"SCIENCE" AND INDIGENOUS CULTURES*

ABSTRACT: This article assesses the expert-oriented approach of the social sciences and helping professions. This orientation, which appears embedded in Western approaches to science, emphasizes that those who have mastered the workings and intricacies of scientific method and helping are professionals or experts. Given the recent experiences and background of the author who worked in the mental health and alcoholism fields primarily with Eskimos and Athabascan Native Americans in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic regions of Alaska, this essay stresses the relevance/irrelevance of scientific findings to indigenous peoples. Without discounting "Science" completely, the author examines alternative modes-of-being-with-others in a communal way, rather than as "objects" in a scientific study. Bringing attention to the reaffirmation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the recent World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and the United Nations Declaration of 1993 as The International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples, this essay ends with a call to consciousness in regard to the ongoing situation of indigenous peoples worldwide.

Science and the Problem of the Expert

An expert-oriented mentality permeates western science and the helping professions in general. It has given us a sense of "surplus powerlessness." By giving deference to experts, we have undermined our confidence in ourselves to solve our own problems as individuals and as members of a community. As Michael Lerner (1985) states in *Surplus Powerlessness* in a chapter appropriately entitled "Science Legitimating Domination":

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> Many people feel even more unsure of themselves, because they can't quite understand what the experts are really saying, garbed as it often is in the language of obscurity.....but who constitutes the experts as experts? Supposedly this is done by some entity called 'Science'...The problem is that science is not the only, or even the best way to organize our experience according to our current needs. In failing to understand the real limits of science as an approach to reality, we tend to disempower ourselves. (p. 203)

Science, therefore, does not appear the *only*, or even the best way to organize our experience. An examination of some of the limits of scientific "findings" as they relate to indigenous peoples should help illuminate how traditionally oriented scientific methods have tended to distort the lived experience of indigenous peoples. While my purpose is not to discredit science completely, it is rather to provoke discussion and dialogue concerning broader questions of the relationship between more traditional ways of knowing (i.e. science, from the Latin *scio* meaning "to know") and human rights and social justice, with particular attention to indigenous peoples.

I do not believe, therefore, that much of the *sine qua non* of scientific method which consists of operationalizing of variables, setting of confidence levels, assumption of the null hypothesis are the *only* ways to look for truth. Certainly, this method *may* be one way to ascertain an aspect of the reality of a phenomenon. Phenomenological approaches, sometimes referred to as "Heuristic" (Moustakas, 1990; Babbie, 1992; Tyson, 1992), while not hostile to such a method, tend to urge viewing such findings in context. Similarly, as it is increasingly well known in academia, Giorgi (1971), analyzing the assumptions of the social sciences, which emulate the methods of the natural sciences, calls for a "human" rather than "social" scientific approach to phenomenon, which in varying situations should be more fecund.

Much, if not all, of the helping professions predicates itself on the assumption that "we" are the professionals, experts if you will, "administering" its services to the population at large in order to "cure" them of their ills. The problem of the expert is long embedded in the humanistic tradition. Keen (1972), for has examined this problem seeking other alternatives to "Freudian Consciousness," which also stresses the need for the expert. and More recently, Katz (1981;1982; 1983/84) has written about the problem of the expert-oriented mentality which appears at odds with communal healing practices among the Kalahari !Kung. According to Katz (1981), "current education and training of community mental health workers in the West have focused on the accumulation of knowledge and on healing technology" in contradistinction to the !Kung healer who disavows "the accumulation of power" (p.57).

1993 as the International Year for Indigenous Peoples

Concern for issues pertaining to indigenous peoples today, who, if living in the United States are often referred to as Native Americans, also appears especially relevant in light of the United Nations Declaration of this year as The International Year for Indigenous Peoples. The theme is this year is "Indigenous Peoples-A New Partnership" (United Nations, 1993). Furthermore, decrying the consumerist and individualist orientation of the world's dominant cultures (of which science is a part) in Europe and the United States, Worldwatch Institute (1993) urging support for indigenous people worldwide, recognizes that "They may offer living examples of cultural patterns that can help revive ancient values within everyone: devotion to future generations, ethical regard for nature, and commitment to community among people" (p. 100).

