

Transcript- Go Global ED Podcast Episode 8 – Dr. David Holmberg, PhD. Professor in the graduate field of anthropology and Professor Emeritus at Cornell University. Dr. Holmberg is interviewed by Dr. Pamela Maimer about his two Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad (FRA) Awards. The program is returning after more than 10 years.

[Intro IFLE] Welcome back to the Go Global ED podcast brought to you by the International and Foreign Language Education Team, also known as IFLE and the Office of Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education. Today we will highlight the Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad (FRA) program. For this conversation, I'm turning it over to Dr. Pamela Maimer, Senior Program Manager in IFLE.

[Pamela] Hi, everyone. After more than ten years this year, the IFLE team is thrilled to bring back the Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad Program. The Faculty Research Abroad Program, or FRA, is designed to send faculty abroad for three to 12 months to conduct research. Today on the podcast, we are talking to Dr. David Holmberg. Dr. Holmberg is a graduate professor in the graduate field of anthropology and professor emeritus at Cornell University.

He's also been the chair of the Department of Anthropology for 12 years and is now the director of the Fulbright and Fulbright-Hays program at Cornell University. Dr. Holmberg received two FRA awards in 1987 and 1997. His ethnographic research has concentrated on the smog of Nepal and focusing initially on religion and social organizations, culminating in the monograph *Order and Paradox* myth ritual and exchange among Nepal's two moms welcome that their home birth to the podcast.

[David] Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

[Pamela] Well, tell us a little bit about yourself, where you received your FRA and what was your research topic?

[David] As you noted, I've had two Fulbright FRAs over the years, one in 87 for six months and one in 1997 for six months. Both of these awards were critical to me as a particularly in the first instance as a junior scholar at the time, I did not have yet have tenure at Cornell University. And as you may know, in big research universities, now, at least two major research projects are expected by the time of receiving tenure.

In other words, you usually can't receive tenure based on a project that you did while working on your doctoral dissertation. And Fulbright Hayes, given its focus on area studies and language, was the perfect sort of fellowship for me because a lot of my work depends as an anthropologist, as an ethnographer depends on area knowledge and language and contributing to knowledge in those two domains.

And my first project was focused principally on questions of medical practice and local to Hmong communities. Depended on my language skills and improved my language skills in both the national language of Nepali and the indigenous language to indigenous to modern language. I talked a lot with local folk about how they dealt with disease and both in what we would see as real medical practice.

In other words, using various botanicals to improve people's health condition, but also working with local shamanic healers who would do things like capture lost shadow souls and raise up a life force. And that project was critical to me. It was the second major project after my first two-year research stint in Nepal in the mid-1970s and was a tremendous boon for me.

My second project took a somewhat different tack. It was focused on ethno-historical project of reconstructing systems of forced labor that continue in Nepal up to the mid-1960s. These forced labor regimes were imposed principally, but not exclusively on the Tamang people who lived in the districts immediately surrounded the cabinet and thus were very close to the center of the state.

Talked to a lot of old people on that trip again, both in Nepali and Hmong languages.

[Pamela] So what did the FRA a funding allow you to do while you were there in terms of your research?

[David] Well, obviously the key things of travel and support, including I was traveling with my family on both of those trips and being able to get, you know, considerable amount of excess baggage over it was critical for the period of time we were going to be residing in Nepal. They also provided us with a research budget. I can't remember the amounts at this point, but there were significant, particularly for internal travel, internal travel in Nepal can include hiring ships to get to relatively remote areas and that sort of thing.

Plus, all the supplies you need in research everything from paper supplies to recording supplies, scanner supplies and the like, particularly. My second project, which was devoted, was a historical project which included locating and then copying documents. Ancient, pretty old historical documents, sometimes going back almost 200 years. But most significantly, for someone who is established in life as a professor or even an assistant professor.

The great thing about the Fulbright phase was it covered your salary, which was you know, set at the time you applied for the grant. And this is pretty significant for people who are becoming professionally established. Other grants often don't provide that level of assistance. So, for me, I was able to come by and you would use the six months I received on that foray and combine that with a leave I would get from Cornell for another semester, and I would get a full year off.

