

Informants and Researchers: Cooperation, Self-interest and Reciprocity (An Examination of Changing Social Relationships)

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ABSTRACT The dependency of the researcher as short-term linguistic and social outsiders on informants for intellectual and material assistance is rarely acknowledged in personal terms. Objectives of researchers are short-term while those of informants relate to their own long-term social roles. The relationships are governed by self-interests and reciprocities in which there are role conflicts and misunderstandings. Anthropologists depend principally on informants without whom they would be almost socially and professionally blind but whose individual contributions are usually acknowledged in ways that do not often point to their crucial role. This study examines the data disclosed in a range of prefaces and the interrelationships of informants and researchers.

1. THE ACKNOWLEDGED ROLE OF INFORMANTS AND THEIR FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE FOR RESEARCHERS

Anthropological methods are widely used as a means of obtaining information about the living conditions and attitudes among peoples in the developing world. While relatively impersonal surveys may still be made, an increasing number of studies involve researchers and a very limited number of informants. To what extent are we aware of and able to appreciate the benefits and needs, which the two sides of the research equation have for each other?

On the one hand researchers have to identify and extract local knowledge and disseminate this to their own professional groups. On the other hand researchers feel that informants are unaware of the contexts and correlations within their own world. The research is then thought to bring scientific order into their information, which is seen as different to the order, which the informants experience as already present in their own societies.

If the situation is viewed from the informants'

side, they may feel that they know how things are linked and the "problem" is to what extent they are willing to provide this information to researchers. What needs are being satisfied by doing so? On other occasions informants may be uninformed about the context in which these studies are being carried out and what bearing these objectives have on their participation.

There is no doubt at all that specific individual informants have been essential to virtually every research project whether or not these reach publication. However the first clue to these relationships and how they are viewed in retrospect must be the prefaces to these studies in which acknowledgement is given to those whom the researchers consider to have helped them.

The order in which acknowledgements are given may well show the structural power position of those listed and these may reflect the future hopes and ambitions of the researchers more than gratitude for the help that they must have received from specific individuals.

The frequent absence of thanks to specific informants is suggestive of a power relationship between superiors and inferiors and that they were used as tools for the personal advancement of these researchers. Thus most researchers have not seen their informants as colleagues in joint enterprises without whom they would have been intellectually if not physically immobilised (Schumaker, 2001). Any researcher will have been taught as a child that they have an obligation to say a personal "thank you" for even the smallest service provided for them. Thus the absence of such acknowledgements needs examination.

These prefaces provide data with implications of social distance and even intellectual arrogance. A cultural abyss which many researchers seemed to have been unable to circumvent or bridge despite staying in their researched communities and having every opportunity to at least figuratively move over cultural boundaries. Thus we start

with a description and discussion of the prefaces to a number of anthropological field studies.

2. WHAT CREDIT GOES TO INFORMANTS IN PREFACES?

Just going along a library shelf will show a wide variety in the form and extent of the acknowledgements listed. Often typists are mentioned but not informants and certainly this would suggest that the researchers are thinking of their futures and who might be useful.

The introduction to Peter Rigby's *Cattle and Kinship among the Gogo* (Cornell, 1969) contains the sentence "without the help of my assistant, close friend and companion Mr Madinda ala Mutowinaga much of the material here could not have been obtained. I am also indebted to Muwaka Mujilima ala Sandiya and Muwaka Mutimila ala Lehawo, who took me into their homesteads and families and made me as much of a Mugogo as I could be". These men are mentioned with obvious gratitude before any academic or other acknowledgements are given. This indeed is a statement of a close personal relationship between equals, which meant a great deal to the researcher, even to the extent of giving the most important man a English honorific title.

Robert Redfield's *A Village that Chose Progress* (Chicago, 1950) gives a detailed appreciation of just one man Senor D. Eustaquio Ceme writing that "more than any other man he made his village what it is today. Energetic and deeply reflective, tenacious of purpose and yet flexible, generous and kindly, he is an admirable man and a notable leader". However in this acknowledgement there does not appear to be any personal relationship. In 1969 this man did not appear to know that a book had been written about him and his village.

James Fernandez's *Bwiti. An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton, 1982) lists four Fang by name from whom he received valuable assistance after half a page of acknowledgements for academic help. Similarly Melford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society. A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Allen and Unwin, 1971) concludes his acknowledgements by writing that "I wish to thank my many friends in Burma, especially my assistants U Ba Thaw and U Aung Thein and my Burmese Saya U Ko Ko". These acknowledgements seem to be referring to more formal but still personal rela-

tionships which are not rated as highly as the academic ones.

