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The “American” Indian

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The labels past and current civilizations create to describe various groups of people may be the exact reason animosity brews between these groups. The belief that a group has racial superiority causes that same group to discriminate against and maltreat groups perceived to be different; because in this case, different is not unique or valuable, different is less. The common distinction of an “other” has been an idea studied in class and continues to be studied by scholars. A common dichotomy between “we” and “they” has been discovered and, for purposes of this paper, will be discussed to understand the implications among one specific cultural group. This exact dichotomy existed between the white settlers and the Native Americans. The Indians who settled prior to the white settlers had established lives enriched by their hunting, the land and animals, and appreciating the universe. The white settlers desired Indian land, and with the spread of these newcomers, came the spread of diseases, technologies, religion, values, and lifestyle imposed by the settlers. These white settlers disregarded the previously established Native American regimes, and their exploration of the “New World” indeed created an entire “new world” for the Indians. The seizing of the lands created a displacement for the Indians which is still explicitly felt with the social pathology found among the remnants of the Native Americans and their corresponding reservations – yet another implementation of the Europeans. Recently, scholars have found that there may be a link between the seizing of the Native American land and lifestyle with the anomie and deviance very prevalent among Indians today (Berkhofer, 1978).
To understand present day issues, it is essential to understand the white image of the Native American and how it promoted problems for the Indians. This image relates to the treatment of these indigenous peoples. When these settlers began exploring the New World, these settlers created ideas and imagery to understand the people they labeled Indians (insert citation from white mans indian). The Native Americans existed as a separate and single other. Yet, this was not an uncommon label for an ethnic group; the Native Americans were not the first to be evaluated as such. “Just as Black Africans became ‘Negro’ others and and Red Americans ‘Indians’ others to whites, so had other ethnic groups become alien others still other societies and cultures throughout history” (mans indian cit).

The Indians had once made up all of the Americas, and presently, they account for less than one percent of the total population (NativeYouth, 2014). The author of The American Indian: Past and Present traced the roots of the Indians from the coastal groups of Virginia all the way through the Carolinas. Other groups lived out west, and some also settled Alaska. With the spread of European settlement came the spread of trade and with trade came interaction resulting in unruly disease and warfare (Donehoo, 1922). Yet, wars were the least of the Indians’ problems: “When the white man first met him he was uncontaminated by the vices of civilization. The vices and diseases which were introduced among the Indians at the coming of the white man have done more to destroy them than have all of the wars in which they have taken part” (jstor article). Native American life steadily changed. (Nichols, 1971) Disease and violence drastically eliminated Indians, while also changing the ways the Indians would forever live.

Europeans brought along goods; however, these “goods” did not help the Native Americans the way they helped the new settlers. One “good” discussed will be alcohol. This
poison hurt the Naïve Americans then, and it continues to cause problems for surviving Native Americans. European goods decreased the need and desire for Native products. Among economic reasons, more animals, which the Indians held dear, were killed in generation of trade. As stated earlier, the Indians felt displaced. This displacement along with the death and disease prompted the smaller tribes to seek the help of bigger tribes. As these tribes converged, many of the smaller tribe’s cultural differences were lost. Losing one’s identity can cause great agony. Great agony results in methods of coping with the distress. The loss of people, tribes, and identity among Native Americans prompted new ways of living and one overlooked idea: “After 1492, Native Americans lived in a world every bit as new as that confronting transplanted Africans or Europeans” (Nichols, 1971)(Kroskrtiy & Field, 2009).

Some scholars even go as far as stating the Native Americans underwent genocide. Ben Kiernan states, “Genocide is the ‘only appropriate way’ to describe how white settlers treated the Indians” (Lewy, 2004). In regards to the population, some students believe that numbers were deliberately toyed with to minimize the decline in Native American population, making the population decrease seem less severe than it actually was. It is evident that Native American population decreased after the white man’s appearance, but even with appropriate numbers, it does not fully support the case for a Native American genocide (Lewy, 2004). Does it support, however, the possibility of such a dismal past carrying through into the present? The Native American population elimination and resulting consequences cannot be ignored.

Different plagues in varying waves killed Native American culture and morale – all occurring after the white settlers’ arrival. Firstly, the spread of multiple diseases rapidly decreased Native American population. With the arrival of the Europeans came the arrival of these ailments. These indigenous peoples had not encountered such alien microbes, and they
lacked the immunity that the European settlers possessed. Diseases, including smallpox, measles, influenza, whooping cough, diphtheria, typhus, bubonic plague, cholera, and scarlet fever, plagued the Indians. Scholars label this phenomena, highly contagious diseases plaguing the less than immune Indians, as “virgin-soil epidemic”. The smallpox especially harmed the Native Americans. From being so ill, adults would even die from causes such as starvation. All in all, though, disease became one of the most hideous enemies of the Native Americans. Alfred Cosby concludes, “but the invisible killers which those men brought in their blood and breath” (Nichols, 1971). Overall Native American decline supports the evidence supporting individual tribes’ perishing cultures. Changing and disappearing culture will greatly alter the future. (Kroskirty & Field, 2009)

