Arctic research at three levels

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ABSTRACT
This paper is a posthumous publication of a Steven McNabb’s presentation to the 1993 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. In it he described how the Social Transitions in the North research project involved explicit cross-cultural contact or participation at three levels: between scientists and public agencies; between scientists and study populations; and between research teams themselves. He explored a few of the entanglements and opportunities that arise in those interactions. Dr. McNabb urged northern researchers to avoid embracing rigid standards, for they will result in more entanglements and fewer opportunities. On the otherhand, if researchers are open-minded, they will be able to treat each dilemma as an opportunity that will make for better science.

Keywords: cross-cultural research, health surveys, health status measurement, Alaska and Russian Indigenous communities.

The Issue
In the old days I think it was fairly customary to think of the principal axis of interaction in social inquiry to be unidimensional: there was the anthropologist on one side, and the native on the other; the scientist and the subject; the observer and the observed. Everybody knew that this was a simplistic formulation and most of us saw danger in objectifying people, but the distinction between "us" and a unitary "them" seemed roughly true though not very compelling. And of course there are several traditions of criticism of such concepts, some of which see the distinction as a vanity of scientists who operate in a moral economy of the manufacture of truth that demands such boundaries, and others which merely probe the intersubjective terrain between and within those observers and observees. But these issues aren't really pertinent to the points I want to raise. Here I am just situating those points in a larger context.

So we can imagine a single avenue of interaction: one that connects scientists to human subjects or study populations. But now broaden the concept to include the notion of coordination, cooperation, research ethics and protection of human subjects, applications of scientific findings, and stakeholders at large in our ‘scientific endeavor. In other words, de-simplify the concept and make it more realistic. If we do so, there are now at least two avenues of interaction for scientists: one between scientists and "the people" and one between scientists and the public agencies and institutions of governance and administration that represent those people. To make this proposition concrete, consider whom we deal with when proposing a study, seeking recommendations and advice, or establishing human subjects protections. We deal with "the public" and we deal with public institutions. They are not identical and their interests do not necessarily run in tandem, nor can we select only one group with whom to do business (1). They may not even reside in the same places. I think this two-pronged arrangement is one that most of us are familiar with.
What I will discuss is a somewhat more complicated model and one that I think will become increasingly common. Here I will describe collaborative cross-cultural research involving teams of social scientists from two (or more) nations, which introduces a third point of contact: interaction, cross-cultural at that, between groups of scientists. Such an arrangement poses unique difficulties but real opportunities for science that are created through three sets of contacts: those between public agencies and scientists; those between resident populations or study groups and the scientist; and those between allied teams of scientists. I am calling this “research at three levels.”

A Specific Case of Arctic Research At Three Levels

Overview

The research program I will discuss is called Social Transition in the North: Alaska and the Russian Far East. This is a four-year research project funded by the National Science Foundation, and administered by the University of Washington School of Medicine. The study is a systematic controlled comparison of sixteen communities, eight in Alaska and eight in the Russian Far East, designed to determine how fertility transition, epidemiologic transition, and domestic transition—changes in the prevailing organization of families and socialization—occur in the far north. The project was developed in specific response to voiced concerns by indigenous peoples and their representatives about population growth, health status, and severe social problems. The first year of research was just completed and data for the first year are now being analyzed. Two tandem teams of researchers, one stationed in Moscow and the other stationed in Alaska and at U.S. universities, work closely together using parallel techniques, such as identical questionnaires and other methods, and both teams participate jointly in all phases of analysis and writing. Hence this is a cross-cultural experiment that truly operates at multiple levels. Figure 1 depicts the three-way arrangement I have described.

I confess that I had a great deal of naive optimism about this arrangement when we planned the project. Some of the confidence was motivated by my assumption that the U.S. and Russian scientists would think alike, aside from nuances that we would swiftly work through. As such, they would be the conduits through which information would flow to us. They would “see” Russian culture as we would, if only we had sufficient exposure, linguistic competence, and so on. We would reciprocate and do the same for them. Naturally we assumed that important differences in interpretation would emerge; after all, we deliberately established a tandem arrangement so that we could work together on everything and thereby expose our differences, and biases, in a clear manner. But I assumed that we would all eventually read from the same, identical script. In this I was naive. We did and will continue to collect data that are formally equivalent, but I don't think we will develop an identical script. In short, this is not merely an issue of inter-rater reliability. U.S. and Russian cultural and scientific traditions are different.
An Example of Ideological Differences
For my own part, my commitment to this project grew out of applied research I had conducted over several years for the Alaska Federation of Natives. This organization commissioned research on several issues of great and growing concern to Alaska Natives, most of which involved the question of community sustainability and social problems. In blunt terms, the issues are summarized as follows: the oil boom in Alaska is over and funds for community development and support have been dropping since 1985; yet the need for funds is increasing, inasmuch as Alaska Native fertility is rising and the birth rate is increasing (due to both fertility and the composition of the population), and the incidence of social problems and health needs are rising. Hence, financial support is dwindling, jobs are disappearing, the population is increasing, and social and health problems are keeping pace with population growth or are increasing at a rate in excess of population growth. No matter how you place these circumstances in perspective, it is hard to be sanguine about future prospects in rural Alaska. So when I look at an issue like Alaska Native population growth, I characterize it as a "problem." I do not mean that it is a good or bad; rather it is a situation with extensive and costly ramifications. Here, I refer to cost in its broadest sense, of course, which includes social and psychic costs, but also formal economic costs even if they are non-monetary (as in opportunity costs).

