Blood on the Ice: Status, Self-Esteem, and Ritual Injury among Inuit Hockey Players

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Since the 1970s, the pace of social, economic, and political change has accelerated throughout the Canadian Arctic. In the Copper Inuit community of Holman, change has been accompanied by an increase in recreational facilities and activities organized by the local Hamlet Council and paid for by the Government of the Northwest Territories. Recreational involvement, primarily in the form of competitive team sports like hockey, provides a valuable outlet for Inuit teenagers and young adults who find it difficult to adjust to the new northern social order. This article examines the most visible of these sports—hockey—and discusses the effects that game involvement, violence, and ritualization of injury have upon young men's sense of control, status, and self-esteem.

Key words: hockey, Inuit youth, recreational acculturation, social change, self-esteem, injury ritual, sports violence; Canada, Arctic

The Holman Hockey League

It is April third, and the first game of the Holman Hockey League playoffs is in progress. The Northern Stores Beavers are playing the Holman Penguins, and at least 75% of Holman's population of 400 is present, generating a deafening noise. As expected, the game has been unusually rough even by Holman standards. The officials have called a number of penalties, for which they have drawn the ire of both teams and fans. It is the last five minutes of play and the score is 4-2. The Penguins are trying desperately to tie the game. Joseph Malgokak (all names are pseudonyms), the Penguins' star defense men, skates up the ice with the puck. He enters the Beavers' zone and looks to unleash a slap shot. The fans are focused on Joseph's play, so they do not hear the whistle blow nor do they understand why play was halted. The referees skate to the other end of the ice, and it is suddenly clear what has happened: a player is lying on the ice, his face twisted in pain, his body motionless. It is Johnny Kanayok, the Beavers' center forward. Fans speculate that Johnny tripped and fell into the boards. Someone suggests that he has injured his head or neck because he is not moving. Johnny lies still for five minutes, then players from both sides skate over to help him onto a stretcher. He is lifted up, carried off the ice, and loaded onto a truck that will drive him the 200 yards across town to the health center for treatment by the nurse.

The arena is suddenly quiet. The game ends several minutes later. The Beavers have won the first game of the playoffs, 5-2, but the topic of conversation is no longer the victory by the Beavers but Johnny Kanayok. How bad is his injury? Was it an accident? Will he be able to play in the next game? Nobody knows what exactly Johnny's injury is, however.

The next day, Johnny is not working his job at the Cop-op, but he is hobbling around town on a pair of crutches. He is lying in the ice, and loaded onto a truck that will drive him the 200 yards across town to the health center for treatment by the nurse.

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recreational acculturation has become a fact of life in Holman and other Canadian Arctic communities (see Condon 1995). Whereas 20 years ago many young people would have spent their time engaged in subsistence related activities, Inuit youth today spend much of their time in school, watching television, socializing within a greatly expanded peer group, and playing organized sports. Although the infrastructure of the community has expanded dramatically over the past 20 years with new housing units, a new health center, new craft shop, and a new Hamlet office building, the facilities oriented toward recreation are most impressive for an isolated community of 400 people. These include a new gymnasium attached to the new school, 2 baseball fields surrounded by chain link fences, an indoor hockey arena with locker rooms and spectator seating,
2 curling lanes, beach volleyball court, and 9-hole golf course.

This article provides a detailed case study of one particular sport in Holman (hockey) and specifically explores the relationships between newly emerging forms of recreational violence and ritualized injury, on the one hand, and conflicts over status, achievement, and self-esteem on the other. Organized sports such as hockey are significant because they provide young people with something to do (many proponents of organized sports argue that they keep potential delinquents out of trouble), but organized recreation is also involved in a major shift in attitudes regarding competition, overt ranking of abilities, verbal expressiveness, physical confrontation, rule-making, and rule-enforcement. Recreational acculturation is just as much a reality as the economic, political, and material changes that have dramatically altered the context of Inuit life and is in many ways a microcosm of those behavioral and attitudinal shifts.

While conducting research on the subsistence hunting and sports involvement of young male householders between the ages of 20 and 35, the authors were struck by the frequency and distribution of various types of injuries. It was apparent from our interviews and observations that the vast majority of injuries occurred as a result of sporting activity, most specifically hockey. It seemed to us that this represented a shift from the recent past when most injuries for young adults were presumably related to wage employment and hunting/fishing/trapping pursuits. We were also struck by the ways in which many older teenagers and young adults dramatized their injuries, even in cases where the injuries seemed insignificant. This suggested a psychological component to what we call the "ritualization of injuries," a dramatic performance of injuries that was partly face-saving and partly self-aggrandizement, depending upon the context. We believe that the dramatization of injury is intimately linked to local perceptions of status and achievement which in turn have a direct bearing on self-esteem. This link is most clearly seen in the most physical of sports played in Holman: hockey.

