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ABSTRACT

Abuses directed towards American Indians have resulted in positive, negative, and undetermined identities. This study focused on some of the problems faced by adolescent Native American Indians, as seen in a 100-year-old Indian Boarding School in western Oklahoma. It was contended, after working with some 400 students in the western plains area, that, though Native American Indians differed markedly from other minority groups and among themselves, adolescence has presented them with special problems which can be related to other minority groups. Another problem identified in the report was the unit of interaction between Native Americans and persons of European extraction--commonly referred to as the "Indian Problem," this problem is actually a problem referring to the interface between the 2 peoples. Other problems discussed were the disassimilation of the Indian, his confused state and world views, and the background of the Indian child. It was concluded that the sytmatology of Plains Indian adolescents of western Oklahoma had its roots in the reciprocal complementarity of inner conflict, social organization, ideological movements, and the assumptions of the educational systems to which they have been exposed. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original copy.]
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The Indian Adolescent: Psychosocial Tasks of the
Plains Indian of Western Oklahoma

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Abstract

The Indian Adolescent

James R. Allen, M.D.

The poor educational achievement of most Indian students---at least as measured by members of the dominant white culture---is traced to roots in the reciprocal complementarity between the basic assumptions and expectations of the educational system, inner conflict and social and ideological change. Special attention is drawn to the paradoxical outcomes that can be anticipated from our current educational approaches. Although the authors' hypotheses are drawn from work with some 400 students in the western plains area, his conclusions concerning the interaction of identity, self-esteem, and acculturation with or without assimilation may well apply to students of other minority groups.

The Indian Adolescent: Psychosocial Tasks of the
Plains Indian of Western Oklahoma

James R. Allen, M.D.

Whether seen as an "epoch" or as a "disease", adolescence is a period of human growth when each of us comes to some new terms with himself and with society. It is a period of reworking old psychosocial tasks and of the elaboration of a new sense of identity. Studies of the life-histories of normal American adolescents in the mid-twentieth century have suggested that at this particular cross-roads of history and individual life-history, adaptational capacity is much higher than theories based on clinical data had led us to suspect, and that we need a broader picture of adolescent development than that currently in vogue. The work of researchers such as Offer (22), King (16), Katz (15), Masterson (19), Heath (11) and Grinker (10) suggests that at least certain groups of healthy white adolescents individualize, consolidate a sense of competence in themselves and their abilities, make important decisions concerning their future, and begin to free themselves of their earlier attachments to their parental figures without marked emotional swings, withdrawal, low self-esteem or poor impulse control.

In this paper, the author wishes to draw attention to some of the special problems of adolescence for a group of Native American Indians seen in a 100-year old Indian Boarding School in western Oklahoma. In the recent flurry of interest in minority groups, little attention has been devoted to Native Americans. The conference on Economic Progress Report, Poverty and Deprivation in the United States, for

Page Two

example, wholly ignored Indians, as did Harrington's discovery of The Other America, whose only Indian poor lived in Asia. The "New Indians" however, can point to unemployment of 40-80%, annual incomes of \$50 to \$1200 a year and a short life-expectancy (16). These peoples differ markedly from other minority groups and among themselves Adolescence presents them with special problems; yet there seems to be a number of processes common to them and to other minority groups.

THE PROBLEM OF THE "INDIAN PROBLEM"

When peoples of differing cultures come into contact with one another, attention is usually focused on only one of them. Thus, for whites the relationship between Native Americans and persons of European extraction is usually referred to as an "Indian Problem". However, the unit of interaction is not a single people but the interface between the two (14).

It might be said that the stereotypical Plains Indian arose as a result of contact with the white man, who introduced horses, guns, and probably scalping. He was also destroyed by the white man, for it was among the Plains Indians that the policy of liquidation of Indian society and of the Indian personality was probably carried to the farthest extremes. Military assaults, the exploitation of tribal rivalries, the breaking of treaties, the slaughter of the buffalo as a war measure, religious persecution, forced land allotments and the confinement of children in boarding schools which forbade the use of native languages--these were the outcomes of the attitude articulated by General Frances Walker, who as Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1871 stated: "When dealing with savage men, as with savage beasts, no question of national honor can arise " (5).

Once part of the War Department, the Indian Boarding Schools are now operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Drop-out rates of up to sixty-percent, educational achievement well below national average, high but generally undocumented incidences of glue-sniffing, alcoholism and suicidal attempts are its heritage. Eligibility for

Page Three

admission today is dependent on a number of factors: impoverishment of parents, geographic isolation, as an alternative to penal detention, and as an alternative for psychiatric hospitalization in institutions which do not exist. Students have been dragged through a college-preparatory course despite an average of two years academic retardation and the fact that most graduates go on to blue-collar jobs (2, 8,29).

