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SUCCESS AND SUICIDE

Resistance to Identity Change:

Implications for Benefits from Land Claims Settlements

Andy Tamas

A Yukon Indian Band member who had only two weeks to go to successfully complete grade 12 went on a drunk and didn't write the final exams everybody knew he could easily pass. A native university student struggled with her teachers and took forever to complete the last few easy assignments that were due in order to receive her degree: not only once, but for each of three degrees- Bachelors, Masters, and her PhD. Within a few months of completing an upgrading course, several members of the Salmon Arm area Indian community committed suicide. The NANA region of Alaska, one of the best-managed, wealthiest and most socially-conscious native-run communities and administrations in the north, has the highest suicide rate in the State.

In these, and in many other similar situations where there were clear indicators of success, there have also been signs that something very troubling was happening. Where things should have been going very well for everybody involved, there were some for whom success was related to very serious self-inflicted damage - sometimes suicide. Why? What was going on? That's what this article is about. I'll try to explain some of the factors I think are involved in the notion of "success", and why, for some people, the possibility of achievement of success brings on self-destructive behavior. I will then discuss these issues in the light of the development of the indigenous human resources required to implement land claims throughout the north.

Becoming Successful

People can achieve success in a wide variety of ways, but one thing is common - there is some sort of change in who they are and their place in the world. They pass over a threshold, or cross an invisible social and psychological line, and become another kind of person. For someone to "become successful" means they make a transition - they change from a "loser" to a "winner", or from a "have-not" to a "have". This increase in wealth, prestige, and power (or something else) is something everybody wants (or it wouldn't be seen as success). Why, then, do some people do things that make it virtually impossible for them to achieve and enjoy this desired goal when it is so clearly within their grasp?

There are, no doubt, many possible reasons for this phenomenon. In attempting to understand this problem in some sectors of northern/native society it is helpful to begin by discussing some attributes of the relationship between the dominator and dominated sectors of society.

Success, Identity, and Oppression

In situations in which there is a history of one group in society being dominated by another, such as the circumstances of the native people of North America (and others, too, such as women, blacks, working class caucasians, and many more) there is often a state of affairs which Paulo Freire calls the "culture of silence". (Freire, 1970). In these situations there is very little communication and sharing between the powerful group and those who are dominated. The relationship between the two groups is one-way, from top down, and it is clear to the oppressed that they have very little influence over their own affairs.

This awareness of lack of influence among the oppressed is often part of a broader feeling of inferiority which Freire says is perpetuated by the dominators in order to keep the social order as it is and thus maintain their position of power. This is done through their control of the economy, and thus the design and control of the school systems, the media, ~~the law~~, and other forms of public education. In some cases this inferiority is expressed in statements (or more subtle forms of communication) which convey impressions of Indians as lazy, (or stupid, or drunks, etc.). These derogatory images have the result of making native people seem to be somehow less than human and thus a valid object of economic injustice or other forms these myths of inferiority, and see themselves as being somehow less capable than the people in power, as being second-class human beings and members of a second-rate social group.

This mistaken belief forms part of their own sense of who they are and their place in the world. This has been reported in heartbreakingly clarity by native parents who have heard their own pre-school aged children say they aren't Indians - usually after watching a series of televised movies which portray Indians in a stereotyped and unfavorable way. To these young and impressionable children, being Indian is not successful, and doing things which are related to the native way of life has relatively low status in their eyes. What they often feel they want to be when they grow up is like the winners of the TV movies, who are almost always members of the dominant, European-immigrant sector of society. These psychologically damaging ideas and self-perceptions which are formed very early in life constitute part of the foundation for the development of adult identity and personality in later years.

Although there may be many things in their own culture that they like and hold dear, this sense of inferiority regarding their own way of life often gives the oppressed a feeling that real success is to be measured in terms of the dominant culture, not in terms of their own apparently second-class group. To be truly successful, then, is to acquire power and status through means such as the accumulation of property, securing a prestigious position in the dominant social order, or some other form of importance and is seen amongst the European-immigrant sector of society.

Very few seem to really seek success in attempting to become wise and skilled in the ways of the land and the habits of animals, or of learning to re-tell the ancient stories and myths exactly as they have been told for centuries, or by striving to overcome the baser side of one's self and living a life of spiritual purity and endless devotion to the well-being of others--these things are usually seen as important, but in a peripheral way. For many, real success is seen in terms of acquiring a mainstream middle-class lifestyle with all the attendant materialistic and impermanent trappings.

In spite of this striving to acquire the success symbols of the oppressor class, the dominated group continues to provide a very attractive social context within which its members grow and develop. In a possible reaction against the pressures arising from their oppressed condition, these groups sometimes learn very strong and warm social and economic networks which serve to sustain its members. One of the features which sometimes denotes membership in these very supportive sub-cultures is the lack of success as measured by the dominant sector of society (and sometimes also measured by their own elders and traditions as noted above).

