**IDENTIFYING COLONIAL DISCOURSES
IN INUPIAT YOUNG PEOPLE'S NARRATIVES
AS A WAY TO UNDERSTAND
THE NO FUTURE OF INUPIAT YOUTH SUICIDE**

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Abstract: Alaska Native youth suffer disproportionately from suicide. Some researchers explain this by pointing to social disintegration brought on by rapid social change, but few make the connection to an ongoing colonialism explicit. This paper articulates some of the ways that colonial discourses affect Inupiat young people's self-conceptions, perceived choices, and, consequently, their behavioral health. Inupiat youth narratives will illustrate these connections and, in so doing, offer new ways to understand youth suicide in Native communities.

Linking colonialism—historical and ongoing—to the health disparities experienced by Indigenous[1] people is an important step in understanding how to begin to promote health and wellness in Native communities. By articulating the ways in which imposed categories and judgments can be implicated in Indigenous young people's psychological dis-ease, this article attempts to illustrate the ways in which colonial consciousness is internalized by youth to their detriment. Highlighting the link between colonialism and self-destruction among Inupiaq young people challenges the common characterization of suicide as mainly a biomedical issue, and repositions it as a political problem stemming from colonization.

Indigenous people in general and Arctic people in particular have experienced profound social and cultural changes over the past century. The resulting acculturation stress, identity conflicts, and discontinuities between past and present have been associated with

significant health disparities among young people living in these communities (Bjerregaard, 2001; Blum, Harmon, Harris, Bergeisen, & Resnik, 1992; Garroutte, Goldberg, Beals, Herrel, & Manson, 2003; Kirmayer, Fletcher, & Boothroyd, 1998; Larsen 1992; O'Neil, 1986; Stairs, 1992; Strickland, 1997). In particular, Indigenous young people in the Arctic suffer disproportionately from suicide (Condon, 1988; Kettl & Bixler, 1991; Kirmayer et al., 1998; Larsen 1992; Leenaars et al., 1997; Tester & McNicoll, 2004). In statewide comparative studies, Alaskan youth suicide rates are notably higher than rates in the other 49 United States (Alaska Injury Prevention Center, Critical Illness and Trauma Foundation Inc., & American Society of Suicidology, 2007; Gessner, 1997; Kettl & Bixler, 1991). Alaska Natives aged 19 and younger have a suicide rate of 76 per 100,000 (Alaska Injury Prevention Center, Critical Illness and Trauma Foundation Inc., & American Society of Suicidology, 2007), while the national average for this age group is fewer than 9.9 per 100,000 (National Institute of Mental Health, 2001). Based on data from Northwest Alaska, Inupiat young people—aged 15 to 19—have a suicide rate of 185 per 100,000 (10-year average for 1990-2000) (Wexler, Hill, Bertone-Johnson, & Fenaughty, 2008). This is more than two times greater than the rate for all ages in Northwest Alaska (71.4) and nearly 9 times higher than the rate for the nation as a whole.

        To explain this glaring health disparity, some researchers point to social disintegration brought on by rapid social, economic, and cultural change (e.g., Duran & Duran, 1995; Jilek-Aall, 1988; Kettl & Bixler, 1991; Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000; Larsen 1992). The resulting acculturation stress, identity conflicts, and discontinuities between past and present have been associated with the high suicide rates found in circumpolar communities (Berry, 1985; Bjerregaard, 2001; Chance, 1990; Kirmayer et al., 1998; Larsen, 1992; O'Neil, 1986; Stairs, 1992; Wexler, 2006a). Tester and McNicoll (2004) link suicide to the ongoing and systematic abuse of Indigenous people across the circumpolar North, but few other suicide researchers make this connection to ongoing colonialism explicit. The community reflected in this study, similar to many Indigenous peoples, has suffered from forced schooling, political domination, and suppression of its native language. The legacy and current manifestations of colonialism continue today. These modern forms of oppression, however, are more difficult to discern because they are subtly embedded in understandings and systems that reflect Western values rather than Indigenous ones. By collaboratively investigating these processes and linking colonial forces with the health disparities suffered by Indigenous

people, tribal communities can gain clarity in their approaches to resist domination and promote wellness. In so doing, they can redefine the nature of and solutions to these multifaceted issues.

