

What is the Culture of Research in the Circumpolar North?

An Ethnographic Perspective of Literature and Personal Experience

Amy L. Wiita

Owner/Principal Research Consultant, Cinza Research

Doctoral Student, Department of Anthropology, University of Alaska Fairbanks,

USA

Introduction

This paper is based on my observations and experiences in public and private sector research and is the summation of my presentation to the 2006 Fourth Northern Research Forum (NRF) Open Meeting in Finland and Sweden. It supports the 2006 NRF position paper entitled "The Culture of Community-Based Research and a Borderless North" (Wiita 2006) which expands on the topics I present here.

I suggest that research in the Circumpolar North is a culture comprised of various components that can be described from a cultural perspective. I will briefly discuss some of these components. The information I present may seem obvious to community members and indigenous peoples but it is not necessarily obvious to all scientists, researchers, and governments with whom communities work. Audience members at the Community-Based Research (CBR) session in which I presented this information supported the presentation of the following "obvious" aspects of the culture of research in the Circumpolar North because they still have problems with governments and researchers who do not understand the basic tenants of working well with community members on research projects. Audience members indicated that perhaps the more we state the basic tenets of CBR perhaps the more people will understand and practice them when conducting research in the Circumpolar North. The Circumpolar research community must move beyond the continued stating of the obvious and reflect on what the research community is practicing and improve upon these practices through cooperative measures between the local, research, and government communities in the Circumpolar North.

I would like to thank the Northern Research Forum for the opportunity to participate in the 2006 NRF Open Meeting as a young researcher and I would also like to

recognize all the researchers from within and outside the North collaborating with communities and conducting community-based research in the North.

The Culture of Research in the North

The overall culture of research in the Circumpolar North includes many diverse cultures such as indigenous, rural and urban, academic, disciplinary, non-Native, corporate, and political cultures to name but a few. The cultures are often specific to the countries that comprise the Circumpolar North. These component cultures, when taken collectively, constitute the culture of research. The culture of research derives from these component cultures and the linkages and interconnectivity between them.

A research institution located in the continental United States asked me to give a presentation about community-based research in Alaska to help them prepare for future research they will be undertaking in Alaska. The conversation and questions that ensued from the presentation reminded me, yet again, that although the Circumpolar North may have much in common with other locations, including locations that are more southerly, the culture of research in Alaska and the Circumpolar North in general, is not the same as that of our southerly neighbors. The culture of research is different here. There is a need for respect of indigenous ways, beliefs, and values; a need to show commitment and foster trust over time; a need to spend time to get to know people and communities; and a need to do things in person rather than from a distance. The research culture in the North and elsewhere needs to foster a process of building relationships with people and communities to work together *not* to simply implement a research process.

Where is the North?

Basic concepts such as simply defining the North can be a challenge (Fig. 1). Other speakers at the 2006 NRF Open Meeting also discussed this challenge suggesting the prevalence of the issue. Definitions of the north are dependent on purpose, perspective, scientific discipline, and subject matter. Boundary definitions may be arbitrary and are neither static nor uniform and change over time due to politics, familiarity with a region and perceptions of remoteness (Holland 1994). Boundaries may be limited to such aspects as latitude, treeline, and temperature. Definitions are often disciplinary—engineers, geographers, anthropologists, and epidemiolo-



Figure 1: Geographic representation of one definition of the North—the Arctic Circle

gists may all define the North differently based on the needs of their research and proposed hypotheses. Individual and community perspectives influence how individuals and communities define northerliness. I would suggest that Southeast Alaska community members would include themselves in the North even though the environment in southeast Alaska supports temperate rainforest and there is no permafrost. Northerliness and its associated boundaries are relative—from Florida, Minnesota may be considered the North and Alaska the Arctic, but in Anchorage, Alaska Barrow, Alaska is considered the North. “Community” also does not have just one definition. It may be a rural remote community, a group in an urban center or an agency at the local, regional, or national level.

From Colonialism to Community

Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses the grounding of research in imperialist and colonialist ways and means (Tuhiwai Smith 2001:1). She notes the power of research for indigenous peoples stating it is so powerful that people write poetry about it. An example of this for the North is the poem “Honor and Glory” by Aqqaluk Lyngé with its reflection on exploration and research in the North and the ethnocentrism it embodied.

In Honour [sic] and Glory

By Aqqaluk Lyngé

“They travelled [sic] and travelled/in a country where they thought/that no human beings could settle and live - They travelled and travelled/and when they arrived they found people/who did not know anything else/about human beings than themselves. – They travelled and travelled/and the hospitality was big/the curiosity without limits/but the guests could not be satisfied. – They travelled and travelled/and everywhere they came/people were examined/their clothes, sledges, and equipments were brought up. – They travelled and travelled/to a country so big/that there cannot be people enough/to name that many places. – They travelled and travelled/and each island or fjord/headland or mountain was named/in honour of this or that or themselves. – They travelled and travelled/and returned with maps of the country, and the way of life described—to gain honor and glory/medals et cetera/for having travelled in a country where people are settled and living.” As quoted in (Kleivan 1997:187).

