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ABSTRACT

The struggle for self discovery is the major task of adolescent development. That struggle can be magnified by certain psychosocial forces which retard such ego identity development. American Indians share a centuries old, psychohistorical experience of massive disenfranchisement, powerlessness, and enforced dependency. Its symptomatic legacy is family disintegration, unemployment, alcoholism, and other suicidal behavior. For American Indian adolescents, who see such manifestations in their parents and tribes, it often triggers an unusually stormy adolescent struggle. The anticipated alienation, disorientation, and confusion of adolescence becomes magnified in the face of such negative identifications. This paper outlines a small group experience and the issues with which these young people deal, its efficacy and outcome. (Author)

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IDENTITY GROUPS
WITH
AMERICAN INDIAN ADOLESCENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The struggle for self discovery is the major task in adolescent development. One's ability to consolidate a personal sense of competence during this period establishes a strong foundation for adulthood. For whatever reasons, there is evidence that Indian children from latency through adolescence frequently get into difficulty both educationally and behaviorally. They fall progressively below the national norms on scholastic achievement tests, and more often than not, drop out, withdraw and act out.^{1,2,3} I believe that certain psychosocial failures dictate an intensified adolescent identity crisis which unchecked, often lead to pathologic adaptation. This paper describes the use of small "T" groups with high school students. The groups primary task is dealing with the identity crisis and its special aspects for American Indian adolescents.

CONCEPT OF EGO IDENTITY OF AMERICAN INDIAN ADOLESCENTS

The concept of ego, identity, elaborated by Erickson^{4,5} holds that the resolution of the identity crisis is the major task of adolescent development and that this conceptualization transcends culture, society or historical era. The ego identity is the major organizing principle of the ego's functioning and is the mechanism by which an individual grows and deals with others. There are three distinct aspects of the ego identity: a personal identity, a group identity and an ideological identity. On all three parameters, Indian adolescents suffer severely.

The etiology of such suffering has been unclear. Early child development among the tribes of the Southwest have in the past indicated that until latency ages Indian children perform intellectually and learn; are socially competent within the extended family structure; that developmental tasks have been accomplished without trauma and that relationships and interactions among family and relatives have been established.^{4,6,7,8} Conclusions, therefore, that the early stages of development were satisfactory seem to have been warranted. But, if childhood is the bedrock on which adolescence rests, what can one make of the discrepancy in terms of such a marginal negotiation of adolescence. Indian adolescents are, dropping out of high school and college with frequency, perform below average on educational achievement tests, are under or unemployed, have high substance abuse rates and feel generally powerless to change things.² In fact, the idyllic child experiences described by others are becoming an increasing rarity.^{4,7,9} The images of noble red men at one with nature in psychohistorical continuity with ancestral ways, and resisting the material intrusions of the white man's world are all a jaded myth. This generation of Indian adolescent for all intent and purpose, no longer has any personal recollection of the impressive dignity of his forebearers. They see only the remains of a confusing century with its policies of material and spiritual conversions, its broken treaties, unkept promises, gross discrimination and oft-voiced promise of liberation.

Those children who are thriving best are either total traditionalists, imbibed from birth with a traditional psychohistorically continuous culture,

common language and integral family structures, or those totally acculturated and assimilated children whose values and demeanor mirror those of the dominant culture. In fact, both of those extremes are unusual and most Indian people fall between those ends of the spectrum. Increasingly, with population expansions, growth of urban centers, public education, and television, the old line traditionalists are slowly disappearing and by the year 2000 I believe, will exist only in the minds of men.

In the school population from which this data is gathered, total traditionalists and urbanized adolescents represent only a small percentage of the Indian studentry, but they represent a disproportionately high percentage in the ranks of those who do well both academically and behaviorally. They do well I believe because their feet are firmly planted in soil nurtured by internal/external value consistency—this who you are, this what you are, this is your uniqueness and this is what you believe. For most Indian children the experience of a separate, unique and valuable image of self is a rarity and it is that quest that is their crucial psychosocial task. It is the psychohistorical discontinuity with the traditional past that fosters identity and role confusion. In a very real sense it is not solely an adolescent phenomenon. Most tribal groups suffer from such confusion and we are witnessing, in the ennui of the last generation, a protracted tribal identity crisis. A psychosocial moratorium exists, with most American Indians hanging suspended between a long but psychically discontinuous past of meaning and importance, a presence of disorganization and dependency, and a future filled with promises of self-

determination. Since colonization and control by the white man, the Indian has been left with little positive ideology with which to identify. Such identity and ideological confusion are reflected among today's Indian youth as intellectual turning off and emotional dropping out.

