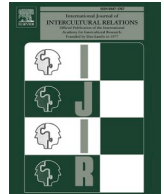




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Native American identity work in settler colonial context

Laurel R. Davis-Delano^{a,*}, Sita Strother^b, Joseph P. Gone^{c,d}^a Department of Social Science, Springfield College, 263 Alden Street, Springfield, MA 01109, USA^b JSI Research & Training Institute, Arlington, VA, USA^c Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA^d Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

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ABSTRACT

In U.S. society, Native Americans face invisibility, stereotypes, discrimination, and structural barriers. In this article, we employ a symbolic interactionist approach, embedded in critical analysis, to explore how this social context impacts the conveyance and interpretation of Native American identity among people who are not Native American. Participants, 213 White American and 104 Native American people, replied to open-ended questions about Native American identity conveyance and interpretation. We employed an inductive thematic approach to analyze their written replies. The majority of Native American participants discussed their identity in the context of limited public knowledge of, and/or oppression faced by, Native Americans. For most Native American participants, this context generated strain and struggle associated with conveyance and interpretation of their identities. Despite this, some Native American participants engaged in identity work to educate others and reduce oppression. Without prompting, some White participants expressed positive attitudes toward Native Americans and their identity revelation. These positive attitudes evidence both hope for social change and problematic fetishization based on romantic stereotypes of Native Americans. We argue that society-wide change is necessary to reduce strain in, and enhance the effectiveness of, identity work by Native American people.

Erasure of and stereotypes about Native Americans (NA) enabled and enable settler colonialism in the United States.¹ When the land was occupied by large numbers of NA people, the bloodthirsty savage stereotype was used to justify genocide and removal of NA people (Berkhofer, 1978). When NA Peoples were forcibly located to smaller and more distant parcels of land, erasure of NA presence fueled perceptions that the land presently in U.S. territory was unoccupied and thus available for White settlement (Buss, 2011). After the last violent U.S. military operation targeting NA Nations, most NA people were required to stay on reservations, in many cases isolated from major White settlements, which likely fueled the White settler belief that NA people were a “people of the past.” With rising industrialization, White Americans emphasized the noble Indian stereotype, including beliefs that NA people were historical

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ldavis@springfieldcollege.edu (L.R. Davis-Delano), sita_strother@jsi.com (S. Strother), jgone@g.harvard.edu (J.P. Gone).¹ People use a variety of terms to refer to American Indians. In this paper, we use the phrase “Native Americans” to reference indigeneity (i.e., Native) to territory in present-day United States, excluding Hawai’i and Alaska. We use the abbreviation “NA” to reduce verbiage.

relics who were “one with nature.” Although White Americans have long “played Indian,” the rise of the noble Indian stereotype, sometimes merged with the bloodthirsty savage stereotype, rendered Indian play especially attractive to White Americans (Deloria, 1998). Today, NA people face a system of oppression² in the U.S. that continues to erase their contemporary existence, emphasize stereotypes of NA people from the past, and encourage cultural and identity misappropriation (e.g., Davis-Delano, Folsom, McLaurin, Eason, & Fryberg, 2021a; Fryberg & Eason, 2017; Robertson, 2015).

Elsewhere (Davis-Delano, Strother, & Gone, 2021b), we explain that common perceived indicators of NA identity in U.S. society arose from settler colonial practices of racialization and cultural stereotyping of NA people, as well as from an emphasis on self-identification rooted in the prevalent U.S. ideology of individualism. Collectively, these indicators obscure and delegitimize the political and collective nature of NA identities. In this article, we shift our focus away from perceived indicators of NA identity to how the oppressive social context discussed in this introduction impacts NA “identity work” and White reactions to NA identity revelation.

Contemporary NA oppression

Fryberg and Eason (2017) make the case that contemporary oppression experienced by NA people involves a combination of omissions and commissions. By omissions, they mean exclusion of NA people from the dominant U.S. culture, and by commissions they refer to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. In mainstream U.S. media and educational curricula, there is evidence of both exclusion and stereotyping of NA people (e.g., Davis-Delano et al., 2021a; Fitzgerald, 2014; Journell, 2009; Shear, Knowles, Soden, & Castro, 2015; Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). There is also much evidence of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination against NA people in U.S. society (e.g., Burkley, Durante, Fiske, Burkley, & Andrade, 2016; D’Amico et al. 2021; Findling et al., 2019; Jones & Galliher, 2015; Robertson, 2015; Senter & Ling, 2017). Further, NA people face cultural and identity misappropriation (e.g., Davis-Delano, Gone, & Fryberg, 2020b; Jacobs, 2020; Keene, n.d.).

