

A CASE STUDY OF HOW CROSS-CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS CAN NEGATE RESEARCH

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Dr. Edward Foulks has provided a valuable service by offering, in this context, a brief summary of an ambitious research project about which the results were primarily in reports of only limited circulation (Klausner & Foulks, 1979, 1980), and a costly book (Klausner & Foulks, 1982). Perhaps even more valuable is his summary discussion of how the project became exceptionally famous—and infamous—for many of the wrong reasons. Researchers, administrators, journalists, and others concerned with mental health and special populations have much to learn ethically and procedurally on the basis of this sad example.

Foulks' summary of findings is accurate as far as it goes, however, interestingly, it omits some of the points that loomed largest when the project was featured news in *The New York Times* and other media for nearly a week.

There is not enough detail in Foulks' present article to serve as a basis for any substantive critique of the research process itself, or of the conclusions. This is not an appropriate context in which to explore in detail the methods and findings of the study that are not reported here. Anyone who is seriously interested, for whatever reason, should go to the earlier and larger sources, which include not only more details about what was done and what was found, but also some fairly extensive discussion of misgivings that were weighed by the researchers as they were selecting their sample, instruments, and so forth. It is noteworthy that those reports are replete with caveats and conditional statements that are the stock-in-trade of academic writers, but that were—predictably—ignored by reporters whose newspaper articles selectively and forcefully publicized the findings in a way that angered many of the people of Barrow.

Foulks' Study: A Cautionary Tale

Presumably no one questions the good intentions of the research team, both with respect to conducting a meaningful study and in terms of phrasing it so that practical implications could easily be discerned and changes implemented to diminish the prevalence and severity of a variety of social problems that people thought of as being associated with alcohol. This

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paper, like Foulks' sad epilogue to the commercially-published version of the full report (Klausner & Foulks, 1982), can well be viewed as a cautionary tale. A Monday morning quarterback whose special skill is 20/20 hindsight might be less than appreciative that Foulks here "raises important ethical and procedural questions to be considered carefully in future projects" (Foulks, this issue), and wonder why they were not considered in the planning of the Barrow study—but such a view may not be fair to those who suffered through it.

One might wonder how much hope there was at the outset that locals would warmly receive a group of researchers from "the lower 48," who had been contracted (by an emigrant) to deal with a quintessentially Alaskan problem. Furthermore, the fact that the diverse constituencies who were interested in the study had very different agendas must have been obvious at an early date, and there should have been judicious weighing of the pros and cons—from the perspective of each of the several groups—at every step in the process of collecting data, analyzing it, presenting the results, and making recommendations.

In principle, the idea of having "a Steering Committee consisting of local Inupiat leaders, and a Technical Advisory Group which was constituted primarily of non-Native professionals" who were also familiar with the area was appropriate, and one might even have expected that such contacts would have helped the investigators to avoid major pitfalls.

But the idea of publicizing the findings before discussing them with local people in a town meeting, so that "public awareness would shock the Inupiat into action to control the alcohol problem", appears, at least in retrospect, grotesquely naive. The fact that the Inupiat were acutely aware of various aspects of "the alcohol problem" had been a dominant theme throughout the report, and the fact that the voters had enacted prohibition at the community level was ample evidence that they had already taken a strong stand. The lack of enforcement of that prohibition presumably has more to do with negligence on the part of the Department of Public Safety (an instigator of the research project) than with the Inupiat themselves.

In summarizing the research and its findings in this issue, Foulks is highly selective, providing little insight into what apparent justification the people of Barrow may have had for complaining about press coverage of the study. For example, it seems to me noteworthy that when the results of the survey "were released to the press by Intersect and the Research Center," the press conference took place in New York City rather than in Barrow. Similarly, it seems ironic that there is no mention in the present paper of the startling "72 percent alcoholism rate" that was featured in *The New York Times* (and presumably other mass media), or about Klausner's having been quoted about "the Eskimos...[as] not a collection of individual alcoholics, but a society which is alcoholic, and therefore facing extinction" (*The New York Times*, 22 Jan. 1980, p. C1).

It is little wonder that members of the community expressed concern over such a characterization. Nor could their ire be dismissed as simple denial of a harsh reality. In a later article, following a marathon public hearing on the subject in Barrow, it was reported that "residents challenged the validity of the report, contending that some of the research instruments and researchers were culturally biased and that some of the findings were erroneous because of false assumptions" (*The New York Times*, 29 Jan. 1980, p. C5). Those same criticisms were important among the points made in the independent "academic critique" that Foulks mentions as having been conducted by a member of the University of Alaska's Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies.

