

## MISALLIANCES IN THE BARROW ALCOHOL STUDY

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Center for Research on the Acts of Man conducted a survey of the use of alcohol among the Inupiat of Barrow, Alaska, in 1979. The study resulted in grievances among many individuals and institutions associated with the community. In a retrospective analysis of the factors contributing to these misalliances, the author raises important ethical and procedural questions to be considered carefully in future projects of this nature.*

In 1979, the author was a member of a research team that conducted a survey in the Inupiat community of Barrow, Alaska. The results of the survey generated considerable reaction on the part of the scientific community, the popular press, and the local population. During the past decade, we have re-examined the circumstances which contributed to the initiation of the study and to its subsequent reception. Our concern has focused on an attempt to understand the conflicting social and ethical factors involved in the process of conducting research on topics as sensitive as alcohol abuse and ethnic relations. The purpose of this report is to examine in detail the political and ethical dilemmas which we encountered. We will argue that difficulties might have been avoided had we obtained better insight into the community's beliefs regarding the nature of "the problem," and had we been better able to ensure more total community participation in deciding how the results of the study were to be used.

### Summary of Methods and Results

A complete report of the research can be found in a book and several scientific articles (Foulks, 1987; Klausner & Foulks, 1982). To summarize, the research team used a 1972 demographic survey of the community of Barrow, Alaska (Katz, 1972), and drew a 10% representative sample of everyone over the age of 15. We interviewed a total of 88 Inupiat regarding attitudes and values about the use of alcohol, and obtained their psychological histories, including drinking behavior. Each subject was also given the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (Seltzer, 1971) and was asked to draw a picture of a person.

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The tabulated results of our survey indicated that 41% of the population considered themselves to be excessive drinkers, and 60% felt badly about the consequences of their drinking. More than 50% reported that drinking ultimately created severe problems with family and spouse. Sixty-two percent regularly got into fights when they drank, and 67% experienced frequent blackouts or amnesia from the episodes. Drinking in this community was described primarily as a social event; only five individuals in our sample reported drinking alone.

Our survey indicated that about 40% of the population were members of the culture-broker or acculturated sector, holding full-time salaried jobs and regularly attending church; the remaining 60% were more traditional in occupation and in their connections to outside social networks. Individuals from the culture-broker class used alcohol in much the same manner as Alaska non-Natives. One quarter of them were abstainers. Although those that drank did so as frequently and heavily as those in the traditional sector, their behavior tended not to endanger life or to precipitate detention in the Community's Acute Alcohol Detoxification Center.

Comparing the social characteristics of individuals detained at least once with those never detained, we found that members of the culture-broker sector were less likely to be detained than traditional Inupiat, despite little difference in the level of alcohol consumption and in other alcohol problems. Eleven percent of the salaried workers, 50% of the blue-collar workers, and 56% of the unemployed and housewives ( $\chi^2 = 9.3$ ,  $p < .5$ ) reported having been detained. The part-time blue-collar worker/traditional part-time hunter was significantly more likely to be detained than were members of the culture-broker class.

Church membership significantly affected Inupiat social interactions, as well as drinking behavior. The churches in North Alaska have a clear position on alcohol use. Thirty-three percent of the population were regular attenders of the Presbyterian Church, which strongly discouraged drinking, and 3% were attenders of the Assembly of God Church, for which total abstinence was a requirement for membership. Sixty-four percent were not church attenders. The minister of the Presbyterian Church identified the people who were active in the church and those who were not. Half of the identified membership was rated as active by the minister and only 29% of those were heavy drinkers, compared to 47% of the nominal members and 48% of those not affiliated with churches.

A similar pattern emerged with respect to detentions in the Community's Acute Alcohol Detoxification Center. Of the active church members, 5% had been detained, whereas 53% of the nominal members and 50% of the nonaffiliated had been detained ( $\chi^2 = 11.3$ ,  $p < .05$ ; the nominal and the nonaffiliated did not differ in their level of drinking problems or in the likelihood of their being detained). The role of the church in this phenomenon may have extended beyond their provision of explicit sanctions regarding drinking; the churches may have prepared members for adapting to the

social hierarchies and bureaucracies now found in their changed society. Church members held positions of leadership in their community, thus reflecting their culture-broker status.

