

Critique

“Ethical Problems in Evaluation Research” by Elisabeth J. Johnson summarizes some of the salient ethical concerns in social science research such as the relative positions of power between researcher and subject, confidentiality and privacy, and “political interests” or the use of research findings by sponsors. The author concludes with proposals and cautions; of special relevance to readers of this journal is Kelman’s “participatory research” which enables people being studied to participate in the research design and implementation.

The subject of the paper clearly has implicit importance to ethnic minorities, for they have often been the objects of social science research. Further, as pointed out by Barnes, the researcher bears special ethical responsibilities when studying minorities because of their generally dependent and relatively powerless position in society, and social science research may be used by “sponsors” to maintain the *status quo* in the case of anthropologists as colonialists. “The use of the methods of inquiry of social science and the application of its findings,” warned Barnes, “have become an essential aspect of the machinery of government.”¹ Project Camelot and its exposure in 1965 helped to resurrect the issue of ethics, social science, and public policy, and alert Third World communities to such uses of research in preserving the *status quo*.²

Joan Moore adds an important point to the discussion of the politics of social science research. She suggests in her description of research among Mexican Americans in the Southwest that ethnic research may be political in another sense. Researchers of ethnic minorities often perceive their work to be for the ultimate benefit of those subject peoples; however, community activists who are the implementers of ethnic research may not be in sympathy with the means or conclusions of that research. The problem for the social scientist is to somehow convince the activist of the importance and validity of the research or to translate its conclusions into community action for social change³. Analogously, ethnic studies has directed criticism at traditional social science for research which is perceived as irrelevant to the needs of ethnic communities, inaccurate, and lacking an “ethnic perspective”; a nagging fear on the part of the critics is the question of exploitation by “outsiders” and the use or abuse of the information gathered. Despite its gradual decline, there still exists a degree of anti-intellectualism among activists both in ethnic studies and in the ethnic community.

The social scientist thus faces a dilemma; the possible social consequences of research on a minority community must surely weigh on her conscience. She must be accurate, but ideologically she is committed to conclusions which promote social justice. Those are some of the elements of importance to ethnic minorities implicit in a consideration of ethics and social science research, the subject of Elisabeth J. Johnson's paper.

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Notes

¹ J.A. Barnes. *The Ethics of Inquiry in Social Science*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977) 48.

² Irving Louis Horowitz, ed. *The Rise and Fall of Project Camelot*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967).

³ Joan W. Moore. "Political and Ethical Problems in a Large Scale Study of a Minority Population." Gideon Sjoberg, ed. *Ethics, Politics, and Social Research*: (Cambridge: Schenkman. 1967), 225-44.

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Johnson's paper contains four assumptions which deserve further attention, especially in the context of ethnic minorities. These four assumptions are both obvious and at the root of the ethical problems: 1) Minorities need services; 2) services are to be provided by the dominant group; 3) the providing of services must be evaluated for cost-effectiveness; and 4) the evaluators are more likely to come from the dominant group than the minority group and hence be more powerful than those being evaluated. This, then, leads to the basic problem addressed by Johnson: How can this evaluation process occur such that the rights and privileges of the minority are protected? Phrased another way, how can this process occur without the dominant group using its power over the minority group?

Johnson notes, I think correctly, that the ethical problems arise because of the politics of providing and evaluating services, and there is no easy, all-purpose solution. Thus, Johnson suggests that within the existing power structure the evaluators, whenever possible and feasible, give those being evaluated a bit more power: informed