

**LIFE IS HARDER HERE:  
THE CASE OF  
THE URBAN NAVAJO WOMAN**

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In December, 1977, and during two five-week summer periods in 1978 and 1979, the author talked with 22 Navajo women who were working or had worked in Flagstaff, Arizona. Flagstaff is a reservation border-town which is, at its closest point, some 30 miles from the southwest corner of the Navajo reservation.

The working hypotheses were: that Navajo women employed in Flagstaff were at the cutting edge of an increasing movement of Navajos from the reservation into wage work; that they were leaving the secure social and economic position of traditional Navajo women; that significant female others would not have been role models for work in the Anglo world; and, that stress could only be the result. It is, of course, a truism that rapid culture change causes stress in the individuals experiencing it, although non-directed culture change is less stressful than is directed (Spicer, 1961:523-4).

It was explained to each of the women that the author wanted to find out how things were going for her, what were the difficult parts of her life, and how she coped with them. It was also stated that, hopefully, the results of the research would be published, with appropriate changes to protect individual privacy. In every case notes were openly made during the talk, (almost always to be augmented after the interview) but in no case was a recording made.

The interviews took place in various settings -- from the restaurant where one woman was a waitress, to the author's office at the university. The use of a temporarily vacant office in the Native Americans for Community Action building was an immeasurable boon for, there, the women were in a more familiar setting and the author was the outsider; the reverse was true when the setting was the office.

Four of the 22 women were Northern Arizona University students; 4 were referrals through friends or relatives; 3 were Native Americans for Community Action referrals; and one a Northern Arizona University employee. A variety of circumstances accounted for contact with the remaining 4. The shortest interview lasted less than an hour; the longest took two complete afternoons, plus countless hours; typed, it is almost fifty pages long.

The data are skewed, and it is impossible to tell by how much. However, several things can be said about the direction of skewing. The women all speak English in varying degrees of fluency. They were willing to talk to me. They are much more highly educated than the average Navajo; however (and it is a large however), no one knows what the universe is. The number of Navajo women in Flagstaff, how many are or have been employed, the jobs they have held, the length of employment, their places of residence, their years of schooling, the number of children, the number and quality of marriages -- all these are unknown. Finally, the interviewing was done when the process of relocating Navajos from the Joint Use Area was beginning to have at least a psychological impact.<sup>1</sup>

In no case was a woman asked her age. It was felt that such a question would be both reminiscent of the officialdom with which all interviewees had come in contact, and that, in at least some instances, their answers would be estimates only. For example, one woman said there was no calendar in the hogan where she was born and that when the government came, her mother reported the month of her birth by its Navajo name. Correctly or not, March was entered in the record; the woman herself subsequently chose a date in the middle -- March 15 -- and said regarding the year of her birth, "I might be older, too."

Another woman, when old enough to begin formal employment in a state where one must be sixteen, found five different dates of her birth in the records of the boarding school she attended — five different days, five different months and five different years. From internal evidence and from appearance, 8 of the women appeared to be between 20 and 30 years of age; 6 between 30 and 40; 5 between 40 and 50; 2 between 50 and 60; and one between 60 and 70.

Ages by Decade:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
20-30	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
30-40	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
40-50	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
50-60	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
60-70	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....

Younger women predominated; but then, it is younger women who are apt to have moved to an urban area, have employment there, speak English and be willing to be interviewed. Perhaps equally predictably, since they were resident in Flagstaff at least temporarily at the time of the interviews, most of the women were from the western part of the reservation. The two from a more eastern reservation area were from the towns of Ft. Defiance and Chinle, west of the Arizona-New Mexico state line which divides the reservation from north to south.

The traditional Navajo emphasis on one's mother seems at first glance not to obtain when an "important people during childhood" item is scored: 12 of the women indicated "parents, mother and father" important and 9 considered "mother" important. However, when a "most important" emphasis is added, 10 of the "parents important" respondents indicate that their mothers were most important. This "most important" status was given to her maternal grandmother by one woman; to maternal grandparents *and* mother by a second; to her Anglo foster parents by a third (whose natural mother is now, however, of primary importance in her life).

