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# AGING AND LIFE COURSE DEVELOPMENT IN AN INUIT COMMUNITY

PETER COLLINGS

*Abstract.* Interviews conducted with 38 Inuit in the community of Holman, in the Northwest Territory of Canada, on definitions of life stages and life course transitions suggest that younger Inuit continue to define life stages and perceive the structure of the life course in a manner consistent with that of their elders. In particular, Inuit perceive that entrance into new life stages, and thus the markers of one's age, are based largely upon the natural processes of growth and senescence and upon one's social maturity, culminating in the development of *ihuma*, knowledge or wisdom, which defines adulthood and the development of which continues into Elderhood. This paper suggests that despite economic, political, and technological changes to Inuit society, there remains a great deal of cultural continuity on an ideological level.

## Introduction

For Inuit residents of Holman, the past 30 years have brought a series of material, economic, political, and structural changes to society that have had profound affects on both individual and community life. Documented changes to political structure at local, regional, and national levels have come about as Inuit gained an ever-increasing voice in government and policy making, culminating in the settlement of various land claims (Duffy 1988; Brody 1978; Saku et al. 1998). Economic and subsistence changes include settlement in centralized communities, followed by the adoption of new subsistence technologies (Kemp 1971), an increasing reliance on wage-labor and social assistance to offset the high costs of foraging with high-tech equipment (Hobart 1982), and the collapse of the fur economy and the effects of this process on Inuit subsistence relations (Wenzel 1991). Social-structural changes include population growth in settlements, which, along with other agents, has resulted in the emergence of social adolescence (Condon 1987), cohorts of young people with distinctly different life experiences (O'Neil

1984), and alterations to the ethos of Inuit culture resulting from exposure to southern Canadian values through schooling and mass media (Condon 1987; 1995).

There are many other possible examples of research concerning social change, but the prevailing theme of nearly all the work on culture change has focused on how Inuit cultural features have changed to accommodate southern Canadian and American values, or how Inuit have become "acculturated" toward "southern" values. Embedded in some of this literature is the notion that these changes are indicative of cultural loss. Both Remie (1984) and Buijs (1993), for example, have examined the disappearance of traditional food sharing practices among Inuit groups and have attributed their loss to material and economic changes to Inuit society. Both view the loss of traditional sharing arrangements as "proof of the erosional effects of modernization" (Collings et al. 1998:302), especially in regard to what they both view as an increased emphasis upon individuality and a decline in the cooperative ethos of Inuit culture. Others (Kelsall 1968; MacPherson 1981) see alterations to economy and material tech

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nology as potentially disastrous for ecological relations in the North, arguing that changes to hunting technology threaten wildlife populations in the North and that new technologies have either destroyed the "natural" balance between predator and prey or rendered obsolete any traditional wildlife management arrangements (see also Freeman 1989; Usher 1987). Condon notes that forces acting in combination with settlement in a centralized community have created a novel (to Inuit) life stage of social adolescence. He describes how acculturative forces have altered Inuit systems of aggression and conflict management (Condon 1990; 1995) in family relations and wider contexts (Condon 1990a; 1992). Condon interprets such phenomena as being caused by external agents and indicative of a loss in the cultural values of "forgiving and forgetting" in favor of an increased reliance on institutionalized control.

In each of these examples, the notion of cultural loss is predominant and, although references to cultural retention or continuity are acknowledged, the focus is on loss. I will argue that this overstates the point, and much that is deeply Inuit remains in both Holman and other communities across the Canadian North.

This paper examines a social-structural element of Inuit culture, that of the structure of the Inuit life course, in the community of Holman. Interviews with adult and elderly Inuit were designed to explore differences in the way people of various ages perceive the structure of the life course, define identified life stages, and make transitions from one life stage to the next. This paper demonstrates that while there are some real and significant differences that can be attributed to acculturative effects, there is a remarkable degree of agreement among people of different generations and life experiences, suggesting that notions of cultural loss, at least on an ideological level, are premature, and that an understanding of concepts such as social adolescence and young adulthood require a broader view of the dynamics of the Inuit life course.

## Community Background

The Copper Inuit community of Holman is located on the western shore of Victoria Island in the Canadian Archipelago. Most of the community's 430 residents are descendants of the northernmost groups of Copper Inuit, although there are also several Western Inuit families who moved to the area in the 1920s and 1930s (Condon 1994; Usher 1965). The community was officially founded in 1939 when the Hudson's Bay Company established a trading post on the northern shore of the mouth of Prince Albert Sound. A Roman Catholic Mission was established in the same year. Throughout the 1930s to 1950s, most of the Inuit in the region remained scattered in isolated hunting, fishing, and trapping camps. Peri-

odic trips were made to the trading post to trade fox pelts for southern foodstuffs and manufactured durable goods. Reliance upon these items increased over time, as the Inuit became less dependent upon localized resources and traditional procurement practices. In the early 1960s, the Canadian government encouraged the Inuit of the Holman region to take up full-time residence in the community. Public housing and other services were provided to facilitate this process of population concentration, which was completed by 1969. Although many families continued to spend much of the spring and summer in hunting and fishing camps outside of the settlement, the primary focus of life gradually shifted from the land to the village.

The settlement expanded dramatically during the 1970s and 1980s. In addition to more public housing, the territorial and federal governments provided a school, municipal services, a nursing station, hamlet office building, community hall, and an extensive system of public works buildings and garages. Federal and territorial governments funded a number of recreational facilities, including an indoor hockey arena, two softball diamonds, a beach volleyball court, and a nine-hole golf course. The Holman Eskimo Co-operative, established in the early 1960s, has expanded over the years to include a hotel, retail outlet, crafts store, and a state-of-the-art print shop and carving studio.

Settlement in the community marks the advent of a series of material changes implicated in the gradual reduction of Inuit participation in the subsistence economy. These changes include the following: (1) the introduction of local and residential Canadian-style schooling, (2) the introduction of new technology for subsistence, (3) increased opportunities for wage labor, (4) government sponsored social assistance, (5) the collapse of the market for sealskins, and (6) the steady deflation of the market for fox pelts. These changes have worked together to alter patterns of socialization within the community. The influence of compulsory schooling has been instrumental in both changing young people's expectations for future employment and disrupting the flow of more traditional information and practical training from parents to children. There is no doubt that young people today in Holman know considerably less about hunting, fishing, and survival on the land than do their parents and grandparents, simply because they have been raised in a settlement and forced to attend school where such things are not taught. This is not to say that young people today neither engage in subsistence hunting and fishing nor value these activities. Younger Inuit simply find that participation in such activities is constrained by economic and social circumstances.

