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Ecology, Socialization, and Personality Development Among Athabascans *

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Perhaps a thousand years ago, groups of Athabascan-speaking Indians migrated southward from their harsh, subarctic habitat in the interior of Alaska and Canada. Some of them reached the Great Southwest and ultimately became the Apaches (Boas, 1911).

During some seventeen years of intense and carefully considered combined anthropological and psychoanalytic work with the Chiricahua, Lipan, and Mescalero Apaches of the Mescalero Indian Reservation in New Mexico, the Boyers discovered the presence of a modal personality type.[1] They learned also that, despite the influences of contact and intermarriage with other Indian bands of the same and other linguistic stocks for centuries, and well over a hundred years of domination by Whites, the child-rearing techniques and attitudes of those Apaches appeared to have remained virtually unchanged from aboriginal times, particularly as they pertained to the prelatency period (B. Boyer, 1964; Boyer and Boyer, 1972; R. Boyer, 1962). This was not an expected observation.

One of us (Hippler) has been investigating Athabascans in many areas of Alaska during the past six years. As a team, the authors have undertaken the study of the widely separated Tanaina and Upper Tanana Athabascans.

Editor's Note: While there was some disagreement among the reviewers of this article about the usefulness of the psycho-analytic approach, the Editor has decided to publish the article to present a different approach to the study of socialization and personality development.

* This paper was presented as a part of a panel discussion, "Cultural Differences and Ego Development" at a joint meeting of the American Psychoanalytic and Psychiatric Associations, Honolulu, May 7, 1973.

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[1] The Boyers have collaborated during various periods of the Apache Research with Drs. Harry W. Basehart, Bruce B. Lachlan, and David M. Schneider, anthropologists; and Drs. Florence B. Brawer, Hayao Kawai, Bruno Klopfer, and Suzanne B. Scheiner, psychologists.

The Tanaina have lived in recorded times in an area where they were heavily influenced by Tlingit and Haida Indians and Eskimos and have had such intimate contact with Whites during the past two centuries that their surnames are Russian or Scandinavian (Hippler, Boyer and Boyer, N.D.; Osgood, 1933, 1937). The Upper Tananas whom we have studied inhabit remote interiors of Alaska (Allen, 1887; Heinrich, 1957; Hippler, 1973; Hippler, Boyer and Boyer, N.D.; McKennan, 1959). They have been influenced but little by non-Athabascan Indians and Eskimos and have had extensive contact with Whites only since the beginning of World War 11.

Because of the vast differences in cross-cultural contacts the three groups had experienced and the variations in their life patterns and social structures, we had not anticipated finding the common dominant personality traits of the Tanainas and Upper Tananas to be congruent with those of the Apaches of the Mescalero Indian Reservation, nor had we expected to find their value systems and world views to be similar in so many ways. We found their socialization techniques to differ in certain manifest respects but to have the same latent emotional impact and to lead to similar expectations. We wondered whether a pan-Athabascan personality type might exist and, if so, how it might have persisted. Accordingly, we reviewed the literature.

A survey of the literature dating back to about 1700 revealed that the other Athabascans of Alaska, Canada, and the Great Southwest share the dominant personality traits of the Apaches, Tanainas, and Upper Tananas (Adney, 1902; Anon, N.D.; Back, 1970; Birket-Smith, 1930; Birket-Smith and DeLaguna, 1938; Bompass, 1888; Boram, 1973; Bowes, 1964; Chapman, 1948; Dawson, 1888; Dyk, 1938; Emmons, 1911; Freeman, 1968; Goddard, 1906; Goldman, 1941; Helm, 1961, 1968, 1969; Helm, DeVos and Carterette, 1960; Hill-Tout, 1907, 1946; Honigmann, 1947, 1949, 1954, 1963; Jenness, 1943; Jetté, 1911; King, 1936; Koolage, 1968; Laguna, 1969-70; Leighton and Kluckhohn, 1948; MacKenzie, 1966; MacNeish, 1956, 1957; Mason, 1946; McKennan, 1965; Morice, 1894, 1925; Olson, 1968; Osgood, 1933a, 1936, 1958, 1959; Rich, 1938; Slobodin, 1969; Steward, 1940; Sue, 1965; Teit, 1956; Van Stone, 1965). This is true despite different social structures and widely variant acculturative effects. We propose that those shared, dominant personality traits, value systems, and world views were grounded in the ecological situation within which they arose. We postulate that in the harsh ecological circumstances of the subarctic Athabascans, they developed social organizations based on small group existence and efficient mechanisms for supporting spacing, and that attitudes, institutions, and child-rearing practices evolved that produced individuals whose personalities functioned well in, and perpetuated, such groups. We attribute the persistence of specific personality traits to the conservatism of puericultural practices.

