

Power, Praxis, and the Social Work of Anthropology¹

Barbara Rose Johnston²

Abstract

This paper discusses complaints against and appeals for participatory anthropological research with indigenous groups. Arguments criticizing collaborative efforts with indigenous groups to shape research goals, methods, and outcome are counterpointed.

Introduction

Calls for developing a fieldwork ethic that emphasizes participatory action research with indigenous groups have been met with complaints from many in the discipline who argue that participatory approaches—especially those that involve collaborative efforts to shape research goals, methods, and outcome—overly emphasize the social welfare needs of the study population. In doing so, such research runs the risk of compromising the objectivity and integrity of anthropological research, and transforms the role of anthropologist from scientist to social worker. I disagree and argue in this paper that collaborative and participatory approaches not only produce credible scientific data, but in many instances, such approaches reflect mandates codified in local, national, and international law.

This essay has its origins in the anthropological debate over Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon* (2000) and the subsequent American Anthropological Association (AAA) inquiry into ethical issues surrounding anthropological and human population studies in the Amazon. Some of the Amazonian research examined by Tierney involved (1) tracking the nature, presence and effect of radioactive fallout in the environment, food chain, and people; (2) identifying human genetic effects of exposure to naturally occurring sources of radiation; and (3) determining the long-term consequence of exposure to high levels of radioactivity on groups of defined and controllable human subjects, including communities who depended upon the local environs for food, lived on traditional lands in tightly defined social groups, and lived in areas with high levels of naturally occurring radiation.

Tierney examined fieldwork praxis as well as what he saw to be the consequential

damages associated with fieldwork and the subsequent publication of books and movies depicting the lifestyles and violent traditions of Amazonian peoples. Within anthropology, and in broader public circles, a fierce controversy developed over the validity of Tierney's depictions of science, scientists, research motivations and relationships, and the consequential damages of conducting scientific research with isolated, indigenous subjects.

A number of professional organizations sponsored inquiries into the allegations raised by Patrick Tierney, and in several important instances his conclusions were scrutinized and discredited (American Society of Human Genetics 2002; International Genetic Epidemiology Society 2001). The American Anthropological Association established an El Dorado Task Force that produced a final report in May 2002 recognizing that some allegations lacked validity yet, at the same time, noting that others reflected serious violations of professional ethics. In their recommendations, the Task Force urged anthropologists to incorporate collaborative and participatory research models in the design and implementation of studies involving indigenous peoples (American Anthropological Association 2002). This report was accepted by the AAA Executive Board in May 2002.

In reaction to the AAA El Dorado Task Force recommendations, in November 2002, Daniel Gross, an anthropologist with the World Bank, and Stuart Platner, director of the National Science Foundation's Cultural Anthropology Program, published a commentary in the AAA *Anthropology Newsletter* (Gross and Platner et al. 2002: 4, hereafter referred to as Gross and Platner). The Gross and Platner commentary was on behalf of a signatory group of some 50 anthropologists criticizing the AAA El Dorado Task Force, in this instance, for its participatory rec-

ommendations contained in Section 2.3 of its *Final Report*. It was this commentary criticizing "Anthropology as Fieldwork" that originally prompted me to write this essay, delivered as a paper to the American Anthropological Association at its November 2002 meeting. The El Dorado Task Force report itself was later rescinded following a mail-ballot poll of its members in May 2005. The resolution to rescind charged that the El Dorado investigation and the resulting report violated the association's ban on adjudicating claims of unethical behavior and that the El Dorado investigation did not follow basic principles of fairness and due process for the accused (American Anthropological Association 2005). The final tally on the resolution was 846 to 338, with close to 90 percent of the AAA membership failing to return their ballot.

Criticism of Participatory Approaches to Research

El Dorado Task Force recommendations of Section 2.3 are those:

- Noting that researchers "may encounter knowledge relevant to anthropological theory, but such interests may have to be set aside if they are not of equal concern to all collaborators."

- Urging that the anthropology of indigenous peoples and related communities move towards collaborative models where research is "from its onset, aimed at material, symbolic and political benefits for the research population, as its members have helped to define them."

- Defining collaborative research as "side by side work of all parties in a mutually beneficial research program" where all parties "are equal partners in the enterprise participating in the development of the research design" (American Anthropological Association 2002).

