

MISCONTINENCE AND THE BARROW ALCOHOL STUDY

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Dr. Edward Foulks is to be commended for sharing his agony and experience with researchers who often face similar dilemmas by the nature of their participation in "a community of scholars" concerned with American Indian and Alaska Native issues. Those researchers at the Center for Research on the Acts of Man might have foreseen the problems that Foulks encountered, but they did not for reasons that are embedded in the very nature of behavioral science research itself. It is not that the necessary understanding is extremely difficult to acquire, it is more to the point that in research, as in many other arenas of action, the taken-for-granted assumptions are seldom examined. This is true in part because philosophical analysis is often separated from the technique of understanding through the use of behavioral science. Foulks leaves us with the heart-felt imperative that the Barrow Alcohol Study is an example of how "...scientists must self-consciously include these sometimes intangible, value laden factors into their research design and planning." I want to examine "these intangible, value laden factors" more closely with the hope that we can identify more precisely their nature.

Behavioral scientists often fail to be sensitive to the fact that a technique created for some end (or aim, purpose, or goal) is often imbued with values that are quite distinct from the process of human valuing which seeks to answer such questions as the following: Does this technique promote "good?" "Ought" this technique have been used in this way for this end? Who benefits from this technique? Who is harmed?

Behavioral science has thoroughly incorporated one philosophical orientation: the position of Francis Bacon which aims knowledge at power over nature (including human nature), and uses this power for the improvement of the human condition. Access to this power over nature through scientific technology is made possible by reliance on sense impressions, rational thinking, and scientific method, as opposed to the understanding of nature through contemplation. Implicit in a strict adherence to this "objective science" orientation is the notion that the scientific process is value-free; that knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon for its own sake, and sometimes for the purpose of "objective" control over nature and human nature, are the goals of science.

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Consequently, scientists are often troubled by the fact-value distinction. The study of value is frequently separated from and often considered irrelevant to the study of fact. The fallacy in this traditional perspective—and I use the term “traditional” purposely—is that technique (in our case behavioral science research technique) both displays value effects by its very existence and is conducted in value fields or systems which shape the ends to which it is used.

Research Techniques and Latent Values

Consider the first issue that the value effects technique displays by its very existence. The idea that technique creates imperatives and institutions that reinforce its existence in an accumulative and selective way is not a new one (Ellul, 1964; Winner, 1977). Nevertheless, a precise understanding of these effects of behavioral science technique among American Indians and Alaska Natives is not always clear, or when clear, is not often expressed. Researchers hold positions in academic research institutes, private consulting firms, government research, organization social service agencies, and university and college schools and departments. These institutions often share a firm commitment both to the “advancement” of knowledge of and for its own sake, and also for “objective” knowledge application for perceived social good. This shared orientation demands that research conclusions be justified on the basis of accepted scientific procedures, and that these conclusions be shared with a community of scholars and those who apply their knowledge through publication. Positions are obtained and careers are maintained to a large part on the basis of grants or contracts received and publications accepted in refereed journals, monographs, and books. The very existence of research techniques has created priorities and institutions which predispose the examination of human behavior, in our case the object of study being the “problem drinking” of a group of Alaskan Eskimo people.

Science above all is to be progressive and cumulative, a subset of the Western ideology of liberalism which Grant (1969) has defined as “...a set of beliefs which proceeds from the central assumption that man's essence is his freedom and therefore that what chiefly concerns man in this life is to shape the world as we want it” (p. 114). Contrast this Western orientation with that shared by American Indian and Alaska Native people which defines humankind's role as being one of minimal interference with the other elements of nature. If animals are to be taken for survival, they must be talked to in the right way so as not to anger their spiritual essence. In this sense, scientific research displays the potential of being an entirely ethnocentric enterprise when imposed without community understanding, consensus, and consent within American Indian and Alaska Native cultures. There may be radical differences between Western science and ethnoscience as practiced by American Indian and Alaska Native people. The issues of

science for whom and as requested by whom, and for what ends becomes the all important concerns.

The Process of Human Valuing

This leads to a discussion of the second issue with respect to technique and values: the process of human valuing within the context of value systems. In the current case, we must consider both the value system of the community and that of the outside and dominant society as expressed through behavioral scientists. Who bears responsibility for deciding the good, the ought, and the nature of being (Jonas, 1984)? Placing value on events or phenomena occurs in the context of larger metaphysical systems which, through the definition of the nature of existence or being, define meaning for individuals and collectivities. Stated in another way, if we agree with Jonas that metaphysics is a doctrine of being and ethics is a doctrine of action, ethical imperatives for action occur relative to metaphysical statements of being. Surely we know enough about the difference between Western metaphysics and the various American Indian and Alaska Native expressions of the nature of being (world views, if you wish) to be extremely careful about placing values, or notions of what ought to be, on American Indian or Alaska Native communities. The value of behavioral science research is for each community to decide. As professional researchers representing the dominant society, we are constantly in the danger of implicitly and explicitly defining ethnocentrically not only what is good research methodology, but what is the good end or purpose of the research process.

