

“Inuvialuit language and identity: perspectives on the symbolic meaning Of Inuvialuktun in the Canadian Western Arctic”

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 health¹, 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 rationale behind this question is an understanding that Aboriginal language retention can strengthen school performance and self-esteem in learners², 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 activities³. This assertion is reiterated in a strong emphasis on human-environment relations in Inuvialuit language revitalization efforts of the past⁴ 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 schools⁵. 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 wellbeing⁶.

Language revitalization and reported healing effects

¹ Kirmayer, Laurence J. 2009 Preface. In *Healing traditions: the mental health of Aboriginal peoples in Canada*. Laurence J. Kirmayer and Gail G. Valaskakis (eds.). Vancouver, UBC Press. Pp.xiii-xxi. Kirmayer, Laurence, Cori Simpson and Margaret Cargo 2003 Healing traditions: culture, community and mental health promotion with Canadian Aboriginal peoples. *Australasian Psychiatry* 11(1) Suppl.:15–23. Zimmerman, M.A. 1998 Enculturation hypothesis: exploring direct and protective effects among Native American youth. In *Resiliency in Native American and immigrant families*. H.I. McCubbin, E.A. Thompson, A.I. Thompson, and J.E. Fromer (eds.). Thousand Oaks, Sage. Pp. 199-220.

² Kanu, Y. 2002 In their own voices: First Nations students identify some cultural mediators of their learning in the formal school system. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 48, 98-119. Swanson, S. 2003 Motivating learners in northern communities: Native literacy and learning of Aboriginal perspectives. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 27, 16-25.

³ Freeman, Milton M. R. 2011 Looking back—and looking ahead—35 years after the Inuit land use and occupancy project. *The Canadian Geographer* 55(1):20–31. Dorais, L-J. 2010 Taitsumaninitaanit Siarumut: language, community, identity, and the young Inuit in Quaqtuq. CIERA report, Laval University.

⁴ IFA 1987 *The Western Arctic Claim: Inuvialuit Final Agreement, As Amended*. Inuvik, Inuvialuit Regional Corporation. Osgood, Lawrence 1985 Foreword. *Uummarmiut uqalungiha ilihaurrutikrangit: Basic Uummarmiut Eskimo grammar*. Inuvik, Committee for Original Peoples Entitlement.

⁵ Gordon, Pauline 2007 Beaufort-Delta Divisional Board of Education. *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages*. Gina Cantoni (Ed.). Flagstaff, Center for Excellence in Education, Northern Arizona University. Pp. 137.

⁶ Lyons, Natasha 2010 The Wisdom of Elders: Inuvialuit Social Memories of Continuity and Change in the Twentieth Century. *Arctic Anthropology*, 47(1): 22-38. Pierce, Tristan, Harold Wright, Roland Notaina, Adam Kudlak, Barry Smit, James Ford and Christopher Furgal 2011 Transmission of Environmental Knowledge and Land Skills among Inuit Men in Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories, Canada. *Human Ecology*, Online First™, 2 May 2011.

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 environment⁷. 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"⁸. However, it is also known that ongoing repercussions of residential school-related traumata are not limited to effecting individuals who were directly implicated, but that entire homes and communities are disrupted by the experience⁹, 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"¹⁰. 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"¹¹. 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 young¹². 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"¹³. Finally, speakers of ancestral languages have been found to consult traditional methods of healing more readily¹⁴.

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.

⁷ Archibald, Linda 2006 *Decolonization and Healing: Indigenous Experiences in the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Greenland*. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation. Reyhner, Jon 2010 Indigenous language immersion schools for strong Indigenous identities. *Heritage Language Journal*, 7(2):137-151.

⁸ Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada 2007 *Journey Forward: National Inuit Residential Schools Healing Strategy*. Ottawa, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada.

⁹ Reyhner, Jon 2010 Indigenous Language Immersion Schools for Strong Indigenous Identities. *Heritage Lang J*, 7(2):137-151.

¹⁰ Kirmayer, Laurence J. and Gail Guthrie Valaskakis 2009 Preface. In *Healing traditions: the mental health of Aboriginal peoples in Canada*. Laurence J. Kirmayer and Gail Guthrie Valaskakis (eds.). Vancouver, UBC Press.

¹¹ Iarocci, Grace, Rhoda Root, and Jacob A. Burack 2009 Social competence and mental health among Aboriginal youth: an integrative developmental perspective. In *Healing traditions: the mental health of Aboriginal peoples in Canada*. Laurence J. Kirmayer and Gail G. Valaskakis (eds.). Vancouver, UBC Press. Pp. 80-106.

¹² Strickland, C. June, Elaine Walsh, Michelle Cooper 2006 Healing fractured families: parents' and elders' perspectives on the impact of colonization and youth suicide prevention in a Pacific Northwest American Indian tribe. *J Transcult Nurs* 17(1):5-12.

¹³ Cherubini, Lorenzo and John Hodson 2008 Ontario Ministry of Education policy and Aboriginal learners' epistemologies: a fundamental disconnect. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 79:1-33.

¹⁴ James B. Waldram, D. Ann Herring, and T. Kue Young 2006 *Aboriginal health in Canada: historical, cultural, and epidemiological perspectives*. Toronto, UTPI.