In their *Anthropology Newsletter* commentary, Gross and Platner raise the concern that

involving untrained community members in the definition of research questions is not likely to improve research design. The difference between a valid and invalid research design is a technical issue learned by studying social science and by acquiring field experience, ideally under the guidance of a seasoned expert. In their zeal to impose a

requirement of advocacy on anthropological research, the Task Force recommends a strategy that would weaken the anthropologist's primary claim to a legitimate role in the host community, that of skilled social scientist. As is well known, the advocacy role could conflict with the detachment required of an observer.

Gross and Platner note that combining research with advocacy can be arrogant as such actions necessarily involve the assumption that the anthropologist, who is typically foreign to a particular society and culture, is a legitimate advocate with the skills and ability to help solve problems. They suggest that advocacy research is highly problematic and raises troublesome questions, such as how to choose the "correct" faction to support in the event that the advocacy role requires choosing sides.

Gross and Platner see research excellence as the primary obligation of the anthropologist. They say anthropologists have "an obligation to explain the goals, requirements, risks and benefits of their research project to the community." Furthermore, they say, researchers may have the opportunity, though not the obligation, to place their skills at the service of the community, and may even elect to serve as an advocate for change. In short, they support "the idea of returning something to their research subjects" (Gross and Platner 2002).

However, Gross and Platner object to the involvement of untrained research subjects in defining the goals or methods of professional research. By defining anthropological research as social work and by demanding that field research designs be developed with non-anthropologists as equal partners, they fear that the AAA El Dorado Task Force endorsement of collaborative participatory research "virtually erases the role of training, expertise, theory and methodology in anthropological research." They maintain that arrogant, subjective, and dangerously incompetent research would be the result since in their view the "primary responsibility of a researcher is to do excellent research" (Gross and Platner 2002).

In rejecting a fieldwork ethic that prioritizes participatory methods, Gross and Platner seek to reassert the notion that scientifically sound

anthropology reflects research goals and methods developed with reference to disciplinary issues and theoretical concerns. The substantive “work” of anthropology is intellectual and the primary purpose of fieldwork is to collect data in a rigorous and objective manner. This interpretation of the social role of anthropology is one where anthropologists work *in* communities, not *with* communities. In the interest of securing the support and input of community members, the researcher may negotiate reciprocal favors. However, power to define the terms of research is in the anthropologist’s hands, and the nature of the researcher-subject relationship is necessarily hierarchical, rather than equitable. Clearly these views are dominant chords in our discipline, as evidenced by the lengthy list of commentary collaborators associated with Gross and Platner.

Arguments for Participatory Approaches to Research

Sadly, the views expressed by these opponents of a participatory approach to anthropological research, do not reflect current and emerging laws, regulations, and norms with respect to human-subject research involving indigenous peoples. A relevant example is “Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of the Heritage of Indigenous People” that was first articulated in 1994 in a statement by United Nations Special Rapporteur Erica-Irene Daes (1995). It was revised in 1999 and adopted in 2003. Some of its principles are as follows:

- [Number 8.] To protect their heritage, indigenous peoples must also exercise control over all research conducted within their territories, or which uses their people as subjects of study.
- [Number 9.] The free and informed consent of the traditional owners should be an essential precondition of any agreements which may be made for the recording, study, use or display of indigenous peoples’ heritage.
- [Number 10.] Any agreements which may be made for the recording, study, use or display of indigenous peoples’ heritage must be revocable, and ensure that the peoples concerned continue to be the primary beneficiaries of commercial application.
- [Number 26.] National laws should deny to

any person or corporation the right to obtain patent, copyright or other legal protection for any element of indigenous peoples’ heritage without adequate documentation of the free and informed consent of the traditional owners to an arrangement for the sharing of ownership, control, use and benefits.

In Canada, by way of affirmation, these principles have been incorporated in the federal policy governing ethical conduct for research involving human subjects (Canadian Institutes of Health et al. 2005) which encourages researchers:

- To respect the culture, traditions and knowledge of the Aboriginal group;
 - To conceptualize and conduct research with the Aboriginal group as a partnership;
 - To consult members of the group who have relevant expertise;
 - To involve the group in the design of the project;
 - To examine how the research may be shaped to address the needs and concerns of the group;
 - To make best efforts to ensure that the emphasis of the research, and the ways chosen to conduct it, respect the many viewpoints of different segments of the group in question;
 - To provide the group with information respecting the following:
 - Protection of the Aboriginal group’s cultural estate and other property;
 - The availability of a preliminary report for comment;
 - The potential employment by researchers of members of the community appropriate and without prejudice;
 - Researchers’ willingness to cooperate with community institutions;
 - Researchers’ willingness to deposit data, working papers and related materials in an agreed-upon repository.
 - To acknowledge in the publication of the research results the various viewpoints of the community on the topics researched; and
 - To afford the community an opportunity to react and respond to the research findings before the completion of the final report, in the final report, or even in all relevant publications.
- Canadian universities and research institutes

have developed their own implementing guidelines, often as a result of consultative partnerships with local tribal councils. For example, the "Protocols and Principles for Conducting Research in an Indigenous Context" of the Faculty of Human and Social Development at the University of Victoria adopted in February 2003, recognizes that

researchers are knowledge brokers, people who have power to construct legitimating arguments for or against ideas, theories or practices. They are collectors of information and producers of meaning, which can be used for or against indigenous interests. ... Research that involves Indigenous people or Indigenous culture as a focal interest (subject matter), whether directly or indirectly, should ensure that research protocols uphold the principles of protection, partnership and participation (University of Victoria 2003).

And these principles inform the United States memorandum of President William J. Clinton, dated April 29, 1994, requiring open and candid government-to-government consultation with federally recognized American Indian tribes prior to taking any federal action (Clinton 1994). All parties, through environmental assessment, are made aware of the potential impacts on American Indian tribes and resources of a federal agency's plans, projects, programs, and activities. Through the consultative and assessment process, terms are negotiated to proceed, or not to proceed, in ways that reflect and respect tribal rights and resources. Consultative regulations relate to federally recognized American Indian governments and those of Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians and, by courtesy, to non-recognized American Indian groups and other indigenous peoples associated with the United States of America. The consultative requirement has been expanded from the proposed actions of all federal agencies, to all actions conducted by any institution or individual receiving federal funds. That includes the economic development initiatives funded by the United States Agency for International Development, the World Bank, and the broad array of scientific research funded by the National Science Foundation (National Environmental Justice Advisory Council 2000).

The point here is that transparent, informed, collaborative, and equitable research partnerships between anthropologists and the indigenous peoples with whom they work is not only an ethical ideal, but also it is in many cases a legally mandated reality. Such efforts to strengthen local control over scientific research originated out of the need to insure that health research respected fundamental human rights. In recent years these have been expanded to protect intellectual property and cultural knowledge and to insure free, prior and meaningful informed consent (see World Health Organization 2003; implementing measures of the Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations 1992). In the United States and Canada, many American Indian tribes and nations have adopted research evaluation tools to strengthen internal community capacity to evaluate and meaningfully participate in research (see American Indian Law Center 1999; Mohawk Council of Akwesasne 2006; Council of Yukon First Nations 2000).

A Personal Research Experience With the Participatory Approach

By way of a personal example from research in the Marshall Islands, I respond in greater detail to the Gross and Platner concern that participatory-research collaborations lack objectivity and compromise the scientific integrity of our discipline. In November 1988, Bill Graham, public advocate for the Marshall Islands Nuclear Claims Tribunal invited me to assist the tribunal in conceptualizing the Marshallese value of land and the related damages and losses experienced by the people of Rongelap, Rongerik, and Ailinginae atolls as a result of the United States Nuclear Weapons Testing program. The public advocate was frustrated with the development of earlier claims for Bikini and Enewetak, which assessed damage and loss from a framework of western property rights. In the Marshall Islands, rights to use critical resources are socially constructed. They are typically determined according to maternal, matrilineal-descent relationships and legitimized according to fluid rather than fixed communal relationships. Existing appraisal documents considered only one aspect of land

valuation—the economic value of rights to use land by leasing.

I agreed to assist, with the caveat that I work in partnership with Holly Barker, a linguistic anthropologist of Seattle, Washington, and the Embassy of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, with several years of experience living and working with the Marshallese. In earlier publications, both Holly and I describe some of the traumas experienced by the people of Rongelap during the nuclear weapons testing program. Acutely exposed to radioactive fallout following the March 1, 1954 Bravo Test, the people of Rongelap were enrolled in a classified research study (Project 4.1) and over the next four decades they served, without informed consent, as subjects in research documenting the ways radiation moved through the environment, food chain, and human body. Biomedical examinations, sampling, and procedures focused on documenting the wide array of degenerative health effects of radiation exposure, while treatment was largely limited to specific radiogenic cancers (see Johnston 1994, Barker 1997).