Scholars have found that oppression faced by NA people, in the form of omissions and commissions, is harmful. Among NA students, omissions reduce school belonging (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015), and among non-NA people omissions are associated with limited knowledge about and support for NA Nations and Peoples (Conner, Fryar, & Johnson, 2017; Kurtis, Adams, & Yellow Bird, 2010; Turner, 2005). Among NA people, commissions contribute to negative emotions (LaRocque, McDonald, Weatherly, & Ferraro, 2011), as well as lower self-esteem, perceptions of future accomplishments, and faith in their NA communities (Fryberg, Markus, Oysterman, & Stone, 2008). Among non-NA people, commissions are associated with higher levels of prejudice and stereotyping (e.g., Angle, Dagogo-Jack, Forehand, Andrew, & Perkins, 2017; Lee, Richard, Irely, Walt, & Carlson, 2009), lower levels of support for policies beneficial to NA Peoples (Davis-Delano, Galliher, Carlson, Eason, & Fryberg, 2020a; Reclaiming Native Truth Project, 2018), and discrimination against NA people (Gonzalez, 2005). Among NA people, discrimination is associated with higher rates of mental and physical health problems (e.g., Findling et al., 2019; Galliher, Jones, & Dahl, 2011).

NA identity work

How does this system of oppression impact NA identity work? Identity work is defined as actions people take to generate, present, and maintain their identities in social settings in order to align others’ perceptions with their own conceptions of their identities (e.g., Burke, 1991; Snow & Anderson, 1987; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Scholars have found that NA people engage in identity work in order to be perceived as NA (e.g., Davis-Delano et al., 2021b; Fitzgerald, 2007; Jacobs, 2019).

Burke (1991) explained that regular and severe interruptions to the process of maintaining alignment of self and others’ perceptions of identity can be stressful. This is the case for many NA people, because White Americans generated and maintain problematic indicators of NA identity to enable settler colonialism (e.g., Davis-Delano et al., 2021b; McKay, 2021; Tallbear, 2013). Continued use of these indicators engenders invisibility and misidentification for many NA people (e.g., Davis-Delano et al., 2021b; Campbell & Troyer, 2007; 2011; Jacobs, 2015). Research by Campbell and Troyer (2007; 2011) revealed that NA people who are misidentified by others have higher rates of mental health problems, and they suggest that this finding is related to the important role NA identity plays in enhancing well-being in the face of oppression.

The present study

Although limited in quantity, existing research on NA identity work is invaluable (Fitzgerald, 2007; Garrouette, 2003; Jacobs, 2019; Krouse, 1999; McKay, 2021; Robertson, 2013; Sturm, 2010). Most of this research is situated in specific communities, including northeastern Ohio (Jacobs, 2019), mid-Missouri (Fitzgerald, 2007), (mostly) Tulsa (Garrouette, 2003), and among those who consider themselves Cherokee (Sturm, 2010). In contrast, we draw our samples from the majority of U.S. states. Other studies on NA identity work, with the possible exception of Garrouette (2003), include NA participants who are not citizens of federally recognized NA Nations, including “reclaimers” (Fitzgerald, 2007; Jacobs, 2015; 2019), “mixed-bloods” (Krouse, 1999), and “race shifters” (Sturm, 2010). In our study, we sought to minimize legal issues, by including only NA participants who are enrolled in federally recognized NA Nations. This enables us to concentrate more fully on identity work in an interactional rather than legal context.

² We use the term “oppression” rather than the terms “inequality” and “injustice,” because many Native American Nations and Peoples seek independence from U.S. society rather than equality and justice within it. By oppression, we refer to stereotypes, prejudice, individual discrimination, structural discrimination, and problematic cultural representations in a settler colonial context.

Sturm (2010) and McKay (2021)/Robertson (2013) focus mainly on NA identity work among those who identify as NA, while we focus on NA identity work among non-NA people. Thus, unlike existing research, we recruited White participants. In this article, we narrow our focus to one aspect of NA identity work: how oppression faced by NA people in U.S. society impacts revelations of NA identity to non-NA people. More specifically, we explore how this oppression affects NA experiences with and perceptions of their identity work and White reactions to identity revelation.

