

Cultural narratives and clarity of identity: understanding the well-being of Inuit Youth

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When the entire history of a society is captured by a few simple labels, it indicates a high degree of consensus about a group's past, present, and possibly its future. This level of agreement is precisely the case for current conceptions of relations between mainstream Canadian society and Inuit. The entire complex history of Inuit is summarized by a succession of frequently used labels: "Traditional culture," "colonization," (forced assimilation) "empowerment" and "decolonization."

These provocative labels evoke powerful images that also have profound value judgments associated with them. The group-based or cultural narrative they describe is a simple one: Inuit lived a traditional, nomadic lifestyle that was rooted in the harsh environment that they engaged and ultimately tamed. Powerful White Europeans "colonized" Inuit and dominated them through forced relocation and economic exploitation. The natural aftermath of colonization was the coerced assimilation of Inuit, symbolized by religious conversion, European-style education including residential schools, linguicide, and the banning of spiritual ceremonies. The "empowerment" and "decolonization" processes that have now been set in motion are designed to rectify the devastating psychological and social consequences of colonization.

These shared labels, that capture the regrettable history between mainstream Canadians and Inuit, have led to a consensual understanding of present-day conditions for Inuit. Simply put, the consensual scenario describes the devastatingly negative effects of colonization and how it has impacted profoundly the self-esteem of Inuit. Everybody argues that it is this loss of self-esteem and accompanying feelings of helplessness that have led to the widespread social dysfunction that is plaguing Inuit communities.

The present research questions this simple analysis. Surprisingly, and contrary to the view captured in the agreed upon labels, many Inuit do not judge colonization negatively. They do not interpret colonization as a series of major negative social changes implemented by White people that destroyed Inuit culture. While there is a growing awareness of present-day social problems in their communities, many Inuit do not consider these problems to be caused by the colonization process. In numerous conversations with students of all ages about Inuit history, White colonizers are depicted as having very little to do with the negative outcomes of the colonization process. Moreover, in the minds of Inuit, the positive consequences of colonization often outweigh the negative ones. Equally surprising are findings from our research in Inuit communities pointing to positive self-esteem. Many Inuit openly discuss issues that they are dealing with and yet their levels of self-esteem are as high as any group of mainstream Canadians.

In the present research, we propose that the supposed agreed upon assumption about the colonization by White Europeans, considered to be a negative process, may be very misleading. Specifically, we argue that focusing on the negative consequences of colonization may not be the central factor for explaining the self-esteem and well-being of modern Inuit.

Instead, we argue that it is not sufficient to only consider the perceived positive or negative valence of the changes that defined Inuit history to explain levels of self-esteem. That is, we believe that it is not just those Inuit who judge colonization positively that have high self-esteem, and those who judge colonization negatively who have low self-esteem. We propose that to achieve a complete understanding of Inuit well-being and self-esteem, we need to understand how Inuit themselves interpret the roles that White colonizers and Inuit as the main actors of the colonization and decolonization processes played in shaping Inuit communities.

We propose that a clearly defined Inuit identity, derived from a clear understanding of Inuit history, allows each Inuk to develop a strong personal identity and positive self-esteem. We further argue that whether Inuit history focuses on events that might be considered negative (colonization) or positive (James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement) is not what is pivotal for Inuit well-being. What is pivotal, we argue, is that Inuit have a clear, shared vision of their history including a clear idea of what precisely caused events that impacted Inuit and a clear understanding of the events that define Inuit history and, by extension a clear and well-defined cultural identity. Specifically, we propose that whether or not colonization was a positive or a negative experience for Inuit is not the main factor in determining Inuit self-esteem and well-being.

In order to address our different view of well-being and self-esteem, we asked Inuit to tell us, spontaneously and in their own words, the history of Inuit from Nunavik. Specifically, we used a well-established technique in psychology, and adapted it for the present research. We label our technique the *cultural narrative method* because it asks our Inuit participants to tell us the story of “Inuit from Nunavik.” We begin the Cultural Narrative Interview by asking the participant to tell us the story of your group, *the Inuit of Nunavik*, playing the role of a story-teller. We guide participants by asking them to divide their story into six different chapters: how Inuit first came to Nunavik (Chapter 1), Inuit at the time of their great-grandparent’s (Chapter 2), their grandparent’s time (Chapter 3), their parent’s time (Chapter 4), their own generation (Chapter 5), and their expected future (Chapter 6).

