

NSF and Me, 1971-2024: Research Support from Undergrad to Emeritus*

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December 31 2024 marked the end of my final NSF-supported project, and thus of 53 years of NSF support for my research. I also served on the NSF's Senior Advisory Committee for Cultural Anthropology, 1993-95 and 2009–10, and over the decades have reviewed many, many proposals to NSF. All of these experiences went a very long way towards defining my research trajectories, from the Allegany Seneca Reservation in the early 1970s, to India in 1978-79, 1992 and 2013, the former Yugoslavia in 1984-85, comparative research in Bulgaria, India, Peru, Portugal and Turkey in 2007-12, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, 2018-2024. While I had many other grants (Wenner-Gren, SSRC, ACLS, HF Guggenheim, NCEEER [3], Fulbright [2]), the NSF support largely defined my career, and it was the NSF-supported projects that led most often to new ideas and new directions in my personal research.

NSF support also determined the initial trajectories of my doctoral students. Five of them had DDRIG support, several more had REGs, and all of them benefitted from my experiences in submitting and resubmitting proposals, and from what I had learned in reviewing them. While many other funders supported research in specific regions of the world, or on specific topics (e.g. “democracy” or violence), NSF is wide open. This means that almost any topic in any region can be presented in any given round of proposals – which also means that very often, no member of the selection committee has expertise in that region or topic. Far from being a flaw in the system, the generality of submissions and of the review panels ensured that successful proposals almost always addressed issues of greater moment to anthropology than those narrowly defined as contributing to studies of particular places. Demonstrating to doctoral students why their research needed to be defined in ways that made it interesting to reviewers with no expertise in that particular place or specific issue, was always among the most powerful of lessons in their doctoral study.

Some of the kinds of support I had may no longer be available, and certainly some of the categories of allowable expenses that helped me can no longer be used. Still, I thought it might be useful to mark the grants.

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1971: SOS -Syracuse University Seneca Research Project

This was for fieldwork as an undergrad Anthro major, and was not actually my grant but rather one directed by two Anthro doctoral students, Paul Feldsher and Susan Williams – the “SOS” in the title was for “Student Originated Studies.” This grant funded about 8 weeks of research by a team of undergraduates, studying the impact on Seneca society of the forced removal in 1965 from their homes along the Allegheny River to two “relocation areas,” still on the reservation but disrupting patterns of sociality and much more. As an initiation into fieldwork it was great – but I doubt that any university would now accept the liability risk of having two second-year doctoral students run a field school of ten undergrads.

I continued research on the Allegany Reservation until 1977, but the politics of research with Native Americans following Vine Deloria’s account of “anthropologists and other friends” in *Custer Died for Your Sins* made doctoral research in anthropology impossible, even though I had permission from the Seneca Nation Council. The general sentiment on the reservation was that while I was always welcome, the Iroquois had been studied enough. Fair enough!

1978-79: Dissertation Improvement Grant, NSF Law and Social Science Program (Keith F. Otterbein, Principal Investigator): \$5,600

This grant was through Law & Social Science, then a new program in NSF with heavy anthropological representation. I had had the opportunity in 1975 and 1976 to join an Indian research team headed by Dr. Kailash Malhotra, studying non-pastoral nomads in Maharashtra. My part was anthropology of law: a study of the ways disputes were handled and statuses adjusted by the caste council, all orally since they were illiterate; and in an unusual dialect of Telugu. I developed my own more in-depth study a couple of years later for my dissertation research. Keith Otterbein, who as an anthropologist of politics also knew something about anthro of law, was my advisor. Products included the dissertation (1981), a number of articles in journals, and a book (1990). The \$5600 easily covered fieldwork expenses for nearly a year, doubtless the most cost-efficient research I ever did.

1984-85: NSF Grant No. SES-8409554 (Law and Social Science Division), for an ethnographic study of an alternative court in Yugoslavia: \$22,579.

Again in Law & Social Science. My research in India had led to my marrying a Yugoslav woman whom I met there and switching areas and topics, studying what was then Actually Existing Socialism in Yugoslavia. This switch was facilitated by a two-year Fulbright in Belgrade, 1981-83. Changing from an ethnographic study of a caste council in India to one of a socialist workers’ court in Yugoslavia was not that much of a switch in terms of then-dominant theorizing about disputes processing, and Serbo-Croatian was far easier to learn than Telugu had been. This research resulted in a book in 1990,

just when socialism failed and the workers' courts went with it. Thus the irony, that while I had thought that the caste council study was salvage ethnography, it turned out to be the socialist courts that withered away – the caste council was still operating as of 2014. I also published a number of articles in journals major and minor. But most importantly, when Yugoslavia collapsed into war in 1991, I was already fluent in Serbo-Croatian, and knew the political and legal systems. I thus wound up studying the violent dissolution of a European state, something I would not have dreamed of doing earlier.

