CAPTURING CONTRACTS: INFORMAL ACTIVITY AMONGST CONTRACT RESEARCHERS

Introduction

There has been a developing trend over the past two decades for an increasing proportion of those involved in the academic labour of higher education to be employed on non-standard contracts, including those of a fixed-term and part-time nature. In the UK, over a third of routine academic work is now carried out by such staff (Ainley, 1994), and this is proving to be an international phenomenon. As Kogan et al (1994, p. 53) have noted, this casualisation has been driven by universities divesting themselves of much responsibility for continuity of employment, and making savings in employer contributions such as pensions and insurance. This move towards a more flexible and cheaper workforce is largely a response to governmental resource restrictions and the need to cope with increased student numbers (Kogan, Moses & El-Khawas, 1994).

The growth of temporary and part-time teaching contracts has been documented in the UK (CVCP, 1991; NATFHE,1993; Cutler, James & Waine, 1997), Canada (Baker, 1985; Rajagopal & Farr, 1989, 1992; Lundy & Warme, 1990), the USA (Gunne, 1982; Pearson, 1988; Leslie, Kellams & Smith, 1991) and Australia (Over & Sherwood, 1994). Moreover, as universities have increasingly attempted to generate other income from external grants and contracts (Kogan, Moses & El-Khawas, 1994), there has been a steady rise in the rise in numbers of researchers employed on fixed-term contracts, and it is this group which constitutes the subject of this paper.

Again there is evidence to suggest that this growth in contract research is an international trend, with increasing numbers of temporary researchers in the western industrialised states (Smith, 1991; Atkinson, 1992; AUT, 1993; Kogan, Moses & El-Khawas, 1994; Barlow, 1995; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In the UK, numbers have been growing since the 1970s (Norris *et al* 1992), and currently there are over 35,000 of

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these researchers across all academic disciplines. In 1995/96 nearly 4,000 academic staff in the social sciences were on fixed-term contracts which included a research element and 2,400 of these undertook research only (HESA, 1995/96). Moreover, there are indications that the occupational structure of contract research reflects wider social disparities, with women under-represented at senior research grades and over-represented at more junior levels (Court *et al*, 1996, p 25).

This state of affairs has generated debates concerning the inequalities suffered by fixed-term staff when compared to those academics employed on permanent contracts. It is also widely considered to be an inefficient system for training and maintaining a skilled research workforce (Salter, 1983; Rees, 1985; CVCP/AUT, 1990; Hart, 1991; New Scientist, 1991; NATFHE, n.d.; Norris et al, 1992; Ransom, 1992; AUT, 1995; Research Fortnight, 1995). Inferior salaries, lack of security of employment, little if any career development, and inadequate (even total lack of) pension provision make it difficult for most researchers to tolerate their status for a lengthy period. It is also highly wasteful for the higher education system as a whole when skilled and talented researchers relinquish posts or are forced to leave (Pettigrew, 1994). The debate has led the UK Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), in conjunction with the UK research councils and others, to formulate a Concordat on Contract Researcher Staff Career Management (CVCP *et al*, 1996). The purpose of the concordat is to provide a framework of conduct to ensure the more equitable institutional treatment of contract researchers. The degree to which institutional policy will be influenced in practice by the concordat remains to be seen and will be monitored by a group entitled the Research Careers Initiative.

Despite this recent attention, the research literature on contract researchers is not extensive. A certain amount of material touches on the management of contract researchers (Roth, 1966; Platt, 1976; Bell, 1977; Crawshaw, 1985; Nespor, 1989; Wakeford, 1985; Horan, 1990; Etzkowitz, 1992; Porter, 1994; Burgess, 1994). Other

material considers more directly contract researchers' occupational lives. The great majority of this latter is based on surveys and charts the terms and conditions of contract researchers' labour (SSRC, 1975; Over, 1984; Varlaam, 1987,1988; AUT nd,1990; Norris, 1991; Bryson & Tulle-Winton, 1994; NATFHE, 1995; Youngman, 1994; Court et al, 1996). Complementing this quantitative data is a much more limited amount of qualitative data consisting largely of accounts by individuals depicting their personal experiences (Brown, 1994; Newbury, 1995; Pole, 1995; Porter, 1984; Scott, 1984; Scott & Porter, 1983, 1984; Pirrie, 1997). In addition, there exists a study of the contract researchers employed on a single project in education (Stronach & Macdonald, 1991). In sum, contract researchers 'represent a highly vulnerable and growing pool of expertise' (Pettigrew, 1994, p. 48), and yet little is known about the complexities of their occupational lives (Brown, 1994).

The Research

With the aim of filling this lacuna, research on the experiences of contract research staff was carried out in 1994-5, involving interviews with 61 social science[1] contract researchers, 59 of whom were employed at 11 United Kingdom universities, one was currently unemployed, and one, with considerable experience within the UK, was employed at an overseas university. The interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, tape-recorded, and were designed to gather data on various social relationships, such as those with peers, with research managers or directors, and with research sponsors. In addition, data were obtained on contract researchers' motives, aspirations, coping strategies, learning processes, and conceptions of identity. Those interviewed ranged from novice research assistants on their first contract, to senior research fellows with over a decade of experience. The interviews also spanned researchers who were on relatively long-term contracts (3 years) to those who were employed on a day to day, even hourly rate. The interviewing at 11 different sites covered researchers employed in traditional academic departments (n=10) and those employed in specialist research centres (n=10). Information relating to the profiles and contexts of researchers is given

in Table 1. The research was designed to include researchers working in a range of contexts under a variety of conditions, with the objective of capturing as wide a spectrum of experience as possible. The data contained in this paper emanate from those interviews.