In summary, there is a paucity of research that examines the ways in which neocolonialism is linked to the health disparities found in Indigenous communities. This is an important area for investigation because it illuminates the ways that Western cultural values have been internalized by Native youth and reasserted through the judgments they make about themselves, their families, and their communities. By tracing the ways that imposed socio-cultural categories, assumptions, and expectations show up in Inupiat youth narratives, this paper articulates some of the ways that colonialism affects Indigenous young people's self-conceptions and perceived choices, and consequently their behavioral health. This understanding can help community members and researchers gain perspectives to elucidate why a disproportionate number of Inupiat and other Indigenous young people die by suicide. This insight can be useful for crafting decolonizing interventions to promote mental health for this and possibly other Indigenous groups.

Northwest Alaska—History and the Modern Day

A brief historical accounting will orient the reader to the legacy of colonialism in the region. Northwest Alaska has hosted many outsiders since the middle of the nineteenth century, when European and Russian whalers converged in the Arctic waters. In 1852 alone, over 220 whaling vessels navigated the waters along the northern coast of Alaska (Bockstoce, 1986), and the sea mammal population declined rapidly due to the mass killing of whales and walruses by Western fleets. There was also a natural concurrent decline of caribou herds (Bockstoce, 1986). With their food resources decimated, many Inupiaq starved. During the same time period, there were outbreaks of tuberculosis and, later (circa 1919), Spanish influenza. It is believed that as much as one-third of the local Inupiat population died in *each* of these epidemics, starting in the late 1800s and continuing through to the middle of the twentieth century (Burch, 2006; Chance, 1990). As a result, the Native population of the Bering Strait decreased significantly during the latter part of the century. Many of those who died were the village Elders, the keepers of historical knowledge.

At the turn of the century, schools were also being established in the region. The first schools—run by Evangelical Quaker missionaries— were erected in the 1890s in Northwest Alaska; by 1910, most of

the Inupiat inhabitants had converted to Christianity[2] (Burch, 1994). Mandatory schooling prevented the Inupiat people from continuing their seasonal, family-group migrations (Chance, 1990). Schools also had a profound effect on traditional socialization practices, because the family was no longer the primary institution educating young people. It was also at this time that year-round settlements were developed where the twelve villages in the region are today.

In keeping with school administrators' assimilationist goals, many Inupiat children were forcibly taken from their homes to attend schools in other parts of the state and country, starting in the 1940s and ending as recently as the 1970s. These schools (forcibly) discouraged the speaking of Inupiaq, and today many among the younger generations do not speak their Native language. The loss of language—a clearly articulated assimilationist goal of the federal authorities—has been implicated in identity conflicts and mental distress of Indigenous people (Duran & Duran, 1995). These policies also resulted in a weakening of traditional belief systems and practices, according to Inupiaq Elders who experienced these changes (Wexler, 2005). As one respected Elder stated,

> School changed the villages from transient groups to villages. If families kept moving seasonally, they were liable to go to jail from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Most recently, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 established the NANA Corporation in Northwest Alaska as one of twelve regional corporations in the state. This act was intended to "settle" the claim of Alaska's Native populations so that they no longer had the rights to lands on which they had lived for generations. Ownership, resources, and control are now divided among the region's for-profit (e.g. NANA, KIC) and non-profit (Maniilaq) Native Corporations, village tribes (each village is recognized as a tribal entity with its own local tribal government), cities (municipalities), and state and federal institutions. These formulations of governance are remarkably different from those traditionally employed by Inupiaq people (Burch, 2005, 2006).

Now, Northwest Alaska is a region that encompasses the hub town of Kotzebue (population approximately 3200) and 11 smaller villages with populations ranging from 100 to 1000 in each village. The entire region is over 25,000 square miles, most of which is above the Arctic Circle. The approximately 8000 residents travel by small plane, boat, and snowmobile (or dog team), depending on weather conditions and season. The region's ethnicity is approximately 85% Alaskan Inupiat

(Eskimo), with the remaining 15% composed of European Americans, other Alaska Natives and American Indians, and other ethnic groups. The population of the Kotzebue is approximately 80% Inupiat, whereas in the surrounding villages this figure increases to over 95%.

