Domestic function and Inupiaq households

Amy Craver

Institute of Social and Economic Research, UAA

ABSTRACT

Objective. This paper examines domestic transitions among Inupiaq households, including changes in household composition, household functions, kin networks, and possibly in cultural ideologies such as ethics of cooperation, achievement, and economic attainment.

Study Design. STN survey data included extensive information on the characteristics of households. This survey data is combined with STN project data from ethnographic accounts and focus groups; socio-economic trend data; and demographic and epidemiological information about community change to gain a clear picture of Inupiaq family structure.

Results. Household data reveal that Inupiaq households living under one roof are rarely an independent entity, either economically or in other ways. Members of one household seldom carry out all the social and economic functions needed to sustain the household. Instead, relatives or friends from two or more households frequently form social networks that support several households.

Conclusion. Inupiaq families were found to be opportunistic, flexible, and creative in responding to the challenges of daily life. Domestic functions are divided among a network of kinspeople—people who may live in several separate households and even in separate communities—but who consider themselves related.

Key word suggestions: Family structure, social change, Alaska and Russian Indigenous communities.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades one of the topics, the arctic science community has focused on is determining how global and regional changes are affecting Alaska’s indigenous peoples. Recent studies of the effects of rapid change in arctic societies have demonstrated that arctic residents increasingly combine elements of traditional cultures with the educational and employment opportunities found in rural, hub, and urban communities. Even though such changes have altered domestic life, the traditional social structure of Inupiaq culture has survived fundamentally unchanged (1). One explanation for the persistence of Inupiaq social structure is that the Inupiat continue to live a subsistence lifestyle and draw upon extended family networks as they harvest, process, and distribute local foods. Another is that the social structure is both flexible and effective enough to continue offering Inupiaq families a strategy for coping with change. Further, Inupiat continue to maintain sharing networks today because year round employment opportunities are few in most rural Inupiaq communities. Because it is difficult to find full time work in rural Alaska, many Inupiat are forced to leave their communities to seek out employment and most people are only able to work sporadically. Although the basic Inupiaq family structure has changed little over time, there are a number of significant demographic traits associated with contemporary Inupiat households that did not exist historically.
METHODS
Overview of STN Household Data: The STN data includes individual and family histories and genealogies; information from ethnographic accounts and focus groups; socio-economic trend data; and demographic and epidemiological information about community change. Narrowing the focus to family issues, STN data includes information on the number of children in the families being studied, sibling order, the spacing of children, and a number of other factors.

Household data collected in the STN study indicate that Inupiat household configurations are volatile. The STN project defined "domestic transition" as changes in household and kinship organization that coincide with other changes, such as changes in subsistence activities, education, or employment. STN project results demonstrated short-term changes in the economic and social setting, marked by abrupt shifts in household organizations. The findings indicated that Inupiaq families were opportunistic, flexible, and creative in responding to the challenges of daily life.

In 1993, for example, the STN researchers sampled Inupiaq households in April, before whaling season. In 1994, the researchers re-sampled the households in May, during whaling season. The study found that women and their families returned to the women’s family of origin for two or three months each year, to help supply labor that whaling households needed during that season. In essence, natal households temporarily recruited women for a period of time each year. Such short-term household shifts are conditioned by economic forces, cultural traditions, and a prevailing political and economic order that offers few economic incentives of sufficient scale to compare with those of traditional family network.

RESULTS
The STN project looked at "transition" to get a better understanding of how local people experience their problems—what they believe about those problems, to what they attribute them, and the values they bring to the problems. STN research indicates that domestic transitions could include changes in household composition, household functions, kin networks, and possibly in cultural ideologies such as ethics of cooperation, achievement, and economic attainment.

One distinguishing feature found in many of Inupiaq households sampled were grandparents raising grandchildren without the middle generation (the grandparent’s offspring) present in the household. This younger "middle" generation is often missing because they are residing in another community either working a wage job or attending school.

Household data revealed that an Inupiaq household living under one roof is rarely an independent entity, either economically or in other ways. Members of one household seldom carry out all the social and economic functions needed to sustain the household. Instead, relatives or friends from two or more households frequently form social networks that support several households. For example, grandparents provide child-rearing assistance for family members with children. Households share subsistence food and resources.

