

The “Talking Circle” as Sociological Practice: Cultural Transformation of Chronic Disaster Impacts

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Technological disasters are unique in that they result in long-term social impacts. The mitigation of such impacts is an area that has received little attention in both the disaster and the applied sociology literatures. This article presents a description of a culturally sensitive mitigation strategy, the “Talking Circle,” and its application to Alaska Natives negatively impacted by the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill. Talking Circles are a traditional social activity for Alaska Natives and this activity was organized and implemented by members of the Village of Eyak in Prince William Sound, Alaska. The 2-day event resulted in many testimonies about personal experiences with the oil spill. Post-Talking Circle activities by Eyak Village members indicate increased cultural awareness and political mobilization. These findings suggest that this mitigation strategy promoted cultural consciousness among victims experiencing chronic disaster impacts and resulted in a “transforming activity” for the Native Village of Eyak.

KEY WORDS: disaster; Alaska Natives; intervention; participatory research.

INTRODUCTION

The Exxon Valdez Oil Spill

On March 24, 1989, the supertanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on a well-marked reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska. This accident resulted in the release of over 11 million gallons of Prudhoe Bay crude oil into the

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pristine waters of the Sound. A complete response failure occurred, and after several days of calm seas, storms and strong winds began to move the huge mass of oil. Subsequently, over 1900 km of Alaskan coastline was heavily oiled (National Response Team 1989; Picou *et al.* 1997).

The immediate impacts of this technological disaster were devastating to marine mammals, shorebirds, fish, and local wildlife. Given that the spill occurred during the most biologically active time of the year, estimates indicate that over 250,000 seabirds, 144 bald eagles, 4400 sea otters, 30 seals, and 20 whales perished from this initial flood of oil (Spies *et al.* 1996). However, the ecological devastation of the spill has persisted over the last decade, with severe declines in the Pacific herring population, which has resulted in the cancellation of five herring fishing seasons in the Sound (Spies *et al.* 1996; Carls *et al.* 1999). Additionally, noticeable declines in the pink salmon fishery have been linked to economic and subsistence disruption in the bioregion's food chain and the continued persistence of *Exxon Valdez* oil in creeks and spawning areas (Cohen 1997; Heintz *et al.* 1999).

The immediate social and cultural impacts of the spill were very disruptive for the small fishing communities and Alaska Native villages in the Sound. Commercial fishing activities were suspended in 1989 and subsistence harvests of Alaska Natives declined sharply over the years immediately following the spill (Fall and Field 1996). Native villages were severely disrupted through the loss of village members to the work afforded by the clean-up operations. Children were often left in the villages with minimal supervision, as many Native parents worked long hours in remote areas of the Sound (Impact Assessment, Inc. 1990; Daley and O'Neill 1997).

Empirical studies also provide convergent evidence of chronic social disruption, psychological stress, and severe depression among Alaska Natives. Palinkas and associates (1992, 1993) found 6 months after the spill that Alaska Natives were characterized by relatively high levels of depression compared with Natives residing outside the spill region. Furthermore, ethnographic research on members of the Native Village of Eyak found high levels of subsistence disruption, family disruption, and personal distress through 1992 (Dyer *et al.* 1992; Gill and Picou 1997; Picou and Gill 2000). In summary, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill had significant, long-term disruptive impacts on the economy, social structure, and subsistence culture of Alaska Natives in Prince William Sound (Gill and Picou 1997).

Social Consequences of Disasters

The long-term social consequences of technological disasters have posed both theoretical and applied challenges to sociologists. Over the last

25 years, case studies and community surveys repeatedly have provided convergent empirical verification that technological disasters often produce long-term (6 to 14 years) social disruption and psychological stress (Erikson 1976, 1994; Couch and Kroll-Smith 1985; Baum 1987; Baum and Fleming 1993; Kroll-Smith and Couch 1993; Green 1996; Gill and Picou 1998). In contrast to natural disasters, massive human-caused toxic disasters appear to engender a social context of uncertainty, anger, and isolation. This pattern contextualizes the emergence of a conflict-based "corrosive community" (Freudenburg and Jones 1991; Freudenburg 1997). Such collectivities are characterized by sociocultural disruption, ambiguity of harm, and long-term chronic collective stress (Freudenburg and Jones 1991). The chronic nature of this response varies from the short-term patterns of recovery often observed for natural disasters (Drabek 1986). Erikson (1994, p. 148) has described this long-term pattern in the following manner:

Toxic disasters . . . violate all the rules . . . some . . . have clearly defined beginnings. . . . Others begin long years before anyone senses that something is wrong. . . . But they never end. . . . An all clear is never sounded. The book of accounts is never closed.

