



# Colonized Silence: Confronting the Colonial Link in Rural Alaska Native Survivors' Non-Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse

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## ABSTRACT

Though there is evidence linking the history of colonialism and oppression of Indigenous people to the high rates of rape and child sexual abuse experienced by this population today, it is less understood how colonial processes, past and present, condition the decision to disclose or report victimization. Drawing on a survivorship storytelling study of rural Alaska Native survivors of child sexual abuse, this paper underscores the importance of centering colonialism in understanding the culture of silence surrounding sexual victimization among Indigenous people. Results show that reasons for non-disclosure are quite embedded within larger social, historical and political themes of colonialism, oppression, and marginalization. Implications for policy and praxes are discussed, as well as a broader mandate of social change to remove barriers to disclosure.

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## Introduction

Scholars of Indigenous persons' overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (especially as victims of violent crime) have often asserted that these disproportionalities cannot be delinked from historical victimization of Indigenous peoples (BigFoot, 2000; Cunneen & Rowe, 2015; Poupart, 2002). Proponents of this strand of reasoning argue that the legacies of colonialism, domination, and oppression of Native peoples in the past has resulted in a cascading and continuous effect of ongoing marginalization in terms of social, economic, cultural, and political sovereignty today. These multiple marginalities contribute to the greater representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system as these marginalities have undermined traditional Native values and support systems and encouraged assimilation to Western values (Berger, 2004).

In the state of Alaska, there is little doubt that the influx of European systems and colonization projects created profound disruption in Indigenous cultural beliefs and systems, resulting in chaos and turmoil in Tribal

communities. Historically, crimes of rape, intimate partner violence and child sexual abuse did not plague Alaska Native peoples and villages to the same extent that they do today. It has been well documented that these social ills are relatively recent phenomena that coincided with the arrival of Westernized/European systems that interfered with the core beliefs and values of Indigenous people across a range of systems, including education, family, economy, law, and politics (Ned-Sunnyboy, 2008). The cumulative impact of these mechanisms of economic, political, and legal domination has primed Alaska Native communities and villages ripe for maladaptive coping. In Alaska, Native women and children are at disproportionate risk for experiencing crimes of rape, sexual assault, and child sexual abuse. Children experience crimes of child sexual abuse at a rate six times greater than the national average and Alaska consistently has one of the top five highest rates of this crime (Standing Together Against Rape, 2017).

Just as problems of violence and abuse are neither traditional nor culturally congruent aspects of Alaska Native life and culture, the silence surrounding these crimes should also not be considered inherent. Traditional Alaska Native oral history has shown overwhelmingly that speaking about painful or shameful experiences had a salubrious effect on the confessor. Yup'ik Eskimo elders, for example, have warned children about the dangers of “holding in” bad experiences as they can manifest into physical illness or even death (Fienup-Riordan, 2005). Despite admonishments on silence and secrecy, it is believed that current estimates of sexual abuse against Alaska Native people are under-estimates at best (see generally: Deer, 2015). It follows, then, that if silence was not a traditional response to trauma and adversity, explanations for the under-reporting and non-disclosure of crimes of sexual violence today must not be divorced from the broader historical context from which these crimes have evolved, namely colonialism.

### **Current study**

The current study focuses on the ways in which the legacies of colonialism, oppression, and marginalization of Alaska Native people condition child sexual abuse survivors' disclosure and reporting decisions in a rural Alaska Native community. It has been suggested that culturally specific contingencies often shape disclosure and reporting decisions among rural Indigenous populations, including fears about the abuser going to jail, losing the income or subsistence catch of the abuser, losing the companionship of someone who might have been viewed as a bastion of local culture (e.g. elders), and distrust of agents of or the process of social control (Evensen, 2007). Lewis (2008) also reported that fear of retaliation by prominent village or community families, as well as legal ideologies inconsistent with notions of retributive justice, also shape reporting decisions. Cuneen's (2008) study of

Indigenous family violence survivors in rural Australia revealed the impact of fear of intervention by child welfare authorities and the subsequent removal of children as a primary deterrent to reporting abuse. Despite empirical efforts building around this topic, the link between reporting and disclosure among Native survivors of sexual violence and the collective colonial experience is less understood. In order to challenge the epistemological privilege of Eurocentric criminological approaches, a paradigm shift that brings colonization “front and centre and named as the root cause” of this problem is needed (McCaslin & Breton, 2008, p. 518). The goals of this research, therefore, are to: (1) take stock of the common barriers to disclosure and reporting of rape and sexual violence in an Indigenous rural Alaska community, and (2) clarify how disclosure and reporting decision-making in this context is structured by the past- and modern-day effects of colonial policies and praxes.

## Methods

This research is based on a survivorship storytelling study of Alaska Native women (primarily Yup'ik Eskimo) living in the Bristol Bay region of Southwestern Alaska that had experienced sexual violence, intimate partner violence, or both at some point in their lives. According to Indigenous scholars, survivorship storytelling is an important tool for rape reform and developing a culturally responsive solution to rape in Tribal communities (Deer, 2015; Goeman, 2008). This methodology combines unstructured interviewing with life history research, and also integrates traditional beliefs and oral traditions to appreciate localized phenomena.