Intermarriage of Inupiat with non-Inupiat historically appears further to have facilitated entrance into the culture-broker sector, since it often necessitated contact with outside bureaucratic organization. According to genealogical data, 51% of the Inupiat were of mixed ancestry. Of these, 33% had been detained for alcohol-related problems, in contrast to 50% of those of pure Inupiat extraction.

Classification by surname also identified a difference in the likelihood of being detained. Unlike a literal measure of ancestry, surnames seemed to have become a focus of social attitudes and social orientations. Those bearing European surnames were more likely to be considered by others in this community as belonging to families of mixed ancestry. They more easily identified with one another and developed a social network. Thirty-eight percent of the population had European rather than Inupiat surnames. Twenty-seven percent of them had been detained, contrasting with 51% of those with Inupiat surnames ( $\chi^2 = 3.8, p < .05$ ).

Psychological indicators of ethnic identity were identified in our sample's human figure drawings. Drawings obtained from our subjects were blind-sorted as Inupiat or non-Inupiat, according to the style of clothing and posture of the figure. Seventy-eight percent of the sample drew Inupiat-style figures. Thirty-eight percent of these had been detained, compared with 13% of those did not draw Inupiat-style figures. The difference was not statistically significant, but it suggested a pattern similar to that found for the previous indicators of social differentiation. To the extent that drawings indicated identification, the culture-broker class were—once again—more immune to detention.

#### Inception of the Study

The impetus for the study originated from the North Slope Borough, which offered a contract to Intersect, a consulting firm in Seattle directed by a former minister of the Presbyterian Church in Barrow. He decided that Intersect would subcontract to the Center for Research on the Acts of Man in Philadelphia to study some of the causes of alcohol abuse and to evaluate the Community's detention program for acute alcohol detoxification. The Director of Intersect established a permanent field office in Barrow, headed by a hospital administrator who was to coordinate the study. The Research Center's team was composed of a cultural psychiatrist, a sociologist, and a health planner consultant from the Kennedy School, Harvard University.

An initial planning meeting was held at the Department of Public Safety in Barrow during the month of April, 1979. The Director of Public Safety was extremely concerned about the traumatic deaths associated with alcohol abuse in the community. He emphasized that he was interested in receiving

research results which might enable him to establish more effective programs to reduce morbidity and mortality. He wanted to know what was behind the behaviors which resulted in detention for acute alcohol detoxification.

A division of labor between the Research Center and Intersect was established at these early meetings. The research was to focus on alcohol use, detention, and nature of social change in Barrow. Intersect would establish the organization that would translate this report and its recommendations into action. These mechanisms included a Steering Committee consisting of local Inupiat leaders, and a Technical Advisory Group (constituted primarily of non-Native professionals who represented various agencies) which provided professional advice for Barrow and the North Slope Borough. The subsequent contract negotiated between Intersect and the Research Center stated:

The Center would analyze social and cultural relations of the population of Barrow, Alaska, in light of the wider societal and economic and governmental organizations of the North Slope Region. Particular attention would be given to the distribution and consumption and abuse of alcohol in and around this community... their work would be based on a review of published and unpublished materials, informal interviewing, and a field study in Barrow of approximately two months.

The Director of Intersect asked for a preliminary research report by September, 1979. This report was to include an analysis of the nature of the alcohol problems and recommendations for remedial public policies. He requested that this and a later larger version of the research be made public in the near future.

Research work began in July of 1979. All basic data were gathered during the summer, but the examination of public safety, court, hospital, administrative, and financial reports, and the study of the research of other scholars both preceded and followed the summer in the field. In fact, some of the census data, vital statistics, and financial audit information were collected nearly two years after the initial field study.

#### Reporting the Study: What Went Wrong

A first draft report of the research, entitled "Alcohol and the Future of Ukpiagvik" (Klausner & Foulks, 1979), was sent to Intersect in late September and was shown to some members of the Barrow Technical Advisory Group. Members of the Technical Advisory Group completed their work on the report in late October, and requested that a public meeting scheduled for two weeks later be postponed and that the research team return to Barrow to discuss the report.