The observations and hypotheses drawn from work with these 400 adolescents should be interpreted as observation and hypotheses drawn from work with particular students at one particular point in time and space. It may not be fully relevant to the lives of other Native North Americans.

IDENTITIES: POSITIVE, NEGATIVE AND UNDETERMINED

While blacks were deprived of their labor and their bodies and kept out of white society, Indians were deprived of their land and were forcibly acculturated. Indian children were snatched up into federal boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak their native languages and the tribes were turned over to missionaries. In a land of religious freedom they had none until 1933, and the indigenous religions were forcibly repressed. Even when a black was counted as half a man for census purposes, Indians were not considered as human beings. This elevation came when it was decided that, for legal purposes, one had to be a human being to sell land. Old-timers in western Oklahoma can remember when shooting Cheyenne or Arapaho was placed in the same category as shooting quail.

If an Indian youth today is to identify himself as an "Indian", he is immediately in difficulty, for there is no one single definition of Indian. For some purposes one may be an Indian, but not for others. Both individual students and tribal groups differ in education, acculturation, and in degree of blood. Thus, to lump these people all together because they are "Indians" is comparable to placing Chinese, Japanese, Asian Indians and Turks together because they all are "Asians".

It has been only a little more than half a century since the Indian Territory

Page Four

west of Arkansas became a state. As if in return for their land, the state was named Oklahoma, "The Land of the Red Men." Today, there are more than forty separate tribes but no reservations within its boundaries. In eastern Oklahoma are the Five Civilized Tribes--Cherokees, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole called "civilized" because they most resembled white society (the Cherokee kept slaves, had public schools, a press, and ambassadors at the Court of St. James)-except that they kept faith, and broke no treaties. The Caddo-Wichita-Delaware and the Kiowa-Apache-Comanche-Kiowa, and Cheyenne-Arapaho, stereotypical Plains Indians of the western movie live in western Oklahoma. These groups see themselves as sufficiently different that adoption-workers report that members of the Five Civilized Tribes are loathe to adopt children born to Indians of the Plains.

Encouraged by the white man, hereditary tribal enmities have not yet died out, and prejudice against members of other tribes is strong. Among western Oklahoma Indians the Navajos seem held in particularly low esteem. When young militants, instituted the banning of "Little Red", and Indian "mascot" who "did" war dances at O.U. football games, a group of Anadarko Indians protested. Unlike the white and black militants, they did not take offense at the use of an Indian as a mascot, but did object that the "Little Red" of that year was Navajo-a Navajo dressed up in Plains Indian costume!

ACCULTURATION: WITH AND WITHOUT ASSIMILATION

To acculturate means to accept the values of the dominant group. Each positive identity is also defined by its negative polarity, the pests to be lived down and the potential futures to be avoided (6). Most of these students have accepted a negative identity. As one young man put it: "My brother is a heavy machinery operator; that's a pretty good job-for an Indian".

What are the American stereotypes of the Indian today, the stereotypes into which the Indian youth is expected to grow? Jim Thorpe and Will Rogers are models for the kind of athletic show-business personality blacks have already inherited, while

Page Five

Indians have been popularized as Tonto, friendly but dumb, or the wealthy chief who uses oil money to buy a new Cadillac because the old one has a flat tire, the granite-faced inarticulate loafer, and the "crazy" drunk. Clyde Warrior delineated five stereotypes: the "slob" or "hood", the "joker", the "white-noser", the "ultra pseudo-Indian", and the "angry nationalist" (25).

These negative identities, however, may be a negative identity only in the eyes of those accepting the values of the dominant white culture. Among the Kiowa-Apache, for instance, reckless drunkenness is almost universal among adolescents and young adult males: in his study of the tribe, Freeman (7) reports only one adult male who had never been an alcoholic! This period of drunkenness, however, occurs in a period of few commitments, and ends when a meaningful position, often the advent of the grandparental role, becomes available. Two contradictory value systems co-exist: one sanctioning the recklessness exhibitionism and the aggression valued in the male of pre-reservation days, the other, sobriety. Each has a special function at a specific life stage. Thus, for the young Kiowa-Apache being a "drunk" is probably seen not as deviant development but rather a sanctioned stage, and the young man will move from it to a stance of responsible respectability, becoming the bearer of tradition and a participant in the payote rites of the Native Church of North America. (20)

The degree to which consciousness of kind develops among people seems to vary with the intensity of the differential treatment they receive. Should they develop special pride or become involved in conflict, group solidarity is enhanced. Slovaks and Polish peasants, for example, had to come to the United States before they disconcerned they were Poles or Slovaks (12). Once the lines are drawn, organizations such as Indian nationalism and Pan Indianism are formed to promote the interests of the new group.

