

Commentary

Indigenous Studies Speaks to American Sociology: The Need for Individual and Social Transformations of Indigenous Education in the USA

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Abstract: Despite legislation to increase educational success for racial and ethnic minorities in the USA, educational disparities persist. I examine this trend among Indigenous peoples in the state of Oregon, but extend it to education systems across the USA. In Oregon, American Indians have the poorest educational attainment of all racial and ethnic groups; only 55% of American Indians graduate on time. I examine this problem from a critical sociological perspective, answering the call for sociology to end its “complicity in the elimination of the native”. I argue education systems are extensions of settler colonial logics and power structures. I propose educational transformations built upon Indigenous cultural teachings, advocating that we follow an Indigenous educational framework that has as its foundation: (1) Indigenous elders’ instructions that education should teach us to be “real human beings”; (2) Indigenous teachings that invite us to engage in reflexivity to understand the “spirit” of our work; and (3) my own Yakama teachings on utilizing a decolonizing praxis within educational institutions. I conclude that American sociology needs to draw from Indigenous Studies scholarship to better understand and address the education inequalities facing Indigenous peoples in the USA.

Keywords: education; Indigenous; American Indian; United States; inequality

1. Introduction

Despite legislation to increase educational success for racial and ethnic minorities in the United States of America (U.S.), educational disparities persist. I examine this trend among Indigenous peoples in the state of Oregon, but extend it to education systems across the U.S. In my paper, I focus on Indigenous peoples who are recognized as members of Tribes who have sovereign status and political rights. Indigenous peoples in the U.S. are numerous, diverse, and within the U.S. government, the Bureau of Indian Affairs is the branch of the federal government responsible for the administration and management of all federal programs that serve the 567 sovereign Indian nations, also known as Tribes, that have a government-to-government relationship with the U.S. According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, there are approximately 2 million members of federally recognized Tribes in the U.S. ([United States Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs 2017](#)). American Indians and Alaska Natives thus have a distinctive status and inherent legal-political rights in the U.S. as part of our sovereign Indigenous nations’ rights in a government-to-government relationship with the U.S. ([McCarty et al. 2005](#)). Tribal legal and political rights are rooted in the inherent sovereign status that each Tribe has, and is affirmed by the U.S. Constitution and in U.S. Supreme Court rulings, as noted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, “When the governmental authority of tribes was first challenged in the 1830’s, U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall articulated the fundamental principle that has guided the evolution of federal Indian law to the present: *That tribes possess a nationhood status and retain inherent powers of self-government*” ([United States Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs 2017](#)). My paper focuses largely on Tribes in the Pacific Northwest region of the U.S. My home

academic institution, the University of Oregon, is located in Eugene, Oregon. The state of Oregon, one of the 50 states in the U.S., has 9 federally recognized Tribes within its boundaries. My university, as a state institution, is responsible for upholding the government-to-government relationship with the Indigenous nations in Oregon, and has a responsibility for serving all American Indians and Alaska Natives. In order to do so, we must ask: How well are American Indian students doing in Oregon's education system? How can we improve educational outcomes for American Indian students? What are the individual and social transformations that must take place in order to improve our educational institutions? In my paper, I will address each of these questions in turn.

2. Results

How well are American Indian students doing in Oregon's education system?

In Oregon, American Indians have the poorest educational attainment of all racial and ethnic groups; only 55% of American Indians graduate on time from all secondary schools ([Oregon Department of Education 2016](#)). This one statistic represents vast structural inequalities facing Indigenous peoples in the U.S. American sociology, and the U.S. education system have been fairly weak in its ability to adequately address social problems facing Indigenous peoples in the U.S, despite legislation and state policies that are meant to address the problem of inequality ([ESSA 2015](#); [Oregon Department of Education 2015](#)). This may not be surprising, given that the U.S., as a settler colonial nation-state, is built upon a legacy of dispossessing Indigenous peoples and uses settler colonial logics to rationalize violence and greed within the borders of the U.S. as well as globally ([Wolfe 2006](#); [Smith 2006](#); [Jacob 2016](#)). However, I argue that one can use a critical sociological perspective, to address this shortcoming, and in doing so answer [Murphy \(2016\)](#) call for American sociology to end its "complicity in the elimination of the native".

