Influencers and Priorities:
A Sociological Examination of First Nations
High School Students in Manitoba

by Chris Adams

INFLUENCERS AND PRIORITIES:

A SOCIOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF FIRST NATIONS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MANITOBA[1]

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PUBLIC POLICY PAPER #46
NOVEMBER 2006

INTRODUCTION

Many First Nations high school teenagers face systemic barriers when making good career and education-related choices. These include poverty, remoteness, unemployment, cultural alienation, and psychological despair.[3] Although there is no shortage of research on these all-too-real problems, this article uses a sociological model through which to examine the connection between what high school teenagers in First Nations communities in Manitoba[4] say will be their priorities as they enter into adulthood ("life priorities") and those who help shape those priorities ("life influencers"). That is, the extent to which teenagers report being influenced by those in their family and community as they seek to make choices about their future.

Socialization is the process through which individuals move in early childhood and adolescence and acquire the knowledge, skills, and motivations for a developed self identity and social life.[5] North American sociologists who are interested in this process typically examine the role played by four categories of influencers: parents and family members, peers, educators, and the media. All are seen as important players in a young person's development with regard to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and motivations. This article provides an assessment of the extent to which all four of these influencers pertain to high school students in Manitoba First Nations communities. However, for First Nations communities, is the examination of these four influencing factors sufficient? This article goes beyond these factors in order to recognize the special circumstances and dynamics within these communities. It also takes an extra step by revising the socialization model and incorporates two other potentially influential agents: elders and local community leaders.[6]

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[3] "Many Aboriginal youth see themselves facing an economic wasteland. They see high unemployment rates, inadequate training and a lack of meaningful jobs." *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Volume 4, Perspectives and Realities*, Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, p. 184. See also Frances Abele, *Urgent Need, Serious Opportunity: Towards a New Social Model for Canada's Aboriginal Peoples*, Research Report, Canadian Policy Research Network, April 2004, p. 8.

[4] Manitoba has five First Nations groups. These are Cree (northern region of the province), Ojibway (southern region), Ojibway-Cree (northeastern region), Dakota (southwestern region), and Dene (northwestern region). See www.manitobachiefs.com. A map of communities surveyed is provided for the reader's reference at the end of this article.

[5] Marlene Mackie, "Socialization," in *Sociology*, 3rd Ed., Robert Hagedorn, ed., Toronto: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1986, pp 63-97. See also Gerhard Lenski and Jean Lenski, *Human Societies*, 4th Ed., New York, McGraw-Hill, 1982, p. 31.

[6] For example, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples identifies elders as a potentially powerful force in developing new and positive trends in education. "Elders have always played a central role in Aboriginal education, which is fundamentally an inter-generational process. Elders are keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise people, the teachers." *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Volume 3, Gathering Strength*, Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996, pp. 525-526.

This article uses a sociological model through which to examine the connection between what high school teenagers in First Nations communities in Manitoba say will be their priorities as they enter into adulthood ("life priorities") and those who help shape those priorities ("life influencers").

This article is specifically aimed at the following:

1. Identifying and examining what First Nations teenagers report to be their priorities for what they would like to do when they reach their adult years. How these priorities link together into attitudinal dimensions is also explored.

2. Identifying the extent to which First Nations teenagers say they are influenced by parents, friends, teachers, and the media when making decisions about finding a job or where they should live.

3. Identifying the extent to which teenagers recognize community leaders and elders as an additional source of influence in their lives.

4. Identifying the extent to which links exist between different life priorities and each of the different sources of influence.

Data and Methods

The Manitoba First Nations High School survey was administered during June, September, and October 2002. Due to the particular nature of the sample frame, that is, that most First Nations high schools are located in remote communities, an in-class paper survey was prepared and then distributed through each school's principal's office. The sample was derived from a list of First Nations schools provided by the Manitoba Aboriginal Education Directorate.[7] Principals in each First Nation high school that were identified as having grades 10, 11, and/or 12 (Senior 2, 3, and 4) students were contacted directly by fax and invited to have their school participate in the study.[8] In total, eleven of twenty-five qualifying schools participated in the study.[9] The number of qualifying students in each school ranged from three to 150. Within each participating school, the surveys were sent by the principal's office to teachers in each of the Grade 10, 11, and 12 classes. A total of 339 out of 998 distributed surveys were returned by the eleven participating schools.

