The native American principle of noninterference with others creates an obstacle for social workers trying to practice "intervention," but much patience and respect for the principle can enable workers to be effective in Indian communities.

Native American non-interference

by Jimm G. Good Tracks

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The standard techniques and theories of social work that bring positive results with many groups, including lower-class Anglo-Americans (Anglos), Negroes, and assimilated Mexicans, are not successful when applied to native Americans.[1] In fact, all the methods usually associated with the term "social work intervention" diminish in effectiveness *just to the extent that the subject has retained his native Indian culture.* The reason is that any kind of intervention is contrary to the Indian's strict adherence to the principle of self-determination. The less assimilated and acculturated the individual, the more important this principle is to him. Some time ago Wax and Thomas described this principle as noninterference.[2]

Many human relations unavoidably involve some influencing, meddling, and even coercion or force. Indians feel, however, that Anglos carry these elements to an extreme while professing an entirely different set of values. Anglos say they prize freedom, minding one's own business, and the right of each person to decide for himself, yet they also think it right to be their brother's keeper, to give advice and take action in their brother's best interest—as interpreted by the Anglo, in and by the Anglo social context.

In native Indian society, however, no interference or meddling of any kind is allowed or tolerated, even when it is to keep the other person from doing something foolish or dangerous. When an Anglo is moved to be his brother's keeper and that brother is an Indian, therefore, almost everything he says or does seems rude, ill-mannered, or hostile. Perhaps it is the Anglo's arrogant righteousness that prevents him from grasping the nature of his conduct. But if the Indian told the Anglo that he was being intrusive, the Indian would himself be interfering with the Anglo's freedom to act as he sees fit.

COERCION AND SUGGESTION

Coercion appears to be a fundamental element in the peoples of Western Europe and their colonial descendants. All the gov-

ernments and institutions of these societies use a variety of coercive methods to insure cooperative action. Traditional Indian societies, on the other hand, were organized on the principle of voluntary cooperation. They refrained from using force to coerce.

In recent times Euro-American societies have tended to rely less heavily on physical violence, but they have only replaced it with verbal forms of coercion and management. Anglo children appear to be taught by their elders, peer groups, and mass media to influence, use, and manipulate others to achieve their personal goals. They begin to try to manipulate others early in life while at play and in their relationships with adults. They continue to improve their manipulative skill throughout their lives as they study psychology and apply it to marriage counseling and psychotherapy. Their newspapers print "Dear Abby" letters from people who want someone else to tell them what to do or how to make others do as they wish. This ability is rightly called a tool essential for living and achieving success in Anglo society. Anglo economic development and exploitation could not otherwise exist. But even when verbal manipulation has superseded physical force, it still remains a form of coercion and constitutes interference. This does not disturb Anglos who feel there is a distinction.

Even a nondirective teacher utilizes some coercion when he wants his pupils to acquire a certain skill, express themselves with certain prepared materials, or participate in a group activity. It appears that the compulsion to interfere is so habitual among Anglos that even when they have no particular business to accomplish in a conversation, they will still tend to be coercive. For instance, one person may remark that he wishes to buy a new car. Someone will immediately tell him where he should buy one and perhaps what kind. In the most friendly manner Anglos are always telling each other and everyone else what they should do, buy, see, sell, read, study, or accomplish—all without any consideration of what the individual may want to do.

But whether it is a subtle suggestion or an outright command, it is considered improper behavior and an interference by Indian people. The Indian child is taught that complete noninterference in interaction with all people is the norm, and that he should react with amazement, irritation, mistrust, and anxiety to even the slightest indication of manipulation or coercion.

RESPECT AND CONSIDERATION

The following incident illustrates noninterference in the simplest of matters. I was visiting my cousins when one of them put on his coat and said he was going down town. He had no car, so one could assume he was going to walk. I restated his intention and volunteered to drive him. The cousin showed noninterference with my activities by not asking or even suggesting that I drive him, although that is certainly what he wanted. If he had asked directly and I had not cared to drive him, I would have been put on the spot. I would have been forced to refuse unobligingly or agree unwillingly. But by simply putting on his coat and announcing his intentions, he allowed me to accept or reject his desires without causing bad feelings for anyone. I could volunteer to take him or pay no attention to his actions.

A cross-cultural misunderstanding might occur in the following way. A non-Indian guest at my mother's home, having enjoyed a rice dinner, might pay my mother this compliment: "Your rice was so good! I should be happy to have your recipe, if I may. And do you want some of my rice recipes in exchange?" The offer of recipes might strengthen friendship among Anglos, but to an Indian it cancels the compliment. If my mother had wanted other recipes she would have suggested it to her guest. When the guest makes the offer on her own initiative, it implies she did not really care for my mother's rice and knows a better way to prepare it. If the guest had talked only about various ways of preparing rice, she would have given my mother the opportunity to ask about any that interested her.

