# *ATTACHMENT TO INDIAN CULTURE AND THE "DIFFICULT SITUATION" A Study of American Indian College Students*

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**Virtually every reference** in the literature concerning American Indian students in institutions of higher learning tells the same story. One, smaller proportions of Indians than whites finish high school and go on to college. Two, Indians who do go to college are less likely to complete degree programs than are white students. This article elaborates what has been termed the "difficult situation" of American Indians in American society (Miller, 1971) and develops its contribution to the high rates of attrition among Indian high school and college students. As a modest test of the argument, the fate of American Indian students who enrolled as freshmen at the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 1975 is examined.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *An earlier version of this article was presented at the Southwestern Sociological Association annual meetings, Houston, Texas, March 22, 1985.*

YOUTH & SOCIETY, Vol. 17 No. 4, June 1986 381-395

## THE DIFFICULT SITUATION

The context of the American Indian experience in higher education lies in the history and structural circumstance of Indian-white relations in general. The experience of American Indians is categorically different from that of the first white colonists and other white ethnic groups who arrived later. These groups migrated here voluntarily, if not eagerly, in search of land and opportunity. Indians—and in the Southwest, Mexicans—are native populations who eventually were conquered by these willing immigrants, their descendants, and their ways (Blauner, 1972). American Indian societies became frozen and suspended in their traditional forms of organization creating "regions of refuge" (Aguirre-Beltran, 1979), a result of reactive social change that occurs when hunting/gathering or horticultural/herding societies are only marginally important to an absorbing nation-state (Hall, 1983).

The structure of relations between the federal government and Indian tribes over the last two hundred years has fostered this dualism between white and Indian cultures.[1] Implicit in the formulation of early federal Indian policy was the premise that Indian culture(s) and white culture—and, by extension, tribal affiliation and U.S. citizenship—were incompatible.[2] The solution was thought to lie in dissolving tribal ties and encouraging Indians to assimilate on an individual basis. With the exception of some tribes who were granted U.S. citizenship by specific treaties, citizenship was to be gotten by leaving the tribe, owning land in severalty, and assuming an occupational stance in keeping with white ways. (A general grant of citizenship was extended to all Indians by Congress in 1924.) Although congressional legislation in the late nineteenth century sought to prohibit the continued recognition of tribal status, the last piece of omnibus Indian legislation passed in 1934 reinstated the tribe as the institutional framework for official dealings with Indians.

Most American Indians with tribal ties reside on reservations or in designated tribal areas. Here tribes are recognized by the

federal government as semisovereign entities, a legal status accorded no other group including Indians not living in these areas. The geographical isolation of Indians accounts for much of their overrepresentation in the periphery of the labor market (Sandefur and Scott, forthcoming). However, it also enhances their ability to maintain traditional values and life-styles, provides some autonomy over what new practices will be adopted, and allows for these choices to become integrated into some coherent cultural scheme.

The minority status of being Indian revolves around attachment to Indian culture. Restrictions on interaction between Indians and whites have not been as severe as those for blacks and, consequently, Indians often are more integrated with whites than are blacks (Sandefur and Scott, 1983). However, to go to college, Indian students typically leave small towns or reservations in which Indian ways still are meaningful and enter environments devoid of these ways. Those fully comfortable with and committed to white ways are better able to cope with the college experience than are Indian students steeped in and attached to the heritages of their tribes.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE DIFFICULT SITUATION

The tension described above is reflected in the behavior of Indian students in white colleges and universities. "Cultural deprivation" or "cultural conflict" (or both) are cited repeatedly in explaining failure rates of Indian students (Miriam, 1928; Patton and Edington, 1973; Weinberg, 1977). According to the cultural deprivation argument, Indian students do not fare well in school because of their relative economic disadvantages. Insofar as this is so, the experience of Indians parallels that of poor whites and blacks. However, the cultural conflict argument offers a different explanation: Indians do poorly in school because the educational system has been one of the major battlegrounds in the confrontation between Indian and

white worlds (Chadwick, 1972; Havighurst, 1970). As the substance, networks, and activities of education in white schools typically champion white values and practices to the exclusion of Indian ones, fitting in and succeeding in school create special problems for Indian students committed to Indian culture.