Table 1   Profiles of contract researchers studied, N = 61

to be located here

Occupational Knowledge and Practice

There is a sociological literature on occupations which embraces the socialization processes particular to forms of work as diverse as hairdressing (Geer, 1972), accountancy (Coffey, 1993), journalism (Parry, 1990), medicine (Atkinson, 1981), the military (Hockey, 1986), prison officers (Carter, 1994) and teaching (Atkinson & Delamont, 1985). In contrast, as Delamont *et al* (1994) indicate, little is known about the reproduction of academic occupational culture, and there is a need for further inquiry in this area.   Moreover, what research there is on higher education has concentrated upon students and teaching staff, with little attention paid to other occupational cultures present in the sector (Delamont, 1996), including that of contract researchers. The research on occupational socialization has largely focussed upon the social processes involved (with peers, instructors/teachers, employers), and to a lesser extent upon the acquisition of knowledge (Delamont & Atkinson, 1995, p. 85-101).

Occupational knowledge and practice are of two principle kinds: formal and informal. The former is normally laid down (often in great detail) in institutional rules, regulations, training programmes, syllabi and the like. In contrast, informal knowledge and practice are usually acquired 'on the job' as individuals gain experience in their work. Some elements are learnt from managers and peers, whilst other aspects remain tacit, private or, as some have termed it 'indeterminate' (Polanyi, 1983; Gerholm, 1990; Delamont and Atkinson, 1995). 'Indeterminacy' has been defined as the 'elements of occupational competence and practice that are dependent on tacit knowledge.   They are not

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susceptible to codification and representation as explicit rules or recipes' (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995, p. 96). Despite the unofficial nature of such knowledge and practice, they are often crucial for the successful completion of occupational tasks. Such knowledge, the concrete practices of particular kinds of work, together with attitudes towards, and definitions of them, constitute what Bourdieu (1990, pp. 52-58) has called the *habitus*: an assemblage of perceptions, dispositions, definitions, habitual understandings, actions, which inter-relate, and are specific to particular collectivities such as classes or occupational groups. The purpose of this paper is then to depict a part of the habitus of UK contract researchers, illustrating some of the aforementioned elements and the factors which sustain them.

A Realm of Insecurity

Interviews with researchers revealed the dominant theme of their working lives to be that of coming to terms with a condition of insecure and unpredictable employment. This was the most prevalent concern which pervaded their occupational, and on occasion domestic, existence. Overall, this insecurity formed a continuum: at its most extreme end were individual researchers who existed on a part-time hourly rate, often not knowing how many hours they would work from week to week, and on occasion from day to day. At the opposite, and relatively secure end of the spectrum, were those who were funded by research councils or major charities for an extended period such as three years.

In between these poles lay different degrees of insecurity, with researchers working part-time and full-time for a variety of contract periods. There were researchers who had experienced a whole series of insecure conditions in a single university, whilst others had an occupational profile which included a succession of moves around the university system. Amongst the interviewees were a handful of researchers who had experienced periods where they held up to three part-time research jobs simultaneously at different

institutions. Several researchers were actually working dual part-time contracts at geographically distant institutions. This kind of composite employment often involved research work devoted to separate tasks (interviewing, survey analysis, observation etc) on different projects, often on unrelated topics; a graphic indication of the fragmentation and casualisation of research labour. Moreover, having to forego a salary increase, or even to accept a decrease, in order to secure the next post, were not uncommon experiences amongst those interviewed. This insecurity, transience and movement have resulted in contract researchers being variously described as 'academic gypsies' (Rees, 1985) or 'the grape pickers of academia' (Salter, 1983).

It is interesting to note that the amount of anxiety generated by such structural insecurity tended to vary greatly, depending upon *inter alia* the biography and circumstances of individual researchers. Those researchers who were wholly dependent upon contracts for their livelihood not surprisingly articulated the highest level of concern, whilst the response of others who had alternative sources of income (usually a partner with a stable salary), was more qualified. In the latter group the concern were not primarily economic (although this always remained a consideration), but rather with retaining research-based employment; an area in which they felt they excelled and which they enjoyed.

We also discovered from the interviews that the shorter the contract, necessarily the greater the focus on acquiring another one, and the sooner the process of securing the occupational future was initiated. Even contracts of a number of years' duration were no exception to this practice and it was common for researchers to describe their practice as: 'a year to settle in, a year to get the research underway, and a year to find another job'. Frequently this was expressed by the phrase 'you are always looking over your shoulder', undoubtedly towards the spectre of unemployment. As Wolcott (1995, p. 53) aptly puts it: '"soft money" researchers nervously anticipate a future in which they may be able neither to please their former patron nor to find a new one'. This pervading

realm of insecurity forces contract researchers to make collective and individual 'situational adjustments', which constitute 'the most appropriate and efficient ways of behaving' (Becker, 1977, p.282). In order to lessen the insecurity and unpredictability of their occupation, they learn the best ways of finding further employment, of obtaining another contract, of securing, albeit temporarily, their future. It is to this kind of knowledge we now turn.