Methods

Data for this article were collected over an 11-month period between July 1992 and June 1993. Both of us were in Holman conducting an NSF-sponsored research project on the economic adaptations and subsistence hunting involvement of young male householders. Our sample consisted of 19 household heads between the ages of 20 and 35, many of whom participated in an earlier study of adolescent development conducted in 1980-1982 (see Condon 1987). Each household head was interviewed biweekly using a standard subsistence effort questionnaire designed to assess hunting effort, food sharing, food consumption, and wage employment activities. While the standardized protocols were necessary for the collection of systematic data, our best data were collected over the cups of tea or coffee that invariably followed each interview session. It was during these informal interview situations that we were able to obtain valuable information about the real concerns and interests of our informants. In the early stages of the research, it became apparent that recreational activities occupied a very important role for the majority of these young adults. This inspired one of us (PC) to do more systematic research in this domain, concentrating primarily upon the members of our sample who were highly involved in sports but including as well a small number of other sports enthusiasts who had not been included in the subsistence study sample. Although all sporting activities were examined, we decided that hockey would be the best sport to concentrate on due to its popularity and the physical and emotional intensity with which it is played. In addition to behavioral observations of hockey playing and practice, data were gathered through formal and informal interviews with players. Finally, an injuries interview designed to assess the frequency and distribution of different types of injuries was administered to the members of our subsistence effort sample.

The Pride and Passion of Hockey

It is generally acknowledged that Holman has one of the most active recreational programs in the Kitikmeot region of the Northwest Territories, if not the entire Canadian Arctic. Not surprising for a Canadian Arctic community, the recreational activity that consumes the most passion is hockey. Residents of Holman received their first exposure to hockey in 1980 when radio and television service was established. Shortly afterward, several children obtained hockey sticks and began teaching themselves how to play. Initially, hockey was simply an amusement limited to the snow-covered streets of town. Later, when children received skates donated by a sporting organization based in Yellowknife, play was relocated to local ponds. The first games of hockey were spontaneous, non-competitive affairs that could last for hours on end with players arriving, joining a team, leaving, and returning later to side with the other team. Games were played in a typically Inuit style, with little emphasis upon scoring or winning and an apparent lack of concern with competitiveness. Emphasis was placed instead upon the activity itself as a means of staving off boredom and enjoying the company of friends. In late spring, when the sun circled the horizon 24 hours a day, boys could be seen playing outside into the late hours of the morning, later dragging themselves to school after a long night of exhausting hockey play.

Eventually, the game of hockey in Holman began to change. A tournament was held one Easter weekend in the early 1980s. Teams were selected and a trophy was awarded to the winners. Friendly competition had always been a part of hockey in Holman, but this event marked the appearance of overt competition, specifically the ranking of the abilities of individual players and an obsession with winning and losing. Several years later, a group of young hockey players built an outdoor rink out of spare plywood. Lights and a warming hut were added a year later. Within a short time, a league was established, complete with a draft of the players, official rules, and a committee charged with maintaining league discipline. In spite of this overt emphasis upon competition and a marked increase in fighting and verbal aggression among the players, hockey still maintained a unique charm. Play was frequently called due to the puck sailing out of bounds into a snow bank or as a result of equipment shattering in the extreme cold. The arena had to be shoveled clear after each storm, and the rough and cracked surface of the ice presented a problem for any skater, regardless of ability.
With the completion of an indoor arena in 1989, hockey entered its most serious phase. Holman players boast about their new facility and about the zamboni, as yet unused, they acquired for resurfacing the ice. The Holman Hockey League is now affiliated with Sport North, an umbrella organization responsible for allocating funds and overseeing the affairs of community sports leagues in the N.W.T. Wishful comparisons with the professional National Hockey League are common by players and fans alike. Some players would like to see full body contact instituted in the territorial league and seek other changes to the current rules in order to make the games more competitive. Many of them claim that such changes would make the games more interesting for the "fans." Holman has over the past few years sent a team to the Kitikmeot regional tournament, a tournament that includes teams from the much larger communities of Cambridge Bay and Coppermine, and has won the gold medal the past two years. The seriousness with which some boys and young men take hockey is evident in a comment one 10-year-old boy made to his teacher at school. After Holman won the gold medal for 1993, the boy said the Holman Flyers (Flyers is the name chosen for the league's regional team) could probably beat the San Jose Sharks (a professional National Hockey League team) because Holman was the best in the Kitikmeot region and San Jose was the worst in the NHL!

The hockey season begins in the first week of November when the arena ice is ready and continues through April 15 with the end of the playoffs. During the 1992-1993 season, 51 players (48 Inuit and 3 Whites) between the ages of 14 and 35 participated. Only 16 men between 20 and 35 did not participate at all in the league. There are four teams in the league and three make the playoffs—players state that if all four teams made the playoffs then players wouldn't try hard during the games and the fans would get bored. The team in first place after the 42 game season earns a bye from the first round of the playoffs and awaits the winner of a three game series between the second and third place teams. Individual statistics and team standings are posted every two weeks so players can compare themselves in terms of scoring and penalties. Goalkeepers can also see how well they stack up against their counterparts. At the end of the season a banquet is held for the players and their spouses, during which individual awards are distributed for the leading scorer, most valuable player, best defensemen, and so on. After a nice dinner and several speeches, a beer dance is held for the entire community. This banquet is one of the few events, including weddings and funerals, for which young men dress in their finest attire. There is no doubt that hockey is serious business for all who participate and many who come to watch.

**Modernization and Community Integration**

It was early in the morning—past midnight—and Charlie, William, James, and I (PC) were sitting in the boiler room, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer which Charlie brought back from Yellowknife. During the evening the subject of politics surfaced on several occasions. Charlie and William presented their ideas on where Holman should go after the Nunavut treaty was ratified. Eventually, the subject of hunting surfaced and especially the effects of the collapse of the fur market. William started to say he was thinking of setting traps this year, but James interrupted and complained. “Greenpeace really ruined our native way of life, man.

