

Some Principles in Engaging Immigrant and Refugee Communities

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Who am I?

I am a medical sociologist, but have spent the last 25 years of my work life with Alaska Natives, Native Americans, and immigrant and refugee communities. In fact, I used to be an eminent applied policy researcher in AK Native communities. I did not publish much because my work was done for federal and state agencies, state legislatures, not for academic journals. It was easy to be eminent because no one else was doing much applied policy research in support of law or policy in Alaska at that time. Most researchers were committed to basic anthropological fieldwork in support of lands settlement, part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and its implications for federal, state, and Alaska Native land and resources managers. I also directed state agencies in the implementation of research into policies and procedures.

Because it was applied policy work, I often found myself as the man in the middle. Because I was white and had a PH.D and was a male, I had some standing with agencies of the governmental world. I had the professional license and race to claim their attention and to enunciate Native issues to white authority, re-casting key issues in terms that white authority could hear them, not in the straightforward way they were experienced by the Native folks themselves – hunting, fishing and gathering rights, local control over the importation and sale of alcohol, offshore and onshore oil field development, hydroelectric development, state compliance in Indian child welfare and the issue of Indian children being placed in non-Indian homes, access to culturally competent health care, control over sacred artifacts, control over community development, control over bio-medical research, Native suicide prevention, and similar topics.

Was I a good researcher? Only in some ways. But it was clear, when working with these communities, that the personal values brought by the professional scientist, leavened by working with real people and their real-life concerns, strongly colors the research product.

What I learned when conducting research on behalf of public policy toward the relatively powerless is that research is really a complex and costly form of persuasion. It is research in the sense that it provides not only some new data but a new framework by which the data can be understood; you change the dominant policy paradigm, populate the new relevant categories with original data, you draw conclusions, and you dare others

to refute your argument an equally persuasive alternative reality. You challenge them with “Where is your paradigm? Where are your data?”

But you can see that this process readily turns the researcher into an advocate, into a speaker for those whose speech is generally denigrated by the powerful. Luckily for me and unluckily for some of them, my evidence-based rendition of the reality of the powerless was persuasive enough in state legislatures and state supreme courts and federal hearings that, more often than not, the powerless who had become my constituents or I their mouthpiece were supported in their claims.

This points to a central problem between the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless. I once attended a federal fish management hearing held in a large Alaska Native hall in a Southcentral Alaska. A federal official convened the meeting with the following caution. “From time to time as you testify, you may see us nodding. Nodding does not mean that we are agreeing with you. Nodding means only that we are hearing you.” But can officials, in fact, “hear,” that is, understand and integrate community voices in the policy-setting process?

I once received a lucrative contract from a federal agency to conduct research in an arctic village in Alaska, asking the villagers their opinions of and likely stance toward prospective oil and gas exploration in their vast trapping and hunting lands. The agency had held formal public hearings in the village, but from these could not ascertain what the community felt or wanted. So they asked me to go and ask. In response to a question of mine, they noted that they had kept an official verbatim record of the public hearings, produced by a court recorder; it had proved useless, but I was welcome to it, a two-foot high stack of typed pages. I took the stack to my office and, using a black marker pen, blacked out all of the text marked “(in Native language), (inaudible), (aside)”, and so on. What I was left with was a perfectly clear and eloquent statement of the village’s position. I never had to interview in the village, the answer was right in front of me. All I had to do was recast the text so that the agency could “hear” it.

Another time, I was invited, as a state official, to a village meeting in Western Alaska, along with a large number of state and federal wildlife officials to discuss the growing problem of walrus being hunted and killed for their ivory tusks alone, an unacceptable, illegal, and wasteful practice by parties unknown. A senior member of the Alaska Eskimo Walrus Commission, a captain of a walrus-hunting crew, addressed the meeting on the topic for about 20 unbroken minutes, his entire speech in Yu’pik. None of us spoke or understood Yu’pik, so we sat in rapt and respectful silence, nodding from time to time as if we glean something from this strange tongue. At the end of his speech, his grandson rose and interpreted the words of his grandfather into English. Grateful, we also thought we understood the now-interpreted message and were about to draw some policy conclusions. Then another man, a biologist living in this part of the world, rose and explained to us that we had understood nothing, because we did not understand the context in which the captain had spoken to us. By the time he had provided the context, we now understood that the message was really 180 degrees opposite our initial understanding. What had we heard? What had we understood? Is it any wonder, then,

that social change and research agencies are so frustrated in their dealings with communities and Native and immigrant communities publish monographs entitled, “Sometimes I Feel Like I Am Just Wasting My Breath”?