John Ladd's *The Structure of a Moral Code* (Harvard, 1957) was based on eight day long sessions with a single Navaho elder named Bidaga which in print covers 71 pages of text. His help is acknowledged at the end of thanks given to many others without giving his proper name 'Son of many beads'. This reads strangely and far too briefly in the preface to a long book which is virtually about the ideas of this single elderly Navajo.

Victor Turner's *Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Cornell, 1967) wrote in the preface that "I am deeply grateful to my many Ndembu friends and informants who appear in the text," but no mention of Muchona the Hornet with whom he had a close relationship about whom he wrote twenty pages in this book. This was a pivotal relationship in cross-cultural learning of ideas and yet its personal nature does not seem to have registered with Turner who only comments that Muchona will have missed their discussions when they parted.

Margaret Mead who wrote *New Lives for Old* (Gollanz, 1956.) on the other hand maintained a long lasting mutually advantageous relationship with Peri, a particular village in the Manus Islands which resulted in public grief when they heard of her death. However she lists ten people from Peri as having helped her at the end of seven pages of other acknowledgements. B. Gustafsson's *Houses and Ancestors. Continuities and Discontinuities in Leadership among the Manus* (Gothenburg, 1992) mentions only two local people by name. Possibly this was done to avoid being accused academically and by the Manus themselves of bias by concentrating on a single village which was their criticism of Mead's work.

Then there are general acknowledgements of help. Jack Goody's *Death, Property and the Ancestors. A Study of the Mortuary Customs of the Lodagaa of West Africa* (Tavistock, 1962) concludes his preface by writing that "my heaviest debt of all is to the Lodagaa themselves, to my own staff and to the inhabitants of Birifu and Tom," but no one individual is mentioned. The reference to staff suggests a somewhat organisational flavour to the overall relationships.

These studies carried out if not within the colonial era may have still been within some aspects of its psychological patterning. There appear to be a somewhat greater degree of acknowledgements in some more recent regional and community studies and by researchers who are

not British.

G. Dahl's *Suffering Grass. The Subsistence and Society of the Waso Borana* (Stockholm University, 1979) has a preface which starts with academic and domestic acknowledgements, then names five field assistants and then refers to the memory of two helpers who had died with "love and respect," certainly suggesting unusually close relationships. Similarly L. O. Manger's *From the Mountains to the Plains. The Integration of Lafoea Nuba into Sudanese Society* (Uppsala, 1994) personally thanks four Nuba for their help.

Whether this points to a greater awareness of this necessary and invaluable help or to an understanding by researchers that their relative status in relation to the people whom they are studying had changed post-colonially or that they had come from a country with no colonial involvements, can only be surmised.

There are other factors than the furtherance of academic careers, good manners and friendship which may be involved in their names occurring in these prefaces. Sometimes the help provided by locals has been so overwhelming that to fail to acknowledge it would appear almost ridiculous. D. Riley and D. Brokensha's *The Mbeere in Kenya* (University Press of America, 1988) which contains extensive socio-botanical details thanks 29 named locals for their help before going on to academic and publisher assistance thanks.

Thanks to wives and children for their tolerance and support is a common feature of dedications rather than mention in prefaces but J. K. Olupona's *Kingship, Religion and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yoruba Festivals* (Almqvist and Wiksell, Stockholm, 1991) mentions "my relations and in-laws as well as local dignitaries with their titles". Thus indigenous researchers working in their own communities may feel the need to make these specific acknowledgements as more important than their academic associations.

On the other hand insiders from the start may have a need for informants who are not well integrated into the researched community, thus giving them a quasi-outsider status. B. Myerhoff's *Number Our Days. A Triumph of Continuity and Culture among Jewish Old People in an Urban Ghetto* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1980) thanked one man particularly as invaluable. He was seen by the community itself as having many outsider or disruptive characteristics and may have been preferred as much with this in mind as with the need to contribute to the project itself.

Sometimes authors have acknowledged the basic human assistance without which their research work would not have been possible in two ways J. O. Drangert's *Who Cares about Water* (Linköping, 1993) by giving the names of his Sukuma assistants before anyone else and sending them copies of this work even though few of them were literate in English. R. Tanner's *Transition in African Beliefs* (Maryknoll, New York, 1969) lists acknowledgements to some twelve Sukuma and non-Sukuma informants alphabetically.

Thus it seems that what is written into prefaces as acknowledgements of help are valuable indicators of what researchers may feel about their research and its future rather than about what may have gone before in the fieldwork itself. Whatever the reasons for the absence of personal acknowledgements to these essential assistants in all fieldwork be it bad manners, covert racism or the thought that it did not matter much as they would not meet their informants again, we consider the dimensions of the relationships between key informants and researchers to be one worth examining in terms of cooperation, self-interest and reciprocity.

4. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF INFORMANTS

In clear distinction to researchers, informants are performing roles in their own permanent social environments and they are only "on stage" in their relationships with researchers for short periods in their lives. Thus their permanent social roles must dominate any considerations they may have for taking up or relinquishing the informant role. It seems clear that the intellectual level of intelligence is an important factor which self-selects informants because they can take pleasure in the contact and discussions which follow. If this was not so it would be difficult to explain the very long hours which they spend in such activities with some evident pleasure.

Developing societies tend to be gerontocratic in structure in which status is gained by age. This ascriptive characteristic often recognised by the honorific title of "old man," may also mean that gender differences become less important with advancing age. Thus the older the person the greater the range of their ascriptive powers and the feeling that they can give details of what they see as the realities of their own societies. They are not free to speak but freer than younger people who have not achieved comparable age

status. Younger people would be nervous of potential role conflicts between their permanent subordinate social roles and the temporary advantages of associating with strangers.

An example of this was Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Penguin, 1971) in which her informants were young unmarried women speaking to someone not well trained in their language, who fictionalised the main features of their own adolescence rather than tell a stranger about the sexual realities in their lives which Mead was trying to discover. It was not appropriate for young women to talk to strangers about their covert behaviour. On the other hand children who have not yet achieved any social status and the anxieties that go with it, have fewer inhibitions over talking to strangers about what they know and how they should behave. A group of Zigua children in Tanzania once demonstrated fifteen different games in one morning.

Gender is an equally restricting factor. Men are likely to have had more experience of dealing with total strangers than women and have seen outsider women performing roles, which they would not accept for women in their own communities. Rural women's experience of outsiders will probably be within a narrower range as contrasted to teachers separated from them by age and nurses whose costume accentuates social distance. Women have less experience of alternatives to their existing roles and may seem less able to provide information, which they see as comparative unless put into a situation where they can talk more freely. The characteristics of status are changing rapidly in developing countries and are possibly accepted as part of overall social change. However for some to change status abruptly by becoming informants for strangers may make their subsequent lives more difficult.

Informants will also have language problems; they know their own languages and the nuances, which are carried in ordinary speech. Researchers are outsiders and their initial and limited use of their shared language will make for incomprehension. Once it is recognised that these foreigners are speaking the local language, it may well be assumed that they know more than they do.

This linguistic difficulty is particularly serious with tonal languages in which the mispronunciations of researchers may be mistaken for subtleties. The informants linguistic usages will not be scaled down to the primary school level that the researcher's understanding would re-

quire. Similarly if informants are translating into English, their range of efficiency will never match the quality of their own natal linguistic usages. There are also fieldwork situations in which informants speak a third language, which requires a further stage of interpretation into the lingua franca rather than a simple single translation in the minds of the researchers.

In addition those who may be classed as secondary informants may be required to give their information through the researchers' assistants, their primary informants who are known to have had long relationships with them. They may be unwilling to speak on very commonplace matters because it would be relayed to their community afterwards. Alternatively if the interpreters belong to another community, tribe or even a nearby village, there may well be strong reasons for not trusting them as they may change the information in order to further their own interests.

Informants for anthropological research have shared characteristics with police informants; it is not a social role, which is acceptable to any society. The giving away of information, not just to insider or outsider expatriates, but to representatives of that authoritarian world with which there should be carefully restrained distancing relationships (Cohen, 1998).

Throughout their association with researchers, such regular informants will have to defend their behaviour to members of the community who do not understand what they are doing and why they are doing it. This is sometimes difficult as with the collection of blood samples at night for filariasis research with its association with sorcery, or that genealogies have to include matrilineal, affinal as well as patrilineal relatives. An important and innovative study of defecating in a Bengali community using a stop watch in order to record the time and distance spent defecating (Kocher, 1977) involved a combination of informants and participants which must have been difficult for those involved to accept and explain when such behaviour is both commonplace, secretive and religiously contaminating.

Overall informants are assessing their own positions in terms of long and short term advantages and disadvantages which is no more than they would be doing the whole time in their own communities if a researcher was not present; indeed they would be foolish not to do so. They are perhaps unusually socially alert people who are offering to the researcher the natural vigilance, which goes with living successfully in

these communities. It seems likely that informants are already socially differentiated from others in their communities and readily accept opportunities to use their talents in ways that are materially and individually enhancing. Just as researchers are assessing their long-term academic futures, informants are making similar calculations.

5. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCHERS

Researchers are self-selected to do a particular piece of fieldwork for which they rely on key informants to provide data and subtle information and they want this material as quickly as possible, which may make them impatient. There may well be personality factors here, which direct or limit their methodological approaches. The more outgoing researchers preferring fieldwork while the less so choosing surveys. They are certainly not detached observers in the scientific sense.

As such they have social and personal characteristics, which may differentiate them from other educated or quasi-alienated persons with whom the researched people may have had or with whom they are currently having social, political or economic relationships. In every situation the researcher is assessed and given a role model by their informants. Researchers have the characteristics of foreigners whether this is by education, nationality or ethnicity. Even if they come from a national university and are obviously national citizens by birth, they are still social outsiders. Social distance factors are always present.

While the researchers may see themselves as professionally neutral and unbiased persons seeking after the truth, their social distance from their informants may defeat that objective in a number of ways. Their demographic characteristics automatically restrict social access and association and with it the type of informants that they are likely to attract or find themselves attracted to in their fieldwork.

Most developing countries if not all societies pay primary attention to ascriptive characteristics. The older the researcher may be, the wider the range of information, which they will be able to obtain; grey hair may well be an asset. It would be impertinent in western societies for young researchers to question much older people on personal matters, particularly those who hold positions of status in their communities. This applies just as much to developing societies,

perhaps even more so as the relationship with the researcher is much more public. It is important to recognise that the majority of field researchers are young and at the beginning of their careers and so may have little ascriptive status. Whatever the Manus may have felt about Margaret Mead as a person, she had grown old alongside them. It was a long-standing balanced and reciprocal relationship from which they benefited materially as a community so they mourned her death personally and publically.

The gender of the researcher automatically restricts the possible range of research topics and the range of possible informants. It is perhaps easier for the post-menopausal woman researcher who can be treated in a socially neutral way as functionally an older male. The fecund but non-fertile woman may not be thought of as a proper repository for answers to socially important questions. Similarly women will tend to react stereotypically to the male researcher and vice versa.

The married or companioned researcher may offer the image of social normality and the male researcher particularly may then be seen as less of a threat to the social ownership of women in the community who might be attracted to him for status or economic reasons. The personal security of unaccompanied women researchers must always be an important consideration in their fieldwork.

Ethnicity is an important factor but not one that has automatic colour correlations. If other demographic characteristics are not favourable, then similar colour may not make any difference. Expatriates clearly are foreigners but national researchers from outside the researched community can be seen socially as internal expatriates with whom the community has just as little in common as if they had come from overseas and moreover possibly more dangerous because of their linguistic skills and their suspected contacts with the central government and local politicians.

Most researchers will have linguistic handicaps and their use of the local language alone will disclose their outsider status, even if they are nationals. In many cases researchers will not initially know the language of the community in which they propose to work. The amount they can learn in the time available will not be adequate to explore in depth the complicated topics which they have undertaken to study.

At best the researcher's highest degree of bilingualism will be achieved about the time of their

departure and most never achieve subsequent visits in which these skills can be maintained and improved. Some of course have no flair for learning languages or are too slow to learn in the time available. This language inadequacy almost certainly means that their knowledge of important issues is second hand filtered through interpreters who are virtually primary informants. This process involves leaps of understanding and interpretation which may alter the meaning of the data in question.

Education is perhaps the greatest of all separating factors. It has given the researchers status and social position as outsiders which gives them a whole range of achieved behavioural characteristics of which a sense of superiority is the commonest. Even if researchers would like this not to be so and indulge in what they see as equalising behaviour such as drinking with the men or whatever, this rarely succeeds; the status of fully participant observer is rarely achieved except by going under cover. Educational high status may distance them from inadequately educated informants unless they see their principal role to be that of listeners.

There is no predetermined and understood role behaviour for researchers except perhaps where they have been a regular feature of the social scene as amongst the Todas of the Nilgiri hills in southern India. The range of their socially inappropriate behaviour must always be extensive so that the assumption of social absorption or acceptance must always be an illusion. The internal researcher perhaps more than the external one, has to resolve a range of role conflicts by unscientific compromises.

The status which researchers have as educated outsiders which they bring with them into the field, may give them a large number of self-imposed restrictions on what they may feel like doing. This may make them reluctant to be participant observers of certain activities; dancing, drinking, washing in the river and so on. Perhaps they wash more frequently and their demands or expectations of water will be above the quantities used by informants. With status comes culturally connected privacy requirement so that the public nature of their lives while researching may be a strain. So near but yet so far from the people with whom they are living.

