HARD CONTRACT: ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

IN CONTRACT SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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In this brief report I will sketch the barest outlines of several of the major problem areas to be found in contract social anthropological research. Anthropological research always presents problems of both a general and a specific nature, the latter usually being reflections of some unique aspects of particular research sites. Some of the general problems include the simple obtaining of permission to work in a given field site, permission which may be impeded or blocked by bureaucratic red tape or political resistance to research on certain topics or in certain geographical areas. Too, there are problems of rapport with informants, and how one establishes and maintains it during the course of the research. Then there are the sort of existential dimensions of anthropological research of the kind of relationship one comes to have with one's informants and their culture (Geertz 1975). In learning a culture, the best means since Malinowski has been to learn the language of the field. That too can present problems (cf. Rabinow 1977).

Theoretical issues which may have to be addressed include the recognition and hence the handling of historical data seen as pertinent to contemporary dynamics in social or political fields (Gaines 1979) or the impact on data collection and interpretation of the social standing of the ethnographer's associates in the field and informants' management of impressions of themselves (Berreman 1972).

In this paper I will explore some of the significant problems which are likely to develop in the course of contract research. I will draw examples from my past contract research experiences. Principal among the problems encountered in contract research, as I see it, are the sociopolitical contexts of such research, its problems of cross-discipline and cross-subcultural communication, and, lastly, the issues of law and control. I place the discussion of these issues in the context of some fairly well known problems found in social anthropological fieldwork, such as those noted above, in order to communicate to readers who have not yet done any contract research. The paper is by turns descriptive, programmatic and analytic.

Politics of Research

Contract research, such as an alcohol research project conducted in two Black communities in which I participated, presents problems of the politicization of research. For that research, the very formulation of the Request for Proposal (RFP), in which I participated as a consultant to a state's Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, was in itself a political move. The need for research of "values, patterns and beliefs related to drinking" was impressed upon the state by Black leaders who cited the lack of attention Blacks were receiving from the service agencies involved with drugs and alcohol funded by the state. The state, under some pressure, recognized the need for such research "to improve service utilization and provision for Blacks of the State." The present research has as its goal the development of knowledge (and, I would argue, understanding) and, based thereon, the presentation of recommendations, non-binding of course, to the state for the improvement of the range of alcohol services for Blacks.

Political machinations were also involved in determining the firm whose proposal would be ultimately successful. Prior to the "letting" of the contract for the alcohol research among Blacks, a large federal contract had been given to a research center in another part of the state. The award of a large contract to one part of the state made it unlikely that another contract along similar lines (alcohol) would be given to a firm in the same area, as it would not increase the effect of the political patronage, an important part of contract letting. A strange turn of events found me later writing and submitting a bid in association with a non-profit research firm.

The field of competitors was narrowed, as noted above, to one part of the state, with my proposal ultimately winning out. When engaged in some competition for a contract, some knowledge of recent trends and placements of contracts in the same field or topic (not to mention the closeness of elections) may help researchers to gauge their chances for success. I think the presentation of a proposal which not only outlined the theory and method to be used to accomplish what the state wnated but which also argued against the approaches I expected my competitors to use, i.e., sociological, contributed greatly to my success.

Now, there can be added other levels, to this rather wide political context of research, which in their totality constitute the "social organization" of contract research (Sjoberg 1967). But in contract research, it should be cautioned, the social units are also, or primarily, political units. As such, aside from the "political history of contract letting," there should be taken into account specific alliances of and oppositions to the research firm for which the anthropologist will conduct the research. Relationships here are generally the products of research history, of who got what grant or contract, who worked with or for whom and when, and, just as importantly, who did not get a contract or grant, who

did not or would not work with or for whom. In sum, the anthropologist doing contract research should be aware that s/he is not entering a vacuum, but rather is entering an ongoing, historically based set of unifying and opposing social and political processes and relationships. All this is not, of course, unique to contract research in contrast to research in a distant land. The machinations of Homo politicus are to be found at home as well. But at home, the anthropologist cannot feign the role of impartial observer and maintain an impartial stance, if only by virtue of the fact that he or she will be engaged in a particular kind of research effort in affiliation with a particular firm. The kind of research to be done, the firm and its type can be seen as units of political meaning in the context of an overall politicized organization of research based on contracts.

