

**COMMENTARY  
BY  
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For almost two decades, the American Indian Research (AIR) team has been investigating the intricate and complex interrelationship between American Indians and alcohol abuse. This article, by R. Dale Walker, M. Dow Lambert, Patricia Silk Walker, Daniel R. Kivlahan, Dennis M. Donovan, and Matthew O. Howard, reports at the mid-point of the major prospective longitudinal study being conducted from 1987–1998. This ground-breaking study is gathering extensive information about two generations of urban American Indians in Seattle, Washington<sup>1</sup>. Building on earlier studies which documented the severity and chronicity of the problems and the failure of existing treatment strategies, the current study directs attention towards the critical phases of personal history in alcohol use within a family setting. By documenting the experiences of youth and their primary caretakers over time, the study offers significant potential to increase our understanding about when Indian youth begin to drink and in what manner, about their families and home environment and about the other influences that effect alcohol use over time. The attention paid to alcohol abuse among Indian women and the analysis of risk factors are particularly important features of this research. Further, it presents an unique opportunity to learn from the experience of both Indian youth who abuse alcohol and those who do not develop alcohol-related difficulties. Insights gained from the study may stimulate the emergence of a new framework for prevention and intervention in the future.

“Alcohol Abuse in Urban Indian Adolescents and Women: A Longitudinal Study for Assessment and Risk Evaluation” provides a general overview of the research, its history and its rationale. Tables and figures describe characteristics of the sample, study timeline and protocol and some of the initial findings on alcohol use. It discusses challenges and decision points faced by the team. It also considers unique features of the research, particularly the lengthy and consistent record of cooperation between the researchers and the urban Indian community, which establishes the environment that assures the community of meticulous and sensitive conduct by the research team and that permits the research team to accomplish the research goals and carry out long term follow-up. The paper is thus an excellent introduction to this study for those who may not be aware of it. I hope that the journal will be distributed widely outside as well as within the United States. Many people will want to read it.

The paper also evoked memories for me. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with Dale and Pat Walker and the AIR team

from 1978–81. During that time, we had many excellent discussions, discovered that critical feedback from our colleagues could either elate or deflate us in our early research efforts, and repeatedly revised the early studies' biographical questionnaire. We also began to work closely with the Indian community, particularly the Seattle Indian Health Board. Since my departure from the region, I have kept in touch with the project and have visited several times.

Thus it's clear that my comments are neither arms-length nor unbiased. I have continued to work on American Indian affairs, although in quite different contexts. My research has explored rights to harvest and manage natural resources in various countries. Recently, I have become increasingly intrigued by the interrelationship between indigenous rights to resources and society's responsibility for environmental rehabilitation and protection. Seemingly remote from the concerns of the article discussed here, several ideas from my current work are conceptually relevant to the study; this article prompted me to consider them more deeply. I wish to elaborate on two broad themes here: (a) the nature of environment that is the basis for the life experiences of the study population including alcohol use, and (b) the relationship between the researchers and the community, and particularly the importance of understanding the interactive nature of the research process.

#### The Environmental Context of the Study of Urban Indian Adolescents and Women

The AIR study focuses on an urban population of American Indians from many tribes. My current pre-occupation with environmental issues, broadly defined, leads me to think about the study within its larger environment. I am interested particularly in the impact of life in the city on the study group. Many of the parents and youth were born in the city. What role does the urban milieu play in the lives of these Seattle American Indian families? The authors comment that many tribal groups are represented in the study population; only a very small proportion, however, are affiliated with Northwest tribes. This suggests several possibilities including several raised by the authors. Seattle was a center for the BIA's relocation program in the 1950s, where Indians were relocated to urban centers far from their home reservations. Indians of Northwestern tribal ancestry may be more likely to reside on nearby reservations. Some may work or spend time in urban areas such as Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia, and Bellingham, but their children may attend schools that are closer to home. Possibly the Northwest Indian families may be more involved with the cultures' traditional economic pursuits such as fishing or with traditional ceremonies.

In my view, the study and its population raise interesting questions about the role of the urban environment, particularly for Indian people who — like many Seattle residents — are living far from the places of

their families' roots. The variety of lifestyles found in the city will also be of interest. For example, Table 2 indicates a very wide range of incomes. Many study participants live in poverty while others do not. These differences permit the researchers to consider the role of urban poverty in the larger picture as well as the possible role of having more secure livelihoods. The city also offers many diverse activities, some of which emphasize that the performance of the group demands healthy behavior from each member, such as team sports, bands, and youth orchestras. Alternately, certain city situations may cause difficulties for the Indian families, such as the possibility of facing prejudice in an urban school. It would be interesting to know how the study participants experience the urban setting and to understand their perspectives on the particular opportunities and challenges as well as risks that it may present in relation to their alcohol use.

