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American Indians and White People

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future course of Indian communities, whether on or off of reservation lands, appears to be desirable.

It is important not only to recognize the need for Indian leadership and full participation in policy making, but also to identify specific Indian wants and desires. To remedy the unusual situation of prolonged dependent status in American society requires extraordinary effort and understanding on the part of the non-Indian population. As a recent task force report of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States said, "Indian spokesmen have stated Indian wants. They want to retain their culture. They want to be consulted and to have a real voice in decisions relating to themselves. They want to retain their reservation lands. And Indians want to enter modern economic life and enjoy its advantages. The Task Force supports these legitimate aspirations of Indian Americans. The Task Force further believes the public has a special and continuing national responsibility to see that the opportunities and rewards of society are fully extended to these citizens."⁵

Genuine acculturation of the Indian people can be promoted only when they play their full part in the life of the larger society. When rural Indian Americans come to feel they have not only a real stake in the future of America, but a responsibility, and the ability, to contribute to it, they will then be able to lift themselves out of poverty of spirit. Meanwhile, the rest of society can help by finding a way to remove the conditions that produce material poverty. Achieving these twin objectives will then lend credence to the phrase *Indian Americans*.

NOTES

- 1 Brandon, William, *The American Heritage Book of Indians* (Dell Publ. Co., New York, 1964). See also, "Indian, North America," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 12, 1957 edition and references cited therein, p. 209.
- 2 U.S. Census of Population, 1960, PC (2) IC, Nonwhite Population by Race, Subject Reports.
- 3 Statement supplied by Bureau of Indian Affairs, pp. xi-xii and p. 1.
- 4 Nader, Ralph, "Lo, the Poor Indian," *The New Republic*, Mar. 30, 1968, quoting Professor Gary Orfield of the Univ. of Virginia, p. 15.
- 5 Chamber of Commerce of the United States, *Rural Poverty and Regional Progress in an Urban Society*, Task Force on Economic Growth and Opportunity, Fourth Report, 1969.

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THOMAS: AMERICAN INDIANS
AND WHITE PEOPLE

As the Hughes have pointed out, when peoples come into troublesome contact with each other, popular and scholarly attention is usually focused on only one of them. Thus the relationship between Indians and the persons of European extraction, known as whites, is commonly termed the "Indian problem." While these authors agree that such emphasis is natural, they call attention to the fact that the unit of racial or ethnic relations is no single people, but the situation—the frontier of contact of the two or more peoples inhabiting a community or region.¹

This paper is an attempt to describe one of the more intimate aspects of just such a frontier situation, namely, what happens when American Indians and white people meet in the course of their day-to-day activities and try to communicate with each other. It does not attempt to define the major areas of difference between Indian and white American culture or personality, nor does it discuss the major reasons for conflict and hostility between the two, but rather tries to explain how and why they find talking to each other difficult. It is, therefore, directed as much to the Indian as to the white reader.

We are aware that there are significant differences in behavior and personality among the various kinds of Indians and, likewise, among the various kinds of white men, and that interesting exceptions may possibly be found to all of our generalizations. Nevertheless, our observations have convinced us that most white men who live in the United States share ideas and practices about proper behavior that are very different from those shared by most Indians.

Social discourse is one of the areas where Indians and whites most easily misunderstand each other. Placed in an informal social gathering, such as a small party where he knows only the host, the Indian will usually sit or stand quietly, saying nothing and seeming to do nothing. He may do this so naturally that he disappears into the background, merging with the wall fixtures. If addressed directly, he will not look at the speaker; there may be considerable delay before a reply, and this may be pitched so softly as to be below the hearing threshold of the white interlocutor; he may even look deliberately away and give no response at all.

In this same situation, the white man will often become undiscourageably loquacious. A silent neighbor will be peppered with small shop talk in the hope that one of his rounds will trigger an exchange and a conversational engagement. If the neighbor happens to be an Indian, his

protracted silence will spur the white to ever more extreme exertions; and the more frantic the one becomes the less the response he is likely to elicit from the other.

Ironically, both parties are trying hard to establish communication and good feeling. But, like Aesop's would-be friends, the crane and the fox, each employs devices that puzzle, alienate, and sometimes anger the other.

