

# WHEN I ASKED ABOUT THEIR “HOUSEHOLD” AND SHE FLINCHED: EXAMINING PROBLEMS WITH HOW WE ASSESS HOUSEHOLDS IN NORTHERN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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## ABSTRACT

The “household” is an important concept in the health and social sciences and in the government census. It is often treated as an independent socioeconomic unit contained in a single physical structure. The household appears on the surface—especially to White non-Indigenous researchers—to be a benign and straightforward concept. However, how the “household” is defined and how household membership is assigned when doing research in northern Indigenous communities is problematic. It does not accurately reflect how many people live today. It is often at odds with how Indigenous community members define their own family relationships. Furthermore, use of household and related concepts like “overcrowding” in research can cause harm in Indigenous communities, by shaping how government resources or services end up being provisioned—or denied—to people. Drawing from the historic kinship literature in Alaska and Canada’s North, contemporary northern studies of household organization, and the author’s ethnographic and kinship research in northern Indigenous communities, this paper critiques current ways of defining household in research. Using my work in Aklavik as an example, I make suggestions for building more accurate and culturally appropriate ways of assessing households, family groupings, and social organization in northern communities.

## INTRODUCTION

I was about halfway through my dissertation field research in a Canadian Arctic community in the late winter of 2012. I was speaking with two women in the Susie Husky Health Centre about concerns that community members had regarding the bacterial infection my research team was investigating.

One woman asked me, “Because, is it overcrowding, too, in the household? You know when there’s so many of them?”

The other woman flinched. Hard. She looked straight at me while answering her friend, “I think we’re OK in our community. ‘Cause we’re not overcrowded people” (Carraher 2013:142).

To this day, I see that flinch in my mind.

The team of health researchers I was working for during my dissertation had already collected household-level data from participants, and I had joined the team to do an ethnographic study of local risk perceptions. Through this work, I came to learn what many Indigenous people living in northern communities already know: that the “household” can be a violent concept. It is violent in how it is defined, who gets to define it, and how its use brings about certain consequences for people. The ways in which local households and communities are represented in reports and literature help shape policy by suggesting what kinds of health or socioeconomic interventions are possible, and

who within these communities and households should be held responsible for implementing or receiving interventions (Nichter 2008:122). A little less than halfway through my first fieldwork stay, I decided, in collaboration with the locally appointed project planning committee and the team of researchers based in Edmonton, to develop a method for studying kinship ties and identifying how multiple households were connected to each other through kinship, socioeconomic ties, and ways of sharing and living together.

To many, the definition of a household seems straightforward and, on the surface, benign. The U.S. Census Bureau currently defines that “a household consists of all the persons who occupy a housing unit. . . . A household includes the related family members and all the unrelated people, if any, such as lodgers, foster children, wards, or employees who share the housing unit” (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). Statistics Canada defines household as “refer[ring] to a person or group of persons who occupy the same dwelling” (StatsCanada 2020). Both the U.S. and Canadian governments define household in terms of a physical structure (a dwelling or housing unit) that can be pinpointed geographically and to which group-counts of people can be conceptually anchored. The household so defined is useful for statistical counts, and therefore, for research because it is assumed it can be standardly applied. It is seen as useful because it creates a demographic unit that exists between the levels of the individual person and a whole neighborhood, settlement, or population.

However, doing household research in northern communities can be a touchy subject, as I discovered. The connotations of how government, policy makers, and researchers assign people into household groupings can be inaccurate and harmful. It continues to shape who does (and does not) have access to wealth, property, and social supports and programs. It is also often an inaccurate picture of who people and their families and communities are. Still, many Indigenous communities and organizations recognize a need for research and want research to be done in their territories and populations. So, what to do? This article examines problems with how the household concept is commonly employed in anthropological and health research in northern North America today and how this concept was shaped by the historical context. Rather than attempting to provide a one-size-fits-some solution, I discuss some things to consider when planning to include measures of social and household organization in research.

## BACKGROUND

To understand the way the household is defined in the United States and Canada today, we may look at how the concept was developed and applied in anthropology, the taking of a census, and the administration of policy. Across these contexts, the people defining the household have been largely White Euro-Americans or Euro-Canadians who drew on Western ideas about the nuclear family, marriage, naming practices, “domestic function,” and broader epistemologies about how humans are connected to lands and what it means to “live together” (reside together) or have a “home.”

### “HOUSEHOLD” IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

“Family” and “household” have been very messily tangled up in anthropological theory, to the point that we cannot agree if the knot is made of two ends of the same thread, or two separate strands. Much of the early twentieth century work on kinship focused on what lineages, descent, and marriage accomplish in the public realm of the political sphere (seen as men’s spaces) and only “marginally paid attention to family and domestic groups” (Holy 1996:51). In the 1960s–1970s, anthropologists debated how the domestic sphere should be conceptualized, particularly how best to define the *units* of the domestic domain in a way that would be applicable cross-culturally (Holy 1996:51). Henrietta Moore (1988:54) wrote:

The major difficulty in talking about the “domestic” is that we automatically find ourselves having to consider a range of amorphous concepts and entities like “the family,” “the household,” the “domestic sphere” and “the sexual division of labour” [*sic*], which overlap and interact in complex ways to produce a sense of the domestic sphere. The family and the household are two terms which are particularly difficult to separate clearly.

Ladislav Holy linked the connection between family and household in anthropology as stemming from Malinowski’s definition of family as a “bounded social unit” in which emotional bonds among members, along with their co-residence in a physical location for the purpose of raising children, were the key distinguishing features (Holy 1996:53). Donald Bender (1967) defined household based on the variables of co-residence and domestic functions. He stated that while the definition of a family is only sometimes dependent upon these, but not

always, “the family is a strictly kinship phenomenon and, as such, is best defined strictly in terms of kinship relationships. This is because families, as a variety of kinship group, vary independently of co-residential groups and of domestic functions” (Bender 1967:499). Yanagisako criticized Bender for assuming that the family and the household are always logically distinct categories (1979:198) and pointed out that basing the household on “residential propinquity” does not work for the study of seasonally nomadic societies or for those who move frequently between multiple houses or dwellings in the same or across multiple settlements (Yanagisako 1979:164).

