

Basic Elements/Characteristics of Native Americans Cultures

(I require college students to memorize these 48 characteristics for their Midterm in Native American History. Consistently, for the last 20 years, students tell me it's the best part of the course)

Adaptability

is the ability to adapt to the changing environment and time while keeping the essence of culture - changing with the times but keeping the essence of the culture.

Ex: A dancer may wear a CD on his shoulder because long ago dancers wore shiny shells there.

Autonomy

the ethic of non-interference in the lives of others.

Ex: Duane didn't force his youngest son to go to college.

Avoidance of eye contact

is a sign of respect and prolonged direct eye contact may be considered an invasion of the self.

Ex: Navajo only stare at another when they are angry.

Bilingualism

concepts and ideas of a culture are not easily translated; language carries culture, so knowing your ancient language allows you to think and express certain concepts more easily and helps keep the culture strong.

Ex: One word in Native American can be 100 words in English and vice versa.

Careful Listening

is important because Native Americans have oral cultures therefore being able to listen well allows the culture to continue.

Ex: A child who listens well might be invited to be a part of a singing group to carry on the

songs. One might patiently listen to grandma's stories so they can be told to the next generation.

Careful Observation

is the basis of learning and the means of acquiring specialized skills of a culture, and part of the experiential learning process.

Ex. Through observation a child has the opportunity to learn artisan skills of traditional basket weaving, beading, and ceremonial dancing, along with social communal skills imbedded in the culture.

Caution in Interpersonal Relations

used in personal encounters with others - information about family or oneself is not freely shared with others to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Ex. When N.A. meet someone they may not volunteer personal information quickly until trust is established. The second-grader won't tell his teacher or school counselor that he lives with his 98-year-old grandmother so as to not be pulled from a loving home by social services who may not be able to recognize their care-givers.

Circle of Life

is recognizing themselves as part of nature rather than separate from it--the interconnectedness of all things.

Ex: The buffalo eats grass, we eat the buffalo, when we die we are returned to the earth to become grass for the buffalo once again--full circle.

Communality

thinking for the group, holding major resources as a group (e.g. land, buffalo herd).

Ex. Taking care to see that everyone has enough of what they need; doing what's best for the group insures your own survival. "If you don't take more than you really need, there will always be enough for everyone."

Competition

between individuals is discouraged; it separates people and leaves some shamed. Group competition is more comfortable as it strengthens the group's connectedness.

Ex: One on one competition in a game of basketball is less comfortable than teams where you're part of a group.

Cooperation

is highly valued, and rooted in the past when cooperation was necessary for the survival of family and group. Cooperation is an effective way of accomplishing large tasks.

Ex: Buffalo hunting required the cooperation of the group.

Courtesy

Politeness shows respect for the individuality of others; it promotes harmony, cooperation, communality, etc.

Ex: Duane was taught to stand and shake someone's hand when introduced.

Cultural Pluralism

allowing differences, valuing differences, and not insisting that everyone be like you.

Ex: Kiowas are very different from Osages, but it's ok; they may know something we might need to know.

No Harsh Discipline

reasoning and or shame are used for discipline -- corporal punishment (striking) or harsh discipline is not used with children (or anyone) so as not to damage self-esteem.

Ex: a child's parents or extended family may speak in a low voice, a give a particular glance or ignore someone and he/she will know what they are doing is not acceptable.

Experiential Learning

Learning by doing--through experience and mistakes.

Ex: A child throwing a glass jar will learn that glass breaks (an important lesson) and will not be punished or scolded for learning.

Extended Family

grandparents, aunts, clan relatives may be part of the household; cousins may be regarded as siblings.

Ex: Grandparents, aunts, cousins may all live together with parents and children and take part in the upbringing of children – different generations together in the same household.

Fan of Reference

there may be different versions of one tribe's myth; all are true.

Ex: People from different clans in a tribe may tell the same story of a myth but in a slightly different way - all are correct. (Note: different tribes have completely different myths. Fan of Reference refers only to one tribe).

Generosity

is highly regarded -- respect is given more for how much one gives rather than how much they have. Generosity creates bonds between people.

Ex: In order to aspire to leadership among the ancient Osage, it was expected that you would give away all your possessions three times in your life. It taught you the value of material things and developed bonds between you and those around you.

Harmony

within the group will create the balance required to achieve goals for the benefit of the group. It promotes cooperation, communality, etc.

Ex: If two people are arguing they will leave the group so as not to break the harmony. Also, harmony with the environment – avoid building your home

on a flood plain.

Holistic Approach to Health

is treating the whole person not just the illness-- includes the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual side of the person. Maintaining the balance of the person.

Ex: An Indian doctor will set a child's broken arm and will also examine why the child broke his arm. Sickness may be seen as an imbalance within the individual and between them and their universe.

Humor as a Survival Mechanism

Humor is used to face adversity and get through tough times.

Ex: If one lost a foot through diabetes, they might joke about not having to clip their toenails anymore.

Importance of Family

Family is a major survival mechanism of support for each individual.

Ex: An uncle or aunt might get you your first job.

Indifference to Ownership

Non-materialistic - being a good person is more valued than acquiring material goods/wealth.

Ex: The most important person in an Indian town is probably not the banker with the Cadillac, but the clan uncle who is always there for everyone.

Indifference to Saving

is an attitude that comes from the past where food, clothing, shelter, and land were provided by nature and shared by the group.

