

Running Head: ALASKAN WOMEN AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION

Out In The Cold:
Alaskan Women's Use Of Supportive Communication
And Support Networks

Dr. Rhonda Sprague

Dr. Elizabeth Fakazis

Dr. Chris Sadler

Curtis A. "Kit" Kiefer

October 2009

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Communication
Division of Communication
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Stevens Point, Wisconsin

Abstract

More than 200,000 American women live under conditions capable of producing extreme stress through cold, darkness, and physical and cultural isolation – in Alaska, America’s “Last Frontier.” Many of these women deal with the stresses of living in Alaska by using supportive communication – a fact which has not been examined in depth prior to this thesis. Using qualitative interview data and a phenomenological approach, this thesis examines the ways Alaskan women use supportive communication, the stressors which spur supportive communication, the channels used for supportive messages, and the characteristics of the messages directed toward certain relational groups. Based on interviews with an extraordinarily broad cross-section of non-native Alaskan women covering many decades and experiential backgrounds, the research identified principal stressors as cold, darkness, physical isolation, cultural isolation, holidays, and the presence of children and other family stresses. Alaskan women derive the most immediate and significant support from face-to-face interactions with immediate family present in Alaska –adults first, then children; short of that, support is supplied by Lower-48 family, Alaskan friends, and finally Lower-48 friends. However, support from these groups is tempered by physical distance and an inability or unwillingness to understand the nature and depth of stressors. Finally, face-to-face communication provides the deepest, richest, and most immediate support; despite technological obstacles and lack of richness, phone calls, e-mails, and letters were still capable of providing

significant support. New media such as texting and social media have made few inroads with respondents.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments 6

Introduction..... 7

Literature Review 21

 Isolation. 19

 Alaska. 21

 Supportive Communication in Alaska. 24

 Research on Alaskan Women 26

 Changes in Supportive Communication. 38

 Summary 39

Method..... 42

 Sample. 43

 Research Design. 44

 Procedure. 45

 Data Analysis..... 46

 Bracketing: Experiences of the Researcher. 47

Results..... 51

 Research Question 1. 51

 Research Question 2 68

 Research Question 3. 86

Discussion..... 96

 Supportive Communication Defined. 99

 Formation of Support Networks. 100

Elasticity/Density/Efficacy of Support Systems..... 101

Sex and Supportive Communication. 103

Source and Type of Support 104

Isolation. 106

Alaska. 108

Discussion Summary: Research Questions Revisited. 109

Limitations of the Research. 111

Directions for Future Research. 112

References..... 114

Appendix 1: Interview Script..... 121

Appendix 2: Respondent Matrix..... 124

Appendix 3: IRB Form. 125

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my mother, Mae Kiefer, for the inspiration. Thanks to my family – Ann, Molly, Andy, and Danny – for their forbearance. Thanks to my professors and fellow students for *their* understanding and forbearance, and for five truly memorable years.

Introduction

According to data from Alaska's Commerce Department (2008), 235,231 women aged 18 and above live in Alaska. Of that number, 166,688 live in the state's two metropolitan areas – the greater Anchorage area (135,493) and the Fairbanks area (31,195) – leaving 74,422 women aged 18 and above living outside of Alaska's metropolitan areas. Approximately 16,700 of that number are Native Alaskan women, meaning that around 58,000 non-Native women are scattered throughout more than 90 percent of the nation's largest state.

A smaller-than-national-average percentage of these women are in traditional husband-wife households. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), Alaska is 50th in the number of households but 47th in the number of single-parent households. Couple that with the Census Bureau's finding that Alaskan men outnumber women 108 to 100, and the fact that Alaska has the nation's highest rate of alcohol abuse (State of Alaska, 2008), and the potential exists for interesting male-female dynamics.

Though outnumbered in their home state, Alaskan women have never been more prominent in the media. Alaskan women were portrayed as strong-willed freethinkers (and a relatively rare breed) in the television series *Northern Exposure* and *Men In Trees*. The vice-presidential candidacy of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin created a new stereotype of the Alaskan woman as a self-reliant “hockey mom” capable of field-dressing a moose (Severson, 2008).

This stereotype is partly backed up with data. In Alaska a higher percentage of women work outside the home compared to other states. Two-thirds

of Alaska women work, compared to 57.5 percent of women nationally, according to the 2000 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). "It has been true for a long time [that a greater percentage of Alaskan women work outside the home]," Neal Fried, economist with the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, told the *Alaska Journal of Commerce* in 2004. "Even in the 1960s, [Alaskan] female participation in the labor force was much above the national average" (Chandler, 2004, p. 16).

Alaskan women played key roles in building the Trans-Alaska oil pipeline in the 1970s (Chandler, 2004). Proportionally more Alaskan women are pilots when compared to women in the "Lower 48," the Alaskan euphemism for the continental United States (King, 2004). Throughout Alaskan history, women have been at the forefront of bush medicine and drives for equal rights for Native Alaskans (Brelsford, 1983).

It is not surprising that Alaskan women have been trailblazers; survival in the state requires everyone to pitch in and do their part. The state is the nation's largest, most sparsely populated, coldest, and most extreme in hours of daylight and darkness. Many Alaskan women have to deal with the isolation of living 100 miles from the nearest grocery store, 200 miles from the nearest hospital, or 500 miles from the nearest Starbucks. Often they are single parents or have husbands employed seasonally and away for months at a time (Chandler, 2004).

Supportive communication via a support network would be a positive way of dealing with Alaska's special stresses. Furthermore, studying the patterns of

supportive communication and the formation of support networks among Alaskan women would aid understanding of how Alaskan women deal with these issues.

Research has not isolated specific evidence of supportive-communication or support-network use among Alaskan women. Research on Alaskan women has followed two tracks: qualitative phenomenological studies of what it means to be an Alaskan woman (Achatz et al., 1997; McPhee, 1976) and studies of how Native Alaskan women react to changes their situation or environment, be that cancer (Colomeda, 1996), depression (Handwerker, 1999), or relocation from a rural environment to Anchorage's urban landscape (Lee, 2003).

There is research on supportive communication in difficult environments like Appalachia (Morris, 1994), rural China (Ren & Du, 2005), and rural North America (Soczka, 2007). The support these networks provide ranges from active recommendations on how to act in stressful situations to passive support mechanisms such as listening.

Burgeoning use of technology-based communication provides another incentive to study supportive communication. The growth of the Internet has enabled many support networks to migrate online (Pierce et al., 2004; Fry, 2006) or move to e-mail (O'Connell & Phye, 2005) from the telephone, the letter, and in-person communications. These technology-based communication media have the potential to be particularly important in mitigating distance factors and other hindrances to the formation of supportive-communication networks in sparsely populated areas like Alaska.

Given the powerful variables Alaskan women must deal with to negotiate their environment – darkness, distance, harsh weather, lack of support services, and traditional roles – there is much to be gained from a study of how and why these women form and use communication networks for support.

Phenomenological studies have traditionally provided rich, nuanced data (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999); therefore, this study will use phenomenology to explore the shared experiences of Alaskan women as they form and use communication networks for support.

In examining Alaskan women's use of supportive communication and formation of support networks, specifically as it relates to the creation of typologies of stressors and support sources and the analysis of channels, this thesis will survey the literature dealing with supportive communication, women's role in same, isolation, the shared experiences of Alaskan women, and technological changes affecting supportive communication; outline the method employed and the data-analysis techniques utilized, and explain the choice of qualitative methods; categorize the data by channel, stressor, and source of support; and draw conclusions based on shared experiences related by respondents.

Literature Review

Support has been recognized as a necessary part of healthy human existence, and has been studied for its impact on individuals at least since 1879, when Cotillion found that marriage enhances health and well-being. This was followed by Durkheim's seminal research on suicide in 1897, where he found fewer suicides among individuals with greater social ties. Support, in a social sense, has been defined as "information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations" (Cobb, 1976, p. 300).

Supportive communication has been analyzed using Symbolic Interaction Theory (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984) and Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). It has also been analyzed for its content and what it says about interpersonal relations. Finally, supportive communication has been defined in terms of control and mastery (Tolsdorf, 1976), self-acceptance (Moss, 1973), and social interaction (Caplan, 1976)

The earliest findings in support-network communication research indicate that support networks require communication to function (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). Support is a communicative act, and supportive communication is a discrete and definable type of communication (Albrecht, Ireby, & Mundy, 1982). This leads directly to Burleson's (2008) definition of supportive communication as "specific lines of communicative behavior enacted by one party with the intent of benefiting or helping another" (p. 386). Albrecht and Adelman (1984) takes more of an uncertainty-reducing view when it defines social support as:

Verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience. (p. 19)

Using this as a jumping-off point, researchers have studied the formation and function of support networks. Lakey and Cohen (2000) finds that stressful events trigger supportive communication, and support fosters the growth of support networks. Support networks, in turn, are conduits for supportive communication (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). That basic finding was later taken in several directions. Sarason et al. (1992) finds that different types of stressful events of different duration produce different types of support and support communication. Hamburg and Killilea (1979) notes that duration and severity increase the chances of a support network forming involving more than one individual and covering more than one incident requiring support.

Weiss (1974) outlines the six key characteristics that support can provide. Not all support systems provide each characteristic, and ones that provide multiple characteristics may not provide sufficient quantities of all characteristics. Also, different individuals may need different quantities of these characteristics to feel supported.

Weiss' six characteristics, as described by Cutrona (1986), are:

- (a) attachment, a sense of emotional closeness and security, usually provided by a spouse or lover;
- (b) social integration, a sense of belonging to a group of people who share common interests and recreational activities, usually obtained from friends;
- (c) reassurance of worth, acknowledgment of one's competence and skill, usually obtained from co-workers;
- (d) reliable alliance, the assurance that one can count on

others for assistance under any circumstances, usually obtained from family members; (e) guidance, advice and information, usually obtained from teachers, mentors, or parent figures; and (f) opportunity for nurturance, a sense of responsibility for the well-being of another, usually obtained from one's children. (p. 351)

Some support systems, especially those in health-care settings or connected with chronic diseases like cancer (Caplan, 1974), can create a sense of permanence in their structure, purpose, membership, communicative styles, and messages (Metts, Geist, & Gray, 1994). Other support systems are more elastic in their formation, membership, lifespan, communicative style, and message. Such networks are said to have less density (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). A support network of mothers of small children may spring up when a mutual friend becomes pregnant with her first child. The network may provide reassurance on body changes and sensations, hints on how to set up a nursery, advice on car seats and pediatricians, and recommendations on breast-feeding. After the child is born the network may go away or evolve into a different sort of support network providing advice on preschool issues and hand-me-down clothes. There are no rules for these networks (Cutrona, 1986).

Several mitigating factors have an influence on successful communication within support networks. A close relationship with the stressor, either family or close friendship, enhances supportive communication but does not necessarily improve the efficacy of that communication (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). Support networks consisting mainly of relatives tend to be higher in attachment, nurturance, and reliable alliance, while support networks consisting of non-relatives are higher in guidance, reassurance of worth and social integration

(Cutrona, 1986). In the case of cancer (Spiegel, 1990) and other chronic illnesses, or specific stress disorders such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Kadushin, 1982), having had the condition can improve the efficacy of the supportive communication.

On the other hand, distance between the stressor and the support network has been negatively associated with efficacy of supportive communication (Waite & Harrison, 1992). Other factors which can hinder supportive communication include depression, standards of comparison, poor social skills, and shyness (Cutrona, 1986).

One of the most significant areas for controversy in the literature is the effect of sex on supportive communication. Tannen (1990) concludes from anecdotal data that women tend to communicate support in terms of emotional support, and use support to pursue goals like “solace” and “escape”; men tend to give practical advice as support, and try to “solve” things. These differences are found in other types of communication, but are more obvious in a support situation, since support communication is given in response to a stress. These findings were replicated in a research setting by Burleson and Gilstrap (2002), though its findings were more equivocal than Tannen’s statements.

Earlier, Waite and Harrison (1992) notes that women report soliciting and receiving support communication more frequently than men, and also have more extensive and readily definable supportive-communication networks. While this does not mean women “need” more supportive communication than men, it does

mean that women are active consumers of such communication (Burlleson & Gilstrap, 2002).

Despite these findings, questions have been raised elsewhere in the literature about how much of the differences in supportive communication can be attributed to sex. While some research shows that women more often use highly person-centered messages, which are effective supportive-communication messages because they have more variance and complexity in their perceptions and intentions, and through a broader set of goals perform more tasks than less person-centered messages (O'Keefe & Delia, 1982; Samter, Burlleson, & Basden-Murphy, 1989), there is also research which shows the use of such messages occurs independent of the sex of the person delivering the message but is based on self-efficacy (Kessler, Folsom, Royall, Forsythe, McEvoy, Holzer, & Woodbury, 1985). However, when it comes to emotional-support messages, women deliver these types of messages more often than men (Akiyama & Elliott, 1996) are more often in a position to deliver these messages than men (George, Carroll, Kersnick, & Calderon, 1998), and therefore may be presumed to be better at delivering messages of emotional support – to have more self-efficacy – than men (Gibbons & Weingart, 2001; Schunk, 1995).

In other research on women performing emotional-support tasks, Clark (1993) finds that women charged with comforting considered themselves to be better at performing the task than men, rated themselves post-hoc as better at performing the task, and overall considered themselves to have greater ability than men to provide emotional support. This research was reinforced by

MacGeorge, Clark, and Gillihan (2002), though it finds that most participants rated themselves high in their ability to deliver emotionally supportive messages.

The real sex-based differences occur in the measurements of willingness to deliver any sort of supportive messages. Men are much more reluctant to deliver supportive messages but rate themselves at least as highly as women in their ability to deliver highly person-centered, emotionally supportive messages. When measuring “strength of pursuit” of emotionally supportive messages, MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson (2005) notes that “women reported greater strength of pursuit than men for the emotion-focused goals of providing emotional support and encouraging a positive perspective. However ... we also found that women indicated greater strength of pursuit for the problem-focused goals ... than did men.” After factoring in self-efficacy, the study finds that the people who most want to communicate supportively are those who are the best at it, regardless of sex. Since women think they are better at supportive communication and communicate supportively more often than men (Goldsmith & Dun, 1997), women are more likely to be better supportive communicators than men. However, the research has set this up as a chicken-and-egg problem with no opportunity for resolution.

In summing up the research on sex differences in social-support situations, Goldsmith and Dun (1997) states:

The profile that emerges from these studies of support provision suggests mixed evidence for the notion that men and women differ in the support they provide to others. There is some evidence that women are more likely than men to give emotional support; however the differences are typically small and inconsistent across studies, perhaps due to the

variability across and within studies in the type of situation, types of relationship, age of provider and receiver, and sex of receiver. Studies that differentiate between denying and legitimating the emotions of a distressed other consistently find women are more likely than men to deny problems and negative emotions ... Conclusions about differences in support provision are further complicated by limitations in the previously reviewed studies. Previous studies have tested only for between-sex differences and have not yet systematically compared the relative frequencies of behavior within-sex. ... Another limitation of previous studies is a result of examining a single situation, asking for assessments across situations, or averaging results obtained from more than one situation ... Finally, nearly all of the previously cited studies are based on self-reports or recalled behavior that may be biased by sex-role stereotypes.

Pulling back from issues of sex and supportive communication, the source and type of support play key roles in the effectiveness of supportive communication. Sources of supportive communication are most often family members and friends (Dunkel-Schetter, Blasband, Feinstein, & Herbert, 1992). However, these groups have been found to be sources of different types of supportive communication, with the effectiveness of that communication based at least in part on receiver expectancy. Receivers expect certain types of supportive communication from certain sources; if the receiver gets the supportive communication he or she wants from the source expected to deliver that type of communication, message efficacy is enhanced; unexpected combinations of message and source can result in decreased message efficacy (Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1992).

The type and source of supportive messages, as Dunkel-Schetter et al. (1992) states, “are important and interacting factors in determining the helpfulness of particular behaviors. It is also clear that the helpfulness of particular sources or providers varies depending on the stressful situation ... even the effectiveness of different informal role relationships may be altered by the nature of the specific situation” (p. 108).

Moving from source of support to the type of message, there is a sharply drawn delineation separating effective types of supportive messages from ineffective types, even in situations that seem to be closely related. For example, Blasband (1990) studied 40 men with AIDS, and Feinstein (1988) studied 20 male and 20 female diabetics, and the two studies came back with diametrically opposed results on the most effective type of supportive communication. Given a typology of emotional, instrumental (defined as material support and active helping behaviors) and informational support, Blasband’s AIDS patients strongly preferred emotional support, while diabetics expressed a strong preference for instrumental support. While there is agreement in the two studies on the most *unhelpful* types of support – minimizing and trivializing behaviors (Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Dunkel-Schetter, 1984) – the fact that there is no agreement on the most helpful types of supportive behaviors hints at the difficulty in creating a one-size-fits-all typology of supportive communication behaviors that can be counted on to provide effective results in a myriad of situations.

Isolation

In the literature there is a lack of consensus on the condition of being isolated – and agreement on only the basics of what constitutes isolation.

Isolation is often equated with loneliness (Chappell & Badger, 1989; Vaux, 1988; Vicernzi & Grabosky, 1987; Weiss, 1973), which Weiss defines as a “separateness from others” (p. 14). Weiss extends this definition to encompass what he calls “unwanted individuation: being separated off from parents and others to fend for oneself, not just in the sense of becoming responsible for oneself but also in the sense of being and developing as a separate self” (p. 15).

Isolation is frequently characterized as being either social or emotional (Mullins, Johnson, & Andersson, 1987; Chappell & Badger, 1989; Vincenzi & Grabosky, 1987; Weiss, 1973), with social isolation being a state of having few social contacts and emotional isolation as an “absence of some particular type of relationship” (Weiss, p. 17). Loneliness is then extrapolated from isolation to be the “felt deprivation” which emerges from the isolation (Vincenzi & Grabosky, 1987, p. 259).

The danger in using the terms “loneliness” and “isolation” interchangeably is that doing so fails to acknowledge the real physical separation that makes true isolation palpable. By equating isolation with “being alone in a crowd” – what Weiss (1973) calls “the form of loneliness associated with the absence of an engaging social network – the ‘loneliness of social isolation’” – researchers come perilously close to creating a too-broad definition where an unconnected divorcee

and a fur trapper living in a cabin 80 miles up the Kuskokwim can coexist uncomfortably under the same definition.

Despite this, the research into social deficits and their application to loneliness has been useful in creating a typology of situations where social-relationship deficits can occur. These deficits have been observed in college students new to a campus (Cutrona, 1982), students who prefer to spend time alone (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980), and students of either gender who fail to spend time with females (Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1983). In addition, loneliness has been negatively associated with having a close best friend (Williams & Solano, 1983), and with a support network that is perceived as being helpful, regardless of its size (Schultz & Saklofske, 1983).

For an individual, feelings of loneliness can appear regardless of social situation based on the characteristics of the individual (Vaux, 1988). Loneliness has been linked to factors such as external control of a situation, social anxiety, and deficits in social skills (Vaux, 1988), though some research condenses these factors down to negative self-perceptions, only slightly aided by actual social-skill deficits (Jones, Freeman, & Goswick, 1981).

The concept of isolation is more appropriately applied to widowed, battered, poor, depressed and elderly women (Geissinger, Lazzari, Porter, & Tungate, 1993). Emotional and social isolation are associated with depression and other personality disorders (Beck & Pearson, 1989; Quevillion & Trenerry, 1983), domestic violence (Feyen, 1989; Fuller, McCarthy, Stoops, Burden, & Gottlieb, 1987; Lewis, 1985; Schillinger, 1988; Tice, 1990). At its most basic, isolation

adds stress to whatever relationships remain (Hart, 1986; Neil & Jones, 1988; Tice, 1990).

Another aspect of isolation is geographical, most often manifested by long distances between people needing services and the services and service providers they need (Tice, 1990). For people dealing with this sort of isolation, the usual response is a “go-it-alone” mentality which may or may not be successful (Tice, 1990).