In theorizing the underpinnings of American Indians' poor education outcomes, I argue that U.S. education systems are extensions of settler colonial logics and power structures. This history of Indian education in the U.S. is one stained with cultural and physical genocide. Historically, U.S. policies have dispossessed Indigenous people from our homelands, with policies of forced removal, reservation containment, and Indian boarding schools ([LaDuke and Cruz 2013](#); [Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010](#); [Tinker 2004](#); [Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 2013](#); [Glenn 2015](#)). The termination era of U.S. policy-making was particularly damaging for American Indians, as the U.S. enacted new laws to extinguish Tribal rights and existence, often in exchange for a small cash payment, for example of US\$1500 per person in an effort to disempower Tribal peoples, rid the U.S. of its government-to-government relational obligations, and force an assimilationist agenda upon Tribal peoples ([United States Department of the Interior 1954](#)). The collective rights of Indigenous nations were extinguished as a result of these policies, and individual and familial identities as Indigenous peoples were greatly harmed.

Despite the widespread silence of American sociology with regard to Indigenous peoples in the U.S. there are exceptions. For example, in one of the only recent American sociology studies published in an American Sociological Association journal to address this topic, Evelyn Nakano Glenn ([Glenn 2015](#)) argues "one logic of settler colonial policy has been the ultimate erasure of Native Americans. This goal was pursued through various forms of genocide, ranging from military violence to biological and cultural assimilation . . . Settler ideology justified elimination via the belief that the savage, heathen, uncivilized indigenes were not making productive use of the land or its resources" (p. 67). Indigenous dispossession is linked to the ongoing forms of racialized violence in the U.S., as part of what Tuck and Yang call the "settler-native-slave triad" ([Tuck and Yang 2012](#)). Glenn agrees with this analysis, noting "What linked land taking from indigenes and black chattel slavery was a private property regime that converted people, ideas, and things into property that could be bought, owned, and sold. The purchase, ownership, and sale of property, whether inanimate or human, were regularized by property law or in the case of chattel slaves, by slave law. Generally, ownership entails the right to do whatever one wants with one's property—to sell, lend, or rent it and to seize the profits

extracted from its use. The elimination of Native Americans and the enslavement of blacks form two nodes that have anchored U.S. racial formation. Redness has been made to disappear, such that contemporary Native Americans have become largely invisible in white consciousness" (p. 67).

Glenn notes the disjuncture between ideological stances and social, historical and political realities in the U.S., noting "For a nation that purports to stand for freedom, opportunity, and equality, the United States has had a long history of imposing coercive labor regimes, social segregation, and restricted mobility on many of its residents. Racializing certain groups as insufficiently human serves to justify subjecting them to oppression, subordination, and super-exploitation" (Glenn 2015, p. 68). Ultimately, Glenn argues that sociological analyses will be strengthened in using a settler colonialism framework, enabling scholars to have a stronger grasp of historicity and a "fuller incorporation of the role of Native Americans in how racism and gender oppression have developed and continue to operate" (p. 69).

I argue that the settler colonial logics that fuel the processes of land dispossession and resource extraction on Indigenous lands are the same logics that dispossess our people of educational opportunities, and harm our people's ability to be healthy, rooted in our cultural teachings, and connected to our Indigenous homelands. The concerns I raise in this article are related to the concerns noted in the field of sociology of race within the U.S. For example, Patricia Hill Collins, in her work critiquing U.S. education, notes, "What the United States needs is another kind of public education—one that encourages us to become an involved, informed public. What this country needs is a recommitment to schools and other social institutions whose mandate lies in delivering the kind of public education that will equip us for this task" (Collins 2009, p. ix). Within her broader argument, Collins identifies racism and social inequalities as structural and perpetual, woven into the fabric of the U.S. education system. I agree with Collin's argument, and extend it to focus on Indigenous peoples, who not only deal with the racism of U.S. society, but also the attacks on sovereignty that Indigenous peoples must constantly defend (Hukill 2006; Lomawaima and McCarty 2002; Smith 2005).

