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The Transculturation of Native American College Students

Terry E. Huffman

"I have advised my people this way — when you find something good in the white man's road, pick it up. When you find something that is bad or turns out bad, drop it, leave it alone. We shall master his machinery, and his inventions, his skills, his medicine, his planning, but we will retain our beauty and still be Indians."

Sitting Bull

Native Americans have one of the lowest levels of higher educational achievement among American racial and ethnic groups. It has been estimated that a mere six percent of Native American students complete their college education (Astin, 1986).

A variety of factors have been identified to account for this dismal record of educational achievement. The lack of success has been attributed to low achievement motivation, poor academic preparation, inadequate financial support, and lack of parental and community support (Guyette and Heth, 1983; Falk and Aitken, 1984; Lin, 1985; McIntosh, 1987; Scott, 1986; and West, 1988). There is little doubt that these factors, individually and cumulatively, pose barriers for Native Americans. However, perhaps none of these factors are more problematic for those students and mysterious to researchers than the potential for cultural conflict that often seems to be inherent in the college setting.

College is an institution of values, norms, and attitudes. Moreover, it embodies a cultural milieu which reflects middle-class America. Many Native Americans find this cultural milieu foreign, even alien. These are individuals oriented toward cultural expectations different than those found institutionalized in the college setting.

For those who face cultural conflicts the options are seemingly few: withdraw from the institution in an attempt to preserve one's "Indianness," or adopt non-Indian ways and pursue assimilation. However, there is another alternative. There are students who have been successful at retaining their cultural heritage while negotiating the complexities of the non-Indian institution. These rather unique individuals bridge the cultures and while they have largely been ignored by researchers, they are worth investigating. This bridging and the progression of values, attitudes, behaviors, and feelings associated with it, is referred to as transculturation.

Methods — The results of this paper are part of an on-going research project involving Native Americans who are attending or have attended South Dakota colleges. The subjects consist of Native American students attending predominantly non-Indian institutions, students attending reservation community colleges but who have attended non-Indian institutions, and former students who have dropped-out of non-Indian institutions.

The research design utilizes a "double-barreled" approach utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative approach involves a questionnaire designed, among other things, to obtain information on cultural, social, academic, and financial problems encountered by Native Americans. The qualitative approach involves in-depth interviews in order to gain greater insights on the Native American's subjective thoughts and views regarding their college experience.

At the time of this writing, thirty subjects have participated in the project.

The Phenomenon of Native American Transculturation — Not all Native American students face cultural conflicts in college. Many are not appreciatively different from their fellow non-Indian classmates. That is, there are those students who have spent little or none of their lives on reservations and have relatively little contact with traditional Indian culture. As they generally identify with and are assimilated into the American cultural mainstream, these individuals feel no great sense of cultural conflict (Huffman and Rosonke, 1989).

On the other hand, there are those students who have a strong identification with traditional Indian culture. Typically they have lived a great deal, if not all, of their lives on reservations and have relatively little contact with traditional Indian culture. As they generally identify with and are assimilated into the American cultural mainstream, these individuals feel no great sense of cultural conflict (Huffman and Rosonke, 1989).

A large proportion of the students who encounter cultural conflict simply leave college...
(Chadwick, 1972; Falk and Aitken, 1984). Scott (1986:381), who describes the attachment to traditional Indian culture as the “difficult situation,” reported:

> The data confirm that being a “cultural Indian” reduces the likelihood to academic success . . . those committed to Indian ways are less likely to become integrated into the university community, and consequently less likely to succeed.

Certainly many “cultural Indians” desire to leave once they encounter the cultural dilemmas of college life (Huffman and Rosonke, 1989). The students who succumb to this temptation stand out in the literature as examples of Native Americans who have failed to make the necessary adjustments to the gesellschaft world of academia.

