

Responsible and Ethical Conduct of Research with Ethnocultural Populations



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“Never look for a psychological explanation unless every effort to find a cultural one has been exhausted.”



– *Margaret Mead (1959, p. 16) quoting William Fielding Ogburn, one of her mentors at Columbia University*

***Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists
and Journalists Devastated the Amazon***

Patrick Tierney (2001)

The Ax Fight

Timothy Asch & Napoleon
Chagnon (1989)

In the Land of the War Canoes

Edward S. Curtis (1914)

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QuickTime™ and a
MPEG-4 Video decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

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A sample of community concerns and problems with researchers expressed by a variety of ethnic minority community members...

- People have been persuaded to participate in research in which they did not fully understand the nature of the risks and benefits;
- Research was conducted which did not respect the basic human dignity of the individual participants or their religious and cultural beliefs;
- Researchers have been interested in our people as an 'isolated' or 'pure' gene pool to be used for laboratory purposes, demeaning the dignity of the people and the community;
- Researchers have sought and published sensitive religious and cultural information, in some cases destroying its efficacy by publication;

- Researchers have taken cultural information out of context and, as a result, have published conclusions that were factually incorrect;
- Researchers have sensationalized community, family, and individual problems and released publications heedless of their impact on our community's legitimate political and social interests;
- Despite promises at the outset that research would benefit our community, researchers have failed or refused to follow through on promised benefits, to share preliminary results with the community or give the community an opportunity to participate in the formulation and recommendations or of a final report; and
- Researchers have failed to respect cultural beliefs and practices of our community in their research methods.

Great Eskimo Snow Words Hoax

Laura Martin (1986) - *“Eskimo Words for Snow”: A Case Study in the Genesis and Decay of an Anthropological Example*



- counts range from 3, 9, 20, 40, 50, 100, and even 400
- no complete inventory seems possible
 - ◆ lack or inaccuracy of citations
 - ◆ application of the example to diverse theories
 - ◆ wholesale reanalysis of the example and its history
- proof for the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis (world view problem)

- Franz Boas (1911) - brief citation of 4 lexicons for snow in Eskimo (Inuit)
- Benjamin Lee Whorf (1940) - *Science and Linguistics* - vague usage of example - suggest 5 words but not the same set used by Boas
- Edward Hall (1959) - *The Silent Language* - uses snow example 3 times and considered it already part of general knowledge
- Why?
 - ◆ exoticism
 - ◆ prepared to believe almost anything about the unfamiliar
 - ◆ reflection of admiration for adaptive quality of societies
 - ◆ grants the lecturer as one in possession of specialized knowledge



“The tragedy is not that so many people got the facts wildly wrong; it is that in the mentally lazy and anti-intellectual world we live in today, hardly anyone cares enough to think about trying to determine what the facts are.”



– *Geoffrey K. Pullum, 1991, p. 171*

Ethical Considerations and Responsibilities to the Population Under Study*

1. Attention must be given to avoid actions, procedures, interactive styles, etc. that violate local customs and cultural understandings of the community.
2. Sensitivity and attention should be given to the cultural *ethos* and *eidos* of the community in every phase of the research.
3. Standard of truth and respect must prevail in every phase of the research effort. Use of “deception,” concealment, etc. is never acceptable.

*Adapted from Tapp, Kelman, Triandis, Wrightsman, & Coelho, 1974

Ethical Considerations and Responsibilities to the Population Under Study (Cont.)

4. Research efforts should take all steps to insure informed consent and to avoid invasion of privacy. Concept of consent, confidentiality, and volunteerism may have to be phrased in the context of the culture of the community.
5. Research should not involve or provide any physical, mental, or social harm or insult to the respondents including degradation, humiliation, embarrassment, damage to one's reputation, anxiety, stress, or significant political risks.

Ethical Considerations and Responsibilities to the Population Under Study (Cont.)

6. The research should not have, as a latent agenda, the transmission of information or the modification of attitudes and behavior unless the agenda is consistent with the project's goals.
7. Overall, the research experience must provide some tangible practical benefit to the community.

Ecology of Lives Approach

- Ecosystems approaches call for “principled cultural sensitivity,” a sensitivity based on respect for whom research and interventions are intended and which would prohibit interventions that violate cultural norms. Knowledge of how lives are led becomes crucial in designing research and interventions that can “take” in the local context and become a resource to the community where they occur.
- The goal of research and intervention is community development where the project is constructed in such a way that it becomes a resource to the community. Unless one cares about how lives are led locally such a goal would be difficult if not impossible to achieve.

Ecology of Lives Approach

- Importance of a coping and adaptation orientation to understanding individual behavior as a resource to community context, cultural history, and local resources and traditions.
- Attention focuses on the transactions between people and context rather than on internal dynamics.
- Emphasis placed on the importance of culture as an historical and contemporary aspect of the framework within which individuals appraise their situation and their options.
- Focus on the community context as the stage within which individual behavior occurs

Ecology of Lives Approach

- A focus on the ecology of lives approach and designing research and interventions at the community level suggest a long term commitment to the locale as part of the process. “One-shot” or “safari” approaches to community based research would be discouraged including the low probability that such an approach would leave a positive residual after the project ends or the grant money runs out.

“The principle that underlies problems of ethics is respecting the humanity of others as one would have others respect one’s own. If field (researchers) genuinely feel such respect for others, they are not likely to get into serious trouble. But if they do not feel such respect, then no matter how scrupulously they follow the letter of the written codes of professional ethics, or follow the recommended procedures of field (research) manuals, they will betray themselves all along the line in the little things...”



– *Ward H. Goodenough (1980, p. 52)*

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