This study was conducted in partnership with the regional domestic violence and sexual assault agency that represents and serves over 30 Alaska communities and villages in Bristol Bay. The agency provided organizational support through providing a physical space to facilitate the study, assisting with participant recruitment efforts, providing transportation for research participants, and offering advocacy and support services to survivors before, during, and/or after data collection. Given the highly personalized and sensitive nature of survivor stories, there was no uniform protocol guiding storytelling sessions. They were largely unstructured, affording survivors control over the conversation and allowing topics to evolve organically. Unstructured data collection of this sort is necessary for achieving a level of depth that structured methodologies (i.e. surveys, structured interviews, etc.) are unable to produce (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Issues discussed by the women included, but were not limited to: culture, community, family life, work/employment, experiences with violence and trauma, healing strategies, visions of justice, and resilience. Each

participant was compensated with a pre-paid gift card and an invitation to attend a community briefing of the research findings.

Given the long history of unethical research practices in rural Alaska, particularly research involving Alaska Native people,<sup>1</sup> it was imperative to obtain localized perspectives and to engage local stakeholders in the planning, execution, and dissemination phases of this project. Local Tribal leaders were consulted during the early phases of the project to ensure alignment of project objectives with locally defined priorities. Shelter staff were also consulted regularly as new themes and patterns emerged in the data. Finally, prior to publication, the results of this research were first presented to local community residents and stakeholders (including Tribal leadership) to ensure validity in the interpretation of the findings, as well as secure community approval in the publication of findings. Postpresentation evaluation surveys with attendees demonstrated very high agreement with the research findings and very strong support for publication.<sup>2</sup>

Three methods of recruitment were conducted in order to achieve the final sample of adult Alaska Native women who had had unwanted sexual experiences at some point during their lives and considered these experiences violent or abusive. First, a broadcast advertisement (i.e. paper flyer) was released and posted in various public locations (including the shelter, post office, library, and other public offices) two months preceding the fieldwork. Following the broadcast advertisement, more targeted advertising was conducted by the shelter, which consisted of querying the client database for current and previous clients who were classified as primary victims of sexual assault, aged 18 and over. Clients who were deceased or had moved away from the community were removed from the sampling frame. Remaining eligible women were contacted by shelter staff via phone or email to gauge potential interest in participation. Finally, a snowball approach was utilized, whereby participants themselves served as recruiters for other potential participants.

About 35 adult women expressed interest in participating in the study and 18 participated. Participant attrition was usually a product of transportation issues. Oftentimes, women living outside the regional hub where the study was conducted (i.e. village communities) stated they would participate if they happened to be in the regional hub during the fieldwork period. The storytelling sessions lasted anywhere from one hour and 45 minutes to 6 hours and many women chose to tell their stories over multiple sessions. Storytelling proceedings were subsequently transcribed and analyzed utilizing the constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Dedoose software was utilized to organize and code the data. As a reliability check, shelter staff were engaged to provide feedback on samples of coded excerpts.

## Findings

By and large, Native survivors of child sexual abuse performed a thorough analysis of their social, political, economic, and cultural spheres vis-à-vis decisions pertaining to disclosure and/or reporting of victimization, both during childhood and adulthood. In particular, the social taboo of discussions involving sexuality, rural economy and state dependency, kinship bonds and family/village loyalties, and negative experiences with law enforcement and other formal social control fed heavily into disclosure decisions. Each barrier is discussed in detail below, followed by an analysis of how each respective barrier is grounded within a larger social, historical, and political conundrum of colonialism and ongoing marginalization of Native peoples. The following themes are based on explicit non-disclosure episodes, as well as events where disclosure and/or formal reporting did take place, but with significant consequences that imbued women with a great sense of regret for speaking out and reluctance to do so again in the future. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used when presenting direct quotes.

### *That's dirty talk!*

With limited exception, women imbued conversations on sexual victimization with notions of distaste, depravity, and perversion. Open and frank discussion of sexuality, especially in the context of personal violation and abuse, was generally not recommended and in some cases, forbidden, in many women's households. Violet, a woman in her early 20s, described the clandestine attitudes surrounding the topic in her household as a child:

It was a hush hush thing. You didn't dare talk about it. It's ugly talk. That's what I remember hearing the elders saying. Because my mom tried to speak up about what my grandpa was doing to her and I remember my Gram saying *Shhh! We don't talk about that. That's ugly, ugly talk.*

Almost always inculcated by family members, intergenerational transmission of the taboo nature of disclosure of sexually abusive situations was commonplace. Violet admitted that the primary inhibitor of her speaking out against her experience with gang rape during her teen years was the desire to avoid "talking dirty" as her mother once had. Debbie, about 35 years Violet's senior, recounted an almost identical admonishment against speaking out on her sexual abuse as a child from her grandparents:

My grandparents always said *we don't dare discuss stuff like that.* Because if you do, it was part of your fault, or you had something to do with it. Even though you were the victim, you were still part of the problem. You instigated it.

Like Violet and Debbie, Claire casually described the advice she received from an aunt on how to deal with the aftermath of a sexual assault:

You know what I do? Just take a shower and forget about it, because what else can you do besides whine about it? My auntie told me “just take a shower and forget about it. Let it go down the drain and just don’t tell anyone about it. And you’ll feel better. Nobody needs to know.”

Some women identified open dialogues of general sexuality, abusive or not, as taboo subjects within their families. Debbie and Brenda both discussed such admonishments against speaking on such topics as typical in their households:

DEBBIE: Back in that day, we weren’t allowed to talk about it in our home. My grandparents always would say that we didn’t talk about private parts or other people having sex. It was totally forbidden.

BRENDA: I remember my cousin telling her mama something [sexual] and her saying ‘Hush! We don’t talk about things like that!’ At 11, I didn’t know what those things were.

