

COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH: THE DILEMMA OF CONTRACT

M.J. HEDLEY,
Department of Sociology and Anthropology,
University of Windsor,
Windsor, Ontario,
Canada, N9B 3P4.

ABSTRACT/RESUME

In creating a cooperative research program on resource management between the University of Windsor and Walpole Island Indian Reserve, the organizers hoped that community input and control over the research process would constitute a movement toward the achievement of self-determination. The project was funded to allow for multidisciplinary participation and to focus on problems of practical significance to the Band.

En créant un programme coopératif de recherche sur l'exploitation des ressources entre l'Université de Windsor et la Réserve autochtone de l'île Walpole, les organisateurs espéraient que l'apport et le contrôle communautaires sur les processus de recherche constitueraient un mouvement d'autodétermination. Le projet a été financé de manière à permettre une participation multidisciplinaire et à concentrer l'attention sur les problèmes d'importance pratique à la Bande.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with a critical analysis of a cooperative research program (Nin.da.waab.jig) on resource management between the University of Windsor and Walpole Island Indian Reserve.¹ As well as examining specific problems, the program was designed to enhance the research capacity of the Band Council by creating a research unit on the Reserve.

It is always a temptation in a critical assessment to begin with a clear-cut model of the desired or achieved structure of social relations or social organization. The next step would then be to examine the achievements and failings and ideally arrive at a precise list of recommendations which others could follow. However, such a model is too easily idealized because it cannot grasp the intricacies of practice which have been distilled in its presentation. Nevertheless, without such modeling aids, it is impossible to make any coherent sense of experience at all. With this in mind, attention will fall on the central issue of the *control over the research process*. This is important, for while the research projects themselves are of unquestionable significance, community control over the research process is central to the structure of Nin.da.waab.jig, and constitutes in itself a movement towards the achievement of self-determination. Casting much of the ongoing complexity aside, the fundamental issue of funding, or more accurately the *social relations of control embedded in funding*, will provide the thematic focus of this paper. Analysis will cover a discussion of:

1. The basic relationships established through the initial funding of the project.
2. The potential threat to such relationships resulting from a tendency to seek permanent funding through contractual work.
3. The current resolution brought about by the Band Council's decision to provide basic funding for the research office.

BACKGROUND

A detailed historical account of the project's origins is not desirable in this context. Nevertheless, it is useful to make some general observations so that the development of the project can be placed in perspective. In the first place, it should be stressed that the establishment of a land claims research unit on the Reserve predates any arrangements between the University of Windsor and the Band Council. Moreover, in addition to the historical and legal research carried out by this unit, the Band had been subject to a variety of studies conducted and controlled by external agencies.² The initial contacts which led to the involvement of the University occurred in 1979. However, it was not until 1981 that a multidisciplinary Native Studies research group was established and a request made to meet with the Walpole Island Band Council in order to explore the possibility of developing a working relationship.³ These initiatives culminated in a meeting with representatives of the Band in which the reasons for the involvement of University faculty, the University's independence from

government agencies,⁴ and possible research problems were discussed. From this meeting, the following agreement was reached and ratified by the Band Council (April 30th, 1981):

1. Particular research projects might be suggested either by the Band or the University researchers, subject to approval by the Band Council.
2. Research funds would be sought by the University from outside sources; however, the Band might be asked to provide support in the form of work space and other resources, where appropriate. The Band Council, at its own discretion, could seek funding to support such projects.
3. Band members would be encouraged to work on projects as co-researchers or field assistants and to participate in related workshops, courses, and training sessions. Where a project involved the hiring of field workers, an attempt would be made to employ Band members and University students as teams in equal proportions.
4. The results of research on the Reserve would be made available to the Band. Any potentially sensitive matters would be discussed with Band representatives before publication, and any potentially sensitive matters would be determined by the Band Council.

