

The Dignity of Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples' Experiences at Work



Navajo Codetalkers Helped End WWII in the Pacific

**Dianna L. Stone, Kimberly M. Lukaszewski,
Brian Murray**

Research in Human Resource Management

The Dignity of Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples' Experiences at Work

Research in Human Resource Management

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Dianna L. Stone, James H. Dulebohn,
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Research in Human Resource Management is an annual series designed to advance theory, research, and practice in Human Resource Management (HRM), and the related fields of Organizational Behavior, Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and Research Methods. The overall goal of the series is to publish articles that (a) improve the effectiveness of HRM processes and practices, (b) improve HRM theory, (d) provide critical reviews of HRM theory and research, (e) enhance the methods used in HRM research, and (f) increase the degree to which individuals have satisfying and fulfilling careers in organizations. Each volume contains articles that are consistent with these goals.

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The Dignity of Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples' Experiences at Work

Edited by

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*We dedicate this book to all Native Americans and Indigenous People who
have served their nations.*

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CHAPTER 1

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIVE AMERICANS' CULTURAL VALUES AND THEIR CHOICE OF JOBS, MOTIVATION, AND JOB ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

Native Americans (NAs) and Indigenous people around the world face numerous challenges in their attempts to gain and maintain employment. For instance, they typically have higher unemployment rates (e.g., NAs have a 11.1% unemployment rate compared to 4.4% for other groups) than their counterparts ([Maxim et al., 2022](#)). They also have some of the highest poverty

rates (e.g., in the U.S. 25–27% of NAs live in poverty) and the lowest income levels (e.g., in the U.S. Native Americans have average income of \$43,825 compared to \$68,785 for their counterparts) (Asante-Muhammed et al., 2022). Further, they are often segregated into low level dead-end jobs with few opportunities for advancement (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2019). For example, many NAs are employed in low-paying service jobs including food preparation or housekeeping, and many others are employed in construction, farming, or fishing which may be part time seasonal jobs with no benefits (BLS, 2019). There are a number of reasons for these challenges including lack of education and training, structural racism, remote location of reservations, lack of broadband access, and a history of forced assimilation and cultural annihilation (e.g., American Indian College Fund, 2023; Hanson, 2009; Serrurier, 2023).

Keywords: Employment barriers; socioeconomic disparities; cultural identity; historical marginalization; workforce segregation

The purpose of this chapter is to set the stage for this second volume in the *Research in Human Resource Management* series on Native American peoples' experience of work (*Native American and Indigenous Peoples' World of Work* and *The Dignity of Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples' Experiences at Work*, volumes one and two, respectively). In it, we focus on the role of Native Americans' (NAs') distinctive cultural values in influencing job choice and the consequent motivation and job attitudes. The chapters that follow in the volume expand on the theme of job experiences, emphasize the dignity of NA people, and consider a number of human resource management issues (e.g., retention, incivility, unfair discrimination.) It merits noting that we limit our discussion to NAs, rather than all Indigenous people, because a review of work-issues for all Indigenous people in the world would be too broad for one paper. Further, there is some empirical research on NAs, but much less research on Indigenous people throughout the world.

NATIVE AMERICANS WANT MEANINGFUL WORK

Like the larger population of workers, NA workers and professionals seek meaningfulness in the careers they pursue; however, they face challenges as NAs due to hurdles in educational attainment, systematic bias, and few opportunities that allow for expression of an Indigenous identity. There are several factors that have impeded the educational achievement of NA students. For example, the history of NA boarding schools, which sought to “civilize” students into the Anglo-American culture, had a negative impact on education (Hanson, 2009; Serrurier, 2023). Further, many schools on

reservations often have been underfunded and have lacked basic resources (e.g., textbooks, qualified teachers) (Faircloth, 2021), and this deficiency has caused NA students to perform two to three grade levels below their white counterparts in reading and math (Office of Public Instruction, 2024). NAs also have exhibited the highest dropout rate of any group in the U.S. (9.9% of NAs dropped out in 2024), and their graduation rate has been much lower than the national average (69% of NAs vs. 81% of total population) (Bureau of Indian Education, n.d.).

