# THE COMMUNITY AS INFORMANT OR COLLABORATOR?

## GERALD V. MOHATT, Ed.D.

Reflection on the Barrow Alcohol Study is important, given the continuing problems associated with behavioral health among Alaska Natives and the desire among leaders of Native and non-Native communities in Alaska to ameliorate the situation (Hensley, 1987; GICCY, 1988; Mohatt, McDiramid & Montoya, 1988; Booker, 1988). The assumptions are that research can provide valuable insights into etiology, prevention, treatment, and epidemiology of behavioral health problems and that such research can guide policy and practice to improve the quality of life for Alaska Natives. However, research within Alaska Native communities will never influence policy and practice if it cannot take place because of distrust engendered by previous research. Foulks (1980) indicates many local scholars believe "that future social research in North Alaska would be jeopardized" if research produces a widespread lack of credibility within a community.

I will analyze Foulks' reply by applying a set of parameters for community-based research from a collaborative and participatory research framework. These principles will point out deficiencies in the analysis of the original research. My analysis is based on the conviction that research must build the capacity of the studied communities to become the researchers of the needs of their own communities. Social research as process has the power to increase the independence and self-determination of the community: individuals become more conscious of themselves, and the community more clearly can differentiate its problems, their causes, and pathways to amelioration. The community can learn of its strengths and define and face its problems, thus becoming empowered and strengthened. However, this process of empowerment can only occur in a participatory research framework in which the research team includes both the experts who are trained in methodology and members of the community. The team becomes a carefully formed partnership based on mutual respect and colleagueship. Through such a process, outside researchers may actually achieve the goals of the research and prevent the alienation between research and the community that Foulks describes so well in his article.

## The Positivist Paradigm

Given these assumptions, I understand the statement of Foulks (1980) when he indicates, "We believe that the mistakes experienced in this research study were less those of scientific methodology than of social and political naivete regarding the people of the community studies." My analysis is that a mistake of scientific methodology caused his team to become and remain naive and resulted in a report with little credibility toward which much hostility was and continues to be felt. The scientific model utilized is based on the assumption of an expert studying the problems of indigenous non-experts in which the latter serves as the object of the research. Additionally, the indigenous people assist in two areas: garnering "better insight into the community's beliefs regarding the nature of 'the problem,' and...[ensuring] more total private community participation in deciding how the results of the study were to be used." (abstract) The scientist is involved in the design and execution of the study as a technical enterprise.

St. Denis (1988) utilizing Smith (1983) and Reason & Rowan (1981) speaks of this type of research as the positivist paradigm or the old paradigm research in contrast to the post-positivist and new paradigm research models. She speaks of the following three aspects of this positivist paradigm that seem to describe the model exemplified in the Foulks' article: 1) "social facts are treated as things external to the individual" (to which I would add "and the community"); 2) "social investigation is a neutral activity;" and 3) social science provides a basis for "social engineering to improve society."

## A Participatory Model

In contrast, the participatory model involves the community and the scientists as colleagues in an on-going process beginning with the setting of parameters and concluding with the interpretation of data. It is based on the assumption that social reality is precisely social and, therefore, one cannot separate social facts from context. In terms of research, the contextualizing must involve the people of the community in all phases of the research. All research is value-laden and most particularly social research. Without continual involvement of the community in which the study occurs, the research is more likely to develop a methodology which is ill-suited to its context. Finally, engineering of social reality implies a degree of control which is inconsistent with the self-determination of communities.

I will now indicate some of the key parameters of participatory research and their application to this study. My analysis is based on the original Klausner & Foulks (1980) report, other local historical documents, and the latest retrospective analysis.

*Parameter one.* The community must set the ground rules for the research, including defining the purpose of the study, who controls the data,

its uses, and the forums in which it will be reported. The setting of research ground roles should occur prior to the inception of the study.