In the earliest deliberations with the Russian team, however, it was clear that we interpreted "problems" in very different ways. To some of the Americans, population growth was a "problem." But to our Russian colleagues, population growth among indigenous minorities was good, and was even a "solution." In Russia there was and still is open public debate about the reproductive characteristics of national minorities. In some quarters, high fertility in the Islamic republics is viewed with alarm, as a harbinger of a time with the European Russian population segment might be overwhelmed by hordes of people of color. Among some social scientists and progressive elements, high fertility among minorities suggests that they are demographically robust and will not be extinguished.

But examine the numerous features of political and scientific ideology that are captured in this simple difference. The public debate that occurs in Russia could hardly occur in the U.S. because of its racist overtones and our current climate of political correctness. It sounds like a debate worthy of William Shockley, and it would never receive an open hearing here. But look further: I see sustainability as tacitly linked to an acceptable standard of living, consciously or not, and so I see population growth and declining economic resources as a problem. It is a problem because standards of living must fall if the population continues to increase at a rate in excess of economic opportunity -- unless people leave their villages and go elsewhere. But the biological viability of the population is the crux of the issue to the Russian progressives who value high fertility among national minorities. Standard of living is a secondary matter; and in the economic turmoil of the current period in the former Soviet Union, "standard of living" is almost meaningless anyway. This simple example of a difference of opinion is really far from simple. This example, like many others, expresses only the bare outlines of immense differences in our thinking about social issues.

Another Example of Ideological Differences: Sociological Definitions
The former example characterized differences in attitudes or scientific opinions and interpretations. Now let us move on to a somewhat more rigid subject matter: sociological definitions that comprise part of the common language of social science, I want to look at a couple of definitions displayed in Table I.

I think it is useful to merely show that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between important social classifications. This fact in itself helps to disarm us of the petty chauvinisms we may exercise (after all, how often do we American arctic researchers think, if only fleetingly, that our classifications are objectively "real"?). Specifically, I wish to draw attention to the key definitions of economic
productivity. In the US, we assess the production of all goods; in Russia, they examine the primary sectors and eliminate the service sector entirely. This is due to political ideology and history: the service industries and occupations were not thought to create value—what they "produced" was intangible.

But this difference masks an intriguing empirical circumstance, and once it is unmasked it uncovers an important similarity in our joint appreciation of economic reality in the north. In the north outside of Russia there has been very little real economic development—in elementary terms, expansion of the primary sector dominated by mining and manufacturing, for example. In Alaska, most development in the service sector is a transient and erratic consequence of government spending, and it is not too misleading to think of this development as "intangible." Many Western analysts now focus their attention on the unique characteristics of peripheral economies with little real development and typified by bloated tertiary sectors—that is, government services. So by coincidence and with no deliberate planning, we converge from two different directions on common wisdom about the meaning of economic development. Here we see unanticipated but welcome catalysts for scientific dialogue that prod us to reexamine our assumptions and evaluate others we might have dismissed at first blush.

