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Transcultural Psychiatric and Related Research in the North American Arctic and Subarctic

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This overview will survey research covering the Eskimo and Athabaskan Indian populations of Alaska and Canada among whom I have worked; I am also familiar with both the cultural and the psychiatric literature about them. (I lack adequate familiarity with the Algonquian-speaking subarctic-woodland Indians of eastern Canada to include them in this discussion.)

In retrospect, the most striking thing about the transcultural psychiatric research among these populations is its spottiness. There have been few specifically psychiatric works about subarctic Athabaskans, and those are of uneven quality. The situation is somewhat better for Eskimos. Nonetheless, I must essentially rely on "related" works to provide a useful overview.

Related researches—those in the general area of personality and culture, emotional expression, and the relationship between cognitive and emotional organization—are more numerous but of far greater variance in quality. Most of the "culture and personality" studies (including those of this author) tend to suffer from methodological and sampling problems, which are perhaps unavoidable in part; some are also tinged by extremely poor grasp of theory or by pervasive axe-grinding. However, these studies are the basic structure upon which further transcultural psychiatric studies in the area must depend.

I shall briefly note the historical sequence of studies and their relationship, if any, to each other and then discuss the best studies and the gaps in needed information.

Athabaskans: General Culture and Personality

The very earliest observations of which I am aware date from the late 1600s and early 1700s. These are of course nonsystematic and

nonpsychiatric, but they are interesting for their description of impoverished and aggressive Athabaskans. (See Hippler and Wood 1974.) In the period 1800–1900 there were recurrent themes of Indian poverty and endemic hunger, continual migration, rapid development of dependency upon whites for food (getting native food entailed great energy expenditure), poorly developed social organization, extreme suspiciousness, and fearfulness. By the time Dawson wrote (1888), there was adequate information to indicate matrilineality, reciprocal clan obligations, potlatching, and moiety systems.

The period 1900–1940 produced the first psychiatric or personality-related research among Athabaskans. Jenness (1933), in what is probably the first actual ethnomedical discussion of subarctic Athabaskans, described a shamanistic treatment of a hysterical disorder (the symptoms appeared to be echolalia and echopraxia). Jenness seems to be saying that dependency is elicited and transference used dependently to alleviate the problem. Jette (1911) provides the single most impressive and useful cataloguing of superstitions and magical beliefs extant, although it remained for Parsons (1922) to integrate ceremonial, emotional, and cultural life in a fashion closer to modern perspectives.

It is, however, in the period 1940 to the present that the real integration of earlier work with more sophisticated perspectives has been achieved. This period has produced the works of Balikci, Hippler, and Honigmann, which include direct attempts to understand predominant psychodynamics. It also has seen the work of authors such as Helm, Leechman, MacClelland, McKennan, Osgood, Oswalt, Riddington, Slobodin, Townsend, and Van Stone, to name only some of the most adequate, who have further developed much more systematic ethnographic information. (See Hippler and Wood 1974, for additional information on these writers.)

The best “culture and personality” study can be traced to Honigmann’s initial work among the Kaska. In an unusual article (1947a), he discussed the psychodynamic background of Kaska sexual behaviour, relating the fearful, hidden, and aggressive quality of sexual intercourse to emotional isolation resulting from the Kaskas’ emotionally deprived childhoods. He also noted the prevalence of “rape” forms of sexual contact and saw latent homosexuality, frigidity, and potency difficulties as common. In a series of further works, Honigmann (1946, 1947b, 1949, 1954, 1968) detailed the relationships between witch fear, isolation, emotional trauma, and interpersonal bitterness. His pioneering work, however, did not

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attempt to fully integrate all the phenomena he discusses. His concern was to relate as much as possible of adult ethos to child-rearing, and he finally concluded that "atomism" characterizes the Kaska groups. Essentially, he found mothering patterns to be less than warm.

In another article, Honigmann (1969) discussed the first specifically psychiatric evaluation of subarctic Athabaskans, which he attempted, and concluded that they present a detached personality type. Among the Kutchin, Balikci (1963a) found much the same kind of interpersonal aggression and the same "rape" pattern of sex; he noted that even friendship is distrusted by these emotionally isolated peoples (1963b, 1968).