1991-93: NSF Law & Social Science & Anthropology Programs, for research in India on "Fact-Finding, Evaluation and the Ordering of Speaking Turns in Legal Settings," \$63,600.

Evidence that nobody expected state socialism in Europe to collapse in the second half of 1989 was that I made a June 1 deadline that year for further research in India. By the time the grant was awarded, as a highly experienced scholar on Yugoslavia when state socialism was collapsing, going to India was not really what I wanted to do, but who could turn down a grant that paid not only research expenses, travel and living expenses for my family to be with me in India for 6 months, summer salary after the grant, and a grad assistant? Fortuitously, a one-month Fulbright in Yugoslavia in January 1991 on the way to India turned into postponement of the grant for a year when start of the first Gulf War led the US government in its wisdom to impose a ban on government-supported travel for the "Middle East region," then defined as running from Morocco to Bangladesh. Which kept me in Belgrade for the final months of existence of Yugoslavia, which is where I should have been anyway. That stay led to some major articles.

I made it to India in January 1992. The research did not work out as planned – the nomads whose council we planned to study didn't show up in enough numbers to make the councils viable. On the other hand, their interactions gave ample scope for research and a new topic suddenly opened up. It happened that the councils met at a saint's shrine in central India which we had studied briefly in 1976, when it was to all appearances the tomb of a Muslim sufi saint, Shar Ramzan, that Hindus also visited, venerating the saint under his Hindu identity, Kanifnath. By 1992, Hindu religious activists had transformed it instead into what to all appearances was the shrine of the Hindu saint, where Muslims still came. We changed focus on to study the several shrines of this single saint with two identities, which proved critical to much of what I did thereafter.

There was an important lesson here. The research as originally planned was impossible to carry out, but the question then became why that was so. I saw this as an anthropological analogue of Fleming's fabled discovery of penicillin. Fleming could have just cleaned the dead bacteria out of the petri dishes and moved on with whatever he had been doing when his research was apparently spoiled, but instead he asked why the bacteria died. I could have proclaimed the 1991 research to have failed but the issue became why the site where the nomads were to meet had become so changed as

to make their meetings so difficult. My answers to that question structured my final two projects.

2007-2012: NSF Cultural Anthropology Program, # 0719677, “Antagonistic Tolerance: A Comparative Analysis of Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites,” \$301,781.

My analyses of competition over the site in India that Hindus and Muslims both shared and fought over, alerted me to some similar dynamics going on in the Bosnian war (1992-95) and easily documented in other parts of the Balkans – and elsewhere in the world. I published an analysis modelling what I called “Antagonistic Tolerance in India and the Balkans” in *Current Anthropology* in 2002, prompting a wave of critical studies of the model. Turkish colleagues Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir and Aykan Erdemir and I used the logic of abductive research to develop a project to test, develop and refine the Antagonistic Tolerance (AT) model through research in Anatolia (historical and modern), funded by Wenner-Gren, and then expanded it into a comparative, international and interdisciplinary project with the same goals, involving research in Bulgaria (Ottoman and contemporary), India (ancient, Portuguese colonial and contemporary), Mexico (Aztec and early colonial), Peru (Inka and early colonial), Portugal (early modern) as well as Turkey. This project incorporated scholars from these countries plus the USA, with disciplinary skills in archaeology, art history, history, and religious studies as well as cultural anthropology. Three members of the team were women, one with small children (fortunately, Wenner-Gren saw childcare costs as legitimate research expenses when NSF did not). Each researcher was involved in fieldwork within their own area of expertise and in at least one area outside of it, with the final book being a jointly written project under my overall guidance and editing. The book, *Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites and Spaces* (Routledge 2016) was thus a unified analysis drawing on all of the research, not a collection of individual chapters on any location or site. The AT project has produced 17 articles by various authors:

<https://antagonistictolerance.com/>.

2018-2024: NSF Cultural Anthropology Program, # 1826892, “(Re)Constructing Religioscapes as Competing Territorial Claims in Post-War Bosnia & Herzegovina,” \$242,000.

