



The land enriches the soul: On climatic and environmental change, affect, and emotional health and well-being in Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Canada

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ABSTRACT

For Canada's Inuit populations, the landscapes surrounding communities, and practices such as hunting, fishing, trapping, foraging, and travelling to cabins, contribute greatly to human health and well-being. Climatic and environmental change, however, are altering local ecosystems, and it is becoming increasingly challenging for many Inuit to continue to travel or hunt on the land. These changes greatly impact health and well-being. While numerous studies examine the physical health impacts of climate change, few consider the affective implications of these changes, and the subsequent impacts on the emotional well-being of Inuit populations. From data gathered through a multi-year, community-driven project in Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Labrador, Canada, however, it is evident that the emotional consequences of climate change are extremely important to Northern residents. Participants shared that these changes in land, snow, ice, and weather elicit feelings of anxiety, sadness, depression, fear, and anger, and impact culture, a sense of self-worth, and health. This article analyses the affective dimensions of climatic change, and argues that changes in the land and climate directly impact emotional health and well-being. Narratives of Inuit lived experiences will be shared through data from interviews, the concept of ecological affect will be introduced, and implications for climate-health research and programming will be discussed.

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You have to know what the land does to a person. It just gives you that sense of freedom, identity. ...It's the best therapy that anybody could have in the world.

Rigolet, Nunatsiavut Resident

1. Introduction: home is where the affect is

Global climatic and environmental changes have become an ever-increasing international concern, with changes in weather, precipitation, temperatures, and ecosystems occurring at an unprecedented rate (IPCC, 2007a,b). Throughout the world, variability in local, regional, and global weather events is resulting in shifting wildlife and vegetation patterns, and alterations in food and water systems are posing significant challenges for humanity and nature alike (IPCC, 2007a,b; Speldevinde et al., 2009; Swim et al., 2011; Tong and

Soskolne, 2007). The effects of these changes have extended into the human health arena, with the expectation that changing climatic and environmental factors will continue to negatively impact health and well-being. In a recent report, Costello et al., (2009: 1693, 1696) argue that climate change "is the biggest global health threat of the 21st Century," and that the field of public health needs to "frame climate change as a health issue." This 'global health threat' is expected to be felt first and most severely in geographically sensitive areas and/or by Indigenous populations, with the burden of climate-health impacts being unequally experienced by Indigenous peoples (Costello et al., 2009; Ford et al., 2010a). Research in the global climate-health field has focused primarily on *physical* health implications, such as health outcomes related to alterations in food and water quality, quantity, and availability, increased foodborne, waterborne, and vector-borne disease, increased heat-related morbidity and mortality, and increased death and injury due to extreme weather events (Costello et al., 2009; Few, 2007; Fritze et al., 2008; Frumkin et al., 2008; St. Louis and Hess, 2008; Tong and Soskolne,

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2007). There is also increasing awareness that people are emotionally impacted by changes in weather, climate, and environment through degradation or disaster, whether slow and gradual or rapid and unexpected (Albrecht, 2010; Albrecht et al., 2007; Higginbotham et al., 2007; Norgaard and Marie, 2006) and, as a result, there is emerging research examining and attending to the relationships among climatic and environmental change, emotional and mental health and well-being, and affective responses and behaviours (Berry et al., 2010; Cook et al., 2008; Doherty and Clayton, 2011; Fritze et al., 2008; Norgaard and Marie, 2006; Norgaard and Marie, 2011; Sartore et al., 2008; Speldewinde et al., 2009; Swim et al., 2010; Swim et al., 2011; Tschakert and Tutu, 2010).

In Canada's Inuit regions, the situation is no different. Across the Canadian North, communities have reported alterations in sea ice thickness, quality, and extent, increased incidences and severity of storms, changes in local and regional weather patterns, declining permafrost levels, warmer seasonal temperatures, and shifts in wildlife migration and plant growth patterns (Ford et al., 2008; Ford and Furgal, 2009; Fox, 2002; Jolly, 2002; Krupnik and Jolly, 2002; Nickels et al., 2006; Nuttall, 2008; Pearce et al., 2009; Prowse and Furgal, 2009; Prowse et al., 2009)—changes that differ substantially from the expected and historical variability in weather, climate, and conditions in these regions. In addition, climatic variability and the resulting environmental changes are expected to continue to impact Inuit and Inuit regions more strongly and more rapidly than in other global geographic locales (IPCC, 2007a,b; Ford and Furgal, 2009; Symon et al., 2005). Indeed, Inuit populations are already experiencing the burden and unequal distribution of climate change.

