

Factors in the Social Pathology of a North American Indian Society

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RÉSUMÉ

On observe dans la structure sociale d'un certain groupe indien de l'Amérique du Nord, divers phénomènes qui semblent toujours avoir un effet marqué sur ses pathologies sociales. Pour comprendre ces pathologies il faut nécessairement faire la conjonction des facteurs historiques mentionnés avec la structure sociale et les exigences de situations actuelles. Il semble bien aussi que les variantes qui déterminent les pathologies sociales de cette communauté peuvent tout aussi bien expliquer celles qui se sont développées ailleurs dans des conditions socio-culturelles différentes.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper discusses certain variables historically operative in the social structure of a society which appear to have an important bearing upon currently observable rates and types of social pathologies. The description and analysis which follows attempts to show that without due recognition of the critical conjunction of historical factors with current situational exigencies the social pathologies of the society in purview cannot properly be understood.

The society in question is a North American Indian Reservation society — one which for a variety of reasons must remain anonymous. Moreover, it is a society which is currently characterized by rates of child neglect, accidents of both a fatal and a more casual type, alcoholism, minor crime, truancy, illegitimacy, divorce, marital and occupational maladjustments, and other forms of dependency which are extra-ordinarily high when compared with ecologically similar Non-Indian communities adjacent to it.

The variables to be discussed may be classified into two major categories: (1) historical; and (2) current. The historic category can be further sub-divided into a number of major variables including: (1) the presence of what will be termed the "Long House Ethic" — a conception of the ideal character traits sanctioned in the traditional culture which manifested itself in the form of personalized rather than collectively defined standards of conduct in a number of institutional sectors of the Indian culture; (2) the restricted channels of vertical mobility associated with ascriptive status systems peculiar to preliterate cultures, including the culture of the society in question; (3) the historically restricted development of voluntary sub-groupings in the Indian culture along occupational, religious, and political interest lines.

The current variables category includes: (1) the loss of political power and control over economics, educational, health and welfare conditions on the part of the Indian community associated with reservation status; (2) the restricted opportunities for contact and communication between the Indian community and the culture of the dominant society associated with reservation status; (3) the restricted geographic mobility associated with reservation status on the part of the Indian community; and (4) the restricted population numbers and the degree of residential propinquity characteristic of the Indian community.

THE HISTORIC VARIABLES

The historical period here in purview extends from the beginning of the reservation around the middle of the nineteenth century to the present. This date has been arbitrarily chosen as a watershed between the historic and the current situations upon which the present analysis centers. Undoubtedly, contact between the Indians of the society in question and non-Indians had taken place from time to time much earlier with resulting changes in the culture and social structure of the Indian society. It was not, however, until the formal establishment of the reservation that the Indian began to experience the full impact of contact with the dominant society. And it was not until some two decades ago

that the impact of change has become manifest in the form of extra-ordinarily high rates of social pathology.

In connection with the discussion of the historic variables which follows it should be recognized that ethnographic literature bearing on the society in question is somewhat sparse and consequently requires recourse to inference in order to provide a working conception of the pre-reservation culture. Such inferences as have been made, however, have been checked against reports and observations made by knowledge informants selected from the Indian community and consequently may be regarded as reasonably valid for the purpose in hand.

The "Long House Ethic": The behavior patterns here subsumed under the rubric, the "Long House Ethic", can perhaps be most readily comprehended by comparison with the more familiar conception of what has come to be termed the Protestant Ethic.

The central idea upon which the Protestant Ethic turns, it is clear, inheres in the postulate that the individual not only can, but logically must achieve salvation through his own efforts. The "Long House Ethic" of the Indian society in question placed a similar stress upon individualism in religious matters, although its social expression differs considerably in form. Instead of individual subservience to God, the "Long House Ethic" stressed individual subservience and a personal relationship to nature and to natural forces. The forces, if properly propitiated, would reward the supplicant with extra-ordinary "powers" which would assist him to achieve his concept of "salvation".¹

It was, moreover, given social expression in the religious and health spheres, primarily, whereas the Protestant Ethic was manifest primarily in the economic and political sectors of the culture. And in practice, the former remained personalized and individualized, whereas the latter, because of ramifications in the economic and political spheres, immediately became collectivized and subject to interpersonal and inter-group controls.

¹ The Indian's concept of "salvation" revolves about the notions of emotional security, clear personal identity, and personal continuity with nature.

Vertical Mobility: The available information leaves no doubt that the social structure of the pre-reservation Indian culture turned on a wholly ascriptive status system. Age was the major factor governing the status accorded individuals, with achievement being a necessary but not sufficient condition for upward mobility.

