From Closed Ranks to Open Doors: 
Elaine and John Cummings’ Mental Health Education Experiment in 1950s Saskatchewan

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During late 1951 and early 1952, married couple, social biologist Elaine Cumming and psychiatrist John Cumming, led a mental health education experiment in Indian Head, Saskatchewan. The study, which was intended to inform strategies toward deinstitutionalization, sought to determine if attitudes regarding mental illness could be changed through commonly used educational practices. It was shaped by the shared interests of powerful philanthropic, charitable, psychiatric, academic and governmental bodies to create healthier citizens and a stronger democratic nation through expert knowledge. However, in addition to the disappointing findings indicating that attitudes remained unchanged, the town appeared to close ranks against the research team. Nonetheless, the Cummings’ later association with sociologists at Harvard University enabled them to interpret the results in a way that lent the study credibility and themselves legitimacy, thus opening the door to their careers as very successful researchers and policy-makers.

À la fin de 1951 et au début de 1952, le couple marié formé d’Elaine Cumming, biologiste sociale, et de John Cumming, psychiatre, dirigea une expérience d’éducation en santé mentale à Indian Head, en Saskatchewan. L’étude, qui avait pour but

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d’éclairer la formulation de stratégies de désinstitutionnalisation, cherchait à déterminer s’il était possible d’infléchir les attitudes envers la maladie mentale par des pratiques éducatives d’usage courant. Elle répondait à l’intérêt qu’avaient en commun de puissants organismes humanitaires, caritatifs, psychiatriques, universitaires et gouvernementaux de voir l’état de santé de la population s’améliorer et une nation plus démocratique s’édifier grâce à la connaissance d’experts. Or, non seulement les résultats, décevants, révélèrent-ils que les attitudes ne changeaient pas, mais la ville semblait resserrer les rangs contre l’équipe de recherche. Néanmoins, l’association ultérieure des Cumming avec des sociologues de l’Université Harvard leur permit d’interpréter les résultats de façon à conférer crédibilité à l’étude et légitimité à leurs humbles serviteurs, leur ouvrant la porte à une brillante carrière de chercheurs et de concepteurs de politiques.

“We have had too much of this sort of thing; we are not interested in it in this town anymore. The sooner you leave, the better.”1 These hostile words were spoken by the mayor of Indian Head, Saskatchewan, in the spring of 1952. The “thing” to which he referred was an experiment designed to change the community’s negative attitudes toward mental illness. The mayor’s tirade was directed at a member of the research team led by married couple psychiatrist John Cumming and social biologist Elaine Cumming. According to the pair, this exchange, which occurred near the end of the nine-month long project, marked the point at which Indian Head closed ranks against the study and against them. As if this rejection was not discouraging enough, the research findings showed that attitudes about mental illness did not change. The experiment, it seemed, had been a complete failure. Coming early in their research careers, this defeat had the potential to mar the Cummings’ reputation and ruin their future prospects. In fact, the Indian Head study proved to be their making as respected, prolific, and powerful researchers in the field of social psychiatry.

Intended as a contribution to the social history of psychiatry in Saskatchewan, this article examines how the Cummings turned the failure of the Indian Head study into personal successes. Their eventual triumph was aided substantially by the Cummings’ relationships with important philanthropic, academic, charitable, psychiatric, and governmental bodies: the Commonwealth Fund, a philanthropic organization that supported them financially and emotionally; the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University, which provided an intellectual community wherein they were able to salvage the research by interpreting the outcome in a way that lent it credibility and themselves legitimacy; and the practical and political backing of both the Saskatchewan Division of

1 Elaine Cumming and John Cumming, Closed Ranks: An Experiment in Mental Health Education (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 44.
the Canadian Mental Health Association charity and the Psychiatric Services Branch of the Saskatchewan Government. These bodies were united by a shared interest in solving social problems through the application of scientific principles to the engineering of society. An examination of the Cummings’ Indian Head project thus furthers our understanding of the broader coalitions and alliances that formed throughout and between Canada and the United States during the mid-twentieth century with the agenda to create healthier citizens and, ultimately, stronger democratic nations.

Elaine Cumming was born in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1915. While still an infant, she moved to England by boat, cradled in the drawer of a steamer trunk. Soon afterward, however, she traveled back across the Atlantic to the prairie city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, after her mother wed barrister Revis Carroll in 1919. Elaine herself married Fred MacNeil in 1939 and the newlyweds moved to Vancouver. Soon after settling into their new home, their son Ian was born in 1940. Despite parenthood, it was not long before the couple divorced and Elaine returned to Saskatchewan with their young boy. While on a train journey between Saskatoon and the provincial capital of Regina, Elaine met John Hamilton Cumming.

John was born in 1917 in the town of Watrous, Saskatchewan, located 110 kilometres south-east of Saskatoon and 180 kilometres north of Regina. He spent approximately the first eight years of his life in this railway settlement but his late childhood and adolescence was an itinerant one, his family moving from one small Saskatchewan town to another, as his father chased “a long series of chimerical entrepreneurial ventures.” John graduated from high-school with a University of Saskatchewan scholarship, and enrolled in Regina College, a junior college of the University. Between 1932 and 1935 he studied physics and math to degree standards but deferred further education to work in a Regina wholesale grocery firm, first as a billing clerk and then later as a buyer and writer of advertising copy. Like many men in 1940, John supported the war effort by joining the Royal Canadian Air Force, but unlike most others, he went on to command a training squadron.
Returning to Saskatchewan following his deployment to England, John married Elaine on New Year’s Eve, 1942. Their son David was born in December 1943. Two years later, John entered the University of Saskatchewan to study pre-med and Elaine undertook her own studies in biology, receiving her BA and MA in 1948 and 1949 respectively. Although her thesis focused on the genetics of wheat, Elaine attempted to gain as much experience as possible in human genetics and “population problems,” taking seminars in “social and human biology” where available. Since there was no complete medical school in Saskatoon until 1956, John completed his degree at the University of Toronto where Elaine joined him to take classes toward her MA degree and to teach biology in the lab. Some of the men she encountered there told Elaine that they did not approve of working mothers but their sexism did not deter her. Upon John’s graduation, the couple returned to Saskatoon, where he completed a year’s internship at the City Hospital and began specializing in psychiatry in the recently established post-graduate resident training program. The four-year curriculum had been established in order to recruit psychiatrists to the province and to retain them there.

The pair were active members of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which had been voted into provincial power under the leadership of Tommy Douglas in 1944. The Cummings shared Premier Douglas’s vision of preventative medicine and community psychiatry in which the treatment of mental illness occurred in general hospitals and mental hygiene clinics rather than in large mental hospitals where conditions were poor and overcrowded. In 1950, the Cummings were offered government positions in the Psychiatric Service Branch (PSB)}
from where they would attempt to turn their mutual dream of community psychiatry into a reality.\textsuperscript{15}

The PSB, a division of the provincial Department of Public Health, held general responsibility for the care and treatment of the mentally ill. Dr Donald Griffith (“Griff”) McKerracher, who led the department, believed that it was crucial to cultivate psychiatric research, and he did this prodigiously, through the recruitment of researchers and the acquisition of funds to support them.\textsuperscript{16} McKerracher also developed a close working relationship with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA).\textsuperscript{17} In 1949, Saskatchewan was the first province to establish its own provincial division of the CMHA and McKerracher chaired its Scientific Planning Committee (SPC), which was responsible for establishing the organization’s philosophy and advising the Board of Directors “on matters of policy and action.”\textsuperscript{18}

At the first meeting of the SPC, held in December, 1950, discussion centered on changing negative public attitudes toward people with mental illness and getting “mental health principles accepted by individuals in the community.”\textsuperscript{19} Three sub-committees were established in order to develop research proposals: research, the training of professional people, and public education. The first of these sub-committees made six recommendations for research, including: “To measure common attitudes towards mental hospital patients; then through education to attempt to change destructive attitudes; then to evaluate the effectiveness of the educational program.” This suggestion was extended to include attitudes toward “the whole problem of mental health and mental illness.”\textsuperscript{20} After the sub-committees reconvened to discuss the various proposals, they agreed to give priority to this idea because it “would give us a better idea of what the public thought about mental health problems, which aspects of mental health were important to them...it would provide us with first hand information regarding existing mental health conditions


\textsuperscript{17} For more detail about the relationship between the PSB and the CMHA, see Gregory Marchildon, this volume. See also, Dickinson, \textit{The Two Psychiatries}, p. 138.