Alaska

Alaska, because of its physical separation from the rest of the United States and the extreme difficulty in getting there, especially before World War II and the construction of the Alaska Highway, has been the subject of more than its share of rapturous, romantic prose. Even the normally cut-and-dried WPA Writers' Guide series of the 1930s (Colby, 1939) was moved to long-paragraphed extremes when describing Alaska:

The best way to know Alaska is to spend a lifetime there. The next best is to experience the return of the seasons there. The year begins, according to the Tlingit Indian calendar, in the latter part of August, when birds come down from the mountains and animals begin to prepare their winter dens. There may be heat prostrations in Fairbanks, but a few miles eastward along Steese Highway the caribou on Eagle summit sniff at the first flakes of snow and begin to drift down into the valleys. In Bristol Bay, according to the white man's simpler calendar, the first season – fishing time – is over, the midseason – play time – is at its height, and the last season – trapping time – is not yet at hand. Frost comes one morning to the vegetable garden, placer miners work

feverishly to make their winter grubstakes, Matanuska farmers harvest their crops, and giant squash and potatoes are on view at district fairs. September, the Small Moon, begins when fish and berries fail. Then comes the Big Moon, October, when snow creeps down the mountains, fur animals put on thicker coats, and trappers lay out their lines. In November, the Snow Moon, the shallow waters of Bristol Bay freeze, Nome and Barrow are icebound, and planes discard wheels for skis. Soon comes the silence of December, when from the heights above Fairbanks the hunter, eating his midday meal, sees a white plume over the whistle of the Northern Commercial Company and long seconds later hears the thin shriek of noon; when the trapper in his cabin lays a batch of homemade doughnuts on the shelf above the stove and they immediately freeze; when automobile roads are drifted high and the snowplow whirrs along the Alaska Railroad; when dogs mush ahead of the sleds of Eskimo and Athapascan drivers, and planes can land anywhere; when to sweat on a lonely trail is to freeze and die. December is the Mothers' Moon, when man, perpetually born out of season, shivers in his house, but every land and water animal, warm in its mother's womb, begins to grow hair. In January, the Goose Moon, the geese look northward and their mentor the sun actually starts on his return journey, while across the northern sky the aurora borealis marches with banners. In February, the Bear Moon, the sleeping black bear turns over on his other side. March is the Sea Flower Moon, when all things under the sea begin to grow; April, The Moon of Real Flowering when plants on the earth begin to show life. May is the Hatching Moon. June is the Salmon Moon, when Caesar's dancing fish return from thousand-mile journeys to spawn, each in the fresh-water stream of its birth, and Indian women dip spruce branches in the streams and lift them out laden with Alaska caviar. July is the Moon of Birth, not only for animals but for towns –tent cities are born beside a mound of gold-bearing gravel or a platinum mountain, and ghost villages come back to life; prospectors take to the hills, the air is full of the clatter of dredges, the shriek of sawed timber, the putter of fishing boats; a fleet of antiquated oceanliners carrying fishermen anchors in Bristol Bay; harpooners hunt the whale; airplane

motors roar endlessly as all Alaska hurries through the sky; and hordes of “round-trippers” crowd the hotels and buy Haida carvings, Eskimo ivory, Tlingit totem poles, Aleut baskets. Last comes, in the first part of August, the thirteenth month, the Fattening Moon, when animals deposit fat in the banks under their skins and whites and Natives reckon up their silver dollars at the year’s end. (Colby, p. viii)

These were the days when boats up the coast and small planes were the only ways to reach Alaska. Population was sparse; Juneau was the territorial capital in large part because it was the first town on the boat trip up from Seattle where gold could be mined (Colby, p. 152).

After World War II travel to Alaska was somewhat easier – though by no means easy – yet the prose created an image of an untamed land of mystery and savage beauty. Even as late as 1976 the journalist John McPhee wrote:

The central paradox of Alaska is that it is as small as it is large – an immense landscape with so few people in it that language is stretched to call it a frontier, let alone a state ... A sense of the contemporary appearance of Alaska virtually requires inspection, because the civilized imagination cannot cover such quantities of wild land. Imagine, anyway, going from New York to Chicago – or, more accurately, from the one position to the other – in the year 1500. Such journeys, no less wild, are possible, and then some, over mountains, through forests, down the streams of Alaska. (p. 18)

Four years later best-selling author Joe McGinnis (*The Selling Of The President 1968*) succinctly cut to the heart of the Alaskan experience for many of its permanent residents:

And as I looked I tried to imagine all the empty space; all the darkness; all the cold. And tried to imagine the people who would choose to live in such a place. Alaska was, clearly, a land which one would have to choose. Not a place one just happened to stumble across. In this generation, except for the natives ... the adult population of Alaska was comprised almost entirely of people who had decided to leave wherever it was they had been, and whatever it was they had been doing (and, in many cases, whomever it was they had been doing it with), and start over again in a place about which, if they knew anything at all, they knew only that it would be cold and dark and lonely much of the time, and – all of the time – radically different from the place they were leaving behind. (McGinnis, pp. 9-10)

McGinnis, though to the point with this passage, did not resist the temptation to wax rhapsodic about Alaska elsewhere in his book. One of the few publications to resist that temptation, the travelers' guide *The Milepost* (1991), simply says of Alaska, "Alaska is the most sparsely populated state in the Union" (p. 10).

Supportive Communication in Alaska

Research is scanty on supportive communication in Alaska. Native Alaskan women do not differ from the established norm in the ways they use supportive communication to cope with depression (Colomeda, 1996) and chronic illness (Handwerker, 1999). Native women who have relocated to urban areas take a bifurcated approach to supportive communication: They return frequently to their home village and derive support from established friends and family, and they form new support networks among other relocated Native women (Lee,

2003). However, the research does not indicate a greater need for supportive communication among these native populations, nor does it show that there is a greater volume of supportive communication emanating from these communities (Handwerker, 1999; Lee, 2003).

The research from regions that resemble Alaska in their geographic isolation and sense of detachment also indicates no changes in the patterns or frequency of supportive communication. Women in Appalachia (Patrick, Cottrell, & Barnes, 2001) and China (Ren & Du, 2006) and farm women in Wisconsin (Soczka, 2006) rely heavily on family for support, with friends providing a supporting role in the supportive-communication process.

Research on Alaskan Women

Early historical writing on Alaskan women can be read and interpreted as sexist, though some of that is simply a reflection of the fact that so few non-Native women were present in Alaska for much of its early history that stereotypes could easily be created by profiling the few women who were permanent residents of the state. This tendency toward stereotyping led to passages such as this (Hinckley, 1972):

Without the civilizing touch of women to reinforce the work of public-spirited men, the maturation of the Alaskan frontier would have been impossible. Like other earlier frontiers, the far North became the nesting place for fallen doves, shrikes seeking a mate, and officious mother hens. Women were in high demand, and if a maid remained a miss, it was because she preferred it that way. Alaska missionaries, like their Hawaiian brethren, were enjoined to get married before they

entered the field. Hardened, isolated Yukon traders, lonely for the tender touch, wore the badge of “squawman” without shame. (p. 203)

The practice of non-Native men marrying native women, common throughout all Alaska history, was chronicled by Helmericks (1944):

“Yep, they keep on floating down the river. In anything they can git. I’ve even seen them on rafts.”

“Is that so? Women too?” I asked with great interest.

“No. No ladies,” the old-timer admitted with the respect of his kind for the feminine sex. “Aren’t many white ladies in this country, ma’am, once you get away from the town. I’m married to a native woman over here for thirty years myself,” he explained. (Helmericks, p. 21)

Interracial marriage was often performed out of perceived necessity in Alaska, but it was often accompanied by raised eyebrows among people coming to Alaska from Outside. This phenomenon was captured in great detail by Helmericks (1944):

“... we’ve got to come down off our high horse and accept the responsibilities admitting the native to our fellowship as an intellectual and social equal. Otherwise why go to all the work and useless expense of an educational program? It’s either one way or the other, for me. What would happen then to our half-breed or full-breed Indian or Eskimo girl from Alaska is that she might marry.”

“You mean a white, American boy in the States. You would encourage it?”

“Yes indeed. And why not? An educated, lovely person – and pretty good-looking in her own right, with a charm altogether her own – I have an idea that the boys would find her quite attractive.”

“But then, the children!” we cried. “What would become of the children of such a match? How they would suffer! All of them would be outcasts!”

“You’re thinking of the situation fifty years behind the times, perhaps,” Mrs. Young suggested dryly. “You paint too gloomy a picture. She should go east of the Mississippi, of course. There she’ll find lots of company. New York University would be delighted to offer her a professorship in art, perhaps in the specialty of Alaskan art, I might say. You see our Alaskan girl is not in her home environment now. She is a traveled person from a remote, strange land that is of interest to everybody. In her veins run generations of slow, unhurried living – nothing to be ashamed of. She really has something to offer, in her own right, don’t you think? She is our newest American.”

“You are very visionary, Mrs. Young. Do you really think that the crossing of the races is desirable?”

“Well, of course these individuals I speak of are exceptions,” Mrs. Young admitted. “Not even all of us can become professors yet by a long sight. The point is that I believe in the future of Alaska as the Forty-Ninth State of the United States. And when Alaska or any other place produces individuals who can rise above their environments, the rest of us should give them a hand and not try to hold them down. The usual low type of squaw-man situation I’m afraid has given us the wrong impression of the whole problem, and naturally the drunken, irresponsible white man who marries in with primitives and accepts them on their level, is at the same time adding to the degradation and to his own, is not desirable. But you ask about the harm resulting from the crossing of the races. A friend of mine who is a professor of sociology said this to the class, on this subject – these are his words exactly: ‘There is no known degeneration of the races.’ However, I shall say this to myself: ‘If our Alaskan girl could marry an Alaskan boy of her own race whose intellect and whose ambitions were congenial to hers, and they could be offered a guiding and helping hand by someone who would take an interest in helping them in their careers, perhaps that would be the best.’ I think all educated people experience a keen pleasure in seeing fine specimens of distinct racial types.’ (Helmericks, pp. 78-79)

Another long-lived Alaskan stereotype, the prostitute (with a heart of gold, more often than not), was brought to life by Dufresne (1966) :

It seemed that beneath her scanty attire and pink feather boa, the Painted Lady (nobody seemed to know her name) had possessed a heart of gold. She had plied her art in the finest traditions of the ancient calling, and had left behind scores of admiring old timers who muttered in their beards that the camp would never be the same without her. They said she had never been known to roll a drunk, but instead had stashed his gold poke away until he could sober up and resume spending. She had grubstaked many a prospector down on his luck with a “see me later when you strike it rich.” She was ever ready with the voice of experience gained in camps from Dawson and down the Yukon to Nome Beach to advise a client down on his luck, and no lonely man had ever been turned away from her door as long as the Painted Lady was alive.

For the first and only time in the history of Nome, the good people of the town had an opportunity to gratify their curiosity about the “girls” who lived their dark lives behind the mysterious board fence and who seldom ventured out on the streets except to get some fresh air in the wee hours of the morning. Now they emerged as a solid platoon in the full glare of daylight, trudging through the snow to pay final tribute to one of their departed members. Alaska Lizzie, Bighearted Bess, Toodles, Dawson Kitty, Deepwater Dorah, Halibut-Faced Mary, Pile-Driver Kate, the Oregon Mare, Betsy the Bitch and all the other veteran camp followers filed into church and took their sets in the front row.

Married women of the town stared with envy as the “girls” threw back their mink coats which were rewards of the trade in the days of the gold rush ...

There was a brief scene outside the church door before the mink-coated “girls” paraded back to their cribs behind the boardwall. Overcome with gratitude at the words of praise and the town’s turnout for one of their kind, big Deepwater Dorah, with a façade like the superstructure of a battleship, addressed herself to the miners and prospectors gathered around. In a deep, gravelly voice, choked with

emotion, she invited, "Come down and see us, boys. Everything's on the house for the rest of the day." (Dufresne, pp. 92-94)

However, Dufresne (1966) was able to tack a non-traditional coda onto his tale:

Big Hans brought me up to date on what had been going on during my absence in the Yukon Delta, and it was a sad story he told. Frenchy Joe, no friend, had started it all by marrying Sourdough Gertie and taking her out to live in his cabin on the Kougarok. Right after that, Charlie the Bear made off with Halibut-Face Mary. A stinker named Misery Chris eloped with Toodles, and the King of Denmark stood up before the preacher with Deepwater Dorah. There were more marriages in the offing. The camp had shrunk too small to support a red-light district and the ladies were up for grabs. Big Hans gave me the shocking news and spelled out the meaning.

"Son, any time the girls begin comin' out of the cribs an' living private, the camp is goin' to hell!"

That winter the Nome gossips had so many true stories going they couldn't make up any better lies. The camp was split right down the middle of Front Street on whether to invite the newly married "girls" into their social gatherings, or hold their noses in the air. The fact of history is that in almost every case the old dance-hall habitués became the strictest sort of wives. They didn't play around, nor allow their spouses to stray, a few bore children in their late years, and in time were accepted and their primrose past forgotten. (Dufresne, pp. 155-56)

Helmericks (1944) also provided an insightful analysis of other stereotypical Alaskan women at the end of World War II:

There were a few married women, probably no single women, on the boat, and I realized suddenly one day that there were no tourists among them. We were soon to become used to the inequalities in the population, and would almost regard it as in the normal sphere of things that the proportion of white males over twenty-one to white females of

the same age group should be so different from the proportion in any other place we had seen. (Helmericks, pp. 4-5)

Most of the newcomers, or cheechakos, came to Anchorage to make money and get out as soon as possible. Some were tough customers, the fly-by-night realtors not the least among them. Twice a month, when pay day rolled around at the fort, certain well-dressed, prosperous-looking strangers suddenly appeared in the streets. These were the professional gamblers from Seattle, or Kodiak. Certain women who stepped from planes always had accommodations waiting for them although the wives of the town had no suitable place to stay. This created quite a disturbance among the wives, who are sometimes forced to put up signs by their front doors: "Private Home." Vice was well organized from Seattle, two thousand miles away.

Grade school and high school were overcrowded and there was a rise in delinquency. The muddy streets thronged with strangers, few of whom ever got much acquainted with each other. Many were burdened with little children and were lonely and homesick. Some were Army wives in slacks and colored sandals, wishing, no doubt, that Anchorage was Atlantic City. (Helmericks, p. 7)

Moving beyond the stereotypes, current qualitative research on Alaskan women indicates non-Native women often have a sort of "first-in" status; for instance, they are the first white woman in a village (Kollin, 1997), the first woman to fly a plane (King, 2004; Dordan, 1994), the first woman to serve in the legislature (State of Alaska, 2008), the first woman to work as a welder on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline (Chandler, 2004), and so forth. This "first-in" mentality has even been transmuted to Native women, so that the first Native woman bush pilot, the first Native woman to serve in the territorial legislature, and the first Native woman bush doctor (Oleksa et al., 1991) are all singled out for their accomplishments.

There is historical precedent for this. Colby's WPA treatise on Alaska (1939) gives scant coverage to Alaskan but includes this passage on an Alaskan pioneer woman, the first Presbyterian missionary in southeastern Alaska:

Wrangell Tlingits were taught to use single-family dwellings by Mrs. Amanda McFarland, pioneer of Presbyterianism in Alaska. Arriving there in 1877, she found herself the only white women with "a few converted but morally uninstructed Indians and a great many heathen about her," and set up to draw up regulations for the community life, to the great annoyance of Chief Shakes. (Colby, p. 138)

About the same time, the travel-writer-soon-to-be-war-correspondent Ernie Pyle (1939) contributed two profiles of pioneer Alaskan women, both strong phenomenological studies carrying an underlying "first-in" theme:

I was the first man to be shaved in the city of Platinum by Alaska's famous lady barber. Her name was Alice Forsgren. She had just thrown up the sponge in Bethel, where she first won fame, and migrated to fresher fields ... Her first customers were two prospectors who paid her five dollars each for a shave, just as a stunt. Things went pretty well for a while, and then I guess the novelty of having a lady barber wore off ... Then Alice's sister and her husband moved to Platinum and started a restaurant. The sister sent word to Alice to come down, so Alice packed her clippers and hair lotion and hopped the first plane. In addition to barbering, she baked pies and stuff for her sister's lunchroom, and did washing and ironing which they took in from the citizens. (Pyle, pp. 186-87)

Pyle (1939) devotes his second profile to a family of female fur trappers:

I said to Mrs. Berglund, “You speak so often of the cabin up there as your real home. Do you expect to stay there forever?”

“No,” she said, “we’ll stay till the price of furs or the run of pelts drops so that we can’t break even. Then we’ll come out. I expect we’ll live on the south coast somewhere. But we’ll never leave Alaska. We’ve been here too long. Sometimes I like it up there, and sometimes I feel I can’t bear it another minute.”

Living in the arctic isn’t any bed of feather mattresses, no matter what some people say. In summer the mosquitoes buzz in poisonous, tormenting clouds. The Berglund women said that sometimes they were so thick you couldn’t see to build a campfire, and that you could run your cupped hand along the side of your face and come away with hundreds of them in your fist. In the fall, when the mosquitoes die, the gnats come to life. Mrs. Berglund said they are worse than mosquitoes – they get in your eyes, and up your nose, they burrow in your hair, they make life a misery. And when the gnats go, then comes the winter.

You may read in the booklets that the winters in Alaska aren’t so bad because they’re dry. But just talk to some of the people who have been through them. At sixty below, your fingers freeze while you’re unhitching a dog. You must move with the caution of a man with a bad heart; to breathe hard is to frost your lungs. To get your feet wet is to lose your feet. To touch a piece of metal is worse than a bad burn. The Berglund women have seen it seventy-eight below, and they don’t know how much more, for that was the last mark before the mercury went down into the bulb. And don’t think you don’t feel the cold, either. “You shiver,” said Evelyn, who was born into it, “until you just can’t shiver any more.” (Pyle, pp. 178-79)

A similar story of “first-in-ness,” and the isolation that can go along with it, was described by Helmericks (1944):

The Hollands were, as we might have guessed, Indian Service people. “If you had only stopped over to see us,” Mrs. Holland told me.

“You know our natives told us there were a couple of white men camping over on the island, but a white woman – I never dreamed!”

“If we had had any idea there were white people at Minto Village, we certainly would have stopped,” I said. “You must have a very wonderful and unusual life there. How long have you been in the Indian service?”

“Five years. Yes, we think we have a rather nice life. When we first took Minto Village it had the reputation of being one of the very worst posts in Alaska. Nobody wanted it, I guess. The Indians were terrible. Oh, we haven’t done all there is to do, as it’s something you can only live day by day, and it takes infinite patience, of course, but we think we have helped them some. Other things going on in this world don’t seem to mean a great deal, after getting into this work.

“When we go Outside on furlough, people try so hard to show me a good time for what I’ve missed, staying here, and they feel so sorry for me. We show them pictures of our lives here, but they still can’t understand why we should want to live here. They think it’s just ice and snow and loneliness. But as for me, I couldn’t live away from Alaska again. When I go Outside, *that’s* when I’m lonely, among people I don’t have anything in common with any more. I’m lonely then to get back to this big, beautiful, free country. You’re your own boss here. You don’t have to mark time for anybody. It seems strange that some people do, doesn’t it? Just look at it – and she indicated with a sweep of the hand – “where any place in this world today could you find a day more perfect than this?” (p. 45)

Helmericks (1944) also detailed the dark side of “first-in-ness” and the dangers of being too isolated in Alaska, too much cut off from a personal definition of civilization:

She told me a weird story about the teacher who had been here before she and Joe had come to this post; the scandal of their predecessor, who had been removed and transferred, was known far and wide, as such things are. This predecessor was in the difficult position of

being a stubborn, mentally set, older single woman. These instances of single women do occur at posts in the field of Indian Service, but as a rule are not deemed desirable. Too many things can happen to a person alone. They are usually small things, but they are big things, too – a breakdown in the electric plant the lack of a proper draft in the kitchen stove pipe, an overly sensitive nature coming from too much battling of the world alone. In this case, it was the latter situation. Lying in bed at night in the silence of sixty below or higher temperatures listening to the flopping and banging of the shutter in the wind, the distraught mind of the lonely, forty-year-old woman brooded over the small happenings of the day, magnifying them. The children in school simply would not behave. She believed that the scattered sourdoughs and trappers of the outlying vicinity were talking about her, because when they came into town they held long, whispered conversations with the trader. She did not get along with the trader, who was married himself to the ugliest native woman in the village. She never felt close to the secretive Indians, possibly because she lacked the prestige of having a husband. She left that even the children laughed at her about that. When the wind would blow and the bang the shutters she began to imagine that it was the children outside her bedroom at night tapping on her window and playing pranks on her.