What then separates those who persist from those who become another Native American attrition statistic? It can not be merely assumed that academically successful traditional Native Americans have experienced a radical form of assimilation. There is a growing body of evidence to refute the assimilationist model of Native American education (Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg, 1986; Kerbo, 1981; McFee, 1972). Rather, it is the very retention of traditional culture that has enhanced the performance of many cultural Indians. That is, these more culturally traditional Native American students undergo a process of transculturation that is fundamental to their academic success.

**The Concept of Transculturation** — Transculturation is the process by which an individual of one culture can enter and interact in the milieu of another culture without loss of the person’s native cultural identity and ways. Hallowell (1972:206) has defined transculturation as:

> a phenomenon that involves the fate of persons rather than changes in socio-cultural systems . . . It is the process whereby individuals under a variety of circumstances are temporarily or permanently detached from one group, enter the web of social relations that constitute another society, and come under the influence of its customs, ideas, and values to a greater or lesser degree.

Transculturation has some important distinctions from the more commonly used concept of biculturalism. Quite often biculturalism is treated as rather one-dimensional. That is, biculturalism typically is associated with bilingualism (Medicine, 1986; Pizzillo, 1976; Vasquez, 1979).

The synonymous use of biculturalism and bilingualism has come under attack as naive (Fishman, 1980; Matute-Bianchi, 1980). Yet, the detractors will admit the usefulness of equating the two terms in finding support for a particular “cross-cultural” program (Bartell, 1979). A fact that could explain why biculturalism has endured with relatively little refinement:

> . . . even though interrelated and interdependent, biculturalism and bilingualism are not identical terms. Bilingualism, in its most ordinary employment, means fluency in at least two languages, including oral communication, the encoding and decoding of written symbols, and the correct inflection and pitch, commonly called the superimposed structure of a language . . . Biculturalism, on the other hand, refers to the cultural elements that may include language but go beyond language, insofar as it is a functional awareness and participation in two contrasting sociocultures (statuses, roles, values, etc.). Thus for the purpose of clarifying the conceptual difficulty here, if it is only the fluency that is assessed as bilingual, it is obvious that bilingualism is not biculturalism . . . There is a sense in which it would be hard to find a better example of the danger of naively defining a term in educational discourse in order to win acceptance of the program offered (Pratte, 1979:183-185).

Also the idea of biculturalism typically implies a kind of acculturated end product. The idea generally is that biculturalism follows a linear pattern with the individual, like a mathematical equation, adding elements from the host culture while relinquishing elements from the native culture (McFee, 1972). Ultimately the result is a sort of “hybrid” with the necessary repertoire of cultural skills (i.e., language) to relate to two cultures. In this sense, biculturalism has simply been a variation on the idea of acculturation.

Furthermore, how an individual receives a blended cultural repertoire is largely ignored. The point of emphasis is that the bicultural individual is a product rather than a process. Only a few attempts have been made to formulate a bicultural process. For instance, Szapocznik and his colleagues have formulated a three-dimensional bicultural process consisting of: (1) the acculturation of cultural elements from the host culture, (2) the retention and relinquishing of native cultural elements, (3) the syncretization of the two cultures resulting in a bicultural individual (Szapocznik and Kurtilnes, 1979; Szapocznik, et. al., 1980; Szapocznik, et. al., 1984; Szapocznik and Hernandez, 1988). However, even in this attempt the implication is nevertheless on an end product.

Transculturation, on the other hand, implies a continual on-going process of cultural encounters and resultant realignments (Sill, 1967). The individual in a cross-cultural situation never achieves the “end product” of biculturalism. This is more analogous to a person on an international journey
experiencing many differing cultural encounters, some of which he/she can relate to, many others in which he/she cannot. At first, the traveler is disoriented and finds little with which to relate. This is the time of first awareness. Each cultural element needs to be tested and evaluated. In time the traveler learns to relate to the new culture on its own terms. This does not mean, however, that the individual has surrendered the native cultural heritage. On the contrary, the individual has simply put it aside long enough to make way in the new cultural setting.

