Self-Perception and Perceived Alienation among American Indians

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Self-perception studies concerning the American Indian are summarized, beginning with early personality studies and progressing to the present. Emphasis is placed on the relationship between the findings and their effect on policy. Survey results of a national sample of 791 Indians are presented describing self-perceptions, perceptions toward feelings of alienation, and the relationship between the two constructs. Implications for research and identifying and developing community programs based on findings are included in the discussion.

Attempts to characterize the American Indian from early colonial times to the present are full of rich, often poignant, and biased descriptions. Whatever the quality of the reports, many would agree that the characterizations often have been fabricated to justify policy. The historian Gary Nash argues quite pointedly that “Indian policy” was and to an extent continues to be shaped by the way images of Indians have been developed and presented to the public. Certain sixteenth-century writings, for example, gave early colonists much to fear as the “people of the New World were not only primitive—but bestial, cannibalistic, sexually abandoned and moved entirely by passion more than reason” (Nash, 1972, p. 201).

Twentieth-century attempts to understand the character and personality of the first Americans range from the reverent, dignified impressions of social anthropologists to the careful use and manipulation of psychometrics by psychiatrists. In general, the findings produce an image in which the Indian is seen as less than normal and in some cases even pathological. The Indian self-image tends to be presented in negative terms bolstered with indications of poverty, squalor, illiteracy, and alcoholism. Just as in the colonial era, modern portrayals of the conditions and character of the Indian affect present policy and the nature and quality of services developed and delivered.

The notion that American Indians in general perceive themselves negatively and feel alienated may be far more apparent than real, although vast numbers of community services and educational programs designed to deal with the negative imagery (e.g., Title IV-A of the Indian Education Act) explicitly alert us to such negative perceptions. This paper summarizes a survey research effort that describes the self-perceptions and perceived alienation of a predominantly late adolescent sample of American Indians. With control for cultural biases built into instrument construction and administration, the results are not in line with those of our historical predecessors.

Early Twentieth-Century Studies

Twentieth-century research on the personality and the self of the American Indian has contained very few studies focusing directly on the “self”; most studies have emphasized instrument and culcul the first their re style or 3. groundwhere,organiz...
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Phrasized personality descriptions obtained from controlled observations or personality instruments. Five basic themes emerge from the literature:

1. The investigations, especially those between 1920 and 1950, show a definite social and cultural anthropological orientation. This makes sense, since anthropologists were the first group of social scientists to study distinct cultural groups, and until recently their research procedures and methods of inquiry dominated American Indian studies.

2. Studies tend to emphasize causal relationships between culturally distinct lifestyle orientations and personality characteristics and development.

3. There is a tendency for investigators to follow particular psychologically grounded theories of personality. Psychoanalysis heavily influenced a number of studies where, on occasion, specific references were made to ego development, stability, and organization.

4. The research findings are inconsistent. Some researchers have found that many more Indians than non-Indians have negative self-perceptions. Others have identified tendencies toward "abnormal personality" characteristics among presumably "normally" functioning Indian samples.

5. Most of the personality and "self" research has been conducted on youths. Few studies have attempted to identify and describe personality and self correlates among adult and elderly Indians.

Early twentieth-century psychologists tended to emphasize internal mental processes, and studies of the Indian personality closely followed this orientation. To accomplish this, some aspect of Indian life—such as kinship ties, child-rearing practices, or religious inclinations—was usually studied, and the investigator would tie the analysis directly to personality traits.

The more representative studies of the period from 1920 to 1940 included descriptions of psychic disorders (Landes, 1938), comparisons of Indian mental development with that of the dominant culture (Hautt, 1934), and effects of child-rearing on ego development (Erikson, 1937). Haught (1934) concluded that the "low mental ability" of the Indian child was related to certain personality deficiencies allegedly common among Indian youth. Landes (1938) concluded that windigo—the Ojibwa mythological spirit—was the principal cause of a deviant personality. At a more dramatic level Saindon (1933), a Catholic priest, made careful observations of Cree culture during his stay on the Wisconsin Cree Reservation. He was especially impressed with the personality structure of the people but probably was less than objective when he noted that "the Indian is a big child...who has quite a liking for those abnormal mental experiences." Each of these studies attempted to isolate and describe the personality of the Indian and attribute it to some aspect of his tribe.