It is important to note the limitations of this brief summary of the history and current geography of Northwest Alaska. Although the effects of colonization were by no means solely unidirectional and hegemonic,[3] there is a tremendous amount of intergenerational grief and a pervasive feeling of culture loss in the region, which are cited as ongoing concerns at conferences and meetings in the region's villages (Wexler, 2006a). Although these experiences of forced acculturation are often articulated in the past tense by community members, the health ramifications of these experiences are clearly contemporary (Wexler et al., 2008). What is missing is a step-by-step approach to describing the ways in which the past and current cultural upheavals are lived today. In an attempt to do so, this paper will examine Inupiat people's narratives to discern the ways that colonialism—historic and ongoing—effect their representations of self and their conceptions of the future.

Method

This paper uses data generated by a Participatory Action Research (PAR)[4] project aimed at illuminating the meanings and practices surrounding youth suicide in Northwest Alaska. PAR serves simultaneously as an organizing philosophy, a critical research methodology, and a community-level health intervention (Best et al., 2003; Dickson & Green, 2001; Fisher & Ball, 2003; Mohatt et al., 2004). PAR is distinctive because of its collaborative approach, orientation toward social justice, and emphasis on action. Indeed, PAR research *must* benefit the community (Kondrat & Julia, 1997; Park, 1999). Green and Mercer (2001) note the importance of this approach for improving minority health, especially the health of First Nations, because local knowledge is woven into the results. This makes them culturally relevant and viable within the community context (Green, 2001; Ottoson & Green, 1987) and possibly transferable to other, similar settings (Gubruim & Holstein, 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Brenda Goodwin (the Inupiaq Community Coordinator) and the author were employed by the tribal non-profit to use PAR to coordinate and direct a suicide prevention effort in a way that was responsive to the regional villages' needs. After obtaining tribal approval in each participating village, the project team worked with the Regional

Suicide Prevention Task Force, composed of a large number of local volunteers, to design and conduct research the task force deemed relevant to understanding Inupiaq youth suicide. All major tribal and local institutions were represented on the task force, and all research procedures were approved by this group and by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board.[5]

The data collection (with guidance from the task force) took place between 1999 and 2002. The task force held quarterly meetings from March 2001 to October 2002 with some 30 members (not all the same) attending each multi-day session. Data collection for the suicide prevention project[6] included quantitative analysis of suicide reports in the region (Wexler et al., 2008), a retrospective study of suicide deaths (Hill, Perkins, & Wexler, 2007), interviews, community meetings, field notes (Wexler, 2006a), surveys (Wexler & Goodwin, 2006), and lastly, youth focus groups. Preliminary findings were shared with active task force members throughout this analysis phase, permission was granted before manuscripts were submitted for publication, and all publications were reviewed by Maniilaq Association's Board of Directors (with representation from all 12 villages in Northwest Alaska).

In keeping with the PAR approach, the research led to several community-based outcomes. These include a community wellness project (2002-2004),[7] a youth wellness project (2003-2005),[8] and a suicide prevention project that, among other initiatives, engages young people in digital storytelling (2006-present).[9] In addition, the research has spurred new conversations and planning initiatives among the region's institutions about how best to prevent suicide and promote youth well-being. This continued work has led to collaborative partnerships that will be investigating healthy pathways to adulthood for Indigenous youth across the circumpolar North.[10]

This paper will mainly focus on the data collected from youth focus groups in the region's 12 villages. Other findings from this project have been reported elsewhere (see above). The focus groups described here were conducted in 2001-2002, and were aimed at learning more about youth suicide from young Inupiaqs' perspectives, given that they are in the age group most at risk of suicide (Wexler et al., 2008). Task force members helped to recruit a convenience sample in every village, with the main criteria being age (13-21) and Inupiaq identity. All participants gave their signed consent before getting involved in the focus groups, and those who were under 18 years old also had a parent or guardian provide additional consent. Questions focused on young people's experiences, their reactions to them, and community

and family dynamics surrounding them (e.g., "Tell me about a time when you did something good…how did people react?"). The 24-question guide—developed in collaboration with task force members—covered many topics, asking participants to reflect on their village, culture, family, role models, gender, wellness, the future, and suicide. Focus groups ranged in size from 3 to 12 participants; slightly more than half were female. The project's Inupiaq Community Coordinator and the author conducted sessions in every village (12) in the region, with two in the largest one (N=13).

