Resistance Theory and the Transculturation Hypothesis as Explanations of College Attrition and Persistence Among Culturally Traditional American Indian Students

Terry Huffman

George Fox University, thuffman@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty/107

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - School of Education by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
Resistance Theory and the Transculturation Hypothesis as Explanations of College Attrition and Persistence Among Culturally Traditional American Indian Students

Terry Huffman

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative research investigation on the educational experiences of 69 American Indian college students. Specifically, the data involving two groups of culturally traditional students (estranged students and transculturated students) are considered. Estranged students are culturally traditional American Indian students who experienced intense alienation while in college and, subsequently, fared poorly academically. Conversely, transculturated students are also culturally traditional students. However, these students overcame acute alienation and generally experienced successful college careers. After an examination of the dominant theoretical perspectives on American Indian educational achievement and attrition, the findings of the research are extended to new theoretical considerations: resistance theory and the transculturation hypothesis.

It has long been recognized that many American Indians encounter difficulties while attending institutions of higher learning (Astin, Tsui, & Aralos, 1996; Pavel, Swisher, & Ward, 1994). A catalog of barriers inhibiting greater American Indian educational achievement has been cited in the literature. Common among these include poor academic preparation, low achievement motivation, irrelevant educational practices, insufficient parental support, social-psychological frustrations with low self-esteem, and inadequate financial support (Falk & Aitken, 1984; Lin, 1985; and West, 1988).

Although these difficulties are serious barriers for American Indians to overcome, perhaps none are more problematic for some students than the
potential for cultural conflict (Huffman, 1993, 1999). Indeed no other single factor has been more frequently identified as a contributing reason for poor academic achievement among American Indians than cultural conflict (Carrol, 1978; Hornett, 1989; Huffman, 1995; Lin, LaCounte & Eder, 1988; Scott, 1986; and Swisher & Deyhele, 1989).

Unfortunately, even a cursory review of the literature reveals a myriad of ways cultural conflict has been conceptualized. For instance, sometimes cultural conflict refers to a disparity between specific cultural nuances such as time orientation (Sando, 1973) or cooperation/competition orientation (Duda, 1980) or even cognitive domains (Davis and Pyaskowitz, 1976). Other usages of the concept refer to more sweeping and broad phenomenon such as social and historical forces that serve to mold cultural incongruities (Ogbe, 1978, 1987). Despite the variation, the major theme included in the conceptual development of cultural conflict is a notion of some discrepancy between the values, behaviors, or political/economic power of those of the dominant status and those of the minority status.

While past research has clearly demonstrated a link between cultural conflict and poor persistence in higher education, the barriers posed by cultural conflict are not necessarily experienced similarly by all culturally traditional American Indian college students (Davis, 1992). For instance, Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg (1986) found that although cultural conflict was part of the academic experience for a sample of Lakota students, nevertheless, cultural traditionalism was actually related to college achievement. Likewise, Schiller and Gaseoma (1993) also reported that, despite acute cultural conflict, the retention of cultural traditionalism could serve to enhance the potential for American Indian academic achievement.

Thus, it appears that for some culturally traditional American Indians the difficulties presented by cultural conflict are simply too great to overcome and an early exit from college is the unfortunate result. However, while the cultural incongruities they encounter are certainly serious, other culturally traditional American Indian students manage to resist these barriers and persevere.

Such a phenomenon raises an important question. Specifically, why do some culturally traditional American Indians fall victim to cultural conflict and do not succeed in their higher educational attempts while others overcome the challenges presented by cultural conflict and complete their educational journeys? This paper examines the subjective experiences of two groups of culturally traditional American Indian college students. One group of students did not complete their academic pursuits while the other group did demonstrate successful academic experiences. The purpose was to explore those subjective experiences in order to gain insight into the possible differing ways these two groups encounter cultural conflict while in college.

**Prevailing Theoretical Frameworks**

Generally, there are two relatively clearly identifiable theoretical frameworks regarding the nature of cultural conflict associated with minority education.
Moreover, each orientation focuses on different levels of social life. These theoretical frameworks are generally referred to as the cultural discontinuity hypothesis and macrostructural explanations.

**Cultural Discontinuity Hypothesis**

Emerging from the early work of anthropologists such as Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski and finding refinement among individuals like Dell Hymes (1974), the cultural discontinuity hypothesis is certainly the more popular of the two theoretical orientations on cultural conflict found in the American Indian education literature. This framework emphasizes the differing and opposing micro-level cultural elements (i.e., communication styles, social values, interpersonal behaviors) that ultimately impact educational performance.