In periods of instability, differential access to opportunity is questioned. One way of handling this is to assert vigorously the negative identities as unabatedly

positive and to reject the former positive ones as evil. Thus, the conditions are set for the emergence and consolidation of a militant ethic. Such a militant ethnic causes problems with the adolescents' parental generation, many of whom have lived to see their children learn to speak the tribal languages they themselves do not know, and to delight in the pow-wows they once avoided. To understand ethnic pride--let alone militancy--may be experienced as invalidating their way of life, and they need to see these adolescents as "ill". The students, for their part, see them as "Uncle Tomahawks" and "apples" - red skin, white insides.

ASSIMILATION: INTO WHAT?

One can acculturate with enthusiasm, but one can not actively assimilate. Assimilation is a diffuse kind of acceptance that can be made only by the dominant group. Self-affirmation and affirmation by others seem to be complimentary; one who has acculturated but who has not been accepted faces a psychological dead end (9,12, 21, 25).

For the Indian, white culture has been largely one of exploitation, if not genocide. In the history of his own people, he can probably find examples enough of law, democracy and of cardinal human virtues. Can he honor Presidents who talk of the necessity of keeping Asian commitments, while systematically and currently breaking all Indian treaties (26)?

Oklahoma is a poor state with a narrow pinnacle of wealth, a land of red dirt and "red-necks". At the risk of ecological over-simplification, one might hypothesize that the "dust bowl" days have left their psychological heritage: the most vigorous left for California to be immortalized as Steinbeck's "Okies". As fitting for the "Buckle of the Bible Belt", fundamentalist Christian churches can make a virtue of suffering poverty. Whole counties are on welfare. One-third of the population has not finished high school. On most educational tests, we vie 48th or 49th position among the states. The end result, however, is a nagging feeling of not counting, betrayed by the need to place "Oklahoma is OK" on license plates. If the Indian is

to learn to be "white" and is to assimilate, this is the white environment where he must find his models and in which he must make a place!

Many whites believe that education is an ideal technique for developing the undeveloped. While generally favoring cultural pluralism--provided it is kept to non-essentials -- we tend to think of education as a tool to Europeanize, as a method of making minority peoples more acceptable to white society; that is, less prone to poverty, alcohol, and lawlessness, and technically more capable of implementing goals set by the dominant group. The Indian Boarding School ostensibly functions to bring the Indians into the main stream of white society. Looking at its graduates, however, it is apparent that it fails to bring most further than to the standards of lower-class rural whites.

Many whites assume that the most important motive for attending school is a desire for individual accomplishment. In reality, if an Indian student selects what appeals to him and formulates it in his own way for his use, or in order to understand an alien situation - perhaps, in the words of Cambridge (4), even in order to prevent a white take-over - he seems more likely to remain in school than if he accepts the value of individualistic accomplishment and then experiences repeated failure in white society. Frustration and a devalued self-image emerge from situations where these young Indians set goals which, for such reality-based reasons as lack of economic access, they cannot reach.

Many whites assume that the Indians wish to assimilate and would have, had they not been held back by poverty, prejudice, and lack of opportunity. Some assume they must assimilate; Congress has legislated some tribes out of existence and threatened to do likewise with the others unless they move of their own accord. In reality, some students may face ritual cleansing when they return from the Boarding School, a cleansing to rid them of their "white-man's" ways. "White-man's religion" or "white-man's medicine" are strong and common words of approbation among these peoples-- a far cry from the shouts of those minorities whose goals are involvement in the

Page Eight

dominant culture, assimilation and the acquisition of economic power.

This, then, is the position of the Plains Indian student of western Oklahoma: if he more fully learns "white-man's" ways, he is likely to assume some negative identity and may see himself, and be seen by his people as disloyal to his native heritage. He certainly risks the dead-end of acculturation without assimilation. Yet, to reject white man's knowledge is to reject much of America and most of the avenues to power and national decision-making, that is to embrace powerlessness. Decision-making by "Indian" principles is decision-making by "first principles" which, however sound ecologically, were never designed to cope with an environment that is increasingly more unnatural. (13)

WORLD-VIEWS AND A CONFUSION OF SELVES

Projecting our own psychology on all "normal" people, we tend to assume that our usual waking state of mental functioning is similar to that of all other "normal" people (4). Sapir (22) noted long ago that different peoples do not inhabit mere variants of the same world but experience totally different worlds. There are subtle ways in which each culture conditions its members to perceive and to create their subjective worlds. Dorothy Lee (17) puts it: "My own culture with its laws of logic, its principles of cognition, its rigidly defined limits, its validation, offers me a strongly bonded and pre-categorized view of reality."

