Contextual identity experiencing facilitates resilience in Native American academics

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the socio-cultural dynamics that interact with ethno-racial identity experiencing in a previously under-researched group. A qualitative interdisciplinary study with 40 Native American academics from 28 mainstream universities across the U.S. served as a case example with findings that contrasted with historically influential theoretical frameworks postulating identity confusion and conflicts at the intersection of one's mainstream education and profession versus one's ethno-racial community grounding. Instead of feeling pressure to identify with only one worldview, the contextual, dynamic identities associated with the inclusive and flexible self-concept of tribal participants allowed them to in turn take advantage of two divergent cultural meaning systems pertaining to their distinct socio-cultural contexts. These shifts were experienced as not endogenous but rather exogenous variables, which did not cause the historically theorized issues. Participants felt their tribal identities instead facilitated meaningful integration of the existing incongruences, which resulted in unexpectedly resilient subjective experiencing.

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1. Introduction of the research problem and its significance

Although the idea of living in two worlds is outdated as an interpretive framework, this notion continues to be influential within the everyday experiences and personal perceptions of many Native Americans,[1] who work in mainstream[2] organizations and at the same time maintain connections with their tribal communities. Identity confusion and conflicts have been historically theorized in people who in this situation have to negotiate two incongruent, even conflicting cultural contexts (Du Bois, 1989; Jones

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[1] No universally accepted collective term exists for the 566 federally recognized Native American tribes (U.S. DI, BIA, 2016), and none can encompass the diversity of their cultures that reflect their traditional geographical locations. Tribes vary also politically, linguistically, economically and sociologically (Fixico, 2003). However, given the small number of Native American scholars in any field, their academic community by

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necessity includes all tribes, many of which share similar world-views, cultural standards and meanings based on common core values (Napoli, Marsiglia, & Kulis, 2003). However, individual Native American identities are based on distinct tribal affiliations (Nagel, 1996).

[2] The majority of contemporary Native Americans live by the meanings and practices of more than one socio-cultural context (Peroff & Wildcat, 2002). Similarly, not all dominant society members fit the standard mainstream middle class notions, facilitated by mainstream psychology practices (Baumard & Sperber, 2010; Heinrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Yet, the terms *mainstream* and *Native American* are useful for general comparisons of socio-culturally specific characteristics pertaining to the corresponding groups as a whole.

& Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Williams, 1997). However, this descriptor problematized the common American experience of membership in multiple or even antagonistic communities (Diamond, Lewis, & Gordon, 2007; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005), which can be associated with unexpectedly resilient experiencing. Notwithstanding the common assumption that Native American academics are highly acculturated, they identified the notion of living at the intersection of incongruent socio-cultural[3] contexts as an important aspect of their experience (Dvorakova, 2018). This article deals with such factors because it was inspired by the principles of participatory research (although the study did not represent true participatory research), in which participants are involved in the formulation of research questions to address the concerns of their communities (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003).

Although ethno-racial minority persons are indeed often marginalized and disadvantaged due to the prevailing ideas embedded in mainstream practices and institutions, numerous members of these groups became successful professionals. However, despite of diversity efforts, the U.S. academia continues to represent the mainstream socio-cultural context, with its presumption of middle-class homogeneity. Although mainstream U.S. universities have recently become more demographically diverse regarding college student populations, the same trend has not materialized among their faculty (American Federation of Teachers, 2010; Antonio, 2002). This applies especially to Native Americans, who as a group retain the highest poverty levels, and are the most underrepresented in higher education relative to traditional ethno-racial groups (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Digest of Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2011; Moody, 2012; Patel, 2014). Additionally, research including Native Americans has seemingly confirmed the notion that strong ethno-racial identification may be associated with a disadvantage (Dews & Law 1995; Jones & Galliher, 2015). This article will thus address the following query while exploring the experience of Native Americans who work as professors, researchers, and administrators within the socio-cultural context of mainstream academia. Under what factors, circumstances, and conditions identity confusion and/or conflicts may or may not be experienced in circumstances such as those of Native American academics, who perceive their socio-cultural contexts as incongruent?

Although utilizing a qualitative interdisciplinary study conducted with 40 Native American academics in a range of fields at 28 mainstream universities across the United States (U.S.), this article is not a mere empirical report. It combines the benefits of discussing theoretical conceptualizations with reporting on the empirical research in which the discussion is grounded. The original contribution of the article lies in examining a case example of identity resilience that contrasts with notions presented in extant literature. This article certainly does not imply that all

existing Native American scholars would experience their identities the same way, or even that they would all be significantly involved in both the discussed contexts. It simply pertains to research participants, who were so involved. However, the experience of this relatively small group of Native Americans, who have been historically underrepresented in identity resilience research (Yip, Douglass, & Sellers, 2014), promises to yield unique insights for more general investigations. Existing research often reduces identity experiencing to test results, which can be misleading. Quantitative operationalization of bicultural identity integration tends to be problematic also because it often mixes perceptions of cultural distance or compartmentalization with cultural conflict, which tends to be interpreted as an identity conflict as well (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). In contrast, the phenomenological understanding of identity as contextual and dynamic, which this article promotes, can facilitate a better understanding of the various socio-cultural factors and the corresponding socio-cultural dynamics, which interact with psychological processes. This perspective is important because an individual combination of personal and social identities necessarily characterizes each individual, and "individual differences play a critical role in whether, how, and when cultural meaning systems are used in everyday life" (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002, p. 512).

2. Conflicted identities, disidentification in previous literature, and emerging perspectives

Since the majority of extant literature on topics relevant to this study concerns African Americans, a parallel study with a comparable sample of participants from this group would have been attempted had additional time and resources been available. However, the presented case-example pertains to Native Americans exactly because pertinent literature about them is sparse.[4] Individuals who negotiate distinct socio-cultural contexts, either due to their mixed origin or through being born in one context and raised in another, historically used to be considered marginal people, who experience psychological conflicts and a sense of disjointed, divided self (Stonequist, 1935). When one of two co-existing cultural groups maintain a higher social status than the other, one's identification with both is still assumed to typically lead to divided loyalties and an ambivalent attitude (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). According to Du Bois (1989), African Americans experienced the meaning of their racial identity as being split between two irreconcilable strivings. These strivings incorporate the impulse to join the mainstream

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[3] A group of people can be said to share a culture when it shares values, beliefs, practices, norms, and definitions (Cohen, 2010). This text generally conceptualizes culture as "the ideas, institutions, and interactions that tell a group of people how to think, feel and act" (Markus & Conner, 2013).

[4] Existing Native American scholarship often focuses on political and economic implications of tribal identities, which typically raise concerns about ethnic fraud and essentialism (Garroute, 2003; Lyons, 2010; Sturm, 2002, 2011). Negotiation of incongruences is rather the domain of novelistic and journalistic accounts, biographies, and poetry (Alexie, 1997; Alvord & VanPelt, 1999; Cook-Lynn, 1996; Jacobs, Cintron, & Canton, 2002; Monture-Angus, 1995), although the risks that stereotypical perceptions, historical trauma, and acculturation stress present to mental health have been discussed too (Duran, 2006; Duran & Duran, 1995; Gone & Trimble, 2012; O'Nell, 1996).