Several have argued that northern Indigenous populations are not adequately represented as single, economically independent households (Craver 2004; Dinero 2003; Langdon 1991) and are more accurately represented by describing family groups cooperating across multiple households (Craver 2004), super households (Burnsilver et al. 2016; Wolfe 1987; Wolfe and Walker 1987), or other groupings (see Dinero 2003; Harder and Wenzel 2012). The large international project Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic (SLiCA) expanded research beyond housing and household makeup to better understand “dimensions of living conditions in terms meaningful to Arctic Indigenous people that can be associated with hypotheses about regional, community, household, and individual differences” (Anderson et al. 2002:312). The project was conducted over several years in multiple Arctic nations and explored several indicators of living conditions including family and social networks and individual household makeup, the structural conditions of housing itself, and many other indicators such as language, self-identification, cultural identity, employment, hunting and fishing, health, spirituality, communication and technology, discrimination, education, and more (Poppel 2015:44). Called an “Arctic social science mega project” (Poppel 2015:40) by one of its own researchers, SLiCA was well supported by several Arctic governments and Indigenous organizations, was well funded, and was collaborative and community-engaged through all phases of study design and implementation. Significantly, SLiCA demonstrated that locally relevant measures of family and household composition can be devised for application in socioculturally diverse populations, and that these can, with coordination, allow for powerful regional comparison. However, research and social policy in general in the Arctic has not (yet) abandoned the myth of the centrality of a “nuclear household,” nor has it fully addressed the

stigma and consequences for Indigenous communities that become labeled as “overcrowded.”

A major reason, I believe, for the persistence of this myth is that the “house” or “household” has been historically tangled up in anthropological concepts of kinship. Morgan ([1881] 2003, [1885] 1975) saw the Iroquois long-house and their traditional (meaning precolonial) culture to be a lens through which anthropologists could examine past “primitive” societies. For him and his contemporaries, this thing called “kinship” was the mechanism by which societies work to both culturally and biologically reproduce themselves. Kin terminology is a way of expressing how a kinship system works, and therefore is a means through which to understand a society—both through examining how it is structured according to a local “cultural logic” defining reproductive pairings according to W. H. R. Rivers ([1911] 1968) and through seeing it from a Native’s perspective, as Malinowski (1922, 1929) advocated. Despite critiques against Rivers and Malinowski, I do agree that understanding local ways of knowing “family” and “kinship” is important. To that I would add that understanding how people live *within* and *across* their household groupings is crucial in order to create fair representations of how people live in communities (e.g., “domestic groups”). Here, I mean it is important to understand with whom people spend time eating, doing family or household activities, sleeping, and basically living their lives within the physical and social spaces that make up housing structures. Yanagisako (1979) pointed out that Malinowski never used the term household and only more vaguely used the term “family” in his descriptions of Indigenous Australians. However, throughout the twentieth century, many anthropologists still analyzed “domestic groups” and “households” based upon Malinowski’s root concepts of the family, as those persons who form emotional bonds for the purposes of living together to raise children and reproduce society.

“Although anthropologists commonly employ the terms family and household loosely without attaching to them rigorous, formal definitions, at the same time most recognize some sort of distinction between the two” (Yanagisako 1979:162). The difference that matters here, but that remains undertheorized and underexamined, is the assumed “residential propinquity” of the household or domestic group. Additionally, one of the most persistent myths of nineteenth-century kinship theory is the idea of the “nuclear family,” which is often implied to be synonymous with the “nuclear household.” As Schneider (1968,

1984), Needham (1960), and feminist scholars such as Ortner (1984) and Franklin (2013) have pointed out, anthropological kinship had long been supposing that there is a natural biological basis that all cultural kinship systems are trying to define in their own ways. This is problematic because anthropologists were often seeing other cultures' ways of "doing" kinship as merely a different way of building onto an assumed "natural" base unit—a nuclear family. This base unit is by extension intellectually mapped onto definitions for nuclear households. A second major problem is that describing nuclear families in relation to household makeup has also historically contributed to the "snapshot" view in which the "nuclear family" is defined in purely formal terms as two opposite-gendered spouses who have children all living together in a house, because this assumes the family is "a distinct, static and durable social unit. . . . It engenders a view of society as a static structure of discrete units which can be enumerated and whose interrelationships can be analyzed and eventually compared with the units and their interrelationships distinguishable in other societies" (Holy 1996:59–60).

Fortes distinguished the domestic group from the family but also described the nuclear family as:

the reproductive nucleus of the domestic domain. It consists of two, and only two, successive generations bound together by the primary dependence of the child on its parents for nurture and love and of the parents on the child as the link between the reproductive fulfillment. The domestic group, on the other hand, often includes three successive generations as well as members collaterally, or otherwise, linked with the nucleus of the group. . . . The domestic group is essentially a householding and housekeeping unit organized to provide material and cultural resources needed to maintain and bring up its members. (Fortes 1969:8–9)

In the ethnographic literature, "joint" and "extended family" are ambiguous terms (Holy 1996:67). However, both require that we accept that the nuclear family is the building block that makes these other arrangements possible, as what is being joined with or extended upon is the nuclear household.

Simpson introduced the term "unclear family" in contrast to nuclear family, arguing that the former is more common in the U.K., because of the high rates of divorce and remarriage in the second half of the twentieth century. Children of divorced parents end up living in two households while neither parent lives in both; thus the family's

economic and emotional relationships must be renegotiated (Simpson 1994). In families where children are raised by parents from separate households, household membership can be more closed or open to individual members within the same family. In some families either parent is welcome to visit and participate in activities in the other parent's house; while in others, the parents stay more physically and emotionally separate while the children move between the two homes (Jacobson et al. 2001). This should beg for us the question of *whose* constructions researchers are privileging, especially in cases where the data about each household is gathered from one respondent only. This has been a problem with the census as well, as enumerators in the Northwest Territories were instructed to go house to house and collect data from the "head of household" (Hamilton 2007) who was (until 1976) defined as the husband leading a nuclear family group (see Downey 2003).

#### THE "HOUSEHOLD" AND "FAMILY" IN NORTHERN ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropologists have for many decades acknowledged that Indigenous cultures in subarctic and Arctic regions of North America have not historically followed Euro-Canadian or Euro-American conventions of making and naming family groups, or of residing in and using household spaces according to Western cultural expectations (Asch 1988; Bodenhorn 1988; Burch 2006; Helm 2000). However, it was not until later in the twentieth century that anthropologists started to work outside the discipline with researchers and policy makers to develop more accurate, culturally informed measures of family and household organization. While there has been some promising work trying to correct this, problematic definitions of family and household are still used in much research in the North. Likewise, the U.S. and Canadian census categories have been updated multiple times to improve accuracy but still may be improved upon.

Morgan's "systems" approach to kinship created a comparative template of six cultures (Hawaiian, Eskimo, Iroquois, Crow, Omaha, and Sudanese) to which living populations and their ancestors could be compared in ethnography (Morgan [1871] 2012). From Morgan's Eskimo (now called Inuit) kinship system, we get his description of the nuclear family as the central unit, although this has been corrected at length in Ernest "Tiger" Burch Jr.'s descriptions of Inupiaq social organization (Burch 1975, 1980, 2006).

