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## Some Problems in Minnesota Chippewa Acculturation<sup>1</sup>

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The "Indian Problem" is a term frequently used without precise definition. It serves, perhaps, to bring to the mind of the general public conditions of poverty, backwardness, drunkenness, disrespect for the law, and lack of education and community organization among the Indians. An objection to this approach is that it does not provide adequate or systematic understanding of the basic nature of this "problem," but refers rather to the easily observable external manifestations. The "Indian Problem" approach also seems to attribute to all Indians an inherent tendency toward socially unacceptable behavior. A more profitable approach is to identify some of the causes for the overt social disorganization by examining the cultural traditions of the Chippewa and their historical relations with the dominant white society.

Certainly there is evidence that Minnesota Indians occupy a disadvantaged position *vis á vis* the total state population when certain criteria are used as a basis of comparison. For example, based on official 1950 Bureau of the Census data (1960 data in such areas are not yet available), Minnesota Indians had a median annual wage of \$619 compared with the median annual wage of \$1,887 for the entire state population. With respect to unemployment, the Indian unemployment rate was 28.8% of the civilian labor force compared with 3.5% for the total state population. Education figures reveal similar differences: only 8.8% of the Indian population twenty-five years old or older had completed at least a high school education, compared with a corresponding figure of 35.6% for the state-wide population; the median number of school years completed was one whole year lower (8.0) for the Indian population than the comparative median for all races in Minnesota (9.0).

The occupational structure reveals that the Indian has a relatively low position in relation to the total population of the state. Based on the four highest occupational categories listed in the U.S. Census reports, only 16.8% of all employed Indians 14 years old and over were employed in these categories in 1950. On the other hand, more than half (51.5%) of the comparative non-Indian population were similarly employed. Minnesota Department of Public Welfare reports show that the Indian population (one half of one per cent of the total state population) accounted for 5.4% of all the public assistance recipients (9,216) and received 2.8% of all public assistance expenditures in 1960. In 1961 these figures increased to 9,951 Indians receiving assistance and 3.1% of all assistance payments made.

Commitments to various corrective institutions in the state show that the Indian rate is considerably higher

than the non-Indian rate. The Minneapolis Workhouse admission figures for 1955, for example, show that 12% of the 7,307 admissions were Indians. Reports of 1955 admissions to the women's section showed that 282 of the 518 total admissions (54%) were Indian women (Berger 1956:13). Between January 1 and July 1 of 1962, Indians comprised 9% of all newly committed individuals admitted to Minnesota state correctional institutions and 9.6% of the total institutional population (Minnesota Department of Corrections 1962:1, 11).

In other less quantifiable areas, there is further indication of disorganization among Minnesota's Indians. No figures are available concerning drinking or the general lack of community organization and development, the so-called inability of the Indian to "help himself", but sufficient accounts have been given of these conditions to substantiate their presence. Also, absence of law and order has frequently been mentioned as a problem among certain Indian populations.

Thus, while the term "Indian Problem" cannot be taken as an analytic or diagnostic concept, it is not a complete misnomer. Evidence suggests that with respect to the total population of the state, the Indian population experiences a situation characterized by a relatively high rate of individual and social disorganization.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the current Indian situation from a cultural-historical perspective, focusing on several factors which may contribute to an understanding of the contemporary Chippewa Indians of Minnesota.<sup>2</sup>

*Cultural Factors.* The Chippewa were essentially a hunting and gathering people living in the northern woodland areas of the Great Lakes. The basic unit of the Chippewa social organization was the conjugal family. The temporary village, consisting of three to fifteen conjugal families, was usually the largest unit in the social structure. This village existed in the spring and summer when the various small families came together from their separate hunting grounds. Landes says that it "was held together by little more than the consciousness of neighborhood, for no official activities characterized its existence" (Landes, 1937:1). Bushnell reports that the Chippewa "had few large villages or settlements. They lived for the most part in small scattered groups, and often moved from place to place . . . These villages . . . should more properly be termed "gathering places . . ." (Bushnell 1922:14,15).

