Debunking the Pocahontas Paradox: The Need for a Humanistic Perspective

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Historical and contemporary stereotypes of Native American Indian women have resulted in inaccurate and insensitive images. Mass media, movies, and printed materials continue to portray Native American Indian women as either princesses or savages. The purpose of this article is to provide a more humanistic perspective of this population.

Native American Indian women are affected by nonhumanistic myths and stereotypes that are promulgated by the media, popular literature, and movies. The "Pocahontas paradox" represents a dilemma for Native American Indian women. This historical movement has persisted in the romanticization and vilification of Native American Indian women (Peregoy, 1999).

In this movement from political symbolism (where the Indian women defended America [in the early 1600s], to psychosexual symbolism (where she defends or dies for White lovers), we can see part of the Indian woman's dilemma. To be "good," she must defy her own people, exile herself from them, become White, and perhaps suffer death. (Green, 1976, p. 704)

Although there are tremendous variations in Native American Indian tribes and nations historically and contemporarily, the traditional perspectives of Native American Indian women can be generalized. Generally, Native American Indian women value being mothers and rearing healthy families; spiritually, they are considered to be extensions of the Spirit Mother and continuators of their people; socially, they serve as transmitters of cultural knowledge and caretakers of children and relatives (LaFromboise, Berman, & Sohi, 1994). A woman's identity in traditional Native American Indian life is ultimately rooted in her spirituality, extended family, and tribe (Green, 1976). They see themselves in harmony with the biological, spiritual, and social worlds.

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American Indian women have struggled to keep their hearts off the ground by being strong. Their strength has been related through oral stories (e.g., "A Woman’s Fight, A Warrior’s Daughter" and "The Warrior Maiden"; Allen, 1989). A “lack of information about significant Indian women in ethnographic publications” (Allen, 1989, p. 27) inspired the collecting of these stories.

The past 20 years have witnessed a renewed interest in rewriting the history of Native American Indian women (Miheuah, 1998). The central problem has been the lack of Native American Indian perspectives (i.e., emic) in writing. An examination of the roles of Native American Indian women is needed within “their own societies and society at large [by taking] a closer look, not from an outsider’s viewpoint, but through modes of expression within tribal society” (Bataille & Sands, 1984, p. viii). The outsider’s perspective (i.e., etic) often leads to “incorrect or undeveloped [findings], providing only partial answers to complicated questions about Native women” (Miheuah, 1998, p. 37).

This article addresses some of the issues of Native American Indian women in an emic and humanistic manner. These issues are (a) the historical roles of Native American Indian women, (b) Native American Indian women’s roles after European contact, (c) the Native American Indian female stereotypes, (d) the evolving social problems of Native American Indian women, and (e) the influence of level of acculturation.

OVERVIEW OF NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORY

Content knowledge and value awareness of Native American Indian people, both from historical and contemporary perspectives, are imperative to gaining an understanding of this population. The long history of interaction that has occurred between Native American Indians and European Americans can be divided into five time periods, which have been determined largely by the interaction of the federal government with Native American Indians (M. T. Garrett, 1996; Oswalt & Neely, 1996): (a) removal (17th century to 1840s), characterized by the saying “the only good Indian is a dead Indian”; (b) reservation (1860s to 1920s), characterized by the saying “kill the Indian, but save the person”; (c) reorganization (1930s to 1950s), schools allowed on the reservation, which eased cultural repression; (d) termination (1950s to 1960s), attempts at sociocultural integration and end of dependence on the federal government, which led to the sale of large tracts of Native American Indian lands and increased poverty; and (e) self-determination (1973 to present), characterized by increased tribal sovereignty mainly due to the militant struggles of many Native American Indians in the early 1970s. These time periods cannot be considered exclusive of each other because of the oral histories that were passed from one generation to the next in Native American Indian cultures. The experiences of past generations are continued in some degree by those Native American Indians who maintain cultural and familial ties.
The earliest written accounts described Native American Indian women as "unfailingly amiable, beautiful, and full of grace and good will" (McLerran, 1994, p. 15). Native American women were contributors to community survival. They were successful agriculturists, made clothing, reared children, preserved food, did bead and quill work, made birch bark canoes, kept fur traders in snowshoes and moccasins, and trapped small fur-bearing animals (Mihesuah, 1996; Van Kirk, 1992). Native American Indian women also controlled the material property and food for the community. Bloodline descent was often matrilineal, with women retaining control of economic property (Hoxie, 1991; Mihesuah, 1996; Spack, 1997).