Stifled conversations on these subjects often shaped women’s sexual awakening later in life. Ginny, for instance, described her own sexual awakening as a self-learning experience, receiving very little counsel from her mother or grandmother on the subject:

I was told what sex was—that’s what husbands and wives do. I was never explained how it was supposed to go, how it was supposed to feel, this and that. No. It was more of a self-learning experience. It became kind of a serious subject to me when I got there between my grandmother and I and my mother and I. They were the hardest ones. It was more of a secret. Secrets or secrecy or not allowed to talk about it. It was a tough subject for them to talk about because they were also not taught. With my grandmother’s generation—I wanted to talk to her, to get her to talk about it. She was told when she got married—all she was told was that “that will happen—your husband will take you to bed.” And that was it.

### *Colonial roots*

Traditional Eskimo social and sexual norms did not inculcate the suppression of conversations on sexuality, gender, and violence that has become so prevalent today. Traditional Yup’ik Eskimos, in fact, were characterized as having relaxed and open attitudes toward sexuality (Oswalt, 1963). Yup’ik societies also encouraged open discussions on sexuality. The shift in sexual norms within traditional Yup’ik Eskimo society can be traced to the arrival of Moravian missionaries in the region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Moravians believed that many traditional Yup’ik practices and beliefs were evidence of a lower stage of development (Fienup-Riordan, 1991); consequently, the Moravians strove to completely replace traditional social and sexual norms with culturally incongruent concepts, such as nuclear family and cohabitation. Such shifts have been implicated in the decline of aboriginal ceremonies and traditional storytelling. For women like

Maddy, religious conviction became a strong buffer against disclosing a series of sexually abusive episodes experienced during childhood:

In a culture with religion—when I was growing up, there was still the idea that you don't have sexual experiences before you're married, and if you do, that's bad. I had many years where I was a bad person, because I had had sexual experiences before I was married.

The taboo nature of discussing topics of sexuality, and relations between men and women more generally, can also be linked to the gradual and steady erosion of Indigenous languages in Alaska Native communities, one of the many causalities of colonial policy, generally, and the Boarding School Era, in particular. As Fienup-Riordan (2005) points out, the progressive assimilation to Western norms and practices, especially English linguistics, by the Alaska Native people has widened the cultural lacuna between generations of families. In Yup'ik villages, traditional lessons and admonishments governing human relations, including human sexuality, have become lost in translation. This has been linked to a progressive abdication of instruction as elder generations lose the ability to communicate in traditional manners to their offspring. Undoubtedly, the non-disclosure surrounding sexual violence and abuse is partially patterned by the intentional destruction of ancestral languages; in the absence of meaningful dialogue to engage in discussions of abuse, the Native community has retreated into silence. Sandra illustrated this point quite poignantly in trying to describe an incident in her village involving two brothers who allegedly raped a younger brother's (named Benny) wife. Sandra expressed difficulty in conveying the story fully in English, substituting Central Alaska Yup'ik for phrases she did not know in English:

This Seymour—he's a bad one. Even his mom, before she died, said "I don't know what's wrong with Seymour." She's the one that said her son Seymour...I don't know how you really say it in English, how you put it...but she said in my language, she said *An'ngaakenva augum Benny qai'llpi'llruyugnarqak, aipaqe'llruyugnarqak arnaaqe'llruuyugnarqak*. I don't know how you say it...rape?

Sandra's retelling of Seymour's mother's statement is somewhat difficult to directly translate into English, but essentially the mother is guessing that something happened between Benny's older brothers (Seymour being one of them) and Benny's wife—that they were "with her together," suggestive of a rape involving multiple perpetrators, as Sandra deduces with some hesitancy. Likewise, Ginny also pointed to language as an important vector of power in her ability to discuss her victimization with her family:

When I told them, there was absolutely no conversation for two weeks. Dad was angry, hurt, and didn't want to speak with anger. Had to think about how to talk about it, how to talk about the whole thing because he's never gone through

something like this. It was never spoken about when he was a child—bad touches, sexual abuse and rape. Even about sex.

Under the lens of colonial power, the seemingly taboo nature of discussing sexuality in general and sexual victimization more specifically is not a traditional nor inherent aspect of Native culture. It is not simply that these subjects are uncomfortable or jarring and Native families would rather steer clear of them; they have been stripped of their personal agency and sovereignty, as well as their traditional moral compass, to engage in meaningful dialogue around these issues and formulate healthy responses.

### ***Don't tell because it will affect us***

Women also implicated issues of rural economy as a significant consideration in deciding whether or not to disclose or report victimization. This was particularly true for women who described a relationship of dependency (financial or otherwise) with those that had abused them. Due to the isolated state of rural Alaska villages, living costs are notoriously high. Transportation costs alone double the price of goods, given that virtually everything must be flown or brought in by barge. For villages that are geographically situated further from the regional hub, staple goods and commodities are even more costly. The role of cash, therefore, in rural economic frameworks, has become increasingly prominent in recent decades. However, subsistence activities (i.e. hunting, gathering, foraging and harvesting activities) also assume a dominant presence in rural economy in Alaska. This means that for rural Alaska families, particularly Native families, economic wellbeing is dually-contingent on cash income, as well as subsistence. Taken together, these twin forces have shaped women's apprehension about creating a disturbance in their own ability to survive in their community. Ginger, a former shelter employee and long-term resident of the community, explained that the economic realities of place often figure prominently into rural women's disclosure calculus. Viewed under this lens, not only are issues of family, kinship, and cultural pride at stake, but also one's physical, spiritual, and cultural connection to place:

People will put up with a lot of shit in relationships because it's better than being single. I have talked to my mental health colleagues and their immediate thoughts on that are the neediness of women, the self-esteem issues, and [relate that] to why they would get into a bad relationship and stay. And that may all be true, but everybody just seems to leap over the obvious one: you can't fuckin' survive as a single person, let alone a single parent, on one income in rural Alaska. You can't do it. If you don't have a partner, you can't live here. She is making the best pick she can for her survival if she wants to stay in the village. She'd rather have a bad man who cuts the wood, hauls the water, and pops the moose, than no man at all. There's many women I know that if they were going to speak out against their



perps, they had to leave the village. So, the choice is: rape, stay and shut up; or prosecute the person. If they win, they lose and if they lose, they lose.

