

Rapid Socio-Cultural Change and Student Mental Health

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PART II — A COMPARISON OF FINDINGS*

In order to clarify the data on inter-generational and identity conflict of Cree and Liberian students experiencing conditions of rapid socio-cultural change, comparisons will be drawn along three parameters: 1) attitudes toward education, 2) the influence of beliefs in witchcraft and spirit possession, and 3) defence mechanisms employed to cope with role conflict. Finally, the question of resolution of identity conflict is considered and hypotheses formulated for further study.

Attitudes Toward Education

A four-stage scale can be constructed to account for modifications in adult attitudes toward education under the impact of acculturative changes, ranging from strong opposition through stages of ambivalence and selective valuation of the student, to a final position of projective identification with the student. These stages may be seen to correspond roughly to the student's achievement level. It should be borne in mind, however, that while one particular stage may be characteristic of a society at a given point in time, there will inevitably be some degree of attitudinal variation within that society.

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The process of culture change is initiated by limited but increasing contact of one culture with another. Traditional societies begin to interface with, but not interact with, elements of the "Western" industrial society. This *interface* period is characterized by guarded exploration (and sometimes by bemused curiosity as well) about the attitudes and behaviour of the unfamiliar group, but meaningful communication and mutual learning are extremely limited. As culture contact increases and the system of education of the industrial society is introduced, conflict with the traditional enculturation process, its educational methods and its authority structure results in firm opposition to the encroaching educational system. This stage of strong resistance to children's breaking with tradition was representative of the Mistassini Cree until the present decade. It is encountered among some Liberian tribes, but is not characteristic of those coastal and interior tribes which have been exposed to the major thrust of recent developments in Liberia.

As socio-cultural change proceeds, the stage of opposition shades into that of ambivalence. At this stage, the adults of the tribe remain opposed to prolonged education and insist that children stop school after two, three, or four years, in order to fully participate in the traditional religious and economic life of the tribe. However, they recognize a need that some members of the tribe should be able to communicate effectively with representatives of the "Western" culture; government officials, potential employers, storekeep-

SCALE OF ATTITUDES TOWARD EDUCATION

<i>Student Achievement Level</i>	<i>Stage of Adult Valuation of Student</i>
Limited Language Skills (Minimal Literacy)	Opposition (Initial Interface Experiences)
Advanced Language Skills (Fluency and Literacy)	Ambivalence (Cultural Broker Experiences)
Limited Occupational Skills (Trades)	Selective Valuation (Family Aggrandizement)
Advanced Occupational Skills (Management & Professions)	Projective Identification (Reflected Prestige)

ers, and others with whom there is increasingly frequent and meaningful contact. Students who have become skilled in speaking and writing English (or French) become valued as "cultural brokers," thus making it unnecessary for the adults of the interacting cultures to develop the kind of close contact that is anxiety-provoking to both.¹⁶ To the extent that the student's role as "cultural broker" arouses feelings of resentment and inadequacy in those adults of the tribe who become dependent on him, the intergenerational conflict is exacerbated and adult ambivalence toward the student and toward formal education becomes intensified. The feeling will then predominate in the tribe that a few years of schooling are useful, but that the student should return home in sufficient time to learn traditional adult roles. This is the position most characteristic of the Cree at present, and is seen with some frequency in Liberia as well.

The following stage of "selective valuation," widely encountered in Liberia, is just emerging as an important stage for the Cree. The student has achieved sufficient occupational ability to function as a skilled or semi-skilled worker, as a heavy-equipment operator or miner, draughtsman, carpenter, or electrician. Female students are able to fill jobs as office or store clerks, secretaries or nursing assistants. At this point geographical mobility often occurs, with a shift toward urban life style. The extended family begins to conceive of the student as an important source of material support. Parents begin to recognize the economic potential of education and urge their children to go to school so that they will be able to get a good job. A wide range of expectations is focused on the student as one whose level of interaction and integration with the dominant culture is such that he can arrange for employment, education, social welfare, and other services for any members of the family who call on him for assistance.¹⁷ The student feels obliged to comply with these family expectations which are often quite unrealistic. The anxiety aroused by this situation becomes incapacitating for those students who feel caught in a vise between the desire to pursue their education and the mounting demands of their family. However, there is a sharp distinction between Cree and Liberian students with respect to the motivation underlying their feelings of obligation toward family expectations. Cree students are motivated by profound feelings of responsibility toward

the kin group, based on the internalized culturally-shared high valuation of generosity. Liberian students, on the other hand, are primarily motivated by fears of retaliation by the kin group and the need to neutralize the threat of reprisal by witchcraft induced by angry relatives.

