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The Psychological Adjustment of Migrant Farm Families

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My remarks here today are preliminary observations, and they are specifically intended to be tentative and "non-technical" in nature. I hope that in some limited way they will enable further comprehension of the kinds of problems facing the migrant worker and his family, especially his children. I hope also that they will help us with our problems in understanding these people so generally apart from our national life. During the next year I shall try to describe the lives of these people more exactly, and present my full medical and psychiatric findings to appropriate professional meetings. For the present I will attempt a broad picture of my interest in the problem, my work in it, and some of my more general conclusions from my current research.

Child development does not occur in a vacuum of psychological "processes" or "stages," but in the midst of a family which in turn

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exists in a world, a society which constantly exerts its varying influences upon all its families. I am a child psychiatrist and am now in my fourth year of clinical medical and psychiatric study of how the life of the child is affected by certain social situations which might be considered stressful.

For over two years I studied Negro and white children of several ages--as young as five and those well into adolescence--in several cities of the deep South. I was interested in learning how these children managed to get along under the social crisis of school desegregation. My work involved prolonged acquaintance with children, their families, and their teachers in Georgia and Louisiana, and briefer contact with others in Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina. In the course of this research I attempted to come to know the child's larger family, his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins as well as his mother and father. It was in doing this that I first encountered migrant agricultural and sharecropper families.

Several of the children I knew in New Orleans had cousins who either still lived on small farms in Mississippi or Louisiana, or had left them to travel with their parents as part of the "migrant stream," from Florida to the Northern states, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and back each year. The sharecropper cousins were white and Negro; the migrant ones only Negro, though I was later to meet white migrant children. I resolved to continue and extend my work by investigating the adjustment of these children and their families to the isolated and often impoverished rural life of farming, and, most particularly, to

the life of migrant farming, a wandering, socially disruptive, and often indigent background for child rearing.

I am now in my second year of this study, and it is nearing conclusion. I have been following certain Negro and white migrant families in order to find out how they live, how they think and feel as individuals, how they view the world and their relationship to it, how they conduct themselves with one another at home, at work, at play. In the course of my work I have talked at great length with public health doctors, nurses, dietitians and social workers. I have worked as a physician in mobile public health medical clinics which aim to reach migrants by going out directly to their midst. I have spent a considerable amount of time talking with growers and various state and local officials concerned with the problems of agriculture, and another large share of time interviewing school teachers responsible for the education of migrant children. But the heart of the work has been repeated interviews with migrant families of both races done in their several homes. I have tried to learn how these parents and children live by watching them at home and at work, by talking with their crew leaders (who hire and transport them) by following their movements over our country and speaking with them in different locations and seasons.

In a very real sense the migrant farmers form a "sub-culture" in this nation. I mean by this that they live apart from the rest of us in a number of significant ways. By definition they are on the move, regularly or irregularly living each year in several states and in the

process managing usually to lose the many advantages of a permanent residence in any one of them. For example, migrants usually do not vote. They are rarely eligible for any local unemployment assistance. They may hardly see the towns whose nearby fields they harvest. Their rights to adequate schooling for their children, to police protection, to sanitary inspection and regulation of their homes, to enforcement of fire regulations for those same homes are in many cases prejudiced.

They come and they soon leave. They not only do this but they know they do, and they feel the implications of their behavior, the facts of their arrival, work and departure in isolation from the life of the various communities whose fields they infiltrate and work. Whether they travel in caravans of trucks and busses, as many do, or by their own cars they ignore most of the roadside stopping places as they move along from state to state. They have their own places to eat and sleep, to stop and obtain service for themselves and their cars--there are a few stations, or there are simply fields along the highways. Migrants know their "place," they know the houses to seek out when they arrive in a county, the stores which are theirs, offering their kind of food for their kind of cooking--and if you haven't lived in their homes and tasted the food, seen it being prepared and eaten, it is hard with words alone to do justice to the grease and starch, the common lack of utensils, the consequent vitamin deficiencies suffered by people whose diet ignores food picked by their very hands and rich as is possible in vitamins.

Most of the activities which Americans of different classes and

regions call upon for their leisure time are not typically chosen by migrants. They usually have no neighborhood churches or movie houses. They join no social clubs and take no countryside trips or picnics. I have never seen their children at scout meetings nor do they launch charity drives or attend book club meetings. Family visits are a matter of seeing the part of the family also on the road and hoping someday for a word or a few days with the rest of the family far away. Phones are not customary, and mail is rare indeed. There may be church services brought to them by ministers themselves migrant in order to reach them. There may be "platter parties," records played in a cabin to hard dancing and soft and hard drink. Television is not rare, bringing all of America into the lives of those who look at it. More accurately, television sets come and go, purchased by some for small down payments; watched by their neighbors, a kind of rallying instrument; often quickly taken away when payments are not forthcoming. And so there is no comparing the unstable, disorganized social life of migrants with that of the large majority of Americans. They are separated from us by their hand-to-mouth existence, their migratory habits which deprive them from intimacy with any solid residential condition, and in the case of the majority of them, Negroes, or Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, by their racial handicaps in our country.

