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Native American Lifestyles: Issues for Human Services Professionals[1]

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Educators and human service workers who experience difficulties in communicating with Native American students, parents and clients may be overlooking important subcultural differences which this group displays. A survey of 180 American Indian families living on and off reservations in Maine and in Metropolitan Boston showed differences in life style, when compared with a control group of low income white families, in the areas of property ownership, competition, consistency of household membership, and in friendship and neighboring patterns, all of which have implications for educalOrs and human service workers.

The tendency for educational and human service agencies and workers to take a monolithic approach in working with low income clients is understandable and may in some cases promote efficiency. That this approach may sometimes overlook important subcultural differences must, however, also be considered. A case in point concerns Indian populations of the northeast.

As part of a project in communicating Indian values to non-Indian human service workers, a survey was administered to members of 180 Indian families living on and off reservations in Maine and in metropolitan Boston. The survey was completed in 1980. Respondents represented four major tribal groups of the northeast: Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Micmac, and Maliseet Indians. Responses to survey questions, when compared with each other and with a control group of low income white families, reveal important differences in both life style and values. These differences should be understood by those who deal with Native Americans, since they also serve as examples of the kind of differences which may be encountered in other subcultures.

The following report summarizes some of these differences, and is based on both statistical comparisons and subjective evaluations by Native Americans commenting on their own life style and its relation to programs and individuals who represent them.

Methodology

A structured interview schedule covering demographics, kin networks, neighboring patterns, and parenting was administered to 180 Indian and 50 low income white family members by trained Indian and white interviewers. The Indian sample was comprised of individuals from 75 families living on reservations in Maine, 75 families living in off-reservation areas of Maine, and 30 families living in metropolitan Boston. The 50 low income white families were from three rural communities in eastern Maine. From the data, reservation/ off-reservation, rural Indian/ urban Indian, and rural Indian/ rural white comparisons were generated. Of importance for professionals dealing with Indians populations of the northeast, the following points, presented in summarized form, emerged from this research.

Differences in Life Styles and Values

The fundamental identification and social unit for Indian people is the tribe. It is an extremely important fact of social life for Indians and is often overlooked by white society, which holds no similar concept. The closest white concept is the ethnic group. While the concept of ethnicity is often employed to explain values, attitudes, and behavior, it nowhere approaches the evocative depth of tribal affiliation. Indeed, many Indian people identify themselves first as tribal members and then as Indians, and both of these identifications often take precedence over their identification as Americans.

For many reasons, the cultures of the tribes have largely withstood the typical process of acculturation exerted by the major society on other ethnic groups. One such reason is the centrality of the tribal concept, which has been reinforced by reservation living and resulting social enclaves that have kept Indians living closely together. That the reservation is still an important focal point of Indian life, even for those who have left it, can be seen from answers to questions concerning places of residence and which of these places they consider to be "home." Of the 180 Indian respondents, 84% had at one time or another lived on a reservation. Among off-reservation Indian respondents alone, 70% had lived on a reservation for an extended period, and among urban Indians that figure rises to 85%. Nearly 30% of off-reservation Indians living in Maine and 46% of Indians living in Boston still think of some reservation as "home," as opposed to the places where they now live.

Professionals who attempt to relate to Indians as they would to any other member of a low income group are

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missina an important cultural point. That tribal affiliation st;ongly influences behavior of many present-day Indians may be seen with particular clarity in prevalent attitudes toward competition, property ownership, family, and community.

The basic mode of interpersonal relatlons among Indian aroups, especially on reservations, is essentially noncom;etitive and non-confrontive. Although competition with self is highly regarded, competition between individuals within a community is kept to a minimum and would probably be disruptive of small, closely-knit groups. Programs with treatment modalities depending on competition and confrontation, e.g. some alcohol treatment programs, are likely to be difficult for some Indian clients.

In some tribes the ownership of real property on reservations does not exist and all tribal lands are owned in common (which confounds white legal and economic institutions). In all the tribes interviewed, the ability to transfer real property on reservations is restricted in some way, most commonly by requiring property to be transferred only to other tribal members.

Indians' lack of property ownership concepts is extended equally to the "ownership" of other people, including children. For example, Indians have no strong concept of illegitimate birth, a concept other cultures have created to facilitate passing on property from one generation to the next. To Indians, children are to be treasured but in no way owned. Indeed, it is not unusual for an Indian child to live for a time with an aunt, grandmother or other relative, and to do so by choice rather than by necessity. Parents will usually not object; in their eyes the child belongs not *to them* but *with anyone* to whom the child is related. To non-Indian educators or social service workers this attitude among Indians may seem to display lack of responsibility or even neglect.

Related to reduced importance of ownership and competition among Indian groups is the apparent increased importance of friendship and kin networks. For example, 52% of Indian women from the reservation sample indicated they had *daily* contact with six or more friends; only 32% of women in white sample interacted with friends with this frequency. However, one should note that friendship ties among Indian people may be based on kin group rather than upon individual preferences, since 72% of Indian respondents living on reservations indicated their homes were within walking distance of at least four different households occupied by blood relatives. For the white sample this figure was 6%. To this extent, low income white rural families are far more mobile than reservation Indian groups.

Frequency of contact with relatives is apparently very high among Indian people, especially on the reservation. Sixty-eight percent of the reservation respondents talked to six or more relatives outside their immediate households on a daily basis, compared to 16% of low income white respondents. Even 41% of Indians living off reservation in Maine and 33% of urban Indians indicate one or two daily contacts with relatives. Low income white respondents occupy a median position with 36% indicating this frequency of contact.

Data descriptive of household composition among Indian groups revealed several distinctive characteristics. First, Indian households tended to be larger than low income white households in this sample. Only 10% of white households interviewed had seven or more people, while 17% of all Indian households - on and off reservation as well as urban-number seven or more. Second, data indicated that Indian women tended to be responsible for child-rearing over a longer span of their lives than white women. In order to qualify as a respondent for a family it was necessary to be a primary caretaker of a child between the ages of three and sixteen. Age analysis of white women respondents indicated only 16% were over the age of 41, while 32% of Indian women respondents were in this category. Further analysis of household composition indicated many of these women in older age categories were grandmothers rearing a second generation of children.

Third, despite the fact that Indian households are larger, a far greater number of Indian households report children under 18 living elsewhere than in the home. Among Indian families, 42% of respondents report absent children, compared with 10% among white respondents. Mention has already been made of Indian parents' attitude toward their children living with other relatives. This practice accounts for some of the absent children. In addition, rates of placement in foster homes for various reasons are high for Indian children and account for others of the absent child group.

Finally, Indian households tend to be more "permeable" than white households. Two questions were asked which focused on mobility of household members: "Has anyone (other than a child) moved in or out of your household with the last year?" and "Do you expect anyone to move in or out of your household within the next six months?" Only 6% of the white respondents answered affirmatively to these questions, while affirmative responses from Indian families ranged from 20% for off-reservation rural households to 40% for urban households. Reservation households occupied a median position with respect to permeability with 33% indicating such moves. While one must be extremely careful about drawing inferences from these data about the stability of these households, it is clear, for example, that assistance programs which are based on household size may find the changes of household composition reflected in these data to be problematic.

Summary

This paper has attempted to describe some differences between Indian and white life styles and values which could impact on the educator or human service worker-Native American relationship. To be sure, these differences have been broadly drawn, but they are felt in subtle, often frustrating ways. The data discussed above were selected to highlight the fact that such interactions may be very different from the norm when a Native American child or family is involved. The authors feel

strongly that many of the frustrations which arise over white professional-Indian relationships would be lessened once the important cultural differences between them were recognized and accepted.