Burch created his own model for identifying important subgroups within Iñupiaq society from larger “nations” all the way down to categories within individual families ranging from the broadest grouping with “compound families” to the “domestic families” and individual “conjugal families” that make them up (Burch 2006). Conjugal families are approximately like the Western idea of a nuclear family, but still not quite the same. While Iñupiaq traditionally trace their lineages bilaterally, Burch provides more nuanced descriptions in which the conjugal family is often made up of a coresident spousal pair and their unmarried children (2006:79), while “complex conjugal families” may include polygynous, or more rarely, polyandrous spousal groups and their unmarried children (2006:87). However, conjugal families are not equivalent to single households by either standard of co-residence or domestic function. Dwellings were traditionally lived in by the conjugal family *and* their extended kin, making up what he termed the “domestic family.” Thus, to describe “domestic functions” at the level of a nuclear or conjugal family unit, or at the level of a single household unit, would be inaccurate. Studying her own people and ancestors, Adeline Raboff (2001:5) draws from Burch’s use of “nations” for Iñupiaq groups and explains why this is also appropriate for use with Gwich’in, Koyukon, and Lower Tanana. In her work, she also applies Burch’s definitions of estate, range, border, and boundaries—explaining how and why these terms are appropriate for considering cultural dynamics in Athabascan societies despite the fact that Burch developed these in his study of an Eskaleut (Inuit) culture. The Mackenzie Delta, where I have done research in Aklavik, is made up of the homelands of Inuvialuit (Inuit) and Gwich’in (First Nations). Although these groups are distinct in ancestry and culture, Burch’s conceptualizations are applicable in many ways because these are based on social formations within families and family activities that change with the seasons, rather than being based primarily on residential propinquity, or on patriarchal and Eurocentric notions that consider the nuclear family the “natural” or “base” unit of society.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING

For both research and policy purposes, it makes sense to use social categories that reflect how people know themselves, and how people interact with each other. Here I turn to problems of conceptualizing “domestic function” in terms of single households, and how analysis of domes-

tic function is incomplete unless we look at sharing—both how it is done in daily practice and Indigenous ways of knowing why, how, and with whom to share.

First, domestic function in Inuit as well as Na-Dene populations rarely occurs only within the walls of a single house. Craver’s (2004) methodology utilized household data from the Social Transitions of the North (STN) research project conducted in Iñupiaq settlements in Northwest Alaska, which included individual and family histories as well as genealogical analysis, socioeconomic data, social demographics, and epidemiological data. Craver concludes that:

Household data revealed that an Iñupiaq household living under one roof is rarely an independent entity, either economically or in other ways.... [D]omestic functions are divided among a network of kinspeople—people who may live in several separate households and even in separate communities. (Craver 2004:50)

In the Gwich’in settlement of Arctic Village, Alaska, Dinero (2003) found that residents who were beginning to participate more and more in wage labor in the late 1990s did so as a way of maintaining their ability to continue engaging in traditional subsistence activities within the mixed wage-welfare-subsistence economy. He defined “a ‘household’ as an occupied dwelling unit” (Dinero 2003:149). However, he notes that in subsistence-based economies like Arctic Village, “the nuclear household is not the production unit. Rather, the extended family across generations is the unit that works cooperatively to benefit the group as a whole” (Dinero 2003:136).

Asch (1988) defines “household” based on residence in a dwelling for Dene of Pe Ts’eh Kì (Wrigley), NWT, in the second half of the twentieth century. He writes that the household in the 1980s when he was there is the “minimal unit of social organization within the community,” and that it is typically composed of a “nuclear extended family consisting of a father, mother, at least one adult son and daughter, and about four younger sons and daughters” (1988:47). However, he also explains that Pe Ts’eh Kì households are linked together closely by kin ties and obligations for working and sharing together that existed prior to settlement. These resemble the traditional extended family groups who wintered together at their fish lakes, while the makeup of the whole community corresponds to the regional band membership before settlement (Asch 1988:35).

Marshall (1977) argues that examining kinship cross-culturally requires us to look at sharing, rather than just production and reproduction. Chance (1987) posited sharing as fundamental to Inupiaq social life. Using social network analysis, Collings (2011) examined how subsistence foods and other economic resources are shared across different kin relations in the Inuvialuit community of Ulukhaktok, on Victoria Island, NWT. Hunters share more often with distant and collateral kin in ways that allow them to weather changing climatic and environmental conditions affecting subsistence availability but that also limit their abilities to earn wage employment; in contrast, households with more securely employed wage earners more often share across parent–child and sibling relations. So we see that even in a geographically isolated population of fewer than four hundred, there are a variety of ways in which people in the same culture draw on kin ties to engage in domestic functions within and across individual household units.

Bodenhorn (1988) expanded beyond economic studies of subsistence food sharing among Inupiaq, concluding that sharing is a “core metaphor” in *all* of Inupiaq social life, including the sharing of names and shared raising of children. Another social network analysis, done among Labrador Inuit living in Nain, found that both traditional kinds of exchanges such as subsistence foods and exchanges such as cash or store-bought foods draw upon close kin ties, especially in observations of frequent reciprocal sharing within and across households (Dombrowski et al. 2013). The authors state their findings support the conclusions of Stern (2005), mainly that Inuit are responsible for helping to support their kin living in other households through sharing of food, cash, and other forms of assistance related to maintaining a home and raising a family. Although the exact institutions of sharing and rules for distribution of game and other items have been damaged or lost due to colonialism, the “moral value” (Bodenhorn 2000; Stern 2005) of sharing, particularly among kin, persists. Sharing remains today as a primary means through which Inuit maintain traditional cultural and moral values, and both accommodate and resist the economic disparities created by the introduction of a wage labor economy and modern housing (both the design of the actual housing stock and housing policy in governance) (Stern 2005:67). A key takeaway from this work is that grouping people in northern Indigenous communities into single households based on physical dwellings creates an artificial and incomplete picture of whatever researchers are hoping to analyze, be

these health patterns, exposure to environmental factors in the home, economic exchange, or other research topics.

#### “HOUSEHOLD” IN CENSUS AND POLICY

As Hamilton (2007) has pointed out, both historic and current enumeration of Indigenous peoples in Canada must be considered differently from non-Indigenous populations because of their colonial relationship with the state. Colonial governments wanted to know how to distribute resources in the new lands they had stolen, as well as how to engage with and control the people from whom these lands had been stolen. To do this, they needed to know who and how many people were living in the territories. Enumerators were equipped with a set of definitions for different ways to count and represent people in a census, and the definitions used today have evolved from these original usages (Hamilton and Inwood 2011). These definitions are based on Eurocentric ideas of the nuclear family, gender, patrilineal surnaming, and ideas about land and property ownership that assume a sedentary lifestyle.