Among some sectors of the native population in the north, these characteristics often include an incomplete public school education, no formal trades or other employment-related certification, participation in occasional or seasonal employment with a welfare-dominated family income pattern, some occasion of having had difficulties with the justice system, possibly a history of alcohol abuse, and other such attributes. Many of these traits are also indicators of lack of achievement in traditional native society as well. People are expected to retain these low-achievement attributes in order to continue to be members of the group. This sort of pressure provides some impetus for members to resist making a change in their social status. It is not, however, enough in itself to prompt them to commit suicide.

Those who do achieve academic success are often alienated from their community and barred from participating in local political processes. This rejection, which Freire says is also a characteristic of a community in the very early stages of emerging from a state of complete domination by the oppressor class, tends to drive skilled native people from the villages to settle in urban centers. This deprives the villages of skills needed for development, and creates tremendous stresses in the individuals involved, many of who have made major personal sacrifices to acquire education in order to be able to be of greater services to their people.

Identity Stress and Social Change

For some other members of the oppressed class, participation at a relatively high level in the affairs of the dominant society is not a major source of stress. These individuals often have two sides to their lives, one side being lived in the majority culture (such as in regular employment in a dominant-culture enterprise), and the other side spent in the traditional culture, with time spent hunting, fishing, or visiting with people who live much as they have in the past.

Each of these environments requires its own set of values and operating principles - even though the language spoken in both might be English, there is a great difference between the ways the language is used in these two worlds. The rules or norms governing human relationships also differ greatly in these two environments. It seems possible for a number of successful native people to deal effectively with these two vastly different sets of world views.

This accommodation seems possible, says Goodenough (1963) only as long as the two value systems are operant in different sectors of people's lives (one set at home, the other at work; one set in the bush, the other in town). When these two mutually-exclusive sets of operating principles come into play at the same time (such as when Grandmother comes to visit at the office), great stress is produced. When a person from the dominated class achieves success by crossing one of the invisible social and psychological lines which removes forever their identity as a member of the oppressed class, the stresses produced are as powerful as those related to the difficulties involved in attempting to operate by two conflicting value systems at the same time. It is this type of distress that sometimes contributes to self-destructive behavior.

The stresses produced by making the fundamental change in identity which results from experiencing a major and irreversible change in social status lend a much deeper dimension to this issue. Such changes can occur when people from native communities successfully pass their final high school examinations, or receive a university degree or some other formal acknowledgment (in terms of their dominant sector of society) of having achieved success. By achieving this sort of success they (and their home community) are being told these individuals have the capacity and obligation to "make it" entirely in terms of the dominant society. However, this is something which they have learned from childhood is an impossibility for members of their social group. Because they have crossed this success threshold they have become transformed into fundamentally different people than they thought they ever could become.

Identity Change and Loss

When members of a society undergo fundamental and irreversible changes in their circumstances (such as during a massive urban renewal program, or upon experiencing other major and irrevocable changes in their lives) Peter Marris (1975) states they undergo a profound and disturbing identity change which is similar to that suffered by individuals upon the loss of a spouse. The psychological impact of this loss can be best described in terms of the bereavement process - it involves a complete re-organization of the way individuals regard themselves and the world around them. It is a very painful process, something which most people will avoid if they possibly can.

A person who has been raised within a dominated sector of society, and whose personal and group identity is determined by membership in this subculture, will not readily leave this warm, supportive way of life.

Their entire frame of reference is determined by their position in this social order. When they approach a threshold which will mean they will never again be able to be fully a part of their group, they will resist (often unconsciously) making the transition. They will sometimes set themselves up for academic or employment-related failure, or do some other inappropriate act which will make it impossible to cross that line from one social group to another and thus avoid the painful psychological transition which accompanies such fundamental changes in identity. To have crossed such a threshold by succeeding through acquiring a high school diploma makes it very difficult for the person to maintain their status (or to continue to see themselves as) a member of the oppressed social group.

There are other such thresholds, such as the acquisition of a university degree or other certificate or diploma leading to steady employment in a non-native enterprise, accumulation of wealth and adoption of a dominant-culture lifestyle, and many other indicators of success in terms of the dominant sector of society. Such circumstances force a complete re-structuring of one's psychological framework, one of the very difficult aspects described by Schumacher (1975) in his analysis of the current condition of many societies in today's rapidly-changing world.

The Pain of Homelessness

The situation faced by those relatively few people who do manage to achieve this success is, however doubly confounding - they leave a subculture by acquiring success in terms of the oppressor culture, but they also never fully become a part of that dominant group. They continue to be members of a visible minority within which they have experienced years of socialization. This makes it inevitable that they demonstrate traits which brand them as being the oppressed class; according to Ogbu (1979) this ensures that they continue to be perceived by the dominant class as being socially incompetent. The inter-group prejudices persist.