The Indian population decline could surely effect later generations. If genocide did in fact occur, feelings of anger, resentment, depression, and betrayal could all be feelings the Indians harbored then and now. We must understand how the Indians came to this state. Quoted in The American Indian: Past and Present, “John Lawson, who visited the Carolina upcountry in 1701, when perhaps ten thousand Indians were still there, estimated that ‘there is not the sixth Savage living within two hundred Miles of all our settlements, as there were fifty years ago’ (Nichols, 1971). Lawson made this statement at the beginning of the 1700’s. Indians had felt the harsh hand of European colonization even then. “Concepts of Indians deemed that civilization would prevail over ‘savagery’ - thus, whites believed the Indian to disappear through death or through total assimilation into white society (Berkhofer, 1978)”. Indians inevitably perish from their vulnerability to disease, European lifestyle, and loss of culture, and we will now examine how each affects the future (Kroskirty & Field, 2009).
Europeans brought with them disease in the form of sickness, but they also brought a more silent disease, substance abuse. Indian desire for alcohol comes from Indian past times. Roger Nichols sums up this tendency: “Liquor, for example proved both impossible to resist and extraordinarily destructive” (Nichols, 1971). Past Indians even state that Indians have no refrain against this inevitable enemy. Indians sought alcohol for their rituals to aid in retrieving a new type of consciousness. Men were typically allowed to drink, and some would drink so much in order to “stupefy them”. As we know, drinking excessively can lead to a multitude of problems – inability to think for oneself, functionally perform in daily activities, as well as physical problems and a tendency towards alcohol. The author mentions how when drunken men acted out and went further than socially acceptable (Levy & Kunitz, 1971). Other Indians excused the behavior with “he was drunk” and “if it was the drink that caused his misbehavior, then he ought to be forgiven”. Presently, Indian men are found to be 50 times more likely to have an alcohol diagnosis than women – modeling this past behavior (Beauvais, 1998). This model of excessive drinking had to have roots somewhere:

Extreme intoxication was common among the colonists and provided a powerful model for the social use of alcohol among the inexperienced Indian populations. Numerous historical accounts describe extremely violent bouts of drinking among Indian tribes during trading sessions and on other occasions, but at least as many accounts exist of similar behavior among the colonizing traders, military personnel, and civilians (Smart and Ogborne 1996). Such modeling was not limited to the early colonial era but continued as the land was colonized from East to West; trappers, miners, soldiers, and lumbermen were well known for their heavy drinking sprees. (Beauvais, 1998)

This alcoholism occurred during colonization of the New World, but it still occurs today - in combination with drug use and other abusive behavior.

“Among both Indian and non-Indian adolescents, drug and alcohol use are much more tightly coupled than they are among adults” (Beauvais, 1998). Beauvais, 1998’s studies conclude
drug use and alcohol to have similar causes and consequences. His data found that Indian youth are more inclined to use drugs than non-Indians:

Data from school surveys generally indicate that drug use is higher among Indian youth compared with non-Indian youth for nearly all drugs and that marijuana use in particular is significantly higher among Indian youth. In 1993, for instance, nearly 50 percent of Indian students in grades 7 to 12 admitted to having ever used marijuana (Beauvais, 1998 1996), whereas the rate for non-Indian youth of the same age was just 12 percent (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 1994) (Beauvais, 1998).

Adults are affected by alcoholism similarly and may pass on this tendency towards substance through genetics. “The age-adjusted alcohol-related death rate in 1992 was 5.6 times higher among the Indian population than among the U.S. population in general; this rate was 7.1 times higher in 1980” (Beauvais, 1998). As time progresses, it seems alcohol problems continue to wipe the already diminished Indian population. There are carefully measured conditions accounting for an abundance of toxins in Indian communities.

Contemporary studies actually link genetics, Indian past, a culture deficiency, attitude and expectancies, among other causes to the substance abuse among Native Americans. Let’s begin with genetics. It appears that as time continues, a generations’ inclination toward alcoholism increases as well:

Evidence for a genetic component in the susceptibility to alcoholism has been increasing over the past three decades. Kendler and colleagues (1997) estimated that among males, genetic factors account for 50 to 60 percent of the risk for alcoholism. Evidence of a genetic component to alcoholism raises the question of whether certain ethnic and cultural groups that have high rates of alcoholism, such as American Indians, may be predisposed to higher alcohol consumption (Beauvais, 1998).

Some scholars believe that if there is a genetic factor, there could be treatment plans and preventative measures for these genetically exposed groups. Scholars also believe some proportion of alcoholism may be heritable, but it is more likely to be a problem for distinct members within a group [Native Americans] than between different groups of people (Beauvais,
Thus, Native American adolescents and men may be more prone to such deviance through heredity. Other influences may or may not be just as potent in in the development and sustainment of alcohol and drug use. These environmental factors are not always as clear to studiers of Native Americans, but scholars believe understanding these influences will lead to a great payoff (Beauvais, 1998).(Levy & Kunitz, 1971).