Without going into great detail, one pertinent example of cultural bias is the questionable use of the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (MAST). It is gratifying that the authors recognized transcultural variation in the meaning of the component questions: "...it was necessary sometimes, with the help of a native assistant, to explain the intent of certain items [in the MAST]" (Klausner & Foulks, 1982, p. 165). Although they subjected the responses to elaborate statistical factor-analysis, they appear to have done the scoring without any adjustment for cultural differences, which raises serious questions about the validity of one of their major quantitative indices of alcoholism.

Heavier reliance on qualitative data might have helped the researchers to present a better rounded characterization of the nature and extent of problem drinking and drinking problems in the community. Furthermore, richer ethnographic detail might have provided a better understanding of the norms, values, and meanings that are the context of such behavior.

But there is another level of significance to this study that seems not to have been addressed by the investigators at all. Quite apart from whatever details are specific to this local case-study, the "misalliances" in Barrow are important in terms of some other general principles. However important this case may be as an example of pitfalls in cross-cultural research and the risks that are inherent in outsiders' dealing with sensitive issues among "minority" populations, it would be a mistake to overlook another crucial set of implications.

If we are to derive maximum profit from the sad experience of Foulks and his colleagues, we should also pay attention to what the data from Barrow have to say about various approaches to prevention and treatment of alcohol-related problems in a more general sense. For example, despite the enormous amount of ink that has been spilled about the percentage of the population who might "really" be alcoholic or about other indices of the scale of "the problem," most people seem to have lost sight of the fact that Barrows was officially a "dry community," one in which prohibition had long been the rule under Alaska's local-option law.

The Control Model of Prevention

If the highly-touted "control model" of prevention—espoused and promoted by National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the World Health Organization, and the highly vocal "New Temperance Movement" (Heath, in press)—were correct, such severe restrictions on the availability of alcohol should have resulted in virtual elimination of drinking problems. That is the approach the Soviets tried a few years ago, and recently gave up as a deeply flawed policy. That is what the Scandinavian countries have favored for decades while suffering dismally high rates of problems, in striking contrast with circum-Mediterranean countries where cheap and easily available alcohol results in high average per capita consumption, but is accompanied by relatively few problems. That is what Iceland, the United States, India, and various states elsewhere around the world tried briefly, and then repealed when they found that prohibition—except when imbedded in a religious context—seems not only to be ineffective but often also to be counter-productive.

There are many advocates of "the control model", which favor a variety of legal and regulatory controls, who explicitly reject total prohibition, whether on the basis of ideology or realism. They have been increasingly vocal in recent years throughout much of the world, calling for higher prices, fewer sales outlets, shorter sales hours, and a variety of other measures that would make alcoholic beverages more difficult to acquire. Presumably these steps would also diminish consumption (e.g., Calahan, 1987; Grant, 1985; West, 1984). However, there are few places in the world where alcohol is more expensive and outlets more restricted than in Barrow. Evidently the basic premises of "the control model" have little relevance to drinking patterns among the Inupiat.

Another cornerstone of "the control model" is the appealingly simple generalization that alcohol-related problems occur in direct proportion to the legal availability of alcohol, so that legislative and regulatory controls are the best way to curtail such problems. In fairness to some of those who are most often cited in support of such a view, it must be noted that Bruun and his colleagues (1975), Makela et al. (1981), Room (1984), and a few others have been careful to point out exceptions and to qualify carefully most of their statements in scholarly contexts. But it is at least equally apparent that such niceties disappear in policy recommendations, consensus documents, and other briefs that are meant to be forceful among legislators, administrators, and other laypersons (Heath, 1988a). Whatever else it may be, the Barrow case is a dramatic illustration that "the control model" did not work, even among the relatively homogeneous Inupiat population, where it had already been chosen by a majority of the voters.

The Sociocultural Model

This is not to say that there should be no controls on drinking. It does suggest that "the sociocultural model" (Heath, 1988b) might be more apt, emphasizing informal controls (rather than formal ones), expressed by peers and kin (rather than in laws and regulations), enforced by social pressures (rather than by judicial penalties), and within the normal sociocultural ambience (rather than isolated from it).

While there is no quick and easy way to help the many Inupiat who may have been hurt by inappropriate actions as a result of their own excessive drinking or someone else's, the experience of some other Native populations elsewhere suggests that changes in attitudes toward drunken behavior, increasing cultural awareness and related self-esteem, and a concerted community effort to re-integrate people without dependence on excessive drinking can achieve significant changes in the rate and types of problems that occur (e.g., Hall, 1986; Jilek, 1981; May, 1986; Weibel-Orlando, 1985).

It is ironic that this brief paper by Foulks, with the various comments on it, may turn out to be the most beneficial outcome of such an ambitious, expensive, relatively well organized, methodologically varied, and multi-disciplinary research project. We are all in his debt for offering his scientific colleagues and others this positive opportunity to learn from a sad experience.

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