Indeed, as women emphasized the high cost of living, limited resources, and unforgiving physical intensity associated with rural Alaska, silence on rape and other forms of abuse was often framed as an instrumental decision designed to protect one's ability to stay in the community. Similar to the socio-cultural taboo of speaking about victimization, women's family members often acted as interceptors of disclosure or reporting. Carrie discussed her first experience of molestation in her village, explaining how the economic realities of village life inculcated a sense of helplessness that had a cascading effect on subsequent victimization:

My first [time] was maybe when I was my daughter's age by the store manager who is married to my dad's half-sister. He told my mom about it and she said "You better not go to the cops. If you do, they won't let us go to that store anymore." And I thought to myself "*she doesn't even care about me. I'm just going to let them do whatever they want to me.*"

Debbie also described how issues of sustainability and survival in the village context often supersede what are seen as individual problems. In her village, a man had recently been accused of molesting his granddaughter. In response, the accused man's wife, Debbie's co-worker, spearheaded a petition to village residents in an attempt to exonerate the man of the charges. In attempting to understand why her co-worker would go to such lengths to exculpate someone accused of such crimes, Debbie implicated the roles of cash and subsistence economy, pointing to chain reaction that disclosure and prosecution of such crimes can potentially bring to a village family:

It made me realize she was worried about her own security because she went into this huge frenzy—*How am I going to get to work? Who's going to chop wood for me? Who's going to get furs? Who is going to make money to pay our bills?*

Terry recalled one incident involving her father "making a move" on her when he was intoxicated. Fearing that his pension would be terminated in the event of an arrest, Terry's mother advised her not to pursue legal allegations and to let the matter drop. Again, financial considerations largely factor into the decision to speak out or remain silent:

It's a lot of pride—*Don't tell! Don't tell! Don't tell!* It's been instilled in us. Even in my generation when I did tell my mom about my dad, it was "don't tell—he'll go to jail." And I had to live with that. That's what they were taught: *Don't tell because it will affect us.*

### **Colonial roots**

Historically, Indigenous peoples and communities have had little control over their resources or economic situations (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). The

relationship between state economic development and Indigenous peoples in the United States, and the colonial exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources, forms the basis of wealth and power in the United States. The same can certainly be said for Alaska Native people. The dependency of rural Alaska Native people on state economic resources can be traced to the Native population's assimilation to Western economic forms, namely capitalism. Evidence of the imposition of capitalism and its key cultural drivers of wealth and material accumulation, individualism, and competition can be seen in Alaska since the initial arrival of Russian fur traders, who introduced notions of wealth and poverty to Native villages, thus establishing economic boundary lines between people on the basis of how much they accumulated. Events of the 1970s further elevated capitalism as the archetype of Alaska Native economic organization. Passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971 transformed land tenure in Alaska, extinguishing long-debated aboriginal statewide land claims in Alaska in return for fee-simple title to 44 million acres of land and cash payouts of near \$1 billion to newly established regional and village corporations—state-chartered entities that were formed to administer land and money received under ANCSA.

Alaska Native regional and village economies shifted radically as a result of ANCSA. Though subsistence harvesting activities remained an important component of village economy, this was undercut by a dependence on government that is quite pronounced in Southwestern Alaska today. Commercial fishing, trapping, craft sales, and local service industries account for but a small percentage of local income; as much as 90 percent is derived from the public sector. Such a large degree of dependence on public sources limits economic diversity in these contexts and undermines the cultural premium that traditional subsistence and harvesting activities once afforded to village residents in favor of cash-based systems. Almost all resource use, from commercial fishing and hunting and gathering activities, involves the use of primarily modern equipment (boats, freezers, guns, skiffs, etc.), which must be purchased using cash. At a time when the market economy of rural Alaska is in a state of crisis, traditional subsistence activities become increasingly difficult to afford, thus perpetuating a cycle of cultural dislocation and state economic dependency of rural Alaska Native people. Numerous examples of this calculated economic exploitation exist throughout colonial history; for instance, when colonizing powers seized Indigenous trade routes, the ensuing food shortages forced the Native population into a relationship of economic dependency with the colonizers, with European manufactured goods replacing Indigenous ones (Dobyns, 1983).

As Native subordination and dependency to state and federal control persists in rural Alaska, it is no surprise that this weighs heavily in the decision to disclose violent and abusive situations. As many women noted, disclosing such crimes (especially to law enforcement) comes with a

potentially life-changing consequences. Simply put, reporting such crimes is often not a cost-effective option for many rural Native women, as Nancy explains:

Us people on the outside—the women—they're husbands and boyfriends are sitting in jail. They get three meals a day, they don't pay rent, they don't pay lights, they don't have to buy their kids anything. And the victims are trying to put a pair of shoes on their kids' feet. I see women walking to work with nothing but a sweater on so their kids can have coats and shoes!

