

## WHO HAS THE RESPONSIBILITY? AN EVOLVING MODEL TO RESOLVE ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN INTERCULTURAL RESEARCH

CAROLYN L. ATTNEAVE, Ph.D.

Dr. Edward Foulks should be commended for his courage and candor in reporting on the "misalliances" and the turmoil that followed from the 1979 study of alcoholism in Barrow, Alaska. This is particularly true since the condensation presented here in many ways does not reflect the complexity that shows in other longer and more sensitive versions of the actual research findings. Unfortunately, on one hand, most of this original material may not be available to the readers of this *Journal*. On the other hand, the skeletonized research data presented here are too limited to discuss their statistical and methodological aspects. However, they do provide a background against which the ethical issues can be addressed.

It would seem that the various questions raised can be divided into two categories: First, what are the responsibilities of the researcher whose subjects are a complex, living community? Second, what are the responsibilities of the community itself? Both researcher and community are faced with additional issues created by elements outside their control, which may be a third category.

### Responsibilities of the Researcher

In considering the responsibilities of research personnel, it is striking how parallel these issues are to those that evolved over the past decades in relation to concern for research and scientific publications truly respecting the rights of the individual participating in medical or psychological research. I can recall in my own graduate school days, when it was an accepted practice to deceive subjects either by withholding information or by outright deception—whether this was to test for placebo effects, or study any of a wide variety of phenomena in perception, social interaction, conditions of and limits of learning, emotional reactions, etc. The zeitgeist seemed to accept the idea that scientific research always had a goal of contributing to human knowledge and thus was an ultimate "good". Few research-oriented scholars were concerned with the impact of their activities beyond the limited scope of their particular experimental design.

Contrast this with today's acceptance of the necessity for a review of every research proposal originating on an academic campus, or funded by

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*American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*,  
Spring 1989, 2(3), pp. 18-24

governmental auspices (and most foundations as well). These reviews ensure that informed consent is given by individual research subjects, that any deceptions that are a necessary part of the design be disclosed at an appropriate point in the proceedings, and that if any damage—physical or psychological—can be traced to participation, this be treated. The expense for “undoing” the harm caused even inadvertently is usually born by the employing institution of the researcher, but could ultimately and legally be assessed against the researcher if no such guarantees were available.

These conditions, or something very like them are also now a part of most clinical practice with individual clients or patients, both in medicine and psychotherapy. It might also be noted for later discussion that in many if not most publications of clinical or psychotherapeutic research and practice, if an individual case is used, the author must take pains to camouflage the identity of such a person. In addition, the consent of the individual to the use of his/her own case history is generally obtained in the same manner that informed consent is secured for research participation. It is worth noting that the goals of professional activity in these cases is almost always to change behavior of individuals, and licensing, degree requirements, and reviews of other kinds are accepted as safeguards for certifying the competency and assigning the responsibility for the therapies to the individual researchers, therapists, and authors.

These concerns for the well-being of the individuals serving as research subjects can now be seen extending in several directions. Perhaps the most familiar example is the current controversy over extending rights to ‘humane’ treatment to animals used in research. More slowly, but distinctly emerging, is a convergence toward the concept of cultures and communities as living systems, having similar rights.

The idea of cultures as living, evolving entities is not new. To some extent the field of anthropology has been dominated by it in at least two ways. Anthropologists have traditionally searched for isolated “pure” (and often primitive) societies to avoid the contamination of cultural contact and mixing that is otherwise prevalent. Almost simultaneously, they have debated whether tools, concepts, and behaviors shared by widely separated cultures are independent discoveries or the result of cultural diffusion and unrecorded contact between social groups.

More imaginative development of the potential of societies to evolve is found in science fiction. The idea lies behind a work as early as the 1920s by Olaf Stapledon entitled *First and Last Men*, and as recently as 1988 in *Alien Blood* by Joan Vinge. *Alien Blood* is particularly an apt illustration, since it deals with the problems of mixed ethnicity, as well as the potential extinction of one ethnic group and the evolution of another. Ironically the problem of the ascendancy of the individual or of the collective group is present, in both the failed and the victorious societies. All of these characteristics seem reflected in today's world, but as works of fiction rather than science, they need not be taken literally.