\textsuperscript{18} Saskatchewan Archives Board (hereafter SAB), Scientific Planning Committee, Mrs. R. J. Davidson, 1950–1954, R1265, 1.A.6, Minutes of the First Meeting Scientific Planning Committee of the Saskatchewan Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association, December 28, 1950, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 3.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 5.
in communities” and “it would give us an opportunity to test different educational techniques and so learn which would be most effective for our purposes.”

The Provincial Government and the CMHA regarded this research as an important means of implementing community psychiatry in the province. A key step toward the establishment of this new approach to the care of individuals with mental health problems was the release of patients from the provincial mental hospitals — the practice and policy of deinstitutionalization. It was expected that the study would provide strategies for cultivating public support for such an endeavour. In particular, it was hoped that an educational program would create tolerance and understanding toward discharged patients, leading to better reintegration as well as to fewer relapses and readmissions. Fostering community acceptance of individuals released from mental hospitals was thus seen as vital to deinstitutionalization.

In addition, Saskatchewan was a growing hive of mental health educational activity, but the impact of these efforts was unknown. For example, federal funds were provided to the Saskatchewan Division of the CMHA in 1950 for an educational director to carry out a public education program in mental hygiene across the province. This grant enabled the organization to build upon existing provincial and national activities promoting the principles of good mental hygiene. Underpinning these principles was the general idea, promoted especially by American psychiatrist Adolf Meyer, that childhood experiences profoundly shape later life and therefore a happy, wholesome and sociable upbringing is key to a mentally healthy adulthood. Parents and teachers were thus encouraged to adopt non-authoritarian democratic childrearing and pedagogical practices in which children were given freedom to develop independently and confidently. It was believed that such methods, which ran counter to prevailing practices, would improve society and further embed a system of liberal democracy. Implicit in this message, however, was the notion that parents, especially mothers, were to blame for their children’s emotional disturbances.

Men and women were also encouraged to identify and fix their own

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21 Ibid., p. 7.
24 See, for example, the files contained in SAB, Public Education in Mental Hygiene, 1950–1951, R-999, XV.31.
25 See for example, Mona Gleason, Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling and the Family in Postwar Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Brian J. Low, NBF Kids (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2002), pp. 121–151; and Brian J. Low, “The Hand that Rocked the Cradle: A
emotional maladjustments and to seek expert help for more serious mental illnesses.

By 1950 the mental hygiene message was being transmitted into the homes of citizens across “every mass medium in Canada, including CBC Radio and the National Film Board of Canada,” (NFB) as well as popular magazines such as Chatelaine, Maclean’s and Parents’ Magazine.26 One of the most acclaimed radio series was sponsored by the CMHA.27 It was entitled “In Search of Ourselves” and first aired across the country in the spring of 1948 on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Dominion Network.28 Described as being “concerned with problems in child-parent relationships and human adjustment” it received numerous awards.29 Each program featured a half-hour dramatized case history and continued with an analysis of the character’s behaviour by psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists. Jack Griffin, who later became General Director of the CMHA, was a frequent commentator.30 A promotional leaflet gave the following rationale for the series: “Social scientists the world over believe that human nature can be changed. Many of them think, too, that human nature will have to be changed in a hurry if we are to survive in this atomic age. And where do we begin? With ourselves of course! And how do we begin? By understanding the reasons for our behaviour and attitudes. And with greater understanding of ourselves, perhaps we can help our children to grow up into happy and useful citizens.”31 Publicity leaflets and study guides were widely distributed and these encouraged audiences to listen in groups so that they could discuss the issues raised.32

The Mental Health Division of the National Department of Health and Welfare also used the media to convey mental hygiene principles to citizens. The four-part Mental Mechanisms film series — a joint effort with the NFB and the Allan Memorial Institute of Montreal — was seen to have such a strong impact that it shaped American
production of similar films. Produced between 1947 and 1950, the series was initially intended “for use in group psychotherapy to evoke identificatory and projective reactions, with their concomitant affects.” Each film focused on a particular problem, including “The Feeling of Rejection,” “The Feeling of Hostility,” “Overdependency,” and “Feelings of Depression.” An experimental showing of the first of these movies on the rural film circuit proved to be such a hit that it and subsequent films in the series were screened for lay audiences. The rural circuit was employed by the NFB as a means of reaching country viewers through traveling projectionists known as “field men” who would bring films, projectors and generators into town schools, halls and libraries for free screenings. These innovative methods were particularly important in Saskatchewan because of the great distance between towns and the fact that many communities were isolated.

Despite the novel way in which the NFB distributed their films, it was not known how many people actually viewed them because accurate records were not kept.

The Provincial Director of Health Education, Christian Smith, was concerned about the fourth title in the Mental Mechanisms series, “Feelings of Depression,” because of its abrupt ending, which could leave viewers “up in the air.” The film was due to be released across rural Saskatchewan in January 1951 and Smith felt that he first needed to learn about its potential impact on the general public. In order to discover this, an audience poll was taken following a showing of the film to students at the University of Saskatchewan, parents at the Regina airport, and interns at the Regina Grey Nuns hospital. Smith concluded that “in a year or so this picture will be accepted by everyone in the way the others have.” Despite Smith’s reassurance, the Provincial Government and the CMHA agreed that more scientific methods of assessing the impact of these various

35 NFB “Our History—Album, The 1940s”
media was necessary and that the SPC’s proposed community project was a means of achieving this.

In early 1951, the SPC submitted a request to Ottawa to undertake the community project. However, when it looked like federal funds would not be forthcoming, representatives from the Commonwealth Fund (CF) were approached while they were visiting Regina. Following agreement by the representatives to take the proposal to the next CF Board Meeting in New York, Clarence Hincks, founder and General Director of the CMHA, noted that for such interest to be shown, the project must be considered “as something outstanding” and he personally “felt it would be outstanding in that it would give clues as to how to eliminate the whole field of human ignorance.”

Although they still had no confirmation that the study would gain approval from the CF, plans were being made by the PSB for its implementation. McKerrarcher outlined these proposals at the Saskatchewan Division, CMHA Annual Board Meeting in May since “the Association must accept the responsibility of what is going to be done.” There was a general consensus that the project should not be carried out with “too much fanfare” or “there would soon be resistance to it among the citizens.” This concern would prove to be prophetic. At this stage, however, McKerracher was keen to move forward, and he had the Cummins lined up to lead the project, offering to send them to the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in Chicago where they could enhance their survey and interview techniques.

