THE BARROW STUDIES: AN ALASKAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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Dr. Edward Foulks and his colleagues had been asked in 1979 to be a subcontractor on a study commissioned by The City of Barrow Department of Public Safety relating to their concern about traumatic deaths associated with alcohol abuse in their community. The goal as outlined by the Department was "to receive research results which might enable (the Department) to establish more effective programs to reduce morbidity and mortality." In this present paper, Foulks presents a retrospective look at this study.

Foulks denotes the differentiation of the scientific merits of his research from the political naivete of his group as well as the political, social, and ethical uproar that ensued as a result of this naivete when the data was released. I certainly would agree that the baseline data that Foulks gathered was valid as a core sample. I would also find, however, that although the study included the Kraus and Buffler (1977) statewide data on suicide and alcohol, it did not address the enormity and pervasiveness of the "alcohol problem" in all of Alaska.

A Statewide Alcohol Problem

The major problem from an Alaskan's viewpoint is that Foulks' work focused on Barrow in 1979 as though the alcohol use pattern were a new phenomenon and as though Barrow somehow has a problem that is not endemic throughout every community in Alaska.

In a subsequent publication *Eskimo Capitalists*, Foulks does look at historical perspectives, but only as they relate to Barrow (Klausner & Foulks, 1982). That retrospective, however, was not a part of the original report that caused the uproar and consternation. The original reports, as written, did not seem to take into consideration long-term, statewide issues, such as the effects of alcohol in Alaska on both Natives and non-Natives, the sociological pressures of change emerging in all of Alaska, or the biological differences in the physiology of handling alcohol by Indians and Natives.

The response of Alaskan Natives to alcohol has been well documented since the time of "contact" with American and European sailors. The historical effects of alcohol on North Slope communities are elucidated by

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James Michener in *Alaska* (1988) when he describes contact by New England sailing ships to the North in 1875. "The (captain) taught two of the older men how to transform molasses into rum and when the first heady distillate appears, the islanders were lost. In the season when they should have been at sea catching seals and storing both the pelts and the meat, they were reveling on the beach. In the more arduous months when they should have been tracking the walrus for its ivory tusks and again for meat which would sustain them for the coming winter, they were drunk and happy and heedless of the passing season."

The above description of events almost 100 years before Foulks' study has clearly nothing to do with oil, 20th century change or the city of Barrow, but it is a recitation of the long standing serious problem of alcohol in the Native populations of Alaska.

Statewide Socio-Political Changes

Foulks' study also did not look at Barrow in the context of the major socio-political changes that were happening in and around it in the 1970s. These included Statehood in 1958; the formation of the Alaska Federation of Natives as a viable lobbying entity; the Alaska Native Land Claims Act of 1971; the formation of Borough City government; the Molly Hootch school decision case; and the placement in Alaska of a great number of Vista workers, to name only a few. These changes involved land, strange corporate and governmental structures, and relatively great wealth throughout the state. They caused profound changes to everyone in every nook and cranny of Alaska. Life in every village had also changed radically with the introduction of electricity, television, freezers, plumbing, telephones, and satellite dishes. The fabric of village life in 1979 was startlingly different from that in 1969, and indeed has made another quantum leap in 1989.

Barrow was only different from any of the other predominantly Native centers because of its proximity to Prudhoe Bay, but all of the other changes were extant in every other village and town in Northern and Western Alaska. The alcohol use patterns are also nearly identical in all of these communities. Because Barrow did have access to greater wealth in a shorter period of time, there was indeed an accelerated wrenching of all of its socio-political structures. The disorganization, fanned by certain non-Native "advisors" during that period, is currently making headlines in Alaska as the federal government is prosecuting several of these "advisors" in a corruption trial. These stresses, as they existed then or as they are acknowledged now, have not played a part in Foulks' writings. The alcohol and violence statistics for the other communities are very similar to those in Barrow, even though Barrow may have been subjected to a greater socio-economic upheaval at the time.

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Shortcomings in the Barrow Study

If one is going to look at the socio-political stresses on Alaskan drinking patterns, it would be important to assess these patterns for both the Native and non-Native populations. It is also appropriate to compare the patterns in several communities of the same size such as Bethel, Kotzebue, and Dillingham, as well as at least one Alaskan urban community. As further control populations, one might also wish to look at the Inuit communities in Canada and the Navajo reservations in the Southwest. Even though Foulks and his colleagues were employed to look at Barrow, these comparisons would be important both in a pragmatic sense and in a scientific sense.

Although large scale sociological and political factors indeed played a role in the drinking behavior in any and all of these communities, I believe the Barrows study focused much too heavily on particular sociological phenomena. These foci include looking at having Caucasian surnames or belonging to a specific church group as the sole cause of the alcohol problem and not simply as important factors.

In addition to assessing one or more control communities, the alcohol and violence statistics from the Alaskan court system and the Alaska Department of Corrections should have been assessed. Ninety percent of the violent crimes in Alaska are alcohol-related, by both Natives and non-Native Alaskans. The Native population is overrepresented in the correctional system (35% of this population as compared to 15% of the statewide population,) and 95% of the Natives convicted of a felony had an alcohol involvement in their case (Department of Corrections, 1987). These are statewide figures with no preponderance of Barrow residents or even North Slope residents.