Although the community is small and isolated, it is by no means a dull place. There are ample recreational diversions for young and old alike, includ-

ing the gym, open every evening during the school year and sponsoring organized competition in basketball, volleyball, floor hockey, and other sports. The hockey arena is open from November through April for general recreation and league hockey. In addition, there are numerous other programs, sponsored by various organizations within the community, designed to promote community involvement. These include several organized sewing nights for women, cooking and nutrition classes sponsored by the Health Center, and drum dancing, which during 1997 occurred two and sometimes three nights per week. All of these so-called recreational activities also compete with Bible study groups at the Anglican Church and meetings of the Hamlet Council and the various committees of the Holman Community Corporation. Most residents of the community are quite active in community life in at least one of these domains.

## Research Methods

Interviews were conducted in Holman over a ten month period between February and November, 1997, with a convenience sample of 38 adult Inuit between ages 23 and 86. Each potential participant was approached beforehand and given a verbal and written description of the project and an assurance of confidentiality. The sample size is approximately 25% of the adult population of the community. Table 1 shows the number of informants by age and gender. There were several difficulties in recruiting older people for the study due to a language barrier. Most Elders are conversationally proficient in English, and all Elders approached expressed a desire to participate in the study. However, many Elders expressed a preference for using an interpreter, citing their English as being too limited for in-depth discussions. Given budgetary constraints, I was unable to pay interpreters for their time, making it difficult to motivate potential interpreters. Interpreters were also much younger than Elder informants. They were conversationally proficient in Inuinaqtun, the local dialect of Inuktitut, but they had difficulty translating the more obscure life stage terminology. Another problem was the dynamics between interpreter and informant. On more than one occasion, a previously enthusiastic informant became evasive and difficult during an interview

Table 1. Age and Sex of Informants, Life Course Interviews.

Age Category	Male	Female
20-40	11	13
40+	8	6

because of long-standing rivalries between the informant's and the interpreter's families of which I was previously unaware.

Interviews were conducted in the home of the informant and typically lasted 2½-3 hours, including the obligatory social visits and cups of tea before and after the interview. Interviews were taped and then transcribed following the interview. During the interview, running notes of responses were also kept. Simultaneous note taking was useful for two reasons, one being that having notes approximating the verbatim interview enabled transcription to proceed much more smoothly. Furthermore, taped interviews were not always reliable, as some informants kept the television or radio on, which profoundly affected the quality of the recording. Often, children were present in the room, pestering the interviewee for attention. Sometimes, both were problems. With Elders, an additional problem was the flow of traffic through the house, as children and grandchildren came in to visit briefly, often bringing or taking country food with them. These visitors never stayed long enough to disrupt an interview, but they introduced a significant amount of background noise to the recordings. Transcriptions of interviews were often done the same day, for fear the passing of time would render ambiguous sections of tape completely unintelligible. Interviewing with the men was conducted by myself and with the women, by myself and my wife, Maya Shastri, although Maya led most of the discussions with women.

The interview itself sought to fulfill several objectives. First, I wanted to elicit the recognized stages that one passes through during the course of life. Second, I wanted to gather material on Inuit beliefs about the transitions between these stages. Third, I wanted to investigate Inuit perceptions of the typical experiences for a person in each life stage, and the positive and negative events or experiences that influence a person during this part of his or her life. Fourth, I wanted to discover how the typical experiences of people in a particular life stage were thought to have changed over time.

All participants in the study were asked the same set of questions. These questions were designed to be open-ended, and they allowed participants the opportunity to respond freely to the question. The open-ended nature of the interview was important because it allowed for a great deal of freedom for both myself and the interviewees. Interviewees had the option of including information they felt was important, and they had a wide latitude when it came to interpreting the question. I found the open-ended nature of the interviews useful too, because some informants interpreted the questions in surprising ways, and it was necessary to steer them back to a particular topic. The structure of the interview allowed me to interject new

questions to take advantage of topics raised by the interviewee, and it allowed me to try new angles in obtaining information when the original questions failed. The interview itself is adapted from Keith et al. (1994:342–346), who conducted research in several different cultural settings (!Kung and Herero peoples in Botswana, two sites in Ireland, two sites in the United States, and Hong Kong) to study the effects of different cultural phenomena on aging and human development. Their work is summarized in numerous articles (examples include Draper and Harpending 1994; Draper and Keith 1992; Fry 1986, 1990; Fry and Keith 1982; Ikels et al. 1992) and in the book, *The Aging Experience* (Keith et al. 1994).

### Life Stages

For the elicitation of life stages, the original intention was to play what Keith et al. (1994:341–342) called the “Age Game” with informants. Each informant would be asked to sort a series of cards, each with a description of an individual person at a different stage of life. The informant would be asked to sort the cards by placing cards with people in the same age group together. The information would then be asked what these different stages were. The task failed miserably and was abandoned after only three attempts. In the trials, the informants attempted to identify who the individuals in the descriptions were, and each card was placed apart from all others. A card believed to be “Esau,” for example, was placed independently of all others because, it was noted, Esau’s life was different from everybody else’s, just as “David’s” life was unique. I was specifically told on all three occasions that if I wanted to know in what life stage each person pictured was, then I should go ask them directly. This response parallels both Draper’s experiences with !Kung and Glascock’s in Ireland (Keith et al. 1994: 146).

After discarding the age game, the interview was reconstructed. Life stage terms were elicited by asking informants what stage of life they consider themselves to be in at present, followed by questions about what they were before they became an “x” and what they would become after they leave stage “x.” I quickly discovered that this method of beginning the interview was useful for introducing the younger informants to the themes of the interview, which were sometimes rather mysterious to participants even after verbal and written descriptions of the project. The following is a typical example taken from the beginning of an interview:

PC: What stage of your life would you say you are in right now?

DE (male, age 29): Well, I’m still not where I want to be. I’m still working toward getting a house, and

getting a stable family. I’m working towards it, but I’m not there yet.

PC: What age would you consider yourself right now, then? If you had to describe yourself to someone else, what age would you say you were?

DE: For me, myself, getting the ACCESS unit [ACCESS is a home ownership program]. My job is what I am working towards. It’s a stable job and it pays well. Compared to other age groups, well, I’d consider myself as a young person. Most young people I know started out that way after they finished school.

