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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESERVATION  
ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS  
AND CULTURAL TRADITIONALISM: A RESEARCH NOTE

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INTRODUCTION

The economic and educational structural characteristics of Indian reservations generally have been well documented. American Indians are among the poorest and least educated of America's ethnics. The 1984 Presidential Commission on Indian Reservation Economies (PCIRE) reported that in 1983 the unemployment rate for Indians living on reservations was 22 percent. Furthermore, the Commission cited Census information as indicating that in 1980 around 408,000 Indians (or approximately 27 percent of the total Indian population) were living below the poverty line.

Educationally, Indians appear to be faring better than in years past. However, PCIRE reported that in 1980 about one-third of the Indian population 25 years and over had not completed high school. Nevertheless, over half of the total population had a high school education or more (about 6 percent of all American Indians held a college degree). According to PCIRE the median years of school completed in 1980 for Indian people was 12.2.

Although these structural characteristics are well known, the relation that cultural traditionalism has with these characteristics is not as well understood. Much speculation has been offered regarding the relation between cultural traditionalism and the economic and educational structure of American Indian reservations. In the past, it was frequently argued that the retention of cultural traditions posed a barrier to the development of Indian reservations (and implied assimilation of Indian people) (Dozier, Simpson, and Yinger, 1957; Linton, 1940; Manners, 1982; Provinse, 1954; Social Science Research Council, 1954; and Vogt, 1957). Whereas, more recently it has been posited that the notion of assimilation was at best misguided and at worst disastrous to Indian people and that development must occur within the context of cultural traditions (Biggart, 1972; Falk and Aitken, 1984; and Levitan and Hetrick, 1971).

Few studies have been undertaken to assess the nature of the relations between cultural traditions and economic and educational structures. This paper is an attempt to investigate the relationship between economic and educational characteristics and American Indian cultural traditionalism on 127 reservations.

METHOD

Using data from the 1980 U.S. Census, a sample consisting of 127 reservations scattered in 18 western and mid-western states was collected. Obviously, the selection of variables was limited to those reported in the Census information. Since the objective of the research was to investigate the relationships between reservation economic and educational structural characteristics with cultural traditionalism, variables indicative of these characteristics were necessary.

The census provides rather good information on the economic and educational structural characteristics of the reservation. That is, census information includes the nature of the economic condition (i.e. unemployment rate, poverty rate, percent of families with no workers in the household, per capita income,

median family income, etc.) It also provides information on the nature of reservation education (i.e., percent of the adult population who are high school graduates, the percent of the adult population who are college graduates, the percent of the reservation who are not in high school and have not graduated, etc.).

It is apparent that there is a variety of information provided in the census tracts that can be used as indicators of these kinds of structural characteristics. As indicators of economic and educational characteristics, two variables for each were selected. Specifically, percent of the adult population unemployed and percent of the reservation population living under the poverty line were selected as economic indicators. As educational indicators two variables were selected, percent of the population over 25 who were high school graduates and percent of the population who were college graduates were selected. These two variables were selected as they offered indications of educational characteristics at both the secondary and post-secondary levels.

There is much less census information on the cultural traditionalism on reservations. This lack of information is certainly understandable. Cultural traditionalism is extremely difficult to operationalize. What may relate to traditionalism on one reservation may be totally inappropriate on another. Furthermore, the subjective nature of "traditionalism" from person to person (let alone from reservation to reservation) makes objective measurement of the concept elusive.

At a very basic level, cultural traditionalism refers to a retention of native cultural ways and customs. One of the most powerful and important elements of any culture is language. Therefore, language would be a good indicator of "traditionalism." The census tracts report the percent of people on the reservations who speak a Native American language. The variable, percent over 5 years old who speak a Native American language, was selected as the indicator of cultural traditionalism.

To investigate the relationships between these variables Pearson correlation and partial correlations were utilized.

#### DESCRIPTION OF STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

The economic and educational structural characteristics of the research sample are quite similar to the structural characteristics of Indian reservations reported by the PCIRE.

The Commission reported that the 1983 unemployment rate for reservations nationwide to be 22 percent. The 127 reservations in this sample have a median average unemployment rate of 7 percent (with a range of 1.2 to 60.0 percent). The Commission also reported that an average of 34 percent of reservation populations were population living below the poverty level. The reservations in this sample have a median average of 27 percent of the population living below the poverty level (with a range of 4.0 to 98.9 percent). It appears, that the reservations in this sample have economic structural conditions (as measured by these two variables) which are comparable to the figures reported in the 1984 Presidential Commission of American Indian Reservation Economies.

The educational structural characteristics of the sample are slightly different from that reported by the 1984 Commission. For instance, while PCIRE reported that two-thirds of the adult Indian population had completed high school, in this sample a median average of one-half of the adult population had completed high school (with a range of 10.9 to 99.9 percent). Also, this sample had a median average of 4 percent of the population with a college education (with a range of .6 to 33.3 percent). Unfortunately, the PCIRE did not report figures on the percent of the reservation population with a college education.

Additionally, the reservations in this sample have a median average of 32 percent of the adult population who speak a Native language (with a range of .2 to 99.9 percent). The PCIRE did not report the percentage of reservation populations which speak a Native American language. Therefore, comparisons on this variable cannot be made.