So far, I have pointed to the wider political, or potentially political, dimensions of the funding agency and the firm or unit within it, in which the anthropologist might work. These dimensions pertain primarily to the relationship of the firm or group with funding agencies and of research groups to one another. At least two other political levels may be elucidated. First, within a given research group with a contract history a particular set of political relationships will exist, uniting or dividing employees and management. (It is also good to keep in mind that a labor-management model of relationships is the appropriate one for contract research).

Within the research group, relationships which predate the arrival of the anthropologist will come into play upon his or her arrival. The extant set of relationships will affect who is "brought aboard" to assist in the conducting of the research. So while hiring practices will reflect old ties, loyalties and debts, such practices do not insure the helpfulness or even appropriateness of the advice and expertise thereby foisted on the anthropologist. In short, it may be necessary to work with people who will not or cannot help the research effort. In my case, an advisory committee which was formed without my "input" consisted of sociologists and psychologists who were old friends of the project's Principal Investigator (PI), and with whom they shared a rather profound lack of understanding of things cultural. While very experienced survey researchers, they provided little input and virtually no support for or understanding of the cultural (semantic and cognitive) approach which informed the research design. A subsequent addition of an anthropologist to this committee helped make it in some sense advisory.

A second level of political processes which anthropologists doing contract social anthropological research will encounter are those found in the communities where the research is to be conducted. Within the communities there are factions and alliances. As the project I worked on was funded by the state, it became the "business" of "key" members of the alcohol service network in the city wherein the research was to be conducted. A problem in this regard is that individuals and groups who are not members of the specific

communities under study feel that they need to know about the research and researchers, and to provide some "input" into the former. Here, the confusion of "community" in its generic and geographical senses is evident. Thus "prominent" members (prominent to outsiders) may have little or no voice in the communities in which the anthropologist is interested, but must nevertheless be contacted and briefed on the research. In addition, those individuals who are actually leaders in the communities (geographical) involved in the research must also be contacted. While the "prominent" and those who actually lead must be distinguished, both will take up the anthropologist's time in profitable and unprofitable ways.

Individuals and groups contacted may be hostile or receptive depending in part on the nature of the alliances with and allegiance to, or feelings of antipathy toward the funding agency, the research firm, competing research firms or groups, or individuals affiliated with any one or more of these entities, as well as to the topic of research or the approach used in the research. Some examples from my research can serve to highlight some of the difficulties.

Among prominent (e.g., well-known to outsiders but not to insiders) community members who were important to contact in the early stages of research were several who had to be approached with special caution. The caution was necessitated by the fact that the PI of my project had some disputes with these individuals in the past related to other research. My PI was not seen as a welcome individual in the communities where the people held sway. Fortunately, one individual had close ties with one of the anthropologists whom I and my anthropologist project coordinator had hired to actually do the fieldwork in the community. That fieldworker was able to meet with the individual and explain the research to him without generating or reactivating any dormant hostility. He then could be approached for his approval by other concerned community members.

In another incident, a person considered for one of the fieldwork positions, but whose qualifications were not really appropriate, tried to make a political issue of not being hired (even before knowing that in fact this was the case). The unsuccessful applicant notified his friends, some with influence in the community, that ours was not the kind of research which should be done there because it was "racist and elitist." As a result, time and energy were spent contacting and explaining to people in the research sites and the State that this characterization of the research was wholly inaccurate. (The basis of the charges seemed to be that: (1) the applicant clearly lacked sufficient education and training to undertake the research [i.e., "elitist"], and (2) assumed that because the project coordinator (an anthropologist) who interviewed him was white, a white would be hired as a fieldworker [i.e., "racist"]. The fieldworker eventually hired was a Black female trained in qualitative sociology. The choice of Black female researchers, in fact, had been part of my original design. "Sexism" would perhaps have been a more accurate charge.)

I might mention here that in making contacts with key people, it is always a good idea to help them in any way possible. If possible, provide them with information and/or introductions to people with whom contact has already been established. Relationships which develop in the course of contract research should be based upon the principle of reciprocity. Regardless of the form of the presentations, their absence can be inhibiting to the research while their use can facilitate matters greatly, or at least prevent future resistance. Just as in traditional social anthropological fieldwork, impression management, including that of the research team members, community contacts as well as the people under study, is important to the conduct of the research (Berreman 1972). Moreover, some historical knowledge of the political and social climate and context of contract research is as important as it is for an understanding of social and cultural processes in traditional anthropological research (Evans-Pritchard 1962; Eickelman 1976). What distinguishes contract research is that such notions should be kept in mind not only in terms of the actual research but also in terms of the historical and ongoing sociopolitical processes which form the context in which it must be conducted.