Within settler colonial logics, there is a simultaneous fascination/desire towards Indians and yet the need to eliminate Indians for the purposes of taking Indigenous land and resources. As Rayna Green argues, the very notion of America "depends on the physical and psychological removal, even the death, of real Indians" (Green 1988, p. 31). Patrick Wolfe articulates that settler colonialism is ongoing, not a historical event (Wolfe 2006). Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2015) builds upon Wolfe's work to develop a sociological framework for theorizing race in the U.S. that understands settler colonialism as a structure/system. Glenn's framework defines settler colonialism as having an "intention to acquire and occupy land on which to settle permanently, instead of merely to exploit resources. In order to realize this goal, the indigenous people who occupy the land have to be eliminated" (p. 67).

Ultimately, educational achievement is not about a sub-population achieving a "magical" percentage of graduation rates. For example, we cannot really say that 60% or 70% or 80% of on time graduation rates will somehow magically indicate that Indigenous peoples have achieved "well-being". Graduation rates matter, but they are not all that matter. I argue that an Indigenous Educational Framework must also account for the well-being of our Indigenous homeland and our cultures. What good would even 100% on time graduation mean, if for example, our homelands are still poisoned from settler society's nuclear waste (Jacob 2010; LaDuke and Cruz 2013)? If our cultural lifeblood, our salmon, precious gift from the Creator, is endangered or extinct because of environmental degradation in the form of toxins in the water, hydroelectric dams that choke out salmon's ability to return home to spawn and feed our people (Colombi 2012; May et al. 2014; Whyte 2013)? We must account for all of these factors in our sociological analyses. Traditional Indigenous cultural teachings are helpful on this matter, and can inform sociological theorization of transformations that are needed.

We see, daily, powerful examples of Indigenous activism around the world, including important examples from diverse regions in the U.S., including Alaska, the Great Lakes/Midwest, the Northwest Columbia River Plateau, and the Southeast Louisiana Bayou (Jacob 2016). In my book, *Indian Pilgrims*, I analyze these important examples of Indigenous leadership and activism and articulate a

concept of Indigenous Environmentalism, which has four main principles: (1) Spiritual Responsibility; (2) Listening to Tribal Elders; (3) Looking Downstream and Looking Upstream; and (4) Embracing Allies Who Understand the Shared Responsibility of Protecting Mother Earth. In my research on Indigenous Environmentalism, I argue that Indigenous struggle can help inform broader environmental activist concerns, and show us the way for resisting the greed, corruption, and pollution of resources extraction by multinational energy corporations (Jacob 2016, p. 43). If we take seriously the words of Tribal elders, who urge us to return to ways of thinking that prioritize “becoming a real human being” then we must challenge our current educational models and institutions to transform in ways that can respect and support Indigenous cultural teachings.

Clearly, we need greater individual and social transformation in Indigenous Education. Political and legal structures complicate this matter, as Indigenous education policies are enacted across multiple bureaucracies at the Tribal, Local, State, and Federal levels (Deer 2006; Tsosie 2007). Within this complex political landscape, Indigenous peoples persist in keeping self-determination as the highest priority for education. We see several examples of contemporary self-determination, including state-wide mandated American Indian curricula, cultural standards for teaching, and an urgent focus on culture and language education (Brayboy et al. 2015; King and Schielmann 2004). The Bureau of Indian Affairs reports that less than 200 Indigenous languages are currently documented and in use; however most fluent speakers are elders, and there is a deep concern for the survival of Indigenous languages (United States Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs 2017; Jacob 2013) Other scholars report that there are only 169 Indigenous languages still spoken in the U.S. (Bonvillain 2017). Across the U.S. and Canada, nearly all of the Indigenous languages are at risk of extinction, with roughly only 34 Indigenous languages being learned by children (Krauss 1992) and it is estimated that only 10% of children speak an Indigenous language (Bonvillain 2017). Our Tribal elders have forewarned us of the dangers of language loss, as Yakama elder, Tuxámshish Virginia Beavert states, “My message to the Yakama people is that learning to read and write your own language is very important. It is the only way to save your native language and culture for the future generation. We are losing our elders every day as they depart to a better place . . . encourage the younger generation to pursue an education, learn the language, teach their children to speak, read and write Sahaptin, and do their part to help preserve the native language and culture of the Sahaptin people” (Beavert and Hargus 2009, p. xvii).