### ***But they're my family***

Conversations about community and place unequivocally evoked discourse on family and extended relations. For the vast majority of women, their community is the place where they were born and raised and where their family is from and has lived for generations. Families are large and family bonds are extensive. Women had anywhere from two to 12 siblings, up to 40 first cousins, and even more second and third cousins—all living in the same village. Given the density of family relations and the geographically isolated nature of communities in this part of the state, the probability of experiencing violence at the hands of someone who is *not* of some relation (consanguinal or affinal) is very low.

As women reflected on the myriad traumatic and violent experiences that had befallen them, their family members and often across several generations, the institution of family and premium placed on kinship and family honor were described as the cultural interceptors of disclosure and reporting. As a child, Charlene admitted to having often considered turning in an older brother who had been molesting her for years. Like many women, Charlene's concerns of family dissolution and turmoil trumped her search for justice and resolution:

I could have [reported him] a long time ago. It's just that I have a kind heart and he's my brother, and I didn't want him gone.

Lack of emotional support from one's family was a common response to claims of victimization, which was described as primary catalyst for remaining silent on future episodes of victimization. Such was the case with Debbie, whose accusation of child molestation at the hands of her mother's husband was met with fierce resistance:

My mom—when I was 6—she married this guy named Donnie. I was 6 when she married him and she was with him for 13 years. During those years, I refused to visit her because he tried to molest me. And when I told her, she refused to believe me. She would take a broomstick handle and beat me and said I was a liar, that I was making up the story.

After Eva's father died, her mother remarried. When Eva was 13 years old, her mother's husband fondled her. Like Debbie, Eva experienced skepticism and disbelief from her mother:

My mom—her husband tried to touch me. And I told her. She was mad at first. After she talked to her stupid husband, she asked me if I did anything. How can you even ask your own daughter that? I'm still holding onto that, because she's still with him. I feel like she chose him over me.

Eva also emphasized that this mindset is prevalent throughout her village, signposting her knowledge of many families in crisis that haven't come forward for help:

It's hard enough to deal with it, but to not have support from your own mom? I just don't see how that even makes sense to them. Why would you allow that to happen to your kids? Just because they're cousins? That's really disappointing. I know some younger girls have been dealing with molestation, but the families don't come forward. They don't want to pursue the charges.

A while back, Sandra had worked for the shelter as a village advocate. In this capacity, she was often the first point of contact for women in crisis in her village, and was responsible for providing the shelter with documentation detailing incidents of sexual assault, including information on the perpetrator. She explained the challenge of working in this role in a community where so many residents are related either by blood or marriage. When faced with the task of reporting a family member (a grandson) suspected of sexual assault, Sandra resigned from her position, emphasizing that she had to prioritize family bonds:

I told [shelter management] if it ever comes across to my family, I'll resign. And then I got a call—go do an interview because of my grandson's family. And I said "What?! I don't think so. I can't." Because my grandson—they're my family. Where will my grandson go? I'll feel badly. People would blame me. And I decided to resign.

Three women who proceeded with formal charges against perpetrators cited lack of emotional support from family members. In these cases, women linked the decision to report victimization to law enforcement to the breakdown of family relationships. The magnitude of family dissolution cannot be overstated. For most women, the choice of coming forward and formally reporting their victimization had a cascading effect on their web of family and social connections in the community. Reporting a perpetrator in such a setting set off a chain-reaction of detrimental consequences for a number of women. Terry described the rift that her police report caused within her family, following the formal charges pressed against a nephew that had raped her:

It created a big problem with me and family's intimacy as far as Christmas dinner, Thanksgiving dinner—we don't even do all that anymore. We don't do birthday

parties. Me and my brother are finally getting along but my sister-in-law blames me for it. How could that be my fault? It broke my heart and I went through a nervous breakdown over it. I developed a pill problem...also alcohol issues, heavier ones—to self-medicate.

Claire noted a similar tension within her family following the arrest and prosecution of her cousin for sexual assault:

*Well, my dad—him and my uncle were best friends. Him and my auntie...were best friends. We would do family barbeques together all the time. Family get-togethers with the maqi<sup>3</sup> and everything. After that happened, there's no more family barbeques or get-togethers. When I see my auntie, she looks right through me. When I see my uncle, he looks right through me. When I see anyone in my family connected to my cousin, I get a dirty look. And this is in my community for 8 years now.*

When Tamara was 10 years old, she was molested by a distant cousin that performed chores and general handiwork around the house. Tamara disclosed the incident to her older sister, making her promise not to tell anyone. Her sister ended up sharing the story with a friend whose relative was a town magistrate. Tamara described what ensued next as a rigmarole involving counselors, social workers, school staff, and the police. She described how this process affected her relationship with her grandmother and other family members:

She didn't understand what was going on; she didn't speak English. They did send a social worker. This was my distant cousin—I guess he got arrested and he did go to jail for it. But in the meantime, my family was mad at me. They blamed me for telling. I just remember my grandma being very angry with me. His side of the family was very angry and cold toward our side of the family.

### **Colonial roots**

The fierce resistance to reporting and disclosure and dogged avoidance of police, courts, social workers, and other agents of social control as a means to maintain familial bonds can also be understood against the backdrop of the historical legacies of colonialism, white supremacy, and forced assimilation in Alaska Native communities. Prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978, thousands of “at-risk” Alaska Native and Native American children were forcibly removed from their homes and villages, sent to foster homes and boarding school, and lost touch (sometimes permanently) with their families, culture, and traditions. ICWA mandated that, except in the rarest of circumstances, Native children must be placed with their relatives or tribes in an effort to keep Native families intact. Women's narratives of violence and subsequent response collectively form a poignant indictment of the vestiges of state-sponsored kidnapping (as many Indigenous and Tribal people have understandably labeled it) that linger in

the minds of Native people today. Despite the provisions of ICWA, however, Native families in Alaska are still struggling to maintain unity and personal sovereignty. On September 12, 2014, *Native Village of Tununak II v. State of Alaska* (Alaska Supreme Court No. 6954) ruled that in order to be considered as an adoptive placement option for children in State custody, petitioners must file formal adoption petitions in the State Superior Court. This new requirement will be an insurmountable hurdle for most families and prevent them from exercising their rights granted under ICWA. The new complexities to the adoption process will necessitate the hiring of an attorney, which the vast majority of Alaska Native families and villages lack access to. This precedent, Indigenous analysts claim, “will make it easier for Tribes and Tribal members to lose their children into state custody” (Brewer, 2014, p. 1).

