



SITTING BULL
A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE
OF HIS ADULT DEVELOPMENT

If we live to the biblical life-span of 'three score years and ten', then the vast majority of our life-cycle will be spent in adulthood – an area about which little was known in terms of psychological theory and research until fairly recently. Indeed Levinson et al (1978) go so far as to describe adulthood as "...one of the best-kept secrets in our society and probably in human history, generally...".

Can it be possible that by applying the psychological perspective of a theory of lives to an adult's passage through life that we could gain a better understanding of an individual's life structure or as Levinson (1978) describes the concept – "...the underlying pattern or design of a person's life at a given time..." (quoted in Sugarman p.103)?

In an effort to answer this question, I have chosen to examine the life of possibly one of the best known Native American Chiefs – namely Sitting Bull (Tatanka-Iyotanka) of the Hunkpapa Sioux. I chose to read 2 biographies on Sitting Bull and although both are on the same person, the authors use different approaches to provide insights into the man's character.

The main theories of lives which I chose to apply in this assignment were those of Erikson, (with particular reference to his development of ego strengths) and Maslow, since I felt that they were likely to be more relevant, given Sitting Bull's cultural background, then a more modern theory such as Levinson's. Also, much of Erikson's research was done amongst the Sioux Indians while if we were to look at the fifteen characteristic traits of self-actualising people as identified by Maslow (quoted in Sugarman, pp. 31-34), then it could certainly be suggested that Sitting Bull was operating successfully at some, if not indeed all, of these levels.

Stanley Vestal's biography *Sitting Bull Champion of the Sioux* (3rd ed. 1989) approached the character of Sitting Bull by way of the literary method after spending 5 years gathering information for the original edition of the book in 1932. Vestal spent much of his youth living in Indian Territory, playing games with Cheyenne and Arapaho boys and consequently developing what would seem to be an abiding interest in their culture. Upon deciding to write a biography on Sitting Bull after the first World War, he returned to Sioux country where there were still tribal

members living who had experienced Indian life firsthand along with some who had known Sitting Bull personally. It is worth mentioning here that only those who actually knew the Sioux and could merit their confidence were able to secure factual data so perhaps a strong point in Vestal's favour, at least from my personal point of view, was the realisation that he had obviously gained enough of the Sioux's confidence to be adopted, as a son, in 1929 by One Bull, a nephew of Sitting Bull; who along with another nephew, White Bull (supposedly the Indian who actually killed Custer at Little Big Horn) provided their support and co-operation to enable their uncle's life story to be printed.

Indeed for more than half a century, Vestal's work dominated book-shelves as the standard biography of Sitting Bull, a fact acknowledged by Robert Utley in my other chosen reading *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (1998) which builds the character of Sitting Bull by historical method; although he does admit that sources he used provided him with "...enough persuasive evidence to corroborate the essence of the image recalled for Vestal by White Bull, One Bull and the other Indians of the 1920's..."

The problem which Utley seems to suffer from is similar to the one which I also faced when attempting to apply the relevance of a theory of lives to Sitting Bull's life-history in that it is difficult to look at him in terms of his cultural norms and not mine, although there are occasions when it has been possible to use what little knowledge I have learned about his culture to perhaps better understand his motivations or at least not pass judgement on him through my lack of understanding.

Sitting Bull was born in March 1831 at Many-Caches on the south bank of Grand River, South Dakota. As a child he was nicknamed "Slow", seemingly because even as a child, he did not instantly put food from his hand to his mouth (as is the habit of most babies) but instead held the food in his hand, constantly turning it over and looking at it before deciding to eat it although "...once he accepted it, however, he never let go..." (Vestal, p.3), and as we will discover this tenacity was a characteristic which he maintained right up to the day that he died. Even as a child, Sitting Bull was proud of his nation and longed for the time when he could share the brave adventures of the warriors. We need

to understand here that to the Sioux prestige, especially won on the warpath was an all important dream so it seems small wonder that at the age of 14, Sitting Bull was so eager to prove to the Sioux that he was a man that he followed his father and other warriors on a raid against the Crow where he successfully achieved the goal of every Indian warrior – namely counting coup, i.e. touching or striking the enemy with the hand or with a coup-stick.

Although our culture may find it difficult to comprehend, Indians regarded hand-to-hand combat as the only manly form of battle even after they had obtained long-range weapons because the prime object of Plains Indian warfare was not bloodshed or manslaughter of the enemy, but a way of distinguishing oneself. Consequently, counting coup was rated by the Indians as a more greater war honour than the mere killing of an enemy and indeed all their social privileges were dependent upon achieving as many coups as possible.