In an informal social situation together, for example, the white man may become progressively more talkative, while some tribal-traditional Indian may stand quietly saying or doing nothing, monitoring the other rather than himself for cues regarding the adequacy of his response. If addressed directly he may not look at the speaker. There may be considerable delay before he replies. For some students, to be singled out in praise is a source of shame; for others, to look directly into the eyes of another is an act of rudeness. Despite very different intentions, both Indian and white may thus try to relate in ways that puzzle, confuse and alienate the other.

The middle-aged generation of America today has lived within a spectator--

Page Nine

spectacle world-view inherited from Aristotle, Newton and Descartes. This is the view of reality our culture has programmed them to see, a view resting on a reality where the observer and the observed can be separated, and in which reality is structured into sequential arrangements of cause and effect. As an essential aspect of the development of a technologized world, this view has served us well, but it has also brought the imminent threat of ecucatastrophe to the inhabitants of spaceship earth.

Our particular mid-century version of this world view is closely linked to a number of assumptions: (1) the assumption that the bigger the better (e.g. the S.S.T.); (2) the assumption of the necessity of a winner and a loser in all transactions, rather than the possibility of "double wins"; (3) the assumption of inevitable competition; (4) the assumption of some basic flaw in human nature; (5) the assumption that man is a species separate from other species, and lord of the universe; (6) the assumption of lineal time; (7) the assumption of the inevitability of the nuclear family. These assumptions-usually unstated, and often unconscious - underline much of our "common sense". The "common sense" of one age, however, often becomes the foolery of another.

The split between the ways of the student's people and the "white-man" ways of the school, a difference often intensified by parental hostility, exacerbates the normal adolescent tasks of identity formation. The young Indian is confronted with the extra task of integrating Indian and Boarding School "selves", selves often hinging on the dominant culture's sense of time, future orientation, attitudes toward achievement, competition and intrusiveness, the belief that individuals can change themselves if they so desire, negative evaluation of altered states of consciousness, and a willingness to active, if publicly clumsy, social experimentation. To reject either ways of being-in-the-world is to deny oneself of his full humanity and one's full potential. To experience both, however, may be to experience confusion incongruence, and internal dissonance.

One seventeen year old boy, a Southern Cheyenne, described his situation thus:

Page Ten

"The white ways are OK here. But at home it's different. Last week when I was home, I used the word "because" to my mother when I tried to explain something. In Cheyenne we don't have a word for that. My mother spit it out like something dirty, saying "because" - that's a white man's word."

"I think differently at home. My people don't think like the white man. For us, things happen when other things happen. I think in two different ways: the Indian way and the white man's way. Sometimes--like when I think that maybe so many bad things have happened to my family because my mother angered a witch - it's like I use white man's thinking, but it's about Indian things. So I wonder just who am I?"

In the second half of the twentieth century we are witnessing a burgeoning interest in world-views strikingly like that of many ancient Native American religions and a growing emphasis upon the development of a man who possesses a deep awareness of his relationship with the total universe (1). Under the stresses of the accelerating social change which makes both the future less predictable and past systems of power and values less obviously relevant, post-industrialized man has come to emphasize what he can know, the Now. Yet, it is not the people interested in such matters - the futurist, the philosopher, the physicist or the "hippie" - with whom that the young Oklahoman Indian is likely to come in contact.

FOUNDATIONS

A young person's successful solution of the tasks of adolescence is partially determined by his psychosocial development prior to that time. Summarizing studies of children of the southwestern tribes, Saslew and Harrower (24) have noted that five year olds have a fair degree of social competence within their extended families. Tracing the progress of these through school, however, yields a very different and striking picture. Their grades are comparable to those of the cultural majority for the first few grades, then precipitously fall (2). Perhaps, with school, the child is asked to renounce much of what he has learned before and this undoes those patterns of trust and personal worth developed up to this time, leading to severe

difficulties during stages of "initiative vs. guilt" and "industry vs. inferiority."

It is the authors impression that for the young Plains Indian child in Oklahoma, the picture is much less sanguine. The tribes are not as large as the Navajo, and not as stably integrated as the Pueblos. They are also heir to all the deprivations, nutritional and health-care problems of the poor. High rates of alcoholism and accidents, within the context of extended families lead to early loss which is rescapitulated over and over. At one time, individual tribes may have had formal rites and rituals for entering and for ending mourning. At least as far as the students are concerned today, however, the rituals for ending mourning are no longer practiced or understood. As a result, some young people are caught forever in an unending process of mourning.

This, then, is the current predicament of many Plains Indian Adolescents of western Oklahoma. Their symptomatology - or rather behavior seen by members of the dominant culture as symptomatology - has its roots in the reciprocal complementarity of inner conflict, social organization, ideological movements and the assumptions of the educational systems to which they are exposed.

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