Though anthropological research dominated the field between 1940 and 1950, a trend toward a more psychologically grounded approach was evident. Personality was of interest, not only as it related to culture but also as it related to the influence of assimilation into the dominant culture, the economic situation of the reservation, and the isolation of the tribe. Projective techniques, especially the Rorschach and the Thematic Apperception tests, were in wide use.

A number of classic studies were produced during the 1940s, and some recognized self process. Honigmann (1967), in an intensive study of Kaska ethos, was perhaps the first to explore aspects of the self, especially its relationship to a worldview. A similar interest was expressed by MacGregor (1949) in his studies of the Dakota, which con-
cluded that a Dakota child sees the world as hostile, dangerous, and unrelenting in providing dissatisfaction from which a self-view emerges of a child who is undeserving and suspicious of all things. To the contrary, Erikson (1950) viewed Siouan child-rearing style as one that encourages attitudes of "undiminished self-esteem and trust" in the tribe to provide for one's needs.

Some of the studies differentiated the personality development of the sexes. Hallowell's (1959) study of 102 respondents from the Lake Winnipeg/Berens River area indicated that twice as many males as females were in the maladjusted class, according to the Rorschach results. He attributed the findings primarily to the decline of traditional ceremonies, the influx of technology, and general influences of the dominant society. Males apparently developed negative self-images that included feelings of incompetence, sexual inadequacy, and disorganization.

The research of this period seemed concerned with isolating the factors that differentiated the personality of the American Indian from that of his/her counterpart in the dominant society. Invariably, and usually without hesitation, researchers viewed the Indian and the dominant culture as two separate poles.

Mid-Century Interests and Personality Studies

During the 1950s, interest in acculturation and its effects highlighted the research. Boggs (1956, 1958), for example, was one of the first to be concerned with acculturation effects on personality development of Indian youth. He concluded that acculturation presents conflicts for Ojibwa youth and that "extensive social disorganization inhibits the development of a 'self role'" (1958, p. 55). Similarly, the Spindlers (1958), through Rorschach protocols, found the male modal personality to be characterized by "anxiety, tension, constriction, and a breakdown of emotional controls" and that "the discontinuity of the male roles... is concomitant with... psychological discontinuing" (p. 233).

Some research emphasized the individualistic nature of the American Indian personality. James (1954), Friedl (1956), and Hallowell (1946) concentrated their efforts on acquiring baseline information within tribes, rather than studying tribes as single units. As an outcome, the researchers introduced individual-oriented terms such as "atomistic," "self-dependent," and "self-reliant" to describe the Chippewa.

Perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of the 1950s is the almost exclusively negative slant of the findings. Few positive findings were generated. Spindler's (1958) conclusions are somewhat characteristic of those made in that decade:

We would expect to find psychological consequences which represent a combination of attenuated native features and regressive disintegration (particularly in emotional and intellectual controls, where the link with self-image and role is most important). That is what Hallowell found among the parents of the children Boggs observed. These children, like their parents, will probably grow up with the regressive features exaggerated, unless something positive happens to the social situation in which their developing self-images will be tested and further shaped. (p. 936)

The consensus of most of the research thus far described was that American Indian populations, particularly the youth, had negative self-images or personality structures. The apparent increase in the number of negatively slanted findings, like the pre-twentieth-century images, would build a case leading eventually to interventions targeted toward Indian youth by a multitude of federal agencies and private founda-
tions. The justification for this intervention is even more apparent when self-image studies of the 1960s and 1970s are examined.

Turmoil, Consciousness-Raising, and the Negative Self

Studies of the Indian self-image during the 1960s ushered in an increased reliance on research findings obtained from allegedly more reliable measurement styles. Many of the studies formed the basis for Indian activism promoting the purported "plight" of the first American.

Reliance on paper-and-pencil personality and self-report measures ranged from the use of specifically constructed semantic-differential scales to tap personality and values (Helper & Garfield, 1965) to such standardized instruments as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) (Bryde, 1969; Saslow & Harrover, 1968) and the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) (Mason, 1969; Trimble, 1969).

The differences in sexuality between American Indian cultures and the dominant American culture concerned some investigators. In describing his findings on the personality structure of the shaman, Boyer (1961) maintained that the "principal fixations of shamans were oral and phallic. There were suggestions that he lacked clear masculine identity and suffered from problems resulting from latent homosexuality" (p. 31). In several research publications, sexual deviancy from the dominant American culture's norms was reported along with the problems of "near-institutionalized drunkenness."