Quotations from these sessions were used as generative themes (Freire, 1970) in the last two quarterly task force meetings. In these sessions, several youth quotations were shared aloud in order to offer task force members a broad (and provocative) range of youth answers to a particular focus group question. Task force members were then asked to talk about their reactions to hearing the (sometimes upsetting) young people's words. These exercises were done in small groups of 3-5 people and then reported back to the larger 30-member task force. The ideas, emotions, and associations spoken about in these sessions were used to guide analysis through the development of codes and associated memos.

The focus groups were transcribed, edited, and coded after the investigator left the region in 2003-2004. The tapes were reviewed and typed as transcriptions, and memos were generated to track the investigator's thoughts throughout the process. All references to names—individual, family, or village—were changed to protect confidentiality. In addition, some details about particular events were altered to ensure that the data were unidentifiable. After inputting the data, the investigator coded the transcripts by developing ongoing coding schemes, paying attention to the task force's reflections and keeping in mind the focus of the study, namely, the meanings and practices surrounding the act of suicide. Once all of the focus groups were transcribed and coded, the author read the transcripts again to check the accuracy of the codes and to insert comments.

Drawing on the 13 youth focus group transcripts, this discussion centers on young people's narratives about selfhood, social responsibilities, and perceived life courses. This view is important because young people's pathways into adulthood are structured by these understandings; their expectations of the future are shaped by these ideas (McAdams, 2006). Describing these narratives is one way to understand how colonization can be implicated in the high rates of youth suicide in this and possibly similar Indigenous communities.

Findings and Discussion

Consider the experience of growing up for Inupiaq young people living in small villages in rural Alaska. Young villagers have exposure to global media, yet live in settlements not connected to "the outside" by roads. Their grandparents know how to speak Inupiaq and to live a subsistence lifestyle, while many of them neither speak the Inupiaq language nor participate in traditional subsistence activities. They are expected to succeed in school—learning European American people's knowledge, language, and ways of being—yet know that they won't need many of these skills in their home communities. Their ideas of the future come from their experiences and those of others in their village communities. Many are uneasy about their future prospects. One young focus group participant put it this way: "I sure hope it [her future] is better than theirs [adults in her community]."

According to Inupiat young people, they are situated between the innocent happiness of childhood and the difficulties of adulthood. They look back wistfully at their innocent days and look toward the future with dread. Adults they know are having a hard time. Inupiat young people imagine their future will be similar—full of stress and hardship. In this uncomfortable in-between, young people understand what is going on around them and feel pressured to decide how they will be involved. A young man clarified this tension and articulated the pathway into adulthood as "scary." He said,

> You could do something that could totally mess it all up, like drugs for example and like….you got to wonder what you're going to do after high school and how you're going to accomplish what you've planned.

As emerging adults, young people watch village grown-ups with critical eyes, and say that they will probably follow their lead and abuse alcohol, feel hopeless, and become "bums." These recriminations reflect the tensions of living between two worlds, blaming oneself and one's community for the struggle, and falling through the cracks in the meantime. Life starts off with such promise, but for many teenagers, their own failure is an almost foregone conclusion. This anomie is the very heart of colonization (Jervis, 2003), and is implicated in the crumbling hopes of Inupiat young people.

Growing up Inupiaq

According to Inupiat young people, childhood is a blessed time—a fun and carefree time in one's life: "When you are young, everything is sunshine, nothing really matters." Life is easier for children because they do not have as many expectations about how their lives should be. Although village families rarely fit within the supposed realities—articulated by teenagers mainly as living in stress-free, nuclear families "like the Brady Bunch"—children are hardly aware of the contrast. "You don't know, what your parents are going through as much as you do, today. And like, you really don't, it really doesn't bother you." This lack of awareness keeps young children from noticing the gap separating their experiences from those of others living in the dominant culture.