We were keenly aware that the Marshallese had been studied for decades, but biomedical research was not developed according to their needs. Scientists repeatedly ignored or dismissed Marshallese personal experiences with radiation effects. And, while hundreds of research reports were eventually published, results were rarely reported back to the affected population. Thus, when we began intensive field research in the spring of 1999, we did so with a formal contract that included the code of ethics of the Society for Applied Anthropology and a clause protecting Marshallese intellectual property rights. We developed a research approach that was purposefully transparent. It involved participatory work with the people from Rongelap, Rongerik and Ailinginae in shaping research questions, suggesting knowledgeable informants to interview, conducting research, analyzing findings, and refining recommendations.

To consider the consequential damages associated with the loss of land from a Marshallese perspective, we identified a number of key questions: What does land mean to the Marshallese? Can one assign a value to land? Does a valuation that assumes *property* is terrestrial

space, that is, the dirt underfoot, adequately incorporate all that a *weto* represent, as a parcel of land extending from ocean side to and into the lagoon? How does one value damage to the ecosystem and loss of the wide variety of natural resources (marine, terrestrial, arboreal)? How does one value the loss of access and use of atoll resources and the meaningful interaction of people and their environment? How does one value the loss of a self-sufficient way of life? What sort of valuation strategies might be used to articulate the broader range of damage and loss suggested by a human environmental impact analysis of nuclear-weapons testing in Rongelap, Rongerik, and Ailinginae Atolls? In asking these questions we soon realized the limitations and difficulties of the term *value* and emphasized in our research and in our final report the meaning and consequences of the loss of a healthful way of life.

With testimony derived from ethnographic interviews, we wove together a narrative that was substantiated by quotes from the declassified records of fallout, human and environmental injuries, medical experiments, and policy documents. The case specific narrative was contextualized with reference to international precedents involving methods to assess and compensate indigenous peoples for damages associated with involuntary resettlement, compensation for loss of land and critical resources, natural resource damage, and loss of a way of life in the United States, Australia, and elsewhere (Johnston and Barker 1999). Our work was later refined in 2001 with additional fieldwork documenting the human environmental consequences of nuclear-weapons testing, distributed for interdisciplinary peer review and revised, and then formally submitted as part of our expert-witness testimony in the claim for consequential damages filed by the people of Rongelap (Johnston and Barker 2001; Johnston in press).

In October 2001, the Rongelap community assembled on Majuro to attend the tribunal hearing and submit additional witness testimony. They provided community record books and maps depicting land claims and land-use history for exhibits. Other exhibits included a series of ethnographic maps for each atoll depicting sacred sites and critical resources such

as springs providing drinking water, giant clam beds, and important reefs to demonstrate that *land* from a Marshallese perspective includes the lagoon and surrounding reefs. And, the Rongelap community prepared and submitted as evidence a list of names of those people who have died from radiation-related illnesses, and those people who suffered from a preventable epidemic of polio.

As anthropologists, we were asked to present and defend our expert-witness report. We proposed introducing and eliciting testimony from Marshallese witnesses that involved sensitive cultural information about land tenure, marine-resource rights, and sacred sites and other cultural resources. The testimony included that of elderly and female witnesses who recounted traumatic and abusive experiences associated with involuntary resettlement, radiation exposure, and human-subject experimentation. Other Marshallese witnesses testifying about current conditions, or recollections of a non-intrusive or traumatic nature, would be interviewed directly by the public advocate and the Rongelap Local Government counsel. All witnesses would be cross-examined by the defender of the Nuclear Claims Fund. The tribunal expressed concern that questioning of Marshallese witnesses by anthropological experts could violate procedural rules.

The public advocate defended our approach, using the notes I had prepared. He noted that many of the witnesses were elderly women whose experiences were very humiliating and painful and that the public discussion of these experiences in front of family members and a broader public broke numerous taboos. He asked the tribunal to recognize the cultural linguistic necessity of an anthropologist posing questions in ways that would minimize cultural sensitivities, respect taboos, and still elicit testimony. He argued that a female anthropologist, with a pre-existing relationship and with rapport with the informants, was necessary to present questions in an appropriate respectful manner that allowed the Marshallese witness the cultural space to respond. And he noted that ethnographic interviews represent the primary means by which anthropological knowledge is generated, that the posing of neutral and culturally respectful questions to elicit information repre-

sented a key element of our data gathering, and that this approach in the proceedings was a cultural and linguistic necessity. Counsel cited the Zuni Land Claims case as a relevant example where anthropologists deposed native experts, and this testimony played a central role in judicial proceedings (Hart 1994). The tribunal accepted these arguments and requested that the Rongelap counsel provide a post-hearing briefing citing the relevant case precedents.