Ex: If you have more of a resource than you need, you do not save it but rather share it.

Indifference to Work Ethic

work is done when it is needed to be done--unlike the Puritan Work Ethic of work for work's sake.

Ex: Do things as needed rather than to “keep busy”.

Individual Sense of Justice

People take responsibility for their own actions. No police or courts in the old days; an elder's council often settled disputes.

Ex: If you kill someone in a fit of rage, you must take that person's place in their family, i.e. bring food, firewood, etc. You try to make it right.

Individuality

Not telling others what to do; everyone has their own path in life – only they know what is best for them.

Ex: If the driver in a car full of Osages veers toward the edge of the road, none of the other people will say (or even think) “Don't drive off the road.” They will say, “There's the edge of the road,” pointing out the condition but leaving the decision up to the driver.

Interconnectedness

is where everything and everyone is connected in the universe in some form.

Ex: We are connected to trees because they produce oxygen which we need to breathe.

Moderation in Speech

words have power; use carefully. N.A. are careful in what they say and do not talk for the sake of talking.

Ex: Silence is comfortable, it means people are thinking. People speak when they have something to say.

Modesty

because boasting and loud behavior attract attention to oneself and may

make others feel shame or discomfort, they are discouraged.

Modesty regarding one's body is common.

Ex: N.A children and adults do not speak freely of their accomplishments; their relatives will brag for them and they can remain humble.

Non-authoritarian

Authority resides in each individual and power is dispersed--there may be many chiefs, each leads by example. Each person is their own sovereign nation; no "Presidents" who can tell others what to do.

Ex: A leader will have followers because they are good at what they do, they speak well, and make good decisions.

Non-hierarchal

an egalitarian society; all roles are recognized as equally valuable.

Ex: Men and women may have different roles, but are appreciated equally for their contributions, e.g. Each individual has their own important role in contributing to the group.

Orientation to the Present

focus on living in the now --"being rather than becoming." You can't really live in the past or future.

Ex: A medical student may tell you he/she is "studying medicine" (being) rather than saying, "I'm going to be a doctor" (in the future, becoming)

Paradox

Two contradictory things/ideas may both be true. N.A.s have great acceptance of paradox; contradictions are acceptable and life is seen as being full of contradictions (e.g. modern physics tells us that light is both a particle and a wave of energy).

Ex: A fire can heat a house as well as burn it down.

Patience

is necessary for many aspects of N.A. life. Culture is passed down both orally and by observation requiring patience to learn.

Ex: Storytelling, hunting, and beadwork can only be learned with great patience.

Permissive Child Rearing

learning is self-exploratory rather than restrictive. Children are seldom forbidden to try anything because they learn from experience (and mistakes).

Ex: A child will learn balance by exploring walking atop a fence and will not be told, “Get down, you’ll hurt yourself.” They may be distracted, however, if it’s too dangerous.

Placidity

is having the ability to remain quiet and still - silence is comfortable. It also means being content with an acceptable situation and not always wanting “more” (i.e. the newest car when your old one works well).

Ex: N.A. have few nervous mannerisms. Listening to grandma’s stories for the 10th time may take a certain amount of placidity (but you can tell them to your children).

Pragmatism

is a practical, common sense, realistic approach to life – few illusions, few pretensions.

Ex: If a drum cracks, turn it over.

Psychology of Oppression

The tendency of oppressed people to continue the habits of oppression after the oppressor is gone.

Ex: Fighting over scarce resources rather than working together to gain more. Story of crabs in a bucket, Indian crabs pull one another back into the bucket.

Respect for Elders

In an oral society, elders carry language, history, and culture and are well cared for. Elders are our libraries, our national treasures.

Ex: When an elder tells a story one listens with interest even though perhaps it is the tenth time. Elders are fed first at a powwow or gathering.

Respect for Mother Earth

Earth is seen as a living being (spirit) who provides everything necessary for life and therefore deserves respect.

Ex: When taking something you need, always give something back, even if only a prayer of thanks; never exploit your mother.

Respect for Nature

is a cooperative way of life to function in harmony and balance with nature; we are an equal part of nature, not separate, not above or below any other part.

Ex: Respect is given by not taking more than is necessary and by giving something back, if only a prayer--the same for hunting--take only what you need.

Shame

is a mechanism of social control; it keeps people doing the “right” thing.

Ex: A person's wrong actions can bring shame on both the person and his/her extended family, so people try to do the right thing.

Sharing

is a core value held by N.A. It promotes the survival of the group and is highly valued.

Ex: Sharing food among people to stay alive when food is scarce; Osage: aspiring leaders gave away everything three times in their life.

Spirituality

is a way of life—everything has a spiritual side/dimension. Every day is Sunday.

Ex: If a buffalo is killed--thanks are given for its sacrifice.

Synthesis

is putting bits of information together to “know” about something; using prior knowledge to learn something rather than taking something apart (analysis).

Ex: To learn how a drum works, you don't need to take it apart, but you have tapped a hollow log and thumped on a stretched canvas and putting this prior knowledge/experience together explains the sound mechanism.

Time

is relative, a continuum without beginning or end, cyclical, and non-linear.

Things are done as needed rather than because a clock or calendar tells you to.

Ex: A powwow will begin when the people are ready, not necessarily at a designated hour.

Veneration of Age

Experience (and sometimes wisdom) comes with age. Older people are valued.

Ex: You can look to older people for guidance; they may have experience with your problem. Grandma may know what to do about a broken heart.