Native American Indian women were integral to the economic and social survival of their nations and tribes (e.g., the fur trade labor force; Van Kirk, 1992). They also held positions of political importance (Mihesuah, 1996; Spack, 1997). Native American Indian women provided guidance and influenced governance decisions and served as leaders and advisers in many Native American Indian tribes and nations (Foster, 1995). For example, Attacullaculla, a Cherokee chief, was shocked to find that European American women were not included as advisers in a South Carolina treaty discussion in 1757 because Cherokee women commonly served as advisers on matters of importance to the tribe (Johnston, 1996). Historians in the twentieth century noted that Native American Indian women often held positions of high status and great power, often making decisions regarding captives, war, and peace (Foster, 1995).

The education of Native American Indian children about traditional ceremonies and practices fell to the women in most Native societies. Because family units were often tied by matrilineal threads, the teaching of family history was the responsibility of the grandmothers and elder women of the tribes. The older women also taught the young girls how to be successful and how to survive in life. They told the stories of their early childhoods and the traditional myths. This teaching by the older women helped the young girls gain a sense of belonging and placement within their tribes (Devens, 1992). "Among most Plains people, power and cultural knowledge were accumulated by and dispensed through females" (Spack, 1997, p. 35). Some tribal groups were described as believing their "society was only as strong as its women" (Spack, 1997, p. 35).

Gender differences among various tribal groups were important for division of labor and activities, but roles were "flexible and variable" (Johnston, 1996, p. 206). As Mihesuah (1996) observed,
may actually be differences . . . religion, social systems, and economies caused
Indian women to react to common experiences of externally induced adversity
and change in dissimilar ways. (p. 16)

In addition to leadership roles in many Native American Indian nations
and tribes, women were responsible for keeping the oral traditions alive
and passing them on to the future generations (Billson, 1995). Oral traditions
and histories are an important source of information for and about
Native peoples. These oral stories reflect how Native American Indian
women saw themselves and how they were viewed and understood within
their own culture by their own community (Almeida, 1997).

Oral histories were the traditional method of learning responsibilities
(Wilson, 1996). Some examples would be the Haudenosaunnee and other
nations of the Northeast who believe that the world rests on the back of a
giant turtle and the first person to dwell on it was Sky Woman (Billson,
1995). The Shawnee honor a spiritual holy woman named Our Grandmother,
who received assistance from the Great Spirit in creating humankind; she
gave the Shawnee life, as well as their code of ethics and most of their
religious ceremonies (Allen, 1989). The Cherokee believed that the first
woman, Selu, was killed. Corn and beans grew where her blood soaked
the ground. During the Cherokee removal (i.e., the Trail of Tears), no one
regretted leaving the land more than the Cherokee women, who by tradi-
tion had tilled the soil (Wilson, 1996).

In the period before contact with Europeans, Native American Indian women
were considered equally essential to the functioning of tribal societies as they
were in the period after contact with Europeans (Spack, 1997). Foster (1995)
explained that even though the term matriarchy is often used, many Native
American Indian societies (e.g., the Iroquois) were matrilocal and matrifocal
instead of a true matriarchy. The society focused on women but was not ruled
entirely by women. "It was our grandmothers who held on to what they could
of our identity as a People. . . . Oftentimes the fire grew dim, but still our
grandmothers persisted. We were taught that the time we are in is only bor-
rowed from future generations" (Green, 1992, p. 93). A traditional Cheyenne
saying reflects the reality of Native women: "A people are not defeated until
the hearts of its women are on the ground" (Almeida, 1997, p. 768).