The small groups of Chippewa were associated with a chief or head man who served as a type of civil leader. These leaders were respected for their personal charac-

teristics; allegiance to these leaders was more or less tenuous, as pointed out by Jones:

"The chiefs are the heads or fathers of their respective tribes, but their authority extends no further than to their own body, while their influence depends much on their wisdom, bravery and hospitality. When they lack any of these qualities they fall proportionately in the estimation of their people. It is, therefore, of importance that they should excel in everything pertaining to the dignity of a chieftain, since they govern more by persuasion than by coercion. Whenever their acts give general dissatisfaction their power ceases. They have scarcely any executive power, and can do little without the concurrence of the subordinate chiefs and principal men. They have no written code of laws, nor any power to put their people to death by their own will; but they are taught by their chiefs and wise men to observe a certain line of conduct, such as to be kind and hospitable. They are also encouraged to be good hunters and warriors, and great pow-wows, or medicine men" (Jones n.d.:108-109).

There was little permanent commitment to the leader, who could be deserted if his leadership no longer proved satisfactory. Therefore no highly centralized authority system existed in the Chippewa social structure. Leadership was tenuous and depended upon successful performance in the various familiar and important roles. These roles were clearly visible to the Chippewa and closely related to the subsistence or economic requirements of these people. In addition to the prestige accorded successful hunters, trappers, rice gatherers and warriors, older Chippewas were granted esteem because their age gave evidence of having lived a good life. Jones reports that the advice of the "longdweller upon the earth is generally listened to with great attention, as it is from them that the youth receive their instructions respecting pow-wowism, medicines, and the traditions of their forefathers" (Jones n.d.:68.)

The culture allowed a high degree of individual freedom in accepting or rejecting the leadership of another. This individualism was perhaps the underlying feature throughout the traditional Chippewa culture.<sup>3</sup> Individualism is noted in Landes' description of the Chippewa outlook toward property rights:

"All property, with one slight exception, . . . is held by individuals, not by groups. Society can only ascertain the legality of the acquisition. Beyond that, society has no voice. Indeed, the individual is urged to the farthest to do as he likes; legally he cannot be criticized when for example he bombards his neighbors with sorcery, or refuses to tolerate needy families on his rich trapping grounds. Individuals may grumble, especially close relatives, and there is a weak notion of fair play; but these are nothing compared with the valuation placed on ruthless individualism" (Landes 1937:87).

This individualistic theme is also basic to Chippewa conceptions of punishment and social control. The underlying principle of justice among the Chippewa was ap-

parently one of torts or private concern for any wrongs. The individual (or close kindred, in some cases) was solely responsible for retribution. There was little total societal involvement in punishment for a misdeed. According to Landes, "No one had the right to interfere seriously with the affairs of another couple, or of another domicile, and this held also for a separating couple . . . In earlier days, too, no one had the right to rebuke a deserter before the community" (Landes 1937:81).

Culturally then, the traditions of the Chippewa strongly emphasized individuality with tenuous nucleated leadership rather than strong central organization. Social control was defined in terms of individual rather than societal responsibility. The culture specified important roles which were related to the subsistence base; the successful performance of these roles assured prestige and a meaningful life.

*Historical Factors.* The first Chippewa contacts with white men were with explorers, trappers and traders. Warren attributes the lack of "civilizing" influence by the French to the class of Frenchmen who were in contact with the Chippewa. He asserts that they were nearly as illiterate, ignorant and superstitious as the Indians themselves, and that many were inferior to the Indian in personal character and morality (Warren 1885:132-33). Subsequent relations of the Minnesota Chippewa with the whites reveal similar circumstances. Winchell reports:

"As the whites increased in numbers and in power, so the Indians became segregated and concentrated, and annuity payments were made at other places, several principal villages being designated as payment-places, and annually visited for that purpose. Such "payments" became grand gala days, when not only the Indians gathered, but the white men who sold whiskey, resulting always in carousal and often in bloodshed, the result being, not infrequently, that the Indian went home poorer than he came, saddened and soured in spirit, and battered in body by the brawls in which he had engaged" (Winchell 1911:637).

Other whites in contact with the Indians included school teachers and government agents who also were criticized for their general failure to effect a positive influence on the Indians. Following the Sioux uprising of 1862, an evaluation of Indian administration made it "evident to the officers of the government that the Indian department had degenerated throughout the whole country" (Winchell 1911:663). E. P. Smith, the first agent to report on the Nett Lake reservation following the change in the Indian Affairs Bureau is quoted by Winchell following his inspection in 1871.