They really ruined our traditional way, the way we used to be. It's our way of life and how we used to be. OK, I'm out of the talk now. I'll be quiet. I don't hunt. I don't do anything.” (Based on Collings' field notes, Holman, September 26, 1992)

As hockey has changed since its introduction to Holman, so has the economy, material technology, political organization, and population of the community. Prior to the introduction of television in the fall of 1980, social visiting was the primary means of entertainment in the community, which at the time had a population of barely 270. In the evenings people often made a walking circuit about town to visit friends and relatives who lived in other households. This was the primary means of passing the dark winter months and allowed for a great deal of social interaction, the exchange of news and gossip, and simple entertainment. In today's climate where every household has at least one television (sometimes two or three), visiting is no longer the common means of entertainment as individuals may seek pleasure from watching favorite television programs in the comfort of home without the hassle of braving the cold and often windy winter nights. Even when visiting does occur, social contact is relatively limited, save during commercials, as everyone is focused on the television. Furthermore, as television has isolated certain segments of the community from one another, the size of Holman has increased markedly, doubling in the past twenty years. Coupled with the population increase is an improvement in government subsidized public housing and loan programs which aid Inuit in purchasing their own homes. Whereas twenty years ago one small dwelling might have housed three generations, today it is common for single young men and women to have their own apartments in one of the many new apartment units in town. As the number of dwellings has increased, so has the physical size of the town, to the point where a stroll around the community may take upwards of forty minutes. Not only does this discourage visiting, but the sheer number of households in town makes it virtually impossible for even the most determined of residents to maintain personal ties with many members of the community. Given these phenomena, it is easy to understand why hockey is looked upon by many members of the community as being a time when one has an opportunity to interact in a public setting with other members of the community who would otherwise remain unseen.

Holman has likewise experienced some fundamental changes in its economy over the past few years. Ten to fifteen years ago, many households were still heavily dependent on the fur trade and seasonal wage employment for support during the year. During the period from 1960 to 1975, most Inuit families in Holman were able to make a comfortable living from a combination of seal hunting, fox trapping, and skin crafts manufacture (Smith and Wright 1989:3). Many hunters spent the spring and summer months hunting seals and used those profits for trapping foxes in the winter months. Trapping was not nearly as lucrative as sealing, but it was something to do during the winter months and also allowed for adult males to spend much of their time out of town running the trap line and hunting caribou. In this sense, people stayed busy for much of the year, and boys who came of age during this time recall it fondly. The collapse of the sealskin market at the end of the decade brought tremendous changes to Holman and other Inuit communities across the Arctic (Wenzel 1987, 1991). Hunters
Once able to support themselves completely by hunting and trapping were suddenly unable to do so. While older hunters today can maintain economic independence by carving and part-time employment coupled with an age pension, younger Inuit are often forced to look for other means to support their families. The growth of Holman as a community has created more jobs, but the opportunities for employment have not grown at the same rate as the population. Consequently, not only are many young Inuit unable to find adequate employment but they are incapable of supporting themselves by trapping due to inadequate skills and unpromising economic returns. It is therefore not surprising that reliance on social assistance has become an acceptable economic strategy (Condon 1988, 1990).

It is within the context of social, economic, and technological change that hockey and other recreational activities have developed. The increased focus on recreation has developed slowly over time, and the hunting/fishing/trapping orientation has clearly become less visible as a full-time occupational strategy for older teenagers and young adults. In some respects, it is tempting to view recreation as filling a void created by the demise of hunting, trapping, and fishing. When one of us (RC) first conducted research in Holman in the late 1970s, very few recreational activities were available for young people. Christmas and Easter were the only times of year in which the community gathered together to play games and sports. At that time, young people had to find other ways to entertain themselves, which they often did through a variety of card games, board games, and constant social visitation. “So boring in town — nothing to do,” was the frequent refrain of most Inuit teenagers and children. Over time, however, more and more recreational activities have been added to the community.

The Hamlet government currently supports a recreation committee that is responsible for developing and administering social programs for young people and for organizing more traditional celebrations such as the annual Christmas games and the Kingilik Jamboree. This committee believes that recreation in Holman is a positive activity that not only allows people to come together as a community but also keeps young people involved in sports and so, presumably, out of trouble. The recreation committee sees its role as unifying the community and promoting community solidarity. This is most obvious from its meeting announcements. Periodically, the recreation committee invites residents of Holman to participate in meetings, and meeting notices are posted in public places about town with the headline, “Recreation is Bringing the Community Together.” These notices always include a drawing of happy Inuit, young and old, socializing, smiling, and enjoying themselves immensely. Recreation is perceived by many as the primary means of bringing the community together, suggesting that the traditional strategies for community integration no longer apply.

Ritual Performance and Violent Expression

Prior to the game, each team meets in a separate locker room at the arena to dress into their hockey equipment. It is an important game tonight, and the players are excited and nervous at the same time. One player sits on the bench, naked to the waist, head down in his hands. He is nearly hyperventilating. Another player sits quietly, a scowl on his face, slowly tapping his stick. One player sees this and tries to make a joke to lighten the mood. No one laughs. When the game begins, two players on the same team begin yelling at each other, almost coming to blows before a third player separates them (based on Collings’ field notes, April 8, 1993).