From childhood, white people and Indians are brought up to react to strange and dangerous situations in quite different ways. The white man who finds himself in an unstructured, anxiety-provoking situation is trained to react with a great deal of activity. He will begin action after action until he either structures the situation, or escapes from it, or simply collapses. But the Indian, put in the same situation, is brought up to remain motionless and watch. Outwardly he appears to freeze. Inwardly, he is using all of his senses to discover what is expected of him—what activities are proper, seemly, and safe. One might put it this way: in an unfamiliar situation a white man is taught to react by aggressive experimentation—he keeps moving until he finds a satisfactory pattern. His motto is "Try and try again." But the Indian puts his faith in observation. He waits and watches until the other actors show him the correct pattern.

Once he has picked up the cues and feels relatively certain that he can accomplish what is expected, the Indian may respond with a sudden energy and enthusiasm that can bewilder his white partners. For example, at a party for a group of Indian college students by the white members of a faculty, the Indian students sat and said virtually nothing. The faculty members did their best to draw out their expressionless and noncommittal guests. Even the stock questions of school and educational plans brought little response. At length in desperation, the faculty members talked to each other.

After refreshments were served the party broke into small clusters of guests, and in each cluster an Indian student did most of the talking. He delivered a modest, but well organized address describing his educational plans. From questions put to him, each had concluded that his role at the party was to paint his academic future. When opportunity offered, he gave the faculty members exactly what he thought they wanted.

The active experimenting disposition of many white men and the motionless alertness of Indians may be related to different cultural attitudes toward what white people call success or failure. Indian friends tell us that they do not praise or reward their children for doing what is proper or right; they are expected to behave well, for this is "natural" or "normal". Thus a "good" Indian child reflects no special credit on himself or on his parents. He is simply behaving as a child of his people should behave.² On the other hand, the "bad" or ill-intentioned child is censured and the child who makes mistakes is shamed, which, in an Indian community, is a grave punishment. As one sophisticated Indian remarked: "As a result of the way they are raised, very few Indians will try to do something at which they're not good [adept]. It takes a lot of courage."

As an example, he cited a phenomenon, common in his tribe, of men gathering to help a relative build a house.

You watch a housebuilding among my people. You see some men struggling with the work of erecting the structure, and, over there, sitting on the grass, may be a man, just watching, never lending a hand, even with the heaviest work. They get the structure up, and all of a sudden there's that man on the roof, working away, laying shingle—because what he knows how to do is lay shingle. All these men that were there are kin come to help with the housebuilding, but each person only offers his assistance in what he knows he can do.

He also reminded us of how an Indian girl who had been making tortillas at a picnic immediately stopped when two highly skilled girls began to help her. She excused herself and disappeared. But a white girl who knew nothing of Indian cookery pitched in and was quite unembarrassed by her lack of skill.

Many other examples of the Indian's reluctance to exhibit clumsiness or ineptitude before others appear in the literature. For example, Nash relates how a Maya girl learns to operate weaving or spinning machines in a factory by silently observing the operator. Only when she feels competent will the observer take over and run the machine. "She will not try her hand until she feels competent, for to fumble and make mistakes is a cause for *verguenza*—public shame. She does not ask questions because that would annoy the person teaching her, and they might also think she is stupid."³

Again, Macgregor mentions that an Indian school track team was reluctant to run because they knew they could not win, and a basketball team did not want their parents and neighbors to come to an interschool game for fear they would laugh at their mistakes and failure to win.⁴

Perhaps it will be reassuring to the Indian to realize that the reckless torrents of words poured out by white people are usually intended as friendly or, at least, social gestures. The more ill at ease a white man becomes, the more he is likely to talk. He is not nearly so afraid of making mistakes as is the Indian and it is almost impossible (by Indian standards) to embarrass or "shame" him. By the same token, he will rarely hold an Indian's mistakes against him. Conversely, the white person who has had little experience in talking with Indians should find it heartening to know that the silence and downcast eyes with which his first conversational gambits may be received spring from shyness and, often, from courtesy. He is not being snubbed or ignored; on the contrary, his words and actions are being observed with minute care. Once the Indian has discovered what his response ought to be, he will make it. This may take a little time, but the person who is not willing to spend a little time ought not to try to talk to Indians.

