Commentary: No Itinerant Researchers
Tolerated: Principled and Ethical Perspectives and Research with North American Indian Communities

Joseph E. Trimble

The core themes and content of the four articles featured in this special edition of Ethos brings to mind a noteworthy quotation offered by Margaret Mead in reference to Columbia University’s William Fielding Ogburn’s approach to the study of humankind; Ogburn was one of Mead’s graduate school professors at Columbia. Specifically, Ogburn claimed that one should “never look for a psychological explanation unless every effort to find a cultural one has been exhausted” (Mead 1959:16).

Ogburn was correct. Before anyone can begin to apply conventional psychological principles and theories to an ethnocultural group, they must understand its unique lifeways and thoughtways. Unfortunately, many psychologists do not subscribe to this principle, often arguing that it takes too much time to completely familiarize oneself with an ethnocultural group. Others argue that they are merely interested in testing hypotheses “so that the universal validity of psychological theories can be effectively examined” (Dawson 1971:291). They often add that deep cultural influences are not likely to influence outcomes. Such attitudes and beliefs are incredulous and ethnocentric. A cursive review of the scientific literature in cultural, cross-cultural, and ethnic minority psychology indicates that ethnocultural lifeways and thoughtways contribute immensely to the social psychological character of humans.

Anyone who has conducted participatory community-based fieldwork knows it is tough and sometimes dangerous for everyone involved. Yet to gather the information necessary to frame an indigenous perspective of a psychological phenomena requires extraordinary patience tempered with well-developed value orientations and research skills. Access to the field to conduct research with indigenous populations is becoming more and more difficult and demanding. An intense concern about field-based research is emerging from many people from different ethnocultural communities who are becoming highly vocal about the problems many researchers create for them. Increasingly, communities are becoming concerned about the presence of “outside” researchers; many are intolerant and unforgiving of past research efforts. The once popular and widely used “safari-scholar” approach to
research is fading from acceptance and “one stop data mining” by itinerant researchers is no
longer acceptable. More than ever, ethnocultural communities demand that research occur
in their communities under their direction and control. Researchers should be prepared
to collaborate with communities, share results that have practical value, and accept the
conditions imposed by the community in gaining access to information and respondents
(Trimble and Fisher 2005).

Margaret Mead reminds us that “the ethnologist (field-based researcher) cannot march
upon a native community like an invading army, for that community is going to be not only a
source of labor and food, but also the very stuff of his investigation. He must slip in quietly,
lower himself or herself as gently as possible into the placid waters of native life, make the
unprecedented arrival of an inquiring white person as inconspicuous as possible” (Howard
1984:117). And then as Mead suggests in another source, “the way to do fieldwork is never
to come up for air until it is all over” (Mead 1977:136).

One no longer can go quietly into native communities. Community access is regulated, if
not directed, by professional ethical standards and guidelines, government requirements for
participant-informed consent, approval from an institutional review board or panel, and
native community approval of the research prospectus. Without approval and review, access
is almost impossible.

The most important challenge, though, is the responsible conduct of researchers while they
are in the field, especially as reflected in the relationship they establish with respondents
(Cassell and Jacobs 1987; Fisher and Wallace 2000).

Unfortunately and regrettably, some researchers take a more self-serving approach in which
their needs, aspirations, desires, and wants overshadow those of their host communities; and
that approach, likely judged rational and acceptable by the researcher, is the foremost reason
for the problems Native communities continue to experience with outside researchers.

Self-serving researchers may believe they can mask their selfish intentions but they may be
deceiving themselves that they will go unnoticed. Ward Goodenough reminds us, “The
principle that underlies problems of ethics is respecting the humanity of others as one would
have others respect one’s own. 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” (1980:52).

“What does it mean to be an ethical person when conducting research with ethnocultural
communities?” ask Trimble and Mohatt (2005). Does it mean that one must be a morally
decent person who closely adheres to a precise set of values that will not be compromised?

Does one consider ethical standards in the context of viewing community-based dilemmas
from a principled perspective guided by the fixed rules of objectivity, reason, and impar-
tiality? Is that approach likely to be acceptable to the community’s research partners? Is it
possible that one’s character and, thus, moral and ethical standards are incompatible with
those likely to exist in the host research community? (2005:327). In addition to the personal
challenges, communities also will want to know what kind of person they will be working
with in the course of the relationship. If researchers don’t closely follow and live by a set of
“principled virtuous ethics,” such as prudence, integrity, respectfulness, benevolence, and
reverence (Trimble and Mohatt 2005), then at some point they slowly alienate their hosts
and may be asked to leave.

Ethics requires self-reflection and an ability to recognize and share with others personal
values, errors of judgment, and lessons learned along the path toward the respectful and
responsible conduct of research. No matter how the topic is expressed, researchers should
seriously consider framing their field-based research around the formation and maintenance
of responsible relationships. One will soon discover that community members will put the
researcher through a sequence of “tests” to assess their level of commitment to working
closely with them and to learn about their cultural ways. In effect, a “relational methodol-
ogy” means that one takes the time to nurture relationships not merely for the sake of
expediting the research and gaining acceptance and trust but because one should care about
the welfare and dignity of all people (Trimble and Mohatt 2005).

Framing ethical principles and guidelines to include “moral considerations” is an indispens-
able condition for guiding research ventures. An emphasis on the worth of moral reasoning
and principles has been the concern of several scholars most notably Clifford Geertz, who
insists that “an assessment of the moral implications of the scientific study of human life which
is going to consist of more than elegant sneers or mindless celebrations must begin with an
inspection of social scientific research as a variety of moral experiences” (2000:23).

I want to join with the authors and editors and dedicate this special edition of Ethos to
Dr. Beatrice Medicine, who carefully and thoughtfully guided the discussion that emerged
from the presentation of the four major articles at the 2005 meeting of American Anthro-
pological Association. Bea unexpectedly passed away in December 2005. In memory of
Dr. Beatrice Medicine and her well-conceived and thoughtfully written scholarly contribu-
tions to the social and behavioral sciences and her passionate dedication to student growth
and development, the Society for Applied Anthropology established an annual student
travel scholarship; readers should seriously consider contributing to this worthwhile fund.
Writing in her memoirs, Bea pointed out that she “went into anthropology to try and make
living more fulfilling for Indians and to deal with others in attempts of anthropological
application meaningful to Indians and others” (Medicine 2001:14). I know she did as
do countless others and along with her many stellar influences we’ll be forever grateful.
Her legacy will live on for countless years to come.

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