From the cultural narratives our participants generate, we can examine the extent to which the participants all tell the same story about the history, present and future of Inuit. We can also explore the extent to which participants’ perceptions of historical events are positive or negative. Specifically, we focus on the valence that Inuit story-tellers indicate for each event in each chapter of their narrative.

Most importantly, we examine the clarity of participants’ identity as Inuit. To assess clarity we study each chapter in each cultural narrative for examples where the participant clearly describes an event that effected Inuit and where the participant has a clear understanding of what caused that event. To be considered as clear, the story-teller must

pinpoint clearly and specifically the cause of events that impacted Inuit. We focus attention on the clarity of “causes” because knowing the cause of an event is the way people come to understand their world. People who have a clear understanding of events, we argue, are in a position to develop a healthy identity and positive self-esteem.

In the context of the present study, then, we hypothesize that participants who can pinpoint clear causes will be the ones who indicate higher levels of personal and collective well-being.

Method

Participants

A sample of 17 Inuit youth were involved in this research. Participants were aged from 15 to 34 ($M=19.5$, $SD=5.0$). In all, 53% were male and 47% were female. Also, in total, 9 were living in the South pursuing a CEGEP education whereas 8 participants were living in the North and attending high school.

Procedure

The Inuit participants were all met individually by the interviewer who was fluent in Inuktitut, English, and French. The purpose of the research was explained to our participants who then signed a consent form while being informed that their answers would remain anonymous and confidential.

The participant could choose to be interviewed either in English, French or Inuktitut. The interviewer, an Inuk himself, met with each participant at the place of their choice, usually the home of the participant or the Inuit meeting centre. The complete interview was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, and translated if necessary into English.

The interviewer began by giving explicit instructions to the participant. The participant was asked to spontaneously tell the story of *The Inuit of Nunavik*, adopting the role of a storyteller. Participants were asked to divide their story into six main chapters beginning with chapter one “*how Inuit first came to Nunavik*” to chapter six “*the expected future for Inuit*”.

The tape-recorded stories were given to two university students who were first asked to code each chapter of every narrative in terms of how clearly the “causes of events” were described. A low score “0” represented not clear and “10” denoted very clear. The coders were not biased because they did not know the purpose of the research. As well, since there were two coders we could assess the extent to which they agreed with each other.

Immediately following the Cultural Narrative story, the participants were asked to evaluate each chapter in terms of how negative or positive (valence) the events they described were (for South group only). Scores ranged from “0” representing very negative events to “10” denoting very positive events. Participants were also asked to complete a Psychological Well-being Questionnaire. Different indicators were used in the questionnaire in order to assess a variety of dimensions of personal and collective psychological well-being. These indicators were personal esteem, self-determined motivations (intrinsic and extrinsic identified),

collective esteem, and Inuit pride (for South group only). Participant’s answered each well-being indicator on a scale that went from “0 – representing low well-being” to “10 – representing high well-being”.

Results and discussion

Our main goal was to explore the association between identity clarity and well-being. Our analysis was conducted in two main steps. First, we compared the North and the South groups regarding the clarity of their identity and measures of their psychological well-being. Second, we examined in greater detail the South group for which we evaluated their ratings of valence of social change and well-being for each cultural narrative chapter.

Comparative analysis of the North and South group

When comparing the North and the South group of participants in terms of identity clarity and well-being, we might expect to find differences in terms of well-being and identity clarity. On the one hand, it is possible that the South group, because they have succeeded at school, and are attending CEGEP, may report higher levels of well-being and more identity clarity. It is possible that contact with the Quallunat in the South made their own Inuit identity more salient, and thus helped them to clarify it. On the other hand, it is possible that extensive contact Quallunat produced confusion in identity because they had to adapt to a new way of life. Similarly, contact with other values and life in the south could create confusion about cultural identity, and thus lower their cultural identity clarity.

When we look at clarity of identity for both the North and South Inuit groups, we observe that participants in the South group tend to attribute the events mentioned in their cultural narratives to clearer and more well-defined causes than Inuit from the North group.

Similarly, results for various psychological well-being indicators show that members of the South group have significantly higher levels of well-being than Inuit youth from the North group (See Table 1). Members of the South group were prouder of themselves than members of the North group. Members of the South group also showed more self-determined motivation than members of the North group, a type of motivation which has been associated with well-being. Members of the South group also showed slightly higher levels of collective esteem than members of the North group.

In sum, these results represent a first step towards confirming that cultural identity clarity is related to present with well-being.

