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Mental Health: American Indian Tribal Societies

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Our moderator, Dr. Red Horse, asked me to present a piece on mental health in American Indian tribal societies. I suppose I should warn you at the outset that I am an anthropologist. I’m not a psychologist or a psychiatrist so if I misuse any psychiatric terms I beg your indulgence.

First, I want to present to you what I think are some important social characteristics of North American Indian societies; and the kind of person socialized in such a social context. I've done field work in quite a few North American Indian groups so that this material is distilled from data collected in many tribal groups. I will pick out only those characteristics which are important to my argument and ignore others. Further, these characteristics that I will be presenting are more typical of Indians in "aboriginal times", before there was too much contact with Europeans. More, this "portrait" will be an ideal portrait, not ideal in the sense of good, but ideal in the sense of extreme. I want to elucidate some five characteristics.

The first characteristic of North American Indian communities is that they are kin based. Now that probably doesn't come as a surprise to anyone, except to emphasize that the kin relationship was the only relationship in most North American Indian communities. The only person that a tribal Indian saw in his community until very recently was a kinsman. Everyone around you was a kinsman. The local unit, or community, of North American Indian groups varied in population size from about 100-300. Such a population means that one lived in intimate association throughout one's entire life with a very small number of people who had a specified, predictable, structured relationship to you. Your cousin doesn't ever become your sister. Your brother doesn't become your uncle. Your brother remains your brother from the time he is born, or you are born, until you die. The only thing that happens as you grow older is that you have more relatives. When you are an old man in a tribal society, you are literally the father of the people.

These kin ties are a network of relationships. They are not a structure of role reciprocities. These relationships are not impersonal and contractual. They are literally a network of relationships. In modern American society, husband and wives are now making contracts. Commonly, one hears talk about the role of the wife or the father. I remember when I first became aware of this feature of American culture, about 1948. I would read articles in
magazines about how to be a wife. And my response was, "Whose"? Well, it doesn't make any difference. One can be a wife without reference to a particular husband, except for confirming purposes. That's a role. One is "into" such a role, and you "do" it. This type of interaction is characteristic of modern society. This is not the case in tribes. Relationships there are mutual and personal. A personal relationship is one which is unique, familiar, holistic, particular, emotive, and definitive. For instance, there's nobody quite like your brother. He's unique. You know your brother intimately. You treat him in a holistic manner; you don't treat him partially. He isn't like a waitress, where all you have to know in order to get food is that person's role function. That's a partial relationship. Your brother is a whole person. You know your brother in the particular. You communicate primarily emotively with your brother. Lastly, your brother's relationship to you is definitive; he tells you who you are, you can't ignore your brother. If he doesn't like you, that hurts. When he does like you? That gives you a certain reward.

In aboriginal times and even today Indian communities were small; 100-300 kinsmen who lived together in intimate circumstances from birth to death. One has to get along with those relatives, so that almost by the nature of the case relationships have to be, at least overtly, harmonious. There is a lot of covert hostility in many American Indian groups, but it can't be brought out into the open. Those kin relationships cannot be broken.

Institutions, that is, those organizations a human community erects in order to do some task for itself, education of the young or whatever it might be, is in tribal societies simply an arrangement of relatives to do a particular task. And if one looks closely at those institutions, we will see that they follow the social form of the particular tribal society, of that kin relationship. If a tribe is organized by clans, then one will see representation by clan in tribal councils, a governmental institution. In a military institutions, perhaps, uncles might sponsor their nephews in war activity. Thus, all institutions in a tribe are kinsman arranging themselves together to accomplish some task. New institutions emerge. They are not planned. In modern urban life, when people perceive a task they first plan- the most efficient organization to accomplish that task, fit themselves into the role slots of the newly created organization, then they take on the task. In tribal societies people first take on the task then the form of the organization emerges. After it continues for a few years it will become sacredly sanctioned. If that institution lasts a generation, it will become traditional.
Now, if I am correct so far in my analysis then you can "sense" the kind of person that emerges in this kind of society. For one thing, this is a person who sees himself as fixed and basically unchanging, perhaps emergent, but neither self-improving nor eroding. One can become a better brother, perhaps, but one can't become a non-brother nor can one volunteer to be an uncle. One can't work toward being a grandfather when one has no grandchildren. That is impossible, of course.

