

***Unikkaartuit*: Meanings of Well-Being, Unhappiness, Health, and Community Change Among Inuit in Nunavut, Canada**

Michael J. Kral · Lori Idlout · J. Bruce Minore ·
Ronald J. Dyck · Laurence J. Kirmayer

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Abstract Suicide among young Inuit in the Canadian Arctic is at an epidemic level. In order to understand the distress and well-being experienced in Inuit communities, a first step in understanding collective suicide, this qualitative study was designed. Fifty Inuit were interviewed in two Inuit communities in Nunavut, Canada, and questionnaires asking the same questions were given to 66 high school and college students. The areas of life investigated here were happiness and wellbeing, unhappiness, healing, and community and personal change. Three themes emerged as central to well-being: the family, talking/communication, and traditional Inuit cultural values and practices. The absence of these factors were most closely associated with unhappiness. Narratives about community and personal change were primarily about family, intergenerational segregation, an increasing population, more trouble in romantic relationships among youth, drug use, and poverty.

Change over time was viewed primarily as negative. Discontinuity of kinship structure and function appears to be the most harmful effect of the internal colonialism imposed by the Canadian government in the 1950s and 1960s. Directions toward community control and action are encouraging, and are highlighted. Inuit community action toward suicide prevention and community wellness is part of a larger movement of Indigenous self-determination.

Keywords Inuit · Community change · Well-being · Happiness

Introduction

The social distress experienced by Indigenous peoples following imperialism and colonialism has been well documented. Colonialism is “the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods... the takeover of territory, appropriation of material resources, exploitation of labor and interference with political and cultural structures of another territory or nation” (Loomba 2005, pp. 8, 11). McLeod (2000) refers to colonialism as the settlement of a group of people in a new territory and imperialism as the taking over without the settling, but here we will use the term colonialism as an umbrella concept. One of the common consequences of colonial intrusion into Indigenous nations is a high rate of suicide among young people, particularly males (Berlin 1987a; Kirmayer 1994; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1995; Tatz 2001). The demographic group manifesting the highest suicide rate in the United States, for example, is young Native Americans (Alcántara and Gone 2007; Echohawk 1997; Olson and Wahab 2006).

In this article, we examine the meanings of well-being, unhappiness, health, and social change among the Inuit in

M. J. Kral (✉)
Departments of Psychology & Anthropology, University
of Illinois At Urbana-Champaign, 603 E. Daniel Street,
Champaign, IL 61820, USA
e-mail: mkral@illinois.edu

M. J. Kral
University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

L. Idlout
Embrace Life Council, Iqaluit, NU, Canada

J. B. Minore
Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, ON, USA

R. J. Dyck
Alberta Health, Government of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada

L. J. Kirmayer
McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada

Nunavut, Canada, a region with one of the highest suicide rates globally. Suicide rates began rising among Inuit youth in the mid-1980s, and suicide is now considered an epidemic in the Arctic (Kirmayer et al. 1998; Tester and McNicoll 2004). While this is the case for Indigenous communities globally, youth suicide rates are particularly high in the circumpolar north (Bjerregaard and Lynge 2006; Kral and Idlout 2009; Silvikien et al. 2006; Vitebsky 2006; Wexler et al. 2008). This high prevalence of suicide has had a profound effect on community life. Notions of health and well-being must be considered in the context of this social perturbation.

While there is an abundance of research on suicide risk factors, most people with an accumulation of these factors will never complete suicide. The standard psychological suicide risk factors for Native Americans are the same as those for White Euro-Americans (Lester. 1997). The understanding of Indigenous suicide, however, must take into account power relations, inequity, and a collective loss of hope in a broader context (Lawson-Te Aho and Liu 2010). Furthermore, in spite of all the data on suicide, suicide theory remains thin to absent (Joiner 2007). Indigenous suicide must be understood in its historical or socially temporal and social/political contexts (Sewell 2005). It is our belief that the investigation of local sensibilities and community contexts will open a door to a broader and more nuanced, contextualized understanding of suicide. To understand suicide, one must first understand the psychological and social perturbations behind it (Shneidman 1985).

A Brief Historical and Colonial Background

The Inuit of Canada, with a population of about 45,000, constitute about 5% of Indigenous peoples in the country. Inuit live primarily in the central and eastern Arctic as well as in northern Quebec and Labrador, in the four regions named Inuvialuit, Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut. The present-day Inuit stem from the Thule culture that dates back to about A.D. 900, who overlapped with and replaced the Dorset people (approx. 1700 B.C. to A.D. 1100), who in turn overlapped with the pre-Dorset and Denbigh people (approx. 3000 B.C. to 500 B.C.) (McGhee 2004). Archaeologists have found evidence that people resided on the small island of Igloodik 4,000 years ago (Purich 1992). The Inuit are a culture long of their land.