The identity crisis transcends chronologic age and can become a ubiquitous, life-long phenomenon. For American Indians, its resolution is too often represented by complete capitulation and abandonment of a unique identity of pride and worth. Mindell,¹⁰ in his experience with Indian pre-schoolers asked a class to draw a picture of their town and its people and each drew some representation of bars and drunken Indians. The incorporation of such negative images occurs very early in life and is responsible in many ways for the absence of any group coalescence and power. Rather, such an identity has fostered enormous dependency on outside sources (usually federal) who take care of American Indians from birth to death. That dependency on the beneficent "giver" of services, fosters a counterfeit nurturance syndrome whereby the giver by giving, in fact takes something away. By giving, one takes away a sense of ones ability to do for oneself it renders one powerless feeling worthless and helpless. The sadness is that its ultimate aftermath is self destructive behavior and a perpetuation of identity confusion.¹¹

AN IDENTITY GROUP FOR INDIAN ADOLESCENTS

Identity confusion, although the negative stage of the identity crisis, is described as normative when confined to adolescence. It is a conflict which Erickson has characterized as being a "crucial period

of increased vulnerability and heightened potential." The groups aim is that through peer participation one can foster identity crisis resolution. I share an intellectual commitment to a humanistic psychoanalytic frame of reference employing role experimentation, fantasy and dream elaboration,¹² with the heart of a social revolutionist who uses games and confrontations to stimulate energy for change. The primary task addresses the question--Who am I? What do I believe in? and Where am I going? As group leader I provide encouragement, challenge, an impetus seaching and new resolutions through the making of decisions, developing choices and taking a stand. The group from which the data derive comprise 8-15 boarding high school students including young men and women aged sixteen through twenty. Students participated in the groups as an elective course entitled "Human Relations" which met once weekly for two hours and for which they received $\frac{1}{2}$ credit upon completion after six months. I have conducted the groups over the past two years. I shared with the group that to learn about behavior, groups, and ourselves, that we would study our own interaction.

Attendance at boarding schools is predicated on Bureau of Indian Affairs eligibility criteria. Included here are educational criteria such as no other available local school; more than three years educational retardation; and bilingual language difficulties. There are also so-called social criteria including a myriad of behavior problems, family problems, and failure to thrive in other schools. The majority of students could go to school elsewhere and are referred for social reasons. The

school therefore sees a highly skewed sample of studentry. The schools failure to define its primary task either as educational or behavior control adversely affects both the quality of education and life at the schools, as I have previously described.²

THE PROCESS OF THE GROUP

1. Who Speaks for the Indian

The hierarchy of verbal participation is strikingly similar to reported data on school performance by Indian children.¹³ Off-reservation children with public school experience were most talkative, children raised and living on reservation most reticent.

We see this phenomenon, parenthetically, in recent militant movements with the most militant Indian spokesmen almost invariably being partially blooded, and urban raised. The reservation Indian has for a century retreated to the safety of isolated communities to resist the white intruder and such sentiments still abound. Those Indians most likely to remain on reservations are those whose perceptions of the white man and urban life are hostile, repressive, cruel and insensitive. Feelings which are reinforced by brethren who returned to the reservation unable to assimilate into the dominant culture. Such self-selective processes reinforce the dichotomy between urban and reservation Indian groups. The urban, generally acculturated Indian, speaks English at home and it is the first and usually only language of his children. Although both urban and reservation groups

share tremendous anger at the White world, it is the urban Indian with skill in language and who, seeing the effect of the urban Black movement of the 60's, uses it to speak out.

Returning to the small group, it is also the case that in silence there is power and that reluctance to participate in the group its silent members control the interaction. It is through the discussion of the phenomenon that "some of the people do most of the talking" that the intragroup confrontation begins. The quiet members rarely interpret that statement by the more vocal members as a stimulus to more animated participation. Rather, the more urbanized members sensing leader support for articulation, vent anger at their silent colleagues.

URBANITES: "This is a class, how come you guys ain't talking-- this is the way it always is--don't you guys have any feelings."

RESERVATION ADOLESCENTS: "You guys bullshit just like the White man--talk, talk, talk--"

URBANITES: "If we are going to do something for our people, we're going to have to learn the White man's game and beat him at it."

RESERVATION STUDENTS: "Don't say our people, you don't know anything about our people. You've never lived with us and you can't even speak with us."

Each group tries to convince the other of its righteousness, the invariable outcome of which is an inability to come together to pursue

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any issues of commonality.

Yet the exchange strikes concordant notes in both groups. The urban Indian adolescent may recognize the need but often resents his parents decision to leave their reservation communities; they wish to speak their native tongues and be familiar with lore and ritual and lament its loss. The reservation student recognizes but resents his urban brothers scholastic success, verbal facility and sophistication. The result at the school, which is a microcosm of the enmities and tribal divisions which exist elsewhere, is not an amelioration of difficulties but rather an attack on the others legitimacy. The groups task is the recognition that a person is not all one thing and not another and that continuing to make believe only services to perpetuate antagonisms and identity diffusion. Such an exchange must lead to an operationalizing of such understanding. Students understand that such hardening of lines (Who is really an Indian.) prevents any group coalescence and recognize its counter-productive, divisive quality. That theme then becomes the groups major focus.

CAH: Is this the kind of thing that happens a lot when Indian people get together?

Peter: We cut each other down a lot.

John: Even in our own tribes we do it to each other. Maybe one part of the village against another or different families.

May: What we do here is the same stuff that always happens at home. I think that's why we're like this—cutting each others down.

CAH: It sounds like one way of handling being put down yourself is to put others down.