Small wonder then that at age 14, Sitting Bull appeared to be particularly concerned with finding his own personal space in Sioux adult society. He certainly seems to have obtained formal operational thought as defined by Piaget in that he could think what others would think of him, because before riding off to join his father and the other warriors, he was able to conceive that had he informed his mother and his two sisters of his intentions then they would soon "...remind him that he was just a boy, only fourteen years old..." (Vestal, p.8), and also of how upon catching up with the other warriors he "...felt the silent disapproval of these men..." (Vestal, p.8).

At this stage of his life, Sitting Bull might be seen as matching Erikson's 5th stage of psychosocial development, since he seems to have gained some understanding of the values and beliefs of his culture to which he felt he must show commitment and loyalty, thus he appears to have been successful in producing the ego strength of 'fidelity' whereby the need is felt to be 'true to ourselves'. Indeed, Erikson suggests that the achievement of a sense of self-identity can carry people through difficult times in their lives and provide them with a "...feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of knowing where one is going and an inner

assurance of anticipated recognition from those who count..." (Gross p.633)

It might also be suggested that even at the young age of 14, Sitting Bull seems to be motivated to address himself to the 4th level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs – self esteem, since he appears to be seeking a high level of self-respect and also respect from others which, when satisfied, leads as Maslow suggests to "...feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy, of being useful and necessary in the world..." (Maslow, 1970, p.45 – quoted in Sugarman, p.31).

Having achieved a sense of adult identity, Erikson suggests that the developmental task of early adulthood is to achieve the ego strength of 'love' achieved through the establishment of 'intimacy' – the adaptive outcome of his 6th psychosocial stage. The maladaptive outcome of this stage is 'isolation', although it should be stressed here that Erikson does not see these adaptive/maladaptive personality outcomes as either/or alternatives, suggesting instead that every personality represents a mixture of both with healthy development involving the adaptive outweighing the maladaptive.

With regard to Sitting Bull's exploits in early adulthood, it should be recognised that Sioux mores exalted female chastity – a point seemingly observed by General Sully in his official statement that "...the females of the wild bands of Sioux, called the Teton Sioux, set an example of virtue worthy of being copied by any civilized nation..." (Vestal p.24).

Nevertheless these mores also encouraged "...youths glorying in their manhood to work every wile and stratagem to violate female chastity..." (Utley p.20), so although Sitting Bull's sexual life is likely to have been active, it is also undocumented with Utley providing the only reference in the two biographies when he suggests that as Sitting Bull matured as a warrior he "...acquired the robust sexual appetites characteristic of his class..." (Utley p.20).

However, by the age of 20, Sitting Bull does appear to have developed the ego strength of 'love' achieved through the establishment of 'intimacy', for although much of his early marital history seems uncertain and confused, Utley found that Sitting Bull's first marriage was to a woman called Light Hair in 1851. The marriage lasted for 6 years and ended only as a result

of Light Hair's death while giving birth to his first son whom unfortunately died of disease at the age of 4 in 1861. Sitting Bull eventually fathered another 7 children which included a son born in 1887 and a daughter born in 1888, when he was aged 56 and 57 respectively and the love he showed for all members of his family is well documented throughout both biographies.

Nevertheless, the death of both his first wife and child within 4 years of each other must certainly have presented Sitting Bull with possibly his first 'crisis' of early adulthood. Although we must acknowledge that he lived in a warrior culture where undoubtedly death was commonplace; it should still be recognised that death of a spouse and death of a close family member are ranked numbers 1 and 5 respectively in the table of 'life events ordered for stressfulness' (Holmes & Rahe, 1967 quoted in Sugarman p.140).

Sitting Bull was in fact married a further 8 times suggesting that he had reached the 3rd phase of Engel's (1962) grief-work – 'resolution', whereby he was able to view the situation realistically, fully accept what had happened and thus start coping without the deceased. However, it is also possible to argue that, from a psychological perspective, the other 8 marriages may hold little significance particularly if we bear in mind that not only was polygamy acceptable but divorce was also easy in traditional Native American culture. Indeed if a marriage was not working then the husband just sent the wife back to her family and found himself, or sometimes even 'stole' another wife!

