COMMENTARY: THE HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF METHODS CAMP

By H. Russell Bernard

The papers in this section of PA are by colleagues who attended one or more weeks of NSF's Short Courses in Research Methods (SCRM) program in 2006. The SCRM program is part of a larger, long-term project (popularly known in the discipline as "methods camp") to help cultural anthropologists develop skills in research design, data collection, and data analysis.

I'm constantly delighted at how similar the social sciences all are with regard to the big research questions they ask, like: Why are some people early adopters of innovations? Why do some work groups develop good morale while others go nova? Why has romantic love replaced arranged marriage in some societies, but not in others? What accounts for variations in fertility within a society and across societies?

With the right tools, cultural anthropologists can provide precious, comparative data on all these questions and more. Every basketball coach knows that you can't teach height but you can teach tall kids the fundamentals of the game. In the social sciences, you can't teach anyone to go out for a year, risk serious illness, and learn another language just to collect some data. But you can teach the fundamentals of social science. The goal of methods camp is to provide cultural anthropologists—"otherwise sensible people who don't believe in the germ theory of disease," as Roy Rappaport (1990) called them—with fundamental skills in data collection and analysis.

Some History

To strengthen anthropologists' research skills, NSF in the 1950s and 1960s supported a series of field schools in Mexico, Peru, the United States, Ireland, and elsewhere. Many of today's

senior scholars in anthropology were trained in those programs. When the bottom fell out of the academic market in 1971, NSF stopped funding field schools. In 1985, NSF sponsored a conference to assess the state of the art in methods in cultural anthropology. That conference (which Pertti Pelto and I convened) produced a joint article, published in *Current Anthropology* (Bernard et al. 1986), and a call for training programs in research methods for graduate students and faculty in cultural anthropology.

In 1987, with support from NSF, Pelto and I established the Summer Institute for Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology (SIRM), a three-week, summer training program in research methods for university teachers of cultural anthropology. Lee Sailer joined us for one year, and in 1988 we were joined by Steve Borgatti. Pelto, Borgatti, and I ran the SIRM through 1995. Some 130 colleagues were trained in qualitative and quantitative methods, particularly methods of cognitive anthropology.

This emphasis on cognitive anthropology was largely the result of Borgatti's (then) new program, Anthropac (Borgatti 1992). That program made it easy to collect and analyze free lists, pile sorts, triad tests, and paired comparisons. These methods have been attractive in anthropology since the 1960s, but the data they produced were difficult to analyze in the era before personal computers. Anthropac supported a renewed interest in the methods of cognitive anthropology (see D'Andrade 1995; de Munck and Sobo 1998; Handwerker 2001; Ross 2004).

Intuitive software for running statistics, analyzing texts, and processing complex network data have since made it easier to teach and to learn all these methods. Of course, learning to use software is not a substitute for learning the basics of any method (you

can't learn the basics of good writing by learning to use a word processor), but the existence of all the new software has made the collection and analysis of mountains of data (whether numbers or words or images) less intimidating and, I believe, has stimulated interest in research methods among cultural anthropologists.

In 1991, Carol Ember, Michael Burton, and Robert Munroe established a three-week summer program on systematic cross-cultural and comparative research. That program, also funded by NSF, ran for six years, training 72 faculty members, along with several post-docs and graduate students in anthropology.

In the early 1990s, as a panelist for dissertation grants in the cultural anthropology program at NSF, Jeffrey Johnson identified training in research design as a priority for graduate students. Johnson founded the Summer Institute for Research Design in Cultural Anthropology (SIRD) in 1996 to help graduate students who are preparing proposals for field research. He continues to direct the SIRD, with Susan Weller and me as co-directors. The focus of the SIRD is on integrating the objectives, theory, and methods for research into a solid grant proposal. Nearly 200 graduate students have been through the SIRD over the last 12 years.