In addition to this blissful innocence, young children and babies are easily incorporated into village life (Chance, 1990). Adults in the community talk about how "there is serenity," as one middle-aged Inupiaq woman put it, in being with children, perhaps because they are considered carefree. They are part of their families' daily routines, being amaaqtuq (carried) to community meetings and following their parents when they go visiting. Babies and very young children are expected to accompany their family members, and are generally well-received. Young children and adults interact frequently and, according to young people, there is less strain between those two age groups when compared to the tensions that exist among teenagers and between teenagers and adults.

Young people—as they engage with the larger world—seem to adopt colonial perspectives while fitting themselves into groupings of *less than* and *greater than* based on imposed notions of status. This change in self-categorization became clear after hearing many similar narratives about growing up and entering a new social hierarchy, as compared with their social experiences in early childhood. Many young Inupiat said things like,

> It just brings back childhood memories when we used to go sliding and, like, just all be together and just have so much fun and then, like, I don't know. It makes me think about today where it's kind of like different.

The carefree village life of early childhood changes when they enter the social hierarchy of school. One Inupiaq boy explained it this way:

> [Things are good] until you get older and start going to school and start realizing which kind you are, and what you are, and stuff like that.

New categories of personhood are imposed by the structures in the school system and additional exposure to the Western values and forms of social control[11] through educational programming (McLean, 1997; Ryan, 1989). Furthermore, young people become more attuned to imposed categories of hip or out of fashion, "in" or outcast, based on consumptive patterns and their display (Arnett, 2002; Condon, 1988; Condon, 1990). These parameters for judgment create divisions that seem to deepen as young people reach adolescence. One young woman explained this in a focus group by saying, "These days it's like we're all kind of prejudiced and, like, we judge each other a lot and gossip and everything." In a different focus group, two young women explained it further by saying, "We're older… like, everyone, they like, they're more opinionated and they…" Her friend added, "…They think they're too cool to do stuff."

As young people regulate their behavior to fit within imposed ideas of coolness, village-based and traditional activities can seem outdated and unappealing. To fit within the global teen culture (Arnett, 2002), young people in remote Arctic villages wear the slinky fashions of pop idols, the almost-falling-off baggy jeans of rap artists, and the thin leather footwear of urban stars despite the obvious hardship of doing so in sub-zero temperatures. A young Inupiaq man living in a small village explained this to me, saying, "…around here, you got to look a certain way to have some friends…You've got to look like them, and if you don't look like them, they'll look at you like you're trash." Another participant explained it by saying, "Kids are looking ghetto and all that. It is a way for them to fit in." In his article about the psychological ramifications of globalization, Arnett (2002) states, "…as traditional ways of life change in response to globalization, traditional worldviews may lack compelling emotional and ideological power for young people" (p. 778). Thus, Inupiat young people seek to emulate a foreign culture and maintain the consumptive patterns that exist in stark contrast to the local realities in which they live.

Rites of Passage: Substance Use, Choice and Destiny

A common belief held in Northwest Alaska is that children have not been corrupted by the world, but teenagers have. According to many, "That's when peer-pressure comes in." In this context, young people talk about good and bad in unequivocal terms. This difference is clear in theory, but in everyday life, the distinction gets muddy: Friends frequently try to coax each other to drink and do drugs (bad) in order to show affiliation and coolness (good). In a focus group, one young woman said:

> There's a lot of peer pressure and there's a lot of drugs and alcohol going on. And it's, and especially (hard) if you don't do it, it's, like, hard for you everyday.

Not unique to Northwest Alaska or to Indigenous youth, drinking and drug use are linked to teen fun and maturity, but underneath these associations, young Inupiat people have seen the consequences of these activities.