The good or valuable end of the research process in the Barrow Alcohol Study could have been defined as using scientific method to understand the legitimacy of the common claim by members of the community that the cause of the "alcohol problem," as defined by the community, was rapid cultural, economic, and political change. But, this research should have been conducted only if it was desired and sanctioned by the community. Foulks seems sensitive to the fact that many community people blame the alcohol problem on the "stresses created by culture and political change." Yet, the initial design phases of the research seemed not to adequately address the issue of the impact of culture contact, thereby speaking to the perceptions and feelings of the community. The issue of why the community displayed alcohol "problems" was not fully integrated into the research design. Rather, the design chosen attempted to identify alcohol use by "social characteristic", as if there were good and bad characteristics leading to lesser or more drinking. I wonder if there is any coincidence that degree of church attendance was a key variable, given the fact that the former minister of the Presbyterian Church in Barrow was director of the consulting firm that subcontracted the research of the Center for Research on the Acts of Man?

If it was the will of the community, the valuable goal of the study could have been defined as identifying positive and effective steps the community could initiate or had initiated to solve the alcohol problem on their own through a process of local action and self-determination. Instead, the community was simply dissected by type of behavior and social characteristic, leading some community members to feel they were the objects of research for its own sake instead of effective initiators of positive action. The dependency feelings and fears many may hold from years of colonial exploitation and economic subservience seemed to have been exacerbated by the research.

Foulks concedes that mistakes were made in the research process, particularly with respect to the role of the press and the procedures through which the community at large were consulted and informed. The "shocking effect" of the press release (purposely arranged by two agencies—Intersect, directed by the former minister, and the Barrow Department of Public Safety) certainly shows that both factors needed to be considered much more carefully. I wish Foulks had also mentioned such problematic issues as: a) the need for anonymity of individuals and the community in the research and publication process (especially with regard to what he concedes to be a "sensitive" problem); b) the potentially biased role of the former minister throughout the research process; and c) the fact that two key representatives of local agencies of social control (the Barrow Director of Public Safety and the Barrow Director of Public Health) were advocates for this research project, perhaps against the consensus of the community itself.

An Ethical Paradigm

Elsewhere, I and my colleague have examined some of the ethical issues involved in the introduction of biomedical technology (including technique, knowledge, and devices) among the Puyallup Indians, a Coast Salish community of the southern Puget Sound in Washington State (Guilmet & Whited, 1987). We created an ethical paradigm which may be effectively generalized to any situation in which the introduction of technology is occurring in a multicultural or multinational culture-contact situation. In such contexts, the nature of the good with respect to the introduction of technology is not always clear. What may benefit one social group may be detrimental to another. This is especially true when the culture-contact situation is dominated by a technologically more powerful culture. We distinguished between the Good, that which contains that action which would result in the best for all social groups (the common or universal Good), and the culture-bound good, that defined by each social group. We also defined several types of ethical action by culture brokers, including: a) continence, action consistent with the common Good by those who know the common Good; b) miscontinence, action in accordance with a culture-bound good that does not conform to the common Good; and c) incontinence,

deliberate actions inconsistent with the common Good by those who know the common Good.

I would classify the ethical action displayed by individuals involved in the Barrow Alcohol Study as miscontinence. The research team knew the good in their own cultural sphere, but these actions, consistent with their own perceptions, did not result in the common Good. In retrospect we can see that their perceived good blinded them to the injury their work would have on the integrity of the people studied. Let us not forget that we social scientists are cultural brokers who bring to our communities various disciplinary techniques which can be very ethnocentric and can cause injury to the people studied. If we are to act responsibly, we must know the end or goal toward which technological activity should be directed, must know the consequences of technological actions prior to the actual performance of such actions, and must act on the basis of both types of knowledge (Mitcham, 1986).

We must break free of our own personal cultural filters which define good in a way that may not be consistent with the common Good. We must understand that the common Good can be defined; it can and must be defined by the shadow that is cast by nonrecognition and noncompliance. The shadow that was cast by the Barrow Alcohol Study is the subject of Foulks' article. The question becomes our willingness, interest, and desire to visualize the shadow before it appears. More community participation, complex scientific-professional ethics with carefully constructed formal procedures and policies to ensure that the integrity of the people studied is not jeopardized by access of mass media to relatively private scientific books and articles, and scientific review before the media has the opportunity to report controversial findings, all are excellent suggestions by Foulks for addressing the misuse of behavioral science research.

I have added that we must consider the ethical and metaphysical issues which arise when we introduce behavioral science techniques into American Indian and Alaska Native communities. While I am optimistic that the critical and reflexive perspective encouraged by the Foulks article will help develop more socially conscious practices, I still believe somewhat pessimistically that many research projects will continue to be conducted in ethically insensitive ways given the effect of self-interest on the research process and the imperfect understanding of the philosophical context of behavioral science research which is shared by many researchers. On the other hand, research ethics may benefit from the fact that communities will demand to set research priorities and methods as they become more aware of the downside of disadvantageous research designs. I have elsewhere discussed the effect of traditional Eskimo patterns of cognition on the acceptance or rejection of introduced technology (Guilmet, 1985).

In any case, significant change in our practices must occur or future research opportunities among American Indian and Alaska Native communities will become increasingly scarce. This might have a devastating

effect on the alleviation of serious social problems. My feelings are best expressed by the last sentence from the previously-discussed article (Guilmet & Whited, 1987) concerning the introduction of technology among Puyallup Indians: "Though we eagerly await the appearance of those who know the Good and somehow do the Good consistently, we recognize that most of the saints are dead" (p. 197).

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