"On visiting the Nett Lake band . . . he found the place deserted. He found the blacksmith shop, the school house and eight houses erected for chiefs, agreeably to the provisions of the second clause, third article, treaty of May 5, 1866, but all deserted, 'the first because the teacher had never been there, and was then engaged in keeping a trading post many miles distant, where the only educational aid he gave the Indians was the art of calculat-

ing how many pounds of flour, at 20 cents a pound, they could buy for one dollar. The blacksmith shop at Pelican lake had never been used. The houses were unoccupied because surrounded by heavy forest" (Winchell 1911: 668-69). Apparently the conditions of degeneracy and retrogression were widespread throughout all of the reservations in the state. Winchell notes:

"Vice and rapine flourished far beyond the worst conditions ever known. The whites, many of them of the worst type, connected either with the lumbering industry or with the official and licensed traders, or as mere vagabonds, were crowding into the country, causing frequent collision with the Indians, in which almost invariably the Indians came out the greater loser" (Winchell 1911:663).

Another aspect of the historical relationship of the Indians with the whites was the use (or misuse) of alcoholic beverages. Whiskey was frequently used to "loosen up" the Indians to obtain agreements from them which they might otherwise be reluctant to make. Prompted by the seriousness of the liquor situation, as early as 1851 in a treaty with the Sioux and by 1854 in the Chippewa treaty at La Pointe, the federal government restricted spiritous liquors from being "made, sold or used on any of the lands herein set apart for the residence of the Indians . . ." (Winchell 1911:625).

The Indians themselves were aware of the situation and the consequences of the heavy drinking. In the late 1860's the following conditions prevailed:

"Affairs at Crow Wing, and hence at Gull Lake and other places under the influence of Crow Wing, had sunk to the conditions of a real Sodom. The schools had been abandoned. The streets were filled with crime and carousal. The Mille Lacs Indians refused to go there, fearing drunkenness, robbery and murder. The people were rapidly dying through the unrestrained dispensation of intoxicating drink. The chiefs and intelligent men of the bands observed the degradation and were alarmed for the future certain extinction of the people, unless they could get away from Gull Lake and Crow Wing . . . Rev. J. A. Gilfillan . . . kept a record for one summer of the murders committed by the Ojibwa upon themselves through the influence of whiskey. These murders, in the little village of Crow Wing, reached the appalling number of 75 in about as many days" (Winchell 1911: 663).

Restrictions against liquor were further strengthened by an 1892 federal law prohibiting liquor traffic on Indian lands and forbidding the sale of alcoholic beverages even to Indians who were not on reservations. This handling of the liquor situation, of course, defined it as a problem area and set off the Indian from the rest of the population in his ability and legal right to drink. Drinking was possible only in an unlawful context and frequently with less-than-desirable associates. Alcohol was accessible to the Indians only through high payments to boot-leggers or through furtively concocted (and often dangerous) "home-brew".

In 1953, the ban against the purchase of liquor by Indians was removed. This law also gave local reservations the option of selling liquor on the reservation.

In addition to the relations of the Indians with the government already mentioned, a particular situation existed with respect to law enforcement. Early reports of conditions on Indian reservations stressed the need for laws that would control the problems that had arisen among the Indians. In 1863 the Board of Visitors stressed that

"The first thing needed is law. It must come from the government which has them in charge. The judge must be its officer and representative, and it must furnish the police. The criminal laws of the general government and of the state or territory where they reside must be extended over them. There can be no reason why they should not, like all other persons resident in our country, be placed in subjection to law . . . As they often reside remote from any officer authorized to administer law, it will be necessary for Congress to provide for the appointment of duly qualified persons, who shall reside at the Indian reservations and see that all laws are enforced . . . There is a great misapprehension in the public mind with reference to the Indian's tribal relations. It is generally supposed that he has a rude patriarchal government, of which the chief is the head, and that this is ample for his protection. The contrary is the case. A chief has no power or authority to make or execute laws for the protection of property or life. There are no such laws in the Indian country. Whenever the Indians have been brought in contact with white men, the chiefs become the instruments by which the trader and employe control the people, and in order to exercise this influence they must be furnished with the presents which are used as the means to secure it. They have no power to punish crime and never attempt it" (Winchell 1911:659).