So, I suggest to you that, without informed intermediaries and considerable time and patience, we are unable to truly hear and understand the voice of the community, whether that community be Alaska Native, American Indian, immigrant or refugee, or other communities we think we know.

Why do we, as individuals, conduct applied policy research among the powerless?

I am driven, in part, by the challenge to help communities drive their own futures. This has occupied a central role in my work career. While outside (the community) institutions, such as coalitions of governments, foundations, academic institutions, and law centers can help move a community forward, the real change is when the community itself becomes the owner and driver of their own future. But, to be honest, community work seems to be my lot; no matter what I do, this is the work that is given to me. For others, it is a matter of great convenience. Powerless communities are certainly attractive laboratories for social research and social and health care experiments.

What have I learned?

As native-born Americans, we have a tendency to think that we understand our own country and the people who live in it. Somehow, we believe, they are all pretty much like us. They want prosperity and safety for themselves and their children.

We also tend to believe that communities are pretty much organized in the same way. After all, most communities, wherever we go, have roads, schools, churches, human services, gas stations, stores, local governments, fraternal organizations, and the like.

In a decidedly Northern European manner, we see local social organization as the sum of the interactions of these various and highly visible elements of community life. Because we believe in both democratic and representative forms of social discourse, we believe that we researchers can go into any community and find out what it wants or what is needed by 1) surveying the population (a democratic form) and 2) discussing issues with formal leaders (a representative form).

Formal leaders include elected public officials; appointed public officials; directors of for-profit and not-for-profit businesses, service agencies and institutions; and officials of civic and fraternal organizations, such as neighborhood associations, PTAs, Scouts, Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis, and so on. Once we have surveyed, we make findings, host meetings, disseminate results, and ask for more grant money.

We tend to expect both new and old residents in America to conform to any number of conventions. In the American society, we expect residents' conformance to certain conventions – to respond to surveys, to be readily interviewed, to have formal ways of representing themselves to outsiders, to have formal governmental or corporate forms, to freely discuss and debate important matters in public settings, to have written records of deliberations, to have formal ways of making (e.g., voting) and announcing (e.g., in English, in proposal form) collective decisions, and so on.

We operate on these assumptions of American forms of social organization, representation, democracy, and self-representation; but for some Native American and immigrant communities, democracy and corporate structures are entirely inappropriate cultural forms, attacking traditional sustaining forms of social structure, deliberation, authority, and decision-making. Quite often, the true decision-makers are not the same as the elected officials and the elected officials are only the messengers for these true decision-makers.

All of this reveals to me that we do not have, in any way, accurate maps into the less-Western communities in our country – Alaska Natives, Native Americans, immigrants and refugees. They are, in fact, foreign to us. For example, remote Alaska Native communities have limited power – their basic power rests in being geographically distant and isolated, saying “No,” saying nothing, ignoring outsiders, speaking in unknown tongues, having invisible leaders and invisible decision-making processes, projecting a false reality through forms appropriate to outsiders, and remaining unobserved behind powerless agents. Researchers and agencies simply cannot assume that the visible leadership is the real governance or that responses to community survey are equivalent to the true community voice. Quite often the “real” reality within the community is masked by a “projected” reality, an accepted and acceptable projection created by community members to make outsiders happy or satisfied.

Every once in a while, an outsider attempts to peek behind the projection to find out what is real. In one instance in northern Alaska, an impatient federal land agency decided it wanted to go for itself, sort of parachute into the community, and meet with the community leadership and get real and timely answers to its questions. The following discussion took place.

Tom: This is a small village in the middle of an Arctic winter. Where will you stay?

Agency: I don't know, probably the village school, it has heat, light, and some plumbing.

Tom: Who will you meet with?

Agency: The village leaders.

Tom: How will you know them?

Agency: They are the elders.