The data are analyzed in a number of ways in this study. Basic univariate statistics are used to examine the overall ratings that students place on different life values and priorities. These are also used in order to assess the extent to which students rate each of the socializing agents. The figures are presented in the form of mean scores as well as percentages of students giving very low ratings (that is, 1 out of 5) and who give very high ratings (that is, 5 out of 5). A further step, factor analysis, is applied to the fourteen life priority items in order to discern patterns within the data and to demonstrate that First Nations student attitudes can to be categorized into four separate and coherent value-related dimensions. This procedure facilitates this article's final stage of analysis which incorporates the Pearson's product-moment correlation (r) in order to identify linkages that might exist between each influencer and post-secondary attitudinal dimensions.

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[7] The sample therefore pertains to respondents who are on-reserve status Indian, except for one school in Winnipeg. That is, only schools falling under federal jurisdiction are within the sample frame and do not include those falling within provincial jurisdiction, such as schools that include Métis or non-status students. The author would be interested in collaborating with organizations or other social researchers who could facilitate the surveying of these student populations.

[8] Extensive follow-up was required for each step of the project: obtaining permission for the school's inclusion, ensuring that they be administered, and obtaining the completed surveys.

[9] The initial list consisted of twenty-eight schools: eleven participated by returning the completed surveys, five initially joined the study but did not return the survey packages, nine declined to participate, and four did not qualify (that is, the author was informed that no high school students were attending for that year).

A. Life Priorities

Teenagers were asked to rate (on a scale of 1 to 5) fourteen different things that they believe are important to do after finishing high school. A very large majority of the students gave very high scores to "Having a Good Job" (77% gave it a full 5 out of 5 rating) and getting a "College or University Degree" (72%). Three other areas achieved a majority who gave 5 out of 5 ratings: "Making Money" (63%), "Seeing More of the World" (60%), and "Learning New Things" (56%). The Life Priorities that had the *fewest* number of respondents giving 5 out of 5 ratings were "Living in My Community" (only 13% give this 5 out of 5), "Being in a Large City" (18%), and "Raising Children" (22%).[10]

Table 1: Ratings of Life Priorities

"On a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is Very Low and 5 is Very High, please rate how important the following things are to you when you finish school."	Overall Item Mean Score (Max=5)	% Giving Very Low Scores (1 out of 5)	% Giving Very High Scores (5 out of 5)
Having a good job	4.7	1	77
Having a college or university degree	4.5	2	72
Making money	4.4	1	63
Learning new things	4.4	1	56
Seeing more of the world	4.2	3	60
Having fun	4.0	2	49
Helping my people	3.9	1	35
Learning a practical skill	3.8	2	27
Learning about my people's history	3.6	5	29
Being outdoors	3.4	5	21
Being with friends	3.5	4	24
Being in a large city	3.1	16	18
Living in my community	2.7	17	13
Raising children	2.9	24	22

Contrasting views are apparent among the students when rating "Being in a Large City", "Living in My Community", and "Raising Children". Some score these three priorities very highly, while others give them very low ratings. It therefore appears that

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[10] Gender does not appear to be a factor on the "Raising Children" choice. 20% of males (N=153) give this a 5 out of 5 compared to 23% of females (N=186). 20% of males compared to 25% of females give this a 1 out of 5.

one discernible dimension among the respondents is that some students might be linked together by what can be termed an "outward world orientation" while others might be linked to their community and therefore considered to have an "inward orientation".

In order to explore this further, and to see the linkages of different life priorities and value "dimensions", a factor analysis procedure was applied to the data.[11] Please see Table 2 on the following page.