The movement to place agents at each reservation can be largely attributed to the inadequacy of former law enforcement. Owing to the inapplicability of federal law, however, this did not solve the problem. In 1869, General Hassler made an inquiry of the United States legal authorities and was informed:

". . . they have no means or authority for punishing crimes or offenses committed by the Indians among themselves, or against the United States, and that all redress and punishment must be inflicted by the agent" (Winchell 1911:665).

The situation was one in which agents were expected to enforce the law on reservations, but since reservations were under federal control, only federal laws could be effectively enforced. State and local laws and law enforcement agencies could not function efficiently on federal lands. The result was that the federal government permitted tribal law to retain jurisdiction in the cases of minor wrongs, primarily because federal laws did not cover minor offenses or make provision for their persecution. As already pointed out, however, no comprehensive system of tribal law existed. Moreover, knowing

that state and local agencies had no real authority to bring about prosecution for crimes, the Indians held these agencies in disrespect, thus any law enforcement the agencies would have been able to furnish was minimized. Federal laws operated almost exclusively in the area of liquor restrictions (Levi 1956:126).

Not until 1953 when Public Law 280 was passed, did law enforcement at most state reservations shift from the federal government to local and state agencies. While other services which were transferred from federal to local and state agencies were accompanied by funds to subsidize the additional expense, the transfer of law enforcement responsibilities was not so underwritten. This legislation was accompanied by a general cessation of direct agent representation at the various reservations and a centralization of BIA operations.

The point should also be made that governmental Indian agencies tended to initiate, organize, supervise, and in almost every other way direct services which were conducted on behalf of the Indian. Where Indian labor and manpower could have been utilized, the federal government often brought in non-Indian workers. Native leadership was not encouraged and the Indian became accustomed to having most things done for him.

Accompanying these various historical occurrences was an over-all process which is perhaps best described as the gradual decline and near destruction of the economic or subsistence base of the traditional Chippewa social structure. The wandering habits of these Indians were curtailed as they were confined more and more to specific localities. Wild game, upon which they were so dependent for their livelihood, diminished as settlement in hunting areas increased. The *Midewiwin* religion lost much of its meaning and relevancy as education and missionary activity changed the thought patterns of many of the Indians. Roles which previously had been meaningful (e.g., ability in warfare, hunting, trapping, and *Mide* ceremonies) decreased in importance. Only in the case of knowledge of the rice harvest did any significant basis remain for leadership in the community.

*Discussion.* It is now possible to look at some of the personal and social disorganization currently evident among the Minnesota Indian population in light of this brief cultural and historical background. Attention will be focused on three manifestations of disorganization frequently identified with respect to the Indian population: drinking, problems of law and order, and minimal community cooperation.

One of the underlying factors in the process of change has been a "breakdown" of the traditional Chippewa cultural base. As mentioned above, economic or subsistence techniques related to traditional Chippewa culture are virtually meaningless under present conditions. The social structure which previously defined meaningful roles for the Indians has been virtually destroyed. No longer is the Indian honored for being a good hunter or fisher, a knowledgeable *Mide* priest or an expert in war. On the other hand, the social structure of the dominant society emphasizes roles from which the Indian has been

systematically excluded. The modern economic structure is almost totally alien to the Indian. He finds it difficult to get a job and his reservation background provides him with few of the social and psychological resources necessary for the retention of any job he may be able to obtain. He is often forced to rely on relief from welfare agencies—a practice which the dominant society has defined as being only for "inferior" people.

Elderly Chippewa presently feel that they are not granted the respect which would have been due them in the traditional culture. The younger people have been influenced by the dominant society values which emphasize youth to a much greater extent than the Chippewa culture. The result is a breakdown of the former status system which gave respect and prestige to the older "longdwellers".