When the individual returns to the native cultural milieu, former ways have not been lost. Experience and skills are certainly broadened but not at the expense of native ways and skills (as implied in biculturalism) (Ortiz, 1947; Polgar, 1960). An international sojourner typically returns with a widened cultural perspective and worldview. The individual, nevertheless, is still the cultural product of his/her society.

When the cross-cultural experience involves members of subcultures within a larger society, the same process applies. Here too journeys into the mainstream result in an enriched and broadened worldview. The important point is that the cultural heritage still remains intact: however, new options exist.

Transculturated students have the unique ability to interact within and between cultures as demanded by the situation (Qoyawayma, 1964). However, the process leading through this cultural-social-psychological maze is not easy. Through interviews with students, four stages of the Native American transculturational process have been identified: initial alienation, self-discovery, realignment, and participation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Stages of Native American transculturation

Stage 1: Initial Alienation
Because traditional Native American students first experience the mainstream college as cultural "outsiders," their initial feeling is one of alienation. At first there are very few things about college life with which they can relate. The institution itself (i.e., administration policies and procedures, even to an extent classroom etiquette, etc.) seem rigid, overly formalized, and altogether strange.

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

"... I felt like I'm where I didn'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 from the Pine Ridge (South Dakota) reservation succinctly summarized his college experience in a similar manner by simply stating: "I feel like I don't belong."

Many students are overwhelmed by the lack of familiar cultural connections. Little contact is made with non-Indian students and the institution itself begins to be regarded with suspicion (due to a growing perception that it is simply another agent of assimilation). Often traditional Native American students even feel alienated from their fellow Native American classmates, particularly those who are more assimilated, viewing them with some contempt as "urban Indians." The same Cheyenne River student stated:

"I just try to keep to myself. It's like they (other Native American students) more or less have accepted the values of non-Indians over Indians ones."

At this stage, traditional Native Americans are extremely vulnerable. An experience in which the perceived threat of assimilation looms large compounded by feelings of isolation from other Native Americans leaves many students disillusioned and thus they reject the college experience. In this sense, Scott's idea of the "difficult situation" is to a point correct. That is, Native American cultural traditionalism and the rigors of academic life do not at first make a blissful marriage.

A student who had lived all his life on the Turtle Mountain (North Dakota) reservation contemplated on the difficulties that he and many other students experience:

"I really think they (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."

Because of their disenfranchisement from college life, it is at this early stage of college life that traditional Native Americans have the greatest potential for unsuccessful academic careers. Many students leave college because of the alienation they feel. Unfortunately, it is these students who often stand out in the literature and serve as stereotypical models of Native Americans who could not release the "old Indian ways" and make the necessary adjustments to the mainstream.

Yet, despite these difficulties, many muddle through. Every day of the first few months (in some cases even years) is a test to their commitment and endurance. A Standing Rock (North Dakota) 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."

**Stage 2: Self-Discovery**

If traditional Native American students can endure the pangs of the initial alienation, they reach a transculturation threshold. At this point they begin to realize that they have not been snared in a web of assimilation, that they can compete academically, and that they can interact with Indians and non-Indians alike, all without a loss to their cultural self. In short, they come to realize that they have not lost their "Indianness" and yet they have survived academically.

Thus, they begin an introspection and make a most curious discovery. They have succeeded because they are Indian and have not attempted to be anything else. It is striking to this writer just how profound this stage is in the experience of the transculturated Native Americans interviewed. Virtually all the transculturated students could relate a specific time in their academic career when they had to take stock of their cultural selves.

At that transculturation threshold a conscious and deliberate decision is made to attempt to relate to both cultural worlds when necessary while using traditional Native American values and heritage as a personal anchor. The Turtle Mountain reservation student referred to above 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 reservation student who was president of his college's honor program and the president of the campus Native American 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."