The literature is almost devoid of sophisticated socialization studies of Northern Athabascans. Since we assume that the isolated Upper Tananas are more like prehistoric Athabascans than are the Tanainas and Apaches, we shall stress our incomplete study of them in the remainder of this paper. However, before we turn to the socialization and personality of the Athabascans, some general remarks are in order concerning basic personality and the development of child-rearing patterns.

Basic personality may be defined as the inventory of shared responses common to the members of a society, integrated into the unconscious, deviation from which will elicit group reaction, usually negative. Such responses result from the interaction between affective and intrapsychic systems on the one hand and social practices on the other. Such social practices were derived initially as primary modes of adaptation to the physical environment and other pressures related to group survival, and, serving survival, they became institutionalized (Lubart, 1970). Since it is unlikely that early man was a conscious social planner, most primary systems probably came into being by accident, stood the tests of adaptive utility and, ultimately, became cultural institutions. Systems which were derived partly rationally originally are not necessarily indoctrinated into the children of succeeding generations by rational means, but rather by emotionally oriented indoctrination involving the reward-punishment system. To the parents, the modes were simply there and other systems would have been unfamiliar and, probably, unthinkable.

Axiomatically, socialization begins at birth and is progressively integrated by the child. It becomes automatized, that is to say, unconscious, and shapes his responses. The child does not know why he responds as he does to various stimuli, but he knows that any other response results in anxiety. In a more subtle way, the unconscious wish to deviate may elicit anxiety in any of its diverse forms, but the child may be unaware of the reasons for its psychical or physical discomfort. He may then resort to whatever modes of ego defense are best available to him to allay his uneasiness and to keep the deviant impulse in check, all without conscious awareness of the nature of his motivations and responses.

Parental care of infants and small children tends to remain constant over time. Even if the conscious attitudes of parents change regarding social goals, indoctrination towards those goals is usually imposed after the adult judges the child to be approachable by relatively rational means. Much of the basic emotional organization of the growing child, aided in its development by subtle parental messages of which the father and mother themselves may not be fully aware, has been formed before such rational approaches are employed. Thus, the deeply integrated shared responses that play such a critical role in the rearing of infants and young children and which combine to form a modal personality in a society change very slowly (DeVos and Hippler, 1969). Change usually occurs when major events alter important aspects of the culture and render the old traits unadaptive. Even in those instances, such modifications transpire dilatorily and the individuals of a changing society react in both conscious and unconscious ways which have become habits of the past and rationalize their inertia while attempting to, or adapting to new conditions. Puericultural practices are remarkably conservative, primarily because parental reactions to situations have become automatic. Mothers and fathers deal with their children much in the same way they were cared for even though they live in and adapt to a world that is starkly different from that of their parents. In some groups, alterations in infant-rearing practices change over three to six generations at the earliest unless a remarkable culture - wide change is imposed from within or without (Borowitz, 1973). What we stress here is that the earliest interactions between children and their parents, especially their mothers, is fateful in the determination of character structure. Clearly it is possible that a genetic element enters into the conservatism of modal personality, but as yet this has been unproven.

Like other nomadic Athabascans of interior Alaska, the Upper Tananas lived in and still inhabit one of the harshest environments occupied by humans, with ordinary midwinter temperatures of -50 F. or colder. Nearly devoid of dependable sources of protein and fat, they lived in isolated matrilineal groups averaging fewer than fifteen persons, widely separated from each other during the food-gathering time of the year. They risked temporary village groupings but for some four months in winter, living off stored food. Were too many people to occupy an area for too long, all would have starved. As it was, starvation was periodic and hunger endemic. Our genealogical data indicate that until the past two generations, food shortage resulted in an infant mortality of 50 to 80 percent.

It is generally thought that the infant does not differentiate clearly between internal and external stimuli for at least some months and does not clearly distinguish between itself and its mother for some years (McDevitt and Settlage, 1971). Faced with chronic hunger, young infants experience generalized discomfort which may persist thenceforth as a psychophysiological substratum of later personality development, manifested by free-floating anxiety (Greenacre, 1941). Psychoanalysts of various schools have postulated that when babies feel uneasy, they split nurturant figures into good and bad breasts and mothers (Klein, 1932; Lewin, 1950; Winnicott, 1953, 1958). We assume that their frustration mobilizes aggressive urges.[2] When they learn that their discomfort comes from lack of food, according to psychoanalytic theory, they hate the split-off bad mother image and want to devour her but, under the influence of the *lex talionis,* they fear retributive oral destruction.

