OBSERVATIONS OF FAMILY DISORGANIZATION AS IT RELATES TO AN INDIAN COMMUNITY

by

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A professional paper submitted to the Department of Graduate Study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

June, 1969
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The writer wishes to express her sincere gratitude and thanks to Dr. S. Gordon Simpson for his invaluable assistance.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Children are perhaps the most unfortunate victims of family disorganization. The children look to the parents for love and security. They look to their parents as a team. The child's world is severely threatened when this team is suddenly disrupted by divorce, separation, or desertion. The emotional and moral impact may be devastating and is often accompanied by economic deprivation.

Many authorities believe that the disordered psychic states associated with family derangement can result in emotional disorders in children which affect their behavior, their school adjustment and productivity, and their reactions to their environments. Early family experiences are of vital importance to children. These experiences are very likely to affect the formation of present and future goals and values and the behavior resulting from these values.

The broken home, defined as one in which one or both parents are absent owing to death, separation, desertion, divorce, or commitment to an institution, has been believed by many criminologists to be an important concomitant of juvenile delinquency. From the standpoint of the psychoanalytic school, a complete family consisting of father, mother, and children is essential to the development of a well-balanced and socially adjusted personality, while from the point of view of social welfare practitioners, the absence of either parent may lead both to dependency and
overcrowding as well as to faulty practices of supervision, training, and discipline. The hypothesis that the broken home and delinquency are associated has been given great emphasis in recent research literature (10:390).

Either directly or indirectly the effects of family disintegration are felt by society and its institutions as well as by the immediate family. Since the family is the primary basis of our society, anything which disrupts normal family life becomes a social problem. The individuals most affected by the disorganized family, the children, need the constructive assistance of society and its institutions (6:9).

Statement of the problem:

The headquarters of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation is located in Poplar, Montana, a town of approximately 2,000 inhabitants. It is the intent of the writer to determine if any apparent relation exists between disorganized homes and the prevalence of juvenile delinquency among the Poplar Indians of the lower socio-economic level.

Procedure followed:

Although much of the research related to this study was already known due to the knowledge and observations of residents of Poplar, fellow school personnel of the writer, and the writer herself, research necessitated specific written references to give it the authenticity required of a formal report.
Limitations of the study:

The initial purpose of the study was to provide some insight into the background and behavior of the lower socio-economic group of Poplar Indian children and relate it to the prevalence of broken homes. An abundance of literature has been published concerning juvenile delinquency and broken homes. However, due to the lack of available literature concerning the youth of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, this part of the study was based on the observations and experiences of the writer who taught eight years in the Poplar Elementary School.

Definition of terms:

The word Indians as used in this study refers to those individuals who are registered as Indians with the tribal government under the regulations set forth by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They receive free medical and dental attention, hospitalization, commodities, and the services of the social welfare worker.

The Indians live under tribal government and are subject to the tribal law enforcement regulations. In general, the law enforcement practices correspond to those of the white community of Poplar.

The Fort Peck Indian Reservation is a comparatively large one, but the majority of the Indian families live either in Poplar or the immediate area. The children attend the Poplar Public School.
CHAPTER II
SOME PERTINENT LITERATURE

In disrupted families where the home is divided through divorce, desertion and separation, and other causes which break down the traditional family pattern, children have little opportunity to build up a basic sense of trust. At the stage of development where a child should begin to develop the feeling of being an individual in his own right, he finds nothing on which to build. In his striving to gain individuality he may develop feelings of worry, anxiety, and fear that cause inner emotional conflict. The result may be one of very aggressive behavior or a "turning in" of himself, a repression.

Until a child is about three years of age the need for both parents is not as great as in succeeding years (3:98-100). The very young are not cognizant of sex differences and do not have a desire for a distinct masculine or feminine personality. The child will probably not be emotionally affected if he has a mother to see that he is well-fed, warm, and loved.

