EDUCATING THE RESEARCHERS

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For many years the tribes and communities of American Indians and Alaska Natives have been the subject of intense study and research in a number of disciplines, particularly anthropology, sociology, psychology, and medicine. Until recently, virtually all research was conducted by non-Indians. Only in the past 20 years have more American Indians begun to enter into the social science professions. Consequently, the majority of research questions, methodologies, and conclusions has been based solely on the interests and cultural background of non-Indians. Furthermore, the types of research funded has been and continues to be controlled by various non-Indian governmental and state agencies.

A Paternalistic Emphasis on Deviance

One of the effects of the western European's positivistic approach to the study of American Indians and Alaska Natives has been to concentrate on studying their weaknesses rather than their strengths. For example, the question of why Indian people have survived as a group despite the odds is not a popular subject for funding. Consequently, few studies examine this topic. The majority of funded research focuses on the deviance of American Indians and Alaska Natives, such as alcoholism, suicide, violence, and mental illness. These are certainly important areas of concern for American Indian/Alaska Native people; however, the manner and method that many researchers have used has not been beneficial to the tribes involved.

Specifically, the researchers' main objective has been to collect the data (usually during the summer), and then publish their findings. Few researchers have encouraged meaningful involvement of the tribe. Even fewer have provided useful feedback to the communities. This paternalistic utilization of knowledge has been exploitive and detrimental to Indian people, especially since it feeds into the negative stereotype of Indians.

Lessons of the Barrow Study

The Foulks article is an example of mistakes that can occur among well-intentioned researchers. It is a useful paper for both Native and non-Native researchers interested in working with tribal groups because it provides

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helpful information for avoiding serious problems. Specifically, it highlights the crucial need for researchers to learn about the culture and the political structure of the tribe prior to entering the community. Foulks experience stresses the importance of encouraging meaningful community involvement in all phases of a research project. Furthermore, this paper demonstrates the growing cultural awareness among some non-Native researchers and practitioners in the Inupiat area. It also reflects the (intentional or unintentional) insensitivity towards the Inupiat community of the researchers and practitioners who were directly involved in the study. Additionally, it indicates that the Inupiat are concerned about the dissemination of information which might have a negative impact on their community.

As a result, it seems that both the Inupiat and the researcher(s) have learned from the experience. The Inupiat are probably more likely to take an active role in all phases of research projects and the researchers are probably less likely to enter a community without first learning the political and cultural structure of the area. In the past, the relationship between the researcher and the Indian tribe/group has been exploitive in favor of the researcher. Researchers entered a community, collected data, and left.

Today, the researcher-community relationship is moving toward one that is more balanced. Ethically, researchers working with Indian tribes/groups should, at the very least, be respectful of the people involved and be willing to share information with the community rather than limit their knowledge to specialized journals and academic colleagues.

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