The disjunction between non-Indian cultural expectations institutionalized in American higher education and American Indian cultural traditions and ways initially places many American Indian students at a disadvantage in college (Deloria, 1978; Garcia & Goldenstein Ahler, 1992; Garrett, 1995; Pottinger, 1989; and Swisher & Deyhle, 1989). In fact, Jon Reyhner (1992) contends that micro-level cultural discontinuities are probably the leading cause for high American Indian educational attrition rates. In scathing criticism, leading American Indian scholar Vine Deloria (1990) put the matter very bluntly:

> [Previous American Indian educational effort] resembles indoctrination more than it does forms of teaching because it insists on implanting a particular body of knowledge and a specific view of the world, which often does not correspond to the life experiences that [Native] people have or might be expected to encounter. (p. 16)

**Macrostructural Explanations**

Although not as clearly labeled in the literature as the former framework, the second major theoretical orientation on cultural conflict may be referred to as macrostructural explanations. This perspective assumes that social/structural forces beyond the realm of the individual are the source of cultural conflict and, as such, are responsible for the lack of educational success among minorities. In effect, “children’s school learning problems are ultimately caused by historical and structural forces beyond their control” (Ogbu, 1985, p. 863).

Perhaps best represented by the work of anthropologist John Ogbu (1978, 1981, 1982, 1987), macrostructural explanations contend that cultural discontinuity scholars focus too heavily on micro-level phenomena that are in reality only the trappings of true cultural dilemmas. Ogbu likens the educational experience of American Indians to those of other “castelike minorities” (1978, p. 217). For Ogbu, racial minorities (including American Indians) have been subjugated to a racially inferior status and subsequently are continually afforded a virtually meaningless educational menu. Moreover, for racial minorities in the United States, life changes are restricted and relatively predictable. Because of a social status that operates much like a caste in a highly regimented society,
opportunities for educational (and particularly economic success) are scarce. Thus, the fate of racial minorities, educational and otherwise, is tied to the social/structural composition of society itself.

Method
This paper results from a five-year research project involving in-depth interviews with 69 American Indian (predominantly Lakota) college students. The major purpose of the research was to explore the personal perspectives of American Indian students on their academic experiences. The research process consisted of four steps: 1) contacting informants, 2) the initial interview, 3) follow-up interviews, and 4) data analysis.

Contacting Informants
For each semester for the duration of the research project, a list of all American Indian students attending a small midwestern university was obtained from that institution's counseling office and its office of minority persistence. During this period a total of 232 American Indian students enrolled in the university. Each student received a letter informing him/her of the research and was requested to consider participating in the study. From the population of 232 students, 69 (30 percent) eventually volunteered to grant in-depth interviews.

The Interview
A base instrument of 25 questions served as a guide for each interview. However, the sessions ran rather informally (much like a conversation) which allowed the researcher flexibility to pursue other relevant issues as they arose. The interviews averaged about one and half hours for each session.

With the permission of the student, each interview was tape-recorded. Additionally, the researcher recorded notes of each interview session in a journal. The transcriptions of the interviews along with the field journal notes served as the primary data sources for this research.

Follow-Up Interviews
After initial interviews, subjects were invited to assist with follow-up interviews. The purpose of these interview sessions was to track students as they processed further with their educational experiences. Additionally, in some cases the follow-up sessions allowed the researcher to clarify ambiguous responses given in the initial interview.

Data Analysis
The analysis of qualitative data is an extremely time consuming and difficult endeavor and, as such, it necessarily involves a series of steps (Strauss, 1987). The first step in the analysis of data consisted of the creation of an initial coding scheme. However, adding and collapsing categories, and refining the coding categories ultimately modified this scheme.
After the coding was complete, the researcher analyzed the data in an effort to examine patterns of responses, behaviors, attitudes, and general experiences/perceptions.

**Cultural Masks**

The author identified four “cultural masks” assumed by the American Indian college students involved in this study (Table 1). A cultural mask is the process by which a person comes to construct a personal ethnic identity. Moreover, a cultural mask also includes the manner in which an individual uses and ultimately projects that ethnic identity. Specifically, the cultural masks included that of: assimilated students, marginal students, estranged students, and transculturated students (for a more complete description of cultural masks see: Huffman, 1993, 1995, and 1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Cultural Masks of American Indian College Studentsa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reservation Background</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Mean Average Age | 25 | 27 | 26 | 32 | 28 |
| Mean Average GPA | 2.50 | 2.77 | 2.17 | 2.81 | 2.62 |

aPercentages have been rounded to sum 100%
While this paper specifically deals with the two more culturally traditional groups of American Indian college students (estranged and transculturated), a brief summary of all four cultural masks is in order to establish the context of the findings.

Largely due to their cultural background before coming to college, assimilated students typically identified with the college “mainstream” culture and encountered few cultural difficulties while in college. Among the 69 students involved in the research, 26 were considered to be assimilated students.

Marginal students held some assimilationist orientation yet desired some identification and affiliation with more traditional American Indian culture. Unfortunately, marginal students often felt pressure resulting from two cultural mandates that complicated their academic experiences. Fifteen students were identified as projecting a marginal cultural mask.

Estranged students had strong identification with traditional American Indian culture and displayed an aggressive rejection of assimilation. These students viewed the mainstream as a threat to their ethnic identity and generally revealed a distrust of the college setting. The seven estranged students of this study encountered extremely difficult college experiences.