The agreement did reflect the existence of complimentary interests.⁵ It was recognized that the potential benefits of the arrangement to the faculty included the possibilities for publications, the benefits derived from the involvement of students, and the more intangible gains associated with involvement in community-oriented research which furthers the cause of self-determination. The Band was seen to gain from the relationship because at least some pressing research issues could be addressed without recourse to the funding or expertise of government agencies. Moreover, because of a legacy of distrust, the arrangement was seen as providing the Band with access to an unbiased assessment of research conducted by agencies of the federal and provincial governments or by groups under contract to them. Such apprehension is justified, for even with the most noble intent, the research process emanating from these agencies is hierarchical in nature. Consequently, even though the Band might have the right of refusal, control of the research process is governed by the exigencies of federal and provincial bureaucracies and the interests embedded within them. The arrangement with the University thereby provided an independent means of evaluating such research and entering into future arrangements with more confidence.

Once this agreement had been reached, the Native Studies Group started to explore the various avenues of funding. Because the Group's interest was in developing a collective and multidisciplinary approach to research, the normal academic avenues of funding were seen to be inadequate.⁶ The eventual outcome of the search was a proposal submitted to the Donner Foundation of Canada which focused on socio-economic and environmental factors associated with resource management. The funding grant for a three-year period by the

Foundation was for \$135,000. This was supplemented by a further \$30,000 from the Band Council.⁷ The significance of the Donner funding needs to be stressed. In the first place, it facilitated a multidisciplinary approach to research in that provisions were made for participation from the fields of anthropology, biology, history, geography, and geology. Moreover, it allowed the focus to fall on problems defined in terms of their practical significance to the Band rather than in terms of any contribution to the field of study. Perhaps even more important, the Foundation was more interested in the possibility of establishing a permanent research and training unit on the Reserve, and the potential value of such a model for other Reserves.

BASIC RELATIONSHIPS: THE INITIAL PERIOD

Attention is now turned to a delineation of the basic relationship which structured the control of the research process following initial funding. In this respect, it has already been mentioned that in any arrangement, the Band Council would reserve the right to determine the range of research problems and the right to terminate research projects at any point. The Council also had access to the results of research and could control the release of sensitive materials. Of course, they could choose to incorporate or exclude the results of research in their own deliberations. In addition, the Council's approval was required in the hiring of office staff. A liaison committee was established to facilitate communication concerning the activities of the research unit.⁸

Organizationally, the staff supported by the Donner grant were incorporated into the Land Claims Office (see Figure 1).

From the diagram it can be seen that the control of funding was divided between the Council and the Native Studies Group. The Band's funds were absorbed in providing office infrastructure. Also, and this was not part of the cooperative project, they provided the salary for the research officer who was involved in lands research. This was significant, because the research officer also assumed the mantle of office manager, thereby further extending the potential influence of the Council over the research process. The two research associate positions were funded directly from the Donner grant and were thereby linked to the Native Studies Group because the University controlled this funding. The salary of the final staff position in the office, the research assistant, was jointly funded by the Council, through the Land Claims Office, and by the Donner grant. In addition, the costs of research equipment and any funding directed towards students also came from the Donner grant.

In retrospect, it is easy to recognize that the situation was inherently ambiguous because the basic lines of authority were never clearly drawn. On the one hand, the direct responsibility of meeting the terms of the Donner grant rested with the University group. This situation meant that a structured program of research and a timetable for the publication of reports was considered to be desirable because it would allow for both the most effective use of the academics' time and for meeting the terms of the grant. On the other hand, Council had also provided funds and therefore also had an interest in the activi-