The children in the lower socio-economic group of Indians on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation often do not have the basic necessities of life for proper growth and development. If a father is not a member of the family, the mother must work to supplement the help received from welfare agencies. The employment she can get is unskilled so the wages are consequently small. Little children are left in the care of older children, if there are any,
or in the care of anyone who is willing to be bothered by them. The parent evidently assumes that as long as someone older is with the young child, he will be all right. A certain amount of affection is received by the small child but, due to economic circumstances, the child does not receive the proper foods and other physical care. A high rate of illness exists among these children due to the condition of the homes and lack of hygienic care. Rickets, tuberculosis, and trachoma are common examples of diseases prevalent among the little children (6:61-62).

A description of the homes in which a large majority of these children live will help give a picture of what the members of the family group must contend with to exist. There is an area of Poplar which is commonly called "Little Chicago" and in which most of the Indian families of the lower socio-economic group reside. The houses were constructed of logs or lumber many years ago. In the process of aging and misuse they have been patched up with anything available, such as old boards, pieces of tin, cardboard, or even old blankets. Some have wooden floors and others have floors of hard packed earth. The houses may have one or two rooms. Furniture is extremely scarce.

In a visitation the writer made to one of these homes, seven children slept in one bed. The second bed was used by the mother and some of the younger children. Even to a child under the age of three such an environment is certain to affect its normal physical and mental development.
During the infancy period a child's relations with the mother are of great importance. The father's role is that of providing for the mother thus giving her time to care for the infant. She is supported emotionally by the father and this helps her to maintain a contented, happy environment in which the baby thrives (4:13).

The little Fort Peck Indian child who belongs to the poor family does not have such harmonious surroundings in which to grow. He develops an ability to fight for his existence at a very early age. He must try to gratify his desires in any way possible. These habits of self-preservation seem to carry over into his pre-school years when there is no father to guide and help him and a mother whom he seldom sees.

A principal in the Poplar Elementary School was very interested in the conditions of the homes from which our Indian children came. From information he gathered in an informal manner, he found that the broken home situation was very prevalent among those living in the area called "Little Chicago." Almost always the father had deserted the mother. The mother, if she had employment, spent little time in actually caring for her children. Often, perhaps to relieve the emotional stress under which she lived, the mother became an alcoholic.

If a child from three to six years of age does not have a father and a mother with whom to interact, it is very difficult for him to develop normal attitudes toward others later in life. At this
stage of his development he evolves intimate feelings toward the parent of the opposite sex. These feelings need to be counter-acted by feelings from the other parent in order to avoid abnormal sex tendencies.

Sexuality exists very early in life. The display of sexuality is much more dependent upon environment than one might expect. Some expression of sex is quite normal but parents should find ways of distracting a child when this expression becomes too pronounced (1:249-251). Without both parents adverse effects might be expected. The conclusions drawn by the child from his experiences dictate to a great degree his future actions.

Among the Indian children of the lower economic level who are products of broken homes, knowledge of sex is an early development. They live in crowded conditions and see and hear much. Brothers, sisters, and friends begin to experiment with sex. Often the mother may have male "visitors" who stay for indefinite periods, living with the family.

There was an Indian woman residing in this area who had eleven children, yet her husband had deserted her before the birth of her first baby. She gave each of the children the last name of her husband. One man or another was always living with the family in their three-room house. Such a condition does not make for a feeling of security in the children but instead develops in them values not acceptable by
society. Often when we inquire into the story of a problem child we see difficulties in the relation between the child and his mother (2:208-209).

Needy children who are left much to their own devices, and who have great freedom of movement, sometimes take the easiest way of getting whatever is the object of their immediate desires. Children are not born with ready-made adjustments to the conditions imposed on them by their adult human environment. The two-year-old child is not referred to a guidance clinic because he pounds on the wall with a toy car, but by the time a child is six years old such behavior is not expected (8:8-9).

By the time the Indian children from the low-income group are six years old, they have developed many ways of gratifying personal demands. There is little money to buy the small luxuries which seem to the child of such great importance. Tremendous pressures, caused perhaps by seeing other children enjoy things they cannot possess, lead them to stealing. They just help themselves to the property of others. Usually, in the case of the younger children, it takes the form of stealing candy, pop, or toys. The parent has little time to investigate the source of the stolen items or may not know of them at all.