The hypothesis that women would be the cutting edge in first-generation off-reservation employment was confirmed.

Occupation of Mothers:

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
Traditional													
Only	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Teacher	•	•	•	•	•	•							
Cook	•	•	•	•									
Waitress	•	•	•										
Knitting													
Mill	•	•	•										
Not													
Determined	•	•	•	•	•	•							

It is interesting that of the 13 "traditional only" mothers, 2 are now outspoken political activists, made so in response to relocation. Three mothers were teachers; 2 were cooks; one a waitress; one worked in the knitting mill in Flagstaff near the end of her middle years after having been a housekeeper and motel maid; and the occupations of 2 women were undetermined. Of the latter 2, one may be considered non-traditional for she worked in various border towns at an unspecified job or jobs; the other may well have been traditional for she lived all her life on the reservation. Her daughter reported, however, that she did not have sheep, a *sine qua non* in the lives of traditional Navajo women.

The types and locations of schools attended total more than 22. The women are probably representative in this regard. Only 6 women had experience with just one type of school, but even here, hodgepodge is the most apt word: 2 of the 6 attended only boarding schools on the reservation, but the remaining 4 attended: (1) an off-reservation boarding school; (2) a reservation day school; (3) an on-reservation mission school; and (4) an off-reservation public school.

The years of school completed by the women are inordinately high; the median is in the "more than high school" category. This fact, however, would seem consistent with employment, speaking English, and off-reservation residence.

Types of Schools Attended:

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
Boarding School on Reservation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Boarding School off Reservation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Day School on Reservation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Public School on Reservation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Public School off Reservation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Indian Dorm while in Public School off Reservation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Missionary School on Reservation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Missionary School off Reservation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Highest Year of School Completed:

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
less than eight	•	•	•	•	•	•
between eight & twelve	•	•	•	•	•	•
finished high school	•	•	•	•	•	•
more than h.s.; less than B.A.	•	•	•	•	•	•
B.A. or B.S. degree	•	•	•	•	•	•
work beyond B.A. or B.S.	•	•	•	•	•	•
Master's degree	•	•	•	•	•	•
work beyond Master's degree	•	•	•	•	•	•

Of the 4 women who make up the "less than eight" and "between eight and twelve" categories, 3 were studying for their high school equivalency, or GED, certificates when interviewed. Probably the most consistent single finding which did emerge from the interviews was that, whatever the circumstances of the women's lives, they have been hard on marriages.

Marital Summary:

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
never							
married	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
married							
once	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
first marriage							
ended	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
married							
twice	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
second							
marriage ended	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Of the 3 women who have never married, one has a daughter and the other has three sons. When asked about a husband, the latter replied with a laugh, "Marriage? I'm not ready for that yet." Only 2 of the 7 once-married women explicitly said that their relationship with their husbands was very close. The interviewing was done two and three years ago and it is suspected that, at the very least, 3 of the 7 "married once" marriages are no longer functioning. Residence after the 19 reported marriages was neo-local in 14 instances and ambilocal, fluctuating over time between neolocal and matrilocal, in the remaining 5.

Only one woman has no children; a total of 32 children have been borne by the remaining 21. This low number, 1.52 children per woman, is atypical of the high Navajo birth rate. The low rate of child mortality reported is also atypical. The women reported the deaths of only three children, two of whom had died in one heart-rending accident. Four adopted children have been raised by 2 women; one raised two of her sister's children and one of her brother's children; and the other reported only that she and her husband, before he died, had adopted a little boy.

The traditional Navajo pattern of fluid residence for children (Leighton and Kluckhohn, 1948:46) still obtains. Two of the women have no children living with them and, of the remaining 20, only 3 stated their children did not live elsewhere at times, while one of the 3 goes, herself, to stay with her adult daughter. The children of 12 women spend time on the reservation with their maternal grandmother or maternal grandparents; the children of another 4

visit on the reservation with their mother's sister or sisters; one woman has children who visit their father's family; and one has children who stay with paternal grandparents. In addition, 5 of the 20 women who have children living with them report that they also have children of various relatives who stay with them in town for varying periods of time.