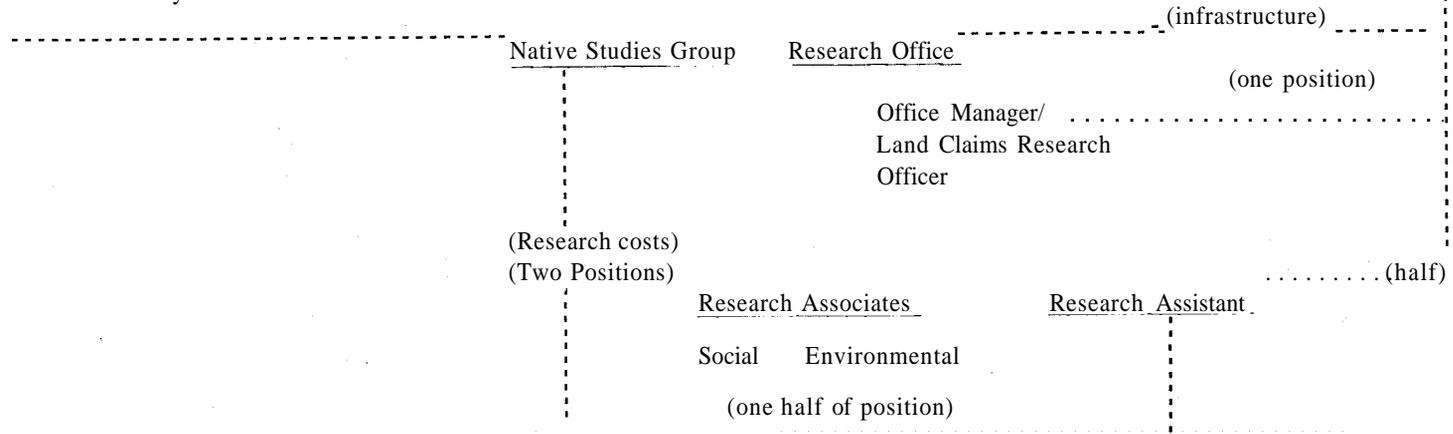
FIGURE 1

Control of Funding

Donner Funding
Administered by the U of W.

Nin.da.waab.jig

Band Funding



Links with the Band Council

Council

- Liason Committee (seldom used)
(University, Research Office & Council representatives)
- Direct representation on Council (first two years)
(Office manager/claims researcher)
- Direct attendance at Council meetings (occasional)
- Informal contacts with Council members

FIGURE 2
ACTIVITIES OF RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

INITIAL ACTIVITIES

1. Direct research related tasks:
 - data collection
 - data files (including newspaper clippings)
 - environmental monitoring
 - bibliographic work
2. Assist faculty and students from the U. of W.
3. Report writing.
4. Attend conferences and workshops.
5. Generate new projects.
6. Generate funding.

ADDED TASKS

1. Generate funding for other groups (forestry, pure water)
2. Maintain public relations: media (historical and environmental issues)
public (respond to queries about the history of
the Band... tours etc.)
3. Represent Council: to other bands on research-related issues; monitoring
treatment of burial sites off the reserve.
4. Attend Band committee meetings.
5. Monitor the research related activities of other agencies.

ties of the research staff. The results of failing to clearly define the lines of authority resulting from this dual structure, and to clearly limit the projects to be accepted by the research staff, meant that tasks tended to proliferate in an unorganized way (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 provides some indication of the range of activities involving the research associates. In terms of the overall objectives of the program, the activities represented a desirable incorporation of the research unit into the ongoing affairs of the Band. Conversely, this heightened involvement did contribute to delays in the completion of continuing projects and various reports. However, of more significance was the fact that these extra services did *not* involve any payments for the time they consumed. This arrangement was an issue because payment for the services provided on a user basis seemed to be one of the ways in which the long-term viability of the research unit could be achieved.⁹