Shortly thereafter, the Research Center received a communication from the Director of the Department of Health. The Department had been cooperative during the field research and had arranged for researchers to meet many Inupiat technical leaders of the community. However, the Director found the report difficult to read, ambiguous, and verbose, and asked for a more "precise and authoritative document." She and other non-Native professionals of the Technical Advisory Group felt that the research report had imposed Western, "lower-48" standards on Inupiat society, and should be rewritten to better reflect the attitudes and values of the community. They objected to what they regarded to be the biomedical bases of the research findings.

### Competing Models: The Problem

It was difficult to identify a consensus of community attitudes and values toward alcohol use/abuse. Rather, ambivalence and an inherent conflict of values regarding alcohol had emerged in this dialogue. On the one hand, there was ample testimony to the hardships experienced by families where alcohol was a problem. On the other, drinking was often viewed as an end in itself, and the behavior of the drinker was excused because he was intoxicated and not in his "right mind." We were also aware that while the problems were widespread in the community, reinforcing the unfortunate stereotypes of the American Indian and Alaska Native and alcohol must somehow be avoided.

On November 5, 1979, the authors once again met with the Barrow Technical Advisory Group, who stated their concern that only Natives were studied, and that outsiders in town had not been included. They further expressed their fear that mentioning ancestry would be a controversial subject. A public meeting was planned and scheduled for the following January. The Barrow Technical Advisory Group asked that the media be used to advantage, that professionals in communications be used to prepare for and promote the meeting, and that the meeting be broadcast on television so that people not present could telephone in their questions. All of the Technical Advisory Group members volunteered to serve on the subcommittees. They looked forward to the Inupiat responses to the report that would emerge from the Steering Committee meeting the following day.

The research team then met with the Steering Committee, composed of leaders from the Inupiat community. Using slides and graphs, the research team spelled out the problems of what the recent research revealed regarding alcohol use in Barrow. For those members who did not speak English well, the presentation was translated into Inupiat. The Steering Committee also endorsed the idea of a town meeting. Their model of alcohol abuse was linked to witnessing culture change; they viewed both the problem of alcohol, and help with the solutions, as part of the new ways of life imposed on them from outside their community.

During the meeting, one leader stated that there was too much pressure for one generation to bear as the culture turned suddenly from a traditional culture to a modern cash culture. He said that problems with alcohol began by the end of World War II. He could not understand why the state and federal governments could not help Barrow stay dry when the people voted for it. Laws against selling liquor must be enforced, he said, stating that maybe new laws were needed.

During the Steering Committee meeting, the authors observed that the Inupiat leaders present were generally from the older generation who had fought over land claims, established a regional corporation, and achieved political self-government for North Slope Borough. They were knowledgeable about political give and take with governments at the state and federal levels. The younger group of leaders in the community, however, were for the most part absent from the Steering Committee meeting. This younger group came to maturity after the resolution of these issues and were proud of their self-reliance. In retrospect, if the research team had learned more about the attitudes of this younger segment of the population, the pitfalls that were to follow might have been avoided.

Following the meetings in Barrow, Intersect proposed that a practical report be prepared. The Research Center was to provide a specific client report simply summarizing the alcohol information and making policy recommendations. The official report, on the other hand, was to be a technical scientific document, dwelling on the more fundamental issue of social change in light of the increased economic activity in the community. The Summary Report was submitted several weeks later (Klausner & Foulks, 1980).

### Systems in Conflict

Soon thereafter, a non-Native faculty member of the Inupiat University of the Arctic in Barrow received a copy of the summary report from an Inupiat friend. The faculty member issued a public attack, calling the short report "ethnocentric and parochial, demeaning and denigrating to the Inupiat people." He questioned the "entire methodological orientation of the research project, based on only a superficial understanding by the researchers, none of whom are conversant in Inupiat." The sentiments were formalized in a letter sent to Intersect over the signatures of individuals from the Health and Social Service Agency of North Slope Borough. They "publicly disavowed any participation in the study." and described the project as another version of "cultural imperialism."