Included within each dimension are those items having a correlation figure of at least .4 (or, in terms of negative direction, -.4). Each of the four dimensions is identified according to discernible orientations or themes. Factor 1 is identified as "Community Builders" in that it correlates well with items that concern developing skills and remaining linked to the local community. While "Community Builders" appear to be community-oriented (ie. inwardly oriented), they are also willing to seek out new things and learning, including elements relating to their heritage, community, and finding a job. Those in the Factor 2 category ("Exiting Seekers") are those who have a strong aversion to staying in their community (-.72) and child rearing (-.47), while they are positive about moving to the city (.73) and seeing the world (.62). Factor 3, "Outdoor Recreationists", consists of those who place a high priority on fun and the outdoors. It correlates positively with "Having Fun", "Being Outdoors" and "Being with Friends". It also correlates negatively with "Having a Good Job" and going to college or university (-.47). Factor 4, "Materialists", correlates positively with "Making Money" and negatively with "Learning About My People's History".

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[11] For this study we used a straightforward factor analysis correlational procedure with no rotations. For an explanation of factor analysis, see Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 7th Ed., New York: Wadsworth, 1994, pp. 427-430.

Table 2: Life Priorities and Dimensions

"On a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is Very Low and 5 is Very High, please rate how important the following things are to you when you finish school."	Dimension 1: "Community Builders"	Dimension 2: "Exiting Seekers"	Dimension 3: "Outdoor Recreationists"	Dimension 4: "Materialists"
Helping my people	+.67			
Learning a practical skill	+.61			
Having a good job	+.56		-.51	
Learning about my people's history	+.56			-.50
Learning new things	+.55			
College/University degree	+.46		-.47	
Having fun	+.48		+.56	
Seeing more of the world	+.46	+.62		
Being with friends	+.46		+.51	
Being in a large city		+.73		
Living in my community		-.72		
Raising children		-.47		
Being outdoors			+.55	
Making money				+.60

Later in this article, this author examines whether or not there are links between these dimensions and each of the agents of socialization that have been identified as playing an important role in First Nations communities. Before proceeding, however, this article first examines the extent to which First Nations teenagers rate the different sources of influence that are identified by the socialization model.

B. Life Influencers

First Nations teenagers report that their parents, as well as their family and relatives, are the most important influences in helping them choose what to do when they leave high school. One-half of the teenagers (50%) give their parent(s) the maximum score possible (5 out of 5) and 30% give family and relatives the maximum score. These figures affirm the primary role that sociologists have observed with regard to the family in the socialization process. These results as they pertain to Manitoba also confirm observations made by those exploring the traditional roles of the family within Aboriginal societies across Canada:

> The family in Aboriginal societies stood between the individual and the larger society, playing an interpretive or mediating role. It helped individuals understand and respond to society's expectations, and it helped Aboriginal society engage individuals in constructive ways and discipline them should they venture on a course that conflicted with prevailing social values and expectations of behaviour.[12]

While parents and family appear to score high, varying positive ratings occur also for each of the other socializing agents that are rated. None had an average score that is below the midway mark (2.5) in the five-point scale. Of particular interest, and concerning the third objective of this research project, that is, *identifying the extent to which teenagers recognize community leaders and elders as an additional source of influence in their lives*, these two additional categories rate the same scores as do teachers.

Table 3: Ratings of Life Influencers

"You might hear about things to do when you finish high school. How important is each of the following in terms of giving you ideas about your choices?"	Overall Item Mean Score (Max=5)	% Giving Very Low Scores (1 out of 5)	% Giving Very High Scores (5 out of 5)
Mother or Father	4.0	6	50
Family and Relatives	3.6	7	30
Friends	3.1	13	17
Media (Television)	2.9	19	16
Community Leaders	2.7	28	13
Teachers	2.6	26	10
Elders in the Community	2.6	27	9

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[11] *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

The following table, contains Gamma scores[13] showing the extent to which Life Influencers are connected to three attitudinal variables that could be considered to be important for building a quality work force within the community context: pursuing a post secondary education ("Getting a University or College Degree"), acquiring skills that might be job related ("Learning a Practical Skill"), and respecting the needs and traditions of the local community ("Helping My People"). Only cells containing statistically significant scores (i.e., based on a chi square calculation < .05) are shown.

