

# **"WHY DO WHITE PEOPLE SMILE SO MUCH?" or WHY NATIVES DON'T CONTROL THEIR SCHOOLS?**

by  
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Eskimos recently have been asking two surprising questions about whites. "Why do white people smile so much?" several in Bethel have puzzled. "Why won't white people look at me when I talk to them?" I was asked with great earnestness by an Eskimo university student. Ironically, these are precisely the observations whites have been making about Eskimos for the last fifty years. Indeed, whites have come to view "smiling" and "shy withdrawal" as basic Eskimo characteristics of "model personality traits," to use the anthropological jargon. What is happening?

Smiling a lot and not facing another person are common non-verbal responses of any member of a subordinate group to any member of a dominant group. Recall, for example, the grinning black Sambo stereotype of another era with his head hung before his "massa." The subordinate group member tends to smile to curry the favor of the dominant group member so that this person will not use his greater power against him. Similarly, the subordinate group member may avoid looking at the face of the dominant group member because he is embarrassed and uncomfortable in the presence of a person of higher status or because he is frightened and wishes to hide since the more powerful person could harm him. While such feelings are rarely conscious, they are the message communicated by smiling a lot and not facing the person in such circumstances.

Are the tables finally turning? Are white people becoming the subordinate and Eskimos the dominant group? Nonverbal signs of white subordination to Natives are not yet common. However, they are becoming more and more frequent, especially among certain academics and government agency people.

Is this new pattern a healthy sign? Are Native groups at last achieving their due status and power in society? While I wish this were so, I do not think that this is what is happening. Rather a new form of patronization seems to be developing and it could do as much damage as the old paternalism which is now disavowed in respectable white circles.

A new game is being played in public affairs called "Proving I'm Pro-Native". Since I know the rules for white players only too well, I can describe them. I am not sure of the rules for Native players, but I think that they are about the same. This game is played in meetings concerned with Native related issues. It is usually played where both Natives and whites are present, although I have seen whites play it all by themselves. The game begins with all players making a move — presenting some proposal regarding the Native-related issue at hand. Whatever white has made the most apparently extreme pro-Native move gains points and is well on his way toward victory. However, it is important to recognize that this proposal is only superficially pro-Native, since usually it will totally disregard possibilities of implementation, longterm effects on Natives themselves, or fairness to other minority groups. However, in following rounds, it is still possible for one of the other players to recoup his losses and even win the game. A white player can, for example, agree with the most superficially pro-native position in which case he gains points. If he is a very clever player, he may be able to top this position with an even more extreme superficially pro-Native proposal of his own and thus knock out the previous white in the lead. Should any white player criticize a proposal made by a Native player, he loses points. Should any white player show deference to a Native player (completely irrespective of whether the Native's proposal was brilliant, indifferent, or absurd), he gains points. The white player who gains the highest point total, of course, emerges as the winner and rakes in the pot — the status of being the most pro-Native. But the pot is fool's gold. The white players know, although they may not verbalize it even to themselves, that it has all been a game. And the winner knows that the white players know and wonders if the Native players know, too. Whatever Native-related issue was at hand, is, of course, the loser because no intelligent discussion of it has taken place. So everyone goes away from the meeting vaguely puzzled and wondering why, for example, "Everyone is in favor of

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Native control of schools, but nothing is ever done about it."

Perhaps this is a necessary transition stage, a swing of the pendulum to the other extreme, before relationships of dignity can be established between Natives and whites. In such relationships, reasonable human beings who do not question each one's respect for the other can present different views, join issue, and emerge with some workable solution to a problem. Since it is white people who by and large began and maintain these games, it is they who probably must end them. However, until they end, the game and goal may become more and more how to prove pro-Nativeness rather than how to produce desirable change.