As women discussed the silence surrounding their abuse, it became clearer that silence was not merely an individual defense mechanism, but often a mechanism to protect the family unit. Debbie provided some insight on how past and contemporary colonial policies encouraging separation of Native families structure decision-making today:

White people—say, my white friends—they are able to communicate about it and talk about it. They aren’t as scared. Whereas in the Native home, they are hiding. They’re scared. They’re ashamed of themselves. I was raised in an Eskimo home, so the way I was brought up—“*we can’t let people know who we really are because if they know they might do something to us like take us away.*” When I was little and the teacher came to sign us up for school, somebody would see them walking by in the window and they’d say “*Kass’aq<sup>4</sup> are coming!*” *That meant run and hide, and we did. We used to run and hide and listen and see what they wanted.*

Separating and creating division within Indigenous families is a hallmark strategy of colonialism. It follows, then, that non-disclosure and non-reporting on rape and other forms of sexual abuse (which, when it occurs in rural Alaska, frequently occurs within families) must not be characterized solely as symptomatic of poor coping strategies, denial, or minimization of the victim. The silence is also a method of modern-day colonial resistance.

### ***Who’s gonna help you, anyway?***

Generally, women’s characterizations of criminal justice systems in rural Alaska were unfavorable, citing numerous instances of victim blaming, alienation, and miscarriages of justice. Women often cited the lack of public resources, such as social services, as one of many reasons that unabated violent victimization against women continues to flourish in rural Alaska, particularly in the villages, and why so many see disclosure and reporting as futile efforts. Carrie described the revolving door movement of social service employees in and out of her village as a substantial barrier to remedying sexual assault and barriers to reporting:

There are very low family services workers here. Even the ones that are here don't stick around long.

Marcy also pinned her despondence on the lack of resources within her village, as well as the general attitudes and norms surrounding sexual abuse that minimized or even denied these experiences that available providers seemed to endorse:

Back in those days, it was like who's going to help you anyway? What can anyone do? What's done is done. We didn't have no VPSOs<sup>5</sup>. We didn't have no counselors. And who would they believe? *Oh, she's just making it up. Maybe they just got into an argument or something.*

Marcy's framing of the tenacity of violence as an "every man/woman for him/herself" scenario was echoed by many of the women who had had some form of interaction with law enforcement. Many noted unequal access to community resources, from housing to employment to access to law enforcement. Violet fervently charged that classist attitudes (observed by many women at the broader community level) are what guide much of police decision-making in rural communities:

They pick and choose if they are going to write a report, they pick and choose if they are going to press charges, they pick and choose if they are going to arrest. Depends on your last name, who you're related to, your history in the community, your family's history in the community—it's all their personal opinion over there. They treat the victim as if the victim is the perpetrator and vice versa. There's more requirements of the victim than of the perpetrator. It's up to the victim to file the protective order, modify the protective order, or strengthen the protective order. They could care less.

Alice also criticized the indolence of the VPSO in her village. Three days before her wedding, she was beaten by her fiancé. She described the graphic and extreme nature of the incident, emphasizing the futility in reporting:

I finally got loose from him and I ran towards the parents' house and he started running after me for a while, but I hid and he couldn't find me. That's when I went to my parents' house and told them what happened and we called the VPSO. We made the report and they didn't do anything. They didn't even come to the scene.

In addition to viewing formal reporting to police, troopers, and VPSOs as a futile effort rife with victim blaming, favoritism, and inaction, some women also imbued the reporting process with a degree of cultural incongruity, noting that engagement with formal agents of social control was often at odds with their cultural identity. Sandra has observed a cultural lacuna between VPSOs and the people of her home village. In particular, she discussed how one VPSO's lack of local knowledge and socio-linguistics adversely affected case adjudication in her community. My dialogue with her below demonstrates how the incongruity between Western criminal

justice agents and local linguistics patterns a great deal of dissonance between the local community and law enforcement:

SANDRA: There's quite a few families in the village that are hurting because of this person who was a VPSO. His reports weren't good. He put "upset" in them. Upset is a big word. Lots of folks in the community are hurt because of him. Their kids are in jail because of his report—how he wrote it. Using the word "upset."

INTERVIEWER: What does "upset" mean?

SANDRA: This person is very violent right now. That's what it means. This person needs to go in a hole right now. That's what "upset" means. Very angry.

