

## Case 2: The Barrow Alcohol Study\*

Native leaders and city officials in Barrow, Alaska, worried about drinking and associated violence and accidental deaths in their community invited a group of sociology researchers to assess the problem and work with them to devise solutions. At the conclusion of the study researchers formulated a report entitled “The Inupiat, Economics and Alcohol on the Alaskan North Slope” which was released simultaneously at a press release and to the Barrow community. The press release was picked up by the New York Times, who ran a front page story entitled *Alcohol Plagues Eskimos* by Dava Sobel on January 22, 1980. The following is an excerpt from that article:

*“The Inupiat Eskimos of Alaska’s North Slope, whose culture has been overwhelmed by energy development activities, are ‘practically committing suicide’ by mass alcoholism... researchers said here yesterday. The alcoholism rate is 72 percent among the 2,000 Eskimo men and women in the village of Barrow, where violence is becoming the most frequent cause of death as a result of ‘the explosive and self-destructive abuse of alcohol,’ the researchers said.*

*‘Offshore oil development is expected to peak in 2010 or 2015’ ... one of the researchers, said at a news conference. ‘We don’t see the Eskimos surviving till then. This is not a collection of individual alcoholics, but a society which is alcoholic, and therefore facing extinction.’”*

The depiction of the community in the article implied to the people of Barrow that they had been labeled a problem. They felt stigmatized. Many of the people of Barrow and in the statewide Native community felt that the researchers had violated their trust by failing to share all results with them first and by not allowing them the opportunity to comment on the results. This led many in Alaska Native communities to doubt that research on alcohol would result in respectful treatment of their communities and created a continuing distrust of researchers and the research process.

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. What is particularly troubling to you about this case?
2. What are the responsibilities of researchers to their study participants?
3. What are the responsibilities of researchers to their participant communities?
4. Do researchers have special obligations when the participants are
  - a. members of culturally distinct groups (often with their own governing bodies and laws);
  - b. vulnerable groups in society; or are
  - c. socio-economically disadvantaged?
5. Could/Should this happen today? What, if anything, can be done to prevent this from happening again?
6. If this happened today what could/should be the role of the IRB?
7. Do you think the researchers in this case were culturally sensitive or competent? Would it have mattered either way?
8. How might researchers today overcome the distrust provoked by this incident?

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\*Adapted from Mohatt GV, Hazel KL, Allen J, Stachelrodt M, Hensel C, and Fath R. 2004. Unheard Alaska: Culturally Anchored Participatory Action Research on Sobriety with Alaska Natives. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(3/4), pp 263-273.