They cannot make a complete transition, finding it impossible to fully transform themselves into new people whose way of living is completely like those who have been raised in another way of life - they continue to behave much as do their less successful kinfolk. As a result they are never really accepted by the dominant sector, and in a sense they become homeless since they also no longer fit the characteristics of their own subculture--they're alone.

This is something many could possibly sense as they approached the threshold between one culture and the other, and which contributed to their subconsciously motivated counter-productive behavior. This would account for the drunken spree taken by the high school student two weeks before final exams, and other similar anticipatory self-destructive behaviors. Some of those who have committed suicide did so, however, after they had become successful by completing their upgrading classes or some other similar achievement. This requires yet another explanation. These tragedies could be seen in terms of a disorientation and loss perceived after the transition has been achieved, rather than being avoided by self-destructive behavior prior to crossing the line.

Incomplete Transition and Stress

Once they have "left home" by passing one of the success thresholds of the dominant sector, they experience the loss of their former identity, and furthermore are expected (by their home community as well as by members of the dominant class) to demonstrate a whole set of traits of members of the mainstream culture. This they cannot easily and readily do.

It requires much more than the successful completion of an upgrading course to learn the complex behaviors associated with securing and retaining steady employment in a mainstream enterprise. These characteristics, such as time conformity, interrelating effectively with dominant sector co-workers as if they are peers, the ability to take direction and learn a host of complex job-related skills, take much time and experience to acquire. Most of these things are not taught as part of a regular upgrading course, and little attention is given elsewhere in our systems to helping people to acquire these essential skills.

The awful realization of an inadequate ability to function, coupled with a sense that an even higher degree of failure is possible once they have left the haven of their familiar surroundings, could be one of many possible factors which might have prompted apparently successful people in communities such as Salmon Arm to take their own lives. The self-destructive behaviors arising from this stress can include drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, petty crimes, an erratic and unreliable employment history, and lack of achievement of one's potential educational achievement, as well as suicide.

CONCLUSION

There are, of course, many other causal issues involved - these include the lack of realistic and meaningful life-goals for a substantial portion of northern village youth (it is, after all, very difficult to construct a meaningful lifestyle for one's self when there is every likelihood of 80% unemployment in the village for the next 75 years). It is virtually impossible for a person to look down life's road with anything approaching hope and striving when that's what their future holds. These clearly are important and directly related factors, but they have been discussed elsewhere more adequately than has the success identity change issue described in this article.

For many who work to improve the condition of the people of the north the issue of self-destructive behavior presents a particularly difficult concern. It is essential to foster economic development initiatives, improve consultative and administrative abilities, and increase the range and quality of professional skills among native northerners. All these areas of endeavor involve some sort of identity change - in one way or another, individuals have to be helped to emerge from the "culture of silence" and to increase their ability to shape their own destiny. For generations this has been beyond their grasp.

With the land claim agreements, however, will come massive development opportunities. If the individuals living in communities throughout the north are to be able to benefit directly from these new initiatives they must be able to undergo the profound personal and identity-related changes involved in assuming their rightful share of control over their own affairs. Not only must individuals become better able to make the transition required in order to achieve success, their communities must also learn to welcome these successful people into their midst and encourage them to use their skills to foster the development of their people. These are major and difficult changes to achieve. The issues outlined in this article appear to need to be resolved soon in order to achieve an equitable distribution of the benefits which are likely to accrue from the settlement of the many land claim negotiations now underway across the north.

Fortunately, it has been shown in other parts of the developing world that it is possible to facilitate this sort of change in a population. The massive literacy and social development campaigns in countries such as Cuba and Nicaragua, which have usually been coupled with government-sponsored programs stressing collaboration and self-reliance which were widely publicized along with broadly-based cultural reinforcement measures, have shown that this can be done.

Possibly the large scale public education campaigns which accompanied these movements produced a community-wide vision of the new social order, and people all made the transition from one identity to another together. This collective transition, which was seen as an act of social responsibility involving everybody, probably produced a broad-based psychological environment within which individual social change related stresses could find a productive and positive outlet. If this is indeed true, the design and implementation of a similar massive public education campaign should be considered as an integral part of the transition process related to land claims implementation and other such attempts to achieve a more equitable society in the north.

Without sufficient attention to this aspect of social change, even the best-designed development plans for the Canadian north won't have sufficient indigenous human resources to enable them to be carried and the end result could be much the same as in Alaska, where after fifteen years of so-called autonomy and self-government there has been virtually no significant improvement in the quality of life of the people living in the vast majority of the native villages scattered throughout the State.