The death of Sitting Bull's son, however, appears to have activated 2 defence mechanisms – namely denial and projection. It seems reasonable to suggest that as a form of denial, he "...adopted his nephew, One Bull, a lad of the same age..." (Utley p.23). He appears to have 'projected' the love he had felt for his own son onto One Bull and indeed according to Utley "...reared One Bull as if he were his own son..." (ibid. p.23). Perhaps a testimonial to the love showered on him by Sitting Bull was the willingness of One Bull to co-operate with Vestal's biography, acknowledged by Utley for "...rescuing Sitting Bull's memory from the ignominy that tainted it for a generation after his death..." (Utley p.xii)

At the same time as Sitting Bull adopted White Bull as his son, he also 'adopted' (as a brother) a 13 year old Hohe boy who had been taken captive during a raiding party on the Crows. Although Utley suggests that this compassion shown to an enemy may have been influenced by the fact that Sitting Bull had no brother of his own and also by the fact that his son had just died; I would suggest here that Sitting Bull may, by the age of 30 (1861) have begun developing the ego strength of 'care' – the adaptive outcome of Erikson's 7th stage of psychosocial development (generativity vs. stagnation), since Erikson himself defines generativity as "...primarily the interest in establishing and guiding the next generation..." (Erikson, 1980 p.103, quoted in Sugarman p.90). Certainly Sitting Bull seems to have had a mentoring role to the Hohe boy who remained devoted to him to the point where he fired the 1st shot at Sitting Bull's captor and even died beside his mentor.

Although 1857 was a year of personal 'crisis' following the death of his wife, it was also the year in which Sitting Bull was appointed a war chief of the Hunkpapa tribe in recognition of his achievements in inter-tribal warfare. Ten years later, at age 36, he was 'promoted' to head chief of the entire Teton Sioux nation and "...to him more than any other falls the distinction of holding together the coalition of tribes that stood firm against the United States for 7 years..." (Utley p.88).

It may be that the 'whites' recognised this influence that Sitting Bull seemed to exert over his people and were so fearful of another defeat like the one experienced at Little Big Horn (1876) that they spent the whole autumn of the same year hunting him down! However, it was not the strong arm of the military which caused Sitting Bull to surrender in 1881 (age 50), but rather his concern that his people were starving and homeless which could surely be seen as an indication of altruistic behaviour, particularly when we consider that his motivation was not personal reward but more a desire to improve the welfare of others. Further evidence of altruistic behaviour would appear to have been demonstrated during his tour with 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show' at the age of 54 (1885), when all the money he earned "...went into the pockets of small, ragged boys...white man knows how to make everything, but he does not know how to distribute it..." (Vestal p.250).

According to Kohlberg's 6th stage of moral development one of the ethical principles we arrive at through individual reflection is the respect for the dignity of human beings as individuals so perhaps Sitting Bull could be seen as attaining this highest level of moral reasoning, especially if we consider that he was able to form the opinion that "...white men would not do much for the Indians when they let their own flesh and blood go hungry..." (Vestal p.251).

A further demonstration of the tenacity he showed as a child and also of his apparent generativity occurred in 1887 (age 56). That particular year saw the government trying to pass the Dawes Act which the 'whites' saw as the key to unlocking "surplus" Sioux lands, but Sitting Bull tenaciously "...denied the existence of any such thing as surplus land..." (Utley p.269), adding that the Sioux (now known as Lakota) would "...need all they now owned and more to provide for their children and grandchildren..." (Utley p.269). Nevertheless the Dawes Act was implemented which is often seen as further proof of the statement made by another notable Native American chief – namely Red Cloud of the Oglala Sioux when he said "...They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land and they took it..." (Brown, p.275).

The final 'crisis' of Sitting Bull's life, however, took place in March 1890 when a Paiute holy man convinced many Indians that by following his teachings and by dancing the "Ghost Dance" then a "...great millennial cataclysm would bury all white people..." (Utley p.284). It seems impossible to ascertain whether or not Sitting Bull was a true believer for although he neither directed the dances nor ever danced himself, he did encourage his people to dance, and refused all requests to withdraw this encouragement.

Because Sitting Bull's spirit was noted for being none submissive in the past, it was upon him that the authorities focused their growing suspicion and alarm that the dancing would lead to further uprisings, and they consequently ordered his arrest in December, 1890.

In the struggle that ensued when the Standing Rock Indian Police went to arrest him, Sitting Bull was killed by Sergeant Red Tomahawk, a mixed

blood Yanktoni-Hunkpapa, thereby fulfilling the vision he had received 7 years earlier (age 52) that "...Lakota's will kill you..." (Utley p.290). In conclusion, I would suggest that to many people, the name of Sitting Bull evokes images of all the appealing characteristics that are usually assigned to the Plains Indians and which are portrayed in such films as "Dances With Wolves", but from a personal point of view, I would be more inclined to agree with Utley when he states that Sitting Bull was "...a real Indian, and a real person, completely faithful to his culture. He earned greatness as a Hunkpapa patriot, steadfastly true to the values and principles and institutions that guided his tribe..." (Utley p.314).

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