Transculturated students also had a strong identification with traditional American Indian culture and did not aspire to assimilation. However, unlike estranged students, these students used their ethnic identity as a firm social-psychological anchor and derived strength and confidence from that cultural mask. Generally, these students displayed a confidence and sense of security that emerged from their American Indian ethnicity. As a result, the transculturated students generally had successful academic experiences. Twenty-one of the 69 students were identified as transculturated students.

As mentioned above, this paper deals specifically with the experiences of the more culturally traditional ethnic identity projections: estranged students and transculturated students. As such, an important question is how do these similarly culturally traditional individuals come to adopt different ethnic identities while in college?

**Estranged Students and the Process of Estrangement**

From the interviews with estranged students, a four-stage estrangement process was identified. This process included the stages of: initial alienation, disillusionment, emotional rejection, and disengagement (Figure 1). Generally, the four stages of the estrangement process seemed to follow in rapid succession. The social, emotional, and cultural isolation felt by estranged students quickly developed into the final act of physical detachment from the institution. Indeed the pace of estrangement is dramatically demonstrated in the fact that only two estranged students remained in college for more than two semesters.
Stage One: Initial Alienation
Largely because culturally traditional American Indian students first experienced the mainstream college as cultural "outsiders," their initial feeling was one of alienation. Generally, to these students, the institution (i.e., administration policies and procedures, even to an extent classroom etiquette, etc.) seemed rigid, overly formalized, and strangely unfamiliar.

A young man who had spent his entire life on the Cheyenne River (South Dakota) reservation, who was active in American Indian religion, and reported a great deal of difficulties while in college (he was, in fact, nearing the end of his first semester when the first of three interview sessions took place) is typical of the impression and reaction of many culturally traditional American Indian students:

...I felt like I'm where I don't belong...I set a lot of goals, I wanted to come to school. But when I got here I found that it was really hard. I had a lot of problems with wanting to leave...My first impression was to get back into my car and just go home.

Another young man also from the Cheyenne River reservation offered a similar reaction. On his initial experience in college he remarked:
Overwhelmed! I felt really overwhelmed. What am I going to do? That and not seeing anybody [another American Indian student]. Not for the first week, not another Native American. I didn’t see anybody. And for a long time I felt that I was the only one in class. It made me feel very small, just like, but then again sticking out like a sore thumb. I don’t know. I wasn’t prepared for it. I really wasn’t.

Many students felt overwhelmed by the lack of familiar cultural connections. Little contact was made with non-Indian students and the institution itself began to be regarded with suspicion (due to a growing perception that it was simply an agent of assimilation). Often, culturally, American Indian students even felt alienated from their fellow American Indian classmates. This social isolation was particularly evident in the attitudes toward assimilated American Indian students. These students were often regarded with measured contempt and dismissed as “urban Indians.”

The first Cheyenne River student quoted above was typical of such sentiments:

I just try to keep to myself . . . It’s like they [assimilated American Indian students] more or less have accepted the values of non-Indians over Indian ones . . . I was a little standoffish . . . But I don’t ever know right off who they are. I know they are American Indian but I don’t know who they are . . . I guess I react to people’s reaction to me.

The culturally traditional American Indians in this study were noticeably vulnerable during the initial alienation stage. The perceived threat of assimilation compounded with feelings of social isolation left many students extremely discouraged.

Stage Two: Disillusionment
Troubled with pangs of alienation, estranged students quickly became disillusioned with their situation at college. The university was typically regarded as an invitation to assimilation offering only a steady diet of non-Indian culture. A student who had lived nearly all his life on the Turtle Mountain (North Dakota) reservation reflected on the difficulties that he and many other traditional American Indian students experience:

I really think they [culturally traditional American Indian students] become disenchanted really quick. I think they perceive it [college] as this huge, monstrous institution rather than a person walking daily. Because it’s foreign, I know for a fact that they do suffer some sort of “culture shock” because the surroundings are new and the way of life is new. The objectives of your time, how you spend your time, what you do, is all new. The emphasis is placed on self and trying to fend for yourself and I think that there are a lot of handicaps like that . . . I think that because the cultures are so opposed that it would be a hard transaction; that they won’t see the benefits of it right away and might become disenchanted.

It should be noted that the student from Turtle Mountain quoted above was not identified as an estranged student. He was actually a transculturated student.
However, he came to the university with a culturally traditional background and orientation and too experienced the same initial alienation as the estranged students. Thus his observation is applicable to the estranged students and appropriately describes much of their experiences.

A woman who had actually lived most of her life off the reservation but had many connections to and spent part of her childhood on the Flandreau (South Dakota) reservation displayed frustration with what she perceived to be the assimilationist mission of the university. This resentment underscores the profound disillusionment she was experiencing:

It is important to me to keep my Indian values and more or less put up with the non-Indian values because it is not for the non-Indian society that I am trying to get a degree for. Do you understand? ... It is hard to be an American Indian in a world that thinks that you should adjust to their type of a culture. It makes me angry at the closed minds of people who will not open their eyes to let the Indian people be who they were born to be. It makes me sad though, to see Native students quit because of this. I have seen it happen many times.

