

THAT WAS YESTERDAY, AND (HOPEFULLY) YESTERDAY IS GONE

PHILIP A. MAY, Ph.D.

In his article, Dr. Edward Foulks describes a series of events which have been acted out, in varying forms, many times on many reservations and in numerous Native villages. Those of us who have worked in the area of Indian mental health have all witnessed and, in some cases, have become involved in such scenarios and debates.

The use of research results, data, and interpretation have presented many challenges for professional and Native alike. The biggest change which I have witnessed over the past 18 years has been the mixing and partial synthesis of these two perspectives—the Native and the professional.

Attitudes in the 1950s and '60s

In the 1950s and 1960s the professional and Native perspectives were far apart; further, they were seldom found within the same human body. There were few Indians or Alaska Natives with professional training, and most of the non-Native professionals who worked on reservations were "short timers" who seldom were able to utilize their non-Native perspectives and reactions to Indian culture in a manner which was constructive and useful for the advancement of Indian mental health solutions. As a result, there were major battles between the polar interpretations of Native and professional paradigms, world views, and ideas on research. The clash of these perspectives took many an interesting turn and resulted in many strange alliances, such as those described by Foulks. The end result of most of these battles was a failure to rationally plan for and carry out proper research studies, and an incapacity to consider and utilize the results of research. The old axiom that "research is a dirty word among (and irrelevant to) Native communities" was often heard, and was used to obstruct and discredit both research initiatives on reservations and the application of relevant results from mainstream research to Native community needs.

An Easing of Tension

Since the late 1960s, change in this area has been slow and localized, but very decided and obvious. Research among most Native groups is less

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an arena of combat and more an area of appropriate debate. Emphasis has been modified among many Indian groups from radical dialogue, which excluded research, to appropriate concern for research as a guide for health, social, and mental health programs. I believe there are a number of reasons for this. First, the doors of higher education were opened more widely to Indians and Alaska Natives in the 1970s, and many Natives have received advanced training. Therefore, many have achieved positions of authority in health, social, and educational programs. Second, even though few Natives have gone specifically into research, their academic and professional training has developed a new understanding and appreciation of the research process and what it can and cannot do for local community needs, interests, and problems. In short, several types of research (e.g. applied and evaluative) have been destigmatized among many groups and separated from some previous research which had little bearing on social and health planning.

Third, today there is a larger number of researchers in the mental health and health areas who have developed and maintained long-term working relationships with tribal groups regarding mutual concerns within the areas of research, planning, and development. Fourth, many federal initiatives, mandated by law, have required research and evaluation of programs (e.g., tribal-specific health plans, evaluation of health status, and education programs), and have provided money for these endeavors. Therefore, tribes wishing to maintain old monies and gain new program monies have had to reach out and establish contacts and relationships with researchers. Fifth, radicalism among Indians and non-Indians alike has declined, allowing for more reasonable debate.

A New Outlook on Research

The above trends, then, set the stage for a new outlook on research. Because of these trends, new procedures and mechanisms have evolved in a number of communities which facilitate research initiatives and the application of research results. Many tribes, most Indian Health Services (IHS) area offices, and many other local concerns now have individuals and committees who are charged with reviewing research proposals, results, and information. These committees are vehicles for formalizing debate, ensuring input from tribes, and for striving towards the proper use of results. They provide a more appropriate arena for the debate and contention of research ideas. Thus, mechanisms are in place in many locales to safeguard against some of the calamities detailed by Foulks. Further, these committees serve an educational purpose for tribal concerns and researchers alike.

I personally have had manuscripts and proposals questioned and even rejected by IHS and tribal committees. In the process of debate, criticism, and revision, these committees and I educated one another. The resulting

projects and manuscripts were greatly improved, and we all were able to gain new knowledge, perspectives, and understanding from the process. One must, however, be patient, generous, and “thick skinned,” and must strive to minimize feelings of proprietary claim on the research in these negotiations. Even though these committees can in some instances cause delays and seem obstructive, the forum they provide is vastly desirable to the series of negative experiences described by Foulks regarding the Barrow, Alaska, ordeal.

Once the research and manuscripts have been approved by an official—and hopefully representative—tribal committee, then publication and dissemination of the results are safer, less likely to cause problems, and more likely to be used for its intended purposes. Further, these committees can suggest various ways to present the factual data so as to protect against offending important constituencies, yet to allow for appropriate implementation. When a mutual understanding is attained by a researcher and a committee, a strong social force has been created. If manuscripts are not approved and data cannot be disseminated, it is painful. This has rarely happened in my experience, but when it does, if one is patient, new, and more acceptable approaches to research and application of research results can be solicited. Censorship, a larger issue, can and has been raised in considerations of tribal and agency research committees. But given the fact that small Native communities can suffer tremendous harm at the hand of the media and public opinion, I prefer to accept the power and judgments of the designated research representatives of the IHS and representative tribal groups.

I tend to believe that the experience described by Dr. Foulks in Northern Alaska is an extreme one, and one which is becoming less likely each year because of the factors mentioned above. But it is still possible that these events can be repeated. I would hope that safeguards such as tribal and agency research committees will continue to grow in number and sophistication. I further hope that we researchers will continue to improve our sensitivity to and control over the volatile potential of our results.

The article by Foulks is important in that it documents a history of how research results might be used in a disruptive, unproductive, and calamitous way by a variety of actors and forces. As history, the Foulks article is valuable to all those who aspire to do research on reservations for the improvement of Indian communities. It is appropriate to conclude these comments with two quotes:

“The use of history is to give value to the present hour and its duty.”
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

“History, by apprising [men] of the past, will enable them to judge the future.”
- Thomas Jefferson

Researchers working in the areas of American Indian and Alaska Native mental health need to know and understand the history of research politics among Natives. And we must strive not only to avoid the bad experience, but to work to ensure effective, culturally-appropriate and sensitive applications of research results. We may fail in these efforts, but the only virtue lies in trying.

Department of Sociology
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131