

RESEARCH ANALYSIS REPORT

by

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Abstract

A report presented on the analysis of:

Whitbeck, Les, et al. "Traditional Culture and Academic Success among American Indian Children in the Upper Midwest." *Journal of American Indian Education* 40 (2001): 48-60

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Research in Indigenous communities has always been a controversial issue. For years Native peoples have been subjected to un-ethical research practices by almost every discipline in academia. Most Native communities have stories about the “Ugly American” professor who invades their community, demanding their time, cultural artifacts and traditional knowledge:

- An Alaskan Inuit village was approached by a woman doing research for her dissertation. She offered to record their elders telling traditional stories in order to preserve them for the tribal museum if they would let her use the recordings in her research. The village leaders consented to her request on those terms, only to have her disappear with all the recordings. They were never able to locate her to get the promised stories.
- A Ute professor laughingly recalls her grandmother’s stories of the anthropology researcher who refused to take “No” for an answer. Bound by cultural taboo to keep certain knowledge secret, the woman was forced to provide inaccurate information to placate the persistent researcher.
- A Muscogee college student came across a book written by a language professor on her experiences studying the Muscogee language. The tone of her writing was extremely condescending and hostile towards her subjects and the cultural information in the book was questionable. The student gave the book to her uncle for his opinion. After skimming through it, he informed her that not only was the cultural information inaccurate but the subjects weren’t recognized as tribal members and had very limited proficiency in the Muscogee language.

These are just a few of the stories that circulate Indigenous communities. Clearly, efforts need to be made to ensure that reliable, useful and respectful studies of Native peoples are the norm rather than the exception in all fields.

The growing number of Native researchers entering the nation's universities have been making a notable impact on the quality of research in Indigenous communities. Unfortunately, non-Native researchers have been reluctant to accept the validity of Native produced research. They cling to the irrational belief that Native researchers are incapable of conducting bias-free studies on their own people. In response to this situation, Native researchers have been partnering with non-Native researchers to conduct research in many fields.

“Traditional Culture and Academic Success Among American Indian Children in the Upper Midwest” is an excellent example of a quality research project conducted by a team of Native and Non-Native researchers. The report, as published in the Journal of American Indian Education in 2001, is useful both to educators of American Indian children and to their communities as well. Not only do the researchers address the question of traditional culture's impact on academic success of Indian children but, it also tackles the bigger issue of difficulties in studying the effects of culture in Indian education.

Introductory Section

The introductory section includes a comprehensive literature review of the major studies on the topic done in the last 30 years. The authors are clear to point out the shortcomings of the existing studies, i.e. small samples and restrictive environments. While they don't explain why they only focus on research published since the 1970's, an understanding of the history of Indian education leads this reader to conclude that the status quo of Indian education today has only existed for that long. Most Indian students today attend public schools, both urban and reservation, or tribally controlled BIA schools. The boarding schools that proliferated in the past have almost vanished along with their “Save the child, kill the Indian” assimilationist mentality.

The introduction section also contains a brief yet thorough discussion of the distinction of the research the authors conducted. They apparently wish to establish their project as the definitive study. This reveals their commitment to an in-depth exploration of the topic beyond what most studies have achieved.

A sub-section of the introduction titled, "Traditional Culture and American Indian Education" provides additional background on the issues involved in studying effects of traditional culture on adolescent behavioral outcomes. These complicating factors include:

- Heterogeneity of cultures - 510 culture groups
- Lack of standardized measures of traditional culture
- Need to use multiple dimensions to capture the complexity of the concept of "traditional culture"
- Conflicting definitions of "success"
- Impact of other contributing factors such as economic disadvantage.

The fact that the researchers are aware of these issues and making a concerted effort to addresses them gives credence to the validity of their study.

Purpose Section

The research question is clearly stated as the Hypotheses: "We hypothesized a positive association between child enculturation and school success."

Methods Section

The authors describe in comprehensive detail the methodology they used in developing their unique models. They explained the measures used to obtain their data range as well as the "Enculturation" construct dimensions applied. Again the extensive details and thoroughness they apply to examine every nuance of the issues involved in researching

this topic strengthens the report's credibility. The balance between adapting existing instruments and developing new unique models and constructs impressed this reader.

Results Section

The results were presented in bivariate correlations and multivariate models. Findings include:

- Maternal warmth, extracurricular activities, enculturation and high self-esteem are positively associated with school success.
- Girls scored higher on enculturation than boys.
- Students from lower income families scored higher on enculturation.
- Enculturation is positively associated with school success.

Discussion Section

The authors state their findings, "provide support for resiliency effects of enculturation in American Indian children even when controlling for typical academic success variables." Their secondary findings that self-esteem was not significantly related to enculturation is surprising and unexpected. This opens the door for more in-depth studies on studies specifically related to traditional culture and self-esteem in adolescents.

The fact that the researchers are clear in explaining their study's limitations and caution the readers against generalizing reflects integrity. The authors clearly state they do not intend to be disrespectful by trying to "scientifically" prove what most Native peoples have known all along. They make every effort to include their subject's communities in developing their models as well as making sure to have permission for all cultural information used. This behavior is the "yardstick" by which all research in Indigenous communities should be measured.