Indigenous language education is of particular importance, as Indigenous cultural teachings, relationships, and worldviews are best expressed in one’s Indigenous language, which is tied to place-based teachings—connecting peoples to their ancestors and homelands (Jacob 2013). As E. Koohan Paik argues, “A routine tactic in successful colonization is to colonize the minds of the people by killing the native language. Within language is an entire universe containing history, culture, pride, identity, and well-being . . . To replace an indigenous language with a colonial tongue immediately puts the native at a disadvantage. As the colonized mind realigns to the worldview and universe embodied in the new language, it begins to rationalize the world through colonial eyes. Soon, the colonized people see all things native as inferior, including themselves, so they acquiesce to assimilation and exploitation. The phenomenon is known as “internalized oppression”. Once the mental landscape has been conquered, the rest is easy” (Paik 2006).

With English-dominance in U.S. education, American Indians are struggling to resist linguistic genocide of Tribal languages (McCarty et al. 2005; Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010). This process is an intentional eradication of Indigenous languages, which serves to simultaneously disempower Indigenous communities and advance a settler colonial logic of assimilation as progress; it is part of the “social architecture” of disrupting the social order and well-being of Indigenous communities (Jacob 2013; McCarty 2011). The land we now call the State of Oregon has always had a rich diversity of Indigenous peoples and languages, with linguists counting 22 languages with at least 39 dialects (Gross et al. 2007; Hymes 1991). Dell Hymes explains Indigenous languages are tied to the landscape and waterways, and gives an example of the rich diversity along the coastal region, “Oregon has

been rich in languages. Traveling down the coast 200 years ago, starting from the Columbia [River], one would have found a different variety of language at almost every river mouth along the way: Clatsop at the Columbia, then Tillamook and Siletz, Yaquina and Alsea, Siuslaw and Umpqua, Hanis and Miluk, Coquille, Tutuni, Shasta Costa, and Chetco. In all, there were six families of languages" (Hymes 1991, p. 27). The nine federally recognized Tribes of Oregon, and non-recognized Tribal communities, are working to reclaim their languages, and this work is a powerful example of Indigenous self-determination in education (Gross et al. 2007).

Education policy either supports and advances Indigenous cultural teachings, or not. Policy is always situated in a web of social power. As Teresa McCarty writes, "[p]olicy is not a disembodied thing, but rather a situated sociocultural process—the complex of practices, ideologies, attitudes, and formal and informal mechanisms that influence people's language choices in profound and pervasive everyday ways" (McCarty 2011, p. xii).

3. Discussion

How can we improve educational outcomes for American Indian students?

Within the field of Indigenous Studies, scholars articulate that problems facing Indigenous communities can best be addressed through answers contained within Indigenous cultures (Bahr 2015; LaDuke and Cruz 2013; McCarty et al. 2005). Social scientists, thus, can use the tools of social science to critique social problems, but should draw upon Indigenous cultural teachings to help inform answers to problems facing Indigenous communities. Doing so allows for analyses and transformations that uphold culturally sustaining practices (McCarty 2008). Thus, in proposing transformation to address educational problems facing Indigenous peoples, I argue that Oregon's schools need to be guided by an Indigenous educational framework that advances educational transformations built upon Indigenous cultural teachings.

My proposed framework answers the call that Teresa McCarty and colleagues noted in their study of Indigenous educational needs, "There is a clear need for much more of this "good and important work" for more Indigenous scholars and teachers, reimagined classroom and school structures, and significant reversals of historical power relations. We are confident that the academic enterprise itself will be revitalized by the insights of a new Indigenous critical posture that privileges Indigenous knowledges and offers critiques of existing erroneous portrayals of Indigenous peoples based on limiting theoretical lenses and outsider misunderstandings" (McCarty et al. 2005, p. 4).