There is also a growing literature (Phillips, Coons, & Wolf, 1984; Phillips, Coons, & Wolf, 1988) both in Alaska and in other communities that Natives physiologically process alcohol differently from their non-Native counterparts. This "alcohol blackout" literature denotes that Indians and Natives are prone to "blackouts" early in their drinking behavior and that both physical and sexual aggression seem to be an integral part of this phenomenon for a small proportion of the effected population. This difference appears to be genetic as to the effects of alcohol on different parts of the brain. The potential for violence by the activation of the limbic system may account for the large number of Indians and Native in custody for both felonies and misdemeanors who have no memory of the event. These individuals have a very different drinking pattern from the non-Native alcoholic. They need not drink every day, but they drink large amounts when it is available. The "blackout phenomenon" is a midbrain occurrence and as such seems to spare these Indians and Natives from either such frontal lobe phenomenon as delirium tremens or such hepatic problems as cirrhosis. If one is looking at the alcohol and violence issues in a predominantly Alaskan Native community,

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one cannot avoid understanding the role that the physiology of "blackout" plays in the perpetuation of this violence, as well as its patterns of occurrence.

Use of the MAST

Foulks' group used the Michigan Alcohol Screening Test (MAST) as their prime objective classification. This test, a 25-item questionnaire, had been developed in the Midwest by Seltzer in 1971 and was intended to be a self-reporting screening device for alcohol use. Seltzer's validative studies established that a score of zero to three is associated with normal social drinking, four is borderline, and a score of five or more indicates established alcoholism. In *Eskimo Capitalists* Foulks surveyed the world literature on the use of the MAST. His study, however, was the first use of the MAST on an Alaskan Native population. Thus, although the test had been normed for other populations as diverse as Ireland and Mexico, it had never been used for this present population. Foulks and colleagues compared their Barrow findings to these prior norms. They found that 72% of the population had a score of five or more. This had been achieved in only two prior studies where the subjects were drunk drivers. When compared to the prior populations, this measure certainly indicated a major skew in the direction of both alcohol and violence. Although these figures correlated in many ways with much of the behavior in Barrow, the figures lent themselves to overinterpretation by the press.

Despite this initial overinterpretation, the MAST data from the Barrow study have proved invaluable to provide baselines for further Alaskan studies. For example, our clinic has been gathering MAST data from diverse groups for the last five years. We have used data from Natives and non-Natives, rural screening of another village, student populations, and correction populations including 100 individuals (82 Native and 18 non-Native individuals) who have committed their crimes during an alcohol blackout. Foulks' data have held up on an item by item basis for each of the 25 questions, with the Native samples being very skewed from the "lower 48" norm and with the Native samples being almost identical to the "Barrow data."

The actual data from the MAST portion of the "Barrow Study" were but the first step in what might indeed prove to be both very solid research as well, as perhaps providing a specific device for predicting drinking patterns and violence in the "at risk" populations. The test would need to be renormed for this population, and viewed in relation to what is known about the physiology of blackout in the Native drinker.

Ramifications for Research

Foulks and his colleagues stepped into a quagmire that had very little to do with the specifics of their study. The release of the data to the press

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in order to "shock the Inupiat into action" was clearly the undoing of this study. Indeed this exposure may have set back research on alcoholism in rural Alaska rather substantially; currently there is almost no scientific research on alcohol and Alaskan Natives being conducted. Our clinic's research has been conducted primarily through the criminal justice system, and it is only now—a decade later—that we are making some inroads into having access to non-correctional populations.

The alcohol consumption problems of Alaska, both rural and urban, have continued for another decade. The drinking has continued as has the violence both to self and others. It is only in the last two to three years that a number of communities are becoming ready to address this endemic public health issue. A number of communities including Barrow have utilized Alaska's "local option" law to vote themselves "damp," while a few others have voted themselves totally "dry." The communities that have engaged either option under the law have noted a marked decrease in violence and drinking. As a part of this movement, in communities where there has been some success in addressing the alcohol problem, there has been a resurgence of cultural integrity by both the elders and the young people. There is, however, still a great ambivalence about "going dry," as evidenced by the fact that in the last year, Kotzebue has had two public referenda on this subject and Bethel has had four such referenda.

Alaska as a "third world equivalent" has been catapulted into the 20th century with the same kind of disequilibrium that happens with any type of rapid social change. Alaska's cities have used these resources to develop a modern "lower 48" infrastructure, while its villages and their peoples suddenly have computers, cable TV, telephones, freezers, and transistor tape players, while desperately holding on to a culturally-relevant subsistence lifestyle. Free time, occupations, cash economies, and subsistence lifestyles impose themselves on the life of everyone in rural Alaska. This is coupled with a generally idiosyncratic response to alcohol by many of its Eskimo and Indian inhabitants.

Foulks' baseline research and even the attendant negative publicity may have inadvertently helped in starting the process of heightened awareness that is only now beginning to take form. Thus, a decade later, awareness at the state and local level clearly mandates a multi-pronged approach. The first prong deals specifically with the tolerance for alcohol and/or drunken behavior in a community, while the second prong deals with the longer term issues of recreating a meaningful and culturally-relevant lifestyle in village Alaska in the 1990s.

The evolution of the progress of these changes can indeed be aided and understood by careful research, but I would highlight Foulks' final caution that any researcher must not only "self-consciously" include sometimes intangible, value-laden factors into their research design and planning, but they must make them part of the central core of the process.

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