Inupiat young people talk about how alcohol has torn apart their families; yet, refusing to drink with friends and family members can be worse. Setting oneself apart explicitly challenges these familial and congenial relationships by calling the person's social affiliation into question. Many young people think there is no way to negotiate this situation well. A young man explained in a focus group interview:

> I think it's...it might not be…worse but I think it's different because it's your friends. I mean, it's, like, not just your friends, it's your cousins and your brothers and sisters that come up to you and are like, 'Hey, you want a beer', you know? It's, you know, kinda tough...

In the same focus group, a young woman said that parents "teach those bad things to us. [First] we see it, [then] when (we) get old enough to have them ask us to do it." Young people talked about family members saying such things as, "You think you are better than us?" and "You should try it first with family." This experience goes beyond peer pressure as it is typically understood, because it can include most of one's peers and family members.

Young people have to decide whether they will be essentially good or bad, sober or high, and, in some instances, "with their family" or "against them." If they do decide to be sober, it is not easy. A young woman explained in a focus group how she stays sober. She said,

> [I] hang out with the people I know are going to stay away from it…that [means] I know I'm gonna stay away from drugs and alcohol. I try to stay with them as much as possible so I don't have to go home.

Clearly, the decision to use or not use substances is not made lightly. A young Inupiaq from a bootlegging[12] family explained this with a sigh: "You have to make the choice if you're going to decide to drink or stay clean." In response, another participant explained that "they grow up with it, so they pretty much learned it from their families." It seems as if the latter speaker assumed what the former's choice would be.

These statements highlight the conflicting values of Western and Inupiaq cultures. Simply put, a Western worldview reflects the idea that individuals make choices and orchestrate their lives with little attention to the context and relations that surround them. That is, European American values privilege the individual and assume that people are responsible to themselves first and foremost as they act on the world (Bar-On, 1999). For Inupiat people, their actions are shaped by their relationships and the learning they have discerned from watching, listening, and interacting with their family, community, and the environment (Burch, 2006; Kendal, 1989). Thus, Inupiat socialization practices emphasize awareness of others, their relations, and the broader contexts within which people act. This responsiveness determines a person's situational conduct; it means that departing from the practices and expectations of one's relations and community norms is, sometimes, more unacceptable than following their lead and making a "bad choice."

The idea of "choice" creates tensions in which young people judge family, community members, and sometimes themselves for making poor choices, when there are few other obvious pathways into the future. One young man in a focus group put it this way:

> [People who live here] are either not working or…not trying to do something good for themselves. It's their choice, so they do it. It's pretty much everybody that don't make a right choice. And there is quite a few of them.

The idea of individual choice creates the idea that most village members are making "bad" decisions and not living in the right way. As people who are associated with this generalized "bad decision making," most young people do not expect that their choices (or their destiny) will be very different.

In this way, young Inupiat people's life courses are inextricably linked to those of others in their families and communities. When the adults in their lives drink or use drugs, young people believe that they are likely to follow. In a focus group a young man stated,

> We learn from the older ones. From some friends from
> another village and, other than that, we just learn from
> our parents, too, and our relatives. They teach us those
> bad things.

Caught within this web of relations, many people feel as if they have very little room to maneuver, even though they believe they should have control over their lives.

The choice framework can be especially damaging because it ascribes blame to individuals for issues that are much bigger than they are. A high-school senior illustrated this tendency as he described the community members in his home village:

> Just that our people here are not…people here are not
> educated or going school or trying to finish or, but there
> is a lot of jobs available here.

His comments were met with nods of agreement from other focus group participants because many people in the community do drop out of school, and there were several job openings in the village that had been unfilled at the time. Although these facts are taken as common sense, it is important to remember that schools—as the primary colonizing agent historically—are not unambiguously benevolent institutions for Inupiaq (McLean, 1997; Ryan, 1989), even when the district tries to be responsive to local needs.[13] In addition, the assertion that there are "a lot of jobs available" needs to be considered critically. The kinds of job vacancies in these villages reflect another tension in the application of Western constructs to Inupiaq communities. In this case, there were two position openings in a village of approximately 500 people, one for a village public safety officer and another for a village counselor. Both job duties require communication practices and social relationships that can be misaligned with Inupiaq social mores.