An Indian will usually withdraw his at-

tention from a person who interferes. If the ill-mannered person does not take the hint, the Indian will leave. In the event he is unable to leave, he will attempt to fade into the background and become unnoticed. In this way, he will avoid provoking the ill-mannered person to further outbursts and at the same time save the person embarrassment by not witnessing his improper behavior. This reaction also reprimands the one who interferes in a socially sanctioned manner. At such times, an Indian can only wonder at the person and wish he could leave. On occasion, however, when pushed beyond endurance, he may lose his self-control and drive the aggressor away with verbal or physical force.

Much delicacy and sensitivity are required for Indian good manners. If one is planning a gathering, for example, a feast to give a child his Indian name, one does not urge people to come. This would be interfering with their right to free choice. If people wish to come, they will come. Under most ordinary circumstances, an Indian does not even speak to another unless there is some indication that the other desires to turn his attention to him. If one wishes to speak with another, whether it is a friend, relative, or spouse, he will place himself in the person's line of vision. If the person's behavior does not indicate an acknowledgment of one's presence, one waits or goes away until later. Should one be talking with a friend and without forethought bring up a subject that may be sensitive or distressing to the listener, the latter will look away and pretend not to hear or suddenly change the subject.

The rules of etiquette are generally followed even by many assimilated Indians. They express a deep respect for the interests, responsibilities, and pursuits of other people. The same respect can be seen even in the behavior of young children. They play in the midst of adults who are having a conversation and yet never interrupt. A child may come and lean for a while against his parent or relative, but without a word or act of interference. Only in an emergency does a child try to attract an adult's attention, and then in a way that will nc interrupt the adult's activity. A child wh gets hurt playing, for example, might com in crying and then go lie down on a bed The adult hears the crying and decides if h wishes to attend to the child. A bold chil who wants something quietly comes up to his parent, stands there a while, and ther whispers the request. It seems that ever the youngest Indian children do not bothe older people when they are preoccupied.

This behavior is taken for granted by Indian people as the proper way to behave Learning it probably takes place on an unconscious level. Indian infants and those beginning to walk do not make loud attempts to attract their parents' attention as Anglo babies do. This suggests that demanding attention is actually taught the Anglo infant. Indian adults do not respond to interfering demands, so the child does not learn coercive methods of behavior. This does not imply that Indian children are never aggressive, but only that the culture does not reward aggression when it interferes with the activity of others. Indian children are taught to be considerate through the example of their elders, and the adult treats the child with the same respect and consideration that he expects for himself. It is generally against the child-rearing practices of Indian people to bother or interrupt their children when they are playing or to make them do something against their will, even when it is in their own best interest. Some Anglo educators show their ignorance of this principle by condemning Indian parents for not forcing their children to attend school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This principle explains much of the general failure of social workers to treat the social and psychological problems of Indian clients. There are other factors, of course, such as the Indian's perception of the worker as an authority figure representing a coercive institution and an alien, dominating, and undesirable culture. The physical appearance of the worker is another factor, and so is his ignorance of the manners

of Indian people. The relationships that both client and worker have with the agency make for further complications, but an understanding of the principle of noninterference can still have an important effect on the worker's role. It can teach him what to expect in his social work relationships with Indian clients and thus enable him to be more effective in helping Indian people.

From an Indian client's viewpoint, the worker is expected to perform only the superficial and routine administrative functions of his office. Clients may request him to increase their aid grants, to draw upon some of their own funds from the agency Individual Indian Monies (IIM) accounts, to assist with a government form, or to submit a boarding-school application. These tasks involve no real social involvement, as involvement is understood both by Indians and non-Indians. The Indian client does not allow or desire the worker to have any insight into his inner thoughts. That would not be a proper part of work.

This expectation does not, of course, correspond to the professional social worker's own concept of his function. A worker could become quite frustrated just shuffling papers about and doing little actual social work when there might be plenty of social problems evident among his clientele. Nevertheless, the worker must not intervene unless the people request an intervention, and he is likely to wait a long time for such a request. The credentials of his profession, his position, status, knowledge, skills, achievements, and authority, though respected by the agency, are in most cases completely without merit among the Indians. Such things belong to Anglo culture and are not readily translatable into Indian culture. His standing in the Anglo community does not give him a license to practice intervention among Indian people.