Players are very serious about their hockey games and each one follows his own pre-game rituals. These may involve tapping, eating certain foods, listening to special music, dressing in a certain way, or even smoking marijuana prior to the game. Each ritual or set of rituals is performed on the premise that it enhances one’s abilities during the game. Since on any given night a sizable portion of the community will be watching, hockey is an elaborate performance of importance both to the players and to those who come to witness it. Indeed, it is the presence of so many people that gives the game much of its meaning (Kapferer 1984:202-203). In a community where there are limited opportunities for young males to attain high status (either in the old status hierarchy of hunting/fishing/trapping or the new status hierarchy of high paying employment), playing hockey well and being on a winning team contribute much to a young man’s sense of identity and self-worth. As in other cultural rituals, the young men performing on the ice are not necessarily playing themselves, but are enacting who they would like to be (Turner 1984:20-21; Grimes 1982:150). More than a few Holman hockey players (perhaps southern Canadians, too) skate down the ice with the puck and fancy themselves a Wayne Gretzky or Mario Lemieux. Many players wear the number and even the name of a favorite professional player. By entering a liminal state, young men are able to express themselves in ways that would normally be taboo according to the standards of Inuit society. Verbal abuse, physical confrontation, and poor sportsmanlike conduct not only provide a release mechanism for many frustrated young people, but such behavior occurs in an acceptable social context — as ritual performance observed and appreciated by spectators. This dual aspect of performance may indeed be a salient feature of sporting behavior for young males throughout the world.

Those who are actively involved in hockey, either as spectators or players, often state that hockey is “just like Christmas,” in the sense that it brings people together and allows for social interaction in a community where past forms of social interaction and inter-household visitation have become undermined. While this is a sincerely held belief on the part of many people, especially younger members of the community, this is certainly not a unanimously held belief. While hockey creates a temporary feeling of joviality and festivity, it can also create a number of breaches in the social order every night there is a game. Condon (1992) has outlined changes in conflict management among Inuit over the past 40 years and notes that traditional means of resolving conflict, most specifically forgiveness and conflict avoidance, have broken down. The past 10-15 years have seen an increase in social conflict as alcohol abuse, theft, assault, and population growth have slowly undermined community cohesion. Attitude shifts on the part of young people are also implicated to the extent that conflict avoidance is no longer highly valued. The hockey game is increasingly a place where conflicts erupt but are not always effectively redressed. Given that the current size of the community has created problems in maintaining social ties among households and individuals, there is a greater opportunities for interpersonal conflict:
While players spend their time during the game trying to score, they also vent their anger and aggression at other players. Many players spend a good deal of their time on the ice hounding an opposing player, trying to “get him off his game” by jabbing, poking, prodding, pushing, tripping, and even slashing the player so that he will become upset and therefore become unfocused on playing hockey. But the aggression and violence are not limited to the players. Individual fans are frequently heard above the din, swearing at the referees, other players, and even other fans. It is not uncommon for two women to avoid speaking to each other for weeks, because one woman’s spouse tripped the other woman’s horse during a game.

Hockey is a game with a tremendous grip on the Canadian psyche, and regardless of where one is in Canada, hockey will eventually turn up as a suitable topic of conversation. Indeed, many southern Canadians who come to places like Holman express the belief that sport is a universal pursuit that brings people together in friendly managed competition. At the 1993 Holman Hockey League banquet, the president of the hockey association of Cambridge Bay, a nearby Copper Inuit community, expressed the notion that hockey is a universal language, easily spoken by all involved, regardless of race or culture. This attitude is frequently expressed by white southerners who work in the Arctic, and the main objective of many of these recreationally minded people is to encourage people to play sports and to teach them the proper, Canadian way of doing so.

Like many other Inuit communities in the Canadian Arctic, there is a small but significant Euro-Canadian population which is resident year-round. Holman currently has a number of permanent residents who have married into the community or otherwise reside continuously in Holman. There is also a significant transient population of nurses, teachers, RCMP officers, and Co-op managers. Some of these southerners enjoy playing hockey and so join the hockey league as a way of getting exercise, interacting with the community, and competing on the ice. However, many non-Inuit who play hockey in Holman invariably complain about the style of play. They frequently complain that Holman Inuit do not have well-developed skills and do not use teamwork to achieve what the Southerners assume to be the universal goal of hockey: putting the puck in the net. The game is often violent in a manner unfamiliar to these outsiders. Other organized sports are played in a similar manner, where an individualistic style of play and a noticeable lack of teamwork are evident. A former recreation coordinator once complained that the problem with the way Inuit play hockey was that they “weren’t real men.” They relied on hitting people from behind and skating away (what Holman players call “bothering”) instead of dropping the gloves and fighting it out on the ice. According to Inuit informants, this same recreation coordinator was famous for chasing those players he perceived were taking cheap shots at him from behind.