Kinship has been described as the foundation of Inuit social organization and life (Bodenhorn 2000; Briggs 1995; Damas 1968a; Guemple 1965; Nuttall 2000; Stevenson 1997; Trott 1982). Briggs (1970) reported that kin pervade the thoughts and even dreams of the Inuit. Inuit social bonds extend beyond sanguinity or filiation to various forms of non-biological affiliation, including namesake, the common practice of adoption, friendship, and marriage or

common-law relationships. Traditional relationships across generations have been very strong, with elders taking on the role of passing on wisdom and knowledge. Kinship is viewed as an important area of traditional knowledge identified by Inuit elders (Saagiaqtuq et al. 2001). Values and practices related to kinship, mutual interdependence, and cross-generational teaching and support guided the Inuit for many centuries before foreigners came to their lands. Minor (1992) notes that, historically, relationships among the Inuit have had three basic features related to mutual interdependence: collaborative partnerships, extended family kinship patterns, and dyadic relations within the nuclear family. Indeed, kinship is the central structure of Indigenous societies, and its changes related to colonialism have been identified as a key factor in social problems being experienced by these peoples (DeMallie 1998; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996).

Northern Indigenous peoples had foreign visitors or *Qallunaat* long ago, such as Scandinavian Vikings around 1008 and British or European fishing ships after 1400. Related to these earlier visits were tensions around kidnapping by Europeans of Inuit between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. *Qallunaat* did not begin to have a major impact on northern Indigenous life, however, until the whaling expeditions and later fur trade of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Infectious diseases brought by the Europeans and Americans, for which Indigenous people's immune systems were unprepared, took many lives (Kenleyside 1990); by 1900, two-thirds of the Inuit population had died (Crowe 1991). These epidemics continued during the first half of the twentieth century, and it has been estimated that in 1950 one-fifth of the Inuit population had tuberculosis (Grygier 1997).

Missionaries made their way into Inuit lives in the early twentieth century, and conversion to Christianity was rapid (Laugrand and Oosten 2010). The Royal Canadian Mounted Police arrived about the same time. Significant colonial involvement of the Canadian government in the lives of the Inuit began officially in 1957, which included the presence of the military and large-scale family relocations during the 1950s and 1960s. Inuit were moved from their extended family camps on the land, where they had lived for many centuries, to aggregated settlements run by *Qallunaat* government officials. Today these settlements are called "communities". The government era changed northern life enormously (Tester and Kulchyski 1994), as did mandatory schooling, which often involved missionary residential schools where much sexual abuse took place (King 1998; Milloy 1999). This government takeover was the most rapid and extreme social change in Inuit history. Many aspects of life were radically altered. Communities modified their diets, hunting decreased, and lifestyles changed from extended family groups and semi-nomadic

hunting practices to the establishment of new settlements and a modern wage economy. After thousands of years of self-sufficiency, Inuit communities have become embedded in the global economy. The fur trade industry collapsed in the early 1980s, devastating many Inuit communities. Poverty became commonplace.

Concerns among Inuit related to land claims and self-government emerged in the early 1970s, and resistance to government control began. Inuit negotiated with the federal government about increasing their autonomy for a few decades (McComber 2007, 2008). The discovery of gas fields in the 1980s prompted the federal government to settle a major land claim in 1984 in the western Arctic named Inuvialuit. The Nunavut land claim in the central/eastern Arctic was finally settled in 1993. The Inuit political territory of Canada called Nunavut, meaning “our land” and first proposed in 1976, came into official existence in the Arctic in 1999 with 26 communities. Nunavut is the size of India with a population of about 27,000. Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit, is one of the languages of this territorial government, and communities with English names are reclaiming their Inuktitut names. Approximately 80% of the people of Nunavut are Inuit; the population of a typical community is about 95% Inuit. The capital of Nunavut, Iqaluit, has a large proportion, perhaps half, of *Qallunat* or non-Inuit. The three other Inuit regions in Arctic Canada are proceeding with land claims and moving toward self-governance.

Against this brief historical background, the demographics of Canada’s northern people remain quite different from those living in the south (Statistics Canada 2010). Educational attainment for Inuit is much lower than for the national population. The Inuit birth rate declined between 1996 and 2001, but it is still twice that of Canada. The proportion of Inuit youth under the age of fifteen (39%) was double that of Canada (18.5%) in 2002. The Indigenous population of Canada is generally much younger than the non-Indigenous population, with a median age of 22 versus 40 for non-Indigenous Canadians. Infant mortality in the Arctic has been 3.5 times higher than it is nationally, and life expectancy is 12 years lower. There is also a significant housing shortage, and 39% in Inuit in Nunavut live in crowded homes. Unemployment rates have ranged from 15 to 72% across Nunavut (Purich 1992).

Recent guidelines for research with Indigenous peoples emphasize the importance of participatory, collaborative work (NAHO 2007; Canadian Institutes of Health Research 2007). Narrative-based, qualitative methods are consistent with Indigenous perspectives of knowledge transmission and understanding (e.g., Mihesuah 1998; Smith 1999). Collaborative, participatory methods linked to community action are particularly relevant to the concerns of community psychology (e.g., Brydon-Miller et al., in press;

Kidd and Kral 2005; Marshall and Rossman 1995; Kral et al. 2011; O’Donnell 2006; Rappaport 2000; Trickett 1996), as is work with Indigenous communities (Berlin 1987b; Gone 2011; Fisher and Ball 2003; Hobfoll et al. 2002).