A similar view was offered by a young man from the Cheyenne River reservation. Comparing an American Indian worldview to the worldview he perceived as part of the college, he stated:

I'm talking about college now. Everything I have, that I need to know is in a book. Everything you have is just like in that little book. Everything you need to know to get by, to get by, and to get by. Nothing but books! And this is, you ask, why? And if I come over to this frame of mind, it's culture lock. I get captured. So I try not to. You know, get captured. It's got to be my choice. That's where we have to keep an equality thing going [balance American Indian and mainstream worldviews in college] ... But that's not the way it is for us. You learn, you know, from others. Not just books. Simple ways are important... If you're not careful, it [American Indian worldview] could be easy to forget.

It is likely that at this early stage of college life many traditional American Indians may exhibit the greatest potential for unsuccessful academic careers (Garrett, 1995). Frustrated by disillusionment, most of the estranged students in this study left college heavy with the feeling of alienation and a keen desire to retain their cultural identity. Unfortunately, it is also quite possible that these students stand out in the literature and serve as stereotypical models of American Indians who could not release the "old Indian ways" [quotation marks added] and make the necessary adjustments to the mainstream (Scott, 1986).

Stage Three: Emotional Rejection

The disillusionment many of these American Indians felt for the higher educational experience quickly turned into emotional rejection of the institution. During this third stage the students generally reported that they had little value for an institution they perceived as rejecting them. One of the young men from the Cheyenne River reservation came to the conclusion that the university was
designed to assimilate American Indian students into non-Indian society. He also emphatically added that when it came to a personal choice:

I believe in my Indian ways so much that I would quit school because our old ways are dying out! I don’t want to change too much, I don’t want to change too much! I want to intensify my cultural side. I mean, this is the white man’s world. I don’t want to keep those [non-Indian values].

Contemplating the same dilemma, a young, first semester freshman who had lived part of her life on the Lower Brule (South Dakota) reservation reflected:

I would not give up my traditional Indian values for anything . . . There's no beauty here [at college], you know? It's different . . . I want to, you know, be free. To believe in what I want to, not what they [non-Indians] want me to.

The same young man from Cheyenne River quoted above was having a very difficult time in his relations with non-Indians on campus and experienced profound feelings of rejection. He stated:

[The university] has been a different experience for me. People are very prejudiced toward my Indian blood. Remarks and judgments are placed upon me without any knowledge of me. It has been an extremely hard adaptation and I will be transferring because of it.

This student, who did not transfer but dropped out of school, also illustrates that the emotional rejection stage includes the preparation for the last stage of the estrangement process; that of disengagement.

Stage Four: Disengagement

Feeling alienated, disillusioned, and rejecting the institution itself, the next step for the estranged student was the physical withdrawal from college. For many students the actual withdrawal was preceded by a brief but intense disengagement from campus activities. Typically this disengagement took the simple form of not going to classes while for others the disengagement was more emotional than physical.

The young student from the Cheyenne River reservation quoted above described his emotional state and social relations shortly before his departure from the university:

Lonely . . . I didn’t know anybody . . . In order to survive on campus you have to know people. You have to have someone to talk to everyday, otherwise you’ll just drive yourself down . . . I’d like to say that it [being an American Indian on a predominately non-Indian campus] isn’t a problem for me, but it is.

Another young man from the Cheyenne River reservation (who had already made his decision to leave school when the third and last interview session occurred) described his impressions and feelings by stating:

It was really different, it was a lot bigger and . . . it really scared me. It wasn’t my idea of college. It wasn’t like what I had known [on the reservation]. All these people walking around . . . There are only a few non-Indians that I’ve
gotten along with. I hardly ever stay there [his dorm room], the rooms are so small and I like openness and being outside. I really don't stick around on campus that much.

Unfortunately, with all the emotional ingredients in place, departing from school was an easy step for estranged students. Indeed, for these students disengagement seemed a logical option. As a Cheyenne River reservation student lamented, “What other choice do I have?”

Transculturated Students and the Process of Transculturation

The challenge for culturally traditional American Indian students is to interact on two cultural levels simultaneously (Garrett, 1996; Schiller & Gaseoma, 1993). That is, successful performance in college requires dual operation at an American Indian cultural level and a college mainstream level (Huffman, 1995).

The transculturated students of this study displayed the unique ability to interact within and between cultures as demanded by the situation. However, the process leading through this social-psychological maze was extremely complex. Through interviews with students, four stages of the American Indian transcultural process were identified: initial alienation, self-discovery, realignment, and participation (Figure 2).

Stage One: Initial Alienation

Virtually all of the transculturated students began as estranged students. Therefore, like estranged students, generally transculturated students also began as cultural “outsiders” to the campus environment. As a result, typically transculturated students too were greeted by an initial alienation from the institutional setting.

This first stage was an extremely painful period in the experiences of most culturally traditional students. Students reported perplexing feelings of loneliness, isolation, and even depression. It is easy to understand why so many estranged students left college soon after their encounters with initial alienation. Many of these students perceived that much was at stake (loss of cultural identity) with little reward in return (an educational experience that did not recognize or value them).