The nomadic and seminomadic lifestyles of Indigenous peoples complicated enumeration greatly in the late 1800s in British Columbia. Much to the enumerators’ frustration, Indigenous peoples of the Stewart, Francis, Pelly, and Liard Rivers were traders who frequently traveled and resided at different times of the year in Yukon and British Columbia, regions that were each supposed to have separate populations (Hamilton and Inwood 2011:102). In another example, several polygamous families in the Northwest Territories were misrepresented in the 1885 census for Canada. The definitions the enumerators were required to follow stated that “only one woman could be assigned to the head of a household, while other wives and their children lived separately...a situation which posed problems for enumerators who were charged with recording individuals as part of a household, according to their instruction” (Hamilton and Inwood 2011:102). Records indicate that a woman was often listed as a “widow” even though her husband was actually alive and well, both because he wasn’t supposed to be recorded as having more than one wife, and because wives often did not live in the same dwelling as their husband (Hamilton and Inwood 2011:102). Specifically, in the areas that fell out of treaty lands (which includes much of what we call the Northwest Territories today), enumeration in the 1881 census was to be done based on household visits, although many enumerators reported back that this was nearly impossible to

do. Starting in 1901, census instructions required for the first time that the Department of Indian Affairs officials should serve as enumerators in the north and other sparsely populated regions outside of reservations (Hamilton and Inwood 2011:99). In both Canada and the United States, the involvement of the DIA and Bureau of Indian Affairs in administering the census in the early 1900s essentially turned the census into a tool of colonization (Hamilton 2007; Shoemaker 1992).

In Nunavut, enumerators frequently would interview only those who they perceived as the head of a household. They would make up birth locations and precise birth times to record for people who could not provide an exact place or date and time of their birth, and they often misrepresented Inuit in the census, labeling “children who were full family members in Inuit society ‘boarder,’ ‘step,’ or ‘adopted’” (Alia 2007:58). This was due to them trying to force representations of Inuit individuals and families into definitions provided for the census categories of the times, which created confusing and inaccurate census records. This led to problems that continued well throughout the late twentieth century, including the distribution of government benefits like pensions (Alia 2007:57–59).

Census and official records of births, names, income, marriages, and deaths need to be accurate to ensure that whole regions and individual people are provided with appropriate redistributions of social and economic resources. However, multiple systematic attempts to rename and redefine Indigenous families and households throughout the north occurred simultaneously as lands were divided up, housing stock built to accommodate nuclear families was introduced, and children were sent to residential schools or taken into adoptive or foster families outside of their home communities. These have had serious consequences for people because land use, subsistence, and other socioeconomic resources are all tied to legal definitions of who “counts” as Native, as family or kin, including who counts as a household member. In fact, such legal definitions act as mechanisms of genocide. Researchers working in northern communities need to understand the colonial gravity of protocols for determining who does and does not “count” as Indigenous, and who does and does not count as a household or family member in the communities where we work. Drawing on my experiences living and working in a remote multicultural Arctic community in Canada, I discuss the major problems persisting in how the “household” is often defined and measured, and I suggest ways of improving household assessment in research.

## MEASURING HOUSEHOLD MEMBERSHIP AND KINSHIP IN A MULTICULTURAL CANADIAN ARCTIC SETTLEMENT

The Canadian North *Helicobacter pylori* (CANHelp) Working Group is a multidisciplinary research team based out of the University of Alberta that works in partnership with communities in Yukon and the Northwest Territories to research the human health burden of *Helicobacter pylori* bacterial infection. Our team includes scientists from epidemiology, pathology, microbiology, oncology, public health, and anthropology; territorial and community healthcare providers; and Indigenous leaders. Since launching our first community-driven research project in Aklavik in 2007, the CANHelp Working Group has grown to include research partnerships with nine Indigenous communities in Yukon and the Northwest Territories. These partner communities are diverse: they are home to Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, Northern Tutchone, Tlingit, and Kaska Dena peoples as well as a smaller number of other First Nations and Métis and some non-Indigenous people. We work with locally appointed planning committees in every community that we partner with. I have worked for this team in four of the nine partner communities, although in this article I focus on Aklavik. The initial Aklavik data on individual epidemiological factors, and household epidemiological and social factors including household occupants, was collected by the CANHelp Working Group before I joined the team, in field research trips conducted between 2008 and 2010.

My work in Aklavik focused on researching contemporary perceptions of health risks in an ethnographic and historically informed context (Carraher 2013), of which kinship research came to make up one component. When first partnering with the CANHelp Working Group (CHWG) as a research trainee under Dr. Karen J. Goodman’s supervision, I reviewed the previously collected surveys, including individual and household questionnaires. I was living in Aklavik at the time I reviewed these questionnaires, which were held in storage at the health center. In addition to reviewing records, I was learning who was who in the community by watching youth hockey in the arena, shopping at the store, playing volleyball in the school gym, going ice fishing with new friends, and learning to sew with beads and moose hide from mothers, grandmothers, and aunties. It was not long before I began to understand that some households were connected to each other through extended kin ties

not represented in the data previously collected, but members of these households spent significant amounts of time living in each other's houses or otherwise sharing time, food, and other resources with each other as if they were functionally one large household. For the purposes of the CHWG research on an infectious stomach bacterium, it seemed appropriate to suggest that we develop a way to consider potential risk factors and protective factors on a level somewhere between individual houses and the whole community. This is because direct person-to-person transmission of the bacteria is most likely to occur between people who spend the most time in close contact with each other, which in the sociocultural context of Aklavik would include some relatives across more than one household. I approached the Aklavik Health Committee and the director of the CHWG, and they all agreed kinship analysis would provide added benefit to the research.

To study kinship in an established research project in which initial data had already been collected, I had to work within certain data protocols and definitional boundaries. Participants already had individual and household ID numbers, so I worked to identify which households are related to each other through extended kin. I collaborated with the Aklavik Health Committee as well as the CHWG staff to determine what family information to collect and how best to disseminate the information to the community after completion. In Aklavik, what worked best for our research purposes was to define attributes for identifying which individual residences ought to be grouped together into extended family groupings that represented people living in and supporting each other across dwellings—in the end some groups include only a single dwelling, most include between two and four, and some include up to eight. Between one and four generations of people reside in most households in the community, and these are largely extended kin groupings. However, there are few apartments with two roommates who are not kin, and one taxi driver lives in the house of the taxi company owners, though he is not related to them through kinship. Most non-Indigenous residents live with their own kin or alone, except for a couple of non-Indigenous residents who have married into local families. The nurses live in their own apartments in a single building provided for them, as do Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). In previous decades, teachers who traveled to the community to work lived in similar apartments the school provided for them; however, today the nonlocal teachers (who were all non-Indigenous during the period of my study) live

wherever they can find accommodation, mostly in private rentals. In fact, my roommate in the first year I lived in Aklavik was a new teacher from Ontario who shared the rent of Ruth's log house with me.