Instead of (re)considering the structures of colonialism that equate personal worth with an education and job even in small, rural settlements without many employment options, this young Inupiaq blames his people for failing to achieve in this way. He judges his people

as "less than" because they are not attaining this Western ideal. In this way, colonialism continues through the recriminations of a young generation.

Adulthood: Nothing to Look Forward to

When asked about the future, many Inupiaq young people expect adulthood will be more stressful than their teenage years. In focus groups, they easily rattled off the additional stressors, such as "finding a place to stay," "…bills, cleaning the house and having a job," and "voting even though we don't know how." These adult activities are not easy. Something as simple as finding a place separate from one's family of origin can be surprisingly difficult in villages with few modern houses and few prospects for jobs. Entering adulthood involves a confusing array of new skills and responsibilities for almost everyone. For Inupiat living in rural villages where everyone knows each other, however, the new expectations, knowledge, and skills required to leave home, go to college, or get a job[14] can be overwhelming.

Defeat will mean that even the most promising young Inupiat people will become like the other local adults, "failures," according to many focus group participants. Adults "don't care if they get drunk"; "their problems just make the cause for drinking, because they can be old enough [to drink] and still, like, not [handle it]." A theme in young people's narratives was that "[it] seems like a lot of adults just kinda give up on themselves."

Most of the young people (men especially) could not identify a role model or "someone they'd like to be like" when they grow up. One reason for this could be that the rare employment opportunities in the villages do not require the traditional skills of a hunter (Brody, 1987); instead, they involve "desk work" that is seen as more appropriate for women. Without employment, men have difficulty doing subsistence activities, because hunting and fishing require snowmobiles or boats in addition to gas money to run them. In addition, many Inupiat in the region perceive the state and federal regulations which limit their harvests to be barriers to their subsistence activities.

These circumstances have ramifications. An older Inupiaq woman put it this way:

> What is left for those to feel like a man? They were traditionally the caretakers of the family; now things are really changing. They no longer feel like they are caring for their families. Subsistence is really important for men to feel like they are contributing. It gives them a place.

Inupiat men are expected to support their families, but the wage economy available in the villages is not well suited for masculine Inupiat roles.[15] Instead of understanding this situation as a result of an imposed economic system, many young people in the focus groups saw men in the villages as generally less capable than women. As one young woman explained, "People around here look to women for strength when it should be the men."

This creates a pervasive feeling of strain for Inupiaq young men who are entering adulthood. As one young participant explained, "Guys take it harder than girls when it comes down to stress." Unfortunately, men are also less likely to talk about their feelings with others and have few circumstances in which it is "normal" to do so. At one occasion, a wellness gathering, an Inupiaq woman commented,

> Then we did that group thing. I looked over at the group of men. I've never seen a group of men sitting and talking and interacting. I didn't know they could do it!

Although half joking, Inupiat men do not tend to verbalize as much as women. A focus group participant emphasized this in saying, "Guys tend to keep emotional stuff to themselves. I think that those guys are more likely to do it (suicide)." With this hard-to-name experience of acculturation strain,[16] young Inupiat men "…feel like they have nothing to live for," according to young people.

Without clearer pathways to navigate these tensions and enter Inupiaq adulthood, men are left floundering. Put more bluntly by a young Inupiaq, "(Men are) tired of how they live and the way they live." A different youth stated it as "They're bored[17] and think there's nothing better to do with their life." These are answers to the question, "Why do you think people attempt or commit suicide?" The tone and content of these statements elucidates some of the ways in which colonialism becomes manifested in the "no future" of suicide.

Conclusion

> There are so many things that could be causing young
> people to commit suicide. We blame it on drinking, but
> what is the real reason? What are the problems that a
> person is experiencing—no job, relationship problems?
> We need to look at the big picture: Why are people
> coming to a point in their lives of no hope?

This paper answers this Inupiaq mother's question by offering
a perspective that links the current experiences of young people to
tensions created and fostered by colonization. The statements from
young people reflect the experience of living with discontinuities
between what they hope for and what they believe is probable; what
they think *should* be and what *is*.