**Stage 3: Realignment**

With the strength and confidence that they find in their cultural identity, Native American students begin a realignment process. At this stage, students make the necessary practical adjustments in their personal, social, and academic worlds. That is, they begin to learn how to relate at both cultural levels as demanded by the situation. The Standing Rock student cited above referred to this stage as "learning to play the game."

Students reassess themselves and their situation. They evaluate their repertoire of values, attitudes, and goals and measure them against those institutionalized in the fabric of higher education. They can then begin to align themselves with the nature of academia and use the appropriate norms and behaviors as needed. In short, they learn to cross cultural boundaries when necessary. At this stage, they are well into the process of transculturation.

A middle-aged woman from Pine Ridge, by any standards a traditional 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 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."

**Stage 4: Participation**

At this stage students begin to settle in. They have 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 learn that they can interact with both Indians and non-Indians alike. Also, typically their goals and desires are crystallized.

Much like other students, at this stage Native American students begin to concentrate on their studies. Interestingly they also make maximum use of their Native American heritage as a source of strength, confidence, and identity. The 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 pow-wows or sweats 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."

Support from others is important to sustain the participation of this stage. Native American students look to others for the moral support necessary to continue the educational process that still proves to be difficult. The same Pine Ridge student stated:

"I had a lot of elderly people talk to me and tell me that I wasn't here for them (prejudiced whites), that I was here to learn and that someday I was going home to help them out and not to pay attention to them. 'Put those feelings aside. Remember what you're doing but also why you are doing.' So that's where my support comes from. From the elderly people from home. When I go home, I get handshakes, I get hugs. I come back all renewed again. I can handle anything that comes my way."

Transculturated students are the least researched and understood among Native American college students. The reasons for this lack of recognition are several fold. First is a conceptualization difficulty related to the very ability these students have to operate at two cultural levels. That is, the ability to operate in the college mainstream has led some to assume that these students are simply assimilated (Boutwell et al., 1973; Carroll, 1978). Working from such an assumption there is a failure to recognize the retention of Native American cultural traditions implied by transculturation (Medicine, 1986).

Second is a methodological difficulty. Most
studies have been quantitative attempts to measure the degree of assimilation (Huffman et al., 1986; Roy, 1962; and Scott, 1986). Typically these instruments have not been sensitive to transculturational phenomenon. Unfortunately few attempts have been qualitative research designs dealing with the perceptions of Native Americans on their academic experience. Such research strategies are better suited to the articulation of transculturation process.

Third, and underlying the first two reasons, is the problem of ethnocentrism. In the past it has been explicitly advanced that assimilation is and should be the key to educational success of all minorities, especially for Native Americans. Therefore, examples of Native American educational achievement that contradicted the assimilation model were either dismissed as an aberration or simply ignored (Medicine, 1986). In essence, assimilation theory tends to assume a "melting pot" or appropriate mainstream American culture, whereas transculturation theory is appropriate to a pluralistic view of American society.

There is an important implication that arises from this work on transculturation. Success in college for traditional Native Americans does not impinge on greater assimilation at all. Rather, contrary to much of the thinking of the past, for many students the retention of traditional cultural identity and heritage is crucial for greater academic achievement and success. Indeed, it is apparent that traditionalism is the instrumental factor in facilitating a strong sense of personal self-identity and confidence in Native American students.

Cultural traditionalism becomes a "blessing" rather than a "burden," however, when one is able to cross the transculturation threshold between alienation and self-discovery. When Native Americans discover or appropriate the strength that comes from being Indian, they have in place the social psychological mechanism to participate and achieve in the mainstream.

Unfortunately, many traditional Native American college students fail to cross that threshold, resulting in academic failure which further perpetuates the notion that traditionalism poses a "difficult situation." In reality it is not the traditionalism that is the difficult situation, but rather overcoming the alienation that comes along with being a culturally traditional Native American in the non-Indian academic world.

References


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