Apart from education researchers have observably higher economic status than most of those with whom they are working. They are wealthier and not just in the way that they have implied access to funds and can be flown away if

they become ill. Their property in the form of vehicles, computers, typewriters, cameras and tape-recorders, even the ownership of a bicycle, may set them apart from the people they are studying. Their whole way of life is seen to represent what members of the community aspire to be or to own.

The people of developing societies have a high degree of involvement in religion whether it is in international faiths or local cults. Since above all they have a 'magical' conception of the universe's working, researchers who have no acknowledged religion or who think that they have no personal magical practices and who consider themselves to be rational, may prejudice these people as not really capable of rational thinking and less intellectually developed than the graduate culture from which they themselves have come. This is part of the way in which researchers express or claim authority ensuring social distance. The researchers even if they are by birth Mishmi, Muria or Bengali are still internal expatriates if they work elsewhere and if working in their own communities, they will be known and influenced by the kinship connections.

Informants may consider it too delicate a matter to tell researchers about how the community views their behaviour. When most in need of advice on entering the community, the researcher may not get it. The wearing of shorts or the tying of a sarong may be taken as involving low status or relating to the wrong sex but no one presumes to tell them. Fieldwork abounds with less obvious examples by which researchers exhibit bad manners through ignorance of what the community would consider to be proper. The necessity of prolonged greetings before work can be started, the use of honorific titles, how to eat and drink in public and which hand to use in public when most cultures use the left hand only for cleaning themselves. Indeed the whole question of good manners in a culture to which the researchers are alien and which may go radically against their own standards of concern for women and animals. There is also the possibility that informants may be poor examples of good behaviour because they have partially alienated themselves from their own communities by being obvious informants.

Costume is certainly an important factor. Male researchers and at least some members of the communities in which they work will be wearing similar clothes. Women researchers who may have more problems in their fieldwork than their male colleagues, make their work more difficult

by wearing clothes that are more appropriate for men. The wearing of male clothing by fecund but not fertile outsider women must raise interesting questions in speculative minds. A young woman psychologist wearing shorts and working on the dream patterns of Ugandan secondary school boys appeared to have had some influence on what was reported to her.

Researchers may also be unaware of the extent to which their presence disrupts a community by just living there, even before they have done any work at all. Just pitching a tent in an intensively cultivated area, will disorganise the grazing patterns of the people whom the researcher now has as neighbours. They lost something of value for the researcher may stay a long time for which the only return would be his entertainment value to them.

Overall the parallels to Goffman's "on stage" behaviour are clear. Researchers are performing narrow and specific roles for short periods in public for which they may have had no previous experience. They are "on stage" and isolated for the duration of their fieldwork and this is not directly related to either their ascribed or achieved roles in their own cultures. It is time out of their normal roles to which they will subsequently return and this colours all their relationships with their informants. Their relationships with the people with whom they work will be filtered through the evaluations and help of informants.

6. THE NEEDS OF RESEARCHERS

The primary need of the researchers is to be successful and the terms of success are set by personal wants and academic requirements. A high proportion of social research requires informants and indeed any research, which requires answers to "why" questions cannot do without them. To a certain extent "when, where, what" and "how" questions can be answered by painstaking and time-consuming observations. Work in the fields can be recorded, public ceremonies attended, behaviour in court watched and how people eat can be observed. Anything further than these relatively easily observable externals require questions. The reasons for a choice of land, partner in marriage, forms of religious ritual and the private utilisation of water requires questions so informants are indispensable. Overall too many questions may be asked and indeed asking questions may not be an acceptable way of behaving in many cultures as it is characteristic of the agents of external institutions.

Informants become indispensable in another way. It may be possible to get answers to simpler questions from a series of individuals who will all have different reasons for answering or not answering. These variations can only be guessed at but they will be as varied as those received in the answers of people in developed societies where such surveys are well known. These variations may or may not be confined to that particular set of circumstances. There can be no assumption of homogeneity.

It is far better for researchers to have a permanent core of informants on whom they can rely and whose biases are constant. Researchers are very conscious of their outsider status and they need such people not only for information but also for language tuition and for lead-ins to social situations of which researchers would not have any advance knowledge nor the initiative to enter alone. Even to live in another community may require substantial help.

How else would researchers get to know that there was going to be a work-party or religious ceremony in a neighbouring village or that owing to the death of an elder or the birth of a son to a particular woman, the political structure of the community had changed or the reasons why someone was unpopular enough to be considered a wizard. Regular informants are the human gossip magazines of their communities through whom they can get access to what they want to know however bizarre.