Table 4: Life Influencers and Four Key Priorities

Life Influencers	Life Priorities		
	"College/University"	"Learning a Skill"	"Helping My People"
Mother or Father	.17 Sig<.05		.25 Sig<.01
Family and Relatives			.29 Sig<.01
Friends			.25 Sig<.01
Community Leaders			.32 Sig<.01
Teachers		.21 Sig<.05	.23 Sig<.01
Elders in the Community			.34 Sig<.01
Media (Television)			

With the exception of the media, each Life Influencer appears to be connected in some way to the three variables for the high school students. The influence of parents is slightly (yet statistically significantly) connected to attitudes regarding post-secondary training, while teachers appear connected to learning a skill. Of particular interest is that the community-oriented variable ("Helping My People") is associated with each of the influencers, with the exception of media. This supports the view made by many that human resource planning and post-secondary recruitment strategies with First Nations populations must go beyond the school system and be designed sensitively to suit the community's needs and interests, by communicating and consulting with a wide range of community members who might play a role in the teenagers' lives.[14] The following section takes the data another step forward by taking the four different attitudinal dimensions (as shown in Table 2) and examining how these are connected in varying ways to those who help shape the decisions of First Nations high school students.

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[13] Gamma scores operate with the same underlying assumptions as Spearman's rho and Kendall's tau and are suited to measuring the association between two ordinal variables. The score provides a measure of the extent to which one variable can serve as a predictor of change on the second variable through a calculated proportional reduction of error (PRE). The reader is referred to Earl Babbie, *op. cit.*, pp. 418-419.

[14] See Agnes Grant, "The Challenge for Universities", in *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*, Marie Battiste and Jean Barman, eds., Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995, p. 212. See also, *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Volume 3, Gathering Strength, op.cit.*, Chapter 5.

C. Life Influencers and Life Priorities

Based on the identification of the four distinct attitudinal dimensions (shown in Section A) a second data processing step was implemented. Likert scales were created that are constructed from those variables that were identified by the factor analysis (in Table 2) as having a correlation of at least .5 within each of the four attitudinal dimensions. By doing this, this author was able to score the orientations of all students according to each of the four attitudinal dimensions[15] thus facilitating a subsequent step: having each of the four attitudinal orientations correlated to each of the Life Influencers.

Table 5 on the following page shows that a small but statistically significant relationship can be discerned for a wide range of socializing agents for the "Community Building" orientation (which included job, training, and community-oriented values). Those who scored high in the third orientation, that is "Outdoor Recreationalism" (which included "Having Fun" and "Being Outdoors", while being negativity correlated towards "Getting a Good Job"), are also influenced by a number of sources. It is noteworthy that there is no statistically discernible link to parental influence.

High scoring for the "Exiting/Seeking" orientation (including the desire to "Being in a Large City", and "Seeing More of the World" while feeling negative about staying in the community) appears to be disconnected from the influence of community, parental, and other life influences. A study of the fourth orientation, that is, the "Materialism" orientation, which encompasses "Making Money" and negative feelings about "Learning One's Own History", reveals that there are a number of statistically significant negative correlations with impact of Life Influencers. In other words, the higher the score on "Materialism", the lower will be the scored ratings for the influence of "Family and Relatives", "Community Leaders", "Teachers", and "Elders in the Community".

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[15] All respondents are attributed with a score for each of the orientations. For example, the "Community Builder" dimension contains five strongly correlated variables as identified in Table 2. A respondent who has the lowest score possible for the five variables is 1+1+1+1+1 and therefore has a "Community Builder" score of 5 out of a possible 25 (which is the maximum score based on 5+5+5+5+5).