In Clifton and Levine's (1963) study of the Klamath, several results were related specifically to the "self." They maintained that "the Klamath seldom have much good and often much that is bad to say of themselves" (p. 74). They concluded that the "highly acculturated" Klamaths manifested a "general, overt, and conscious devaluation of the self" (p. 74).

A few studies compared the personality and self-image profiles of Indians and non-Indians and those among specific groupings of Indians. In separate studies, both Herreid and Herreid (1966) and Bryde (1969) reported personality descriptions among their respective sample populations based on the results of the MMPI. Herreid and Herreid found that a sample of Alaska natives were collectively more disturbed on certain MMPI scales than were non-native Alaskans. Bryde administered the same instrument to Oglala Sioux and non-Indian adolescent groups and reported, "On each of these measures the total (Indian) group revealed greater personality disruptions. Notable among the more meaningful variables were feelings of rejection, repression, anxiety, and a tendency to withdraw" (p. 10).

Through the use of the California Psychological Inventory, Trimble (1969) found significant differences between employed and unemployed male Indians in western Oklahoma on 8 of the 18 scales. The CPI profiles of the employed sample corresponded closely to those of a typical respondent; that is, the normative standards established for the CPI. In contrast, the unemployed response profiles were well below norms, especially in the areas of a sense of well-being, tolerance, and socialization.

Educational opportunities and relative socioeconomic deprivation were sometimes reflected against personality correlates. For example, Hoffman (1968) found that the self-concept of American Indians was related to academic aspirations and that the self-concept of a student was in direct relationship to the education and occupational level of the father. Hoffman also reported that self-concept increased among subjects whose mothers worked and that it tended to increase further as the occupational level and status of the mother increased.
In an effort to assess the impact of an educational intervention program on self-concept, Mason (1969) concluded through CPI profiles that female participants demonstrated a more negative attitude in terms of personal worth. Of the American Indian, Mexican-American, and Caucasian subjects, she found that the Caucasians tended to express the greatest sense of self-worth whereas the Indians expressed the least.

Perhaps one of the more dramatic findings of the decade points to the credibility given by some Indians to the images generated by the dominant culture. James (1961), for example, found the local Whites' negative stereotype of the Indian as "dirty," "drunken," "lazy," and "immoral." James concluded that,

[To the extent that he, the Indian, accepts the values of White culture and defines his goals in terms of them, as inevitably he must to participate successfully in the roles that constitute the subculture extension of White institutions, he is forced to admit the validity of the stereotype. He is pressed to internalize the negative stereotype as a self-image, to conclude that he is, in fact, an "inferior" person. (p. 734)]

The research of the 1970s continued to substantiate the prevalence of a negative self-image. What one finds in the 1970s data, though, is a more systematic attempt to isolate sources of the negative findings. Prior to the 1970s, investigative work had played a significant role in creating a generally negative image of Indians. Medicine (1971), an anthropologist, placed the blame for this squarely on the writings of her predecessors and colleagues. Because anthropological data were usually framed in the ethnographic present, "tribes were seen as components of 'culture areas' frozen in ecological domains and social systems" (McHickel, 1970, p. 6). On the other hand, the writers of the 1970s recognized that it was counterproductive to decry the placement of Indian tribes in the past while expecting present-day members of those tribes to continue to behave in that incorrectly described framework. Yet the writings and research of the 1970s that dealt with the personality of Indians added little—contemporary social scientists perpetuated the idea that Indians "simply don't think well of themselves."

Several researchers recorded Indian students' characterizations of themselves. Zirkel (1971), for example, concluded on the basis of a literature review that Indian students' self-concepts were significantly lower than those of Whites. Hathorn (1971) found that low self-image in the Indian was reinforced by formal education. Brockman (1970) administered a questionnaire to students on the Flathead Reservation and found that discrimination both by teachers and by non-Indian students tended to lower a woman's total score among these students, although many students from prosperous Indian families were not aware of any discrimination. In his study of various ethnic groups' self-concept, Cooper (1971) found that Indians were positive in their perception of self but less positive about their perception of themselves as students. Rosenthal (1974) also found a low self-image among early adolescent Chippewas. In contrast, Martig and DeBlasi (1973) found no overall significant differences in Indian and White self-concepts but did find that girls had higher self-concepts than boys.