For anthropologists, this is very significant. If you take all your time off to go and do field research, you can't use your leave to write, which has published things, which is a significant part of the career trajectory of any academic. And so being able then to do the field research under the auspices of the right program. But then having the time under a leave, a sabbatical leave or other kinds of leaves to do writing was a critical support for me as a particularly as a junior faculty member, but also as a more senior faculty member.

[Pamela] So how was the faculty research abroad? How did that impact your career trajectory as a young researcher? And then later on, how did it help, hurt or impact your tenure, will you?

[David] Yeah, well, it certainly did on the first round because it was my second major research project, and it was after that project and before the second project that I received tenure. And so that was a huge support. And, you know, the second you're a supporter of six months of support I got was also absolutely critical to me because although my first foray, I was kind of extended out of my initial research and added on to it, I really was able to open up a completely new field of research on the

second half, right on this historical project, looking at these systems of forced labor, about which we knew very little from the perspective of people and village communities in Nepal.

[Pamela] And tell us how that experience you got to really witness firsthand research and action and some changeovers in government that really significantly impacted you going forward. With your research. Tell us about those experiences.

[David] Well, particularly in the second FRA, which I focused on this historical forced labor system, it was shortly after the political revolution in Nepal that occurred in the early 1990 in which Nepal moved from a kind of royal dictatorship to a constitutional monarchy before 1990 freedom of speech, freedom of association kinds of things that we accept as the normal in our lives were not possible in Nepal and particularly groups of people who had been subjected to various forms of oppression were not allowed to organize.

Nepal was and continuous to be a caste-based society. And although the Tamang themselves are not a Hindu caste population, they were incorporated the state very low in the hierarchy and were never allowed into government or any other aspects of economic and political life in Nepal in any significant way. But after 1990 they were able to organize and to demand recognition and they were one of the most significant Tibetan Burman minority populations in Nepal and indigenous populations in Nepal.

Although as a census figures are at their accuracy is always questioned by, you know upwards to 40 to 50% of the population in Nepal would be categorized as indigenous. And these people were pretty much on the outs. So after 1990 they were allowed to organize. So they take it took a huge interest and were collaborators in large respect.

In this research that we were conducting, which I did an association with my long-time research associate So you want to log who was from the community in which I worked and who work hand in glove with me all the way through this period. But the ethnic associations in Nepal took a real interest in this work because it contributed to their own historical discovery of their situation in Nepal.

And this also then led to a. Along with its ethno-historical research as a model for I was very interested in what was going on at the time, which was this identity politics as it was emerging in Nepal. And I was able to follow it as it progressed through the through the years, right up until the present time.

[Pamela] That sounds super interesting, and I'm sure that it also was you were told me you were able to have some impact on policy as a result of your research there. Tell us a little bit about that.

[David] Well, you know, Nepal has gone through a tumultuous time since 1990 and they went through what they call people's movements John Andolan and Nepal. They've gone through two major people's movements. The second one was in the mid 2000 there was also a Maoist insurgency that grew up in the mid-1990s and continued on into the mid to 2005 2006.

And on several occasions because I worked with very closely with to Hmong people and other people in Nepal I ended up being invited to conferences, briefing new ambassadors to Nepal and also a conference at the State Department about what the U.S. response should be to the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. And because I was intimately involved with people on the local level in Nepal, I hope I had something positive to offer in terms of the formation of U.S. policy, in particular towards Nepal.

The you know, we all know that in Washington, and we talk about inside the ring road mentality, you know, on the Nepal side of things, too. There there's a inside the Beltway in Washington and Nepal. There's a ring road that's called the people speak of inside the ring road, where people really don't know what's going on out in the hinterland.

You know, what's going on in the hinterlands is really invisible, awesome to people in the center. And this is where the Maoist movement grew up and sustained itself, whereas people in the center weren't really even Nepali elites were not aware of what was going on But my whole research career in Nepal has been primarily focused on rural areas where the grievances of local people, the situation of local people in the rural areas, were critical to understanding the Maoist movement and how to respond to the Maoists.

