insights. Obviously, any attempt to „scale“ a practice theoretical approach on expertise in order to ethnographically analyze its workings in complex systems (organizations) or in assemblages of an equipped humanity (clinics, societies) will require some theoretical wriggling as well as methodological twists and turns. As a start, the notion of „ecologies of expertise“ might be helpful, pointing to material, social and cultural contexts where expertise is made and made useful.

Abstracts, part II:

RICHARD NED LEBOW (Dartmouth College/Lund University): The Conspiracy of Prediction

Why do we feel the need for and respect expertise in the modern world? Drawing from this Weberian approach, the presentation will emphasize the continuing human need to believe in predicting and to some degree influencing the future. As a corollary of Entzauberung, secular experts have replaced shamans and other religious leaders as those thought to possess this magic. In recent years there has been more disenchantment with them for several reinforcing reasons. These include a number of important political and economic developments that were not predicrted (e.g., end of the Cold War, 9.11 and the perceived threat from the Islamic world, the various economic shocks). People feel more in need of reassurance but trust experts less.

From this starting point I could go on to "expose" what I call the conspiracy of prediction. In economics, politics, education, to name just three domains, prediction is impossible, but we deny this truth. How could the economy function if people did not believe that interest rates were to some degree predictable? How would universities justify admission if they confessed they had no realistic algorithms for predicting how students will perform once admitted?

I will then talk some more about two of the domains noted above, drawing on my experience as scholar-in-residence in the CIA, and chair of Dartmouth's admissions and financial aid committee. I also want to say a few words about positivistic social science, and the reaction against it, which is another compelling example.

KILIAN BIZER (Göttingen): Exploring Expertise – The Economics of Expertism

What constitutes an expert? From an economic point of view, two characteristics come to mind: An expert has or is assumed to have some specific knowledge applicable to the issue in question. This knowledge could help resolve a regulatory choice problem ("better policy", "better regulation"). Frequently such knowledge in the field of economics is the structuring of problems, the gathering and interpreting of quantitative data, the design of policy instruments, etc. For this purpose experts write long expertises and provide and apply the knowledge of their field. The politician or public agency who is inviting the expert finds itself in a principal-agent-situation, where they cannot fully observe the knowledge the agent masters and applies. As a result the agent can provide a sub-optimal service without fearing detection, if the results are not made public. This brings me to the second characteristic.

The second characteristic of experts is that not so much their knowledge but their personal ability to transmit a message is used in the political process. For this purpose politicians or public agencies invite experts to public (non-academic) events where they present results, answer questions in interviews or debate the issue with others. Such events have a double effect: They serve to control the expert by scrutinizing his arguments, but can also help the politician or public agency by adding academic authority to their position. At such events experts with a deep voice, friendly manners who calmly answer all questions are used for other purposes than their sharp, cynical and ranting colleagues. Although it is always helpful to be media-genic, experts can be choreographed and selected almost like actors. In this realm, the principal-agent-relationship is somewhat reversed: The expert believes to be engaged for his or her knowledge, but is misused for providing reputation to an issue or position.
In conclusion, specific knowledge might be a necessary condition for experts, but the expert's acting capability and communication style constitutes the sufficient condition to expertism. Though experts are generally aware that they are demanded for more than their knowledge, they frequently underestimate the importance of the second characteristic of their expertism.

ELLEN HERTZ (Université de Neuchâtel): Who says anthropologist don't use experimental methods? "Expertising" intangible cultural heritage in Neuchâtel, Switzerland

"As a salaried functionary for the Republic and Canton of Neuchâtel, it was difficult to say "no" to the head of the cantonal Service for Cultural Affairs when she requested that I serve as an expert on a cantonally convened ad hoc commission to study the question of what to put on the canton list of intangible cultural heritage, to be transmitted as per reques to the Swiss Federal Office of Culture. I tried to argue that I had just received a large grant award in which I was to study the administrative procedures by which cantonal and the national lists were to be constituted, and that I could not be both an expert to and an observer of the process. This argument apparently held little water in the eyes of the (very pleasant) cantonal adminsitrator. Neither didi it convince my Dean, a historian and member of the National Science Foundation commission that had

decided to give me the aforementioned large grant. And so stuck I was, expert and observer, in the rather small country that is Switzerland, and then even smaller canton that in Neuchâtel. In my presentation, I will describe my discomfort and the various twistings and turnings I effectuated to try to alleviate the pain."

GEORGINA BORN (Oxford University): What is a properly anthropological analysis of expertise, 25+ years after Anthropology as Cultural Critique?