Putting aside the research that has been accomplished, or any mention of that which has not, it is clear that the basic achievement of the grant period was the establishment of a research unit which enhanced the capacity of the Band to

investigate issues it considered of immediate relevance. Though primarily funded externally, the location of office and staff on the Reserve has allowed for the slow incorporation of the activities of the unit into the affairs of the Band. The liaison with the University facilitated the direct involvement of interested faculty and access to a wide range of expertise, yet it maintains considerable community input into and control over the research process. Moreover, the long-term involvement in research facilitates an increased sensitivity on the part of faculty and direct involvement on the part of Band Members with the research staff. Such positive aspects do not imply that there are no criticisms to be made or that the project unfolded perfectly in a well-ordered plan. Neither situation is the case. At least for the University faculty involved, the degree of involvement in the affairs of the Band and the time taken away from what were considered to be primary tasks was not expected. However, such unexpected departures are perhaps less important than the precedent which was established by the presence of the research group and its manner of integration into the activities of the Band.

THE CONTRACT: SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVE FUNDING

While researchers hoped that some form of user-payment arrangement could be made with the Band to cover the cost of some services, it was not expected that such income, or Band funds generally, would provide the means by which research activities would be reproduced over time. The user-fee option reflected a belief that the research office should generate its own funds. In this respect, it can be seen that a traditional academic approach was at work in that the continuous search for funds to support research was, and remained, the predominant pattern. As can be seen from the following quotation, the idea of such an approach was built into the original proposal:

A major goal of the project is the development of the self-sustaining capacity of the Band to pursue its own research objectives. Consequently, the research associates will be responsible for developing further projects and to seek directly external funding to support these.

Given the limited applicability of academic sources of funds, it is perhaps not surprising that the major alternative which the research unit as a whole considered was that of entering into contractual relationships on the same basis as consultants. Particularly attractive in this respect were the funds available from various government departments destined for studies of reserve communities.¹⁰ Contract work was seen to entail entering into competition for projects with the numerous consultants in the field. To this end, a brochure was prepared (published in the summer of 1985) outlining the type of expertise that the group could offer. It was envisaged that the engagement in this type of research would provide an income to cover the costs of office staff and office maintenance, and that a surplus would be generated which could be used to

subsidize the more general research activities on the Reserve.

THE LIMITATIONS OF CONTRACTUAL RELATIONSHIPS: THE REPRODUCTION OF HIERARCHY

The advantages of entering into contractual arrangements seem straightforward. Yet, when the implications of such contracts are examined more closely, they can be seen to entail consequences which are antithetical to the reproduction of community-based research. It is to an examination of these consequences that attention is now turned.

The research group recently entered into a series of negotiations with one of the divisions within the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) in order to obtain a contract for a project. The project in question entailed a national survey which would determine the need for, and the form of a community-based environmental monitoring program and the possible development of a training program associated with it. In the opinion of the research group, the project was considered to be worthwhile because its aims, inasmuch as these would be implemented, did fit the group's ideals concerning both community control and environmental management. Hence, it is not the concrete focus of the proposed project that is at issue, but rather the implications entailed with respect to *control over the research process* in this and other such relationships.

In general, entering into a contractual relationship means that the right to determine the problem for research passes into the hands of the client (in this case the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development) and beyond the control of the community. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility of negotiations. However, the client providing the funding retains the ultimate power of determination. This is also true with respect to research design, for although the research group may have considerable latitude, the client is again in a position to ensure that the standards required and the duration of the project are appropriate in terms of its own frame of reference. This influence is likely to be apparent from the evaluations embedded in the initial application (reflecting the terms of reference etc.) to the presentation of a final report. In other words, problem selection and research design are no longer controlled by any group representative of Indian Bands or the Native community generally. This is even more apparent when a national survey is involved because the subjects are threatened with total removal from the research process. This may be ameliorated to some extent by making provisions for consultations with representatives of the local community groups which are to be approached and by making provision for the local dissemination of results.

The basic issue however remains, namely that the connection between the researchers and those researched no longer has a community character.