In the United States, victims of technological disasters must entrust assessments of damage, responsibility, liability, and reparations to the legal system, assuring long-term uncertainty and challenges regarding their claims (Picou and Rosebrook 1993). Given the economic and health threats posed by massive environmental contamination, over time, an adversarial pattern of claims emerges, eroding trust in responsible institutions and producing a sense of powerlessness among victims (Molotch 1970; Freudenburg 1993, 1997). This lack of formal and informal social support structures precludes the emergence of a "therapeutic community" and delays community recovery from the technologically based disaster event (Couch 1996).

These findings on chronic impacts have sparked a lively discussion between environmental sociologists and traditional disaster researchers regarding the utility of conceptually distinguishing natural disasters, i.e., earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes, from technological disasters, i.e., radioactive releases, neighborhood contamination, and oil spills (Kroll-Smith and Couch 1993a, b; Erikson 1994; Quarantelli 1998). This discourse has been academic in nature, resulting in suggestions for more research on victims' social construction of disaster impacts, as well as improved understanding of generic "collective crisis situations" (e.g., see Kroll-Smith and Gunter 1998; Quarantelli 1998). More important for the present research, the issue of community recovery from technological disasters has received little attention from applied sociologists and emergency management practitioners (Mitchell 1996).

What is known about community recovery from chronic technological or industrial disasters comes primarily from the natural disaster literature (Tierney and Baaisden 1979; Bolin 1982; Weaver 1995; Mitchell 1996). Programmatic interventions for communities, neighborhoods, and victims chronically impacted by such events are nonexistent. Because technological disasters produce fundamental changes in the victimized social collectivity, e.g., competing claims regarding damage, liability, and victimization, recovery to a “predisaster” state involves unique challenges (Couch 1996, 1999). Baum (1987, p. 46) has noted that research on “natural disasters did not provide a good foundation for making decisions about T(hree) M(ile) I(sland) and probably will prove insufficient for understanding future technological mishaps.” More pessimistically, Edelstein, (1988, p. 9) contends that for contaminated communities “recovery to a ‘predisaster equilibrium’ is difficult if not impossible.” This lack of programmatic strategies for mitigating chronically impacted communities identifies an important need for development of social interventions.

The present manuscript describes the implementation of a culturally based community intervention strategy for addressing the chronic (7-year) social impacts of the largest oil spill in North American history, the *Exxon Valdez* disaster. Specifically, I provide a description and interpretation of the implementation of a 2-day Talking Circle as a participatory, culturally based intervention strategy for mitigating the chronic cultural disruption produced by the spill. Ethnographic data and participatory evaluation research provide information on the effectiveness of the Talking Circle for reducing community social disruption and promoting local cultural mobilization (Park and Williams 1999).

Participatory Research

Participatory research involves three distinct activities—research, education, and action (Hall 1975, 1981). Taken together as a process, these concepts are used to “present people as researchers themselves” and reduce “the distinction between the researchers and the researched” (Tandon 1988, p. 7; Gaventa 1988, p. 19). As Gaventa (1988, p. 19) has stated, “The participatory research model not only generates knowledge, but also facilitates the development of conscious mobilization.” As such, participatory research involves subjects as active participants in the decision-making process for designing and implementing field activities.

Three types of knowledge are involved in participatory research—instrumental, interactive, and critical (Habermas 1972, 1973; Park 1993). Instrumental or representational knowledge is derived from the methodol-

ogy of positivism and contains a structure of explanation that focuses on external events and causal relationships (Park 1993; Park and Williams 1999). Interactive or relational knowledge emerges through the sharing of information by people. Conversations between people generate information-sharing among group members, thereby producing knowledge which is mutual and connected to the life-world of the participant (Park 1993). Critical or reflective knowledge allows people to review the social problem context in light of potential change for social and collective transformation (Park 1993). As Park (1993, pp. 7–8) states,

Critical examination means not only that people come to grasp the causes of their miseries, which can be dealt with instrumentally. But, by reflecting on these causes as being socially rooted in human actions, they also come to realize that things do not have to remain the way they are and that they can engage in actions to transform the reality.

In sum, critical knowledge forms one basis for mobilization and collective action.

The Talking Circle as Participatory Research

In January of 1994, the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council funded a mental health demonstration project in the fishing community of Cordova. The organization of this project provided opportunities for the exchange of information between researchers and community residents through a participatory research process. This model resulted in program design, delivery, and evaluation and the completion of a Guidebook for chronic disaster mitigation (Picou *et al.* 1997; Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council 1999; Ka'aihue 1999; Arata *et al.* 2000).

