

EDITORIAL

Recent years have seen the slow, but gradual accumulation of large scale studies of alcohol use and abuse among Native communities. Indeed, many of the authors represented in the present volume are responsible for this progress. However, most of the work to date has been of a cross-sectional nature, constituting important, yet limited perspectives on this phenomena. The constraints imposed by such forms of inquiry frustrate answers to questions about the relative contribution of risk and protective factors over time, about key transitional periods, and about subsequent developmental pathways. Insights of this nature ultimately are needed to inform the content, timing, duration, and sequence of preventive interventions across the life span.

Over the years, frequent conversations with Drs. Dale Walker and Pat Silk-Walker impressed upon me the careful thought that had been invested in their longitudinal study of alcohol use and abuse among a large sample of urban Indians, with special emphasis on the mother/child dyad. As we talked, there was little doubt in my mind that the empirical findings of this work would find its way into a variety of professional and public forums. However, many of the issues that we discussed at greatest length had to do with the opportunities for and challenges of conducting longitudinal research in this special population. Those issues touched upon matters of science — e.g., sampling, recruitment, retention, analysis, participant confidentiality — as well as local benefit — e.g., community participation, feedback, and programmatic application. The lessons learned about these matters seemed much less likely to be published. Most professional journals, today, are interested only in what they consider to be the “meat” or substance of a study; the “doing” of research often is considered outside of this domain. Ironically, with respect to longitudinal work in particular, thoughtful reflection on the latter is precisely what is now needed. Thus, Walker et al.'s offer to author a manuscript along these lines, employing their current experience as the central speaking point, was fortuitous: an offer I quickly accepted.

In the pages that follow, then, the reader is treated to a sophisticated presentation of research methods employed in a longitudinal fashion and comments by other investigators who have shared similar struggles. The result is a wonderful discussion of ideas, approaches, and priorities that is sure to instruct all of us. This exchange adds in important ways to the dialogue surrounding the potential and the pitfalls of studying the human condition over time.

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