My proposed Indigenous educational framework advocates that we follow the following three important lessons: (1) Indigenous elders are our most precious teachers, who hold cultural knowledge that will sustain our communities; (2) Education is a reflexive process that should nourish our peoples' spirits; (3) Decolonizing praxis is an effective way to guide our individual and collective work in Indigenous education. In my discussion that follows, I define and provide a brief overview of each lesson listed above, with supporting examples of Indigenous education interventions that apply to each component of the framework. In doing so, I address the question:

What are the individual and social transformations that must take place in order to improve our educational institutions?

Indigenous Educational Framework Key Components

- (1) Social transformation in Oregon's education system should follow Indigenous elders' instructions that education should teach us to be "real human beings".

In choosing the outcomes of an education system, in the U.S. context there is typically an emphasis on seemingly value-neutral goals related to reading literacy, mathematics literacy, information literacy, and content knowledge science, history and social studies; these outcomes can be measured by standardized tests provided by corporations and paid for by states who are testing students as a means of evaluating whether they are eligible for graduation. However, such assessments ignore the

culturally-rooted knowledges that have sustained Indigenous peoples on our homelands for thousands of years. These assessments also place authority into the hands of test makers and textbook authors, instead of with Indigenous elders, our most precious cultural teachers. In my proposed framework, I argue that we need to reinstate Indigenous elders into our academic systems, to reclaim their rightful authoritative roles as knowledge keepers. Although this work is just emerging in Oregon, we have strong examples in other sites in the U.S., particularly in Alaska.

In a groundbreaking and multi-year project that examined Indigenous elders' perspectives of education, Alaska Native elders articulated the importance and purpose of Indigenous education in their work with university faculty in Alaska. One of the main points the elders clarified, over and over, was that the purpose of education should be for students to become "real human beings". In their publication of the project findings, the "Ways of a Real Human Being" are listed; these are the outcomes that indicate one is truly educated—that an individual express all of the following in their daily lived experience and in their relationships: "Listen, Experience the world without words, Revere all life, Respect all others, Affirm all others, Observe closely, Feel the connection to All That Is" (Mercurieff and Roderick 2013, p. 12). These educational outcomes have sustained Indigenous peoples in what many perceive as a harsh natural environment—Alaska. Indigenous elders view these cultural teachings as helpful for all peoples. One can contrast the educational priorities of Indigenous elders with those typical in U.S. education systems, which are out of balance, with an overemphasis on electronic devices, an individual achievement ideology that defines achievement based on a standardized test. Indigenous elders' vision of education reminds us that teachers and learners are accountable to one another in relationship to the community. Students are accountable to all members of the classroom and community, and should feel and uphold a connection and respect as part of their daily learning experience.

This teaching can be applied to achieve educational institution transformation. For example, faculty can use this teaching, communicate it to colleagues, and reform curricula and teaching methods to respectfully integrate and practice Indigenous cultural teachings. There are many ways that this can be accomplished, as noted in the literature (Friedel 2014; Sabzalian 2016; Scully 2012). I will mention a few examples I have witnessed in Oregon: students can engage Indigenous storytelling traditions, learning from a master elder storyteller, and then practicing telling stories that teach cultural lessons and connect students to important cultural sites; students can attend and serve as supporters for Indigenous community gatherings; students can engage service-learning projects to support a community-defined project (Jansen and Beavert 2010). The benefits of placing Indigenous elders' priorities for education at the center of educational practice include exposing students to Indigenous ontological and epistemological tradition; for example, "Indigenous cultures tend to treat knowledge as a deep awareness of the world around them and their place within that world. Indigenous knowledge derives from long-term intimate knowledge and experience of a particular place and a particular community" (Mercurieff and Roderick 2013, p. 34).

(2) Indigenous teachings invite us to engage in reflexivity to understand the "spirit" of our work.

