

Postcolonial Suicide Among Inuit in Arctic Canada

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Abstract Indigenous youth suicide incidence is high globally, and mostly involves young males. However, the Inuit of Arctic Canada have a suicide rate that is among the highest in the world (and ten times that for the rest of Canada). The author suggests that suicide increase has emerged because of changes stemming in part from the Canadian government era in the Arctic in the 1950s and 1960s. The effects of government intervention dramatically affected kin relations, roles, and responsibilities, and affinal/romantic relationships. Suicide is embedded in these relationships. The author also discusses the polarization between psychiatric and indigenous/community methods of healing, demonstrating that government-based intervention approaches to mental health are not working well, and traditional cultural healing practices often take place outside of the mainstream clinics in these communities. The main questions of the paper are: Who should control suicide prevention? What is the best knowledge base for suicide prevention?

Keywords Inuit · Suicide · Postcolonial · Prevention

Indigenous youth suicide incidence is high globally. Most of these suicides involve young males. This is the case for Australia (Hunter and Milroy 2006), New Zealand (Beautrais and Fergusson 2006), Brazil (Coloma et al. 2006), Pacific Islanders (Else et al. 2007), Peru (Brown 1986), Guam (Booth 2010), Micronesia (Ran 2007), Canada (Kirmayer 1994), and the United States (EchoHawk 1997). It is also high among circumpolar indigenous youth from Siberia (Vitebsky 2006), Alaska (Bjerregaard

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et al. 2004; Wexler et al. 2008), Arctic Canada (Kirmayer et al. 1998), Greenland (Bjerregaard and Lynge 2006), and northern Norway (Silviken et al. 2006). The term “indigenous” is used in this paper despite Kuper’s (2003, p. 389, 2005) suggestion that it is “loaded,” open to relabeling, political, and a euphemism for “primitive.” Most will agree with the first three points. I use the term because it is accepted by Inuit.

For 2009, the suicide rate among Inuit in Nunavut, Arctic Canada, was 83.9 per 100,000 (Nunavut Bureau of Statistics 2012), while that for Canada in 2008 was 11.7 per 100,000 (Statistics Canada 2012). In Nunavut, the suicide rate was as high as 126.2 in 2003, and so it can be up to ten times as high as the general population. Suicide began to rise among Inuit youth in Nunavut in the mid-1980s (see Fig. 1). Suicide rates have been criticized for underreporting of such deaths, particularly in certain countries, making some comparisons difficult. (Andriessen 2006; O’Carroll 1989; Sainsbury 1983). Others view suicide rates as useful in identifying trends such as male and youth suicides (Wasserman et al. 2005).

Inuit youth suicide has been on the radar of the Canadian and Nunavut governments for some time. While the Government of Nunavut is responsible for health in the territory, the federal government provides funding for identified health problems including suicide. Mental health professionals have visited Inuit communities, and expensive suicide prevention training was conducted with select community members in the late 1990s. Yet despite this intervention, the suicide rate has remained high. A report was subsequently produced by the Nunavut government that highlighted suicide risk factors and intervention strategies (Government of Nunavut 2010). While colonial intergenerational trauma and distress transmitted across generations that originates with a traumatic event is identified as a causal influence and it is recommended that communities develop their own activities for mental wellness, the report nevertheless still emphasizes the assumed relationship between suicide and psychiatric disorder, associated suicide-intervention training, and evidence-based psychiatric intervention through mental health services.