The AIR study offers several paths to exploring these and related questions. The Biographical Questionnaire will provide information on links between urban and reservation life, about participation in Indian rituals and ceremonies and about participation in sports and other activities. Knowledge about the presence of caring and encouraging teachers, adult mentors for youths and supportive relatives and neighbors for the family may emerge from other parts of the protocol. At some appropriate point in the study, I hope that the researchers will also ask additional follow-up questions specifically related to the urban environment to explore these questions, and to facilitate comparisons with studies of alcohol use in the reservation environment.

### Research as a Social Process

As a part of an undergraduate class in Social Relations at Harvard many years ago, I recall being advised to look for two key elements in the conduct of research: "elegance and relevance."<sup>2</sup> Certain studies have methodological elegance in their meticulous construction, attention to detail, reliability, validity, but may not necessarily be relevant to truly important issues in science and/or society. In contrast, other studies speak eloquently to important issues in society, but their relevance may be undermined by inadequate attention to rigorous methodology. In my view, the AIR longitudinal study contains both elegance and relevance. However, because of the nature of the study as part of a social process, some issues about the relationship of the study and the community are relevant here. These issues challenge the balance of elegance and relevance, and it will be important that they be taken into account as the research progresses.

The authors are well aware of the possibility that participation in the study through the yearly interview may function as an intervention that could potentially influence study findings. As well, it seems possible that

the communication of results through publications such as this one may become potential interventions. For example, a study participant who reads this journal or other reports (e.g., Walker, 1993; Walker et al., 1993) might perceive the research findings as a "wake-up call" to seek help and/or change behavior. Alternately, participants reading about risk factors could begin to see their futures as part of a "self-fulfilling" prophecy. This issue is not unique to the current study. It is ingrained in the combination of the longitudinal design and the obligation to disseminate important findings in a timely manner. The ethical and scholarly requirement to convey research results is important to the Indian community and to scientific and other audiences. The research team and its activities are part of this larger social process and thus it is important that the study document and take into account any possible impacts that both participation and publication may have on the findings.

The study is well-informed by current standards that emphasize partnerships between researchers and Indian communities<sup>3</sup>. Thus, when initial findings have potential relevance for treatment (e.g., Walker, 1993), the obligations of partnership suggest consideration of the desirability of initiating interventions with current or succeeding cohorts. Again, this is not a problem unique to this study, but the complexity of both the research focus on alcohol abuse and the relationship to the community over time makes it a particularly difficult issue. Stated differently, when will the researchers know enough to begin to venture into the prevention and intervention which is now seen as a long-term goal of the study? On the one hand, it could be argued that some study participants require immediate programs that address the problems identified through their participation in the research, even though the staff does provide resource material on available assistance and intervention was not the basis of the original consent procedure nor the research plan. On the other hand, however, it may be extremely difficult to evaluate and decide if results from early parts of a long-term multifaceted study provide sufficient basis to justify changing course before the entire study and its results can be assessed. Treatment centers in other locales will also have to give very careful consideration to recognizing the most appropriate time to utilize study results in designing their programs. Both premature use and delayed recognition of findings as they emerge could be costly in human terms.

#### Concluding Remarks

Recognition and discussion of the issues in fora such as this journal broaden the discussion and enrich the possibilities for addressing the issues. Continued sensitivity to the complexity of the study will assist in striving for a continued balance between elegance and relevance. In my view, the demonstrated competence and commitment of the AIR team will enable them to meet these challenges with the careful and appropriate

attention to the implications of the research that characterizes their work to date.

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#### Footnotes

1. I use the terminology “American Indians” primarily here, in keeping with the preferred usage in the article. In Canada, the term “First Nations” is often used, as is “aboriginal peoples”. Internationally, the concept of “indigenous peoples” has gained greater usage, particularly within the context of the United Nations.
2. It is not possible to provide clear attribution for the source of the class discussion at this time, however, it seems appropriate to credit psychologist Jerome S. Bruner as the inspiration, and possibly the actual source. The description here relies on my recollection over many years and passed on to students in my own classes. In my memory, I associated these ideas with the work of Dr. Bruner, which was discussed in Social Relations 150 in December 1962. However, recent review of my class notes indicates that the discussion of his ideas concerned somewhat different contrasts: eloquence and relevance in education; mechanistic and relevant approaches in research on cognition. I attempted to

resolve this discrepancy between recall and record in time for this article by contacting Dr. Bruner (he was abroad), and by consulting his publications, but without success.

3. The design of this research reflects the increasing recognition of the vital importance of developing new and more appropriate relationships between researchers and Indian people in recent years. The involvement of Indian people at all stages of the research is seen as very important in developing partnerships. For interesting descriptions of an innovative partnership approach to studying environment and health in native communities in Canada, called Project EAGLE (Effects on Aboriginals from the Great Lakes Environment), see Bird (1995) and Wheatley (1993).