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Effects of Resettlement of Marshall Island
Youth in a High Risk Environment
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The Problem

In 1946, the small community that inhabited Bikini Atoll in the northern Marshall Islands was relocated when its ancestral homeland was selected as the United States' first nuclear test site in the Pacific. Numerous other Marshallese were subsequently relocated as these tests continued. Prior to relocation the Marshallese were an isolated people having relatively little contact with outsiders, but since 1946 they have experienced multiple relocations that have altered their traditional living patterns in numerous ways.

The original relocation of these people was conducted in the name of vital scientific research, without serious regard for their psychological, social, or economic welfare. Although a number of research efforts have investigated their subsequent adjustment problems, none of these studies produced a systematic plan for the rehabilitation of the Marshallese or their eventual return to their homeland.

This year, small groups of these people are beginning to return home, without benefit of adequate economic or social preparations. Consequently, they will undoubtedly experience numerous problems of personal and collective readjustment. Their family and home patterns, work activities, community structures,

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patterns of social organization, and cultural values must all be realigned to their new setting. Moreover, many of these people were born after the 1946 relocation, and have never experienced life in their native land. They are therefore totally unprepared for the problems they will face.

Enewetak, Bikini, and Ujelang, the main resettlement islands and atolls, are considered to be high risk environments. Radiation fallout resulting from the 46 different bomb tests in the late forties and early fifties exists in abundance in certain areas. Resettlement will occur in areas where radiological levels are considered safe. To expand inhabitability, the Department of Defense is currently scraping off layers of radioactive soil, mixing it with concrete and storing it in a crater on Enewetak. In the meantime, returnees must avoid the "hotspots."

Radioactive fallout has affected certain flora and fauna. Despite warnings some early returnees ate breadfruit and pandanus. Monitoring of metabolic processes in these people revealed that some had increased body burdens of cesium-137. As a result of these and related instances measurable amounts of plutonium were recently found in urine samples.

Although the resettlement is officially scheduled to begin within the year, returning natives are becoming fearful of the hazards. Enewetak and Bikini natives also know of the pain and suffering experiences of natives on the neighboring islands of Rongelap and Utirik. People on these islands received radiation burns and exposure from the bomb tests and as a



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result incidence of thyroid cancer is unusually high. Most recently, a young boy born of an exposed parent was diagnosed as having thyroid cancer raising questions of second generation genetic effects or latent radiation as possibilities for all who were or are exposed. The possibility of similar problems occurring among the returning groups has generated a great deal of anxiety.

Despite the fear and restrictions the people of Bikini and Enewetak are determined to return. They are tired of being moved from one island to the next and now desire to resettle traditional lands. Responsible government agencies are prepared to organize and prepare the land for resettlement. No agency, however, has initiated efforts to assess the potential psychosocial and readjustment and coping problems facing returnees.

Although all returnees will be affected in some way, children are most likely to experience the most difficulties. Restrictions on native foods and straying onto "hotspots" present real dangers especially since Marshallese children are raised in a highly unstructured environments. Indeed, conflicts between traditional child-rearing patterns and compliance with safety standards will occur. Furthermore, most of the children were born and reared during the period away from traditional lands. Some have been exposed to varying levels of acculturation. Nontraditional norms have been internalized during the early socialization process. Therefore, the combination of the high risk environment, the resettlement process itself and becoming resocialized to traditional Enewetak and Bikini will very likely

create adaptation and coping problems.

There is one more issue. Due to the poor nutrient condition of the soil and restrictions on diet returning natives will require federal assistance. Diets will need to be supplemented with food provided by government agencies. The likelihood of this program producing a state of dependence and reliance on government welfare programs is high. As a consequence, youth may grow to expect the subsistence and support as a way of life possibly affecting incentives to learn traditional forms of providing for families. Similarly role models may undergo drastic revision furthering complicating the development process.

The return of Enewetak and Bikini youth to traditional lands raises serious ethical and scientific questions related to the effects of forced migration and resettlement to a high risk environment. Overwhelming problems of collective and personal readjustment loom large. Resettlement must be carefully documented to gain a better understanding of the practical problems of adaptation and coping in unusual environments. Moreover, it may be possible to collect and analyze early data to design an intervention scheme and prevent problems from occurring.

