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RESEARCH REPORT

STUDY OF BELIEFS ABOUT ABORIGINES*

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In June 1973 a proposal for a study of the beliefs of metropolitan (Perth) Caucasian children and adults towards Aborigines was submitted by the Western Australian Institute of Technology** to the then Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority. The proposal was forwarded to D.A.A. in Canberra, was approved, and preliminary work on a pilot study commenced in February 1974. The survey continued through the year and the results were analysed. A final two-volume report was presented to the Department in January 1975.

The objectives of this study were to determine beliefs held about Aborigines by metropolitan white school children (ages 10, 12, 14 and 16 years) and adults, as a function of differences in sex, occupational status and amount of contact with Aborigines. The scope of the study was widened by including a sample of metropolitan Aboriginal adults in order to determine what beliefs they held about Aborigines.

The differences in beliefs held about Aborigines by white respondents were examined as a function of differences in sex, occupational status and amount of contact with Aborigines.

The survey was also to assist the Department in the implementation of recommendations made in the final report, such as appropriate utilisation of information obtained from the study for material in films, pamphlets and social studies books.

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** WAIT - AID is a company established by WAIT in order to provide the general community with its research expertise.

This study gives a fascinating insight into the beliefs children have about Aborigines and how these change with age, and perhaps even more interesting, the beliefs Aborigines hold about their own people.

The older children are seen to be more positive - open-minded in their beliefs and have greater faith in the qualities of Aborigines. Adults are much less so since they concentrate more on ideas relating to adaptability of Aborigines to white society on terms which usually favour the whites. The older children may not be aware of all the practical problems involved in this rather one-way process of adapting, but perhaps their rejoinder may be that whites generally have created most of these problems.

The younger children are probably oblivious to most of the issues and problems involved in this and obviously need an enormous amount of information about them.

It became obvious that paternalism clearly increases with age. Rather stringent requirements are set down by the older whites for Aboriginal integration into white society. Usually these standards are set with little regard for the background of Aborigines. Assistance given to them usually has conditions which must be fulfilled, a requirement inducing involuntary dependence by the Aborigines. Inability to meet the standards set down leads to judgments by older whites of incompetence and inadequate motivation in Aborigines; and a self-fulfilling prophecy is the result. The increasing paternalism with increasing age is corroborated by Beswick and Hills (1) who found that ethnocentrism increased with age.

The metropolitan Aboriginal respondents appeared to be quite confident in their ability to cope with present and future social conditions. They basically want to live by the laws of white society and do not appear to want complete self-government as many consider this will cause deterioration in interpersonal relationships with whites, which they believe is not as poor as whites think. The impression gained from the data is that they would appreciate far more control over their lives, particularly in regard to economic matters. The Aboriginal sample feels that Aborigines are quite capable of administering the funds granted by the Federal Government.

In comparison to the Aborigines, the beliefs of whites appear to be somewhat extremist and out of step with the times. Obviously, white adults need to know more about the aspirations of metropolitan as well as outback Aborigines. Whites also seem to be over-reacting to the problem of poor interpersonal relationships. Social distance and

determinants are simply not an issue for Aborigines but what is important to them is the recognition of Aboriginal qualities without reference to the desirability of these qualities for adaptation to white society.

It was found that the amount of contact with Aborigines has an important influence in the beliefs held by whites. Respondents who have had considerable contact are more cognitively complex and consequently able to be more receptive to diverse opinions about Aborigines. With increasing contact, social distance and its determinants becomes less important and the perceived qualities of Aborigines achieves more prominence. Obviously the contact variable may be confounded by other variables differently affecting the responses of urban and rural people and these variables must be taken into account when generalising the results beyond the metropolitan area.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

Any educational program designed to provide information about Aborigines will be considerably more effective if it is based upon empirical evidence about how children differ in the beliefs they hold about Aborigines. Such a program could supply details about:

- a. Physical and personality characteristics of Aborigines;
- b. Historical, cultural and religious background of Aborigines;
- c. Present social conditions in which Aborigines live, including problems of employment, housing, education, alcohol and crime;
- d. Similarity of white people and Aboriginal people in terms of general ability, educational and employment opportunities, motivation, ambitions, and basic human rights;
- e. Interpersonal relationships between Aborigines and white people;
- f. Beliefs Aborigines hold about white people;
- g. Differences between metropolitan and country Aborigines.

The younger children seem largely ignorant of present day Aboriginal life in all its variety of forms. To alter this they should be presented with material which highlights past and present life-styles (with a heavy emphasis on the latter) in varying types of environment:

- government-run reserves
- missions
- country towns
- cattle and sheep stations
- cities
- coastal areas
- interior

This should also include situations where there are whites and where there are not. The children should also be given some idea about the proportion of Aborigines who live these different life-styles.

It is recommended that in the educational materials there be:

- a. Little or no comparison of Aborigines with whites;
- b. Little discussion about the quality of relationships between Aborigines and whites or the determinants of social distance between them;
- c. A de-emphasis on the problems Aborigines have in assimilating into white society. This information is
 - rarely imparted objectively
 - open to ambiguous interpretation by the children who, at this age can understand human social relationships at only a superficial level
 - of little importance as far as Aborigines are concerned.