This teacher presently made that fatal mistake which spells the end to the Indian Service teacher when, along with the growing peculiarities, she commenced to seize the opportunity and temptation to impart some of her own religion to the children at school. As an organized missionary group, in this case Catholic, naturally had this village covered within their territory, the interference caused confusion, and it was not many months before this teacher was removed. Before her removal her growing lack of self-control had long placed her in the position for the ignorant to tease. She correctly realized that the whole countryside were making fun of her, something revolving around the subject of her being an “old maid.” She became obsessed with the insane idea of proving the fact of her virginity to the sourdoughs and she managed to contrive and secure, apparently from a visiting doctor of

some sort at one of the river towns, a certificate of virginity, which, when authorities came to remove her, was nailed up on the bulletin board in the classroom for adults and children to see, despite the fact that few could have read it or cared a great deal in all probability. No one knew what eventually became of her. (pp. 105-06).

It can be hard, in light of all these stories, to remember that the concept of “first-in-ness,” like so many other things associated with Alaska, is fairly recent in origin, as McGinnis pointed out in his book *Going To Extremes* (1980):

As one who came from a section of the Northeast that was steeped in three hundred years of American history, it was a shock for me to realize how close to its roots, to its origin, Anchorage was. For example: *the first white woman ever to have lived in Anchorage was still alive*. Nellie Brown. Living in a nursing home up in Palmer. Pretty far gone now, and deeply into the booze, so one would not gain much from talking to her, but she was the equivalent – chronologically, at least – of a Pilgrim who had reached the New World aboard the Mayflower. (p. 38)

Through the 1950s and ‘60s women in Alaska often came to the state with their husbands, who themselves came to the state most often by conscious choice or through a military transfer. The number of Alaskan-born non-Native women was relatively small during that time. The discovery of oil on Alaska’s North Slope in the 1970s, changes in American society which gave women a greater sense of independence, and a growing population in the wake of Alaska’s statehood in 1959 changed this dynamic somewhat (Jones et al., 1977). There were more non-Native women born and living in the state, but the population of Alaskan women was growing as much from without as within (Jones et al., 1977).

This immigration to Alaska – and the fact that it was a purposeful immigration to Alaska, that Alaska was not just a place that one, in McGinnis’ words, would “just stumble upon” (McGinnis, 1980, p. 9) – fostered a new appreciation for the idea of “first-in-ness,” a new willingness to be isolated. This philosophy was powerfully declared by Meader (1964):

During our “crisis” years when my wife and I were deciding to become wilderness residents, we agreed that only certain guarantee of freedom and independence (without which no genuine creative exploration of our wild origins could succeed) was isolation in a true wilderness. Without isolation we knew we would be forced into a painfully familiar negative posturing that has proved so fatally abortive to cultural pioneering in the past. Moreover, we realized even then that without commitment to the necessities of life we could hardly evolve a life in the wild that had integrity. (p. 10)

Finally, by 1976, McPhee was able to lay out an unabashed celebration of willing isolation, the apotheosis of “first-in-ness,” in his phenomenological account of the recollections of an Alaskan-born white woman in the Alaskan bush:

“In Edmonton, every place I went to I could see nothing but civilization. I never felt I could ever get out. I wanted to see something with no civilization in it. I wanted to see even two or three miles of just nothing. I missed this very much. In a big city, I can’t find my way out of a paper bag. I was scared to death of the traffic. I was in many ways unhappy. One day, I thought, I know what I want to do – I want to go live in the woods. I left the next day for Alaska.” (McPhee, p. 185)

As Alaska's population has grown and become established, more non-Native women have been born and raised in Alaska, and remain there; however, Alaska still has one of the nation's highest immigration rates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Despite a growing population, Alaska still has far fewer residents per square mile than any other state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Its largest city, Anchorage, has slightly more than 260,000 residents. The metro area of the next-largest city, Fairbanks, has 82,000 residents. More than half of Alaska's population lives in these two cities, with the remaining 330,000 scattered over more than 570,000 square miles (State of Alaska, 2008).

Non-Native Alaskans are still a novelty in many Native Alaskan villages, and the prevailing non-Native Alaskan culture still values independence, brute strength and manual dexterity over intellectual achievement and emotional competence (Kleinfeld & Kleinfeld, 2004). Complicating this situation for non-Native Alaskan women, more than half the state geographically does not see the sun for weeks during the winter, there are more single-parent households than the national average, and Alaskan men are more likely than the average American man to work at jobs that keep them away from home for weeks or months at a time (Chandler, 2004).

Changes in Supportive Communication

Women's experiences in Alaska have not changed as dramatically, particularly over the last decade, as the channels which conduct supportive

communication. Supportive communication is increasingly being conducted using new media forms. Cell phones, text messages, e-mail, blogs, and other forms of electronic media are being used to provide support (Van Lear et al., 2005).

Electronic communication helps mitigate but does not eliminate physical-distance issues (Ledbetter, 2008). Since none of these methods have been shown to be as effective as face-to-face communication in providing support (Ledbetter, 2008), they cannot be considered a complete substitute for face-to-face communication. However, they can be an improved means of providing support in areas – like Alaska – where physical separation is a significant obstacle.

Summary

Supportive communication is provided and support networks form in reaction to stress. While the research on the relationship between sex and supportive communication is far from conclusive, it does indicate that women have a strong predilection to use supportive communication, and are quite proficient at using supportive communication. There is also a paucity of research geared toward developing a typology of stressors that encourage supportive communication as a response.

Short of such a typology, it is apparent from the literature that isolation is one specific stressor that often prompts supportive communication in response. Isolation is experienced by many women in rural areas, and manifests itself in a myriad of ways, including abuse and depression – retreating further into a self-

imposed shell of isolation. This sort of response casts isolation as both an agent of stress and a response to stress.

There is overwhelming evidence from the literature that Alaska, because of the distance between even the smallest towns as well as the state's distance from the rest of the Lower 48, engenders and encourages isolation. Feelings of isolation can also be intensified by physical factors such as cold and darkness, and because of societal factors such as a higher percentage of single mothers and a higher percentage of husbands who are away from their families for long periods. Given those factors, RQ1 asks:

RQ1: What are the circumstances or stressors that lead to supportive communication among Alaskan women?

Women deliver emotional-support messages more often than men (Akiyama & Elliott, 1996) are more often in a position to deliver these messages than men (George, Carroll, Kersnick, & Calderon, 1998), and may be better at delivering messages of emotional support than men (Gibbons & Weingart, 2001; Schunk, 1995). Furthermore, there would appear to be a clear-cut need for emotional-support messages in Alaska based on isolation, darkness, extreme climatic conditions, a premium placed on physical labor, and conservative societal norms – all factors encouraging supportive communication in locales outside of Alaska. However, the fact that “first-in-ness” is still present in Alaska and is often exacerbated by self-imposed isolation may create a higher threshold of efficacy for emotional-support messages directed toward Alaskan women. As suggested

by research on battered women in Appalachia (Tice, 1990), if someone is in the Alaskan bush of their own accord but in need of emotional support, it is conceivable that it would take a stronger—or that very least, a different – message to provide that level of support than it would for someone with easy access to support services. Given that, RQ2 asks:

RQ2: What are the characteristics of effective emotional-support messages directed at Alaskan women?

The literature on the culture of Alaska discriminates between those living in Alaska, whether “cheechakos” (white immigrants) or Native Alaskans, and those living Outside. The literature further postulates a difference in understanding what it takes to live in Alaska between Alaskans and those Outside. RQ3 builds on that by asking:

RQ3: Is there a difference in effectiveness of the supportive communication delivered by Alaskans and those living in the Lower 48?

If there is a difference in the effectiveness of supportive communication delivered by Alaskan friends and family and friends and family living in the Lower 48, then the follow-up question must be:

RQ3a: How do the characteristics of supportive communication differ between Alaskans and those living in the Lower 48?

Finally, supportive communication is increasingly being conducted using new media forms, such as cell phones, text messages, e-mail, blogs, and other forms of electronic media (Van Lear et al., 2005). Electronic communication helps mitigate but does not eliminate physical-distance issues (Ledbetter, 2008). They can be an improved means of providing support in areas, like Alaska, where physical separation and other natural conditions erect barriers to other types of communication. Given that, and given the fact that Alaskan women have used various forms of communication, from oral to texting, RQ4 asks:

RQ4: How does channel selection affect the efficacy of supportive communication among Alaskan women?

Method

Because this study is designed to gain insight into the shared experiences of Alaskan women as they form support networks and use supportive communication, a phenomenological approach was taken. Creswell (2007) outlined a model approach to qualitative phenomenological research, based on the approach compiled by Moustakas (1994). The Creswell approach uses these steps:

- First describe personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. The researcher begins with a full description of his or her own experience of the phenomenon. This is an attempt to set aside the researcher's personal experience (which cannot be done entirely) so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study.
- Develop a list of significant statements. The researcher then finds statements ... about how individuals are experiencing the topic, lists these significant statements ... and treats each statement of equal worth, and works to develop a list of nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statements.
- Take the significant statements and then group them into larger units of information, called "meeting units" or themes.
- Write a description of "what" the participants in the study experience with the phenomenon. This is called a "textural description" of the experience – what happened – and includes verbatim examples.
- Next write a description of "how" the experience happened. This is called "structural description," and the inquirer reflects on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced.
- Finally, write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions. This passage is the "essence" of the experience and represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study. It is typically a long paragraph that tells the reader "what" the participants

experienced with the phenomenon and “how” they experienced (i.e., the context). (p. 159)

Sample

A purposeful cross-sectional sample of Alaskan women was used. There was no technological prerequisite for participants; the channel of communication used, though it can have a significant impact on support-network formation and perpetuation, cannot be confused with the network itself. The only prerequisite for participation was residence in Alaska at some time during the participant’s adult life. The guidelines set out by Creswell (2007) recommend interviewing between five and 25 subjects.

Twelve people were interviewed specifically for this project; in addition, one transcription of a seven-year-old interview was employed as reinforcement. Interviews ranged from 15 to 75 minutes and yielded 64 pages of material for coding.

Interviewees ranged in age from 24 to 83. Length of time spent in Alaska ranged from eight months to more than 50 years; correspondingly, respondents first came to Alaska in a range from more than 50 years ago to 2006. Geographic and demographic coordinates ranged from Anchorage, Alaska’s largest city, to bush villages with 100 residents, and from south Alaska to areas north of Fairbanks (but south of Point Barrow in the extreme north). Three were married when they moved to Alaska and remained married; three divorced after they left Alaska; three were single when they moved to Alaska and married there, or met their husband there; the remaining four were single when they came to Alaska,

and single when they left. A summary of ages and experiences and a key to pseudonyms can be found in Appendix 2.

As the above comments indicate and Appendix 2 delineates, survey respondents displayed tremendous variations in demographics and Alaskan experiences. Some respondents lived only in Anchorage or Fairbanks and rarely if ever ventured into the country beyond. Some lived in the bush and rarely made it to cities, or even large towns. Some stayed less than a year; some have stayed the rest of their lives. Some Alaskan sojourns began half a century ago; some began mid-decade. The experiential panoply makes the commonality of experiences and responses to those experiences especially remarkable.

Research Design

As Creswell noted in his approach to phenomenological research (2007), the researcher's past knowledge and experience with the subject must be transcended in order to create valid research. The researcher grew up in Alaska; his mother had a singular opinion on life in Alaska. He has friends in Alaska, and friends who have recently returned from Alaska. They have strong opinions on Alaska and women's roles in Alaskan society. These feelings and experiences will be explained at length in a subsequent section.

The researcher has set aside these beliefs, feelings and perceptions in order to be open and faithful to the phenomenon and truly reflect the full spectrum of the participants' experiences, as stipulated by Colaizzi (1978). However, the

researcher's experience, combined with his training, enables him to ask appropriate questions and probe purposefully.

Procedure

Women meeting the standard for inclusion were approached and asked to participate. Because of the researcher's distance from the subjects, collecting a suitable pool of possible participants was done via the "snowball" method described by Miles and Huberman (1994); that is, individuals meeting the criterion were asked if they know any other individuals meeting the criterion, who were asked if they know any other individuals meeting the criterion, and so forth.

Research was conducted in person and via phone interviews. While Stewart and Williams (2005) has noted some degradation in data when using methods other than face-to-face, one of the characteristics of the population being studied works against the researcher: The women under study simply live too far apart to make totally face-to-face research possible.

Phone and in-person interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and downloaded to a computer for transcription and analysis.

Recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's (1978) method of analyzing transcripts for phenomenological study was employed. Transcripts were read several times to get a feeling for the material. Key phrases, sentences or words were identified and meanings derived. The meanings were clustered into themes, and finally the themes and descriptions were presented as a full-spectrum description of the phenomenon.

Verification, validation, and validity were applied to the transcripts. The standard for validity requires thorough literature searches, adherence to the phenomenological method, bracketing, taking accurate field notes, sampling an appropriate population, and sampling until results take on sufficient sameness to suggest that saturation has occurred (Meadows & Morse, 2001). Validation was accomplished by multiple data-collection methods, in this case e-mail dialogues and interviews. Validity is based on external reviews and trustworthiness (Kearney, 2001).

Themes and meanings were not determined prior to analysis, but instead were allowed to emerge from the interview-and-analysis process. While this takes more of a grounded approach to the data, it is consistent with other work in this field (Soczka, 2006). It also minimizes researcher bias – which may not be a detriment to the qualitative-research process but does need to be accounted for.

The coding method used to achieve this involved color-coding the transcripts on the computer using the highlighting function of Microsoft Word. The number of colors matched the number of themes derived from multiple readings of the transcripts. The color-coded excerpts were then loaded into a

matrix in Microsoft Excel, with the name of the individual providing the excerpt running horizontally and themes running vertically.

Themes and clusters of themes began to emerge once the excerpts were placed into the matrix. At this point the larger matrix was funneled into a smaller matrix of themes and meanings. This matrix formed the basis for the results. This model is similar to the approach used by Miles and Haberman (1984).

Bracketing: Experiences of the Researcher

I moved to Alaska when I was six months old, and lived there until I was seven. My parents had lived in Alaska previously. My father moved to Anchorage, Alaska, in 1952 and sent for my mother shortly thereafter. They lived in Alaska from 1952 until 1955, when they moved to Hawaii for a year. In 1956 they moved back to Anchorage, where my brother was born. They moved to Wausau, Wis., in 1958 for my birth, then headed back to Alaska – first Anchorage, and then Fairbanks, where we lived until we moved back to Wisconsin.

Unlike most people who moved to Alaska in the 1950s, my father was neither motivated by a get-rich-quick reverie nor was he military personnel stationed in Alaska. My father sold cars. Selling cars in Alaska in the 1950s was a singularly difficult trade. The only way cars could be brought to Alaska was by boat or by being driven to Alaska from some place in the Lower 48. At least once a year my father and the other car salesmen would fly to Detroit and drive a caravan of new models through Canada and up the Alaska Highway – at that time

less than 10 percent paved, and the remainder gravel – to Alaska.

Beyond that, car salesmen had to deal with cars that would not start in minus-30 temperatures and customers who would not buy under the same circumstances. Cars sitting on lots would develop “square wheels”: The air pressure would lessen because of the cold, the remaining air would migrate to the top of the tire, and the bottom of the tire would flatten and freeze. Until the tires warmed up and the pressure equalized the cars would drive with an unappealing “thunk-thunk” sound – presuming they started. Engine-block heaters were standard equipment in Alaska.

As a family we drive up and down the Alaska Highway seven times. We drove into Snag, Yukon Territory, at that time acclaimed to be the coldest place in North America, when it was 67 below zero. My father drove on winding mountain roads with brake fluid and steering fluid congealed into Jell-O because of the cold. We spent a week stranded northwest of Whitehorse in a small trailer with a burned-out wheel bearing, waiting for the replacement to be shipped up, trucked out, and mounted. As children, we went trick-or-treating in full winter regalia because it was 10 below that night. We went to school in the dark and came home in the dark. We went out for noon recess every day until it got below 30 below zero; only then did we stay indoors. We swatted mosquitoes in the summer, stayed up all night because of the all-day daylight, and chased fly balls at the local baseball park hit by the likes of Baseball Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson, who as a college ballplayer came up to Alaska for the summer and played for the local Fairbanks team, the Alaska Goldpanners. My classmates were mostly

servicemen's children, with a few Native Alaskans mixed in.

As a child growing up in Alaska, I never thought twice about where I was living compared to anyplace else – though we saw plenty of other places in our summertime travels. It was simply where we lived. Only after I married and traveled back to Fairbanks with my wife did I realize that if Fairbanks was not indeed the end of civilization, the end of civilization could be seen from there.

I considered my parents to be pioneers, and my mother to be a pioneer woman of the first rank. My mother's comments on being a woman and flying to Alaska by herself in the early 1950s cement her status for me. The Alaskan women I remember were an interesting lot. There were several European women who had married servicemen stationed in postwar Europe; they ran shrieking into the hallway of our apartment building the day their champion, President Kennedy, was assassinated. There were women of breeding, from New York and the deep South, who had followed their husbands to improbable places and tried desperately to recreate a piece of the old gentility in frontier Alaska. Some of them drank. There were servicemen's wives bewildered by a place so cold, dark, and alien, and servicemen's wives who took it in stride. There were Cub Scout den mothers, like Cub Scout den mothers everywhere else. There were housewives who wore pearls in the house and fur parkas and mukluks when they went out. Not all of them were pioneers. Not all of them loved Alaska. Not all of them were in Alaska by choice. But for the ones that were – the women that were – Alaska was the best place on earth and Alaskan women made the best and truest friends.

My mother certainly felt that way. From the time we left Alaska in 1967 to her death in 2002, my mother kept in contact with her Alaskan friends, even after friends from other times and places had fallen off and away. She characterized her relationships with her Alaskan friends as close – close in a way no relationships with family outside her immediate family had ever been. After her death, I picked up some of the correspondence with her Alaskan friends – correspondence which continues to this day.

Furthermore, my brother-in-law spent two multi-year stints in Alaska as an engineer connected to the oil industry. My family and I have visited my brother-in-law and his family in Alaska – in the summertime. I have also visited other Alaskan friends – my friends and friends of my family.

I have other friends of both genders who have lived in various places and circumstances around Alaska. Their experiences helped shape the idea for this research.

Despite not having lived there for more than 40 years, I consider myself an Alaskan.

Results

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked about the different types of stressors or situations which spur supportive communication. These can be roughly categorized as stressors which are unique to Alaska and stressors which are not unique to Alaska, though that is an artificial distinction. Cold, darkness and extreme physical separation are not unique to Alaska; even the combination of these is not unique to Alaska.

A more reasonable division of stressors are physical characteristics – cold, extreme physical separation, darkness – and non-physical characteristics or stressors – children, holidays, and cultural isolation. These stressors are summarized in Table 1.

Physical Isolation

Most, but not all, respondents said they experienced feelings of isolation living in Alaska. Even women who lived in Anchorage, the most metropolitan and cosmopolitan area in Alaska, experienced strong feelings of isolation – even when they were regularly interacting with other people, through a job or other social network. Isolation was not only geographical but personal, tied to the Alaskan ethos of self-reliance.

Women who said they did not feel isolated themselves said they saw it in other Alaskan women.