Despite these challenges, NAs, like others, often strive to find meaning and personal fulfillment in their work (e.g., Murry & Yuan, 2025; Page-Reeves et al., 2017). For instance, NAs typically find work to be very meaningful when their jobs are aligned with their personal and cultural values, provide a sense of personal gratification, and contribute to the larger community or society. Work is much more than just a means of making a living to NAs and often involves the experience of being connected to something beyond oneself or having a sense of purpose in one's life. Many NAs view meaningful work as deeply intertwined with their cultural values, ancestry, commitment to the land, and contributions to their tribe or community. Interestingly, research by Murry and Yuan (2025) found that work has meaning for Indigenous people when it includes three basic components including: (a) a sense of generational belonging (i.e., seeing work as a continuation of their ancestors' values), (b) a feeling of connectedness (i.e., to community, land, and culture), and (c) the belief that the goals of the job align with Indigenous causes and personal beliefs.

However, finding jobs that allow NAs to express their values and contribute to the well-being of their community is much more difficult than finding a job just to pay the bills. There are a number of social and structural barriers that prevent Indigenous people from gaining employment (Maxim et al., 2022), and unfair discrimination may keep them from being employed in jobs that provide them with a satisfying work life (BLS, 2019). Although some research has considered the factors that affect NAs' meaningfulness at work (Murry & Yuan, 2025), little research in human resource management, organizational behavior and industrial and organizational psychology has considered the relationships between NAs' cultural values and their satisfaction with work or other work outcomes (Dabdoub et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2023). To contribute to existing research, we will (a) consider the research on Native Americans' cultural values and their implications for work, (b) review the existing research on Native Americans' and Indigenous peoples' job satisfaction and the challenges they face pursuing jobs and careers, (c) offer directions for future research and practice on the influence of cultural values on job satisfaction.

EXISTING RESEARCH ON NATIVE AMERICAN WORK ISSUES

To date, there has been very little empirical research on NA work issues (e.g., [Al-Asfour et al., 2021](#); [Dabdoub et al., 2021](#)). Prior to discussing the relationships between NAs' cultural values and work-related issues, we review the results of two empirical studies on NAs' beliefs, job and career search, and job satisfaction to provide a greater understanding of the research that exists on NAs' work issues.

Native American's Beliefs About Education

There is an emerging body of research on Native American's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors toward education and careers (e.g., [Al-Asfour et al., 2021](#); [Colston et al., 2019](#); [Smith et al., 2014](#); [Turner et al., 2022](#); [Turner & Pope, 2023](#)). [Al-Asfour et al. \(2021\)](#), for example, conducted interviews with NA students in a community college using [Syed and Özbilgin's \(2009\)](#) relational model to understand their attitudes toward education and the challenges they face in their job or career search. The results of their study revealed that NAs were motivated to pursue advanced education as a means of attaining career mobility. They stressed that education is important for accessing good jobs and emphasized that education should be continuous throughout one's life.

Challenges Facing Native Americans in Their Job and Career Search

The results of the same study described the challenges that NAs faced in the job market and their pursuit of long term careers ([Al-Asfour et al., 2021](#)). For instance, transportation was one of the biggest challenges they face when they attempted to gain access to jobs. The primary reason for this finding was that many NAs were poor and did not own cars, and there was little or no public transportation near remote reservations ([Al-Asfour et al., 2021](#)). Further, participants in the study indicated that the lack of transportation also affected their willingness to apply for jobs because they felt they would not be able to accept job offers due to the lack of transportation. Another major challenge was that they often experience unfair discrimination in the employment process, and this had a negative impact on their motivation to seek jobs outside of their reservations.

Family expectations and responsibilities also served as a barrier to gaining access to jobs and pursuing careers ([Al-Asfour et al., 2021](#)). Family was extremely important to NAs, but the needs and expectations of families

create challenges and conflicts for young NAs in the job search process. Extended families often placed numerous obligations and responsibilities on young NAs, and they experienced high stress levels when they were not able to fulfill these obligations and expectations (Al-Asfour et al., 2021). For example, they may be asked to quit school and help support their families meet their basic survival needs. Thus, NAs may have long term career goals (e.g., becoming a lawyer), but family responsibilities often led them to give up on these goals and seek jobs that only meet basic needs (Al-Asfour et al., 2021). It merits noting that other disadvantaged groups (e.g., Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans) often experience similar challenges which means that they are often relegated to low level jobs (Maxim et al., 2022). Disadvantaged groups in the U.S. do not have the luxury to pursue careers when they have to help their families meet their current survival needs.