Secondly, in Native American society, mostly on reservation, “unemployment rates are high, school completion rates are low, and basic support systems are underdeveloped” (Beauvais, 1998). This is similar to the past support for Native Americans, and it could be both a cause and a consequence of the alcoholism. These bleak conditionals cause problems for the family structure as well as other structures present in Native American areas. Native American children lack the resources other cultural groups flourish from. In result, these children and their corresponding families are predisposed to a life of alcoholism and drug abuse (Beauvais, 1998). The American Indians remain very susceptible to struggle, and they heal their wounds with poison, just infecting their condition more.

Secondly, Native Americans were forced to become simply “American”. Children were removed from their homes to attend boarding schools. These schools would have been hundreds of miles away, and they would have specialized in removing the cultural identity of the Indians. Boarding school conditions are described as severe, and behavior was to be shaped by punishment. “Physical and emotional abuses were common” (Beauvais, 1998). Indeed, this schooling harmed the children, but it also impacted Native American parenting. Parents, with boarding school children, had limited parenting experience, and boarding school students typically became abusive parents themselves later on (Beauvais, 1998). All of these practices
“led to an accelerated weakening of the values, beliefs, and cultural forms that had previously guided behavior in Indian communities” (Beauvais, 1998).

Lastly, and perhaps, most touched upon already, a loss of culture is primary condition leading to Indian social problems – such as drug and alcohol abuse. Culture had been an Indian strength, and when the White Man emerged, Indians lost much of their culture, deeply weakening Indian morality. There is not much research supporting this topic, but scholars believe it is because the topic has not been properly characterized leading to improper measurements (Beauvais, 1998). Scholars do believe though that culture is a protective factor for the culture’s practitioners.

Going off of this point, Indian culture and ritual happened in conjunction with the use of alcohol. When the other parts of the culture disappear, the only remaining portion was that similar to the Europeans – alcohol. “Being Indian” promoted toxin abuse. Indians, again, were ambivalent about alcohol use, and many believed alcohol enhanced their family and social ties. Secondly, Indians placed responsibility for their actions outside of the person and in the realm of spirituality (Beauvais, 1998). If an alcohol problem persisted in a community, the community would hold a ceremony but not directly intervene. The Indians used surface level methods to attempt to pacify the situation. Also, Indians sought a new form of consciousness or “transcendental experiences”. The Indians admired the universe and desired “contact with supernatural forces” (Beauvais, 1998). Alcohol would supposedly bring them this contact. Rituals, intending to bring visionary experiences, tend to not be disruptive or excessive. They are more controlled. Peyote is consumed, and it is supposed to put Indians in contact with spiritual forces instilling harmony (Beauvais, 1998). Some believe Peyote consumption could be likened to the excessive use of toxins, but is it not meant to produce hallucinations. A “roadman” makes
certain the ritual is structured, controlled, and that rules and forms are held firm. Peyote ritual has actually been found to treat alcohol and drug use in Indian communities (Beauvais, 1998). Thus, one can see that some ancient rituals were causal conditions to socioeconomic problems today, but this cannot be claimed for all ceremonies, namely the Peyote ritual.

Today, Indians have dispersed or remain on the fragments of the original reservations. As stated, much of the cultural heritage of this ethnic group has been lost over time (NativeYouth, 2014). “The US policy of ‘Indian Removal’ fragmented whole tribes and nations, placing them in land with little agricultural value which they were not accustomed to” (NativeYouth, 2014, 2014). The natives had been used to their buffalo and vast lands capable of rich hunting and appreciating the universe. Instead, native families were forced to leave their previous homes. More specifically, native children had to attend the oppressive boarding schools valued on eliminating traditional beliefs and replacing them with English values and the English language. Children would be punished if they were caught practicing their spiritual beliefs (NativeYouth, 2014). This leads to improbable records of the past. “This effectively destroyed most of the oral history surrounding Native Americans, eliminating any chance at a substantive record being kept of their past” (NativeYouth, 2014). Now, these remaining Indians have either been forced into fully assimilating into American life and culture or remaining on the fragmented reservations, accompanied by the problems previously mentioned for this weakened, exposed group.

Some reservations still exist, but even many of these are split apart from other groups taking control of parts of the land. Picture a wide reservation. Now, picture that same reservation broken apart by other groups and government emplaced institutions. Some Native Americans have survived from the lax gaming laws, allowing casinos in a reservation (NativeYouth, 2014). Yet, is this a true benefit or does it just add to the socioeconomic problems facing the remaining
Indians and their reservations? The combination of gambling and alcohol surely cannot strengthen Native American society. The past hurt America’s indigenous, and the present does not support a healthy future.

“The future of Native Americans is precarious … The population of Native Americans is steadily declining, with their numbers dwindling on every census taken over the past fifty years. Young Native Americans move out of reservations in larger numbers every year. These young natives are the minority in any community they enter outside of a reservation, and they often marry non-native people” (NativeYouth, 2014). Although it is very unfortunate that America has lost much of its indigenous peoples’ unique culture and lifestyle, it may benefit the Native Americans to leave the land they have lost. It will be sad to completely lose this ancient group of people and their spiritual, unique ways of viewing the world, but it remains inevitable in every society that different people have to assimilate to the majority culture or lose themselves entirely.
References