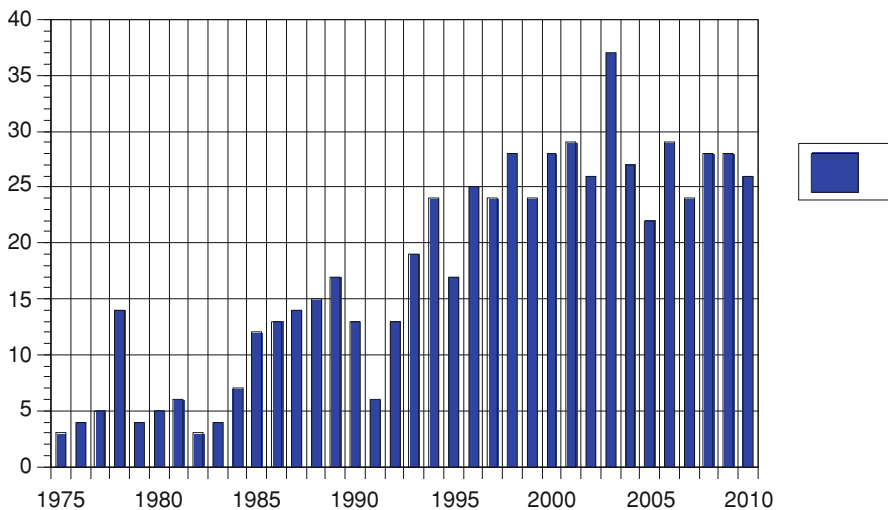


Fig. 1 Suicide in Nunavut, 1975–2010

Two very different conclusions were reached by the authors of government reports that addressed the problem of suicide. The emphasis of the first 2007 report was placed on “Inuit societal values,” culturally relevant programming, traditional knowledge or *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangiit*, the role of elders, and indigenous “best practices” for suicide prevention including indigenous prevention strategies from Greenland and Australia (Government of Nunavut 2007). The 2-year planning of the second 2010 report included members and consultants of the Government of Nunavut, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., the group responsible for Inuit land claims, Embrace Life Council, an Inuit organization for suicide prevention and community wellness, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Surprisingly, there was only one Inuk member from Nunavut in this group. Speaking with some of the non-government people involved in the report, it appeared that during the planning meetings, a split had occurred between the “scientifically” research-minded members on the one hand, and the Inuit community-based members on the other, on how best to address suicide prevention in Nunavut. One of the members had created a committee that included elders and youth from Inuit communities in the different regions of Nunavut. The purpose of that committee was to generate ideas for community-driven suicide prevention. The scientifically oriented members, who were in the majority, rejected this committee, which was suggested as an advisory committee for this group, and instead did their own community consultations. There is little of this in the new strategy report. The process of these meetings was focused on graphs and other statistical information rather than on reports from community members or information about Inuit colonial history and current social life. The Western science side won, leaving many of the others dismayed.

This polarization between psychiatric and indigenous/community methods of healing and intervention goes well beyond Nunavut. Ethnographies in Native American reservations in the United States are demonstrating that government-based intervention approaches to mental health are not working well, and traditional cultural healing practices often take place outside of the mainstream clinics in these communities (Gone 2008; Prussing 2008). The Western programs are found to be not widely accepted by people living on the reservations. Prevention science is focused on evidence-based programs where program fidelity is highly valued (Botvin 2004). Yet the cultural adaptation of these programs has introduced a tension into the field, as many of the associated programmes do not work well when applied in indigenous contexts or with minority groups (Castro et al. 2004; 2010). This tension is currently taking place in Nunavut. Who should control suicide prevention? What is the best knowledge base for suicide prevention? We will return to these questions at the end of this paper. I first describe colonial intervention, particularly by the Canadian government, and Inuit perceptions of the suicide epidemic that has arisen among their youth and the negative effects of social change on family, parenting, and romantic relationships.

The Research

My work with Inuit has been based on a community-based participatory action research model. This is where some informants are co-researchers who contribute to

the generation of research questions and conduct interviews, co-interpret the material gathered and help one to place it in context, and are involved in dissemination of results. The action component means that community benefit is built into each project (Brydon-Miller et al. 2011; Kidd and Kral 2005; Minkler and Wallerstein 2003). Participatory research is an approach rather than a method. Among indigenous people, participatory research is being proposed as an ethical research principle (Canadian Institutes for Health Research 2007; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1993; NAHO 2007), a decolonizing shift of sharing and respect in the research process. Many indigenous communities have had a negative experience with researchers, including anthropologists (King 1997; Smith 1999). Anthropology is also slowly moving in this direction, from collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005) to public and applied anthropology (Borofsky 2009; Lamphere 2004). This represents the bringing together of academic and applied anthropology tied to public interest and social justice.

Participatory research requires the sharing of power, both for research and community involvement, and has a covenantal ethics committed to working for the good of others (Brydon-Miller et al. 2011). Difficulties can arise that are specific to this form of research. I have encountered problems including extensive time delays; the division of participants on goals, objectives, and methods; the stereotypes and biases academics and natives held of each other; difficulties in understanding each others' cultural perspectives; and not being able to include all stories from the field. Participatory research can take on many meanings, and it can be a means or an end (Hayward et al. 2004). It may be questioned whether participants are representative of the community or of the organization. Participatory research thus presents a number of challenges, but my experience of it has been positive. I believe our research is better for it.

Our first project began in the late 1990s as collaboration between an Inuit steering committee, an academic, interdisciplinary research team, and two Inuit communities. Many of the research questions came from Inuit, as did the participatory method. I worked closely with Inuit in the two communities, particularly the youth committees in each community. We developed a study over 4 years and conducted interviews with fifty Inuit people in two Nunavut communities on meanings of well-being, sadness, health, social change, and suicide. There was, in the end, a strong consensus across the steering committee, research team, and community members involved in this research.