The kind of school that the Indian student attends is one factor in determining his/her self-concept. Several articles have compared students from integrated public schools with those from segregated Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools. Corrigan (1970) used the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS) to determine the self-concepts of almost 250 Indians from public and BIA schools. He found that Indian students from BIA schools scored significantly higher on the Moral-Ethical Self Scale than did Indian students from public schools. However, when comparing the ratings by sex, he found
that females from BIA schools and males from public schools consistently held the most positive self-concepts. The data also showed that for 9 of the 11 TSCS scales utilized, the mean scores of the Indian students were significantly lower than those of the normative group and that the Indian students displayed significantly greater conflict.

Thornberg (1974) investigated self-attitudes of Indians, Mexican-Americans, and Blacks in a rural Arizona high school. Blacks showed a more positive self-attitude than Mexican-Americans and Indians. Indians were found to have the best attitude of the three groups toward school but the lowest self-attitude.

Withycombe (1973), studying Paiute children, did find a relationship between segregation and self-concept. She used the This Is Me Scale and the Bills Index of Adjustment and Values Form EL with 108 subjects, both Paiute and White. Paiute children scored lower on self-concept and perceived themselves as being significantly less accepted by their peers when they attended segregated schools. Furthermore, both self-concept and other-perceived social status dropped for the Paiute children as they advanced in school. Withycombe’s findings showed male–female differences for the scores of the White children but not for those of the Paiute children: White males gained a more positive self-concept from 1st to 5th grades, whereas White females showed a more negative self-concept for the same period.

Among the many negatively slanted studies exist a few that show the Indian self-image to be no different from that of other groups. Dreyer (1970) found that, in comparison with non-Indians, Indians had a more clear-cut sense of phenomenal self and that they perceived clear boundaries between what was individual and what was societal. Benjamin (1973) used three testing instruments—a form of the semantic differential test, a competence scale, and a teacher rating form—to determine the self-concept of 90 ninth-grade Eskimo subjects who were away from home for the first time. The subjects generally characterized themselves as being friendly, helpful, and kind but not as being particularly strong, good-looking, or smart. Their ratings on the dimension of self-confidence showed that they felt most confident in making new friendships and least confident in their ability to speak in front of a group. Similar positive self-concepts were reported by Sherarts in his study of Menominee High School students (Sherarts & Associates, 1973). Their data showed that in comparison with Whites, Indian students characterized themselves as being more friendly, more adventurous, freer of parental control, more casual, and more interested in happiness than in success.

Martig and DeBlissie (1973) found that Indian and Anglo boys in New Mexico public grade schools had similar self-concept ratings. Both groups of boys, however, scored lower than the girls. The authors concluded that self-concept had nothing to do either with race or with school achievement. Using the Self-Social Symbols Tasks and the Self-Concept of Ability Scale, Lanners (1969) compared two groups of elementary school Onondaga Indians with comparable non-Indian samples and found no significant differences on the scales.

In a large study of slightly over 2,000 Indian students, Fuchs and Havighurst (1972) reported “that self-esteem and self-concept data from our study indicate that the great majority of Indian youths see themselves as fairly competent persons within their own social world” (p. 147). In addition, the authors found that “all groups of Indian students rated their future more positively than their present self” (p. 146).

Positively oriented self findings have been found among certain Indian samples. Themes vary and range from research on acculturation to the use of specific assessment techniques. Leffey (1976) was interested in the relationship between acculturation, child-
rearing, and self-esteem. She found that acculturation indeed led to increased stress and low self-esteem and that the less acculturated had a more integrated and stable personality. Meyer (1970) looked at the relationship between morale and self-esteem and concluded that “Indians’ difficulties in adjusting to the overall American culture were caused by the dominant society’s bias toward minority groups” (abstract).

Lechnyr (1974), investigating the effects of an Indian alcohol training program on feelings of powerlessness, self-esteem, and empathy of Indian paraprofessionals, found that moderately high self-esteem and low powerlessness feelings among the trainees existed both before and after the training sessions. Even though self-esteem was positive in general, it increased as an individual remained in the program and on the job.

Many of the multi-ideological problems faced by “self” researchers led Lefley (1982) to design a three-phase study of the Indian self-concept, which she conducted among samples of Miccosukee and Seminole tribal groups in southern Florida. She compiled a series of self items from the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale and the Sarason-Ganzer Word-Rating Scale and combined them with self-esteem and Indian Stimulus scales specifically designed for her studies. All scale items were translated into the Miccosukee language and subsequently back-translated to check for conceptual validity. Lefley’s results clearly show that variations in self and ideal self responses can be attributed to the dynamics associated with sociocultural change, use of the native language as a medium for testing, examiner ethnicity, and social structure and parenting processes. For example, when low self-esteem was found, it was directly related to the acculturation-tribal disintegration process and the role and identity conflict concerning Indianness. High self-esteem scores were more likely to occur when the scales were administered in the native language by an Indian examiner. Future studies of the self in cross-cultural settings should heed the implication of Lefley’s work.

