

# Indians and sociologists: Science or exploitation?

by Robert J. Trotter

*Into each life, it is said, some rain must fall. Some people have bad horoscopes, others take tips on the stock market. McNamara created the TFX and the Edsel. Churches possess the real world. But Indians have been cursed above all other people in history. Indians have anthropologists.*  
—Vine Deloria Jr.  
*in Custer Died for Your Sins*

Gone are the days when anthropologists and other social scientists can walk into an Indian village and say, "O.K. boys, line up. I want to measure your heads." Some researchers, acting this way in the past, have alienated the American Indian. And "the Indian's gripes are legitimate," says Samuel L. Stanley, program coordinator with the Smithsonian Institution's Center for the Study of Man.

Anthropologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, social scientists and social workers of all descriptions have long been actively involved in studying Indian populations. Their findings have done much to enhance public awareness of Indian problems, but they have not always produced workable solutions to these problems. In fact they may be making matters worse.

"Lately, the social scientist has been subjected to a number of verbal attacks on the part of certain Indian leaders. It seems that the encroachment of the scientific community has worn thin the patience of many tribes. The scientist is being accused of projective ethnocentrism, overromanticism and a general over-all misunderstanding of the Indian's sense of values." This statement was the basis for a symposium on research implications for native American social action at the recent meeting of the American Psychological Association. Says Joseph E. Trimble of Oklahoma City University, chairperson of the symposium, "A lot of Indian people are getting tired of social scientists snooping around, trying to get information and using it for selfish reasons." Social scientists, he explains, do not believe they are doing anything wrong but invariably they forget that the Indian has needs that must be considered. "By and large this is true," he says, "even though some attempts are being made to turn the information back for the Indian's benefit."

Richard Wilson of the Native American Studies Institute at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque agrees there is a problem. Many sociological studies, he says, make false comparisons between white and Indian cultures or between different Indian cultures. "This is like comparing apples and oranges," and often does nothing more than perpetuate invalid stereotypes (drunk, lazy or unintelligent).

A more scathing denunciation of social scientists (anthropologists in particular) was made by Vine Deloria Jr. in his book, *Custer Died for Your Sins*. He says many Indians believe they have been exploited by anthropologists and that the products of their studies are tucked away on library shelves—of value only to students perusing them to obtain academic credentials.

But not all anthropologists agree. Some feel their work is a science very

much like history and should be pursued in a scientific manner. Sentimentality should not obscure reason.

John J. Bodine of American University in Washington argues that Deloria's attack is based on very selective issues and that he "does not acknowledge the many times that social scientists have aided in solving Indian problems." For instance, historians and anthropologists have given the Indian a valuable record of his cultural heritage.

The problem, however, is more complicated. As Trimble says, "You can't throw out research. It is necessary for a basic understanding of the Indian's particular problems." And, says Stanley, "There are a lot of things social scientists are doing that the Indian needs. It is a matter of getting the needs of both groups to mesh. This is not an easy job." One way may be to let the Indian initiate the research projects he feels are necessary. Trimble explains that "we can give him qualified help in research and then answer his questions." William R. Hood, professor of human ecology at the University of Oklahoma Medical Center in Oklahoma City, says, "American Indians have the same right as any other interest group to demand that the tools of research be employed only in their interest and at their request."

Bodine has a similar solution. He agrees with Deloria's insistence that social scientists should become actively involved in the Indian rights struggle. "No scientist today who works with people," he says, "can afford the luxury of insisting that he is engaged solely in pure research and retire to a nonexistent ivory tower." He must become involved in a meaningful way and stop symbolizing the Indian as a kind of endangered species. "Even social scientists," he says, "must admit that in the majority of cases they do not have the proper answers." But, "we do have a role to play and it is vital. We must become the watchdogs that stand ready to intervene on the side of the Indian. . . . We must communicate to Indian people our readiness to help when and if they call upon us," but never become involved without the express approval of the people in question.

In conclusion Bodine states, "We who have worked with Indians are necessarily forced today to examine our aims and motives very carefully to detect what errors we have committed which are alienating us from the very people we are dedicated to help. We cannot rest on the discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes of the past as if they were legitimate laurels. If we are not willing to reexamine our professional conscience for evidence of these mistakes, then we have no right to call ourselves social scientists." □