New York Times Higher Education Supplement, August 1, 2004

Rituals and Traditions; It Takes a Tribe

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WHEN the budding pundit Walter Lippmann coined the term "stereotype" back in 1922, he offered several examples from the America of his time: "Agitator." "Intellectual." "South European." "From the Back Bay." You know, he told the reader, when a glimpse and a word or two create a full mental picture of a whole group of people. As in "plutocrat." Or "foreigner." Or "Harvard man."

Harvard man? We know, thanks to Lippmann, that stereotypes are part of serious problems like racism, prejudice and injustice. What is Lippmann's alma mater doing on such a list? (He even added: "How different from the statement, 'He is a Yale man.'")

Spend time on a campus in coming weeks, though, and you'll see what he meant.

At colleges across the country, from Ivy League to less exclusive state schools, students who are mispronouncing the library's name this month will soon feel truly and deeply a part of their college. They'll be singing their school songs and cherishing the traditions (just as soon as they learn what they are). They'll talk the way "we" do. (Going to Texas A&M? Then greet people with a cheerful "howdy.") They'll learn contempt for that rival university -- Oklahoma to their Texas, Sacramento State to their U.C. Davis, Annapolis to their West Point.

They may come to believe, too, that an essential trait separates them from the rest of humanity -- the same sort of feeling most Americans have about races, ethnic groups and religions. As the writer Christopher Buckley said recently in his college's alumni magazine: "When I run into a Yale man I somehow feel that I am with a kindred spirit. A part of that kindred-ness comes from his gentility and his not being all jumped up about it. It's a certain sweetness of character."

All this sentiment comes on fast (a study last year at Ivy League campuses found freshmen even more gung-ho than older students). Yet college loyalty, encouraged by alumni relations offices, can last a lifetime -- as enduring as the Princeton tiger tattooed on the buttock of former Secretary of State George P. Shultz, or the Yale sweater sported by evil Mr. Burns on "The Simpsons," a number of whose writers went to Harvard.

New identities are forged within the university as well, in elite groups like Skull and Bones at Yale or the Corps of Cadets at Texas A&M or Michigamua at the University of Michigan; in sororities and fraternities; even in particular majors and particular labs. Students don't just attend a college; they join its tribes.

"What endlessly impresses me is people losing sight of how arbitrary it is," says Robert M. Sapolsky, a Stanford biologist who specializes in the links between social life and stress. "Students understand how readily they could have wound up at another school or wound up in another lab." Yet every year, he adds, "they fall for it." For most, what Professor Sapolsky calls that "nutty but palpable" onset of college tribalism is just a part of campus life. For social scientists, it's an object of research, offering clues to a fundamental and puzzling aspect of human nature: People need to belong, to feel a part of "us." Yet a sense of "us" brings with it a sense of "them."

Human beings will give a lot, including their lives, for a group they feel part of -- for "us," as in "our nation" or "our religion." They will also harm those labeled "them," including taking their lives. Far as genocide and persecution seem from fraternity hazings and Cal versus Stanford, college tribes may shed light on the way the mind works with those other sorts of groups, the ones that shape and misshape the world, like nation, race, creed, caste or culture.

After all, a college campus is full of people inventing a sense of "us" and a sense of "them." As one junior at the University of California, Los Angeles, told her school paper before a game against the University of Southern California: "School spirit is important because it gives us a sense of belonging and being a part of something bigger. Besides," she said, "U.S.C. sucks in every way."

In an e-mail interview, Professor Sapolsky writes that "Stanford students (and faculty) do tons of this, at every possible hierarchical level." For instance, he says, they see Stanford versus Harvard, and Stanford versus the University of California at Berkeley. "Then, within Stanford, all the science wonks doing tribal stuff to differentiate themselves from the fuzzies -- the humanities/social science types. Then within the sciences, the life science people versus the chemistry/physics/math geeks." Within the life sciences, he adds, the two tribes are "bio majors and majors in what is called 'human biology' -- former deprecated as being robotic pre-meds, incapable of thinking, just spitting out of factoids; latter as fuzzies masquerading as scientists."

Recent research on students suggests these changes in perception aren't trivial. A few years ago, a team of social psychologists asked students at the University of California at Santa Barbara to rank various collections of people in terms of how well they "qualify as a group." In their answers, "students at a university" ranked above "citizens of a nation." "Members of a campus committee" and "members of a university social club" ranked higher than "members of a union" or "members of a political party," romantic couples or office colleagues working together on a project. For that matter, "students at a university" and "members of a campus committee" ranked well above blacks and Jews in the students' estimation of what qualifies as a group.

Much of this thinking, researchers have found, is subconscious. We may think we care about our college ties for good and sensible reasons -- wonderful classes! dorm-room heart-to-hearts! job connections! -- when the deeper causes are influences we didn't notice.