The most comprehensive study of the self-concept of Indian youth to date was conducted as part of an extensive impact evaluation of the Title IV, Part A Indian education programs (Development Associates, 1983). Ten items measuring academic self-concept and global self-esteem were developed using the work of Abdel-Mawgood and Hatch (1972), Rosenberg and Simmons (1971), and Kohr (1982) as a guide. Items were included in an 8-page student questionnaire and administered to well over 12,000 American Indian and Alaska native students in the 4th to 12th grades in 115 sample sites in the fall and spring of the 1982 academic year. Trimble and Richardson (1983) report that a fairly high percentage of positive responses was found for the self items in both administrations of the questionnaire, the high fall ratings leaving little room for improvement in the spring. The positive ratings of self-esteem and academic self-concept suggest that school activities and experiences collectively had no negative effect.

In contrast to that from previous decades, research concerning personality and the self increased dramatically during the 1970s and early 1980s. The most significant result of this period has been a growing awareness of the failure of previous efforts and an increased questioning of assessment approaches and findings. Indeed, educational research about Indian self-concept produced contradictory findings and, as a consequence, poses many substantive questions.

The Present Study: Challenging the Stereotypes

In view of the lack of conclusive research into the “self” and associated personality constructs of American Indians, very little is known yet about the “self” and its relationship to the psychological orientation of the American Indian. Yet interest about
the self process among Indians seems to be growing. Since the late 1960s, the American Indians' interests in the "self" have been motivated by a concern for how they are perceived by others. There are good reasons for this concern: many Indian parents feel that negative self-image is one of the main reasons for the high drop-out and suicide rates among their youth; Indian activists and other concerned citizens feel that the high rate of alcoholism among American Indians also can be attributed to a negative self-image. Although the negative emphasis gets much attention, many Indians tacitly reject the findings. Then, too, there are those who subscribe to the notion that a relationship exists between the alleged poor quality of life of Indians and their image; the argument goes that if people live in poverty, are deprived, alienated, and powerless, they probably have a negative perspective on themselves and their surroundings. The following results are presented as a harbinger for reassessment of the American Indian self-image.

Method

Questionnaire Development, Administration, and Respondents

Interview schedule development. Questionnaire content was generated by 30 American Indian informants from 8 geocultural regions in the United States. Over 40 "self"-related categories were elicited that reflected tribal-specific and pan-Indian conceptualizations. The categories were further reduced to 11 topical ones as follows: (a) alienation, (b) esteem, (c) control, (d) stability, (e) development, (f) utilization, (g) acceptance, (h) values, (i) interpersonal, (j) motivation, and (k) human nature.

Resource documents were reviewed to locate survey items that could measure the categories listed above (cf. Robinson & Shaver, 1969; Shaw & Wright, 1967; Wrightsman, 1974). Over 500 items were identified and included in the first draft of the questionnaire. The items then were reviewed by 30 informants representing the five sample sites to establish face and content validity and "linguistic" equivalence; if fewer than 90% of the informants judged an item to tap what had been anticipated, it was eliminated.

Item reliability was established through use of a survey-resurvey approach with a sample of 99 American Indians randomly sampled from four separate geocultural regions. The stability coefficients for each pair of items ranged between .61 and .88. The completed version of the interview schedule was divided into 6 parts and contained 309 items. In addition to self-perception and alienation dimensions, measures were included to tap locus of control, philosophy of human nature, and value orientations. Information concerning the locus of control and value orientation findings can be found in Trimble (1981) and Trimble and Richardson (1982).

Survey procedure. Indigenous interviewers from five sample sites representing distinctly different Indian communities administered the survey schedule. The five sites were (a) a reservation located near the eastern seaboard of the United States, (b) a reservation in the northern plains states, (c) a pueblo in the southwestern states, (d) a military base in the central United States, and (e) an American Indian community college.

Respondents. Respondents were selected using a modified quota sampling procedure controlled for age distribution and gender. The total sample included 791 American Indians representing 114 tribes or tribal combinations (e.g., Kiowa-Nava;
Sioux-Chippewa). All of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' 12 area jurisdictional offices were represented; representation ranged from 6 respondents from the Juneau, Alaska, area to 148 from the Aberdeen, South Dakota, area.