Research Design and Duration

The purposes of this research project will be to perform in-depth social, psychological, and cultural analyses of the functional processes and adaptation and coping problems occurring in the resettlement of a displaced society, and to explore strategies for developing an early intervention scheme.

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Emphasis will be placed on the youth experiences.

The basic approach of the project will be longitudinal and will emphasize an interdisciplinary research perspective. Ethnographic and functional analysis at the individual, social and cultural levels will also be utilized. The two principal investigators for the project will be a psychologist and an anthropologist. Research scientists from the fields of public health, sociology and clinical psychiatry could also play a role.

The principal objects of the study will be the full range of rehabilitation developmental processes occurring among the returning Marshallese as they attempt to re-establish their traditional communities. These processes include individual coping behaviors, interpersonal interaction patterns, extended family networks, resocialization procedures, social control techniques, intergroup relations, sustenance activities, territorial patterns, norm formation, and value generation. Secondary objects of study will be the governmental assistance programs offered to the returnees, insofar as these programs affect their rehabilitation processes. Particular attention will be given to unintended consequences of these programs such as dependency or conflict.

Measurement techniques employed in this project will include field observation, participant observation, structured interviews, open-ended interviews, self-reports, biodocumentaries, official records, and critical-event documentation.

Federal agencies and territorial officials anticipate the total resettlement to occur within the next four years. The

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study ideally should be conducted during the resettlement period particularly since many critical-incidents could occur that could bear on analysis and interpretation. The first four to six months would be spent designing the study, developing data collection instruments, and establishing collaborative arrangements with local officials and native leaders. The effort requires immediate attention as incidents have already occurred that could influence future outcomes. Events occurring now need to be documented and combined with future occurrences to produce a data base that would enable development of intervention schemes should the problems surface sooner than anticipated.

Anticipated Results and Significance

Typically, resettlement of traditional lands is an unusual event in the life history of cultural groups. Eventual resettlement of Bikini and Enewetak is even more unusual as returnees will have to contend with a toxic environment, changes in quality of life, and effects which will disrupt the natural sequence of events in the socialization process. These events present an excellent opportunity to systematically document and assess a social phenomenon about which social scientists and planners know very little. Results would greatly increase our understanding of effects of resettlement process on youth and the sociocultural and psychological changes that occur as people attempt to re-establish communities. Data could serve as a solid basis for developing new intervention and prevention models.

Forced relocation of people and communities to make room for technological research or development is likely to be repeated

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in the future in different settings. Possibilities include coal excavation on the lands of American Indians and Alaska Natives, nuclear waste disposal in southwestern states, and oil shale exploration throughout the west. All such actions would, unquestionably, seriously disrupt existing communities, and might well involve relocation of residents. In turn, this could eventually lead to future rehabilitation movements. Hence, study of the current rehabilitation process in the Marshall Islands should facilitate (a) greater awareness of the social, psychological, and cultural consequences of population displacement, and (b) development of guidelines for more effectively managing relocation and rehabilitation processes when they are necessary in the future.

Resettlement of Bikini and Enewetak will be in full scale operation within the next five months. To develop a solid data base the proposed effort requires expeditious funding. Bikini and Enewetak people have already experienced a great deal of grief as a result of their original relocation in 1946. Little was done then to identify and develop intervention models. The opportunity now exists to prevent further hardships to these impoverished people by receiving appropriate support to conduct research efforts.

Professional Project Staff

Joseph E. Trimble is a Research Scientist at the Battelle Human Affairs Research Centers. He holds a Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of Oklahoma. His research efforts

are concentrated on sociopsychological issues and problems of American Indians including personality development among adolescents, education, and impact of energy development on reservation and Alaska Native village lands. He is one of the few American Indian social scientists in the country working on contemporary issues associated with tribes and native groups. His background and knowledge of cross-cultural problems makes him aptly qualified to pursue the goals described in this project.

Robert Kiste is a Visiting Scientist at the Battelle Human Affairs Research Centers and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota. He holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Oregon. He is most noted for his research on Bikini and Enewetak people conducted while the groups were in their relocated state. In fact, he is considered by many to be the world's leading authority on relocation problems experienced by Marshall Island groups.