The employment histories of the women are diversified, for they reported having worked in 44 different job categories at different times in their lives. One woman, as an extreme example, has had a total of 12 discernibly different types of employment. The largest number, 7, have worked in offices; but 6 of these 7 have also worked in three other jobs: as waitress, motel maid or social worker. Five women have worked in the knitting mill, where the pay is low, and the work physically demanding, repetitive and extremely boring.

At the other end of the scale, 5 women have directed programs -- usually federally funded -- either on the reservation or at NACA. Four have worked as domestics and 4 as nurse's aides. Three have worked in one or more of the following: sales, educational aides, cook or cook's helper. Two have been involved in production work aside from the knitting mill, 2 have worked for film companies, 2 as teachers and 2 as cashiers. An additional 28 jobs -- including crew leader of an on-reservation youth construction crew, checker for the Santa Fe Railroad, heavy-equipment operator, service in the Air Force, bartender, laundry work, modeling, bilingual radio announcer -- were reported.

The major source of stress -- and stress was the central focus of this research -- was reported by 8 of the women to be engendered by fear of not living up to expectations, whether those expectations were their own or those of others. For example, one woman in her late twenties, whose town residence causes her to be considered a resource by visiting relatives from the reservation, and whose job is a high-pressure, demanding one, said:

It feels like I'm running and running to put myself in a better position to take care of them [younger siblings]. I'm the oldest, and mother expects without asking. She won't tell me so I can make arrangements.

She doesn't give me any indication of what she wants, so I have to make arrangements and then [when things go wrong], the boom drops. I'm expected to be hospitable all the time, day or night, and to make everything comfortable. And they don't call [ahead of time]. I may be sitting there with no food, but they come and expect to be fed. Mother can't understand. You're always supposed to be hospitable, always be prepared, like all the time you expect people.

She continued,

The learning part is there, then when the opportunity is given, you've got to grab it. What's important is the feeling that "I can do." I feel good about doing something for myself that I can do, making use of what I've learned, which is working.

It is no less poignant because it is predictable: 6 of the women experience stress because of the contradictions between their traditional Navajo backgrounds and the Anglo ways to which they must now, at least to some extent, adapt. Children are a source of stress to 5 of the women, while lack of transportation and the pressure of time, particularly the disjuncture between Navajo "person" time and Anglo "clock" time, were identified as stressful by 3 women.

The following causes of stress were reported twice: competing demands of work and school; lack of money; stress on their jobs; competing demands of work and home; separation from Navajo culture; lack of adequate baby-sitters; and conflict between their husbands and their friends.

Stresses mentioned once were: inability to find a job; crowded living conditions; concern over personal health; husband's behavior; religion; the deaths of two children; contradictory expectations of parents and non-Navajo in-laws; divorce and ex-husband; husband-mother conflict; fighting between two factions of the family (between father and cousins); and worry about sisters. Twenty-two women identified 51 causes of stress. There are 1.5 children per woman, but 2.3 sources of stress!

"When things are bad for you, what do you do? How do you handle it; how do you cope?" each woman was asked. The ways in which stress was relieved do not total as many in number as do the causes of it — 11 ways were reported by the women. As an outsider, the author identified 2 more, for stress seemed to be internalized by 4 of the women, although they themselves did not identify this as a response, and for one additional woman, the author's summation reads, "fights back!"

Two ways to relieve stress were reported significantly more often than the other 9. Of the major patterns, one is to count on relatives — 13 of the women said such aid was invoked to relieve stress. Four of the women reported illnesses which were related to stress, although one qualified her answer by saying "at one time." In addition, a fifth woman had had, along with other unspecified physical disabilities, allergies which were severe enough for her to have moved to Flagstaff from another border town in the hope that they would diminish and to have, even after her move, relied on medication for some months to relieve her symptoms. Three women relieved stress by visiting the reservation, a response which obviously overlaps that of the previously noted "relatives" category. Another 3 women reported relief from stress through helping others, being with friends, work and recreation. Two women said they had found relief in alcohol, 2 in attending classes or school, and 2 in working on their houses.