At the age of six a child enters school. Whether or not he enjoys and profits by the school experience depends to a great extent on the home and school environments. At home, due to the lack of
one parent or both, he may have had great freedom of movement. This freedom of movement is hampered when he becomes a member of a school group. He must learn to adopt a manner of behavior not native to his home environment. The property of other children or adults must not be taken. The teacher must be respected and obeyed.

The Indian child of a disorganized home has a most difficult adjustment to make. Besides the fact that he is Indian and from a poor home, he faces a cultural crisis which confuses him. He may develop a distinct feeling of inadequacy which may seriously impede his learning processes. Inadequacy in facing the situation may cause the child to become very aggressive and he develops his self-ego by picking fights and causing trouble. Or he may develop a passiveness, a "turning in," and become shy and uncommunicative (8:95-98).

Both of the latter described manners are applicable to the Indian children of the lower class broken homes. Fist fights develop over very trivial matters such as whose turn it is to bat a ball. A first grade teacher in Poplar related an incident in which a six-year-old Indian boy had smashed the nose of another boy over the ownership of a pencil. A fourth grade child, an Indian boy in the writer's classroom, caused another child to break his arm by impeding his progress down a slide and pushing him off to the ground. Some of the Indian youngsters become so shy and uncommunicative that it is difficult for them to take part in classroom activities.
Stealing is common among this group of Indian children even in their first years at school. The children appear to have developed very clever ways of hiding stolen objects. Due to the lack of having money of their own, and partly due to habits acquired before entering school, money is the item most commonly stolen.

An example of this was given by a teacher of a third grade in Poplar. A child's lunch money had disappeared from her desk. No one had seen anyone near the child's desk. This had happened several times before and the teacher was determined to find the money. She systematically searched each desk. She had the children line up and checked each one's pockets. No missing quarter was found so the teacher had them take off first their shoes and then their socks. Out of the sock of one of the girls fell the quarter.

Preadolescents and adolescents can usually face family separation with some degree of understanding. The development of an independent and individual identity is important at this period of a child's life. Of great importance to the child is the presence of a strong, effective person in the home environment to provide the needed guidance, attention, and affection. At this stage the goals of a child are beginning to take a definite significance and shape. Past behavior and the quality of the home environment influence these goals for better or for worse.

In a child we do not usually call acts of misbehavior delinquency. The development of criminal behavior originates as part of the random
movement of children in a world of adults. The activities of children are defined by the attitudes of society and organized institutions. A child's values and goals are formed by a selective process of growth within his environment. The Indian child of the lower socio-economic group described in this paper has little opportunity to select his goals and values in the manner approved by society. From his mode of life in a disorganized home, subjected to little supervision, and in need of love and attention, he grows from a naughty child at home into a behavior problem at school. The children who later become juvenile delinquents usually have a past history of misbehavior.

The delinquent child is all too frequently the truant of yesterday. The truant is the school child who found extra-curricular activities more appealing and less burdensome than curricular activities. The step from the child who is a behavior problem in school to the truant is a natural one; so, too, is the step from truancy to delinquency (11:70).

In the broken homes of the Indians of whom we have been speaking, children who have reached the adolescent stage are to a great extent expected to fend for themselves. They pick up what food they can find at home, often having the only hot, well-balanced meal of the day free at the school cafeteria. They have freedom of movement as far as any effective home discipline is concerned, coming and going much as they please. It is the rule rather than the exception for these young people to fall into ways not acceptable by society.
Studies have been made by Burt, the Gluecks, Healy, Bronner, and others which show that half of our delinquent children come from broken homes (8:66-67). More recent studies place the figure even higher. Early writers saw broken homes to be an important factor, if not the greatest single causal factor, in understanding juvenile delinquency.