PC: So you’d call yourself a young person, then? And you became a young person when you finished high school?

DE: Well, I never finished high school, but yes, that was about the time I became a young person, about the time when people finish high school. For me, being a young person is like a transition period between school and settling down and raising a family. And realizing what I want to do, and going about doing it.

PC: So is being a young person like being an adult? Or is it something different?

DE: I guess I’ll be an adult when I get where I want to be. Well, I hope I’ll be an adult. To tell the truth, I don’t ever consider myself that at all. I’m still a kid at heart, and sometimes I still act that way. That’s what keeps me feeling young.

PC: So what comes after being an adult?

DE: Middle age. I don’t think there’s anything, really. It’s not like you’re going to hit 40 and you’re middle aged and you’re supposed to do certain things or act a certain way. Some people are like that, but not me. It doesn’t work for me that way. Some people are 40 and they still play hockey. So as long as my body allows me to, I’ll still do those kinds of things that young people do, like play hockey. It’s not really that well-defined.

The social visit following the interview was usually as productive and often more informative than the interview itself, as informants were allowed greater freedom to discuss issues raised during the interview and to expand on particular topics covered. Such discussions were fruitful in aiding my understanding of how Inuit perceive the life course and how they arrived at the particular statements made during the interview.

### Life Stages: Definitions and Meanings

Condon (1987:54–64) discusses life stages and typical behavior for individuals in particular life stages, understandably paying more attention to “teenagerhood.” In particular, he notes, following Rasmusen (1932:304), that the term *inuhaaq* (plural

*inuhaat*) refers to the process of “becoming or resembling a person,” and that once a person becomes physically mature and begins acting appropriately, he or she is then referred to as *inirngniq*, adult. Informants today maintain that the proper meaning of the word is “fully developed body” or “fully mature.” Condon also noted that the common English age terms, still in use today, are the terms “baby,” “kid,” “teenager,” and “adult.” As noted previously, English is the predominant language in the community, and very few younger people can be considered even conversationally proficient in Inuinaqtun.

As mentioned above, informants were asked for life stage terms, followed by questions regarding the characteristics of each life stage. Respondents generally named six life stages. For purposes of this study, younger people refers to those under age 40 ( $n = 24$ ), and older people refers to people aged 40 and over ( $n = 14$ ). The remainder of the paper will focus on differences between these two categories. Age 40 provides a convenient break between the two groups because it represents groups of people with quite different experiences. That is, those under age 40 are those who were raised primarily in the context of settlement life, experienced a high degree of formalized schooling in the community, were socialized as much by their peers as they were by their parents and grandparents (see Condon 1990; 1990a), and came of age in a community in which the viability of the subsistence economy was slowly declining due to the collapse of the fur markets (Wenzel 1991).

Linguistic usage and affiliation further reinforces the separation of people into two categories. Older people invariably gave their terminology in Inuinaqtun, largely because most of these interviews were conducted in Inuinaqtun. Young people (under age 40), however, almost always gave their responses in English if not asked directly for Inuinaqtun terms. These people were asked, at the end of the interview, if they knew Inuinaqtun words for the English terms they provided. Respondents typically knew only three terms, two of which seem to be universally known: *nutaraq* (child), and the stage *inutquaq/aaquaq* (old man/old woman). Table 2 shows the commonly used life stage terms in English and Inuinaqtun.

There are differences in the ways in which life course stages were named. Young men typically focused on stages in adulthood, referring to young adulthood, middle adulthood, older adulthood, or permutations of this sequence. Young women, perhaps not surprisingly, named more terms in childhood: baby, toddler, kid, and teenager, for example. Elders' distinctions rested on either a stage beyond *inutquaq/aaquaq*, (for which they used the word, to refer to the very old—*inutpiakhaq*, younger people never mentioned a term beyond the *inutquaq/aaquaq* stage), and a term *inirnikhaq*, meaning middle

Table 2. Life Stage Terms in English and Inuinaqtun.

English	Inuinaqtun
baby	<i>miraq</i>
kid	<i>nutaraq</i>
teenager	<i>inuhaat</i> male: <i>inuuhuktuq</i> female: <i>arnaruhiq</i>
adult	<i>inirngniq</i> male: <i>angun</i> female: <i>arnaq</i>
middle aged	<i>inirnikhaq</i>
elder	no term for “elder”
old man	<i>inutquaq</i>
old woman	<i>aaquaq</i>

age or young Elder. (The suffix *-haaq* is listed by Lowe (1983) as meaning “just” or “recently.”) In this case, as in the case of the term *inuhaaq*, it seems to refer to a process of transition between two stages.

Elders also used more terms in their discussion of life stages that were omitted from this list because such terms were perceived as descriptive rather than discrete life stages. So, for example, terms such as *nuliaqtituk* and *uingituk*, which refer to the state of having a husband or a wife, were not viewed as life stages themselves, but rather terms that described a person. Similarly, numerous terms used to refer to child development (*pihulihaaq*: just started walking) refer more properly to developing abilities rather than discrete life stages. Given the overlap between some of these terms, in the interviews informants were questioned about only four life stages: childhood (*nutaraq*), teenagerhood (*inuhaaq*), adulthood (*inirngniq*), and old age (*inutquaq/aaquaq*). This was done because inclusion of the other terms in questioning was perceived by informants as repetitious. Additionally, some attempt had to be made at standardizing the disparate responses to the number and kinds of life stages.

Other noteworthy items of discussion involve the ascribed meanings of words. Although Condon (1987:55) refers to *inuuhuktuq* (young man), *arnaruhiq* (young woman), and *inuhaaq* as being words used to describe teenagerhood, Elders use the terms in a very different sense, namely to refer, almost exclusively, to young adults. That is, male Elder informants, when asked what the stage of being an *inuuhuktuq* was like for them, typically responded that they were getting married at that time, trapping and traveling on their own, and just starting families. They would then explain that one or two of their sons were in that stage now. When asked what age I was thought to be (a married 30-year-old with a daughter),

Elders replied that I also would be referred to as *inuuhuktuq*. There was also an indication among these informants that being an *inuuhuktuq* was more a question of social characteristics than of physical ones. Several informants indicated that a person who was *inuuhuktuq* was also *inirngniq*.