Table 1. Clarity of identity and psychological well-being (general score)

Group	Clarity of Identity	Psychological well-being			
		Personal esteem	Collective Esteem	Intrinsic motivation	Extrinsic identified motivation
South group	5.93	8.56	7.91	7.44	9.00
North group	4.94	6.75	7.05	5.75	6.88

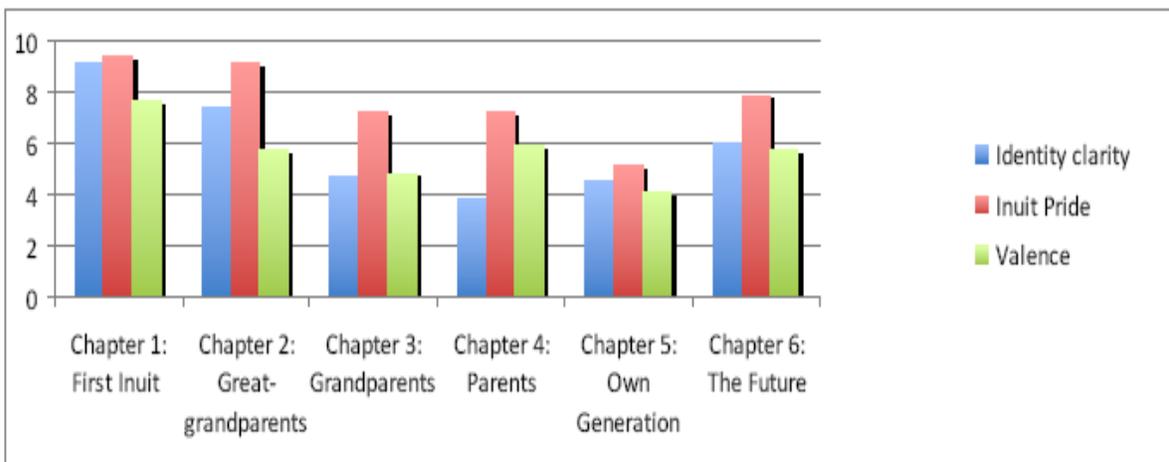
Chapter analysis for the South group

To further confirm the impact of clarity of Inuit identity on psychological well-being, we examined the scores of participants in the south group for each chapter of their narrative. This also allowed us to isolate our findings from other factors, such as academic success, that might influence both identity clarity and well-being.

From our analysis, two main findings arise which confirm that identity clarity plays a pivotal role in terms of determining the well-being of Inuit. Our results appear in Figure 1, where all the chapter scores are presented for clarity of identity, positive or negative valence of events and Inuit pride. First, we observed a strong association between identity clarity and well-being ($r = .82; p < 0.05$). Specifically, when we look at the scores for each chapter, it seems that when identity clarity is high, well-being is also high (see Chapter 1: First Inuit and Chapter 2: Great-grandparents). In contrast, when identity clarity is low, well-being is also low (see Chapter 3: Grandparents, Chapter 4: Parents, and Chapter 5: Own Generation). As for Chapter 6: The future, results show that the scores for both identity clarity and well-being are between the highest and the lowest chapters.

Second, our results show that identity clarity seems to play a more important role than the positive or negative valence of social change. Specifically, our results show that Inuit were ambivalent about whether colonisation was perceived as a positive or negative process: most of the ratings are neutral. Indeed, our results show that in all chapters, except one (Chapter 1: First Inuit), valence ratings were close to the neutral point suggesting that our participants considered the events as being neither positive nor negative.

Figure 1. Identity clarity, valence and Inuit pride by chapter (South group)



Conclusion

The present study supports an alternative view to the traditional understanding of the colonization process. Our results challenge the traditional view that colonization is perceived negatively by all Inuit and that its negative consequences produced low self-esteem among all Inuit. Many of our Inuit youth reported high levels of well being and positive self-esteem. Moreover, our results indicate that self-esteem and well being differ among Inuit. For example, well-being and esteem were quite different for our North and South groups of Inuit youth. In addition, well-being and esteem varied according to historical period as captured in the narratives.

The most important finding was the pivotal role that Inuit identity clarity seems to play for well-being and esteem of our participants. Clarity of Inuit cultural identity may well provide individuals with clearly defined goals and strategies for achieving these goals. Pursuing a set of clearly defined goals no doubt leads to healthy motivation, psychological well-being and positive self-esteem.

The reasons for a lack of identity clarity may be diverse, and would need to be further investigated. But clearly, our results show that having a clear understanding of the history of one's group can have an important impact on collective well-being, and this independent of the positive or negative valence of events impacting Inuit.

Inuit young people may well benefit from interventions designed, not to boost their self-esteem directly, but instead to help them clarify their identity as Inuit.