There is no denial that the broken home is only one of a number of factors to take into account and that the age of a child and the quality of home life, as well as the mere fact of a break, are important. A number of studies have shown, however, that abnormal or defective family relationships are much more prevalent among families of delinquent children than among families of comparative children who do not become delinquent (9:210).

The atmosphere of the homes, evidences of strains and tensions resulting from unsatisfying human relationships and environmental pressures, need to be evaluated in terms of the reactions of the individuals involved. This is reflected in the behavior of the Indian children of the Poplar area. As a rule these behavior-problem children go about in small groups, one very aggressive child becoming the leader. They commit burglaries, vandalism, and assault.

A few years ago an elderly man was knifed to death by three of these Indian boys because he refused to give them his billfold. The boys were apprehended by the police, and one of them was sent to a reformatory in Colorado. In 1967 he became involved in a fight with
some of the inmates and was himself knifed to death. He was the child of a broken home.

The delinquency of the Indian girls from the lower socio-economic level in Poplar generally takes a different form from that of the boys. They are prone to threaten to "beat up" on some individual after school, and frequently they do. They do a considerable amount of "shop-lifting" much to the discomfiture of the businessmen in town. The greater number of these girls come from the small, poor, broken home and are often pushed into sex delinquency.

Within the disorganized family, many conditions contribute to push the girl into sex delinquency. Intimate conduct with sex behavior among parents owing to a lack of privacy, a lack of physical privacy for herself, the presence of outsiders like lodgers or male friends of a deserted mother, older sisters returned either pregnant or with illegitimate infants, and brothers with court and prison records give the girl from the disorganized family an entirely different value judgment on sex and predatory crime than is received by girls from protected middle-class families (10:479-480).

During the past two years another form of delinquency has been evident in the Poplar area, most noticeably so among the young Indian members of the lower socio-economic group. These children, mostly the boys, have formed the habit of inhaling fumes from gasoline, cigarette lighter fluid, and the cement used for building model airplanes in order to experience the sensation of drunkenness. Many
have done this for so long that they appear to be addicted to its use. Most of the articles are easy to obtain by one means or another.

Three Indian boys who were members of the fourth grade taught by the writer were habitual "sniffers." They occasionally brought to school cans of lighter fluid hidden in their jackets, or rolled up rags, socks, or gloves saturated with the fluid and also "concealed." The smell alone gave the boys away, to say nothing of their silly behavior and feelings of nausea. One of these boys lived with a father and a mother, one was being raised by a foster mother, and the third was one of a large family of illegitimate children.

In the spring of 1968 these same three boys became involved in a series of burglaries and thefts. They were taken to court and finally placed in the juvenile section of the tribal jail. The boys attended school for a month directly from the jail. They came to school cleaner and performed better in school than when they lived at home.

The education of these young people has become a problem in Poplar, and the greater share of school dropouts falls into this group. The causes are probably many but surely two of them are home environment and the school's lack of constructive help. A very few leave school to get jobs to bolster the family income.
CHAPTER III
DISCUSSION

Numerous studies have been made of the relation between disorganized homes and juvenile delinquency in specific areas, but there is a lack of population data which would show the family situation of children as a whole in the United States. Since the proportion and types of disorganized homes among the juvenile delinquents vary greatly according to sex, age, racial or ethnic group, and offenses committed, using any particular data for purposes of comparison must be done with care (7:116).

As far as the writer has been able to determine, no surveys have been made on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation to indicate the percentage of juvenile delinquents which come from broken homes in the lower socio-economic group. However, an idea of the prevalence of delinquency on the reservation may be perceived from the following figures which the writer secured from Superintendent A. A. Baker of the Fort Peck Agency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal Year</th>
<th>Number of Juvenile Cases</th>
<th>Felony</th>
<th>Misdemeanor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>312</td>
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</table>
Based on case histories of delinquency, the Fort Peck Department of Law and Order estimated that over 50 percent of the delinquents came from broken homes.

