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# Cultural change and mental health in Greenland: the association of childhood conditions, language, and urbanization with mental health and suicidal thoughts among the Inuit of Greenland

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## Abstract

In Greenland, the rapid sociocultural change of the last 50 years has been paralleled by an epidemiological transition characterized by a reduction in infectious diseases, an increase in cancer and cardiovascular diseases, and an increased prevalence of mental health problems. During 1993–94 and 1997–98, two health interview surveys were conducted among Inuit in Greenland and Inuit migrants in Denmark. The response rates were 71 and 55%. Information on mental health was obtained from 1388 and 1769 adults. As indicators of mental health, the prevalence of potential psychiatric cases according to the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) and the prevalence of suicidal thoughts were studied in relation to childhood residence and father's occupation, current residence, and language. The statistical methods included logistic regression and graphical independence models. The results indicated a U-shaped association in Greenland of GHQ-cases with age and a high prevalence of suicidal thoughts among young people; a low prevalence of GHQ-cases among those who were bilingual or spoke only Danish; and a high prevalence of suicidal thoughts among migrants who grew up in Denmark and among residents of the capital of Greenland. In Greenland, women were more often GHQ-cases and had suicidal thoughts more often than men. The association between language and GHQ-cases is presumed to operate through socioeconomic factors. It is necessary to modify the common notion that rapid societal development is in itself a cause of poor mental health: as a result of successful integration into the modern Greenlandic society, some population groups have better mental health compared to other groups. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## Introduction

The contact of two or more cultures whether peaceful or hostile generally results in changes on both sides.

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During the 20th century, a large number of cultures have come in contact with the European–American, or Western, way of life and this contact has mostly resulted in profound changes in the culture and society. The changes have resulted in an epidemiological transition whose characteristics are observed in most affected countries. Among the Inuit, recent changes include a reduction in infectious diseases, an increase in chronic diseases such as cancer and cardiovascular diseases, and an increased prevalence of mental health problems (Bjerregaard & Young, 1998). In this article we present

and discuss our empirical data on acculturation and mental health from two population surveys conducted among the Greenlandic Inuit.

Rapid sociocultural change has been studied by a large number of researchers and has been variously described as acculturation, urbanization, migration, modernization, or westernization. Berry and Kim (1988) have proposed a model for acculturative stress that explains the relationship between cultural change and mental health. Berry (1990, 1994) has outlined a theory of acculturation and adaptation, and has discussed the specific situation of circumpolar peoples. According to Berry, acculturative stress gives rise to a number of health consequences such as lowered mental health status, homicide, suicide, substance abuse, and family violence, as well as changing patterns of physical health. Some physical health problems increase due to new sources of disease and to increased stress while other problems decrease due to improved health care, housing conditions and other factors. Berry defines four different modes of acculturation: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization, resulting from the perceived importance of maintaining one's own cultural identity and relationships with other groups.

Moderators at different levels influence the degree of cultural stress experienced by individuals. It depends on the nature of the dominant society, for example whether its ideology puts emphasis on assimilation or on multiculturalism. Studies have shown that in pluralist societies, integration results in the least acculturative stress, but acculturative stress has been shown to exist both in multicultural and culturally homogenous societies (Sam & Berry, 1995).

Denmark is a culturally homogenous country without a multicultural tradition. In Greenland, the official policy during the colonial period (until 1979) was consequently assimilationist, epitomized by the status of Greenland as a Danish county and the use of the terms "northern Danes" and "southern Danes" for Greenlanders and Danes, respectively, ignoring the cultural identity of the former. Since the introduction of home rule in 1979, the official policy has been integrationist, acknowledging the economic dominance of Denmark and the continued need for highly trained Danes in several areas of the new Greenlandic society. At the level of individuals, attitudes towards Berry's four modes of acculturation can vary, and whichever strategy an individual employs, demographic, social, and psychological characteristics of the individual are important determinants of acculturative stress.

O'Neil (1985, 1986) working with an actor-centred model of participation in social change, points out the important fact that, in a changing society, different birth cohorts experience different worlds and must apply different coping strategies. For example, each cohort comes of age to find different economic possibilities

available to them and different diseases prevailing in the community. Risk factors, for example those for youth suicides, are accordingly different and will change for successive cohorts of young people as they age and participate in the changing of their society.

In the present study, culture change was estimated at the individual level by the types of community and family experienced during childhood by youth and by proficiency in Greenlandic and Danish languages. We are of course aware that culture and culture change cannot be isolated from educational and socioeconomic factors (Helman, 1990), but in a cross-sectional epidemiological study it would be very difficult to distinguish among these closely related factors and to identify their unique relevance.

Greenland was colonized by Denmark/Norway in 1721, but the Inuit had had repeated contact with European whalers and explorers before that time. Over succeeding centuries, cultural exchange proceeded with the acquisition of European goods such as firearms, cloth, tobacco, and food, with the thorough Christianization of West Greenland by the mid-19th century and the introduction of literacy and paid work. New infectious diseases, like smallpox and probably tuberculosis, were also introduced with devastating results (Bjerregaard & Young, 1998). The shift from a traditional Inuit community to a modern society started in the beginning of the 20th century when fishing began to replace the hunting of marine mammals as the main livelihood. The shift was accompanied by a population movement from a large number of small villages to larger — although still small by any comparison — population centres, and by the gradual supplementation of the traditional subsistence by a cash economy.

By the end of World War II, however, Greenland was still by and large an isolated and traditional society where most people lived in small villages and subsisted on small-scale hunting and fishing. The last 50 years of the 20th century have witnessed unprecedented changes in Greenland as it has become a modern society thoroughly integrated in the global economy and global politics. Fishing and jobs in the associated processing industry are the basis for an economy that operates largely at a fully modern level using ocean going fishing vessels in addition to smaller crafts and fishing from the ice. Subsistence hunting and fishing is still widespread but is increasingly becoming a leisure time activity. There are daily connections by air to Denmark and weekly to Canada, even small villages have telephone and internet cafés, and in the supermarkets of the towns fresh mangoes and pawpaws can be bought as well as a range of European meat, dairy, and vegetable products, and frozen Greenlandic fish and seal meat. Before 1950, 2% of the population was non-Inuit, almost exclusively Danes. In 1975 this had increased to 19% but has since then decreased to 12% as the result of a conscious

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