When I was a little kid I went to school. After a couple of years I could understand the language of my white teacher. One day she said to me, "What are you going to be when you grow up, Bobby?" I didn't know what she meant. I mean, what's there to be? Bigger? Well, of course, that wasn't what she was really asking me. She was asking me what occupational goal are you going to choose after which to model and create your self. Later she said, "Bobby, you are an awfull~bright boy, but you will never be able to better yourself here in eastern Oklahoma. You will have to leave here." I studied what that might mean. I thought, perhaps, that it might mean that my kinfolk, and thus my own self, weren't any good. Why else would I have to leave? "Because, she said, "there's no opportunity here." Not the opportunity for what? Well, to "better" myself by working toward that occupational goal!

In tribal groups not only is the human being seen as fixed, but a child has an innate feeling of self-worth, just by virtue of those kin circumstances. One of the features of a definitive relationship is that there is either a lot of love or hate or both involved in it. If there is a lot of love, then, a child in a tribal society has an unquestioned sense of self-worth. Most of the deftnition of who you are explicitly comes from that kin network. If you would ask me about socialization, for instance, in a tribal society I would be very hard put to hypothesize stages or even to say when it ends. In such a society, for instance, learning is so experiential t~at you finally have to learn how to be an old man. And in fact, a lot of older Indians resist becoming elders, because an elder must assume heavy responsibilities. But one becomes an elder as others relate to you in that way. You finally surrender and become an elder and responsible for "the people". So if you would ask me where does socialization stop, I would be very hard put to say, or to set up stages of socialization.

The major social control mechanism in American tribes has been label led by outsiders as "withdrawal"; that is to say, Indians withdraw from somebody who Ts "out of line". I don't think that is exactly what is happening. Rather it Ts that Indians deny access of self to errant
individuals. When you deny access to your self to someone whom you define you can "wipe them out". If you have ever watched an Indian mother start to ignore her badly behaving child, then you have seen how quickly that child "gets in line". All of you can logically imagine what a potent social control mechanism "withdrawal" is, if that definitive kin system is stable. So much for my first characteristic of American Indian societies.

The second characteristic of Indian groups is that these societies are traditional societies. By tradition I mean a body of knowledge that has been accumulated over time by a societal group and which regulates life. There's very little authority among North American Indian tribes mainly because authority is vested in tradition, not persons. You can get in very big trouble in North American Indian tribes if you try to tell your relatives what to do. They don't like it. The people who have the social power to direct that society, elders, direct by referring to tradition, by and large. They will say, "You know, the old people said...." This indirection is supposed to give you the necessary guidance. If there is something new happening in a tribal society and one doesn't have any traditions for guidance, then a decision must be made on the basis of consensus, mutual agreement. And everybody has to agree overtly even though a silent minority may not really go along with the majority. In a well regulated tribe most decisions are traditional ones. They are not based on consensus because there is not that much new that comes up, until modern times.

Now that body of tradition is usually thought of as by tribal people in North America as "the Law", or "the Way" or "the Rule" or what have you. That Law or that Way or Rule is outside of the person. It's not inside, as your relatives aren't inside of you; they're outside of you. One pays attention to one's relatives and to the Law. Internal guides and control are little developed in North American Indian tribes. Guides and rules and controls are outside the individual. Individuals may have "motivations" but they very rarely ever regulate their behavior by an ideology, or a code, or some internal goal, or what have you. Most regulation for the person comes outside of the self.

In a pristine, aboriginal tribe in North America there were no alternatives. This doesn't mean that such a society was conformist, it simply means that since everyone has primarily the same experience, then there was a consensus on how to proceed, about what tradition was, what it was that the old people had to say, what had to be followed.
A person who sees his nature as fixed and is without tradition behaves erratically. If you
don't have kinfolk to frown at you and if you don't have a body of tradition to follow, you act
erratically. One of the reasons why there are corrupt governments in Africa and on Indian
reservations\(^1\) where everybody puts their hand in the till up to their elbow, is that officials have
no kin folks around to scowl at them when they are dishonest. That kind of personality needs the
structure of those kin relations, both to be definitive and as a social control and as a support and
as a guide. The kin network and those traditions work hand in glove with one another. In fact the
social form of that kin group is, of course, part of the tradition of people.