Staying in the Game

This occupational knowledge has a distinctly entrepreneurial flavour, with its operationalisation being variously described by researchers' as 'drumming up business', 'capturing contracts', 'academic hustling', and 'staying in the game'. This is perhaps not a surprising feature for a marginal group attempting to maintain its precarious position in an academic labour market which is itself becoming increasingly entrepeneurial (Breneman & Young, 1988; Ziman, 1991; Wood, 1992; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). There are a number of ways for individuals to seek opportunities. The most obvious perhaps is seeking advertised research posts in the national press. This method however does have a number of drawbacks, for posts may be located in any area of the country, and concerned with topics or areas unrelated to previous research experience. Both factors present potential problems of mobility and suitability for the researcher. However, other methods of finding posts are available and require entrepreneurial activity initiated when researchers are in post, and endeavouring to remain within the same centre or department. In this context, being entrepreneurial includes securing funding for further research, or ensuring that one is selected to occupy a post for which funding has already been secured, or might be. This kind of activity and the knowledge which underpins it, are not of course related to technical adequacy in the carrying out of research. Researchers realise that to maintain employment such adequacy has to be assumed *a priori*:

The bottom line is you have to be able to do research, go out, get the data and come in on time. Otherwise you have trouble with sponsors and everyone gets worked up...Well if the report is late, it can get a bit sticky under the armpits! Really contract research is about 'can do' people, there is no room for passengers. That's not to say you don't hire learners, after all that's what research assistants are, but the learning has to be fast ... how to run a survey, how to do the research methods stuff. You are not going to get rehired if you can't do that, and you are not going to get a decent reference either. (Senior Research Fellow, Research Centre.)

Rather it is other factors, additional to technical adequacy, which researchers perceive to make the difference, and which aid them in the process of securing more employment. These kinds of understandings and activities are manifest in two inter-linked contexts: (1) the 'home' department or centre in which the researcher is working, and (2) communication with sponsors of research.

On Home Ground

In any work setting how one progresses is dependent upon a number of factors. There may be, at least superficially, the purely meritocratic feature of how well one accomplishes the job, in other words one's technical capacity. However, there is also not just what one knows but *who* one knows and *how* one is known. This state of affairs is certainly evident in academia, as Wunsch (1993, p. 353) points out: 'Scholarship on successful careers provides evidence that success often depends not only on hard work but on the ability to self- promote'. The interviews indicated that building continuity of employment within a particular department or centre, demanded such a combination. There is an imperative to be proactive so as to safeguard the occupational future. This applied just as much to those who saw themselves continuing in contract research, as to those whose long term aspiration was a more stable

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academic post. For the latter group, particular indicators of success in contract research (publications, acquisition of research funds etc) as well as experience of other academic tasks, such as lecturing, were additionally recognized as the required building blocks for a move towards what one researcher termed 'the academic comfort zone'. This requires sustained effort on the part of researchers; in effect it is the *political* work (Collins, 1979; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) necessary to maintain and extend one's position. Researchers initially have to recognise that such work needs to be done, and then to attend to its particularities, as the following accounts suggest:

> There's a lot of diplomacy that has to happen that I don't really know about because I've not been here long enough to know how to play it. And generally speaking I feel like I'm quite a straight person and I would just rather say what I think, but you can't be like that because there are all these other things that you don't even know about that's going on...So, you know, it's really difficult to know how to play things really, I just try to suss out what is going on. (Research Fellow, Department.)

> From very early on I suppose I was in a sense generating work or thinking about generating work, rather than saying there would be a job for me afterwards...I don't want to slip back into being a research assistant, I want to be there, I want to be directing the work. That's the stage to get into. You have to look out very much for yourself...because there are no career structures there are a lot of pitfalls...I don't see myself as sitting around saying 'has this institution or that institution got a job for me'. I see it as I have to generate work. (Research Associate, Research Centre.)

The conditions within which this work occurs fluctuate. A small minority of researchers operated within departments in which they are the sole researcher, and had very little connection with other members of staff or the business of that department. In such

contexts they are sometimes located in marginal office space, occasionally geographically disconnected from their departmental centre. In effect a couple of those interviewed possessed no office space, their research tasks being completed at home, in the field or in institutional libraries. In contrast, the great majority of researchers were based in centralised accommodation surrounded by peers, and were very much part of a more developed research culture. However, in both kinds of context researchers need to be proactive in support of their continued employment. They in effect need to ensure their visibility to their immediate research directors, to other staff members who might possibly dispense research opportunities, and to peers with whom they can cooperate in further research. Learning the importance of visibility and learning how to be visible tends to be a variable process, and the interviews indicated that for some researchers such an awareness develops gradually over time, over the duration of more than a single research contract. In particular those researchers whose experiences were confined to operating solo in departments appeared to proceed along a more gradual learning curve than their peers in research centres. This awareness develops through personal experience and is aided by the informal transmission of insight from peers, so that researchers arrive at the realisation that the process of internal recruitment is influenced by factors additional to technical competence. The following observation was echoed frequently:

> It's to do with the personal relationship between you and the two directors, but it also involves being part of the internal culture here, you know, and it's being part of that...it's about being on the inside, that's how the recruitment works. It's very sort of almost like talent spotting. (Research Associate, Research Centre.)

Perhaps the most obvious way of maintaining visibility is simply to maintain a presence at home-base, carefully ensuring that one is noticed. For social science contract researchers this may be somewhat problematic, for their role normally involves

gathering data, often for extended periods, and on occasion quite distant from their institution. Periods of absence on fieldwork have the potential to harbour negative consequences in terms of integration into the informal culture of the department or centre, as one Research Fellow reflected:

> Yes. I suppose I just see people to say hello, but a lot of the time I've been out on fieldwork and I've done some work from home. So in that sense I don't feel that integrated. In some ways I could have done more myself, I could have got more involved in seminars and stuff that is going on here. For example I don't go to staff meetings because in some ways I don't feel they are relevant to me... (Research Fellow, Department.)