The attitude of the Upper Tanana parent toward the very young child is ambivalent. While they treasure their infants and toddlers, parents also consider them to be somewhat less than human, and dangerous. The baby's drool is thought to be toxic in some way. The infant is surrounded by amulets that are meant to ward off imaginary monsters which are thought to want to devour it. We assume that such bogies symbolize the parents' unconscious filicidal wishes (Rascovsky, 1970).

The folklore of these Athabascans is an omnipresent given. It is replete with maternal and infantile representates who devour one another.

As is true today, in the past when the next child was born, the parents' solicitude was transferred forthwith to it, causing the displaced erstwhile family monarch to become severely frustrated and intensely jealous. As we know to have been true among the Apaches of the Mescalero Indian

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[2] It is irrelevant for the purposes of this communication whether aggression be viewed as innate (Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein, 1949) or solely resultant from frustration (Miller et al, 1941).

Reservation, we believe that the displaced toddler developed murderous impulses toward the new rival which were channelized into insecure reaction formations and that, under the influence of the still pervasive influence of the primary process (Freud 1915), the older child developed diffuse unconscious guilt and a fear of the possible magical effects of its anger.

But the child also grew to fear intense positive feelings. When it sought to express love to its mother, it was generally rebuffed or ignored. Overt expression of love was thought to indicate to the supernatural monsters with which the Athabascans peopled their environment that the cherished object was especially desirable. There was also a special form of the evil eye belief similar to what we find among various Mediterranean groups.

The Upper Tanana mothers were themselves products of similar socialization and their developmental potential was impoverished. We postulate that over time they had developed an emotional distance which protected them against severe depression when loved ones, especially infants, were lost. They were simply incapable of supplying the supportive emotional care which could lead to a child's developing a sense of basic trust (Erikson, 1950). They seem to have had a minimum of physical contact with their young. They preferred to leave them in hanging cradles as they still do, placed so high that the infant could see only the ceiling and upper walls of the dwelling and the occasional face of a passer-by. When in the cradle, the baby's human contacts were largely limited to what he could achieve by hearing, and his tendency to live in a world of vague fantasizing was reinforced. In the darkness, or when they are alone, the Upper Tananas, at least today, are preoccupied with the possible supernatural meanings of unidentified noises and frequently visualize specters in the dark.

Parents feared the excreta of infants and still have the overt attitude that even the child of less than six months of age soils itself with the conscious intent of frustrating the caretaker. At the same time, cleanliness training is highly inconsistent.

According to all reports, the child grew up in an environment in which there was intersexual hostility. Males, fearing that their wives wanted to poison them, preferred to do their own cooking and to live and sleep apart from women. There were and are no set meal times. Each person tended to, and continues to, eat separately much of the time.

Sexual relationships were apparently without tenderness and frequently involved brutality on the parts of both participants. Today this tendency is especially manifest in the presence of alcohol imbibing. Living arrangements forced children to be aware of parental sexual activities and oedipal conflicts were awakened very early. The youngsters responded to their observations according to their levels of psychosexual maturation, in terms of oral and anal sadism. Their identifications with the excitements and fears of both parents contributed to a later sense of insecure personal and sexual identity. We believe that such experiences contributed to the problem of latent homosexuality which exists among some Southern Athabascan men (Boyer, 1964) and assume the same to hold for the Upper Tananas.

As they do today, men viewed women as dangerous and unfaithful. Blood from female genitals was assumed to be toxic. Pubescent girls were isolated from family dwellings for weeks or months and there were rigid postpartum and menstrual taboos. We assume that these practices increased uneasy fears plus the woman's hostility toward men. The fact that females tolerated such treatment bespeaks their acceptance of their ascribed role as dangerous, inferior, and dirty. Men consciously believed and believe vaginas to be dentate, but youths had and have to prove their masculinity by sexually servicing seductive, frightening older women. Women viewed men as sadistic rapists. The folklore is laden with women and female animals whose vaginal teeth chew up the logs males shove into them, as well as other manifest portrayals of intersexual brutality and hatred.

Death was common and surrounded by ceremonies and taboos, the analysis of which indicates that they are meant in part to absolve the living of the guilt associated with their murderous desires and their wishes to attain fusion with maternal representatives via necrophagia (Hippler, Boyer and Boyer, 1973).

Much of the socialization experiences of the Upper Tananas took place in a social and emotional environment which tacitly and overtly reinforced the continued use of primary process thinking, the kind of thinking which determines much of the structure of the dream (Altman, 1969). It also supports the persistent use of primitive psychological defenses, especially splitting and projection. Our field work with the Tanainas and the Chiricahuas, Lipans and Mescaleros and our reading about the lives of other Athabascan groups indicate that their socialization practices retain the essential elements which were outlined above for the Upper Tananas.