Sandra's observation of this dissonance was echoed by a number of other women. Eva described the reluctance of her cousin to report a rape, noting specifically an aversion to state trooper involvement in family matters:

I know a lot of women up there that deal with this kind of violence and their families do not encourage them to come forward. The first cousin that I was talking about that was raped by Donald—she didn't come forward because her mom didn't want the troopers to come around anymore asking questions.<sup>6</sup>

Tamara recalled her experience of being sexually molested and subsequently processed through the child welfare system as somewhat alien to the traditional Yup'ik way of handling family matters. Like Sandra, the incongruity between local Native customs and Western justice methods shaped a rather traumatic outcome for Tamara and her family (despite her offender being successfully apprehended):

At 10 or 11, I was being yanked from my classrooms and being forced to talk to strangers and just scary people. My grandma found out about it, and she didn't speak English. All she knew was there was a Caucasian social worker coming to our house with all these questions and papers, and it caused her to be angry, which then turned on me. Native tradition is: What happens in the house stays in the house. We deal with it. We don't involve outsiders, western culture—anything of that sort.

### *Colonial roots*

In Alaska Native communities, traditional deterrents to violence against women and children was the dishonor brought to oneself, one's ancestors, and one's future generations when disrespecting anyone and anything. Immediate response to violent behavior was largely a community affair and customarily began with teaching the offending individual the importance of respect and reiterating the consequences for inappropriate behavior. By and large, these methods were effective. If all else failed, village leaders resorted to banishment.

These traditional methods of conflict resolution and social control began to erode in Southwest Alaska as missionaries and educators imported Euro-



centric models of justice to the region at the end of the 19th century. Yup'ik legal practices, in particular, were viewed as sacrilegious, uncivilized, and superstitious (Lee, 2000). Though the government and church officials supported Yup'ik villages in the creation of village councils, which allowed the Yup'ik people to continue some of their traditional legal practices (such as non-coercive problem solving), state pressures by the 1960s mandated that villages become more court-like. This included institutionalizing an adversarial justice model by bringing permanent state prosecutors to rural regions, as well as introducing law enforcement and VPSOs to these areas. The importation of the adversarial, punitive criminal justice systems undercut pre-constitutional methods for maintaining balance and harmony. Maddy summarized how Alaska's "colonial model" (DeMarban, 2013, December 04, p. 1) of justice bucks traditional beliefs in rehabilitation and reintegration, emphasizing that it is this disconnect that feeds the culture of silence:

If the goal is to punish [offenders], I don't think people are going to come out. Because the person who does the punishing gets blamed. When you're the victim who speaks out and you're seen as the punisher, you're going to get the blame. Right now, there's a lot of talk about the heroin use in our community. As long as the emphasis is on punishing people that are selling—no one wants to turn in their son or brother for punishment. They would turn them in if they had hope for help, but not punishment.

The progressive waning of Alaska Native land rights also feeds into issues of criminal jurisdiction in rural Alaska. As mentioned previously, one the major distinctions between Alaska Native people and Indigenous people from the lower 48 is that almost no Alaska Native people reside on Tribal land (i.e. reservation land).<sup>7</sup> As ANCSA extinguished Indigenous land claims and formed regional and village corporations, it was decided that those entities would be charged with handling land allotments, as opposed to establishing reservations. In 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court case *Alaska v. Native Village of Venetie* ruled unanimously that Alaska Native lands, with limited exceptions, are not "Indian Country," thus sharply limiting the powers of Tribal governments in Alaska. A glaring example of this limitation came to a head in 2013 with the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) that granted new criminal jurisdiction to Lower 48 Tribes, including the ability to issue civil protective orders to arrest and detain any person. Because "Indian Country" does not exist in Alaska, Alaska Native Tribes did not receive such powers. As mentioned earlier, Alaska is also one of six states designated as a Public Law 280 (PL 280) state. PL 280 was originally part of a mid-20th century effort to eradicate Tribal nation recognition and assimilate Indigenous people to mainstream United States. PL 280 transferred law enforcement authority in Alaska from the federal government to the state of Alaska—an arrangement to which neither the state nor Alaska Native

Tribal governments consented. The state of Alaska was not provided with any additional resources to enforce crimes in Alaska Native villages. To add insult to injury, the federal government withheld funding for the development of Tribal court systems. The result has been widespread criminal justice dysfunction in PL 280 states, especially Alaska. This lack of Tribal capacity presents formidable challenges for effective response to crimes occurring in Native communities, especially crimes of sexual assault (Deer, Goldberg, Singleton, & White Eagle, 2007). This patchwork of colonial-influenced law and policy has created so much ambiguity in the Alaska legal code that individual Alaska Native communities and the people living there find themselves at a loss for seeking recourse for criminal victimization. Violet described the ways in which the very limited authority of Tribal court in her community quell the reporting of sexual abuse and family violence to formal authorities:

To be honest, I think it's because the state of Alaska's court system interfered with the Tribal court system. The way the Tribe handles things...before they remove a child from the family, they give the family another chance to make things right. The state of Alaska's court system—once you mess up, you're done. There is no three strikes, it's first strike and you're out. You can say goodbye to your kids.

## Discussion

Regardless of place or culture, disclosure and reporting of child sexual abuse is a complex and often delayed process. Crimes of this nature are found in most cultures and they are unequivocally shrouded in taciturnity. These observations are far from new. It is well-established that disclosure and formal reporting of sexual violence and abuse among Native American/Alaska Native populations are low, leading to misaligned representations of this population as uncooperative, unmotivated, resistant, or hard-to-reach (Horejsi, Craig, & Pablo, 1992). The fundamental shortcoming with such portraits is that they are often informed by a Eurocentric tendency to ignore critical epistemological and ontological concerns central to the Indigenous experience, thus perpetuating and reproducing Indigenous men and women as dysfunctional subgroups (Cunneen, 2006).