Nevertheless, Intersect and the Barrow Department of Public Safety began to plan for the town meeting which was scheduled for January 24, 1980. Both agencies wanted a press release to proceed that meeting. Intersect saw the publicity as having the political impact necessary to galvanize solutions to the alcohol problem in Barrow. They hoped that public

awareness would shock the Inupiat into action to control the alcohol problem. Belief in this approach was also ironically shared by the Barrow Director of Public Health who, through a letter, asked the researchers to provide some numbers on alcohol use that would startle the community. She reported that another group had estimated that 50% of the adult population suffered alcohol problems and our higher estimate seemed useful to her. The researchers were asked to participate in procedures of reporting the results of the research that were to have far-reaching ethical and political implications.

#### The Startled Community and the Errors of Research Reporting

In mid-January, 1980, the results of the survey that had been presented to the Inupiat Steering Committee and Technical Advisory Group in Barrow in November were released to the press by Intersect and the Research Center. The report referred to increasing use of alcohol and social problems related to cultural changes concomitant with increasing wealth associated with North Slope energy development. The report indicated the degree of the problem, and made recommendations for modifying the Detention Program, for increasing surveillance of the flow of alcohol into Inupiat villages, for adding alcohol education programs, and for establishing a local alcohol agency. Long-range suggestions included slowing the flow of cash through the community, capitalizing it as a current asset, and investing in projects not necessarily in the North Slope Borough.

The January 22, 1980, *New York Times* press release was headlined *Alcohol Plagues Eskimos*. The Associated Press release said that alcoholism and violence had overtaken Eskimo society after the sudden development of Alaska's North Slope oil fields. The United Press International Wire Service wrote its story under the headline, "Sudden Wealth Sparks Epidemic of Alcoholism", with the subhead, "What We Have Here is a Society of Alcoholics." That same day, the North Slope Borough public information officer released a report that stated the community was stunned and angered by the content of the study, and that the manner of its release had done irreparable harm to the community. The Director of Public Safety was fired.

In reporting the study, the press confirmed the stereotype of the drunken Alaska Native, whose traditional culture had been plundered. The public exposure had brought shame on the community, and the people were now angry and defensive.

One of the researchers who had traveled to Barrow to present the report's findings at the two day public meeting found 300 Inupiat crowded into the church. Their serious faces showed little emotion, but they stayed 7 hours—until 3:00 A.M.—listening to the reports. On a projection screen they were shown color videotape prepared by a Seattle television station which depicted the many personal tragedies associated with alcohol in

Barrow. Inupiat leaders present in the audience spoke via videotape. The elders spoke in Inupiat, with English translation being offered by a woman who had just experienced a death in her family due to alcohol abuse.

The following day in the town hall, one of the researchers presented the findings of the study and answered questions from the general audience, composed of Inupiat and non-Inupiat.

#### Academic Critique

Later, the North Slope Borough, guided by requests from the Health Department, engaged a professor from the Center for Alcohol Addiction Studies, at the University of Alaska in Anchorage to prepare an academic critique of the research study. His mission was to "evaluate the study undertaken to determine if the conclusions arrived at are warranted on the basis of the procedures followed."

He believed that the findings used from previous studies on suicide rates (Kraus & Buffer, 1977) were inflated. He found the figures on the quantity of alcohol consumed to be invalid. The estimates of the frequency of intoxication based on association with the probability of being detained were termed "ludicrous, both logically and statistically." After several other criticisms of statistical method, he warned that because of questionable methodology, the recommendations should be taken cautiously. He went on to state that the people of Barrow had a right to be angry over the study because the authors spread misleading facts about the community and its people, both locally and nationally, and that the study had done a disservice to the field of legitimate research that might be of real value to the people of Alaska. He echoed the sentiments of many local scholars, who now recognized that future social research in North Alaska would be jeopardized by the community's angry response.

A non-Native faculty member of the Inupiat University of the Arctic stated:

We feel we have proven ourselves in the eyes of the community...the North Slope Borough Assembly has been the victim of a sophisticated hoax aimed at destroying the credibility and integrity of the Inupiat people. The research on alcohol abuse and the news coverage was the most demeaning and reprehensible sham. Instead of using Winchester and Remington rifles to destroy a people and a culture, as with the Indians in the 1880s, they bent words, numbers, and statistics to accomplish what was in effect a social and cultural genocide. These con artists hiding behind the guise of professionalism and religiosity, and acting as consultants to the North Slope Borough have



dealt a devastating blow to the Inupiat people and their cultural heritage.