Yet, despite these difficulties, many culturally traditional American Indian students muddled through. They struggled with the feeling of being detached from the everyday life of the campus and many reported an overwhelming sense of intimidation. Every day of the first few months (in some cases even years) was a test to their commitment and endurance. A Standing Rock (North Dakota) reservation student, who was nearing the end of his academic career, reflected:

I felt like this was the last place on earth I wanted to be because there was nothing that I could relate to. It was all just really different . . . I had a bunch of walls around me. It was hard for me to be here. I look at it as being afraid; being out of place, feeling like I was different and a lot of people treated me different . . . I just had to take it one step at a time.
Figure 2
The Process of Transculturation

STAGE ONE
*Initial Alienation*

Feelings of alienation;
Little with which to relate

Transculturation

STAGE TWO
*Self-Discovery*

Discovery of personal strength emerging
from Native cultural heritage

STAGE THREE
*Realignment*

Learn to relate to both Native and
mainstream cultural settings using traditionalism
as an emotional anchor

STAGE FOUR
*Participation*

Full use of American Indian culture
and heritage as source of strength

A young woman from Lower Brule recalled her first encounter with college:

I would say that it was kind of like cultural shock for me because of this
discipline and study habits and the pace and everything like that... like I
said culture shock. I just didn’t fit in, I felt like I didn’t fit.

Persistence for these American Indian students was extremely difficult. When
recounting these initial experiences, some students seemed surprised at their own
perseverance. One student from the Cheyenne River reservation exclaimed:

It amazes me. I’m amazed I was able to hang on. I almost didn’t... I almost
left, you know, went back home... It was hard, boy!

However, this endurance was crucial. It appears that one of the critical factors
in the experiences of transculturated students is that they remained on campus
for a longer period of time compared to the estranged students. That is, enough
time for a transformation to occur—a self-discovery.

**Stage Two: Self-Discovery**
If culturally traditional American Indian students could endure the pangs of initial
alienation, they arrived at a transculturation threshold. At this point most began
to realize that they had not been ensnared in a web of assimilation, that they could
compete academically, and that they could interact with American Indians and
non-Indians alike, all without loss to their cultural self-identity. In short, they
came to realize that they had not lost their “Indianness” and yet they had survived
academically.

Thus, many of these students began introspection and made a most curious
discovery. Namely, the transcultured students came to realize they had succeeded
because they were American Indian and had not attempted to be anything else.
Most of the transculturated students could relate a specific time in their academic
career when they made a deliberate decision to push forward while utilizing their
cultural heritage as a personal anchor. Reaching this transculturation threshold
was often an extremely difficult journey. However, the rewards at the end were
enormous. A Turtle Mountain reservation student recalled reaching his threshold:

> I really had to do some searching and really some finding out; am I going
to accept the way I am or am I going to try to conform or am I just going to
leave it alone? Finally I had to accept what I was and that there are some
things that are more to being an Indian than just the “Indian.” There was [sic]
feelings and family and culture, there was [sic] ways of doing things. When
I learned to separate the two and learn that this is the way you do it at work,
this is the way you do it at home, and you conduct your family affairs this
way, then that’s good. I think the turning point came when I decided to
separate the two . . . Then I resolved my “Indianness” and the way the system
works.

A Standing Rock student, who was president of his college’s honor program and
the president of the campus American Indian student organization, put it this way:

> The first thing I found out when I came to college is how much Indian I was
. . . I’d say my strongest identification with my own “Indianness” has been
since I’ve been here . . . It’s a real source of strength because I guess it sort
of gives me a reason for being here.

An enhanced and secure sense of ethnic identity tended to produce a more clear
sense of purpose for these students. A student from Cheyenne River reflected:

> I don’t feel I have to lose anything anymore. I think I have gained. That what
I have is already there. I can’t lose it. I’m an Indian person and that’s not
going to change. But I’ve learned. I’ve learned how to grow, you know? I’ve
learned how to see things differently than maybe before. But I’m still Indian.
That hasn’t changed. I came to the point where I decided to be me and let
everyone else, just accept everyone else. No more of “well this is Indian,”
and “that’s not Indian.” It was just if I can relate to you that’s good enough.
The changes that corresponded with this phase of self-discovery were provocative. Students generally reported they became more relaxed and comfortable in college. Moreover, this self-discovery allowed transculturated students the ability to move into the third stage of their educational, cultural process, that of realignment.

Stage Three: Realignment
With the strength and confidence that they found in their cultural identity, transculturated students began a realignment process. At this stage, students made necessary (and practical) adjustments in their personal, social, and academic worlds. They generally began to learn how to relate at both cultural levels as demanded by the situation.

Further, at this third stage students reassessed themselves and their situation. As a general pattern they evaluated their repertoire of values, attitudes, and goals and measured them against those institutionalized in the higher educational system. They then began to align themselves with the nature of academia and used the appropriate norms and behavior as needed. In short, most learned to cross cultural boundaries when necessary. At this stage, they were well into the process of transculturation.