Elaine Cumming’s overall research responsibility in the PSB was to evaluate provincial psychiatric services in order to “discover whether the effect of any given service is that which it was designed to be,” while John’s duties included clinical obligations such as psychotherapy in the general hospital and outpatient clinics as well as the administration of a psychopathic ward.

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18 Grants, Subseries 1, Box 300, Folder 2871, “Saskatchewan Department of Public Health/University of Saskatchewan: Psychiatric Training and Field Experimentation in Mental Health (EHS) November 13, 1950 to June 13, 1955”, Letter from Elaine Cumming to Mildred Scoville, September 5, 1951, p. 1
psychiatry in the post-graduate resident training program during this
time. Elaine’s role in the proposed study was to be planner and
analyst, while John’s was co-planner and education director.

By mid-June, the CF had approved the “study of community attitudes
and responses toward mental health education”, and bestowed a sum of
$15,000. Founded in 1918 by the wife of Stephen Harkness, a partner
of John D. Rockefeller, Sr. in Standard Oil, the CF took a particular inter-
est in mental hygiene. While the receipt of money from a large American
philanthropic organization, an “archetypical capitalist institution,” may
seem counter to the CCF’s socialist ideology, Harley Dickinson argues
that Douglas found it both necessary and pragmatic to gain financial
backing from philanthropic organizations. In fact, the CCF
Government relied heavily on financial support from various American
philanthropic organizations, including the Rockefeller Foundation, for
the implementation of various aspects of its mental health program.

Such alliances were possible because of a shared commitment to
planned social change including the shaping of citizens through the scientific application of psychiatric theory and practice.

Once the funding had come through, John and Elaine arranged for
training by Shirley Star at NORC. Star had already begun a study
similar to the Cummings’ intended project and had pioneered an interview
schedule, using case histories, for measuring public attitudes toward
mental illness. The Cummings proposed to use this instrument for their
own project and the NORC team also helped the pair revise their ques-
tionnaire. As with the Saskatchewan study, Star’s NORC research was
financed by the CF. The Cummings were greeted “very warmly” by Star
and received “invaluable help” on the project while in the “Windy
City”. On their return from the United States in early August, the
Cummings formalized their research plans, including three principles
that would underpin the educational program: “Behavior is caused and

47 RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 3.2, Box 10, Folder 115, Memorandum, John Cumming,
Applicant for Advanced Medical Fellowship, May 9, 1952, p. 1.
48 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 8.
49 SAB, Scientific Planning Committee, 1951–1954, R1265, 1.A.6., Minutes of the Meeting of the
Executive Committee of the Saskatchewan Division, CMHA, June 28, 1951, p. 1.; RAC,
Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2871, Letter from John Cumming to
50 Richardson, Theresa, The Century of the Child: The Mental Hygiene Movement and Social Policy in
51 Dickinson, Harley, The Two Psychiatries, p. 75.
52 Ibid., p. 75.
53 Ibid., pp. 75–76.
55 RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2871, Letter from Elaine
is therefore understandable and subject to change”; “There is a continuum between normality and abnormality” and “There is a wider variety of normal behavior than is generally realized.” By following these tenets, it was hoped that people would be convinced to treat the ill in the same way they treat the well.56

Indian Head (given the pseudonym Blackfoot), located in “a long and fertile valley in the southeast corner of the Province” with a population of 1,500, was chosen as the town in which these assumptions would be tested. The community was selected because it was feasible to survey all of the adults and reasonable to assume that the educational program would reach the entire local population. It was also “settled and stable with a homogenous population” (described as English-speaking, 95% Anglo Saxon, and 5% Metis), “fairly representative of the whole southeastern section of the Province,” and close to the PSB headquarters in Regina.57 However, the town was “wealthier than the average community of its size.”58 Its relative affluence was aided by an Experimental Farm carrying out agricultural research, and a Forest Nursery Station supplying tree and shrub seedlings for sheltering farmsteads across the province.59 Indian Head was also regarded as the birthplace of the Farmer’s Movement, because The Territorial Grain Growers’ Association was formed there in 1902.60 Despite these radical roots, the Cummings described the settlement as largely conservative and “probably less ‘progressive’ ” than the rest of the province. Yet, this made the town even more appealing to them because it was felt that if they could change attitudes there, they could change them anywhere.61 Since John’s childhood and adolescence were spent “within 100 miles” of Indian Head and Elaine grew up in Saskatchewan they felt a “shared experience” and “tradition” with the community and its people.62

The Cummings decided to use a control group because the broader existing mental health education campaigns being undertaken across the

56 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 20.
57 Ibid., p. 16.
58 RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2871, Letter from John Cumming to Mildred Scoville, September 14, 1951, p. 2.
59 History of Indian Head and District, Inc., Indian Head: History of Indian Head and District (Regina: Brigdens Photo Graphics Ltd., 1984), pp. 42–54. The wheat Elaine used for her MA thesis came from the Experimental Farm, see Cumming, Methods of Producing Chromosome, p. 2.
61 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, pp. 16–17.
62 Ibid., pp. 25–26. Kay Parley, who lived in Indian Head from age ten to fifteen during the mid-1930s, found that some of the local youth teased her about the fact that her father was a patient in the Saskatchewan Hospital at Weyburn. Although she “really liked a lot of the kids” in Indian Head, she did not experience this stigma by association in Moffat or Regina, the other Saskatchewan communities she grew up in. Kay Parley, interview with the author, Saskatoon, March 30, 2010. For an account of her experiences in the Saskatchewan Hospital at Weyburn as both a patient and a nurse see Kay Parley, Lady with a Lantern (Regina: Benchmark Press, 2007).
province might themselves be responsible for changed attitudes.63 Moosomin (given the pseudonym Deerville) was chosen for this purpose because it was of a similar size and composition, and while situated in the same southeastern section of the province as Indian Head, it was far enough away not to be influenced by the experiment occurring there.64

Before embarking on the study, advice was given to the Cummings by the SPC’s education sub-committee to gain acceptance from the community by initially going in alone, becoming known in the community, “meeting various people who are important in the various town organizations and trying to win their good will and cooperation in a relatively informal way.”65 John took up this advice and first went to Indian Head on August 16th. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a half-holiday for the town and proved unproductive. He therefore returned on August 21st and began by approaching an old acquaintance who owned a local store. This friend provided John with the names of community leaders who were then contacted individually and told that the research team would like to learn what local citizens “thought about mental illness and the mentally ill” through a survey and interviews. John reported that the townspeople were friendly and polite but bemused as to why the team were interested in them and what their motivation was.66

Although John felt that gaining acceptance in the community was difficult, cooperation was assured from many people including the mayor, the town clerk, several club and organization executive officers and the proprietor of the local weekly newspaper. This latter association proved immensely helpful as the newspaper carried several articles supplied by the research team, advertised its educational activities and included supportive editorials.67 The first piece appeared on August 30th and described the purpose of the study as determining “community attitudes toward health problems.” The article went on with some detail about the Cummings, the Saskatchewan Division, CMHA and the CF. It concluded by asking if the community was “ready to accept the research workers as sincere, friendly people, interested in a scientific search for fact?”68

63 At the beginning of the study CBC radio began broadcasting “Mental Health Nights,” four series of weekly programs addressing issues around mental health and human relations, see SAB, Radio, Lectures, Films, R-999, XIV.7.a, Listening Service Division of Health Education, Bulletin No. 16, September 7, 1951, p. 1.
64 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 17.
66 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, pp. 22–23.
67 Ibid. See also, RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2871, Letter from John Cumming to Mildred Scoville, September 14, 1951, p. 2.
68 “$14,000 Research for Indian Head,” The Indian Head News, Thursday August 30, 1951, p. 1.
The following week another item appeared in the newspaper, informing readers that all adults would be asked to fill out a short questionnaire about their opinions on mental health problems and that some would also be asked to take part in an interview. The piece concluded with a quote from John indicating that he was “sure that Indian Head would fulfil its reputation for public spirited cooperation by giving him and his interviewers a little of its time during the coming week.” An editorial in the same edition of the paper, however, noted that the typical reaction to the project from the “man-on-the-street” was to ask, “What’s the matter — do they think we’re nuts?” The piece was intended to stem local concerns that the purpose of the research was to track down individuals with a mental illness.