This participatory research model was implemented in Cordova, Alaska, a small isolated community of 2500 residents located in southeastern Prince William Sound. Cordova is economically dependent on commercial fishing, and, as in the Native villages of Tatitlek and Chenega Bay, many residents, particularly Alaska Natives, participate in seasonal subsistence harvest activities (Fried 1994; Picou and Gill 1996). The Native Village of Eyak is, in part, a symbolic entity, in that it is located in Cordova but has no geographically specified residential area for village members. Village members reside throughout the community and the village maintains an office in the community. There is a village chief and an administrative director of village operations. Residents of the Villages of Tatitlek and Chenega Bay regularly travel to Cordova by boat, plane, or ferry and the village of Tatitlek maintains an office in Cordova. Both Chenega Bay

and Tatitlek have fewer than 100 residents, while Eyak has approximately 500 members.

The organization of the Talking Circle initially involved a series of meetings with representatives of the Cordova Mental Health Clinic (Sound Alternatives) and the Native Village of Eyak. The decision to organize and implement this activity resulted from the purposeful exchange of instrumental knowledge and the emergence of interactive participation on the part of village leaders and local residents. In May, September, and December of 1995 the author and research staff met with representatives of a wide variety of community, civic, and religious organizations in Cordova. Initial meetings in May were structured to provide the results of 4 years (1989–1992) of sociological research to community and village residents in a clear, straight-forward, and understandable manner (see Picou *et al.* 1992; Picou and Gill 1996). Alaska Natives were asked to review and validate these research results from their own experience and observations (Erikson 1994). This procedure resulted in the personal documentation of the continuing cultural and social disruption from the spill and the interactive verification of personal (e.g., social isolation and alcohol abuse) and collective problems (e.g., nonparticipation in cultural events). By June 1995, members of the Native Village of Eyak proposed that a culturally acceptable intervention strategy would be the holding of a Talking Circle devoted to the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.

Prince William Sound Native people come from a variety of tribal groups including Aleuts, Tlingits, Eyaks, and Athapaskans. However, over the years, a distinct cultural group (Alutiiq) has formed from these various Native origins. In the broadest sense, Alutiiq culture is made up of village groups, with territories, that engage in the harvesting, processing, and sharing of renewable natural resources. The indigenous people in this area practice subsistence culture and are primarily resource dependent, despite the infusion of a cash economy derived from limited commercial fishing incomes among a minority of Natives (Gill and Picou 1997).

Talking Circles are not unique to Alutiiq culture; however, this activity has been advanced as a critical component in the “New Alaska Native” movement (Napoleon 1991). Harold Napoleon (1991, p. 21), a Yup’ik Native from Hooper Bay, Alaska, has outlined a model of Alaska Native cultural breakdown which began in the early twentieth century with the “Great Death.” Ironically, despite the cultural cleansing initiated by the boarding schools of the 1930s, the loss of self-government, the loss of hunting and fishing rights, and the loss of land, the material lives of Alaska Native people actually improved with the antipoverty programs of the 1960s and 1970s (Napoleon 1991). Nonetheless, over the years, the quality of life of Alaska Natives has suffered significantly as indicated by data which reveal

extremely high rates of alcoholism, suicide, homicide, and fatal accidents (Napoleon 1991).

Napoleon (1991, pp. 14–24) views this pattern as being self-destructive and the major obstacle for the emergence of a collective Alaska Native culture.

Many of today's generation of Alaska Natives have turned on themselves. They blame themselves for being unemployed, for being second-class citizens, for not being successful as success is portrayed to them by the world they live in. . . . There is no one to tell them they are not to blame, that there is nothing wrong with them, that they are loved. . . . By the time such children are grown, they are deeply depressed. . . . They have become demoralized, discouraged and do not think much of themselves. . . . They never talk. They have turned inward. (p. 23)

The primary ritual response proposed by Napoleon (1991) for this cultural malaise is the Talking Circle. Alaska Native culture acknowledges the concept of village and a "healthy village" is viewed as "a circle whose people are safe within its fold" (Napoleon 1991, p. 29). Only by coming together as a circle can cultural consciousness emerge and the threats to Native culture be overcome.