The explanation for the social worker's initial uselessness is easily given. His professional function is generally performed from within the Indian culture, and no foreign interference is desired or contemplated. If a man's problems seem to be a result of his having been witched, for example, he will seek out the properly qualified person to help him alleviate the condition. He will have no need of any outside diagnoses or assistance. Should a personal or family problem be of another nature, it is addressed again to the proper individual, an uncle (mother's brother) or a grandfather—not to a foreigner such as the social worker. In every case, the people utilize the established, functional, culturally acceptable remedy within their own native system.

WORKER'S APPROACH

Can a worker ever convey his potential for helpfulness to Indian clients without breaking their norms? How can he do this while they adhere to the principle of noninterference?

Patience is the number-one virtue governing Indian relationships. A worker who has little or no patience should not seek placements in Indian settings. Native temporal concepts are strange to the non-Indian. Some non-Indians even believe these concepts are unstructured and dysfunctional, and perhaps they are—in the Anglo conceptual framework. But the social worker's success may well be linked with his ability to learn "Indian time" and adjust his relationships accordingly.

Native temporal concepts have no relation to the movements of a clock. They deal in terms of natural phenomena—morning, days, nights, months (from the native concept of "moon"), and years (from the native concepts of "seasons" or "winters"). Ignorance of these concepts makes it impossible to understand the long time it takes any alien to become established in the Indian community. For although they are seemingly without interest, perhaps even indifferent to the new worker, the people will at length carefully observe the manner in which he presents and carries himself. It would be well for the worker to know how slow this evaluation process is likely to seem, for he must not become impatient. The evaluation will progress in accordance with native temporal concepts. Perhaps in a year or so a majority of the

people will have come to some conclusions about the worker's character. Basic acceptance comes only after there has been enough observation to determine with reasonable assurance that the worker will not inflict injury with his activities.

There is little or nothing the worker may do to expedite the process; to push things along would be interfering with the process and the people. In the meantime, as he performs his superficial functions for the people, he may discreetly interject bits and pieces of his potential for further assistance. But discretion is needed to the utmost in order to avoid the slightest coercive suggestion. If the worker inflicts a coercive tone in conversation and thus thwarts an individual's self-determination, it could be a major setback and perhaps mean complete failure with that individual.

Only time can bring the fruition of the worker's occasional hints. One day a person may decide to test the words of the worker with a real problem. It would not be a preconceived act, discussed beforehand in the community, but merely an impulse on the part of one individual to find out the truth of the worker's boasting. Nevertheless, there will be many among the people who are likely to be aware of it.

A great deal may depend upon this trial case, perhaps the entire future relationship between the worker and his clientele. The worker should recognize the importance of this opportunity and be keenly aware of its possible ramifications. A positive solution to the test problem can be the best way to advertise the worker's potential usefulness. A success will travel quickly by word of mouth throughout the close-knit Indian community, and as the good word spreads the worker's worth to the community becomes recognized. Other clients will come forth.

It will never be necessary to perform "social work intervention" and interfere with an individual or the community norms. The people will incorporate the worker into their functional system. He will perform social work in agreement with the native system rather than try to intervene on the basis of a foreign system. Otherwise he would alienate the people.

An alien, it should be noted, is anyone who is not a member of the tribal group. Among Navajos, a Cheyenne would be as alien as an Anglo, though his acceptance may be more readily attainable.

WORKING WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Needless to say, this discussion has excluded numerous complications that are always present in reality, but an effective approach to the noninterference norm is basic to any social work with Indians. If the worker is ever mindful of this norm and how it conditions his role and acceptance, he should be able to deal with the other problems.

A continued adherence to engagement from within the preexisting native framework will assure the confidence and trust of Indian clients. In time they may use the worker to assist with personal problems pertaining to matters outside the native system and even with problems inside the native system that for one reason or another cannot be resolved by the regular native approaches. In the latter case, however, the problem would actually be resolved by a regular approach, inasmuch as the worker would have *become* a native approach by functioning within the native framework.

But even then it should be kept well in mind that the worker is still an alien. His degree of acceptance is based entirely on how well he is able to work within the preexisting native systems and norms. Perfect acceptance comes only with the loss of the worker's alien status, which cannot be achieved except through adoption by Indian people. To become one of the people is, of course, most unlikely, but not impossible.

Notes and References

1. The author's experience indicates that the statements made in this article apply to the Navajo and the tribes of the Northern and Southern Plains. Much that is said here might also be true of the Pueblo and other tribes.

2. Rosalie H. Wax and Robert K. Thomas, "Anglo Intervention vs. Native Noninterference," *Phylon*, 22 (Winter 1961), pp. 53–56.

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