The present study, which was part of a larger project on suicide prevention, focused primarily on Inuit concepts of well-being or happiness (*quviasungniq*) and unhappiness. The emphasis is on Inuit meanings of these terms. Kitayama and Markus (2000) show how well-being is a “collaborative project”, constructed within one’s social world and cultural models of goodness and morality. In interdependent, collectivist cultures, engagement in harmonious relationships is more strongly associated with life satisfaction than in individualist ones such as the United States (e.g., Kwan et al. 1997). There has been a more recent focus in psychology on subjective well-being and positive psychology (Kahneman et al. 1999; Snyder and Lopez 2002). The objectives of this study were: (1) to identify Inuit meanings and experiences of wellness, happiness, unhappiness, and healing; and (2) given the continuous and often rapid social change in Inuit communities, to determine the experiences of recent change in each community that have affected experiences of well-being.

Method

The project was initiated during a Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention conference in Iqaluit, Nunavut. Following the conference, an Inuit steering committee was organized in Iqaluit by a community member, Eva Adams, and a multi-disciplinary academic research team was formed across several universities by Kral. Development of the project was guided by the Inuit steering committee.

From the outset, the study was designed as a community-based participatory action research project, with Inuit of different generations, including youth and elders on the steering committee. The Nunavut communities of Igloodik (population about 1,200) and Qikiqtarjuaq (population about 480) were invited to participate, and Inuit from these communities contributed to the fine-tuning of the study for their respective communities. The Inuit community groups especially involved in the project were the Youth Committees; the Baffin Regional Youth Council was also involved in consultation.

An open-ended interview was designed, with the core content determined collaboratively among the research team, steering committee, and community representatives, particularly the local youth committees. Interview questions were refined in Igloodik, the first community visited, with input from community members and the local youth committee. Two respected community elders in Igloodik

gave final approval of the interview protocol. The interview focused on eliciting meanings and experiences of wellness, happiness, unhappiness, healing, and recent changes in the community. To increase participation among youth and ensure confidentiality, the Youth Committee in Igloolik suggested administering an anonymous survey in the two communities. The survey asked the same open-ended questions as the interview, about meanings of happiness, health, sadness, healing, and social change. Suicide was also asked about, but those findings will not be reported here.

Fifty Inuit between the ages of 14–94 were interviewed in the two communities, evenly divided between females and males. These interviews were translated and/or transcribed. Sixty-six students completed the questionnaires in English administered primarily in classrooms. There were 37 high school students in grades 10–12 (average age 17.7, range 14–25), representing 66% of all students enrolled in those grades. From the colleges, 29 students participated, representing 38% of all students enrolled (average age 32.7, range 24–49). Only three blank questionnaires were returned. All students were living in their home communities.

Interviews were first conducted in Igloolik by two Inuit and two *Qallunaat* fieldworkers, in same-sex pairs of Inuit/*Qallunaat*. The female Inuit fieldworker was from Igloolik, but none of the other fieldworkers were from either community. The female pair and one *Qallunaat* (Kral) conducted the interviews in Qikiqtarjuaq. One month was spent conducting the interviews in each community. Participants were recruited by multiple means: telephone, visiting homes, social settings, and word-of-mouth snowballing. Interviews were held either in people's homes or in office space, which was a room in a small empty house in each community. All respondents were given the option to have the interview conducted in either English or Inuktitut. Almost all Inuit under the age of 60 speak English, the language of the schools in Nunavut. All elders were interviewed in Inuktitut, and almost everyone else chose to be interviewed in English. The interviews lasted on average between 20 min and 1 hour, although several interviews with Elders were up to 90 min in length and some were held over several meetings. All interviews were recorded, and oral informed consent was obtained from all respondents and recorded in written format. Parental consent was obtained for high school students by asking students to bring consent forms to their parents, who were phoned to confirm their consent. It was agreed that the narratives would remain unidentified for data analysis and subsequent publication. Discussions about privacy with community leaders led to the narratives not being returned to the communities. Given the difficulty of remaining anonymous in communities of this size, an attempt has been made to

change a few more obvious potentially identifying characteristics in some of the narratives. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Windsor and the Nunavut Research Institute, who received approval from the Hamlet Council in each community.

Fieldworkers met each morning to review interviews from the previous day and evening. Themes were derived as the interviews progressed, and interview questions were modified slightly over time based on experience and feedback. Prior to leaving each community, the fieldworkers met with the Youth Committee and other local social agency, school and hamlet representatives to review the major themes, and then went on the local call-in radio to provide feedback and discussion of these themes with community members. Fieldworkers and the president of the Igloolik Youth Committee met with the Inuit Steering Committee after all data was collected to discuss the major themes found. Interviews were translated and transcribed in Igloolik by Inuit. Research team and steering committee members met subsequently in the south or in Iqaluit several times to discuss the project and findings. Consensus was reached on the findings reported here. The Nunavut Social Development Council, an Inuit organization dedicated to cultural continuity and community wellness, provided input into action-focused dissemination subsequent to data collection.

