

# Native Ethics and Rules of Behaviour\*

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*Psychiatrists assessing Native children and adolescents often find them passive, difficult to assess and not forthcoming. This behaviour, which actually reflects the influence of Native culture, is often misinterpreted by clinicians unfamiliar with that culture as evidence of psychopathology. Patterns of conflict suppression, conflict projection and the humiliating superego are described and placed in their historical and cultural perspective, where they originated as techniques of ensuring the group unity and cohesion essential for survival in a hostile environment. Failure to recognize and understand such cultural influences can lead to errors in diagnosis and treatment that can turn what was intended as a helpful encounter into a destructive one.*

Many general psychiatrists see Native children and adolescents in assessment, and often find them passive, difficult to assess, and not forthcoming. This behaviour, which affects the individual Native child's attitude and performance in an assessment situation, is understandable in view of the child's cultural background. The psychiatrist may, at times, misinterpret the behaviour as resistance, passive-aggression, opposition, depression, or withdrawal. The general psychiatrist's failure to recognize the derivatives of the individual child's cultural heritage as they affect his behaviour in a clinical situation may result in unperceived errors in diagnosis, in formulation, and in treatment. For example, overuse of antidepressants and the all too frequent diagnosis of personality disorders may occur. This may turn what is intended to be a helpful encounter into one that is not useful or even traumatic for the patient. Such encounters will no doubt also be frustrating for the clinician.

For these reasons, this article is presented to discuss some features of the Native Canadian's cultural heritage, hoping that this might provide a context that will help mental health professionals understand and deal with Native patients with greater sensitivity and accuracy.

It has long been recognized that the culture of the North American Natives differs substantially from that of the dominant white (non Native) society. Variations in customs, beliefs, ideals and aspirations, as well as psychosocial differences, are well documented and generally accepted (1-7).

Well over one and a quarter centuries ago, for example, significant differences between the two cultures were alluded to by Susanna Moodie, writing about her own encounters with Native people:

I had heard and read much of savages, and have since seen, during my long residence in the bush, somewhat of uncivilized life; but the Indian is one of Nature's gentlemen — he never says or does a rude or vulgar thing. The vicious, uneducated barbarians who form the surplus of over-populous European countries, are far behind the wild man in delicacy of feeling or natural courtesy (8).

Why and how were this "delicacy of feeling" and "natural courtesy" established and maintained? What accounts for the often radical differences between Native and non Native society that were noted — albeit, a bit hyperbolically — by Ms. Moodie? Some of the differences have been recognized widely as being biological (9-12). However, the following is an attempt to identify and analyze certain of the North American Native ethics, values, and rules of behaviour which persist in disguised form as carryovers from the aboriginal culture and which strongly influence Native thinking and action even today. Some of the difficulties encountered by modern day Native people as they attempt to practise aboriginal ethics and rules of behaviour in the context of radically different social circumstances will also be discussed.

The direct observations on which this article is substantially based were compiled during 24 years of medical practice and other forms of association with the Iroquoian groups of southern Ontario and Quebec, the Ojibway of southern Ontario, and the Swampy Cree of James and Hudson's Bay. The last 12 years of this period were spent in service as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist. Additional data were obtained through extensive interaction with Native people across Canada and in the northern United States during service as a visiting consultant and lecturer. The limited material published on the subject was also reviewed.

Although the author believes the following ethics and rules of behaviour to be present in some form in all tribes of North America, his therapeutic contact was confined to Ontario and Quebec Native people, and the reader is cautioned against any indiscriminant or universal application.

The individual and group survival of this continent's aboriginal Plains, Bush, and Woodlands people required harmonious interpersonal relationships and cooperation among members of a group. It was not possible for an individual to survive alone in the harsh natural environment (13) but,

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in order to survive as a group, individuals, living cheek by jowl throughout their lives, had to be continuously cooperative (14) and friendly. These conditions were established and maintained by the following.

### Conflict Suppression

Conflict suppression was established among the members of an extended family, clan, band or tribe largely through the practice of non interference, non competitiveness, emotional restraint (including the suppression of anger), sharing, the Native concept of time, attitude toward gratitude and approval, Native protocol and the principle of teaching (shaping vs modelling). These first four principles are designated as the most important factors promoting harmony and the latter four are believed to be less influential. These practices, which are described in detail below, were enshrined as "ethics" or principles of behaviour. Over time they became embedded in Native culture as societal norms and continue to influence Native life today.