In summary, the results of the research by Al-Asfour et al. (2021) found that NAs believe that education is important for finding good jobs and having a satisfying career. However, the results also revealed that at least three major factors serve as challenges to their ability to pursue jobs and careers. Those challenges include lack of transportation, unfair discrimination, and extended families' expectations and obligations. In view of these challenges, we will consider strategies for overcoming them in the summary section of this chapter.

Research on Native Americans' Job Satisfaction

There is limited empirical research on DS – NAs job attitudes or job satisfaction (e.g., Dabdoub et al., 2021; Haar & Brougham, 2013; Weaver, 2003). Haar and Brougham (2013) developed a model of factors affecting the job and career satisfaction of Indigenous individuals. They compared the job satisfaction levels of the Maori people (e.g., Indigenous people from New Zealand) and New Zealanders who descended from Europeans. Their results revealed that cultural well-being and collectivism were unique factors that predicted the job and career satisfaction of Maoris. Further, traditional predictors of job and career satisfaction (e.g., work family conflict, hours worked, tenure, and organizational support) did not contribute much variance to understanding NAs' job satisfaction.

A study by Dabdoub et al. (2021) tested a model of job satisfaction that was partially based on the one developed by Haar and Brougham (2013). Their results revealed that organizational fairness, regardless of minority group status, and the meaningfulness of work were positively related to job satisfaction for NAs. Further, the study's findings indicated that organizational support, work interfering with family, and job tenure were negatively related to job satisfaction. Unexpectedly, the results did not find that NAs' cultural wellbeing or collectivism were predictive of job satisfaction, and these findings differed from the results of the Haar and Brougham (2013)

study. The authors argued that the differences may have been due to the fact that NAs may be acculturated to the dominant Anglo-American culture more than Maoris. However, additional research is needed to understand the conflicting findings.

NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURAL AND WORK VALUES

Based on the results of these reviewed studies, we consider the role that cultural values may play in determining NAs' job choice, motivation, and job satisfaction. To conceptualize the relationships between NAs' cultural values and work attitudes and behaviors, we used [Locke's \(1976\)](#) value-perception theory in which he argued that the factors that one values, including cultural values, affect individuals' choice of jobs, job attitudes, and job behaviors. This theory predicts that the ability to express one's values on a job plays a key role in determining one's job satisfaction, motivation, and retention rates. Expanding on this proposition, individuals' level of job satisfaction is directly related to how well their jobs meet their basic or cultural values. When a job's attributes are consistent with one's values or allows one to express their values then individuals should be satisfied. However, when there are discrepancies between one's values and the attributes of jobs then individuals are likely to be unhappy with jobs. For example, if a person values autonomy on the job, but supervisors use close supervision to control them then they are likely to be displeased or disgruntled on jobs. Conversely, if the individual values autonomy, and the supervisor offers the person the freedom to choose the methods used to perform the job then he or she is likely to be happy on the job. There has been considerable support for this theory in organizational behavior and human resource management (e.g., [Judge et al., 2001](#); [Judge & Ilies, 2004](#)), but we know of no research that has examined the degree to which the ability to express one's values on the job affects NAs' job attitudes and behaviors.

Given the elements of the value-perception model, we apply the theory to help to understand and explain NAs' work attitudes and behaviors. In particular, we provide a review of NAs' cultural values and potential work values as the basis for their job choice, motivation, job satisfaction, and retention rates. It merits noting that we know of only one study on NAs' work values ([Murry & Yuan, 2025](#)), and this study provided limited results. As a result, we make inferences about NAs' work values based on research that has identified their cultural values.