Results

For the Inuit involved in the project, a primary goal has been to convey Inuit perspectives on well-being. Thus the project's title, *Unikkaartuit* or "the people's stories", coined by Eva Adams, an Inuit research team member. Although we identify discrete themes found in the narratives, there was great overlap across themes. This reflects an Inuit holistic perspective, in which significant aspects of life are viewed as intertwined rather than discrete. For example, the theme of "talking" cannot be meaningfully separated from "family", and it is difficult to separate "family" from "the land" as Inuit typically go out on the land, e.g., camping, with their families. Nevertheless, attention is directed to each of these themes as important factors in both well-being and unhappiness.

Narrative analysis using NVivo qualitative software was conducted by Kral and identified a total of 48 themes across the 50 translated/transcribed interviews and 66 questionnaires, where a theme was defined as more than one narrative on a particular topic across participants. Coding was done following Charmaz (2006) along the guidelines of grounded theory, where repeated themes are highlighted across participants' narratives. There were 208 separate narrative segments about family/kinship. This is

substantially more than the second most frequent topic, talking, which generated 137 narrative segments. The family was also the most common theme for high school and Arctic College students. Family was the most common theme in narratives about wellness, happiness, and unhappiness. Talking was the most frequent theme for discussions about healing, and country food (meat from the land or water) was the most common theme for meanings of health. Other unsolicited themes, in descending order of frequency, were drugs or alcohol (64 narrative segments; NS), traditional knowledge (62 NS), the land (48 NS), violence (39 NS), elders (34 NS), anger (29 NS), education (26 NS), youth and elders (24 NS), suicide bereavement (24 NS), Christianity (23 NS), and romantic relationships (21 NS). The remaining themes each had fewer than 20 narrative segments. The three primary codes/themes identified in the NVivo qualitative analysis, presented next, were the same three found during the fieldwork and reported to and discussed with the communities before we left each one.

By far the most prominent theme across all interview questions/questionnaire items, and interrelated with most other themes, was the central importance of *family and kinship*. Being with family, speaking with family, visiting, going on the land together, sharing food together, and many other family-related activities were closely associated with wellness, happiness, health, and healing. When asked about happiness, family was mentioned four times more frequently than the next most common theme, which was being on the land, usually with family. Unhappiness was tied to not being with family, not visiting, and with anger, alcohol, drugs, sexual abuse, and violence often associated within the family context. Family problems were often mentioned as reasons for young people being suicidal; however, the most common reason given for suicidality was problems in romantic relationships. Sample statements related to the family were: “Usually when I am happy I have to hug someone. And when I am not happy I just can’t leave it alone. I have to hug someone. To me, hugging someone has a significant meaning” (female, age 79). “Summer life. Family. Having a good family relationship with my wife and with my daughters” (male, age 47). “I’m feeling happy when my kids are happy. When I’m happy, I want my kids to feel happy. And being happy is loving, hugging, making sure that the people you want to make feel happy know that you’re happy about something” (female age 43). “My wife, my kids, good friends. I have to continue going on to be the happiest way for my family, for my parents and for the community” (male, age 39). [Unhappiness is] “not being with parents” (male, age 24). “Just being with relatives” (female, age 21). “My friends, to talk to them. And my family” (female, age 16).

The second most prominent theme across all narratives combined was *talking and communication*. Talking with family members was viewed as very important, and Inuit believed strongly that merely talking to one or more others was essential to one’s well-being. Such talk was associated with daily matters, but particularly with communication of negative feelings, past negative experiences, or remorse. Talking was identified as *the* significant component of prevention, intervention, and healing. It was cited over five times more often than the next theme for healing, which was being with family. Positive emotions were thus linked with talking, while negative emotions were often tied to the absence of such communication. Sample narratives:

The way I see healing is that if you want to heal you only need two or three trusted people to talk to you. ... It must first be done with two people at first, then go on from there. It seems to me that people involved in healing are just waiting around. And the only way they could help is when someone asks for help. Otherwise nothing will be done (male, age 76).

Once you start talking to other people, opening to other people... That’s the key thing, start talking, start opening about yourself (male, age 47).

Being able to talk to a little guy out there who’s crying out there, and then, you know, comforting... (male, 46).

Visiting older people. People with knowledge. Older people have more knowledge than I (male, age 27).

If you talk about your problems, you will feel a lot better (female, age 17).

Healing is talking and getting together with people (female, age 16).

Healing is good, talking about problems is good. Healing to me is when you have problems and you talk about them to someone (female, age 14).