A middle-aged woman from the Pine Ridge (South Dakota) reservation, by any standards a culturally traditional American Indian person (whose late father was a well known Lakota spiritual leader), described the realignment process this way:

When we go to school we live a non-Indian way but we still keep our values . . . I could put my Indian values aside just long enough to learn what it is I want to learn but that doesn’t mean I’m going to forget them. I think that is how strong they are with me.

Another woman also from the Pine Ridge reservation stated:

My mom told us, “This is the white man’s world, you grow to learn and to live in it and at the same time try to keep your culture.” It’s kinda hard to be back and forth like this. I think the way I’ve taken things is to take things that you think are going to benefit you and the rest you don’t bother with.

It is important to note that for these students realignment did not mean assimilation. It was the practical matter of operating within the college environment.

Stage Four: Participation
At the fourth stage of the transculturation process most of the students settled into the routine of college. They had largely overcome the alienation of their early college experience and discovered that it is possible to be an “Indian” in the heart of the non-Indian world. They learned that they could interact with both American Indians and non-Indians alike. As one student from the Lower Brule reservation explained:

I have my inner strength; I have my culture, my background, my traditions to fall back on to help me through. Yet I’m taking from, I would say, the
white culture through education. But I'm trying to give something back too, by teaching them [non-Indians]. And in every class I've been in I try to teach them about our culture, about our plants, herbs, and told them about sweat lodges and told them, you know, about things like that and teach them that you can give and then you receive back . . . I feel that I have a special advantage because I have two cultures that I can draw on. I can learn from here too. And I am learning.

At this stage, transculturated students appeared to be positioned to fulfill the goal of completing their education. Importantly, to accomplish this objective they seemed to make maximum use of their American Indian heritage as a source of strength, confidence, and identity. The middle-aged Pine Ridge student cited above observed:

I think that the time we spend away from our people, we appreciate our ways and our people even more. People that have left the reservation to go away to school, I have never seen them participate in things like powwows or sweat or sun dances. I've never seen them do that. Yet they go away for four or five years and then they come back and they are really strong into spirituality; they're really different. And I was thinking that they appreciate things more when they are away like that. They must think about it or something happens while they are away.

The four stages of the transculturation process were not easy but they were rewarding. The insights offered by these students are evidence of the daunting task involved in overcoming the initial alienation of their college experience.

**Theoretical Reconsiderations**

The recognition of two distinct groups of culturally traditional American Indian college students raises an interesting and extremely important question. Why were some culturally traditional American Indian students successful in their college pursuits (most notably the transculturated students) and why were some not successful (the estranged students)? The experiences of the students in this study cannot be adequately answered by either the cultural discontinuities hypothesis or macrostructural explanations. As such, in a preliminary attempt to account for the differing experiences among estranged and transculturated students of this study, two different theoretical frameworks are suggested: *resistance theory* and the *transculturation hypothesis*.

**Resistance Theory**

According to *resistance theory*, a variety of sources within the educational arena may indict minority cultures (Erickson, 1987; Pottinger, 1989). For instance, predominant pedagogical styles, the curriculum of the school, the behavioral expectations, the personal prejudices of school personnel (among other factors) often convey overt and covert messages that devalue the culture, heritage, and identity of minority students. Resistance theory asserts that during the educational endeavor, minority individuals actively resist and reject the implicit and explicit messages attacking their ethnic identity (Erickson, 1987). Under such conditions, educational achievement falters.
Specifically, resistance theory contends that minority students are not passive social actors in this drama. These students actively work to protect their ethnic identity. Resistance, in this sense, is a means of coping with a subordinated social position as well as preserving a distinct social identity (Ogbu, 1987). As a young man from the Sisseton reservation (South Dakota) challenged: “I believe in my Indian ways so much that I would quit school because our old ways are dying out!”

Referring to such survival strategies, Erickson distinguishes between “cultural boundaries” and “cultural borders” (1987, p.345). For Erickson, cultural boundaries “can be thought of as behavioral evidence of culturally differing standards of appropriateness” (p. 345). Cultural boundaries are simply the fact that different groups speak, act, and think in distinct ways. In essence, cultural boundaries represent the normative expectations held by respective cultural groups. Moreover, Erickson stresses that the recognition of cultural differences is itself socially and politically neutral. That is, the acknowledgment of cultural boundaries is not an act of value assessment.

On the other hand, however, cultural borders relate to the value placed on one set of cultural expectations over another. Erickson argues that cultural borders include assessing merit to differing cultural expectations. One cultural package is deemed superior to another. As such, cultural differences are “borders” to be protected. For Erickson, resistance to ethnic attack is border work, the active attempt to preserve an ethnic identity.

The estranged students in this study actively resisted what they perceived as cultural assimilation and opted for survival strategies and engaged in their own border work. Unfortunately, as a result, most were quickly disillusioned and left college with feelings of extreme emotional, social, and cultural isolation. They recognized the “cultural discontinuities” around them and they understood what they believed to be their only choices: assimilate or leave. As such, they were not blindly ambushed by cultural conflict—rather, they were pushed out by forces they only vaguely understood. Generally, these students saw the conflict for what it meant to them and resisted it the best way they knew at the time. Simply put, estranged students resisted by leaving the institution.