In 2004–2005, I returned to one of these communities, Igloodik, for almost a year conducting ethnographic fieldwork (Kral 2009). My focus was on three questions: what effects did the government era have on family and affinal relations, what are the lives of male youth like, and how has the community, the youth in particular, addressed suicide prevention and youth wellness? I was living alone in a small bunkhouse and had Inuit visitors almost every evening. I worked on a number of community projects, and invited the Ammituq Youth Society to hold their weekly meetings in my bunkhouse when they needed a place to meet. My third question of youth community action for suicide prevention was focused on this youth group.

Suicide

Historically, suicide among Inuit has been known as “altruistic,” where old or very ill adults would kill themselves or be killed, usually at their request, at times of famine during poor hunting. I have heard accounts of this from Inuit, including of the last “traditional” suicide in Igloodik, of the grandfather of a woman in her mid-50s. Two of the man’s sons helped him die and were arrested but later released. Balikci (1970) reported suicides among Netsilik Inuit going back to the 1920s. He found that they were more common among men across the age span. He saw that Netsilik suicide was different from other Inuit suicides where most victims were elderly. Balikci found that half of these suicides were “preoccupied” with another person, and included jealousy and resentment. He thought that most of these suicides fit with Durkheim’s egoistic suicide, linked to a detachment from others.

In the interview study in two Inuit communities, we found that family, talking, and traditional cultural values and practices were seen as most central to well-being and happiness. Sadness was considered primarily to be the absence of these. The family was most prominently at the center of well-being. Social change was felt most strongly in the family concerning roles and responsibilities. Intergenerational relations were now strained, which together with poverty were issues of concern among Inuit. Inuit were also unhappy that there was much less visiting taking place in the communities; that there were too many people; and that parents had much less control over their children (Kral et al. 2011).

Suicide was identified as a major social problem by Inuit. According to Inuit, including suicide attempters, romantic relationship problems are the trigger for most youth suicides. Family problems are also implicated. Other concerns that Inuit had were changes in kinship patterns and relationships, most notably a new intergenerational segregation. Parents and grandparents had been the mentors and teachers of children and youth, but since the government era young people were increasingly on their own, interacting much less with their parents and elders. Regarding suicide, much was learned. Mortality data from the coroner’s office of the Government of Nunavut showed that hanging was the most common method of suicide, and the vast majority of suicides were teenagers and youth in their early twenties. Hanging in most cases took place at home during the night when the family was asleep, from the closet bar with the clothes pushed to the right and the noose tied on the left side. In most cases, the victim was facing the wall. The meaning of some of these details is unclear. Clothes may be pushed to the right because most Inuit are right-handed. Facing the wall has become normative. Suicide methods are culturally scripted everywhere, and in Nunavut this is the common method (Chan et al. 2005; Gould et al. 2003; Kral 1994; 1998; Stack and Wasserman 2005). I do not know if this method holds for other Arctic Indigenous peoples. Few suicide notes were found, and most notes were about romantic relationship breakups. Suicidal youth felt rejected, and were seen as lonely, angry, and isolated. Most young Inuit who had made a suicide attempt indicated that speaking with a family member had saved their lives. It was common for suicidal youth to hide their intentions, and suicides are often a surprise to the community. Inuit of all ages also spoke of how youth are copying each other, and of the contagious effect of suicide.

A review of coroners' reports for the two communities studied found 68 percent of suicides to be precipitated by romantic relationship problems or breakup (Kral 2003). An additional 20 percent were youth waiting for a court date, having been arrested for break and entry or dealing drugs. Inuit of all ages, including those who had made suicide attempts, said that romantic relationship problems were the primary reason for suicide, followed by family problems. It is not uncommon for boys in particular to threaten their girlfriends with suicide should the girl want to break up the relationship. Many of these feelings are centered on jealousy and possessiveness. Many male youth also threaten their parents with suicide, often because they want money or other things from them. I found a number of parents to be fearful of their sons. Suicide is thus often a form of protest. An elder stated, "Maybe in this community they're thinking that if I scold him for what he's not supposed to do, maybe if I talk to him, maybe he's going to suicide." There is some generalized fear that scolding youth may place them at risk for suicide.

Family problems were also seen by Inuit as a cause of suicide. Some of these problems include fighting among the parents, which can get violent with alcohol use. A large number of these parents were in the residential school as children and claim that they did not learn parenting skills. Many youth avoid their parents, and many parents avoid their children. It is not uncommon for youth to stay in their rooms at home alone with the door closed. One suicide took place in Igloolik when I was living there. It was a 16-year-old boy who shot himself some time in the afternoon in his locked bedroom. His family came home and was there until late at night when the boy's girlfriend came by looking for him. She went outside to look in his window and saw the body. His family had assumed he was locked alone in his room as usual and had paid no attention to him for the entire late afternoon and evening. Many Inuit youth feel alone, as reported by community members and by youth themselves. The sections below on parenting and affinity/romance highlight changes felt by Inuit in these areas. Both were identified by Inuit as problems related to youth suicide.