Voluntary Sub-groupings: Voluntary sub-groupings in the traditional Indian culture were confined to the religious sphere. Occupational, economic, and political interest groups appear to have been wholly absent from the traditional scene, if for no other reason than the lack of internal differentiation of the traditional social structure.

THE CURRENT VARIABLES

The major variables operative in the current situation can now be reviewed.

The Loss of Political Power and Control: Leadership, initiative and authority were from the beginning of the reservation period centered in the hands of the federal government and its immediate agent, the reservation Superintendent. Only in the matter of ceremonial and in certain purely private matters does any significant degree of authority and power reside with the members of the Indian community and their tribal Chiefs. In consequence, such authority and initiative as does remain to the Indian community is centered in the hands of older persons who are noted for their conservatism. The younger members of the society are more or less systematically excluded from positions of leadership.

Contact and Communication with the Culture of the Dominant Society: Prior to the advent of integrated education at the high school level about a decade ago, communication between Indians and the non-Indian culture was largely restricted to the National Government and its immediate agents. One result of such restricted channels of contact and communication is that the "organizational memory" of the Indian community is replete with what are regarded as instances of betrayal and deliberate distortions of understandings contained in the original Treaty

between Indians and federal government. In consequence there has developed an extremely strong, though carefully masked, out-group antipathy directed against all non-Indians and a corresponding in-group solidarity among Indians *vis-à-vis* the non-Indian out-group. This has occurred despite certain internal differences and conflicts structured along ethnic sub-group lines. In practice this has meant a strong negative attitude toward non-Indian cultural traits and standards in the non-material aspects of cultural borrowing and a concomitant effort to maintain traditional Indian cultural practices where possible.

Geographic Mobility: The institutional concept underlying the legal device of the Indian reservation centers in the notion that the Indian is not equipped to manage his own affairs and must therefore be defined in the eyes of the law as a ward of the state who, like a minor, must have his rights protected until such time as he achieves legal and "social" maturity. What this implies is that the worldly wealth of the Indian is intimately connected with the reservation status of his society.

The real property value of the land comprising the reservation itself is legally regarded as the Indian's rightful inheritance. His Treaty rights are to a very large extent administratively coincident with his being domiciled on the reservation. Should he choose to leave the reservation and make his abode elsewhere, his only claim upon the communal property of the Indian society is his nominal share of the available liquid assets currently held by the society. The social services, such as health and welfare, are rendered problematic if he takes up residence away from the reservation. The Indian therefore finds that his economic as well as his social interests are optimally secured through continuing residence on the reservation. And in consequence of these several considerations, the Indian can neither be permanently removed, even by force, nor easily persuaded to break his ties with the land and the people which comprise the Indian society.

Population Numbers and Residential Propinquity: The population of the society under review is approximately 1200 persons, divided into some 280 family units. Size of family unit

will vary from a single widow or widower to families with both parents and 9 or more children. Approximately 65% of the population is under the age of 21 years. Moreover, current reproduction rates are of an order which will double the size of the population in about 15 years.

Given a high degree of geographic isolation and the restricted communication with the dominant society, the Indian community is compelled to rely largely upon its own resources so far as social purposes are concerned. Lacking as it does complete acceptance on a basis of equality among non-Indians, the entire Indian population is drawn into extremely close social and familial relationships. Nearly every member of the Indian community bears a near or remote blood kinship to every member. One important result of this is that everyone is more or less personally known to everyone else. Moreover, everyone's affairs and his behavior are widely known and achieve a high degree of social visibility in the Indian community. Impersonality and anonymity in social relationships is, therefore, at a minimum.

THE CONJUNCTION OF HISTORICAL AND CURRENT VARIABLES

The conjunction of historic and current variables in relation to current types and rates of social pathologies can now be discussed.

The personalized and individuated values and behavior patterns traditionally associated with what has been described above as the "Long House Ethic" continue into the present with only slight modification. The decline in traditional authority accorded the Chiefs and Elders, however, implies that these patterns no longer perform their traditional function in the Indian community. The traditional doctrine which asserts: "I am not my brother's moral keeper" has come to have tragic consequences in the current situation. Moral responsibility for another's spiritual welfare at present rests, not with ego, but with alter. And in this respect the form of behavior is entirely consistent with traditional values. What is changed and lacking, however, is that

alter no longer can or does depend upon his personal source of tutelary power. And in the absence of this traditionally common source of individual support, the traditional pattern of reciprocal moral indifference has lost its anchor.²

Currently, despite an implied need for moral help or guidance on the part of another there is no feeling of moral compulsion to render such aid. Moreover, there is little awareness or incentive on the part of ego to attempt to upgrade the social conditions which influence for good or ill the moral aspects of another's behavior, or to confront another with the consequences of his behavior upon other persons or the society at large. A reformed alcoholic, upon being requested to give assistance in helping to establish a branch of Alcoholics Anonymous, refused on grounds that he had succeeded in shaking off the habit on his own and others might be expected to do likewise. Such matters, clearly are seen through the eyes of the Indian culture as personal and private and hence not subject to review or concern by others.