Pat: Hey man! You see your family totaled on booze nights, weekends and rodeos whenever--it makes me feel someways--shitty because that's what I am too.

CAH: You see it, you feel it, and then lay it on everyone else which keeps'em put down.

2. Anger Directed Outward

The personal expression of anger is a crucial time for any, but especially a transcultural groups survival. When one gets angry at the object or the person where it is really intended instead of keeping it in and destroying oneself, it serves a dual purpose. It humanizes the previously fantasized inviolable oppressor rendering him vulnerable, and it serves as the nucleus for group coalescence. It should be noted that the feeling that Whitemen are different, to be feared, and responsible for Indian oppression, are shared by most Indian people and those feelings differ not in kind between any Indian group only in degree.

CAH: It's been clear for some time that you've been talking about White men as if there were no White man in this group.

Eldon: Eh! We're not talking about you, you're cool.

I have found this an oft encountered impasse in transcultural and interracial groups,¹⁴ there is some more comfort in dealing abstractly with the "White man" than confronting his personal embodiment.

Yet only by experiencing a personal confrontation can one really experience his own liberation. The oft-expressed desire for Black therapists with Black clients, Indian therapists with Indian clients, etc., as facilitating the groups process is I believe, exaggerated. It may facilitate easier entry, but mixed racial leadership provides different grist for the therapeutic mill. The effectiveness of groups has infinitely more to do with the leaders style and personal qualities than some arbitrary accident of racial fate. My experience suggests that the leaders racial difference is extremely important in providing the nidus for intragroup coalescence and perceived power through personal confrontation. I capitalize on my racial difference by using it in games and fantasy trips to trigger personal exchanges. I become a white wagonmaster "conquering" the West; a cavalry officer at Wounded Knee; a trader who has bilked the tribe; then a missionary; a teacher at an Indian school and closer and closer to home. They ask, "What am I really doing at the school?" "Couldn't I get a job elsewhere?" "Am I another rip-off artist sucking Indians dry?" "You're only doing this to get material for a book." The confrontations can be, and are, painful--I believe them a necessary equalizer.

3. Encountering Their Identity

We have dealt by now in the group both with who am I and what do I see and believe, but the real power of "identity" becomes operational with group direction and a shared clarity of some ideological stance. Having focused the anger outwardly and feeling good about

their subsequent survival they feel the power of group cohesiveness. Using the shared group experience and its confrontations we move to this operational translation in the outside world. The group decides for example, to blockade, a crucial staircase leading into the academic buildings by interlocking their arms. They decide to let fellow students pass if they try, but not teachers and other staff. They become aware of their interdependence, the confrontations increase their resolve--push comes to shove, they hold. Interestingly, it is the Indian student and staff member who generally avoid such confrontations as they have undoubtedly learned to avoid others because of eventual subjugation. The group can personalize such avoidances in their own behavior especially when confronting any invested authority with its perceived inviolability and its capability of retribution. To see and to hear about powerlessness and dependent feelings is one thing but to have experienced it is to really understand it.

WHAT DOES THE GROUP DO AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN

4. Changes

I am posting a simple viewpoint--there is a failure in psychosocial development of Indian adolescents. That failure is the non-resolution of the identity crisis. Its determinants are the failure to provide an atmosphere of psychohistorical meaningfulness and personal worth in being Indian.

Most American Indian tribes have not solved the problems of their identities since their subjugation and colonization by the white man.

Having failed to redefine their current lives to bring them into juxtaposition with their historical achievements, the tribes are forced to confront the recurrent ghost of the identity crisis. Stated otherwise there are no positive role models to help resolve ones identity. Its expression in the adolescent is thus only a reflection of a total tribal crisis.

American Indian tribes learned a century ago that their acceptance, indeed their survival, was predicated on conducting themselves in accordance with the desires of others. The Indians place in the social order has dictated both his conduct and the treatment he can expect. His individual social fate has been that of his tribal group; one of federal nurturance with its attendant dependency, humiliation, and powerlessness.

For a hundred years there had been little other collective identity from which the Indian derives stature. Identity is rooted in the social order--for any change to occur in Indian identity there must be a change in the existing social order. That change will come when the Indian redefines his socially valued past history of dependency to one of personal powerfulness and control of his own destiny.

Such personally perceived power can be achieved in small group settings, but it is a painful struggle for both members and leaders. The therapist must maintain a sense of competence and usefulness in spite of the overwhelming sense of cultural devastation. The

therapist must realize that the hopeless use hopelessness as a defense against change and unconsciously seek to render the therapist hopeless for the same reason. Yet the group can undo the protective responses that people develop toward despair and resignation. Also leadership must attempt to reshape it through some gut-shaking strategies and confrontations that are capable of producing change.

Those students who go on to school have found the group particularly helpful, those who returned home are, most often, suffering. They suffer in every way from the dependency syndrome I have described. They felt that to create a group in the artificial confines of a school without familiar, personal and tribal pressures was a far cry from recreating that experience in an Indian world. At home they give up, surrendering to the counterfeit nurturant which seems easier than the revolution of locking arms and making change.

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