Violence in the hockey arena is a special issue for many Euro-Canadians, especially those who were taught to behave in the same manner as the above-mentioned recreation coordinator: chasing opponents around the ice in order to fight with them in a “manly” fashion. Efforts have been made by the Holman Recreation Committee to curtail violence in hockey. What is surprising, however, is that there are very few fights in which the players drop their gloves and seek to pulverize each other with their fists in a face to face encounter. A typical violent interaction involves one player skating up behind the other and lashing at him with a stick or gloved fist and then skating away. This infuriates all Euro-Canadians witnessing or experiencing the violent action, but it makes perfect sense in light of traditional Inuit methods of violent expression, which rarely involved face to face confrontation. To stretch an analogy, Balikci (1970:179-182) explains that the typical way of committing murder among the Netsilik was by shooting or stabbing from behind — a manner that was designed to avoid face-to-face combat. Pierce et al. (1982:27) have argued that all sports model the ways in which a culture regulates violence, but it is evident from our observations that a society also determines the specific ways in which violence is expressed, especially in expressive arenas such as sports.

Stress and Coping: Games as Therapy

Games are much too important a social-psychological phenomenon to leave to just one academic discipline. It is for this reason that an extensive literature exists in the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology, sports medicine, and the newly emerging field of leisure studies. The reason for such multidisciplinary interest is that the interaction between humans and the games they play is too complex to suggest only one major function or one proximate cause of those games. Games have been variously explained as social integrating rituals (Turner 1984:19-20; Grimes 1982:147), as societal models which aid in the socialization process, specifically role learning (Csikszentmihalyi 1981; Kelly 1990), as therapeutic devices by which individuals can express and ultimately resolve conflicts engendered by early learning experiences (Sutton-Smith and Roberts 1964), and as activities which facilitate coping with life stresses (Coleman and Isao-Ahola 1993). While all these interpretations may apply to the playing of hockey and other games in Holman, we believe that the most relevant are those which concentrate upon the manner in which games can assist young Inuit in developing appropriate coping strategies in the face of profound changes occurring around them — changes that are often beyond their control and sometimes beyond their understanding.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, John M. Roberts, Brian Sutton-Smith, and their colleagues published a series of cross-cultural papers examining the relationship between games and socialization strategies. The conflict-enculturation model suggested that games provide a buffered environment in which social learning can take place and the psychological conflicts inherent in the socialization process can be partly assuaged. Thus, not only do games model culture and encourage the acquisition of culturally valued skills and attitudes, but they provide a therapeutic “couch” upon which individuals can
resolve the uncertainties and conflicts that are a direct result of socialization pressures.

A more recent research tradition in the field of leisure studies offers a useful complement to the conflict-enculturation model. Since the early 1980s, a large number of papers have addressed the beneficial consequences that leisure activities can have for psychological well-being and overall health (Caldwell and Smith 1988; Chalip et al. 1992; Iso-Ahola 1988; Kleiber 1985). A number of mechanisms are proposed including the promotion of positive moods (Hull 1990), the overcoming of loneliness (Caldwell and Smith 1988), and the provision of coping strategies for dealing with specific life stresses (Weissinger and Iso-Ahola 1984). More to the point, Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) state that leisure activities benefit physical and mental health in two ways: through leisure-based social support and through leisure-generated self-determination (or control). Both factors ultimately contribute to an individuals' sense of self-esteem, and both are relevant to hockey playing in the community of Holman.

In adapting to the local cultural context, hockey in Holman involves much more than just fun, exercise, and friendly (or unfriendly) competition. We do not believe that young people's involvement in hockey can be understood solely by what is happening on the ice. In this rapidly changing society, social roles and expectations have been turned upside down. Inuit teenagers and young adults, especially males, are experiencing great difficulty adjusting to the new social, economic, and political order. The standards used in the past to determine social maturity no longer apply, and young people are struggling to gain a sense of control over their own lives. Young people attend school and learn about lucrative employment opportunities that are available only to those willing to leave the community either for training or subsequent employment. They watch television and peruse glamour magazines that show the rich and the famous parading about with material luxuries that few of them will ever be able to buy. In their own homes and those of their friends and relatives, they see alcohol and drug abuse ripping families apart. Even those young people who have obtained specialized vocational training often return to Holman only to be unemployed or underemployed. The frustration experienced by many of these young people accounts for unusually high rates of suicide, spousal assault, theft, and alcohol and drug abuse. Given the honored position which hockey holds in Holman, there can be no doubt that this activity provides much more than just fun and games. Control, along with status, achievement, and self-esteem are all factors that give Holman hockey much of its appeal.

Hockey and other organized sports were introduced to Holman at a time when land-oriented economic pursuits were still viable but becoming increasingly marginalized due to incessant attacks by animal rights activists. With the collapse of trapping and sealing as viable, self-sustaining economic activities, many young Inuit males were deprived of an economic activity that had not only sustained the parental generation but also defined in part what Inuit culture was all about. Over time, fewer and fewer young people learned traditional hunting and survival skills. Whereas many Inuit over the age of thirty-five were born on the land and grew up outside of town, younger Inuit who entered their teenage years after the trapping and sealing economy collapsed where not taught all of the necessary land skills required to be successful hunters and trappers. Many of these teenagers are now in their mid-twenties, and there is simply no economic incentive for them to learn the traditional skills of their parents and grandparents. Likewise, employment opportunities in town are limited, so many young men are only able to find low-paying, part-time employment if they are able to find work at all. Many choose to remain unemployed, accepting social assistance and playing sports to pass the time. Among the 48 players in the 1992-1993 Holman Hockey League only 35% were employed full-time, 4% worked 20-30 hours per week, 15% worked fewer than 20 hours per week, 19% labored in seasonal or casual activities, 21% were unemployed, and 6% were attending school.