Apart from the structural changes in control over the research process, there are two further implications which could cause a potential threat to the program. In the first place, the heightened demands on the time of the research staff derived from an externally-imposed schedule would undermine their ability

to do the very work that contract work was meant to subsidize. Hence, their ability to complete on-going projects, and to respond to immediate issues, would be reduced and the potential effectiveness of the group diminished. This could be alleviated by employing part-time staff, but given the problems of training, the availability of qualified personnel, and the desirability of having some involvement throughout such projects, questions about the allocation of time remain.

A further problem arises from the likelihood that the expertise of some faculty would be necessary and not easily replacable. Yet, this prospect raises the issue of the basis of their involvement. Such projects would not be community-based and the links with community research and with self-determination would at best be tenuous. Moreover, the potential benefits that result from research that may be of some value in academic publication would probably be totally lost.¹¹ The likely outcome would probably be that the faculty's contribution would become part of the cost of conducting research and a monetary payment would have to be made. In some cases, this is already part of a university's practice. Yet, for those whose engagement is premised on the community nature of the program, such a solution would be less than satisfactory.

The manner in which faculty and research staff become involved in contract work may well re-direct their practice to research processes which are no longer community-controlled. Moreover, inasmuch as this re-direction involves entering into relationships with government departments, the activities of Nin.da.waab.jib may inadvertently serve to reproduce the very hierarchical structure of research which it set out to overcome. This is even more readily apparent when it is remembered that the power to implement the results of research remain firmly entrenched in the hands of the (non-community) client. While the particular characteristics of contract arrangements vary, it seems that dependence on financing of this type would transform the nature of both the control of the research projects and the problems which are pursued. The result would be that the central concern of maintaining a community-based and community-controlled research group would be rendered largely symbolic.

RESOLUTION: COMMUNITY CONTROL

During the period within which a brochure was produced and tentative negotiations started with DIAND, a budget covering both office expenses and research staff salaries was submitted to and approved by the Band Council. This confirmed in a very direct way the perceived value of the research unit and at the same time affirmed community control over the research process. Under these circumstances, it is ironic to note that it was the Council that expressed the greatest reserve with respect to the group's negotiations with Indian Affairs. When permission was sought to proceed with negotiations, the Council made provisions to have the terms of reference of any arrangement assessed by an external consultant.¹² A more telling recognition of some of the dangers which are associated with the tendency to seek funding through contractual arrangement is hard to visualize.

CONCLUSION

The direct funding by the Band of a locally-based research unit is the ideal solution to achieving control over the research process. The initial funding for the cooperative program on Walpole was unique in that it facilitated the establishment and evolution of such a unit. It was also unique in that it allowed for the initiation of a multidisciplinary research program which drew extensively on the resources of the University. As a result, a small step towards self-determination was realized in two ways. In the first place, the research capacity of the Band was directly increased as was its ability to monitor and more effectively draw upon the resources of the university and other institutions. Secondly, the research unit was directly involved in the resolution of research issues defined by the Band. This is not to suggest that there are no problems to be overcome or that the group could not work more effectively. This is definitely not the case. Nor is it to suggest that such a research group could or should seek to replace the role of consultants or the resources which are available in government departments. However, in the case of either, a community-based perspective can be developed from which the efforts of others can be evaluated. The overall result is a greater access to the benefits which are derived from well-directed research and the breakdown, at least in part, of the hierarchical relationships in which research is so often embedded.

The possibility for further cooperation between the University of Windsor and the Walpole Island Band Council is far from exhausted. However, the general lesson to be learnt is that firm institutional links between bands and universities are an important part of opening up the resources of the latter. In the case in question, the existence of a liaison group (the Native Studies Group) on campus greatly facilitated that process. In this respect, it is important to recognize that the needs of Native communities far exceed the range of competence of any particular discipline. Consequently, it is necessary for such a group to develop the ability to turn their activities into a thoroughly multidisciplinary endeavour. Conversely, it is clear that the presence of a research unit in the community with established links with the university is advantageous. It provides both a window to the university and at the same time establishes a point of contact.

