

“Like Anybody Else”: Alaskan Native Voices on Family Life

This educational program intended as a family sociology curriculum supplement presents the perspectives of contemporary Native Alaskans on family life. Its purposes are focused upon raising awareness and increasing cross-cultural understanding.

“What are Native Alaskans like? “ “Do they live in igloos and eat walrus and kill whales?” “Don’t they club seals?” “Do they have families like other people do?” “I heard that they share their wives with visitors, is that true?” “Aren’t most of the natives alcoholic and poor?” “At one time they probably had a thriving culture but that was a long time ago.” “The native population lives on government handouts and doesn’t want to work or go to school.”

These questions and comments are among many that I have heard and responded to over my twenty years of living in the arctic. Many of these questions spring from a foundation of stereotypes and misinformation. To some extent, the lack of knowledge about the people and cultures in question is understandable, given their geographical remoteness and the relatively small amount of available, accurate and current information. Many people’s knowledge of these cultures is garnered primarily from Hollywood and other fictional sources. Of course, understanding why the ignorance persists does not lessen the effect these stereotypes have upon the people in question.

We know stereotypes can be powerful weapons employed to justify and maintain the status quo, often resulting in the social structures that stigmatize and marginalize whole groups of people. Stereotypes are used covertly in defense of policy decisions while overtly, decisions purportedly reflect fiscal responsibility and social accountability.

It is very well documented that since first contact with the western world, the native people of North America have been dehumanized, stigmatized, stereotyped, killed, generally marginalized and frequently dealt with in an outrageous manner. When one considers the enormity of the effects of western civilization upon the native populations, it can be a staggering thought.

Unfortunately, with all that we have learned, we continue to misrepresent reality and exploit our neighbors. Our public school textbooks and many university texts and resources continue to make assumptions about the diverse native cultures. Perhaps the most egregious mistake is that typically, Native Americans are grouped together as if they are one entity, one culture. It would be a little like saying that all Europeans are the same. Or, that all African cultures are identical. This is not to say that we do not differentiate between certain major groups, such as the Hopi or Apache or Cherokee. Group identification happens when it is convenient for a special interest group, or when it might

be convenient to highlight some social problem in the context of a visible group. Sometimes a particular native group might be identified because it is consistent with an historian's perspective and definition of history.

One significant result of being recognized is that once notice is taken, the group does stand out for the moment, often *captured for all time in that moment* and placed neatly in a text or in an exhibit. At this point the identified group now has the potential of becoming a case of *arrested cultural development* in the mind of the observer. A visit to a Native American exhibit in most any museum will serve to illustrate this point. Put yourself in the mind of an elementary school student with limited cultural experience and knowledge, visiting an exhibit for the first time. For that child, the cultural artifacts and non-material culture are frozen in time. Unfortunately, many adults visiting the same exhibit often do not take much more from the experience. Is it any wonder that people are frequently surprised to find out that Native Americans are still among us, living, raising families, working and maintaining a rich cultural identity and heritage?

It is interesting that Eskimos (Yupiks, Inupiat, Siberian Yupiks, Cu'piks among others) are sometimes given a special status among the questioning. It is possible that Eskimos pique the imagination more than other groups, because the information contained in school texts and movies is so limited. Nevertheless, in the minds of many and reflected in the questions asked, is the assumption that the cultures existing in the arctic are ancient and primitive. This is true to some extent. The cultures are ancient, but primitive is a relative term applied from an ethnocentric perspective. Moreover, it would be quite unrealistic as well as inaccurate to assume that these ancient cultures have not evolved and adapted to changing times.

Imagine for a moment what fantastic upheavals occurred within these cultures. The native cultures of the arctic are based upon the oral tradition without the benefit of a written language until very recent history. The important consequence of this is that much of the cultural heritage and history was lost through forced assimilation and colonizing policies of the new immigrants to this territory. And no small part was played by disease such as influenza. Influenza was responsible for the deaths of a significant percentage of the native population. For example, on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea in the 1830's, there were approximately 10,000 people living at many village sites. By 1880, there were only about 1,000 people remaining. Some people were able to return to the Chukotka Peninsula but many more died of influenza. One could conclude that the effects of that kind of death and loss felt by the survivors were overwhelming. Add to that loss, the cultural devastation and the void left by the fragmented culture and it might be even harder to imagine how any people could have survived intact. When the disaster of Sept 11 occurred, the outpouring of support and resources to help the survivors was impressive and clearly made it possible for them to move forward with their lives. There were no crisis teams or outpouring of support for the survivors in the arctic. Clearly, much was lost. Death and massive cultural loss occurred here, and yet people adapted and survived. Native cultures are alive in North America. The cultures are different than before first contact without question and most certainly still changing and adapting. The

fact that the people of the arctic have suffered great loses, personally and culturally, is well documented. The fact that they have been able to adapt to the changing world is less well documented.

We talk a great deal these days about cultural sensitivity and celebrating diversity. In order to accomplish this lofty goal, education on many levels and in different mediums is required. The brief program: *Like Anybody Else: Alaskan Native Voices on Family Life* is one tool that can assist in this educational process. The focus is upon two native women, one Yupik and the other Inupiat. They offer their personal perspectives on family life in their villages. Particularly important to note, is that while they live in some remote and extreme circumstances, they talk about a variety of familiar and common issues with which individuals and families of many different origins must cope. The program demonstrates nicely that life and culture continues to evolve and thrive among the diverse and resilient people of the arctic. In addition, it contradicts many stereotypes and offers a fresh and different look into the daily lives of Alaskan Natives. The story told in this program is that which can be found in the spectrum of experiences between glorification of the past and the unfortunate contemporary plight of those that suffer from many of society's social ills.

Like Anybody Else: Alaskan Native Voices on Family Life has the potential to be used as a stand-alone program or as supplemental to public school and college/university curriculum. It can help to bridge the gap of cultural misunderstandings, promote more positive cultural perspectives and reduce stereotypical thinking.

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