Family support for first-time mothers in the Aleutians

Rachel Mason

National Park Service, Anchorage, Alaska

ABSTRACT
Objective. This paper examines changes in the support first-time mothers receive from parents and other relatives in Aleutian communities.

Study Design. Data were collected as part of the Social Transitions in the North study. Data used in this study came from the Aleutian communities of St. Paul, Akutan, Unalaska and Sand Point, Alaska.

Methods. The STN study data using a combination of background ethnographies, a detailed survey instrument, open-ended interviews, Kleinman focus groups and genealogies. These were meant to complement and build upon each other.

Result. While it appears that teenage pregnancies still occur while the unmarried mother lives with her parents, the social context of such situations has changed considerably since the 1970s. Many respondents indicated that although families are more fragmented than previously, the responsibility for raising children continues to be shared throughout the extended family. Nuclear family households have become more prevalent. Government transfers and housing have become more readily available for young single mothers.

Conclusions. The extended family is still a viable social and economic unit in Aleutian villages. People may live in nuclear family households, but parents, grandparents and other relatives are still a strong support for young mothers.

Keywords: Health surveys, motherhood, family, critical life event, Alaska and Russian Indigenous communities.

INTRODUCTION
In 1995, Year 3 of the Social Transition in the North Project, respondents in the Aleutian communities of St. Paul, Akutan, Unalaska and Sand Point were asked to describe the important milestones of their lives. Many mothers identified the birth of their first child as a critical life event. In addition to the interviews, survey protocols and background ethnographies also provided information on women’s first experience of childbirth. This paper uses all three sources of data for Aleutian communities to look at changes in the support first-time mothers receive from parents and other relatives.

METHODS
The STN study used several methodologies. The background ethnographies, the survey instrument, and the open-ended interviews, as well as Kleinman focus groups, genealogies, and Anthropac triads, were intended to complement and build upon each other. As the information on first-time mothers shows, data gathered using different strategies are not always consistent. My experiences conducting interviews and surveys with the same people suggest that the open-ended interviews give the most trustworthy account of the respondents’ experiences and reactions. The ethnographies, secondary information, and interview data, however, all provide a context for understanding the survey responses.

The fullest set of survey data comes from Year 1, 1993, when a sample of respondents answered a long questionnaire. The average age for 149 female survey respondents (102 Alaska Natives and 47 non-Natives) from Aleutian communities was 39.
Forty-three percent of these women were 35 and under; 57% were over 35.

The women we interviewed commonly reported that their first pregnancy occurred when they were still teenagers, before leaving their parents’ home. It is puzzling, therefore, that in the survey data, none of the respondents in the younger group reported having a child in her teens. Only 9 (23%) of 39 respondents over 35 said they had their first child in their teens. It is possible that some people failed to mention children they did not raise themselves.

Not all survey respondents answered the questions about their history of sexual partners asked in Year 1. In fact, in subsequent years many respondents expressed relief that this year’s questions were not as invasive! Some respondents preferred completing the surveys with an outsider to being questioned by their neighbors. In all years, local researchers conducted many of the surveys, but project personnel from outside asked all the open-ended interview questions.

RESULTS

In the Aleutian communities, 28 Native female respondents answered the questions about the woman’s age when she had her first sexual partner, and whether she had married that person. The reported age of first sexual relationship ranged from 14 to 22. Only 4 of 13 (31%) of the younger women had married their first sexual partner, while two-thirds of the 15 older women said they had married their first partner.

The survey question asking how many children a woman had given to others to raise also yielded few valid responses. Only 5 of 87 female respondents in the Aleutians said they had given a child to someone else to raise. A slightly higher proportion, 8 of 20 (40%), of younger Native women took in one or more children, as opposed to 10 of 27 (37%) Native women over 35. This was despite the longer opportunity the older women had already had to take in children than the younger ones. A possible explanation is that some people, especially the older ones, do not consider grandparents raising their grandchildren, or other child care by close relatives, as "taking them in" or "giving them to others."

The interviews revealed that women who became first-time mothers in the 1970s or earlier had less positive memories of parental support when they became mothers than younger women, whose first children were born in the 1980s or 1990s. The most striking illustration of the difference came when older women contrasted their parents’ stern reactions to their unwed teenage pregnancies to their own more accepting view of their young daughters’ pregnancies.

One older Aleut woman said she became pregnant at 16, when she was still living at home. Her father told her either to give up the baby for adoption or to go to work to support her child. She moved to a nearby village after her son was born and worked in a cannery. She said:

I was worried when I was pregnant. And there was Mom and Dad to face. It was hard to decide whether to keep him. I couldn’t just keep him and stay home with my parents, like some kids have the option today. It was either you give him up or go out and find a job and you take care of him.

In fact, the young mother was not entirely cut off from family support. Her sister cared for her baby while she worked. She soon met and married her husband, they had two more children, and he adopted her first son. She maintained a good relationship with her father. One of this woman’s concerns for her daughter as she grew up was that she not start having children too young. At the time of the interview her unmarried daughter, then 22, had a baby. The respondent said:

she was afraid to tell us. She was so excited that our response wasn’t that it was the end of the world.

Another over-35 woman from the same community said that when she became pregnant as a young girl:

We went to court. Papa wanted us to get married to give the kid a name. But [my boyfriend] lied about it being his kid. I was still staying over at Mama and Papa’s.

In response to a Year 2 open-ended question about the best and worst things that happened in the last
year, a non-Native woman married to a Native man said:

My daughter getting pregnant has been the major event. My husband wanted to kick her out of the house. I felt since she was my only daughter I had to stand by her. I had to tell her we were disappointed. They will get married, after they graduate from high school. My husband is old-fashioned. He wanted to kick her out.