Any integrated society depends on a relatively coherent complex of social norms, values, expectations, roles, and prestige systems. When a relatively high degree of integration or coherence is not present—in this case owing to social change—we can expect social and individual disorganization to be manifested in various forms. According to Rose, "Social disorganization—in the form of one or more of the familiar social problems—occurs when a significant proportion of meanings and values are no longer sufficiently internalized to guide the behavior of a significant proportion of the individuals still in physical contact with one another" (Rose 1954: 12).

Heavy drinking (and its concomitants) has frequently been identified as one of the Indians' greatest problems. At one reservation, for example, group activities were consciously planned so that they did not conflict with "drinking periods". In planning a local council meeting, several of the men mentioned that it would be impossible to hold the meeting during one period of several days—immediately following the first of the month—"because everyone will be drunk then".

While many people have attributed the Indian's problem with alcohol to some genetic characteristic or the "purity of the Indian blood stream", there are much more adequate explanations. Excessive drinking can be seen as a response to the personal conflicts resulting from a lack of clearly defined roles or meanings and values in contemporary Indian life. The type of drinking done by the Indians is extremely significant in understanding Indian disorganization. Many Indians drink volume alcohol such as 3.2 beer and cheap wine almost to the exclusion of any other form of alcohol. The express intent of such drinking is to "drink to get drunk" or "to pass out". Drunkenness serves a function, as illustrated by one Indian man who said, "When I am drunk, I can be anyone I want to be—doctor, lawyer, hunter—anyone!" Drunkenness is an "escape" for the Indian. The "escape" is from the inconsistencies and conflicts caused by a lack of clearly defined roles. For the younger generation, drinking may serve as an escape from the boredom and lack of meaning in their reservation experience.

The history of liquor in the experience of the Indians has compounded this situation through the definition of

liquor as "bad" and the Indian as unable to handle it. The argument may be advanced that the Indian has not really learned how to drink or how to be moderate in his consumption of alcohol. He has been, until recently, denied the social control of drinking publicly and has been "forced" to restrict his drinking to illegal and furtive indulgence in "home-brew" or boot-legged liquor.

Application could be made at this point of the formulation of Julian Steward (Steward 1955:43-63). He suggests that acculturation studies make use of the concept of "levels of sociocultural integration"—e.g., national, folk or community, and family levels. Institutions associated with these levels of integration differ with respect to their complexity and form. Steward points out that "American Indians since post-white times have been potentially subject to influences from both the "national" and "folk" levels of European culture (Steward 1955:56-7). Thus, the "family" level of sociocultural integration of the traditional Indian culture, i.e., patterns of life of the small hunting and gathering units, has been influenced by the imposition of dominant society "national" institutions, i.e., the reservation system, governmental controls and the national economy. While "national" institutions have been imposed on Indian "family" culture, little attention has been paid to the total effect of such "intervention" on traditional Indian institutions. Because of the isolation of the Indians, a continuity of traditions has been supposed. However, to quote Steward, ". . . native patterns do not necessarily remain intact because individual Indians do not participate in white society. All "tribes" have been brought into a relationship of dependency upon American culture through economic, governmental and often religious institutions. In most cases, the influence of the institutions of the larger sociocultural system has been sufficient to destroy the native pattern, often with traumatic effects. It was the most serious weakness of the New Deal policy for the Indians to suppose that an uncontaminated native core of attitudes and values could be preserved while the tribe became increasingly dependent upon national institutions" (Steward 1955:57).

The relative absence of law and order has been identified as another "problem area" of the contemporary Indian situation. An illustration of attitudes toward this "problem" may help to clarify the factors involved. A theft was committed involving government money at one state reservation. The boys responsible for the theft were discovered; upon the return of the money, no further disciplinary action was taken. This prompted the comment by a non-Indian: "These Indians are never punished. If they steal something and aren't caught—then they get away with it. If they are caught—then they just give it back and that's all there is to it! They don't see any reason why there should be anything else done about it!"

The cultural background of this situation suggests a plausible explanation. The private or individualistic nature of the culture includes a view of misbehavior in which only the person wronged has any recourse when an offense has been committed. Further, no one else

really has any right to be concerned. Opposed to this is the dominant society view that an act against a person or property is a crime against society as well. Society has a responsibility to apprehend the guilty person and see that proper punishment is enacted. Owing to this discrepancy, it is not surprising that external law enforcement agencies have difficulty securing cooperation of Indian communities and that Indian communities are not more concerned about their "problem".

