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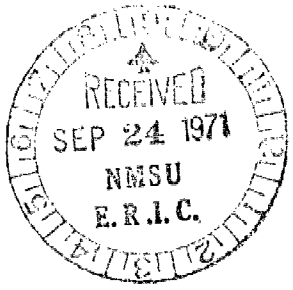
ABSTRACT

A survey of research on the peer society of American Indians reveals that little is known about this topic. American Indian populations, especially peer societies of young Indians, constitute one of the most difficult groups on whom to conduct research. Although Indian students respond docilely to self-administered questionnaires, such instruments are relatively imprecise for reporting the nature of Indian peer societies. One basic method suggested for gathering data is the community study type. The best research procedure would involve relatively lengthy subprojects by small research teams, each consisting of 1 or 2 graduate students at the doctoral level. When the subprojects had been completed, it would then be possible for a "principal investigator" to review the findings in order to judge how survey or other techniques might be utilized in order to generalize the findings. (LS)



PEER SOCIETIES OF INDIAN CHILDREN

AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH EDUCATION PROBLEMS

A Position Paper
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By
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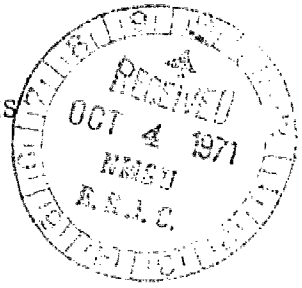

"Position Paper" by Murray L. Wax

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Theoretical Background

The role of the peer society in the social development of normal children in every society has been studied and analyzed by a variety of social-psychologists, from the classical to the contemporary. George Herbert Mead regarded "the game" as a decisive metaphor for the kind of social development which occurred within the matrix of the peer society and that led to the human ability to undertake joint activities, complexly integrated. In Mead's analysis the linguistic communication among childhood peers is the foundation of such later complex processes as logical reasoning (via taking the role of the other). Jean Piaget demonstrated via empirical studies of Swiss children how their moral sense develops and matures in the course of the play activities of the peer society. And, Harry Stack Sullivan argued that the movement out of the family circle into the peer society was a crucial step in the normal maturation of the psyche. Anthropologists, such as Yehudi Cohen, have followed these leads and built social theories analyzing the differences among cultures depending upon the age and condition of children when they are expelled from the maternal family circle into the society of childhood peers.

On the other hand, the literature of the schools has been focused more on matters of individual conduct than on peer societies. Fledgling teachers are exhorted to treat their pupils as individuals and not to lump

them together into a mass; they are urged to seek to understand the conduct of each child in virtue of his peculiar familial background rather than as a manifestation of group social life within the classroom and school. Except in the memoirs of gifted individual teachers, there has been little consideration of the dynamics of the peer society of the classroom. Even sociometry, which could be a technique for factoring the subgroups within the larger classroom society, usually finds its employment, not in discerning what goes on within the peer society, but in determining which children are isolates and which are leaders.

Within the literature of the sociology of education, the pioneering analyses of Willard Waller took into consideration the communal organization of the school and the functionings of peer societies. Yet, despite his insights the subsequent research within this discipline gave but little attention to peer social life, and it was only in the 1960's with the publication of such researches as by James S. Coleman on midwestern schools (The Adolescent Society, 1961) and by the research team responsible for Formal Education in an American Indian Community (1964) that the topic began to attract the scholarly attention which it merited. Coleman's subsequent research, Equality of Educational Opportunity (1967), using larger, more national populations, offered further support to the thesis of the importance of the peer society of the school pupils in determining the nature and level of scholastic performance.

In the American Indian schools, the research team of M. L. Wax, Robert V. Dumont, Jr. and Rosalie H. Wax (together with various research associates) studied in 1962-63 the Oglala Sioux children attending the federal schools on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and then in 1966 the Tribal Cherokee children

attending small rural public schools of northeastern Oklahoma. While the nature of the two school systems was radically different, as was the structural situation of the two tribal peoples, and while the norms governing social interaction varied between the two peer societies, nonetheless, in both cases these societies of Indian youngsters did exercise a preponderant influence upon the nature of the social and scholastic interactions within the school classrooms. Corroborative evidence came from other research investigators, such as Harry F. Wolcott who, working in a one room school that served Kwakiutl children, found his operations completely constricted by the peer society.

Significantly, the findings of the Waxes, Wolcott, and others in regard to Indian children in the schools were immediately utilized by those designing programs to train teachers to work in urban lowerclass settings. Estelle Fuchs, Elizabeth Eddy, and others, have used the research findings from the Indian situations in order to make their students aware of what they are likely to be encountering in the classrooms: true, the peer societies of the urban classroom would be less tightly organized, and the language dialect of the children might not be as different from standard English as is the Lakota from rural Midwestern English, yet nonetheless, much of the same patterns of interaction, and lack of educational achievement recur.

Needed Research

1. The research cited above has been on small day schools serving homogeneous Indian populations. What is not evident from those findings is the nature of the patterns which emerge among Indian children in boarding establishments, be these ordinary schools, or schools for children from

disrupted families, or reform schools. Most boarding schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs serve tribally heterogeneous populations and have larger numbers than the small rural schools. Presuming that establishments such as Flandreau, Chilocco, or Haskell Institute are going to be maintained, and granting that the peer climates are extremely important in determining the nature and extent of student adaptation and achievement, then it would seem of great importance to undertake empirical investigations.