The social discourse which emerges from a Talking Circle does not include "debate or argument." Rather a social context for "sharing oneself, one's experiences, feelings and thoughts with the rest of the village" is created (Napoleon 1991, p. 28). This social activity is available to all village members and Talking Circles can be tailored to a variety of audiences and social situations. There are different types of Talking Circles, including Healing Circles, Elder Circles, and Community Circles. The Talking Circle held by the Native Village of Eyak was patterned after the Community Circle. Invitations were posted throughout the Cordova community and sent to the Native Villages of Chenega Bay and Tatitlek. The invitation requested the attendance of "Native people and all those who respect Native culture." The focus of the Talking Circle was the *Exxon Valdez* disaster and the traditional Talking Circle rules of confidentiality and uninterrupted discourse were also noted in the invitation.

METHOD

Target Population

The target population of this program was Alaska Natives residing in Prince William Sound. The program was developed over a 6-month period by members of the Native Village of Eyak, which is located in the community of Cordova, Alaska. During this time local residents worked with the author through a participatory research model. Similar participatory

approaches had been used previously in a variety of applied programs among Native Canadians and Canadian Intuits (Brice-Bennet 1977; Bobiwash and Malloch 1980; Berger 1980). Given the fact that no intervention programs for mitigating chronic community impacts of technological disasters exist, the participatory research model fostered the development and implementation of a culturally based intervention strategy through the participation and decisions of village members.

Author's Role

The author assumed a "peripheral membership role" (PMR) in the organization and implementation of the Talking Circle intervention (Adler and Adler 1987). PMRs go beyond traditional participant observer investigations in that the researcher develops a variety of relationships with participants, which range from casual acquaintances to "close friendship with key informants" (Adler and Adler 1987, p. 38). PMRs establish "trust and acceptance" with participants through a variety of experiences. In the case of the present activity, the author had intermittently resided in the local community of Cordova for over a year since 1989, collecting community social impact data. In addition, during this time he worked closely with village leaders for the collection of data on the social and psychological impacts of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. On numerous occasions, presentations were made to village members on research findings, thereby initiating an exchange of instrumental knowledge with a broad spectrum of village residents. In short, the author provided resources, guidance, and encouragement to local villagers for designing and implementing the Talking Circle.

All ethnographic data reported in this article were collected by the author. This information was collected between 1996 and 1999 from members of the Native Village of Eyak. A systematic social survey for evaluating the outcomes of this intervention was impossible to implement given the cultural inappropriateness of such an activity. However, postevent personal interviews specifically probed interpretations of both individual and village impacts of the Talking Circle. Program development and the mobilization of the Native village of Eyak as a cultural and political entity since 1996 also provide historical data for evaluating the consequences of the Talking Circle for village organizational development.

Structure of the Talking Circle

The Talking Circle was held in Cordova on January 27–28, 1996. Although two ritual activities were conducted on the shores of Orca Inlet,

the Talking Circle was held at the local Masonic Lodge. A number of people came from outside the community to assist with and participate in the 2-day event. Included in this group was the Director of the Alaska Council on Prevention of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, representatives from the Southcentral Alaska Native Foundation, the Northern Lights Drummers, several Native spiritual leaders from Alaska, and one American Indian spiritual outreach specialist from Oklahoma. The weather was clear and unusually cold, with high temperatures of 10–12°F. This fact limited the number of outdoor activities that could be included in the Talking Circle.

Over the 2-day period, approximately 85 to 90 local residents attended the event. As noted above, a number of Alaska Natives (14) from outside the community were also in attendance. Approximately 80% of all participants were Alaska Natives, while non-Native participants included spouses, friends, and interested Cordova residents. A number of Elders from the Villages of Tatitlek and Chenega Bay traveled to Cordova for the event and their presence was viewed as very positive by local organizers. The age of those in attendance ranged from 3 to 80.

The events of the Talking Circle were structured by two outdoor rituals. One activity took place in the early morning hours of the first day, while the second activity was held at the end of the event, occurring in the late afternoon of the second day. Food was available for breakfast each morning and a “potluck” dinner was served to a large gathering of participants on the evening of the first day. The activities of both days included traditional drumming and translations of English statements to Alutiiq by an Alaska Native spiritual leader. The various activities were coordinated by Alaska Natives and Native Americans from outside of the Cordova community since this was the first cultural activity of this kind in the Native Village of Eyak in decades. Most participants spoke over the 2-day period, and it is interesting to note that on the second day, many engaged in traditional dances during intermittent performances by the Northern Lights drummers. I estimate that an additional 20 people attended but did not formally participate (as a speaker) in the ceremony.