Respondent median age was 19, and slightly more than 52% were female. All were enrolled members in their respective tribes and covered the blood quantum spectrum from one-eighth to four-fourths. More than 80% were of mixed blood background. Close to 55% were born and raised in rural communities, both reservation and nonreservation. The remaining 45% had varied residential patterns—some were born on reservations and had moved to urban areas and others were born in cities but moved back and forth between the reservation and the city. All spoke English and identified it as their first language; about 20% indicated that they both understood and could speak their tribal language.

Results

Results of the survey are presented first to show the response patterns in the self-perception items. Analyses of alienation-related items are followed by an analysis of variance of self-perception patterns and alienation-related items.

Sixty-five items constituted a self scale constructed to assess four dimensions—esteem, acceptance-of-self, acceptance-of-others, and stability-of-self (which also taps

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**Figure 1.** Sample site comparisons of mean responses to selected self measures.
self-development and self-utilization). Representative items from each of the four subscales are as follows: (self-esteem) "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with other people like myself"; (acceptance-of-self) "I look on most of the feelings and impulses I have toward people as being quite natural and acceptable"; (acceptance-of-others) "I seldom worry about other people. I'm pretty self-centered"; and (stability-of-self) "I change from a very good opinion of myself to a very poor opinion of myself." A 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "almost always true" (5) to "never true" (1) was used to measure item response.

Figure 1 shows the mean responses to the four self subscales generated by each sample site. No significant differences were found between the sites. There is considerable

![Graph showing responses to self-perception and perceived alienation among American Indians.](image)

**Figure 2.** Sample site comparisons of mean responses to alienation-related items.
Table 1

Average Ratings of Alienation Items by High and Low Self-Perception Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Alienation</th>
<th>Alienation via rejection</th>
<th>Political alienation</th>
<th>Powerlessness</th>
<th>Social isolation</th>
<th>Normlessness</th>
<th>Resentment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;High&quot; self-perception</td>
<td>347.16(^1)</td>
<td>315.47</td>
<td>291.66</td>
<td>311.50</td>
<td>332.88</td>
<td>353.42</td>
<td>390.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(58.86)(^2)</td>
<td>(53.77)</td>
<td>(60.75)</td>
<td>(52.58)</td>
<td>(40.55)</td>
<td>(56.68)</td>
<td>(65.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Low&quot; self-perception</td>
<td>270.07</td>
<td>234.26</td>
<td>234.07</td>
<td>232.98</td>
<td>283.16</td>
<td>248.37</td>
<td>278.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(64.47)</td>
<td>(45.60)</td>
<td>(52.93)</td>
<td>(53.37)</td>
<td>(45.30)</td>
<td>(61.27)</td>
<td>(78.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(F^1) =</td>
<td>143.92</td>
<td>235.67</td>
<td>95.74</td>
<td>201.08</td>
<td>120.69</td>
<td>281.10</td>
<td>224.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(df =)</td>
<td>(1,370)</td>
<td>(1,351)</td>
<td>(1,371)</td>
<td>(1,365)</td>
<td>(1,363)</td>
<td>(1,356)</td>
<td>(1,373)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)Because of the absolute size of the score values, it was necessary to apply a constant value of 100 to each respondent's summary score. As a result of the transformation, absolute values range from 100 to 500. Scale results in the summary tables have an absolute value range from 1 to 5. Whichever the case, the interpretation of the results is the same.

\(^2\)Standard deviations.

\(^3\)For all \(F\) ratios, \(p < .001\).
consistency in the response patterns and comparable variation, as depicted by the standard deviation. The small amount of between-scale variation suggests a relative homogeneity of attitudes toward self among the respondents.