Drawing on my ethnographies – the subjects of which have been intellectuals, artists, musicians, computer scientists, television professionals, cultural and media bureaucrats (at the BBC, IRCAM, UC Irvine, Hexagram at Concordia University, and other computer / digital music institutes and universes) – I want to reflect on the methodological and ethical dimensions of my anthropological work. Rather than be tempted to dwell on sociological generalizations – about authority, skill, cultural capital, or communities of practice for example – or to think only synchronically about the positioning of my expert-subjects within a field defined by the prestige economies or material infrastructures of expertise, I have been impelled to locate these economies and materialities of expertise both with detailed specificity, and diachronically. I have tried to analyse expertise as the actor experiences it: that is, as located within a motile universe of shifting but cumulative and path-dependent concerns and matters that are highly particular to a given field, even as they are distributed spatially and temporally through the transnational circulations and genealogical or historical arcs embodied in communities of genre, professional association, aesthetic, philosophical or 'paradigm' affiliation, and so on: the social imaginaries of expertise. In many of my ethnographies, of course, several such fields and circuits are entangled or overlain. At the same time, I have wanted to attend closely to the local social universe of the institution within which the expert is privileged to work, often unconscious of her/his local privileges. The juxtaposition of these social universes has been one abiding interest for me. But strangely, anthropology has not been very interested in this method, notably the concern with the particularities of field and genre. It has been disinterested even though this direction would enable anthropology to become even more than today a meta-discipline of the forms and norms of Western and transnational social and culture life, and thus fulfill its post-postcolonial coming of age as the most comprehensive of disciplines of the social. It is this that puzzles me and that I'd like to discuss: the contradiction between our actors' profound, vocational commitment to their field or métier, and anthropology's abiding disinterest - despite the critiques and turning points announced over 25 years ago (most spectacularly in Anthropology as Cultural Critique) - in building out analyses of the worlds of particular historical forms of expertise.

Abstracts, part III:

DON BRENNEIS (University of California, Santa Cruz): Crowds, Clouds, and conversations: Deliberating peer review

Peer review, whether pursued on a funding panel, an editorial board, or an assessment committee, has long been a process premised on the twin elements of expertise and deliberation. Such sites and practices provide key contexts for the enactment of expertise both as individual and collective capacity. They also often have a distinct future-focused quality. Even the evaluation of past accomplishments is usually directed towards shaping and supporting subsequent trajectories.

In recent years, however, the value, trustworthiness, and efficiency of such expert deliberation have been challenged from multiple directions; if there had been an "irrational halo," it is now often taken to be tarnished. Some of these challenges reflect the widespread institutional drive towards audit and transparency, goals assumed to be achievable through comparative measurement and other analytical techniques. Others come from the affordances offered by new and, on the face of it, more objective and efficient technologies; the rise of bibliometrics is a particularly marked case. New media resources are also central in the imagining of alternative evaluative practices, especially in the area of scholarly publishing, where the rise of post hoc crowd reviewing is becoming increasingly salient. Such practices, i.e., where a manuscript is first put up on line and then subjected to critique, revision, and potential removal as determined by on line reader response, reverse the usual temporal flow of publication, raise significant questions about the stability of scholarly knowledge, and presume a much more broadly shared – and enacted – understanding of how knowledge might best be produced. They also, in the language of many of their advocates, democratize scholarly and scientific participation significantly.

My presentation will explore several dimensions of this changing scene, one in which new actors, new audiences, and new forms of expert enactment are in play. I'm particularly interest in the social life of collaborative rather than individual expertise, both in the internal workings of committees and in relation to the varieties of public actors who are coming to claim more of a role and a responsibility vis-à-vis these mundane but consequential processes.

SUMMERSON CARR (University of Chicago): Disavowal, Dissemination and the Cultivation of Clinical Expertise

In the world of Motivational Interviewing (MI)—a relatively new, but increasingly recognized genre of clinical expertise—the greatest threat to the cultivation of expertise is the idea that one has already established it. The most experienced MI practitioners not only warn novices of "the expert trap." They also refuse to identify themselves as experts. Indeed, in MI, expertise is imagined not as a static property of professional personhood, but rather as the product of an ongoing, intensive, and carefully managed interactive process, which requires clients as well as practitioners to speak and act in anticipated ways. To this end, MI training centrally involves role-playing future conversations with problem-

plagued clients, practicing well-defined rhetorical strategies that constitute an expert register by the very performance of naïveté, uncertainty, and ambivalence.

In this paper, I link the disavowal of expertise—as both native discourse and practice—to its cultivation in this rapidly growing community of practitioners. More specifically, I suggest that what appears to be ambivalence and uncertainty may instead be precisely the way would-be, never-quite experts gain recognition, establish trust, and ever expand their reach into new terrains of professional practice.

TESS LEA (ARC Queen Elizabeth II Fellow/ The University of Sydney): Can there be good policy? Or is this a wrong-headed faith in the idea of expertise?

In this talk I ask how we might research and theorize expertise about infrastructure – engineering, plumbing, architectural design, and road building – when this is braided within interventionary expertise aimed at amending the lives of Indigenous people. My questions emerge from multi-sited fieldwork for a project entitled “Can there be good policy? Tracing the paths between policy intent, evidence and practical benefit in regional and remote Australia.” The question ‘Can there be good policy” of course comes from David Mosse, who asks “Is good policy unimplementable?” In this project I have been experimenting with a Latourian sociology and also activating experiments to trace the social life of remedial policy across housing, schooling, multi-media enterprise development, civil and construction projects. But researching spaces of liberal settler policy encounter where expertise is materialised in so many guises raises messy methodological, practical and conceptual challenges about holding different frames of reference in view, which I begin to address and formulate here.