The Resident Researcher: An Alternative Career Model Centered on Community[1]

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Considers the potential benefits and costs of an alternative career model for community researchers, one in which professionals specialize in the community where they live. By virtue of their local familiarity, resident researchers can make more informed judgments about research problems and methods. They can employ longitudinal designs to assess change and be available to assist in interpretation and implementation of research. Potential costs include the possibility of provincialism, unintended researcher effects, ethical dilemmas, the need to cultivate community relations, and role conflicts. Interdisciplinary training programs and research field stations can contribute to the development of the resident researcher role. Researchers in the community can help generate grass roots support for social science research.

KEY WORDS: resident research; career model; community; field research.

Can community professionals create a career, including a research specialty, based on a single locality? Bullard has done so. Bullard has been a city planner, community researcher, and mayor in New Bedford, MA, the town where he was born and raised. He describes his feelings of attachment to

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the town as "infinitely more powerful than that which I feel to any [other] place because it comes from my family, my history, my heart, and my gut, not just my head" (Bullard, 1991, p. 74). Bullard contrasted his own strong roots in the town with the typical attitude of planners and researchers whom he characterized as "hired guns" who enter and leave a place with the same lack of long-term commitment displayed by the television cowboy Paladin in *Have Gun. Will Travel.* Bullard's devotion to New Bedford is such that he reportedly lacks the time and emotional resources to conduct serious research elsewhere.

Influenced by Lynch, his mentor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Bullard has conducted interviews and obtained mental maps of New Bedford to define and articulate an image for the community. This research has infused and helped to guide his political life. Although some professionals engage in both research and advocacy, focusing these activities on a single community is rare. Bullard felt the anomaly: "I am alone in the woods. There are no mentors, no examples. . . . There do not even seem to be followers" (p. 78). However, there are benefits: "The rewards of staying in one place and making it a career are immense. One sees every day the improvements for which one has been responsible. There is a connectedness to time, place and people that serves as an anchor in an uncertain world. I understand the meaning of my life" (p. 78). Bullard believes that if the distinctive qualities of communities are to be preserved, more researchers should choose the path he has taken: "a single committed person willing to stay and become part of such a community is more important and has a greater positive impact than a hundred hired guns" (p. 79).

In some ways, Bullard's role resembles that of local researchers. Their primary concern with local events contrasts with the cosmopolitan scholar's concentration on broad concerns of a larger academic community. It is noteworthy that Gouldner (1957), who suggested this distinction, gave little attention to a research role for the local scholar, whom he portrayed as primarily interested in teaching and administrative issues.

Bullard's role is closer to the model of regional scholarship in the natural sciences. Field researchers may dedicate their careers to studying flora or fauna in a single locality, and they may base their publications on localized observations. Some conceptual parallels to Bullard's community focus exist in environmental psychology. They include place cognition (Canter, 1977; Lynch, 1960), topophilia or love of place (Tuan, 1974), place dependence (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981), and spirit of place (Swan, 1991). However, Bullard's model entails more than cognition and emotions — it requires action and deliberate intervention (cf. Lewin, 1946). Bullard is less concerned with people's attachments to places as a general psychological phenomenon than he is with how these attachments inspire and motivate

researcher-practitioners. The empowerment programs and action research of some psychologists also fit what Bullard advocates. Examples include Loo's (1991) studies of institutions and agencies in San Francisco's Chinatown and Rivlin's (1987, 1990; Rivlin & Imbimbo, 1989) research on the homeless and on Jewish neighborhoods in New York City. Some community social psychologists in Latin America have practiced resident research for more than a decade (see Sanchez & Weisenfeld, 1991, for a series of articles describing these efforts).

Bullard's account, published appropriately in *Places* magazine, resonates with our previously expressed concerns regarding the aspatial quality of training and research in community and environmental psychology and related disciplines (Sommer, 1990; Sommer & Wicker, 1991; Wicker, 1989). Typically, students are introduced to presumably universal concepts and theories, and they are trained in techniques amenable to multiple applications. This training implicitly gives higher value to research projects that examine theoretical issues of interest to the larger academic community. Localized projects, even if they are of immediate and pressing concern to members of one's institution or community, are less valued.