The above estimate appears to compare in a positive way with the results of surveys made in other areas. Since the establishment of juvenile courts in the United States around the year 1900, some social statistics have been compiled on the youth who were brought before these courts. These data show that 40 to 50 percent of the children came from broken homes. This seems to indicate that broken homes are an important factor in understanding the problem of juvenile delinquency (8:8-9).

A survey of numerous studies made among various groups shows that approximately 40 to 50 percent of the juvenile delinquents come from broken homes. In New York City several studies indicated that 45 to 56 percent of the delinquents were from disorganized homes. A similar study made by Shaw and McKay in Chicago compared 1,600 delinquents with a 7,000 representative sample of public schoolboys. It was found that 42.5 percent of the delinquents came from broken homes (10:391-392).

It is also evident from studies made that there is a higher rate of juvenile delinquency among children who come from economically deprived areas. John P. Clark and Eugene P. Wenninger conducted a study of 1,154 public school students from the sixth through the twelfth grades in the school systems of four different types of communities.
They found that the lower class areas had higher illegal rates, particularly in the more serious types of offenses (5:181-193).

In a recent book written by Martin and Fitzpatrick the authors stated that the two structural situations most frequently cited in relation to delinquency are disorganized homes and working mothers. The family is the primary socialization agent. Since family problems consistently crop up in the history of juvenile delinquents, professionals who deal with delinquents have developed a strong conviction that a mixed-up family is largely at fault (7:115-116).

The methods adopted by a society to deal with juvenile delinquency reflect the prevalent explanations of this behavior and the particular political, economic, and social needs of the time. In the past most social reform was focused on worthy citizens who were deemed victims of some kind of injustice. Present social reform is more concerned with such things as school dropouts, mass poverty, and culturally deprived children. Society is beginning to understand more fully what is involved in the prevention and control of delinquency.
CHAPTER IV
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary:

The purpose of this study was to determine if any apparent relation existed between broken homes and juvenile delinquency among the Indians of the lower socio-economic group on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. An effort has been made to show how far below acceptable standards their home environment falls, and how this appears to be related to their attitudes, feelings, school productivity, and social adaptation.

The Indian child from the above described group is confronted with a multiplicity of problems: (1) his race designates him as being different in background from the time he enters school, (2) he begins school with feelings of emotional stress, (3) his home environment has not been physically or mentally healthy, (4) he has feelings of antagonism toward society, and (5) he lacks economic security.

Conclusions:

On the basis of this study the following conclusions were reached:

1. There appears to be a definite relationship between broken homes and juvenile delinquency in the lower socio-economic group of Indians on the Fort Peck Reservation.
Due in part to poor environments, many Indian children become behavior problems before they enter school.

These Indian children enter school with a large number of cultural, social, and emotional conflicts.

The school as a social institution must meet the situation with sensitivity and understanding.

The adults of the area need to be made aware of the multiple causes of juvenile delinquency and be motivated toward helping to correct them.

Recommendations:

Too little attention has been given to the physical and psychological problems of the Fort Peck Reservation children. The following recommendations would make a start toward helping these underprivileged youngsters:

1. Statistical surveys made on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation concerning economic conditions, broken homes, and juvenile delinquency.

2. Studies of these surveys made and brought to the attention of the people of the area.

3. The setting up of an elementary school counseling program.

4. The development of a program of education for the parents to enlighten them concerning the needs of their children.

5. A thorough study, evaluation, and revision of the school curriculum in order to meet more completely the needs of all the children.
6. Positive attitudes assumed by religious organizations to develop higher goals and values.

7. Constructive outlets for the energies and emotions of these youngsters while not in school to be worked out cooperatively by local organizations.

8. Better programs of work to be developed and put in operation by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to occupy a greater number of the young people, especially during the summer months.

Since past handling of the problem of juvenile delinquency on the Fort Peck Reservation has apparently accomplished very little toward remediying the situation, it seems that new approaches are needed. In order to develop new approaches the people of the area need to be more informed about the causes of juvenile delinquency. Formulating and putting into operation plans for its prevention are more desirable than dealing with the problem after the behavior patterns have been formed.
SELECTED REFERENCES