Activities on the morning of the first day included a brief discussion regarding the history and rules for a Talking Circle, the cultural meaning of this event and instructions on how participation in the circle would be organized. The focus of the Talking Circle—the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill—was “framed” and “contextualized” at the beginning of the first day’s activities by the spiritual leaders. It was noted that the spirit world framed the cultural impacts of the oil spill in terms of “Yuuyaruq,” a Yup’ik term for “the way of the human being.” Unwritten, Yuuyaruq is similar to Mosaic law for defining proper social and personal relationships, relationships with nature and with “the land, the rivers, the heavens, the seas and all that

dwelled within them” (Napoleon 1991, p. 5). The Yup’ik word for spirit is “iinrug,” which is possessed by all things, both animate and inanimate. *Iinrug* is the “soul” or “essence” of any being or object (Napoleon 1991, p. 17). As such, all creatures destroyed by the oil spill produced pain and sorrow throughout the “spirit world,” i.e., the subsistence culture of Alaska Natives. This massive, meaningless death created holes in the spiritual world (sky) and took away not only the souls of creatures, but also the souls of Alaska Natives. Such holes in the sky can usurp the human spirit and an entire village can succumb to this ongoing spiritual void. Only by recognizing this threat can people restore both nature and themselves. Restoration and healing will occur through public testimony, apology, and collective rituals, and accordingly, the holes and the spirit of all, both humans and nature, will be transformed and restored to a healthy state.

Following the introduction and recognition of Elders in attendance, several people provided instrumental knowledge about the spill by documenting ecological and cultural impacts. These statements were made by participants who sat in the circle and who had knowledge of traditional scientific information about research conducted in Prince William Sound. The author spoke to circle participants about published research on the social, cultural, and psychological consequences of the spill and how these impacts were similar to those on Native and non-Native victims of other technological disasters. Following this initial instrumental discourse on ecological and human disaster impacts, participants spoke, taking their turns in a clockwise fashion.

RESULTS

The testimonies and statements made by participants ranged over a wide variety of experiences and concerns. On many occasions, participants become emotional, oftentimes becoming choked up as they spoke. Many shed tears while they spoke, oftentimes soliciting similar responses from their highly attentive audience. I have categorized these statements in terms of five objects of discourse. Although some testimony could not be easily classified, in that speakers simultaneously incorporated multiple objects of concern, five basic themes were addressed. These themes included the ecological destruction of the spill, Exxon, traditional cultural spirit, the group, and self.

The discourse which emerged on these themes took place within a sociospatial setting (the Talking Circle) and involved a dialogue with these five referential objects. The forms of association which characterized the Talking Circle also reflected the coordination of action through the commu-

nication process itself. In other words, there was an ongoing dialogue, through which a consensus was derived in terms of communication (Habermas 1987). This conception of discourse reveals “the social process through which participants generate a universe and it is the outcome of such a process—the meaningful universe as a social fact imposed upon us” (Eder 2000, p. 226). In sum, the description of discursive themes of the Talking Circle focuses on dialogues and subsequent consensus areas which emerged during the 2-day event.

Content of the Talking Circle

The dominating theme embedded in the rituals, testimonies, and many statements made during the first day of the Talking Circle was the destruction of the Prince William Sound ecosystem. This theme was initiated by an early morning ritual which was held next to a large group of sea otters that were sleeping in an area referred to as “the spit,” north of Cordova, adjacent to Orca inlet. A hardy group of 15–20 participants drove vehicles in the cold, dark morning to this area, letting their car lights shine on the sea otters. A Native American spiritual outreach specialist spoke to the sea otters in English, followed by a translation of his statements to Alutiiq by an Alaska Native spiritual leader. The ceremony lasted approximately 30 min. The discourse in this setting focused on apologizing, specifically to the sea otters, for the mass death and destruction caused by the spill. It was announced that

we are here to visit our brother, the sea otter; we are here to apologize for the needless death caused by oil in the water. Our hearts have been saddened by the misery you suffered. We are here to apologize to you.

Spiritual leaders also asked the sea otters to forgive those responsible and make Prince William Sound “whole again” by spreading the word of the Talking Circle throughout the “spirit world.” This ritual closed by a strong pronouncement to the sea-otters to

. . . go . . . go into the water and tell the seal, the sea-lion, the eagle, the fish . . . tell all that live in the Sound that we ask forgiveness and are truly sorry for the black death that came in 1989.

This theme was a common one and the discourse with nature continued throughout the 2-day event. In one of the early testimonies, an Alaska Native male stated,

I was there right after the spill. We picked up dying animals, tried to capture dying birds . . . everything was dying. If you could have seen this, you would have cried like I did (participant chokes, long pause). My heart was heavy . . . a piece of me died out there. . . . I will never forget how precious the Sound is to me.

