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THE AZTEC COMMUNITY AND ABNORMAL BEHAVIOR: A LOOK AT ITS PROGRAM FOR PRIMARY PREVENTION

ABSTRACT. — *In this paper the author emphasizes the fact that the Aztec Society had developed social care, human relations and individual care, which as a consequence functioned as preventive factors for mental health and against abnormal human behavior. Examples of the prenatal care, of the social care for children, of the elementary psychological well-being in schools and of the social policy in adulthood and old age are presented. All these activities and methods helped to eliminate conditions which led to the emergence of mental disorder and encouraged influences that facilitated emotional well-being.*

KEY WORDS: *Aztecs — mental health — abnormal behavior — health prevention.*

When Western mental health practitioners think of the Aztecs, it is generally to connect them with the deadly rite of human sacrifice rather than to give them credit for any positive intellectual or social contributions (Wasserman, 1982). However, this paper will take the position that, over four centuries ago, the Aztecs of Mexico-Tenochtitlan employed measures aimed at the primary prevention of abnormal behavior that would be considered valid even by contemporary standards.

According to Caplan (1964), primary prevention consists of those efforts made to block the development of psychological disturbance. For Caplan, the aim of this kind of prevention is to reduce the frequency of mental disorder and, insofar as possible, to prevent it from occurring altogether. However, as Altrocchi (1980) points out, in addition to reducing abnormal behavior, primary prevention also works to promote effective functioning. Indeed, as some mental health specialists have argued, a society which is sincere in this effort to prevent deviant behavior needs to help its citizens gain control over their problems throughout the course of their

lives (Bloom, 1977; Caplan, 1974; Glidewell, 1971). Thus, the remainder of this paper on Aztec primary prevention will be organized around a broader, life-cycle approach.

PRENATAL PERIOD

Both Caplan (1964) and Altrocchi (1980) believe that the first stage in the development of a healthy personality comes even before the child is born. They claim that the fetus is affected by the mother's emotional experience during pregnancy, and that future mothers should be educated in the matter of psychological health. A comprehensive longitudinal study by Stott and Latchford (1976) indicates that this is the case as well. Their research findings suggest that expectant mothers not aware of the stressful effects of: 1. physical and mental fatigue; 2. personal conflicts outside the family; and 3. worries over running the household, tended to produce children with underdeveloped sensorimotor, intellectual, and integrative capacities.

The Aztecs seemed to be quite concerned about educating expectant mothers on the importance of psychological well-being. According to Schendel (1968), Aztec physicians gave instructions to pregnant women on stress management which did not differ greatly from that considered standard today. Expectant mothers were taught not to overwork or lift heavy objects since the exertion could very easily produce discomforting fatigue. Pregnant women were also advised against getting involved in personal relationships outside the home which would result in their becoming emotionally upset. In addition, it was recommended that a midwife be hired on a lying-in basis during the last trimester of pregnancy so that an expectant mother could be relieved of worrisome household concerns. Thus, Soustelle (1964) claims that pregnant women in Aztec society were confident of receiving ample physical and emotional support right until the birth of their babies.

INFANCY AND CHILDHOOD

Caplan (1964) argues that in the early formative years it is extremely important to stress primary prevention. He claims that during this time of life, children must be provided with physical supplies like food and shelter, and psychosocial supplies such as satisfactory affective and social stimulation. On this score, Maslow (1970) has stated that for human beings to function effectively as adults it is first necessary that they gratify the physiological and social-emotional needs of infancy and childhood. According to Maslow, on a species-wide basis, an unstable, demeaning environment at the beginning of the developmental process will prevent persons from fulfilling their human potential as they pass through the adolescent and adult years.

The Aztecs, perhaps intuitively realizing the importance of adequate physical and psychosocial resources in the family, managed to create a kinship system which ensured children that they would grow up in safe, secure, and loving environment. For example, the death of a parent did not prevent any child from receiving the same level of support that he or she had previously enjoyed.

Let us take the case of the "father". In Aztec society the "good father" was described as "diligent, solicitous, compassionate, sympathetic" (Calnek, 1974, p. 196). Upon his demise, one of his brothers — an uncle to the fatherless child(ren) — automatically stepped in and provided the child(ren) with food, shelter and clothing, as well as a stable and loving environment for the remainder of the socialization process. On this matter, Calnek (1974) points out that the Aztec definition for "uncle" was: "Provider for those who are orphaned, the entrusted one, the tutor, the manager" (p. 197). Indeed, it is interesting to observe here, that unlike the definition of "orphan" in Western societies, it took the death of only one parent for children to acquire "orphan" status so that they might have their vital needs fulfilled.

Thus one could conclude, like Calnek (1974), that in Aztec society concepts such as "father" and "uncle" did not serve merely as identifying terms in a family network but, more importantly, they spelled out the economic and social responsibilities that adults had toward related children as the children were growing up.

ADOLESCENCE

Altrocchi (1980) claims that adolescence is a significant time for primary prevention, because in this developmental stage young people are actively concerned about positive personality development. By stressing mental health education in the secondary school, Altrocchi believes we build toward personal effectiveness, which he regards as a young person's best guarantee of future happiness.

The Aztecs, likewise, were quite committed to educating their youth in matters related to mental health. During the adolescent years, Aztec students learned about psychological well-being in schools called *calmecacs*. These schools were primarily attended by sons and daughters of dignitaries, but there is a strong evidence from the writings of the sixteenth-century Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagun (1932), that children from merchant and plebeian families could attend as well.

In the *calmecacs*, students learned that healthy personality development was embedded in the concepts of "face" and "heart". According to Leon-Portilla (1963), "face was the verbal embodiment of an ego or self" (pp. 113 and 114). The "heart" was related to the "face" in that it signified man's dynamism; it was the active searcher of the self. The purpose of mental health education was to give shape and meaning to the human face and to humanize the heart of the individual. Students were taught that if their behavior was righteous and enriched another's life, they would assume a "face" and develop a "heart". Leon-Portilla (1963) claims that only by developing this authentic "face and heart" could an adolescent find a path where answers to the mysteries of life were contained while avoiding the road leading to a dark "dream world".

ADULTHOOD

Still another crucial time for primary prevention, asserts Caplan (1964), is adulthood. He believes that society should take every step possible on behalf of its adult citizens to eliminate the poverty conditions which exacerbate deviant behavior. On this score, Glidewell's (1968) findings suggest that children living under impoverished circumstances do not have significant behavioral problems, whereas poverty-level adults do. Though no researcher would claim a cause-and-effect relationship between poor economic conditions and adult psychological disturbance, there seems to be a general cross-cultural correlation between these two factors (Bebbington, 1978; Dohrenward, 1975).

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