Background of the Author

It is important to point out at the outset, however, that I am male, white and middle class. Consequently, I am aware that my perceptions are biased, subjective and emanate from a particular perspective. However, rather than claiming "objectivity" and then purporting to find "truth" via rejection of a "null hypothesis," I will attempt to provoke discussion of these issues by relating to some of my work and other experiences in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic regions of Alaska. I had lived in Alaska from 1981-1987 where I, among other things, developed a Generalist Counseling Program that was to be "culturally sensitive" to the Eskimo population of the region and was Director of a Mental Health/Substance Abuse Treatment Center in a predominantly Athabascan community.

Descriptions of Helping

Unfortunately, therefore, the very notions of "professionalism" and the "expert," in disciplines that are to help, rather than hinder, appears to have set up a hierarchical relationship, in itself a western ideology, which is at odds with non-western cultures that espouse more communal and non-hierarchical treatment methodologies. Although some elders have spoken of shamans who, at times, would instill fear in individuals, communal ways of healing appear to have been much more permeating and widespread.

When I asked elders (as well as some of my students recounting stories from their elders), for instance, to describe traditional Eskimo ways of helping those in need, if possible, prior to the arrival of the "White Man," responses did not appear to emphasize "experts" *over* "non-experts," or notions of "mental

health professional" or "learned person" over the "inept," but rather a kind of "struggling together" in the face of the many hardships that life in the Arctic produced. In times of starvation, for example, individuals would at times share what they found in their "honey buckets." Sometimes even persons would cut off parts of their skin which they in turn, would share with other members of the community. It is well known how a hunter in this present day shares the meat from a "kill," rather than hoard it for him or herself.

Also, upon the introduction of alcohol to the community, some elders discussed with sadness how people would follow tracks in the snow which appeared "wobbling." Then, if they would find a person drunk or unconscious and "everyone would give him [or her] much love." Noteworthy also was that notions of "orphaned child" appeared totally absent from the worldview of the Eskimo. It was difficult, for example, to get the idea across of "orphan." According to one elder, all children were loved and like gifts to the community.

Not one person talked about anything akin to "talking cures," or "free association." People didn't sit with one person for something similar to a fifty-minute session. I learned in fact of a phenomenon known as "white man's disease." This "disease" is when "Whites," as they are sometimes called, "use big words, sound important, and speak fast." In addition, it appears that children are treated with utmost respect and are socialized into a strong sense of mutual responsibility. According to some elders, for instance: "Do not shove a child around. A child that gets shoved around at an early age like that always ends up feisty, getting into fights"; and "When we were kids are parents told us...to help people.... We should we kindly to all people" (Craig and Skin, 1983, pp. 11-12). In fact, my impressions were that overall in order to "help," one could prevent misfortune by a strong sense of community, characterized by mutual responsibility and caring.

Recent Developments

Currently, in Native American cultures, there are sweatlodges, which are ways to purify one's self and pow-wows, where Native Americans discuss communal issues and celebrate a sense of community through dance. Noteworthy also is what appears to be an extremely effective community approach towards alcoholism in the population at Alkali Lake (The Honour of All, 1984), a predominantly Native American community. In that locale, an approximately 90% alcoholism rate among the population was reduced to approximately 5% By enlisting the help of concerned clergy, businesspeople, "everyday townsfolk" *and* human service providers, an all out effort was attempted to once and for all eradicate alcoholism in that town. It was undoubtedly a communal effort to achieve a "quality" sobriety.

I am reminded here of the words of Mr. John Schaeffer (personal communication, January, 1983), an Eskimo leader and recently president of The Northwest Arctic Native Association who lamented the fact that despite the influx of helping professionals during the last twenty years, alcoholism, substance abuse, suicide, and domestic violence rates had remained constant. My point certainly is not to "romanticize" the Native American, to embellish the idea of the"noble savage," nor to claim entirely that "their" approach is "better" than a "Western" approach. Yet, it is necessary to recognize that in some contexts assumptions of science and helping should not go unquestioned.