There are relatively scarce historical, sociological, and anthropological studies of migrants, and there has been, to my knowledge, no clinical psychiatric study of how they endure psychologically. The major information about their lives comes from

our novelists and journalists, our public health officials and legislative investigators, our concerned lay organizations. Further scientific study of just how these millions of people live and what their living habits do to their thinking and feeling about themselves and the world they inhabit is badly needed. In fact, the absence of such information confirms the relative isolation of migrants from our national life and its predominant curiosity about itself--sometimes of a restless, self conscious kind which embraces any research in the social sciences with uncritical passion.

Yet, studying migrant workers is not easy because they are unwilling to trust outsiders, reluctant to feel easy and spontaneous with them, and so unconvincing in the reliability of their conversation. I found this to be the case with white migrants as well as Negroes: a large measure of aloof, suspicious and even sullen behavior is shown to outsiders.

We can find out much about how the migrants came to be migrants by studying the history of agriculture in this country, clearly impossible to do here. But even my very limited research illustrates how a collapsing rural economy in the South causes families either to seek out cities and their different conditions of living and working or to drift toward a lowlier, more chaotic form of farm life in migrant harvesting. After all, many of the Negro and white people I have studied as they seek and oppose desegregation have only recently left tenant farming. In both white and Negro families the choice of city living was made because the breadwinner had obtained a kind of

vocational training in the armed services which suggested to them that the move to cities like Atlanta or New Orleans, in spite of all their formidable qualities, was reasonable, that is offered some chance of a job and with it a life less pressed by hunger, cold, disease, no money, and no work.

Here are the words on tape of a Negro man whose six year old daughter pioneered school desegregation in Louisiana: "We just couldn't stay on the farm no longer. My daddy's still there, but there wasn't room for us, so we had to leave or we would have been taking our mother's food and bringing nothing in...I mean you can grow some food, but not enough to keep you fed all year, and there's no money for anything else...So we left one by one...I went to New Orleans because I'd learned how to be an auto mechanic in the service. So I figured I could always get me a job there...My brother didn't have nothing he could do but farm and he figured he could go to Florida and get a living from that...We had some cousin do that a few years back, so he knew to go to them."

A white man is now telling me his story--a deeply convinced segregationist brought up in Mississippi, he had withdrawn his child from school when the Negro man just quoted sent his child there, yet they grew up only thirty miles apart: "...It was the army that did it... I mean getting my trade...my electrician's training gave me the push to come here...One of my brothers is still home with my folks and there ain't much they're getting out of the farm to keep them but barely alive; and another's in Mobile and he ain't doing much of anything

so far as we can hear. I think he works on the docks there when he can; but he's got no skill is the trouble...and we have a brother in Florida who works on farms there. He stays there most of the year, and they leave in the summer and do some picking North, and then they come back. It's better than no work at all...No, I think they'd rather be right where we are, to tell the truth. They came here before we did...yes, he's older than me...so he didn't get a job and he didn't get a job, and then he either had to stay on relief or leave, so they just packed up and went back to the farm (their father's small farm in Mississippi) and then I guess he had to leave that too, like we all do... so that's how he come upon Florida."

What emerges from these family histories is a small confirmation of what we all know about the serious troubles of millions of Southern tenant farmers, black and white, and how these troubles cause emigration, and how the destination chosen can be influenced by educational experience, (the armed services were unwittingly serving as "vocational rehabilitation" centers for both of these men) and finally, how the difficulties of poor people lead to frustrations and animosities easily channelled, given any social and political encouragement, into racial antagonisms. I would imagine that my "accidental" meeting with the problems of sharecroppers and migrant workers as I took routine notes on relatives from families involved in racial conflict reflected an important historical truth which I may have once dimly perceived in the abstract but now was learning more concretely.