Hippler's work with Alaskan Athabaskans, using projective tests (as did Honigmann) in addition to normal anthropological tools, uncovered similar dynamics in Alaska. In a series of articles (Boyer, Boyer, and Hippler 1974; Hippler and Conn 1972; Hippler 1973; Hippler, Boyer, and Boyer 1975; Hippler 1974a, 1974b) it is suggested that the various Athabaskan phenomena can be successfully integrated. Briefly, an ambivalent mother creates anxiety in the infant. It is projected (the reason Athabaskans are so ubiquitously fearful and suspicious) and re-introjected (the reason they are personally sad and depressed). Anger builds up over cold and distant parenting, and abrupt displacement of affection onto newborn siblings creates an anger which is displaced onto persons outside the kin group to the extent of near xenophobia.

Harsh, inconsistent socialization creates a punitive but self-briefing superego, and internal controls are difficult to achieve. Thus, social control is vested externally in the individual, in the chief or lineage head. Because of poor internal controls, much effort must be expended to avoid warfare, which is endemic. The fear of starvation, which is omnipresent, and of avenging war parties no doubt adds considerably to projective and suspicious thinking.

In an attempt to relate these and other aspects of the Athabaskan personality to possible historical factors, Hippler, Boyer and Boyer (1975) suggest that the extreme environment (nearly the harshest on earth) may have forced population spreading, reduced the utility of gregariousness, reinforced feelings of emotional and nurturance poverty, and helped create the sad, angry, suspicious, lonely Athabaskan. Hippler (1974) also attempts to relate this personality type to forms of alcohol abuse among Athabaskans, but no strictly clinical evidence is presented.

The research seems reasonably clear on the Athabaskan person-

ality. However, three factors must be taken into consideration: 1) there have been no adequate epidemiological surveys of a psychiatric nature on the subarctic Athabaskans, although Foulks (1972) has made an attempt in this direction; 2) there have been no reported psychoanalyses of individual Athabaskans; and 3) Balikci and Honigmann have not yet published objective material, such as projective test results, to substantiate their views, while Hippler and the Boyers have only published summaries of such tests.

At present, although there are studies on separated subarctic Athabaskan groups which reasonably seem to report a common Athabaskan personality style, there remains a need for additional material, which can be manipulated statistically but is clinically insightful, to support these observations, as well as to indicate variance in psychodynamic organization and in psychopathology within the group.

Eskimos

While those who have attempted to gain a psychodynamic perspective on the Athabaskans tend to be generally in accord, the same has not always been true for Eskimo studies, although consensus seems to be growing.

Eskimos have been described by some as gregarious, open, friendly, kind, gentle, and humorous, as well as truthful and non-violent. Other observers have found them violent, distrustful, egocentred, cruel, self-seeking, and opaque. Clearly, such wide differences of perspective must be explained or accommodated if the ethnographic picture is to be of value to transcultural psychiatric research. Fortunately, a number of personality-related researches, including some using projective tests, have been undertaken concerning Eskimos. Moreover, a number of studies have been done by psychiatrists, and some of a specifically psychiatric nature have been accomplished.

Since the literature on Eskimos is massive, the reader is referred to the Arctic Bibliography (1971), Fortune (1968), Murdock (1960), and the Peabody Museum (1970). Annotated bibliographies which include more details concerning materials related to transcultural psychiatric research include Hippler (1970) and Hippler and Wood (forthcoming).

Because of the plethora of work, a brief overview is useful. The earliest, casual observers of the Eskimos saw them in a very positive light, with the exception of comments on their lack of cleanliness,

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but none of these pre-1900 writers had any noticeable psychodynamic sophistication. For example, although their descriptions of Eskimo child-rearing, as summarized by Bruemmer (1971), depict it as noncoercive and gentle (he calls it a forerunner of Summerhill), when we read Stefansson (1913) we find that the adult created by this type of upbringing was superstitious, improvident, violently dangerous, and unpredictable. Also, the adult Eskimo tended towards concrete and magical thinking and was hopelessly lost when faced with new situations. A benevolent child-rearing seems unlikely to produce such adults.