The different values attached to research problems have implications for other aspects of the research process. For example, the cosmopolitan researcher is likely to favor cross-sectional research designs and to employ laboratory experiments or representative surveys that examine presumably general processes rather than substantive topics. Such research is most likely to appear in professional journals read by other cosmopolitan scholars. The emphasis on general processes tends to favor the use of inferential statistics to test group differences, rather than descriptive statistics to describe existing situations.

The gains from this kind of research are well known and widely appreciated. The dominant epistemology has engaged some of the best minds in the social sciences. It has produced insights that have both challenged and reinforced societal beliefs, values, and practices. It has also yielded more limited, but important contributions to specific technologies.

However, the benefits of the cosmopolitan approach do not usually include direct contributions to specific local or substantive problems. The approach's tenets and methods tend to disregard the specific locus of research and particular substantive issues. For example, researchers studying attitude change rarely analyze the many facets of the social situations and behavior settings that they create or select. Nor do they examine the broader community contexts in which the research is conducted. Researchers typically have little interest in the particular topics or issues that they use to assess attitude change. To them the topics are merely convenient vehicles for studying general processes.

        Useful knowledge about particular communities, neighborhoods, and be-
havior settings requires a different approach. Researchers who start with a sub-
stantive problem are more likely to employ formative, rather than prearranged
summative research designs (Scriven, 1971). They probably employ a combina-
tion of strategies, such as selective sampling, longitudinal designs, direct obser-
vation, content and archival analyses. Their research results are more likely to
become known through local newspapers and magazines, oral presentations or
written reports to agencies, and other community outlets.

        In an earlier paper, we described one alternative to the cosmopolitan
approach — a career model in ecological psychology based on specialization
in behavior-setting genotypes, especially mundane and ubiquitous behavior
settings such as supermarkets, restaurants, and gas stations (Sommer &
Wicker, 1991). Bullard's account indicated another alternative, one in which
researchers concentrate on a particular community, neighborhood, or other
place of a similar scale. In a sense, this alternative focuses directly on the
resident researcher's own attachment to place (e.g., Canter, 1977; Tuan,
1974). Some community psychologists such as Kelly (1979) have described
the advantages of long-term commitment to local settings in which research
occurs, as distinct from single interventions, but little attention has been
given to research specifically upon the community in which one resides for
a period of time, where one applies his or her research skills longitudinally
to one's immediate surroundings. Although living in a single location and
being a social scientist are necessary ingredients of the resident researcher
role, they are not sufficient. If so, a social scientist who lived in a place for
an extended period would automatically qualify as a resident researcher.
The additional requirement is the willingness to apply scientific scrutiny to
familiar people and settings on a long-term basis. Our use of the singular
to describe the resident researcher role is a matter of linguistic convenience.
The role may be occupied by an individual, a family (husband–wife teams
are very common in field research in the natural sciences), or a field station.
The resident researcher with an academic appointment is likely to enlist
successive cohorts of students in the research.

        Although examples of resident research on community issues are available
in the literature, we know of no attempts to describe and analyze it as a career
model. We believe that permanent or long-term residency in a community cho-
sen for study can influence virtually every aspect of research, including choice
of problems, methods for collecting information, responses by recipients of the
research, the statistical analyses, and how research is disseminated and used. In
the following paragraphs we consider some advantages and problems that are
likely accompany the resident researcher role. The list is incomplete and on some
points our discussion is admittedly vague. Our goal is to contribute to early dis-
cussions of a distinctive role for researchers, not to define it.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF RESIDENT RESEARCH

Long-term contact with the community can lead resident researchers to formulate research problems in a more sensitive and more appropriate fashion. Researchers who have extensive firsthand knowledge of a community can use that knowledge to identify problems more incisively. For example, a visiting researcher might see similarities in two public parks that are viewed as quite different by local residents. Resident researchers should be able to get more useful information because they possess the knowledge to ask the right questions and make distinctions that informants would regard as more appropriate.