Who is the community, one might ask? In the Foulks' article this logically would have been the representative group from the borough serving from the beginning as a guiding group. It should have been heavily represented by Native residents broadly constituted in terms of age, sex, and political distribution within the community. To have had separate technical and elders groups seems to me to be problematic. It established the hiatus between expert and non-expert and created distance between the community and the research process, thus increasing the inevitably of alienation. The research team was in the difficult position of being a secondary contractor and, therefore, initially should have developed a participatory structure and framework in order for the research to be guided by the community. Foulks (1980) discussed his involvement with the steering committee, their representation from the older generation, and his perceived need to involve other age groups in order to learn "more about their attitudes..." What I am suggesting is that the assumption guiding the research must shift from simply using "committees" to learn more to a process of creating partnerships and colleagueships for the research. What Foulks seems to have done is create collective informants among the community with whom the team cross-checked their work.

Although it is clear that the community had great concern about the accuracy of the data and the implications of its interpretation for their reputation and sense of well-being, the researchers reported and continue to report the study in scholarly forums. It is important in collaborative research to insure from the beginning that agreement exists on the rights of the researchers to report their study. The contractors have the right to indicate the forums in which they wish and do not wish the research to be reported as well as who will own the data once the study is completed. If the research team does not agree with the limitations in this area, they do not have to do the research. No discussion was made of this issue in either article, although I am sure it has been a major concern of North Slope leaders during and subsequent to the study. It also raises a serious ethical question when required permissions did not seem to be acquired.

Although one does not know in detail what happened in the initial meetings reported by Foulks (1980) to have occurred in July, they could have initiated a careful analysis of what Intersect meant by "social and cultural relations of the population of Barrow, Alaska...[and]...wider societal and economic and governmental organizations" and whether, in fact, the Borough leadership and community not only had similar interpretations but, in fact, wished the team to define the question in this particular manner. It seems that this did not happen. The structure for the research defined quite independent roles for the research team, technical group, and steering committee. Additionally, it seems to this researcher that the process of only

meeting with both technical group and with the steering committee to modify the report represents critical errors in methodology.

*Parameter two.* The research team includes technical researchers, a broadly constituted steering committee, and local research colleagues and workers. The team guides the design of the study and methodology, the instruments used, the questions asked, the interviews performed, the analysis of data, and the development of recommendations from the data.

In this model the group would meet throughout the process to determine and monitor the specifics of the research, its implementation within the community, any explanations provided to the community, and the reporting of its results. In this context, the criticism of the local faculty member that the group had only "a superficial understanding" should not occur.

In this case and at this point, such a group would have either included or not included outsiders, Natives, and ancestry as variables to study. The outside research group would not simply hear that concern and make its decision, but would instead reach consensus with the community committee on what and who to include in the study.

Additionally, they would decide when and to whom to release the report. I found the discussion of why Intersect and the team released the report to the press to be indefensible and disturbing. Did the community want to be shocked? Does such shock typically lead to—openness or defensiveness— when it comes from a report of any group, particularly a non-Native group? It is clear that Intersect, the team, and the Director of Public Safety wanted the report to stimulate action. Unfortunately, they seem to have placed themselves in a position in which enough distance existed between them and the community that they could actually believe that press releases would help "galvanize solutions" (Foulks, 1980). "The proof is in the pudding" as the saying goes. I found this article unconscionable.

There is no discussion of the use and training of local research interviewers or data analyzers in the Foulks' article. It would seem that the outside team with Intersect did the work, developed the report, and attempted to begin the process of eliciting comments and recommendations about the data. If, in fact, no one from the indigenous community participated as a researcher and no conflict occurred, the team would have left the community more dependent on "outsiders" than capable of articulating and investigating their own problems. Such a deficit in social research eschews the responsibility of the researchers to build the capacity of the community and reinforces historical dependency relations.

*Parameter three.* The team itself must check its process against the desires of the original contractor as it moves through the research.