These social formations were based on the overlapping kin charts I collected as well as a review of the previously collected household surveys for the Aklavik *H. pylori* Project—both of which collected information about where people in one's family currently reside. The groupings of extended families residing across dwellings (what we ended up calling "multihousehold groups" or MHGs) were verified by community co-researchers and representatives from the Aklavik Health Committee—and, like Burch's work in Inupiaq communities in Alaska, were based around identifying groups of people who regularly participate in domestic functions with each other: eating, sleeping, sharing resources, and spending time together. Based on this work and a review of the broader literature, I identified four problems that appear consistently in northern studies and are also present in Aklavik:

1. The household is often an incomplete picture of co-residence patterns and domestic function.
2. Definitions of the household based on the nuclear family as a core unit are often at odds with how Indigenous people define their own family and household memberships.
3. Misrepresentations caused by these definitions potentially exclude people from being able to access resources, causing harm.
4. Related constructions used in policy and research such as "household crowding" are stigmatizing, pathologizing, and harmful to Indigenous peoples. They can also be inaccurate and do not make a lot of sense from a local historical perspective.

Aklavik provides an excellent case to illustrate these problems because it is multicultural, home to Inuvialuit (Inuit) and Gwich'in (First Nations), Métis, and non-Indigenous people. Located on a sharp bend in the Peel Channel of the larger Mackenzie River where bear, caribou, fish, and berries have historically been plentiful, it has always served as a meeting place between different people. This is why the trading post was established there in the early 1900s, soon followed by the first church, log houses, and, eventually, the rise of year-around occupation of the hamlet (although several people do still travel out on the land for weeks or even over a month at a time, to remote hunting cabins and family fish camps). Today, Aklavik sits at the border between the Inuvialuit

Settlement Region (ISR) and the Gwich'in Settlement Area (GSA) and is represented by three local governments: the Hamlet, the Aklavik Community Corporation (Inuvialuit government), and the Ehdiitat Gwich'in Band (First Nations government).

Compared with the SLiCA "mega project" (Poppel 2015:40), analysis for the Aklavik *H. pylori* project was on a much smaller scale with fewer personnel and less funding and time. Kinship and household analysis were not the main research topic but were intended as just one (of several) means for researching another topic altogether (bacterial infection in this case). SLiCA authors (and many other scholars) acknowledge that family and household make-up continue to change in northern populations and that northern cultures and communities continue to largely not revolve primarily around the nuclear family. My work in Aklavik is more localized, but it provides an opportunity to examine the historical and ethnographic context more deeply, and it provides a case study to critically examine major problems encountered when attempting to do household-level research in northern communities.

#### THE HOUSEHOLD IS OFTEN AN INACCURATE PICTURE

In initial work on the Aklavik *H. pylori* project, each participant recruited into the project was assigned a participant ID number. Two digits in the number represent the housing unit that the individual reported living in during their interview. One respondent from each household enrolled in the project filled out a household questionnaire that collected data on possible environmental and living factors that might be associated with *H. pylori* infection, as well as some demographic data about the household occupants. Specifically, one question recorded the members currently living in that household and their relationship to the respondent, which was used to initially identify household membership. For statistical analysis, the CANHelp Working Group needed each individual person to only be represented in the data set once (no one should be "double counted"). Working within those parameters, I set out to identify how individual households are connected through kin ties.

While filling out kinship charts with participants in my fieldwork, I welcomed anyone who wanted to be included. Those who were not already enrolled in the project went through the informed consent process for the first time with me. I did not limit myself to only collecting kin charts from one person per household. These charts

quickly started to overlap as someone's child on one chart was someone else's sibling, partner, or parent on another. In addition to asking who the respondent's parents, partner, siblings, and children are, I asked which of these relatives currently lives with the respondent in their household. It should be noted that I did this work between 2012 and 2015, and I knew that co-residence would not always match what we had on record from household surveys collected earlier in the Aklavik *H. pylori* project. Children grow up and move. People form or dissolve affinal partnerships. New babies are born, and some people die. As ethnographer James Clifford wrote, "Cultures do not hold still for their portraits" ([1986] 2010:10).

As the charts started to overlap, I began to see that household membership is incredibly fluid in some families but more constant in others. In a few cases, individuals will report on household membership differently even when asked about co-residence during the same period of time. For example, a young Inuvialuit adult who was the respondent on one chart reported names for his birth mother and father, and he identified all of his father's children from a second marriage as his siblings, who he sometimes lives with. When that man's father was the respondent for his own kin chart, he did not list this young man as a relative, only naming his children from his second marriage. When the young man's mother (his father's ex-partner) was a respondent for her own chart, she named the young man as her son who lived with her. In the household questionnaire from the initial Aklavik project, this young man was listed as living in his mother's household (who lives alone when her son is not staying with her). When I asked the young man which household he *lives* in, he said he lives "sometimes with Mom, sometimes at [name of father]'s place with my brothers." When I asked if he stays at either household more often or if he feels like he is a member of just one household, he responded that people stay with their different relatives all the time. It is no big deal to come and go in different family members' houses. Based on service-provider and researcher definitions, the young man described above could be classified as one of the "hidden homeless," who moves between multiple residences but does not own, nor is he head of household, in either. But as Christensen (2017:21–22) points out based on her work in the Northwest Territories, "homelessness" is an "outside word," meaning that care must be taken with how homelessness is approached, studied, and applied in Indigenous contexts. As my intent was to describe people how they understand themselves, I classify this

young man as living in an extended family that includes multiple households.

Looking at the *CANHelp* Working Group data without my kinship research, we would not know that this person considers himself part of his father's household. Responses like this were common. Some people reported children, siblings, or cousins would stay in their houses for shorter or longer periods of time, sometimes because a person has a seasonal job or spends time away for subsistence and visits to family camps, or to go on summer trips to Herschel Island or Shingle Point. No matter how systematic one is about it, recording household membership according to co-residence in a dwelling is an inaccurate portrayal of how several people live in their families. As others have pointed out, children with parents in different households are often members of both (Jacobson et al. 2001; Simpson 1994). A study of eight rural Alaska villages found that on average half of all households experience changes in co-residency, or household membership, over the course of a year (Bruden et al. 2013). The authors conclude that taking "household migration" into consideration for designing research at the level of households is important in rural Alaska Native settlements, both to improve the accuracy of the results and to identify and deliver appropriate health interventions. In northern settlements such as Aklavik, where housing stock is limited and wait lists for public housing are long, adult children continue to be members of both their parents' households and may stay in either place, moving back and forth. Furthermore, surveys from only one respondent per household reflect that respondent's perspective on which of the people count as household members, but they may not represent all the people actually staying in the house.