The third most common theme related to well-being concerned Inuit traditional knowledge and practice or *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ)*. Examples included knowledge about or going on the land, hunting, camping, eating country food, spending time with elders, making traditional tools, skin clothing, building an igloo, and Inuit beliefs and cosmology. Family/kinship and communication are also an integral part of *IQ*. Narrative statements included, “One of the happiest times I remember when I was a kid, going out caribou hunting, walking, mainland, food, caribou and just enjoying life, that was one of my favorite times” (female, age 43). “What makes me healthy is eating country food and healthy food. How do I get that? My family” (male, age 21). “When I go out camping, fishing and other hunting” (male, age 17). “For me when I eat lots of Inuit food. Makes me more healthy” (female, age 15). “Country food makes me healthy” (female, age 14).

Recent Changes in the Community

In the interviews, Inuit were asked questions about the rapid changes taking place in the North. They responded to open-ended questions about (1) how their community is changing, and (2) how this change is affecting them personally. Most of the changes described were negative.

Regarding recent community change, the most common response was that each community is getting bigger. This was due to building construction and more people, with the latter focusing primarily on many new births. Family change was the next most frequent response, reflected in more distancing and less talking and visiting. The third most common response was a decrease in traditional cultural values and practices, centered primarily on a decrease in hunting and on language change. This was followed by narratives about changes in childrearing practices, particularly about less parental control and involvement, and an increase in drug use. (The main drug used in Inuit communities is cannabis.) Other themes centered on changes in romantic relationships among young people, romantic partnerships among youth forming more frequently but more easily breaking up; more domestic violence and abuse; and more unemployment and financial problems.

In response to how these changes are affecting them personally, Inuit most frequently responded by noting changes to their families. Again, this change was experienced primarily in terms of less communication and visiting, especially across the generations. Personal effects included money problems, unemployment, the processes of resolving romantic relationship problems (less likely to be resolved than years ago), and having less control over children. Sample statements include:

I would like to say first that when I was a child things used to be somewhat more open than they are now. They were more into helping one another. I have noted changes happening as I grew up. I have noted the changes. I am very sensitive to the feelings of other people who are being affected by violence and other unfavorable acts (female, age 79).

Our children are different than we are (female, age 48).

Well, the way I see it, when I was younger and there were less people here, we were more – we were able to share more. Help each other more. And respect our elders more. Not nowadays, even for myself, I'm very changed because I don't go visiting around anymore or see some relatives. It's because, it seems to me, it's changed me because I have more things to do at home and then I have this job... And I have more responsibilities. And sometimes these responsibilities, gets a bit too much. So my priorities have

changed a lot, and what I usually do for myself is to do some sewing. And that's really good therapeutic way of making yourself less stress (female, age 43). Yes, in the area of relationships with relatives. I seldom visit my relatives anymore (female, age 28).

Changing Family Lifestyles

According to the Inuit participants in this study, visiting, or *pularungnik*, has diminished in recent years. An Inuk in her late 40s remembered visiting declining after the introduction of the phone-in radio. She indicated that this was the beginning of a shift to public electronic communication, when, for example, someone called into the local radio asking for meat rather than making a request directly to someone in their family.

Elders were discussing that, because someone...said that this is going to break up families. The families didn't visit each other as much anymore and the people could now ask the public for different things, request different things. Instead of asking one person, or someone in your family, you could just air your concerns.

Elders were concerned about this change in visiting, and are unhappy about it. An Elder woman in her late 70s remarked, "Nowadays we don't go visiting anymore, and there are times that I stay home all by myself for prolonged periods for lack of visitors. But if you look out the window, you see people walking by and never coming to visit you". One 28-year-old woman indicated,

I seldom visit my relatives anymore. Maybe once in a great while. There is a great change in terms of family relationships, in that we the younger people are not particularly concerned with our relatives. We no longer visit our elders anymore or help them in any way. Basically what we are doing now is just staying home. Personally I don't go out camping anymore, and I think most of the young people don't go camping much anymore. It seems to me that the older Inuit do most of the camping, while the younger ones are always staying at home and not camping.

Another woman, age 22, also spoke of less visiting today.

Let's say about ten years ago. My aunties and cousins would come to our house and have caribou for dinner. I remember when I was a little girl, after church we would always go to my grandmother's house. A lot of our relatives would come, and enjoy tea, caribou, and so on. Have fun. But that barely happens anymore.

A 59-year-old man agreed:

In the olden days we were always told to visit elders by our parents, But today because of various commitments people don't do much visiting anymore. Another factor may be that because the distance between houses is quite far, this may also be a factor in not visiting anymore.

A young Inuk also talked about similar change, speaking of her childhood and saying "because houses were closer then, and also because there was no TV, we would always be outside playing, even in wintertime". A 43-year-old woman reported, "Nowadays, we don't visit our relatives, our older uncles, older aunts and stuff like that anymore. Maybe it's due to the fact that there's so many people here now". She added, however, "But the times have changed a lot and the young people are now in a place where they don't really know the old traditional ways but they know the new way more... And it's due to the fact that the elder's voices are starting to, you know, diminish...I want the young people to know that. Elders are an important part of their life". Although many expressed the desire to visit others in their homes, younger Inuit admitted that they were not making time to do this. Inuit traditionally interacted in smaller groups, and these large communities changed such interactions including visiting.

