

**MALFEASANCE AND FOIBLES OF
THE RESEARCH SPONSOR**
damnant quod non intelligent

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Ten years have elapsed since the preliminary findings of the now infamous and legendary Barrow Alcohol Study were released to the scientific and public communities, respectively. In the course of the past decade, numerous cross-cultural researchers and Native community activists have held up the study directed by Professor Edward Foulks as an example of what happens when community-sponsored research violates certain ethical practices. The study and the ongoing flow of debate also are held up as an example of what happens when the values, beliefs, and lifestyle preferences of a Native community are not given careful and due consideration. Throughout the debates, however, Foulks has displayed a willingness to listen and respond to the heated complaints. Indeed, he appears to recognize that something did go astray, and seems willing to both admit the mistakes of his team and assure others that he will profit from the criticisms. To this end, I applaud his admission of error and willingness to further subject his work to the scrutiny of the researchers represented in this journal. If Foulks had excused himself from the occasion presented by the editor of this journal, I believe it would have only served to reify the many accusations tossed in the direction of the study.

In reviewing Foulks' article and a few of his earlier publications concerning the Barrow Alcohol Study I must admit that I, too, could join the ranks of the hard-line critics. However, others in this journal have addressed the procedural, methodological, and statistical flaws in the study; hence, I will restrain myself.

Responsibilities of Research Sponsors

In his paper, Foulks points out "that the mistakes experienced in this research study were less those of scientific methodology than of social and political *naivete* (my emphasis) regarding the people of the community studied." To an extent, and based on my experiences, observations concerning community-sponsored action research, and my careful reading and assessment of the scenario surrounding the Barrow Alcohol Study, I believe Foulks touches on a lively yet often overlooked point: many community planners and action research sponsors are indeed ignorant of the strict rules

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governing scientific research, standards, and ethical policies we are obliged to follow. More often than not, action research sponsors appear to lie in wait, ready to tear into a draft of a research report armed with little understanding of the general requirements of the scientific method and professional report writing. In short, many sponsors are almost too quick to condemn what they do not understand—*damnant quod non intelligent*. In the shadow of my contention I would argue that community action research sponsors have a responsibility to understand and appreciate what they will receive when they contract out a scientific venture. Above all else, they should expect a product to be empirically oriented, and conducted and written in a straightforward objective manner. In the main I believe Intersect and Dr. Foulks and his research team delivered such a product to the contractor, the North Slope Borough.

Let me stay with this point for a moment. Several critics, most notably the Director of the Department of Health and “other *non-Native* (my emphasis) professionals of the Technical Advisory Group” found the report to be ambiguous and verbose, difficult to read and lacking in precision and authoritative tone. In my opinion, the report was none of these things. If the reviewers expected a precise and authoritative report, it was their responsibility in the first place to lay out their expectations, standards, and level of sophistication in the initial contractual agreement.

Continuing this point, I was somewhat mystified to learn that the non-Native critics were quick to point out that the report had imposed Western, “lower 48” standards on Inupiat society and should have been written to better reflect Inupiat values and attitudes. I am not sure that I understand what “Western, ‘lower 48’ standards” really implies. If the non-Native critics are focusing on Foulks’ professional scientific report writing style than they are way off base; in effect, they are criticizing the standards established by science itself, and none of them have the credentials nor the expertise to offer that criticism. Second, their criticism is certainly ethnocentric and in no way does justice to the very extraordinary heterocultural makeup of those who reside in the “lower 48.” Third, how can a technical report describing the distribution, consumption, and abuse of alcohol in Barrow be written to reflect Inupiat values and attitudes? As I read the contractual agreement between the North Slope Borough and Intercept, nowhere can I find a scope of work statement that calls for an ethnographic analysis of Native values and attitudes. Moreover, and more to the point, a description of summary descriptive statistics can only be presented in the manner described by Foulks.

A related but significant line of criticism was offered by a non-Native (again) faculty member at the Inupiat University of the Arctic. His attack claimed that the report was ethnocentric, parochial, demeaning, and denigrating to the Inupiat; he even charged that the methodology of the study was flawed because the researchers were not conversant in Inupiaq. I find the statement concerning the research staff’s lack of fluency in Inupiaq

somewhat absurd and nonsensical. From what I can gather from the requirements of the agreement, Intersect and Foulks were not required to be fluent in Inupiaq nor was any part of their product required to be translated into the Native dialect. Frankly, I seriously doubt if any of the non-Natives responsible for initiating and monitoring the project are themselves totally fluent in Inupiaq and completely understand Inupiaq values and attitudes. In many ways, it sounds as though some of the non-Natives most vocal and active in their criticisms of the Barrow Alcohol Study were terribly patronizing and overly paternalistic. What and whom were they protecting? After all, the non-Natives were largely responsible for setting up the study and providing details concerning the project's scope of work. In addition, I am invariably suspicious of non-Natives who reside as a minority in a Native community and who zealously take pot shots and cast unsubstantiated, inflammatory remarks toward outsiders especially those hired ostensibly to document what Natives already know to be factual. Moreover, I am doubly suspicious and usually intolerant of local non-Native "experts" who find it necessary to come to the rescue of "their people...their informants"—usually without the consent of traditional leaders.

Absence of Native Commentary

In the course of reading through the reports of the Barrow Alcohol Study, I looked for negative criticisms and comments from Inupiaq traditional leaders and Natives with advanced academic degrees. The absence of any Native commentary was either a) a deliberate omission or an oversight by Foulks and his colleagues; b) eliminated by non-Natives because it served no useful purpose or it wasn't strong enough; c) never solicited in any manner whatsoever; d) not documented throughout the course of the public meetings of the advisory committees; or e) due to the efforts of non-Natives to cover the mistakes they made in initiating the study in the first place. Whatever the reason, I would be eager and delighted to read comments prepared by the Inupiaq leaders, community activists, and planners to learn about their insights and concerns. After all, since the study was directed toward them and involved their perceptions of the "alcohol problem," they in fact are the real owners of the data. As such, the Inupiaq people of Barrow should have the final say in this whole scenario.

