

**COMMENTARY**  
**BY**  
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The breadth, intensity, and effort devoted to this study are staggering! These investigators' foresight, even courage in undertaking such a monumental work auger well for the future of American Indian (AI) youth and families. The funding agency and institutions supporting this study have shown both boldness and responsibility in fostering this major study. In the face of such a grand design, this commentator's first impulse was to shrink from comment. Further reflection led to my reaffirming certain points and considering a few suggestions, which humbly follow.

**Methodological Dilemmas**

These authors have tasted the challenge of longitudinal work. Their Discussion is rich with suggestions regarding this special work. Walker and collaborators have not crumpled before the inevitable ethical and humane considerations that such work inevitably engenders. To their list of special approaches might be added "finders' fees" and collaboration with ethnic urban associations — methods that this commentator has used with good effect (Westermeyer & Bourne, 1978; Westermeyer & Neider, 1984; Westermeyer & Peake, 1983).

Longitudinal research demands unique techniques and leads to personal impasses that the cross-sectional researcher can hardly begin to comprehend. These investigators carefully considered the ethical, legal, and professional obligations before and during their work. Missing from their list is the personal involvement that ensues — a kind of "field work countertransference." Perhaps they will cover this topic in a future treatise. This dimension of the work has led to great rewards, onerous responsibilities, and unavoidable tragedies for this commentator, enhancing and dogging my life in ways not foreseeable.

A central success in this study was the high proportion of subjects retained in the study over time. This commentator has likewise found that follow-up rates exceeding 90% are feasible in such studies (Westermeyer, 1989). Not only are such high rates achievable, they are necessary if one is to study the full range of subjects and not simply those within the "two standard deviation" limit acceptable to many social scientists. Such work distinguishes true epidemiological studies from social surveys seeking to describe modal behaviors and outcomes, as distinct from a

typical, unusual, or pathological outcomes of interest to clinicians and others of our ilk (Westermeyer, 1990).

Walker and coworkers have also demonstrated that near-random sampling can be accomplished for AI samples — a field in which “snow-ball sampling” and “samples of convenience” have held sway. This is not to say that such random sampling is problem-free. On the contrary, Walker et al. encountered “false positive” AI identities and suspected “false negative” AI identities. We likewise found that about half of AI patients admitted to a university hospital were accurately identified as AI by the admissions office, with one-fourth misidentified and one-fourth have no ethnic data recorded. These findings suggest that true random sampling methods for AI subjects cannot yet be achieved.

### **Promulgation of Findings**

Walker and coworkers will likely be analyzing these rich, important data for years to come. The large number of data bits per subject and the collection of data at several points in time call for creativity and persistence in the analytic phase of their study. If this commentator’s experience with longitudinal studies holds for the Seattle study, Walker et al. will spend more time analyzing, understanding, and publishing than they have spent in collecting these data! Their “data glut” will create problems for them, since it is unlikely that they will receive adequate funding or have adequate staff (or even time) to understand and promulgate their findings. Consequently, waste will ensue: waste of subjects’ time, waste of researchers’ efforts, waste of taxpayers’ dollars, and waste of valuable information.

Walker and collaborators might address this problem proactively. Alternates (neither all-inclusive nor mutually exclusive) for approaching this problem might include the following:

1. Early on, they might publish data-rich papers that might be used by other researchers for secondary analysis. Some journals permit such data in appendix form. This approach could begin immediately. Their funding sources might assist in this effort.
2. At some future time, Walker et al. might make their data set available for analysis by others. This could occur at the conclusion of their grant funding or at some future date (say, the year 2000, or 2010). Under this plan, the authors would have to decide where to “deposit” their data (e.g., NIH, INS, the World Wide net), how to share “ownership” (since the data and the analysis comprise two separate forms of “intellectual property”), and what kind of editorial constraint or censorship they might want to exercise. Innovation,

selflessness, and consideration of all good and bad possibilities would necessarily presage such a step.

3. The investigators and their various backers might locate funds for others to analyze and publish these data at Walker et al's. bailiwick (or wickiup, if you prefer). This could provide a venue for AI college students, graduate students, medical students, residents, fellows, and junior faculty to participate in the analysis and publication of these data in Seattle. I have utilized this approach on a modest scale with longitudinal Hmong survey data (Westermeyer & Her, 1995) and Hmong opium addict data (Westermeyer & Chitasombat, 1995).

### Intervention Opportunities

Even these early data suggest opportunities for prevention and early intervention of Substance Related Disorders. Prevention-intervention efforts should not await the complete analysis and publication of these data years from now. The time for designing and studying such efforts is now, or at least in the near future. Can Walker et al. devise and propose controlled intervention methods, based on their experience during this study?

Previous interventions in AI communities suggest that obtaining control groups poses a serious problem. Control groups within the same region may be "contaminated" by the propensity for AI communities to spread the words regarding effective interventions over great distances. AI leaders and communities demure from studies without benefit to community members. Creativity would be needed to develop realistic intervention studies that meet desirable criteria (e.g., controlled by AI communities, affordable, acceptable, accessible).

### Summary

Like all good studies, this effort by Walker and colleagues leads not so much to fixed answers and firm solutions, as to new questions and quests.

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