Contact and Colonialism

The first major contact with White or *Qallunaat* people for Inuit was with Scottish and American whalers in the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Many Inuit moved close to the ships in the summer and worked for the whalers in exchange for guns, ammunition, flour, tobacco, and other goods. In the 1920s and 1930s, the trinity arrived: the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, missionaries, and the Hudson Bay fur trading company. Conversion to Christianity was rapid during a time of epidemic disease brought by outsiders to Inuit (Laugrand and Oosten 2010). Shamanism and other Inuit traditional spiritual activities went underground. But Inuit remained in their seasonal extended family camps, retaining much of their lifestyle. The colonial encounter by the Canadian government during the 1950s and 1960s, however, was swift and harsh. Wenzel (1991) referred to this as the government era, when Inuit were relocated from the land to aggregated settlements run by *Qallunaat* government workers. Children were forced to attend day schools

in the settlements, or residential schools, and some schools were run by Catholic missionaries where much sexual abuse took place. Limited space will not allow discussion of the trauma experienced by many boys, now middle-aged men, from the sexual abuse in these schools. Many have spoken to me about the pain they have felt, continue to feel, and have inflicted on others because of this. Their subjectivities were shaped by the colonial madness of some missionaries. These schools were also assimilation factories that created gaps between children and their parents. Burch (1975, p. 37) referred to these schools as the “largest force of change” in Inuit society. Condon (1988) found most Inuit parents to be disapproving of these schools. Housing began a breakdown of the extended family system due to very small houses for nuclear families (Damas 1996). The government era began during a severe tuberculosis epidemic when a great number of Inuit were transported to southern hospitals, and many died there. This era was one the state implemented making its new Inuit citizens “legible” (Scott 1998). The colonial settlement scheme by the government turned out to be as much about transforming social relations among Inuit as it was about identifying and “helping” these new Canadian citizens. Since the 1970s, however, Inuit have organized themselves and have negotiated with the Canadian government land claims and a political territory called Nunavut, or “our land.” Yet social problems like suicide continued.

Kinship and Relatedness

The most notable effect of colonialism on indigenous peoples has been on their kin and affinal relationships (DeMallie 1998; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996). Kinship has been at the center of Inuit social organization (Briggs 1995; Damas 1968a). Damas (1963) and Graburn (1964) observed in the 1960s that community-wide and extended kin economic cooperation was decreasing (see Graburn and Strong 1973). Intergenerational segregation began to take hold. Most Inuit have experienced social change since the 1950s as negative (Kral et al. 2011).

Condon (1988) studied Inuit youth and found that, by the early 1980s, parents and children there were highly disapproving of each other. Parents did not like the behavior of their teenagers, who were said to be staying up all night and sleeping most of the day, having multiple sexual partners, and playing sports over other things parents viewed as more important. The teenagers, on the other hand, were against their parents’ drinking. These teens were not abusing alcohol in large numbers. Condon found that about half the adults in the community he was in were drinking excessively and that domestic fights were common during or after adult drinking parties. A very large number of children grew up together forming a new youth culture (Condon and Stern 1993). Condon found that adult supervision and regulation of youth was minimal, perhaps corresponding to traditional freedom given to children. This earlier freedom, however, was within the boundaries of kin roles and parents did maintain sufficient control (Briggs 1970).

Condon (1988), like others, attributed the decrease of family-centered life to the large number of Inuit in the settlements. O’Neil (1983) also found that, by the early

1980s, the Inuit youth peer group was very important and a “refuge” from adults. Like Condon, he found adolescents spending very little time with adults. Condon (1988) found that teenagers valued each other more than they did adults, and he concluded that the creation of the adolescent peer group was perhaps the most anomalous cultural invention of the settlements. O’Neil (1983) found that adolescents were mostly with their peers, a significant change from the traditionally strong cross-generational relationships of teaching and mentoring. Yet those coming from more traditional families who still used arranged marriage were more successful at hunting and in their general work.

Damas (1963) identified two key features of Inuit relationships at the beginning of the government era, when these relationships were still much the same as they had been in the family-based camps on the land. These features are *ungayyuq* or affection–closeness, and *naalaqtuq* or respect–obedience. *Ungayyuq* was not demonstrated very openly in public in a Western sense, but more typically through helping, warm eye contact, smiling, or compliments. Small children were shown the most expressive *ungayuk*, which was associated most strongly within the nuclear family and affinal relationships (Briggs 1968). *Naalaqtuq* was seen through respect for older Inuit.