Following the example of Alkalai Lake, then, Native American communities appear to have adopted a more communal approach, consistent with their apparent ways of socialization, rather than rely *solely* on western healers and therapies. For example, in schools, some individuals, Native Americans themselves, have instituted an hour a week for students, from the first to the twelfth grades simply to talk about things that might be bothering them. The rationale, according to the originator of this idea, Rudy Hamilton, himself a Native American, was that he felt that Native children had a tendency to hold things in. When they became older they might escape through depression, alcoholism, and in the worst of cases, suicide.

Since the program was initiated, there was not one suicide attempt in his village. Prior to that program there was on the average one attempt every two years for the past ten years. Although one cannot draw a direct causal relationship between that program along with other communal "healing" attempts in that village, nevertheless, there were undoubtedly changes in the village. These changes were brought about when, like in Alkali Lake, the individuals; white, red, or brown, united in a cause, and decided to "empower" themselves. Through a mysterious, if not spiritual process of "collective passion," (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1972), they were *determined* improve their lot.

The Paradox of the Utilization of Mental Health and Alcoholism Services

My experiences in Alaska seemed to indicate a kind of paradox with the utilization of state funded mental health and alcoholism programs. On the one hand, most residents undoubtedly respected many of the human service professionals' dedication and concern for their problems; on the other hand, my impression was that quite often these programs were underutilized. Certain *individuals* whether White or Native, were sought after rather than specific programs.

It is significant then that the problem of underutilization appeared to be not so much the service providers, but rather the strategies and programs which emanated from these policies. These policies, in turn, were steeped in scientific ideologies that were problematic. The problem then was not the many

dedicated and caring helping professionals who practiced in the field, but rather an issue endemic to the helping professions in general.

As a whole then, the helping professions appeared steeped and embedded in western ideology. Treatment methodologies, consequently, tended to carry much conceptual baggage and scientific bias. Putting aside the more obvious fact of dedicated and culturally sensitive providers versus less dedicated and culturally insensitive ones, could there be other explanations for an apparent "failure" of human service programs on the whole among indigenous populations?

Could one explanation be that despite the fact that the helping professions tend to decry the "infiltration" of middle class values in "their" programs, nevertheless, they continue to provide programs that are essentially middle class in orientation? The ethical standards for the American Psychological Association, for example, urge that "treatment" should be culturally relevant. Nevertheless, the very fact that treatment is set up as a hierarchical relationship, (i.e. therapist-patient) appears culturally irrelevant. A credo, for example, in the human services is that people come to practitioners because they are "professionals," the experts. But, if successful treatment methodologies such as Alkali Lake do not assume "professionalism," but rather "community" as primary to the healing process, can it not be said that the basic philosophical assumptions of some of the helping professions tend to be misguided?

Inupiat Ilitqusiat as an Example

I would like to illustrate the embededness of treatment methods in western ideology and scientific method by way of another example. *Inupiat Ilitiquisiat* is a kind of "spirit movement" among the Inupiat Eskimo of Northwest Alaska. This movement, which stresses tribal identification, asserts that survival of the Eskimo community "depends on our ability to restore our traditional values ad take on our responsibilities to ourselves and to others" (Christensen, 1982, p.11) As part of this movement, the elders drew up a list of "Inupiaq Values." These values are: Knowledge of Language, Sharing, Respect for Elders, Love for Children, Hard Work, Knowledge of Family Tree, Avoid Conflict, Respect for Nature, Spirituality, Humor, Family Roles, Hunter Success, Domestic Skills, Humility and Responsibility to Tribe.