Fifty-six items in the survey interview schedule constituted a generalized alienation scale designed to tap 7 alienation-related subdimensions—general alienation, alienation via rejection, political alienation, powerlessness, social isolation, normlessness, and resentment. Items representative of those found in each of the seven scales are as follows: (general alienation) “There is not much I can do about most of the important problems that we face today”; (alienation via rejection) “Success is more dependent on luck than real ability”; (political alienation) “These days the government is trying to do too many things, including some activities that I don’t think it has the right to do”; (powerlessness) “Sometimes I have the feeling that other people are using me”; (social isolation) “It is hard to figure out who you can really trust these days”; (normlessness) “People don’t really care what happens to the next person”; and (resentment) “I don’t seem to get what is coming to me.” A 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5) was used to tap responses. The distribution of the responses to the subscales is presented in Figure 2. Contrary to the scoring of the self items, the alienation-related ones were scored differently; a mean score approaching 5 actually implies less alienation and a score approaching 1 implies more alienation.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 3.** Average responses of high and low self-perception groups to alienation-related items.
Feelings of alienation are typically subjective and formed primarily through one's experiences with and perceptions of a larger social system. Like values and beliefs, they may shape one's self-image. If one feels hopeless, resigned, powerless, or isolated, one is presumed not to have positive feelings about oneself. Most social scientists argue that if one feels good about oneself, one is less likely to feel alienated, powerless, normless, and socially isolated (cf. Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978).

We particularly addressed the question "do high positive self-perceivers feel any differently about alienation-type constructs than low negative self-perceivers?" To establish contrast groups for comparison, composite self scores were generated for each respondent. The composite scores subsequently were ranked from low to high. Respondents whose scores were in the upper 25% of the total range of composite self-perception scores formed the "high" self-perception group; those whose composite scores were in the lower 25% formed the "low" self-perception group. The scores indicate that their perception of themselves ranges from a moderately low level to a low but not an extremely low level.

Analysis of variance was performed to test the differences between the two groups on the seven alienation scales. (See Table 1.) For every alienation-type scale, there were significant differences between the "high" and "low" self-perception groups. For example, "high" self-perceivers were significantly less likely to express resentment than "low" self-perceivers. For every scale the direction of the average ratings showed that the "high" self-perceivers had higher composite scores (i.e., they tended to disagree or to find the items to be "less true" than did "low" self-perceivers). Figure 3 shows the nature of these statistically significant differences.

Discussion

Survey Findings

Three basic findings are obtained from the survey: (a) the Indian samples perceived themselves in a moderately positive vein; (b) the samples did not perceive themselves as alienated either generally or specifically; and (c) Indians who perceived themselves quite positively tended to perceive themselves as less alienated than those who held moderately low self-perceptions.

Self-perception. What is most apparent from the self-perception results is the tendency for the respondents to view themselves in a moderately positive direction. For example, the aggregate self-esteem scale responses fall near the positive end of the scale, suggesting that the respondents perceive themselves to be of worth, are satisfied with themselves, and believe they are on an equal plane with others. The Indian respondents not only indicate a positive regard for themselves, but also for what they do and how they compare with others. Responses to the 5-item stability of self-esteem subscale reveal that the respondents' self-opinion does vacillate as a function of mood, situation, etc. Some respondents, however, did indicate a strong inflexibility in their images of themselves.

Contrary to popular opinion and to the findings of many researchers discussed earlier, the American Indian's self-image is moderately positive. The results from the self-development and utilization subscales are particularly encouraging. Our respondents show a definite need and desire to grow, develop, and improve themselves in many ways. We suspect that the positive results from the self-perception portion of the survey will verify what many American Indians have long known. Therefore, the possibility that
other people will dismiss the results and continue to think of American Indians as an inferior group is disturbing.

Self-perception and perceived alienation. The self-esteem response patterns here appear to be somewhat consistent with those found among America's other ethnic minority groups, particularly Blacks. According to Rosenberg and Simmons (1971), "It has been assumed that self-esteem will suffer seriously in a minority group which consistently ranks lowest in the society's prestige structure" (p. 1). They continue, "If the black is treated as an inferior on grounds of his race or his lack of success in the occupational or academic realms, then his sense of personal value should assuredly be low" (p. 2). Yet, some of Rosenberg and Simmons's findings on the self-esteem of Black adolescents actually cast doubt on the low-self-esteem-low-status relationship. Despite their findings and those of Bachman (1970), the low-self-esteem-low-socioeconomic-status relationship has not disappeared from the writings of many social scientists. Although our findings do not necessarily lay the notion to rest, they may assist in efforts to continue chipping away at the assumption.

Many Indians, especially those residing on reservations, maintain that they have little control over their own destiny. Furthermore, among American Indians, tribal and government relationships have created intense feelings of resentment and hostility. The relationships between federal and state governments and the American Indian over the years have been strained. An obvious example of eroded faith and trust is the government's failure to live up to extant treaty arrangements and responsibilities. The disenchantment felt by many Indians was made manifest during the early 1970s with the American Indian Movement's takeover of Bureau of Indian Affairs offices in Washington, DC, of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, and of the small church grounds at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota. Relationships with state and federal government agencies, missionaries, industrialists, land developers, and outsiders in general are thought to have created feelings of alienation, powerlessness, resentment, distrust, and social isolation.