Even with the existence of the committed and joint research team, in order to monitor the pulse of the community the team will need to have ample meetings with the community leadership during the initial research and post-research. I would say that the efforts made after the report to work with and

inform the community were certainly a strong point of the project and a necessity for a collaborative project. However, in a collaborative project, members would not have made the errors of judgment in reporting and would have reached consensus on the precise variables to study.

*Parameter four.* Research can be discontinued once begun if the team and the contractor (provided this is the community studied) agree that it is not appropriate. However, the power to decide this is ultimately that of the community contractor.

We seem to assume that a contract once made must be completed. However, completing a contract in fact may mean not to complete the research and/or not to report the results. Only the community should decide this. A collaborative process has a reasonable chance of knowing whether the research team should approach the contractor and/or community leadership to determine if the research should continue. It would not have been a failure to discontinue the project or not to report the results if the Borough would have determined that the common good was best served by such means.

## Summary

Foulks writes in this issue:

> It was difficult for the Research Team through the polemic to locate the voice of the Inupiat. Most of the speakers had been non-Native. [T]he Inupiat understood their problem with alcohol in terms of stresses created by culture and political change. Their perspectives were not unlike those of the Departments of Health and Public Safety, Intersect, the Technical Advisory Committee, and the researchers.

Foulks implies in this latter part of his article that in some ways his group was almost sabotaged or victimized by a group of non-Native professionals who wanted to, at best, paternalistically protect the Inupiat or, at worst, protect their own positions of power as "helpers" and definers of what is right and wrong with the Barrow community. This seems to me to be a convenient scapegoat. From retrospective reports of Inupiat people and examinations of the local press, ( *The Pioneer All-Alaska Weekly, Anchorage Daily News, and Barrow School News*) there were in fact a large number of Inupiat people not only upset but also in disagreement with the report. More appropriately, as Foulks (1980) states, "Barrow is a complex and multifaceted community containing many factions—non-Native and Inupiat alike." Additionally, Foulks indicates the research team should have developed methods that insured more and broader community participation.

My conviction is that the team would have needed to change their scientific paradigm to a collaborative approach in which empowering the community, building community capacity, and discovering answers to complex questions unite in the same research process. I do not believe the question is "how to use research results" but rather "how to conduct research in Native communities such that the decisions are clearly theirs." Professional ethical standards and standards of scientific conduct must become contextualized by a paradigm that creates an indigenous research methodology and collaborative research ethics and methods. Only the community should decide when benefits outweigh risks. The design and conduct of the research will determine how likely it is that local communities will have this opportunity. Researchers must not simply become more self-conscious of "intangible, value-laden factors," but instead must employ a systematic method in which research means building capacity. The outside researcher becomes the consultant to the community rather than the community as the informant or consultant to the researcher.

Naivete seems to have little to do with the problem confronted by the research team and intersect. I have argued it has more to do with assumptions about research expertise, ethics, relationships between researchers and community, the paradigm of research, and assumptions about the capacity of Native communities to engage in the process of research. Objectivity is a standard for our research. Unfortunately in conducting research in Native communities, objectivity often seems to imply that outsiders can make statements about such communities based on the data they gather and questions they ask without considering the lack of community involvement in shaping the research. The research assumptions related in the Foulks' article can originate from an institutionally-racist perspective which sees the Western positivist paradigm as helping to reach objectivity when, in fact, it guarantees distance from the reality of the people they wish to understand. We must avoid solely product considerations in order to embrace culturally-based research processes.

I appreciate Foulks attempt to face the failures of his work, however I do not believe he has adequately faced the bias in the methodology and inappropriateness of his continuing to report the data. I also think he should state directly that he does not plan to report the data in any further forums, a clear desire expressed by people from the North Slope. Such a clear, definitive statement would signal the beginning of a needed paradigmatic shift in his thinking.

University of Alaska - Fairbanks
College of Human & Rural Development
Seventh Floor, Gruening
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701

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