However, presence at the institution has inevitably to be balanced against, and negotiated with, the demands of actually doing the job, completing the fieldwork, bringing the data in. Thus awareness develops that being visible brings potential advantages in the long term, but also needs to be considered in the context of the immediate demands of fieldwork. This awareness may take some time to develop to the point where individuals begin actually to change their practices:

> With fieldwork there's always some degree of anxiety, no matter how experienced you get....Well you've got a sponsor and there's always a deadline, and you can't write the report until you get the data, so there's always some degree of pressure. Now I have never liked meetings and would much prefer to be out in the field, but you get a lot of meetings at a centre like this...to do with administration, planning meetings, finance meetings, and meetings about IT. So I used to avoid them on purpose until the penny dropped!...Lots of things happen in meetings and they are public, so they are venues for you to show how competent you are, how committed you are, etc, etc. They are sort of theatres of opportunity and opportunities

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get offered out and if you are not there you miss out. (Research Fellow, Department.)

These opportunities are linked to the context in which researchers are working and in traditional academic departments they tend to be more restricted than in large research centres. The kinds of opportunities on offer may include the usual academic activities such as: involvement in teaching, administration of in-house seminars/workships, attendance at conferences, hosting of visitors, in addition to membership of committees. Volunteering for these activities brings the researcher experience in spheres above and beyond the direct research process. In addition, active volunteering presents to those in positions of power the profile of a committed and enthusiastic colleague, someone whose commitment visibly extends beyond mere contractual obligations, who is prepared to help out and on many occasions to work in their own time:

What does usually happen is that you haven't finished by the time your project ends and so you're running over...I mean, last year I ended up spending the whole summer and not paid any research money and writing a very big report, ha....Well because the research time ended and then there was no more money available at that time. (Research Fellow, Department.)

If something came in which was in our area which we should bid for, which we stood a chance for, it would be 'alright let's get a group of people together' and they will spend a good deal of time over two to three days putting the research proposal together. But I have to say also that ... to do those kind of things comes from my own time. So I do the stuff in the evenings, at the weekends - if there's a proposal that needs to be done, typically what happens is that you do it whenever you can. I would then spend perhaps in an evening, a hour or more on the telephone with _____

(research director), talking through it, and on the basis of that I would then rewrite or amend the proposal and throw it in and hope for the best. (Research Fellow, Research Centre.)

This kind of visibility helps establish for the individual a reputation as a committed researcher and hopefully brings the benefit of further offers of employment. This may come in the form of being the 'named' researcher on a funding proposal, or being encouraged to apply for a research post (accompanied by the unofficial indication that one is the favoured candidate), or being presented offers of more interim work until a larger project materialises. It may even extend to the relative luxury of bridging funds between contracts, although this was apparently a rare occurrence according to interviewees. Moreover, the more visible and committed the researcher is perceived to be, the better her or his general treatment. As we have indicated, contract research is very much a continuum in terms of conditions and the differing nature of the work itself. Thus being 'plugged into' research projects to undertake small amounts of interviewing or data coding, is a very different proposition from being *the* researcher hired to work single-handed on a major long-term project; different in terms of material security, status and intellectual stimulation. The more experienced researchers were well aware of this hierarchy of treatment, and the following comment, from a Research Fellow with almost a decade of experience, was typical:

I get jobs here because I'm known and I finish. I finish the work, I'm reliable blah blah, so I get contract after contract... I've been treated quite well, I think, for a contract researcher in a sense, but they never try and give me rubbish, they always try and get me the best jobs. But on the other hand my use is seen really very much as a contract researcher. (Research Fellow, Department.)

Once the researcher is established in the above sense, the accomplishments of her/his work can lead to relative occupational stability, which in turn breeds confidence that one will probably manage to secure some form of contract in the future. The following quotation is illustrative of this relative confidence:

> Well for the B__ project she was the director for that. Just as L__ had done, she approached me one day and said: 'Look,' (the agency actually asked her to run the project) 'they've asked me', she broadly told me what it would be about and, 'would you be interested in working on this?'. I said, 'Yes, I would,very much so', and that's all I did - expressed an interest 'Are you familiar with the R__ project?' again it was L__ who asked me if I would be interested and I said, 'Yes, I would,' and it happened. (Research Fellow, Department.)

Peers and Protection

Whilst it is imperative that researchers maintain high visibility of their competence to managers with the direct power to hire them, they also acquire knowledge about the important role peers play in 'staying in the game'. The availability of this particular peer resource was largely determined by the researcher's location (the number of our researchers in the location at the time of interview is given in brackets; one researcher was unemployed at the time):

(1)   academic departments which only occasionally hired researchers, usually one or two at a time (5 departments; 11 researchers);

(2)   academic departments which normally had several researchers on a range of contracts of differing degrees of security (5 departments; 17 researchers);

(3)   research centres which normally had larger numbers of researchers on different kinds of contracts (10 centres; 32 researchers in this category).

In locations of the first type, this kind of peer support and the resultant shared knowledge were absent. Even when researchers were hired, there was often little overlap between their contracts, which precluded the development of peer support. In contrast, within both the other type of contexts there were enough researchers to form a critical mass, and individuals learned to recognize the value of peer aid, as they strove to protect themselves from unemployment. Whilst there was occasional evidence of competition between researchers for work, interestingly there was far more evidence of mutual aid. Indeed, supportive and helpful relations were revealed as the prevailing pattern of behaviour.