The Transculturation Hypothesis

Kurt Lewin (1948) argued that minority members often employ their ethnicity to their advantage. Lewin’s contention is particularly useful when applied to the experiences of the transculturated American Indian college students. The author refers to the theoretical model emerging from the analysis of these students as the transculturalational hypothesis. The major dimensions of this theoretical framework are outlined below.

1. American Indian Ethnic Identity as Emotional Anchor: The idea that American Indians must undergo a radical form of assimilation in order to achieve in higher education can be utterly dismissed by the findings of this study. The
transculturated students demonstrate that cultural traditionalism need not be a “difficult situation” standing in the way of academic achievement (Scott, 1986). These individuals forged a strong self-identity and, in the doing, acquired the necessary tools to interact and achieve. The confidence, self-worth, and sense of purpose displayed by the transculturated students were not in spite of being an American Indian, it was because they were American Indian.

2. The Importance of the Transculturation Threshold: To arrive full of confidence in one’s identity and ability is a hazardous journey. As the estranged students demonstrate, having a strong sense of one’s ethnic identity and an absolute determination to retain that identity were not enough to survive social-psychological alienation. It is not an overstatement that all of the culturally traditional American Indians in this study arrived on campus as cultural outsiders. Their first experience was that of isolation, loneliness, and even despair. One of the most significant findings in this study is the identification of a transculturation threshold. The transculturation threshold is a more or less specific point in which some students decided to retain their cultural identity, use that identity and the self-discovery that emerged as a result.

A good illustration of this phenomenon is the case of a very successful student from Standing Rock reservation. His life and college experience were particularly eventful with many personal triumphs and tragedies. He related how he ventured into the realization that his ethnic heritage and identity were his real strengths and source of courage.

After a tumultuous beginning, this student eventually graduated among the top in his class, was a talented writer, a highly effective campus activist for American Indian and minority rights, and had been offered a graduate fellowship at one of the nation’s leading universities. Yet, his college endeavor almost ended in failure. His first years in college were filled with bouts with alcoholism and depression. He was intimidated by his fellow non-Indian classmates and suffered from overwhelming timidity in interactions with his professors. He struggled daily with the temptation to leave school.

With time he began to appropriate traditional American Indian healing approaches into his recovery efforts. Amid his recovery from alcoholism he soon discovered that he was an equal academic competitor with non-Indian students. He recalled coming to the conclusion that he wished to fully embrace his traditional roots. This was a dramatic and defining moment not only in his academic career but in his personal life as well. Describing that period of assessment he related:

I decided that I was Indian. There were all these walls around me, but they weren’t going to shrink any less if I were less “Indian” . . . I guess being here [in college] taught me how much strength there is in being Indian. When I finally accepted that, I was on my way . . .

Eventually this student was academically successful. But this success did not come until after a difficult period of personal, emotional, and cultural assessment.
If his was the only case of such cultural accounting, it could be dismissed as an isolated case of the intimate, personal journey of one man. It was not the only case. Other students related experiences of some type of reconciliation. Few were as dramatic as the case described above. However, virtually all described some period of sorting through their situation and arriving at the conclusion to use their ethnic identity as personal strength. Therefore, during such moments, this transculturation threshold appears to be a critical moment in the formation and projection of the transculturat ed cultural mask. It was during this time that the culturally traditional American Indian college students in this study moved from the estranged cultural mask to a transculturated one.

3. Ability to Engage Two Cultural Settings: One of the least recognized and understood aspects of the transculturat ed experience is the ability for an American Indian to effectively engage the cultural setting of non-Indians without assimilation. The concept of transculturation incorporates the idea that American Indian college students need not necessarily relinquish their Native ways in order to be successful. Rather, the transculturation hypothesis assumes that American Indian students simply increase their cultural repertoire adding the skills needed while keeping their Native heritage intact. As such, the individual is conceptualized as fully capable of interaction with two different cultures without cultural loss.

The transculturated students of this study clearly demonstrated this ability. They evidenced a capacity for cultural learning and relearning that positioned them to traverse cultures.

4. The Process of Cultural Learning: Just as important as cultural retention, transculturation is a process of cultural learning. To successfully engage a cultural setting requires that the individual understand that milieu. As such, the transculturation student must be able, willing, and provided the opportunity to undertake this learning process. Therefore, it is assumed that transculturation is as much a socialization process as it is the preservation of one’s former cultural heritage and identity.

However, because cultural learning can be a very disorienting and intimidating experience, a crucial factor facilitating this learning process is that the individual needs to be secure in his/her own ethnic identity. Thus, once again we must consider the importance of the first dimension of the transculturation hypothesis. The link is an important one. The absence of emotional security in their ethnic identity appears to be a major reason many of the estranged students experienced great difficulty navigating through collegiate problems. Clearly these students highly valued their culturally traditional ethnic identity and they did not wish to risk losing that identity to assimilation. However, compared to transcultured students, the estranged students did not possess the social-psychological means to explore the trappings of unfamiliar cultural surroundings. Their ability to actively engage in new cultural learning was seriously compromised by the concern of losing (or diluting) their cultural identity.
The strength of ethnic identity has a major, but easily missed, implication for transculturated students. Ethnic confidence and security provide the opportunity to explore and learn the cultural setting of the mainstream. Without the opportunity for exploration and subsequent discovery and learning, it is very likely that many culturally traditional American Indian students will find it difficult to be successful in a predominantly non-Indian higher educational institution.

