

Conceptual Negativism in Chipewyan Ethnology¹

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse certains des facteurs qui ont contribué au fait que la culture et la société Chipewya ont été décrites ou analysées au moyen de concepts négatifs tels que déculturation, désorganisation et désintégration. L'auteur soutient que de tels concepts viennent de la définition de la culture des chercheurs, de leur méthodologie et d'autres facteurs étrangers aux Chipewya. Ces concepts peuvent tout au plus nous donner un aperçu de l'adaptation des Chipewya à la société canadienne contemporaine et ils sont ethnocentriques et injustes envers les Chipewya.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists and Canadian Government researchers who have worked with the Chipewyan since the 1920's have given remarkably similar appraisals of these Indians' culture and society in terms of the concepts of "deculturation," "disorganization," and "disintegration." This may be gratifying to those who value inter-observer reliability, but these appraisals — while perhaps logically consistent and intellectually satisfying — fail to elaborate

¹ Portions of an earlier version of this paper were presented as part of a research proposal (Koolage 1969) and subsequently as a paper to the American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings, New York, 1971. I am greatly indebted to John Honigmann for reading and criticizing the early drafts of this paper and to Louise Sweet and James VanStone for their helpful advice on this most recent draft. However, I assume full responsibility for this paper.

the many ways in which the Chipewyan are adapting to changing socio-cultural conditions in northern Canada. In another respect, these appraisals have been rather ethnocentric and contribute very little to part of our expanding audience, namely the Chipewyan themselves who increasingly resent such characterizations.

If we grant that one of the principal aims of ethnology is the description or "translation" of a way of life into terms understood by others, we may in humanistic fashion analyze those factors which influence the anthropologists' cultural description (cf. Pocock 1961:88-89, Maquet 1964:47-55). Analysis of these cultural descriptions of the Chipewyan reveals that these negative concepts or labels applied to them are congruent with and to some extent derived from the authors' definitions of culture, the methods and techniques employed, and — in some cases — very extraneous factors such as requirements for M.A. theses, romantic notions of Chipewyan life, and/or marked disdain for contemporary Indian cultures.²

In this paper, I will attempt to elucidate how the concepts and/or labels of deculturation, disorganization, and disintegration have been employed and make some inferences as to why they have been utilized. I assume that the anthropologists described what they observed, but why did they see the Chipewyan as they did? I also assume that the concepts are logically consistent with the data presented, but assert that these concepts are not logically necessary with respect to the data.

I will first briefly review some pertinent studies of the Chipewyan, the formulation and usage of the concepts under discussion, and then make some inferences as to the factors influencing their utilization.

BRIEF REVIEW OF CHIPEWYAN STUDIES

Our first account of the Chipewyan is Samuel Hearne's *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the*

² It is important to note here that I am not trying to denigrate either the anthropologists concerned or their capable works, but I am attempting to reassess our ability to communicate in positive and meaningful ways with our expanding audience.

Northern Ocean which was first published in 1795. Hearne, an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, was sent inland and north from Churchill "for the discovery of copper mines, a north-west passage, etc." and to promote trade with the "northern Indians" in 1769 (Hearne 1958). After two false starts, he set out for the Arctic Ocean accompanied by Chipewyan men and their wives. His journal of that trip and the appended section, "A Short Description of the Northern Indians, also a farther Account of their Country, Manufactures, Customs, Etc." (Hearne 1958:196) constitute the primary source we have of the "aboriginal" Chipewyan. Like other early explorers, he notes primarily those aspects of Chipewyan life which struck his curiosity and interest, such as acts of shamanism, methods of hunting, foods and their preparation, menstrual taboos, interpersonal relations, and the Chipewyans' relations with the Hudson's Bay Company. In some ways, it is perhaps the most "sympathetic" account we have of the Chipewyan in that Hearne describes behaviours, even though not congenial to him, in terms of the ingenuity with which they accomplished a goal, such as obtaining extra goods from the Hudson's Bay Company. This account is also enriched by Hearne's comparative comments on the Cree ("Southern Indians") and Eskimo.