Tom: So, you will go up to every older Native and assume they are a decision-making elder?

Agency: I don't know. We may hold a meeting or go door-to-door and ask.

Tom: In what language? These folks speak Gwit'chyn, a rare Athabaskan language. Do you speak Gwit'chyn?

Agency: Don't they speak English?

Tom: They won't speak English with you, they will keep to their own counsel.

Agency: Will they listen to us and our questions in English?

Tom: Maybe. But you won't know whether they are interested in your questions, how or who or when they will consider them, how they will make their decision, when they will make their decision, or when or how they will announce it to you.

Agency: Oh. Maybe we should talk to the City Council then.

Tom: That's cool. That's why they set up the Council, to talk to outsiders. But the invisible decision-making process will be the same. You can't directly get to or influence either the process or the decision-makers, no matter what you do.

The trip was cancelled.

So, what do the relatively powerless do to try to affect policy? Some advocate and embarrass agencies in public, using the eloquence for which many are justly famous. Others perform a kind of jujitsu, leveraging the strength of the majority against itself, particularly in the control of communications and giving or denying permission.

Immigrant and refugee communities are very similar; they hide behind opaque languages, invisible and unknown decision-makers, elaborate extended family communications systems, and saying "no" by simple inaction. Unlike Alaska Native villages, they are often not settled communities nor have very elaborated political structure. Many communities are nothing more than extended families, so require less formal governance forms. In trying to establish partnerships with these kinds of communities, we often fail because we need or want or expect more structure there than there really is.

Many new immigrant and refugee communities are not traditional neighborhoods. Other traditional neighborhoods, often comprised of poor, ethnically or racially distinct populations, are often marked by a shared deep history (often several generations) and significant social and political organization which can be mobilized into collective action on behalf of families and children.

Many immigrant communities live in far more transitional areas in which poor and minority communities have begun their way in, for example, Seattle/King County, based on affordable housing and human services supports. Like the Caucasian and African-American populations that preceded them, the newly immigrant and refugee Asian, African, and Latino populations have settled temporarily in these locations until their employment and economic situations enable them to move to more affluent and attractive neighborhoods. Based on barriers posed by limited English proficiency, culture, and economic situations, these populations and communities have interacted little internally or with one another in any political or social sense. Due to the fact that they have arrived in different historical waves based on events in their home countries, they often lack their own internal political and formal leadership or representational structures. They also

often fail to turn for help to local human service agencies (including schools), preferring to rely initially and instead on internal community resources (e.g., family, elders, chiefs, religious leaders, natural helpers, business people).

Do not assume that it is particularly easier for me than for you to see into and connect with these communities. There is serious difficulty in forming even tentative relationships with these communities. Mistrust of outsiders and their agendas, lack of bona fides from trusted others to engender trust, the protective aspects of anonymity of leadership and speaking in a different language than English all make access very tricky and time-consuming.

I suggest to you that immigrant communities constitute an almost invisible universe to us at this time. I think they may also constitute an alternative universe, in that their cultures and social forms bear little, if any, resemblance to what we anticipate a community to be in America. If we find that we are totally confused about the “forms” when we travel to foreign countries such as China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bolivia, or Italy and that our expectations are constantly refuted in these places, we would be well-advised to adopt the same approach to these immigrant enclaves in the United States. If we are going to develop productive working relationships with and for them, we are going to have to set aside many of our expectations and demands and begin to deal with them on their terms. For that, we need to know what those terms are.

In one instance here in King County, I am working with a large project to support certain refugee communities. These lack, among other things:

- Common history and language
- Formal skills required to succeed in the American economy
- Social and political ties to one another

In turn, supportive organizations and institutions lack some of the skills and resources necessary to link themselves and their efforts with these populations to create the effective relationships and solutions desired by both parties.

Our project team expressed some relief when we discovered that some immigrant and refugee groups had organized themselves to conform to American conventions, in this case 501-C (3) not-for-profit corporations as the appropriate form to conduct some affairs with the larger world. Like many of their immigrating counterparts, they formed themselves into Mutual Assistance Associations (MAA), membership organizations based on a common nationality/language/culture/ history and, in some instances, religion. MAAs are to support and advance the successful transition of individuals, families, and communities into American life, among many other purposes.