Many young Inuit felt that they did not get enough attention or love from their parents or other relatives. "I know the parents love them, but they don't get enough attention. That's part of the problem", said a 25-year-old woman. One man, age 47, reported "I would say there were families [who were] very close-knit, and now they're spreading apart. They're not living around with one another anymore. They're gradually moving away from this community". Mobility was evident in both communities. A middle-aged man from Qikiqtarjuaq stated that "the family traditions were very strong when I first came up here, and I've noticed that the family is gradually falling apart. They're not tight-knit anymore. Some families are moving away from this community, because maybe they're tired of living in this small community". A 76-year-old man, talked about parents not being as involved with their children as they used to be: "We are now living in houses with so many rooms. Family members may come in and show some concern on their faces, but they immediately go to their room and you didn't have time to ask them what it is that is wrong...Because as parents we are more than willing to help our children, and I may be right to suggest that we and our parents don't talk enough to each other anymore". Recent sedentarization reflects new patterns of community life, and the large cohorts of young people who grew up together is also new for Inuit. These young people

followed the Western style of relating more among themselves than with older generations (Hareven 2000).

Intergenerational segregation is an increasingly common feature of community life for Inuit. The effects of this segregation were evident in the stories gathered here. Interests and activities among young people have been diverging from those of their parents and grandparents. A number of elders wondered why hockey arenas were being built in the communities. They believed that such activities kept young people from spending time with older Inuit, and learning traditional practices such as hunting. A middle aged man commented,

With the arena, I've talked to a number of elders and they said, 'Why did they open the arena?' Because my kids are staying up late and they don't want to help with getting some ice from the iceberg, and they don't want to go out seal hunting, because it's hockey night tonight.

Another middle-aged woman talked about differences between the generations, and how disparate their experiences have been during their lifetimes:

Most of us older, well, people my age, lived traditional ways. Like when you're about four or five, you didn't have a recorder, no TV, no telephones, nothing, no electricity, but still we were living in the old traditional ways, the last bit. And then here we are, living in a very modern age, in the same lifetime as ourselves. And it really sometimes creates havoc in our brains because what we learned before, how we were brought up, is very different from [the way] we are bringing up our kids.

The cultural change reflected in enthusiasm for sports like hockey was troubling for this woman, who wanted to help her children who were no longer living with her. She said that she sometimes felt "worthless" as a mother. Yet younger Inuit, teenagers and those in their 20s, were generally very pleased with having arenas and sports available to them. Sports and related activities were associated with happiness and health for many in this age group.

Young people were perceived as being caught between two cultures and their own experience confirmed this predicament. An elder, age 76, stated,

Children who are attending school may easily go wrong and may end up not knowing what to do. And I can't blame them, in that they seem to be stuck in two worlds. When they leave for school in the morning they are being taught by people other than their parents until the school is over. Then when the school day is over they go home and their home atmosphere

is totally different from the school and they must cope with that. This may lead to children getting confused.

As a woman, age 68, put it: “It’s almost like a catch-22, parents or the teacher, and [children] are in concept stuck in between”. A 27-year-old man spoke about young Inuit being “stuck in two cultures”, and the challenge of committing oneself to school and to traditional activities like hunting and even maintaining Inuktitut the way it has been spoken by the elders. “They had to learn one thing, and then learn another”, he said of his peers when he was a teenager.

The still relatively new wage economy also appears to be contributing to changes in cultural practices. A 24-year-old woman said

families are more distant now than they were when I was a kid. Money was always a big part of my distant families. Money I think is the reason why families are more distant. We can’t really afford to feed all our uncles and all our aunts and cousins in one house, so we’re sort of separated now.

A 39-year-old man also spoke of money leading to less sharing:

[The community] is changing fast. When I was young, we were a good family. We were living in one house, we helped each other with the money and the meat. Today it’s a lot different. Probably from the bills we got to pay and me, I’m not giving any money to my relatives because I got to support myself.

Finally a 59-year-old man suggested, “Perhaps, to an extent, we are concentrating so much on the value of a dollar that we are not as neighborly as we used to be”.

Discussion

In this study of Inuit notions of well-being, family, talking or communication, and traditional Inuit cultural values and practices were viewed as the most important features of well-being, and their absence was associated with unhappiness. These three domains were closely associated, and consistent with the central values of traditional culture. Many of the narratives about talking referred to the family.

Clearly, despite the profound changes in community life brought by colonization and sedentarization, the family still holds a central place in Inuit life. Well-being is understood in terms of the experience of spending time with family—talking, sharing food, and experiences on the land. Even young people who were oriented toward their peer groups in ways consistent with the larger North

American and global youth culture, acknowledged a desire for more contact with parents and elders. For their part, adults saw youth as missing out on vital opportunities for learning culture and collective sources of well-being.