In the late 1990s, panelists for senior grants in the cultural anthropology program at NSF identified training in research methods as a priority. In 2003, NSF held a Planning Conference for NSF Summer Workshops on Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology at the Belmont Conference Center in Elkridge, MD. Two programs in methods training came out of that conference: the Summer Field Training in Methods of Data Collection in Cultural Anthropology (SFTM) and the Short Courses on Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology (the SCRM).

The SFTM involves graduate students directly in collecting and analyzing data collected in the field on major research projects. In 2004, 2005, and 2006, there were two SFTM field schools: one in the Bolivian Amazon, among Tsimane' Amerindians, and one in Zambia, among Citonga-speaking peoples of Southern Province. The program in Zambia was run by Lisa Cliggett, with participation by Deborah Crooks. The Bolivia program is run by a team including Ricardo Godoy (the program director), Victoria Reyes-García, Clarence Gravlee, J. Richard Stepp, William Leonard, Thomas McDade, and Susan Tanner and is scheduled through 2009.

Among the suggestions at the planning conference was that workshops on specific methods be developed and managed by a committee of colleagues who have experience in providing training in research methods. The proposal for the SCRM was in response to that suggestion. The board of directors for the SCRM program includes Jean Ensminger, Eric Smith, Carmella Moore, Susan Weller, and Jeffrey Johnson.

The SCRM offers three five-day courses each summer. During the first three years (2005–2007), the SCRM offered four different courses two times each: text analysis (taught by Gery Ryan and Clarence Gravlee), survey research (William Dressler and Kathryn Oths), direct behavioral observation (Raymond Hames and Michael Paolisso), and methods of ethnoecology (Gary Martin and J. Richard Stepp). In 2008, the SCRM will offer text analysis again (this time taught by Clarence Gravlee and Amber Wutich) and will add two new courses: one on network analysis (Jeffrey Johnson and Christopher McCarty) and another on systematic techniques for gathering and analyzing video data (Elizabeth Cartwright and Jerome Crowder). Information on the SCRM courses is on the Methods Mall at http://www.qualquant.net/training/

Finally, beginning in 2007, the SCRM began offering one-day workshops at the annual meetings of the AAA and the SfAA. These workshops are on the use of various kinds of software (for text analysis, for statistics, and

for network analysis) and on principles of research design.

Do Cultural Anthropologists Need Their Own Methods Courses?

One might legitimately ask whether cultural anthropologists need their own methods courses. After all, courses on statistics, questionnaire design, probability sampling, database management, and statistical data analysis are offered in departments of statistics, psychology, education, political science, and sociology. Unfortunately, students of cultural anthropology are not encouraged to invest their time in learning systematic methods of research (Cohen 2003; Plattner 1989), and may even be actively discouraged from doing so.

Cultural anthropologists could also attend short courses on research methods that are available in the United States (at the University of Michigan: http://www.isr.umich.edu/src/si/courses. html—now in its 60th year), in England (at the Essex Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis and Collection: http://www.essex.ac.uk/methods/—in its 40th year) and, as of 2006, in Croatia (at the University of Lubljana: http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/events/summerschools/ljubljana/index.aspx).

These programs offer courses (open to graduate students and faculty alike) in both qualitative and quantitative methods and are well known in the social sciences. Students and faculty in cultural anthropology rarely take advantage of these opportunities. Obviously, participants in the SCRM are willing to devote time and energy to learning more about research methods. In talking to participants, I find that many have actually been looking for methods courses taught by people who understand the exigencies of fieldwork—that is, other anthropologists. Disciplinary homophily, it turns out, is still an important consideration in the decision to learn more about methods.

The SCRM offers anthropologists training in the methods that are most useful to them. By the end of 2008, with six different courses in place, the SCRM will have many pieces of a

methods curriculum. Every course has a web site with a detailed syllabus and all the readings (in full text) for the course. Our goal is to make these sites available to support all who teach these courses.

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