The third characteristic is that Indian societies are sacred societies. Tradition is sacredly
sanctioned. In fact, to talk about tradition per se is really a distortion. Tradition is sacred like
everything else. Life is sacred. Everything is meaningful. There is nothing dead in the tribal
world. If you walk out of the house in the morning and you see a stone in the yard that's got a
peculiar shape to it, then you pick it up because it is, no doubt, an omen of some kind. It has
meaning. The universe has order, it has reciprocity, it is alive, it is moral, it has meaning. And
that's everywhere. There is nothing dead in a tribal world and nothing without meaning to the
person. It is the realm of the sacred that is causal. If you ask an old Papago why the country is
drying up, he might tell you it is because the Papago don't put on rain ceremonies like they once
did. In other words, that's what's causing the lack of rain. Immoral human agency in the sacred is
what is conceived of as causal.

The fourth characteristic is that those small communities of American Indians are
extraordinarily responsive to the physical or natural environment. If one examines the customs of
any particular tribal groups, one can see that their culture reflects a certain natural environment--
the houses, the marriage customs, whatever. If corn is introduced into a society where women
have control over plants, they will no doubt take over gardening. The best marriage arrangement
then is to leave them at their fields and you go over there and live with them, if you are a man.
That's what is called a matrilineal lineage in anthropology. And that social form reflects a
certain "environment". What are called culture areas in North America, areas where tribes have
customs in common, are tied to particular natural environments. As an individual is responsive
to kin folks and tradition outside of themselves so that little community is responsive to its
physical environment. Now, in modern times an Indian community can be very responsive to
social environment, as well.
My fifth characteristic is that, always under aboriginal condition, those small communities are bounded and closed by definition. Strangers just do not come around. Strangers are enemies or non-entities. The only expertise that is relied on is the experience over time of the closed social group. Most strangers who might come around are non-kin and couldn't speak the local language to begin with. So it is, by definition, that you take into account only those meanings that your society has learned over time. This fifth characteristic is a most important one, modernly.

When Europeans came, some southern tribes had already developed priesthoods; that is to say, elders whose specific job it was to think about the destiny of the people. These priesthoods started worrying about the possible destructive impact of the European presence. They began to close off their societies so that new meanings could not come in and disrupt tradition, or at least so that the elders could be selective about European ideas. Those tribes who made that hard choices particularly those among the southwestern and eastern tribes, are in fairly good social shape because they have not allowed alternatives and conflicting meanings and definitions to freely enter those societies. Tribes who have not done so are in bad social shape, generally speaking.

Most Indian societies, however, did not close off and begin to monitor foreign influences when European civilization entered North America. Quite the opposite! The presence of Europeans "naturally" opened up these societies to the outside, and sometimes disruptive influence as Indians set up new relations with outsiders – officials, settlers, trappers, the military, etc. More, the Fur Trade effectively tied Indian societies in northern North America into the European economy very early.

I have seen this process, this "opening up" or partially incorporation by an outside society, happen to some Indian groups in my lifetime; usually by way of the school system. The situation among the North Carolina Cherokee comes most strikingly to my mind. In this recently "opened" tribal society the difference between verbalized values and actual behavior is vast. I had a friend there who told me one day that "the Indians will never get anywhere as long as they keep on helping out all their relatives who won't work." We were sitting on his front porch and right at that moment his son-in-law was carrying away a load of groceries from my friend's kitchen. My friend is a moral Cherokee and, of course, he will not cease to share with his son-in-
law. On the other hand, that "official" attitude, which I am sure is sincere, reflects just the opposite morality and comes by way of white teachers in his school years.