Figure 2 shows that on the average no single community expressed more than a moderate position on any of the alienation subscales. There are differences between some of the communities on some of the scales; for example, respondents from the East expressed lower feelings of alienation than did those from the northern plains community. Statistical differences, though significant, are not reported here for the sake of brevity. (See footnote 1.)

Attempts at assessing feelings of powerlessness did not provide us with any additional significant insight, for our respondents did not express feelings of powerlessness. The same can be said for feelings of social isolation and normlessness (anomie), although here some respondents expressed some feelings of hopelessness.

Responses to the resentment items introduce some interesting findings. Looking at individual item responses, we find that two-thirds of the respondents did not feel that they were getting a "raw deal" out of life, one-half were not likely to hold a grudge, and 47% were not likely to be jealous of others. When they looked back on what had happened to them, only 28% felt that they had been cheated; 22% felt that they should be getting more than they currently were. On the basis of these response patterns, the majority of the respondents could hardly be termed resentful. The fact that most felt they were not getting a "raw deal" out of life raises some interesting questions about the personality and social characteristics, especially forgiveness, of many Indians. Though many respondents seemed generally trustworthy and trusting of others, many felt
alienated from politics. Due to past and current injustices, some respondents expressed a moderate degree of resentment, but resentment seemed marginal for the sample as a whole.

Our results strongly suggest that people with positive opinions of themselves are indeed less likely to feel alienated, powerless, resentful, rejected, isolated, or normless than those with moderately negative opinions of themselves. The results of high–low comparisons should be viewed with some caution, however. Although the average differences in our samples are large and significant, the location of the average values between the two extreme points falls somewhere around the middle. Neither the “high” nor the “low” self-perception group falls strongly at one or the other end of the scale. In other words, neither group felt strongly alienated or strongly integrated. We might conclude that those who hold “good” to “strong” opinions of themselves tend to have a healthier outlook toward themselves and social conditions and, as a result, are getting a large amount of positive feedback from others. It is quite possible that “high” self-perceivers are viewed as positive role models in their communities; their potential to affect the growth and development of youth by setting appropriate positive standards is worth considering by interveners and researchers alike.

Throughout the decades numerous studies have attested to the negative image Indians held about themselves. Indeed, many federal and state programs have attempted to alter that alleged image. Yet a review of the literature coupled with the findings of the present study provide data that challenge the negatively slanted ones. Of course, the inconsistencies may be attributed to an assortment of factors, including instrument bias, reporting procedures, statistical interpretations, regression effects in the treatment of the “high–low” groups, and the personal convictions of the investigators. Thorsell (1975) offered an interesting alternative explanation to the matter when he said that “the predominantly positive patterns of self-evaluation exhibited...may well be a function of the heightened ethnic pride and awareness that have taken place among members of minority communities in the United States” (p. 5). Fuchs and Havighurst (1970) shared essentially the same position but added more specifically that “the Indian youth are not depressed, anxious, paranoid or alienated as a group... However, they have the same problems that youth of other low-income groups have, and these problems are complicated to a degree by the fact that they are Indians” (p. 150). In other words, although the occurrence of ethnic pride within a group can promote positive feelings about the self, the very element of ethnic or racial status also may lead to certain negative feelings that affect one’s feeling of acceptance by “outsiders.”

From the findings accumulated and discussed thus far, it would seem that Indian community-based programs aimed at changing a personality correlate like self-concept should have been more carefully researched. Admittedly, some of the American Indian population may have problems with their view of themselves but certainly not to the extent that large-scale change-oriented programs are justified. Even more disturbing is the likelihood that many Indians have been led to believe that their self-image level is much lower than it appears to be here. Future mental health efforts targeted to intervene and change, therefore, should attend to culturally specific perspectives rather than rely on accounts obtained from a different orientation. Dinges, Trimble, and Hollenbeck (1979) add that “there will be an increasingly larger Indian adolescent group in the near future whose education, social service, health care and legal justice needs must be met. Large scale program decisions are now being made that are based on inadequate knowledge about many critical aspects of the adolescent period” (p. 287). One therefore
would expect future policy to be affected by an accurate portrayal of the "images of Indians."

References


