



Problems in Indian families : a survey of major problems and coping procedures of twenty Indian families residing on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation
by Michael A Emerson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF SCIENCE
in Home Economics
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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was first to survey American Indian families on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and identify the major problems and coping procedures of the families interviewed.

Secondly, the purpose was to survey the professional workers employed by the Reservation who were responsible for dealing with Indian problems. This part of the research was conducted to compare their perceptions with that of the Indian families.

The sample included a total of twenty Indian families and five professional workers. The survey was carried out by the use of personal interviews, using questions of open-ended form.

The research disclosed that there were events perceived as major problems by the twenty Indian families and five professional workers within the Indian family structure. These were concentrated within the areas of (1) marital, (2) economic, and (3) occupational.

Coping procedures were used, though it was the general attitude of both the professional workers and Indian families that most coping procedures were not adequate in dealing with the families' problem areas.

In comparing the perceptions of both the professional workers and Indian families interviewed, it was found that the professional workers perceived major problems and coping procedures almost entirely in terms of overt, observable behavior. The Indian families reported some of the same observable behavior but also perceived other behavior that was not overt, i.e., emotional and psychological.

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PROBLEMS IN INDIAN FAMILIES: A SURVEY OF MAJOR PROBLEMS
AND COPING PROCEDURES OF TWENTY INDIAN FAMILIES
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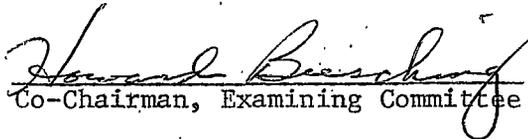
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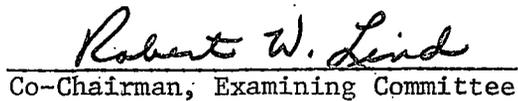
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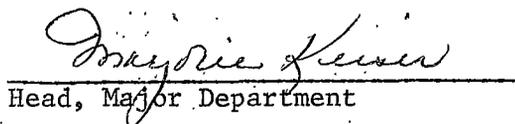
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was first to survey American Indian families on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and identify the major problems and coping procedures of the families interviewed.

Secondly, the purpose was to survey the professional workers employed by the Reservation who were responsible for dealing with Indian problems. This part of the research was conducted to compare their perceptions with that of the Indian families.

The sample included a total of twenty Indian families and five professional workers. The survey was carried out by the use of personal interviews, using questions of open-ended form.

The research disclosed that there were events perceived as major problems by the twenty Indian families and five professional workers within the Indian family structure. These were concentrated within the areas of (1) marital, (2) economic, and (3) occupational.

Coping procedures were used, though it was the general attitude of both the professional workers and Indian families that most coping procedures were not adequate in dealing with the families' problem areas.

In comparing the perceptions of both the professional workers and Indian families interviewed, it was found that the professional workers perceived major problems and coping procedures almost entirely in terms of overt, observable behavior. The Indian families reported some of the same observable behavior but also perceived other behavior that was not overt, i.e., emotional and psychological.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Until recently many counselors, educators, and researchers seem to have believed that aside from significant language barriers people from different ethnic backgrounds could be helped effectively with traditional methodology. The assumption has been that the way to assimilate people from different cultures or ethnic groups was to Americanize them, that is to wean them from their own cultures and channel them into a melting pot of white middle-class culture and life styles. In the process of implementing this kind of assimilation of divergent ethnic groups, our educational system was designed to mold them into the kinds of people who would fit the prevailing definition of what constituted a red-blooded American. As a result the idea that an individual should be developed into his own racial culture, whether Puerto Rican, Chicano, or American Indian, was never conceptualized as a responsibility of the professional working with these people. Instead, top priority was awarded to the process of Americanization at the expense of the ethnicity of the individual.

In the field of education and counseling, we are presently witnessing the development of an alternative to the traditional theory of practice of assimilation. This alternative is called pluralistic acculturation. This approach calls for educators, counselors and researchers to accept, to understand, and to appreciate the fact that

other cultures function as viable and valuable models of different systems for individual and social life and organization. One way in which to accomplish this is through an investigation of how the ethnic group in question views the particular problem or situation. A definite need exists for this new approach. There is a need to develop within the professionals working with these people a familiarity with divergent cultures, not only to understand each other better but also to understand the rich diversity of human nature. What is being said is that when the professional relates to an individual within a different racial and ethnic inheritance, the professional has an obligation to recognize and evaluate the importance of the other person's culture value system (Palomares, 1971:139-145).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was first to survey American Indian families of the Fort Belknap Reservation and identify the problems and coping procedures of these families. More specifically, the two major areas, problems and coping procedures, were broken down into six parts: (1) marital; (2) parental; (3) interpersonal; (4) economic; (5) occupational; and (6) extended family.

Secondly, the purpose was to survey the five professional people employed by the reservation who are responsible for dealing with Indian problems. This was done to find out if they perceive the family problems and coping procedures to be the same as the families

interviewed perceived them, and to compare their perceptions with the Indian families interviewed.