I know an older Cherokee there in North Carolina who was quite influential in Cherokee affairs there. He decided that, as he told me, "We need a chief around here who will run things in a business-like way." There was one man on the reservation who was a good business man and who came from a prominent, traditional Cherokee family. This man had political ambitions and my elderly and influential friend, John, decided to "back him" for chief. John campaigned very hard for his candidate and, sure enough, this Indian business man became chief. Shortly after the election I saw my friend John on the road. He seemed very angry. I asked him what was wrong. He said, "I went up to the tribal office this morning to see our chief and a young Indian girl at the desk there asked me if I had an appointment." He said, "I don't have to have no appointment to see our chief. You know, that's not the way a chief is supposed to act." "Well," I said, "you know, John, you wanted things run in a business-like way. Well, you got it." Now you see that kind of ambivalent behavior in the extreme in tribes that are open. Such "value conflict" causes frustration, confusion, feelings of inadequacy, breaks down social control, and so forth.

Those tribes who closed up and began to worry about their social and conceptual boundaries also began to institute new forms of social control to deal with new problems. For instance, if you go to a ceremony at most Creek Indian stomp grounds you will encounter three men at the outskirts of the stomp ground. One will be a medicine man and the other two rather formidable looking men will be guards. They will stop your car and if there's any woman in that car that the medicine man feels is in her menses or anyone drinking, they'll turn your car around and make you leave. Drinking is so socially destructive that the Creek priesthood has instituted such control. If you somehow get past those guards and you get on to the stomp grounds drunk, you will be tied to a post there and you'll stay there until the middle of the next day. Not every Creek stomp ground is this "strict" but a great many of them are.

Other tribes have built controls against drinking into the very definition of who you are and who the people are. Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma don't drink and fall down on the street. That's out! That makes you a non-Cherokee. If you do that Cherokees avoid you and look at you like you are a maniac. And that hurts! The "high prestige" tribe does- not fall drunk on the street. That's all. So that attitude is being built right into -ho we are as Cherokees by that
priesthood. Those old men; their job is to think about the destiny of the people and that's what they're doing.

Let me talk a little about deviancy. Most tribes can stand a lot of deviancy as long as it isn't socially destructive. Tribal groups are not conformists. If you evidence strange behavior, that is not socially destructive, you will be allowed to be "strange". There's all kinds of supports for this seemingly permissive attitude. For instance, if someone doesn't show up for a ceremony where he's required to be, you might think "Perhaps he has had a dream that told him not to come." But deviant behavior doesn't call anyone in a tribe into question, because no tribal operates on an ideological basis. New Englanders in the 1700's must have had an ideology about which people had grave doubts because they seem compelled to smash everybody who didn't conform to that ideology. The same way seems true of Catholic officialdom in Spain in the 1500's. Tribal groups are not ideological, they are not called into question by deviant behavior. Therefore, you can allow deviant behavior as long as it isn't socially destructive.

In the American suburbs everybody "goes up the wall" if you don't wear just the right kind of clothes, one of the motors of western civilization, as you know, is self-doubt. That's the reason we go out and build careers and rocket ships and fortunes and empires. But tribal groups don't have that kind of self-doubt. For one thing, no tribal is creating their own self. You just are; you are finished and complete and whole and there you are. This is especially true of relatively unacculturated, "old times" tribal groups.

Now let's turn to mental health and mental illness in the Indian tribe. I don't know how common mental illness was in aboriginal times nor what types of mental illness occurred then. However, in a lot of Indian communities now one sees a lot of very chaotic and erratic behavior, to say the least--incest, juvenile crime, alcoholism, family trouble, etc. I would lay much of that human trouble simply to a lack of boundaries in those Indian communities; communities that have not yet firmed up their boundaries and where elders have not yet successfully monitored outside influences. In some tribes such monitoring may not be possible now. Other tribes seem to be simply in a transition period, perhaps socially "jarred" hard by western civilization, but in another generation could very well restabilize themselves. In some tribes, the dye is cast. For Cn5tance, the Chippewa tribe has shown pronounced instability for too many years for a social rebirth in the tribal mode. However, in all Indian communities whether they are stable or unstable, there are certain kinds of mental trouble which is usually handled very well; anxiety
and depression. Indian doctors are phenomenal at handling anxiety and depression. I have seen patients shaking to pieces go through an Indian ceremony and come out the next morning with their cheeks blooming and their eyes sparkling. I'm sure any of the Indians here know of many such cases. It's very common. Indian doctors are very successful with anxiety and depression. One sees less anxiety and depression in the more stable, traditional tribes. But even in tribes that are not stable, medicine men are very successful in curing such ills.