## RESULTS

Table 1 lists the zero-order correlations for the five variables. These correlations show that among the sample reservation populations, cultural traditionalism is significantly inversely related to high school achievement ( $-.160$ ,  $p .05$ ). However, interestingly, cultural traditionalism is positively correlated with the percent of the population with a college education ( $.132$ ,  $p < .10$ ).

Among the economic indicators, cultural traditionalism does not show a significant correlation to the unemployment rate on reservations ( $.015$ ) while it is positively correlated with the reservation poverty rate ( $.268$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The zero-order correlations clearly show that educational achievement (on both the secondary and higher educational levels) is inversely related to poor economic conditions. The percent of high school graduates on the reservations is significantly inversely related to both the unemployment rate and the poverty rate ( $-.289$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $-.353$ ,  $p < .001$  respectively). While the percent of college graduates on the reservations is not correlated with the poverty rate ( $.018$ ), it is significantly inversely related to the unemployment rate ( $-.152$ ,  $p < .10$ ).

These correlations may reveal something of the relationships between these variables, however, alone they offer an incomplete analysis. Partial correlations between cultural traditionalism and the educational variables, while controlling for economic conditions, reveal a different relationship than that which appears using only the zero-order correlations.

Specifically, while the zero-order correlation show that cultural traditionalism is significantly inversely related to the percent of high school graduates, when controlling for the effects of the economic conditions of the reservations, the correlation between these variables falls to only  $-.086$  (Table 2). Additionally, the partial correlation between cultural traditionalism and percent of college graduates on reservations while controlling for the same economic conditions ( $.125$ ), although not significant at the  $.10$  level, nevertheless, remains fairly consistent with the zero-order correlation ( $.132$ ,  $p < .10$ ).

## DISCUSSION

In the past it has been common to regard cultural traditionalism as a barrier to greater educational achievement among American Indians (Boutwell, et al.). These findings suggest, however, that the relationship between cultural traditionalism and education must be understood within the larger economic context of reservations. That is, the notion that cultural traditionalism poses a barrier to greater educational achievement as assumed by the assimilation model of education is too simplistic to be of any real benefit.

It is particularly interesting that there is a major change in the correlation between high school achievement and cultural traditionalism when controlling for economic conditions. With the effects of economic conditions uncontrolled it appears that traditionalism is significantly correlated to low rates of high school achievement on reservations. However, while controlling those same

economic conditions, it is clear that the effects of traditionalism on secondary education achievement is virtually nonexistent. A finding that hardly supports the assimilation model of education.

Additionally, cultural traditionalism seems to be related to reservation college achievement. It could be argued that this latter relationship is spurious. That is, those reservations which are the more traditional also tend to have high poverty levels. In fact, cultural traditionalism is significantly related to high poverty levels. Therefore, it could be assumed that poorer reservations attract college educated Indian people back in the capacity of helping professions (i.e., teachers, public service workers, health care workers, etc.). Thus, poorer reservations have a large pool of college graduates due to the need found on the reservation. However, the data does not support this assumption. The reservation poverty rate is not related to the percent of college graduates. It cannot simply be concluded that poorer reservations attract greater numbers of college educated Indians due to their greater need.

At the risk of committing an ecological fallacy, the writer suggests that cultural traditionalism may in fact be related in a direct fashion to college achievement. Specifically, previous research has shown that traditionalism is related to college achievement (Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg, 1986). These researchers argue that cultural traditionalism supplies Indian college students a clear normative base from which to operate and a strong cultural identity. Together these social psychological factors give an edge to some Indian students which may enhance their chances of success at a predominantly white institution. While one must be careful in drawing social psychological conclusions from aggregate data, it could be that these findings are pointing to this kind of relationship.

In conclusion, the relationships among cultural traditionalism and the educational and economic conditions of reservations are complex at best. Clearly the effect that American Indian traditions have on rates of educational achievement cannot be understood divorced from an appreciation of the economic conditions of reservations.

Further research is needed; empirical findings are lacking. It is precarious to attempt social psychological inferences from aggregate data, however, the findings here may well be indicating that poor economic conditions of reservations pose a greater barrier for educational achievement (especially on the secondary level) on reservations than does the often presumed barriers offered by cultural traditionalism.

Table 1  
Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	CULTRAD	HSGRAD	COLLGRAD	PERUNEM	PERPOV
CULTRAD	1.00				
HSGRAD	-.160**	1.00			
COLLGRAD	.132*	.405***	1.00		
PERUNEM	.015	-.289***	-.152*	1.00	
PERPOV	.268***	-.353***	.018	.238***	1.00

CULTRAD=Cultural Traditionalism  
 HSGRAD=Percent of High School Graduates  
 COLLGRAD=Percent of College Graduates  
 PERUNEM=Percent of Population Unemployed  
 PERPOV=Percent of Population Living Below Poverty Line

\*p<.10  
 \*\*p<.05  
 \*\*\*p<.01  
 \*\*\*\*p<.001

Table 2  
Partial Correlations: Cultural Traditionalism  
with Educational Variables Controlling for  
Economic Variables

Variable	HSGRAD	COLLGRAD
CULTRAD	-.086	.125

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