LaFromboise and others (LaFromboise et al., 1994) emphasized that spiri-
tuality is essential to many Native American Indians, especially to Native
American Indian women. In many Native American Indian cultures, women
are viewed as extensions of the Spirit Mother and as keys to the continu-
ation of their peoples. LaFromboise and colleagues (LaFromboise et al.,
1994) stated that "American Indian women's lifes [sic] are enriched by
caring that is expressed in a variety of ways. These expressions range from
being cared for as a daughter to caring for the spiritual well-being of the
community as a wise woman" (p. 255). For example, Cahuilla women re-
reflect an understanding shared by the Navajo and Sioux that spiritual and
emotional health cannot be made distinct (Benally, 1988).
However, Western psychology has typically not dealt with traditional Native American Indian spirituality in a completely unbiased manner. This lack of unbiased attention has been noted and interpreted by LaFromboise and her colleagues (LaFromboise et al., 1994) as a “historic hostility toward things spiritual in general and a suspicion of clients who are highly religious” (p. 213). More emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of spirituality in the lives of Native American Indian individuals. Concurrently, the valuing of diverse forms of religious expression among Native American Indians deserves attention (LaFromboise et al., 1994).

NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN’S ROLES AFTER EUROPEAN CONTACT

Early European explorers considered Native American Indians the essence of what people would be without Christian and civilized behavior. The terms beast, savage, and heathen were used to describe Native American Indians. The negative view that Europeans had of Native American Indian women was that although human in form, they were barely human in their customs (Devens, 1992; Oswalt & Neely, 1996). The early attributions document early cultural biases regarding Native American Indian women and, perhaps, “their [Europeans’] desire to manipulate reality to accommodate their expectations” (Oswalt & Neely, 1996, p. 23).

European representation of Native American Indian women in early art works helped to “subjugate” these women in the view of the dominant culture. For example, Alfred J. Miller, who produced numerous paintings of Native American Indian women during the colonizing (mid-1800s), imposed subjugation in two ways: (a) the depiction of Native American Indian women in a morally inferior position to the early colonizers and (b) the use of “domestic ideology,” resulting in an image of Native American Indian women as domestic “moral influencers on the frontier” instead of co-contributors to survival (McLerran, 1994, p. 2).

Most newcomers’ contacts with Native American Indian women prior to coming to the New World were through literary and visual representations that helped perpetuate the stereotypes. These stereotypical images of Native American Indian princesses “became instrumental in furthering the cultural domination necessary to the colonialist enterprise” (McLerran, 1994, p. 2). The Indian princess stereotype persisted but also began to co-exist with the image of the “repulsive, lascivious squaw.” Miller portrayed colonial America as a “young, virginal Indian woman” (McLerran, 1994, p. 4). This image emphasized the deflowering of the New World through exploration and conquest. “America was represented as a young Indian woman upon whose passive, receptive body European colonists could carry out their project of exploitation and domination” (McLerran, 1994, p. 5). In reality, European colonization served as a catalyst for change in the traditional humanistic gender roles of Native American Indian women.
This change was effected through intermarriage between clan systems and the destruction of matrilocal traditions (Mihesuah, 1996). Negative results of this change included the development of other Native American Indian female stereotypes.

NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN FEMALE STEREOTYPES

As early as 1575, prior to the Pocahontas legend of 1624, the New World had a symbolic image of Native American Indian women (Green, 1992). The image of the New World moved from a pair (male and female) of Tupinamba Indians representing “promises and danger” to the Indian Queen by herself in 1575. The Indian Queen (bare breasted, clad in animal skins, leaves, jewelry, and weapons, with her foot on a once-living conquest) was the personification of abundance and danger in the New World (Green, 1992). The Indian Queen reigned as the image of the New World until around 1765. The Indian Princess became the new image as the American colonies moved toward independence. Her skin was lighter and her clothing more Romanesque. In the words of Green (1992),

She seems less barbarous than the Queen; the rattlesnake [“Don’t Tread on Me” sign] defends her, and her enemies are defeated by male warriors rather than by her own armed hand. She is Britannia’s daughter as well as that of the Carib Queen, and she wears the triangular Phrygian cap and holds the liberty pole of her later, metamorphosed sister, Miss Liberty (the figure on the Statue of Liberty and the Liberty dime). . . . She is armed, usually with a spear, but she also carries a peace pipe, a flag, or the starred and striped shield of Colonial America. She often stands with The Sons of Liberty, or later, with George Washington. (p. 154)

The most significant model for European American understanding of Native American Indian women came from the legend of Pocahontas. This version of the Native American Indian maiden coming to save John Smith has been repeated through both written and visual media for many years (e.g., Walt Disney’s recent Pocahontas (1998) movie/videotape). Pocahontas is touted in Native American Indian literature as the “Mother of Us All” (Green, 1992). An anti-Pocahontas image has also resulted in the image of the Squaw.

A perplexing dilemma occurred as the authentic Native American Indian woman began to be recognized. Native American Indian women began to be viewed in a dual-faceted manner: either as a strong, powerful, dangerous woman or as a beautiful, exotic, lustful woman. Both facets were merged together into one representation of Native American Indian women through the stereotype of Pocahontas, who was viewed as having been motivated by lust in the saving of John Smith’s life (Green, 1992). Thus, the Pocahontas Paradox or Princess/Squaw dilemma has persisted throughout U.S. history, and the mass media continue to perpetuate stereotypes of Native American Indian women (Harris, 1989; Merskin, 1996).
Medicine (1988) provided insight into the ongoing influence of symbolic images on contemporary Native American Indian women today:

Distorted images of Indian women have been perpetuated by the continuing male bias of mainstream writers. The "prostitute-princess syndrome" of much anthropological, historical, and missionary writers is presently reinforced by the portrayal of native women in the media. The tribal, viable, residual, and synergetic roles of indigenous women in contemporary racist and sexist American society have neither been delineated nor rarely even acknowledged. (p. 87)

Evolving Social Problems of Native American Indian Women

A review of the literature on the history of Native American Indian women reveals the impact of historical experiences on the way that Native American Indian women view themselves and how others view them. Most of the literature is related to the social problems and difficulties experienced by Native American Indian women. Demographic data strongly suggest that the health and mental status of Native American Indian women is generally worse than that of their non-Native counterparts (Peregoy, 1999). Identified impacts on health include living under multiple oppressions, including being a woman, perhaps a single parent living in poverty, and being a minority (Reynolds & Pope, 1991); lack of resources to meet daily survival needs (Smith, 1991); and barriers to adequate and culturally appropriate treatment services (Peregoy & Schliebner, 1998).

Mental health issues facing Native American Indian women of North America include the demands of living bicultural lifestyles and living away from family and extended family to realize higher education or to apply that education in the urban settings that have a demand for particular skills and training (Peregoy, 1999). Acculturative stresses such as these influence tremendously the daily experiences of Native American Indian women. Data concerning the rates of mental health and developmental needs for Native American Indian women are extremely limited. The meager existing data refer to the population as a whole, undifferentiated by sex.

Personality disorders, alcoholism, psychoses, and drug abuse are the most frequent psychological problems identified in the literature, accounting for 40% of all visits to Indian Health Service Behavioral Health Programs (LaFromboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1990; Medicine, 1993). Issues by Native American Indian women, presented at the time of intake, included alcohol misuse in the family (82%), adult–child relationships (78%), grief reactions (77%), depression (76%), child management abuse (72%), and marital conflict (72%); (LaFromboise et al., 1990; Medicine, 1993).