The over-sensitive white man may take comfort in the fact that the Indian who wishes to insult him will generally make his intentions quite clear. The Indian who looks away when you address him is being considerate—to stare into your face might embarrass you. But the Indian who treats you as if you were invisible is putting you beneath the notice of a highly observant man.

to come home. Papa, though very fond of his little girl, behaved as if he neither saw nor heard her. I noticed that the child was very distressed and frightened, but I did not realize at this time how severely her father was rebuking her.

By this time some non-Indian readers may have concluded that the upbringing of Indian children must be harsh indeed and that the little tykes creep through their days behind a wall of silence created by adults. Nothing, of course, could be farther from the truth. Indian parents are by no means "busy" all the time, and when they are unoccupied they like nothing better than to coddle, play with, and talk to little children.¹⁰ Moreover, when an Indian gives anyone, child or adult, his attention, he gives all of it. Thus, when he is interacting with an adult, the child is not only treated with the warmth and indulgence noted by so many observers, but he is given an attention that is absolute. As we have already noted, this intense concentration on the emotional and intellectual overtones of a personal relationship also characterizes adult interaction. Thus, there really is no such thing as a casual or dilatory conversation between Indians. If they are not *en rapport* they are worlds apart; if they are giving their attention, they use every sense to the utmost.

As we have noted, the first impulse of an Indian who encounters an interferer (with whom he is on terms of friendship) is to withdraw his attention. If the ill-mannered person does not take the hint, the Indian will quietly go away. If it is impossible for him to leave, he does his best to make himself inconspicuous. By disappearing he avoids provoking the disturbed individual to further outbursts and also avoids embarrassing him by being a witness to his improper behavior. Simultaneously, he rebukes him in a socially sanctioned manner. In the past an entire community might withdraw from an incorrigible meddler and leave him quite alone.

Perhaps because these social sanctions are usually effective in an Indian community, Indians have not yet developed devices for dealing with an interferer who claims to be peaceable but aggressively refuses to permit them to withdraw. They can only marvel at his bizarre behavior and wish that he would go away. Sometimes, when prodded past endurance, Indian women will lose their self-control and try to drive out intruders with harsh words and even physical force.

Since the white man from infancy has been encouraged to defend himself and "face up" to unpleasant things, he almost invariably interprets the Indian's withdrawal from his verbal "attacks," not as an unostentatious rebuke, but as evidence of timidity, irresponsibility, or, even, as a tendency to "flee from reality."¹¹ This Indian trait more than any other seems to baffle the white man, for though he has been exposed to Christian doctrine for many, many centuries, he still cannot begin to understand the man who will not fight back.

We regret that some social scientists are among the least perceptive persons in this particular matter. (Perhaps their training makes them over prone to equate a disappearing informant with personal failure.) For example, we have seen a social scientist of some repute attempt to initiate a discussion with Indians by suggesting that they no longer possessed any

culture of their own but were unrealistically clinging to an impoverished "reservation" culture. What they ought to do, he went on to say, was to leave the reservations and become assimilated. When this remark was received in expressionless silence the scientist suggested that this "lack of response" supported his point, for no one present had been able to defend the existence of their culture. The faces of the Indians became even more impassive, but the scientist did not notice that the feet and legs of some of the young men from the Plains tribes had begun to tremble as with the ague. A white person in the audience could no longer control his impulse to interfere, and, in the ensuing debate, much of the Indian's tension was dissipated.

On another occasion a psychiatrist whose initial overtures had been observed in silence by his Indian audience began to prod them with remarks intended to arouse their anger. The Indian men, as usual, made themselves inconspicuous. A few stole out of the meeting. But some of the women lost their tempers and the session ended in a loud and rather vulgar brawl.

After these incidents we talked with both the white and the Indian participants. Both of the social scientists assured us that they had merely been trying to elicit a response from the Indians and the second one seemed naively pleased with the "discovery" that "they'll only react if you get them mad." The Indians seemed to feel that it was best to ignore the whole thing. As one older man remarked: "You do not take the words of an insane person seriously or get angry at him."

The reader, by now, may be able to appreciate the blunt truth of a statement made by a middle-aged Apache who was attending a college class of the behavior of ethnic groups. Hoping to stimulate a discussion of accommodation and assimilation, the instructor asked: "What develops when two different peoples meet?" Laconically, the Apache replied: "Bad feelings."