What does need to be taken seriously is whether social research, particularly that which is acknowledged to be needed in order to attempt social change, should in some way be subject to a review of the rights of the group involved. Should the community be given an opportunity to give informed consent to the research and to publication? Are there cultural or community rights which should be respected and protected, just as in other situations the rights of the individual are supported? Should research competence be reviewed to include ethical and moral judgements about the necessity of spending time and energy to get acquainted with the Culture itself and the interactions of all the parts of the Community? Finally, if the answers to the preceding questions are "yes", whose responsibility is it to require compliance?

Foulks suggests that to some extent he and his colleagues were naive in accepting the views of the contracting agency, Intersect, and the advisors it selected as representative of the total community. It would appear that they were also a bit naive in expecting that their skills in research and scientific reporting were a sufficient safeguard if they kept within their required tasks, and left the utilization of the results to Intersect and others. When, perhaps inevitably, they were drawn into defending their research to a distressed and disturbed community, they found themselves to be scapegoats. Since the days of ancient Greece those in power have had a tendency to kill the messenger who brought unpleasant news. Communities as well as individuals often find it much safer to attack outsiders than the politicized factions which had supported the research originally. Given the circumstances of their subcontract, it is not clear that Foulks could have changed the way community rights to the research results were not safeguarded. The question remains however: Should Foulks and his colleagues have tried to do so?

#### Responsibilities of the Community

In the 1970s, perhaps beginning even in the late 1960s, a "buzz word" among social scientists who were also American Indians was, "We ought to have a Green River Ordinance for researchers." The town of Green River, Oregon, had effectively controlled the nuisance and demoralizing impact of solicitors and peddlers going from door-to-door by requiring a local license of anyone undertaking such activity. Approval of applicants took into account the number and kind of persons active in the community at any given time, as well as the perceived integrity of the solicitation or the value of goods offered for sale.

Anthropologists and psychologists in particular, but to some extent sociologists and other social scientists, have been traditionally allowed to study and record experimental and clinical data on American Indian and Alaska Native populations quite freely, often in the name of "academic freedom." However, the impact of the results of their studies often had fallout

similar to that described by Foulks of jeopardizing future cooperation or welcome of fellow professionals. Many tribes recall anecdotally the exploitation of research data in ways that they had not expected—often to their detriment. Since no outside agency seemed interested or willing to intervene in this process the idea arose that the Tribal community itself should take control under its self-governing powers.

Only a few American Indian Communities were able to take advantage of the concept, but one example illustrates the positive results. The Zuni in Arizona have for at least a decade had such authority. Periodically the whole Zuni population is polled for its concerns and their selection of the major problems that the Tribal Government should address. The result should be humbling for social scientists. Road development, housing, resource management, and other problems of like nature often head the list. Nevertheless, concerns about education, mental and physical health, and social problems are often included.

As these topics are prioritized, they are consulted whenever a social scientist wishes independently to utilize the Zuni population in any research. If the topic fits within the priorities of the community, discussion and negotiation is opened to see if the proposed project will help find answers to their needs. Without a clear relationship to the priorities and a willingness to include the Zuni communities in the planning and execution of the research, it is not approved. In this situation it is exceedingly difficult for any social scientist to find appropriate samples of people to participate in any research project. The effect is to control the number and kinds of research according to the Zuni views of their own needs and advantages.

In the case of the Zuni, such policies have worked out well. There are not only helpful community/researcher collaborations, but also there is a mutual exchange between cultures. Social scientists learn about the Zuni people from working with them rather than from the position of a detached outsider. Moreover, members of the Zuni community are given an opportunity to participate in the planning and execution of research studies, and are therefore better able to understand the implications and limitations of the results, whether positive or negative in relation to their goals. A fair number of Zuni people have continued into research training, and are developing a resource pool of experts indigenous to the community.

There are probably other American Indian and Native groups that have successfully worked out a method of "licensing" research on themselves and within their geographic territory. However some units of tribal government are so rife with power struggles between various factions that the necessary stability for assuming this kind of responsibility cannot be achieved. The imposition of the Anglo American model of one-person-one-vote, and majority rule on a culture that customarily depended on consensus for major decision making has had a variety of impacts on tribal communities and their ability to assume control of and responsibility over their own affairs.