Communication Breakdown: Cross-Discipline and Sub-Cultural Communicative Problems

The second area of difficulties in contract research that I want to discuss here is communication. As in the case of the sociopolitical arena, several levels of problems are pertinent to distinguish. First, at the highest level, there are problems of communication between the anthropological researchers and the funding agent. In general, there is the problem that while anthropologists are communicating in their own dialect of academese, the funding agent, in my case the state, speaks its own dialect of "bureaucratese." The latter seems to be a combination of computer terminology, military and sports metaphors, folk terms (usually derived from some group whose needs have been made known to the bureaucracy) and "buzz words." The latter are particularly important as they articulate state policies or programs which encode the stance it wishes others to believe it takes on particular issues. Such words or phrases may be seen as "key symbols" (Ortner 1974), but it should be kept in mind that such symbols often encode an image of the state and its actions which it seeks to manage, and may not reflect real policies and intentions. Thus, the issues of language learning and discovery of what the informants "really mean" are as important in contract as in traditional research, but in contract research it is important both in terms of the research itself and in communications with the funding agency.

Problematic communication in contract research can likewise develop in the encounters with other social scientists. Then too, there are the problems of communication with representatives of of various sections of the communities under study. Several may occur with respect to each of these groups. First, when dealing

with representatives or key people in the community (or institution-
alized research population), the anthropologist may well find that
s/he is being implicitly or explicitly directed to produce specific
results to coincide with leaders' assessment(s) of the problem or
problems and their causes. In contract research, the anthropologist
will be placed in the position of explaining why the research will
or will not address certain questions seen as vital by certain
leaders. Leaders may be interested in finding support for their own
particular definition of the situation, as the raison d'etre of
their own organization may be based upon a particular definition of
problems through which they may have attained prominence.

In addition, there is the problem of common sense. In contract
research, one is dealing with individuals who may have an investment
in that research in terms of its organization or, as above, in terms
of its potential results. But because one often is involved with
individuals who are not trained social scientists in a cooperative
effort to get the job done, one encounters a conflict between common
sense and social science, two different (but not necessarily contra-
dictory) systems of explanation.

For example, in my case there has been some resistance to the
progress of the research because "everybody knows why Blacks drink"
(i.e., poverty and racism). This statement refers to "problem
drinking," not drinking in general in the Black community.) This
explanation of the problem of alcohol in Black communities comes
both from prominent educated professionals and from laymen in the
research sites. For prominent individuals, this explanation may
serve their own ends, e.g., demonstrating support of and involvement
in the Black community, while for others it is a common sense
explanation which makes cultural sense (cf. Geertz 1975a). Thus,
like a lamp post for a drunk, research is sometimes not used for
illumination, but for support.

On the other side of the coin, communication across disciplines
incurs another set of difficulties. When interacting with special-
ists from other disciplines, conflicts develop over the very deep
paradigmatic differences in the social scientific academic disci-
plines which are no less significant in contract research. As in
medical settings, actors' definitions play a crucial role in
determining their perceptions of phenomena and their behavior
(Kleiman, Eisenberg and Good 1978; Gaines 1979a). So, while my
research aimed at explicating the semantics of alcohol use in Black
culture as a means of developing recommendations to the state for
changes in the provision of services which are culturally consonant,
sociological and psychological advisors routed about for means by
which to gather "hard data" on "pathology" defined a priori. Major
methodological differences also separate the different social
sciences, which makes it difficult to communicate in comprehensible
terms to members of the other disciplines. In such cases, patience
and one's teaching abilities may help get discussions going in a
direction that will contribute to the kind of work in progress (or

planned) rather than reformulating the research in sociological, psychological or other terms.

When dealing with funding agencies, anthropologists should keep in mind that such agencies have definite models in mind about social scientific research. Most contracting agencies have had experience primarily with one kind of social science, namely sociology. Sociology is therefore the model for social science both in terms of issues addressed (e.g., class, sex, race--now sometimes called ethnicity but still encoding the old notion of race) and the methods to be employed (questionnaires, surveys and results subjected to certain statistical tests). In this regard, the anthropologist doing contract research must act as an educator and not only explain what anthropology is and does, but also the differences between anthropological theory and method and those of other disciplines such as sociology. As mentioned above, stressing the shortcomings of the competitors' approach can assist in gaining contract awards.

Law and Control

The last area I wish to consider here concerns some legal dimensions of contract research and their implications for the anthropologist's control over his/her research and its results.