The results of this study show that the social distance dimension increases in importance until it becomes a very dominant criterion of, and forms the basis of, most of the beliefs held. This means that the nature of Aborigines *per se* is ignored to a large degree and only their relationships to whites, and Aboriginal qualities affecting this relationship are considered important. Obviously the excessive emphasis by whites on social distance and its determinants does not provide a favourable climate for understanding between the two races to develop. If prejudice increases with age, as several studies have demonstrated, then an increased emphasis on the relationships between whites and Aborigines is associated with an increase in prejudice and hence, this dimension should be de-emphasized at an early age.

It appears that older children do have enough information to formulate beliefs and would have more beliefs than the younger children. Often, however, the information is distorted, particularly information about social distance and its determinants. The older children tend to over-react on issues related to this dimension and so they consider relationships between Aborigines and whites to be poorer than the Aborigines themselves believe. This is particularly true of those who have had little or no contact with Aborigines.

The program for older children should follow the one for younger children but at a more advanced level. Once again interpersonal relationships and the problems of adaptability should be de-emphasized although not completely ignored. The qualities of Aborigines and their importance for self-determination should be discussed. Assistance from Aborigines is required here to provide information they believe essential for white understanding of Aborigines.

The educational program should not be concerned, initially at least, with details about what should be the present state of affairs as far as Aborigines are concerned. That is an equivocal issue which should be left to children to discuss after having received the maximum amount of non-evaluative information on the areas mentioned above. A program which deviates from this type of approach may be in danger of degenerating into a crude manipulation of the children's attitudes in a way that may perpetuate existing erroneous beliefs or form new ones.

Amount of contact with Aborigines has no impact on adults, some on the younger children and considerable influence on the older children. Therefore, an educational program for the older children should be presented by an Aborigine, preferably several of them working on a rotating basis. The children are then exposed to more Aborigines and probably ones with quite different backgrounds. Aboriginal women, as well as men, should be the educators. A course on the Sociology of Aborigines could perhaps be offered as an elective within a social studies course at high school.

Contact does not have as great an impact on the younger children and there should not be a great loss in effectiveness if whites administer the educational program. It is recommended, however, that the task be allocated to the less paternalistic younger white personnel.

EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL

Films are perhaps too expensive as a main source of imparting

information. It would be difficult to depict faithfully the various Aboriginal life-styles because the camera is likely to affect their behaviour. Films perhaps can be used to break the monotony of written material.

Recorded interviews with a wide range of Aborigines on a variety of topics, either filmed or not, should provide an effective source of information about beliefs held by Aborigines and how these beliefs differ as a function of a number of variables. Any films made should be strongly influenced by Aboriginal advice. The choice of subject matter should be largely left to the Aborigines. They are aware of what qualities are the most misunderstood by whites and material in the film may be chosen to rectify the more serious erroneous beliefs.

The most convenient and economical form of material would be pamphlets, magazines and books. Information from this report and that supplied by Aborigines may be used as the basis of this. Magazines perhaps could discuss current Aboriginal affairs throughout Australia. However, all material should receive the stamp of approval from Aboriginal representatives.

From this study a number of recommendations were made which are of great importance for the Western Australian Department's Schools Program which is now being re-organized on this basis.

This extremely pertinent study has highlighted further areas on which research is now needed, and it is intended to extend this study to include the following :-

- a. A follow-up study both before and after the use of the program, to observe which beliefs change and to what extent.
- b. In order to broaden and deepen the scope of the work, a separate study on the beliefs of country children will need to be done.
- c. A survey of the beliefs of Aborigines, both in the city and country, about themselves and whites is also intended.

Dr. Mueller delivered a paper based on this study at the 4th Annual Conference of Socio-Psychologists at Flinders University on 17-18 May 1975. Copies of this study can be obtained from Dr. W. Mueller, or Dr. B. Bishop, Department of Psychology, WAIT, Hayman Rd., South Bentley, W.A. 6102.

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SCHOOLS COMMISSION REPORT FOR THE TRIENNium 1976 - 1978

CHAPTER 9

EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINES

9.1. Over the last two years Australians have become more aware through the bitter comments of Aborigines in the media that a new government cannot overnight solve problems which have been festering for more than a century. It is still possible for the National Population Inquiry Report to note in 1975 that 'in every conceivable comparison, the Aborigines and Islanders ... stand in stark contrast to the general Australian society, and also to other "ethnic" groups, whether defined on the basis of race, nationality, birthplace, language or religion. They probably have the highest growth rate, the highest death rate, the worst health and housing, and legal status of any identifiable section of the Australian population'. They also have the least schooling.

9.2. Noting that a range of educational initiatives had been taken at both State and Australian Government levels, the Commission initially felt that it was possible that action needed was already in progress, particularly as other agencies had been working with the complexities of the situation for much longer than the Commission had been in existence. As it studied the situation however, the Commission came to the conclusion that one element, the voice of Aborigines themselves, was still muffled. To assist it in its consideration of the problems the Commission formed an Aboriginal Consultative Group chosen by Aborigines from all parts of Australia.