Researchers have little experience of how to recruit people who have to perform roles that are more complex than in most employment situations. Attracting informants involves a wide range of urgent considerations and their identification needs the support of locally influential people. They are usually recommended by someone in authority, chief, priest, politician who would scarcely suggest individuals antipathetic to their own interests. Thus informants will rarely have the detachment to which the researchers themselves aspire.

The sort of information which most researchers require could only be acquired after living for years in these communities and perhaps not even then. Above all researchers are in a hurry and even if there are not tight financial considerations, they are certainly restricted in the amount of time they can afford to spend away from home and their universities, even if it should just be the restrictions imposed by the weather. They may be under contract to a government or development agency or have to provide a thesis by a

certain date. Above all there may be immigration time limits, which can only be renewed with difficulty.

Researchers are in a hurry for another set of reasons as without the assurance of further field-work opportunities, they wish to accumulate as much primary data as possible for theoretical development during their subsequent careers. Since they are psychologically if not socially in a hurry, researchers tend to ask unnecessary questions for which they could get much of the answers by just watching what goes on in the community. As R.H. Tawney once remarked, the best equipment for a researcher is a stout pair of boots. Malinowski never planned his day's work because as soon as he started walking, he found something to interest him.

While they are in a hurry in the long-term, in the short-term they may feel that they are under-employed since they do not have anything specific to do at any time. In the eyes of the community in which they are working, they may appear to be able to survive without having to do any work. Thus researchers may feel that they have to be actively involved at once for which any informant is better than none.

A growing number of anthropologists under contract are engaged in development related rather than academic projects and so they focus on rather well defined questions. These are easily answered out of context, as indeed they must be as many questions are put to groups who provide group answers in much the same way that they have always answered the questions of intrusive and potentially troublesome outsiders. Such researchers have no time for or interest in informant relationships. All this leads to a greater dependence on informants than would be likely to occur should they be working in their own cultures where cultural and social distance factors would be less obtrusive and unlikely to make researchers somewhat credulous.

Researchers for all the individuality of their lives, are not prepared for isolation and in field-work there are few opportunities for relief from loneliness. They come from societies in which they have been surrounded by friends and associates with similar interests and their families are always available as a resource. They are not used to a social isolation in which they have to try to create a social circle from nothing. In such a situation the extrovert will have advantages over the introvert with the former preferring some form of participant observation. Thus researchers need informants for both personal and professional

reasons.

7. THE NEEDS OF INFORMANTS

Informants could be said to have no such needs until the researcher appears in their communities and it is then that potential informants develop needs, which can be met by these unexpected opportunities. Members of the researched community will either be repelled or attracted by the presence of researchers whether they be nationals or foreigners. They can be seen as government spies or at least as one of their agents for change which they know in advance will disturb their existing pattern of living. These people all operate in the same way asking questions and having no visible means of support. Their only previous experience of strangers asking questions will probably have been policemen. All other government activities may have been seen by them as having undesirable consequences, demands for financial contributions or for extra and usually unpaid work (Cohen, 1998).

What are they likely to gain from associating with outsiders visiting them frequently or who come to live in their communities? Any decision to approach researchers or to accept their approaches has to be seen in terms of self-interest. The first self-interest has to be economic advantages but there are many others, such as getting to know more about conditions in the researcher's society, curiosity, intellectual challenge of discussions with strangers, pleasing the chief or pastor who recommends them and of course the passing on of information. The contact could lead to access to both information and reading materials that informants want for their own intellectual development.

It may also be part of a strategy to furnish the researchers with information that may eventually benefit the community with a development project. The development researcher is always a source of possible advantages. There can be few people living in developing societies whether in rural or urban areas who do not see their own standard of living as lower than that of outsiders, however defined, who would not welcome some periodic if not permanent improvement. With overseas researchers, economic advantages are immediately apparent. They appear better clothed and fed than the members of the communities in which they work. Whatever the researcher may throw away may be useful.

Researchers from the developed world take the use of time as a permanent restriction on their

lives, which they have to husband and ration. Few realise that the people in developing societies also have concern for their use of time but not in the sense of being controlled by clocks. Too often rural societies are characterised by people sitting around and not working. Nevertheless these people carry out implicit cost-benefit analyses for anything that they do just as people do in societies run by the clock. The use of accurate time increases with nearness to urban centres and the possession of radios which forces time into the calculations of all who have them, while others still calculate time by the sun. Potential informants are always short of time. This is more obviously the case with woman informants, who apart from income generating activities, spend long hours collecting firewood, fetching water and preparing each meal from scratch. Talking to researchers has no immediate relation to their existing lives; it is time out of routine, while talking at the well is doing two things at the same time, fetching water and keeping up with local affairs. Talking with researchers has to be more valuable and interesting than the normal round of work. It can be but language difficulties and the absence of any shared understanding of semantic inferences can make the answering of apparently banal questions a boring activity which wastes time.