On one level this aid is directed towards the technicalities of doing research: research design, how to gather, collate and analyse data, and subsequently how to draft research reports and other publications. Peer aid and support in the technicalities of research constitutes an important resource, especially given that many of those interviewed had received no research methods training during their formal education. This was due to the diverse routes via which individuals entered contract research labour, for example via social work or legal work. Other researchers had originally worked as secretaries on research projects, or been hired initially for their technical capacity in areas such as computing. For these individuals research is very much learnt 'on the job' with the help of more experienced peers.

On another level, and possibly more important, is a realisation that the help of peers is crucial not just in doing research but in acquiring further contracts. At locations with a critical mass of researchers the interviews revealed that individuals plied their research trade via a series of interlocking peer circles. On occasion projects would be worked on solo, but often work would be effected in teams, constituted according to factors such as technical expertise, knowledge of subject, and availability. The following comments were typical of researchers working in a team context:

Another thing I didn't say before, the other thing about working here that I like, is the way that you can collaborate quite a lot on projects... you can either share the good news or commiserate together, and I think that's another good thing about being here is that you have got that opportunity to collaborate and there's room for that and people are OK about doing that, there isn't any of it's you only, whatever, or any real competitiveness. (Research Associate, Research Centre.)

I'm sure in other departments it would be completely different, but it's a very supportive atmosphere here and we seem to help each other out, you know, if there's work opportunities and somebody says: 'Oh so and so's got work, or how about that or how about ringing so and so'. So there's a feeling that we're all in together and we're all sort of helping each other out. (Research Assistant, Department.)

At locations where there is a considerable amount of research activity, with numerous researchers at various points in their contracts, and on contracts with differing levels of security, knowledge of research opportunities constitutes a valued resource. This knowledge usually circulates freely between peers, and concerns pieces of work which sponsors may need imminently or in the future. Mutual aid consists of not only imparting this information, but also for example: inviting peers to collaborate on projects one has devised, agreeing to collaborate on other colleagues' projects (even if this is not immediately convenient), or nominating peers to sponsors for research one is unable to undertake oneself. These kinds of 'gifts' (Mauss, 1967) of work are not generally major projects, but usually smaller projects or perhaps specific activities on a project (data analysis, interviewing etc). Via this mutual aid, researchers are able to tide themselves over until greater contractual opportunities arise. This was particularly so in certain of the large research centres visited, where part of the contractual obligation was for each researcher to raise a certain amount of external funding. These personal 'income

targets' make awareness of such gifts, their giving and their circulatory pattern, even more important for occupational survival. The following comment is illustrative of gift-giving practices in a large research centre:

> And also here it's the kind of place ... a lot of consultancies are going on, so a lot of things have to happen fairly quickly at times, so there's a need for any sort of part-time staff or short-term people who can help out on all sorts of projects. And there were chances coming up...as I said the kind of place it is, a lot of the time someone is short of a person who could do two months work. I was working for the city council which was a month full- time for me, when they (research sponsor) asked somebody else on the staff here if they could work on a project, and the person they phoned said 'I can't do it but there might be a person who can,' so they turned to me - so it was mainly because people here came to you saying 'Well, are you willing to work two months on a project?'. (Research Assistant, Research Centre.)

A further kind of understanding which researchers develop and which impacts upon the patterns of peer support, concerns knowledge of colleagues' competence. The interviews revealed that staying in contract research is a pressurised business. We use the word 'business' firstly because many of the those interviewed conceptualised their activities as such, and second, as previously indicated, entrepreneurial activity is usually required if employment is to be sustained. The great majority of contract researchers have deadlines imposed by research funders, which makes it a pressurised activity right from inception. In addition, most respondents revealed that it was a common practice to be involved in multiple projects simultaneously, often up to three at one time. It needs to be kept in mind that in social science at least, the majority of this contract research activity is not at the 'luxury end' of the spectrum, on large projects funded by research councils, but rather on small-scale investigations sponsored for example by local authorities, government agencies, charities and the like. The entrepreneurial work of

sustaining employment must be pursued on top of the actual research activity, and the interview data certainly depicted a recurrent theme of coping with pressure.

In such a context it becomes imperative for researchers to acquire knowledge of the peers with whom they are going to collaborate in applying for research funding, and undertaking research itself. For there is little room for error or failure in contract research, whether in the timely completion of research reports, or in the securing of funding and consequent employment. Hence with *whom* one is collaborating constitutes an important factor for individual researchers, and it is crucial to be assured of colleagues' occupational competencies:

> Well what you learn is who to do research with and who not to!...You learn it from hard experience, like working with people who can't really write, or miss deadlines, or they are not too good with funders in terms of communicating...I suppose the other way you learn is coffee bar or corridor talk, 'he's having trouble', 'she's had to repeat the pilot', that sort of thing. It's not always the people you think will have trouble like new research assistants. I've seen people with PhDs struggle under the pressure, as most of the time it's not like academic research, it's more immediate, narrower, and you need to be able to do that sort of business. If you have any choice you try and avoid people who you feel cannot manage, because the time scale on projects is normally tight and if there are problems *you* will end up baling the project out. (Research Fellow, Research Centre.)