John’s stated confidence in the residents of Indian Head nonetheless appeared to be well placed because approximately twenty members of the local Canadian Legion, the Home and School Club and Good Will, voluntarily distributed the two-page mimeographed questionnaires on the afternoon of September 10th and picked them up later in the evening. Furthermore, very few people refused to take a questionnaire and there seemed to be little opposition. Despite appearances, John later noted “either a passive hostility or else an extreme denial of responsibility” because a considerable number of questionnaires were returned blank with no explanations. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that due to an unusually late harvest caused by heavy rain, many of the farmers who spent their winters in town were still working in their fields. Nonetheless, an article in The Indian Head News on September 13th declared the survey a success and encouraged readers to participate in the interviews. Additionally, John was cited as offering the services of the CMHA to groups “interested in the very broad field of mental health and personal relationships,” noting that several had already accepted his invitation.

The researchers were left with 540 useable questionnaires, representing approximately sixty percent of the community’s adults. The interviews

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69 “Adults to Test,” The Indian Head News, September 6, 1951, p. 1.
70 “How’s the Old Reaction,” The Indian Head News, September 6, 1951, p. 2.
72 “Mental Health Questionnaire Survey Proves Successful Here,” The Indian Head News, September 13, 1951, p. 1. The questionnaire comprised one open-ended question and 25 items covering two key dimensions: “social distance” or “how close a relationship the respondent is prepared to tolerate with someone who is mentally ill” and “social responsibility” or “responsibility for causing illness as well as responsibility for assuming the social burden which the mentally ill person places on society.” See, Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 54.
73 RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2871, Letter from John Cumming to Mildred Scoville, September 14, 1951, p. 2.
74 Mental Health Questionnaire Survey Proves Successful Here,” The Indian Head News, September 13, 1951, p. 1.
75 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 53.
obtained a better response, reaching the target of one-hundred. Designed by Shirley Star, this aspect of the study asked participants for their opinions about the case histories of six fictional people with various mental illnesses and one boy with a delinquent past.76 A team of six social workers and clinical psychologists who conducted the interviews between September 10th and 16th enjoyed the experience, finding participants to be friendly and receptive.77

Over the next nine months,78 the Cummings delivered their educational campaign to determine whether attitudes toward mental illness could be improved through methods and materials commonly in use. Following earlier advice, they attempted to proceed slowly, not to oversell the program, and avoid hostility by letting local citizens move at their own pace.79 In fact, they appear to have quite quickly implemented an extensive and intensive program employing a variety of methods: newspaper articles and advertisements, the placement of pamphlets and booklets in the library, study groups, speaking engagements, debates, films (including ones from the Mental Mechanisms NFB series) and radio. As the pair noted, although similar educational activities had been carried out elsewhere, none were as far-reaching or as concentrated as in Indian Head.80

On September 20th, the Indian Head News ran an advertisement promoting a talk by Karl Menninger in Regina on the subject of “Mental Health”81 and on September 27th it contained an article describing a speech delivered by John earlier in the week to the Home and School Club titled “Revulsion Bad for Mental Patients”.82 A study group developed out of this last session and the Club itself proved to be the most supportive and enduring link made in the town. By early October another collection of local citizens formed the “YMI Club” — a “phonetic shortening of the question...‘Why am I like I am?’” — “to investigate

77 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, pp. 36, 41, 192; “Adults to Aid Test,” The Indian Head News, September 6, 1951, p. 1.
78 The Cummings state that the educational campaign lasted six months, but I am starting from the first newspaper article which was placed in the Indian Head News on August 30, 1951 until the final newspaper article appeared on May 29, 1952.
79 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 34.
80 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 50.
81 “The Canadian Mental Health Association presents Dr Karl Menninger,” The Indian Head News, September 20, 1951, p. 4. Menninger was in Regina teaching on the Resident Training Program. See, RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18 Grants, Subseries 1, Box 300 Folder 2872 “Saskatchewan Department of Public Health/University of Saskatchewan: Psychiatric Training and Field Experimentation in Mental Health (EHS) November 13, 1950 to June 13, 1955”, Letter from D.G. McKerracher to Mildred Scoville, September 27, 1951.
82 “Revulsion Bad for Mental Patients,” The Indian Head News, September 27, 1951, p. 1.
problems of personality development in both children and adults.”  

Despite these apparent successes, the Cummings were disappointed that Indian Head did not show greater interest in their educational efforts. In fact, the Civil Servants’ Association asked the team to help them plan a series of activities for their membership. However, following a screening of the NFB film, “Breakdown,” which dramatized the fictional “schizophrenic breakdown” of twenty-three year old Anne Morton, the organization voted against further mental health speakers and films. The Cummings had initially been somewhat hesitant about showing the film after an audience poll they had taken at its premiere indicated that the story left viewers “anxious and dismayed” largely because they felt there to be no indication as to the cause of Anne’s sudden and dramatic illness. Experience since, however, had shown them that follow-up discussions generally alleviated concerns. Unfortunately, such easing of anxiety did not prove to be the case with the Civil Servants Association.  

It is worth pointing out here, that in keeping with the mental hygiene message, the film clearly depicts Anne’s father as authoritarian and her mother as overanxious and compulsive. Moreover, the scenes of Anne’s unravelling are both harrowing and melodramatic — heightened by piercing sound effects emphasizing her inner turmoil and malevolent ghostly voices representing auditory hallucinations. Her “modern” and “effective” treatment in a “progressive” institution employing group therapy, insulin treatment and electroshock therapy is juxtaposed with the horrors of overcrowded “snake pit” mental hospitals still holding chronic patients indefinitely. In addition to feeling anxious about the film, the Civil Servants may have believed that it was patronizing and that it blamed them for the mental health problems of their children.  

During the fourth week of the program, rumours began to spread about the study: that it was a government conspiracy to build a new mental hospital in Indian Head and that it was a plot spearheaded by the Roman Catholic Church. The Cummings felt that although the first of these rumours was untrue it was understandable because the interviews and questionnaires designed to elicit attitudes toward people with mental illnesses and psychiatric institutions might have led townspeople to such a belief. Initially they interpreted the second rumour as an expression of citizens’ disbelief in the stated reasons as to why the study was being undertaken in their community. Since the local parish priest did not

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85 *Breakdown* (1951) Robert Anderson, director. See also, Nichtenhauser, Coleman and Ruhe, *Films in Psychiatry*, pp. 77–82.  
86 Cumming and Cumming, *Closed Ranks*, p. 37. The rumours may also have been an expression of the community’s fear of stigma by association if a hospital were to be built in the town. See Chris Dooley, this volume.
support the study because he regarded the CMHA to be anti-religious due to its acceptance of masturbation, the only connection to the Church was a Home and School Club executive member who was involved in some of the educational activities. Only later did the Cummings become aware of the “sharp Protestant-Catholic schism in the town.” Anti-Catholic sentiment was not unique to Indian Head — it was at one time rife across Saskatchewan, where Catholics comprised a sizeable minority. However, within Indian Head its presence was historically evident by a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan instituted in 1928, whose first principle was “Protestantism.” While this racist organization died out in the early thirties, the Orange Lodge and Ladies Orange Benevolent Association, ultra-Protestant organizations, remained very active in Indian Head, for example, establishing an orphanage for Protestant children. Unaware of the religious divide at the time or the level of anxiety the experiment was provoking, the Cummings moved forward with their educational efforts. By late December, four months into the experiment, not only did the Cummings note a continued disinterest in their program, but they also observed a pattern of withdrawal from the two study groups that were established.