Men similarly have time commitments particularly towns people and shop-keepers and indeed the nearer to the towns, the less appropriate becomes financial inducements for cooperation as it then becomes comparatively better or worse pay for what they see as paid work. During the cultivating season both sexes will be working long hours. In between this season there are long periods with little or no necessary work for men to do, which is filled with valuable social interchanges to extend and maintain their own status and economic opportunities. Their social networks have to be refurbished so that long beer drinking sessions are important. Potential informants may be sitting around but they are not doing nothing. So informants who give up potentially important group activities would appear to have made some assessment of their needs.

It is also necessary to remember that the more communality there is in a society, the more integrated individuals are into the activities of their neighbourhoods, the more guarded they have to be in what they say and to whom they say it. The relative freedom of speech, which comes with urban-industrial societies, is due to the anonymity of much social activity in which people only

interrelate closely with the few members of their primary groups.

Thus people with unusual ideas and with a mentality, which sees beyond their community and its practices, will usually have few there with whom to discuss matters of interest; they are isolated. The cynicism of Sukuma chiefs discussing with a researcher the techniques of traditional healers, contrasted with their reticence on the same subject when anyone else was listening. Some Sukuma enjoyed laboriously writing essays on important themes for researchers as they knew that they would not be read by anyone else. Speaking can always be overheard but the written word in a largely non-literate culture is secret.

The absence of well-nourished people in developing societies and the presence of large numbers of poorly fed people makes the well fed researcher an easy target for comparison. Potential informants are often more interested in food and eating than in research objectives. The researchers who give tea, biscuits and cigarettes to those who spend evenings with them as a normal sign of hospitality will be appreciated but for others who are less at the subsistence level, gifts of books, pens and paper would be more appropriate. There are many fringe benefits from association with researchers other than money. A potential relationship with researchers may be seen in terms of employment. Subsistence communities are only halfway into the money economy; they survive, as do most of the town-dwellers on what they and their families can grow. Money is needed for everything else which they need to buy and to pay tax. What they want to buy is usually far above the economic realities facing their families and communities.

Population expansion alone makes marginal employment a permanent necessity for most men whether they leave or stay in their communities. Thus employment as a research assistant or regular informant is an attractive local opportunity for which they may consider that no particular qualifications are necessary, other than to convince the researcher of their own value. They may well try and keep these profitable relationships going by giving researchers what they want; information. Re-recorded autobiographies of Kenyan convicts varied in major details; they wished to keep the relationship going as a relief from the boredom of a long prison sentence rather than as an exchange for a few cigarettes. While on the face of it their short-term need for employment has been met, their specific intellectual ca-

pacities developed by their association with researchers, will have been left in a dead-end when the researchers leave.

8. INFORMANT-RESEARCHER RELATIONSHIPS

Except in unusual circumstances the objectives of informants and researchers are not likely to be the same but diametrically opposed. The factors motivating them if applied to the researchers would be regarded as built in biases. It is unlikely that they will see the need for detachment in providing and assessing information. Researchers at least for a time provide their informants with partial access to a higher standard of living with at least the possibility of further employment with other subsequent researchers.

Given the characteristics as well as the needs and benefits which we have listed, we may conjecture that there are also positive outcomes from the cooperation between middle aged researchers and well-off elderly informants. The older informants have the time for long discussions which younger people do not. The young anthropologist who is not bilingual may well fail to receive deep information from any source.

Certainly for some such as Muchona the Hor-net being an informant made for a highly valued association and Turner wrote of their final association (Forest of Symbols, 1967, 150-1) "what grieved him was that he could no longer communicate his ideas to anyone who could understand them. The philosophy don would have to return to a world that could only make a 'witchdoctor' of him. Had some kind of death occurred?" However he also wrote of the jealousy which his gifts of money to Muchona had occasioned and that even at the height of their intimacy they treated each other with reserve. It is also pertinent to ask whether Turner felt any comparable sense of loss and if so why he did not record it or was Muchona just another interesting but ephemeral element in the development of his important anthropological theories.

We can illustrate the informants' views indirectly because of the prominence of a few researchers. The informants who helped Margaret Mead and Malinowski were able to talk about these associations many decades later when it appeared in retrospect to have been an interval of excitement and relief from their everyday lives. The Todas of the Nilgiri Hills knowledge of anthropological terms testifies to the results of these early associations but they could not re-

member who told them.

