



# Perceptions of Alcohol Use Among Alaskan College Students

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### Introduction:

Nearly 50% of all college students report binge drinking in the past two weeks (Weschler, 2002). Binge drinking results in significant health, academic, legal, and social consequences.

The high rates of problematic drinking in college represent a major concern for health care practitioners and university officials alike.

Students often misperceive excessive drinking as being normal and think that the binge criterion is lower than they think it should be (Wardell, 2013).

As part of a larger investigation, this research examined perceptions of problem drinking among college students in relation to the students' own drinking behavior.

### Hypothesis:

We predicted that UAF students who reported higher levels of drinking would rate the vignettes as less problematic than students who reported lower levels of drinking.

### Methods:

Our participants consisted of 100 college students from a wide range of backgrounds at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Vignettes of alcohol consumption were developed to describe a hypothetical student's drinking behavior. The drinking behavior included cases of alcohol misuse, alcohol abuse, and alcohol dependence.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: those who received a set of vignettes featuring an Alaska Native student and those who received a set of vignettes featuring a White student.

### Measures:

Students were asked to rate how problematic a described student's drinking behavior was on a five point Likert scale. For each of the five vignettes presented, there were four questions concerning the severity of the drinking behavior. Items were summed across the vignettes to yield a total score with higher scores indicating more problematic drinking. Possible scores ranged from 20 to 100 and represented our dependent variable. Ethnicity of the student described in the vignettes varied according to experimental condition.

Other measures included:

- ❖ A demographic form asking basic information including age, ethnicity, and gender.
- ❖ The NIAAA alcohol consumption question set, which directly asks about the participants' drinking behaviors. This measure includes the following variables: number of drinking days in a typical month, number of drinks consumed on a typical drinking day, number of drinks consumed in a peak drinking episode, and number of peak episodes per typical month.
- ❖ The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) was used to classify participants as hazardous or non-hazardous drinkers.

### Procedure:

After participants expressed an interest in being part of the study, they met with the researcher to complete a packet of paper and pencil measures. Half of the participants received a packet with White student vignettes and the other half received a packet with Alaska Native student vignettes. Afterwards, participants were given a debriefing form and were each compensated \$25 for their time. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection and the UAF IRB approved all methods.

### Analyses:

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all study variables. Correlations between variables were examined. Alpha was set at .05 for all analyses.

### Results:

#### Participants:

- Age: M = 21.21; SD = 3.52; Range = 18-34
- 59% female, 41% male
- 72% White, 7% Alaska Native or American Indian, 6% Hispanic, 5% African American, 4% Asian, and the remainder were other ethnicities.
- The year in school was approximately evenly distributed between freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors.
- 97% had never been married, 62% lived in the dorm or University housing, 27% lived off campus, 10% lived with their parent(s), and the remainder lived in other housing situations.