Despite growing evidence that the community was resisting their efforts, the Cummings remained “optimistic about getting some real results from the experiment” and intensified their educational campaign in the new year. In mid-January a radio series in which children and adults from the community formed a panel to answer and discuss questions submitted by listeners began to air. “Junior Jury”, as it was titled, was broadcast for eight weeks on the local radio station and typically dealt with sibling and parent-child relationships. Sponsored by the Home and School Club, some of the programs were recorded in the homes of residents and a telephone check during one of the episodes mid-way through the series found that sixty percent of those listening to the radio were tuned into the Junior Jury. One Jury member, who was twelve years of age at the time, remembers that “it was a bit of an honour to take part” and “a lot of fun.” She still has the green crest emblazoned with the word “Junior Jury” given to all the children who participated. John highlighted key themes

87 Cumming and Cumming, “Mental Health Education,” p. 65.
89 History of Indian Head and District, Inc., Indian Head, p. 200.
90 Ibid., pp. 155–157, 200. In contrast to this racist history, the CBC television series “Little Mosque on the Prairie” about a Muslim community living in a small prairie town, has been filmed in Indian Head since 2007.
91 RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2871, Letter from John Cumming to Mildred Scoville, January 4, p. 2.
92 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 27.
93 Doreen Bennett, telephone interview with author, April 16, 2010.
raised in five of the episodes through a weekly column in *The Indian Head News* and wrote other pieces for the newspaper on comic books and adolescence. His commentaries typically promoted the mental hygiene message of democratic child-rearing principles.

Coinciding with the launch of the radio program, the Home and School Club's winter program commenced and included a series of talks sponsored by the research team: Lloyd Coates, director of the psychological section of the Regina Health Department speaking on “the influence of the school on the emotional development of your child”; “Griff” McKerracher discussing “The Part the Parent Can Play in Improving a Child’s Life”; and M. Martin, acting director of the psychiatric wing of the Regina Hospital, talking about “How Well Adjusted Children See Their Parents.” Additionally, a speaker brought in by the team for the local teachers’ convention spoke on “the relationship of different methods of teaching to personality development.”

In late January the Indian Head’s branch of the Agricultural Institute hosted a debate entitled “Is Social Research Comparable to Agricultural Research?” Panel members included Elaine Cumming, psychiatrist Abram Hoffer, and Humphry Osmond, clinical director of the Saskatchewan Hospital, Weyburn. The debate provoked considerable hostility among the agricultural scientists attending. Although they were uncertain as to why this was the case, the Cummings initially believed that it may have been because the educational team referred to themselves as scientists and the agriculturalists did not believe that human beings could be studied scientifically. Later, however, they postulated that the scientists perceived that the intention of the debate was to lend the experiment scientific legitimacy. As such, in addition to resenting what they considered to be a misrepresentation of science, the agricultural scientists may have also been concerned about being tainted or stigmatized by association.

Perhaps it was the antagonism John sensed the debate would provoke that led him to admit one week prior to the event, “I doubt whether we could have chosen a more difficult town to enter if we had tried and it

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95 John Cumming, “Condemn Comics?”, *The Indian Head News*, February 28, 1952, p. 3; John Cumming, “They’re Just Young Adults”, *The Indian Head News*, March 20, 1952, p. 3.
97 Cumming and Cumming, *Closed Ranks*, p. 28.
100 Ibid., p. 41.
has been discouraging at times.” Yet, he believed that they had “passed the place where we were viewed with universal suspicion.”\textsuperscript{101} In early February, things were indeed looking up as discussion groups with older high-school students were organized and a talk on provincial psychiatric services emphasizing the poor state of overcrowded mental hospitals was delivered to ninety members of the Board of Trade.\textsuperscript{102} The creation of another study group, for “young married couples who wished instruction in the emotional aspects of the care of infants and children” soon followed.\textsuperscript{103}

In March, the Cummings and the Home and School Club jointly ran a three-day film festival entitled “Small Fry.” The general theme was “child development and special problems of children”\textsuperscript{104} and included such NFB titles as: “Setting Emotional Needs in Childhood”, “The Feelings of Hostility” and “Angry Boy.”\textsuperscript{105} In total, 260 people attended the festival and sixty remained after the screenings to take part in small group discussions led by John.\textsuperscript{106} A final film venture was another joint endeavour — a fundraiser for the local Citizen’s Band. Tickets were sold door-to-door and two commercial movies were screened at the Gary Theatre: an English comedy and “The Quiet One,” a film about a boy from Harlem “who is almost destroyed by his family life and social environment.” The turn out of less than 100, however, was very disappointing.\textsuperscript{107}

Despite this last setback, by the end of March John reported that, “the project must be going fairly well” since his “periods of reactive depression are shorter and less frequent than earlier.”\textsuperscript{108} Indeed, the most successful educational feature of the study occurred the following month, when arrangements were made for members of the local Canadian Legion to visit the Saskatchewan Hospital, Weyburn, where they were told about the “problem of the chronic ward by the superintendent and following they visited the patients.” The Legion adopted the “ward as a continuing project” and sent “cigarettes, candies, and other comforts.”\textsuperscript{109}

Toward the end of the study, the Cummings believed, despite their repeated renewals of optimism, that something was very wrong. In one

\begin{footnotes}
\item[101] RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2871, Letter from John Cumming to Mildred Scoville, January 24, 1952, pp. 1–2.
\item[103] Ibid., p. 31.
\item[104] “Film Festival for Special Week,” \textit{The Indian Head News}, February 21, 1952, p. 4.
\item[105] “Small Fry,” \textit{The Indian Head News}, February 28, 1952, p. 5.
\item[107] “Audience Quiet Too,” \textit{The Indian Head News}, May 1, 1952, p. 1.
\item[108] RAC, Commonwealth Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2871, John Cumming to Mildred Scoville, March 27, 1952, p. 2.
\item[109] Cumming and Cumming, \textit{Closed Ranks}, p. 32.
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of the most dramatic incidents, a local Home and School Club member who intelligently and diligently helped the Cummings organize events in the town as a part-time paid worker suddenly warned them to stop the educational activities as they had “run their course.” Enthusiastic and cooperative from the outset of the study, the woman grew increasingly nervous about the Cummings’ presence in the community and their refusal to end the program. Eventually, she became so distressed that she was admitted to a psychiatric unit for the treatment of acute anxiety.\(^\text{110}\) John and Elaine later interpreted the woman’s reaction as a response to the isolation and anger she was experiencing from friends and acquaintances because of her continued association with the experiment.\(^\text{111}\) In addition, it was determined that “part of the educational content of the educational program, especially as it pertained to childhood experience, seems to have activated some of her specific problems.”\(^\text{112}\) A local citizen let the team know that she was “very angry with them” for letting her friend “manipulate them into admitting her into the Psychiatric hospital.”\(^\text{113}\)