Kinship ties remain extremely important in most Native North Americans communities (Demallie 1998). This reflects indigenous concepts of the person that are centered on social relations as well as relationships to the land (Kirmayer 2007; Kirmayer et al. 2008). Unfortunately, mental health services in Nunavut have tended to be focused on individuals rather than on families or community. Such Westernized individualistic approaches may not work as well as family oriented approaches consistent with Indigenous notions of self and personhood (Prussing 2008; Gone 2008). Family was most commonly related to suicide prevention and intervention, as Inuit who had previous experiences of suicidality reported that speaking with family members was what helped them the most (Kral 2003).

Narratives concerning community change were primarily negative. The increasing population of communities has been viewed as a problem among Inuit, with “too many people” being a common complaint especially among older Inuit (Rasing 1994). Only three generations ago Inuit were living in extended family camps on the land, and middle-aged Inuit today were all born on the land. The aggregation of Inuit onto government-run settlements changed Inuit life enormously. Kinship-based social organization was disrupted. The large number of children growing up together and learning about the late 1960s culture in the south developed into a new youth culture that began to want more independence from their parents (Condon and Stern 1993). This was the beginning of intergenerational segregation for Inuit, which participants in our study across the age span viewed as a serious problem.

Along with changes in the community, the Inuit family has been changing. In this study, Inuit reported that there is less talking and visiting, and that parenting has changed with children being seen as too independent. There is less communication between parents and children. The reasons for this were not explored in this study, but this is a pattern that has been developing since the 1960s (Briggs 1995; Klausner and Foulks 1982). Many parents today were taken to residential schools in the 1960s and 1970s, and report that they did not have parents to model parenting behavior. Many Inuit teenagers today say they spend very little time with their parents (Kral 2009). This is in contrast to the mentorship style of childrearing among Inuit three generations ago, where one’s parents and elders were one’s teachers, the relational center of affection (*ungajuq*) and respect (*naalaqtuq*) (Damas 1968b). Briggs (2001) demonstrates how Inuit autonomy, especially among youth,

was a strong cultural value but today is a fragile one expressed in withdrawal: “Autonomy may become a defense against a weak self-esteem, instead of a celebration of strong self-esteem” (p. 244). Withdrawal has been more acceptable to Inuit than conflict, and many youth have withdrawn from their parents. Numerous parents have also withdrawn from their teenage children (Kral 2009). In addition, intergenerational segregation likely reflects the combined effect of three factors: (1) sedentization and the move from small nomadic extended family groups to relatively larger communities; (2) a high birthrate, decreased infant mortality, and the moving of Inuit to aggregated settlements resulting in a very large cohort of young people; and (3) rapid culture change making for markedly different experiences across the generations.

Social change has an effect on family life. Gardner (1998) described a change in the Euro-American family that has taken place over the past few centuries, which he identified as the move from the “vertical” to the “horizontal” family. In vertical families, strong communicative and affectional bonds exist across living generations, whereas in horizontal families these bonds are seen within age cohorts. In horizontal families, fewer ties exist across the generations and close communication—even the spending of time together—occurs more often among those of approximately the same age. Gardner noted that since Europeans arrived in North America, Americans have become increasingly horizontal in their relationships. Generations have become increasingly segregated (e.g., Bly 1996; Hareven 2000). If Gardner’s geometric metaphor is applied to the Inuit family, rather than taking a few centuries the move from vertical to horizontal has been taking place over only the last three generations. Wachowich’s et al. (1999) collaborative study of three generations of Inuit confirms that great differences in lived experience do indeed exist across living age cohorts, and this cultural change continues to have its greatest impact on youth (Condon 1988; O’Neil 1986). The change in intergenerational communication among Inuit was already apparent in the early 1970s (Brody 1991).

Another significant relational change seen in the communities concerns romantic relationships, especially among youth. Arranged marriage was the traditional method for such partnerships, but the contemporary American model of love based on individualism and choice has become prevalent (see Swidler 2001). Trouble in romantic relations was the triggering factor in most suicide attempts by Inuit, and many youth threaten their partners with suicide when arguing (Kral 2009). A large number of Inuit youth experience distress in these relationships, and need guidance. Parents were once central in guiding young people into these relationships, and many parents are now left out of youth romance altogether. Given the importance

given to family and communication for well-being, this guidance needs to come from parents and elders.

Lack of employment or meaningful activity is another crucial component of community change with mental health implications. Poverty became common when the wage economy was established in the 1950s and 1960s (Graburn 1964, 1969), as there were few jobs. In one of these communities, Igloolik, the unemployment rate is about 50%, and 65% of its members receive government income support (Takano 2005). Increasing cannabis use was also indicated as a negative change in the community and was framed largely as a financial problem because the substance is expensive (Kral 2009).

The meanings and psychological impact of poverty depend on cultural and social context (Kirmayer et al. 2009). However, there is evidence that poverty is negatively effecting family life (Caughy et al. 2003). In mainstream society, poverty exposes children to multiple stressors including poorer health (Evans and English 2002) and is associated with inconsistent and less nurturant parenting (Hashima and Amato 1994). Poverty and economic marginalization remain significant problems in Nunavut.