#### THE "HOUSEHOLD" IS AT ODDS WITH HOW INDIGENOUS PEOPLE KNOW THEMSELVES

Aklavik residents have their own ways of defining household membership and family. In my experience, when people talk about where they live, they tend to reference a whole community, "I live in Aklavik," but refer to dwellings as places where "I stay" or "I was staying at." Identity is more often discussed in terms of what regions one's ancestors are from and who one is related to, rather than which house a person currently lives in or previously lived in. The degree to which people feel rooted and attached to a physical house structure varies, while the degree to which people feel affinity for a locale—the community they were

born in, raised in, or where their ancestors are from—appears to be more consistently meaningful. This raises questions about how strongly census enumerators have leaned on "residential propinquity" as an indicator of household membership, as discussed by Yanagisako (1979).

One February day in 2012, I collected a kin chart from a middle-aged Inuvialuit man who told me a story about building his own house, something he was very proud of especially since most housing was provided by the government. He said his family did not have permanent houses before: "I'm from a family of nomads!" Growing up, his family moved back and forth "across the coast" from Herschel Island to Paulatuk. "In the springtime every year, all my mom had to do was start to cry that she wanted to see her mom, and Dad would pack up the family and we head out!" It was not until this man was older that he stayed in Aklavik long enough to be married and raise a son, at which point it became important to him to build his own house, with a big porch, to his family's liking. Not everyone felt the same about their housing, but people whose houses were built by themselves or a family member were proud of the fact, while people who lived in government-provided housing had different kinds of emotional attachments to their housing and based their senses of "home" on different criteria.

Several people in Aklavik talked about their families being from "all over the delta." Many adults I interviewed in 2011–2012 discussed growing up any time between the 1950s and 1980s in families that moved often between multiple settlements, including between Tuktoyaktuk and Paulatuk in the ISR, Fort McPherson and Tsiighetchic in the GSA, Old Crow in Yukon, and Inuvik, which like Aklavik sits on the border between the ISR and GSA. One woman I interviewed who is Gwich'in on her mother's side and European on her father's side was adopted by the Inuvialuit man who married her mother when she was a young child. One of seven children, she recounted moving with her mother and adopted father to Edmonton, Alberta, and then to several settlements in the Dehcho and South Slave regions of the Northwest Territories before moving to Inuvik where she attended residential school and eventually back to Aklavik. Not all families move between multiple settlements while raising children, and several families in Aklavik reported living in the same house for years or sometimes decades. However, the fact that there is such wide variation in how family groups move indicates that defining household membership based on co-residence reported at one time only gives us, at best, a mo-

mentary snapshot of part of a larger family's life—often a blurry snapshot at that. Furthermore, basing household membership primarily on who is reported residing in a dwelling at one point in time arbitrarily separates family units living within the same settlement that community members recognize as single cohesive units to which they belong.

In Aklavik, people emphasize home and family in terms of social networks and relationships with places, such as family camps or whole communities. Government-provided housing may have the same occupants for years or may see occupants come and go (especially teachers or RCMP who are not originally from the area). Houses that have been built by community members may have identities of belonging that outlast the duration of their original occupation. The log house I rented for the first year I lived in Aklavik is still referred to in town as “Ruth Stewart’s old place” or “Ruth’s log house,” even though she sold it to the present owners who have been renting it out to different people for years now.<sup>1</sup>

#### MISREPRESENTATIONS OF HOUSEHOLD ARE EXCLUSIONARY AND HARMFUL

In policy and in housing designs, both the United States and Canadian governments have attempted to reshape Indigenous societies based around the concept that an economically independent nuclear household is ideal. By building access to benefits and other services around household units based on co-residence, Indigenous kin groups that take care of each other become divided by literal walls. For one of my key informants in Aklavik, an elder Gwich’in woman, colonialism has been directly tied to housing policy and the design of modern housing. She told me it “was a big mistake” when people started moving into Aklavik to live year-round. She told me, “The government said your kids have to stay for school. Next thing, we had houses in town.... Then they give you oil. The government said, ‘We’ll take your house down and build you a house.’” When I asked her why she said it was mistake, she replied, “It disrupted the families! And disrupted family activities” (Carraher 2013:40). Suddenly, children were boarding in residential schools for much of the year, missing their families and missing out on traditional ways of learning about subsistence, spirituality, language, and their cultural identity. As Ruth told me, she understood why so many people in her generation were depressed and why “parents started to drink.”

Ruth often talked about the introduction of government housing and welfare in my interviews with her, as well as when we would visit informally, for tea. “The government keeps Aboriginal people under foot. They don’t want to empower us, they want to keep us under their foot,” she said while visiting me in May 2012, in the log house I was renting, which used to be hers. Prior to government housing in the mid-twentieth century, Ruth told me, “the Métis lived in Pokiak, the Hansens, the Wrights, and the Rosses were big families there.” Pokiak is across the Peel River from Aklavik, where the now-century-old remains of Hansen’s log house peeks up out of the ground—just some log beams and a little bit of the roof is left. Hansen, who built and lived in that house, was a Dutch man who married into a local family. Ruth continued, “The Inuvialuit lived on the other side of the river.” However, the government started paying Indigenous families an allowance if they sent their children to the residential school. Aklavik All Saints School opened in 1936 and operated until 1952. Children were sent to Inuvik residential schools after the Aklavik All Saints School closed, although some children attended the Federal Day School, which was renamed Moose Kerr School (Usher and Brody 2010). Along with the introduction of a wage economy and welfare payments, fur prices dropped significantly, and trappers could no longer support their families with fur sales alone.

Aklavik floods in the spring when the river ice breaks, sometimes requiring evacuation from homes. In the 1950s, the territorial government built a new town about 35 miles east, which became *Inuvik* (the “place of the people” in Inuvialuktun). It was hailed in the media at the time as a marvel for its innovative above-ground utilidor system and other modern designs, and people were encouraged to relocate there. Ruth remembers that when the government tried to get people to move to Inuvik, “they offered everyone who would move a house and a job. A lot of the Pokiak families left, and a lot of the young families [in Pokiak and Aklavik].” Ruth sees the introduction of government housing and welfare as a major reason for health and social problems that exist today in Aklavik, which keep people under the government’s foot.

Like Stern (2005) found in Ulukhaktok, housing design and policy and the wage economy encourage the nuclearization of Inuit households, yet the moral value of sharing (Bodenhorn 1988, 2000) persists and works to maintain social, economic, and cultural ties between extended kin that link multiple household units together

into a more meaningful grouping. Similar cultural values of sharing with people—usually with kin, although sharing is also emphasized as something good to do with anyone in a community or at an event such as a feast or gathering—are found among First Nations and Métis in northern Canada and among Alaska Native communities. Sharing is culturally important, but it is also an economic survival strategy. For social and health research done in northern Indigenous populations, it makes more sense to work locally with people to decide how best to identify social groups or networks for analysis of research variables. In many cases, identifying sharing networks that tie multiple houses together can provide a more accurate sampling unit. Of course, this takes time and a commitment to do long-term work with a community, and it raises some important questions about how best to compare research between multiple settlements or regions when different social units are assessed. But these are not reasons to not try.