Recommendations

The insights gained from the interviews with these American Indian students suggest important considerations for both researchers and educational practitioners. Specifically, these insights help to inform us on future research directions as well as implications for educational practice.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study specifically examined the nature of ethnic identity as it directly relates to the academic experience, there are many other facets of American Indian higher education that may be richly explored using qualitative research designs. Simply put, there is much to be learned regarding the way American Indian college students perceive, operate within, and ultimately experience higher education. For instance, future research could focus on such features as family relations, academic preparation, financial barriers, among others, that are also related to the manner in which American Indians experience higher education. There is little doubt that a wider examination of the personal insights of life in academia would greatly enrich the American Indian education literature as well as facilitate an assessment of current educational practices.

Implications for Educational Practice

The culturally traditional American Indian students in this study occupied a precarious position. While they generally sought to retain their ethnic identity, to do so while remaining in academia typically resulted in a sharp contest with social-psychological alienation. Ironically, if alienation among culturally traditional American Indian students is to be challenged, the experiences of these students suggests that a strong, culturally traditional ethnic self-identity is a major part of the solution. That is, a strong self-identity served to equip the transculturated students with the social-psychological security and confidence necessary to engage the cultural milieu of the mainstream campus.

Therefore, as they directly relate to ethnic identity, several implications for educational practice are presented for consideration.

1. Need to Celebrate American Indian Ethnicity: One relatively simple way to discourage feelings of alienation is to celebrate American Indian ethnicity on campus (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). An institutional setting that is perceived as forbidding only exacerbates social-psychological alienation (Davis, 1992).
Therefore, institutions enrolling American Indian students could dispel some of these perceptions by including American Indian heritage and culture into the campus environment.

Specifically, these measures could involve adorning the campus with American Indian art, the art of prominent or emerging American Indian artists, and with displays that recognize the accomplishments of American Indian alumni. Additionally, colleges could establish regular campus American Indian cultural and educational events. Moreover, special orientation programs for entering American Indian students could be created or existing programs expanded. This could provide the opportunity for new American Indian students to become somewhat acclimated to the campus environment.

2. Need for Culturally Appropriate Counseling: While the celebration of American Indian ethnicity can make the campus a more comfortable setting for many American Indian students, it remains a cosmetic move. Ultimately, the essential test for reducing alienation (and subsequent attrition) comes through the relations with other individuals. It is crucial, therefore, that the human relations dimension of the American Indian college experience be recognized. Nowhere is this mandate more important than the design and delivery of counseling services to American Indians (Trimble & Fleming, 1989).

There is evidence that culturally appropriate counseling at the higher educational level is an extremely important component in the persistence of American Indian students (Haviland, Horswill, O’Connor, & Dynnesson, 1983). However, there is also a debate over the nature of culturally appropriate counseling. On the one hand, some researchers argue that culturally traditional American Indian college students demonstrate a strong preference for racially and ethnically similar counselors and generally have rather specific expectations regarding the counseling experience (Haviland et al., 1983; Johnson & Lashley, 1989). Other researchers contend that counselor ethnicity is not as important as perceived cultural sensitivity evidenced by the counselor (LaFromboise, Dauphinais, & Rowe, 1980; LaFromboise & Dixon, 1981).

While the specifics of the debate are beyond the scope of this paper, given the experiences of the culturally traditional students in this study, it is obvious that culturally appropriate counseling is greatly needed. The ideal counseling situation would likely include highly trained, culturally sensitive American Indian counselors. However, the reality is that there has been, and likely remains, a shortage of competently trained American Indian professionals (Trimble & LaFromboise, 1985). Thus, cultural sensitivity may prove to be the key to appropriate counseling. Ultimately the burden falls on institutions of higher learning to ensure that they have staffed culturally competent as well as professionally trained personnel who are perceived as legitimate resources among culturally traditional American Indian students.
Conclusion

Persistence of American Indians continues to be a major concern in higher education. Yet, the best alternative toward realizing educational success among culturally traditional American Indians is to strive for achievement through cultural autonomy (Van Harnm, 1996). The transculturated students of this study provide evidence that culturally traditional American Indians can achieve academically while retaining their cultural integrity. If more favorable graduation and persistence rates are be realized, a situation in which American Indian college students perceive the freedom to express any ethnic identity they chose (whether it be traditional or assimilated) should be encouraged. Such a situation would not solve all the problems besetting American Indian higher education persistence. Nevertheless, it would make a positive difference.

Terry Huffman, Ph.D. is an associate professor of sociology at the University of North Dakota. He received his Ph.D. from Iowa State University. Areas of research interest include family studies and American Indian studies.

References


