Appendix: data, position, method

Data

This book relies heavily on ethnographic fieldnotes. Fieldnotes may be written in as many ways as there are ethnographers, but far from being a random process of data collection it is a highly structured way of dealing with the fact that one cannot know, in the moment of gathering information, what will turn out to be relevant or useful in a subsequent analysis. So one gathers as much as possible: observations of practices; descriptions of settings and interaction; conversations overheard; questions asked and answers provided; analytical reflections; observations about one's own bias or prejudice; notes on the mismatch between read theory and what one observes and overhears; new research questions to be pursued; what one does not understand; preliminary conclusions to be run past informants for discussion.

The Municipality

The main bulk of my data stems from the seven months (January–June and November 2009) I was doing fieldwork in the Municipality which agreed to let me follow their implementation of the trial. I spent most days in this period in the job center, with the exception of three weeks in February, during which I had teaching obligations to fulfill at my university department, and two weeks in April, during which I participated in conferences. My data from the Municipality primarily consist of: daily fieldnotes from meetings between caseworkers and recipients of sickness benefit; fieldnotes from the weekly team meetings; and fieldnotes on the conversations between caseworkers or between caseworkers and myself. Audio recorded data include five interviews with caseworkers who were involved in the project and one who was not; recordings of twelve project meetings pertaining to *Active—Back Sooner*; five recorded meetings between the project group and the private employment agencies involved in the execution of the project activities; and one recorded meeting between representatives from different organizational levels in the Municipality discussing the drafting of a public procurement notice. Furthermore, my data pool includes the Municipality's local project descriptions and some internal summaries and evaluative reports they made in connection with the project.

The private employment agency—ENGA

The next big portion of data comes from the private employment agency which I have called ENGA (a meaningless acronym) and where I spent four weeks during the fall of 2009. Apart from fieldnotes and audio recordings of meetings between the employees from ENGA and the municipal caseworkers, it includes a total of eighteen tape-recorded interviews with eight employees; fieldnotes from classroom sessions with the recipients of sickness benefit who had been referred there for various reasons; notes from staff meetings and meetings between employees and recipients of sickness benefit or rehabilitation benefit. Finally, it contains fieldnotes from my own conversations with the employees and with the recipients of sickness benefit.

The National Labor Market Authority

I spent a total of one month in the National Labor Market Authority in the fall of 2009. My data from this site primarily consist of fieldnotes taken during the weekly team meetings and notes recording the daily work of the twelve employees who took turns having me sit in on one day in their work life. The data I got was rich but only little of it pertained to the trial which is the subject of this book. This data is, therefore, largely unused in this book (see however Vohnsen 2013b; Vohnsen 2016a; Vohnsen forthcoming). The primary data pertaining to the National Labor Market Authority which has been included in the book are two taped interviews with people who were involved in drafting the later adjustments of the project; some memorandums I got by requesting subject access; and finally, from the two large seminars for the participating municipalities hosted by the National Labor Market Authority. These two seminars were the “experience-gathering seminar” held in January 2009 and the “midway seminar” held in April the same year.

Recipients of sickness benefit

I furthermore spoke to a number of men and women who had been drafted into the project, in other words the recipients of sickness benefit. Apart from the people I met fleetingly at the Municipality and at ENGA, I visited six recipients of sickness benefit in their homes and tape recorded their accounts of interaction with the Municipality and, in some cases, with ENGA. Three of these I had met at ENGA and therefore saw several times. This material is largely absent in the book. Since I have limited my analytical scope to focus primarily on the implementers of *Active—Back Sooner* and their decisions pertaining to the project, plus later on the revised sickness benefit legislation, the subjects of the project and of the law take up a peripheral role in the book.

Other data

I have interviewed the following persons once or twice: the Permanent Secretary from the Ministry of Employment, a civil servant from his administration; a reporter who critiqued the legal basis of the project on the radio; and a Parliament member and former Minister who gave an account of the relationship between Minister and administration as she experienced it. Apart from this I have had un-recorded conversations with scientists and researchers who have taken an interest in the scientific basis of the interventions. My research assistant, Rasmus Kolding, interviewed a total of five caseworkers and five team leaders from six other municipalities that had chosen to be part of the controlled trial *Active—Back Sooner*. I have had these interviews at my disposal as well as some British reports on parallel efforts to reduce sickness absence in the UK which he found during his research. Further documents include: a large number of Danish public research reports and the evaluation of the project; correspondence between the National Labor Market Authority, the Ministry of Employment, the Junior Counsel to the Treasury, the Employment Region and various municipalities. Finally, I have also referred to minutes from a parliamentary debate and some of the documents that were used as basis for discussion of the project in Parliament.