#### REPRESENTATIONS OF “HOUSEHOLD CROWDING” CAN BE STIGMATIZING AND HARMFUL

Crowding is a very real issue in northern regions, where the cost of living is high, available full-time employment is insufficient, housing stock is limited, and wait lists for public housing are full and long. It has been observed in the North that household crowding influences a number of health problems, including infectious disease, respiratory health, food security, and mental illness (Bruce et al. 2016; Hansen et al. 2020; Riva et al. 2014; Ruiz-Castell et al. 2015; Singleton et al. 2017). However, research and policy seeking to address household crowding also brings with it the potential to harm the very communities it is intended to help. Working with immigrant families in North America, Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson (1998) discuss how “overcrowding” becomes an absolute empirical measure, but one based on whose cultural perceptions? Lauster and Tester (2010) discuss how comparative measures such as “household crowding” actually end up further harming minority groups. Policies often end up being designed to be administered according to the dominant group’s definition of social units, which works to discipline minority groups to conform to these definitions to access resources or supports. Researchers and policy makers may not intend harm when assessing household crowding, but the stigmatizing consequences of how Indigenous populations are represented in scholarship as well as media are very real. As Morin and colleagues (2015) point out,

the subjective perceptions of living conditions in Arctic communities do not always agree with so-called objective measures of living conditions applied by researchers. While Nunavummiut have made it known that they are dissatisfied with the inadequate number of housing units available in their communities, which leads to what researchers and policy makers call “overcrowding,” the authors conclude that “there are significant discrepancies between the dark picture usually painted of Inuit conditions and certain realities for Nunavummiut” (Morin et al. 2015:222). This resonates with my experiences in Aklavik, where people raised their concerns about the inadequate quantity and quality of available housing stock while simultaneously pushing back on negative stereotypes they perceived as being levied at them by government, policy makers, or others about Indigenous people being “overcrowded,” unsanitary, or unfit in how they live.

The social and health sciences tend to assess “crowding” based only on data collected in a population at a certain point in time, leaving out any consideration of historical family size or other important factors. While living in Aklavik, I worked with residents to trace family lineages back to the late 1800s, when the hamlet was permanently settled. The term “overcrowded” does not make much sense for describing household makeup today in Aklavik, when understood through a local historical lens. As I looked over dozens of hand-drawn charts drafted in collaboration with two community members, we saw that there were fewer and fewer children born to mothers over the last five generations. As I researched the settlement history of the hamlet and reviewed old photographs of people’s houses and the community, as well as aerial photographs of the settlement, I saw that houses had gotten larger in each generation. Tipis gave way to the first small one- or two-room log houses, later replaced by “match-box” houses provided by the government and the larger multiroomed houses of today. While houses became larger and were built with multiple rooms, based around Western ideas of domestic function, independence, and privacy, family size has actually decreased, due to both the lower average number of children born per mother and the breaking up of extended families living across numerous houses.

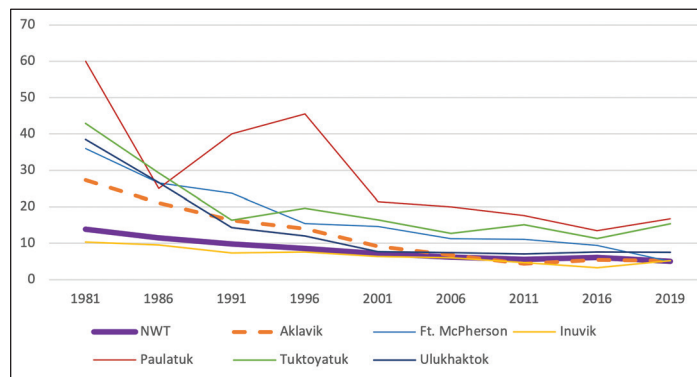
We do not have complete data on average household size based on co-residence in the first half of the twentieth century. However, combining several lines of inquiry, including accounts from living Elders, kinship analysis, and archival information, suggests the number of persons per

room and whole house has steadily decreased since the early twentieth century. Elders report families are smaller than they used to be, and kinship data extending back to many of the first settlers in Aklavik in the early 1900s supports this. There's been on average fewer children born per mother over the decades in Aklavik. Aklavik has consistently had lower percentages of household size and "crowding" relative to other settlements in the Beaufort Delta and the Northwest Territories as a region, and the number of families living with six or more people in a housing unit has steadily decreased since the 1980s (Table 1, Fig. 1). However, in Aklavik, as in other NWT communities, we have seen an increase in the need for public housing and for government assistance with rent.

What has increased in Aklavik over the past decade is not necessarily the size of families living in a household but

the percentage of households that qualify as "core needs households" and the percentage of housing units that are "not affordable" (Table 2). Core housing need (CHN) is a measure of households in Canada that was developed in the 1980s to determine private residential households eligible for government financial aid to afford or maintain "acceptable" (safe) housing. A household is determined to be in core need if the housing falls below at least one indicator of housing adequacy or if the occupants would have to spend 30% or more of their total income before taxes to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that meets the government standard (StatsCanada 2017). While the percentage of core needs houses in Aklavik decreased from 36% to 24.3% between 2009 and 2014, the percentage of housing that is not affordable has continued to rise. In future health and socioeconomic research, it may make more sense to do research at the level of multihousehold kin groups and assess the degree to which households that support each other qualify as core needs households, rather than assess crowding solely based on co-residence counts at the single-household level. When assessing household crowding, it is important to frame research questions, data interpretation, and dissemination of results in ways that acknowledge Indigenous communities' perspectives and experiences and take care to describe the limited housing stock available as being the main problem—instead of labeling people as "overcrowded."