Through illustrative narratives, this paper tries to demonstrate
how Inupiat young people's ideas about themselves, their families and
communities, and the future are negatively affected by the misalignment
between Inupiaq and Western expectations and values. These cultural
conflicts often show up in narratives that condemn individuals for their
lack of success without implicating the colonial forces that so often lead
to this outcome. This is problematic because the dominant culture is
able to situate young people's ideas, making Western understandings
the standard by which they (harshly) judge their world. These imposed
notions also establish the criteria youth believe they have to follow to
achieve success, and the "best way"—making good individual choices—
even though they have a sense of shared destiny. This untenable situation
leads many to feel like they have reached an existential dead end.

In this frame, one could understand the alarmingly high
Inupiat youth suicide rate as the result of healthy pathways thwarted
by cultural discontinuities and active oppression. Young people do
not see possibilities for the future because they have been taught to
understand their past and present through a colonial perspective:
the struggles of their family members and neighbors are understood
as personal and collective failings, not the results of oppressive belief
systems and structures. With this gaze, there are few options. According
to young people, they can either "give up" (as they believe so many
other adult community members do) and fail, or they can hold onto
the idea that they can work hard, make good choices and "succeed" as
individuals. Exploring the ways in which these ideas ignore (or replace)
alternative, Inupiaq perspectives can be a fruitful endeavor that opens

new possibilities for wellness. This exploration can also highlight the ways in which Inupiaq success and health might look different from those imposed from the outside.

Community members—mostly Elders and adults—have identified this as an important step toward prevention. As one Elder stated:

> So, over time we have felt like our ability to control our own lives has been taken away. Our children are not able to communicate with us [through the Inupiaq language], our lives being very different through the changes that have occurred, our constant battles with trying to protect our subsistence way of life, to our young people not feeling like their is a future for them. We haven't replaced these things with an understanding of how we have to have healthy villages.

One way of moving from "no future" to a vision for healthy communities is to understand the ways in which the historical (cultural) battles continue through the everyday understandings of Inupiat young people. Identifying how modern forms of colonialism can be linked to the ways young Indigenous people think about themselves, their families, and their communities is an important step in reconstituting local control.

By understanding how modern colonialism cloaks Western assumptions and expectations in matter-of-fact language, young people can be helped to see how this process renders people—their people—failures. This insidious rationale takes responsibility away from the colonial structures and places it firmly on individuals' shoulders. Understanding these modern colonial processes can offer Indigenous youth a collective purpose: to resist by highlighting traditional meanings, redefining success (and failure) based on their own belief systems and community norms, and promoting a healthy future on their own terms. This perspective can help Indigenous young people craft a future that makes sense to them, their families, and their communities.

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Notes

1 Indigenous incorporates Alaska Native, Inuit, Aboriginal, American Indian and other First Nations.

2 See Burch (1994) for an explanation of the rapidity of this conversion.

3 See Bodenhorn (1997) for a description of Inupiaq resistance and re-positionality in relation to Western intrusion.

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5 This was the institution where the author did her doctoral studies.

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10 The National Science Foundation International Polar Year initiative is working collaboratively with partner communities in Norway, Siberia, Nunavut and Alaska to describe Indigenous pathways to adulthood.

11 See McLean (1997) and Ryan (1989) to better understand the ways that grade levels, academic performance measured as individual achievement, categories of deficiency such as special education, leveling, and differential disciplinary statuses can be implicated in the colonial project.

12 The tribes representing all eleven villages in the region, not including Kotzebue, have made alcohol illegal. In Kotzebue, it is illegal to buy or sell alcohol, but people can ship limited amounts to town.

13 The local school district has been very open to community involvement and has tried—with varying success—to decrease the historical divide between schools and communities in the region.

[14] The region's largest employers are the health and social service association, which often has openings for people with advanced degrees, and a large mine that requires workers to live on-site for two weeks at a time.

[15] See Burch (2006) for information on Inupiaq gender roles.

[16] See Samson (2003) and Tatz (2001) for a full description of these kinds of experiences for Innu (Canada) and Aboriginal (Australia) people.

[17] Arnett (2002) and Musharbash (2007) discuss a profound meaning of boredom that is akin to anomie (Durkheim, 1951).