The final stage of attitudinal change is represented by "projective identification." At this stage the student has achieved a level of education that prepares him for managerial or professional status as well as integration in the urban industrial society. At the same time, continuing intercultural contact has encouraged a shift in values among the adults such that their status within the tribe, as well as their emotional gratification, is measured to an important degree by the acculturative success of their children. In Liberia this pattern is just emerging at present, while for the Cree it has not yet become identifiable in any meaningful sense.

The Influence of Witchcraft and Spirit Possession

Beliefs in witchcraft and spirit possession are fundamental to most Liberian tribes and play a decisive role in shaping behaviour. Fears of "being witched," or being "humbugged by geni" dominate interpersonal relations. These beliefs cross generational boundaries and are shared by virtually all members of the tribe. The desire to protect oneself from malevolent practices initiated by jealous peers or relatives encourages guardedness and inhibits cooperation. There is a strong tendency to interpret adversity of all kinds in terms of witchcraft.

Beliefs in witchcraft and spirit possession do not permeate Cree culture and shape interpersonal relations to the same degree. The fundamental difference is that the Cree do not attribute responsibility for witchcraft to their own kin, but rather to members of another band within the tribe or to non-kin within their own band. Such beliefs do exist, however, and come prominently into play when isolated hunting groups are faced with the threat of starvation. At such times it is often felt that malevolent shamans have invoked witchcraft to drive the beaver, moose, and bear away from the hunters.¹⁸ It is also believed that, when faced with starvation, some hunters would become possessed by the cannibalistic "Witiko" monster.¹⁹ Hallowell stresses that fear of serious illness or accident

occurring in the isolation of the hunting territory could generate intense anxiety, and that even slow recovery from minor illness tends to be interpreted in terms of witchcraft. However, the strength of these beliefs has diminished to the extent that adversity, illness and death attributed to external influence are far more characteristic of the older generation of Cree than of the student generation.

Role Conflict and Mechanisms of Defense

Differences in the cultural belief systems are reflected in the characteristic defense mechanisms utilized to cope with anxiety generated by role conflict. In Liberia, where witchcraft beliefs continue to play a dominant role in the psychic organization, intense anxiety is defended against by denial and projection.²⁰ Liberian students, who through their pursuit of Western education, come to identify with the value system of the urban, industrial society are acutely aware that they are defying tradition and drawing upon themselves the hostility of their elders and many of their peers. Owing to their dependence on group approval²¹ and their tendency toward superego projection²², this hostility is felt to be a grave threat to their physical and mental well-being. Fears of academic failure that would necessitate the student's return to a potentially hostile kin group and tribal authority structure are repressed and denied. Aggressive retaliatory impulses toward authority figures and competing peers rising from those fears of failure, are projected and emerge into conscious expression as convictions of witchcraft intervention or spirit possession. Fears of failure and of tribal retribution are thus re-interpreted in magical terms in accordance with an internalized traditional belief system, as evidence of external interference with the student's competent functioning. These projective mechanisms serve to arouse sympathy and support and neutralize hostility among family and peers, since the student's beliefs are readily understood and shared by the tribe.²³ This in turn may relieve the student's anxiety to the point that he may either become reintegrated within the family and tribe, or be better able to direct his emotional energies toward his academic goals. It is only if the student's identity conflict is of such magnitude that these defences are insufficient to cope with the anxiety aroused by it that the defences miscarry and ego regression follows.

For the Cree student, fears of being harmed by witchcraft do not assume a central role in psychic functioning. But individual competence, self-reliance, and sensitivity to the needs of the kin group are of major importance, and conflict in identity role brings with it considerable anxiety over these important elements of the student's self-image. Threats to the student's self-image, provoked by fears of failure and feelings of inadequacy in his educational aspirations, are reinforced by feelings of guilt over his continuing inability to contribute to the support of the family. His increasing reluctance to fulfill the traditional role expectations of his kin group exacerbates feelings of guilt and contributes to a growing fear of rejection by his family. The degree to which feelings of guilt and fears of rejection constitute a threat to the stability of the student's self-image will depend on the extent of family opposition to the student's aspirations. Aggressive impulses aroused by these threats to the student's self-image are dealt with by means of introjection, rather than projection as in Liberia. Spiraling feelings of guilt over insensitivity to the needs of the family, and anxiety about rejection by the kin group, give rise to a sense of hopeless isolation and to a complex of symptoms consistent with a clinical diagnosis of depression.

Where introjective defences miscarry, regression tends to follow a pattern of gradual social and emotional withdrawal, rather than the rapid development of aggressive, grandiose and paranoid manifestations typical of Liberian students. These differences in defence mechanisms and in manifest psychopathology reflect the essential distinguishing features of cultural emphasis on cooperation and responsibility toward the group on the part of the Cree, in contrast to the preoccupation with witchcraft and suspiciousness toward the group characteristic of Liberian tribes.