Following the conflict-enculturation model of games proposed by John M. Roberts, Brian Sutton-Smith, and associates (Roberts et al. 1963; Sutton-Smith and Roberts 1964, 1971), young Inuit should play hockey because they experience conflict over achievement during childhood which carries into adolescence and, in some cases, even into young adulthood. This conflict is undoubtedly exacerbated by changing economic conditions that have made it more difficult for young Inuit to attain social and economic maturity, whether such maturity is defined by traditional Inuit standards (being a good hunter) or by recently introduced southern standards (having a good job). Young Inuit turn to games that assuage this conflict and provide a place for them to practice their physical skills at the same time. Like many other former hunting and gathering societies, Inuit society has always socialized for achievement and self-reliance (see Barry et al. 1967), and the game of hockey as it is played in Holman models these values quite well. If achievement and self-reliance cannot be expressed in the conduct of everyday life, then it can be expressed on the ice while competing with one's peers. Status and control, so elusive to these young people in real life, become attainable goals when modeled in the context of play. Thus, games like hockey are psychologically rewarding as well as physically rewarding. A very similar process has been observed by O'Neil (1983:213) in another Canadian Inuit community:

...teenagers derive considerable confidence and self-esteem from their sporting abilities. Young Inuit are acutely aware of the gap separating them from Whites in many other areas of modern life (i.e., work and education skills), but gain much satisfaction from the knowledge that in the area of basketball and volleyball, they compete on the same level as their white counterparts.

The conflict which young people experience is not completely resolved, however. In spite of decreasing participation in traditional subsistence activities, these activities are still highly valued, even by young people who rarely participate in them ("it's part of our identity" as one young non-hunter pointed out). Young people continue to express, albeit mutedly, admiration for individuals who are active hunters and trappers. One gets a sense that their feelings are "hunting is an important activity, but I could never do anything like that," so they turn to an activity that they can do. Indeed, this conflict may be further exacerbated by the opinion of many elders that hockey is a worthless activity:

William and George were visiting when I arrived at the house, and I had a chance to ask William about his wound. William said he caught Sam's slap shot right on the collar bone, and then his arm went numb. "I thought
It is apparent from Peter's story that the injury he received was not necessarily a completely negative experience for him, even though it meant that his arm was useless for several weeks afterward. A child who has been injured in such a fashion will invariably find himself receiving more attention and sympathy, at least temporarily, from adults and other children. In addition, an injury which is accompanied by a clear marker that a great deal of pain has been withstood (crutches, cast, sling, bandages, etc.) might even enhance the child's status in the eyes of his or her peers.

Hockey players deny that an injury increases the status of the player who is injured, but we are convinced from observing players that many minor injuries are perceived by some as enhancing a player's status among his peers and among the spectators who are watching the performance. Injuries draw attention to the player, as seen in the opening story of Johnny and his knee injury. Johnny was injured at the end of the game, after the outcome had been determined. Whether or not Johnny was really injured and to what degree his injury affected his abilities on and off the ice is unimportant. Johnny received the special treatment, even if this treatment was limited to questions about his knee. Likewise, an injury enhances a player's status because it becomes an excuse for failure. If Johnny had been injured and his team had lost, Johnny's inability to play would have been offered as an excuse for their loss during the game. Indeed, this is a frequent statement made by members of a losing team.

Injuries also enhance the sense of achievement for the injured player. Prior to every game the dressing rooms are filled with players equipping themselves with braces, bands, and pads which players state are necessary to support their ailing body parts. Likewise, it is not uncommon for a player to leave a game complaining of an injury of some sort, only to return later to the same game after tightening a shoelace or applying a brace.

In spring 1993, we conducted an exploratory survey on accidents and injuries with our subsistence sample of 19 young male householders. As described above, these individuals were already part of a 12-month subsistence hunting study which required bi-weekly interviews on hunting, fishing, food sharing, and other economic activities. Fourteen of these informants were also active hockey players and participated in the 1992-1993 hockey season. Since the injuries interview was an exploratory effort, and one that was primarily interested in hunting/fishing injuries, we did not interview any younger individuals. Each interview lasted 15-30 minutes, during which open-ended questions were asked about past injuries, perceptions of the severity of past injuries, degree of recklessness while engaged in different activities, perceived status associated with certain injuries, etc.

The mean age of our respondents was 29.7 with a range from 23 to 34. Five of those responding indicated that they rarely participated in any organized sports activities while the remaining 14 indicated that they were active in at least one sport. When asked to recall the number of injuries in each of 4 categories (drinking, hunting, working, or playing sports), the number of reported injuries for sports was higher than any of the other categories. This suggests either that sports related injuries are more memorable on the part of informants or that they are indeed much more common. Either explanation, however, is significant.

When we asked our informants about the recklessness of their behavior while engaged in different related activities, we discovered little difference between the categories with one notable exception: on the whole, most informants reported that they were much more careful while boating on the ocean. One of these informants related a dramatic incident in which many informants confessed to being afraid of boats and the water. Today, he reports that this is one activity that he takes very seriously. Most of our informants, regardless of age, felt the same.