In the period between Hearne and Birket-Smith, more than 150 years, we have no full or rich accounts of the Chipewyan. Among others, there are brief references to these Indians in the journals of explorers Turnor (1934), Fidler (1934), Thompson (1916), Mackenzie (1801), Macdonnell (Jeness 1956), Simpson (1843), and Richardson (1851). Petitot (1876) and Legoff (1889), both Roman Catholic priests, have given us descriptions of the language. Lowie (1912) and Goddard (1912) collected folktales, and the latter did an analysis of the language.

In 1923, Birket-Smith, as a member of the Fifth Thule Expedition, spent a month in Churchill collecting data on the Chipewyan to contribute to the lacunae of our knowledge of Northern Athapaskans and to add a different perspective to his primary goal, a study of the material and social culture of the Caribou Eskimo (Birket-Smith 1930:5). From the Chipewyan visiting the Hudson's Bay post at Churchill he collected information on material culture (that which he regarded as

"aboriginal") and some folktales. His monograph also contains information on social culture and religious beliefs which he obtained from the Right Reverend Arsene Turquetil, O.M.I., who had lived for some years with Chipewyan at Reindeer Lake. In the spirit of ethnographic reconstruction, Birket-Smith's "Contributions" is a rather full account of the "aboriginal" Chipewyan which draws heavily from Hearne and the other early explorers.

From the period 1930 until 1960 we have several journalistic accounts (cf. Harrington 1953) of the Chipewyan and June Helm's (MacNeish 1956) excellent reconstructions of kinship and leadership.

Walter Hlady worked among the Chipewyan in Churchill in 1959-1960 as a community development officer attempting to implement programs for them. His report (1959-60) on this program provides information on the Indians, especially the problems they faced at that time, but these are incidental to his description of the programs undertaken.

James VanStone's *The Snowdrift Chipewyan* (1965) is the product of two summers and a winter month of fieldwork in a small community at the eastern end of Great Slave Lake. As part of a larger study in acculturation in the Great Slave Lake-Mackenzie River Valley area, Snowdrift was chosen by VanStone "on the basis of its homogeneity and a low level of intensity of acculturative factors" (VanStone 1965:xiv). He states that "in order to understand all the operative factors [in the area's culture change], it would be necessary that subgroups or communities displaying all the differential effects of the historic acculturative continuum be discovered and made available for study" (1965:xiii).

VanStone uses essentially a descriptive ethnographic approach with special attention to history which includes prior accounts of the Chipewyan as well as events which influenced them, such as the fur trade. He also notes comparative materials from the area, for example, June Helm's description of the Lynx Point Slave (1961), and the special "problems" in Chipewyan and Athapaskan ethnography, such as Chipewyan social organization. His comparative framework is the Chipewyan in history and the contemporary Athapaskans in the area. With its discussions of the

environment, history, economy, life cycle, social structure, and religion, this is the richest account of contemporary Chipewyan that we have.

From approximately 1965 to 1967 Ravindra Lal worked for Community Development Services in Churchill as a Research Assistant and Staff Consultant. His two brief papers (1965, 1967) on the Chipewyan deal historically with their relocation to Churchill and the negative results of this process.

In the summer of 1966, I lived with the Chipewyan in Camp 10 while a fieldwork trainee at the University of North Carolina. Since it was a training session and there was little known of the contemporary Chipewyan resident there, I concentrated on gathering and reporting of ethnographic materials. In other words, there was little or no preconceived anthropological "sense of problem" which guided the gathering of data. I state that my thesis "is an attempt to describe... broadly and in natural history fashion an Athapaskan group living in an urban neighborhood" (Koolage 1967:1). At the time I wrote the above report, I considered and naively rejected using ethnohistorical and comparative Athapaskan materials for fear of unduly influencing the selection of data presented. What few comparative materials are used deal with the other ethnic groups in the area — Eskimo, Cree-Metis, and Eurocanadians — in terms of interaction between and stereotypes of the ethnic groups. While there is a rough conceptual scheme of culture put forth in the categorization of behaviours reported, the term "culture" is not used at all.