### Non Interference

The ethic of non interference is a behavioural norm of North American Native tribes that promotes positive interpersonal relations by discouraging coercion of any kind, be it physical, verbal, or psychological (14). Manifestations of it have been observed and described by Rosalie Wax and Robert Thomas (15), among others. A high degree of respect for every human being's independence leads the Native to view instructing, coercing or attempting to persuade another person as undesirable behaviour. Accordingly, group goals are arrived at by consensus and achieved by reliance on voluntary cooperation. Wax's characterization of white society provides a stark counterpoint to the Native norm:

Thus, at a casual party, the (white) man who remarks that he plans to buy a pear tree may anticipate that someone will immediately suggest that he buy a peach tree instead. If he remarks that he is shopping for a new car, someone will be happy to tell him exactly what kind of car he ought to buy (15).

The white man who can out-advise another is "one up" and the individual over whom he has exerted influence is expected to take it all with good grace. In Native society by contrast, such an attempt to exert pressure by advising, instructing, coercing or persuading is always considered bad form or bad behaviour. The advisor is perceived to be "an interferer." His attempt to show that he knows more about a particular subject than the advisee would be seen as an attempt to establish dominance, however trivial, and he would be fastidiously avoided in future. The ethic of non interference, then, is an important social principle.

Indeed, it was even a principle of governance and group administration in aboriginal times. In aboriginal Native societies, the most talented and best qualified member would be selected leader by informal consensus. Among the Cree and Ojibway, leadership was task specific and fluid (16,17). Among the Iroquois, selection was vigorously democratic,

then bestowed for life upon those designated as sachems (18,19). But once the leadership had evolved, it would rely on voluntary cooperation for the attainment of group goals, whether with regard to hunting, warfare or economic decisions.

The ethic of non interference is one of the most widely accepted principles of behaviour among Native people (20). It even extends to adult relationships with children and manifests itself as permissiveness (21,22). A Native child may be allowed at the age of six, for example, to make the decision on whether or not he goes to school (15) even though he is required to do so by law. The child may be allowed to decide whether or not he will do his homework, have his assignments done on time, and even visit the dentist. Native parents will be reluctant to force the child into doing anything he does not choose to do.

### Non Competitiveness

The practice of non competitiveness meanwhile, suppresses conflict by averting intragroup rivalry (14) and preventing any embarrassment that a less able member of the group might feel in an interpersonal situation. Members of a Native baseball team, for example, will rarely be heard to cheer team mates even if a home run is hit with the bases loaded. To do so might embarrass those who had struck out or managed only single base hits. This non competitiveness extends even into working life despite the fact that it is often seen by non Native employers as a lack of initiative and ambition.

### Emotional Restraint

The exercise of emotional restraint (17) is a corollary and extension of non interference and non competitiveness. On the positive side, it promotes self-control and discourages the expression of strong or violent feelings (14). However, emotions such as joyfulness and enthusiasm are suppressed along with anger and impulses to destructiveness. Still more problematic is the fact that the suppression and repression of hostility give rise to a number of psychosocial disturbances currently experienced among Natives. Repressed hostility often explodes into the open under the influence of alcohol and is inappropriately visited upon innocent bystanders such as a spouse, child, or casual acquaintance. The present day cause of Native frustration, usually government bureaucracy, which interferes with even the basic aspirations of Native people, is controlled by oppressors too distant to be seen or wrestled with (23). Violence within the family and community by a person under the influence of intoxicants is a serious problem on reserves (13).

Emotional restraint in the Native also appears to give rise to a high incidence of grief reactions following separation or loss. Forty-four percent of the Native people who consulted a psychiatrist, according to one small study, were suffering from a grief reaction of one kind or another (24).

### Sharing

Sharing, the exercise of generosity, is a behavioural norm that discourages the hoarding of material goods by an individual (14). In aboriginal times, when this principle

originated among Native peoples, group survival was more important than individual prosperity; consequently, individuals were expected to take no more than they needed from nature and to share it freely with others (25). Of course, this is somewhat akin to the central principle of Marxism and Christianity. Native people, however, regard it neither as a political ideology nor as a religious requirement. It was and still is simply a part of the Native way of life. Although the main function of this principle was to help ensure group survival in the face of the ever present threat of starvation, it also serves as a form of conflict suppression by reducing the likelihood of greed, envy, arrogance and pride within the tribe.

As an offshoot, however, it may also suppress individual ambition since one is not supposed to keep for himself the fruits of individual labour. In addition, the discouragement of the acquisition of material goods has been extended to education and the acquisition of other non tangible assets. Subtle disapproval of a Native student's plans to attend university may be enough to make him decide to stay on the reserve.