It is noteworthy that one value is to "Avoid Conflict." In this case, the questions then becomes to what extent should one teach "assertiveness" as a highly esteemed goal of psychotherapy, in western cultures. No study seems to scientifically validate assertiveness as essential to one's being, although studies do point to a lowering of self-esteem as a failure to assert oneself (Wallace, 1984, p.10). This one "truth" among many other problematics of human existence has been supposedly "found," by one or even a plethora of scientific

studies that have been duplicated and found to be "valid" and "reliable." The helping professions which purport to have developed their treatment approaches on scientific evidence, continue with the dissemination of this "truth" despite the fact that it *might* not be culturally relevant. Thus, the question of assertiveness training courses in cultures where avoiding conflict is a value, might be culturally "inappropriate." Only, the community can decide the relevance or irrelevance of such a course.

Science and Social Justice

At its worst, scientific enterprise could be described as a form a colonialism and imperialism. Although these words have tended to have pejorative meanings and to be associated with radical social movements, they, like all explanations need to be looked at, if we are to truly have a society based on the most decent of values, human rights and social justice. In 1978 a national report was compiled on the mental health problems of American Indians. The report found:

> Without reservation...alcoholism and alcohol abuse affects directly and indirectly the entire national Indian community...and, the concept of the colonized and colonizer relationship found in Indian countries is probably the most appropriate way to view these issues. (Blauner, 1972, p.5)

That report was submitted to the President's Commission on Mental Health! Many leading scholars of colonialism point to the fact that even the best quality care of the colonizer subverts its positive effects. In the end:

> Alienation manifests itself both through the fact that my means of recovery belongs to another, that the object of my desire (in this case sobriety) is the inaccessible property of another, and through the fact that each object as well as my own activity is alien to itself, since everything and everybody, the capitalists not excluded is dominated by an inhuman fee...(Zaher, 1974, p.5)

Thus, even if one recovers, it can also be seen as a kind of "spiritual" death (Colorado, 1986). The helping professions then, by leaning upon the findings of science as well as mastering the intricacies of their professions and taking on the toga of expert need to be critically evaluated as to the relevance and/or irrelevance for a particular culture, in this case, indigenous peoples.

Two Contrasting Approaches

One example of a "typical" scientific study of indigenous peoples is *Psychodynamic Problems of Adaptation Among the MacKenzie Delta Eskimos* by Lubart (1970). The rather complex and meaningful world of the Eskimo is immediately seen in terms of scientific constructs. For example: "This report is an attempt to correlate observed patterns of social disturbance among Mackenzie Delta Eskimos with factors in basic personality. Particular emphasis is placed on points of potential conflict implicit in the structure of Eskimo character" (Lubart, 1970, p. xi). Its methodology consisted essentially of the "detached" and "objective" scientist studying his "subjects," (i.e. the Eskimo), in typical scientific fashion:

> Aside from general observations of behaviour, about 60 depth interviews were obtained in serial sessions. Together with many less formal interviews and spontaneous discussions, these provided life histories and furnished a great deal of material for psychoanalytic interpretation. (Lubart, 1970, p. xii)

It is not within the scope of this paper to cite this study in depth. However, some of its conclusions are noteworthy: "Hedonism has always been a part of Eskimo culture and is the route to relief from tension in many cultures when an individual's goals of validation are confused, non-operational and immature" (p. 44) He continues: "Pathological patterns and potentials related to the system of permissive child reading...can be disastrous" (p. 44).

Given the "scientific" findings of this study, should human service providers and policy makers, therefore, set up programs that "decrease" hedonism or that teach parent "effectiveness" training in order to counteract the deleterious effects of "permissive" child rearing "found" to exist among the Eskimo population?

By using such value laden terms such as "hedonism" and "permissive" isn't that an attempt to "force" a western interpretation of an extremely complex culture into pejorative labels? Couldn't one say that such labels are, at their worst, examples of colonialism? To construct programs from these value laden labels, despite their supposed scientific objectivity, which experts "discovered", could possibly be considered even further forms of colonialism.

One shouldn't be quick, however, to totally dismiss science as a worthless effort. Robert Coles (1977), for example, in his classic work *Eskimos, Chicanos and Indians* astutely acknowledged his own biases and tried to come up with a more descriptive, rather than categorical and pejorative study. He was aware that considering people as "objects" in a scientific study tended to dehumanize them. Thus, he perceived as severely limiting the effort to "get"

information from individuals in order to label and make abstract generalizations about "them".