Thus, domestic functions are divided among a network of kinspeople—people who may live in several separate households and even in separate communities—but who consider themselves related. In a 1975 publication, Burch referred to such networks as the "local family unit" (2). Burch defined the local family unit as consisting of several households choosing to live together because of kinship, economic, and subsistence ties—an arrangement that made sense because "everyone in most villages used to belong to a single local family, which is the precise context in which generalized reciprocity did occur"(3). What is different today is that the "local" family unit—responding to economic, educational, and social forces—is now commonly spread over a larger area that may incorporate regional hub or urban communities.
DISCUSSION
The interdependence found among Inupiaq households differs markedly from conditions in most American households, which typically are independent social and economic units. There is strong supporting evidence from the STN data as well as from work of other researchers that contemporary extended Inupiaq households are consistent with traditional kinship organizations as described by Burch (6).

Recent studies of kinship and social organization also support the generalization that the typical Inupiaq household is comprised of people who share some form of domestic function, whether living under the same roof or not. "Domestic functions" include providing clothing, shelter, food, child-rearing, and subsistence labor—functions that in the Western culture are associated with independent households and in Inupiaq culture are often shared among relatives living in two or more houses (7).

This sharing of domestic functions appears to be a particularly useful strategy for Inupiaq families facing social and economic change. Under a kinship network, households can share responsibilities for everything from child-rearing to subsistence hunting and fishing to earning money. Today’s Inupiaq families and households are challenged by the wish to live off the land with the obligation to earn wages. Ironically, cash has become mandatory for living a traditional subsistence way of life. Rural Inupiaq people face the continual challenge of trying to balance wage earning with living a subsistence lifestyle. This challenge is ongoing, due to constant changes in the wage economy, the types of jobs available, and the amount of money households need. Virtually all hunting, fishing, and trapping activities require store-bought items.

Inupiaq families have developed strategies for coping with economic, social, and environmental uncertainty. People pieced together their livelihoods from many different sources. For example, one respondent’s household spent almost $3,000 more on utilities in a year than the household’s total income. To function, this household had to receive resources from elsewhere. In this case, the respondent’s two adult sons—living next door—contributed money to his household from their wage jobs. In turn, the sons ate meals at their father’s household and used his equipment.

CONCLUSION
Considering that the Inupiat draw on extended family networks, it is important to account for multi-household networks when analyzing household demographic data. Yet data collection efforts have rarely, if ever, taken this multi-household approach. For example, data-gathering instruments, such as census forms, are designed for the more typical independent, nuclear households of mainstream America. Throughout the nation, census data are collected and analyzed on an individual or household basis. But when Inupiaq households are categorized as if they were conventional American households, the data collected are often inaccurate and incomplete—because this approach does not account for the Inupiat’s special understanding of household, family, and domestic function. Since standard surveys fail to account for inter-household relationships, some of the most unique and critical aspects of rural Alaska’s domestic economy—the rich and complex economic relationships among cooperating households—are not accounted for and are being ignored. Suggestions for further research would include developing an effective method for identifying and describing multi-household networks.

REFERENCES
1. Magdanz, J. Uttermohle, C., and Wolfe, R. The Organization of Subsistence Food Production in Two Inupiaq Communities, Wales and Deering, Alaska. Nome, Alaska. Alaska Department of Fish and Game Technical Paper #259, 2002.
2. Burch, E. Eskimo Kinsmen: Changing Family Relationships in Northwest Alaska. American Ethnological Society Monograph 59. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975.
3. Burch, E. Modes of Exchange in Northwest Alaska. In Hunters and Gatherers, v.2:Property, Power, and Ideology. Ingold, T., Riches, D., and Woodburn, J. (eds). St. Martin’s Press. New York, p. 95-109, 1998.
4. Craver, A, in press. Household Adaptive Strategies Among the Inupiat.
5. Magdanz J, Utermohle C, and Wolfe, R. The Organization of Subsistence Food Production in Two Inupiaq Communities, Wales and Deering, Alaska. Nome, Alaska. Alaska Department of Fish and Game Technical Paper #259, 2002.
6. Ellanna, L and Sherrod, GK. The Role of Kinship Linkages in Subsistence Production: Some Implications for Community Organization. Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game Technical Paper 100, Anchorage, 1984.
7. Ray, DJ, Nineteenth Century Settlement and Subsistence Patterns in Bering Strait. Arctic Anthropology. 2(2):61-94, 1964.

Amy Craver
Institute of Social and Economic Research, UAA
3211 Providence Drive
Anchorage, AK 99508