Research In and With Tribal Communities: History, Evolution, and Vision

Nancy Rumbaugh Whitesell, Ph.D.
Michelle Sarche, Ph.D.
Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health
Colorado School of Public Health, University of Colorado
Acknowledgements

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Goals of this talk

Provide an historical context for research in and with tribal communities
- What has research looked like in the past?
- What does research look like now?
- What is a vision for the future?
Indigenous peoples have been, in many ways, oppressed by theory. Any consideration of the ways our origins have been examined, our histories recounted, our arts analyzed, our cultures dissected, measured, torn apart and distorted back to us will suggest that theories have not looked sympathetically or ethically at us.

Barrow Alaska Study in 1979

- Press release of findings states, “Alcohol Plagues Eskimos”
- Standard & Poor’s rating of the community dropped, and community was precluded from receiving funds for municipal projects
Havasupai case in 2010

- Tribe provided blood samples to researchers at the University of Arizona, for what they believed was a study to understand the genetic basis for the high rates of diabetes in their community and find a cure.
- Consent stated research was to study the “causes of behavioral/medical disorders.”
- Genetic links to diabetes like those found in another tribe were not found among the Havasupai so the research did not find the cure for diabetes the tribe hoped for.
- 2 dozen other research publications came from these data – including one reporting a high degree of inbreeding, and one that challenged tribal beliefs about their origins in the Grand Canyon, and in the tribe’s view, the basis for their sovereign rights as a tribal nation.
- Tribe sued the University of Arizona, and settlement was made in April 2010, awarding $700,000 to 41 research participants and the return of the blood samples to the tribe.
Criticisms of Past Research in Tribal Communities

- Research driven by questions generated outside the community
- Research conducted primarily by outside investigators
- No real relationship between community and researchers
- Inflexible approach based on western scientific methods
- Dissemination efforts focused in scientific outlets
Research Question + Western Scientific Approach = “Knowledge” adding to the scientific literature Tribe Community
30+ years of Research in one Tribal Community: Example of how Research Partnerships can Evolve
- Researchers new to community
- Targeted research project
- Began building relationships in community
- Engaged tribe in approval process
- Engaged local partners for help in adapting measures
- Began exploring options for community dissemination
Research driven by questions generated outside the community

Research conducted primarily by outside investigators

No real relationship between community and researchers

Inflexible approach based on western scientific methods

Dissemination efforts focused in scientific outlets
1980s
- Return to community for large scale research project
- University investigators partnering with local research staff – setting up field office, hiring and training local research staff
- Increasing reliance on expertise of local partners for adapting methods and measures
- Agreements with tribal government for approval of projects and regular review of findings/dissemination
- Provision of community research summaries and presentations
Research driven by questions generated outside the community

Research conducted primarily by outside investigators

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Dissemination efforts focused in scientific outlets
- Move to intervention studies – driven by tribal partners
- Questions increasingly co-created by community and university partners
- On-going field office, employing and training interventionists and research team
- Tribal partners playing more integral role in identifying grant opportunities and generating research projects
- Increasing reliance on local expertise for measurement and methodology
- Tribal Research Review Board created – grassroots group of local researchers, service providers, cultural experts
- Established presence in community
- Greater involvement in community dissemination efforts (e.g., local health fairs) – typically led by local staff
Research driven by questions generated outside the community

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Dissemination efforts focused in scientific outlets
2010s

- Continued emphasis on interventions, application of research
- Tribal partners building infrastructure for more independent research, greater control of research agenda, transitioning to leadership role in research
- Increased funding directly to tribe – ARRA infrastructure building, NARCH grants
- Instituted community research conference; actively exploring ways to communicate research findings effectively to community members
Research driven by questions generated outside the community

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Dissemination efforts focused in scientific outlets
Lessons Learned in this Process about Best Practices for Tribal-University Partnerships for Research
Useful and Appropriate Models of Research for Tribal Communities

- Models for partnerships between communities and researchers
  - Community-Based Participatory Research
  - Tribal Participatory Research/Kinship Models

- Research driven by community questions

- Research to provide information that will be directly useful to community

- Western scientific ways of knowing working together with cultural ways of knowing contribute to shared success
A tiered model of involving the community in the “community base”

- **Tier 1: Project Core Staff**
  - The team that is primarily responsible for the research/evaluation
  - Can be tribal staff, program staff, field staff for university-based research

- **Tier 2: Advisory boards**
  - Community experts who provide broader perspective, substantive expertise
  - e.g., EAST Council

- **Tier 3: Broader input from community**
  - Focus groups, interviewees
  - Reaching out for broader community input
  - e.g., parents, youth, teachers, service providers
Evidence-Based Practices

What is “evidence”?  

- Scientific Criteria
  - Randomized Control Trials as the gold standard
  - Efficacy (in the lab) vs. Effectiveness (in the world)

- RCT in Indian Country?  
  - Exclusion and Refusal

- “Best Practices” that may not really be best for tribal communities  
  - e.g., “proven” usually not proven with American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians

Alternative ways of thinking about evidence

- Dr. Fox and Dr. Bigelow
Interventions Developed from Within

- Culturally-based interventions
  - Building from the ground up

OR

- Culturally-adapted interventions
  - Using EBPs as a starting point
    - Surface adaptations
      - e.g., language, symbols
    - Deep structure adaptations
      - e.g., storytelling, tiyospaye
    - Supplementation
      - e.g., interweaving cultural curriculum

- Pros and Cons
Some Priorities Moving Forward

• Finding the right balance of western science and “tribal science”
  • Educating tribal researchers in western science
    • Principal Investigators (study leaders)
    • Research teams
  • Educating western researchers in tribal culture and ways of knowing

• Building research oversight infrastructures in tribal communities – IRBs, RRBs, etc.

• Building tribal administrative infrastructures for navigating research funding systems – from application process to tracking expenditures, complying with federal requirements, etc.

• Finding ways to communicate research findings effectively to those in the community who can benefit from them
Tribal Community

Research Question

Western Scientific Ways of Knowing

New Knowledge

Cultural Ways of Knowing
What researchers can do to support the partnership

- Be informed about tribal culture, norms, and practices
- Be informed about tribal protocols for research & follow them
- Work with community partners to identify questions that need to be answered
- Provide consultation on how research can answer these questions:
  - Consider what is feasible
  - Propose a research design
  - Propose research measures
- Work with community partners to review evaluation plan and change it based on what will work for the community
- Provide summaries of research progress and findings in straightforward language
- Seek ongoing input and feedback throughout the research process, making changes as needed to ensure success
What communities can do to support the partnership

- Help researchers understand cultural customs and practices
- Ensure that community stakeholders are represented in discussions
- Work with researchers to identify questions that need to be answered
- Consult with researchers on the research plan
  - Identify potential barriers to successful implementation
  - Provide input on procedures and measures, insuring a good fit with the community culture and language
- Assist researchers through the tribal approval process
- Help interpret findings in cultural context
Contact information:
nancy.whitesell@ucdenver.edu