When the interviewers returned for the post-study part of the research in May, they found a hostile and suspicious reception. They also experienced a drop in the number of people willing to be interviewed and the amount of questionnaires returned. A man who was well known in the community, but who had not taken part in the study, told one of the interviewers, “You’ve sure got this town by its ear.”\(^\text{114}\) However, things came to a head when the mayor told another researcher to leave town. At this point, the Cummings felt that the town had closed ranks against them.\(^\text{115}\)

Unfortunately, analysis of the questionnaires and interviews provided no comfort, showing “no appreciable change in beliefs about mental illness or attitudes toward the mentally ill.”\(^\text{116}\) The results were not substantially different than those obtained from the control population in Moosomin — the average person “was neither willing to get closer to a

111 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, pp. 45–46.
113 Ibid., p. 70.
114 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 40. The Cummings’ frustration with the community response appears to have spilled into an advertisement they took out in the local newspaper. Ostensibly meant to thank readers, it included the following comment: “Our gratitude to all those who by their co-operation assisted us in a difficult job of social research, and especially to those who gave our staff a cordial welcome, even when they did not fully understand the reason for asking ‘all those questions’. We hope that you will regard this time as being spent in service to others less fortunate than ourselves.” “Thanks,” The Indian Head News, May 29, 1952, p. 4.
115 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 44.
116 Cumming and Cumming, “Mental Health Education,” p. 68.
mentally ill person nor willing to take any more responsibility for the problem of mental illness than he had before the program.”

Yet, this was not to be the end of the Cummings’ research careers. Throughout the study they had been corresponding with Mildred Scoville, the CF’s representative with responsibility for the Cummings’ project. She provided the Cummings with encouragement and feedback and helped John to attain further financial support from the CF, thus enabling him to study for two years at the Harvard Department of Social Relations. Scoville reassured the Cummings that despite the unanticipated findings, their study was “worth doing,” noting that the anxiety displayed by the community was “itself ... an important finding.” She further let them know that she was “impressed” with their preliminary report and told her colleagues that she was “really impressed with their interests,” “the quality of their thinking” and found them to be “interesting and delightful people.”

There was no sociology department at the University of Saskatchewan at this time and John wanted to gain “a comprehensive background in the social sciences” in order to teach general social science in the university’s medical school and to assist with future research. The fact that Elaine was already accepted in the Department of Social Relations to undertake a PhD in sociology was no doubt another motive. Her reason for embarking on further graduate work was to expand her theoretical knowledge and gain “as wide a range of research and teaching techniques as possible” in order to fill a need for such expertise in Saskatchewan. The Indian Head study was to serve as the basis for her thesis. McKerracher had written a glowing recommendation to the CF for them both, highlighting that they were “very outstanding people” and stating how impressed he was with their work in Indian Head.

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117 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 87. The Cummings concluded that the more educated an individual was the more likely they were to tolerate someone with a mental illness (social distance); and that younger, more educated citizens living in medium to high rental areas who also valued community involvement were more likely to take responsibility for the problem of mental illness than older, less-well educated individuals who valued puritanical virtues. The only difference the experiment made was that more high and low scores on the responsibility scales were apparent for the most highly educated, although the average score remained unchanged.

118 See RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 3.2, Box 10, Folder 115.


121 Ibid., p. 5.

122 Cumming, “The Social Control of Mental Illness.”

123 RAC, Commonwealth Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2871, Excerpt for Fellowship Cumming & McKerracher, February 21, 1952, p. 2.
supported Elaine’s studies financially through a grant from the Department of National Health and Welfare.124

The Department of Social Relations was a good fit for the Cummings. Cross-disciplinary in nature, it brought together sociology, psychology, and anthropology and a key area of work was “the clinical study of the individual and the problems of mental health.”125 It is not possible to detail the Cummings’ time at Harvard here. What must be emphasized is the encouragement they received and the theoretical framework they developed which enabled them to engage with their Indian Head findings in a new way. More specifically, it is important to recognize that they were greatly influenced by Talcott Parsons’ theoretical approach which also characterized the Department of Social Relations. Simply stated, the model he adopted can be described as “structural functionalism.”126 This perspective assumes that any society is a structure comprised of interrelated parts which work together to keep the whole functioning.

By March 1953, structural functionalism, especially as adopted by Robert Merton, shaped a new understanding of the Indian Head results. Kaspar Naegele, a former student of Parsons and Research Associate in Mental Health at the Harvard School of Public Health, was particularly influential in the application of this theoretical perspective to the study. This same month, John wrote to Scoville that with Naegele’s help the material seemed much richer and that they were beginning to see that the prejudices toward mental illness uncovered by their research “served strong unrealized functions in the social sense for the lives of Indian Head,” and that “a lot of our material can be made to yield some answers to what these functions are.”127 In May, John was explicit about his new theoretical understanding, identifying that “the important thing which we have gained in our year at Harvard is simply in one sense a new viewpoint.”128 Soon afterward, he indicated that the ideas they had

124 The entire contents of the following file relates to the grant which supported Elaine: SAB, R999, XV:82.p, “Training in Social Relations.”
126 There are many different interpretations of Parsons and for purposes of brevity and the argument I wish to make here, I have simplified his work. For a fuller discussion of Parsons see, for example: John Holmwood, Founding Sociology? Talcott Parsons and the Idea of General Theory (London: Longman, 1996); Guy Rocher, Talcott Parsons and American Sociology (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1973); and The Talcott Parsons Reader, Bryan S. Turner, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), especially the Introduction, pp. 1–20.
unearthed would help to provide “the basis for a rational approach to ‘pre-
ventive psychiatry.’ ”

The Cummings’ fresh interpretation of the Indian Head study can be
summarized thus: the townspeople’s ideas about mental illness formed a
consistent pattern of denial, isolation and insulation. That is, they believed
that there was a sharp divide between mentally ill people and everyone
else. Therefore, when a person displayed odd behaviour, the community
tried to keep them in their ranks, the ranks of the sane, for as long as pos-
sible by denying that their conduct constituted mental illness. As such, the
community had a much narrower definition of mental illness than the
“experts.” However, if conduct became too dramatic, threatening and
unpredictable, the townspeople acted to protect themselves and their
rules of conduct by branding the apparently disturbed person “mentally
ill.” Once branded, a person was seen as completely different to the rest
of the community and in need of isolation in a mental hospital.

Townsfolk also insulated themselves from feeling guilty about someone
being institutionalized, by reasoning that it was really the best place for
the mentally ill because they were receiving the most appropriate care.
In short, this pattern of denial, isolation and insulation functioned to
protect the community of Indian Head from deviant behaviour and
guilt; thus ensuring its stability and solidarity.

The educational efforts, which stressed that the boundaries between
mental wellness and mental illness were vague and arbitrary, and which
further exposed the harsh realities of mental hospitals, threatened the com-
munity’s own solution to a perceived threat and ultimately to its functioning.
Congruent with the structural functionalist model, this explanation essen-
tially argued that component parts of the pattern adopted by Indian Head
toward mental illness — denial, isolation and insulation — worked together
to keep the community functioning as a whole. Given this need for a “solid-
ary of the sane” the Cummings concluded, it was not surprising that the town
of Indian Head closed ranks to protect itself against the researchers.