[Pamela] And I think an important thing about the faculty research abroad and our other Fulbright programs are its emphasis on language and being able to go out and communicate with the people in their language. Talk about how language impacted your fellowship.

[David] Well, I mean, both Nepali and Tamara's language were critical to all the research I've done since I've been in Nepal. And the support is there for a program, as you know. Without that, I wouldn't have been able to enhance my abilities in both of those languages. To you know, I can give you an example of how a language to your particularly to my language knowledge was important.

One of the things I was doing throughout the Maoist insurgency period was trying to to witness and document what was going on in the rural area in which I worked in terms of Maoist of the Maoist insurgency, but also the effect of government military actions on local people who were kind of caught between the Maoist forces and the government forces as they were as they were fighting each other.

And, you know, the way people, of course, in these villages, communities, they were they would get interrogated by government forces at one point, and then the next day they'd be interrogated by Maoist forces. And they would they were really caught in between and would sort of keep their mouth shut. But if they get their mouths shut, they would get beaten and harassed and in other kinds of ways.

But I was able to talk to people in the native language, Nepali dominant Nepali populations as well, do not speak the local language, but I could be up in the village is during this period. I could talk to local people into my language. And they had their own secret language for talking about both the Maoists and the government troops.

The Maoists were stationed high up in the forests in the mountains and would swoop down at night and extract things from village communities and the troops would come during the day. And so in some odd language, they would refer to the Maoists as people of the night wouldn't do me. And the p they referred to the government troops as the green people the pygmy.

And but, you know, you could get a lot of you could find out a lot about what's going on. The language produces rapport particularly for a dominated population. If you go particularly as an outsider, as a Westerner who can make the effort to learn the language that people use in their everyday lives, that produces a bond and a rapport of trust.

So they were very often very willing to talk to me and about things. They trusted me also because of my long-term relationships with them. But language is the gateway to rapport and understanding, and I

hope I could bring that knowledge to bear both to my colleagues in Nepal, who I also had associations with people in all levels in Nepal, society, and government.

And I could take my knowledge and help inform the situation there. But I also felt like I could inform policymakers on the U.S. side as well.

[Pamela] That's fantastic. And that's the things we love to hear about, is how language can really transform a situation and give you more access as a researcher. And that's what our Fulbright based programs were designed to do. But now we all we never like to have people leave without giving us a taste of their experience through an interesting or funny or impactful story that they may want to share with the audience about their experience. And do you have one of those stories.

[David] Well, I have all kinds of stories. I don't know if some of them are fit for prime.

[Pamela] Time, maybe G-rated or, you know.

[David] I'd probably have some R-rated ones that are pretty funny. You know, I like to think of I had a very close relationship with the head man of the village where I worked. He became an villager's eyes. My father and I used to spend endless hours on the they have these kinds of platforms on the front of their houses where people sit around and gather to discuss the day's events or to resolve disputes.

Because he was the head man. It was sort of the center of the village activity. And I used to hang out up there. I was kind of his sidekick. He would use me for setting up various jokes that he had and but he was also a very observant man, and he'd been observing some foreigners. He'd come visit us and he'd seen them around and he got to, you know, of course, knew me and my wife pretty well.

And he would say, you know, I've been watching you Americans over the years. He said, and you know, when we Nepalis arrived in a new village, we kind of hover outside the village on the hillside. We looked down and we looked down into that village and we say, Where are we going to get something to eat, you Americans?

You go, you sit outside that village, you look down the village, you say, Where am I going to find a toilet? Oh, which that was against.

[Pamela] (Laughs) One or the other.

[David] But he kind of captured in a nugget, which is the difference between a life for relatively subsistence level people, where you had visitors coming from outside and, you know, we were a pretty big group. We had two children. My wife, myself, and we had a young student because we were traveling alone around in the mountains a lot, our kids weren't going to be able to be in school.

We took a recent base student who was very interested and that part of the world to go on as our kids tutor. So we were a group of five people rich in small highland villages in Nepal. You know, you can't just crash on people in their small houses. So right we had this this relatively big tent and we were up, you know, looking for documents and interviewing old people in this village in the spring and in the spring, these very high winds come off the Tibetan plateau and they can be fierce I mean, they can really, really blow.