The AT model developed through the previous NSF grant dealt exclusively with historical trajectories of the development and transformations of religious sites, some of them quite ancient, some more recent. What we had not been able to study was the processes through which sites were (re)built and religioscapes changed during and immediately after an ethno-religious conflict. My detailed knowledge of the progression of the 1992-95 war in Bosnia – Herzegovina (B&H), acquired through research after the 1992 India fieldwork and before the development of the AT model, led me to see that country as a place where I could study these processes of competitive interactions over sacral sites between the Muslim/Bosniak, Roman Catholic/ Croat and Orthodox

Christian/ Serb communities that comprised 95% of the population. With Prof. Mario Katić of the University of Zadar, who was born in Bosnia and was the most serious scholar of Bosnian Croat communities, I developed a proposal to study these processes, making predictions of patterns of changes we expected to find in specified circumstances in reconstructed communities. We included geographers from the University of Zadar, experienced in the region, since we expected mapping the sites in their communities and in relation to each other, would be crucial to understanding these processes. After fieldwork in Fall 2018 and summer 2019 the project was stalled by the Covid pandemic for nearly two years, thus being extended ultimately until the end of 2024. This extension proved to be enormously beneficial as it gave us opportunity to observe three electoral campaigns in B&H – all major political parties appealed to voters of only one community, and the distribution of political advertising clearly revealed population distributions, since parties appealing to voters of one community would not even bother advertising in places where other communities were dominant. The Covid pandemic also convinced me to retire in 2021, on the condition that I could complete this project. Thus NSF support was literally from my undergraduate days to professor emeritus.

While the AT project had been international, the Bosnia project was “mixed” (*mešovito* in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian) in terms of the ethno-religious communities of B&H. Mario and I recruited additional researchers, ultimately involving three Croats (Mario and the geographers), two Serbs from Serbia (one of Bosnian Serb heritage), two Serbs from Bosnia, and a Bosniak from Bosnia. Two members of the team were women. Interdisciplinarity in addition to cultural anthropology and geography included ethnomusicology, history and religious studies. Products as of December 2024 include three journal articles, final stages of editing of a thematic issue of a geography journal, and multiple presentations at conferences and workshops. A book is mapped out, as are other articles.

A final word on team-based research in anthropology:

It turned out that much of my research was done in the context of interdisciplinary and international teams: as an undergrad on the Seneca Reservation, with Indian teams in the work on the nomad caste council, and the AT project and that in B&H. Such team-based research would not have surprised Franz Boas, or Clifford Geertz before he turned away from empirical research to only interpreting cultures, or any archaeologist, but seems now uncommon in cultural anthropology. And comparative research even more so.

So I'll end with a few thoughts on why I think it is important that such research be encouraged. The first reason is obvious: multiple perspectives often lead to the development of new insights. This is especially true when the team is interdisciplinary. Archaeologists in the AT project and geographers in the B&H one played an important

role in demanding that theories advanced by the cultural anthropologists be closely connected to empirical data; both of those fields now benefitting heavily from advanced technology and data manipulation. Yet the breadth of thinking of the less technologically driven fields was important in getting the archaeologists and geographers to see limitations in their own ways of approaching data on social processes. In regard to getting data in the first place, a key moment in the 1992 research that led ultimately to the AT project was the willingness of local Muslims to talk in depth with a Muslim researcher, which they were not willing to do with non-Muslims; and the information and documents they gave us were exceptionally important for developing our thoughts. In the AT project itself, gendered access to data took many forms, from the willingness of women in some places to speak only with women researchers, to the freedom with which a very visibly pregnant colleague was able to make observations at a site while the men who controlled it were being interviewed by the PI – to them, the pregnant woman was obviously not important, while to us the information gained through her observations outweighed the value of the interview.

As for comparative research: there is a strong tendency for specialists in any area to see their own place as unique, not comparable to anywhere else. Yet throughout the AT and B&H project, we were repeatedly struck by the ways in which our models, originally derived through comparative research, could be applied in new contexts. The ultimate such application may have been in my own demonstration of the utility of the AT model to a workshop of scholars working on the Late Antique Eastern Roman Empire – possibly greater utility than even I expected.

In any event, the intellectual journeys I have been on for over 50 years have been fascinating. And NSF's support has been key to my going on them, in directions I had never anticipated going.

*Belgrade, Serbia
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