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John Cournane

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Article abstract

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Are rural American Indian adolescents becoming a race of angels?

John Cournane

“It is well known that indigenous children in Canada are fairing so poorly as a result of complex historical and contemporary dynamics that play themselves out in indigenous communities and in our cities.”¹

Article 30 of the UN Convention of the Rights

of the Child recognizes the right of Indigenous children to enjoy their traditional culture, religion and language. This article contains the unwritten hope that societies around the world will help maintain distinct Indigenous identities.

Since October 31, 2002, the government of Canada has attempted to live up to that obligation by setting aside \$320 million over five years to improve early childhood development for indigenous children². Before conducting quantitative and qualitative research on the specific

programs funded by the federal government, my goal in this paper is to provide a brief overview of the importance of developing a Canadian Aboriginal identity amongst adolescent First

Nation people. My fear is that without such programs Canadian Indigenous children will become “individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, and rootless – a race of angels” (Fanon, 1963, p.170).

The Roots of the Situation

David Lester in his book *Suicide in American Indians* states that:

The ambiguity of identity in adolescent American Indians (comes) as a result of the conflict between the American Indian culture and the dominant American culture ... this conflict may be greater for American Indian adolescents than for other ethnic groups, especially because the other ethnic groups have lives more intertwined with the dominant culture than reservations (Lester, 1997, p. 51).

Abstract

This article discusses the importance of identity formation and the development in young Aboriginal persons as important in the early years of education. Education is an important anchor that would help ensure a reduction in adolescent suicides and improve ego development.

The dominant culture is not an abstract entity. According to Fanon, it is a “whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action

through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence (Fanon, 1963, p.188). The separation of Aboriginal youth from the dominant culture takes on a special significance after the two great wars because:

Only in the course of the two great wars of this century did the populations of the more developed industrial states take on the character of nation states. Nation states one might say, are born in wars and for wars. Here we find the explanation why, among the various layers of we-identity, the state level of integration today carries special weight and a special emotional charge. The integration plane of the state, more than any other layer of we-identity, has in the consciousness of most members the function of a survival unit, a protection unit on which depends their physical and social security in the conflicts of human groups and in cases of physical catastrophe (Elias, 1991, p. 206).

Since the World Wars there has been permeation throughout society of a “we-identity”. The current “we identity” has morphed into an “official recognition of the social reality of diversity (that came from) the policy of bilingualism within a multicultural framework announced by Prime Minister Trudeau in 1971...bilingualism within a multicultural framework was an attempt by the Canadian state to establish a flexible basis for unity and a comprehensive nationhood” (Ghosh, 2002, p.24). This comprehensive nationhood under the banner of multiculturalism was seen as welcoming, inclusive and embracing. Peter Caws (1994) compared it to concepts like international, pluralist and ecumenical, suggesting that it transcends sectional divisions. However, Trudeau’s vision incorporated a bilingualist approach that resulted in interculturalism within Quebec leading to Bill 101 and the protection of a Quebecois identity.

What about protecting and promoting a distinct ethnic identity for First Nation people?

A Distinct Ethnic Identity

Denise Newman’s article: Ego Development and Ethnic Identity in Rural American Indian Adolescents³ related ego development to an organizing framework that is responsible for asking life’s bigger questions: Who am I? How do I view my world? - Questions that can only be answered through coming to terms with the concept of identity. One of the first researchers to focus on identity, Erik Erikson (1963), purported that it is impossible to separate identity from ego development. The identity/ego development paradigm for Charles Taylor (1994) is a fundamental defining characteristic that makes us human beings. As human beings our co-dependence is central to our development, this is reflected in Brameld’s (1970) research that identified identity as undergoing both an individual and collective development within simple or complex institutions. Likewise the work of the Russian psychologist Leo S. Vygotsky (1978) was based on a cultural-historical activity theory that perceived a strong interdependence between the social context and the individual. Vygotsky’s theory was based on the belief that individual development is in direct relation to social experiences. The co-dependence aspect of identity formation, according to Erikson, begins to occur at the crucial time of adolescence because at this time individuals are neither consciously nor deliberately attempting to shape it. Preschool programs and early school age programs provide fertile ground to reach First Nation children because they are characteristically striving for more independence while figuring out where they belong in relation to the broader community. It is important that the community given the responsibility to educate these children is made up of First Nation elders

because non-recognition and/or misrecognition of an ethnic identity during these early educational years can inflict harm, and literally can be thought of as oppressing and incarcerating them in a false, deformed, and existentially reduced mode of being⁴.