Drawing on their local knowledge, resident researchers can select methods that yield more valuable information. Better formulated problems coupled with sensitivity to local interests and values should pay off in better information. Resident researchers' awareness of special interests, influential local persons and groups, and nuances in interpretations and perceptions — all of which may be unknown to outsiders — can lead to choices of samples, methods, questions, observations, and research designs that tap more of the essence of a problem. For example, knowing that a public park is a gathering place for students after high school athletic games, a researcher studying park use would be careful to include the days and hours that include this particular use. An actual illustration of the omissions of outside researchers experienced by one of us was a study of a bus system in a national park. The outside researchers stopped taking observations at dark, and even though they lacked data, they recommended running fewer buses in the evening hours. Subsequent investigation revealed what a resident researcher would have known — that the number of riders increased considerably after visitors had finished dinner; campers used buses to travel to ranger-led programs and to centralized facilities in other areas of the park.

Long-term residency in a community allows researchers to conduct well-timed longitudinal studies and to document community change. Although the benefits of longitudinal research are almost universally recognized, they are rarely realized. Few researchers or funding agencies are willing to make the long-term commitments that are required. Travel and relocation costs may also discourage follow-up investigations by outside researchers. Resident researchers are in an excellent position to conduct longitudinal research. By informally monitoring developments that follow an initial data collection they can make informed judgments about timing of subsequent assessments, which is crucial in longitudinal studies (cf. Kelly & McGrath, 1988). Moreover, being on the scene permits the local researcher to respond to fast-moving developments. A local researcher who has kept good

research files can draw from already developed instruments and sampling methods, and can rely on earlier findings for comparative data. More generally, a major advantage of long-term research is the opportunity to study and document community change. If a community environment has been monitored prior to the initiation of a social program such as transportation for the elderly or low-cost housing, the program's effects on the community can be more readily and more powerfully documented (L. S. Barker, personal communication, July 7, 1992).

Key informants and participants are known and available to resident researchers. Local researchers should already know many of the key participants in a community through myriad formal and informal networks, such as service clubs, workplace associations, friendship and family linkages, and religious institutions.

Background information that outsiders would have to spend considerable effort to obtain and assimilate is readily available to resident researchers. Our local researchers will maintain files of personal documents, reports, newspaper reports, photographs, and the like, on a variety of local issues. They will also be familiar with the community resources for further information, including the city offices, library, historical society, and chamber of commerce. For example, a resident researcher interested in the city's parks may have a file of photographs taken over several years, a folder of newspaper clippings relating to planning issues and controversial decisions and uses of the parks, recollections of numerous park visits and conversations with park users, and knowledge of a file in the city library that would be amenable to content analysis. Residency allows researchers ready access to backstage as well as frontstage knowledge of the setting and its occupants (Goffman, 1963). Over time, long-term researchers may themselves become a valuable community resource. Having studied a community, they can provide an account of how existing institutions and programs came into being. They can also relate information on defunct settings and failed attempts to create programs in the past (L. S. Barker, personal communication, July 7, 1992).

Resident researchers can capitalize on opportunities for synergy and continuity by coupling investigations. The study of a focused population can also facilitate cross-sectional research. Results from one investigation may suggest follow-on studies that are expedited because the same instruments, research participants, or research entry points may be used. For example, questionnaires on disaster preparedness directed to city police officers may require only slight modification to be appropriate for fire fighters, studies of school truancy might be extended to police records of delinquency, a hospital that cooperates in a survey of parking needs for a neighborhood might also provide data on commuting patterns of its employees.

The commitment and concern of resident researchers will be evident to community members. Citizens often accuse researchers from outside the community of insensitivity to the feelings and concerns of local people. Residents often object to the exploitative aspects of research by visitors who come into a community, collect data, and then depart to report their findings in scholarly journals. These scholars may give little or nothing back to those who donated their time and surrendered a measure of their privacy to the study. Citizens also complain about professional consultants from the outside who provide advice to the community. The consequences of following the advice will most directly affect the residents, not the consultants. Such complaints are less likely to arise when an insider does the research. Resident researchers gain credibility by casting their lot with others in the community. What happens in the schools, on the streets, and at city hall affects them and their families.