A person who was *inutquaq* was simultaneously *inirngniq* as well. Nearly all of the older informants and several of the younger ones indicated that there was no word in Inuinaqtun that corresponded to the English word teenager, which suggests that the term itself has changed in meaning. It also reinforces Condon's (1987:56–57) statements that in traditional times, one went from being a child to being an adult, with the term *inuhaaq* being used to refer to people who were expected to be responsible within the household and begin thinking of setting up their own domestic unit, even though they were not yet socially mature enough to do so.

In conclusion, in spite of minor differences between men and women and the dramatic linguistic differences between young and old, there exists a general agreement concerning the structure of the life course, although the language of choice used by older and younger people is different. The next section will present and discuss differences between young and old and male and female regarding how one makes transitions from one life stage to the next.

## Making Transitions: Differences and Similarities in How Inuit Age

During the interviews, informants were asked specifically how one enters and exits particular life stages in addition to questions about the characteristic experiences of a person during a particular life stage. Although there were many different responses to these questions, answers were categorized into two different themes: *Natural* and *Social*. Social themes were further categorized into three sub-themes: Domestic, Economic, and Attitudinal.

### Natural Themes

Mentions of transitions characterized as based on nature imply that one enters or leaves a life stage because of the action of time, due to natural factors such as physical maturation, physical deterioration, chronological age markers (i.e., reaching a certain age, such as 50). This category includes seemingly ambiguous statements, as "it just happens," which refer to the action of the passing of time. Some examples are included below:

AE (male, age 31): I know I'll be an old man when I can't skate anymore, and when I have to start asking for help to get my jacket up and pull my zipper

up. "Son, I need to go bathroom again." Those kinds of things. You can't start your machine anymore. You can't change a tire anymore.

BB (male, age 39): I'll be an Elder when I slow down, maybe a little bit. When I slow down I know I'll be an Elder.

KO (female, age 48): Must be [I'll become an Elder] when I turn 50. That's what everybody says, anyway. But that's in a couple of years.

HK (male, age 35): Nobody told me. It just happens. Just came, I guess. When I turned 20, somewhere around there, then I was an adult. I felt a little older. I felt like I wasn't a teenager anymore.

CN (female, age 65): [They become a teenager] when they start having their monthly. That's for the girls. They have to know about that, or else they won't know what's going on, you know.

MK (male, age 74): Everybody, when they turn 65, they get an old age pension. That's when they know they get old. *Inutquaq* is no good. You can't do anything. It's getting weak. You can't work good. Everybody is like that when they get old. Not like white people you know, these Eskimos.

### Social Themes

Mentions of transitions based on domestic, economic, and attitudinal themes are all considered social themes and imply that one moves to new life stages based upon the acquisition of particular social characteristics. *Domestic themes* involve changes in marital status, attainment of parenthood and grandparenthood, changes in domestic arrangements, and changes in one's role within the domestic sphere. Some examples are as follows:

DA (female, age 35): I guess I considered myself an adult when Kim was born. When I got pregnant with Kim.

BG (male, age 54): I guess if you start having children, get married, then you become an adult.

IN (male, age 31): My life really changes when I became a papa, eh? That's one of the big changes right there. That's when I knew I was a young man.

Transitions based upon *Economic themes* refer to mentions of changes in economic arrangements. These include changes to either subsistence involvement and wage employment. Some examples are included below:

FK (male, age 50): You're an *inuuhuktuq* when you're trying to have things on your own, I guess. Like a rifle, dogs, of your own stuff, or being a trapper for yourself. People are trying to thinking of supporting themselves. Me, I never once depended on my mom or my dad. I got my own stuff in my own way.

MB (female, age 32): When you become an adult you have a lot more responsibility. How are you go-

ing to find work? There are so many things you want. You've got to get a job and don't depend on others. Being responsible took a lot of will and wanting to show others you can do it. But first you have to want to do it for yourself.

As will be shown later, economic themes were of minor importance in identifying one's position in the life course. Indeed, both of these examples, especially the second, have embedded within them notions that what is critical for entering a new stage such as adulthood is not a change in one's economic role but rather a change in attitude.

Transitions based upon changes in Attitudinal themes are much more difficult to define particularly. Keith et al. (1994:167–168), for example, refer to similar themes as “social maturation” but leave this category vague in definition and do not explore it in detail. In Holman, it quickly became clear that an important component of moving through the life course involved changes in both the attitudes of the individual and the attitudes of the community toward the individual. Informants frequently mentioned that when one attains a new life stage it is because their “mind changes.” Thus, this category includes mentions of changes to personal responsibility and independence from others, involvement in community life, withdrawal from community activity, association with others in the same life stage, and community recognition as belonging to a particular life stage:

SA (female, age 24): [You become an adult] when you start getting involved with committees.

CN (female, age 31): [A kid becomes a teenager] when they say, “I don't need your help anymore, I don't want your help anymore.” They start making choices on their own. They might make some bad choices, but that's their choice. You have to let them do that.

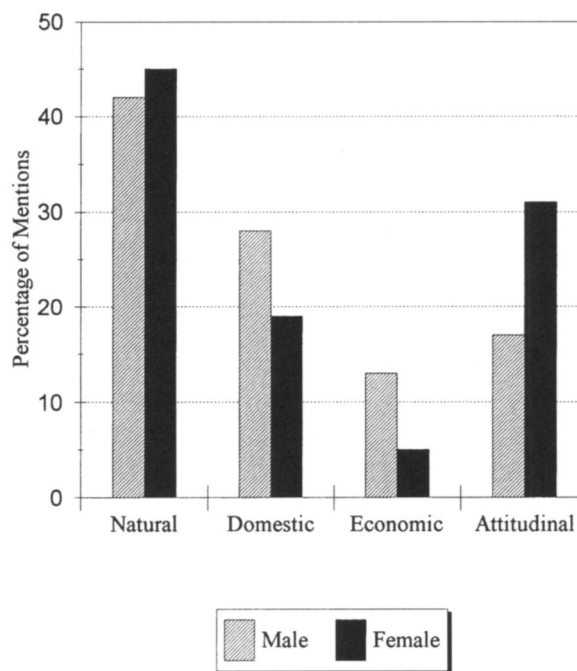
SK (female, age 35): That's how I always perceive it, being an Elder. RN has been an Elder for many years, but she would never allow herself to slow down until she became late 80s and she said she lost interest in sewing and going visiting and just wanted to stay home and relax.

RM (male, age 33): When I started running around with other teenagers [I became one]. At around 10 or 11. I was really mature for my age because I hung around with a lot of older kids.