In August of 1981, the Research Center presented a paper based on the Barrow Study at the Fifth International Symposium on Circumpolar Health in Copenhagen, Sweden. Following presentation of the paper, the Director of Public Health from Barrow rose to enter these comments into the proceeding:

The release of the questionable results of the study to a nationwide news source prior to informing the studied community is a classic example of researchers utilizing indigenous people as so many laboratory specimens. If we within the North Slope Borough are to work at solving our major health problem, alcohol abuse, we cannot sit by and let researchers publish erroneous sensational statistics....

#### The Dilemma of Reaching a Consensus

It was difficult for the Research Team to struggle through polemics and locate the voice of the Inupiat. Most of the speakers for the community had been non-Native. Contrary to the above quotation, the Steering Committee, composed of Inupiat elders, had heard our research report several months before its release to news sources. Their reactions at the time were, on the surface at least, in agreement with the presentation. They suspected that the problems were widespread, and understood them in terms of the rapid social changes thrust upon the culture during the past several decades.

Later, during the telethon on Alcohol Problems in Barrow, other Inupiat residents expressed the following statements:

How many detentions were there from 1968 to 1976? Do you watch for suicide? How many repeaters are in detention? Is divorce caused by drinking? What does an old person do who has to live with a drunk young person? Why doesn't the Arctic Regional Corporation ban alcohol from the hotel which they own? It is our fault if we get drunk and commit suicide. I am divorced, but my ex-husband harasses me when he is drunk; what should I do? Why don't parents see what their drinking does to kids at school? My husband drinks and then drives; what should I do? Someone gave me their child because they were out drinking too much; what should I do? My parents drink and I get scared; what should I do? Why wasn't something done long ago about this? We drink, not because of our personality, but because

of the political climate of the Arctic Regional Corporation, the Borough government, and the unrest around the formation of the Inupiat people.

The Inupiat understood their problems with alcohol in terms of stresses created by cultural and political change. Their perspectives were not unlike those of the Departments of Health and Public Safety, Intersect, the Technical Advisory Committee, and the project researchers.

The consequent misalliances of this research and its handling in the mass media have resulted in negative attitudes toward research in the area; have brought up ethical and human subjects questions regarding community studies; have called into question the use, dissemination, and ownership of knowledge; and have generated theoretical skepticism regarding the interface between medical diseases, social illness, and deviant behavior. The scientific merits of this study are a matter of public record and can be evaluated elsewhere by the reader. However, we believe that the mistakes experienced in this research study were less those of scientific methodology than of social and political naivete regarding the people of the community studied.

The community of Barrow was complex and multifaceted, containing many opinions and factions—non-Native and Inupiat alike. Our research team was sponsored by only a few of these factions, including Intersect and the Department of Public Safety. Methods were not developed to ensure more community participation because we wrongly believed that the Steering Committee and the Technical Advisory Committee reflected general public opinion. Finally, we became part of a process that allowed reports usually reserved for relatively private scientific books and articles to be used in the mass media for public information purposes. Such a process becomes a complex scientific-professional ethics issue warranting carefully constructed formal procedures and policies to ensure that the integrity of the people studied in research projects such as this is not violated. Contract research projects are perhaps more vulnerable to exploitation in this regard than government or foundation-funded research, in that the results of the latter usually first appear in referred scientific publications. They are therefore subjected to scientific review before the public media has the opportunity to report controversial findings.

### What Can Be Done

The question of how to use research results which may ultimately be detrimental or denigrating to a community under study requires adherence to established professional ethical standards, considerable soul searching, and negotiation with subjects, sponsors, and third parties who may be involved. Research involving issues implicitly reflecting the moral values of a community demands particular sensitivity in this regard. Mental illness,

suicide, homicide, venereal disease, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), and drug and alcohol abuse are among many sensitive problems which require more social and biological research.

However, successfully carrying out population studies of these often life-threatening conditions is predicated upon establishing cooperative and informed relations, wherein the benefits of the research clearly outweigh the risks to the subjects, their families, and their communities. We hope that our experience will provide a lesson demonstrating the degree to which the questions and methods of science are rooted in ethical social, and ethnical political issues of the times, and of how scientists must self-consciously include these sometimes intangible, value-laden factors into their research design and planning.

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