THE CONCEPTS OF DECULTURATION, DISORGANIZATION, AND DISINTEGRATION: THEIR FORMULATION AND USAGE

"Deculturation" as a term was introduced by Birket-Smith in discussing the contemporary (1923) Chipewyan at Churchill in a section of his report titled "General Impressions." In comparing the Caribou Eskimos to the Chipewyan, he finds the former

...often fairly well off according to their small standard, still possessing that self-reliance that is a consequence of the fact that connection with

an old, deeply rooted culture has been preserved, very impressionable, helpful, and almost always smiling. In contrast to them the Indians [Chipewyan]: timid, reticent towards strangers, afraid of lowering their dignity, poor, importunate to an incredible degree, and, according to report, not entirely innocent of being unreliable and thieving... their shyness, penchant for begging, etc., must in reality be regarded in the light of their general deculturation (Birket-Smith 1930:7-8).

He does not elaborate further on the contemporary Chipewyan or his view of their "deculturation" except to note difficulties in his answering a question of ethnographic reconstruction, namely, "What do the Caribou Eskimo possess that the Chipewyan lack?" The difficulty, it seems, lies in the fact that "the Chipewyan are much more decultured than their Eskimo neighbors and therefore have undoubtedly lost relatively much more of their original culture" (Birket-Smith 1930:105). For Birket-Smith, then, the term or concept of deculturation assumes neither primary nor secondary importance in his study of aboriginal Chipewyan culture; it is merely ancillary as is his interest in the contemporary Indians.

VanStone borrows the concept of deculturation from Bernard James' study of "The Socio-Psychological Dimensions of Ojibwa Acculturation" (James 1961). As VanStone utilizes it, deculturation is a "process" which "occurs... when the abandonment of an aboriginal culture trait is not replaced with a White cultural equivalent." (VanStone 1965:110). In his concluding chapter on "Chipewyan Acculturation" the concept is employed as an explanatory device to get from his descriptive materials to his conclusion that Snowdrift is "to some extent, a 'poor-White' type of subculture" economically and that it is similar to other "bush communities" "exhibiting a sort of bush culture that is duplicated many times in many places throughout the Canadian north" (1965:110-111). From his historically oriented view of Chipewyan culture, he finds very little at Snowdrift "that is distinctively Chipewyan" (VanStone 1965:111). However, in his comparisons with other contemporary bush communities in the area, he finds many "traits" that are common or similar to Snowdrift.

Lal employs the concept of disorganization (and disorder) in analyzing the conditions of juvenile delinquency, in-group violence, heaving drinking, lack of employment, and conflicts with the law. He feels these conditions are the result of poor

planning and communication with the Chipewyan on the part of the Indian Affairs Branch, and of the Chipewyans' being "hopelessly ill-equipped to function effectively in an urbanized environment." In essence, it was a case of "the blind leading the blind" (Lal 1967:7). Especially, he claims an association between the Chipewyans' use of alcoholic beverages and their disorganization. "In 1960 treaty Indians received the legal right to drink liquor. The consumption of beer and wine in Camp 10 soared. A progressive disorganization was the inevitable result." (Lal 1967:6).

Walter Hlady used what might be termed the descriptive label of disintegration in referring to the Chipewyan institutions of marriage and the family. In one passage he notes "...the clash in cultures has resulted in a gradual disintegration of family unity" (Hlady 1960:4). While he does mention changes in economic, marriage, and leadership patterns, little material is marshalled to support the above statement. It appears to be given so that the reader will understand some of the problems he encountered in the applied anthropology project.

The concept of social disintegration as formulated by Alexander Leighton (1969) and used by John Honigmann (1966) was applied to the Chipewyan neighbourhood of Camp 10 by myself. Social disintegration supposedly exists when a "community or neighbourhood manifests a combination of the following characteristics: high frequency of broken homes, few and weak associations, few and weak leaders, high frequency of hostility, high frequency of crime and delinquency, and a weak and fragmented network of communication" (Leighton 1959:318-319; Koolage 1967:1). It is interesting that the unit of analysis is not called a "culture" but a segment of a society — in this case a neighbourhood.