Physical isolation in Alaska takes two forms: Being isolated from family

Table 1: Selected Examples of Significant Statements, Formulated Meanings, and Themes Common to Alaskan Women using Support Networks, in Regard to Stressors		
Theme	Formulated Meaning	Significant Statement
Physical isolation	Physical isolation is one of the chief sources of stress for Alaskan women. Isolation can be characterized one of two ways: As isolation from the Lower 48, primarily from friends and family in the lower 48 -- which encourages feelings of isolation even in cities and situations lacking physical isolation -- and true physical isolation, either geographical or cultural.	He'd be gone for anywhere from three weeks to two months at a stretch. I was newly married and he left right away, and it was so hard to interact with anyone else. It was cold and snowy and I was stuck in the house. Oh my gosh, that made it difficult. Some days I felt like I didn't want to get out of bed, didn't want to do anything. I called home, I called my friends. I needed to talk to someone; I needed to talk with someone back home. And it was not -- it was just not good enough. I needed more. It was hard.
Cultural isolation	Some Alaskan women have difficulty handling a new culture -- either a Native Alaskan culture or simply the prevailing norms of non-Native Alaska.	While I loved the culture [it] was also a challenge ... I didn't speak the language, and I had to teach children who spoke the language, and that was definitely a challenge.
Children	Raising small children in Alaska is a major cause of stress. Combating the cold and darkness with them is a problem. Parents can rarely take their small children out of the house in the winter out of fear of frostbite and generalized depression. Lack of daylight can exacerbate a "cabin fever" feeling.	When we were raising children and you're talking about a distance from Illinois to Alaska, they're away from their grandparents, their aunts and uncles, you know. It's a challenge to be on your own up here with small children.
Darkness	Darkness is not as dangerous per se as cold, but it still requires special types of supportive messages aimed at breaking down resistance to going out in the dark. The relentless nature of cold and darkness has a wearing effect when combined with physical isolation.	I'd go to work in the dark; I'd come home in the dark. Unless I took myself out physically I never saw daylight. That was a little troubling to me.
Cold	Cold is an interesting stressor because it is physically dangerous to go outside in the cold. Supportive messages are designed to break down resistance to going outside, but must be positioned in such a way as to not make going outside dangerous.	You were housebound so much of the year, and I think it just got to you after a while ... There were stretches where it was three weeks of 35 below for a high ... One day in May when Dennis called from work and asked me if I wanted to move to Seattle I was delirious.
Holidays	Holidays are a stressful time even under normal circumstances. In Alaska holiday stress is exacerbated by cold, darkness, compromised travel schedules, and separation from Lower-48 family.	Always Christmas every year was a difficult time. Seemed like every year we'd be getting ready to leave and a big storm would blow in and we couldn't get out. We'd miss all the commercial flights, and the airlines -- the commercial airlines -- didn't seem to understand ... One of my friends needed to come home so badly, and her flights were just not working out, she couldn't get out. I'd tell her, "Listen: In the worst case we'll stay together. We'll keep Christmas together." And it all worked out okay.

and friends in the Lower 48 (“being a long ways from home”), and being isolated from even other Alaskans (“being a long ways from everyone and everything”).

As an example of the first form of isolation, “Katherine,” who spent two periods of two-plus years living in Anchorage, said:

I do think sometimes I felt isolated when [my husband] worked the North Slope many times, and I did feel that feeling, that single-mom thing. So I felt the isolation of the single-mom thing as well as taking care of everything else. That’s what you do up there – you take care of yourself. Everyone does their own snow shoveling, for instance. It’s not like the people, the neighbors or whatever, come over and say, “Can we shovel out your driveway?” That’s Alaska. Everybody does their part. Sometimes I felt like, geez, I felt like I could be so isolated – no family, yes friends, but they’re all busy and don’t have time.

This was echoed by “Joyce,” whose time in Alaska was spent in Anchorage:

Well, my husband traveled a lot. He was a pharmaceutical salesman, and he traveled all over Alaska, the southeast, Fairbanks, Homer. He would be gone, uh, sometimes five days, sometimes into the second week. I didn’t mind driving in the weather ... I was just alone, you know. I didn’t want to go to Alaska in the first place. We got transferred from Olympia to Anchorage, and my husband wanted to go, wanted to see Alaska. I did everything I could to say. “Let’s not go,” but it didn’t help.

Respondents said that communication with friends was one of the few things that could ease the feelings of isolation. As “Katherine” said:

When we’d talk we would be planning what we would do next together,

dealing with the seasons, the weather, trying to support each other in remaining active. We were all active people but we had to encourage each other. We would say to each other, “You need to go out on a hike,” so you don’t get in that gunk, that funk of yecch. In conversations you would sort of support each other, go, “Hey, we haven’t done that for a while,” and we would do that and take it from there.

At the same time, certain types of communication with friends and family were encumbered by the physical isolation. People who valued face-to-face interaction with friends and family as a source of support found access to that type of interaction severely curtailed, as “Karlene” explained:

If I wanted to visit my best friend, which I did pretty regularly when I lived in the Lower 48, it, you know, at that time you could buy a \$200 round-trip plane ticket, so I could see her fairly often, and I knew at this point I would be seeing her maybe once a year, if I was lucky. So I knew I was going to be giving up the regular interaction – you know, the face-to-face – which – uh, that’s a hard thing. [laughs] It was really hard.

The other type of isolation, being a long ways from anyone and anything, was described by “Ellyn,” who formerly worked for the Bureau of Land Management. “I lived in a remote area with no roads,” she said. “You had to fly in by plane, so your accessibility to civilization was limited.”

Her experience was echoed by “Shannon,” a 30-year-old former bush teacher:

Where I lived was a fly-in village, and often we were under severe constraints. If the weather was bad you couldn’t get mail, you couldn’t get groceries, and if you were trying to get somewhere you had to wait

for the weather to clear, and that could be a week, could be longer ... I guess that living in such a remote village, such a remote area, I found I had to find an inner strength I went back for a second year, and I probably wouldn't have if I didn't have that strength. You learned quickly, I guess, how to make do under some difficult circumstances. Living in a fly-in village, you didn't have certain things, like access to a lot of different groceries or supplies. It taught you how to be creative, I guess, with what you had, and grateful for what you had. We were fortunate we were teachers; we lived in special teacher housing with things like running water and heat. We had all those things, and knowing that the students in the village may or may not have had those things made us realize how much we had, and how grateful we were for those things. And when we moved down to the Lower 48 and were able to enjoy these things every day, every day was like a gift, in terms of what we had available to us.

A common practice among women who said they experienced this form of isolation was to relate stories that illustrated just how cut off they were from the rest of civilization, be it Alaska or anyplace else. Here is the story "Shannon" told:

One story, one of my favorite stories I like to tell, opens people's eyes to the situation we were living in, there in Alaska, on the Bering Sea. It was January and it was very windy. We walked out of school and watched the roof blow off of the store. The roof blew off the store and sliced the power pole in half. It didn't register with us at the time, but the entire village was out of power. No power, no water. The entire village was cut off, with no power, no water, no heat, and no electricity. They opened up the school and became a sort of community center, because it had a generator. The teachers stayed in the building the first night, and after that it was okay to be back in our building. After that we would not get scared really, but we would just wonder when help was going to come;

after all, it was winter in Alaska. It got to appoint for us where we would be melting snow for water and boiling water on our stove. We had a propane stove; not every stove in the apartments had propane, but we had gas, so we could cook, we could boil water. Basically we huddled together and supported each other. We were there for each other, doing what we could to take our minds off of our situation. We were telling jokes, telling stories – there was no TV. We got a little goofy – because we had to. A lot of us there liked to knit, so we'd be sitting there knitting with headlamps on. Funny stuff like that. We played cards, played games, lit candles, and just kinda kept each other company. We were isolated, out there by ourselves, and it was kinda hard. It was five days before they came out to fix the poles. We'd go walking around, my roommate and me, surveying the damage. There was debris everywhere. It was kind of an interesting time.

Another common practice among these women was to tell stories of hardship and isolation and then follow them with acknowledgements of the beauty and special nature of the place they were. For instance, after telling the power-outage story “Shannon” quickly followed up with this:

Some days, I don't want to say you forgot where you were, but you would just go on with your life. And other days it was so different. Yeah, but you could get up in the morning and come in the evening and go back to your pretty place with all these modern conveniences, and had I wanted to just close the blinds I could have forgotten where I was. But to get from my house to the school I had to go up a pretty big hill, and there would be days when I would stop and look out at the Bering Sea and think about what an amazing place it was and how fortunate I was to be a part of it.

Cultural Isolation

Respondents reported experiencing two types of cultural isolation in Alaska: isolation based on unfamiliarity with Native Alaskan culture, and isolation based on unfamiliarity with aspects of non-Native Alaskan cultures. The first sort of unfamiliarity is not unusual in Alaska and works both ways; natives coming to more populated areas of Alaska experience much the same thing (Lee, 2003). The second sort of isolation is akin to some of the forms of loneliness also described by Weiss (1973).

The issues in dealing with Native Alaskan culture center around language and cultural norms, exacerbated by much-higher-than-average rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, spousal abuse, and firearm-related violence (Falk, Yi, & Hillel-Sturmhofel, 2008). A succinct summary of issues faced in dealing with Native Alaskan culture was offered by “Shannon”:

While I loved the culture the culture there was also a challenge. There was the language. I didn't speak the language, and I had to teach children who spoke the language, and that was definitely a challenge. Then there was all the baggage these children brought to school. They carried a lot with them, sort of emotional things, and dealing with that was definitely a challenge.

She then relayed this story of a specific incident:

Like at Christmastime, and in the village everyone is related. Everyone gets together in a big community hall that's heated by five wood stoves. Everyone gives gifts and presents and things and no one thinks about us. You're welcome, but all the other teachers would go home, and we were the only ones who stayed. We were the only ones who weren't native.

Encounters with Native Alaskan culture are not restricted to Native towns and villages (Lee, 2003). “Chris” encountered Native culture in Army housing in Fairbanks, and was put in a position of adapting to aspects of Native culture in order to be accepted, in an environment where she admitted she needed to be accepted. She described the situation this way:

The first friend I made in Alaska was this Native lady. When I was staying at a hotel in downtown Fairbanks, one of the hotels they keep for people who are in the military, while they wait to get housing. So they put us up in this hotel in Alaska and I was doing laundry in the laundry room down in the basement and I met this Native lady, and she and I started talking, and she told me about her daughter and her daughter’s wedding. Her daughter had just gotten married, and we went back to her room and she offered me some moose – some of the moose stew from the wedding. So I started eating this bowl of moose stew and it tasted okay but the texture was a little off, like it was crunchy. I told myself, “Okay, I’m gonna be polite, I’m going to eat all of this moose stew,” because there wasn’t that much of it, just a small bowl, and when I got done she told me it was moose brains. Moose brains! Oh my gosh, I just ate moose brains! That explained the texture. After I had eaten the whole thing she told me it was moose brains. Still, she was very nice, and we kept in contact while we lived there and after I had moved onto the base. She was a Native lady, but, oh – I once made the mistake of calling her an Eskimo. She taught me a lot about life in Alaska.

Children

While isolation and the need for support appeared in statements of Alaskan women regardless of position and circumstance, other characteristics of supportive-communication situations followed patterns observed elsewhere in the Lower 48. Specific stressors that required supportive communication from a

network of friends and acquaintances were quite similar to stressful situations documented in Appalachia (Patrick, Cottrell, & Barnes, 2001), China (Ren & Du, 2006), and rural parts of the Lower 48 (Sozcka, 2006). As an example, from “Katherine”:

We were pregnant at the time and we had a miscarriage. And she was just there. She was already a first-time mom, so she knew how to be the friend I needed at the time. That was the person I needed, being so away from everyone, family. And she understood everything without having to talk about it.

“Pat” related another Alaskan-pregnancy story:

When I found out I was pregnant ... it was a shock beyond all belief. I had had a surgery that supposedly prevented anything like that from happening. It was really tough. What made it better was in Alaska they had a mentoring program where they paired teachers up with someone who lived up there, had experience up there. It just so happened that my mentor was in the village that weekend, as well as my aide ... who was in my village, and another teacher from the district office was there as well. They helped to shed a little laughter on the situation. I don't know what I would have done without them.

The theme of kids and friends was echoed by “Karlene”:

I felt like I was just barely hanging on. I worked close to 60 hours a week and I commuted almost three hours a day, and I traveled, and I finished my master's degree at the same time writing my thesis, and I had two little kids – and almost all the housework, car, yard, fell on me. So I was just burning the candle at both ends. I think that's what made me more solid in my – in my friendships. I needed it more than I ever had.

Respondents cited difficulties in dealing with children in the extreme conditions imposed by Alaska – darkness, cold, and physical and mental isolation. Children seemed to heighten negative feelings engendered by other stressors.

“Louise,” who gave up teaching when her child was born, remembers it this way:

But we were just away from everything, you know, and - well, but my own personal experience was that when we went back to Alaska after [my husband] graduated from college, things were entirely different. We had a daughter and I was hoping, to be honest, to be close to my parents when I had a child. In Alaska, if it wasn't for [name of friend] I would have gone stir-crazy. [She was] rich; [she] had a two-bedroom apartment. We lived in an efficiency - just a tiny thing, that was all we could afford. I'd go over to [her] house for coffee, just sit and talk with [name of friend], you know. I was foundering, especially in winter.

Distance from family was much more of an issue when children were involved. Respondents who did not recall feelings of isolation from family before children were born noted those feelings after children arrived. “Violet” remembers:

Plus, you know, you're away from your family. When we were raising children and you're talking about a distance from Illinois to Alaska, they're away from their grandparents, their aunts and uncles, you know. It's a challenge to be on your own up here with small children ... Well, once I had to be hospitalized, and my husband's work friends came in and took care of the children while I was in the hospital. I did the same thing for them when they were in the hospital. That was one of the biggest things, for friends to come in and help us with small children.

Parent-child interactions that seem simple in the Lower 48 took on added complexity in Alaska, when factored against stressors such as cold, darkness, and

six-month-long winters. Consider something as basic as dressing children to play outside in the winter, as related by “Joyce”:

We had three small children and we had no family up there. Well, it was constantly putting on winter clothes on kids, and they’d play a little while, and then they’d come in because they were cold, and then it was taking clothes off and on like that. I think that was biggest thing.

Darkness

Regardless of where respondents lived in Alaska, darkness was consistently cited as a source of stress requiring supportive action. Along with extreme cold, darkness was described as being a constant drain on energy during winter months, particularly January and February. The relationship between darkness and depression was described by “Louise”:

In Fairbanks because of the weather and the winter we didn’t get out too much, you know ... I wasn’t used to the extreme cold and all that darkness. Summers were wonderful; it was light forever and you had all this energy. I used to say it was unfortunate I felt this way, but one day in May when [my husband] called from work and asked me if I wanted to move to Seattle I was delirious ... I don’t think I ever really let on that I was feeling a little depression. I’m sure I told someone that it’s cold all the time and dark all the time. But no, I don’t recall ever telling one exactly how I felt when I was – you know, when I was feeling that way. And my mother did know when I left Alaska that I didn’t want to go back, that I wanted to be close to my family. I don’t think she was aware of just how I felt.

“Ellyn,” speaking from Durango, Colo., in March, first noted how nice it was to have “longer” days in Colorado when compared to Alaska, and then said:

The winters are too long. The darkness is too much for me. December and January I don't like because it's dark. Summer, it's like you're in a feeding frenzy. There's so much light and you don't get much sleep, but you have all winter to catch up. In winter, you hibernate. In February you come out.

"Karlene" expanded:

You know, by December living in Wasilla, which isn't so far north as so many places in Alaska, 10:30 in the morning it was -- the sun finally came up. And then it was setting again by 2:30 in the afternoon, so there was just such a slim margin of being -- of having daylight. Lots of people, including myself, had problems with depression like I'd never had before. I had to buy the happy light box, you know, to sit on the desk, because I didn't see daylight at all at work. I would be working in the basement of a museum.

-- The happy light box?

Yeah; don't you know what the happy light box is?

-- No I don't.

They mimic the natural sunlight?

-- They -- those weren't invented when I was living up in Alaska.

They -- they've had them maybe 20 years or so. But they -- a lot of people I know had them, a lot of my neighbors and friends. I'd turn it on and I'd just run it in the wintertime, most of the day, at my desk, since I never did see the sunlight in the wintertime being inside the building. I would just see it at lunch time for you know, maybe half an hour. Just not having the normal, natural, biological rhythms really it [laughs] it really played havoc.

Cold

Cold and darkness were mentioned in tandem as stressors requiring

significant adjustment and significant support, usually from Alaskan friends, before adaptation. Cold required more clothes, but beyond that, cold required a whole new way of thinking and acting. At worst people were housebound for weeks at a time, afraid to leave their home for fear of being stranded, suffering frostbite, or having their car quit running halfway to a destination. Even after 40-plus years, the cold was still a vivid memory for “Louise”:

I can remember the heater for the car. Eventually we got a garage. You didn't just get a garage with your apartment; you put your name on a list to get a garage. Not everyone got a garage. When we got a garage we did the headbolt heater thing for the car, where you plugged it in so you could start it. When Dennis could move the car he'd bring it right up to the door and we'd get right in so you weren't exposed to the cold any more than you absolutely needed to be, you know. There were stretches where it was three weeks of 35 below for a high.

Adjustment was as traumatic and stressful for “Chris” as she moved into housing at Fairbanks' Fort Wainwright:

In Texas, you know, we had central air conditioning, with the registers in the ceiling, you know, and then when we came to Wisconsin they had the registers on the floor, and I was like, “All right; I can handle that, I can understand that.” But when we got to Alaska we were in this military housing, you know, which was older to begin with, and it had these big huge radiators with pipes running up from the floor across the ceiling, and I'm like, “Oh my gosh, what are these things? These things are huge.” And then when they kicked in – oh my gosh, when the radiators kicked in it was like someone took a monkey wrench and was banging on the pipes, and steam was coming out through these pipes, and I'm like, “What the hell is this?” But it was the heat; it was what they needed to do to keep the house warm. But oh my gosh, I'm like, “What the hell

is this? Where the hell am I?" You'd get burned if you touched the radiators, you know, they were so hot, and it was scary when they kicked on because the whole house would shake and you're like, "They have earthquakes up here, right? Is this an earthquake? What happened?" because it was just that loud and, you know, banging.

The concept of cold as a stressor could be expanded to encompass many types of extreme weather, as related by "Karlene":

Oh, the cold. It's not that it's so much colder, at least where I live, than, you know, the northern United States, um, but that where we lived it was incredibly windy. We could have storms that could last two weeks, you know, with up to 80-mile-an-hour winds, and once we lost part of our roof. It was just harrowing. It just beat on you because there was no respite, and so when it was cold it was windy cold, and so you just couldn't get outside and – at least, I couldn't and enjoy it. You know, other people could, but I just couldn't. [laughs]

Responding to cold as a stressor was as difficult as responding to darkness as a stressor. Both discouraged face-to-face communication since that often required leaving home, and leaving home was not seen as being practical in conditions of extreme cold and darkness. Support by letter was helpful and welcome, but not immediate. In cases where e-mail was available, e-mail functioned well as a source of support that did not require venturing out into uncertain weather conditions.

Holidays

Holidays were a source of stress for Alaskan women because so many major holidays – Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter – fall during the Alaskan winter; because holidays are traditionally times spent with family, and so many Alaskan women were separated from their families to such an extent that going

home for the holidays was not feasible; because for those heading somewhere during the holidays weather bad weather can affect transportation schedules; and because holidays are a stressful time even under normal circumstances.

“Shannon”’s recollections were the most vivid:

I think probably the Christmas countdown, the end-of-year countdown, you know, the end-of-year countdown [was a stressful time]. We’d tell each other, “It’s only a few weeks away,” “It’s only a few days away,” whatever, and then we’d get to see people, see your parents, you know, go back home ... I know we’d just kinda give each other pep talks. You know, we’d tell each other that thing was an amazing experience, and we’d look back on this and be a stronger person. And we were absolutely right... Always Christmas every year was a difficult time. Seemed like every year we’d be getting ready to leave and a big storm would blow in and we couldn’t get out. We’d miss all the commercial flights, and the airlines – the commercial airlines – didn’t seem to understand. They’d say, “Well, you can just drive to the airport,” but we couldn’t just drive to the airport. We had to fly to the airport. One of my friends needed to come home so badly, and her flights were just not working out, she couldn’t get out. I’d tell her, “Listen: In the worst case we’ll stay together. We’ll keep Christmas together.” And it all worked out okay. One gal was quite a bit younger, in her early 20s, and she was wanting to be home so badly. She was just wanting to be home. I wanted to be home, too, but sometimes in Alaska what you have to understand is you just go with the flow. You gotta be flexible.

Other Stressors

Natural disasters are not uncommon in Alaska. While there are no tornadoes or thunderstorms in Alaska, floods, brushfires, blizzards, windstorms, ice fog (caused by the crystallization of water vapor and particulate matter in extreme cold), earthquakes, and volcanoes all occur too frequently for many residents. More than 55 years ago, when my mother first moved to Alaska, she arrived to a volcanic eruption. More than 55 years later a respondent said she was sitting at home “waiting for the volcano to erupt.” Such is life in Alaska.