Many benefits flow from a real assumption by the community of the responsibility for utilizing appropriate skills and tools from the mainstream culture to help solve problems in a minority culture. One of these advantages is to place ownership of the research data and utilization squarely and clearly with the community itself. If research is subsidized by grant funding sources, this needs to be negotiated when developing the original contract to avoid later conflicts and misunderstandings.

A closely related matter to be clarified in contracts between a community and research scientists is the manner and form of reporting results to the public domain. How the information is to be presented at professional meetings, published in professional literature, and released to other media can be clearly understood by all parties. The use and dissemination of the results within the community itself should also be provided for in the basic negotiations, including advice from the researchers and community leaders on the probable impact of such dissemination in various forms.

One advantage of such reviews by the cultural community is the resulting sensitization of the social scientist to reaction to professional jargon and unexplained cultural usages. For example, in the Barrow project, "detention" by the Department of Public Safety implies a police arrest to non-members of the Inupiat. Actually it was a community devised plan to respond with a preventive intervention when family or friends requested help with a person who was dangerously out of control due to heavy drinking (Folks, 1987, p.350). Conversely, the term "culture broker" used by anthropologists and social scientists has a specific technical meaning. However, it implies to others that there is an exchange of cultural information for personal gain. Interestingly enough similar problems of communication arise in developing the protection of individuals.

When comparing individual and community as entities capable of and requiring the respect and "informed consent" provisions, there are perhaps somewhat different responsibilities required of communities and cultural groups than of individuals. Individuals have a mutually agreed upon and recognized identity. The community must define itself and its members, and must find ways to ensure that all subgroups of which it is composed are adequately represented. The community must, in other words, answer a number of questions, including the following: "Who compose our community?" How are they adequately brought into participation in the decision making and research participation? If the geographic boundaries of the cultural community include non-members of the ethnic group, is interaction between the two cultural groups significant as an element in the phenomena to be studied? How will this second cultural group be included in the protections of confidentiality? To what extent do the resident but non-members of the cultural community share in the planning of the research and in the dissemination of the results?

The acceptance of the responsibility by the ethnic community to provide answers to these questions is not yet well developed. However it seems to

be a predictable trend of the future. Shared responsibilities of this sort would allow mutual projects of research and evaluation of social changes in ways which are not now possible, or only beginning to emerge. They involve role changes for both researchers and for cultures and social units that may not always be comfortable. Clearly defining acceptable boundaries of both social science research and its application could facilitate the resolution of some of the ethical problems involved.

#### Other Considerations

There are many elements of any community's life that are outside both its own control and that of any social scientist conducting research. Obvious elements are cataclysmic events of natural origin including storms, weather changes, earthquakes, meteor falls, etc. Another such set of events with a high impact are due to human activities such as wars, missionary activities, technological changes, and in this case the decision by distant corporations to exploit natural resources hitherto ignored or unknown to the cultural group involved.

Whenever social scientists note the impact of such events, it is necessary to probe for the way they are understood and interpreted by various parts of the community, and it is often helpful to seek historical data. For instance, it is interesting that the older members of the Inupiat community attributed the stress and misuse of alcohol to the events of the 1940s which involved World War II. The younger adults, coming to maturity after that event, attributed the present problems to the increase in money and availability of alcohol associated with the development of the Alaska Pipeline. Neither the community nor researchers thought to trace any historical records to the periods of time before the living memory of those now resident, but it is predictable that distilled spirits were introduced with similar effects with the first European contacts — probably the Russians and most certainly the Anglo-American traders. The lack of historical perspective by the community may be a large factor in their discomfort with the data describing a new cultural element—social stratification—which seems to have introduced differential behaviors under the influence of alcohol.

Almost certainly among uncontrolled forces one must put the sensation-hungry elements of the public media, both in the press and on television and radio. Foulks and his team of researchers may regret their participation in making their research information public on a national (and possibly global) scale. Once they had cooperated in the preparation of the press release, passively if not actively, headline writers and others seeking to gratify their own interests could not be restrained by the Inupiat community itself.

Indeed it may be that some sensationalism was desired, if not cultivated, by the major contractors as a way to "galvanize" community action (Foulks, this issue). Intersect may have wished merely to push away what it

perceived as apathy as if it were a small boulder on the trail, but what resulted was more like an avalanche.