There are sometimes difficulties over culturally based ideas of property. Researchers when they come from developed societies see their ownership of property in fairly precise terms; to have "mine" prominently in their minds and yet to have their property on display; the LandRover outside, the camera and tape-recorder on the table and the bottles of beer on the floor. Informants from less economically developed societies may think and act more in terms of "us" and thus expect sharing to be an integral part of the researcher-informant relationship. Articles on display can be asked for so that the LandRover is expected to be a sort of family taxi in socially defined emergencies.

The issue of gender is possibly more vital to good communal rapport than any other characteristic and needs to be handled with great delicacy. Gender roles are narrowly defined and should be observed as the freedoms to which researchers are used to in universities do not apply. Informants from opposite sexes need to be talked to in public and never at night and the wide spread avoidance of parental in-laws respected.

It seems unlikely that male researchers have gone without physical contacts with local women if their time in the field is prolonged. Apart from the difficulties, which may arise from such relationships over payments, family connections and animosities, it is more than likely that they were contacted if not provided by informants.

Status factors alone make it unlikely that unmarried women will feel able to be informants and the use of married women requires the tacit permission of their husbands. Women are socially "owned" and only the divorced and widowed may feel any freedom to discuss anything other than the commonplace with researchers. Post-menopausal women may have the status, knowledge and the time to be sources of information. Women may have standard ways of avoiding questions or potential involvements.

From the point of view of the researchers, there has often been a closeness verging on indispensability; any matter of importance could be tried out on key informants with their socialised and accumulated knowledge of their own communities. Similarly the informant is in a position to gather information about the researcher's society. This kind of exchange of experiences may be critical in enhancing the mutual understanding of the issues, which are being investigated.

Linguistically informants provide the neces-

sary bridge between the researchers' inadequate vernacular knowledge and the complex semantic usages of the societies in which they work. Overall they fetch and carry for their researchers and were probably responsible as likely as not for their physical and psychological well-being over the long periods in which the researchers were isolated from their own people.

Furthermore their long hours of work for which they were often paid, sometimes got them help in their personal affairs; help over a burnt house, carrying a relative to hospital and putting in a good word for them with government officials who might use them later.

It is not only that the informant plays a role but it is also that the informant causes difficulties. It is more common for letters to be exchanged than for researchers to make subsequent visits. Researchers are socialised into accepting and seeing as natural short-term working relationships with informants; they are seen as human tools for a particular job and of limited value subsequently.

We have found no description or mention of the loss of friendship except possibly for Rigby and his two Gogo friends, while there are descriptions of the loss of informants. It is perhaps only after the researchers have gone that informants come to realise that they have just been employed. Indeed they use the word 'friend' for what they see as a reciprocal relationship when the researchers would use the word "acquaintance". Few researchers have formed any lasting personal relationships with the people with whom they have spent so much time and from whom they have profited so much and in whom they have invested as much as their informants, so much emotional capital.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Some researchers acknowledge the help of their informants in grateful and personal terms, while most give their names after those of their academic colleagues and contacts. Others sweep all informants into a nominal acknowledgement to whole communities. Finally even when a study is made of a particular individual, he is rarely thanked for the prolonged contact and exposure to questioning and the invasion of their privacy. There does not seem to have been any change in this in the post colonial era as academic needs continue to dominate the relationship.

We are bound to conclude that the informants, on whose work the foundations of researchers subsequent careers were often based, have not

often received the overall gratitude to which their efforts and support should have entitled them. As early as the 1960s Ugandans were referring to researchers of any sort as sucking their blood for their own advancement.

No social scientist could have achieved more than the most banal and limited accumulation of data without their intellectual assistance. Most researchers would have suffered isolation and some degree of material deprivation during their fieldwork but for the intercessions of their informants who acted as well as their eyes and ears in seeking for analogical incidents. They perhaps thought that they were making life-long friends of their researchers who usually considered them to be just acquaintances or employees for this short period in their own professional lives.

It is an employment situation in which the behavioural standards of the researchers are set by the labour relations standards of employers in their own countries. Whereas for these informants in a pre-industrial situation, it was a master-client relationship of which they already had their own social understanding and experience. Researchers without this necessary experience of social obligations, may have treated their informants with unsuspecting indifference.

It would seem that acknowledgements in published field studies reflect a number of interests. Structured to the past; donors of grants. Structured to the future, reflecting hopes of further academic involvement. Nominal politeness to typist, editors and publishers. Contributory to the material used; academic helpers, local informants and communities. Emotional gratitude; friends created by the research situation. Necessary political assistance; formalistic gratitude to the political authorities without which the research could not have been undertaken in a foreign country.

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