Interpretation and implementation of research can be shared by resident researchers and community members. Several promoters of naturalistic inquiry have noted an advantage that their grounded methods have over more cosmopolitan approaches: those who provide research data can help interpret the "facts" gathered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Whyte, 1991). This benefit applies to resident researchers, who can and should solicit comments and interpretations of their findings from community members before the results are published or widely disseminated. After the results are announced, the local researcher will be available to participate with the community and its leaders in further interpretation. Laypersons, including people in the local media, can make too much as well as too little of particular findings, and their interpretations can be consequential. A convergence of meaning is more likely if the author of the research report is a local telephone call away. When the research includes recommended changes in policy or practice, the researcher can be on hand to explain the recommendations, to monitor their implementation, and to assist in fine-tuning the program. This situation contrasts with one in which outside consultants' research is quietly filed and forgotten, or whose recommendations can be rejected because of unchallenged strident opposition by a vocal minority.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH RESIDENT RESEARCH

Although local research can yield a number of important benefits, pitfalls also can be anticipated. A number of them are closely tied to the conditions that we have cited as producing benefits. For example, close contact with a single community not only promotes identification and

caring, it can also lead to selective perception or reporting. Bullard's article does not, for example, mention the notorious sexual assault that occurred in New Bedford a few years earlier. This omission seems notable, although there was no imperative to mention this tragic event since Bullard was not writing a history of his community. We describe in the following paragraphs a number of problems associated with local research. Although these problems may also apply to cosmopolitan researchers, they are particularly relevant to resident researchers.

Resident researchers may be so steeped in local culture and beliefs that their values are not explicitly stated or examined, or that they become intellectually narrow or provincial. In making this point, we wish to be clear that we do not consider any research to be value free. The best that researchers can do is to acknowledge, probe, and evaluate the premises and values that structure and guide their work. Investigators must pay special attention to the operation of covert bias when their roles include both information collection and advocacy. Values penetrate every research decision, including choices of methods, samples, design, analyses, interpretations, report wording, and dissemination. This is not to say that resident researchers should avoid advocacy or political activities. Indeed, such activities, particularly if accompanied by thoughtful reflection, can yield insights that otherwise would be missed (Schon, 1983). Almost by definition, resident researchers are provincial. Their professional lives focus on a single, bounded community that they care about. The attendant danger is that this narrowed focus may lead them to ignore or discount ideas and information originating elsewhere. To some extent, corrective processes for biases and intellectual provincialism are inherent in our research disciplines and political institutions. For example, our discipline values research that employs multiple methods and data sources, which may include accounts from both participants and observers, and information from government statistics and surveys. Although intellectual parochialism can exist among local researchers — just as it can among cosmopolitan scholars — we do not regard it as a necessary consequence of the role described here. The requirement to produce information relevant to specific local problems is one antidote. No single approach will be appropriate for the range of research problems the resident researcher will face; the need to find workable solutions to these problems is likely to stimulate a broad search. Other antidotes to provincialism that may be available to resident researchers include participation in multi-person teams made up of permanent residents and outside researchers, occasional consultation in other communities, and attendance at professional meetings. On a broader level, the skepticism of the scientific approach and the confrontational aspects of the democratic process are also correctives. A resident researcher who is unaware of biases

may have them pointed out by colleagues who read and comment on re-
search reports and by fellow residents in discussion and debate on issues
addressed by the research.

   *Resident researchers may directly or indirectly shape the events and proc-
esses they study.* As with the issue of bias, the appropriate concern is not
whether research affects the systems it studies, but the degree to which
researchers acknowledge these effects when they interpret their findings.
The same concern applies to resident researchers' advocacy activities when
they act as private citizens. This issue has been considered at least since
Lewin (1946) described and practiced action research (also see Geller,
1987; Fairweather & Davidson, 1986). It does seem important that, when
presenting research findings, resident researchers disclose their advocacy
roles and the positions they have taken on relevant issues.

