

LIMITED NOTIONS OF CULTURE ENSURE RESEARCH FAILURE

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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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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.

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References

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