JK (male, age 63): If I get old I'm just going to sit there. Never hunting polar bear, trapping, traveling, fishing, never look for seal holes, never feed the dogs, never have dogs. I'm going to just want to sit around. Old people is like that anyway, I know.

## Age and Gender Contrasts in How Inuit Negotiate the Life Course

The way in which a person enters a new life stage is in some respects perceived quite differently de-



**Figure 1. Transition Themes Sorted by Gender, Ages Combined. Total Number of Coded Mentions: Men (n = 19): 98, Women (n = 19): 91.**

pending on one's age. Figure 1 displays the differences in mentions by theme and gender when the age categories are combined. Natural themes play an important role in transitions from one life stage to the next for both genders, as 42% of male and 45% of female mentions of life stage markers involved natural themes. Among the social themes, differences included a higher incidence of mentions of domestic themes for men (28% for men to 19% for women), and the converse for mentions of attitudinal themes (31% for women opposed to 17% for men). Economic themes appeared to be nearly inconsequential in marking life course transitions or in identifying a person as belonging to a particular age category (13% of mentions by men, 5% of mentions by women).

Figure 2 displays the same numbers by theme and age when genders are combined. Some differences become more pronounced. Natural themes were mentioned with similar frequency by older and younger people (42% of older people's mentions and 44% of younger people's mentions). Social themes (domestic, economic, and attitudinal) showed some disparities, with 32% of older people's mentions focusing on domestic issues, compared to 19% of younger people's mentions, with the opposite true for attitudinal themes (26% by young people and 19% by older people). Again, economic issues appear to be of minor importance



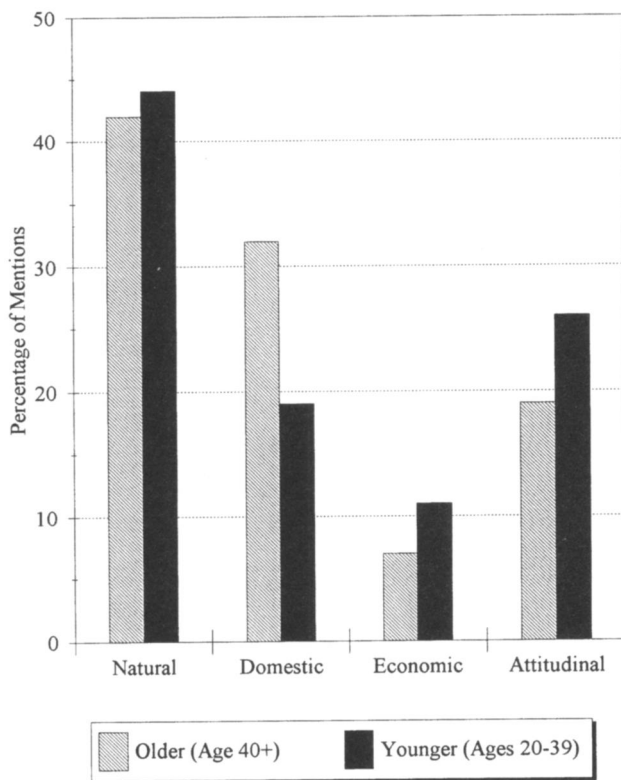


Figure 2. Transition Themes Sorted by Age, Genders Combined. Total Number of Coded Mentions: Older (n = 14): 59, Younger (n = 24): 130.

in marking life stage transitions (11% for younger people, 7% for older people).

### Natural Processes As Markers of Transition

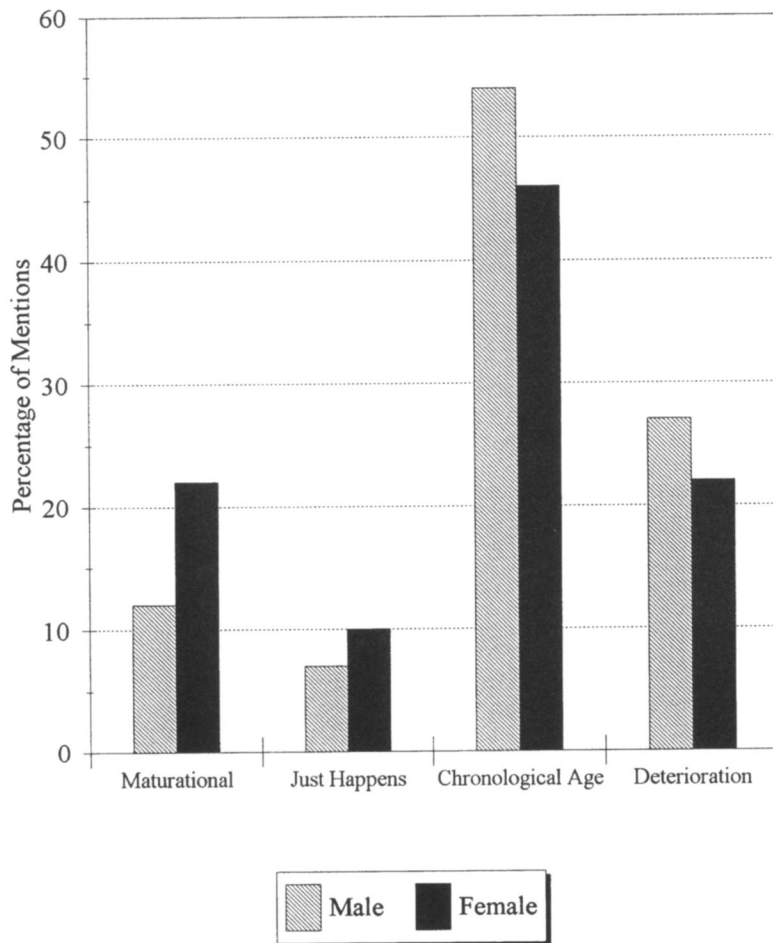
One of the most readily apparent distinctions that emerged from the interviews was the importance of natural themes as markers of transition between life stages. Figure 3 breaks down the natural themes mentioned in the interviews by gender, and Figure 4 breaks these themes down by age. The differences between males and females appear minimal, although one distinction is the greater frequency of mentions of maturational changes by women (22%, against just 12% by men). Noteworthy, however, is the distinction between the ways in which younger people claim to mark transitions between life stages. Among the natural themes cited by young people in Figure 4, chronological age is the most important marker of moving across life stages, receiving 58% of all mentions involving natural themes, as opposed to just 32% of the mentions by older people. Indeed, young people mentioned chronological age as a marker for entering all life stages. Conversely, older people mentioned issues of physical deteriora-

tion (40%) much more frequently than did young people (18%), perhaps because older people are experiencing those issues and young people are merely looking forward to them at some point in the future. Other differences appear to be minimal.