Justification

Quite often when researchers and agencies in the helping professions are planning special projects or programs for the people they will be serving, they fail to find out how the people in question feel about or view those particular issues. Instead, they decide what is best for the people without any research concerned with the individual's views and wants. Without this information the programs planned would only be speculating on the real needs of the people. As stated by Jack Plumage on Tuesday, November 19, 1974, at the Human Rights Conference, Helena, Montana:

The policy has been--HELP THE INDIAN--we must make him equal to us. I propose that we have been helped too much. Not only that but we have been given the wrong kind of help. No one has ever come to us and said "'WHAT KIND OF HELP DO YOU NEED?" or "WHAT ARE YOUR PROBLEMS?" It has always been the whiteman telling us what our plight was or what our problems are and then their experts helping us to solve our problems in order to civilize us.

Knowledge derived from what the Indian views as a problem and how he copes with it could be utilized in many ways; for example, by the Mental Health Branch of the Indian Health Service. The Indian Health Service would be aided by this information by giving this knowledge to their Mental Health Consultants on reservations, particularly the Fort Belknap Reservation. The information would aid in the consultant's overall view of Indian problems and influence the selection of

the mode in which therapy is to be given.

The Mental Health Consultant on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation has made a request for the information, believing that it might prove valuable to him in treatment.

Finally, this research was addressed to the 36,710 Indian people of Montana whose demand for studies directly concerned with how the Indian himself feels is finally being heard (Office of the Governor, August, 1974).

Limitations and Delimitations

There are three delimitations that the researcher has selected. First, the researcher has delimited his research to Indian families of the Fort Belknap Reservation. Secondly, the researcher has delimited his population by defining "adult" as a person eighteen years and older and also any person under eighteen years who has the responsibility of raising and caring for a family. Third, the researcher has delimited the type of problems to fall within the areas of: (1) marital; (2) parental; (3) interpersonal; (4) economic; (5) occupational; and (6) the expanded family.

The research was limited by (1) those persons taking part in the research and (2) by the total number of professional helpers employed by the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation.

General Questions to
be Answered

Through personal interviews, the answers to the following questions were sought:

What events are identified as major problems to the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in regard to marital relationships?

What events are identified as major problems to the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in regard to interpersonal relationships?

What events are identified as major problems to the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in regard to occupational situations?

What events are identified as major problems to the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in regard to economic responsibilities?

What events are identified as major problems to the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in regard to parental responsibilities?

What events are identified as major problems to the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in regard to the extended family?

What are the coping procedures used by the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in relation to marital problems?

What are the coping procedures used by the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in relation to interpersonal problems?

What are the coping procedures used by the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in relation to occupational problems?

What are the coping procedures used by the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in relation to economic problems?

What are the coping procedures used by the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in relation to parental problems?

What are the coping procedures used by the Indian families of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in relation to problems within the extended family?

Definition of Terms

Major problem. ". . . an upset in a state . . ." In a state of unbalance or having a major problem, by definition, is postulated that the habitual problem-solving activities are not adequate and so do not lead rapidly to the previously achieved balanced state.

With this definition, there are three sets of interrelated factors which can produce a state leading to major problems:

1. A hazardous event which poses threat
2. A threat to instinctual need which is symbolically linked to early threats that resulted in vulnerability or conflict

3. Inability to respond with adequate coping mechanism (Parad, 1973:24-26).

American Indian. Any person, male or female, who is able to claim American Indian heritage, without regard to the per cent of Indian blood.

Adult. Any person, male or female, eighteen years of age and older, or any person, male or female, under eighteen years, who has the responsibility of raising and caring for a family. Under this definition, the adult members of the nuclear or extended family, if living within the family household, were considered part of this research.

T.N.S. Tape Notations Sheet.

Coping procedure. The procedure used by individuals to work out their problems.

Interpersonal area. The area dealing with interactions between the Indian family and other people, i.e., how the family relationships are with their neighbors, friends, community, etc.

Chapter 2

SELECTED REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Major Problems

A person with major problems is at a turning point. He faces a problem that he can not readily solve by using procedures and coping mechanisms that have worked for him before. The result is that his tension and anxiety increase, leaving him less able to find an adequate solution. A person in this state feels helpless, he is caught in a state of great emotional upset and feels unable to solve his own problems (Aguilera, 1970). Crisis or major problems may occur, as stated by Caplan (1961), when an individual faces problems which he finds himself unable to solve. He goes on to agree with Aguilera, Messick, and Farrel (1961), in stating that there is a rise in inner tension and signs of anxiety and an inability to function in extended periods of emotional upset.

According to Caplan (1964), man is constantly faced with a need to solve his problems in order to maintain some balance to his existence. When he is confronted with an imbalance between the difficulty of a problem and his ability to solve it, or lack of coping skills, a major problem state may evolve. Tension rises and discomfort is felt, with feelings of anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, and helplessness. Caplan (1964) also stated that there are four phases which elicit major problems or a crisis: (1) the initial rise in tension as the habitual problem

solving techniques are tried; (2) a lack of success in coping with the situation as the stimulus continues and more discomfort is felt; (3) an increase in tension which acts as a powerful internal stimulus and mobilizes internal and external resources; and (4) as the problem continues and is neither solved nor avoided, tension increases and major distortion and disorganization occurs.