Such studies as have been undertaken on Indian boarding schools have not penetrated into the peer society in order to present an insider's portrait of what life is actually like for the Indian children. Several studies of boarding schools have been conducted (e.g. that directed by the psychiatrist, Thaddeus Krush) but none has so far published reports of the kind in question. If intelligent action is to be undertaken to improve the quality of the Indian boarding schools, we need to know in detail and depth the nature of the experiences of the Indian participants, especially the nature of their peer social life. Meanwhile, in the absence of accurate reportage on boarding schools, a genre of muckraking literature had begun to appear which focusses on the occasional instances of abuse or tyrannical authoritarianism and thus serves to obfuscate the issue of just what is happening (positively and negatively) to the development of the Indian children. It could be argued that the research here outlined is necessary if the Bureau of Indian Affairs hopes to be able to cope with the criticisms being advanced by militant Indians. An objective portrait in depth conducted by outside scholars would have a multiplicity of uses.

2. What happens to Indian children from rural (or reservation) type backgrounds when they enter as individuals or small clusters into ethnically

integrated classroom situations, such as a consolidated school in a small city or a typical urban school in a metropolis. Does the previous socialization of these children into intense peer societies leave them incapacitated for an affective adaptation in this situation where they constitute so small and weak a minority? Do Indian children tolerate the integrated classroom better or worse if they enter as (a) individuals, (b) small groups of two or three, or (c) members of fairly sizable gangs (e.g. ten or more)? What are the implications of the foregoing for maintaining or dissolving the ethnically segregated schools of American Indians? 3. What about the performance of the Indian student in college? Again, here, what seems to be the optimal situation for educational achievement of the Indian student who derives from a rural ethnically segregated background -- what would be desirable in terms of a peer society for him? 4. Insofar as our concern is to focus on Indian children and their educational experiences, it would be very important to examine reformatories or other institutions for incarcerating juvenile delinquents. In some states, Indian children are represented among the populations of these institutions in numbers far beyond their relative proportion in the total. These institutions thus make a significant contribution (or lack of contribution) to the education of the Indian youngsters; and likewise it is the peer societies of such penal institutions which help to mold the character and responses of the Indians. The power which the peer societies of such institutions exert on their inmates has been well documented in a series of sociological studies (e.g. Goffman, Sykes).

Methodological Considerations

A. Indian populations, especially peer societies of young Indians, constitute one of the most difficult and fractious on whom to conduct research.

Some militant Indian groups have adopted the position that no research should be conducted on Indian peoples except by Indians; others condemn all research and demand that the monies be used for programs of welfare. Even in situations where such groups are not influential, it is nonetheless true that Indian adolescents may be extremely reluctant about discussing with external researchers the details of their lives in school and dormitory. At present, Indian students still respond docilely to self-administered questionnaires, but there is no predicting how long this will remain true, and in any case, such questionnaires are relatively imprecise instruments for reporting on the nature of peer societies. Necessarily, the basic methodological approach has to be community study type of research, including participant observation; this approach does not preclude survey sample techniques and the use of structured instruments, but it subordinates these to an ethnographic familiarity with the social situation.

There are several excellent examples of the use of this methodological approach: William Foote Whyte's Street Corner Society remains a classic study of a peer society; Elliot Liebow's Tally's Corner has been awarded prizes and has become an academic best-seller for the information that it throws on the lives and problems of lowerclass Blackmen; and Formal Education in an American Indian Community brought to visibility the active life of the peer society in the classrooms of Indian day schools. These various exemplars indicate that the best research procedure would involve relatively lengthy subprojects by small research teams, each perhaps (as in the case of Whyte or Liebow) consisting of a single graddate student at the doctoral level. Whyte succeeded because of the relationship he established with Doc; the Waxes because of their relationship with Robert V. Dumont, Jr., a gifted young man of Assiniboine-Sioux ancestry. Considering the vagaries of doctoral research projects,

the best procedure would be to invest in a number of subprojects, each involving a single student or pair of students, with each having modest funds adequate to pay for local assistants and with considerable autonomy. Among a half-dozen such subprojects, each modestly funded, there might be one or two that would redeem the cost of the entire effort. Naturally, it would be most appropriate to try to recruit Indian graduate students to undertake these projects, but this would not be absolutely essential. When these subprojects had been completed, it would then be possible for the Principal Investigator to review their findings in order to judge how survey or other techniques might be utilized in order to generalize the findings. Coincidental with the studies of boarding schools, there should be complimentary studies which interview samples of the parents (or parental kin) of the pupils, in order to discover their attitudes toward the schools and toward the placement of their children within them. If parents resent the boarding schools, or identify these schools as custodial -- or even penal -- institutions, this would be extremely important to ascertain.

B. For most investigators who have attempted it, research on Indians in urban areas has been a highly frustrating enterprise. Great difficulties surround any attempt to locate, enumerate, and in some way classify the Indians in the area. Lower-class Indians especially are often transient. Added to this is the problem of locating or identifying school age youngsters. Researchers who have discussed the situation with school administrators in cities like Denver or Tulsa find that, despite the presumed presence in the metropolitan area of fair numbers of Indians, the school system itself has records that identify only modest numbers of Indian children, and no school seems to have more than ten per cent of Indian children in its population.

If we can assume that longitudinal and demographic studies of Indian populations might be desirable, then it would be efficient in the long run to invest in computerized programs, using the resources of tribal rolls, federal school rolls, and other record systems in order to compile and maintain listing of numbers, ages, locations, and other background information concerning the number of significant Indian populations.

Meantime, however, the best procedure would be to focus not on particular urban school systems, but on Indian children of particular tribal and residential groupings whose members are migrating or otherwise involving themselves with urban life. These kinds of urban configurations would be best studied by local projects, handled through the medium of an institution of higher education located near or in the urban setting (e.g. the University of Colorado or the University of Denver vis a vis Denver) for in that case the project director could utilize a force of graduate students to trace down and interview the Indian families of the area, while he selects one or two of the team to observe in the school system, and a few of his best students to trace out the patterns of migration of particular children within and without schools.

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