When asked about the status of having a sports related injury (one that might require a brace or crutches), 14 informants said that there was no status associated with such an injury. Four informants admitted that there might be a little status associated with such injuries but not a significant amount. When asked about hunting and fishing related injuries, eleven informants said that no status was associated with such injuries while six said that there was some status and two said that there was a high amount of status associated with them. These exploratory findings suggest that, in spite of the high level of sports involvement of most young males in Holman, many perceive hunting as more prestige-generating, even though they do not engage in such activities themselves. In a separate interview procedure, we asked these same informants to rate the perceived importance of 23 different activities regularly engaged in by young adults. This list included sports as well as hunting, fishing, and equipment maintenance activities. The results show that the most highly valued activities are those related to subsistence and equipment maintenance. Sports activities received lower ratings, although hockey was the most highly rated of all sports.
Old values die hard. What is problematic is that the behavior of many young people does not parallel the values espoused; they have to work harder, at least on the behavioral level, to convince themselves that hockey and other sports are as important as hunting. This accounts for the melodramatic self-promotion that invariably takes place each year at the annual hockey awards banquet. Few events in Holman attain a similar level of self-importance.

Although we did not have the time and resources to conduct this survey with a larger sample of older children and adolescents, we would expect different results given the sports addiction of many of these younger people. It is important, however, to point out that even the nurse admitted that she was amazed at the relative ease with which young people run to the health center for even the most minor injuries and often request bandages, crutches, and braces to parade before their classmates (Audrey Woodget, 1993, personal communication).

Last night we were playing basketball at the gym; it was a regular league game and the first and second place teams were squaring off. The playoffs start next week, and so the winner was likely to finish in first place and have an easier game before the finals. Jimmy Appatok was guarding me during the game, which is something that he typically enjoys doing, even though I (PC) am at least 7 inches taller than he is. Halfway through the game, however, Jimmy suddenly stopped running and began to limp on the court. He said he sprained his ankle and he hobbled to the sidelines to sit down. He rested for a few minutes then replaced his sneakers and came back into the game when one of his teammates wanted a rest. He returned to the court limping, but within a few moments he was running normally again. After the game, a number of players asked Jimmy how his ankle was. He said it was sore, but it was okay, and he walked home with a decided limp. (based on Collings' field notes, Holman, October 13, 1992).

Playing with an injury is important because it enhances one's sense of achievement within the context of the game. Should a player receive an injury while participating in the game, he has one more obstacle to overcome in order to win. Being able to win in spite of an injury implies not only that the player was able to overcome the pain involved to continue playing but that he was skilled enough to be able to win even though his abilities were somewhat lessened. This means that he must be a better player than the other players who were not injured but lost the game anyway. Likewise, the injury supplies a ready excuse for losing. If a player is on a losing team, it is easy to use the injury as an excuse for losing. Therefore, injuries for players are an important aspect of playing games because they provide a further control of the game situation, either as "face-saving" ego insurance or status-enhancing self-aggrandizement. Just as the game provides an environment protected from normal social life in which participants can compete with reduced consequences of losing, injuries provide a strategy within the game that allows for the consequences of losing to be reduced even further or the consequences of winning greatly enhanced. Our prediction is that those individuals who are most frequently injured or who complain about their injuries in public settings the most should be those players who are experiencing the greatest conflict over their own position within the community. These players should therefore be the ones who are the most dedicated to playing hockey and exhibiting behavior that may be properly called addiction to the game. We do not have definitive proof that this is the case, but the data collected to date are certainly suggestive of such processes:

During last year’s playoffs I had a visit with a player who is frequently injured: “I’ve sprained my ankle so many times it is like a scratch because I do it so much. The nurses used to get sick of me going there for sprains.” As we were sitting on the sofa watching television he told me that he wouldn’t mind losing the hockey game that night, even though a victory would mean his team would win the hockey league trophy. He explained himself, saying that if his team won, then the season would be over and there would be no more hockey. He wasn’t ready for the hockey season to be over yet, so he thought his team should lose the game. Sure enough, his team did lose the game that evening, but they won the next game and thus won the playoffs. Several nights later, I visited this same player, and he said that he was sorry the playoffs were over now. He paused and added that it didn’t make sense for the season to be over yet because the ice in the arena was still good, so they should schedule some more games so people can play more hockey. He sighed and flipped the channel on the television and sat back down onto the sofa to watch the beginning of an NHL playoff game. (based on Collings’ field notes, 1993).

Summary and Conclusion

Hockey provides a microcosmic stage for the analysis of social change in the Inuit community of Holman. Sixteen years ago, when the second author first conducted research in Holman, hockey and other organized sports were virtually non-existent. The only games played were a handful of traditional Inuit games and a few introduced relay races enacted during holiday celebrations such as Easter and Christmas. Most of these games were played for fun, and any competition that arose between individuals was defused by laughter and joking on the part of participants and onlookers. Over the past 16 years, there has been such a dramatic expansion of recreational activities and facilities that the newly arrived southern visitor is hard pressed to figure out why the government has pumped so much money into an apparently non-economic domain.

If sports have become so important to the lives of young Inuit and the perceived panacea to many social problems, it is because these activities not only satisfy certain basic needs for entertainment but provide an essential therapeutic stage for attaining social status and self-esteem. In this respect, Inuit youth are probably not much different than adolescents anywhere. Game playing and other leisure activities provide buffered environments wherein young people can learn social roles and exercise a degree of control and self-determination in a circumscribed environment. Fragile, developing egos require such buffered environments to learn life’s essential skills, attitudes, and confidence before venturing forth into a world that is much less forgiving of failure. Such control and self-determination are normally beyond the grasp of young people who are forced to delay the attainment of adult social status for many years beyond puberty. As society becomes more complicated (requiring a greater range of models for young people to learn complicated social roles), social maturation becomes delayed as well (requiring a longer period of involvement to deal with the necessary frustrations of prolonged...
adolescence). Indeed, games which model society and thus provide an important learning and therapeutic environment are most important in those societies with delayed social maturation.

