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Racism against First Nations People and First Nations Humour as a Coping Mechanism

Darren Dokis

Introduction

As prevalent as racism is against First Nations, so is the use of humour by First Nations people as a coping response. Racism against First Nations people is still widespread in contemporary society, and is reflected in both government policies and in public perception. Continued attempts to reduce or eliminate treaty rights and the incessant attempts to appropriate and exploit what little land the First Nations still possess are justified through this racism. With their culture, language, land ownership, and treaty rights continuously under attack for the last 500 years, it is of little wonder that First Nations people as a whole have problems with stress and coping. While some First Nations people have succumbed to the temptations of unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol and drug use, others use the most powerful weapon in their arsenal—the First Nations sense of humour.

In this paper, I do not intend to offer a thorough examination of racism against First Nations people, but rather to provide a brief overview of a few aspects of racism against First Nations people, the effects of this racism on them, and the use of humour as a coping mechanism. As such, I draw on a wide variety of existing studies in the areas of racism, assimilation, culture loss, First Nations humour, coping mechanisms, and the psychology of humour as a coping mechanism. I will take the information obtained from these sources, and use it to argue that humour is an effective method of coping with racism for First Nations people.

Overview of First Nations Racism

Racism against First Nations people began soon after European settlement in North America. As the importance of First Nations contributions to the fur trade and their value as allies began to decline, so did too the positive view of First Nations people in the eyes of the colonialists (Trigger 1988:19-20). The First Nations people became less "noble savages" and became just savages. This change in perspective about First Nations people is apparent as early as first contact with Christopher Columbus. Columbus initially viewed First Nations people as 'generous and docile', but as they began to resist the 'gifts' of colonization and progress brought by Columbus, they quickly became viewed as 'cannibalistic savages' (Ransby 1992:84). According to Ransby (ibid.), "... deeming them 'racially', socially and culturally inferior served as a convenient rationale for confiscating their land, usurping their labour, and, eventually, annihilating them as a people."

Canadian anthropologist Stanley Barrett (1987:221) stated that "racism has been endemic in Canada [and that]... the degree, scope, and persistence of the phenomenon lead to a single conclusion; racism in Canada has been institutionalized ... racism that is intrinsic to the structure of society."

There is no aspect of First Nations culture and life that was...
untouched by racism. Canadian government and society saw First Nations people as children, unable to think for or protect themselves. In 1918, Arthur Meighen, Minister of the Interior for Canada, told Parliament that “the presumption of the law is that he [the Indian] has not the capacity to decide what is for his ultimate benefit in the same degree as his guardian, the Government of Canada” (Meighen in Francis 1992:202). Any positive aspects of First Nations culture were attributed entirely to the influences of European civilization, and of course, any failures were their own (Francis 1992:199). Ultimately, racism and misinformation about First Nations people and their culture serves the primary purpose of maintaining government control over First Nations. This trend continues into the present. In June 2006, Canada refused to support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Furthermore, in November 2006, the government cut $170 million in funding for First Nations language training (CBC News 2006) while increasing funding for French language training in Ontario alone by over $300 million (Newswire 2006). By refusing to support international Indigenous rights and canceling funding for First Nations language training, the Canadian government demonstrates their continued paternalistic attitude towards First Nations people.

Because the Canadian government historically viewed First Nations people as children, no part of First Nations life fell under their own jurisdiction. For example, First Nations systems of government and law were replaced by European systems of governance. Until 1960 in Canada, First Nations people could not vote. It was illegal for First Nations people to drink alcohol. First Nations religious practices and languages were outlawed, and the education of their children was taken out of their hands. First Nations children were taken away to be educated in the residential schools in order for them to be assimilated into mainstream Canada. It was made illegal for First Nations to file land claims or to enlist the help of lawyers to pursue land claims. Hunting and fishing rights were taken away, their means of livelihood left entirely under the control of the government. First Nations were not able to decide whether an individual was a member of their tribe, and until 1951 were unable to even leave reserves without a pass (RCAP Vol. 1. 1996).

Despite the Canadian government’s assertion that bringing this ‘civilization’ to the First Nations has always been for the benefit of the First Nations people, it has always been about the assimilation of First Nations people into mainstream culture (Francis 1992:203). Assimilation is a strategy used by the Canadian government to deal with the ‘Native Problem’, as it eliminates the need for the treaties and opens all remaining land owned by First Nations to exploitation by Canada. Unfortunately for the Canadian government, First Nations people have not been so obliging; First Nations continue to fight for their treaty rights and for the preservation of their culture.