With hindsight it seems clear that the researchers should have delayed any premature announcement until the community leaders and the population as a whole had had an opportunity to process the information and to give the research team feedback about it. This might have revealed the missing young adults' opinions and secured their involvement. Whether, under the terms of their contract and the division of activities between themselves and the major contractor, Foulks and his colleagues had the ability and power to do this is, of course, another question. Certainly neither they nor Intersect had the power in any case to prevent the 'leaking' of the research report to the non-Native faculty members of local colleges, whose emotions were also raised and who fed the fires of sensationalism with their polemic attacks.

It is clear that Foulks is a sensitive social scientist who found himself in a fairly common but nevertheless undesirable position of having his research misunderstood and misused without being in any position to mitigate or undo the damage to his personal reputation and that of the professions involved in social research in general. By bringing the incident to professional attention without seeking self-justification, he offers an opportunity for colleagues to wrestle with the ethical problems involved.

In the same spirit, perhaps these comments suggest ways of developing a more generic answer to the issues, rather than any effort to assign blame. It may be embedded in human nature to attack the bearer of information rather than the problem the messenger is reporting. Perhaps by participating in the evolving identification of cultures and communities as requiring protection of their rights in the same manner as individuals participating in research and scientific publication, and by developing the appropriate responsibilities to be assumed by both the communities and those engaged in social science research, there will be a mitigation of such devastating effects in the future.

University of Washington  
5206 Ivanhoe Place, N.E.  
Seattle, Washington 98105

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## LIMITED NOTIONS OF CULTURE ENSURE RESEARCH FAILURE

FRED BEAUVAIS, Ph.D.

The candor of Dr. Edward Foulks in discussing the problems encountered in this piece of research is highly appreciated. There are few of us that have not made major mistakes in the conduct of our work, yet it is not often that we are willing to have others scrutinize and comment on research that has misfired. Foulks' openness provides the opportunity to rectify some of the misguided approaches that have been all too prevalent in cross-cultural research.

Discussion of the aftermath of this research can take place at several levels, but I would like to focus on an underlying issue that may explain a great deal of the controversy that was generated. Cultural change is most often seen as occurring along a single continuum from "traditional" to "modern." Anytime a traditional culture comes in contact with a more modern one, it is assumed that people will gradually move from the "old" to the "new" and that while in transit, they are confused, are experiencing "acculturation stress," and are generally unable to function competently. Furthermore, there is usually an implicit assumption that traditional is inferior and modern is superior. This latter point is often denied, yet there are ordinarily subtle, and not so subtle, indicators that this basic value position is held. Another element of this model holds that since movement is on a single continuum, something of the old culture is always lost when one embraces parts of the new culture — it is basically a zero-sum game. This is a very narrow and simplified view of how cultural change operates and has serious limitations from a research perspective. This view can also lead to a devaluing, either actual or perceived, of the culture of the people under study. When this occurs those of the minority culture are likely to become actively resentful or passively resistant.

There is ample evidence that the Point Barrow research was guided by this one-dimensional model and that this led to many of the problems encountered. The perceived inadequacy of the Inupiat people is clearly demonstrated in the nearly total absence of their participation in the research. The project did include a steering committee comprised of Native people, but their participation in the research was minimal until the latter stages of the project when the research was completed and the recommendations formulated. At that point, they could only endorse the

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*American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research,*  
Spring 1989, 2(3), pp. 25-28

findings with a faint hope that some good would come of them. In fact, the entire project was conceived and directed by non-Natives. Even at the point where emotions were high and the researchers feared physical reprisals, recourse was to another group of outside experts to resolve the controversy (Klausner & Foulks, 1982).

A lack of confidence in the Inupiat people was clearly revealed in the attempt to "shock" them into action by reporting the most extreme results available. Underlying this act is a belief that the Inupiat were incapable of seeing the destruction being brought about due to alcoholism and that only by "scolding them" would they see the extent of the problem. Indeed the anecdotal information from the elders at the community meeting shows that this assumption is false; the elders were very aware of what was happening among their people and they were asking for assistance with the solution.