In addition to salvaging the Indian Head study through this interpretation,
the connections they made while at Harvard also helped them to promote it.
Early on in their studies, John met anthropologist Ben Paul from the School
of Public Health who requested that he and Elaine write a chapter for a book
he was editing titled *Case Studies of Public Reactions to Health Programs.*
The release of this book was the first time the Cummings’ published any part
of their study. Mildred Scoville not only supported this endeavour, but she

129 RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, 3.2, Box 10, Folder 115, Letter from John Cumming to
130 Cumming and Cumming, “Mental Health Education,” pp. 53–54; Cumming and Cumming, *Closed
Ranks*, p. 126.
131 See Cumming and Cumming, “Mental Health Education.”
also helped them to publish their own book, *Closed Ranks*, using Commonwealth funds.  

An outline of the book had initially gone to Harvard University Press for consideration and received hostile reader reports dismissing the Cummings’ functionalist theory, arguing instead that the project failed simply because the educational program was wrongly conceived. John acknowledged that the book would not have been printed if the CF had not exerted pressure or subsidized it.  

While the Cummings were establishing themselves professionally in the United States, there was increasing discontent about their study back home in Saskatchewan. Not only did it send a stark warning about the futility of mental health education, but it also implied that deinstitutionalization was unfeasible. The couple’s sociological analysis suggested that negative attitudes toward mental illness could be altered only if a functional equivalent was established or if the need for the function it served was somehow made redundant. They themselves proposed that the mentally ill might be placed in foster homes and/or that the most dangerous of them be kept in treatment units. Yet, while such strategies might be “functional” for the larger community, they are likely to be very harmful to individuals identified as mentally ill and thus really no solution at all.

Within the government there were individuals who believed that the Cummings’ themselves were responsible for the response they received from Indian Head, suggesting that their “strident support of mental health reform and their intolerance of local prejudices quickly alienated them from the communities in which they worked,” and that they were a “problem to be managed.” A commonly held view was “that it was hard to tease out what was the closing of the ranks against ideas as opposed to closing the ranks against them.” The Cummings seemed to provoke strong feelings in people; “You loved them or you really didn’t.” D’Arcy asks “whether the negative responses were a reaction to the educational program *per se*, to the way it was conducted, or even to behaviours and personalities of the change agents involved” and not “anything at all to do with its attitudes towards the mentally ill.”

132 See Cumming and Cumming, *Closed Ranks*.


134 Cumming and Cumming, *Closed Doors*, pp. 141–44.


137 *Ibid*.

The Cummings were aware of such criticisms because reviewers of the book manuscript raised similar questions. However, since the townsfolk expressed their hostility toward the interviewers and not directly to themselves, the pair were confident that their own attributes and manners were not to blame.\textsuperscript{139} Having been unable to locate anyone in Indian Head who remembered the Cummings, I cannot be certain how the residents perceived them. However, a Junior Jury member remembers the town being divided rather than closing ranks against the researchers completely: "I do remember some folks taking umbrage, others thought it was a great idea and of course they disagreed among themselves. They had their fans and those who were not their fans after awhile."\textsuperscript{140}

Interviews with the couple’s former colleagues demonstrate the powerful and complex personalities of the Cummings. What stands out most is that, apart from a shared perception that they were a very close and intellectually brilliant couple, people’s opinions about Elaine and John were often polarized. The same behaviours and traits could be interpreted and experienced differently by various individuals. For example, John was known not to be very talkative, and this was seen by some as illustrative of his quiet, thoughtful and reserved nature but by others as a sign of his snobbery. Elaine’s outgoing disposition was regarded either as sociable, humorous and forthright or as intimidating and even unkind. While some individuals felt that they were both very welcoming and giving of their time and knowledge, others experienced a barrier due in part to the couple’s higher social status.\textsuperscript{141}

Miriam Siegler and Humphry Osmond argued that the Cummings failed because their educational program was underpinned by a “useless model” comprising “six different models” making it impractical and reducing people’s confidence in them. These critics proposed that a straightforward “medical model” would have yielded a more positive response.\textsuperscript{142} The Cummings’ analysis could also be criticized on many of the same grounds as structural functionalist arguments. These include the point that because society’s parts are regarded as reinforcing it as a whole, it cannot adequately address change or conflict and therefore serves to

\textsuperscript{139} Cumming and Cumming, \textit{Closed Ranks}, pp. 106, 110, 151.
\textsuperscript{140} Scott Eichel, telephone interview with author, April 16, 2010.
justify the existing order. It is important to point out, however, that the Cummings were careful to emphasize that they did not regard their analysis to be a complete answer to their experience in Indian Head.

Whatever the reason for the Indian Head study’s results, it certainly cast a long shadow across the province. In the course of researching this project, I came across numerous people from different walks of life, who were not involved in the experiment, but nonetheless had heard about it. Mostly, they recalled being told that the Cummings were “run out of town.” For example, in 1974 when Carl D’Arcy was preparing for a re-survey in Indian Head, he was warned by the Head of Psychiatry within the University of Saskatchewan, who was worried about his physical well-being, that “the Cummings were almost lynched...” In fact, D’Arcy found the citizens of Indian Head to be “extremely helpful and cooperative” and that they did not remember the original study. The conduct of his own research elicited “nothing more than mild curiosity as to why a grown man would interview people about such a topic — after all, that was more like women’s work.” Joan Brockman, who was a co-researcher with D’Arcy, remembers two of the people she interviewed recalling that the Cummings “were more or less run out of town,” that John was regarded as “a ladies’ man and not liked by the men,” and “Elaine smoked and wore trousers,” which was apparently seen as unusual for a woman in Indian Head during the early 1950s.

These comments suggest that a certain degree of the negative response to the Cummings was due to their perceived breaches of gendered expectations. Saskatchewan writer Sharon Butala notes that for men to gain respect in rural communities, it was “essential to have a reputation for being a hard worker” and that hard work was synonymous with “manual work.” This notion of masculinity existed beyond rural Saskatchewan as social commentators across the country warned about the emasculating effects of white-collar office work during this time. As a psychiatrist, John did not fit with conventional notions of manhood. In a similar fashion, Elaine flouted feminine conventions through her clothing and by her smoking. Furthermore, she was in full-time employment during a period in which women were expected to “embrace full-time domesticity and motherhood” even if such notions

143 For a much fuller critique of structural functionalism see Patrick Baert and Filipe Carreira da Silva, Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), pp. 52–87.
144 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, pp. 111, 114.
146 Joan Brockman, personal correspondence with author, October 14, 2009.
did not fit the reality of the increasing numbers of women working outside the home. Nor, in fact, did ideal beliefs about womanhood fit with the reality of the rural prairies where many women not only engaged in domestic work but also in farm work and paid work. Elaine’s status as a divorcée was also unusual during the 1950s, although it is unlikely that the residents of Indian Head were aware of this fact.

The Cummings, however familiar they thought they were with “[t]he style of life” in Indian Head because they “spent most of our lives close by,” were still outsiders. In describing her experience of feeling like an outsider after moving to rural Saskatchewan, Sharon Butala recounts the following story: “a woman, listing members of the community...remarked to me that she’d left out a certain family. ‘They didn’t move here till the forties,’ she said, ‘so I never think of them.’ She meant that even though the family had lived here for almost fifty years, in her estimation, they would never be truly local people.” This sentiment was, in fact, expressed to the Cummings by a local: “You can’t get anywhere in this town unless you came in with the old pioneers.” John furthermore believed that the general attitude of Indian Head was “epitomized” in a comment made to him “about a suggestion which had been put forth for a revision in the town’s policy regarding holidays. The person remarked; ‘Who does he think he is, he’s only lived in this town for four years!’” The Cummings were aware that most of the residents had “lived in the town for many years; many were born there,” and that “[M]any of the families who pioneered the district still lived in [Indian Head].”