Position and method

As Philip Abrams (2006 [1977]) pointed out, it is notoriously difficult to study the State. It tends to slip away between one's fingers as soon as one tries to define it. When we speak of "the State," do we talk about the government as a whole or just one minister? Or do we talk about the governmental administration or a sub-unit in a municipality? When I began my employment as a PhD student in the summer of 2008, I knew practically nothing about the way the Danish state system, as Abrams defines it "the palpable nexus of practices and institutional structure centered in government" (ibid.: 112), was structured. In high school, I was a mathematics student and the subsequent travelling in Central America and six years of training as a student of anthropology had done nothing to challenge my ignorance of the political and administrative structures of the country in which I was born. The seven months I was employed as an internal consultant in a municipality after obtaining my masters degree did provide a crash course in the working of a municipality but "the State" in which I now became employed was foreign territory to me. While conducting my PhD research I was formally employed by the Ministry of Employment, seconded to the cross-ministerial innovation unit MindLab (co-funded by three ministries including the Ministry of Employment), while being supervised from and academically attached to the Department of Anthropology, Archaeology, and Linguistics at Aarhus University. The three parties co-funded my research. The requirement was that my research would somehow "be useful" and thematically fall within the area regulated by the Ministry of Employment.

Useful to whom?

For the first year and a half of my employment as a PhD student I was based in MindLab's office situated in the heart of Copenhagen next to the Danish Parliament and a few hundred meters from the Ministry of Employment and the National Labor Market Authority. Upon my employment I soon learned that in Denmark "the State" is an administrative unit comprising the ever-changing configuration of the Danish Ministries and their subsections. "The state" however is not the only public administrative configuration. There are the five geographically based regions (primarily taking care of the public health care system) and at local level 98 municipalities that each collect taxes and have their own budgets. While bound by national law produced in "the State" and approved in "the Parliament," the municipalities have relative autonomy in terms of structuring the offers they are obliged by law to offer to the inhabitants of their municipalities. The larger part of the first year and a half, I spent circulating between the National Labor Market Authority, the municipal job center, the private employment agency ENGA, and the private homes of some of the recipients of sickness benefit whom I interviewed. The final year and a half I spent alternately at Aarhus University and the University of St Andrews in Scotland, writing and teaching.

The fact that my colleagues at MindLab were working directly with policy-makers in its three owner ministries gave me access to much background information about the world of policy-making, which has not been included in this book but which shaped my interest in implementation. The requirement that my research "be useful" took me some time to come to terms with—not least because my own understanding of "usefulness" initially was rather crude. I feared I would one day be held accountable for the time and money spent on my research and that I would be expected to provide clear cut suggestions for how the Ministry of Employment could achieve its goals. This troubled me. Not only because it seemed too great a task and was one that contradicted what I continue to see as the role of research, but also because "the Ministry of Employment" is no stable thing. Political preferences change, as do Ministers and Governments. So "useful" to whom, exactly? I am grateful to my supervisor from MindLab, Head of Innovation Christian Bason, for allowing me to work out my own take on "usefulness." My answer to the question became, "useful to those who wish to know about implementation and the practical effects of policy." I found help in the pragmatic principle that also governs the theoretical framework of this book, namely that our knowledge about the world shapes our approach to it. I wanted to offer the civil servants in the Ministry a different way to look at a familiar field of intervention "the labor market area" and a different approach to thinking about the effects of their work.

Dangerous naivety—National Labor Market Authority

My previously mentioned ignorance about the political field I entered caused problems and the fact that I chose to focus my research on the implementation

of the controlled trial *Active—Back Sooner* had some unfortunate methodological implications. In the spring of 2009 *Active—Back Sooner* became the focus of a legal and political controversy—something I of course had no way of knowing when I chose it as my object of study in November 2008. That it was an attempt to work evidence-based was partly what had caught my interest in the project, and being a researcher my first move was to read up on the research it built on. In this case I had difficulties finding it and it did not take many days before I was on the phone to the National Labor Market Authority asking for references. It turned out I was not the only one who was unable to find the research the controlled trial built on. Some journalists had started to look in to the matter as well and the fact that I seemed from the outset of my research to be asking the same questions as the journalists probably did contribute to placing me in the same category in the eyes of some of the civil servants from the National Labor Market Authority. This was an image I was not able to shake off during the year I did my research. Not least because I took an interest in the subsequent legal controversy and because I continued to bounce into unspoken norms about how one acts when employed in a Ministry.