Wenzel (2004, personal communication) has described *ungayyuq* and *naalaqtuq* as “complementary structuring complexes... that have to work together. If all that binds a dyadic pair is *naalaqtuq*, it would be the equivalent of serfdom; likewise, if only *ungayyuq*, life would be too loose. *Naalaqtuq* is the ‘stuffness,’ while *ungayyuq* is the ‘flex’.” *Naalaqtuq* works through benevolent cooperation. Stevenson (1997) has noted the importance of status relationships, determined by age, within Inuit kinship based on both *ungayyuq* and *naalaqtuq*. Age and sex determined authority among siblings, with higher status among older males. *Naalaqtuq* has been an important bonding factor for inter-generational relations. *Ungayyuq* and *naalaqtuq* were thus part of a whole, working together. Damas (1963, p. 172) wrote that “acculturative influences interfere with the operation or formation of native-centred authority patterns,” or *naalaqtuq*. Brody (1991/1975, p. 159) also found that settlement life “disrupted the old basis of authority and respect.” I spoke about this with Leoni Qrunnut, a respected elder. Leoni said that *naalaqtuq* has remained much the same within families for children who still respect both adults and their older siblings. She said that with the older youth, teenagers and those in their early twenties, this was another matter, but she would not elaborate.

As Brody (2000) has argued, once you remove respect from its traditional form among hunter-gatherers, then everything will go wrong. The Northern Service Officers and other *Qallunaat* in the settlements thus introduced new forms of hierarchy and subordination. Status relationships changed in the settlements, whereby high status had been with the best hunter, and among Iglulingmiut, the oldest male member of the extended family referred to as the *isumatuq* or wise one (Damas 1968b). In the settlement, status became associated with having a job, money, and living like a *Qallunaat*. It must be stated, however, that large differences exist among Inuit families for the continuity of traditional *naalaqtuq–ungayyuq*. While some families experience extremely difficult relationships across generations, others have maintained much of this traditional relational bond. Many

Inuit are trying to revive the pairing of *naalaqtuq* and *ungayuq*. Yet respect across age and gender has changed, especially for today's Inuit youth. It is this dramatic colonial turn in family experiences and relationships that I argue is behind social perturbation including suicide. A notable effect has been on parenting.

Parenting

Parenting has changed markedly among Inuit. Leoni Qrunnut, the elder, spoke to me of there being two types of parents: those who learned parenting skills from their older generation, and those who did not learn parenting skills. Children from the second group are less connected to their parents, from what Leoni has seen. These would include her children's generation, the middle-aged adults who attended residential and day schools. She talked about traditional child-rearing and said that much child-rearing today is wrong, such as giving a crying child what she or he wants. She said that it was like this sometimes before the government era and that it was also problematic then.

Youth not spending time with their parents was a frequent topic of conversation I had with middle-aged Inuit. Many youth are relying primarily on peer support. A woman in her fifties asked of male youth and their fathers, "Are they going out hunting with him? Are they walking with them on the streets, going to the stores, you know? No. None of that is happening." She added, "It's not the young people. It's the parents who are not taking time with their children." Another middle-aged woman made a similar point. This woman, aged 50, spoke of the time when she was a teenager. "We didn't spend days with our mothers learning to sew anymore because we were in school. We would just have breakfast and leave our family. And just come home for lunch, and then go again. After school you could go off with your friends." She indicated that she did not learn how to parent, saying, "Parenting skills, family, how to behave, you know, all of that we dropped. We didn't have time anymore." She said that, in the earlier days of the settlement, the children "were basically running around. Just basically out of control. The parents couldn't be there. They were not teachers anymore. In the camp they were. They were the leaders, and we're not the leaders here. The setup has changed." Many Inuit spoke about *Qallunaat* teachers taking over their roles with the children. "We were never taught through words," remarked Elder Uqsuralik Ottokie, "It was only through observing and listening that we learned... we were not encouraged to ask questions" (Briggs 2000; pp. 58–59). Another elder, Samonie Elizabeth Kanayuk, spoke about parents as teachers. "Children as young as 5 years old used to go out hunting with their fathers because they were students, because their fathers were teaching them" (Bennett and Rowley 2001, p. 14).

Elders are identified in Igloolik as those over the age of 65 and for community events over 50; however, some younger Inuit are called elders if they have been in positions of community leadership or if family members so decide. Elders tend to promote traditional Inuit values and practices, but they are rarely involved in political or government programs.