Not only did the Cummings assume a very visible presence in a town to which they had just arrived, but they also proceeded to give expert advice, underpinned by mental hygiene principles, very quickly and intensely. Their message implicitly blamed parents for their children’s emotional disturbances and explicitly claimed that they “knew better” than the locals about how to raise their children and maintain relationships with one another. As a former colleague of the Cummings suggested, “they were

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149 Ibid., p. 54.
153 Cumming and Cumming, Closed Ranks, p. 16.
154 RAC, Commonwealth Fund Archives, Series 18.1, Box 300, Folder 2872, Letter from John Cumming to Mildred Scoville, September 14, 1951, p. 2.
155 Cumming and Cumming, “Mental Health Education,” p. 45.
arrogant, they went into this area and thought they knew something about mental health and were expected to be treated as if they were missionaries. Playing God.”156 Another previous associate similarly remarked, “most of us have some flaws if you look closely enough. I’d say they had a kind of superiority that didn’t wear well in a small town in Saskatchewan.”157 In the community’s “sparse attendance at meetings,” “rapid turnover of discussion groups,” “neglect of printed materials,” as well as its closing of ranks, it may have been voting with its feet.158 As the researchers acknowledged, they “knew we were there, knew that we were trying to change their ideas, and refused stubbornly and actively to accept the change.”159

Some social historians influenced by Foucault and other similar theorists, adopt an analytical framework referred to as governmentality — “regulatory strategies and techniques operating from within many discourses, institutions, and practices that shape and guide the conduct of groups and individuals: the ‘conduct of conduct’. . .this idea. . .allows us to see regulation not simply as coercive or objectifying but as a process involving the ‘cultivation of subjectivity’.”160 Such an understanding can be applied to the mental health education campaign in that it was an attempt to change people’s attitudes and behaviour, to regulate them, using expert knowledge and technologies to help implement desired policies and practices.

The concept of governmentality, however, suggests that power does not always operate from the top-down but that it can also be deployed from the bottom-up, and that it is dispersed, diffused, fragmented and exercised by “ordinary” men and women. Of course many factors operate to constrain the methods and opportunities available to individuals such as the various social positions they occupy.161 Using this conception of power, it nonetheless can be argued that while the Cummings attempted to exercise power over the residents of Indian Head, the citizens themselves used their own power to disregard or oppose the Cummings and their messages, to return blank questionnaires and to close ranks. Veronica Strong-Boag found that in the 1930s rural prairie mothers, who were “subjected to a barrage of well-intentioned advice from child-care experts” adopted

156 Cyril Greenland, telephone interview with author, August 20, 2009.
158 Cumming and Cumming, “Mental Health Education,” p. 52.
159 Ibid., p. 55.
161 Sangster, Regulating Girls and Women, p. 10
similar strategies of resistance. The Indian Head experiment was rooted in a desire to gain knowledge about Saskatchewan citizens in order to test the efficacy of commonly employed educational methods and to inform strategies toward deinstitutionalization. The discipline of psychiatry converged with philanthropy, charity and the social sciences in an attempt to achieve this end. Each of these practices shared a common interest in solving social problems through the application of science and was buttressed by a government that sought and nurtured expert knowledge as a means of achieving extensive social reforms. This case is one example of wider efforts during the mid-twentieth century to build a healthier and stronger democratic nation by creating ideal citizens.

In many ways the Indian Head experiment was a failure. The negative results contributed to a serious delay in the implementation of plans for a comprehensive boarding-out program, a key aspect of community psychiatry. In an effort to lessen the visibility and therefore hostility toward discharged and paroled patients, they were instead dispersed throughout the province. Furthermore, the Indian Head study may also have led to the decline of mental health education campaigns because of a pessimism that such programs would make no difference, or worse, produce a negative response. In fact, Shirley Star’s research in the United States reached conclusions similar to the Cummings. However, because her study was never published, the Cummings’ “interpretation and conclusions, took on national and international significance.” John himself believed Closed Ranks likely had an impact: “ten years after this study, efforts to shift attitudes through educational programs had all but ceased...Our work, together with work that had been done previously and work that followed, may have had something to do with this change.”

On the other hand, the study opened many doors for the Cummings, who were able to use the various connections they made while carrying out the research, and later, while writing it up at Harvard, to establish and advance their own careers. The book, Closed Ranks, became recognized as a landmark study and remained in print for twenty-five years.

166 Ibid.
The Cummings continued to succeed with many widely and critically acclaimed future publications and they held powerful positions in New York State. Hugh Lafave, the Associate Commissioner for Manpower and Training with the State Department of Mental Hygiene, recruited them to the ranks of his unit. Lafave was from Saskatchewan himself and brought in several people who had at one time been involved in psychiatry in the province including Frederic (Fred) Grunberg and Anthony (Tony) Spellman. Collectively this group became known as “the Saskatchewan Mafia.” While working for the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene, John was Deputy Commissioner and Elaine directed the Albany Mental Health Research Unit. The Cummings eventually moved to British Columbia where Elaine went on to chair the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Victoria and John became the “architect” of the Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service where he encouraged deinstitutionalization and the construction of community care facilities. John passed away in 2002 and Elaine in 2003.

Research examining the effectiveness of mental health educational activities and attitudes toward mental illness did in fact continue in Saskatchewan, albeit on a much smaller scale than the Indian Head project. For example, the SPC commissioned a study to measure attitudes toward mental illness in Melville during August and September of 1952. It was concluded that this study “provided some clues but was limited in scope.” More positive results were found in a 1966 study titled “The Changes of Attitudes Toward Mental Illness Study,” conducted in Eastend and Regina, but this project did not have an educational component.

As Deborah Lupton argues, in liberal democracies there is an imperative to regulate citizens with their consent through an internalization of...
desired values and beliefs. Public health practices, including educational efforts and research, are one means used to achieve such an end. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the failure of a particular approach does not necessarily lead to its discontinuation but may even lead to its intensification.\footnote{172 For example, in his study of the CCF in northern Saskatchewan, David Quiring concludes that “Even when its efforts led to failure, the CCF did not question its basic hypothesis or goals, but blamed imperfect subjects and methods”, CCF Colonialism in Northern Saskatchewan: Battling Parish Priests, Bootleggers and Fur Sharks (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), p. xv.} Although the Cummings’ research may have delayed efforts to establish community psychiatry, it did not stop them. For example, between 1963 and 1966, there was a 72 percent reduction in the number of patients in Saskatchewan Hospital, Weyburn — the highest rate of de-institutionalization occurring in any such institution in the world.\footnote{173 Mills, “Lessons from the Periphery,” p. 185.} Furthermore, mental health education campaigns continue to this day in Saskatchewan and elsewhere.\footnote{174 For example, public education and awareness programs undertaken currently by the Saskatchewan Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association include: workshops, presentations, pamphlets, posters, websites, radio interviews, newspaper articles, displays, direct mail campaigns and the development of a mental health literacy toolkit. See Canadian Mental Health Association (Saskatchewan Division) Inc., Annual Report, 2009–2010.}

This paper has demonstrated that the Indian Head experiment came about because of shared interests held by specific philanthropic, academic, charitable, psychiatric and governmental bodies in shaping ideal citizens through expert knowledge. However, it has also shown that many different individual and social factors, and their interaction, can impede or promote attitudinal and broader change. Even with the support of numerous influential groups, the experiment produced neither a totalizing or inconsequential outcome. In the end, the Cummings’ study was neither a success nor a failure — it closed certain doors but opened others.