That young people should mention chronological age as an important indicator of entering a new life stage is not surprising given the experiences this cohort of Inuit has had in dealing with institutions of the Canadian state. The generation of Inuit under age 40 is the first to have experienced formal education for a significant portion of their childhood and teenagerhood. The education system, with its use of grade levels to denote educational progress, also emphasizes the movement of individuals from one grade to the next based upon chronological age markers. Indeed, Condon (1987:163–164) notes that the policy of the Holman school until the 1980s was to advance students to the next grade level to keep them with age mates, even if their academic performance continued to lag. Even today, school policy is to keep age mates together as much as possible, although they often work at their own academic level, attempting to keep children interested in at least coming to school (Paul Bennett, Holman school principal, pers. comm. 1997). And, although relatively few young adults today have completed high school, the knowledge of when one should complete high school, between the ages of 18 and 20, has become a marker of entrance into adulthood, at least ideally. Furthermore, the Canadian government has redefined the meaning of specific life stages by the application of various financial instruments, the most prevalent of these being the old age pension, to which one becomes entitled upon reaching age 65.

The Inuvialuit Regional Corporation has likewise defined Elderhood as beginning at age 50. Like the old age pension, Elderhood brings with it financial rewards. For Inuit reaching the age of 50, these rewards are in the form of a one-time payment of \$2500 and, until recently, a yearly payment of \$1500 paid in three instalments. Known as “elder benefits” by Holman Inuit, these payments originate from the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation and are a component of the land claims settlement. According to Holman Elders, the age of 50 was designated by Elders within the Inuvialuit Settlement Region some years ago because it was felt that this age approximated the time when a person traditionally became an Elder in their community.

In spite of a definition by Inuit themselves, however, the IRC is an institutional agent, and Elders in Holman note that while age 50 is set in stone as the definition of Elderhood, perhaps this age is no longer suitable because of the changes to the economy and improved health care available for older people. Indeed, given the growing number of people becoming Elders in their communities, in-

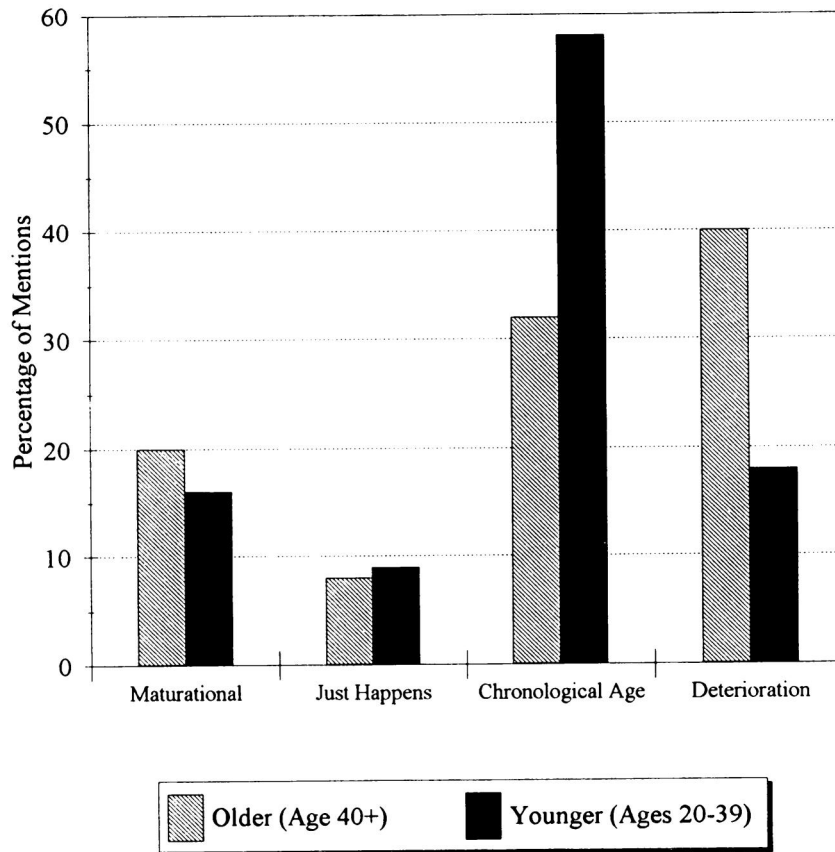


**Figure 3. Natural Transition Themes Sorted by Gender, Ages Combined. Total Number of Coded Mentions: Men (n = 19): 41, Women (n = 19): 41.**

creases in Elders' longevity, and the limited nature of the funds for elder benefits, some Elders are questioning whether payments should be made to all Elders. Whereas some Elders clearly depend on payments to meet their needs, others continue to hold wage labor jobs or hunt and trap actively. Clearly, the earning power of a healthy 50-year-old male is far greater than that of a decrepit 70-year-old, for example. This problem has come to the fore especially in light of recent decisions (1997) to suspend annual elder payments and rumored discussions to reduce the one-time payment upon reaching 50. Some Holman residents believe that these decisions to reduce payments have been made because of alleged mismanagement of the Social Development Fund from which elder payments are made. In spite of these problems, however, Elderhood now begins at age 50, and this definition is accepted by virtually all young people.

The situation with elder benefits exemplifies a major structural change to Inuit culture; namely, that of the intrusion of the Canadian Government and, more recently, the institutional power of the IRC (Inuvialuit Regional Corporation), into the lives

of Holman residents. Both play active roles in managing the lives of individuals in the community. As many other authors have noted (Hagestad 1986; Harevan 1986; Kohli 1986; Kohli and Meyer 1986; Mayer and Müller 1986; Mayer and Schoepflin 1989; Neugarten and Hagestad 1976; Street and Quadagno 1993), one of the functions of the state involves assuming some of the responsibilities previously accorded to kin groups or other local social and political agents. In Holman, these responsibilities have included education, child care assistance, social welfare, health care, and elder care, among others, and the mechanism the state uses to determine who receives these benefits and when they receive them is based on an individual's chronological age. In this way, the state begins not only assuming responsibilities for individuals but also begins scheduling lives and the appropriate times when individuals must move to the next stage. Thus, one becomes an Elder when he or she turns 50, even if that individual does not "feel" like an Elder; one is "old" when he or she receives the old age pension, regardless of whether that person feels "old" or not; and one is an "adult," or at least enti-



**Figure 4. Natural Transition Themes Sorted by Age, Genders Combined. Total Number of Coded Mentions: Older (n = 14): 25, Younger (n = 24): 57.**

tled to the benefits and responsibilities of adulthood, at age 18, regardless of whether one is socially ready.