Recent research has identified social integration with whites as one of the strongest predictors (second only to high school grade point average) of academic success among Indian college students (Kerbo, 1981). Research on *white* high school and college students that focuses on the social systems of schools suggests an explanation of why this is so. Attribute variables (such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status) affect rates of success, not simply because of direct effects on academic performance, but also because they determine the chances of being accepted in a school's social systems (Tinto, 1975). Awareness of one's place in a status hierarchy is tightly tied to self-evaluation and self-esteem (Faunce, 1984). In addition, fitting into facets of high school and university life can enhance the emotional, social, and technical resources needed to succeed academically.

Institutions often have multiple status hierarchies and hence offer a variety of criteria for self-evaluation and support. Where status hierarchies denigrate Indian characteristics and values, Indian students who cherish Indian ways must suppress that regard or run the risk of negative evaluation. Negative evaluation leads to one of four responses: the student can try harder to be "less Indian" (mobility orientation), change the criteria by which he or she is being evaluated (challenge orientation), accept devaluation and develop poor self-esteem (defeatist orientation), or withdraw from the institutional setting altogether (escape orientation).[3] Of the four responses, Indian students committed to Indian ways frequently choose to "escape."

This dilemma is depicted in Figure 1, a model for predicting academic success among Indian college students. The key variable is "Attachment to Indian Culture." Greater measured

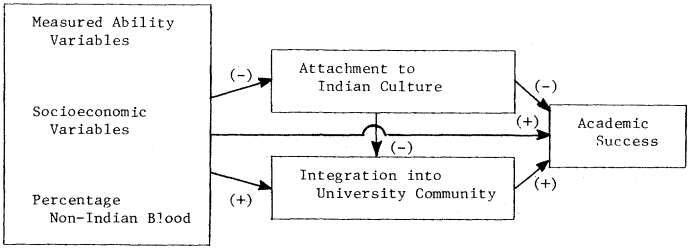


**Figure 1: Model of Academic Success Among American Indian College Students**

ability, higher socioeconomic background, and a higher percentage of "non-Indian" blood—indications that significant integration has taken place prior to arrival at college—are expected to reduce attachment to Indian culture, facilitate subsequent integration into the university community, and thereby increase the likelihood of completing college. Although variables in the model are defined at the individual level of analysis, the line of explanation presented above identifies the school itself as a key locus of the problem. The implications for intervention therefore address those school-created negative evaluations of Indian students that are avoidable and unnecessary.

## THE LOCAL CONTEXT

During the 1970s, mounting dissatisfaction among Indian students and staff at the University of Oklahoma became evident. Although a few courses dealing with tribal cultures and histories could be found, no course work was available in Indian languages, treaty law, or current organizational principles (such as Indian health care delivery systems). The university favored the position that Indian students, and minority students in general, should concentrate on "mainstreaming," that is, on shedding distinctive identities and fitting into existing structures rather than seeking revised programs, additional considerations, or special facilities. In

1972, some two hundred Indian students and community members occupied the university president's office. They sought official university recognition for Indians and Indian ways, an officially designated place on campus for Indian students to meet, and a formal American Indian studies program. They requested the hiring of Indian faculty. In the context of programmatic neglect of Indian problems and issues, they demanded that the university discontinue the use of the mascot, "Little Red," an Indian clad in stereotypical war dance garb who performed at intercollegiate sporting events.

In response, the mascot was shelved. Intertribal powwows, first sponsored on campus in 1969, now were financially supported as well. A budget of about twelve thousand dollars was provided to initiate a "Native American Studies" program. Although little new was added, existing course work was brought under a single umbrella. A house near campus was purchased and designated the "American Indian Student Association Center." Project Threshold classes were held to help low-income students (primarily black and Indian) adjust to university course work. Searches eventually were conducted to seek out talented Indian students and encourage them to enroll. Although important steps, these changes fell short of those envisioned by many Indian students and staff.

## DATA

The sample consists of all Indian students who enrolled as freshmen at the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 1975. All students in the sample were recipients of some form of financial support from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. To be eligible for such support, the student must have at least one-quarter "Indian" blood and be a member of a federally recognized tribe. The cohort contains 53 males and 48 females. Although there are no reservations in Oklahoma, there are officially designated tribal areas in the state. Two-thirds of the 101 come

from five local tribes (Cherokee, Kiowa, Comanche, Seminole, and Choctaw); most of the others are from other Oklahoma-based tribes as well.