   *The ethical issues that resident researchers are likely to face may be more
complex, and their resolutions less clearly indicated, because of continuing dual
roles as researcher and activist.* Maintaining confidentiality of information is
likely to be a greater challenge for local researchers than for outsiders who
are not well acquainted with the people who have provided data. Stronger
and more elaborate safeguards are necessary when the research participants
and research staffs are members of the same community. The safeguards
should include coded data sheets, locked file cabinets, and clear policies
regarding access to data files. Greater vigilance and training may also be
necessary to avoid inadvertent disclosure of confidential information in in-
formal conversations. A less obvious ethical problem may exist when a re-
searcher's observations or findings are potentially threatening or
compromising to local residents. To use such data could limit future access
to research participants. A similar dilemma would exist if the researcher
were able to explain or interpret data only by reference to information
provided in confidence.

   Resident researchers must pay special attention to community relations.
Only by developing and maintaining ties with all important constituencies
or stakeholders in the community, including those who are not power-
brokers, can local researchers maintain credibility and preserve access to
diverse community groups. It is necessary to stay in touch with community
members, even though it takes time away from direct research activities
(cf. Barker & Wright, 1971, p. 18; Barker, 1978, p. 48). The relationship
of trust must be reciprocal. When Louise and Roger Barker moved to
Oskaloosa, Kansas, to conduct their landmark observations of children,
one parent said to them. "You'll be watching us, but don't forget, we'll
be watching you." The Barkers believed it was essential to share findings
with the community. Periodic reports were sent to all post office box-
holders, and appeared in the local newspaper, and all of the publications

were placed in the local public library. Although people were only mildly interested in the actual data, knowing that the publications were available dissipated any suspicions of concealment (L. S. Barker, personal communication, July 15, 1992).

Resident researchers can expect to experience role conflicts, feelings of professional isolation, and concerns for professional respectability. In many cases resident researchers will find their scientific training indispensable. However, their socialization in graduate school may set them up for later role conflicts. That training will have identified cosmopolitan scholarship as the ideal research role. In particular, it will have emphasized the description of problems in abstract and somewhat global terms, the use of an analytic strategy to break down into components the social and behavioral events of interest, and the end goal of increasing knowledge and understanding. The practical agenda of local researchers may conflict with each of these emphases. Their problems are likely to be stated in terms of specific, concrete goals, such as how best to develop a public transportation center. Also, synthesis, rather than analysis, is required; numerous considerations must be brought to bear on the practical problem, including some that are not psychological. The end goal is likely to be action and implementation (Altman, 1973). Although some scientist-practitioner role models are available, resident researchers will probably feel as isolated professionally as Bullard does. This isolation may be compounded by regret at having strayed from the cosmopolitan scholar role held in such high esteem and exemplified by one's mentors. One commentator has described the dilemma in this way: "we are evaluating ourselves and others within the profession by a standard that is too uniform for optimal growth and vitality of the discipline. Like Procrustes, we are trying to fit ourselves and everyone else into the same bed, and naturally some are coming up too short or too long!" (Nocks, 1988). In the following section we discuss several changes that could make graduate training more hospitable to the resident research role. However, in the immediate future, we expect resident researchers will simply have to work out their own coping strategies.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Tensions about one's professional career, such as those we have described, often arise from a mismatch between the values and duties of certain professionals on the one hand and institutional and organizational contexts within which they operate on the other. If our graduate programs were more intellectually diverse, the niche for resident researchers

would be easier to carve out and justify. Resident research could be developed and defended in programs that recognize the legitimacy of a wide range of research approaches and theoretical frameworks, that encourage challenges to basic assumptions, and that acknowledge and value non-academic professional roles. Interdisciplinary programs are more likely to have such features, since they typically are founded on principles of intellectual diversity.

Social research field stations represent another potential source of institutional support for resident researchers, who could serve as directors, project leaders, or staff members. Although the most successful exemplars of field stations are in agriculture and biology, such facilities have also been established for studies of community life. Perhaps the most notable was the Midwest Psychological Field Station in Oskaloosa, Kansas. Founded by Barker and Wright in 1947, this facility ceased operation in 1973. Its activities and products are described in various publications, including Barker (1978), Barker and Schoggen (1973), Bechtel (1990), Schoggen (1989), and Wicker (1983).