The ethic of sharing has its corollaries: equality and democracy. If one visits a Native village, one usually sees few people who are very rich or very poor. An economic and social homogeneity is promoted by the ethic and practice of sharing, and every member of the society is considered as valuable as any other. No one is given special favours except the elder. Everyone is expected to do his fair share of the work and to keep for himself only his part of what he has taken from nature.

This is in sharp contrast to white society's drive towards individual success, power and wealth. Consequently, there is pressure on Native society to adopt the white man's outlook, to relinquish the ethic of sharing for the sake of individual prosperity and success. But Native society has so far not been willing to do this, perhaps in part because it is contrary to the principle of sharing.

Talented young Native people, for example, are often encouraged by well intentioned whites to strive for individual success and thus escape the doldrums of poverty and lack of opportunity on their home reserves. Yet, even if the young, talented person is so inclined, often his peers and elders subtly, or not subtly, discourage it. They know that, more often than not, young Native people who are attractive, talented or have better than a Grade 12 education are taken away from the reserve, placed in the white society and disappear as far as the reserve society is concerned. They often marry non Natives and sometimes become embarrassed about their origins, never returning or sending their prosperity, knowledge or wisdom back to the village. They are essentially lost. Clearly, this runs contrary to the tradition and ethic of sharing and, partly as a result of this conflict between the values of the white world and the traditional ethic, Native society has tried to resist it. Still, this skimming of Native society has occurred consistently for over 400 years. Indeed, it is only recently, with new employment opportunities on the reserves, that young Native people have been willing or able to return and share their achievements with their home reserves.

The above four principles of conflict repression, in their various forms and expressions, constitute the basis for demystifying and understanding Native behaviour. To carry the process further, though, four more traditional influences on behaviour are described. These have been observed at work during clinical practice and reported in the literature, but their overall specific functioning is still incompletely understood. These influences are: the Native concept of time; the Native attitude toward gratitude and approval; Native protocol; and the practice of teaching by modelling.

#### *The Native Concept of Time*

Like others living in close harmony with nature, the Native person has an intuitive, personal and flexible concept of time (26-28). It may have had its origin in an age when the activities of Native people were regulated by the seasons — by the sun, the migratory patterns of birds and animals, and a changing food supply. The absence of electricity or any other form of energy meant that the Native people had to depend on the seasons and nature to supply food and light. Having to live in harmony with nature in mutual relevance to all these things, the Native people developed the concept of "doing things when the time is right" — that is, when the whole array of environmental factors converge to ensure success.

The concept remains in play today. The Native person who appears to be dragging his feet might appear incorrigibly lazy one moment, but possessed of energy and tenacity when all the complicated factors are in alignment. For example, Mohawk steelworkers are highly esteemed for their contribution to the building of skyscrapers in cities such as New York, Boston and Chicago. The Mohawk crews will work 16 and 18 hours a day, putting up structures well within the contract time when "the time is right." Sometimes, however, they may seriously imperil a project if they choose not to work, perhaps because the time is right for some other enterprise.

Today, the Native concept of time seems less a principle for living with nature and more of a manifestation of the need for harmonious interpersonal relationships. For example, Tom, Dick and Harry may not make it to an 8 pm meeting because they have other responsibilities they are unable to leave because the time is not right. If they have a particular interest in the matter under discussion, the meeting will not be started until they arrive or until some message is received that they are not coming. To start without them might offend these esteemed and influential members of the community, quite aside from the fact that the other members of the community may not be aware of the importance of their input into the discussion. In another, more social context, it might be rude and inconsiderate to start a dance at a wedding celebration without all the brothers and sisters of the bride and groom being able to take part in the first waltz. Given the universality of the concept of time in Native society, Native people never seem to be inconvenienced or annoyed if social functions and other meetings start hours after the scheduled time.

#### *The Native Attitude toward Gratitude and Approval*

Gratitude or approval among Native people is very rarely shown or even verbalized. One is not rewarded for being

a good teacher, doctor, nurse, farmer, fisherman or hunter because that is what one is supposed to be; conversely, to be less than adequate would be a great embarrassment for the person being assessed, and so is not pointed out either. One is not thanked for doing something good because gratitude is seen as superfluous. The intrinsic reward of doing the deed itself is considered sufficient. Consequently, Native people have a great deal of difficulty accepting praise, reward and reinforcement. Indeed, Native children who are praised by their teachers will often deliberately do something to reverse the teacher's opinion the next day. To be told in front of the class that they have done a good job may be construed by them as being lied to and humiliated if they themselves do not believe they have done things perfectly. They may become ashamed if the positive assessment is not shared by the group. For that matter, even if praise is warranted, it may embarrass their peers who have not done as well, thereby disrupting harmonious relationships in the peer group.