Use of an "Outside" Research Firm

I have some concerns about the organization of the study and the fact that a contract was offered to Intersect, presumably a non-Native research group based in Seattle. If the North Slope Borough administrators were so adamantly concerned about the cultural integrity of the study, why did not they contract with a Native research firm or at least a cadre of researchers tied into a Native studies program at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks

or Anchorage? Better yet, why did not they solicit the expertise of researchers at the Inupiat University of the Arctic, especially those who seem to know so much about Inupiaq values, attitudes and general lifestyle? Moreover, if the administrators recognized that research expertise was available through the Center for Alcohol Addiction Studies at the University of Alaska at Anchorage, why did not they solicit the Center to assist in the project? It seems to me that if there were any concerns about "cultural imperialism" those concerns could have been easily and almost effortlessly tended to by involving the appropriate Native group and cultural brokers before the study was conducted or when the contract was awarded.

From my reading, and based on my observations of the whole Barrow Alcohol Study, the North Slope Borough administrators must share the responsibility for the accusations and inflammatory remarks directed toward Foulks and Intersect. They initiated the study, signed off on the contract with Intersect, participated in the planning and conduct of the research—and then turned on Intersect and Foulks, apparently to absolve themselves of any wrongdoing or responsibility for the research. Collectively, their ethical standards and judgement should be dutifully challenged and accordingly censored and reprimanded.

Release and Ownership of Data

In addition to the actions taken by the North Slope Borough administrators connected to the study, what troubles me most about the whole scenario is the decision to release the study's findings to the press. I believe the responsibility for this decision rests with Intersect and Foulks' research group. As I understand contract research, the study's products, whatever they may be, are the property of the contractor, the North Slope Borough. The Borough should have reserved the right to decide on the extent to which the study's findings were released to the public. I even take the position that the property of the study, especially the findings, belongs with the respondents, the Inupiaq people of Barrow (Trimble, 1977; Trimble, 1988). They or their representative should have had the last word on the distribution of the findings. This is true even for findings published in professional journals. Research participants have rights of consent. Under the ethical principles which govern research, researchers must, above all else, maintain standards which protect the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents.

The fact that the results of the study were released to the press and the fact that the results were used for Foulks' professional advancement is most disturbing to me, especially when Foulks did not have permission to use the data generated in the study. I repeat, *research respondents own the data*. Let me use this occasion to remind readers of our responsibilities as researchers. Far too many seemingly well-intended cross-cultural researchers have shown little regard for the question concerning data ownership. In response to these concerns, the American Psychological

Association convened a task force to establish Advisory Principles for Ethical Consideration in the Conduct of Cross-Cultural Research (Tapp, Kelman, Triandis, Wrightsman & Coelho, 1974). The principles developed by the task force expanded upon the established ethical principles developed by the American Psychological Association to include: "(1) the inherent ethical acceptability of the actions undertaken in the research; (2) respect for the host culture; (3) open communication; (4) respect for subjects' rights; (5) protection of subjects' welfare and dignity; and (6) benefit to the participants" (Warwick, 1980, p. 361). To this list I would add that the "responsibility for the establishment and maintenance of acceptable ethical practice in research always remains with the individual investigator." The investigator is also responsible for the ethical treatment of research participants by collaborators, assistants, students, and employees, *all of whom incur parallel obligations* (my emphasis) (American Psychological Association, 1973, p. 22). In short, all who in any way were responsible for the conduct of the Barrow Alcohol Study stepped on and violated fundamental ethical principles.

Issues of Confidentiality

The world now knows who was a respondent in the study, not by individual name but by community of origin. Consider that the population of Barrow in 1980 was close to 2,300 people of which some 78% were Native (American Indian and Aleut as well). Consequently it would not take much effort to single out who likely participated in the study.

Given the circumstances surrounding the Barrow Alcohol Study, I wonder why the collective voice of the Inupiaq in Barrow were not more vocal concerning the violation of their rights as human participants. Could it be that the participants were not made aware of those rights? If that is the case, they then as well as now have a recourse which indeed would create an embarrassment to the research team should they opt to pursue it. I leave this disturbing possibility to those who maintain a surveillance of the ethical conduct of psychiatrists and the disciplines represented by those who were a part of the Barrow Alcohol Study.

Community Repercussions

In closing out my comments, I feel compelled to add a few more points. I was not able to obtain all of the correspondence and published materials concerning the activities surrounding the Barrow Alcohol Study. Hence some of my comments may misrepresent the facts. If I am in error and overstated or was inaccurate in my interpretations then I too stand accused. To those who are offended by my inaccuracies, I extend deep apologies. Foulks and members of Intersect and the research team should know that several people I contacted in Alaska were simply not willing to discuss the

project any further and wished that the publicity would die down. Frankly, I do not blame them for that position and would probably take a similar position if I were a victim of such circumstances.

There is one more disturbing point. The study's results were intended to serve as a justification for initiating an intensive alcohol prevention and intervention program in Barrow. According to one of my informants, no such program was implemented even after the controversy settled down. Sadly enough the incidence levels of alcohol use and abuse in Barrow are still at the levels reported by Foulks. Moreover, the incidence of marijuana use and abuse is reportedly running a close second to alcohol abuse in the community. Both findings are tragic and unconscionable considering the intent of the original Barrow Alcohol Study.

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