The Resolution of Identity Conflict

Is it possible, building on comparative descriptive findings on identity conflict for Cree and Liberian students, to advance hypotheses concerning the possible means of resolution of identity conflict among students experiencing conditions of rapid social and cultural change?²⁴

Preliminary analysis of available data suggests that attempts at an unconscious level to resolve identity conflict follow one of three major directions: 1) polarization toward the "acculturated" identity model represented by the working class or middle class individual in an urban, industrial society; 2) polarization toward the "traditional" identity model represented by the older generation of the tribe; or 3) a synthesis of the two models.²⁵ It is hypothesized that the factors determining the direction of conflict resolution in individual cases will be: a) the age at which the individual starts school, b) the extent to which the student has internalized feelings of rejection in family relationships during pre-school years, c) the degree to which he develops positive affective ties with teachers, counsellors, foster families, or other individuals who serve as identity models representative of the industrial society, d) the attitude of the kin group toward the student's educational aspirations, or otherwise expressed, the degree of inter-generational conflict over formal education, and e) the extent to which the student's aspirations are consistent with his potential to achieve them. Detailed information is presently being analyzed on these factors as they influence a group of 109 Cree adolescent students of the Waswanipi and Mistassini bands.²⁶

Preliminary analysis suggests that successful synthesis of identity models requires relatively conflict-free pre-school family relationships, parental support or at least absence of opposition toward the student's educational goals, positive affective relationships with individuals representative of the industrial society, and availability of resources that would allow for the achievement of occupational goals and for status recognition within the industrial society. This in turn depends on the degree to which the urban, industrial society is prepared to accord recognition and status to those tribal youths whose education and skills have equipped them for active participation, and on the availability of desirable employment possibilities within or close to the region inhabited by the tribe, so that status recognition will be possible within the context of the extended family and the tribe. Where these favourable circumstances are present, it is hypothesized that older siblings who have completed their education will increasingly serve as models for the successful synthesis of identity roles, and to the extent that these older siblings are able to work through the intra-familial

conflict generated by their own educational aspirations, siblings currently in school will encounter less family opposition.

Notes and References

16. For a description of the concept of some individuals within a changing society functioning as "cultural brokers," see C. Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes: Social Deviance and Economic Change in Two Indonesian Towns*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963; and R. Paine, "Brokers and Patrons in the Canadian Arctic: A Reappraisal of the Case of the Marginal Man," paper presented at the Scandinavian Ethnographic Congress in Bergen, Norway, June, 1967.
17. At this stage urban migration becomes a factor of significance and with it the high risk of integrative failure, powerlessness, rejection, and the other stigmata of the "culture of poverty." See O. Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Scientific American*, Vol. 215, No. 4 (1966), pp. 19-25.
18. Speck, *op.cit.*
19. R. Landes, "The Abnormal Among the Ojibwa Indians," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 33 (1938). A. I. Hallowell, "Fear and Anxiety as Cultural and Individual Variables in a Primitive Society," *Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 9 (1938), pp. 24-47; S. Parker, "The Witiko Psychosis in the Context of Ojibwa Personality," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 62 (1960), pp. 603-623; R. D. Fogelson, "Psychological Theories of Windigo 'Psychosis' and a Preliminary Application of a Models Approach," in M. Spiro (ed.), *Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology*, New York: The Free Press, 1965.
20. R. M. Wintrob, "Psychosis in Association with Possession by Genii in Liberia," *Psychopathologie Africaine*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1966), pp. 249-258.
21. H. Collomb, "La Position du Conflit et les Structures Familiales en Voie de Transformation," *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal*, Vol. 12 (1967), pp. 451-464.
22. Wintrob & Wittkower, 1968, *op.cit.*
23. R. M. Wintrob, "Sexual Guilt and Culturally Sanctioned Delusions in Liberia, West Africa," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 125 (July 1968), pp. 127-133.
24. One approach to this problem is taken by McQueen (A. J. McQueen, "A Social Psychological Theory of Modernizing Youth," paper pre-

sented at the annual meeting, African Studies Association, New York, November, 1967), who considers identity conflict as one important variable influencing problem-solving among students in Nigeria and has developed a paradigm to explain "predispositions of modernizing youth to resort to political and criminal solutions to their plight."

25. A more complete discussion is contained in R. M. Wintrob & P. S. Sindell, "Education and Identity Conflict among Cree Indian Youth: A Preliminary Report," ARDA, Department of Forestry and Rural Development, mimeo., 1968.
26. This work on education and identity conflict among Cree youth is being carried out by the author in association with Peter S. Sindell, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, McGill University. Financial support for this research has been provided by the Laidlaw Foundation.