Some 20 years ago, researchers asked students at Rutgers to describe themselves using only words from a set of cards prepared in advance. Some cards contained words associated with Rutgers, like "scarlet," the school color, and "knight," the name of its athletic teams. Others, like "orange," were associated with archrival Princeton. Some students took the test in a room decorated with a Rutgers pennant; others took it under a Princeton flag. A third group saw only a New York Yankees banner.

Students who saw a Princeton or Rutgers emblem were more likely to use Rutgers-related words to describe themselves. They also mentioned

that they were students at Rutgers earlier than those who saw only the neutral flag. They didn't consciously decide to stand up for Rutgers. Outside their conscious minds, though, that identity was in place, ready to be released by symbols of the tribe.

More recently, three social psychologists at Harvard looked at another example of subconscious tribal beliefs. Mahzarin R. Banaji, who led the study, argues that people in similar, equivalent groups will place those groups into a hierarchy, from best to worst, even when there is no rational basis for ranking them. The psychologists tested Yale sophomores, juniors and seniors, who live and eat together in "residential colleges." Students know that these colleges are effectively all alike and that people are assigned to them at random. Still, the team found, Yalies did indeed rank them from best to worst. (In the interests of peace and comity, the colleges were kept anonymous.) Moreover, students assigned to the less prestigious units were less enthusiastic about their homes than those from the ones with a better reputation.

What this suggests, Professor Banaji says, is that taking one's place in a tribe, and accepting the tribe's place in a larger society, are mental acts that happen regardless of the group's purpose or meaning. Once people see that they've been divided into groups, they'll act accordingly, even if they know that the divisions are as meaningless as, oh, the University of Arizona versus Arizona State. "We know that human beings identify with social groups, sometimes sufficiently to kill or die on their behalf," she says. "What is not as well known is that such identity between self and group can form rapidly, often following a psychological route that is relatively subconscious. That is, like automata, we identify with the groups in which we are accidentally placed."

Not all researchers agree that people care about so-called nonsense groups with the same passion they give to religion, politics or morals. Another theory holds that the subconscious mind can distinguish which groups matter and how much. One example comes from a much-cited experiment, performed, naturally, on college students.

In 1959, the social psychologists Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills asked undergraduate women to join a discussion group after a short initiation. For one set of participants the initiation required reciting a few mild sexual words. The other group had to say a list of much saltier words about sex,

which embarrassed them no end (remember, this was 1959). The discussion group was dull as dishwater, but the women who suffered to join rated it as much more valuable than those who had a mild initiation (and higher than a control group that didn't have to do anything).

A subconscious clue for perceiving a tribe as real and valuable, then, may be expending sweat, tears and embarrassment to get in. The political activist Tom Hayden recently recalled just such a rite at the University of Michigan, in an article on the left-wing Web site alternet.org. He was complaining about the lock that Skull and Bones has on November's election (President Bush and the Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry, are members).

"As a junior, I was tapped for the Druids," Mr. Hayden wrote about his own campus clan, "which involved a two-day ritual that included being stripped to my underpants, pelted with eggs, smeared with red dye and tied to a campus tree. These humiliations signified my rebirth from lowly student journalist to Big Man on Campus."

As for Professor Aronson, had he not wanted tight control over the experiment, he writes in his widely used textbook, "The Social Animal," he and Professor Mills could simply have studied an initiation outside the lab -- at a campus fraternity or sorority.

THAT kind of lumping together -- studying one group to explain another -- drives scholars in other fields to distraction. To them, a pep rally is different from a political rally. Historians, trained to see big generalizations as meaningless, are often aghast at the way psychologists' theories about groups ignore the difference between, say, today's two-gendered, multiethnic and meritocratic Harvard College and the one that gave Lippmann his degree in 1909. And anthropologists for generations have disdained psychology for ignoring cultural differences.

But one fact is clear, and college groups exemplify it well: While many creatures live in groups, humanity's are unlike anything else found in nature. Peter Richerson, a biologist at Sacramento State's rival, the University of California at Davis, likes to point out that his students, sitting quietly together on the first day of class, are an amazing exception to the general rules of animal behavior. Put chimpanzees or monkeys that don't know one another in a room, and they would be in hysterics. People

team up with strangers easily.

Professor Richerson and his longtime collaborator, Robert Boyd, an anthropologist at U.S.C.'s hated enemy, U.C.L.A., argue that we will sign up for membership in tribelike groups for the same reason birds sing: It feels right because we evolved to do it. "We want to live in tribes," Professor Richerson says. Humans are "looking to be told what group they belong to, and then once they do that, they want to know, 'What are the rules?'"

The tricky part, says Professor Sapolsky of Stanford, Cal-Berkeley's bitter rival, is that humans alone among animals can think about what a tribe is and who belongs. "Humans actually think about who is an 'us' and who is a 'them' rather than just knowing it," he says. "The second it becomes a cognitive process, it is immensely subject to manipulation."

And, of course, studying the phenomenon won't make you immune. "I'm true blue," says Professor Banaji, who taught at Yale from 1986 until 2002, when she joined the Harvard faculty. "I was physically unable to sit through a women's basketball game between Harvard and Yale on the Harvard side."