Changes in parenting was thus a major theme in my discussions with Inuit across the ages. Many are afraid to discipline their children for fear of their children

becoming suicidal or of the law should they ever spank them. A new childhood emerged from the government era in which there were collisions between teachers and parents, freedom and discipline, and collectivism-individualism. The traditional model of childhood was subverted. Settlement life was largely modeled on southern Canada by a government that did not recognize or even ask about Inuit family life. Parenting was appropriated. Sen (2005) describes colonial childhood as one redefined by an imposing government in a nationalizing project. Early accounts of Inuit, from the early nineteenth to the early and mid-twentieth centuries, point to the centrality of family and of parent–child and cross-generational relationships (Briggs 1970; Hall 1970/1876; Parry 1969/1824; see DeMallie 1998). The new childhood has experienced a significant discontinuity in sexual and affinal relations.

Affinity and Romance

One of the more significant disruptions of kin structure by the aggregated settlement was the eventual loss of the arranged marriage. As early as 1960 in Igloolik Malaurie (2007) reported the priest encouraging young couples to refuse this arrangement. It was still the norm in the mid-1970s and taking place in many families in the early to mid 1980s (Condon 1988; Wenzel, 2004, personal communication). By the 1990s, it appears to have almost disappeared. Graburn (1964) identified what he called “the marriage problem” in the early-to-mid 1960s, which he claims began when the settlement program took hold. Graburn attributed this problem more generally to two things: (1) A change in the *naalaqtuq* obedience relationship with parents. The matrilineal norm was being challenged by couples refusing to do this. Young people were creating their own rules. (2) Young people being extremely confused about courtship. “Many of the young men and girls just do not know how to carry out a successful courtship under present-day conditions. They are at a loss for what to do...” (Graburn 1964; pp. 196–197). The cultural model for sexuality and marriage was changing (Graburn 1969).

Brody (1991/1975) noticed changes in Inuit adolescent and youth romance in the early 1970s. He reported the romance among young Inuit to be hollow yet high in emotionality. “There is little to share beyond mutual attraction and acute feeling,” wrote Brody, “and there is, therefore, little to sustain the relationship. The pattern is very like that in the south: couples who have been profoundly emotional in their attachment suddenly end it. But in the north, this back-and-forth of shifting affairs takes place in an atmosphere heavily charged with powerful, desperate feelings. In such an atmosphere, the eruption of anger and morbidness is commonplace” (1991, pp. 232–233). Burch (1975) found that the most common sources of marital strain were in the order of jealousy, not fulfilling economic expectations, and child-rearing. He saw relationships among younger couples as more problematic than those of older couples, describing them as volatile. Emotional expression was traditionally highly structured (Damas 1972), and Briggs (1970) indicated that its expression, particularly anything negative, was highly constrained. The traditional means of resolving tension between Inuit was by withdrawal (Damas 1963). Yet Burch (1975) found that the expression of emotions was being much influenced

among Inupiat by *Qallunaat* by the 1960s, as younger Inuit were emulating *Qallunaat* role models. Anger was becoming a prevalent expressed emotion between younger couples. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, O'Neil (1983, p. 259) saw young Inuit men angry with young woman, and relations between the sexes continuing to be “highly emotionally charged and tremendously meaningful.” By the early 1980s, the issue of arranged versus chosen marital partners had become, according to O'Neil (1983, p. 264), the “most significant issue in the marital arrangement.”

Along with a new model of romantic love, a Western one based on individual choice (Swidler 2001), came a shift in sexual practices and the emotions associated with them. The emotions of jealousy and anger became much more prevalent in these relationships. Burch (1975) thought that this shift to publicly sanctioned monogamous sexuality actually increased such behavior. This has been found elsewhere including among Australian Aborigines, where sexual jealousy is higher in monogamous communities (Cowan 1992).

There has been little anthropological research on love, however, it has been found that romantic love likely exists universally (Jankowiak and Fiscer 1992) and within arranged marriages in Asia (De Munck 1996). Arranged love marriages are taking place (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008). In India, where arranged marriage is still prominent, love marriage has challenged arranged marriage in parent–child relationships such as challenging parental authority, in producing unpredictable emotions and intergenerational conflict, and in creating ambiguity in love relationships (Donner 2002). As has taken place for Inuit, Donner (2002) reports that couples in India initially sought parental consent in their choice of partner. It may be that the individuality that comes with love marriage has contributed to parent–child and intergenerational problems among Inuit. Affinity has changed dramatically for Inuit, and youth today are left with a fragmented model of love and sexuality. Suicide has become embedded in these relationships among youth. Suicide prevention then becomes a community concern, and some Inuit communities have begun to address this (Kral et al. 2009).