In the same way that discussion has glossed over the complexities expressed in the evolution of *Nin.da.waab.jig*, no easy answer can be given to the question of the applicability of the model to other circumstances. Nevertheless, if the enhancement of community control over the research process and access to the independent and multidisciplinary resources of the university are desirable, then the experience of Walpole Island is of relevance. The form that such cooperation takes will vary according to circumstances. However, the point to recognize is that the wide range of expertise available in the university can be harnessed in a non-hierarchical way to further the objective of self-determination.

NOTES

1. The comments in this paper are based on my personal involvement in this project from its inception to the present.
2. There had been a variety of studies into such areas as capital planning and the feasibility of developing a marina and a sports complex. The work was usually done by consultants who were funded by the DIAND.
3. The initial membership of the Native Studies Group consisted of a geologist, geographer, biologist, historian and an anthropologist. The multidisciplinary nature of the group reflected the wide variety of research needs that were identified by the Band. It may also be of interest to note that none of the members of the group had been involved previously with research concerning Native communities.
4. An important aspect of the discussion was concerned with identifying the interests that university faculty had in such research. Of particular importance was the university's freedom from the influence of government agencies. The Council was also interested in learning what personal benefits faculty would derive from a joint research program. This led to a discussion of the possible advantages such an arrangement would have for teaching students, publication, and the personal satisfaction of being involved in local research.
5. The list of questions drawn up as a result of this meeting were as follows:
 - 1) Problems of fall plowing in relation to soil quality and erosion;
 - 2) The possibility of introducing alternative farming strategies, including market gardening and rice production;
 - 3) The state of fish and game resources, including current harvests in relation to sustainable yields and the economic value of these resources;
 - 4) The ecology of unique natural habitats such as the prairie grassland and oak forest and the development of a plan for their preservation and utilization;
 - 5) An inventory of forest resources and the development of a forest management scheme;
 - 6) Design of a plan for the monitoring of key environmental factors such as water quality, shoreline stability, and the effects of drainage, dredg-

ing, and agricultural projects;

- 7) Long-term changes in environmental conditions in the St. Clair Delta and the implications for settlement and land use on the Reserve;
- 8) The historical development of social and economic conditions of the Reserve in relation to land tenure and land use practices.

This list is by no means exhaustive. However, it does give a clear idea of the potential value of the multidisciplinary resources available in universities.

6. The usual funding agencies (SSHRC/NSERC) do not make provisions for the degree of multidisciplinary work envisaged or the type of practical focus. Moreover, they are not generally interested in funding the training component of the program.
7. The contribution of the Band Council was a condition of the Foundation's involvement. This obligation was met through the provision of office space and facilities on the reserve.
8. The Liaison Committee consisted of representatives from Nin.da.waab.jig and the Band Council. The group only met on a few occasions and then fell into disuse. At the time this did not seem problematic for one of the members of the research group was also a councillor. However, when he decided to resign from his council activities, the formal avenues of continuous communication were reduced. This hindered the development of a organizationally sound working relationship.
9. A user-pay arrangement was employed to cover the research cost involved in assessing the risks involved in the containment of material dredged from the St. Clair River and in an analysis of water quality on St. Anne's Island.
10. The projects of most interest to the research group were those directly involving Walpole Island and neighbouring communities. However, it was recognized that a wider range of options would have to be pursued if adequate funding for the research unit was to be generated.
11. To this point, members of the group have not been involved in academic publication resulting from the involvement in the cooperation program. This reflects both the practical nature of the research problems and the continuing commitment to pre-existing research in other areas. However, given the exigencies of university life and the considerable amount of time expended on the program, a link between research and publication has to be made.

12. The concern of the Band Council was to ensure that they would not incur any liability in the event of a failure to meet the terms of the contract. Moreover, they were also concerned that involvement in such a project would take too much time away from projects defined by the Band Council.