From Newman's (2005) research "a reasonable relationship (exists) between ego development and identity strivings during early adolescence" (Newman, 2005, p.11). The larger society, as Newman (2005) points out, impacts the formation of an ethnic identity for Aboriginal adolescents by introducing them to negative Native American labels and racial stereotyping, as evident in popular cultural sports teams (Braves, Redskins) and the omission of native Indian social and political history from educational texts or the portrayal of Native Americans as somehow a "developing people". A lack of understanding of the authentic roots of their ethnic identity can lead to an ethnic deprivation which may render "some stages of ego development insurmountable for the child, after which s/he will cease to develop.... or very slowly thereafter" (Loevinger, 1976, p.174). However, according to Newman, if an awareness of ethnic identity is nurtured at an early age it can result in more psychologically mature Native American adolescents possessing a higher degree of awareness of their ethnic identity. These higher levels of ego development are associated with greater emotional experiences, both positive and negative.

From Assimilation to a Proactive Approach

Assimilation for Aboriginal people can, as noted by Newman, come in the form of labels and racial stereotyping. This exclusion, imposition and expropriation are often considered "as wholly external – an extrinsic force, whose

influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin" (Hall, 1990, p.233). However, the ability to throw off these false portrayals of First Nation identities is not such an easy task because they become "actively disaggregated... recomposed –re-framed, put together in a new way... (becoming) a site of a profound splitting and doubling" (ibid). He uses Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* to emphasize his point:

The movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self (Fanon, 1986, p.109).

Who is the "another self"? Ghosh and Abdi's (2004) perspective of the another self is developed from an educational framework where a focus on certain traditions and theories in schooling, centred around the social construction of knowledge "imply the constructions of reality, their selection, and the organization (which) legitimize the knowledge and culture of the dominant group, with the resulting elevation and ensured continuity of this group's bodies of knowledge at the expense of the others" (Ghosh and Abdi, 2004, p.13). The "another self" that Aboriginal adolescents are exposed to in Canada, and in other parts of the world, come at their own expense. The social construction and conceptualization of Aboriginal adolescents divide them from their classmates and intrinsically provide a powerful negative theoretical identity. The way to change this is to promote programs such as Aboriginal Head Start, a program designed to have indigenous communities play an active role in establishing First Nation identity curriculum at an early age. The curriculum and social environment

designed to foster a distinct Aboriginal identity places social structural change ahead of psycho-social change.⁴ Placing Aboriginal children in a social structural environment that is Indigenous will eventually lead to a psycho-social change that will profoundly effect ego development.

Conclusion

Stuart Hall writes that cultural identities are the “points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning” (Hall, 1990, p.226). First Nation youth must be positioned in a way that they intrinsically respect their identity. The famous sociologist Emile Durkheim wrote that we must not “direct our attention to the superficial position of our consciousness; for the sentiments, the ideas which come to the surface are not, by far, those which have the most influence on our conduct. What must be reached are the habits...these are the real forces which govern us” (Durkheim, 1956, p.1052). Canadian First Nation adolescents must be taught about an ethnic identity that influences conduct. Thus the habits that need to be implemented must, as the First Nations Action Plan state, be under the control of First Nation Peoples and be grounded in First Nations languages and cultural values. Helping to provide a First Nation identity with positive habits will go a long way in helping to reduce adolescent suicide and improving ego development. Without such an approach the generation will become a race of angels. Ten years ago the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples wrote:

The majority of Aboriginal youth do not complete high school. They leave the school system without requisite skills for employment, and without the language and cultural knowledge of their people.

Rather than nurturing the individual, the schooling experience typically erodes identity and self-worth. Those who continue in Canada’s formal systems told (The Commission) of regular encounters with racism, racism expressed not only in interpersonal exchanges but also through the denial of Aboriginal values, perspectives and cultures in the curriculum and the life of the institution (RCAP, 1996, Vol. 3, p.434).

The negative cycle of Aboriginal youth struggling within the educational system must end. First Nation Ego Development and Identity formation in the early years of education is vital.

End Notes

1. Statement by Mr. Keith Conn, Delegation of Canada to the Second Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on Agenda Item: Health. New York, May 19, 2003.
2. The article appeared in the May/June periodical Child Development.
3. This is based on the work of Charles Taylor and can be found in Ghosh and Abdi, 2004, p. 26-27.
4. Weber, Marx and Durkheim have all viewed psycho-social change as occurring after social structural change.

Bio

John is a PhD student in Education at McGill University. John obtained a MSc degree from the London School of Economics and an MBA from the University of Ballarat. John’s interest in First Nations Research began at the University of Alberta where he majored in Native American history. His BA honours dissertation was on the Anglican Missionaries impact on the Sisika Indians and his level of Cree was at an intermediate level. John is looking forward to undertaking more in-depth research about multicultural projects and programs aimed at First Nations children.

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