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Sharing and cooperation in the Far North: old social mechanisms under evolving economic and climatic conditions in village Alaska

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Bldg 50 Room 51a

Talk 2:15-3:30

Discussion: 3:30-5:05

A substantial body of research seeks to explain the evolution of sharing and cooperative behaviors in hunter-gatherer societies in the distant past. Now, from the other end of the time horizon, researchers seek to understand the ongoing role of sharing and cooperation in the modern context, as subsistence-oriented societies increasingly engage in mixed subsistence-cash economies. In these evolving economies and against new sources of uncertainty (e.g. climate change, development), do sharing and cooperative behaviors still act to spread risk and mediate scarcity across a population? Are the most productive households the largest distributors of food and other resources, or do other cultural factors, such as age and status intervene in distribution pathways? How does engagement in the cash economy modify involvement in subsistence? I'll explore these questions in three villages in Arctic Alaska, two coastal Inupiat communities, and one interior Gwitch'in village. Data represent valued flows of subsistence foods, equipment and labor, based on own and cooperative hunting and sharing relationships through complete village networks. Results indicate that inflows into households (lbs) from hunting and social relationships within communities are strongly skewed, with between ~10-20% of households reponsible for 80-90% of all meat and fish harvested. Identifying patterns of redistribution from productive households to other households highlights the strengths and limitations of sharing and cooperative relationships to contribute to arctic livelihoods under conditions of change.