The historic emphasis upon this particular form of individualism, while undoubtedly functional in the traditional setting currently has associated with it a number of additional dysfunctions. Of the several that could be mentioned, perhaps the major one is its current inhibiting effect upon attitudes toward holding office or engaging in voluntary group action in non-traditional contexts. Significantly, with the exception of a veteran's organization, none of the religious, educational, occupational, economic, or governmental organizations have voluntary or auxiliary bodies associated with them. Efforts to organize a branch of A.A. failed completely, and both a Parent-Teachers Association group and an inter-community discussion club failed shortly after being organized.

The absence of such voluntary groupings implies that there is no established machinery or mechanism in the society for the elaboration and development of functional norms and standards of behavior consistent with the demands of the current situation.

² The absence of such a positive moral reciprocation pattern does not deny the presence of reciprocal patterns in Indian life such as the sharing of physical and materials resources, gift exchanges, and the like.

In consequence, there are no groups whose interests may be seen to be placed in jeopardy by the presence of personalized behavior and, correspondingly, there is a conspicuous absence of organized opinion which might serve to invoke effective negative sanctions against persons whose behavior is inconsistent with the functional needs of the society.

The federal government's seizure of authority and initiative in the fields of health, welfare, government, education, and the economy which accompanied the establishment of the reservation was again undoubtedly functional at the time for both the Indian and the government. Nevertheless, in the face of the current situation, the latent dysfunctions flowing from this state of affairs are several.

The traditional reliance upon ascribed status, when coupled with the loss of political control by the Indian community in the reservation period, has meant that older persons continue to occupy existing positions of nominal leadership, with younger persons being more or less excluded from any effective voice in communal affairs. The cumulative effect of this state of affairs has crystallized into an attitude which can be expressed as follows: "If anything needs to be done it is the responsibility of the government to provide it to us and for us; for all these things were promised to us in our Treaty and we are therefore justified in expecting that our needs will be cared for by the government".

Since effective authority and power reside with others, largely non-Indians, responsibility for action and initiative are seen to rest there as well, particularly, on the part of younger persons. There is, moreover, no incentive and little opportunity to search out knowledge of ways and means by which power might be seized. Within the Indian culture this predisposition has been rationalized on several grounds: (1) the prevailing conception of Treaty rights; (2) the prevailing antipathy toward many non-Indian cultural standards and usages, particularly, those bearing upon the acquisition of power and wealth; (3) the inferred attitudes of superiority on the part of non-Indians with whom contact and communication do in degree exist. Parenthetically, this has meant that many non-Indian techniques in the

occupational, economic and educational spheres have been borrowed, but selectively and without being accompanied by the corresponding regulatory and integrative mechanisms which obtain in the non-Indian culture.

The near monopoly on power and initiative held by the federal government and its immediate agents, when coupled with the absence of geographic mobility, leaves few avenues of vertical mobility open to members of the Indian community. Since the acquisition of wealth for its own sake is regarded as an out-group trait and therefore to be despised on that ground alone, and since the initiative and authority which do remain to the Indian society are monopolized by the aged, it follows that the younger members of the society are free to adopt a very restricted time-perspective — one which places a negative premium on the deferment of gratifications in all spheres of life and encourages the gratification of impulse and fancy in the here and the now.

Lacking as he does acceptance on a basis of equality in the non-Indian society around him, the Indian has no external reference groups which might inspire and motivate behavior of a type calculated to advance him in the prestige scale of the non-Indian containing society. Alternatively, within the confines of the Indian society which can and does serve as a reference group to some extent, current behavior has no apparent institutional connection with advancement in the prestige scale of the Indian society. Only chronological age will serve as a vehicle to this end and, hence, no exemplary behavior in the present is required or demanded. In the changed context which has resulted from contact and borrowing, this leaves the door open to a calculated program of living life in the here and now, with its associated gratification of whim and fancy of whatever momentary description.