“Joyce” recalled living in Alaska during the state’s greatest natural disaster, the Good Friday earthquake of 1964:

We were living on Thompson Place, out past Merrill Field. My mother said afterwards that she was certainly glad we couldn’t afford a house in Turnagin [where the earthquake was most severe]. But our new house was almost ready, out on Buckingham Way. When the earthquake hit I was home alone, with three kids. We had just gotten back from a movie when the earthquake hit. There was a Disney matinee at a theater downtown, the one that was destroyed. The theater was full of small children. Anyway, we had just gotten home and I was just started dinner when the earthquake hit. We were very scared. I didn’t realize – I didn’t know there were earthquakes in Alaska, if you can believe that. We didn’t know what was happening; trees were whipping around, you know, and dishes fell out of cupboards. We all slept in the same bed, with our shoes and boots and clothes on, for a week, because we were afraid of the aftershocks. We didn’t know if one of the aftershocks would be a bigger one than the first one. The power was off, and I think we turned the natural gas off. There was no heat, except for what we could get from what we could burn in the fireplace.

- - Did the community sort of rally around, and everyone help each other?

-- No. No, they didn't. I think my friend had already moved on to Elmendorf. You know, we moved there in October – late September or October. So, you know, for a new person coming into a new area there and winter had already started, and we had three little kids, it was hard to get out and meet new people. So we were – there we were.

Summary

Sources of stress among respondents fall into two categories: physical and emotional. Physical stressors cause stress among Alaskan women through these stressors' extreme nature. For example, winter in Alaska causes stress because it is colder and darker longer in Alaska. Distances are greater, both to services and to family. Earthquakes and other natural disasters are not necessarily more common in Alaska but are more traumatic when they occur.

Emotional stressors are related to cultural or family issues. Children are a source of stress, particularly in how they interact with physical stressors – keeping them warm when it is cold, keeping them happy when it is dark, and so on. Spouses provide stress when they leave for protracted periods, and then again when they come back. Lower-48 families create stress when they experience illnesses or deaths and the Alaskan family cannot be there to provide personal support, or when they perform rituals, usually constructed around holidays.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked about the characteristics of effective emotional-support messages directed at Alaskan women. Results showed that message source was the chief determinant in the effectiveness of emotional-support messages directed at Alaskan women. Characteristics of the message source were instrumental in forging the bond between message source and effectiveness: Local family and Alaskan friends provided immediacy, augmented by a underlying acknowledgement of shared experiences – the “we’re going through this together” effect; Lower-48 family was capable of providing long-term emotional support, though they were also capable of adding stress requiring supportive communication (often provided by Alaskan friends); and Lower-48 friends were not often seen as capable of providing immediate or emotionally satisfying support.

Results are summarized in Table 2.

Alaska Friends

Perhaps because isolation engendered a need for friends, and the need for friends in turn engendered an increased level of supportive communication, the friendships that formed in Alaska were characterized by respondents as being deeper and more enduring, with mutual efforts to maintain contact beyond their time in Alaska. As one respondent said, “They become your extended family.” “Katherine” characterized her Alaskan friendships this way:

We sought each other out because that’s what you do. Your friendships

Theme	Formulated Meaning	Significant Statement
Strong bonds formed with Alaska friends	Shared feelings of isolation lead to formation of support structures that benefit and bond all participants, creating deep, enduring friendships. In-person and e-mail networks of Alaskan friends form organically through being in Alaska, not necessarily in reaction to obvious stress. These networks provide support in stressful times. This effect lingers after people have left Alaska.	When I look back I think, “Gosh – I lived there and worked there for two years, yet they understood what it was like for me and what we lived through.” So they can understand now, they can provide some really good insight into hard situations. I mean, they’ll call me now when something might be hard for them, you know, and I’ll say, “Remember that time when we lived in Alaska?” and we can get through stuff together.
Immediate family as source of support	Immediate family can supplant Alaska friends as primary support source if they are present. Immediate family is less effective as a support source if they are gone for protracted periods.	Without family I would have felt very lost.
Ambivalence of Lower-48 family	Family in the Lower 48 provide more supportive communication than Lower-48 friends. Though they do not always exhibit the same level of understanding as Alaskan friends, there is usually a greater effort made on both sides to understand and make situations understandable.	With my family I’d be more honest. I’d adjust what I was saying to be more open with them.
Ineffectiveness of support from Lower-48 friends	Lower-48 friends are a minor source of support. They have difficulty grasping the circumstances of their Alaskan friends, their priorities separate, and they tend to lose touch with their Alaskan friends, in part because of the difficulty of communicating. However, this can change when Lower 48 friends and Alaskan women make specific efforts to meet face-to-face.	Most of my friends in the Lower 48 have no idea what kind of life I’ve led.

seemed to be bonded tighter, and they’re still strong today because of that experience [in Alaska]. It’s neat to think about. You don’t have isolation, you don’t have to worry about it, if you cultivate friends. Thinking back on it, on those days, like you’re having me do now, it brings smiles to my face, because these are people I know really well – and I know them well because of Alaska.

Friendships were often formed on the basis of commonalities, with the most

common commonality being thrown into the same situation together, with little knowledge of what they had gotten into. In those cases friendships formed among newcomers to Alaska thrown into similar situations, or between newcomers to Alaska and veteran Alaskans willing to show the ropes to the newcomers. Examples of both types of friendships were related by “Chris,” the former Army wife:

The majority of people I had contact with in Alaska were military wives with families, and we could talk about what we were going through and relate to one another. Even the people who grew up in Alaska could understand what we were going through and could answer a lot of my questions. For me it was no different being in Alaska than being from a different ethnic group, you know. People in Alaska were mostly curious. They were curious about what it was like living in Texas; they were curious about other places ... Yeah, I’d say so. When I became friends with people who had been in Alaska for a while they helped me view things differently. You know, I’d be saying, “Oh my gosh it’s so dark,” or, “Oh my gosh it’s so cold,” and they’d just – they’d take a different outlook. They showed me how to manage my time so I wouldn’t get so, you know, and they sort of had a different way of viewing things which helped me.

Occasionally the commonalities were more common than expected.

Several respondents remarked that they expected Alaskans to be vastly different from themselves, and expressed vague disappointment when that was not the case – and in fact, that many of the Alaskans they encountered were “just like them.” This found its ultimate expression in this anecdote expressed by “Allie,” the pastoral intern:

One of the reasons I wanted to go to Alaska was to get out of the Milwaukee-Madison-Saint Paul, you know, middle-class, white, European thing, and when I got to Alaska the congregation, the church I was at was all transplanted middle-class, white European people. I thought Alaska was going to be so different, but not many of the people that I came in contact with in the congregation were born and raised in Alaska. I'd say 90 percent of them were transplanted Midwesterners. It was not what I expected, but it was okay, too.

While initially expressing vague disappointment at this situation, "Allie" acknowledged the positives of such a situation:

Yes – [they understood me] perhaps better than I did. There was a member of the congregation whose grandmother died – back in the Lower 48 she died – and we held a memorial service for her up there and I cried and cried, and I didn't understand why I had cried so much. They did. They knew it was a little bit of homesickness. It had affected me without me admitting it had affected me, because I don't think I was – I mean, it wasn't like I was missing my home, my parents. My home life was not the greatest before I left, and so I didn't mind leaving.

Several respondents commented on the ease of making friends in Alaska, attributing this to the extreme conditions, the search for common ground, and the outgoing nature of Alaskans. This was particularly the case for single women, particularly in the 1960s and '70s. "Violet" remembers:

It wasn't hard to make friends there. Within the first week we had been invited out to Elmendorf. They had a sort of bachelor's quarters there, and all they invited all the teachers out to a party. We met a lot of men there, and a lot of girls, too. We lived in an apartment complex, you

know, and so we never did feel lonely. Every day we were with someone we knew. And these were people we stayed in touch with, did things with. Well, you know, if you hearken back to those times, very few of us were born and raised in Alaska. Everyone was from someplace else. Everyone was from someplace else, and so you tended to migrate to each other. From day one when I was there we were making plans for Thanksgiving, plans for Christmas. We created a family out of groups of friends. The people downstairs who gave me dinner – we used to babysit for their children. [“Louise”] did too. They had small children, and so Anne and I used to help with their children. We would all get together, and we were just like family, only we weren’t related by blood. Where we were, where everyone comes from someplace else, we didn’t know people who had relatives in Alaska. Now we have other relatives, sons, uncles, cousins, but we had to begin all by ourselves.

While it was certainly easy for single women to find friends, it was not appreciably more difficult for married women with children, “Louise,” who saw it both ways, recalls:

It was the social life for me. When I went there I was only 22 and I could have had a date - I could have had three dates in one day. That was the way it was up there, you know, and we did so many things with the young people there, and I must say I loved the adventuresome spirit of the young people who were up there. You know, I came from a small town in Illinois, and I came to this bustling, thriving city in Alaska, of all places ... We formed such warm friendships; some of the people from Standard Oil that we met up there are still – we still keep in touch with them, though some are gone, you know ... I think a lot of them did. [“Violet”] certainly did; the year before, she was the new teacher in the new place. [My friend] really helped. God placed me there next to her. She was just there for me when I had this small child, this very small child, living in an apartment you could clean in half an hour, you know. Without her there would have been some very long days. Most people up

there could understand what I was going through ... She was always so upbeat. I thought she was just the perfect mother, wife, and homemaker. She always had cookies baking or something cooking, and I thought I could do more stuff like that instead of just moping around. Just letting me talk and being a good listener and telling of her life experiences too – that helped so much.

Respondents often used anecdotes to illustrate the sense of community engendered by Alaskan friends. A typical story involved friends coming to help in a particularly stressful situation, in contrast to the somewhat non-supportive behavior of fellow Alaskans who might have been neighbors or acquaintances but were not classified by respondents as being close friends. Here is a typical anecdote, from “Louise”:

One thing I really remember was when [son’s name] was born. I went to the hospital at 10 at night and he was born at 5:30 in the Some co-workers of [my husband] came over and slept in our bed, so by the time [my husband] came home [my daughter] never knew her dad had been missing. People were very willing to help in any way they could. They were like a community. The people at Chevron were like a community. They were really tight. It was such a small office. We still receive Christmas cards from people who were in that tight group there. We really relied on each other for support.

In general, the people recalled by respondents as being Alaskan friends had were not only supportive in times of stress in Alaska but were supportive afterwards, in other situations and at other stressful times when neither the respondent nor her friend may have still been living in Alaska.

The panoply of Alaskan friendships was outlined by “Shannon”:

I met her there and went grocery shopping together – and when you go grocery shopping, you go grocery shopping for four months. We had a great time; she taught me a lot about Alaska. We were roommates. We flew out to the village separately. I went out in the morning, I think, and she came out in the afternoon. We just became great, great friends; I even stood up in her wedding. Since we left we still e-mail, we still talk. I think we're going to be lifelong friends ... I had a great network of friends in Alaska, roommates and friends, and there were things that worked out ... My friends from when I was in Alaska are still my friends.

Immediate Family

My mother often said that Alaska helped bring us closer together. “Many times there was just the four of us,” she said. “We had to be close to survive.” The idea of Alaskan self-reliance was restated as a process and a way of life, engendered through physical and emotional isolation, which drew families closer together. “Pat,” who spent two years teaching in the Alaskan bush with her husband and two school-age children, put it this way:

Without family I would have felt very lost. I saw it with younger teachers. They came by themselves, and they really struggled.

This feeling was not universal among the respondents. Three respondents indicated that their husbands traveled extensively while they lived in Alaska, leaving them by themselves or with very small children to care for. Those women did not cite their immediate family living in Alaska as a source of support but rather as a source of stress requiring supportive communication from others. This sentiment was summed up by “Joyce”:

My ex got to come out several time to meetings; several times he was in Seattle or some place and he came out. I only got to come out twice, I think, for business meetings. I was stuck up there.

Lower-48 Family

The broadest range of responses from respondents dealt with their relationships with family in the Lower 48. Many respondents were of two minds about their relationships with their Lower-48 families. Lower-48 family members were capable of significant support, whether they were writing letters or e-mailing, making their Alaskan relative welcome on her visits back to the lower 48, calling, or coming north to visit. At the same time, Lower-48 family members could be negative about Alaska, and could be a major source of guilt for Alaskan women, either because Lower-48 relatives did not approve of women living in Alaska or because Alaskan women wanted to visit their Lower-48 relatives but could not.

An example of parental support was related by “Violet”:

My parents were very much for it. My grandmother thought it was a great idea. I’ve since learned that other people in the community could not believe that my parents would let me come that far – that far away, you know. But for my parents, it was more like, “[“Violet”]’s going to do this” – and [“Violet”] did.

The flip side of that experience was detailed by “Sue,” whose story hints at a sort of “first-in-ness”: She was the first of her family to travel so far away from home to live – and was doing something that was very unusual for young

women in her parents' acquaintance. She recalls:

[My parents] did not think it was a good idea at all. My parents, they let me go but, you know, my father didn't understand. My father thought I should be living at home, teaching at a school in the suburbs. They never really did understand what I did. I think the thing was that they had never traveled much – which was probably the reason I wanted to travel. I took a lot of pictures and wrote letters very often. I tried to communicate to them the beautiful place I was enjoying and the fun times I was having. I wish I had communicated more. They were not comfortable discussing my decision – well, I don't remember any deep discussions. I did interview for jobs in a couple of suburbs, but more to make my parents happy, you know. I did what I wanted to do. I was independent. I felt paying my own way to school I had earned it, you know. I was making my own choice.

Parents' reactions to news of a move to Alaska were at ends of the spectrum: either very supportive or very apprehensive. An example of apprehension was relayed by "Karlene":

Uh, there was a big hesitation with my parents because I knew that they would be very worried. But we talked about it a lot, and I know they didn't think it was a good idea, and I didn't think it was a good idea, but we – but we – but we knew there were things we could do to make it better, I mean, so we just sort of took it as a job, as okay, what do you need that – to make life more livable? ... I got a huge coat before I left – you know, those kinds of things. We just kinda said okay, how can we deal with this?

The combination of distances and independence could engender feelings of resentment on the part of Lower-48 family, as outlined by "Louise":

I know my father for one was very much against it. Father had a heart attack when he was 50; he died in January 1964 when he was 57, so in 1957 he had had a heart attack. He was in business for himself, and after he had the heart attack he couldn't work any more. I had already applied and gotten a job in my hometown. I could live at home some more, pay for things, you know, because there were still - I still had brothers and sisters living at home. I think my father knew it would be a great adventure for me, but he didn't want me to go. Mother didn't like for me to be so far away, but even so I think Mother was pretty much for it ... My first summer I went home, and my parents picked me up at the airport in Moline. I was just going on and on about Alaska, how I would love to see the beautiful mountains out my window every day and just like that, on and on. And my father said, "Look outside this window. Look out the window. Just look at that farmland - look at that beautiful black farmland. Have you ever seen anything like that?" He felt like I was abandoning my roots, like it was - like I had been a little bit smitten by this Alaska.

Occasionally parents' reactions would veer toward out-and-out recruitment of Alaska-dwelling children to come back home."Ellyn" remembers:

Oh, God, every time I come to California to visit them it's like, "When are you moving back home?" It took a long time for them to get out of that. But everybody would come up here in the summer, and I would go down at least twice in the winter.

In general, the departure of a child to Alaska was traumatic for both parents and child, and dealing with separation was an ongoing source of stress for Alaskan women, particularly - as in the example cited earlier - when the parent did not support the separation. "Eleanor" said, "My mother didn't think she'd see me alive again." Another example was offered by "Joyce," who was a housewife

in Anchorage for the two-plus years she lived there:

My mother thought I was going to the end of the earth. My husband had went ahead. He was already up there, and had secured a house for us to rent. I had to take care of working with the company that moved us. I had to take care of closing the house in Olympia and packing the kids off to Oregon for two weeks. Back then it took two weeks, you know, to ship your stuff up to Alaska by barge, so we had to wait in Oregon until our stuff got up there. I had to live with my mother and the three kids, and when she took us to the airport in Portland she cried all the way back to the car. It [sobs] sorry ... it makes me cry to think about it. She thought she might never see us again. However, she came up two times with my aunt and she babysat the kids while we took a week's trip. My in-laws came up one year for a week and we did come out.

Occasionally parents' reactions would veer toward out-and-out recruitment of Alaska-dwelling children to come back home. "Ellyn" remembers:

I saw my parents every day; we'd talk every day. To not to be able to see them for four or five months at a time was really, really hard. Also, at the same time they knew I was doing something pretty incredible, so they were happy for me.

Separation from parents was one of the most traumatic aspects of the Alaskan experience for many women. Communication under these circumstances could be difficult, but most respondents characterized the communication as being supportive yet honest. "Shannon" recalls:

I think maybe I communicated that, what it was like, what it was really like, to my close friends, but more my family and brothers. I communicated mostly to everyone else with a strong face, you know, sometimes even to friends I was close to. You know, they'd ask, "How're you doing?" and I'd say, "Everything's going great," "Yeah,

it's kinda hard but I'm doing all right," whatever.

Separation from family was most often characterized as separation from parents, since all respondents were under 40 when they moved to Alaska, and had living parents. However, separation from Lower-48 family, and the need for supportive communication from that family, was not restricted to parents. Two respondents mentioned siblings as a significant source of support and one, "Joyce," mentioned separation from her grandparents:

Well, I'll tell you, I thought I'd never see my grandparents again. They were still living and they were elderly –in their 80s – and I think I saw my grandfather one time when I came out, and then he died a month before we came back. What ... was it a month? Let's see ... no, it was three or four weeks. That's all. He died and I wasn't able to come to the service because it was so close to us moving.

Lower-48 Friends

Friends in the Lower 48 were not a prime source of support for most respondents. Only two respondents said they received significant support from a friend in the Lower 48. "Chris," one of the two respondents who characterized as close her relationship with a Lower-48 friend, described the relationship this way:

My best friend. I think I called her every 10 minutes the first couple of days. I was saying things like, "Oh my gosh, do you know how cold it is? And do you know the clothing people wear here?" When we got off the plane people were walking around with these huge hats that had eyes on them, you know, and snouts, and they were wearing these boots with fur coming out the top and all over the place, and the first thing I told Rachael was, "Rachael, you wouldn't believe it: There was this thing at

the airport.” I mean, it was like they were wolves with people in the middle.

Even “Chris,” who characterized her relationship with her Lower-48 friend as supportive, acknowledged that she lost touch with other Lower-48 friends, through a combination of their forgetting and the major changes Alaska had wrought in her life:

[For my other Lower-48 friends] it was more of an out-of-sight-out-of-mind thing. We’d developed lives away from each other. It was amazing how quickly we’d lose those commonalities. I think it was a more of a, “Why would you want to do that for – why don’t you just wait for him here?” kind of thing ...

The ignorance of Lower-48 friends toward Alaska, the characteristics of the state, the experience of living there, and the distinctive stressors women face in the state were common themes, regardless of age or time spent in Alaska.

“Louise” said:

Most of my friends in the Lower 48 have no idea what kind of life I’ve led. Speaking of that, one of them had children, and all of them lived in the lived in the immediate area, you know, around Monmouth. They thought I was crazy; what I did wouldn’t have interested them at all. They just had sort of a, well, a lack of imagination.

“Violet” added:

Some of your high-school friends - you know, some of them had not been outside the state of Illinois, so I didn’t go on so much around them. They had gotten married right out of high school maybe, so I tried not to

be so effusive. It wasn't like I thought their lives were humdrum. That wasn't it.

“Louise” said:

I think some younger people [appreciated my life in Alaska]. I think once you get settled and you have a family you can't think it's possible for you. But when you're single and making your own choices and you're 20, it's just like a new life for you. I think people relate[d] to it and wish[ed] they could be doing that sort of thing ... I would talk about my daring life more to my friends than to my family. At that time in Alaska, you know, there were about nine men to every woman, so we double-dated all the time. We went out often and had a lot of fun. We skied on the weekends ... I had the one close friend – the one I told you about, the one whose mother was sick and wasn't able to go with me – and she was the one I communicated with closely. Other people would get Christmas cards once a year.

A basic lack of understanding on the part of Lower-48 friends was a barrier, but it was not an insurmountable obstacle to the provision of support, as described by “Shannon”:

I think that people kinda ... sure, they didn't really understand. Just because it was such a dramatic change. It's not like I was moving to Anchorage, or some place on the road system. I was moving to a small native village on the coast of the Bering Sea. They were very surprised at that, I have to say, but they were very supportive, too ... I think that there were several people that I had to explain things to several times. I had to explain to them that I lived in a fly-in village, things like that. They didn't – of course, the culture was so different that they couldn't begin to understand anything about that.