This Indigenous teaching asks educators to consider, as the fundamental starting point of our work, that we acknowledge we all have value as spiritual beings, and that our spirits matter for the work we are doing in education, and all institutions. This cultural teaching is again asking us to look beyond the technical skills of being able to read or write, design a study, or write up the results of a study for publication. This principle is instead asking that we look at the spiritual foundation of our work. Is it rooted in a connection to the land upon which we are working? Are we continuing to understand and develop our relationships with local Indigenous peoples on whose homeland we live? Do we approach our studies or work as an act of respect? As Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith articulates, those of us working in universities should pay attention to decolonizing methodologies that are built from Indigenous cultural teachings. We need to train our students, the next generation of educators and researchers, to understand their work as spiritual. Linda Tuhiwai Smith suggests

how we can do this, with each educator and researcher learning to prepare oneself to be evaluated by criteria important to Indigenous communities, such as “Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? What other baggage are they carrying? Are they useful to us?” (Smith 2012, p. 10). I have engaged these questions with students in my doctoral seminar, with several students breaking down into tears, as they come to terms with the deep sense of alienation and stress that rules their daily lives in the academy. From an Indigenous perspective, if we do not provide students with an alternative approach to doing their work, their spirits will continue to be damaged, and we can expect damaged work from them as a result. The good news is that we have clear pathways forward: follow the teachings of Indigenous elders. Ways that I have accomplished this with my students is to encourage them to think about their reading discussion questions by walking outside, explaining their thesis statements to a tree outside, and to pause and make an actual connection with the student sitting next to them in class. Each of these brief examples is a way to break the alienation that damages the spirit of students in a U.S. education system that too often defines rigor in narrow ways. Within my proposed Indigenous educational framework, we are called to view all of our work as spiritual—what is the spirit of our work? Is it angry? Is it shamed or embarrassed? Is it clear? Is it generous? These are questions that educators and researchers can use to better understand how one’s work in educational systems may shift so that accountabilities to, and outcomes for, Indigenous peoples are not pushed into the margins (Smith 2012, p. 195).

- (3) Finally, as the third key component of an Indigenous Education Framework, I draw from my own Yakama Tribal teachings on utilizing a decolonizing praxis within educational institutions.

In my earlier work, I explain that Yakama decolonizing praxis “advances our understanding of social change efforts concerned with “making power” to reclaim indigenous traditions, bodies, languages, and homelands . . . [by] drawing from traditional teachings and utilizing new methodologies [to work toward a vision] that: (1) understand indigenous bodies as sites of critical pedagogy; (2) centers social justice praxis to build a moral community; and (3) utilizes grassroots indigenous resistance as a mechanism to dismantle colonial logics” (Jacob 2013, p. 107). My proposed Indigenous educational framework utilizes this decolonizing praxis to urge educators and students to connect theory and practice in our work to reshape U.S. education in general, and in Oregon particularly. This concern is rooted in an activist orientation that connects educational theory with a commitment to social change (Tuck and Yang 2014). For U.S. educational institutions to make significant progress in better serving Indigenous students’ and communities’ needs, educators must recognize that individual and social transformations are needed in education. Individual educators can work to integrate Indigenous cultural teachings in their approach to building and delivering curricula. Indigenous communities, elders, and scholars have solutions and examples ready to share with educators who are seeking respectful partnerships to do this work (Edmo 2008; Sabzalian 2016; Scully 2012; Simpson 2014). For example, Indigenous languages can be brought into classrooms, Indigenous histories of place and land can be included alongside the “whitestream” curriculum (Arvin et al. 2013; Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 2013). Indigenous storytelling traditions can be utilized, as just one of 25 Indigenous Projects named as an example of decolonizing methodological work (Smith 2012). Systemically, educational institutions need to recognize the higher stakes of transforming our schools to be places of social justice praxis. An Indigenous educational framework provides a generative way forward in this important work. Engaging in this work can address the shared challenge given that U.S. institutions, built upon a foundation of settler colonial logics, often deny or ignore the social injustices perpetuated through a widespread belief in American exceptionalism (Arvin et al. 2013; Deyhle and Swisher 1997; Tuck and Yang 2012).

4. Conclusions

Mainstream American sociological analyses are currently inadequate for addressing the poor educational outcomes of American Indians in the U.S. American sociology needs to turn its own

critical lens upon itself as a field, to end its “complicity in the elimination of the Native” (Murphy 2016; Wolfe 2006). Individual and social transformations are needed that draw upon the teachings of Indigenous cultures. Doing so will help address the generations of harm that American policies have inflicted in Indigenous communities in the U.S., and Indigenous communities can then perhaps experience educational institutions that support the maintenance of their cultures, languages, and well-being of Indigenous homelands.

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