Initial data—including high school grade point average (GPA) and American College Test (ACT) scores (measures of academic ability) and number of hours completed and number of semesters enrolled (measures of academic success)—were collected from the students' cumulative files maintained by the university.[4] In addition, questionnaires were mailed during the summer of 1980 to all members of the cohort. Respondents reported parental education and income levels, indicated quantum of "Indian" blood, and responded to items measuring "attachment to Indian culture" and "integration into the university community." Attempts were made to reach non-respondents by telephone. This produced complete information for 72 of the 101 members of the cohort.

The measure of "attachment to Indian culture" is derived from a ten-item Likert scale created for this study. Items address the importance of attending powwows, learning to speak one's tribal language, being knowledgeable about one's tribal heritage, associating with and marrying only other Indians, and the like. Subjects responded to each item using a five-point continuum ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scree test (Gorsuch, 1974), applied to the complete principal components factor analysis of the items, indicates that the creation of a single scale by summing the ten items is justified. The eigenvalues are 4.01, 1.22, 1.09, .84, .73, .60, .51, .38, .33, and .28. All factor loadings are substantially larger than .30 for the one-factor solution, also a strong indication that the items measure a single construct. The alpha reliability coefficient for the scale is .83. Scale items and factor loadings are presented in Table 1.

The same procedure was followed in validating the measure of "integration into the university community" (also presented in Table 1). Items address the availability of, and one's involvement in, campus activities and organizations. Eigen-

## TABLE 1
## Measures of "Attachment to Indian Culture" and "Integration into the University Community"

| Items Measuring "Attachment to Indian Culture" | Loadings for 1-Factor Solution |
|---|---|
| 1 Attending powwows is an important part of the American Indian life-style. | .71 |
| 2 American Indians should be knowledgeable about their heritage. | .40 |
| 3 An American Indian should learn to speak his or her native tongue. | .58 |
| 4 More Indians should make it a point to attend powwows. | .74 |
| 5 It is important to belong to an Indian organization. | .79 |
| 6 The medicine man continues to play an important role for the American Indian. | .69 |
| 7 American Indian studies are an important part of every Indian student's college program. | .58 |
| 8 American Indians should marry only other American Indians. | .62 |
| 9 It is preferable for American Indians to live in all-Indian neighborhoods. | .70 |
| 10 American Indian political groups should help only Indians. | .59 |
| **Items Measuring "Integration into the University Community"** | |
| 1 In my experience, most students found it easy to get the help they needed at the University of Oklahoma (OU). | .76 |
| 2 I think that OU attempted to involve students in university activities. | .74 |
| 3 My parents (or relatives) enjoyed coming to OU on special days like Mom's Day, Dad's Day, and the like. | .55 |
| 4 OU made special efforts to assist and reach out to students of different races. | .75 |
| 5 I felt free to join a fraternity or sorority at OU. | .44 |
| 6 The dormitories at OU were good places to live. | .56 |
| 7 The cafeterias at OU served good, well-balanced meals. | .53 |
| 8 I enjoyed intramural sports at OU. | .64 |
| 9 OU had excellent theater plays for students like me to attend. | .68 |
| 10 School spirit was very evident at student activities at OU. | .54 |

values derived from the principal components solution are 4.26, 1.51, 1.07, .79, .65., .55, .40, .32, .25, and .20. Factor loadings for the one-factor solution all exceed .44. The alpha reliability for this scale is .85. These provide ample evidence that the items form a composite scale.

## FINDINGS

Of the 101 American Indian students who enrolled at the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 1975, 22 (21.8%) were still enrolled four years later in the fall of 1978 and 6 (5.7%) completed their degrees by the spring of 1979. The corresponding figures for the 2,628 other freshmen who enrolled in the fall of 1975 are 52.2% and 16.7%, respectively. When the data were collected in 1980, Indian students had remained enrolled for an average of 4.80 semesters (compared to an average of 6.07 semesters for other freshmen who enrolled in the fall of 1975) and the average number of credit hours completed by the Indian cohort was 48.16.