The lack of understanding could occasionally manifest itself as outright cruelty, as “Allie,” a seminarian who interned in Anchorage, recalled:

There were a lot of jokes – “Oh, you’re going to live in an igloo.” They started calling me “Nanook” and things like that. A friend of mine made me a tape with that Johnny Horton song about Alaska – you know, “going North to Alaska.” They thought that was funny. There were a lot of misconceptions ... No – and on two points of the spectrum. We were in Anchorage, this very large, very sophisticated city of 150,000, full of people and things happening all the time. People back home assumed it was so remote and so desolate. And then with the sunlight and darkness they didn’t have a clue.

After several episodes of this sort respondents began filtering what they would tell their Lower-48 friends. If respondents felt their Lower-48 friends would not understand an experience, they simply wouldn’t tell them. “Eleanor” described one such adventure, in Sitka:

I went to the Baranof Hotel there and the rustic Red Dog Saloon. It was one of those places, you know, with sawdust on the floor, and then the people, a lot of the people were miners. The people were not unfriendly, I guess you could say, but different, rugged – loggers, fishermen, miners. There was sort of a raw feeling to the place, and I know – I didn’t think they would understand.

However, these attitudes could be changed when both sides made concerted efforts to maintain friendships and keep lines of communication open – particularly face-to-face communication. This was summarized by “Karlene”:

After I’d been there a couple years I really realized for my mental health it was good for me to get out as often as I could. So with my job I

traveled regularly that I could always – I also often sometimes tacked on vacation with that and then would stop around the country and see my friends. Um, because there's just a lot that you can't talk about in a phone call or an e-mail because it's just not comprehensive.

-- So the face-to-face meetings really helped you open up?

Yeah, absolutely. 'Cause it gave you that time, and – and perspective, because you weren't living it. You had a break from it and you go, "Oh, I forgot what it's like to live differently," you know, and so you're kind of readdressing that, uh, that change ... I think then I realized how important, maybe more so than when I had lived in the Lower 48 – how important those friends were.

-- So it was a conscious decision on your part to really maintain those relationships?

Yes. Yeah. Yeah, it definitely was.

-- And without it seeming like work, you really worked hard at it.

Yeah, I did. And I always felt like I wasn't as good a friend as I should be 'cause I was more – more busy there than I had ever been in my life. I felt like I was just barely hanging on. I worked close to 60 hours a week and I commuted almost three hours a day, and I traveled, and I finished my master's degree at the same time writing my thesis, and I had two little kids – and almost all the housework, car, yard, fell on me. So I was just burning the candle at both ends. I think that's what made me more solid in my – in my friendships. I needed it more than I ever had. But that's stayed with me, since I left.

She then went on to recount a time where a Lower-48 friend came to Alaska and provided support:

I was -- I was really struggling one fall – the fall before I left. I left in the summer, last summer. Everything had just really gone downhill, in the marriage, and at point I was – I felt paralyzed, like I just could not – I

needed to separate myself from it but I couldn't, 'cause I just don't like to give up. And, uh, my best friend came up, and she has almost no vacation time. And, uh, she doesn't like it up there, so she knew I needed her. She came up – they were up for Thanksgiving that year, and just helped me get stuff done around the house – but just, you know. We'd known each other for, for 30 years, so that's the one person I could just, just open up to, more than anyone.

Summary

Family and friends living in Alaska, while capable of delivering the greatest amount of support because of their proximity to Alaskan women, did not always deliver that support. Spouses, while technically living in the same household, were in many cases gone for weeks or months at a time, and then upon their return were not always capable of providing appropriate support. Young children were present but not capable of appropriate supportive actions or messages. Alaska friends were at times unable to understand the sources of respondents' stress or unable to supply needed supportive messages.

Time and distance mitigated the supportive capabilities of family and friends living in the Lower 48. Lower-48 family was capable of providing support, but they struggled to understand specific stressors or the depth of the need for support in stressful situations they could understand. For instance, Lower-48 family could understand cold but they could not understand the effects of a week of 35-below-zero temperatures. Ultimately, the willingness of most Lower-48 families to provide support aided the efficacy of such support efforts.

More than any other group, Lower-48 friends lacked the willingness to

understand stressors and provide appropriate support. The extreme physical separation encouraged an “out of sight, out of mind” attitude among many Lower-48 friends. However, this attitude could be overcome with perseverance from both sides.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 and Research Question 3a asked about differences in supportive communication delivered by Alaskans and those living in the Lower 48, both in terms of effectiveness and characteristics. Results showed that the tendency of Alaskans to deliver immediate, in-person messages were the main discriminators and the main determinant of the generally superior effectiveness of messages delivered by Alaskans. In other words, the communication channel was the main difference in supportive communication delivered by Alaskans to Alaskan women.

Results of channel analysis are summarized in Table 3.

All Communication Channels

In some instances – where e-mail was available, for instance – technology helped facilitate supportive communication. In other instances technology was a roadblock to be overcome in the process of communicating supportively. In all instances technology influenced the process of supportive communication.

Respondents lived in Alaska variously over a time period ranging from the early 1950s to the late 2000s. Communication changed dramatically over that period as technology made new forms of communication possible. In the 1950s, my mother remembered, “no one called. We wrote letters.” In the early ‘90s, “Katherine” said, “I don’t think we were doing e-mails too much back then,” and added, “We called.” By the later 2000s, according to “Pat”:

Theme	Formulated Meaning	Significant Statement
All communication channels	Communication technologies play an important role in communication frequency, content, and efficacy. However, easier access to communication channels does not mitigate feelings of isolation.	
Face-to-face	Face-to-face supportive communication was the most supportive in content and efficacy. It was not always the most frequently used method of supportive communication in situations of pronounced physical isolation.	There's just a lot that you can't talk about in a phone call or an e-mail because it's just not comprehensive.
E-mail	E-mail communication was cited for frequency, but ranked lower in content and efficacy, depending on who was doing the e-mailing.	Thank goodness for e-mail. It was probably the easiest way I could keep in touch. You know, up in Alaska there's a three-hour time difference, so that complicated things. But I'd e-mail pictures of what I was seeing when I could.
Phone	Telephone communication was cited by research participants as having the least amount of content and efficacy. It also was rated low in frequency.	People couldn't afford three-minute phone calls to Alaska back then.
Mail	Research participants valued mail communication for its efficacy and frequency; content was also good, depending on who was writing the letters,	My friend Sally at work, her mom wrote to her every day. She wrote every day! It might only have been five or six lines, but she wrote every day – and I was a little envious of that. I had to keep telling myself, “That’s her folks. My folks love me just as much.” Because getting a letter was so very important, you see. When I got a letter I was so thrilled. It was like a lifeline to home.
Other media	Ham radio was used in an emergency; no respondents recounted using emerging media such as texting or instant messaging.	I got a message from a Ham radio operator who happened to be in contact through Salem, Oregon, who called me from my family because, you know, the phone lines were terribly busy.

You could send e-mail at the school. But phones, there were no land lines. Cell phones don't work. There was a phone at the school, but there was like a five-second delay, so talking on the phone was very hard We could only talk back home through e-mail, which was a real blessing to have.

Face-to-face

Respondents characterized face-to-face communication as the most effective form of supportive communication, because of its immediacy and flexibility. Respondents reported receiving face-to-face supportive communications most often in social situations and in situations requiring immediate feedback. An example of the use of face-to-face supportive communication in a social situation was provided by “Shannon”:

Your female friends, there was so much bonding going on in the village on the weekends. There wasn't anything going on on the weekends, you know, so we gals would get together and watch movies, that sort of thing. You need that. They were such good friends up there I don't know how I would ever have made it without them, helping out on the day-to-day stuff. We're still friends; we still stay in contact ... When I look back I think, “Gosh – I lived there and worked there for two years, yet they understood what it was like for me and what we lived through.” So they can understand now, they can provide some really good insight into hard situations. I mean, they'll call me now when something might be hard for them, you know, and I'll say, “Remember that time when we lived in Alaska?” and we can get through stuff together.

“Shannon” also provided an example of how face-to-face supportive communication was used in a situation requiring immediate response. The urgency of this communication was heightened by the fact most other communication channels were unavailable:

One story, one of my favorite stories I like to tell, opens people's eyes to the situation we were living in, there in Alaska, on the Bering Sea. It was January and it was very windy. We walked out of school and watched the roof blow off of the store. The roof blew off the store and sliced the

power pole in half. It didn't register with us at the time, but the entire village was out of power. No power, no water. The entire village was cut off, with no power, no water, no heat, and no electricity. They opened up the school and [it] became a sort of community center, because it had a generator. The teachers stayed in the building the first night, and after that it was okay to be back in our building. After that we would not get scared really, but we would just wonder when help was going to come; after all, it was winter in Alaska. It got to a point for us where we would be melting snow for water and boiling water on our stove. We had a propane stove; not every stove in the apartments had propane, but we had gas, so we could cook, we could boil water. Basically we huddled together and supported each other. We were there for each other, doing what we could to take our minds off of our situation. We were telling jokes, telling stories – there was no TV. We got a little goofy – because we had to. A lot of us there liked to knit, so we'd be sitting there knitting with headlamps on. Funny stuff like that. We played cards, played games, lit candles, and just kinda kept each other company. We were isolated, out there by ourselves, and it was kinda hard. It was five days before they came out to fix the poles. We'd go walking around, my roommate and me, surveying the damage. There was debris everywhere. It was kind of an interesting time.

A quote from the previous section in regard to the importance of face-to-face communication with Lower-48 friends bears repeating here for its pertinence to the importance of face-to-face communication. Face-to-face communication with Lower-48 friends is characterized by Alaskan women much the same way – as crucial to building and solidifying friendships – as face-to-face to communication with Alaskan friends, in the words of "Karlene":

There's just a lot that you can't talk about in a phone call or an e-mail because it's just not comprehensive ... [Face-to-face meetings] gave you that time, and – and perspective, because you weren't living it. You had a

break from it and you go, “Oh, I forgot what it’s like to live differently,” you know, and so you’re kind of readdressing that, uh, that change ... I think then I realized how important, maybe more so than when I had lived in the Lower 48 – how important those friends were.

E-mail

Respondents said they considered e-mail a very valuable channel for supportive communication. Respondents who said they used e-mail reported that it combined some of the best elements of letters and face-to-face communication: It was nearly immediate, yet its tangibility added a “stickiness” to supportive messages. In situations where all three types of long-distance communication were available, e-mail was the preferred communication channel. There was no distinction among the types of messages sent via e-mail. E-mail’s merits were described by this “Shannon”:

Thank goodness for e-mail. It was probably the easiest way I could keep in touch. You know, up in Alaska there’s a three-hour time difference, so that complicated things. But I’d e-mail pictures of what I was seeing when I could. But you know, like anything else, life sort of takes over sometimes. You kind of get caught up in doing the things you’re doing ... Thank goodness for e-mail. I can e-mail them in the middle of the night or whenever. So we keep in pretty close contact.

However, access to e-mail could be compromised – and when access was compromised, respondents reported that some of the immediacy of its supportive capability was lost. However, the channel still functioned as a conduit for supportive messages from away, as described by “Pat” in the quote opening this segment.

Mail

Respondents ascribed more of a persuasive role to letters. Letters were used not only to update the people back home (or, more rarely, friends) on what was going on in respondents' lives, but also to convince recipients that what respondents were doing was safe, and fun, and the best thing for them. "I tried to put up a good front," one said about the letters she wrote.

At the same time, respondents ascribed a dutifulness to letter-writing. Letter-writing was something that had to be done as part of a tacit contract between the respondent and her family. Sometimes the contract had help being enforced, as described by "Allie":

The secretary at church was really good about getting me to write letters. I would come in and she would say, "It's Tuesday – have you written a letter to your parents?"... I wrote to my Mom every week, or something like every week. She kept all the letters, so I have a chance to – I kept them, and they're in a drawer.

Her comments point up another attribute of letter-writing: Letters were kept. Respondents of all ages reported either they kept their letters from home or the people they wrote to kept the letters. This permanence was not an attribute of any other communication channel.

Furthermore, respondents of all ages reported writing letters, even when e-mail was available. People who wrote letters and used e-mail said they used e-mail to report on more immediate, day-to-day situations and mail for broader discussions with more emotional content.

Respondents who wrote letters varied in the frequency with which they wrote. Some wrote letters several times a week; others wrote once or twice a

month. “Louise,” who described herself as a “letter-writer” recounted her letter-writing patterns this way:

I wrote to my parents at least once a week. I wrote to everybody on their birthdays -- and Easter, Valentine’s Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, things like that, you know. But I had five brothers and sisters, four of them younger than me, and I would write to them ... We communicated almost always by mail. I remember we sent everything air mail. Air mail cost six cents back then. I don’t think – we didn’t have just first class, I don’t think. If I sent it first class it would take two weeks or more. I don’t even think you could do it. If you sent a letter from Illinois to Wisconsin backs then it cost three cents, and if you sent one air mail from Alaska it cost six cents. It cost a lot of money at the time to send gifts back home or send something – and it was something we wanted to do because my parents did not have a lot of money and they still had children at home. I was the second-oldest of six children and my parents still had kids at home. So outside of letter-writing – and I did a lot more letter-writing than they did. The fact that they didn’t write as many letters didn’t discourage me. My dad maybe wrote me six letters when I was up there; my mom wrote more often, of course ... But my friend ... at work, her mom wrote to her every day. She wrote every day! It might only have been five or six lines, but she wrote every day – and I was a little envious of that. I had to keep telling myself, “That’s her folks. My folks love me just as much.” Because getting a letter was so very important, you see. When I got a letter I was so thrilled. It was like a lifeline to home.

Phone

The telephone was used least frequently by respondents because of cost, access, and voice quality. Initially phone calls were prohibitively expensive. “We didn’t make long-distance phone calls back then,” “Louise” said. “Three-minute calls were it, and even with that people couldn’t afford three-minute phone calls

to Alaska.” “Sue” added, “Except for when I was back down - down in the Lower 48 - not only did I not call my parents daily, I didn't call them more than once a month, and that was for no more than three minutes because it was so expensive.”

Access to quality phone service was also cited as being a problem for respondents living in remote areas of Alaska. “Pat” put it this way:

There were no land lines. Cell phones don't work. There was a phone at the school, but there was like a five-second delay, so talking on the phone was very hard. I called Ann once from Fairbanks. She and our parents were the only people we talked to on the phone.

Respondents who said they made phone calls and used e-mail drew distinctions between the types of messages they relayed through each medium, and the emotional content of those messages. E-mail was used for factual retelling of events or circumstances; phone calls dealt more with feelings and emotions. “Karlene” described it this way:

With e-mail ... you'd stick to sort of factual things that are just sort of going on in your life, but with the phone call I think it's definitely more personal because you've got that voice on the other end of the line, and you know you've got that – they can tell by your voice if you're joking about something or serious about something, and, you know, unless you're an excellent writer that doesn't always come through in your e-mail.

Other Media/Channels

In general research subjects did not report using other communication channels or communication media, such as text messaging, instant messaging, or social media. The lack of use of some of these media can be attributed to the lack

of cell-phone service in many areas where research subjects lived, and the time when research subjects lived in Alaska.

However, “Joyce” reported using a different communication channel in a time of particular stress – in the aftermath of a massive earthquake which struck Alaska in 1963:

After the earthquake hit [my parents] were very concerned. I got a message from a Ham radio operator who happened to be in contact through Salem, Oregon, who called me from my family because, you know, the phone lines were terribly busy. You just couldn't get through on the phone.

Summary

Respondents judged face-to-face conversation to be more supportive than other forms of conversation, though all channels of communication were deemed capable of conducting supportive messages. The characteristics of face-to-face communication which made it more effective are immediacy and flexibility, particularly in cases of extreme stress (such as the power being cut off to an entire village). However, phone calls and e-mails could duplicate aspects of face-to-face communication with only a slight decrease in efficacy. E-mails were singled out for their relative speed and their ability to convey factual information, while phone calls were judged effective in conveying the emotional aspect of either supportive messages or calls for support.

In addition, letters were cited by respondents of all ages as being sources of supportive messages. While more modern media would seem to have supplanted letters as a source of communication, even people who just left Alaska

stated that they wrote letters, looked forward to receiving letters, and used letters as part of the supportive process. Respondents alluded to a cathartic effect inherent in the letter-writing process which may be the key to letters' continued effectiveness as a support mechanism for Alaskan women.

Discussion

Extensive efforts have been made through the literature review and the research to establish a two-fold state of difference: that Alaska is a different place and Alaskan women are different – or are made to be different – than their Lower-48 counterparts. At the same time, extensive efforts have been made to establish that Alaskan women need and use supportive communication to deal with the demands of that different place.

We can review the success of those efforts on a step-by-step basis.

1. *Alaska is a different place.* The research paints Alaska as a wild place, the closest thing to a wilderness the United States has to offer. The physical characteristics of the area have been established. The state is nearly as large as the continental United States and has fewer residents than San Francisco. No place in the United States has a colder mean temperature in January than Point Barrow; no city with more than 10,000 residents is darker in the winter than Fairbanks. The raw statistical numbers are so completely opposed to the numbers for the Lower 48 that it is ludicrous to suggest the possibility for different attitudes, values, and experiences does not exist. However, in another, very real, sense, many of these geographical differences are irrelevant to the research. No place looks like any other place, and people are attracted to different places for different reasons. Also, if we are studying people, it matters little where the people *are not*. Alaska's vast open spaces only matter when people have to traverse those

spaces; without people traversing them, they are meaningless. There is no need to study uninhabitable portions of Alaska, or the rocky, arid slopes of Nunavut. Where the people are, and what the people are doing in the places where they are – those are the important concerns. Given that – moving beyond the place to the inhabitants of that place, as we must – we must consider that:

2. *People in Alaska are different.* The question that proceeds naturally from such a statement is: Compared to what? Among the people encountered in the literature was a pilot, a seller of baskets, a doctor, a newlywed, a cook, and a fur trapper. The people interviewed were teachers, housewives, a land surveyor, and a seminarian. Only the fur trapper is an unusual occupation for women anywhere. People were neither made different by their profession, nor were they made different by some of the stressors they encountered. Physical isolation, cultural isolation, illness, and family pressures all placed stress on Alaskan women, just as they have placed stress on women in other situations and circumstances (Lee, 2003; Soczka, 2006; Patrick, Cottrell, & Barnes, 2001; Ren & Du, 2006). Women's reactions to these stressors were no different than women in these previously documented situations: They sought support and communications of support from family, individual friends or groups of friends. The reactions to circumstances observed and documented in the literature were repeated in the research. This leads to a final overarching

statement, which is:

3. *We can only be concerned with the attributes of Alaska that affect people, and create needs for supportive communication.* Alaska's size is only a factor to people who have to deal with it. The research produced at least one woman, "Violet," who was not at all concerned with Alaska's size one way or the other. Her family was there, and close by, Anchorage was close by, the roads were well-plowed in the winter and well-paved in the summer. She liked winter, the darkness no longer fazed her, and besides, she said, it was not that cold where she lived; Illinois, where she came from, had more extreme cold. She described her existence as not being remarkable in the least, and by these simple measures we would have to agree with her. It was not that way when she first came to Alaska, and she was removed from family and friends and had to form new support networks, but her Alaskan existence had grown into that. Cold, darkness, and physical isolation no longer caused her stress, no longer required support. If every Alaskan woman's experience had been similar to hers, we would have to conclude that Alaska places no undue stress on the women that live there. At the risk of sounding existential, Alaska's attributes are not the issue, but rather people's reactions to those attributes. Not everyone reacts in the same way to those attributes, though there are some commonalities. In a nod to John Dewey and his philosophy of self-actualization, the thing that is most important to study is not

Alaska or the experience of women but the intersection of the two: Alaska as experienced by women, and their reaction to those experiences, specifically those experiences requiring supportive communication.

Within that context, the research took what was documented in previous research, transported it to Alaska, and obtained similar findings there. The easiest way to address this is to take the key findings from the literature and examine the shared experiences of respondents as they apply.

Supportive Communication Defined

Burleson (2008) defines supportive communication as “specific lines of communicative behavior enacted by one party with the intent of benefiting or helping another” (p. 386). The research turned up many instances of such communication, whether in the teaching of coping skills to an Army wife, the reassurance given to a young teacher afraid of not making her flights home, or in telling a young mother far from home that everything will be all right. There is an uncertainty-reduction component to this communication as well, matching the definition of supportive communication put forth by Albrecht and Adelman (1984); “a perception of personal control in one’s life” (p. 19) is enhanced when a young woman separates from her family and heads into the unknown – and finds the unknown to be more “known” than she had expected.