Obviously, such knowledge normally grows with experience in contract research generally and with time spent in a specific centre or department. On occasion individuals have no choice about with whom they work on projects, as factors such as availability of colleagues and research directors' instructions preclude this. However, on occasions where some choice is available, the above kind of knowledge informs

collaborative activity. Analysis of the data revealed that individuals who were not selected as likely collaborators were not necessarily excluded from other aspects of the gift giving process, for example the provision of information about opportunities for work elsewhere. This generosity was rationalised with phrases such as: 'we've all got a mortage', 'we all need work', and 'we're all in the same boat'. Moreover, respondents were keen to point out that such definitions of competence were not necessarily fixed, as it was readily recognised that individuals required time to become skilled at contract research. Therefore evaluations of competence and decisions to collaborate with peers inevitably did change over time. Understandably, the greatest degree of latitude in this evaluative activity was afforded to novices, whilst experienced colleagues who were still judged not to be up to par were given less licence, as suggested by this comment from a Senior Research Fellow:

> And you know, there's a lot - it sounds a back biting thing to say, and I don't think I'm a malicious person - but there are a lot of people who put themselves about, who don't necessarily have enormous competences in this area, but they make themselves known, they make themselves visible, and they are around when they are needed. (Senior Research Fellow, Department.)

In locations with a critical mass of researchers, peer aid constitutes a valuable resource, making available to the individual researcher various kinds of gifts: information, collaboration, nomination. The giving and receiving of such gifts helps to secure the material future, and thus reinforces the value and meaning of the practice to researchers (Bourdieu, 1977). Gift exchange has both economic and symbolic dimensions which reinforce each other, helping to establish and sustain solidarity in the face of insecurity.

Networking Niceties

Just as indeterminate knowledge informs interaction with peers and research directors within the home institution, this knowledge also influences relationships with funding bodies. These agencies are of course crucial for they usually directly fund researchers' salaries. As is the case within their internal institutional environment, researchers learn that 'invisibility' pays no dividends in attempting to secure monies from external sources. Research funding is usually acquired via a bidding process which is supposed theoretically to be meritocratic. Competition for funding is particularly intense in the UK social science community as the amount of overall funding, when compared to natural sciences, is minimal (ESRC,1996). Hence researchers learn to supplement the formal application procedure with other activities which they describe as 'networking'. The basis of networking is the projection of a highly visible competence in research activity to likely sources of patronage. Researchers realised that invisibility was highly detrimental and might well result in unemployment. Despite the harsh economic reality underlying networking, for many individuals it was not an easy or unproblematic process, and the following comment reflects a commonly experienced initial reluctance to engage in this practice:

> At first I found that very hard, I didn't like that at all. I was quite happy to sit in here and wait for someone to ring me up and say 'would you like to do some work?', but going out...I had to do quite a lot of soul searching 'is this really me' do I want to ring up and say 'hello this is B____ from _____' you know, I found that very difficult; it's got easier, a lot easier. (Research Fellow, Research Centre.)

One potentially fertile field for networking is the circuit of national and international conferences pertinent to the area or discipline in which researchers are active. So, researchers present papers not purely for scholarly purposes but also to render visible their competence and activity to other delegates, some of whom will be potential funders. When interviewed, the respondents frequently described such work as 'selling';

selling their ideas, their theories, their expertise, and their ability to research the area. Researchers also become well aware that merely attending a conference is not sufficient; their visibility must be high enough to ensure that potential funders register their presence. This was articulated via comments such as 'make sure you say something', 'just making sure they know I'm there', and 'making your name and face known'. The nuances of this practice of visibility are usually initially learnt within the researcher's home institution and subsequently refined and extended to external venues such as conferences, sometimes under the tutelage of more experienced researchers. Other venues for promotional activity may become available depending upon the resources of the researcher's own institution. Revenue-generating events such as courses and workshops also provide opportunities for displaying expertise:

> Yes I think the present things have all come from contacts I've made. We put on workshops for people, quite a few things, that people have met us at workshops, talked about what we are doing and when they've got some evaluation, given us a ring. People I've met on courses I have taught on have got in touch with me about work. Just people you meet at conferences and things like that - you've got to put yourself about a bit, be nice to people ha ha - its horrible isn't it - but that does seem to be how it happens it's who you know really. (Research Fellow, Department.)

Once initial contact is made with funders there are grounds for building a relationship which researchers fervently hope will positively influence their future applications for funding. Such relationships are usually developed incrementally by increasing the level of interaction, engaging in the discourse of funding possibilities, and forming links with key individuals with specific responsibilities for research funding. The following practices were common amongst more experienced researchers:

Well the other way we get money is through funding bodies...And we will ring them up and say, 'I've got a good idea, what do you think, what shall we do, when are your committees meeting?'....We're aware of what their interests are, when they might be ready for some more research, we're out there in the market place thrashing it out, yes...We're interested in networks and things. I mean, there's a lot of ringing people up and saying, 'What's happening?', but again its a reciprocal thing, people ring up and you know in any field especially when they're specialised there are only certain key people and we know them. We know nearly all of them. And so we get to hear about things and then what people are interested in and then you know what policy decisions have been made. It takes a long time to get to that stage, but that's what it's been like for the last two or three years, very much going to public meetings, people asking you to speak at conferences and things, just chatting to people...they're not traditional researcher skills, no. (Senior Research Fellow, Research Centre.)

In a sense, the function of the above kind of relationships is intelligence gathering, the accruing of information concerning policy development, research direction, and possibilities for future funding. By such means researchers keep funding contacts informed of their competence,float potential projects,and gauge possibilities. Acquiring knowledge of the sponsor, and being known by them, potentially increases the success rate of bids. The following comment typifies the practices of the more experienced researchers interviewed:

Yes, I hustle more than write a proposal in a sense. You realise what your experiences are. I very rarely, very rarely invent a proposal cold and then find the funder, I will go the other way around. I put in for what the funder wants, or I try to, I do the work and make contacts all the time. I will spend a lot of time getting the networking going so the funders are going to know

me, rather than feel cold. I really haven't had too much success going in cold, but I've had lots of success with funders who I've made myself known to. (Senior Research Fellow, Research Centre.)