Native Americans' Cultural Values

Although there is a large number of NA tribes in the U.S., research has shown that they share a common set of basic cultural values, and we

consider these values in the section that follows. Cultural values are often defined as the collective beliefs, standards, principles, and ideals that guide the behaviors, norms, and decision making of individuals, groups, and societies (Triandis, 1994). Prior to discussing NAs' values, it merits emphasis that cultural values are typically shared in a specific group (e.g., ethnic group, nation, religious community), but there are often individual differences in cultural values within those groups. For example, a NA group may emphasize familism, but an individual within the group may not express that same value. As a result, we believe, as do others (Betancourt & López, 1993) that NAs' cultural values apply, on average, to the group, but all members of a group may not share the same cultural values. On average, Native Americans' cultural values emphasize collectivism, cooperation, in-group harmony, idealism, coupling scientific and nonscientific ways of knowing, indirect communication styles, and the interconnectedness of all living things (Stone et al., 2023). Further, cross-cultural researchers have argued that one's basic and cultural values have a profound effect on their work attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Triandis, 1994), so we consider how NAs' cultural values may influence their work values, job choice, motivation, and job attitudes. We know of no specific research on NAs' work values, so we make inferences about their work values from their cultural values.

Native Americans Value Collectivism

NAs' cultural values are very different than Anglo-Americans' values and they are, on average, more likely to emphasize collectivism and in-group harmony than Anglo-Americans who stress individualism and competitive achievement (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Those who value collectivism place the needs of the group over the needs and goals of the individual (Triandis, 1994) and stress loyalty, working toward the common good, and helping one another. In contrast, those who emphasize individualism place the needs of the individual over the needs of the group and stress independence, autonomy, competition, and self-reliance (Triandis, 2001).

NAs also are more likely to place a great deal of importance on in-group harmony and cooperation (Hain-Jamall, 2013), and they emphasize group rather than individual achievement (Pewewardy, 2008). For instance, NAs typically honor people who have made significant contributions to the tribe or their community rather than honoring specific individual achievements (Dvorakova, 2019; Pewewardy, 2008). They also try to avoid calling attention to themselves (Burk, 2007) and prefer working in groups to working alone (Pewewardy, 2008). Individuals who value collectivism also stress that people should work together in harmony, cooperate with others, and become part of an interdependent group (Triandis, 1994). Collectivists also exhibit more loyalty and helping behaviors than individualists and are more likely to work toward the common good rather than individual goals (Triandis, 1994). Further, collectivists do not believe individuals are just separate units that should be interdependent from one another (Triandis, 1994).

Whenever possible, NAs also avoid competitive acts and aggression, and some tribes view competition as improper behavior (Burk, 2007). Others believe that it is acceptable to win at games once in a while, but they should not win or dominate other groups all of the time (Burk, 2007). However, their emphasis on cooperation and group harmony may create internal conflict for those who try to fit in to work organizations that are dominated by Anglo-American value systems that emphasize individualism and competitive achievement (Pewewardy, 2008).

Given the tenets of the value-perception theory and the fact that NAs typically value collectivism, their choice of jobs, motivation, and job satisfaction levels should be influenced by the degree to which jobs enable them to meet their collective values. For example, they may be more likely to choose jobs that offer them an opportunity to work in teams rather than to work by themselves. They are also more likely to be motivated by enhancing the well-being of their work group, families, or tribes rather than their personal self-interest. Further, NAs should view team-based rewards as more satisfying than those based on only individual performance. We are aware of only one study that has assessed the degree to which collectivism values are related to work attitudes and behaviors (Haar & Broughm, 2021). This study found that collectivism predicted career satisfaction for the Maori people in New Zealand. Given the limited research on this topic, we offer the following hypotheses to foster future research.

- H1. NAs are more likely to value collectivism and cooperation than Anglo-Americans.
- H2. When NAs value collectivism and cooperation they should be more likely to (a) choose jobs that offer them an opportunity to work as part of a team rather than work alone, (b) be motivated by enhancing the well-being of their work group, family, or tribe than their individual self-interest, and (c) be more satisfied with team-based rewards rather than rewards based on individual performance.

Native Americans Value Familism

NAs also are more likely to emphasize familism values than Anglo-Americans. Familism stresses strong family unity, mutually supportive relationships, and stress that the family's interests should come before the individuals' self-interest (Campos et al., 2014). However, when NAs refer to families, they are referring to large extended families (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, etc.) rather than small nuclear families that consist of only a father, mother and children (Al Asfour et al., 2021). Given their emphasis on familism values, they are also likely to strive for a sense of belonging, and view family customs and norms as very important (Al Asfour et al., 2021).