To non Natives who work among Native people, this attitude toward expressions of gratitude or approval can be disconcerting. Those who work in remote Native villages are often impatient with what they perceive as ingratitude. For their part, teachers are often puzzled by the failure of the "normal" reward system to motivate students.

As for Native people themselves, since excellence is expected all the time, they generally are reluctant to try new things. They often experience a great deal of performance anxiety about making mistakes and holding themselves up to public scrutiny, ridicule and teasing (15). This further reinforces the need to avoid risk taking behaviour.

#### *Native Protocol*

Protocol subsumes notions such as manners, ceremony and savoir faire. It may seem to a casual observer that Native society is rather loose and unstructured and that there are not many rules of behaviour or etiquette. This is not the case at all. Native society has highly structured and demanding rules of social behaviour. There are rules about everything. Many, however, are specific to individual villages, clans, tribes, and bands, a fact that can cause problems, given the ethic of non interference.

In keeping with the ethic of non interference, it is not possible to instruct a stranger regarding local practices or protocols. Rules can never be stated, for to do so would interfere with the individual's right to behave as he sees fit. The kinds of consequences that can result, even among Native people, are illustrated by the following anecdote.

Among the Native peoples of Ontario, there is one group composed of hunters and gatherers who did not develop many advanced food preservation techniques. They lived in an isolated setting which did not have electricity or refrigeration. When a moose was shot, everyone in the village would share. The moose would be skinned, gutted and laid on the floor in the hunter's kitchen. The people in the village would come in with pots and would carve a roast off for their own use. The proper behaviour in that situation was to eat as much as one possibly could — six or seven meals a day as roast moose, fried moose, baked moose, moose tongue, and boiled

moose. At the end of three days there would be nothing left of the moose except the antlers and the hooves. The hunter would walk among the eaters as they enjoyed the meat and get his thanks by watching them restore their nitrogen balance. In this circumstance, it was the appropriate protocol to eat as much as possible before the meat spoiled and was wasted.

Another group living in the south of Ontario had practised animal husbandry since the Europeans brought farm animals from Europe. They had also been engaged in agriculture for thousands of years, growing corn, beans, squash and potatoes. When the southern group had a feast or banquet, the women prepared five or six times as much food as was possible to eat, as a display of prosperity, generosity and sharing.

When the two groups got together for a bowling banquet, the farmers from the south put out a great deal more food than was actually needed, intending to take home whatever was left over to put in their freezers. The hunter tribe, who were the guests, thought the appropriate and polite thing to do was to eat all of the food before it was spoiled and wasted. The farmers were offended by what they perceived as the hunters' greed and gluttony, and the hunters were distressed because they thought they were expected to eat more than human beings could. It was only after several of these unhappy interactions that the farmers learned that they should prepare only as much food as could be easily and comfortably eaten in one sitting.

#### *The Practice of Teaching by Modelling*

In teaching their children, white people seem to use "shaping" — that is, rewarding learners for successive approximations of the behaviour that they have been instructed to carry out. Native tribes use modelling almost exclusively. One is *shown* how rather than *told* how. This can be seen as another form of *conflict repression* in that the teacher does not purport to know more than his student, but through his own actions conveys useful and practical information which the student then has a choice of adopting or rejecting. The student is never placed on the spot and required to perform before he has been adequately trained. This reduces his performance anxiety and increases his loyalty to his teachers, who usually are parents and older members of his extended family. Modelling seems to increase attachment to the older members of the group, promoting group cohesiveness and continuity.

#### *Projection of Conflict*

In order to reinforce and promote the above behaviours, which can be classified generally as forms of conflict repression, it was necessary from earliest times to develop a number of superego constructs that would prevent deviations from these principles without causing intense anxiety. These devices of social control can be generally categorized as "bogeymen" admonitions or teasing, shaming and ridicule.

The need to suppress anger is taught to young Native children as having its origins in the aboriginal society, in which

there purportedly were shamans and witches who could be dangerous to an individual or his or her family. Shamans and witches were said to retaliate by casting spells upon the perpetrators of insult and injury. They did not always reveal themselves, so it was not possible to tell at a glance who was the good witch and who was the bad. Anger provoked them, so children were taught from a very early age never to engage in angry behaviour. Angry behaviour was considered not only unworthy and unwise, but dangerous as well.