For example: at one point I made a formal request for access to the documents relating to the preparatory stages of the controlled trial in order to ensure I had all the publicly accessible documents. I was continually being told that the information I was given when I spoke to the civil servants in the National Labor Market Authority was confidential and it made me nervous. I therefore felt I needed to ensure a pool of material to which I could safely refer. My request however was taken as something akin to a declaration of war since it seemed that only reporters request subject access before they want to expose the ministries in some way. It did not help me that I requested the subject access at the very same time as did the reporter who had recently exposed them several times in the media and that I did it knowingly: my reasoning had been to save the civil servants the trouble of having to find all the documents twice since I knew it was a time-consuming affair. However, it caused a scandal and the news of my request traveled all the way up to the Permanent Secretary and talk about “the PhD student who requested document access” spread to other ministries and was the subject of horrified talk. There was information I would have liked to have but which I, unfortunately, was cut off from: one civil servant from the National Labor Market Authority put it to me quite bluntly in the fall of 2009 after having told me that she had deliberately tried to cut me off from information: “You are dangerous because you are ignorant about the ways of politics. You have no idea what might be politically sensitive and you probably have not even considered that your handing in your PhD thesis will most likely coincide with the national election.” She was right. Nothing was farther from my mind. The data I did get from the Ministry, however, I owe primarily to the unshakable Head of Office in an Office in the National Labor Market Authority where I was allowed to spend a month during the fall of 2009, and to those of his employees who decided to confide in me. People from the higher administrative levels, including the Permanent Secretary himself, were more at ease with my project and were forthcoming with interviews and data.

On being a researcher—the municipal job center

Initially I had planned to begin my research in much closer collaboration with the civil servants in the National Labor Market Authority. However, at the time my research was bound to begin, there was no Head of Office in the Office which would work most closely with the translation of the *Action Plan on Sickness Benefit* into concrete implementable proposals. *Active—Back Sooner* was such a translation of the Action Plan's proposal 32, but with no one in charge of the Office, there was no one to decide to take me in and no one to forward my request to. Instead I found a list of the municipalities who had applied to participate in the implementation of the project. I decided on a municipality where a friend of mine had recently begun to work in the Central Administration and through her I got hold of one of the persons responsible for the municipality's work in the employment area. This person promised to forward my request to Ulla, the Head of the job center, with whom I had a meeting a few weeks later, and the team leader, Peter, gave me permission to follow the work in the job center. After the permission arrived that I could join the project group I was invited to every meeting that concerned the implementation of *Active—Back Sooner*. Peter officially welcomed me in the group this way:

Peter: Nina, you just join whatever might be interesting for you. Let this be an open invitation. We cannot promise you the highest service level because people are busy and that is the way it is meant to be. We do not have a lot of space but there is always a free office you can use. Generally put, you can be here in whatever way you like.

And this turned out to be true. I had full access to every meeting or type of work I wanted to look at and the caseworkers were all forthcoming and generous with their time and interest. As a small but significant gesture I was given my own coffee mug on the first day of my arrival; care was taken to see that I got my own email address and password to the computer systems (after having signed a declaration of confidentiality) so I could access all the files I found relevant and receive the emails that informed me when and where beers would be drunk on Fridays. There would always be several people who had noticed when I had not been around for a few days and who would be happy when I returned. The extreme openness and the degree to which these people shared their doubts and passions about their work has given me access to stacks of data that leave them quite vulnerable to critique and makes me responsible for managing the task of presenting their work and concerns in a way that respects their openness and generosity.

As opposed to the time I spent in the National Labor Market Authority, where most employees seemed to find it uncomfortable or disturbing having someone sit on a chair and take notes while they worked, in the municipal job center it was easy for me to find a "place" in their daily work life. Here the caseworkers were used to having interns from the Schools of Social Work or the recently employed caseworkers sit in on their work for extended periods of time. They

were therefore accustomed to working with an observer next to them and were in the habit of articulating the grounds for their actions. My “role” on the other hand was not that of an intern or a recently employed caseworker but exactly that of a researcher. Due to my extended stay in this organization I felt it was important that the caseworkers did not forget that I was there to collect data. One way I persistently tried to establish myself as a researcher was by taking notes overtly during conversations and meetings or by asking permission to tape record meetings or private conversations.

The importance of not being “researcher X”—private employment agency, ENGA

My contact to the private employment agency ENGA came about as a result of my participation in several meetings between their employees and the caseworkers from the Municipality. ENGA was among the two private employment agencies most used in the project and they seemed concerned to improve both the communication with the Municipality and the content of their offers. When I asked their team leader Marianne after one of these meeting if I could follow their work she told me she would think about it. She needed to confer with the director of ENGA but equally important she wanted to discuss it with all the employees attached to the “sickness benefit package” to which the recipients drafted for the project were referred. This resulted in two meetings before I was given permission to follow their work with the project. The first meeting with Marianne and one of the top managers in the organization went fine but the second meeting with participation of some of the employees from the “sickness benefit package” did not go as smoothly. Some of the employees were familiar with the work of another Danish researcher, “researcher. X,” who had published a book that made an institution which was in some respects similar to ENGA appear in a very bad light. Some of the employees were anxious I would pick-up on thoughtless office talk among colleagues and present casual statements out of context as representative of their attitude towards their work and the citizens they worked with. If my primary task in the National Labor Market Authority had been to convince them that I was not a reporter, to gain access to ENGA it was crucial that I convinced them that I was not a researcher like “researcher X.”