Other factors constituted parts of the cultural milieu in which socialization transpired. There were good and bad shamans, to whom were ascribed supernatural powers. The former used their powers for the common good and the latter, by definition witches, for evil purposes. At times, a single individual was thought to be both shaman and witch. The shamans and witches served well as good and bad mother projects. Today, shamanism is waning. The medicine man's sacred functions are being assumed by white medical personnel. There is still a tendency to ascribe witchery to mean-dispositioned elderly people. Ghosts were and are omnipresent, as is true of 'wild men' and imaginary monsters. Phobias against familiar animals and birds are institutionalized.

Athabascans, despite their suspiciousness, are also gullible and highly suggestible. Hysterical trances and visionary states are common among older children and adults. Ego and superego controls are highly inconsistent. Impulsivity prevails. Although much unconscious guilt exists, Athabascan behavior is dictated essentially by group sanctions. There is a prolonged psychological adolescence. People are 'supposed' to assume responsibility for their own behavior and renounce inconsiderate and narcissistic actions in their teens and twenties, but are not actually expected to do so until they reach their forties. When most people become grandparents, they give up functioning as adolescents. Only then are they seemingly able to give children consistent warmth and support.

The child-rearing practices and the physical and psychological milieu within which they took place produced a basic personality which was suitable for the subsistence patterns of the nomadic Athabascans in small groups in their harsh environment. Three main facets of that personality organization were especially adaptive.

At every stage of the child's development, his care produced frustration and mobilized aggression. Such hostility was directed initially toward the child's frustrators, his family members. Animals and enemies served as other suitable objects for the discharge of the readily available and societally needed aggression. It would seem, however, that hostility was present in such great quantity that the culture had to provide still other objects upon which to project and against which to discharge aggression. Thus, we find belief and terror in the form of witches, ghosts, wild men, monsters, and bogies. We see here, too, the functional utility of the cultural support of primitive defenses, especially projection. Support of the splitting defense is to be found in the existence of people who are both shamans and witches, as is probably true to some degree of all small scale and middle range societies. In most cultures, grandmothers are probably more permissive than mothers and are perceived to some extent by children as being more gratifying emotionally. Among the Athabascans, the mothers appear to be factually emotionally depriving in addition to being highly inconsistent in the model she supplies for superego development. There, the grandmothers are not only more emotionally gratifying but they are also more consistent in discipline. We think that the actual presence of the emotionally depriving mother and the relatively gratifying grandmother also reinforced the use of splitting.

We have chosen to stress the effects of the frustrating aspects of the Athabascan parents' ambivalence toward their children. However, in actual witnessed everyday behavior, the hostility of the mother is more evident than that of the father who, like the grandparents, is more tolerant and supportive of the needs of the young child. Such caretakers are also to be found in the manifest content of the oral literature. Like the actual parents, however, the caretakers of the myths and legends are very frequently undependable and are apt to become attackers, seemingly as the result of whim.

We do not assume that all groups whose harsh environment requires that they develop small group existence and geographical spacing mechanisms come to develop socialization practices which reinforce the use of the primitive defenses mentioned above, but we find it interesting that denizens of the Sahara Desert (Miner and DeVos, 1960) and the Australian outback (Róheim, 1955) are thought to do so.

The other two factors have been mentioned above. The first is that of emotional distance, a degree of unattachedness which made it possible for people to lose loved ones without suffering debilitating depressive reactions. The second is the suspiciousness which was so necessary for self-and group-preservation in the hostile surroundings where each noise might herald danger.

COMMENT

We have sought here to support the hypothesis that in the ecological circumstances of the aboriginal Athabascans, socialization practices developed that produced a basic personality which was adaptive to, and supported, the cultural framework within which it arose. We have noted that this personality constellation now appears to be pan-Athabascan. Dominant shared personality traits exist regardless of the social structure of the particular society or the degree of acquisition of cultural traits which have been obtained through diffusion. We assume that the conservatism of socialization attitudes and practices is responsible for the persistence of that modal personality, even among groups where it is no longer socially and individually useful, such as the Apaches of the Southwest, who have long since abandoned their nomadic hunting, gathering, and raiding subsistence patterns. We have used the structural model of psychoanalytic theory (Arlow and Brenner, 1964) in our attempt to illustrate how the ecological environment could have influenced the development of the pan-Athabascan modal personality and to explain hypothetically the conservatism of socialization practices. In our judgment, it is obvious that some psychological explanation is required, and no other psychological theoretical system suffices.

We do not claim that the basic personality of the Athabascans cannot arise in the presence of other ecological pressures and/or socialization practices. We do not even know whether it is common in the progeny of most hunting and gathering groups. We have designed research which we intend to execute to clarify some of these issues.

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