As an extension of this method of suppressing intragroup hostility, the concept of the bogeyman "who ate bad children" emerged to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships by projecting responsibility for the child's frustration onto an unknown and unseeable outside force. The parents were never seen as the source of frustration and deprivation, so the child's good behaviour could be maintained without direct confrontation with the parents or other elders. As a result, responsibility for frustration nowadays is easily projected onto teachers, Children's Aid Society workers, police, family court judges and others who impose restrictions and demands from without. However, the notion that all frustration is due to causes outside the group generates feelings of powerlessness over and resignation to evil forces that, in reality, are merely the darker side of one's own nature and that of others. Projection relieves the individual and his society of responsibility. Thus, Native people feel continuously at the mercy of the bureaucratic white government, which now takes the place of shamans, witches, bogeymen and bad weather.

#### The Humiliating Superego

Teasing, shaming and ridiculing as means of social control maintains harmonious interpersonal relationships by placing the responsibility for the discrepancy between self and ego ideal only upon the child. Shaming and teasing as an alternative to loss of privileges and parental anger can serve to erode self-esteem and give rise to an overwhelming sense of humiliation when encountered later in life. This tends to promote blame avoidance, which shows up as further non interference, hesitancy to try anything new or unwillingness to apologize or otherwise admit error or defeat. Behaviour patterns such as these tend to persist often in the face of changing times and circumstances: escape behaviour, for example, is often seen in Native students and employees when they have made errors.

A humiliating superego often is produced by the child rearing practices of teasing, shaming and ridiculing, which produce social shyness that sometimes verges on terror. This is functional in that it keeps young people attached to the group, promoting group unity and survival. While Kagan (29) has demonstrated the inheritability of shyness which he has called the "behavioural inhibition response to the unfamiliar," Native child rearing practices tend to add a psychological and social component to this biological predisposition. If 15% of the children in an ancient aboriginal society inherited the shyness trait as part of a normal distribution of that trait, it would tend to become concentrated within

the ghetto established by the reserve system. Young Native people who were bold, reckless and curious would be motivated to move away and seek better opportunities for employment and adventure, having the nerve to do so. The prevalence of the shyness gene would then become amplified among the people left at home. Meanwhile, among bold, reckless, and curious Native men, there is a high incidence of death by misadventure, such as industrial accidents on the high steel, motor vehicle accidents and homicide. They also tend more frequently to marry non Natives who refuse to live within the reserve system. As a result of such factors the tribe is continually deprived of their genetic material.

#### Conclusions and Implications

To ensure survival in an often hostile environment, Native societies found it essential to maintain group unity and cohesiveness. Hence, every effort was made to avoid interpersonal conflict among members of the group, a tendency that has persisted even into modern times. Behavioural norms designed to suppress conflict and promote group unity and survival are encouraged and reinforced by child rearing practices. However, these often result in a humiliating superego and result in the projection of culpability. This thesis is suggested as a means of understanding modern Native behaviour.

The list of Native ethics and rules of behaviour outlined above is far from complete and would have to be expanded to promote the further demystification of Native behaviour. However, these are arguably the most important.

Native people have a reverence for and attachment to their land, even to the few acres left after the pillage of the forests and plains by the dominant culture. Natives are products and extensions of this land and the vestiges of Native ethics and rules of behaviour, which continue to promote group unity and survival on Native lands, will not easily or soon be relinquished, even if the consequence of persistence in the old forms of behaviour is to be removed from competitiveness and success in the dominant non Native culture. However, maintenance of traditional Native ethics and rules of behaviour, as manifested in Native child rearing practices will continue to have significant implications for Native mental health. These implications are the subject of a paper presently in preparation.

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#### Résumé

*Les psychiatres qui examinent les enfants et les adolescents autochtones les trouvent souvent passifs, difficiles à évaluer et peu communicatifs. Les cliniciens qui connaissent mal la culture autochtone interprètent souvent à tort ce type de comportement, qui en réalité traduit l'influence de cette culture comme un signe de psychopathologie. On décrit les structures correspondant à la répression des conflits, à la projection des conflits et au superego humiliant, et on les replace dans leur contexte historique et culturel d'origine, à savoir celui de techniques destinées à assurer au groupe l'unité et la cohésion essentielles à la survie dans un milieu hostile. Le fait de ne pas reconnaître et comprendre de telles influences culturelles peut entraîner des erreurs de diagnostic et de traitement qui risquent de transformer une entrevue qu'on voulait bénéfique en expérience destructive.*

Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

Location/Phase: *Part III: Toronto*

Witness: *Albert McLeod*

Submitted by: *Christa Big Canoe-Commission*

Add'l info: *P03P03P0101*

Date: *JUN 11 2018*

Initials

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