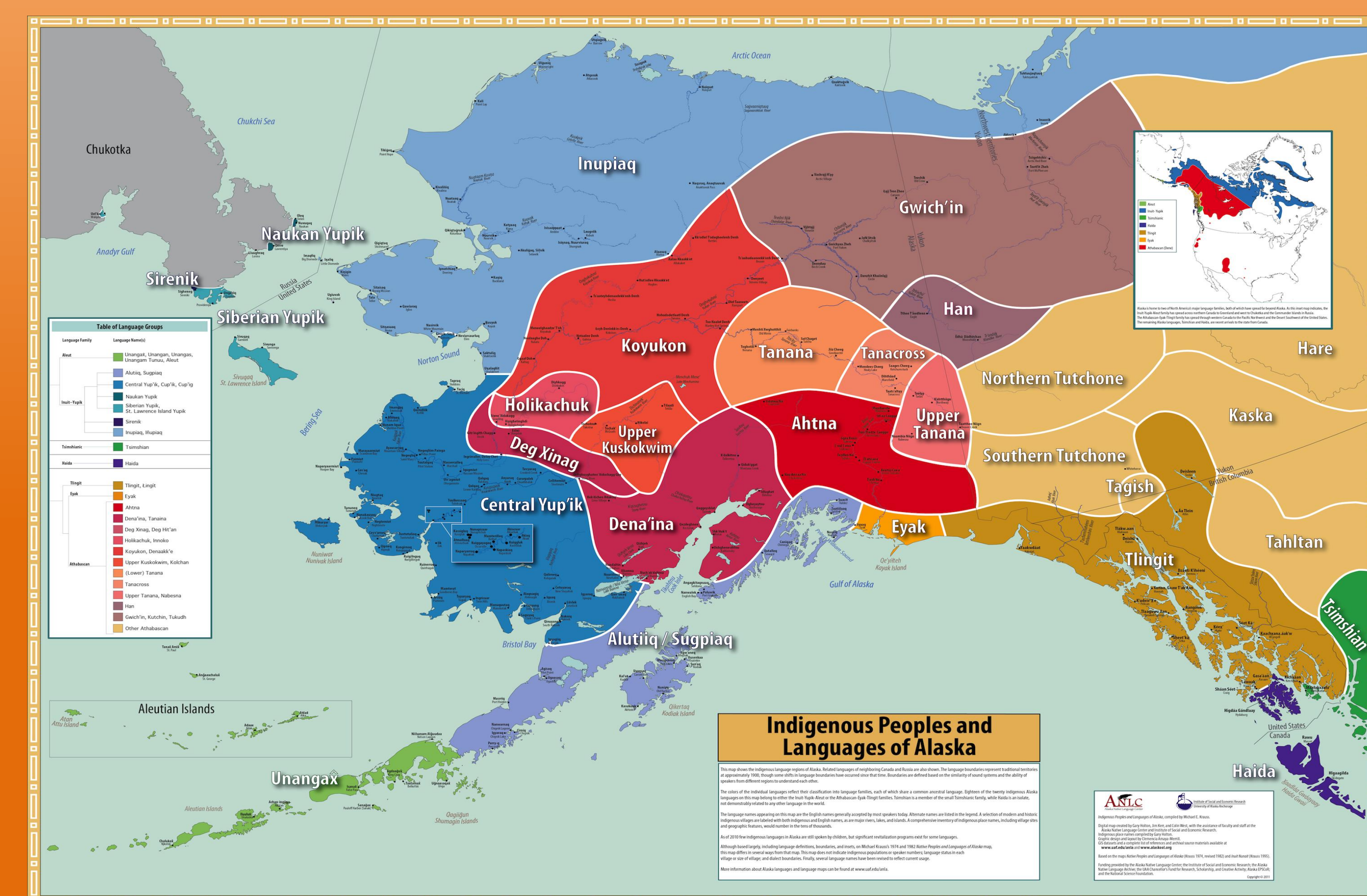
#### Descriptives:

- The number of days individuals consumed alcohol in a typical month ranged from 0-30 (M = 3.79, SD = 4.56).
- The number of drinks individuals consumed on a typical occasion of drinking ranged from 0-15 (M = 3.02, SD = 2.67).
- The number of binge episodes individuals had in a typical month ranged from 0-10 (M = 1.68, SD = 2.36).
- The number of peak drinks individuals had in a 24 hour period ranged from 0-38 drinks (M = 6.26, SD = 5.88).
- The number of days individuals drank their largest number of drinks ranged from 0-15 days (M = 2.04, SD = 2.42).
- The overall vignette ratings scores ranged from 29-80 (M = 57.27, SD = 10.04), and ratings were equivalent between the Alaska Native and White drinker vignettes.
- Scores on the AUDIT ranged from 0-23 (M = 5.89, SD = 4.59). Scores above eight indicate hazardous drinking. In our sample, 30% of participants scored in the hazardous drinking range.

#### Correlations:

Greater overall vignette ratings were significantly associated with:

- Fewer drinking days in a typical month (r = -.24, p < .05).
- Fewer drinks on a typical drinking occasion (r = -.21, p < .05).
- Fewer binge episodes in a typical month (r = -.29, p < .01).
- Fewer peak drinking days in a typical month (r = -.38, p < .001).
- There was no significant association between vignette ratings and AUDIT scores (r = -.19, p > .05).



### Discussion and Future Directions:

Participants who reported higher levels of drinking were less likely to report that the person described in the vignette was engaging in hazardous drinking behavior. While some of the vignettes were described as clearly pathological and alcohol dependent, participants were often unconvinced that the fictional person described had a problem with alcohol. This may indicate that students need education about what a binge episode is and about the hazards of binge drinking.