When we encountered the MAAs, we were relieved because they embodied forms that we understood – their officials represented their membership and could speak for them, spoke eloquently in English, seemed reasonably comfortable in public meetings, and were somewhat familiar with corporate procedures. While some lacked sophistication in the required paperwork to access funds for their projects, they appeared to be avid and

quick learners of this convention as well. The more they looked and acted like us, dealing with budgets, insurance, measurement, and so on, the more comfortable we became with them. However, we need to remind ourselves constantly that their adoption of this form does not mean that this form has very much weight in the community nor that we actually understand very much about their community, their own social forms, their own values and concerns, their own “behind the scenes” “social organization”, and so on. For example, we should not conclude that, because they are represented by elected officers, is these officers actually make the community decisions, rather than the elders, traditional chiefs, religious authorities, wise men and women, and so on. So, we actually have no idea about their core values and concerns or how they actually make decisions.

While the MAAs do not contain or represent every member of a specific immigrant or refugee population, their constituents contain much of the range of this population – professionals, business people, the underemployed, the unemployed, all levels of language fluency and literacy in English and their home languages, young people, old people, and so on. While the officials effectively deal with us, they also perform another function – protecting their members from too much direct contact with us. I suggest that this role is not accidental but purposeful – using those more sophisticated in-American ways to act as a buffer between community members and the agendas and methods of the outside world. One potential loss in this buffering process is that we ourselves have less direct contact with “just folks”, those who provide the data underlying our research and policy development.

This is less a research issue than a relationship-building issue. For example, I always start my inquiry about the communities at their outer edges, because I want to properly discover the correct forms and the “right” people. I am very concerned about our being immediately identified with marginal, even distrusted, members of these communities. Even if I never find the community leaders, I try to at least have contact with the “average” members and hope that conversation about our activities would filter through the community as it talked to itself. Whatever I do, if it is to be useful, has to be constructed carefully over time, often very long periods, that is, years of lead time.

So, formalized political protocol may work with structured and settled communities; only personal protocol will work with recent immigrants and refugees. For example, in one Alaska Native community, I spent three years as a state official offering to help them, open-handedly, construct a cultural center they said they wanted to retrieve, retain, protect, and exhibit some of the great clan art and artifacts of their past. When I first approached them, they assigned me and my quest to their only and lowest-level white employee. It was a way to keep me distanced from them; if I decided ultimately to go away. I met with her for two years, discussing the various challenges and opportunities open to us. Somehow, she kept the village authorities informed. At the end of two years, she was joined by a more corporate-type villager, someone I thought was pretty marginal to the village and somewhat of a flake. We also met for about a year, but nothing substantial occurred. I just kept flying back to the village with more paper. One day, I flew to the village and met with this corporate gentlemen and two other men, in their late 50s. We talked about many things, but not the project. We talked about the role that

Native wisdom might play in helping the larger American society deal with its environmental and equity issues. We talked about religion, about the conflict between traditional and Christian beliefs, the possible confluence of Raven and Christ in the Native spiritual world. Finally, daylight was beginning to fade behind the mountains and in the complex inshore channels of the archipelago. I needed to catch my little plane back home before the light failed. As I stood up and gathered my belongings, the corporate man asked, "Wasn't there something you wanted today?" "Well, I was hoping for some word on the project." "Oh, that's been approved." The other two men laughed at my surprise, we all shook hands and the deal was done. A few months later, my position in my agency ended and I went back and said, "I would like you and the agency to continue the project. Let me tell you about my successor." And they said, "We didn't shake hands with your agency, we shook hands with you. The project is over." I discovered then that, in such communities, handshakes or other agreements are between real persons, not communities and agencies or communities and projects.

I talked earlier about outsiders parachuting into the community and taking the hallowed Martian approach -- "take me to your leader." Most often, they quickly discover the invisibility and aloofness of community leadership. They simply lack an effective social "map" of the community, because they won't invest the time and energy to work with community guides in developing an initial map which would provide them with safety in getting to understand the community world. Smart people will not go into a strange forest, jungle, desert, subterranean cave, or underwater environment without a proper map, but will readily try to enter an unknown community without a map, I suppose "relying on the kindness of strangers."