In Figure 1, page 10, there is shown a Paradigm with the effect of balancing factors in a stressful event, one leading to a major problem state and the other leading, of course, to no major problem. Figure 2, page 11, carries the Paradigm one step further in applying it to a hypothetical situation, and like Figure 1 shows one leading to a major problem state and the other not.

Through an exhausting search of the literature at the Library at Montana State University and Weber State in Ogden, Utah, the researcher found no significant literature on the American Indian family structure or any literature pertaining to the American Indian family per se. Therefore, the researcher structured his review of literature to cover the aspects of the American Indian which were accessible to him; namely, aspects dealing with Indian culture, life style, government, and the American Indian as an individual.

Fort Belknap Indian Reservation

The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, located south of the Milk River in north-central Montana, is the home of descendants of two

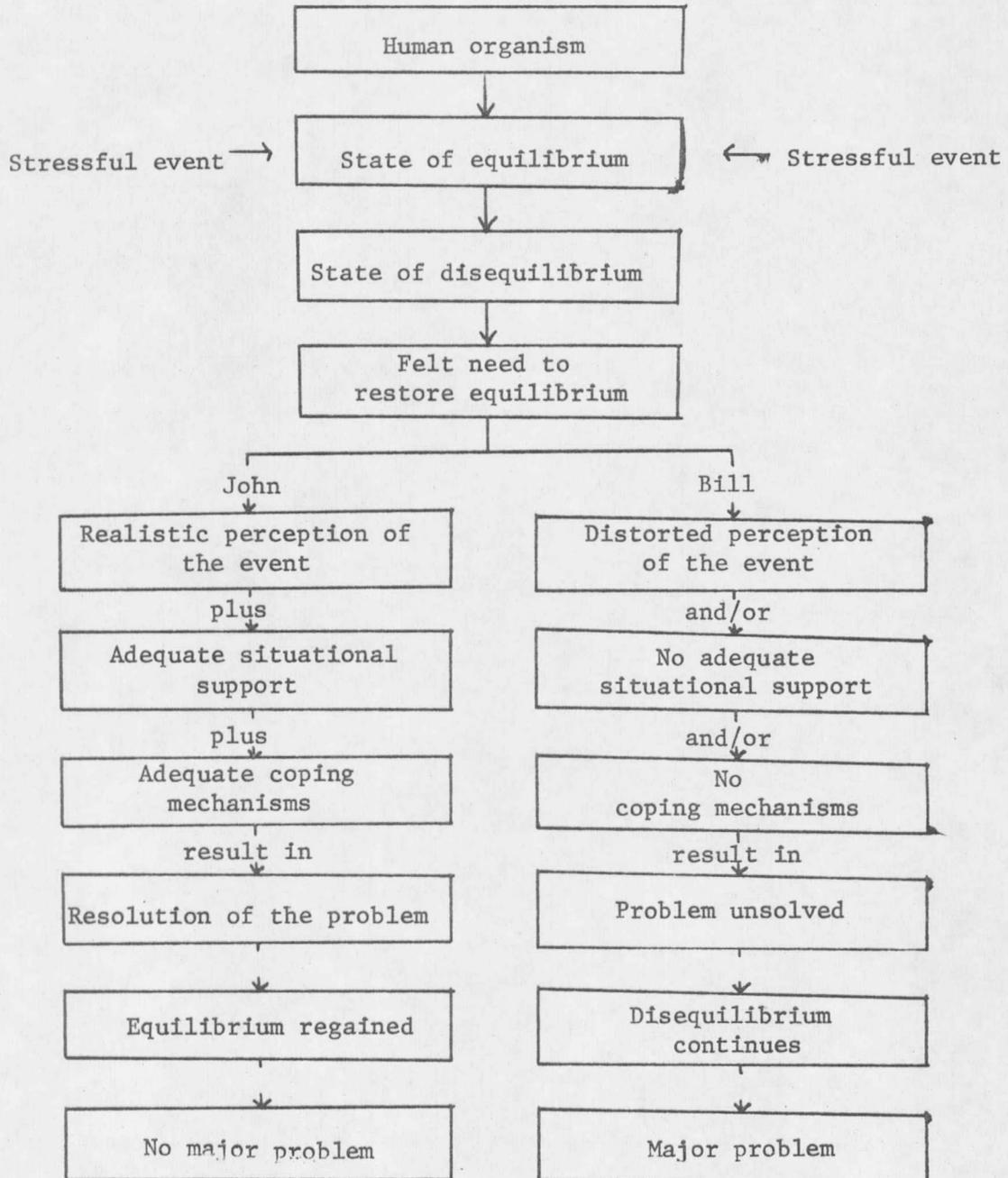


Figure 1

Paradigm: Effect of Balancing Factors in a Stressful Event

