This project is being conducted in partnership with the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC), the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre (ICRC), the Beaufort Delta Education Council (BDEC), and Aurora College, providing qualitative research relationships with current and potential learners, as well as teachers and teachers in training.

Aim and scope of research

Recognizing the broad interconnections between cultural identity, self-esteem, and mental health, this research focuses on the construction of cultural identity through ancestral language revitalization in contemporary Inuvialuit society. The project seeks to establish a better understanding of socially ascribed meanings of Inuvialuktun, the ancestral language traditionally spoken by Inuvialuit of northern Northwest Territories, Canada. Using qualitative anthropological methods, the study asks what are some of the impacts of Inuvialuktun language revitalization efforts on Inuvialuit identity formation across several age sets. The epidemiological rational behind this question is an understanding that Aboriginal language retention can strengthen school performance and self-esteem in learners, thus potentially increasing the immunity of a community to mental health problems. In this regard, we hope to gain a better understanding of the extent to which Inuvialuktun language revitalization figures in the formation of a healthy contemporary Inuvialuit identity. Although the study focuses on language and identity, and does not directly measure correlations between mental health and language retention in statistical terms, it is hoped that data gathered through interviews and questionnaires will illustrate the interplay between cultural identity, human-environment ties, and mental wellbeing in the community of Inuvik.

Human-environment relations and language revitalization

It is well documented that one of the primary pillars of Inuit identity are ancestral land and land-based activities. This assertion is reiterated in a strong emphasis on human-environment relations in Inuvialuktun language revitalization efforts of the past and present. Today the same mandate of communicating the role of human-environment relations in Inuvialuit cultural heritage is followed across a majority of culture and language related training offered to Inuvialuit youth by the learning centers and in the public schools. Inuvialuktun language materials are heavily focused around ‘on-the-land’ activities, and many language immersion camps take place close to nature, or directly in the bush. This is to further illustrate the inseparability of environment, culture, and language as integral components of Aboriginal identity and wellbeing.

Language revitalization and reported healing effects

It has been reported widely in the literature that Aboriginal language revitalization and other forms of Aboriginal decolonization can have a healing effect on individuals affected by posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resultant of immersion in an assimilative residential school environment. According to Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, extensive separation of children from their homes often led to their inability to communicate with their parents in their mother tongue. The same authors state that, to this day, language loss breaks down communication with elders who carry traditional knowledge, for which reason the strengthening of language and culture reduces the perpetuation of non-Aboriginal structures and policies, and can have a "healing effect on school survivors." However, it is also known that ongoing repercussions of residential school-related traumas are not limited to effecting individuals who were directly implicated, but that entire homes and communities are disrupted by the experience, and that this "shared history and social predicament … has made many communities vulnerable to a range of social problems that, in turn, increase the risk of emotional suffering." In light of these observations, it is to be expected that younger persons are presently affected by the traumatic memories and resultant language attitudes of their parents' and grandparents’ generations.

Language revitalization as a means to build community wellness

Iarocci et al. note that that attempts of young Aboriginal individuals to downplay the importance of cultural heritage, for the sake of protecting self from the continual discrimination by the dominant culture, can lead to the creation of "negative models of self that ultimately compromise emotional well-being." The same authors juxtapose this tendency with Marc A. Zimmerman’s findings, which show that "...youths with the highest levels of both self-esteem and cultural identity reported the lowest levels of alcohol and substance use". Furthermore, Aboriginal parents and grandparents have identified maintenance of cultural values as instrumental in building community strength to prevent suicide in young. Similarly, in the context of formal education, increased respect for indigenous language and culture not only increases “Aboriginal students’ sense of identity,” but also betters students’ “chances to be academically successful.” Finally, speakers of ancestral languages have been found to consult traditional methods of healing more readily.

Expected findings

This qualitative research is concerned with the meaning and experience of language and identity for Inuvialuit, and hopes to illuminate the interplay of language revitalization, mental health, and wellbeing. It does not seek to verify any causal relationship between variables, rather, given its qualitative approach; this study seeks to provide deeper insight into how select Inuvialuks (i.e. potential or current learners of Inuvialuktun) construct cultural identity with the aid of utilitarian or symbolic use of ancestral language. Looking to a secure sense of identity as integral to self-esteem and mental health, the study seeks to show how language ideologies and attitudes may be shaped by residential school trauma in previous generations, and what are the impacts of a majority culture on language learners’ motivation today.

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