In addition to government policies, racism is also prevalent in mainstream Canadian society. First Nations stereotypes are still prevalent today and are easily enumerated. In an informal survey of a group of non-First Nations students conducted by me at the University of Western Ontario in
November, 2006, the students were asked to identify stereotypes of First Nations people. The following stereotypes were immediately identified: drunken Indian; lazy Indian; dumb Indian; dirty Indian; gasoline huffing Indian; useless Indian; gambling Indian; thieving Indian; heathen Indian; welfare Indian; Indian giver; poor Indian; uncivilized Indian; treacherous Indian; Chief; Squaw; Indian time; and perhaps most relevant to this essay, the stoic, humourless Indian. While this was not a formal survey, it is a question perhaps deserving more serious study in the future. When asked the same question in regards to a variety of other cultures, the same group was unable to come up with even half the number of stereotypes. It is also important to note that all of the stereotypes listed were negative; I had only asked for stereotypes in general. When asked for positive stereotypes, I received blank stares and after five minutes, had only two – the loyal Indian and the resourceful Indian.

A more formal study in 2005 by Russel Barsh examined the results of numerous surveys of Canadian attitudes about First Nations people, and came up with several conclusions. Between 1976 and 1986, Canadian support for increased economic well being of First Nations, for First Nations control of school programs, for cultural protection, and for settlement of land claims all decreased, and support for First Nations self-government was opposed by one third of respondents (Barsh 2005:282). Support for First Nations self-government was still strongly opposed in 1997 (Barsh 2005:283). Another study examined by Barsh (2005:283) showed that 55% of Canadians believed First Nations people would be better off if they were assimilated into mainstream culture. The recent publication of an editorial in the Gazette, a student newspaper from the University of Western Ontario, entitled ‘Canada has done enough for its Aboriginals’ (Hayes 2005) is a good indicator that racist viewpoints are still widespread and that Canadians are not adequately educated about First Nations issues.

While some of the above policies are no longer enforced, many others are. First Nations are still fighting for self-government and for the right to control their own land. Land claims are still unsettled; First Nations traditional religions are still seen as heathen and ungodly; hunting and fishing rights are still not honoured; Canadian law still takes precedence over First Nations justice systems; First Nations are just beginning to gain control of their education, and most First Nations still have no control over who is or is not defined as a member of their tribe. As will be made evident in the following section, the attacks past and present on First Nations culture have had negative repercussions.

Effects of Racism on First Nations People

The negative effects of racism on First Nations people are expressed in a variety of ways. Disillusionment and distrust with the Canadian government and with Canadian society at large is common. Lack of cultural identity enforces feelings of alienation within society. Furthermore, stereotypes have lead to a lack of self-confidence and to feelings of being demeaned. These factors, combined with land appropriation and cultural alienation have caused frustration, depression, and anger. “When you take away from Native people their culture, their language, and their land, it
creates a vacuum... anger and frustration at what has been lost or taken rushes into that vacuum” (Taylor 1998:32).

These negative feelings have led to self-destructive behaviours within First Nations communities, including family violence, high rates of incarceration, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse. Estimates indicate that as many as 80% of First Nations families have experienced family violence (Fox and Long 1998:274). Rates of incarceration are also extraordinarily high for First Nations people; while First Nations people only form 5% of the population of Canada, they make up 40% or more of the prison population (Taylor 1998:31). In the face of these incarceration rates for First Nations peoples, it is interesting to note that the majority of First Nations cultures had no prisons and no need for prisons (Taylor 1998:32). Traditionally First Nations cultures have seen crime as something dealt with within the community, by friends, families, and sometimes healers, if the situation warrants it.

Additionally, suicide rates among First Nations cultures are over twice as high as that of other Canadians – 34 deaths per 100,000 for Canadians, versus 14 deaths per 100,000 for First Nations people, with rates being higher for males then females (Fox and Long 1998:274). Rates also vary between First Nations cultures as well. For example, some Anishnabe tribes in Northern Ontario report suicide rates as high as 98 per 100,000 (Lester 1997:122). First Nations people in general suffer from a type of depression called anomic depression, in which they feel useless and helpless. The symptoms of anomic depression include “(1) anomie, the absence of accepted norms combined with cultural identity confusion, and (2) a chronic dysphoric state, with lack of self-respect, purpose or hope for future” (Lester 1997:47).

Finally, while some aspects of drug and alcohol abuse are certainly blown out of proportion by mainstream racial stereotypes, there is certainly no arguing that these problems are far more prevalent among First Nations people than they are among non-First Nations North Americans. Inhalant abuse is particularly prevalent among First Nations people. While many chemicals are sniffed, gasoline is the most common. These chemicals have serious long term health effects for the users. The 1995 British Columbia First Nations Solvent Abuse Study attributed chemical abuse to: “Young people not having enough to do, drug dealers in the community, intense rivalry in the community, lack of spiritual/cultural traditions and geographical isolation” (qtd. in Fournier and Crey 1998:307). Fournier and Crey (ibid.) also point out alcohol and drug abuse, diabetes, domestic violence, suicide, and fetal alcohol syndrome as further reasons behind chemical abuse.