Coles writes, for example:

> I am, or at least I have wanted to be, exceedingly wary about categorical, overinclusive descriptionsancertainly, causative links: *this* (in the home, the culture, the larger society) leads to *that* in Eskimo children or adults....If mere abstract remarks are the essence of what the reader ends up taking away from this book, then I will have, by my lights, failed miserably. The whole point of this work has been to put myself (body, mind and I pray but cannot at all be sure, heart and soul) in a position, with respect to a number of children, that offers them a chance to indicate a certain amount about themselves to me, and through me, to others. But each life, as we ought know, has its own history, its own authority, dignity, fragility, rock-bottom strength. (p. 77)

Thus, he appears to have adopted an interpretation of science that opts for participant-observation. In more academic parlance, one could say that his research was descriptive and qualitative. Whereas Lubart's study was also descriptive and qualitative, to a major extent, it nevertheless, failed to relinquish its own scientistic assumptions which resulted, in a simplistic and rather pejorative explanation of the Eskimo's world. Coles's study furthermore, appears to reject a basic assumption of research in the social sciences, to predict and control. Instead, he seeks more phenomenological criteria, such as understanding. This is not to totally discount other quantitative approaches and even qualitative approaches of which Lubart's study was but one example. Rather, both Coles's and Lubart's works were examples of scientific studies based on different assumptions.

A Call for Consciousness

The problem which I have tried to point out in this paper concerns itself with a rather erroneous supposition on the part of the expert that he/she is the sole founder of "truth" which was arrived at by means of a particular scientific method. Thus, helping modalities, social policies, and programs become based on these experts' statements rather than emanating from the social consciousness or what I have described as "collective passions" of the community at large. As a case in point, one of my Eskimo students woefully lamented: "They make life too easy for us now. Before we used to go hunting and fishing to eat. We would hunt animals like fox ad ear for clothing, too. Some of us would even make raincoats from whale intestines. We used to cut down trees and burn the wood to warm us up. Now we go to the local store and

buy everything with food stamps. Often, governments just give us money to buy some of the things we need. We have lost our subsistence lifestyle and our culture."

To speculate concerning reasons for an apparently unprecedented belief in scientific expertise, Peter Berger's (1967) concept of "theodicy" appears significant. This concept refers to beliefs of people throughout the centuries about certain value systems and theological deities. People have taken these beliefs as doctrines of faith or morals. It seems that in the 1980's beliefs in science have replaced beliefs in God, Allah or Jehovah. Thus, as technology has come rushing through and challenged traditional creeds, it has supplanted old dogma with a new one. As with all belief systems, it needs to be reevaluated and assessed as to its relevance for contemporary times. If this new belief system, (i.e. science), is not assessed critically, which I have tried to initially do in this paper, it is in danger of becoming a kind of "second order level of abstraction" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), divorced from the experience of a "lived" community. Scientific findings, therefore, may tend to obscure the richness of the lived experience of the Eskimo's world.

The World Conference on Human Rights meeting in Vienna in June of this year recently reaffirmed the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This Declaration, signed by the United States in 1948 is increasingly referred to as customary international law and a document with burgeoning legal status for governments (Wronka, 1992). That document which stresses the little known economic and social rights (i.e. rights to health care, shelter, employment, security in old age etc.), and even lesser known, solidarity rights (i.e. rights to self-determination, intergovernmental cooperation, humanitarian disaster relief etc.) can serve as an effective primary prevention strategy to enhance well-being and mental health.

Lack of employment, for instance, is directly related to domestic violence and substance abuse (Gil, 1973; 1992). Similarly, the apparent failure of governments to provide for self-determination of Indigenous Peoples worldwide, that is, to control their own destiny, appears related to many of the problems which they face. Certainly, science with its emphasis upon the "expert" and the "professional" seems to play a major role in diminishing this sense of control among indigenous peoples. Only science as a means to empower, rather than a method which creates surplus powerlessness, will provide hope for a socially just and more humane world.

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