Table 5: Correlations of Life Influencers and Orientations

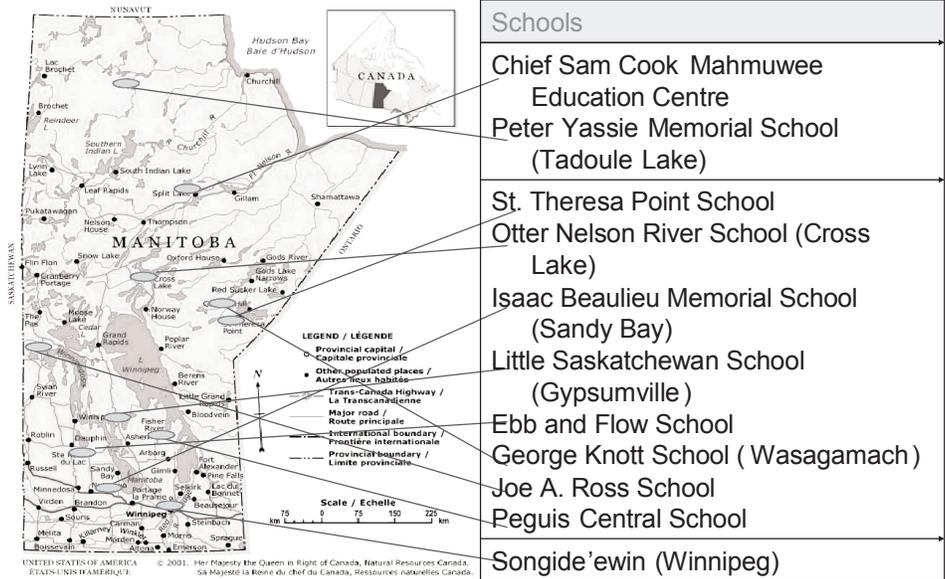| Life Influencers	Life Priorities Orientations			
	"Community Building"	"Exiting/Seeking"	"Outdoor Recreationalism"	"Materialism"
Mother or Father	.19 Sig<.01			
Family and Relatives	.24 Sig<.01		.16 Sig<.01	-.15 Sig<.01
Friends	.23 Sig<.01		.31 Sig<.01	
Community Leaders	.30 Sig<.01		.13 Sig<.05	-.21 Sig<.01
Teachers	.12 Sig<.01		.15 Sig<.01	-.16 Sig<.01
Elders in the Community	.30 Sig<.01	-.17 Sig<.01	.14 Sig<.05	-.29 Sig<.01
Media (Television)	.23 Sig<.01			

CONCLUSION

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this examination of the Manitoba First Nations high school survey. First, most teenagers report that as they leave their childhood years they continue to be influenced by their parents, relatives, friends, teachers, and the media. Furthermore, they also demonstrate that community leaders and elders can, and do, play a role in their decisions and life priorities. Secondly, the life priority attitudes reported by students generally fall into four general orientational dimensions. An issue of concern is that two of these four are clearly linked to abandoning the local community and its heritage. Furthermore, students who exhibit these orientations reflect a disconnection with those who have the potential to play a positive role in their lives.[16] The underlying message from the data is that educators and community leaders need to strengthen their connections with each other as they work to ensure that students are positively influenced as they make plans for the future. Results from this Manitoba First Nations study supports the following observation made earlier by the Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal People: "Individual, family, and community are the three strands that, when woven together, will strengthen cultures and restore Aboriginal people to their former dignity."[17]

The underlying message from the data is that educators and community leaders need to strengthen their connections with each other as they work to ensure that students are positively influenced as they make plans for the future.

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[16] It is beyond the scope of this survey-based study to explore what factors could contribute to the ability of adults to perform these positive roles.

[17] *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Volume 3, Gathering Strength, op.cit.*, p. 11

Participating First Nations Schools

Schools
Chief Sam Cook Mahmuwee Education Centre
Peter Yassie Memorial School (Tadoule Lake)
St. Theresa Point School
Otter Nelson River School (Cross Lake)
Isaac Beaulieu Memorial School (Sandy Bay)
Little Saskatchewan School (Gypsumville)
Ebb and Flow School
George Knott School (Wasagamach)
Joe A. Ross School
Peguis Central School
Songide'ewin (Winnipeg)

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About the Author

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"Manitoba's Political Party Systems: An Historical Overview," Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, June, 2006.

"Who Cares? Canadian Public Opinion and the Environment," Paper presented to the Association of Canadian Studies in the United States, St. Louis, November, 2005.

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"Crumpled Globalization and Canadian Agriculture Politics in the 1940s," *Policy Innovation Journal*, Ottawa, October, 2001.

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