One cannot examine a situation as distressing as the Indian and white frontier of sociable contact without wondering what might be done to make it less painful for both parties. To tell most white people that they can get along with Indians fairly well if they do not interfere is almost like telling them to give up breathing. It is, perhaps, equally difficult for an Indian to appreciate that the "mean" and "crazy" deeds of the white men do not necessarily have the same significance as the mean or crazy deeds of an Indian.

We have noted that there is less tension and distress in those situations in which the atmosphere of power and authority in which the Indian and the white man usually meet is mitigated or absent. Thus, the white man often finds it easier to get along with the Indian when he is gambling, trading, partying, or simply "chewing the rag." This is not because there is anything particularly friendly or brotherly in these activities but because they represent some of the few remaining social situations in which the white man cannot always immediately assume an authoritative or interfering role. In such situations the Indian learns to make allowances for or take advantage of the white man's restlessness, his incomprehensible "pride"

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that part of the Trickster Cycle criticizes the chief, since "one of his functions was to interfere in all kinds of situations." Macgregor's statement that the Indian respects the individual's accountability to himself for his own actions is helpful and Lee's remarks on individual autonomy and social structure are extremely acute. Indeed, only Lee seems to see that Indian "respect for the individual" is an integral part of Indian "respect for social structure" (Macgregor, *op. cit.*, p. 65, n. 7; Dorothy Lee, *op. cit.*, Chap. I). Erikson (*op. cit.*) has made an uncommon attempt to describe how white people and Indians see each other and often notices the Indians' reaction to "interference" without quite understanding what is going on.

6 "Indians in Overalls," *Hudson Review*, III (1956), 369.

7 Some fine descriptions of the extremely delicate interaction demanded in Eskimo communities may be found in the works of Peter Freuchen.

8 White people frequently interpret this consideration as indifference or gross indulgence. As Macgregor remarks:

[Indian] Parents do not force their children to conform because 'mother knows best' or to avoid damaging the parents' reputation or self-esteem. A child who runs away from school is usually not asked why he came home. Likewise, a grown son who leaves the reservation and is not heard from in years is rarely questioned on his return about what he has been doing. (*Op. cit.*, p. 67, n. 7.)

9 Erikson, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

10 The men of some tribes do not play with little children but they usually seem to enjoy talking to them.

11 Even Erikson, who is far more aware of the withdrawing disposition of the Indian than are most other white men, does not see that it is, to the Indian, a matter of self-evident good manners. See for example, his complex discussion in *op. cit.*, 124-25.

12 *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

13 *Op. cit.*, pp. 152-53.

It is a startling and disturbing experience to discover that only a handful of the innumerable sociological investigations of prejudice and discrimination have dealt with treatment of the American Indian.¹ The great majority of studies have focused on the attitudes of whites toward blacks, Jews, and Spanish-speaking minorities, presumably because of their greater numbers and "visibility" as minorities in segregated urban ghettos. Among the rationalizations that can be offered to "explain" the paucity of sociological studies of anti-Indian prejudice and discrimination are the lack of Indian-white contact in the urban scene and the relative "invisibility" of Indians to sociologists oriented to urban problems. These rationalizations are somewhat weakened by the fact that during the last 20 years Indians have migrated to the cities and now form sizable minorities in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Phoenix, Seattle, Denver, Minneapolis, Chicago, and other metropolitan areas. In recent years, especially during the past decade, sociologists and psychologists have had ample opportunity to study Indian-white relations, but have not done so. It may be that they have feared to "trespass" on territory traditionally claimed by the anthropologists. More probably, they have simply been insensitive to or unaware of the problems of discrimination and poverty faced by Indian-Americans.

This paucity of studies on prejudice and discrimination against Indians is even more startling when viewed in historical perspective, because Indians as a group have experienced as much systematic discrimination as any minority in American history, if not more. Estimates of the Indian population within the current boundaries of the United States in 1492 range from 700,000 to 1 million. By 1871, when they became official wards of the nation, their numbers had been reduced by the most radical forms of discrimination, war, and genocide, to less than half a million. Further decline occurred under the early reservation system. The Indian population reached a low point of approximately 240,000 persons during the first few years after 1900. The following official census figures for Indians in the United States reflect population trends since 1890:²

1890	248,253
1920	244,437
1940	333,369

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