When asked about personal change, Inuit responded in similar ways to their accounts of community change. In a collectivist culture, personal change is directly related to community change. Inuit thus spoke of less family communication and visiting, money problems and unemployment, problems with romantic relationships among younger Inuit, and parents having less control over their children. The emphasis was on family change, which was experienced negatively and included less communication across the generations. Communication, talking, needs to be increased in Inuit communities, where it has declined along with visiting. We found that talking is in the form of speaking with family members or friends, informally, to either one person or a small number of other people, including elders. It is not a public confessional or private therapeutic monologue. Yet talking and emotional expression have been found to be related to positive mental and physical health (Pennebaker 1997).

Relational life is paramount for Inuit. This study shows that the most salient psychological effects of colonialism on Inuit have been on family relationships. It is surprising that little historical research has been conducted on such change in the Inuit family. Some have noted the negative impact of colonialism on Indigenous family life, including Inuit, but research remains to be done on the exploration of this effect (Condon 1988; Evans-Campbell 2008; Graburn 1969). Kinship was at the center of Inuit social organization prior to colonization, and dramatic changes to family structure and communication have transformed this core institution. Relationships, according to Alfred and Corn-tassel (2005), are “at the core of an authentic Indigenous

identity. Clearly, it is the need to maintain respectful relationships that guides all interactions and experiences with community, clans, families, individuals, homelands, plants, animals, etc. in the Indigenous cultural ideal” (p. 609). As Brody (2000) has written about Inuit and other Indigenous peoples, “If these relationships are not respectful, then everything will go wrong” (p. 294). This study shows that it is family and community relationships that are at stake in the Inuit postcolonial world.

Changes in the family are one important context for understanding Inuit youth today. Many Inuit youth feel increasingly alone with experiences of a global society that diverge from the life experiences of their parents and elders. Inuit youth are motivated to be part of this global agora and to also feel connected to the world of traditional values and practices represented by their elders. Many Inuit youth say they live in these two worlds, yet feel they are deeply rooted in neither. Henze and Vanett (1993) describe the difficulty of living in two cultural worlds, showing that they are neither distinct nor internally uniform, living in both has multiple meanings, it is not clear how one is able to pursue the “best” of each world, conflict is created between contradictory value systems, and the mainstream society schools cannot mediate between these worlds. Berry (2005) has found that the integration of two cultural worlds, the old and the new, is associated with less stress and better adaptation, and that acculturative stress decreases after contact. Yet he indicates that having the power to decide on how acculturation takes place matters. Inuit were not in control of this process. Furthermore, the problems are now located in altered family and community relationships, which has complicated the individualistic notion of acculturation. Rather than living in two worlds, Deyhle (1998) argues that one lives in one complex and conflictual world. Inuit youth yearn to feel a sense of belonging and love. It appears that feelings of not belonging together with emotional disconnection are contributing to youth suicide, as this is a well known suicide risk factor (Joiner 2007). We suggest that this has been colonialism’s negative impact: decreasing the sense of belonging in a family-based collectivist culture where this sense was at the center of life. Future research should explore further the relationship between suicide and family change among Inuit and other Indigenous peoples.

Chandler and Proulx (2006) argue that personal and cultural continuity sustains life, and that suicidal youth lack a sense of a sustained, continuous self over time. They suggest there are discontinuities in the sense of self among suicidal Canadian First Nations youth that make them vulnerable to suicide. While many aspects of cultural continuity still exist for Inuit, the dramatic changes in kinship, marriage, and community have resulted in a significant rupture in cultural continuity.

This study demonstrates that family life is essential to Inuit conceptions of well-being. These data suggest that interventions for mental health promotion should be community-based and family centered. The family is central to *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* or *IQ*, Inuit traditional knowledge and practice, and family life is mentioned in the *Baffin Mandate* of the Nunavut government as an important direction for future policy (Government of Nunavut 1999a, b). This is currently taking place in Igloolik, where a community wellness committee exists that is creating a traditional healing center together with *Inullariit*, the Elder’s Society. Their plan is to focus on the family, and to have elders and family members involved in healing. Elders and youth appear to be open to engaging each other, and mentoring programs bringing them together should be developed.

Mental health promotion and well-being programs may have better outcomes when communities take ownership of the activities (Kral et al. 2009). This is consistent with the theory of community empowerment (Rappaport 1987) and with suggestions that community psychologists and similar others begin with listening to what community members identify as important to them (Trickett 2011). Other ongoing participatory action research has evolved from this study, and in Igloolik an organization has been formed called *Tungajuk* (feet solidly planted on the ground) to support participatory community wellness projects. This study assisted in the development of the Health Canada National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, through which Indigenous Canadian communities and organizations are developing their own federally funded suicide prevention activities and programs (see Kral et al. 2009). This support for community initiatives and empowerment is in keeping with indigenism, the global Indigenous human rights movement, which aims to mobilize collective agency (Niezen 2003). Much of Inuit culture persists as Inuit reclaim power over their lives. We recommend that other government agencies adopt similar participatory action strategies with Indigenous communities to advance health, social services, education, corrections, and other vital community concerns.

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