Some outsiders quickly abandon their quest for leaders or guides in favor of using somewhat dubious cultural brokers instead. They come to identify with or be identified with more marginal members of these communities, those who live and thrive between the community and the powerful outsiders. This may engender more distrust and result in mis-identifying the true community and its leadership. Outsiders have few ways to get around self-styled, self-serving, and self-appointed leaders and brokers. Outsiders may marginalize the good brokers from both societies or reference groups and threaten their very existence. I remember I once worked for a gas pipeline company that hired a local community member, well-educated and well-spoken, to be its broker, its go-between between the village and the company. This community member was seen by each side to be an effective spokesperson for the other side. When the company failed to be awarded a federal permit to build its pipeline, it left the community and its broker. The broker was marginalized by the village, blamed for the failure of his company to deliver jobs and wealth to the village. Three weeks later, he ran out of gas on the ice in his snowmachine, too far away to get home; he died, reportedly an accident. Was it?

A problem posed by relying on marginal people is that their efforts often produce marginal project findings. We must invest in connecting with and maintaining trust ourselves with more than brokers and agents, but with community members throughout the community.

Just a few additional points for your consideration.

As researchers, we bring with us a lot of baggage, such as the sanctity of scientific method and codified professional and institutional ethics, reduced to a kind of proceduralism. We all have, in our files, examples of ethical guidelines and forms for working in and with communities. I suggest that, in the main, these mask the true imbalance in power between the research and community, the project staff and the community. We color in the squares by holding public meetings, providing interpretation for the meetings, getting informed consent, hiring locals, seeking “input,” and so on, but do we truly transfer any power or authority over any part of our projects to the community? Do we understand the difference between a community-as-laboratory and community-as-partner?

For researchers, for example, one large piece of intellectual baggage we carry around, like the turtle carries its shell, is the presumed neutrality of our scientific research, our disinterestedness in the answer, except for having the answer. But neutrality in science is our bias. We assume because we are well-meaning, that our actions will be viewed positively by the community. Doubt it. Our research is based on our values, our assumptions, our concepts, our concerns, our views of the world, our language, our purposes, our resources, our audiences and critics, our peer reviewers, our issues, our relevant categories, our variables, our understandings of how things work and how the world is put together. When was the last time you as a researcher ever allowed the community to change or amend or modify the research question, to make it more correct for you and relevant for them?

The question is, research for whom? Is it a choice between our academic or research questions versus the health and well-being of real communities? Can there be joint ownership of the question? Can we hold, concurrently, two versions of reality, academic versus experienced reality, or agency versus experienced reality? How are these values to be blended?

In Alaska, for example, the entire rural area where the bulk of Alaska Natives lives seems viewed as a national health laboratory, due to its isolation, homogeneity, and relative powerlessness. I can't tell you how painful it was, as a university health center director, to try to find a middle ground among the legitimate research objectives, such as vaccine efficacy, of federal agencies, the health and future of Native children, and the role of local public health officials and nurses in such a convenient laboratory. Often, my stance was to stand aside and let the researchers, whose values were in their research, fail for want of a guide or a mentor.

So, for me, the key issue between agency and community, institution and community, is power and ownership. My last story today. In the 1980s, it was likely that offshore oil exploration was going to occur close to some Alaska Native villages who relied on the sea, the near-shore, for fish, whales, seals, crab, and other wild resources. The villagers felt they were powerless to stop the rigs from coming in and the companies were concerned about the legal and public relations implications of a loud village protest. A

local political leader convinced the company to cede 3% of the ownership and proceeds of the rig to the village. That way, if the inconvenience and danger produced a modicum of benefit, it would sit better with the villagers; equally, it gave the villagers a sense of ownership and power over future events, whether good or bad. If the rigs caused some degradation to the environment, villagers could at least mollify themselves that it was the result of their decision, not something that others did to them. This would enhance their feeling of being in control of their own fate. The local leader later told this story to a scientific meeting and was asked, "How could villagers believe that 3% ownership gave them power?" As a leader concerned about the emotional well-being of his people, his response was shockingly candid. "Give them the power if you can. If you can't, fool them into thinking they have it." Troubling ethics? Perhaps. Sound social health policy. Absolutely.