The second significant way in which stress was relieved, reported by at least 16 women as compared with the 13 who relied on relatives, was religious participation, although definitions of "religious" varied. Not only was religion identified as a major way in which stress was relieved, but 5 of the women — almost one-fourth of the total — indicated that religion was increasingly important, or had become so in their adult lives, in helping them cope with stress.

The religious backgrounds of the women were such that the author had to resort to fractions; for example, the father of one woman was a traditional Navajo but her mother was a practicing Catholic. Eleven and a half traditional ancestors were reported, 5-1/2 Christians (Mormon

included), and 3 Native American Church members (parents who "go with peyote"). There were 4 women whose backgrounds were not ascertained, although the father, at least, and probably the mother, of one of the 4 seems to have been traditional.

Religion of Parents/ Grandparents:	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
Traditional											
Navajo	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Christian	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Native Am. Church	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Not Ascertained	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

While growing up, 8 of the women were Christians of some denomination or other, but this number includes the not uncommon boarding-school assignment to some -- to any -- church. Seven of the women grew up traditional, and one had some grounding in the Native American Church. Four said they had no particular religious background, although one said her sisters had Kinaaldá and she believed she would have, had she not been away to boarding school. There was insufficient information to classify the childhood religion of 2 women.

Religion When Growing Up:	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
Traditional								
Navajo	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Christian	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Native Am. Church	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
None in Particular	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
None Mentioned	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

A variety of responses were necessary to flesh out the "present religious participation" chart. One of the 4 NAC women said she was just beginning in this church. One of

the 5 Christian women said merely, "I think of myself as a Mormon." The Baptist Church accounted for 2-1/2 women, for one woman went equally to Baptist and Assembly of God services probably because, in Flagstaff, both churches have services in Navajo. Two women denied current religious participation; one of them was assigned to the Presbyterian Church while in boarding school but said, "But for me, now -- no." The other had had a traditional Navajo wedding. Two women made up the "can't be categorized" total; while one woman's denomination was not specified, she was a volunteer tutor in a local Christian day school for Indian children; and the other woman, who spoke of herself as a "pagan Catholic," could not be categorized.

Present Religious Participation:							
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
Traditional							
Navajo	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Christian	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Native Am. Church	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Denied	●	●	●	●	●		
Can't be Categorized	●	●	●	●	●		
None							
Mentioned	●	●	●	●	●		

An additional comment on religion in the lives of the women might be given here: MM, the woman who said, "But for me, now -- no," has enrolled her daughter in parochial school and listens nightly to her daughter's prayers recited according to the nuns' instructions. SP attended a Methodist mission school, spent two of her summer vacations with an NAC family, joined the Baptist Church, married a Catholic and, with her husband, became a Mormon. CL turned down a job in Utah because she wasn't sure she could take the pressure from all the Mormons in town. AB was against NAC; JU's husband "can't stand it"; and LE's grandfather always said not "to do peyote" because it never was part of Navajo religion, regardless of the pan-Indian name of the Native American Church. RG was enormously displeased with her mother's constant pressure to be-

come a Christian; her son has been initiated into his Hopi god-parents' kiva society. LB's foster mother is now living in Oral Roberts' old folks' home.

The last section of this paper reports data received in the broad category of reciprocal help between relatives and non-kin. The chart categorizes, as one instance of help, aid of wildly varying quality and importance, from "talks with friends" to large amounts of valuable gifts from in-laws at the wedding, counseling younger siblings and generally aiding them in admission to the university, purchase and subsequent giving of a car, almost-total care of two or more children, to the expectation that, on a mother's request, three teenage half-sisters would be housed and jobs found for them. The variety of kinds of aid really cannot be summarized.

It is interesting that aid was received in 46 instances from female relatives as compared to 22 instances from male relatives, and that exactly half the help received from men was from blood relatives, the other half being from men related by marriage. In contrast, help was received from 35 female blood relatives, and 9 women to whom they were related by marriage. Two women reported aid received from their foster-mothers.

