The Social Transition in the North (STN) study was a brilliant research project cut short. The study was designed to better understand the causes and effects of demographic, epidemiologic, and domestic transitions in Alaskan and Russian Far East communities. The project, initially funded by the National Science Foundation (1), was in its third year of data collection when the Principal Investigators were killed in a boating incident off the Russian Far East coast near the city of Providenia, on the Bering Sea. While most of the required data was already collected, their untimely deaths prevented its complete analysis.

Following the tragic demise of the Principal Investigators, the National Science Foundation transferred custody of the STN data bases to the Alaska Native Science Commission (ANSC). ANSC took the lead to form a STN Steering Committee to pull together all of the materials and develop potential plans for how to bring some closure to the initial research project. With the financial support of the National Science Foundation, the Alaska Native Science Commission contracted with Alaskan researchers, including two members of the original research team, to explore the data from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The Commission’s intent was to demonstrate the utility of the STN data collection in addressing pivotal problems of Arctic people. Some of these preliminary papers were presented at the 50th Arctic Science Conference in Denali, Alaska in 1999 (2) with the financial support of the National Science Foundation (3).

Eventually, stewardship of the STN dataset was transferred to the University of Alaska Anchorage, Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies with the support of the Center for Alaska Native Health Research (4). The researchers who presented at the Denali Conference compiled a series of papers to alert the research community to the availability of this valuable information.

This collection of papers begins with Rachel Mason’s overview of the Social Transition in the North project. She describes the initial project aims and hypothesis, and gives a chronology of the project from its inception through 1998.

The projects’ Principal Investigators had drafted and presented papers on the project at various conferences while it was in its formative stages. These papers are presented posthumously using their original text whenever possible. Steve McNabb’s paper describes his vision of the STN project and clearly shows his awareness of the challenges faced by the STN researchers. He discusses issues anticipated to arise during the cross national and cultural research endeavor, including ideological differences, and differences in the ways that researchers in Alaska and the Russian Far East define the problems to be addressed in this study. Bill Richards’ posthumously published paper describes the rapid changes he believed increased the populations’ vulnerability to disease. He focuses on the overt anger and racial tensions associated with a growing dependency on government programs. He points out the important balance between human rights and the “fall out” from rapid development of natural resources. These two papers demonstrate the depth of understanding of the Principal Investigators in facing the cross cultural challenges posed by the Social Transitions in the North project.

Rachael Mason’s second paper on family support of first-time mothers is an example of how the ethnographies survey data and open-ended interviews can be used together to develop a detailed picture of the changing attitudes and behaviors related to child rearing.
A paper by Brian Saylor and Gary Hughes examines the reliability of the dataset by comparing it with similar enumeration data collected from similar populations five years after the initial collection of the STN data.

Don Callaway’s paper on the health of Elders compares the health status of US and Russian community members of 58 years of age and older. While Callaway cautions researchers against possible underestimation of the seriousness of health problems using the self report questionnaire, the use of the survey data illustrates its utility in assessing the health status of elders.

The STN data can also be used to assess the nutritional status of people in the Russian Far East and Alaska. Kari Hamrick and Janell Smith use survey data to compare US and Russian populations with US benchmarks from national datasets. Their paper compares the Body Mass Index (BMI) of the populations and their use of subsistence foods.

Amy Craver was one of the original members of the research team. She argues that the combination of traditional and modern cultural elements have altered domestic life within participating arctic communities. Nonetheless, social structures remain basically unaltered. In her study she uses family histories, genealogies, and survey data to describe family structures.

The publication of this collection of papers alerts the research community of the utility of the STN data and makes the data available to the research community. To this end, the data has been organized, cataloged and prepared for archiving at the University of Alaska Anchorage Consortium Library. Under ICHS stewardship, IRB and stakeholder approval has been solicited for an ongoing protocol for the use of the STN material. Data access protocols have been developed by Susan Means of the UAA Institute of Circumpolar Health Studies to assure that the data can be used by researchers and communities in a manner consistent with the Principles of the Conduct of Research in the Arctic (5). These protocols are published in this edition to assist researchers in gaining access to this remarkable dataset.

Last, the obituaries for four of the principal researchers are published with permission from the journal Arctic Anthropology, published by the University of Wisconsin Press.

Special thanks go to Amy Craver, Alexandra Hill, Susan Means, Kathy Graves, Amy Wiita, and Carl Hild for their tireless work preparing this data collection for archiving.

It is our hope that the papers contained in this special issue will encourage other researchers to use the data collected during the Social Transition in the North project. We believe that the expanded use of this information, consistent with the Principles for Conduct of Research in the Arctic will honor the work of the initial investigators and assist Arctic communities in effectively addressing the challenges they face during a time of rapid change.

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3. National Science Foundation funds were awarded to the Alaska Native Science Commission (OPP-9633690 and OPP-9983728).
4. The Center for Alaska Native Health Research (CANHR) is supported under a Center of Biomedical Research Excellence (COBRE) grant from the National Center for Research Resources, National Institutes of Health.
5. Principles for Conduct of Research in the Arctic, National Science Foundation, Office of Polar Programs, July 2002.