Nelson (1900), one of the more balanced early writers, noted the intensity of Eskimo conflict with Athabaskans and the local blood feuds and vengeance cycles, as well as the more benign aspects of Eskimo life. Rosse (1883) noted the prevalence of hysteria, but his work, although the first clearly "medical" work among Alaskan Eskimos, is opinionated.

The period 1900-1940 saw a more fundamental attempt at sophisticated observation; much of it was psychodynamically sound, or at least useful to the ethnopsychiatrist. For example, in a discussion of law ways, Hoebel (1940-41) makes it clear that Eskimo society, while putatively egalitarian, was jealousy-ridden, and while supposedly peaceful, in reality was wracked with violence.

This period also saw an increase in studies of the problems innate in acculturation, studies which became even more evident in the period from 1941 to the present. Many authors attributed all the problems to contact with whites, but Lantis, in a series of books and articles (1953, 1959, 1960), suggested that many of the traditional aspects of Eskimo life were involved as well. She was among the first to make a cautious use of Rorschachs, and these tests suggested that the southwest Alaskan Eskimos were reality-oriented, but were passive with problems, feared hostility, had serious body-destruction concerns, and exhibited obsessive-compulsive behaviour and separation anxiety. Their social life was constrained and unhappy, marriage was brittle, their leaders were petty tyrants, and the reality of child-rearing was harsher than most previous observers had reported. These observations are important since they mark the first serious attempt to integrate antithetical aspects of Eskimo behaviour and personality. However, because of the initial nature of her work, Lantis did not attempt a comprehensive statement.

About the same time a series of researchers began using projective testing, and the first real transcultural psychiatric research also

made its appearance. Murphy (1964) attempted to analyze the specific psychiatric problem of normality and shamanism and to uncover culturally determined indicators of normality for Eskimos. This needed work was followed by that of Murphy and Hughes (1965), which tested the cross-cultural validity (high) of the Health Opinion Survey for Eskimos. Attempting to place Eskimo nosologies and etiologies in a Western psychiatric framework, Murphy and Leighton (1965) showed some success.

Parker (1962, 1964), in an early attempt to relate child socialization and adult psychopathology among northwestern Eskimos, relied heavily upon assumptions about the beneficence of Eskimo child-rearing, claiming that it was poor preparation for adult crises and led to adult hysteria. Preston (1964), using the same assumptions, was puzzled by Rorschach responses from hospitalized northwestern Alaskan Eskimos, since these were form-dominated (which I believe reflects the great need for personal controls over aggression) and contained many anatomical, nude, and X-ray responses (which I believe suggests hidden aggression). Furthermore, she found passivity and helplessness in the card responses, but her fear that these responses were only a reflection of the hospitalized state of her subjects is probably not true, since I have found the same things in nonhospitalized Eskimos.

Ferguson (1960), however, using Rorschachs, found Canadian Eskimos to be affable on the surface, while showing compulsive and stereotypes traits underneath. Some of these peculiar findings make more sense in light of the Honigmanns' observations (1953) on child-rearing and adult personality. Their work is a sound basis from which to attack the problem of the paradoxes of Eskimo life, since it was the first serious, sophisticated, and successful attempt to explain the varied and contradictory behaviours found among the Eskimos on the basis of their child-rearing patterns and the adult personality patterns to be expected from these. The Honigmanns also saw a mostly benign childhood but observed that the apparent friendliness among adults seemed mostly to reflect a need to appease and that the Eskimo optimism seemed based on narcissism. They noted intersibling rivalry and corresponding adult touchiness. Their findings described Eskimos as unable to deal with rejection, living with forced smiles, but possessed of flexibility in dealing with the world.

In a brilliant exposition of Eskimo behaviour, Briggs (1971) noted in more detail specific concerns over control of violence, the

anxiety about the expression of anger and the fearfulness underlying most Eskimo "gentle" behaviour, thus supporting the Honigmanns' conclusions.