An Alaska Native female voiced that she worried about the eagles. She commented,

The oil was in the water, but death reached the sky. The eagles did not understand, they ate oiled fish and animals. They got sick . . . they died. . . I hurt for the eagle.

Other participants were more direct; another Alaska Native female said,

We apologize for the errors of white people again. Now I ask forgiveness for those who do not feel the spirit; for those with hearts of oil, whose greed caused this evil.

This dialogue of apology, concern, and sorrow for all living creatures destroyed by the spill proved to be a discursive theme shared by all in attendance. It provided a common rationale for being present and participating in the Talking Circle.

Discourse with Exxon

Some participants addressed the “principal responsible party” of the spill—the Exxon Corporation. At times, this discourse reflected anger and participants’ rejection of Exxon’s legal claims regarding the appropriateness of their clean-up operations and payments for damage. One Alaska Native stated,

Exxon came to clean up the spill and ignored Native traditions and our knowledge of the Sound. They think they know everything, but they know nothing. They could not survive one winter in my village.

Another participant felt that

the clean-up is a lie. There is oil where we hunt seal, catch salmon and teach children our ways. I can take you to this oil if you want me to.

Several participants directed attention to early promises made to them by representatives of the Exxon Corporation at a meeting held in Cordova in April of 1989. One Alaska Native male stated,

Exxon came to Cordova and told us “We will make you whole again.” I heard them say that at the high school. Now they hide behind lawyers and tell us we are not damaged. This is not right!

This theme was part of the discourse during the first day of the Talking Circle. It emerged from the dialogue with nature and, when addressed, created a sense of uneasiness among the gathering. One participant asked the questions,

Where are the herring? Where are the seal? Who speaks for them? I worry they will never return like before the spill. Where is Exxon now? They will not . . . apologize for this spill. . . . This mess is their fault.

Throughout the first day of the Talking Circle a consensus emerged from the dialogue regarding ecological damage and the irresponsible behavior of the corporation that actually spilled the oil—Exxon. However, anger and venting did not characterize this dialogue. Moreover, a sense of gaining a common understanding of the oil spill, the ecological damage, and the response of Exxon over the last 7 years was frequently addressed on the first day.

Discourse with the Cultural Spirit

During the Talking Circle references were often made to “cultural tradition” and the “spirit world” in a variety of contexts. Several participants called on “the great spirit” to heal the people of Prince William Sound and to restore the mammals, birds, and fish to their original abundance. One participant noted,

We must first reclaim the ways of our culture. the ways of our Elders before we can restore the Sound. We must look to our spirit.

A second participant talked of being “in harmony” with all living creatures. He stated,

All Native people need to realize that we are one with nature; that we know the way to live in harmony with all living things.

The discourse with tradition and cultural spirit was also apparent during the time when the Northern Lights drummers performed. During the first day, participants listened intently to the rhythms of the drum, and visibly showed enjoyment and pleasure during performances. During the second day, many participants actually danced to the drumming and the spiritual leaders participated, demonstrating traditional cultural dance from a variety of Alaska Native and Native American traditions. One Elder stated,

I like the drum. It makes me remember my youth: the drum awakens a spirit deep inside me that I had forgotten ever existed. My heart leaps to the beat of the drum.

This dialogue evoked the presence of a higher spiritual older that transcended the damage and disruption of the spill. The “great spirit” or “spirituality” of Alaska Native culture was reaffirmed and a design for the future was embedded in the discourse. As one participant noted,

All of this has happened, but we are here today. The traditions of all Native people involve mother earth and her creatures. We know that; take strength from that which is here.

Discourse with the Group

Throughout the Talking Circle many participants spoke to others in attendance and addressed members of the Native Village of Eyak who were not present. This discourse directed attention to current social conflicts in the local community and addressed the behavior of community residents. One local resident stated,

We argue about the trees: some want to clear-cut, others want the trees. We argue with our brothers and turn our backs on Native ways. The spill has made us angry: it has soiled our souls. We must take the spirit of this Talking Circle back to our families, neighbors and friends. This is important.

Throughout the second day of the Talking Circle, statements regarding the success of the event became increasingly frequent. Speakers commented more about the Talking Circle itself and the implications for social change for Natives. One non-Native participant stated,

I don't know much about the spill . . . except it was bad. But I do know that I have enjoyed listening to others and being here with my friends and neighbors. This needs to happen more often.