I too had read her book: it was quite a horrific read and a classic example of the “system treats little man with evil” type literature, in which caseworkers are portrayed as indifferent and sometimes even mean people who care next to nothing about the fate of their clients. I knew of her as a good and thorough researcher and had no doubts about the validity of her work, but it was representative of precisely the kind of work I had wanted to distance myself from with my own research. If her observations and critiques of the people employed in the welfare system were correct, I wanted to understand the conditions these people had for carrying out their work as they wished. Thus it was not difficult for me to argue that my research would be nothing like hers; that it would not be yet another critique of the people employed in “the system” but an exploration of implementation and

the employees' conditions for carrying out official policy. In any case it turned out to be a needless concern of the employees. I never heard anyone talk about any of the citizens they worked with in anything but a respectful manner. If they spoke ill of anything it was the conditions for their work which they often found counter-productive to reach the goals they were subjected to. Hence, at ENGA they were as open and forthcoming as in the municipal job center once we had established I was not there in order to "expose them." They shared my interest in describing and communicating the conditions under which large parts of the labor market effort was carried out, and with this book I hope to have lived up to their expectations.

Use of personal names and place names

In this book I refer—as a rule—to people either by a fictional name (e.g. Ida, Marianne, Henry) or by their non-specific position or profession (a caseworker, a civil servant, a lawyer, a reporter). Exceptions to this rule is The Permanent Secretary from the Ministry of Employment and other holders of clear-cut offices, such as the Minister of Employment and the Vice Director of the National Labor Market Authority, who are easily identifiable and for that reason will simply be referred to by their titles. In one instance where I quote from parliamentary minutes I use the politicians' proper names as this information is publicly accessible. Those who are most vulnerable to identification in this book are the municipal caseworkers and the civil servants whose colleagues would recognize them because they take up a prominent role in this book. To make identification more difficult I have, in consultation with some informants, decided on the strategy of sometimes scrambling caseworkers, cases, and episodes from different days.

I have done this not only to ensure anonymity but also to present a variety of work and decisions. Information pertaining to sickness benefit cases is highly person sensitive data and in the instances where I recount conversations between caseworkers and recipients of sickness benefit I have altered central information such as illness and profession where they are so obvious as to allow the specific recipient of sickness benefit to be traced. So for instance, in the first portrait of implementation where I go through a series of meetings to present the municipal unit's work, the caseworker I have chosen is Ian who will be easily recognized by his colleagues. However, the cases and episodes, on the other hand, "belong" not only to him but to other colleagues as well. I have furthermore invented extra caseworkers or civil servants to whom I have attributed the most critical or vulnerable statements. For instance the caseworkers Ena and Frank are such fictional caseworkers whose persona the real life caseworkers occupy in turn when offering harsh critique or statements that leave them especially vulnerable. The implication of these choices, of course, is that this book can by no means claim to offer portraiture of the individual life-worlds of specific people.

While the Ministry of Employment and the National Labor Market Authority are situated in Copenhagen, the Capital of Denmark, I have been purposefully vague concerning the location of both the Municipality and the private

employment agency which are included in this study. Whenever I refer specifically to these organizations and the geographical location in which they are situated, I refer to them as the *Municipality*, the *job center*, the *town* or *ENGA*—the latter being a purely fictional and meaningless acronym I have given the private employment agency to distinguish it from other private employment agencies. What I call private employment agencies are themselves organizations with often highly diverse assignments—some undertake research of their own; some offer courses directed at things other than getting people back to work. However, all of them contract with the Municipality and since it is in this capacity that they are interesting to this book, I refer to them as private employment agencies to call attention to their role as private actors in the employment industry.

Since I have been present during meetings between the Municipality and the National Labor Market Authority and between ENGA and the Municipality there are people in all of these organizations who will know which municipality and which private employment agency I am dealing with. However, while they know the identity of each other and realize that people will probably guess at their true identity, they have wished to reserve the right to “deny” which anonymity will grant them. I have, therefore, omitted information that would make their organizational identity obvious. Again there are implications. The book is curiously lacking in descriptions of organizational and geographical contexts. Yet the “content” and “context” I have needed to tell the stories in this book are not the private lives of Ida or Henry, nor the organizational budgets or the architectural details of the surrounding towns and streets. Rather I have needed descriptions of work routines, of organizational links, and of the processes through which *Active—Back Sooner* was made and unmade. Neither of this has been hindered by the above constraints on the presentation of my material.