Help From and To Relatives and Non-Kin		
	Help From	Help To
<u>RELATIVES</u>		
female, blood	35	41
foster-mother	2	1
female, marriage	9	0
<u>Subtotal of females</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>42</u>
male, blood	11	20
male, marriage	11	2
<u>Subtotal of males</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>22</u>
other	12	9
<u>RELATIVES, TOTAL</u>	<u>80</u>	<u>73</u>
<u>NON-KIN</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>84</u>

The help-to-kin category again represents one instance of different types and amounts of aid but, since this is true also for the help-from categories, it is assumed that, at

least grossly, the numbers may legitimately be compared. Forty-two instances of help were reported to have been given to female relatives. Sisters were the recipients of aid in 16 instances, mothers in 12, and one woman aided her foster-mother. Twenty male relatives were helped, all blood relatives; in 12 of the 20 instances, brothers were named as recipients. The other 8 male relatives receiving the aid were: fathers (3), grandfathers (2), brother's son, the woman's own son, and an uncle (1). In 2 instances, women helped men to whom they were related by marriage, one a brother-in-law and the other her ex-husband's relatives.

The "other" group includes 2 instances of aid to parents and the help given, in one instance each, to the following: foster-mother, sister-in-law's parents, husband's sister, sister's son's daughter, grandparents, and (counted together) nieces-and-nephews.

While the gross totals suggest that the urban Navajo women interviewed were a debtor population -- that they received more help than they gave -- the first important fact to be noted is that in the help-given-to-female-blood-relatives category, the women were non-debtors. A second interesting finding concerns the totals for help received from, and that given to, male relatives. Help was received equally from male-blood and male-marriage men, 11 instances each; however, help was given to consanguineal males in 20 instances and only twice to male affines.

Third, it is primarily in the non-kin category that the women were debtors, and the fact is that in Flagstaff, more help was available from non-kin, whether in the form of food stamps, job referrals, legal services or welfare and unemployment benefits.

In summary, this paper presents data from interviews of 22 Navajo women as they were in one place -- Flagstaff -- and at one time -- the late 1970s. The ages of the women ranged from early twenties to mid-sixties; their education ranged from less than 8 years to Master's degree and more; they have for the most part been married and had children; and they have been employed in the Anglo work world and frequently under male Anglo supervisors.

Their ties and identification with their Navajo backgrounds continued to be strong, both psychologically and socially, as was shown by their patterns of response to the stresses they perceived and the help they received and returned to those to whom they are close -- almost always to individuals with whom they are related in some way.

The perception which first stimulated this research was that under enormously difficult circumstances, for which little in their backgrounds prepared them, these women were individually human beings of great strength. At times in the course of the research, the author was seized with a fear that in the weakening, dissolving, and genocidal tearing-apart of the fabric of traditional Navajo life, the bedrock of strength on which these women drew was being annihilated. At other times, particularly when the women spoke of their own child-bearing practices and ideas, there was hope again that Navajos will survive, different but intact, the onslaught of push and pull factors which drive and lure them from Dinetah, the land and cultural base which is Home.

Flagstaff lies against the base of one of the four sacred mountains, *Dook'o'oos'iid*, Shining Mountain, the Mountain of the West -- which Anglos know as the San Francisco Peaks. Perhaps it is close enough that the women who live and work there are not too far from the *Yé'ii*, whose body encircles the land bounded by the four sacred mountains and protects the Navajos within. Perhaps for them, the prophecy will not come true -- the telling long ago -- that

When the population increases so much that The People spread out beyond the boundary represented by the God's body, that will be the end of the Navajos. Because Navajo people live beyond that boundary now, it could be that they will run into difficulties with nature and will be out of harmony with the plan of the Gods (Yazzie, 1971:83).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The first Navajos were relocated in 1977. Relocation is to be concluded by 1984, by which time some 6,000 Navajos and 100 Hopis are expected to accept a new place of residence. The only summary work on relocation is Kammer, 1980.

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