Sexual abuse and battery are common among reservation, rural, and urban Native American Indians (Groginsky & Freeman, 1995; Hendrickson, 1996; Norton & Manson, 1996). Ongoing unprotected sex increases the risk of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases (Edwards, 1992).
sity and pathogenic weight control create conditions favorable for adult onset diabetes and heart disease (Rosen et al., 1988). Suicide among Native American Indian women is a major consideration (Young & French, 1995).

LaFromboise and her colleagues (LaFromboise et al., 1994) emphasized that adolescent Native American Indian girls are a particularly vulnerable population. They are six times more likely to be sexually abused than are Native American Indian male adolescents, more prone to depression than boys, and more likely to be suicidal. Furthermore, the incidence of female alcohol abuse is high. These researchers offered this interpretation of those findings:

The impact of the welfare culture and the . . . [l]osses can be identified at the individual level by feelings of victimization attributable to racism and stereotyping, value conflicts, or confusion, isolation, and oppression. Unresolved grief over losses and effects of ongoing cultural genocide are often presented by clients in the form of chronic cycles of crisis and depression. (Lafromboise et al., 1994, p. 61)

CURRENT NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN’S ROLES

Native American Indian women maintain a respect for the power of words (LaFromboise et al., 1994). Native American Indian women are socialized to use words positively (e.g., to inform, think, reconcile with others) as well as negatively (e.g., to insult or threaten). Many also use disclaimers to their humbleness and limitations prior to expressing an opinion. Native women were encouraged to be strong and resilient in the face of tragedy (Leen, 1995; Wilson 1996). Written work (e.g., poetry), conveying the strength, resilience, and autonomy of Native American Indian women, continues to pass on these qualities (Gould, 1995; Hogan, 1996).

Emmerich (1993) discussed the impact of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) field matron program on the acculturation of Native American Indian women. BIA employees (field matrons) were sent into Native American Indian villages and homes to provide instruction on appropriate duties according to the dominant society. Forced education, resulting in the removal of all things “Indian,” including language, was an institutional attempt at forced acculturation (Spack, 1997).

Young (1992) reported a relationship between locus of control and self-reported psychopathology in a Native American Indian sample that was 60% women. The research compared external locus of control with anxiety and depression manifested by and in affluent, acculturated Native American Indians. The results indicated the possibility that Native American Indian women who are more acculturated are more oriented to external control and, thus, more prone to anxiety and depression.

Studies (e.g., Young & French, 1995) have also indicated a positive correlation between the number of Native American Indian women in the labor force and the suicide rate for Native American Indian women. As more Native American Indian women entered the work force, the suicide rates for Native American Indian women increased.
The effects of forced assimilation have destroyed the complementary nature of female-male relations and have resulted in a general increase of Native American Indian male control over women. Women held many complementary positions in the tribes, as did men (Peregoy, 1999). When European men colonized the New World, they imposed a male-dominated system of “gynocide” (Allen, 1992). Many activities continued to be practiced, including roles of leadership and guidance of a tribe by women, only not publicly. Native American Indian women mirrored the movement of empowerment that was witnessed during the 1960s (Peregoy, 1999).

_Culturation_ serves as an inclusive term for both acculturation and enculturation. Both components of culturation are related to changing cultural beliefs and values when one cultural group is exposed to another cultural group (Herring, 1998). _Acculturation_ is described as noncompulsory means of integrating the values and beliefs of the new culture, and _enculturation_ is viewed as a compulsory means of changing (Drummond, 1996). The accepted definition of acculturation for this discussion is an individual’s “affiliation with a second cultural group while realizing they are not a full member” of that group (Coleman, 1997, p. 196). Enculturation refers to incidents when coerced culturation occurs. The history of Native American Indian peoples in the United States is replete with examples of coercion. _Assimilation_ is the term used to describe full membership in a second cultural group (Coleman, 1997).