One way of approaching some of our observations is to hear what others who work closely with migrants feel about them. Growers employ them and are very sensitive to their capacities and behavior. Here are small sections of one long taped interview with a Florida grower, a man whom I found to be an earnest, hard working, thoughtful and kind person--I have heard similar comments constantly from other growers from doctors, nurses, teachers, county agricultural agents, from all whose work brings them close to migrants: "No matter what we try to do for them, they undo it. We build houses for them, and they destroy them. We fix their screens, and they tear them within the same day. We try to get them to take care of things, you know, where they live, everything from the house to their own belongings, and they don't seem to care...If you ask me the real answer to this is massive education of the children, because I know they're not born the way they are, but they sure develop that way as things are now, and you could give them twice their salary and they'd still do what they do now...They'd drink it away and waste it on a lot of junk they buy, silly trinkets and unnecessary luxuries if you ask me...and then they still wouldn't eat right if they could get as much money as anyone around here; and they wouldn't know how to save it and spend it sensibly the way you and I would...So it's not just money, it's their bringing up... and what a lot of people want is for them to change and be more like us... Well, if they're going to be more like us I think you'd have to get children right from the beginning and set up good schools for them and teach them real intensively, not just reading and writing, but all

the things we learn at home as well as school...you know, how to care for yourself and what the world expects of you...I mean that you should study and try to get ahead...then if they had that kind of education I do think they'd grow up different from their parents...Yes, I suppose they wouldn't want to work for us then...But if we're trying to make those kinds of changes with them we'd probably have to do something about our agriculture, too...We won't be needing them anyway the way we used to; it's a matter of time when machines will take it all over, or most of it, and then we could use the better educated ones; and just a few of them compared to what we have now could run a farm if they were intelligent enough...But meanwhile we're caught in the middle. We've got to worry about the market prices and weather and all the overhead we have and we have all the trouble of getting migrant labor and then keeping them steady and productive...It's easy to jump on us, but no one helps our vegetable prices the way they do some crops, and we can be wiped out in a season from a freeze or price drop, and when we need labor it's an emergency. Either those fields get harvested right away or they don't. And who's going to do it?...Maybe if they helped us with getting equipment to take away the need for so many field hands, and also got going on educating them, we could sooner or later get rid of the whole problem."

Again and again one hears that migrants are unreliable, unkept, lacking in thrift and tidiness. Worse, they tend to be willfully destructive of property, heavy drinkers, quarrelsome with one another, and generally a discouraging and depressing lot, unresponsive to aid,

sullen before advice, ill-suited even for more money or better working and living conditions. And their employers make a sound case not only for this, but for their own precarious position in our economy.

Such assertions and complaints lodged by many intelligent growers and hard working officials in the fields of migrant health and education are hard to dispute. I am thinking of how very trying it is for a dietician to work with a family daily surrounded by citrus fruits yet unwilling to serve them to their children. Potato chips, cokes, perhaps canned and stewed corn, fried fat, yes for those. Fresh fruit and vegetables, the very harvest of their hands, are ignored or rejected. I am thinking of how suspicious migrants often are when mobile units come almost to their very door offering nearby free medical diagnosis and treatment. I am thinking of how many migrant families don't want their children to go to school, don't care whether they receive their "shots," the various vaccines and immunizations we so eagerly welcome for our children, and don't, certainly, pay attention to the amenities of property care, or civil behavior with one another; to the value of moderation in alcoholic intake, sexual indulgence, and child bearing; to the conventions of marriage and divorce; or the refinements of budgeted expenditures for sensible, and hopefully useful, "permanent" possessions.

Now there is no time and space here to describe suitably the lives of these people; and only in this way can we fully understand the reasons for the truth of what others see about them and their habits. Their homes and how they are kept, their food and how they

take it, the daily rhythm of their work, play and sleep must be carefully documented and related to their past, as individuals and as families; to our past as a nation, in all the historical, social, and economic senses of such a "past;" and finally, to their present as they are confronted with its daily tasks, and demands, possibilities and impossibilities--confronted with them in full possession of their past.

If such documentation is to be done elsewhere, we can at least emphasize here the generally illiterate quality of the minds of most of these workers; the isolated and disorganized quality of their social existence; and the fear, anxiety, and frustration which characterize much of the structure of their psychological lives.

Falling back upon my own work, I am struck by the differences I have seen within the same families, between those children brought up in relatively stable--socially and economically--urban homes and those brought up in migrant farm families. In a sense one is at loss, for a moment, to deal with the information accumulated. The children I studied in New Orleans or Atlanta faced heavy social and psychological stress. They were entering previously all-white schools under heavy community resistance and the tensions generated, the mobs, the threats, the apprehension and uncertainty, were there for anyone to see. I have previously reported upon their extraordinary survival; and, of course, such paradoxes need close study.

Briefly, what seemed stressful to me as I watched these children was that for them, but was also for them an opportunity, a challenge,

indeed a rarely sensible moment because this time pain like that long suffered by them was now sustained to some useful purpose. Their fathers were employed. They lived in reasonably steady communities, and a good part of those neighborhoods mobilized to support them and their parents. They received recognition, social and emotional support for their efforts.