A field station contains the physical locus and administrative structure for collecting longitudinal data in designated settings. New data are added to the archives as earlier data are analyzed and disseminated. The archives of the station represent an appreciating resource both to the local community and to the larger intellectual community. Archives provide local investigators with ideas as well as baseline and comparative data for current projects. With time, thoughtfully collected and preserved data can provide a rich source for historical inquiry. Social research field stations are appropriate for all types of communities, including central cities, suburbs, rural areas, ethnic neighborhoods, and industrial centers.

Typically, field stations are sponsored by universities and scientific organizations. They require a long-term commitment from the sponsor to achieve their purposes; this commitment sustains the activities of the station, although outside funding may support individual projects. Under such a protective umbrella, other benefits accrue: Graduate and postdoctoral students can obtain research experience and exposure to resident researcher role models, visiting scholars can participate in current projects or draw upon the archives to conduct fresh analyses, publications from the station can be made available for dissemination, and the continuity of the endeavor can be demonstrated to local residents (cf. Sommer, 1990).

The size of the geographic area and the variables studied by a resident researcher will depend upon situational factors coupled with time and resource constraints. A researcher could begin studying a single neighborhood and expand the investigation to an entire city, or begin with

the city as a focus of investigation and subsequently conduct more detailed case studies on a single neighborhood. When the investigator is committed to a place, there is no need to collect all the data at a single time. Loo (1991) spent several decades studying San Francisco's Chinatown. During this period she completed studies on specific issues affecting the community, such as crowding, language acquisition, mental health, and gender issues. These studies resulted in individual papers in technical journals. In 1991 there was enough material for an integrative book describing the history of the community and the lives of the residents from many standpoints. Loo has also served as a consultant for many social agencies and programs. Guenther (1992) used a similar approach in the planned city of Brasilia, conducting an overlapping series of studies on several different issues. Cross-sectional and longitudinal designs necessarily merge for the resident researcher since multiple relevant data sources are likely to be available in any new investigation.

Geographic separation of different groups of people on the grounds of ethnicity or other demographic variables limits who is able to be a resident researcher in which community. Liebow (1966), a white sociologist, who spent a year among street corner men in a black neighborhood in Washington, DC, realized in the end that he would always be an outsider:

> The brute fact of color, as they understood it in their experience, and I understood it in mine, irrevocably and absolutely relegated me to the status of outsider. . . . I used to play with the idea that maybe I wasn't as much of an outsider as I thought. Other events, and later readings of the field materials, have disabused me of the particular touch of vanity. (p. 248)

Institutional barriers within academic institutions to longitudinal research in single communities exist but they are not insurmountable. Data collected on a long-term basis can be analyzed cross-sectionally at key intervals. One can also focus cross-sectionally on specific topics that lend themselves to individual papers. The progression from small focused papers to more substantial, integrative chapters, monographs, or books is a reasonable model of institutional survival.

Our last point has to do with the relationship of social science researchers to their local communities and to the larger society. Most researchers do not appreciate the extent to which the public financially supports this country's total social research effort. Taxes are the most important source of funds for the infrastructure that supports research projects — academic buildings, salaries for faculty and support staff, libraries, computing systems, and so on — as well as for grants and released time for research. Private foundations have more funds for research because they are not taxed; the exclusion is made on the basis of their presumed contribution to public betterment.

In today's political and economic climate, current levels of public support for research cannot be taken for granted. How would our social research enterprise fare if it were closely scrutinized on the criterion of public benefit? To the extent that research addresses only other researchers, claims universality while disavowing direct local applicability, and disregards the immediate contexts of behavior, it is vulnerable to reductions in public support.

Resident researchers working on problems of interest to the local community could illustrate to laypersons the benefits of social research. Such efforts could help develop a constituency that will protect research funding during difficult economic periods. The work of resident researchers can also connect with colleagues working in universities and in the private sector, and prepare student researchers for a variety of career options. Resident researchers could thus play an important role in sustaining and protecting our larger research enterprise.

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