With some careful listening to the steering committee, events may have taken a different course. These community elders were expressing a strong belief that the problem of alcoholism was one of rapid cultural change. The research team might have done well to stop at this point and ask some searching questions about what they meant, and how things could be made different. The elders were harkening back to a time when things were better, when they had a sense of control over their lives, and when a sense of cultural integrity allowed them to ward off social problems. I realize that there is a universal tendency to look backwards to the "golden age." However, while life in the past for the Inupiat may have had its own problems, community leaders still felt that the problems were their own to solve. Instead of listening and trying to work constructively with the elders to find new paths and solutions, the researchers proceeded to "demonstrate" that the most traditional people were those with the greatest alcohol problems. This type of finding, when presented out of meaningful context, further devalued Inupiat culture and, instead of moving toward answers, only added to the problem.

#### Procedural Issues

An extremely short time period (three months) was allowed for the initial report to be issued. In addition to being an inadequate length of time to gain an understanding of a problem of this magnitude, the short time period could generate the suspicion that only preconceived ideas would be registered in the report—or, that there may have been a "political" agenda involved. Indeed, after decades of research, we only have a minimal understanding of the causes of alcoholism in general, let alone what might be leading to alcoholism in this unique socio-cultural environment.

As alluded to previously, the steering committee should have been much more fully involved from the beginning. A general principle of community development is that people have an investment only in those things they have had a hand in creating. Even if the report was fully accurate

in its findings and the recommendations highly appropriate, the Inupiat people would not have a sense of ownership nor would they feel responsibility for the problem or potential solutions.

Furthermore, there was no mechanism in place for utilization of the results. Simply calling the community together to hear the results does not ensure that change can or will be made. Accurate data are a prerequisite to change, but do not lead to change without further intervention, especially in a community that has become immobilized by the effects of alcohol and the rapid erosion of traditional methods for dealing with social problems. In the past several decades, much has been learned about community organization and community change, and these principles could have been adapted for use in Barrow. Structures for effecting change should have been in place even before the data collection took place. Meetings should have taken place to examine and explicate community values and beliefs, and these discussions could have led to the formulation of research questions that had real meaning for the people of Barrow. When the research results were available, working groups could have proceeded to work on problem areas that were pertinent and of immediate importance to the people of the community. With this type of preparation and the assignment of responsibility for the results, a cooperative, rather than competitive, atmosphere could have been established.

The issuing of a press release is puzzling. The intent of the research was to help resolve a problem in Barrow, yet the research team felt it necessary to give the problem widespread attention. Was this another attempt to chastise the people of Barrow and force them to change through embarrassment? Apparently so. In another publication Foulks writes, "They (the research sponsors) saw the publicity as having the political force necessary to galvanize an alcohol program in North Borough. White and Moeller had engaged researchers of some prominence precisely because their report would receive national press attention" (Klausner & Foulks, 1982, p. 306). A further rationalization for the press release was the "scientific" standard of not withholding data from the public. In an attempt to project this work as a true scientific enterprise, the press conference itself was held at the University of Philadelphia. All things taken together, it appears that the press release had more to do with politics and publicity than it did with science. If community change was the scientific goal, the way the results were disseminated was certainly counter to that goal. As noted above, it seems that the information could have been disseminated within the community and served as a basis for rational change. The community meetings were indeed an attempt to do this; however, the press release vitiated any effect that the meetings may have had.

The press was also misled into believing that something inherent in the Native culture was accounting for the alcoholism problem, which spread the myth even further. There is considerable research showing that more traditional Native people (using the restricted model) have greater problems.

This "finding" often sends researchers on a quest for those traditional values or beliefs that account for higher levels of alcohol use, for example. Thus we see the search for Indian alcohol abuse turning to such explanations as emulation of the vision quest, or for drug abuse as resulting from a tradition of peyote use — ignoring, of course, that peyote has a much shorter history among most Indian people than alcohol. Generally, these types of explanations are not empirically based, but they have such common appeal that they take on an aura of "truth."

The search for unique, cultural answers also obscures the fact that, in terms of problem behaviors, cultures are usually more alike than different. In losing sight of these similarities, the opportunity for effective interventions is lost. We do know some things about prevention and treatment of alcohol abuse and should not be reluctant to use this knowledge in culturally different populations. Furthermore, we know that socioeconomic stress can lead to increased substance abuse, and is undoubtedly a better predictor in a population than any exotic cultural explanation.

Most of the problems Foulks outlined in his paper stem from the inadequate conceptualization of the cultural identification process. The Inupiat people undoubtedly felt that their culture was under attack and responded accordingly.

Colorado State University  
Western Behavioral Studies  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523

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