Yanagisako (1979) discusses needing to know how economic constraints and demographic factors affect household as well as family size and structure,



**Figure 1.** *Percentage of households reporting six or more persons occupying a household in Beaufort Delta communities.*

**Table 1.** *Measures of household occupancy and crowding for Beaufort Delta communities, 1981–2019.*

	Beaufort Delta communities																	
	Percentage of Households with Six or More Persons										Average Persons per Household							
	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2019	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	
Aklavik	27.3	21.1	16.3	14.0	9.1	6.8	4.4	5.4	5.2	4.2	3.9	3.7	3.3	2.9	2.7	2.8	2.7	
Fort McPherson	36.0	26.5	23.7	15.4	14.6	11.3	11.1	9.4	5.0	4.7	4.3	3.9	3.4	3.1	2.9	3.0	2.6	
Inuvik	10.3	9.5	7.3	7.6	6.4	6.0	4.7	3.3	5.2	3.1	3.1	2.9	2.9	2.8	2.7	2.7	2.6	
Paulatuk	60.0	25.0	40.0	45.5	21.4	20.0	17.6	13.5	16.7	6.0	4.9	4.9	5.0	4.3	3.9	3.6	3.1	
Sachs Harbour	—	—	—	—	—	11.1	12.5	7.5	—	4.6	3.6	3.1	3.3	3.2	2.8	2.4	2.5	
Tsiigehtchic	40.0	16.7	12.5	—	16.7	16.7	9.1	—	x	4.6	3.7	3.9	3.3	3.2	2.9	2.4	2.7	
Tuktoyaktuk	42.9	29.3	16.3	19.6	16.4	12.7	15.1	11.3	15.4	5.3	4.4	3.6	3.7	3.4	3.2	3.1	3.3	
Ulukhaktok (formerly Holman)	38.5	26.7	14.3	12.0	7.7	7.4	7.1	7.6	7.5	4.6	4.0	3.4	3.4	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.1	
Northwest Territories total																		
Northwest Territories	13.9	11.5	9.8	8.6	7.2	6.2	5.6	6.1	5.0	3.5	3.4	3.2	3.1	2.9	2.9	2.8	2.8	

— means data are not available; X means data are zero or too small to be expressed.

Sources: NWT Bureau of Statistics, Census (2001, 2006, 2011, 2016); StatsCanada, 2016 Census of Population.

*Table 2. Percentage of core needs among households and houses needing major repairs, Aklavik.*

Year	Population	Housing Units		Not Affordable		Not Adequate		Not Suitable		In Core Need	
		Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
2000	632	254	100	15	5.9	46	18.1	35	13.7	83	32.6
2004	623	248	100	19	7.7	89	35.8	20	8.0	80	32.2
2009	618	228	100	10	4.3	80	35.0	26	11.4	82	35.9
2014	637	226	100	16	7.1	53	23.4	18	7.9	55	24.3
2019	622	222	100	25	11.3	62	27.9	18	8.1	—	—

— means data are not available.

Sources: NWT Bureau of Statistics, NWT Community Surveys (2004, 2009, 2014, 2019); 2000 NWT Housing Needs Survey.

and we need to pay attention to how social inequality influences domestic organization in specific locales. Taking an ethnographic and historical perspective to contextualizing how community members understand and classify their family relationships and household members is an important first step toward improving the social units we use for research. This perspective must ultimately inform policy, which has real consequences for how people live.

### CONCLUSION: WHAT WAS IN THAT FLINCH?

Despite her protest that the community of Aklavik is not an “overcrowded people,” my friend still wanted me to do kinship research and wanted the *CANHelp* Working Group to continue our research overall, including looking at potential health-protective and risk factors that may be present in people’s housing environments. She, and many other community members, saw the value of looking at how people live together in their housing as well as in their multigenerational families to produce research that accurately represented who they are and how they live. Numerous times over the years I have lived in or visited Aklavik, people have spoken with me about using research to advocate for improved policies or new programs that will fit people’s real needs. When reviewing the first draft of this paper for community feedback and approval, one Aklavik Health Committee member pointed out “the single population...in the next generation is going to continue to grow,” and Aklavik needs more housing for single adults in addition to the small and large family units available. However, they also emphasized that “when an opportunity for our young people opens for a home unit to occupy on their own, they will do so but by extension are still family and belong to the household of their parents by association, [if] not by paper documentation by govern-

ment standards.” Thus, in moving forward with research in the social and health sciences, the question is not “Why don’t we just throw out single-household surveys and use something totally different?” The question, instead, should be “How can we do this better?”

The medical anthropologist Mark Nichter (2008:122) proposed defining the household as a type of *social formation* rather than a group count of people who reside in the same physical dwelling. “A narrow focus on the physical space constituted by a house and member counts overlooks the extent to which households are constituted through social processes and projects, as well as the extent to which household boundaries are permeable, their memberships fluid and the ways memberships are made and unmade over time are variable” (Nichter 2008:123). If we follow this idea that households are foremost social formations rather than group counts of people who have “stayed” in a dwelling at the moment of being surveyed, this should help to build a description of kinship and household dynamics that reflects how people in northern communities know themselves and that is also based on how multiple housing units in a community are connected through family ties and reciprocity. Collecting data from multiple people in a family or household, as I did with kin charts, allows for the fluidity of household residency and makeup to be detected—and it can be used to develop a locally appropriate method for systematically identifying attributes that ought to be included in assigning household membership to individuals participating in research. Discussing issues such as interhousehold migration, and which activities and attributes local people see as the most definitive of what a household is and what household members do with each other, can help shape research instruments that center social formations, fluidity, and a local cultural worldview. This can be done in potentially many ways, through meetings with community collabora-

tors or co-researchers or through early-stage exploratory surveys, just to name a couple of ideas. Such instrument development should also be fitted to the research topic and capacity of the research team. For the CAN*Help* Working Group, we were researching a chronic bacterial infection that is believed by scientists to most likely spread through direct person-to-person transmission but that often does not result in noticeable symptoms until much later after infection. Because the source of *H. pylori* infection is so difficult to pin down in time and space, identifying those people who spend the most time in close contact with each other in their daily lives is important. In Aklavik—and elsewhere in the Canadian North and Alaska—a more accurate grouping of people who are in close daily contact is achieved when we look at how extended families live within and across multiple households. For the CAN*Help* Working Group, I recorded multiple residences for some participants who do stay at different houses but who also listed the residence the individual reported living in at the time of sample collection. It would be possible to go even further with identifying multihousehold groupings of extended families in a way that takes interhousehold migration into account, by following people rather than residences. These are decisions that researchers should make in consultation with community members.

Potential risks in research should be discussed with people, their concerns for research should be addressed, and the research process and dissemination of results should not be harmful or stigmatizing to the communities where we work. We can work to build measures of social units that are informed by local cultural understandings and the historical context of demographic patterns. We can also work to find ways to make studies comparable between communities and regions in which the meaningful social units of a society or population vary, as the SLiCA project has done on an impressive scale with populations living in Greenland, Scandinavia, eastern Siberia, Canada's Arctic, and in Alaska. This indicates that locally adapted methods can be used to create indicators of living conditions—including ways of measuring household makeup and family dynamics—that can be used to develop regional and interregional comparisons (Eliasson et al. 2015). However, we should strive to achieve these ends even in smaller-scale, local, and regional studies, as I have tried to do with my work in Aklavik.

## ENDNOTES

1. Ruth Stewart no longer resides in Aklavik. When Aklavik Health Committee members were reviewing the first draft of this paper prior to submission to the journal, they acknowledged her role as an important and outspoken member of the community and felt that the information shared with me in interviews is important and still relevant today, but they also expressed that I should state she does not currently live there.

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