Formation of Support Networks

The research provided ample reinforcement for the assertion of Lakey and Cohen (2000) that stressful events trigger supportive communication and fosters the growth of support networks. Stressors ranged from children to cold to earthquakes; in almost every instance, respondents cited the use or the need for supportive communication.

The research documented the formation of support networks, which functioned as conduits for supportive communication in the manner outlined by Albrecht & Adelman (1984). It also reinforced Sarason et al. (1992) and Hamburg and Killilea (1979), which found that different types of stressful events of different duration produce different types of support and support communication. Supportive communication and supportive acts for young mothers tended to be episodic, dealing with whatever child-rearing crisis was occurring at the time (e.g., “once I had to be hospitalized, and my husband’s work friends came in and took care of the children while I was in the hospital”). Supportive communication for dealing with the cold required near-continuous intervention over a winter (e.g., “We would say to each other, ‘You need to go out on a hike,’ so you don’t get in that gunk, that funk of yecch”).

The key observations of Weiss, as summarized by Cutrona (1986), were reinforced; evidence was found of attachment (“they become your extended family”); social integration (“we enjoyed doing the same activities”); reassurance of worth (“they’ll call me now when something might be hard for them, you know, and I’ll say, ‘Remember that time when we lived in Alaska?’ and we can

get through stuff together”); reliable alliance (“she was just there ... she understood everything without having to talk about it”); guidance, advice and information, usually obtained from teachers, mentors, or parent figures (“She taught me a lot about life in Alaska”); and opportunity for nurturance (“he was always interested in what was going on with us”).

Elasticity/Density/Efficacy of Support Systems

Support systems dealing with chronic diseases like cancer (Caplan, 1974), can create a sense of permanence in their structure, purpose, membership, communicative styles, and messages (Metts, Geist, & Gray, 1994). Such formalized systems were not found among Alaskan residents; however, there was evidence of such networks which formed among Alaskan residents and Lower-48 families, especially when contact was very formalized and systematic (“I called my parents every week”).

The support systems which are more elastic in their formation, membership, lifespan, communicative style, and message – the networks with less density (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984) – were the networks most often seen in Alaska. These were the networks made up of bush teachers brought together for a school year, for instance. For in-person support networks, Alaska revealed itself as a place where relationships were ever-changing, creating friendships that spanned distances while forming other friendships with people just coming into the country.

As in the literature, relationship status had a strong influence on successful communication within support networks. Close relationships – immediate family in Alaska or close friendships in Alaska – definitely enhanced supportive communication; in addition, in contrast to what was reported in Albrecht and Adelman (1987), supportive communication coming from Alaska family and friends was characterized as being more appropriate and efficient (“They can understand now; they can provide some really good insight into hard situations”).

Cutrona’s (1986) finding that support networks consisting mainly of relatives tend to be higher in attachment, nurturance, and reliable alliance, while support networks consisting of non-relatives are higher in guidance, reassurance of worth and social integration was not entirely supported. While networks of Alaskan friends certainly helped with guidance, reassurance of worth, and social integration, they also supplied attachment and nurturance, often under the guise of a surrogate family (“we were just like family, only we weren’t related by blood”).

Waite and Harrison’s (1992) finding that distance between the stressor and the support network is negatively associated with efficacy of supportive communication found support in the research, especially when it came to Lower-48 friends. With Lower-48 friends the weakness of the attachment when compared to Lower-48 family became evident when extreme distance placed a strain on the friendship. Many Lower-48 friends drifted apart from their Alaskan friends, could not or did not bother to understand the sources of their Alaskan friends’ stresses, and were unable to provide effective support.

Sex and Supportive Communication

The research addressed sex differences in supportive communication obliquely. There was no evidence, for instance, that men were not able to understand the stresses placed on Alaskan women, and were unable to provide support. Fathers and other male relatives in the Lower 48 were able to provide support (“My dad was very supportive ... we sent him postcards”). One respondent (who was married at the time) noted that the first Alaskan friend she made was a man, and another (single at the time) reported that her best friend was a man. Five of the interviewees met their husbands when they were in Alaska; they did not say whether they were particularly good at supportive communication, but it is highly unlikely they were bad at it.

At the same time, there was “Louise”’s very powerful story of a father reacting with jealousy to his daughter’s love of “this Alaska.” Men were capable of not understanding why their female daughters, siblings, or friends would want to go to Alaska. Motivations for moving to Alaska in the first place were often different for men. Men were often transferred there for work and brought their wives along. Only in one instance was a woman able to get transferred to Alaska, and that was only after her husband had been transferred to Alaska. As “Karlene” said, “It was more of a money-making venture for him.”

There were no significant differences between men and women in the efficacy of supportive communication directed toward Alaskan women. There were differences in frequency, in part because some women (Alaskan bush teachers, for instance, or stay-at-home moms) were more frequently in the

company of women. Nothing in the research suggested that women preferred to seek supportive communication from women – or men, for that matter.

The lack of differences between the sexes appears to extend to the willingness to deliver supportive messages. Nothing in the research suggests, as MacGeorge, et al. (2005) did, that women are more likely to want to deliver emotionally supportive messages, or, as Goldsmith and Dun (1997) puts forth, that women are better supportive communicators than men.

Source and Type of Support

Just as suggested by Dunkel-Schetter et al. (1992), supportive communication toward Alaskan women was most often provided by family and friends – Alaska friends, primarily; however, Dunkel-Schetter et al. goes on to suggest that these groups have been found to be sources of different types of supportive communication, with the effectiveness of that communication based at least in part on receiver expectancy.

It is difficult to ascertain from the research precisely what types of supportive communication Alaskan women expected from different groups, other than they did not feel support for anti-Alaska sentiments from long-time Alaska residents; however, it was clear when support was expected and not received, such as in the case of the young woman whose father was not supportive of her move to Alaska, or the women with children who expected help from neighbors and did not receive it (“It’s not like the people, the neighbors or whatever, come over and say, ‘Can we shovel out your driveway?’”).

Working with the typology of supportive communication outlined by Blasband (1990), there was ample evidence of emotional support (“we’d just kinda give each other pep talks”), instrumental (“my husband’s work friends came in and took care of the children while I was in the hospital”) and informational support (“she taught me a lot about Alaska”). Alaskan women did not seem to prefer one type of supportive communication over another, even in times of extreme stress. When power was cut off to the native village, any of the three types of supportive communication would likely have been welcomed; instructions on how to restore power would have been appreciated, as would have stories of past experiences when the power went out. As it was, the supportive communication was emotional, and the respondent considered it appropriate – not that she would have considered the other two types inappropriate.

The only instances of minimizing and trivializing behaviors and communication, which have been characterized by Dakof and Taylor (1990) and Dunkel-Schetter (1984) as unhelpful and unsupportive, were provided by some Lower-48 friends, who were portrayed as not showing much interest in Alaska or their friends’ new situations (“There were a lot of jokes – ‘Oh, are you going to live in an igloo?’”). Their lack of willingness to understand their friends’ situations led to unhelpful and unsupportive communication.

Isolation

The literature's lack of consensus on the condition of being isolated and what constitutes loneliness was echoed in the research.

Many of the respondents were in situations that would be considered isolated – “Ellyn,” the only woman in a surveying gang of 20 men in the Alaskan wilderness; “Pat” and “Shannon,” bush teachers in native villages; “Eleanor,” a single woman traveling to Alaska alone in the 1950s – yet some described themselves as not feeling isolated, some described themselves as feeling isolated but not lonely, and others said they were lonely at times.

There is no question that the definition of isolation expressed by Weiss (1973) -- “a separateness from others ... unwanted individuation: being separated off from parents and others to fend for oneself, not just in the sense of becoming responsible for oneself but also in the sense of being and developing as a separate self” (pp. 14-15) – applies to the women under study; the research also turned up many instances of social or emotional isolation as documented by Weiss (1973) and others (Mullins, Johnson, & Andersson, 1987; Chappell & Badger, 1989; Vincenzi & Grabosky, 1987; Weiss, 1973).

Given that, why did some respondents consider themselves to be lonely while others did not? The key may be in Vincenzi and Grabosky's statement (1987) that loneliness is the “felt deprivation” which emerges from the isolation (Vincenzi & Grabosky, 1987, p. 259).

Some of the respondents said they did not feel deprived in Alaska; in fact, they made statements such as “I never felt so free.” Age and marital status had nothing to do with these statements. Respondents who said they felt deprived of something – most often close contact with family or friends, such as in the woman who was not able to see her grandfather before he died, or the woman with many girlfriends across the Lower 48 who felt she was being denied access to those friends – also mentioned feelings of loneliness with more emphasis and frequency.

In this regard, the research not only reinforces the findings of Vaux (1988), who found that feelings of loneliness can appear regardless of social situation based on the characteristics of the individual, but also embodies the biblical statement that “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Phillippians 4:11). Vaux’s typology of situations which encourage feelings of loneliness, including external control of a situation, social anxiety, and deficits in social skills, was not completely reinforced by the research; it could be that Alaska and Alaskans – the parts of Alaska experienced by the respondents, and the people who live there – are attuned to social anxiety and deficits in social skills because so many Alaskans came from Away into the country and had to find their own way. It could also be just the opposite: That so many Alaskans were like the respondents (“I wanted to ... get out of the ... middle-class, white, European thing, and when I got to Alaska the congregation, the church I was at was all transplanted middle-class, white European people”) that social anxiety was minimized.

However, this does not minimize the potential for women to feel isolated in Alaska. All the respondents said that at one time or another they felt isolated. In addition, their isolation did add stress to existing relationships, as postulated by Hart (1986), Neil and Jones (1988), and Tice (1990). Isolation was geographical and cultural, and to some extent respondents resorted to the “go-it-alone” mentality described by Tice (1990), with varying success. However, for the most part Alaskan women were able to handle the stresses of isolation, and the heightening effect isolation had on other stressors, though effective supportive communication.

Alaska

All respondents acknowledged that they considered Alaska to be a special place. Not all of them enjoyed their time in Alaska, but all of them said they realized they were experiencing something that most of their friends and family in the Lower 48 had never experienced. They acknowledged the beauty of the place, expressed a new regard for nature’s power, realized their insignificance in the greater scheme of things.

In that respect, the “first-in” phenomenon for Alaskan women was perpetuated. Contemporary Alaskan women no longer have the opportunity to be the first female bush pilot, the first female Native surgeon, the first female governor-slash-vice-presidential candidate. However, they can be the first of their family to teach in Alaska, the first of their family to join a surveying crew, to live in the bush, to fly to Alaska alone, to install the state’s first computers. Alaska is

still remote enough that women who go there have a special status in the eyes of at least some people in the Lower 48.

As for their role in Alaska, most of the women profiled had what in the Lower 48 would be considered women's jobs: teaching and homemaking. Only three had what would be considered non-traditional jobs for women: surveying, curating a museum, and installing computers. However, none of the women interviewed said they felt demeaned or oppressed in any way; women in "non-traditional" roles said they were not criticized in Alaska for taking on those roles, and women in "traditional" roles said they felt no particular pressure to take on those roles.

Discussion Summary: Research Questions Revisited

As a means of reviewing, RQ1 asked, "What are the circumstances or stressors that lead to supportive communication among Alaskan women?"

The stressors are physical and cultural isolation, children, cold, darkness, and holidays. None of these are unique to Alaska; however, they were capable of combining to create uniquely Alaskan stressful situations.

RQ2 asked, "What are the characteristics of effective emotional-support messages directed at Alaskan women?"

The characteristics of effective emotional-support messages reflected the typology forwarded by Blasband (1990): emotional support ("we'd just kinda give each other pep talks"), instrumental ("my husband's work friends came in

and took care of the children while I was in the hospital”) and informational support (“she taught me a lot about Alaska”).

Ineffective emotional-support messages were of the types described by Dakof and Taylor (1990) and Dunkel-Schetter (1984) as minimizing and trivializing. They were provided by Lower-48 friends, who were portrayed as not willing to understand their friends’ situations.

RQ3 asked, “Is there a difference in effectiveness of the supportive communication delivered by Alaskans and those living in the Lower 48?”

The answer is “yes,” to the extent that differences in effectiveness in supportive communication directed at Alaskan women had to do almost entirely with immediacy. In many cases the most effective supportive communication was the most immediate. With that said, Lower-48 friends and family could provide relatively immediate supportive communication via e-mail; respondents considered this sort of communication to be effective. Also, letters from home were often cited by respondents as providing effective supportive communication by the fact that *they were written*, not because they contained particularly supportive messages or were especially timely.

Building off of RQ3, RQ3a asked, “How do the characteristics of supportive communication differ between Alaskans and those living in the Lower 48?”

The key characteristic is immediacy. Alaskans were more capable of providing immediate support in situations that demanded it. The Good Friday Earthquake and the power outage in the Native village are extreme examples of

this, but given the great distances between Alaska and the Lower 48, immediacy is a major issue for Alaskan women. When Lower 48 friends and family could provide immediate communication, particularly in-person immediate communication, that communication was deemed to be highly effective.

Finally, RQ4 asked, “How does channel selection affect the efficacy of supportive communication among Alaskan women?”

Once again, the issue is not so much channel selection as immediacy. As one respondent put it, “Sometimes in Alaska what you have to understand is you just go with the flow.” Unexpected situations crop up in Alaska with unusual frequency: A moose appears in the driveway. The car will not start for a week of minus-35 days. Power is knocked out, and no one knows when it will be restored. Even an immediate form of electronic communication such as e-mail lacks the flexibility to deal with these situations. Only in-person communication has the flexibility and immediacy to deal effectively with these situations.

Therefore, the short answer to RQ4 is that all channels studied are capable of providing efficacious supportive communication; the only instances when efficacy falls off are when the wrong channel is chosen to deal with the situation – and there were very few instances cited by respondents where that happened.

Limitations of the Research

Only 12 interviews were conducted. Results of the last interviews indicated the research may be approaching saturation, where additional interviews

would not yield significantly different results, but it is not certain whether saturation was achieved. Additional research is needed to validate the findings.

There are two concerns with the sample: that the sample is too broad, and that the sample is not broad enough. The sample includes women whose time in Alaska varied from two months to 10 years, from the early 1950s to the late 2000s. This sample may be too broad; too many things may have changed in Alaska in 50-plus years, so that what was a common experience in 1955, when Alaska was still a territory, was not a common experience in 2008, when a (female) Alaskan governor was a vice-presidential candidate.

At the same time, the panoply of Alaskan experiences described in the interviews makes a case for a broader sample, to capture the differences that might be present in a single mother working on the Alaskan pipeline, for example, as opposed to a seasonal worker in a national park. There are no interviews with anyone who spent a portion of their childhood, adolescence, or even pre-marriage young adulthood in Alaska. All of these perspectives might have value in deriving a true set of shared experiences.

Directions for Future Research

First and most importantly, the current research must be completed and the study must move beyond pilot stage. Preliminary findings must become conclusions, and conclusions must be supported by research that has reached the saturation point.

Beyond that, since the preliminary findings indicate specific stressors are pertinent in spurring supportive communication – winter, physical isolation, and the feeling of being a stranger in a strange culture – each of the stressors might be examined individually for their role in engendering supportive communication.

Similarly, there is value in examining individual stressors quantitatively, or examining all stressors together quantitatively, to determine how each stressor functions as a spur for supportive communication. There are templates for such research (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Adelman & Adelman, 1987; Cutrona, 1986). Using Uncertainty Reduction Theory, as suggested by Berger and Calabrese (1975), as a framing mechanism for such research would seem to be particularly appropriate.

References

- Achatz, M., Caldera, D., Saylor, B., DeGross, D., & Alaska State Dept. of Health and Social Services, (1997, May 1). *Alaskan Voices*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED414116) Retrieved October 8, 2008, from ERIC database.
- Akiyama, H., & Elliot, K. (1996). Same-sex and cross-sex relationships. *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences*, 51B(6), 374.
- Albrecht, T. (1994). Social Support and Community. In B. Burleson, T. Albrecht, and I.G. Sarason (eds.), *Communication and Social Support*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- Albrecht, T., & Adelman, M. (1984). Social support and life stress: New directions for communication research. *Human Communication Research*, 11(1), 3-32.
- Albrecht, T., & Adelman M. (1987). *Communicating Social Support*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.
- Albrecht, T., Irely, K., & Mundy, A. (1982). Integration in a communication network as a mediator of stress. *Social Work*, 27(3), 229-234.
- Blasband, D. (1990). Social support, rejection, stress, and coping among gay men with AIDS. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California-Los Angeles.
- Burleson, B., & Gilstrap, C. (2002). Explaining Sex Differences in Interaction Goals in Support Situations: Some Mediating Effects of Expressivity and Instrumentality. *Communication Reports*, 15(1), 43.
- Buzzell, C. (2006, March). The best years of our lives. *Esquire*, 145(3), 206-234.
- Caplan, G. (1974). *Support Systems and Community Mental Health*. New York: Behavioral Publications.
- Caplan, G. (1976). The Family As Support System. In G. Caplan & S. Killilea (eds.), *Support Systems and Mutual Help*. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Chandler, C. (2004, Aug. 22). Alaska's women have historically been workers. *Alaska Journal of Commerce*. Retrieved October 8, 2008, from Newspaper Source database.
- Chappell, N., & Badger, M. (1989) Social isolation and well-being. *The journals of gerontology*, 44 (5), 169-176.
- Cobb, S. (1976). Social Support As A Mediator Of Life Stress. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 38(5), 300-314.
- Colaizzi, P.F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist sees it. In R.S. Valle & M. King (eds.), *Existential-phenomenological alternatives for psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Colby, M. (1939). *A Guide To Alaska*. New York: McMillan.
- Colomeda, L. (1996). *Through the Northern Looking Glass. Breast cancer stories told by Northern Native women*. New York (National League for Nursing)
- Creswell, J.W. (2006). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Cutrona, C. (1986). Objective determinants of perceived social support. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50(2), 349-355.
- Dakof, G., & Taylor, S. (1990). Victims' perceptions of social support: What is helpful from whom? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 80-89.
- Dordan, M., Nicholson, D., & Alaska State Dept. of Education, J. (1994, January 1). *Women and Minorities in Alaskan Aviation*. Alaskan Equity Publication.
- Dufresne, F. (1966). *My Way Was North*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.
- Dunkel-Schetter, C. (1984). Social support and cancer: findings based on patient interviews and their implications. *Journal of Social Issues*, 40 (4), 77-98.
- Dunkel-Schetter, C., Blasband, D., Feinstein, L., & Herbert, T. (1992). Elements of supportive interactions: When are attempts to help effective? In S. Spacapan & S. Oskamp (eds.), *Helping and Being Helped: Naturalistic Studies* (pp. 83-114). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Falk, D., Yi, H., & Hiller-Sturmhofel, S. (2008). An Epidemiologic Analysis of Co-Occurring Alcohol and Drug Use and Disorders: Findings From the National Epidemiologic Survey of Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC). *Alcohol Research & Health*, 31 (2), 100-110.
- Feinstein, L. (1988). Social support, dietary adherence, and blood-glucose control among patients with non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California-Los Angeles.
- Fry, S. (2006). A Technology Supported Induction Network for Rural Student Teachers. *Rural Educator*, 27(2), 1-10. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EJ783857) Retrieved October 2, 2008, from ERIC database.
- Fuller, A., NiCarthy, G., Stoops, N., Burden, D., & Gottlieb, N. (1987). Battering and abuse of women in intimate relationships. *The Woman Client: Providing Human Services in a Changing World*, 1, 209-222
- Geissinger, C., Lazzari, M., Porter, M., & Tungate, S. (1993). Rural Women and Isolation: Pathways to Reconnection. *Affilia*, 8(3), 277-299.
- George, D., Carroll, P., Kersnick, R., & Calderon, K. (1998). Gender-related patterns of helping among friends. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 22(4), 685-704.