When I said that this concept was "applied" to the Chipewyan, I meant just that. The concept did not grow out of the data but was borrowed from elsewhere to aid in understanding the relationship of Chipewyan to other indigenous people in the North. It was also applied to fulfill a tacit requirement of Masters' theses in that they are expected to have theoretical significance. With this in mind, we may note that the concept is used at the beginning of the report and in a short concluding chapter. "Dis-

integration" is neither used in the body of the report nor did it guide the research of the writing.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE UTILIZATION OF THE CONCEPTS

Several elements, which might broadly be called "methodological," are common to the studies under discussion and have a bearing upon or have influenced the usage of the labels of "deculturation," "disorganization," and "disintegration." The first of these is the generally short periods of fieldwork involved. These short periods of work seem prohibitive of building culture constructs demonstrating the "integrative" nature of functional interrelationships and for observing seldom occurring events. Another aspect of this is the relatively little depth of these studies. Hlady and Lal make no attempt at depth because of the problems they consider. Birket-Smith (1930:5-6) and I (1967:2-3) mention problems with interpreters and informants and there seems to be a tone of disappointment and frustration at attempts to get below the surface. None of the above authors are fluent in Chipewyan. These studies go little beyond the descriptions of "material" and "economic" culture and such behaviours as meet the eye.³

To examine more closely why these concepts have been employed, let us consider each study and author in turn. Birket-Smith seems to hold the view that a culture is the sum of its traits. In infer this from his preoccupation with trait distributions as seen in his work in the reports of the Fifth Thule Expedition. He is interested in diffusion, origins (of the Caribou Eskimo, for example), and what might be called historical geographical determinism (Birket-Smith 1930:5, 101-110; 1957:11-14). His focus was and still is the "aboriginal" culture (cf. Nelleman 1965:63). He has little interest in the contemporary cultures of Indians and Eskimos (cf. Birket-Smith 1965:55). With a definition of "*the*"

³ In an effort to correct some of these shortcomings, I have been encouraging and supporting efforts by the Churchill Chipewyan to *present themselves* to others through their artistry, video-tapes, and hopefully their own writings. I as an individual or anthropologist cannot do it. I feel as Edmund Carpenter does when he eloquently and passionately explains his own inability to express the "intense, beautiful revelations" that are man experiencing others (Carpenter 1965:55-56).

culture as being the sum of its pre-European traits, deculturation is logically consistent with the loss of those traits. But in ignoring what has been added to the culture, Birket-Smith leaves little room for alternative interpretations of the data he presents. Hypothetically, had he spent more time in Churchill, lived with the Chipewyan, and used a different definition of culture, he might have found "culture" instead of the lack of same. Hence I view the methods, approach, and interests of Birket-Smith as being factors conditioning his use of the term "deculturation" with respect to contemporary Chipewyan.

VanStone's broadly descriptive ethnography is less dependent upon his theory and approach than is Birket-Smith's. VanStone is definitely concerned with history: he says so (1965:xiii), the nature of his historically relevant comparative materials imply it, and a recent work, *Eskimos of the Nushagak River: An Ethnographic History*, indicates a continued interest in it. In borrowing the concept of deculturation from Bernard James (1961), he becomes analytically involved in counting trait distributions in a manner somewhat similar to Birket-Smith. However, in using the concept of deculturation as explanation and not as a rigid criterion for the selection of materials reported in the monograph, VanStone presents us with a descriptive account that lends itself to logical inferences other than those he proposes. For example, one might infer a continued aboriginal pattern of "atomism" in his description of community organization rather than a recent process of deculturation.