Research has moved from the exploratory colonial voyages involved in conquering peoples and places Lyngé references in his poem to cooperation and collaboration with local communities as an important component of research projects. *Whatever* is being researched *is* someone’s—someone’s culture, someone’s home, someone’s way of knowing, someone’s geography. *It* is not just a research discovery process. In the nearly twenty years I have been interested in community-based research in and outside the Circumpolar North, CBR has slowly emerged as a priority in the research community. This has been a slow but important paradigm shift away from research-centric agendas.

Decision making in research is becoming more localized through locally driven processes that include local in-

put and participation in research design and implementation. Funding sources now often require community collaboration and the dissemination of research results to communities. This is part of the slow paradigm shift in the culture of research. These requirements, however, do not ensure locally driven active participation by communities or that the information disseminated to communities is in a format conducive to stimulating interest in the research results or in an appropriate format to promote community consumption of the information. Community collaboration should include active participation in all stages of the research process from design to the final publication of results. Researchers should provide communities with interim research updates throughout the research process as well as the final findings. The information should be what the community wants to know, in a format they want, and distributed when they want it. Community needs will dictate what format is most appropriate, for example, posters, newsletters, community discussions, talking circles, or even agency reports may be appropriate depending on the community.

There are many factors to consider when collaborating with communities on research projects—factors that may not be obvious such as the best time of the year for communities to participate in research activities. In Alaska, for example, conducting research in rural communities during the summer may not be the best time of the year for communities to participate in research when subsistence activities are a priority. Community-based research is a process of building relationships with people and working together to meet community and research goals.

Whose Ethics & Whose Politics?

Ethics are also an influential component of the culture of research in the North. Culture can influence perceptions of ethicality. For example, traditional community culture, academic disciplinary culture, and professional culture may each result in different definitions of what is ethical. Researchers and communities may not view ethics the same. Researchers must embrace ethics as a shared process where they tailor the process to community needs with community control of research consent and protocols rather than simply implementing a step-wise list of tasks of informed consent. Researchers' perspectives should focus on community needs, *not* just research needs, and foster community trust through respect. As a member of the Alaska Area Institutional Review Board says, "consent is a process *not* a signature."

Communities, governmental organizations, Native organizations (local and international) and profes-

sional organizations are publishing research codes of conduct and holding researchers to a standard of full community collaboration in projects. Communities are focusing on their own research protocols and guidelines including, for example, the Alaska Native Science Commission Code of Research Ethics, Alaska Native Knowledge Network guidelines for Respecting Cultural Knowledge, the Alaska Federation of Natives Guidelines for Research, U.S. Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee and the National Science Foundation Principles for the Conduct of Research in the Arctic, Inuit Circumpolar Conference Draft Principles for an Arctic Policy, and the International Arctic Social Sciences Association Guiding Principles for the Conduct of Research.

Regionalization and national interests are also components of the culture of research in the North. As Mead Treadwell noted in a plenary session at this NRF and as Crawford, Shinn and Sorlin note, world politics such as World War I and II and the Cold War influence the culture of research through the nationalization or denationalization of research through specified research agendas, the status of country to country relations and research and development needs (1993). Country-specific policy statements on arctic research further exemplify the influence of the government on the subject matter and magnitude, as a result of funding, of research in the Circumpolar North. It is important to examine whether policies are guided by current community needs or national political needs. Policies direct funding, funding directs research, and research directs priorities available to researchers and communities thereby affecting the research conducted by communities. The key point here is not just that policy affects funding but that government relations affect community-based research and the culture of research in the North.

Discussion

Within the culture of research in the Circumpolar North, research must genuinely focus on community-based research needs. Social science research is becoming more collaborative, with local residents and local scientists having active roles in research. This is a positive and necessary change in the culture of research. Often, however, researchers form local partnerships as a process of political correctness to facilitate research implementation rather than to foster effective working partnerships with local experts. Some researchers neglect to disseminate research findings to communities in a culturally appropriate manner; they present and publish findings without community involvement; they do not take the time to get to know the local community with whom they want to work; they do not spend time in the com-

munity; they implement research at their convenience rather than at the communities'; and project coordination is often focused at the governmental level rather than the community level.

People must be educated in northern research practices. Scientists, consultants, local communities, and community leaders must advance community-based research within the culture of research in the North and outside the North. Many researchers from outside the North working here do not have a thorough understanding of our research culture and community-based research here. The culture of research in the North must further community-based research, uphold community needs, and strive to reduce the borders and barriers between research and local community interests.

References

- Crawford, E., T. Shinn, and S. Sorlin. Editors. (1993). *Denationalizing Science: The Contexts of International Scientific Practice*. Vol. XVI. *Sociology of the Sciences, A Yearbook*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Holland, C. (1994). *Arctic Exploration and Development c. 500 b.c. to 1915: An Encyclopedia*. New York & London, : Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Kleivan, I. (1997). "Poetry, Politics, and Archeology in Greenland," In: *Fifty Years of Arctic Research Anthropological Studies from Greenland to Siberia*, vol. 18. Edited by G. R. a. H. C. Gullov, pp. 187-194 Copenhagen: Department of Ethnography, The National Museum of Denmark.
- Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2001). *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Third edition. London & New York: Zed Books Ltd.
- Wiita, A. L. (2006). "The Culture of Community-Based Research and a Borderless North: A position paper presented for the 4th NRF Open Meeting." *4th NRF Open Meeting, Oulu, Finland and Luleå, Sweden, 2006*.