Acculturation occurs individually (psychological acculturation), within families, or within groups (Herring, 1997). Five levels of acculturation are commonly found in the literature: “pantraditional,” traditional, transitional, bicultural, and assimilated. These levels of acculturation reflect a continuum from pantraditional (being isolated in past traditions and customs) to complete assimilation (submersion in another culture). M. W. Garrett and Garrett (1994), Herring (1997, 1998), and LaFromboise et al. (1990) described each of the types of acculturation:

- Pantraditional: This level includes individuals or families who choose to return to their cultural traditions, ceremonies, and belief systems. They may speak cultural languages and maintain connections with the tribe of origin. They have no contact with the non-Native world.
- Traditional: These families retain their historical traditions and languages. They generally, but not always, reside on reservations and tribal lands. They do accept many of the contributions of the “White man,” such as electricity. They can converse in their traditional language or in English.
- Transitional: Individuals in this family pattern speak both Native language and English. They do not fully accept the cultural heritage of their tribal group or identify completely with mainstream
culture. In essence, they have not decided which culture to accept, and they exist in a state of evolving.

- Bicultural: Generally accepted by dominant society, these individuals are simultaneously able to know, accept, and practice both mainstream values and traditional values and beliefs.
- Assimilated: Generally accepted by dominant society, these individuals have rejected their ancestry and traditional value systems. They embrace only mainstream culture.

External struggles, due to postcolonial government interventions, have been recorded (Duran & Duran, 1995). Native American Indian relationships with colonizers and postcolonial governments created an acculturation struggle (Leen, 1995). European American attempts to enculturate and assimilate Native Americans focused on institutions and changed the status of Native American women. Enculturation created cultural confusion, ambiguity, and dissonance (Poupart, 1996; Singleton, 1996; Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Washienko, Walter, & Dyer, 1996). Many governmental programs and policies were implemented to encourage and coerce Native American Indians to assimilate into the dominant cultural practices. Programs and policies included: relocation changes (Blackhawk, 1995), change in tribal interactions (Medicine, 1985), BIA field matron programs (Emmerich, 1993), intermarriage (Cotrell, 1993), psychological acculturation (Boniferro, 1994), language (Brown, 1994; Lord, 1996), and forced education (Devens, 1992; LaCroix, 1994; Mathes, 1992; Spack, 1997).

Internal struggles have occurred among various tribal members. These conflicts have created factional systems. Mihesuah (1996) described the internal turmoil created by levels of acculturation:

Tribes have long experienced factionalism, between those who cling to tradition and those who see change as the route to survival. . . . Indians in tribal power positions . . . [o]ften use expressions of culturalism against those who do not subscribe to their views. . . . Indians with a high "level of acculturation" might view themselves as "more enlightened" than others whom they deem as "less enlightened," "uncivilized," or "heathens." Usually, but not always, mixed-bloods had more . . . m]aterial goods than full bloods, and maneuvered themselves into . . . [l]eadership positions . . . [a]nd saw themselves as morally superior to the uneducated, non-Christian, and less wealthy traditionalist. . . . Those who valued tribal tradition and resisted acculturation believed themselves to be "more Indian" than the "sell outs." (p. 16)

**COPING MECHANISMS**

The reality for Native American Indian women is much different than the prostitute-princess dichotomy fable. Although a scarcity of information regarding Native American Indian women exists, studies have examined sex role orientation (Napholz, 1993) and stressful life events that have strained coping strategies (Silver & Wortman, 1980). In addition, chang-
ing gender roles have affected both Native American Indian women and men. Whereas traditional roles have remained relatively intact for Native American Indian women, the rage and violence directed toward them by Native American Indian men are generally attributed as manifestations of their anger and pain associated with the loss of their respected male roles (LaFromboise et al., 1994).

With the low use of mental health services, Native American Indian women often rely on their own coping skills. Some of these coping skills are dangerous (e.g., alcohol and other drug use/abuse) whereas others, rooted in tradition and spirituality (e.g., chants and prayers), prove helpful. Coping mechanisms used both on and off reservations include social support from family and community persons (LaFromboise et al., 1990; Peregoy, 1991), as well as the use of traditional healing practices, including prayer, sweat lodge ceremony, and other religious/spiritual activities (Peregoy & Schliebner, 1998).