Bivariate correlations (n = 72) are presented in Table 2. Looking first at the antecedent variables, high school GPA is highly correlated with ACT score (.43), annual family income with both education of head of household (.38) and percentage "non-Indian" blood (.29), and education of head of household with percentage "non-Indian" blood (.22). Attachment to Indian culture is negatively correlated with family income (–.29) and percentage "non-Indian" blood (–.32); in other words, the more affluent the student's family or the more "non-Indian" blood the student has, the less likely it is that he or she is committed to Indian culture. Integration into the university community is positively correlated with annual family income (.20) and education of head of household (.47) and, especially important for purposes here, also is negatively correlated with attachment to Indian culture (–.28). Finally, number of credit hours completed is positively related to high

**TABLE 2**
**Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations**

| Variables | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 High School Grade Point Average | --- | .43* | .11 | .13 | .01 | -.07 | .16 | .40* |
| 2 ACT Composite Score | | --- | .18 | .15 | .16 | -.04 | .15 | .41* |
| 3 Annual Family Income | | | --- | .38* | .29* | -.29* | .20* | .27* |
| 4 Education of Head of Household | | | | --- | .22* | .00 | .47* | .28* |
| 5 Percentage Non-Indian Blood | | | | | --- | -.32 | .15 | .14 |
| 6 Attachment to Indian Culture | | | | | | --- | -.28* | -.28* |
| 7 Integration into University Community | | | | | | | --- | .41 |
| 8 Credit Hours Completed | | | | | | | | --- |
| Means | 2.89 | 18.32 | 14966 | 12.05 | 28.60 | 35.11 | 30.03 | 54.71 |
| Standard Deviations | .55 | 4.53 | 8542 | 3.22 | 28.03 | 7.53 | 7.43 | 39.77 |

*$p < .05$.

school GPA (.40), ACT composite score (.41), annual family income (.27), education of head of household (.28), and integration into the university community (.41); it is negatively correlated with attachment to Indian culture (–.28).

Table 3 contains a summary of statistics derived from regression (path) analyses of the variables. When all antecedent variables are considered simultaneously, both family income (–.233) and percentage "non-Indian" blood (–.280) continue to be significant predictors of attachment to Indian culture. However, when integration into the university community is so analyzed, the effects of education of head of household and annual family income are not statistically significant (although their bivariate correlations were significant). Here only attachment to Indian culture (–.261) is a significant predictor of it. This is evidence that attachment to Indian culture is the

**TABLE 3**
**Regression Analyses**

| Dependent Variables | Independent Variables | Unstd b -1 | s.e. of b | Stnd B -2 | R | RSQ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attachment to Indian Culture | High School GPA | -.613 | 1.732 | -.045 | | |
| | ACT Composite | .053 | .215 | .032 | | |
| | Family Income | -.002* | .001 | -.233* | .39 | .15 |
| | Educ HouseHead | .328 | .284 | .141 | | |
| | Non-Indian Blood | -.751* | .032 | -.280* | | |
| Integration into Univ | High School GPA | 1.211 | 1.742 | .089 | | |
| | ACT Composite | .089 | .217 | .054 | | |
| | Family Income | .000 | .001 | .036 | .36 | .13 |
| | Educ HouseHead | .377 | .287 | .163 | | |
| | Non-Indian Blood | .014 | .033 | .001 | | |
| | Attachment to IC | -.258* | .123 | -.261* | | |
| Hours Completed | High School GPA | 15.185* | 7.957 | .210* | | |
| | ACT Composite | 2.745* | .987 | .313* | | |
| | Family Income | .000 | .001 | .099 | | |
| | Educ HouseHead | -.319 | 1.327 | -.025 | .61 | .31 |
| | Non-Indian Blood | .049 | .151 | .034 | | |
| | Attachment to IC | -.726 | .582 | -.137 | | |
| | Integration Univ | 1.430* | .564 | .267* | | |

1. Unstandardized partial regression coefficients.
2. Path coefficients, i.e., standardized partial regression coefficients.
*$p < .05$.

mechanism linking the socioeconomic variables with integration into the university community. In other words, Indian students from less affluent backgrounds are the ones most likely to have attachments to Indian culture and subsequently are the very ones least likely to feel integrated into the scheme of things in university life.