An under-35 Native woman said about the milestones in her life:

Mom was supportive when I went to college. Dad, no, because I had a year-old daughter. I had my first daughter when I was in high school; I didn’t get married because I was too young and scared.

In each of these examples from different times during the last few decades, a young woman’s father made strong assertions about her proper role as a mother. In pre-contact times, and even within the memory of some older interview respondents, Aleut marriages were contracted between the couple’s parents. A girl’s parents and especially her father stood to benefit from her husband’s labor during the period of brideservice before a woman had her first child. A girl as young as 13 could marry if she could do women’s work. A boy could marry when he was a successful hunter, probably not before he was 18. The young couple usually lived with the bride’s parents until their first child was born, then moved to live with the groom’s relatives.

Another theme that emerged from interviews with older Aleut women was that as girls, they got few explanations of how babies were born. Some even reported going into labor with their first child without knowing what was happening. One woman said:

When I was 17, my mother delivered her last baby. My mother was a midwife...[but] I never knew nothing. When I had my first period I knew nothing... When my daughter had her period I tried to explain what was what—but it was kind of hard... Mama didn’t explain a thing... We were in the dark so we’d better not let our kids be.

Again, before European contact the situation was quite different. At puberty, girls had a period of seclusion, during which they received instruction from an older female relative on the taboos a woman needed to observe, such as avoiding her husband’s hunting tools while menstruating. This puberty ritual took place in the Aleutians as late as 1948. Veniaminov observed in 1840 that a woman pregnant for the first time would be taught what to do:

When a woman feels that she is pregnant, she must immediately inform her mother or her grandmother of this who naturally instructs her how to behave in times of pregnancy, what to eat and what not to eat, where to go and where not to go (Veniaminov, cited in Lantis).

By the 1950s when some of the older respondents had their first children, such systems of instruction had fallen away, although some of the customs and taboos were still present. During the time the older women were growing up, the church was associated with moral rules. One woman remembered:

Sex was bad and scary. The church frowns on extramarital sex. If you sleep with a man and are not married, you’re not supposed to have communion.

In the Year 2 (1994) interviews, the Aleutian respondents were asked what changes they had observed in their communities during their lifetime. Many Aleuts who had come of age in the 1960s or earlier remembered that in the past, parents were stricter with the children and the church was a stronger influence. In the old days, they said, families and community members were closer and helped each other more.

Nineteenth-century barabaras (traditional sod and driftwood houses) were inhabited by a core nuclear family in addition to grandparents, unmarried uncles and aunts, and adopted or borrowed children. In pre-contact days, 40-200 people might live in a single longhouse. Respondents recalled that even several decades ago it was not unusual to live in multi-generation households. Remembering World War II in St. Paul, an elderly woman said:
I had my first child at age 17, in 1944 after the evacuation. My husband was drafted in the army two days after we got married… I was happy to move out of Grandma’s house and be on my own. While my husband was gone, my grandparents would watch the baby while I went out dancing.

Today, grandparents frequently care for their grandchildren. One woman said,

I was only 39 when I had my first grandson. I’ve always got kids here spending the night. I love it. I feel the responsibility to have them over all the time.

Respondents of all ages pointed to an increase in disruption to families in their community because of substance abuse. This may have contributed to a breakdown in communication and instruction between the generations. In a group discussion, one woman said she was 17, ignorant and alone, when she had her first child in Anchorage. She said,

My mother drank a lot, and probably wasn’t told very much either. I had four kids by 21. I married at 16 to get away from home. My mom drank and was mean.

In the past, grandparents often took over the care of children of very young mothers. Today, several interviewees reported that grandparents or other relatives were keeping children because of substance abuse in the middle generation. For example, one woman said her granddaughter had lived with her since she was a newborn. Her daughter was now sober but was going to college, so the child was still with her grandmother.

DISCUSSION
The interviews suggest that there were as many teenage mothers in the 1980s and 1990s as there were in previous decades. The lack of support for this assertion in the survey data information can be explained by factors relating to the sample and survey instrument. The questions about age at first childbirth are far into the questionnaire, in a section that also asks whether the respondent drank or used drugs while pregnant, along with her age when she had sexual partners 1 through 10. It is not surprising that there are relatively few valid responses. Also, the youngest Aleut woman surveyed was 21, and there were no teenage respondents. We know more about the older women’s point of view than that of women under 35.

While it appears that teenage pregnancies still occur while the unmarried mother lives with her parents, the social context of such situations has changed considerably since the 1970s. Many respondents indicated that although families are more fragmented than previously, the responsibility for raising children continues to be shared throughout the extended family. Nuclear family households have become more prevalent. Government transfers and housing have become more readily available for young single mothers. One respondent said:

There used to be more sense of community here. People used to help each other. Now nobody gives a damn. The government puts them in HUD homes. Everybody used to build their own.

More optimistically, however, it is clear that the extended family is still a viable social and economic unit in Aleutian villages. People may live in nuclear family households, but parents, grandparents and other relatives are still a strong support for young mothers.

REFERENCES
1. Black, L, Ethnographic Summary: The Aleutian-Pribilof Islands Region. Social Transition in the North Working Papers, 1993,Vol. 1, No. 3.
2. Lantis, M, Aleut. In Handbook of North American Indians. Vol. 5: Arctic. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution. 1984, pp. 161-184.
3. Laughlin, WS. Aleuts: Survivors of the Bering Land Bridge. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980.
4. Lantis, M. The Aleut Social System, 1750 to 1810, from Early Historical Sources. In Ethnohistory in Southwestern Alaska and the Southern Yukon: Method and Content. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970, Pp. 139-301.

Rachel Mason
National Park Service
2525 Gambell Street
Anchorage, AK 99503
Email: rachel_mason@nps.gov