SUMMARY

Historical texts focus on Native American Indian men, especially those having a formal role such as chief, warrior, spiritual leader, or diplomat (Jaimes & Halsey, 1992). European Americans continue to have a poor understanding of the historical significance of Native American Indian women. History highlights the accomplishments of Native American Indian war heroes such as Geronimo, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud, whereas the history of Native American Indian women of significant importance is rarely acknowledged (Almeida, 1997). Green’s (1992) research indicated that Native American Indian women have primarily been represented as anonymous figures who prepare food, haul wood, and take care of children. Merskin (1996) presented evidence of the mass media perpetuating stereotypes of Native American Indian women by examining mass media productions that continually depict Native American Indian women as existing only in the past.

Because it went against their cultural belief structure, as described by Jaimes and Halsey (1992), European colonists emphasized the reduction of the status of Native American Indian women within their nations. As a result, the economic, political, and social status of Native American Indian women suffered immeasurably (Green, 1992). However, Native American Indian women held equally important roles in determining the sovereignty of their nations (Almeida, 1997). Some examples include the clan mothers of many northeastern and southeastern Native American Indian nations and Native American Indian women’s societies of the Western Plains nations, such as the Cheyenne and Piegans (Billson, 1995).

Indeed, women occupy a special, and even dominant place, in Cherokee lore. Loy (1999) described ancient Cherokee society as matrilineal—that is, people traced their family roots through the mother’s clan, which could be one of seven clans: the Wolf, the Deer, the Wild Potato, the Paint, the Blue,
the Long Hair, and the Bird. Marriage between members of the same clan was
forbidden; and the wife, not the husband, owned both home and planting
field. A few women, such as Nancy Ward, earned the title War Woman or
Pretty Woman, entitling them to speak in councils and decide questions of
war and punishment (Loy, 1999). These traditional roles of Cherokee women
inexorably faded with the incursion of European settlers and missionaries.

Probably, the female leader most widely known outside Native Ameri-
can Indian circles would be Wilma Mankiller, who served from 1985 to
1995 as the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. In addi-
tion, Joyce Dugan became principal chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee
Indians in 1995. Currently, approximately 12% of federally recognized Native
nations have female leadership (Green, 1992).

Native American Indian women’s power is now significant and on the
rise in many communities. Native American Indian women continue to
wield considerable domestic and political authority. Oglala Sioux women,
who are occupying an increasing number of positions as tribal council
members, judges, and decision makers, count their traditional family skills
and experiences as important factors in their leadership ability (LaFromboise
et al., 1994). Similarly, Northern Paiute women’s long-term concerns for
community issues, along with their kinship connections and experiences
in coordinating social and community goals, contribute to their effective-
ness as leaders (Lynch, 1986). In a study of 10 tribal councils on Nevada
reservations, Lynch reported that women constituted the vast majority of
the membership on local committees and service clubs, and only one tribal
council did not have women members.

These contemporary female leaders represent a reaffirmation of women’s
power among Native American Indian women. As Cherokee historian
Loy (1999) wrote in her latest book, Cherokee Woman, “These women did
not become chiefs by succeeding in business or law. They became chiefs
because they embodied the values of generations of Cherokee women,
values apparently still honored and respected by men and women alike
(pp. 37–38).

Almeida (1997) asserted that contemporary Native women “maintain their
responsibilities as keepers of their culture, working for the revitalization of
the languages, arts, and religious practices of their people, with the focus al-
ways on future generations” and as Native women “assert their traditional
rights and assume their traditional responsibility of being the central voices
of their communities, Native American [Indian] nations will survive and their
women’s voices will remain loud and strong” (p. 769). The time has arrived
for a more accurate and more humanistic portrayal of Native American In-
dian women in the media

REFERENCES


The unexpected always happens.
—Lawrence J. Peter (1919–1990), Writer and educator