As expert witnesses, we could have simply testified about the information collected in previous interviews. However, by questioning the Marshallese before the tribunal we were demonstrating our methodology, that is, the methodology upon which our written submissions are based. The purpose of conducting ethnographic interviews as part of our case presentation was to enable us to reconstruct our methodology for the tribunal. We wanted to demonstrate to the tribunal that our expert testimony (1) is based upon sufficient facts or data, (2) is the product of reliable principles and methods, and (3) results from applying the principles and methods reliably to the facts of the case. In the post-hearing brief, which I drafted with input from Paul Magnarella of the University of Florida and other anthropologist/lawyers, United States federal and state evidentiary rules were cited. They allow expert witnesses to question other witnesses. We provided references to procedures and evidentiary rulings in similar land cases involving traditional cultures and damage claims of indigenous peoples in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

As to the substantive complaint about compromised science, how does one explore these questions from a participatory research initiative and produce an anthropological study that is rigorous, defensible among peers and before a court? Our strategy was to first develop a research proposal containing key questions and evidentiary needs, methods, and techniques with input from a professional peer-review network, and then to utilize a Marshallese advisory committee on *land values*. The latter was to help refine fieldwork questions, tease out the missing elements, identify knowledgeable informants, and generate public interest and support for the project.

We conducted fieldwork with Marshallese assistants, conducted archival research, analyzed data, and developed a draft report that was then sent through another round of Marshallese and independent scientific peer review. We were hugely fortunate in having access to the declassified literature. Each and every bit of oral testimony was substantiated by the scientific documents and military records classified by the United States Atomic Energy Commission, Department of the Navy, Department of Defense, and the Department of Energy. This mix of collaborative and participatory anthropology and evidentiary analysis resulted in complete acceptance by the tribunal judges. In three days of hearings we did not receive a single critical question.

The end result was an assessment of the consequential damages of nuclear-weapons testing, human-subject experimentation, and involuntary resettlement. It not only demonstrated social, cultural, physical, economic and environmental effects, but also presented valuation assessments for each category of injury using United States standards and case precedents, as well as the community notion of a meaningful remedy. In doing so, we redefined the principle of *just compensation* employed in the court setting, from a model of economic compensation for damage and a loss of individual property rights, to a broader model of community damages and remedial needs associated with the loss of a way of life (Johnston and Barker 2001, Barker 2003). At this writing in August of 2006, the tribunal has yet to issue its findings. However, using our assessment as a planning tool, the local Rongelap government has developed plans and begun to implement many of the recommended remedies, especially those ideas that originated from within the Rongelap community.

Conclusions

Anthropologists are citizens of the world who are scientists with the tools and training to document reality in ways that affect lives. We anthropologists not only have the ethical obligation *to do no harm*, but also to insure that we consciously structure our public forays with careful consideration of the nature of proposed work and the social contracts that structure this work.

Anthropological research conducted with the collaborative involvement of indigenous peoples has produced scientific findings recognized as competent and significant in countless peer-reviewed settings. The question of subjectivity and compromise in such research findings has been explored in numerous venues, and the role of anthropologist as scholar/advocate has been validated in legal forums and court cases in the United States, Canada, Australia, and as noted in this case, in the Marshall Islands.

Anthropological research shaped and conducted without the meaningful involvement of indigenous research subjects runs the risk of violating the rights of indigenous groups and those of individuals that are protected by national and international laws. Included are rights to self-determination, to meaningful informed consent in human-subject research, and to intellectual property and the control of cultural knowledge. ○

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the invited session titled "Conducting Ethical Fieldwork among Vulnerable Indigenous Groups" held on November 20, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, at the annual conference of the Committee on Ethics of the American Anthropological Association.

2. The Ph.D. in anthropology of Barbara Rose Johnston is from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and was awarded in 1987. Her contact information is as follows: Senior Research Fellow, Center for Political Ecology, P. O. Box 8467, Santa Cruz, California (CA) 9506-8467 USA by regular mail, bjohnston@igc.org by e-mail, and 831-459-4541 by telephone.

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