Prevention from the Inside

Inuit suicide prevention is a powerful lesson in indigenous community engagement and control. One of the communities I visited, which had the highest suicide rate in the Canadian Arctic, had not reported a suicide for almost 4 years. Inuit were saying that they had heard the community had done something from within. I spoke with Inuit in the community, and they had done two things to stop the suicides. Local community leaders such as the Deputy Mayor and other Hamlet Council members had brought Inuit together on a regular basis to talk about suicide and what they should do about it. The local youth committee did the same with youth. A *Qallunaat* nurse helped them in organizing this committee and as an outsider was instrumental in working with the community to take responsibility for suicide prevention. I spoke with her, and she attributed the action taken to the community, not to herself. The second intervention was by the local housing committee, who removed the closet

rods from every house. The closet rod is the most common means of suicide by hanging. These were very strong messages by the community that Inuit there wanted the suicides to stop, and they did. In this case, suicide method was removed and a consciousness was raised about suicide prevention, including surveillance of people at risk. The processes by which such outcomes take place need to be studied.

In the other community, the local youth committee opened a youth center with the help of Isuma, the film company in Igloolik (the makers of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*¹). A center was eventually opened in a small house and featured peer counselors, films, games, elders speaking, and other activities for youth. The suicides stopped for almost 2 years until financial problems caused the center to close. The suicides returned, one or two a year for the next 6 years. Then the next youth committee, with whom I was working, re-opened the youth center. Suicides have decreased significantly. It is unknown how many cases of self-harm there have been. This community action is a form of collective agency, of empowerment that is at the center of indigenous healing and strength for future generations (Kral and Idlout 2009). The collective action was the development of forms of social intervention that were not culturally “indigenous,” e.g., opening a youth center. Indigenous communities have successfully combined modern intervention tools with traditional practices and beliefs in mental health (Gone 2011).

Discussion

When one looks closely at more specific local groupings of indigenous people, great variations are found regarding both colonial impact and indigenous response. My approach here follows that of Nicholas Thomas (1994), who wrote of there being many colonialisms rather than any single code, and of the need to look closely at practices and subjectivities in particular places. The Inuit of Nunavut have their own history of colonialism that differs from First Nations and Métis histories in Canada. It has very much been a *colonialisme interne* or domestic colonialism, conducted from within a nation, even though it has been in the form of a powerful outsider taking over an insider culture. Burke (2005, p. 147) notes that social change is less often internal to any social system, but “in practice social change is often provoked by encounters between cultures.”

In order to understand suicide, one needs to first understand the perturbation behind it. The government era of the 1950s and the 1960s has had the most profound and rapid effect on Inuit social change in their history. Inuit have felt this impact on problems they have identified, including intergenerational segregation, hunting, parenting, visiting and feelings of closeness, and affinal and romantic relationships. The core relational features of *ungayyuq* and *naalaqtuq* are no longer the same for many Inuit. The elders were adults when they moved to the settlements. The middle-aged Inuit were taken away as children to school and many developed subsequent problems with alcohol and domestic violence. Many Inuit youth today

¹ *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* was released in 2001 and won many awards including Cannes Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival.

are feeling alone. Suicide has become a cultural idiom of distress, a contagious idea among youth (Kral 1994). Durkheim (1951/1897, pp. 131–132) wrote that “the idea of suicide may undoubtedly be communicated by contagion... perhaps no other phenomenon is more readily contagious.” There is evidence that suicide is contagious via the media (Gould, Jamieson, and Romer 2003), and I have argued that the idea of suicide is internalized (Kral 1998) via cultural transmission (Bloch 2005).

Suicidal young males are feeling rejected by their families, but primarily by their girlfriends. Many of these young males are controlling, possessive, and jealous in these relationships. Is there an undermining of masculine status among these youth, as found by Niehaus (2012) among suicidal men in an area of South Africa? This possessiveness is new for this younger generation. Many of them witnessed their fathers’ violence toward their mothers. Perhaps being rejected by girlfriends is a loss of masculine control. Yet possessiveness of women is not a dominant norm, as many young men and likely all women see this behavior as negative. A code of possessive courtship exists among a large minority of Inuit male youth, which may have become for them a code of masculinity. Suicide for many is a communication of anger, a protest, and a form of revenge.

Perceived “not belonging” has been identified as a suicide risk factor, and Joiner (2005) argues that this is especially felt in collectivist societies. This was Durkheim’s link between poor social integration and suicide (Durkheim 1951/1897). It appears that many Inuit youth have a sense of not belonging, of social disconnection. As Balikci (1970) noted for the Netsilik Inuit, these suicides are a form of Durkheim’s egoistic suicide. There are many forms of belonging for Inuit, the primary one being the family. The sense of belonging, or *ilagijauttiarniq*, has been very much patterned on intergenerational relations within families. Suicide may manifest itself as another form of belonging. Niezen (2009) has argued that suicide among First Nations youth in Canada, often taking place in clusters, is a way of belonging for those youth. They are connecting with other youth who have killed themselves, including their friends, for similar reasons along the same life path. Suicide is, as Staples and Widger (2012) write, “a kind of sociality in its own right.”