While there is a burgeoning field of study that is beginning to examine climate-health connections within a Northern context (e.g. Furgal, 2008; Furgal and Seguin, 2006; Ford et al., 2010a; Harper et al., 2011; Seguin, 2008), the focus remains on the current and potential physical health impacts: decreased physical activity due to unstable travel conditions and unpredictable weather patterns; increased infectious and vector-borne diseases due to temperature shifts; increased UV exposure leading to sun burns and eye damage; increased danger and chance of injury and death while travelling due to unstable ice conditions; and increased obesity and incidence of diabetes due to changing access to and abundance of traditional food sources and a reliance on market foods (Furgal, 2008; Furgal and Seguin, 2006; Furgal et al., 2002; Harper et al., 2011). Little attention, however, is given to the *affective* implications of a changing climate—that is, the conditions that give rise to the expressed or observed emotional and/or behaviour responses to the changes—and the subsequent impacts on the *emotional* health and well-being within Inuit populations. Several notable research studies, however, indicate the need for and the importance of studying the emotional and psychological dimensions of climate change within Inuit communities (Berner and Furgal, 2005; Ford et al., 2010a; Furgal et al., 2002).¹

In order to address this gap in both theory and research, and drawing from a multi-year case study conducted in the Inuit community of Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Labrador, Canada, this paper will illustrate—through voices and lived experiences—the many ways that the affective consequences resultant from ecological changes are of increasing concern and importance to the emotional health,

well-being, and daily lives of Northern residents. To our knowledge, this is the first in-depth study of the emotional and affective dimensions of climate change within an Inuit context, and works at the intersection between people, places, spaces, emotions, affect, and ecologies. Although these findings are emergent from a single case study in Canada's North, the results from this research serve to expand and enhance current climate-health research, and enrich current understandings about the depth, extent, and impacts of the affective dimensions of climate change and the subsequent impacts on emotional health and well-being.

2. (Ac)Climatising emotion, affecting climate

As climate change increasingly impacts numerous facets of Inuit life, culture, and livelihoods, many research studies have been (and continue to be) conducted to identify areas of susceptibility and vulnerability within communities, and explore opportunities to expand and enhance upon already present adaptive capacities and resiliencies (c.f. Ford et al., 2006; Ford et al., 2008; Ford et al., 2010b; Ford and Furgal, 2009; Ford and Pearce, 2010; IPCC, 2007a; Nickels et al., 2006; Pearce et al., 2009). This literature, however, does not focus on the affective dimensions of climatic and environmental change, or on the emotional responses or emotional susceptibilities and/or resiliencies (differentially) present within communities. As mentioned above, emotions and emotional health and well-being have also been relatively absent from consideration in climate-health research and literature. Yet, emotions and emotional health are essential components of adaptation and resilience and, as current research in psychological coping mechanisms in the context of natural disasters is indicating, previous levels of emotio-psychological health and strength are directly related to the ways in which people deal with upheaval, respond to change, and adapt (c.f. Doherty and Clayton, 2011; Halpern and Tramontin, 2007; Rao, 2006; Swim et al., 2010; Swim et al., 2011). Emotional health and well-being, and therefore the capacity for emotional strength and resilience, is also intertwined with socio-cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political structures; indeed, climate change itself takes place within the context of myriad and overlapping social, technological, political, economic and cultural transformations and stressors (Swim et al., 2011).

Within an Inuit context, communities throughout the Canadian North have experienced rapid socio-economic and socio-cultural transitions in the last 60 years, ranging from a shift from a nomadic lifestyle to community settlement, to forced relocations and land dispossession, to residential schools, to changes in culture and language. Furthermore, Inuit communities experience greater disparities in health outcomes compared to the non-Aboriginal Canadian populations, from lower life expectancies, to higher incidences of infectious disease, diabetes, obesity, and respiratory illnesses, to higher occurrences of alcohol and drug usage, to higher occurrences of mental illness, suicide, and suicidal tendencies (Ford et al., 2010a; Kirmayer et al., 2009; Lehti et al., 2009; Richmond, 2009; Richmond and Ross, 2009). All these factors are now taking place within the context of a rapidly changing environment and climate in Inuit regions, and climate change itself is being experienced and given sense and meaning through complex emotional processes that are place-based and individual- and context-specific.

From a climate change and climate-health perspective, then, what can we learn from an understanding of affect and of emotions, and how can research and practice in this field be expanded and enhanced from an inclusion of affect and emotion? Before delving into these questions more deeply, it is first important to define 'affect', and to situate the emotional dimensions of climate change within this context.

¹ At a recent conference in Mexico City in July 2011 entitled *Indigenous Peoples, Marginalized Populations, and Climate Change*, organized by the United Nations and designed to inform the next Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, the lack of research on the mental and emotional health impacts stemming from climate change was identified as a major gap, with research in this area urgently needed.

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