Networking practices involve considerable strategic activity on the part of contract researchers: accruing information about funders' intentions, formulating proposals to fit these intentions, sign-posting future areas for investigation, and maintaining a high profile. In addition of course, research contracts have to be seen to be effected competently, for without an acknowledgement by funders of such competence, the networking niceties depicted are liable to be of no avail.

Discussion

The knowledge we have portrayed and the practices it underpins are important resources which researchers use in an attempt to sustain employment in a competitive and marginal occupation. This combination of knowledge and practice is deployed in three arenas:

(1)   within the general orbit of the particular centre or department;

(2)   within what may be termed the subculture (Gerholm, 1990);

(3)   in the external terrain of relations with research funders.

How quickly and comprehensively researchers learn these aspects of their trade is dependent upon a number of contingent factors. Firstly, the interviews indicated that such learning is more partial and slower where there is no critical mass of peers, and few research-active permanent staff. The absence of a cohort or subculture of peers deprives the novice or inexperienced researcher of a valuable resource of occupational understandings. When there is a similar absence or paucity of permanent staff involved in research, again the possibilities of knowledge transmission decrease. The interviews revealed a trend for new researchers, who worked solo in small academic departments with no real track record of sustained project funding, to complete their contract and

leave, having acquired relatively little knowledge of the contract research world. In contrast there was evidence to illustrate that when experienced researchers found themselves in a similar context, their previous knowledge and skills immediately helped them to develop possibilities for further employment. These experienced researchers were well aware that their occupational interests were best served by employment in major research centres, rather than in small departments without a track record of research funding. Unfortunately, though, the vagaries of the employment often preclude such choice.

Secondly, there were inevitably biographical differences between researchers, some being much more receptive to the importance of issues such as visibility, collegiality, and networking. Thus some researchers were more aware of the 'cues', or pointers towards the significance of unofficial activity (Kleinmann, 1983; Eggleston & Delamont, 1983, Miller & Parlett, 1976), which were tendered by peers, managers, and staff of research funding organizations. As a result their learning curve was somewhat steeper than that of less 'cue aware' collegues. It would of course be possible to investigate the reasons for such differences in perception, by inquiring in much greater detail into our respondents' biographies, albeit with what we suspect might be diminishing sociological returns. Yet what the interviews did reveal was some correspondence between 'cue awareness' and the researcher's economic situation. Certainly for some of the researchers interviewed the urgency of securing another contract was greater than for their peers. The most common rationale was that the researcher was the sole economic provider for herself/himself, and on many occasions, for dependants. In contrast, other researchers were in a less pressurised economic position, usually having a partner with a stable income to support their household. Unsurprisingly, economic imperative acted as a great motivator to stimulate the development of cue awareness.

The research revealed an absence of formal learning amongst those interviewed, during their career as contract researchers. None of the departments or centres of which the

researchers had experience ran formal training programmes on the craft of research. Any formal knowledge these researchers had acquired consisted primarily of research methods courses at undergraduate level. However, some had not even been exposed to this level of training. For example, there were individuals who entered research via secretarial or technician posts on a project, as well as those whose first degrees contained no research methods training whatsoever. Moreover, learning about *how* to do research is not the same as *doing* research. Nor is doing research necessarily the same as doing *contract* research, where researchers are ultimately responsible to a sponsor or client. Interviewees' knowledge of how to do contract research was overwhelmingly of an informal nature and learnt by practice. Almost a quarter of those interviewed possessed a doctorate, and had acquired knowledge of research processes as postgraduate students, but these individuals emphasized that they still had much to learn when taking on the role of contract researcher.

This paper has focussed upon the acquisition of knowledge of an informal, 'indeterminate' and on occasion private nature (Jamous & Peloille, 1970; Atkinson, Reid & Sheldrake, 1977; Atkinson & Delamont, 1990), usually gleaned via personal experience. Some of this knowledge remains entirely tacit, constituting personal rules of thumb for undertaking the tasks at hand. Other elements of this knowledge are more public and circulate informally between peers. How much knowledge and which elements are transmitted between researchers is dependent upon factors such as the particular combination of individuals present at any particular time, and the location in which they work. As previously depicted, the operational conditions of doing contract research can vary widely, particularly between large research centres and smaller units. The same kinds of knowledge may remain tacit or private in one context, whilst in others there will be a more collective awareness of them. This is not to say that such knowledge is formally exchanged between researchers in any regulated or codified fashion. Rather it tends to be assimilated incrementally and experientially, and

consequent action is improvised as the day to day routines of contract research work unfold.

Much of the sort of knowledge and derivative activities portrayed here have some degree of congruity with other occupations such as selling (Prus, 1989) or even prostitution (Heyl, 1979)! Those who occupy these occupational roles depend to a large extent on their presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) to convince their clients or audiences to buy services; contract research is no exception. As a baseline, in order to be successful, researchers have of course to complete research contracts on time and deliver a product which meets sponsors' expectations, but perhaps less obviously, they also need to accomplish the kind of additional 'work' depicted above in order to gain contracts, renew them and maintain relationships with research funders. Within their own particular centre or department, researchers also need to project and sustain a competent and highly visible research self to those who are in a position to rehire them. As noted by one of our respondents quoted above, such competencies are not centred on traditional research skills, taught on methods courses, but are very much learnt on the job, often through hard experience.