“It’s mostly elders,” said one young man when asked about relationships across generations. “They’re accepting me when they call me to see if I have enough country food, if I’ve eaten lately.” We found that many elders said they were waiting for young people to come to them to learn. “Right now they’re just waiting,” said a middle-aged Inuk. In the words of one Inuit elder, “A lot of elders don’t say anything, but that doesn’t mean they don’t want to help. They’re just there waiting” (Kral et al. 2000). Briggs (2001, p. 245) also found this, and quoted an Inuit elder speaking about youth: “We are just sitting back waiting to be approached. If we are asked we will counsel.” Another middle-aged Inuk indicated: “Sometimes the young people are saying that they don’t know how to approach the elders today. In the past it was different.” Inuit communities are increasingly organizing camping trips for elders and youth, and youth receive much benefit from this (Fienup-Riordan 2002). In Igloodik, one youth who had made several suicide attempts by hanging went on a camping trip with an elder and other troubled youth

and learned to hunt for the first time. He said he felt like a man, and today it is a success story in the community.

Some may view suicide among Inuit as a postcolonial social disorder, as Inuit have suffered, and also benefitted, from government intervention. Changes in kin relations, including parenting and sexual relations, have affected young Inuit negatively. A significant gap remains between parents and their children. Suicide is indeed complex and remains a mystery, yet it can become an option, an idiom of particular distress, for a specific population. This appears to have taken place with Inuit youth. Good, Hyde, Pinto, and Good (2008) argue that postcolonial disorders stem from disorderly states, the imposition of particular political and moral orders, that reproduce subjectively experienced disorder.

The disordering of Inuit kinship and social structure by the state has produced the perturbations described in this paper. Colonialism unravels the social worlds of the colonized, creating a collective anomie (McMichael 2000; Scott 2005). Many youth are feeling rejected and without options, disconnected from family. The effects of government intervention have been enduring for three generations, each experiencing a different form of it. Duran and Duran (1995) argue that Native North American suicide is a form of postcolonial internalized hatred, what Alexander (2004, p. 10) calls cultural trauma, in this case acts that have “abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity.”

While middle-aged and elder Inuit refer to the government era as the beginning of their social problems, youth speak about more immediate problems like relationships with romantic partners or parents. Youth do not have an explicit postcolonial agenda, but many believe that their voices and actions need to take shape toward a positive future.

When the communities take control over suicide prevention and take action for youth wellness, the positive outcomes for youth are notable. In Igloodik, suicide not only stopped but high school attendance increased and break-and-entry crime, committed by young males, almost stopped. Each community I have written about here did something unique for suicide prevention. What successful communities had in common was that they developed the collective self-efficacy for action themselves. What they did was not necessarily Inuit-cultural, as they incorporated Western ideas to strengthen their sense of themselves (Sahlins 1999). They took ownership of prevention. That Inuit youth took action for their own well-being represents a local social movement, based on similar movements among indigenous youth in the Arctic and elsewhere. It is likely diffusion which is responsible for the positive outcomes among youth, as youth self-determination becomes a local reality and identity for young Inuit (Amit 2002; Adam 2003).

The ethnographic research reported here supports community-driven suicide prevention. Health Canada of the Canadian government recently began the National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, targeting all Aboriginal people in Canada. What is unique about this program is that rather than bringing Western mental health programs into Aboriginal communities, communities and Aboriginal organizations are funded to develop and run their own suicide prevention programs and activities (Kral et al. 2009). Among Inuit, this is in keeping with communities designing these programs with some success (Kral and Idlout 2009). Community

control is directly related to fewer indigenous suicides (Chandler and Lalonde 1998). The Canadian government is working with these communities to evaluate their prevention activities. No findings have been reported at this time.

Additional ethnographic study of suicide is needed. Cultural perspectives in suicidology are rarely seen, yet this is critical for an understanding of suicide. Suicide theory is underdeveloped, and there has been no integration of the multi-disciplinary approaches to research on suicide. The ethnographic study of suicide and culture will provide a look into the lives of people who are suicidal, into their varied contexts and their subjective experiences, into the meanings of suicide. There has been a call for qualitative research in suicidology (Goldney 2002; Lakeman and Fitzgerald 2008), to open the door to a broader and deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Ethnography has enabled me to learn what is most important to Inuit, what troubles them, and their explanatory models of suicide. Ethnography, unlike the dominant quantitative methods in suicidology, will allow for an understanding of suicide “from the native’s point of view.” Quantitative studies do not address the important question, “why suicide?,” while ethnography can begin to examine the choice of this particular form of death. Through ethnography, a cultural theory of suicide can be developed. It is time for anthropology to shed light on the subject.

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