Native American Identity: A review of Twenty-first Century Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to examine research on Native American identity within the social sciences in the twenty-first century in order to identify trends in research topics, various perspectives, and potential future studies. Through the review of a sample of 88 publications relating to the topic of Native American identity, the sample was retrieved utilizing three scholarly databases across a wide range of fields of study. Publications are examined by area of focus and publication year.

Introduction

In the 1960s, the native American population, as reported in census data, increased faster than would be biologically possible (Castle 1996, p. 184). Some have argued that this increase was a result of “recounting” (Castle 1996, p. 346). The number of Native Americans self-identifying increased from 2,570,000 in 1960 to 14,725,285 in 1987 (NPS 1990, p. 94). In 2010, 5.2 million people identified as Native American (Jacobs 2014, p. 80). Several other sociopolitical influences occurred during this time including the passing of several influential pieces of legislation and the growth of a pan-Indian identity.

Native American identity gained some attention in social research, especially anthropology, in the 1980s. “Research into the emergence of indigenous identity and their relationship to local identities...and processes of globalization...is still in its initial stages, much is local or historical rather than ethnographic” (Grau 2005, p. 236). Anaya 1996; Hanson 2004; Morris 1992; Muñoz-Velázquez 2001; Smith & Wash 2000)

Native American identity also gained focus from researchers in cultural and developmental psychology, as well as sociology, at the turn of the century. This review addresses how Native American identity has been approached by social researchers since the 1990s through a holistic approach.

Methods

How has Native American Identity been addressed in social research since 1990?

The present study utilized the EBSCO Host, JSTOR, and Web of Science composite databases to retrieve social research publications focusing on Native American identity, within the time period from 1990 to 2016.

Search 1 Criteria: Directed at reviewing research primarily focused on identity
- Native American or American Indian or Alaska Native - Subject
- (AND) Identity - Title
- (AND) Cultural Identity - Subject
- (AND) Sociology or Pol Sci - Type
- (AND) Anthropology - Subject
- (AND) Education - Subject
- (AND) Health - Subject

Search 2 Criteria: Directed at reviewing identity as addressed in ethnography
- Native American or American Indian or Alaska Native - Subject
- (AND) Scholarship or Peer Reviewed - Type
- (AND) Ethnography - Research Subject

36 of the 484 unique publications were included from the search results. 50 studies from references were included that met the initial inclusion criteria. (Not limited to peer reviewed articles)

A total of 88 scholarly publications addressing Native American identity were reviewed.

The present review considered the following topics:
1) (Contemporary Native American identity), (2) impact of historical trauma, (3) impact of federal policy, (4) role of education, (5) role of cultural revitalization, (6) role of tradition and ceremony, (7) community participation.

Subject keywords search was conducted for the secondary search within JSTOR and were limited to the American Indian Studies, Anthropology, and Sociology categories.

Table 1: Initial Search Results: Exclusions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Exclusion Criteria</th>
<th>Excluded Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>Not focused on identity</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>Not focused on identity</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alaska Native</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
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<td>Pol Sci</td>
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<td>Anthropology</td>
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<td>Education</td>
<td>Not focused on identity</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Not focused on identity</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Native American identity, since 1990, has become a more frequent scholarly topic. However, much of that attention has been within the venues of the behavioral science, social, and education fields. (Primary reasons for exclusions were for research questions relating significantly to these fields) Following the reckoning of sources found in the citations that met the criteria, 88 publications were selected based on publication year and field of research. Those publications addressing identity directly were distributed across the fields of research 38.7% (19) Anthropology, 18.9% (10) Education, 10.5% (9) Sociology, 9.3% (5) Psychology, 12.8% (11) Other (See Figure 1) The sample data suggests that the number of anthropological studies on Native American identity, as well as psychology studies, published per year began to increase after 1996. Anthropological studies seem to be the most prevalent on the subject. The data also suggests that anthropology led the social sciences in area of research.

Chart 1: Results by Field of Study

The topic of study continued to receive some attention from scholars in anthropology, as well as other social researches. However, the results indicate that in 2004 this topic began to lose its attention in psychology while development and cultural psychology continued to produce publications of research studies on this topic. (See Figure 2)

The role set genre revealed the following common sub-topics in relation to Native American identity:
- Historical Trauma
- Globalization
- Identity Politics
- Identity Constructs
- Group Boundaries

Next, the fields of developmental and cultural psychology have produced models for the analysis and understanding of Native American adolescent identity. Notably, Markstrom developed a model that was tested and reviewed in two separate studies by Kulis et al. This model incorporated the elements of the sub-topics identified in social research during the literature review. (See Figure 3) As shown below, some of these topics can be mapped to multiple sections of this model.

Figure 3: Markstrom Model Comparison with Findings

Conclusion

In the early twenty-first century, Native American identity received some attention from anthropologists and other social researchers. However, focus on this topic has somewhat dwindled, though it is discussed within works centered on other topics. A significant portion of this work has focused on identity politics and the role of government in shaping Native identity due to the conflicting interests of the federal and tribal governments. Research has also tended to focus on a narrow band of influencing factors, rather than addressing Native identity as a whole.

The linear focus of identity focused on Native American tribes through federal policy in conflict with the fluid nature of identity and limits these groups from shaping their own membership boundaries and therefore their cultural future. The breadth of legal complications that have occurred in the past may potentially continue into the future. Further, Native Americans have a vested interest in controlling membership boundaries in order to maintain cultural continuity, distinctiveness, and community resources. The federal government, which has long influenced the shape of Native American tribal identity through membership boundaries, has a limited interest in defining membership inclusion for economic benefit. It should also be said that, as outskirts, anthropologists studying Native American identity have an ethical obligation to research this topic with consideration to the impact such research has on federal policy and its implications for tribal sovereignty.

Further research to understand the Native American identity and boundary maintenance should include the role of historical trauma, federal policy, enrollment, cultural revitalization, tradition, community participation, and importantly should address tribal response and cultural preservation. The Markstrom model is a potential paradigm for studying Native identity that could incorporate important factors identified in existing research. Research is needed to determine whether the model could be applicable in the field of anthropological or means to create a more holistic picture of modern Native identity. Importantly, it may offer more insight into how influences from outside cultures are enacted in order to maintain cultural continuity and group cohesion. This may in turn lead to identifying culturally specific methods of defining membership, assist in resolving the conflict of interests between tribal and federal governments, and aid self-determination.