Now there appears to be a strong paranoid component in most North American Indian normal behavior. If you're that cued into your relatives you are going to be a little paranoid. But I don't see that "paranoia" usually reaching abnormal proportions among Indian tribals. Some psychiatrists have commented that there seems to be a schizophrenic component, too, in Indian behavior. I think that is a grave error, bad observation. If you have to keep alert and make sure that you're getting along with your kin folks, you have to "lay back" and observe. You can't be coming on like gangbusters all the time. So what appears to be catatonic behavior is mis-observation. Tribal Indians may be low key and low cue people, but very much social beings, certainly not catatonic. The "paranoia," however, is normal in such a personality and culture. People who are knowledgeable in these regards tell me that the most common psychoses among North American Indian groups is manic-depressive behavior. I have seen such kinds of behavior in individual Indians, particularly during drinking bouts. Usually manic-depressive behavior is not conceived as sickness in the medical theory of most Indian groups.

Anxiety and depression, on the other hand, are usually perceived of as sickness and can be cured. Manic-depression behavior is not. It is usually thought of simply as odd behavior. What Indians do with anti-depressives (if that's what they are) is that they move away from them and give them plenty of social room until such deviants start to really give everyone trouble, then the group will start to try to contain them. Most Indian groups, specifically cure anxiety and depression, and contain manic-depressive behavior.

I suppose that manic-depressive behavior can get so far out of line that it requires treatment. I had a cousin that showed such behavior, (He's now dead.) He lived 70 years evidencing really "off the wall" manic-depressive behavior. He never got to the point where he needed hospitalization. Perhaps if a psychiatrist had seen him he would have been hospitalized. But we just kind of "plowed around" him. For example he'd come over to the house when we were eating, sit at the table and laugh like a fool. We couldn't carry on a conversation. If he got
too bad, the ladies would get up and leave or they would evidence harsher disapproval. They would say, "Hah, Ned" the ladies, in particular, would box him in and would keep him a little bit under control. My cousin lived to be about 75, evidencing what was to us very odd behavior. I think that if a psychiatrist had seen him he would have been hospitalized. But he functioned without too much trouble in Cherokee tribal society. It would be my guess that if he hadn't been in that kind of social context he would have "flipped right out," but he was both rewarded and contained at the same time.

Let me sum up by saying that there is a particular kind of person that comes into being in North American Indian tribal groups, a kind of person who emerges from the circumstances that I have described and who needs a particular kind of context in which to be mentally healthy. When that context is broken, then that person gets into trouble. I think half the Indians in American cities ought to go home. That's my advice. Get out of here and go home! Otherwise, many are just going to rattle around and get in trouble. Many young Indian men are like a rock in a hubcap. If they aren't bumping into the bureaucracy and getting entangled in it, they are getting in trouble with the law. It's always something! Mainly because there's no structure here for them. There are no guides. For young Indians a city can be a cafeteria of pleasure. Nobody tells you not to do something or to do something, so you just do whatever is most pleasure able, whatever the consequences. One can get in very bad trouble in the city that way.

Tribal Indians need a certain kind of milieu in order to flourish as human beings. That milieu is successful in both curing mental illness and containing it as well, it allows tremendous deviancy. Indian societies do not contain too quickly. I think that if a person has anxiety or depression in a society that is too conformist, then those anxieties and depressions will be increased. All of the above factors make for successful tribal societies in North America. Indeed, most societies in this world had lived out most of their history before social work or psychiatry was ever thought of.

In modern times, however, we have created a non-society. The United States is not a society. It is a group of individuals maximizing their self interests, held together by law and institution. When you create a non-society you are going to create social, psychic, and spiritual trouble. If you pull people from a stable society into a non-society, you're going to increase that trouble. If you take a stable society and you erode it by contact with a non-society, you're just
going to give that "stable" society trouble. This is not to say that American industrial society isn't productive in a great many ways, just because it is a mass of maximizing individuals. But if that's what you've got, maximizing individuals, held together by Institution and law, then you are certainly not only going to create psyche trouble for these mystified individuals, but also for all those others, like tribal Indians, who are not of that kind of person hood.