

Study shows adaptation to two worlds

NORMAN — The majority of Oklahoma Indians are not having great difficulty adapting to life in two worlds, according to University of Oklahoma researchers.

Although national and state media frequently focus on the dissatisfaction of American Indians with the predominantly white social structure, preliminary findings of a study conducted by faculty and graduate students in the OU department of communication indicate that most American Indians in Oklahoma are able to manage the duality of their identity.

"Only a minority of the respondents were strongly ethnic and refused to accept the dominant white culture," said Young Yun Kim, OU professor of communication.

The study took an in-depth look at the psychological impact of being Indian in a predominantly white culture and assessed the level of social interaction and communication skills reached by the respondents.

Broadly interpreted, Kim believes, the study will show that individuals can accommodate the influences of more than one culture in their lives.

The study involved extensive interviews with 180 American Indians at five different sites across the state. The interviewers were 28 specially trained OU undergraduate students who are American Indians.

"We felt like it was important that the interviewers be Indian so the respondents would feel free to express their true feelings," Kim said.

Co-investigators for the research project are Kim and OU communication professor Philip Lujan. Lujan is an American Indian, while Kim is a native of Korea. Four communication graduate students served on the research team.

Kim said the study's initial findings predictably show that urban Indian professionals have the fewest problems dealing with white culture, while rural Indians are less accepting.

But even for the urban professionals, the study presents a picture of social isolation in their personal relationships.

"There isn't a great deal of social

integration between Indians and whites," Kim observed. "Many respondents indicated their close friends are other Indians."

She attributes this lack of social integration, at least in part, to differences in the way the two races view friendship.

"Indians take friendship very seriously and consider it a lifelong commitment," Kim pointed out. "Whites often are viewed by Indians as less committed to friendships."

Kim said, however, that many of the Indian respondents believe that friend-

ships can transcend group differences.

Initially, the study indicates that respondents with better communication skills are more accepting of the influence of both cultures in their lives.

"Communication skills can help minimize barriers," said Kim, whose field of study is intercultural communication. She believes the world is beginning to wake up to this reality, with both the public and private sectors placing greater emphasis on the development of intercultural communication skills.

"Ideally, Indians who are good communicators could help those who are not to process their frustrations and find ways to cope," Kim said. "Indians can best train other Indians."

The OU researcher speculates that Oklahoma Indians are more accepting of the predominant social structure than Indians who live on reservations or in more isolated communities. Kim hopes that funding can be secured for a second phase to the study, which would compare the experiences of Oklahoma Indians with those who live elsewhere.