One might add that had another anthropologist studied the community he might have used a definition of culture that would lead him to a different culture construct characterized by cultural integration (cf. Valentine 1969). While comparable to other bush communities in the area in respect to some aspects of culture — such as economy — the Snowdrift community would also be characterized by its own distinctiveness. Having visited Brochet, Manitoba, which appears to be developmentally about half-way between Snowdrift and Churchill (on a small to complex social scale), I feel an intuitive validity to the above conjecture.⁴

⁴ In a recent unpublished manuscript, "The Emergence of the Micro-Urban Village among the Caribou Eater Chipewyan", Jim Smith has amply documented continuing Chipewyan cultural processes at Brochet, Manitoba.

Why did VanStone choose to apply the concept of deculturation to Snowdrift? From the above discussion I point in answer to his interests in the historical approach, the short field period, the attention to material and economic culture, and the influence of Jame's article on the Ojibwa.

Lal's community development work among the Chipewyan was in part characterized by attention to ethnohistory as well as mission-oriented attempts to outline future courses of action for community development to take. That he was not happy with the Indian Affairs Branch's moving the Chipewyan from Duck Lake to Churchill is apparent in both his papers, especially in "From Duck Lake to Camp 10: Old Fashioned Relocation." In both papers he compares Chipewyan life prior to the move to life after it and finds that the quality of life was much better at Duck Lake than at Churchill. Life at Duck Lake is noted as having strong leadership under a "charismatic" Chipewyan lay preacher, a homogeneous population, cooperation and sharing in common endeavours, and a lack of "parasitism" — or one person living "constantly on the goodness of others" (Lal 1965:4-5). Now Lal finds that "life has changed from the cooperative 'communism' of the past" and suffers from age group separation, weak leadership, poor communication, and heavy drinking, leading to uncontrolled behavior (1965:5-6).

I conclude that Lal's view of life at Duck Lake, anger at the Indian Affairs Branch, use of older informants, and work done predominantly in his office in town are influences in his use of the terms "disorganization" and "disorder."

Turning to Hlady's work on the Chipewyan, my inferences as to why he employed the term "disintegration" are based, in part, upon his mission orientation and his recent thesis work. Hlady did do much more ethnological work in Churchill than is reported in the community development paper. However, he was not fond of Churchill and found the conditions of fieldwork, including the governmental bureaucracy, rather difficult. Also, living at Fort Churchill, four miles from the Chipewyan neighbourhood, he worked during the coldest part of the year which limited his mobility (Hlady 1960:9, 15). In this and the fact that he has published papers in Manitoba archaeology I infer that he has an

historical approach or orientation. Why he used the concept of disintegration will become more apparent further on.

The "tacked on" quality of my own use of the concept of social disintegration at once suggests that other alternative analytical concepts might have been used. In briefly glancing over the materials presented and the tendency to focus upon what is often termed "problem" behaviour (heavy drinking, frequent court convictions, and low levels of employment) among the Chipewyan, the "appliqué" theory appears to be consistent with the data. Why was disintegration and not another concept employed? The construct appeared to be logical and intellectually satisfying. It had been used with regard to other northern communities (Honigmann 1966) and thus had comparative value. In another sense, my then current interest in mental health and the concept's "diagnostic" value in identifying community units or neighbourhoods as high risk areas for "mental illnesses" were influential factors.

I thus point to my own interests in mental health and factors such as M.A. requirements as partial reasons for the use of the concept of disintegration. My early data do not necessarily eliminate other alternative negative conceptualizations, including deculturation. It would be possible, with the consideration of historical and other contemporary Athapaskan materials, to conceive of the Churchill Chipewyan neighbourhood as indeed "deculturated" (although sporadic fieldwork from 1968 to 1972 brought to my attention many "traits" I had formerly presumed lost, such as the hand game). However, to do so would require me to define Chipewyan culture as being the "aboriginal" culture only I am not prepared to do that.

Two other factors which influenced my finding social disintegration in Camp 10 were a bias against the rather "organized" violence found there in 1966 and my interaction with Indian elders who expressed fear and sorrow about living in this neighbourhood.