Understanding the ways in which historical oppression and ongoing marginalization of Alaska Native families, communities, and cultures and how these issues are intricately entangled in the decision to speak out against victimization can have profound implications for professionals and frontline staff serving this population, including social workers, child advocates, court personnel, forensic nurses, and educators. Research has shown repeatedly that the attitude of caregivers and mental health professionals is germane in helping women disclose abusive situations and tell their stories (Bates, Hancock, & Peterkin, 2001). Understanding the interplay of broader

historical, political, and social systems that condition non-disclosure among rural Alaska Native women and children is critical to facilitate shared understanding. This is particularly important in regions of rural Alaska, where there is often a distinct dichotomy of non-Native professionals and the local Native population. Both the women and other key informants interviewed for this project often commented on this dichotomy, noting the disconnect that arises when non-local and non-Native medical, educational, or social service professionals work with the local Native community with limited entrée or training into local culture and customs. As Shepherd (2001) points out, such arrangements do little in terms of supporting the local Native community and resolving complex social problems. This research can serve as an important resource for professionals working with Native populations in rural Alaska.

Beyond what might be considered service delivery implications, this research also informs an imperative to examine and institute change at broader levels where state and imperial power rests. Smith (2015) explains the conundrum of women of color in the United States who survive sexual or physical abuse, in that they are often told they must “pit themselves against their communities...to begin the healing process” (p. 151), and yet those same women experience pressure from their communities to remain silent about violent victimization to maintain a united front against racism. Without question, the women in this study described being caught up in such conflicting loyalties. This has profound implications for adopting strategies that encourage survivors to speak that are cognizant of the larger structures and systems that condition silence and perpetuate marginalization and the neo-colonial status of Native women.

In many ways, the decision to remain silent can be seen as a method of colonial resistance, particularly when silence is characterized as instrumental to keeping family units intact by avoiding formal engagement with law enforcement, child protective services, and the broader Western criminal justice system. This resistance, however, should not be conflated with personal empowerment. Virtually every woman noted the insidious nature of silence in the context of rape and strongly advocated for tools and strategies that would facilitate disclosure and speaking out. Because non-disclosure and silence are so deeply rooted in colonialism, it follows that the only way to create such tools and strategies is to address the broader structures and systems that breed such responses by the Native community. Following Hill's (2008) advocacy mandate for “social change, not social services” (p. 198), breaking the pervasive silence on rape and sexual abuse in Indigenous communities must move beyond (though not necessarily obviate) a direct client services approach and embrace a grassroots model of social change that allows for the reclamation of personal and political sovereignty. Such social change requires systems analysis in the political, economic,

institutional and cultural arenas of Indigenous societies. Focusing solely on individual women, their families, or even their communities as the sole sites of intervention ignores the broader power structures that reinforce the colonial status of Native women.

### **Limitations**

The sample consisted of adult women representing various cultural groups in Alaska. The majority of women identified as Central Alaska Yup'ik Eskimo, but there was also a handful of women identifying as Aleut, Athasbascan Indian, Tlingit Indian, and Inupiaq Eskimo. The analysis strategy employed in this research did not examine distinct differences existing among and within these distinct cultural groups. Marenin (1992) warns against this oversight, noting that such approaches might undervalue distinct differences that exist among and within Native groups. However, it should be noted that this amalgamation of cultural groups as presented in this research is, in fact, representative of the cultural and racial mix of the community where the fieldwork took place. Often referred to as a “cultural melting pot” by a number of local residents, the majority of the local population identifies as multi-racial, claiming Alaska Native, Russian, Scandinavian, Irish, Italian, Swedish, and Japanese ancestries, to name a few. This community also ranks as one of the highest in the United States for inter-racial marriage. It was also common for participants in this study to speak about the exchangeable nature of their Native identity, claiming different sides of their ancestry when they feel pressure to negotiate with a racial and/or cultural binary.

Relatedly, this research also did not explore how narratives of non-disclosure and non-reporting varied systematically across the distinct communities and villages. It is important to note that communities in Western Alaska provide very different levels of support and access to resources for community members. They have also experienced different trajectories in terms of social and economic transformation that may pattern very localized contingencies on disclosure and reporting decisions. Careful consideration of these dimensions of place and how they shape women's narratives is an important consideration for subsequent inquiry on this subject.

Finally, it is important to note that although this research underscores the importance of colonial history in examining modern-day marginalization of Native people, it does not fully unpack the processes of action, reaction, and interaction that, through time, produce and shape social, economic, political, and cultural outcomes. Natives are not and have not been merely passive recipients of changes thrust upon them; they are active participants in the reproduction of their own history and are integrated in their wider social fields. This research does not discuss methods of Native resistance to colonialism and neo-colonialism and this risks an overly simplistic depiction of

an imposition of an alternative way of life on a passive population. Understanding the ways in which the Native community negotiated and continues to negotiate with these larger social processes and systems is an imperative for realizing and appreciating indigenous self-determination

## Notes

- 1 Hodge (2012) provides a comprehensive overview of research abuses with American Indian/Alaska Native populations and the need for Tribal oversight of research efforts.
- 2 These findings are available upon request.
- 3 “Steambath” in Central Alaskan Yup’ik.
- 4 “White man” in Central Alaskan Yup’ik.
- 5 In the villages, there are no police or state troopers, only Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs), who are usually local residents (though sometimes outsiders) who are trained to monitor the safety of the village and resolve conflicts as the first responders. Essentially, VPSOs investigate and resolve misdemeanor crimes and report felony crimes to the Alaska State Troopers.
- 6 The word for “trooper,” translates in nearly every Native language in Western Alaska as *he who comes and takes away*.
- 7 The only reservation land in Alaska is held by the Tsimshians of Southeast Alaska, as they did not receive payout for their lands under ANCSA.

## Notes on contributor

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