Much of the research on the effects of the industrial state on individual lives has focused on Western settings, particularly Europe and the United States. The important point here, however, is that while the effects of state intrusion into Inuit lives shows some parallels with European models, the Inuit experience is unlike that of any European case simply because the state culture is foreign to Inuit. Consequently, while we might expect younger Inuit to adopt the Canadian cultural model of life course structure, to what degree is it salient to their lives?

In the interviews, although young people mentioned chronological age as an important marker of transition from one life stage to the next, these mentions were nearly always accompanied by other themes. Thus, one Inuk might say he would become an Elder at age 50, and he would become an Elder when he slowed down, but these events will not necessarily occur at the same time. Another might say she became an adult when she turned 20, and she would become an adult when she started having children. In no case was chronological age mentioned as the sole reason for entering a new life stage.

It also became apparent in the interviews that one's age is ascribed based on his or her individual social characteristics. This was especially true when young people occasionally declared the age of an elder in the community. In all cases, active, healthy, and highly visible Elders were always thought to be younger than their actual age (sometimes by over a decade), and inactive, decrepit, and rarely seen elders were thought to be much older. In one case, a feeble 72 year old was thought by some to be over 100.

On the whole, then, Inuit possess a general lack of knowledge about the actual ages of their peers and other community members. This was borne out most effectively when I was asked to assist the grade ten students on a class project. The exercise was a kinship and genealogy project as part of a class in Northern Studies, and the students were asked to construct a time-line of the community, mapping the births of everyone in Holman in connection with historical events in the life of the settlement. The students involved in the project began perusing the list of birthdates and expressed surprise at the actual ages of both their peers and their elders. Quite obviously, and perhaps not surprisingly, the students had a general idea of how old their peers were, at least in the sense of who

was older and younger than they were, but they had no idea of either the actual or relative ages of any of the older people in the community, people who were in different life stages and in different birth cohorts. This made it more striking by the fact that birthdays themselves are continually on peoples' minds: the local radio station (CBC, broadcast from Inuvik) spends nearly half of its noon news show sending birthday greetings to listeners.

What conclusions can be drawn from this? Chronological age for Inuit is useful and necessary for determining access to various financial benefits provided by the state, but it otherwise has low salience in the lives of Inuit, even in a school setting, where advancement to higher grades is now dependent upon performance rather than age (even though age mates are often kept together in the classroom). Classes often contain students with a range of abilities and ages. The grade ten class, for example, had students ranging in age from 15 to 26. Additionally, chronological age is useful for relating to outsiders, anthropologists included, who are known to use and understand such criteria. What are clearly more important in marking life course transitions are the social processes involved in the growth and development of an individual.

### Social Process as Markers of Transition

As Figures 1 and 2 make clear, domestic issues have a limited utility as markers of transition between life stages. In fact, the data indicate that changes in domestic roles are important in marking one's entrance into adulthood but insignificant in moving to other life stages. Part of the reason for this may be due to the fact that domestic roles and responsibilities simply do not change as one grows older. This is particularly true for women, who begin performing domestic tasks while still in childhood. Unlike other societies, for example, Inuit do not have an "empty nest" (see Hagestad 1986 for a discussion of family roles) when their children grow to adulthood and establish their own residences. On the contrary, older Inuit frequently adopt some of their grandchildren, and it is common for at least one adult child, and perhaps their own children, to be living in the household with the aged individual(s). Consequently, according to Inuit, grandparenthood holds no special significance as a marker of Elderhood or old age, since their roles as domestic caregivers remains the same.

Whereas domestic roles have some utility as markers of an individual's age, economic roles seem to be entirely impotent and are not important as markers of any life stage. Unlike industrial state societies, there are no perceived careers in Holman. Full-time subsistence hunting, for example, is no longer a viable economic option for most Inuit. The costs of foraging from the centralized community

are astronomical, especially considering the dearth of employment opportunities and the collapse of the fur economy, which, until the mid-1980's, provided some support for full-time subsistence activity. Additionally, steady full-time jobs are few and occupied by a small handful of workers who have clearly realized their fortune to have gained such positions. Most of the lucrative jobs are with the Hamlet government. However, such jobs are difficult to hold for great lengths of time because of the monotony of the work, the friction that can develop between employees and supervisors, and the demands for financial or other assistance made by kin. Consequently, Holman people do not generally think of their employment as a lifelong career vocation, but rather as a job that may or may not be temporary, depending upon circumstances likely to be beyond their control.

Furthermore, economic and domestic tasks typically do not change with age. Many girls, for example, begin performing certain tasks in late childhood, such as domestic chores, cooking, child care, and sewing, that they will perform for the remainder of their lives. For boys, subsistence hunting is a constant in their lives and a task that they expect they will perform until they are too old to hold a shotgun or rifle and see what they are shooting.

Given the role stability in Holman in the economic and domestic spheres of life, it is perhaps not surprising that the most salient social feature of aging is that of attitudes. That is, domestic roles are uniform throughout one's life, and economic roles are either uniform or ambiguous, but one's social maturity is paramount. Thus, one becomes an adult not because he or she is married and has children, but because he or she wants to be perceived as an adult by others. One therefore begins to act accordingly, displaying his or her independence and ability to make responsible decisions, becoming active in community life, and (as one woman suggested) serving on the various Hamlet and IRC committees. One becomes old not when he or she gets wrinkles and gray hair but when he or she displays the characteristics of being old: withdrawing from community life, "slowing down," and "feeling lazy."