Furthermore, the problem of crime and delinquency in the Indians' case can only be adequately understood when it is remembered that they had been under federal control until only recently. Disrespect for state and local authorities, coupled with the introduction of laws in areas which were previously "legal vacuums" has been to a considerable extent responsible for the present conditions. In addition, reluctance of local agencies to deal with internal or local Indian problems contributes to the lack of community law and order.

The final problem discussed here is the lack of effective community organization or cooperation. While this factor is perhaps less visible as a problem area, most people who have worked closely with the Indians have become aware of it. For example, at one Minnesota reservation, effective regulation of rice harvesting procedures was consistently thwarted by individual violations of rules set up by the duly elected rice committee. Indians "riced" illegally at night, trespassed in areas of the rice beds set aside for additional ripening, and took it upon themselves to lower the water level in the lake by removing boards from the dam. The problem may be stated in terms of the unwillingness of some people to accept and abide by a majority decision.

The Chippewa culture did not necessitate the acceptance, on the part of the minority, of a majority decision. Where disagreement with an authority occurred, the person was able to leave the band of the particular leader or to challenge his leadership. Further, leadership itself was not highly structured or routinized, but was subject to change since it depended on a person's continued successful performance in various meaningful roles. Because of the cultural allowance for actions based on individual autonomy, it is not surprising that coordinated community activity is limited.

In addition, it should be pointed out that the Indian Reorganization Act has only been in effect since 1934. This act authorized the establishment of local self-government by the various Indian groups. The act is based on dominant society conceptions of collective government with the democratically elected representative body making decisions for the entire group. Democratic institutions are not central to traditional Chippewa culture, however, and this difference may help to explain some of the local Indian councils' difficulties.

The "helping orientation" of agencies which have historically dealt with the Indians has also contributed to the lack of development of community organization and cooperation.

*Conclusion:* The above discussion deals only with a few

of the "problems" of the contemporary Minnesota Indian situation. Hopefully, the major underlying sources of other difficulties are included in the few topics treated here. In any event, the background provided by the cultural and historical review and the theoretical interpretation seem to provide a more complete understanding of those forms of individual and social disorganization which have often been referred to as the "Indian Problem".

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an outgrowth of my field experience at the Nett Lake, Minnesota, reservation in 1961, and a growing interest in the contemporary Indian situation in the state.

<sup>2</sup> While other than Chippewa Indians are included in the total Indian population of Minnesota, the seven principal reservations are all Chippewa and more than 95% of the Indians in the state are Chippewa. No attempt is made here to apply this discussion to non-Chippewa Indians, though there are some grounds for pointing to various similarities in the conditions of all Minnesota Indians. Since my own field work experience was among the Nett Lake Indians, it is probable that the discussion will be most applicable to this group. However, basic similarities in the cultural traditions and historical experiences of the majority of Minnesota Chippewa warrant at least consideration of these factors for the wider state Chippewa population. There is no implication that all Minnesota Indians fit into the "problem" category.

<sup>3</sup> Hickerson uses historical and ethnographic sources to cast doubt on the widely held view of a strong individualism or "atomism" among the southwestern Chippewa of pre-reservation Minnesota and Wisconsin (Hickerson 1962). While accepting the scholarly contribution of Hickerson, it does not entirely discredit the individualistic interpretations of traditional Chippewa life (See for example Landes 1937; Barnouw 1950).

The difference of intent of Hickerson and myself must be noted. Hickerson essentially contrasts the southwestern Chippewa with the Saulteaux or northern Chippewa and finds that the southwestern group evidenced "a marked degree of cohesion in contrast to the northern (Canadian) branch (Hickerson 1962:9). On the other hand, it is my intent to contrast the traditional Chippewa culture with that of the dominant white society. In contrast to the dominant white society, both southwestern and northern Chippewa groups exhibit an individualistic orientation.

It should be added that individualism or "atomism" as a culture theme would be most applicable to Chippewa Indians of the northern regions of Minnesota (e.g., Nett Lake, Lake Vermillion and Grand Portage) because of the geographic and cultural similarities and historic ties of these groups with the Canadian or northern Chippewa (Hickerson 1962:86).

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