Historically conceived, the segregation of the Indian community on the reservation served the function both of geographically isolating and thus protecting the Indian from non-Indians as well as limiting severely the degree of contact and communication between Indians and non-Indians. In the current situation a number of dysfunctions flow from this state of affairs. Members

of the Indian community who tend to deviate from traditional Indian cultural norms in the direction of the non-Indian cultural standards are deprived of clear-cut models which they may emulate as well as effective communication channels with appropriate non-Indian groups to which their development might gravitate. Accordingly, such persons of necessity become marginal persons who can identify with and internalize neither of the two cultures completely. At best they can integrate their knowledge of and identification with the two cultures only in a limited, situational manner. Moreover, the numerous discontinuities of experience in the two cultures frequently leave many situations inadequately defined for the Indian with resulting confusion and withdrawal.

Given the out-group antipathies mentioned above, the individual who openly attempts to emulate non-Indian cultural standards of conduct is subject to ridicule and contempt by the members of the Indian society. Alternatively, under the impact of borrowing and change, both intended and unanticipated, the traditional norms of the Indian culture are rapidly waning even within the confines of the Indian community. The result is that the Indian individual finds himself in a rapidly changing and complex cultural conflict in which he lacks group supports regardless of the direction he selects for personal growth and development. Whether he stays on the reservation or leaves it, whether he tries to emulate the traditional Indian ways or chooses to follow non-Indian ways, he stands alone and relatively unsupported by others whose values are similar and who can serve as models, guides and confidants.

The fact that the Indian has Treaty rights and that property arrangements bind him to residence on a particular reservation practically eliminates all geographic or residential mobility. In this connection it is again apparent that while these arrangements may have proven functional in the recent past, present circumstances reveal a number of dysfunctions associated with this state of affairs. For the absence of opportunities for geographic mobility implies that the Indian community as a whole has no alternative but to absorb and accommodate the socially untrained and personalized behavior of its members, if for no other

reason than that it cannot expel them.³ The range of alternatives open to the Indian society in this respect is further restricted by the presence of the out-group antipathies mentioned above. The latter condition permits where it does not compel the rationalization of personalized and socially unrestrained behavior on grounds that the individual involved is the reluctant victim of the non-Indian way of life which impinges upon him in a unique way. And it follows that in the face of such circumstances moral standards and norms must be compromised and weakened in order to accommodate the ever increasing range of personalized and socially unrestrained behavior which must be ordered by them.

In the face of such a cultural definition of the situation, the individual would appear to be formally absolved from the necessity of making his behavior socially and morally acceptable to other members of the society. His geographic mobility is, on the one hand, restricted and impaired, and his personalized behavior can readily be rationalized on grounds of out-group influences and depredations, on the other. Accordingly, the individual is free, as it were, to permit his behavior to vary both in degree and in kind, without necessarily incurring sanctions such as would obtain in a comparable non-Indian community.

The current dysfunctions associated with the settlement patterns fostered at the time of the reservations establishment turn on the fact that the entire population of the Indian society numbers only about 1200 persons. This fact, when coupled with a high degree of residential propinquity and a high degree of social interdependence, implies a high degree of social visibility, public awareness and scrutiny of individual behavior. These conditions, moreover, obtain for all members of the Indian community. The significant result of this is the fact that the absence of effective negative sanctions against personalized and socially unrestrained behavior is universally publicized. And this in turn means that both socially restrained and socially unrestrained

³ Law violators can, of course, be punished in accordance with tribal laws. Those individual deviants who stop just short of law violation, however, are difficult to deal with since legal expulsion is out of the question and moral rejection would be to play the "enemy's game".

behavior patterns are equally available as models for emulation by the younger members of the community. To the extent that the "Long House Ethic" persists into the present, it would appear to provide added reinforcement at the motivational level to the individual predisposed toward the adoption of personalized rather than socially restrained patterns of behavior.

General Observations

In conclusion one is led to speculate on the extent to which these same historic variables are operative as well in the case of the lower status levels of non-Indian communities. The descriptions of behavior of the lower-lower stratum provided by Warner, Hollingshead and others would appear to constitute parallels with the behavior and motivational syndromes observed in the Indian community in question. The ethical system, the absence of available channels of geographic and social mobility, and the absence of voluntary group activity appear to be entirely common. Likewise, the current situation facing the lower stratum in non-Indian communities appears to be characterized by the same variables. That is to say, the middle-class cultural standards which are imposed upon them from without or from above pose for the members of these strata nearly identical problems and situations to which they must adjust.

To the extent that this conclusion is valid it would appear that the variables cited in the present paper have explanatory value which transcends the confines of the culture under review and acquire a greater degree of generality, and predictive power in explaining social pathologies in diverse cultural situations.

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