In summary, anthropologists dealing with the Chipewyan since 1923 have characterized them as being "deculturated," "disorganized," and "disintegrated." Birket-Smith's and Van-Stone's use of the concept of deculturation is a logical derivation of their interest in ethnographic reconstruction and ethnohistory,

their definition of Chipewyan culture as the "aboriginal" culture, their short periods of fieldwork, and their sense of disappointment at not finding more that was "traditionally" Chipewyan.

Hlady, Lal, and I employ "disintegration" and "disorganization" in describing the Chipewyan living in Churchill. All of us had contacts with the larger society of Euro-Canadians and learned the stereotypes of the Chipewyan which are prevalent in the community. In essence, we sought a whole culture — integrated and organized — according to traditional anthropological models as a reaction to these stereotypes, but we observed only pieces. We either did not spend enough time in or lived away from the neighbourhood and did not interact with it intensively enough to find such integration and organization as it might possess.⁵

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, I believe that I have demonstrated that recent anthropological studies of the Chipewyan have dealt with them negatively⁶ — at least in terms of analytic concepts and/or labels such as deculturation, disorganization, and disintegration. I have also shown that these concepts are not necessarily ones which are derived from the data without alternatives and that factors such as methodology, definition of culture, and even M.A. requirements have been instrumental in their usage.

⁵ Two recent comments on the contemporary Chipewyan in Churchill which are not dealt with in the text of this paper should be mentioned. R. M. Bone, in an editorial comment in *The Musk-Ox* remarks that: Here (in Churchill), these *primitive* people of the bush would have an opportunity to taste and adapt to modern urban living and a wage economy. Unfortunately these people did not adjust. Rather, they *lost whatever pride and purpose* they had in life. Today they are a *frustrated, despairing, and broken* group of Canadians (1969:1, emphasis mine—wk).

Phil Dickman, a community development officer, notes that: ...alcohol and prostitution have played hell with these people for their culture had no worthy defence against these vices ...this *sick community* of Chipewyan Indians sadly represents a modern day tragedy (1969:22, emphasis mine—wk).

Both of these authors see elements of Chipewyan society and/or culture as being deficient or pathological. However, Dickman does note the influence of government policies and the larger Churchill society as being responsible for the Chipewyan's position today.

⁶ For a similar appraisal of the concepts of deculturation and proletarianization, see Honigsmann 1969.

Do these conceptualizations of Chipewyan culture communicate to the Chipewyan, or for that matter, to other Euro-Canadians or anthropologists? I suppose they do but in a negative and perhaps not very scientific manner. Chipewyan who utilize gossip as a major source of social control understand.

Chipewyan ethnology has not progressed very far from the 1930's. We have no psychological studies or "ethnoscience" analyses to elucidate the "cognitive maps" of the Chipewyan, nor are there any reasonably inferred world views put forth. We have no life histories of Chipewyan; Hearne's discussion of his friend and guide, Matonnabee, is the best we have in this regard. Ecological studies are just now coming into print (e.g., Jim Smith 1973) and offer promising new and less biased views of the Chipewyan. But while the ecological approach will open new analyses of the Chipewyan, will communicate more precisely with other scholars, and may even be of utility in Chipewyan land claims, they will probably be as bloodless and devoid of feeling as my own recent work on statistical analysis of multi-ethnic adaptive patterns. Who will write of the Chipewyan in humanistic or socio-political⁷ terms which communicate with the Chipewyan, the non-native layman, and the anthropologist. Anthropologists will take care of themselves, but it will probably be the Chipewyan and artistic young people who will do the most to present the Chipewyan as human beings with a living culture and society. Anthropology has not presented this facet of Chipewyan. In the light of past studies, I think it is one we need.

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⁷ P. D. Elias has given us a good description of the socio-political and economic structure of the larger Euro-Canadian society of Churchill which demonstrates the Euro-Canadian control of the town's economy. While his research was not with the Chipewyan, its implications and thereby utility are of more value to the Chipewyan and other resident native groups than the more traditional anthropological studies discussed in this paper.

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