In contrast, their cousins, meeting no such crisis, living on "quiet" and often lovely farms, show markedly less hopeful psychological development. In order to find out how any child thinks and feels, how he is learning to see himself in relation to the rest of the world, from his family to many others more casually involved with him, the child psychiatrist must rely upon interviews with older children, interviews with those who observe and care for children, such as parents and teachers, and most significantly, playing games with younger children and drawing with them as well as talking with them. It is in a game or through a sketch that the very young child sometimes offers unutterable indication of his budding feelings about himself and the world about him.

Looking at my notes and drawings done with these children, and comparing them with like summaries of past work with Northern children in child guidance centers or Southern children in desegregated schools, I am struck by the accuracy with which these migrant children realize and portray their special world. The disorganized, confusing, impoverished nature of migrant living does not escape the notice of the children whose parents offer it to them as their future. There

are grossly visible attitudes and symptoms in many of these children which indicate their adjustment at an early age to the restricted, isolated, yet oddly impulsive life ahead of them. What I mean is that the growing child in a migrant family learns even at five or six to adapt to the kind of life his parents live, and by example, teach to their children

What does he learn? He learns to become specially guarded with the outside world regardless of his color; and if he is Negro or Mexican he learns the additional guarding which comes from racial differences and their meaning quickly caught by children in our society. He learns to fear and distrust much of the world which "we" call our own, or simply take for granted after we have made that assumption--salesmen, gas station attendants, employers, city officials, storekeepers, mail-men, and, of course, the police. He learns that there is little prompting to be had for school attendance. He most likely has many brothers and sisters, and he learns to care for them and share with them. His capacity to do so is a striking contrast with the behavior displayed by many children from middle-class American homes where each of the two or three children is frequently encouraged to be very much his own self. He certainly learns much less of the controls and admonitions so familiar to middle class living. In brief, the migrant child sees a world different from ours, and learns not our lessons but his, and the result is that he grows to have a code of "right" and "wrong" characteristic of his experience and often incompatible with our attitudes and our experience. Put another way, the migrant

develops a balance of drives, conscience, and contact with the outside world which stems from his distinctive life.

Such contrasting experiences in this same country create much of our trouble in reaching and understanding these people; and our trouble is theirs, too. They simply do not trust us, or they do not understand us and our hopes for ourselves and them. Yet, it does not take a high order of intimacy with them to observe the many physical and mental diseases which afflict them. Psychiatrically they seem prone to alcoholism, depressions, violence, anti-social behavior, paranoid episodes. Their children are frequently retarded and epileptic due to poor obstetrical care--many of them are still born at home and without any medical care. They suffer a high incidence of bacterial, parasitic, and fungal diseases. Vitamin deficiencies prevail among them. Large numbers of them walk about with serious systemic diseases, either ignored or only randomly and thus poorly treated. And all these diseases have their psychiatric implications, too--in apathy, anxiety, and irritability.

Confronted with such dismaying facts our reactions as middle class citizens, as professionals in medicine or education or government, are understandable if at time self-defeating. We want to "forget" what amounts in sum to a vastly unpleasant and complicated state of affairs. We are made uncomfortable, and we eventually feel guilty and anxious, and after that, perhaps, gloomy and angered. We don't quite know what to do, and sometimes it seems far easier to ignore the sources of human development, in their intricate relationship

to culture and society, and seize upon the results of such development, in this case so vexing and provocative.

Still, what are we to do? I am no political scientist or economist, let alone one faced with the hard responsibilities of public office. I can only say with some special experience that it is indeed possible to get to know and understand these migrant families and their behavior; and in certain ways, through them, our own. If we are to approach these people with some of our standards of living and behavior, which they see on television or from the road, and know to exist for others if not themselves, we must do so, it seems to me, with patience and willfulness. We must, that is, be prepared for the tiresome work, the coordinated planning, in education, medicine, agriculture, housing, and a host of associated fields, required for the job.

Our tenant farmers and migrant workers will respond to a consistent and strong effort exerted their way from the many directions involved in replenishing the needy. Their children can be better taught. Their health can improve. Their water can be safer, their food more nourishing. Eventually their actions can become more constructive and their spirits higher. Nor need they be enemies of their present employers, many of whom wish them well and are also caught in frustrating situations which are really part of the same social and agricultural problems afflicting the migrants. Whatever we do, then, we should mean. A few casual and half-hearted attempts are likely to result in frustration, anger, and finally a sense of failure on both sides, theirs and "ours."