Most important in contract research is the fact that it _is_ contract research. Therefore, legal procedures and legal definitions of rights and responsibilities obtain (see also Pierce-Colfer 1976). So, while such terms as "team" and "team work" may be bandied about, the anthropologist is in fact an employee working within the context of a hierarchically organized group. One consequence is that, in contract research, moral or ethical interests take a back seat to legal responsibilities and liabilities. For example, only those individuals who actually sign the contract for the research are legally responsible for it. As such, while they may know nothing of the research or its underlying perspective, signators to the contract can and will exert their control over it. It is in their interest to do so as they are legally responsible for what the anthropologist does (or does not do). Thus, control of the research may not fall to those who designed it and are actually carrying it out, but rather, as in my case, to the legally responsible persons of the organization (with its non-profit tax status) under the auspices of which the research was conducted.

Problems of control may also develop with respect to the findings of contract research. Some problems are: Who has control over the data? How will it be disseminated? How will sources be kept confidential? The last of these problems should be dealt with "going in" (before research begins). In the alcohol research in the Black community, our fieldworkers were told not to record anyone's name so that statements could not be attributed to them. A simple code system was developed by the fieldworkers to organize their notes so that others could not identify the informants mentioned

therein. In my case, it was necessary to argue the point of informants' confidentiality and to refuse to supply any names of individuals to the PI (Principal Investigator) who had visions of obtaining police records of informants who mentioned having drinking problems.

For the other points regarding control of the data, again, it must be kept in mind that the research has been contracted. As such, the funding agency has legal proprietory rights over the data. Data may be used only with their express permission. Furthermore, the firm for which one works has rights to the data. Both sets of rights have primacy over those of the research anthropologist, who has no rights to the data unless they are expressly given.

In another project on which I worked several years ago for a research firm, the Director of the research institute feared that the data which I and another anthropologist had collected and for which we had devised the means of collection, would be leaked (it was not) and "his" signal contribution to the field of alcohol studies among adolescents would go unnoted, which it did. Because of his fears, I and the other anthropologist lost access to the data which we had collected. Research data can therefore easily be lost to the anthropologists who collected them.

Summary and Conclusion

Social anthropological research done on a contract basis presents both old and new problems for the anthropologist. A point to remember when contemplating such research is that the research itself constitutes only half of the battle, the other half being the necessity of dealing with various sociopolitical, communicative and legal dimensions of contract research.

The anthropologist considering contract research should not only develop the background and skill specific to the research in which s/he wishes to engage, but also apprise her or himself of the sociopolitical context of funding and supervision. Furthermore, the anthropologist should be prepared to handle communicative problems whether with laymen community leaders (real and nominal), funding agencies, or assorted professionals from other fields who may be called in to work on the project. Finally, the issues surrounding the legal bases of contract research have to be dealt with and the anthropologist informed of his or her rights and responsibilities and their implications for the conduct of the research and the disposition of the data derived therefrom.

Solutions to the problems raised in this paper are difficult to develop. One can always call for more training, but I am not sure such training is possible. For example, many of the political and social problems noted above are a result of the interplay of specific personalities through time. The resulting specific processes and situations are not greatly generalizable. It seems unlikely

that such could be taught in new courses for anthropologists-in-training. So, in terms of preparation for contract research, I might make two general suggestions. First, it should be remembered that there are two general domains to which anthropological exper-tise should be applied in the context of contract research. These are the research itself and its sociopolitical context, a context that will define the research in quite different terms from those which academics might be accustomed to anticipating. Second, it seems to me that some knowledge of how bureaucracies work would be useful. Therefore, it would be advisable to get some understanding of the literature based on Nader's (1972) notion of "studying up" as contract research presents the anthropologist with a situation which is both a context for research and an object of research.

In this paper I have presented some general remarks on areas of difficulty which seem important for those interested in contract research. I have discussed some problematic issues, the sociopolit-ical, communicative and legal/control issues, here in the hope that other anthropologists may find something useful if they should seek research contracts. Such contracts are often <u>difficult</u> to fulfill in terms of the problems mentioned above, but also in terms of the endless deadlines and "make-work" which all funding bureaucracies require to fulfill various aspects of the contract. But, too, as contract research, it is the <u>legally binding</u> agreements which serve as the basis of research efforts. In these two senses, contract social anthropological research is based upon what in some circles is called the "hard contract" rather than the academicians' custom-ary gentlemen's agreement.

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