These high rates of incarceration, suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse indicate that racism has had profound negative effects on First Nations culture. While drug and alcohol abuse have been used as coping mechanisms, they are not healthy alternatives, nor will they ensure the long term survival of First Nations societies. In the face of this adversity, one of the greatest strengths and coping mechanisms possessed by First Nations people is their sense of humour.
First Nations Humour

Before I examine First Nations humour as a coping mechanism, First Nations humour must be defined. In his discussion on First Nations humour, Vine Deloria (1969:146) tells us “One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh. Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humour life is redefined and accepted.” First, we must answer the question of whether First Nations people have a sense of humour at all; here comes into play the stereotype of the ‘Stoic Indian’. In his foreword to Keith Basso’s Portraits of “the Whiteman”, Dell Hymes (1979:ix) wrote "the great capacity of Indian people for creative wit has been obscured by the image of the Indian as silent stoic.” Don Fixico (2006:171) further comments on this stereotype, when he wrote “Indian people are quite the opposite from the stereotype of the stoic Indian with the stone face... people who do not know Indians think that they are quiet, at least much quieter than the population of the mainstream in America. Nothing could be further from the truth.” Vine Deloria (1969: 146-147) wondered that Indians got anything done because of their overemphasis on humour; “Indians have found a humorous side to nearly every problem and the experiences of life have generally been so well defined through jokes and stories that they have become a thing in themselves. The more desperate the problem, the more humor is directed to describe it.”

First Nations humour is expressed primarily through stories and teasing. Not surprisingly, because First Nations cultures have strong oral traditions and oral histories, a good portion of their humour emerges through storytelling. First Nations people feel that stories involving the exploits of their friends and family are the most humorous, especially those involving foolish things or experiences (Fixico 2006:173).

Teasing is used amongst First Nations people to help keep the peace, to remind members of a tribe that they are all part of the same tribe, and are all of equal importance (Fagan 2005:36). There are two common characteristics of teasing in First Nations humour: permitted disrespect and self-deprecation. Permitted disrespect implies you have the other person’s permission to joke about them or to tease them (Taylor 2005:28). This form of teasing requires a level of intimacy between individuals; only those that know each other well and have a close relationship tease each other in this way. Self-deprecation is a reverse form of teasing, in which an individual teases him or herself to portray humility and to display solidarity (Kelly 2005:62). Roger Speilmann (1998:123) noted that teasing differs between First Nations people and non-First Nations people. While non-First Nations people tend to respond to teasing by trying to set the record straight, First Nations people tend to respond to teasing by not only laughing along, but by joining in and teasing themselves. Fixico (2006:176) wrote, “We make fun of ourselves to get by in life. We need to make fun of ourselves because of a dire situation that leaves us no other way to respond. Feeling helpless, we make fun of ourselves, but we are not hopeless.”

Humour as a Coping Mechanism

Now that we have established that First Nations people do indeed have a sense of humour, we can look at the use of humour as a coping
mechanism. Studies have found that a healthy sense of humour does in fact serve to reduce the effects of stress (Lefcourt & Martin: 1986:61). In the short term, humour increases positive feelings such as happiness and well-being, as well as a feeling of control over one’s life, and reduces anxiety, depression, and anger. The long term, healthy use of humour promotes self-esteem, emotional well-being, and permits more satisfying interpersonal relationships (Martin 2007:306). Gordon Polson (1998:111) asserted that teasing yourself and teasing your people’s ways of thinking and doing things can be an intrinsic part of both your own and your culture’s healing.

First Nations people have an unmatched ability to laugh at themselves and their situation.Humour is an integral part of their culture and is essential to the long-term health of their society. Without humour, First Nations people would surely have succumbed to the twin pressures of racism and assimilation long ago. As Fixico (2006:183) stated, “Indian humor is the ability to be flexible while sometimes feeling powerless against the government and cultural mainstream in control of your life.” Through the use of humour, First Nations people are able to inject some control into a life full of confusion and conflict. Deloria (1969:167) succinctly summed up the positive role of First Nations humour; “When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive.”

Conclusion

It is unquestionable that institutional and cultural racism against First Nations people has existed in the past and is still prevalent today. Having looked at racism, examined the effects of racism on First Nations society, and explored some of the negative coping mechanisms used by First Nations people, there can also be no question that humour is among the more positive and effective coping mechanisms that can be used by First Nations people. Humour is an integral part of First Nations culture:

“Finally, this is the way Indians are. Being Indian is realizing that you are different from other people, different in a cultural context. In this way, being Indian is learning to laugh at yourself and your own situation. Sometimes, it is making a joke about yourself before the other person does. Indians laugh as much as they cry and feel sad. They laugh because they need to, and sometimes because they do not know what else to do. Sometimes it is the only thing to do when you have almost run out of tears. There is very little difference between the emotional threads of crying and laughing. It is like a fine thin line that is the difference. Tears are involved in both emotions. This human emotion of laughing has sustained Indian people throughout time. It is a way of survival.” (Fixico 2006:183)
First Nations people today deal with racism and other problems in the same way they dealt with problems in the past; through stories. Traditionally, stories were used to inform, to educate, to share ideas, and to teach First Nations people how to survive. Just as humour was always a part of First Nations storytelling, it is just as or more important today with the additional pressures of the modern world. New stories and the humour in them enable modern First Nations people and their cultures to survive in today’s world.

**Works Cited**