Over the past 20-30 years, social maturation in the Arctic has been profoundly influenced by a number of factors: compulsory schooling, subsidized housing, population growth, economic security, and improved medical care. As Condon (1990) has outlined, these social, economic, and political changes have contributed to a prolongation of adolescence. While in the past young Inuit were required to make a relatively rapid transition from childhood to adulthood, this is no longer the case. Inuit youth now spend a very long period of time in a liminal life stage during which many are neither gaining the necessary education to secure a good, high-paying job nor learning essential hunting and fishing skills from their parents and grandparents.

American and southern Canadian youth also experience a delay in the attainment of adult status. A profound difference, however, is that occupational goals and aspirations are usually within the grasp of many southern youth. This is not necessarily the case for young Inuit who must contend with a northern world of limited employment opportunities. Furthermore, cultural values regarding the importance of hunting, fishing, and trapping persist even as young people are increasingly unable and in some cases unwilling to engage in those pursuits which, for a previous generation, help define the concept of adult.

Hockey is so popular and has reached such heights of addiction because it provides so much to a young Inuk's sense of identity. Young people are well aware of what distinguishes Inuit from non-Inuit. Typical responses elicited in informal interview situations have included: “Inuit love the land and want to protect it,” “Inuit hunt and fish and eat land food,” “Inuit know how to travel on the land in cold weather,” etc. We have yet to encounter anyone who has told us that “Inuit play hockey,” but quite a number of our informants have insisted that “Inuit skate faster than non-Inuit.” This suggests an alternate mechanism by which some young people can define themselves as Inuit. Not only do Inuit hunt and fish (albeit some do so on a very irregular basis), they skate faster and shoot harder than the non-Inuit who play against them.

This redefinition of what constitutes good hockey represents a standard that young people themselves have constructed rather than a standard imposed upon them by others. By these other standards, whether it be that of the parental generation or that of southern society as learned in schools and seen on TV, most young Inuit often do not fare very well. To put it metaphorically, young Inuit have found the voice by which they desire to be accepted as Inuit from childhood to adulthood, this is no longer the case. Inuit youth now spend a very long period of time in a liminal life stage during which many are neither gaining the necessary education to secure a good, high-paying job nor learning essential hunting and fishing skills from their parents and grandparents.

Gelfand and Hartmann (1976) believe that children’s involvement in competitive sports may produce a number of detrimental effects ranging from cognitive deficits to interpersonal deficiencies. In our own society, there appears to be an increasing tendency for young people to idolize narcissistic, verbally offensive, and physically aggressive professional athletes who have negotiated record breaking contracts. Fans will tolerate any level of outrageous conduct as long as the player in question excels on the court or field. In a cross-cultural study of inculcated traits and game types, Roberts and Barry (1976:10) conclude that games are clearly associated with a culture’s emphasis upon certain character traits, but that these traits may not be attractive to everyone: “if games build character, that character may be less than ideal.”

We do not dispute the notion that games can be useful in a positive sense. Indeed, much of this article has concentrated upon the positive aspects of young Inuit game involvement. Games certainly help build character, teach cooperation, assuage psychological conflict, and carry out a number of other positive functions. For some people, however, games can teach violence, verbal aggression, subterfuge, cheating, poor sportsmanship, and other undesirable traits. To suggest that the learning experience is the same for all participants is like suggesting that all members of a small-scale society must be the same due to similar socialization pressures. Young people take away different lessons from similar sporting situations because they bring with them different expectations, different abilities, and varying levels of self-esteem.

What is healthy involvement for one person may not be healthy for another. Young people who play primarily for fun and exercise certainly come to the game with different
expectations than those players who participate because their entire sense of self-esteem depends upon how well they play the game and whether or not they are on the winning team.

If hockey appears to contribute to community conflict, it is not only due to the game, but because community integration has already been profoundly influenced by population increase, decreased social visitation, and growing economic/material disparity between families. Hockey is only one venue within which the frustrations and uncertainties of many young people are expressed and, in some cases, amplified (another venue, of course, is alcohol consumption). It may be justifiable to blame hockey for a great deal of the community’s woes, but assuming that hockey and other sports and recreation programs are responsible for all of Holman’s social problems is just as naive as thinking that an increase in recreation spending will be the long-sought panacea for these problems.

NOTE

1 On a scale from 0 (low) to 5 (high) the perceived importance of 23 activities was: spring fishing = 4.7, spring hunting = 4.6, summer fishing = 4.3, summer hunting = 4.3, working ski-doo = 4.3, fall fishing = 4.2, fall hunting = 4.2, winter hunting = 4.0, winter camping = 3.9, making/repairing sleds = 3.9, working on Hondas = 3.7, driving ski-doo = 3.4, hockey = 3.1, driving on Hondas = 2.8, watching TV = 2.8, golf = 2.7, carving/drawing = 2.6, baseball = 2.6, partying = 2.4, volleyball = 2.2, smoking up = 2.2, basketball = 2.1, and Nintendo = 1.6.

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