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 1960's, the native American population, as reported in census data, increased faster than would be biologically possible (Caskey 1996, p. 184). Some have argued that this increase was a result of "remnant" (Caskey 1996, p. 384). The number of Native Americans self-identifying increased from 22,500 in 1940 to 1,872,285 in 1994 (Young 1996, p. 407). In 2016, 2.3 million people identified as Native American (Jacobs 2014, p. 80). Several other sociopolitical influences occurred during this time including the passage of several influential pieces of legislation and the growth of a pan-tribal identity.

Native American identity gained some attention in social research, especially anthropology, in the 1980's. "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 'globalizing'" (Brumbaugh 2005, p. 250). "Anaya 1996; Hanson 2004; Morris 1992; Muñoz 2001; Smith & Warch 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 1990's 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 2010.

Search 1 Criteria: Directed at reviewing research primarily focused on identity

- Native American or American Indian or Alaska Native - Subject (AND)
- (AND) Identity - Title
- (AND) Cultural Identity - Subject
- (AND) Sociology or Public Policy - Type
- (AND) Education - Subject
- (AND) Health - Subject

Set 1 of 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:

- (Contemporary Native American identity, (2) impact of biological trauma, (3) impact of federal policy, (4) role of cultural revitalization, (5) role of tradition and culture, (6) role of traditional and contemporary (7) role of community participation.

Subject categories used to develop a coding scheme for the secondary search within JSTOR were limited to the American Indian Studies, Anthropology, and Sociology categories.

Table 1: Initial Search Results Exclusion

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exclusion criteria</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Reason for exclusion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not peer reviewed</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>Not included</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not within scope</td>
<td>111</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not relevant</td>
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<td>Not included</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not human subjects</td>
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<td>Not included</td>
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<td>Not published</td>
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Data Analysis

Following the completion of the search for relevant publications, the results (88) were compiled into a list. Each item was reviewed to determine the field of study to which it corresponded. Anthropology, Ethnology, Psychology, Sociology, Education, and Other. Most frequently, this was done by noting the publication journal. Books or other publications were categorized on the basis of abstracts, the authors actual text itself. The total for each category was calculated. Each item was also reviewed in detail and annotated for relevance to the topics under consideration. The results were then charted by publication year and field of research. (See Figure 1: Results by Field of Study) The annotations were then parsed in order to analyze the prevalent sub-topics.

Results

Native American identity, since 1990, has become a more frequent scholarly topic. However, much of that attention has been given to themes concerning the role of historical trauma, federal policy, enrollment, corporate interests, and aid self-membership inclusion for economic benefit. It should also be said that, as experts, 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, and 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 is appropriate for Middle American research on Native American identity. It is important to note that much more research is needed to understand the complexities of Native American identity. However, the results indicate that in 2004 this topic began to grow in importance, and while developmental and cultural psychology continued to produce publications of research studies on this topic. (See Figure 2)

The role we have identified the following common sub-topics in relation to Native American identity:

- Historical Trauma:
- Socioeconomic Development:
- Globalization:
- Identity Politics:
- Identity Constraints:
- Group Boundaries:

More recently 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 map to multiple sections of this model.

Chart 1: Results by Field of Study

Figure 1: Results by Field of Study

Figure 2: Yearly Publications/Comparison

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 governance 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 formed 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 challenges 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, distinguish new communities, and community resources. The federal government, which has long influenced the shape of Native American tribal identity through membership boundaries, has a crucial role in maintaining membership inclusion for economic benefit. It should also be said that, as experts, 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, and 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 is applicable to the field of anthropology as a means to create a more holistic picture of modern Native American identity. It may offer more insight into how influences from outside cultures are internalized in order to maintain cultural continuity and group cohesion. This may eventually lead to identifying culturally specific methods of defining membership, assist in resolving the conflicts between tribe and federal governments, and aid self-determination.