What has been portrayed are certain kinds of knowledge which fuel particular kinds of practices, which in turn are used to help improve employability and sustain employment in a competitive and insecure academic occupation. This pragmatic activity then constitutes part of the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990) of social science contract researchers. Despite attempts to improve the employment conditions and career prospects of contract researchers with the recent introduction of the Concordat on Contract Research Staff Career Management, signed *inter alia* by all the UK research councils, the Royal Society and the British Academy, there appears to be a real dearth of information concerning the complexities of contract researchers' occupational lives and work practices. There is a pressing need for such knowledge in order to inform national policy on the 'careers' of an occupational group which makes such a significant

contribution to the research profile of universities and colleges but which has traditionally been subject to such high degrees of insecurity of employment that the very idea of a 'career' may appear risible.

Endnote

The researchers interviewed were working within the following social science fields: Sociology, Social Legal Studies,Social Work and Policy, Politics, Psychology, Planning and Education. Their individual intellectual backgrounds were even more diverse, also encompassing disciplines from the Humanities and Anthropology.   Various of the research centres visited operated within a multi-disciplinary framework.

Table 1   Profiles of contract researchers studied, N = 61

Gender	Female	Male		
No of researchers	37	24		
Age of researcher	20-30	31-40	41-50	50+
No of researchers	17	18	20	6
Qualifications	First degree	Master's	Doctorate	Professional/ other
No of researchers	52	20	15	21
Grade/Title	Research Assistant	Research Associate	Research Fellow	Senior Research Fellow
No of researchers	14	12	30*	4
Experience of CR	1-3 years	4-6 years	>6 years	
No of researchers	25	16	20	

* plus one currently unemployed Research Fellow

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There's a lot of diplomacy that has to happen that I don't really know about because I've not been here long enough to know how to play it. And generally speaking I feel like I'm quite a straight person and I would just rather say what I think, but you can't be like that because there are all these other things that you don't even know about that's going on...So, you know, it's really difficult to know how to play things really, I just try to suss out what is going on. (Research Fellow, Department.)

It's to do with the personal relationship between you and the two directors, but it also involves being part of the internal culture here, you know, and it's being part of that...it's about being on the inside, that's how the recruitment works. It's very sort of almost like talent spotting. (Research Associate, Research Centre.)

If something came in which was in our area which we should bid for, which we stood a chance for, it would be 'alright let's get a group of people together' and they will spend a good deal of time over two to three days putting the research proposal together. But I have to say also that ... to do those kind of things comes from my own time. So I do the stuff in the evenings, at the weekends - if there's a proposal that needs to be done, typically what happens is that you do it whenever you can. I would then spend perhaps in an evening, a hour or more on the telephone with _____ (research director), talking through it, and on the basis of that I would then rewrite or amend the proposal and throw it in and hope for the best. (Research Fellow, Research Centre.)

I'm sure in other departments it would be completely different, but it's a very supportive atmosphere here and we seem to help each other out, you know, if there's work opportunities and somebody says: 'Oh so and so's got work, or how about that or how about ringing so and so'. So there's a feeling that we're all in together and we're all sort of helping each other out. (Research Assistant, Department.)

... a lot of consultancies are going on, so a lot of things have to happen fairly quickly at times, so there's a need for any sort of part-time staff or short-term people who can help out on all sorts of projects. And there were chances coming up.. .as I said the kind of place it is, a lot of the time someone is short of a person who could do two months work. I was working for the city council which was a month full- time for me, when they (research sponsor) asked somebody else on the staff here if they could work on a project, and the person they phoned said 'I can't do it but there might be a person who can,' so they turned to me - so it was mainly because people here came to you saying 'Well, are you willing to work two months on a project?'. (Research Assistant, Research Centre.)

Well what you learn is who to do research with and who not to!...You learn it from hard experience, like working with people who can't really write, or miss deadlines, or they are not too good with funders in terms of communicating...I suppose the other way you learn is coffee bar or corridor talk, 'he's having trouble', 'she's had to repeat the pilot', that sort of thing. It's not always the people you think will have trouble like new research assistants. I've seen people with PhDs struggle under the pressure, as most of the time it's not like academic research, it's more immediate, narrower, and you need to be able to do that sort of business. If you have any choice you try and avoid people who you feel cannot manage, because the time scale on projects is normally tight and if there are problems *you* will end up baling the project out. (Research Fellow, Research Centre.)

And you know, there's a lot - it sounds a back biting thing to say, and I don't think I'm a malicious person - but there are a lot of people who put themselves about, who don't necessarily have enormous competences in this area, but they make themselves known, they make themselves visible, and they are around when they are needed. (Senior Research Fellow, Department.)

I mean, there's a lot of ringing people up and saying, 'What's happening?', but again its a reciprocal thing, people ring up and, you know, in any field ... there are only certain key people and we know them. We know nearly all of them. And so we get to hear about things and then what people are interested in and then you know what policy decisions have been made. It takes a long time to get to that stage, but that's what it's been like for the last two or three years, very much going to public meetings, people asking you to speak at conferences and things, just chatting to people...they're not traditional researcher skills, no. (Senior Research Fellow, Research Centre.)

Yes, I hustle more than write a proposal in a sense. You realise what your experiences are. I very rarely, very rarely invent a proposal cold and then find the funder, I will go the other way around. I put in for what the funder wants, or I try to, I do the work and make contacts all the time. I will spend a lot of time getting the networking going so the funders are going to know me, rather than feel cold. I really haven't had too much success going in cold, but I've had lots of success with funders who I've made myself known to. (Senior Research Fellow, Research Centre.)