Hippler (1974) attempted a synthesis of Alaskan Eskimos' personality and culture, based on projective tests, the literature, and observations; he came to conclusions remarkably similar to those concerning Canadian Eskimos. Essentially, he found Eskimo socialization to be initially benign, but with the mother exerting subtle but powerful demands for control over certain behaviours. While generally permissive in form, socialization includes frightening, teasing, and some forms of external emotional cruelty. The child learns never to interfere with another child, but only for fear of the other's violence. He learns that the real power in living with people lies in dissimulation when needed and bullying when possible. These self-centred needs are balanced pragmatically, but not necessarily empathically, against a recognition of the power and claims of others. Anger and sibling rivalry is displaced onto the powerless or onto animals. But animals who are killed must be propitiated for fear of the anger of their spirits.

The major concerns are over aggression. Men smile at each other to signal their peaceful intent. Hippler believes that it is this habit of circumlocution, deference, and self-disparagement which led to the overblown praise of Eskimo culture by earlier writers and observers. Most of them were not trained to detect the anxiety and anger underlying these expressions. Eskimo egalitarianism is not based on an assumption of equality but on fear of any man leading another. Eskimos "borrow" freely from one another, but this reflects an unwillingness to confront the "borrower," whose actions, in many cases, come close to the equivalent of theft, for fear of a confrontation. In fact, even wife-lending is often merely acquiescence in a *fait accompli* or a deliberate but unconscious placation. Because of the generalized fear of expressing anger or provoking anger in anyone else, indigenous social-control systems were generally limited. Actual, long-term, cooperative activity and even judicial constraints only emerged after white law provided a safe umbrella enabling villagers to have habitual murderers removed.

Studies of Eskimo culture and personality, then, have been evolving a more balanced view of the probable psychodynamics. Lantis' careful work on Alaskan Eskimos and Honigmann's pioneering efforts in Canada are both reflected in Hippler's synthetic approach. But, as with Athabaskan studies, there is still a need here for de-

tailed studies of latency socialization and the adult life-cycle from a dynamic perspective, and also for a discussion of variance—all related to change and adaptation in a more sophisticated fashion.

Transcultural Psychiatry

As we have noted, psychiatry is a nearly empty field as far as Athabaskan studies are concerned. A great deal more has been done with Eskimos; by far the best single work is that of Foulks (1972) on the arctic hysteria. He discusses the so-called calcium deficiency hypothesis for arctic hysteria or *pibloqtok** and central nervous system disorders, as well as environmental, social, biological, sociopsychological, political, demographic, and outside influences in the etiology of psychological maladjustments. This is a more efficient method, I believe, of looking at the totality of maladjusted responses than single-cause analyses. Foulks' findings are not merely limited to arctic hysteria; he also compares incidences of disorders such as schizophrenia by culture group and social organization level, but only *en passant*. Wallace (1961) had proposed that *pibloqtok* was neurological and based on calcium deficiency. Foulks rejects this theory but does suggest that other organic factors, such as various respiratory and middle-ear infections, CNS damage, and the emotional deficiencies associated with hearing loss may be relevant.

To explain the hysterical aspects, Foulks notes the present acculturation problems of some Eskimos. However, he adds to these the factors of gross distortions of the circadian and calcium rhythms, respiratory and infection problems resulting from changed housing conditions, the oppressiveness of Eskimo shame controls, and the pervasive desire to "escape" from other people's interest and prying. Foulks' work is, I believe, a model that might well be followed with other ethnic groups. It integrates psychodynamic and other perspectives very well for his purposes.

Epidemiological and Similar Research

Transcultural psychiatric research includes studies of murder, suicide, various extreme forms of deviance, culture-bound emotional disorders, curing styles, and epidemiological and etiological studies.

**Pibloqtok* is a frenzied, dissociative-type reaction in which the individual may faint, rush about, or imitate animals or anything anyone says. Often the victim will eat fecal matter, tear off his or her clothes, and roll about in the snow or jump in water. If this occurs under very adverse climatic conditions, or in the absence of help, it is often fatal.

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Not all of these have been uniformly dealt with for Eskimos, but what data exist suggest high levels of certain deviant expressions, such as murder and suicide. Balikci (1961), for example, found a suicide rate ten times as high for Canadian Eskimos as for the world at large. Butler (1965) had similar findings, and Willis (1962) related the high incidence of hospitalization for emotional disorders in the Northwest Territories to suicide attempts. Kraus (1974) found suicidal behaviour in Alaska at least three times as frequent as in the United States overall. Nachman (1969) related suicide "epidemics" among Eskimos to "imitative" aspects of *pibloqtok*-like behaviour, a view which Kraus also accepted. Graburn (n.d.) detailed extremely high rates of murder for Canadian Eskimos, and this seems possible for Alaskans as well, but the data are unreliable.