An Alaska Native stated,

This Talking Circle has moved me. The people are wonderful, the food is great and I enjoy the drumming. I could listen all day.

Indeed, some participants were more direct about improving cultural consciousness among locals. One Native woman said,

We need our own dance group. Our children need to be taught cultural ways that we have ignored for years. This is what I have learned over the last two days.

Discourse with Self

The final theme frequently addressed was one's own self in relation to the spill and personal problems. One male Alaska Native exemplified this discourse in the following manner:

I let the spill hurt me. I began drinking more and hurting people. I have not talked to some friends in over 5 years. I am sorry for this and I will change.

Similarly, an Elder from the village of Tatitlek noted an important personal change as a result of the Talking Circle. He testified,

When I come to Cordova, I always go to the Alaskan [Bar] for beer. Yesterday, after we finished, I walked over there. I ordered a beer from the bartender and he gave it to me. I tasted the beer, but after the Talking Circle, it tasted bad: so I left the beer on the bar and walked out.

Following this statement, this participant's wife tearfully embraced him and

everyone at the Talking Circle displayed strong approval by applauding and embracing each other.

The reaffirmation of the power of the Talking Circle for serious personal problems was borne out by one of the last participants to speak on the second day of the event. A non-Native woman, who was pregnant, stated that she was having serious problems with her pregnancy and she asked the spiritual leaders, Elders, and participants in the Talking Circle to pray for the safe delivery of her child with a moment of silent prayer. As the quiet grew over the gathering, a sense of confidence overcame the speaker and she smiled and stated, "There is a spirit among us that will help my baby. Thank you."

At the end of the second day, a closing ceremony was conducted by the spiritual leaders. About 40 participants left the Masonic Lodge and drove to the shores of Orca Inlet, just outside of the town of Cordova. A large bonfire was burning on the rocky beach. Participants made their way down to the beach and circled the bonfire. The Native American spiritual leader burned cedar and sage so that the holes in the sky would now be filled by the spirit infused in the smoke of the burning wood. The smoke carried the spirit of goodwill and fellowship that was generated by the event and the initial healing for Native people of Prince William Sound was declared. The spiritual leader also used a sacred eagle feather and approached every participant, individually, to give up the evil in their spirit and replace it with good. As this ceremony was proceeding, a large bald eagle circled the gathering several times. This was unusual given that the afternoon darkness of winter was rapidly arriving. The spiritual leader stopped the ceremony and advised that

eagles do not fly at night. This is a good sign: all creatures in Prince William Sound now know about the Talking Circle; this is a sign of power. We are joined with the spirit of the eagle.

As the ceremony continued, the eagle landed in a large spruce tree, clearly visible to all, and remained there until darkness precluded seeing it in the distance. Following the ceremony participants formed small groups as they left. Several people went to a local sweat lodge to continue their own personal spiritual reaffirmation, while others continued to speak at smaller gatherings in their homes. Everyone who left the shores of Orca Inlet that evening appeared to be motivated to overcome the destruction of the oil spill and inspired by the activities of the Talking Circle.

Discursive Conflict

There were several events that transpired during the Talking Circle where some "creative tension" characterized the social setting (Park and

Williams 1999). These “encounters” were short-lived and resulted in prolific apologies from Native Americans and Alaska Natives from outside the local villages. None of these encounters occurred within the framework of participant discourse. Rather, they occurred when the rituals and traditions of outsiders clashed with the rituals and traditions of locals.

For example, on one occasion during the first day of the event, a Native American spiritual leader began burning very small amounts of cedar and sage in the lodge where the participants gathered. Several elders expressed to a local Alaska Native participant that they were annoyed by the odor and their traditions did not include such indoor burning. As this fact was announced to the group, the burning was stopped and several “outside” Natives gave apologies, while also reaffirming the common traditions that bind all Native people.

I apologize to the Elders for burning. Elders should be respected and treated with honor and dignity. Elders are the living heritage of all Native people despite differences in our cultures. I am sorry and would never purposefully offend the Elders in this room.

A second occasion which involved discursive conflict occurred near the end of the Talking Circle. Participants had been sitting down for over 2 hr when an “outside” Alaska Native leader announced to the group that it was time for a break. He then requested that everyone stand and engage in a series of stretching exercises to relieve the body from inactivity. One local Native leader did not stand and was personally asked “to stand and stretch.” His response was defiant:

Who are you to tell me what to do? This is just like the boarding schools. . . stand, sit, sleep. Do I go to your village and tell you how to act?