Why might attitudes be so important in defining one's place in the life course? As mentioned above, it may be partly due to the lack of importance of other social factors that leads to emotional maturity or emotional development as significant markers of one's age. Regardless, for Inuit, movement through the life course has traditionally been perceived primarily and ideally as a process of intellectual development rather than one of domestic or economic accomplishment. In other communities this development is known as *ihuma*, the attainment of knowledge, wisdom, or reason. An important feature of an individual's maturation involved developing *ihuma*. Indeed, Briggs (1970:358) states

unequivocally that among the Utkuhikhalingmiut, “reason (*ihuma*) defines adulthood.” Those who were particularly knowledgeable or possessed a well-developed sense of *ihuma* were also those who could become community leaders. Furthermore, Briggs also states that one could possess too much *ihuma*, a state called *ihumaquqtuug*, which was thought to be common among the very old, and potentially dangerous (Briggs 1970:363). Gubser (1965: 211–213) likewise notes that Nunamiut Eskimos around Anaktuvik Pass, Alaska, thought of the *is-huma* as the mind, which appeared during childhood, at age 4 or 5, and then grew as the individual developed the capacity to use memory to solve problems, a process that continued throughout life.

In Holman, the concept of *ihuma* itself was at least not acknowledged publicly. Younger people, when asked, indicated they were unaware of the term or its meaning. The data from the interviews, however, suggest that the development of knowledge or wisdom, and its subsequent transmission to others, is an important goal of Inuit life course development. In the interviews this was borne out by some of the obvious contradictions of multiple and conflicting definitions of life stages and by the existence of people who clearly did not fit stated definitions, such as in the following example:

MS: How do you go from being a teenager to being an adult?

LN (female, age 26): When you act more mature and start taking on responsibility for your actions.

MS: What about a person who is 30, who you categorized earlier as adult, but they still act like a teenager. How do you explain this?

LN: Someone who isn't an adult. They weren't brought up right. They didn't listen to their parents. Selfish.

The development of *ihuma* was acknowledged by older people, though not overtly. Most referred to this process of developing *ihuma* not as the development of knowledge or reason, but as a process of waking up as if from a dream, or having their eyes opened for the first time, as they became aware of certain facts of life. The following excerpt makes this clear and also touches on some of the problems LN, above, raised:

MS: What is it like for adults in Holman today?

WM (female, age 56): Today the things that adults do—teens see what they are doing and follow the same pattern. As Mary [WM's daughter, who is present at this interview] gets older she will wake up and realize that things she does are wrong. It will be like waking up from sleep when Mary will start realizing the things she does are bad. That she shouldn't do them. From a teen to a young adult you are in a fog. Sometimes it clears up and the next day you are back in fog. The next stage of life

is adult and you realize that what you are doing is not right. At that time in my life [as a young person, becoming an adult] it was like being in fog or waking from a deep sleep. You start realizing from what you've been told that what you are doing is wrong.

A component of successful aging involves not only possessing *ihuma* but also transmitting it to younger members of the community. Those who do not age successfully are those who do not possess wisdom (or, perhaps, possess too much), are not involved in community life, or who suffer from various attitudinal problems that prevent them from being fully integrated into the life of the community.

## Conclusions

In summary, Inuit perceive transitions from one life stage to the next, and consequently markers of an individual's age, as being primarily determined by (1) the process of physical growth (puberty and adulthood) and senescence (declining health in old age), which is concurrently marked by an individual's chronological age, and (2) the process of social maturity whereby individuals begin assuming more responsibility for their actions on both the individual and community level. Chronological age, although frequently mentioned, especially by younger informants, appears to have low salience except in cases where financial benefits may be obtained (such as in achieving Elderhood or becoming eligible for the old age pension). Likewise, domestic and economic roles appear to have little utility for Inuit, possibly because of the stability of domestic roles across a lifetime and the ambiguous nature of the contemporary economy. While these conclusions might seem rather obvious, it is worth noting that the emphasis Inuit place upon social maturity (labeled attitudinal themes in this paper) in denoting life stage transitions seems to differ markedly from other societies. As Ikels et al. (1992) note, !Kung foragers referred almost exclusively to functionality and appearance as markers of age. Herero pastoralists in Botswana emphasized familial responsibility and functionality. In two sites in the U.S., movement through the life course was reported to be strongly influenced by domestic and economic roles.

In Holman, there appear to be few differences between men and women and between old and young in defining the life course, which immediately suggests that there is great deal of cultural continuity in how Inuit conceptualize how individual lives should be structured. This itself generates several problems, among them whether, in spite of the material changes to Inuit culture (such as the changing nature of subsistence hunting, the influx of new technology, establishment of centralized communi-

ties, and integration into the Canadian state structure), Inuit cultural ideology remains unchanged or whether cultural ideology is simply more resistant to change. If ideology is more resistant, then Inuit will eventually adopt Canadian cultural ideology, albeit at a slower rate. This has been suggested for other cultural phenomena such as child-rearing (Condon 1987:61–62). A corresponding issue is the degree to which this ideology will be transmitted to Inuit who are now in their teenage or childhood years. Children and teens were not interviewed for this study, but they, in turn, have vastly different experiences than do their parents, especially in terms of their own educational experiences, their exposure to southern mass media, and their lack of exposure to more traditional subsistence activities.

A second issue is the degree to which this professed ideology plays out in real life. LN, above, acknowledged that there were people who were, according to their age, adults, but who still acted like teenagers. She stated that such people were not raised properly, they were selfish, and they did not listen to their parents or elders. There are indeed many young people (and a few older people, too) who do not conform to the ideals laid out in this paper. Young people are especially aware of the cognitive dissonance between their own personal circumstances and the ideals that they espouse in the interviews themselves. This was reinforced during drinking parties, when young Inuit admonished me to not say anything to their parents or older siblings about their drinking or smoking marijuana. Indeed, the reason they were drinking and smoking, they frequently said, was because of the difficulty in meeting the ideals of their older siblings, parents, or Elders. Ideally, domestic roles are stable across a lifetime, but there are many women who, by choice, are mothers but not wives, just as there are many men who are fathers but not husbands. There are many men who engage in neither subsistence hunting nor wage employment.

Previous papers (Collings and Condon 1996; Condon et al. 1995) claimed that the material conditions of the contemporary economy were causing adjustment problems for young people. That is, an inability for a young man either to find steady employment or to participate effectively in the subsistence economy prevented such men from becoming recognized as adults. Additionally, the current social reality of the North—a dearth of jobs, an inability to make it as a full-time hunter and trapper—is exacerbated by the pressures that Elders are placing on their adult children. The data from this paper, however, seem to suggest that while economic and social circumstances may be implicated in some ambiguities regarding life stage transitions, especially for younger people, a greater difficulty may lie in the delayed development of *ihuma*. *Ihuma* does not develop in a vacuum. The ability of individuals

to learn reason and emotional maturity is dependent upon social connections across generations, connections that are increasingly threatened by the current social climate of the North.

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