Table 1. Allied Social Science Concepts: U.S. and Russia

| United States | Russia |
|---------------|--------|
| **Native (Alaska Native):** defined by blood quantum, this is a legal definition recognized by courts of law; in social science vernacular, it is a cultural and ethnic emblem of identity; its biological basis is generally immaterial in social science analysis; appositional terms include "Western" (cultural) or "caucasian" (biological). | **Small People/Nationality:** the terms(s) derive from Soviet political philosophy and relate to Russian social science concepts of "ethnoses" as sociocultural formations; biological characteristics are erratic, inasmuch as the child of a Chukchi woman and Russian man is usually "Russian" whereas the child of a Russian woman and Chukchi man is normally "Chukchi"; the appositional term could be "Russian" but generally not "caucasian." |
| **Transients/Outsiders:** loose terms Without unambiguous referents, usually refer to non-Native inhabitants of rural villages; by implication, most non-Native village dwellers are to a greater or lesser extent "transient" and may be permanent "outsiders." | **Newcomers:** recent immigrants to isolated communities; since populations of rural, remote settlements are predominantly "non-Native" this group of newcomers may comprise a minority of the non-Native population, in contrast to the U.S./Alaskan case. |
| **Rural (vs. urban)/Village (vs. town):** the dichotomy distinguishes between mainly Native remote, small hamlets and larger "hubs" with larger proportions of non-Natives and more, elaborate infrastructure; the terms are salient in both cultural and economic terms. | **Nomad/Camp vs. Settlement vs. City:** a simple dichotomy is not valid inasmuch as nomadic camp dwellers comprise a distinct population group; "settlements" are similar to "villages" and "cities" are much like "towns" but many very large cities in the Russian Far East have no parallels in Alaska; few settlements are mainly Native; some scholars will make distinctions between nomadic, semi-nomadic, sedentary, semi-sedentary and other categories of settlement. |
| **Gross National Product (GNP):** a measure (gross) of the value of all goods produced throughout the economy. | **Net Material Product (NMP):** value (net) of national production only in the "spheres of material, production" and omitting the service sector. |
A Third Example: Historical Contingencies VS. Ethnogenesis

Our conflicting views of evolutionary perspectives are also set in stark relief as we collaborate in joint investigations. When our work commenced, some of our Russian colleagues were initially perplexed about the Americans’ reasons for collaboration. Some Russians assumed that we wanted to undertake comparative research because Russian arctic social conditions were like conditions in Alaska decades ago. Hence, the Russian North was like a time capsule, a living laboratory held in temporal stasis. This view is consistent with a strong evolutionary perspective, of course. Speaking only for myself, I don’t accept this view at all. Russia today is not like Alaska ten or twenty or thirty or forty years ago. If it were, we might accept the counter-proposition that the Russian North will be like Alaska in thirty or forty years. I find these propositions inconceivable. I accept a systems perspective that tells me that systems can converge from very different directions—a property of equifinality—and that they can end up in very different places even given identical initial conditions. I want to compare Alaska and the Russian North because many empirical conditions are similar despite immensely different sociopolitical systems. In short, this comparison offers good opportunities for systematic controlled comparisons.

But I must accept the fact that the evolutionary model offers explanations for these circumstances. The ethnogenesis concept itself implies pervasive and even unyielding forces at the core of a culture that may be held accountable for these similarities that persist despite very different historical and political chronicles. All of these concepts must therefore be items for our critical dialogues, which encourages open-mindedness and a willingness on both sides to dismiss received wisdom and customary rules of thumb.

One Final Example

In my Alaskan work I have long made it a habit to compensate respondents for their time, either on a piece-work basis or on an hourly rate. Survey respondents, for instance, might receive anything from $5.00 to $30.00 for responding to a questionnaire. This custom is alien in Russia, in part because of the historic custom of acquiescence to authority (which the scientist would represent). But our Russian colleagues proposed to provide gifts in place of money for Russian respondents. Since this project relates to health issues, health-related gifts were considered appropriate. During the next year, such gifts, including toothbrushes and condoms, will be distributed in Russian Far East villages.

This compromise makes sense, but it forces me to question my practice of paying. In Alaska, research is an industry characterized by payments for valued commodities information. Many Alaska Native residents have even become accustomed to receiving payments or chances for prizes when they attend meetings of Alaska Native organizations. The custom is fully compatible with local expectations. But now the beauty of the Russian practice seems clear and genuine, and I wonder if the practice of payments to respondents merely builds on an aberration that has developed over time? I have not reached a conclusion, but the issue wouldn’t have been raised if I had not first seen my practice to be alien to the Russian custom. No solution will be best in all situations even in a single country with Native Americans as a group. Native American institutions have widely varying positions on the subject of research participation, human subject protection and compensation. Some will eschew any position at all due to a lack on consensus or uncertainty about the research process

CONCLUSIONS

I have described how this research project involves explicit cross-cultural contact or participation at three levels: between scientists and public agencies; between scientists and study populations; and between research teams themselves. I have explored a few of the entanglements and opportunity that arise in those interactions. My point is that if we embrace a rigid standard we will see more entanglements and fewer opportunities; if we are open-minded, we will be able to treat each dilemma as an opportunity that will make for better science. I am asking that we drop the pretence that we scientists...
comprise a unitary group with a common language and common goals and common intellectual traditions. That subconscious pretence retards collaborative research since it encourages the view that differences in understanding are misunderstandings and hence problems that must be overcome. If this is the position we assume, we will generally try to figure out who is right and who is wrong. If we ask instead "where do our assumptions come from and how do they serve us?" we are more apt to find some common agreements. Finally, this process must be explicit in order to create an opportunity where we might otherwise see an obstacle.

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