That the data are unreliable is the basic fact for the entire body of epidemiological studies of Eskimos. Very serious problems of under-reporting and of alcoholism masking psychotic disorders obscure much of this work.

Alcoholism itself has been the subject of hundreds of articles, some appearing in this journal. These articles have ranged from the impressionistic and clinical to the statistical. A large number of such articles attribute even the tendency to alcoholism to "cultural breakdown." Most such articles are based on "common sense psychology" and are hence psychodynamically useless. The statistical articles tend to show extremely high levels of incidence of alcohol abuse, but tend also to be superficial in analysis.

Overall, the need for serious epidemiological and nosological work among these populations is very great. A thorough attempt to relate the form, content, and incidence of psychopathology to culture and personality in this region has yet to be undertaken with any success.

Analysis of State of Research and Suggestions

With the foregoing brief overview in mind some comments spring easily to mind.

The basic issues in transcultural psychiatry arise from the desire to broaden the scientific, experimental, and pragmatic base of theories concerning emotional and cognitive organization and disturbances. Such theories have had their genesis in the European and North American experience. Basic issues include:

1. To what extent does (do) Western psychiatric theory(ies) explain non-Western behaviour?

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2. Are disturbances similar in dynamics and etiology cross-culturally? That is, are culture-bound disorders truly unique?
3. Do culture-bound disorders increase our understanding of the influence of social milieu on personal adaptation and adjustment?
4. Do culturally distinct healing approaches provide information of theoretical or practical value for therapeutic intervention outside the culture at issue?

In the case of arctic and subarctic studies in transcultural psychiatry we find that Western sociopsychological theories do seem to provide consistent, coherent explanations for both Indian and Eskimo behaviour. Disturbances among both groups seem to arise from factors which can be understood and analyzed in Western terms. Culture-bound disorders among Eskimos appear to be dynamically similar to problems among Western peoples, differing only in some outward forms but understandable in psychoanalytic terms.

The study of culture-bound disorders may be said to increase our appreciation of cultural factors in illness, but it must be noted that a theory of such factors is already inherent in nearly every Western etiological theory of disorder. Accomplished work seems merely confirmatory. Culturally distinct healing-approaches seem to provide more information about therapeutic techniques in general, but to be essentially inexplicable in the absence of Western psychiatric theory.

In sum, no matter how devoted the attempt to explain human behaviour and its etiologies cross-culturally in strictly local-culture acceptable terms, such attempts have the flavour of solipsism unless they are related to an organized body of theory. And the most consistently useful body available worldwide still arises from Western psychiatric theoretical and clinical findings.

Why then the unevenness in its use and adaptability? The experience of such research in the North American arctic and subarctic suggests some reasons and offers, by inference, some suggestions.

The extant theory about psychodynamic processes is still too amorphous for easy cross-cultural use. Resolutions between Kleinian and Freudian or neo-Freudian theory, not to mention integration of various behaviourist theories, developments in ego psychology, and studies of perception and cognition have simply not been adequately achieved. Researchers attempting to use one or several of such theories have done so at varying levels of competence. There remains a serious, continuous fixation on the part of some researchers

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with a Rousseauian perspective which does not permit them to face up to pathology in groups that they are emotionally attracted to; rather it leads them to be critically acceptant of relativistic interpretations of behaviour and intolerant of universalistic ones.

Suggestions

Whether the researcher is concerned with theoretical or practical concerns, certain needs suggest themselves.

First, research in transcultural psychiatry in the arctic and sub-arctic needs to be much more systematic and theoretically related.

Second, less descriptive or *ad hoc* and more specifically problem-oriented research is needed.

Third, there must be more promulgation of procedures adequate to overcome the sampling and statistical problems inherent in the study of such populations.

Fourth, if, as I believe, the literature shows that we are dealing with small populations with *relatively* similar psychocultural dynamics, then the laboratory aspects of the situation in a time of culture change are very promising.

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