- Gibbons, D., & Weingart, L. (2001). Can I do it? Will I try? Personal efficacy, assigned goals, and performance norms as motivators of individual performance. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 31(3), 624-648.
- Goldsmith, D. J., & Dun, S. A. (1997). Sex differences and similarities in the communication of social support. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 14, 317-337.
- Goldsmith, D. J., & Fitch, K. (1997). The normative context of advice as social support. *Human Communication Research*, 23, 454-476.
- Graef, K.. (ed.) (1991). *The Milepost*. Bothell, Wash.: Alaska Northwest Books.
- Hamburg, B. A. & Killilea, M. (1979).Relation of social support, stress, illness and use of health services. In *Healthy people: The Surgeon General's report on health promotion and disease prevention*. Washington, DC: U.S.
- Handwerker, W. (1999). Childhood origins of depression: evidence from native and nonnative women in Alaska and the Russian Far East. *Journal of Women's Health*, 8(1), 87-94. Retrieved October 8, 2008, from CINAHL Plus with Full Text database.
- Helmericks, C. (1944). *We Live in Alaska*. Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing.
- Hinckley, T. (1972). *The Americanization of Alaska, 1867-1897*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Pacific Books.
- Jones, D., Alaska Univ., A., Alaska State Commission on Human Rights, A., & Others, A. (1977). *The Status of Women in Alaska, 1977.A Preliminary Study*. Retrieved October 1, 2008, from ERIC database.
- Jones, S. M., & Burleson, B. R. (1997). The impact of situational variables on helpers' perceptions of comforting messages. *Communication Research*, 24, 530-555.
- Jones, W.H., Freemon, J., & Goswick, R. (1981). The persistence of loneliness: Self and other determinants. *Journal of Personality*, 49, 27-48.
- Kadushin, C. Social Density and Mental Health. In P.,V. Marsden and N. Lin (Eds.), *Social Structure and Network Analysis* (pp. 147-158). Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- Kearney, M.H. (2001). Focus on research methods: Levels and applications of qualitative research evidence. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 24, 145-153.
- Kessler, L., Folsom, R., Royall, R., Forsythe, A., McEvoy, L., Holzer III, C.E., Rae, D., & Woodbury, M. (1985). Parameter and variance estimation. In Eaton, W., & Kessler, L. (eds.) *Epidemiologic Field Methods in Psychiatry: The NIMH Epidemiologic Catchment Area Program*. Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press.

- King, P. (2004, Jan. 11). Alaska Group Celebrates 50 Years of Encouraging Women to Fly. *Alaska Journal of Commerce*. Retrieved October 8, 2008, from Newspaper Source database.
- Kleinfeld, J., & Kleinfeld, A. (2004). Cowboy Nation And American Character. *Society*, 41(3), 43-50.
- Kunkel, A. W., & Burleson, B. R. (1999). Assessing explanations for sex differences in emotional support: A test of the different cultures and skill specialization accounts. *Human Communication Research*, 25, 307-340
- Lakey, B., & Cohen, S. (2000). Social support theory and selecting measures of social support. In S. Cohen, L. U. Gordon & B. H. Gottlieb (eds.) *Social support measurement and interventions: A guide for health and social scientists*. New York: Oxford.
- Ledbetter, A. (2008). Chronemic cues and sex differences in relational e-mail: perceiving immediacy and supportive message quality. *Social Science Computer Review* 26(4), 466-482.
- Lee, M. (2003). 'How will I sew my baskets?' Women vendors, market art, and incipient political activism in Anchorage, Alaska. *American Indian Quarterly*, 27(3), 583-592. Retrieved October 1, 2008, from America: History & Life database.
- MacGeorge, E. L. (2001). Support providers' interaction goals: The influence of attributions and emotions. *Communication Monographs*, 68, 72-97.
- MacGeorge, E. L., Clark, R. A., & Gillihan, S. J. (2002). Sex differences in the provision of skillful emotional support: The mediating role of self-efficacy. *Communication Reports*, 15,17-27.
- MacGeorge, E. L., Graves, A. R., Feng, B., Gillihan, S. I., & Burleson, B. R. (2004). The myth of gender cultures: Similarities outweigh differences in men's and women's provision of and responses to supportive communication. *Sex Roles*, 50, 143-175.
- McGinnis, J. (1980). *Going To Extremes*. New York: Alfred P. Knopf.
- Meador, F. (1965). A Return To The Wilderness. *Alaska Review*, 2(1), 9-15.
- Meadows, L. & Morse, J. M. (2001). Constructing evidence within the qualitative project. In J. M. Morse, J. Swanson & A. Kuzel, (eds.). *The nature of evidence in qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Metts, S., Geist, P., & Gray, J. (1994). The role of relationship characteristics in the provision and effectiveness of supportive messages among nursing professionals. In B. Burleson, T. Albrecht, and I.G. Sarason (eds.), *Communication and Social Support*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

- Morris, L. (1994) Informal aspects of social divisions. *International journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 18, 112-126.
- Moss, G. E. (1973). *Illness, immunity and social interaction*. New York: John Wiley's Sons.
- Mullins, L., Johnson, D., & Andersson, L. (1987). Loneliness of the elderly: The impact of family and friends. *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality*, 2(2), 225-238.
- O'Connell, J., & Phye, G. (2005). Creating Strategies for Improved Teaching and Learning. *T.H.E. Journal*, 32(12), 26-29. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EJ762423) Retrieved October 8, 2008, from ERIC database.
- O'Keefe, B., & Delia, J. (1982). Impression Formation and Message Production. In *Social Cognition and Communication*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- Oleksa, M., & Alaska State Dept. of Education. (1991, January 1). Six Alaskan Native Women Leaders: Pre-Statehood. . (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED377992) Retrieved October 20, 2008, from ERIC database.
- Olson, D. A., & Shultz, K. S. (1994). Gender differences in the dimensionality of social support. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 24, 1221-1232.
- Patrick, J., Cottrell, L., & Barnes, K. (2001). Gender, emotional support, and well-being among the rural elderly. *Sex Roles*, 45(1-2), 15-29.
- Pierce, L., Steiner, V., Govoni, A., Hicks, B., Thompson, T., & Friedemann, M. (2004, May). Internet-based support for rural caregivers of persons with stroke shows promise. *Rehabilitation Nursing*, 29(3), 95. Retrieved October 1, 2008, from CINAHL Plus with Full Text database.
- Pyle, E. (1947). *Home Country*. New York: William Sloane Associates.
- Quevillon, R., & Trenerry, M. (1983). Research on rural depression: Implications of social networks for theory and treatment. *International Journal of Mental Health*, 12(1-2), 45-61.
- Ren, Y., and Du, H. Gender difference of social support networks of China's rural-urban migrants: A whole network analysis. Paper presented at the Population Association of America annual meeting, March 31, 2006, Los Angeles, Calif. Retrieved Sept. 24, 2008, from <http://paa2006.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=61441>.
- Samter, W., & Burleson, B. (1989). Evaluations of Communication Skills as Predictors of Peer Acceptance in a Group Living Situation. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED314806) Retrieved January 20, 2009, from ERIC database.
- Sarason, I.G., Sarason, B.R., & Pierce, G. (1992). Relationship Specific Social Support. In T. Albrecht, I.G. Sarason, & B. Burleson (eds.), *Supportive Interactions: Symbolic Discourse and Relationships*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

- Schillinger, E. (1988). Dependency, Control, and isolation: Battered women and the welfare system. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 16, 469-490.
- Schultz, B., & Saklofske, D. (1983). Relationship between social support and selected measures of psychological well-being. *Psychological Reports*, 53, 847-850.
- Schunk, D. (1995). Self-Monitoring of Skill Acquisition through Self-Evaluation of Capabilities. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED381276) Retrieved Jan. 2, 2009, from ERIC database.
- Severson, K. (2008, September 17). A Political Punch Line Is Dinner in Alaska. *New York Times*. Retrieved October 8, 2008, from Academic Search Elite database.
- Soczka, K. (2006). The gendered experiences of Wisconsin dairy farm women. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.
- Spiegel, D. (1990). Facilitating emotional coping during treatment. *Cancer*, 66, 1422-1426.
- State of Alaska (2008). "Alaska Population Projection Data Sheets." Accessed Oct. 1, 2008, at <http://www.labor.state.ak.us/research/pop/projections/AKNativePopProj.xls>.
- State of Alaska (2008). Alaska's University Celebrates the Milestones of Alaska Statehood. Accessed Oct. 1, 2008, at <http://www.alaska.edu/creatingalaska/calendar/calendar.xml>.
- Streubert, H., & Carpenter, D. (1999). *Qualitative research in nursing: advancing the humanistic imperative*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins. Retrieved October 8, 2008, from CINAHL Plus with Full Text database.
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Tardy, C. H. (1992). Assessing the functions of supportive messages. *Communication Research*, 19, 175-192.
- Tice, K. (1990). A Case Study of Battered Women's Shelters in Appalachia. *Affilia*, 5(3), 83-100.
- Tolsdorf, C. (1976). Social networks, support, and coping: An exploratory study. *Family Process* 15, 407-417.
- United States Census Bureau (2008). "State by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin." Accessed Oct. 1, 2008, at <http://www.census.gov/popest/states/asrh/files/SC-EST2007-alldata6-AL-MO.csv>.

- VanLear, C., Sheehan, M., Withers, L., & Walker, R. (2005). AA Online: The Enactment of Supportive Computer Mediated Communication. *Western Journal of Communication*, 69(1), 5-26.
- Vaux, A. (1988). Social and personal factors in loneliness. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology*, 6(3-4), 462-471.
- Waite, L., & Harrison, S. (1992). Keeping in Touch: How Women in Mid-life Allocate Social Contacts among Kith and Kin. *Social Forces*, 70(3), 637-655.
- Weiss, R. S. (1973). *Loneliness: The experience of emotional and social isolation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Appendix 1

Interview Script

What is your name?

What is your age?

Where do you live?

(If not Alaska) When did you live in Alaska?

For how long?

(If Alaska) How long have you lived in Alaska?

Where have you lived in Alaska?

What did you like most about living in Alaska?

Were there any special challenges about living in Alaska? Describe them.

Describe the circumstances that led to your move to Alaska. (PROMPT: Were you married at the time? Did you go with your husband? Did your husband go before you? Did your husband come after you? How long?)

Did you want to get away? Was that an aspect of your move to Alaska? If so, was “getting away” all that you thought it would be? How was it different?

Describe the reaction of friends and family when they found you were moving to Alaska.

How did you feel about leaving friends and family to move to Alaska?

How did you communicate to friends and family that you were moving to Alaska?

Before you left for Alaska, did you make promises to friends and family to keep in touch?

Did you keep those promises?

When you arrived in Alaska, who was the first person back home you talked with?

How soon after you arrived in Alaska did you talk with them?

Did you feel that people back home understood what it was like living in Alaska?

How did you communicate your feelings about Alaska to your friends in the Lower 48?

Are there any aspects of your Alaskan experience you felt uncomfortable discussing with your friends in the Lower 48?

What were some of the things they said to you about Alaska? Did they ever try to cheer you up? How did they try to cheer you up? What were some of the things they would say?

When you were living in Alaska, how did you feel about living in Alaska?

Tell me about the first friend you made in Alaska. How did you meet this person?

Did you feel like your Alaska friends understood what it was like to live in Alaska? Did you feel like your Alaska friends understood what it was like *for you* in Alaska?

Did your Alaska friends ever try to cheer you up? What were some of the things they said?

How did you communicate your feelings about Alaska to your Alaska friends?

Are there any aspects of your Alaskan experience you felt uncomfortable discussing with your Alaskan friends?

Did you meet with these friends in person? Did you do things together regularly? What were some of the challenges you faced in maintaining your friendship? How did you meet those challenges?

Did you stay in touch with people back home?

How frequently?

What channels of communication did you use to stay in touch?

Did you lose touch with any friends while you lived in Alaska? Describe how that happened.

Tell me about a time when you faced a challenge while you lived in Alaska and had to rely on your friends for support – either long-distance support or in-person support.

Appendix 2

Matrix of Respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Alaska	Place(s) Lived in Alaska	Current Residence	Occupation in Alaska
"Louise"	73	5	Fairbanks, Anchorage	Concord, Calif.	Teacher
"Violet"	72	61.5	Anchorage, Big Lake	Big Lake, Alaska	Teacher, Homemaker
"Shannon"	30	3	Bush	Phillip, S.D.	Teacher
"Sue"	76	2	Anchorage	Corpus Christi, Texas	Teacher
"Eleanor"	74	<1	Juneau	East Norwalk, Conn.	Computer Installer
"Chris"	32	2	Fairbanks	Weston, Wis.	Army Wife
"Katherine"	47	5.5	Anchorage	Tulsa, Okla.	Activities Director
"Pat"	38	2	Bush	Stevens Point, Wis.	Teacher
"Karlene"	41	7	Wasilla	Durham, N.C.	Art-Museum Curator
"Allie"	47	1	Anchorage	Amherst, Wis.	Pastoral Intern
"Ellyn"	49	29	Bush and Anchorage	Anchorage and Durango, Colo.	Land Surveyor
"Joyce"	76	3	Anchorage	Lynnwood, Wash.	Homemaker

Appendix 3

University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Protocol for Original Submissions

A complete protocol must be submitted to the IRB for approval prior to the initiation of any investigations involving human subjects or human materials, including studies in the behavioral and social sciences.

Send: 11 copies of (1) the completed protocol; (2) project abstract; and (3) samples of informed consent forms to the IRB chairperson. PROTOCOLS LACKING ANY ONE OF THESE THREE ELEMENTS WILL NOT BE APPROVED. In addition, copies of questionnaires or interview questions MUST be attached.

PLEASE TYPE

Project Title: Analyzing Alaskan Women's Use of Support Networks

Principal Investigators: Kit Kiefer

Department: Communication
Graduate Student _____

Rank: _____

Campus Mailing Address: 801 9th St., Plover, WI 54467

Telephone: 715-341-7417

E-mail address: ckief944@uwsp.edu

Faculty Sponsor (if required): Dr. Rhonda Sprague

(Faculty sponsor required if investigator is below rank of instructor.)

Expected Starting Date: 9/10/09
11/23/09

Expected Completion Date: _____

Are you applying for funding of this research? Yes _____ No *****

If yes, what agency? _____

Please indicate the categories of subjects to be included in this project. Please check all that apply.

* Normal adult volunteers

Minors (under 18 years of age)

Incarcerated individuals

Mentally Disabled

Pregnant women

Other _____

(specify)

(Faculty Member) I have completed the "Human Subjects Protection Training" (available at <http://www.uwsp.edu/special/irb/start.htm>) and agree to accept responsibility for conducting or directing this research in accordance with the guidelines.

(Signature of Faculty Member responsible for research)

(Department Chair or equivalent) I have reviewed this research proposal and, to the best of my knowledge, believe that it meets the ethical standards of the discipline.

(Signature of Department Chair or equivalent)

***** Do not write below this line – for IRB use only *****

IRB approval _____

Date _____

(Signature of IRB Chair)

**Approval for this research expires one year from the above date.
If research is not completed by this date, a request for continuation must
be filed and approved before continuing.**

Revised form: January 2001

Proposal Abstract

Write a brief description of the purpose of the proposed research project. (100-200 words)

Alaska presents a paradox for women: It values and rewards independence, but places unique demands on women when that independence leads to isolation. Communication-dependent support networks are one way Alaskan women could cope with isolation while maintaining their independence. Determining whether these networks exist and then studying them would help understanding of how Alaskan women deal with these issues. Phenomenological methods are appropriate for studying this question because of their ability to elicit deep, nuanced qualitative responses. In order to gather this information, interviews must be conducted and transcribed, and then the transcriptions must be analyzed for clusters of meaning.

Please complete the following questions for all research.

1. Describe the characteristics of the subjects, including gender, age ranges, ethnic background, health/treatment status and approximate number.

Female workers (ages 18-89) who are either currently living in Alaska or who have lived in Alaska. The goal is to find 5-25 women willing to be interviewed about how they sought supportive communication and built support networks. Participation in the study is voluntary.

2. Indicate how and where your subjects will be obtained. Describe the method you will use to contact subjects.

Participation of volunteers will be requested via e-mail and follow-up phone calls. Names of potential volunteers will be obtained via the "snowball" method, with potential subjects known to the researcher being used to recruit, or at least provide the contact information for, other potential subjects.

3. What are you going to ask your subjects to do (be explicit) and where will your interaction with the subjects take place?

Each participant will be asked the questions in the attached script. Their responses will be recorded and transcribed.

4. Will deception be used in gathering data? Yes _____ No X
If yes, describe and justify.

5. Are there any risks to subjects? Yes **** No _____
If yes, describe the risks (consider physical, psychological, social, economic, and legal risks) and include this description on the informed consent form.

Beyond the sharing of personal information, which has limited potential to cause psychological stress, there are no foreseeable risks to participants.

6. What safeguards will be provided for subjects in case of harm or distress? (Examples of safeguards include having a counselor/therapist on call, an emergency plan in place for seeking medical assistance, assuring editorial rights to data prior to publication or release where appropriate.)

The researcher will state that no anticipated cause for stress/anxiety should be present. Both pre- and post-interview commentary will assure the participants of their rights along with how their information and responses will be used. In addition they will be given the researcher's phone and e-mail address as well as the e-mail address and phone number of the IRB chair for any concerns or questions.

7. What are the benefits of participation/involvement in this research to subjects? (Examples include obtaining knowledge of discipline, experiencing research in a discipline, obtaining course credit, getting paid, or contributing to general welfare/knowledge.) Be sure to include this description on the informed consent form.

Their participation will provide society and science with information regarding the use of supportive communication and support networks in circumstances which can involve extremes in climate, isolation, darkness, strict societal norms, and removal from previously established support systems.

8. Will this research involve conducting surveys or interviews? Yes ***** No
If yes, please attach copies of all instruments or include a list of interview questions.

(SEE ATTACHMENT)

9. If electronic equipment is used with subjects, it is the investigator's responsibility to determine that it is safe, either by virtue of his or her own experience or through consultation with qualified technical personnel. The investigator is further responsible for carrying out continuing safety checks, as appropriate, during the course of the research. If electronic equipment is used, have appropriate measures been taken to ensure safety? Yes X
No _____

Recording devices will be checked for safety before proceeding.

10. During this research, what precautions will be taken to protect the identify of subjects and the confidentiality of the data?

Subjects quoted in the paper will not be identified by their real names. Tapes or digital recordings which include identifiers will be stored in a locked drawer at the researcher's home.

11. Where will the data be kept throughout the course of the study? What provisions will be taken to keep it confidential or safe?

Tapes or digital recordings which include identifiers will be stored in a locked drawer at the researcher's home. Transcriptions will be kept on a computer accessible only to the researcher at the researcher's home.

12. Describe the intended use of the data by yourself and others.

Data will be used qualitatively to delineate the shared experiences of Alaskan women as they form and use support networks.

13. Will the results of the study be published or presented in a public or professional setting?
Yes ***** No

If yes, what precautions will be taken to protect the identity of your participants? **State whether or not subjects will be identifiable directly or through identifying information**

linked to the subjects.

Subjects quoted in the paper will not be identified by their real names – except for the researcher’s mother, who is deceased. Only someone with previous knowledge of the subjects would be able to identify the subjects.

14. State how and where you will store the data upon completion of your study as well as who will have access to it? What will be done with audio/video data upon completion of the study?

Tapes or digital recordings which include identifiers will be stored in a locked drawer at the researcher’s home. Transcriptions will be kept on a computer accessible only to the researcher at the researcher’s home.

A completed protocol must include a copy of the Informed Consent Form or a statement as why individual consent forms will not be used.

Revised form: January 2001

University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point

Informed Consent for Research Involvement

PROJECT TITLE: Alaskan Women's Support Networks

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kit Kiefer from the Communication department at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. Your participation in this study is voluntary.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: To analyze how Alaskan women form and use communication networks for support.

PROCEDURES: You will answer questions on how you have formed friendships while living in Alaska, and how you have used your network of friends for support while living in Alaska.

POTENTIAL RISKS/BENEFITS: Beyond the sharing of personal opinions and stories, there are no other foreseeable risks to your participation. This study can provide society and science with important information regarding supportive communication under significant mitigating circumstances.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION: None

CONFIDENTIALITY: Measures have been taken to assure that your identity will not be disclosed in any materials disseminated beyond the researcher.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL: You can choose whether to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS: If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Kit Kiefer at 715-344-6087 ext. 17320/ ckief944@uwsp.edu or Jason Davis (IRB Chair) at [715-346-4598](tel:715-346-4598)/ jdavis@uwsp.edu

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD, a group of faculty and staff at the university who review each proposal to ensure that participant rights are respected and that research is conducted in a safe and ethical manner.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

ELECTRONIC SIGNATURE WILL BE OBTAINED AT THE END OF YOUR SURVEY
AFTER READING AND/ OR PRINTING PLEASE CLOSE THIS WINDOW AND
PROCEED TO THE SURVEY SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____