The number of credit hours completed has three significant predictors: ACT composite score (.313), integration into the university community (.267), and high school GPA (.210). Testing well on the ACT is the best predictor of academic success among Indian students in this sample. Independent of performance on the ACT, knowing whether or not an Indian student feels integrated into the university community provides the next best basis for predicting academic success. Beyond these two considerations, high school GPA is a sound best basis for predicting academic success among Indian college students. Attachment to Indian culture is not statistically

related to credit hours completed when all variables are considered simultaneously (although it is correlated with this variable at the bivariate level). Considering its direct effect on integration into the university community in conjunction with the effect of the integration variable on credit hours completed shows how attachment to Indian culture nevertheless influences how successful the student is likely to be. Indian students who are less devoted to Indian ways are more likely to feel comfortable in the university community and, in turn, those who feel that way are more likely to succeed academically.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examines key factors affecting academic success among American Indian college students enrolled in a large state university. The data show that there are two avenues of explanation in accounting for academic success among Indian students. One is built around accepted indications of academic ability. Two of the three best predictors of academic success are ACT composite score and high school GPA. Independent of all other considerations raised here, those Indian students who performed well in high school and on standardized entrance requirement tests are much more likely to succeed in college than those who performed more poorly in high school and on these tests. Mastering college course work requires proficiency in reading and writing, aptitude for handling abstract thought, and the ordering of daily habits around a specific routine. High school GPA and ACT composite score tap prior experience in carrying out these chores and hence are strong predictors of academic success among white and Indian students alike.

The second avenue revolves around considerations that are not strictly academic ones. The findings clearly show that being a "cultural Indian" reduces the chances of academic success. Independent of all other considerations, including how much measured academic ability the student has, such a student is more likely to fail because he or she is less likely to become

integrated into the university community. The findings are of importance because they identify the process through which attachment to Indian culture affects academic success and because they implicate the role of the university setting in encouraging failure.

The overall context of Indian-white relations provides the point of departure for interpreting these findings. Historically, the assumed course of change in Indian-white relations has been unidirectional: Indians have been expected to become "white" cheerfully. In the case of education, Indian students have been counseled to become "less Indian" as a conscious strategy for doing better in school. If this is what is meant by success, many Indians would not consider dropping out of school a mark of failure. For many, success in education means mastering white ways on one's own terms by maintaining some commitment to Indian values and tradition. The issue is not whether assimilation should take place but rather how much, how fast, and under whose direction. These are questions that Indian students must confront and resolve for themselves.

On the other hand, the theoretical and empirical importance of the variable, integration into the university community, suggests the following policy for a university administration: Facilitate integration into the university community by making the university community more inviting to Indian students committed to Indian ways. By definition, a university setting contains many status groupings, some of which revolve around a variety of academic and special interest concerns. The substance and activities of some hierarchies are compatible with academic success and hence facilitate staying in college and doing well; others run at cross-purposes and actually undermine academic success. It is important that Indian values and ways be sanctioned positively in some of these hierarchies.

These considerations point to formally instituted structures that positively evaluate Indian students for being Indian, make them part of the university community, and enhance the skills and resources required for academic success. Universities might take the initiative in establishing Indian cultural centers

devoted to documenting and preserving Indian ways. Course work in many disciplines might be revised to include and showcase Indian languages, art, history, philosophies, and customs. Some of this course work might become part of the general education curriculum required of all students. Such concerns might become one of a university's designated areas of academic excellence and consequently receive high priority in funding. These are issues that university administrators, assuming that they are concerned about the "difficult situation" in which many of their Indian students find themselves, might confront with Indian students and staff.

## NOTES

1. There is no "one" Indian culture. Although tribes may share certain cultural elements in common, each constitutes distinct social and cultural systems.

2. See Officer (1971) for a history of relations between the federal government and Indian tribes. Initially, federal Indian policy sought to regulate trade between Indians and whites. However, early in the nineteenth century the focus shifted to the acquisition of land from Indian tribes and, consequently, to the resettlement of Indians elsewhere. Policy at this time also called for efforts at "civilizing" Indians. Funds therefore were provided to sponsor missionary work among Indian tribes and the first agents were hired specifically to instruct Indians in "white ways." Following the Civil War, the first reservations were established as part of the resettlement program. Although much resettlement was accomplished peacefully, the Indian Wars of the 1870s were waged to conquer and move to reservations the few remaining "hostile" tribes. Off-reservation boarding schools were established in 1879 to isolate Indian children from traditional cultures during the school year and enhance the chances of assimilating them. The Homestead Act was extended to Indians in 1875 to encourage voluntary, permanent residence away from the tribe and to provide for individual rather than communal ownership of land.

3. These responses correspond to the active and passive modes of adaptation suggested by Merton (1968) as strategies for dealing with anomie. More recently, Figuera-McDonough (1983) revised the typology in developing an explanation for delinquency among high school students with bad grades. Her research portrays delinquency as a defensive strategy that seeks to ameliorate denigrated self-image.

4. Data originally were collected by Suarez (1981).

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