And so we're it's the middle of the night and the wind starts to blow at such an incredible level that our tent is blown over nearly flat. I was afraid the tent was going to pick our young daughter up in just lift

her off and carry her away. And so we were madly, you know, got the kids into a house and we were trying to hold somehow hold the tent down.

And of course, we became the total laughingstock of village the next day for our adventures of flying a flying tent. You know, the stories go on and on and some of them are so funny and some of them are funny. Yeah.

[Pamela] And I think that's important, too, that it's such a rich experience. That you had and you were able to have your family participate in that experience. And that's one of the differences with Fulbright Hays is that we do offer enough funding for families in our Deidre program, and A is based on your salary so that then allows you to have the family participate, whereas that might not be true of other experiences but now we come to the end of our discussion and we appreciate everything that you've had to contribute and still are contributing to the Fulbright-Hays programs.

In your role as director of the Fulbright Program at Cornell, is there anything you'd like to leave for new applicants to understand or tips about their applications for the program?

[David] Well, first, let me say that I'm a tremendous supporter of Fulbright programs and the Fulbright Hayes program particular, which so values the production of knowledge about other parts of the world, knowledge about not only culture and society, but also language and history and environment. And you can get a whole host of international development and all the kinds of things that are so critical.

And so I do want to say that as far as tips. I mean, the great thing about the Fulbright-Hays programs that actually credits what you know about other parts of the world and your language. And in your proposals, you can demonstrate that the area studies knowledge and enhance that area, established the studies knowledge through the research you want to conduct.

And the proposals thus are somewhat different where other disciplinary oriented funding programs will be looking at, you know, not the sort of proposals that be strong and a disciplinary sense, but they don't necessarily credit that area. Studies knowledge the way Fulbright-Hays has historically as I understand it, the review committees are made up of people who are familiar with those areas of the world and are also deeply familiar with those places and credit the kinds of knowledge that you can bring to your applications.

The other thing, of course, is that you can the Fulbright-Hays expects, in my experience that you have deep and appropriate contacts in the host country. So not only are you enhancing knowledge production, you're also enhance human relations, your ties to people in academic communities in the host country. And those also have to be demonstrated, in my experience within the application itself. And they take those kinds of relations quite seriously.

[Pamela] That's fantastic. And we look forward to applications for the Faculty Research Abroad program. And if you have questions, please contact FRA@ed.gov. We'd like to thank you, Dr. Holmberg.

[David] Thank you.

[Pamela] And to everyone out there, make sure you come and visit us at the Department of Education's website to learn more about the Fulbright-Hays programs. Thank you.

[Intro IFLE] Thanks for listening to the Go Global ED Podcast, a production of the International and Foreign Language Education Office at the U.S. Department of Education. Be sure to follow us on Twitter at Go Global ED. And subscribe to our newsletter to learn more about upcoming podcast episodes and other IFLE updates.

Guest Biography:

David Holmberg is Graduate Professor in the graduate field of Anthropology and Professor Emeritus in the Department of Anthropology, Cornell University. He chaired the Department of Anthropology at Cornell for twelve years (1990-1997; 2001-2008). He is currently the Fulbright/Fulbright-Hays Advisor at Cornell. His ethnographic research has concentrated on the Tamang of Nepal focusing initially on religion and social organization culminating in the monograph *Order and Paradox: Myth, Ritual, and Exchange among Nepal's Tamang*. More recently, he has conducted ethnohistorical work on systems of forced labor in Nepal and on conceptions of power and the rise of indigenous people in the political life of Nepal as well as on the cultural rights of indigenous peoples, work that has appeared in the journals *Signs*, *American Ethnologist*, *Critique of Anthropology*, and *Studies in Nepalese History and Society* as well as in edited volumes. He is currently completing a book manuscript, *Extractive Labor/Productive Ritual*. Significant portions of his scholarship have been supported by the Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research program of the US Department of Education. He held Fulbright-Hays awards in 1987-88 and 1997-98.