With that statement the man left the room. The immediate response from the Talking Circle leader was an apology and reaffirmation of respect for the traditions and opinions of local Natives.

Please don't be angry. I am not here to teach you my ways, but to share with you the ways of all Native people. We should not mistreat each other; I am sorry about the boarding schools and do not mean to stir memories of those times. Please know that I honor your opinion and traditions.

Eventually, the local Native leader returned to the room where the Talking Circle was being held and remained as an observer until the activities ended.

These two examples of “creative tension” or “discursive conflict” had minimal negative consequences for the Talking Circle. In fact, on both occasions the desires and traditions of local Natives were publicly reaffirmed by Natives from outside the community. In one sense, the outcomes of these encounters were increased solidarity and cohesion among all participants and, subsequently, increased consciousness regarding all Native tradi-

with ongoing training and technical assistance to ensure success. The tribe also sponsors an annual memorial potlatch and sobriety celebration which draws participants from around the region (Peschang 1998).

From the end of the Talking Circle to the present, the author has solicited feedback from attendees regarding their evaluation of the consequences of the event for the Native Village of Eyak. Interestingly, all have been positive and there has been an overall transformation to continuing village participation by most individuals who were originally involved in the organization and implementation of the Talking Circle. This participatory characteristic, coupled with the discourse which emerged during the Talking Circle, facilitated a "reflection–action–reflection cycle" in the local Native community. As Park and Williams (1999, p. 95) suggest,

. . . The investigation of a problem leading to change producing actions must be followed by an examination of what is produced in terms of its relationship to the initial problem and other problems that are generated in its wake.

As the "action–reflection–action cycle" continues, embedded within it is the basis for participatory evaluation of the original activity or event—in this case, the Talking Circle. As one village member stated in March 1999,

The Talking Circle was important because it gave everyone a sense of knowing that we all shared a common hurt. It also gave direction to all Native people who were there. The way for us should be the Native way. We now realize that it is important for us and our children to embrace our elders and our heritage.

The Talking Circle did not mitigate the social and cultural impacts of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in the traditional sense of the concept of mitigation. That is, a prespill state was not produced by participation in the event. Rather, the discourse involved in the Talking Circle resulted in the fusion of instrumental, interactive, and critical knowledge, which transformed both individuals and the collectivity to a more culturally conscious, participatory position. One villager summarized this transformation immediately following the event in the following manner.

The pain of the spill will never go away. But, there are other, more important, things for me to do now. I want to learn how to make a drum; I want everyone in the village to have a drum; I want the children to have a dance group. After today we have a place to start. I know we [Eyak village] can do it.

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tions and customs. In short, the Talking Circle and the discourse which emerged allowed local Alaska Natives to participate directly in cultural activities, thereby raising cultural consciousness.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Because of the chronic nature of their disruptive impacts, technological disasters pose unique challenges to both community and individual recovery. As such, conventional models of recovery have proved to be insufficient and ineffective in their application (Baum 1987; Edelstein 1988; Couch 1996). Rather than "recovery," "transformation" has been suggested as a model for helping victims and communities overcome long-term social and cultural disruption (Couch 1999). As a culturally based intervention strategy, the Talking Circle promoted collective empowerment of local residents through the participatory research model. By designing, organizing, promoting, and participating in the Talking Circle, members of the Native Village of Eyak became active participants in this transformation process. As active participants, villagers became aware of cultural traditions, while simultaneously engaging in appropriate cultural behaviors for responding to the spill's ecological destruction. This response mitigated the negative cultural impacts of the spill by refocusing attention on cultural traditions and therefore increasing cultural consciousness. This transformation activity helped redirect the Native Village of Eyak to mobilize their cultural resources and increase participation of their members in the organization of village priorities. Village activities over the last 3 years support this contention.

Before the Talking Circle, the Native Village of Eyak was characterized by a lack of cultural activities and village organization. Since 1996, the tribe has assumed management of many of its own health care programs and will soon be contracting BIA programs. Eyak Village now has an active environmental program, recently purchased a new building, and is in the process of establishing a housing authority. The village became a participant in a regional cultural program through Chugachmiut, the regional nonprofit Native organization. The village organization now has 15 employees, a much larger budget, a negotiated indirect rate, and full benefits. In the Spring of 1999, Eyak Village sponsored a conference which was a 2.5-day participative planning process with tribal members to establish future collective goals. The conference was well attended and brought an additional sense of unity to tribal members as they defined their common interests. Villagers have established a flat, team-based organization that employs primarily local tribal members to run programs and supports them

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