Method

For this research project, we join two theoretical frameworks: micro-level symbolic interactionism embedded in macro-level critical theory. Symbolic interactionism informs our analysis of communication during social interaction, while critical theory enables us to explore and discuss how the culture and social structures of U.S. society impact this communication. Below, we review our samples, materials, procedure, and analytical process.

Participants

Three samples of participants were recruited to complete online questionnaires for this study: 104 Native Americans, 102 White Americans from states with higher percentages of NA residents (abbreviated as H, for higher), and 111 White Americans from other states (abbreviated as L, for lower). All of these samples were secured by the Qualtrics company, which prescreened for some study criteria. Demographic questions at the start of the survey also screened for study criteria, and those who did not meet these criteria were automatically removed. Further, participants were automatically removed if they did not correctly answer the attention check and did not meet the required character count. White participants were also automatically removed if they could not recall a time they suspected or learned a person was NA (as this was one of two primary prompts for this questionnaire). Participants were manually removed if they wrote unacceptable answers, such as pasting irrelevant material into the text box.

In the final sample, all participants were either exclusively White or NA people who were enrolled in a federally recognized NA Nation, lived their entire life in the U.S., were 18–50 years old, and resided in and lived the longest in states other than Alaska and Hawai'i. Mean ages were 33 (NAs), 36 (H Whites), and 35 (L Whites). Percent women were 65% (NAs), 61% (H Whites), and 68% (L Whites). Median level of education was “some college or associate’s degree” (NAs & H Whites) and bachelor’s degree (L Whites). Mean score on political beliefs was moderate-leaning-slightly-liberal for all samples. The White sample from the higher percentage NA resident states were from Arizona, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, or South Dakota, while the other White sample was from 33 other U.S. states. The NA sample was from a total of 33 U.S. states and enrolled in 38 NA Nations.

The sample criteria discussed above relate to the goals of our research. In particular, we sought to: minimize the degree to which our results become outdated (age), examine experiences only on the U.S. mainland (residency), explore societal meanings most influenced by the dominant racial group (Whites), and enable exploration of issues other than political status (enrolled in federally recognized tribes). For more details on these samples, please see Davis-Delano et al. (2021b).

Materials and procedure

This research was approved by IRB officials at the first and last authors’ institutions. After participants completed the consent form at the start of the questionnaire, they answered both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The surveys for White participants, which took them a median of 15 min, required them to describe a time they suspected or learned that a person that they were interacting with was NA. Then, they were asked to describe verbal and non-verbal criteria that they would use to determine whether someone was NA in the future.

NA participants answered 12 open-ended questions. These questions asked participants about: the degree to which they wished non-NA people knew of their NA identity, why they wished non-NA people knew of their identity, experiences with misidentification, whether they ever concealed their NA identity, if and how non-NA people can tell they are NA, ways they convey their NA identity, and reactions to revelation of their NA identity. Median time to complete this survey was 19 min.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used by the first author to conduct inductive analysis of written replies to the open-ended questions. This process included all of the steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Our analysis met all fifteen criteria (when appropriate) for “good thematic analysis” described by Braun and Clarke. In particular, the first author undertook the following (prescribed) steps: familiarization with data, recording codes in a systematic manner, reviewing codes, and combining codes into themes and sub-themes.

The first author determined common themes and sub-themes by computing the percentage of participants who articulated each (sub)theme. In this article, we report (sub)themes conveyed by at least 5% of the NA sample and 10% of White participants from either or both White samples. These common (sub)themes were refined, named, and brought together via thematic mapping. The first author generated a codebook (of common themes) and developed a process for the second author to independently code 20% of randomly selected participant replies in a deductive manner. Cohen’s Kappa reliability figures were high, 0.91 (96.4%) for the White samples and 0.91 (96.3%) for the NA sample. The last author assisted the first author in interpreting and framing these themes, as well as situating them in social context.

Results

Most of the percentages for results reported in this section are listed in Table 1. As discussed in Davis-Delano et al. (2021b), NA identity is important to the vast majority of NA participants and the vast majority want non-NA people to know they are NA. Thus, it is not surprising that, inclusive of their identity work, NA participants reported that most people they interact with, many of whom are non-NA, are aware of their NA identities.

Relatedly, 12% of NA participants indicated that they want non-NA people to be aware of their NA identity because being NA is “who they are,” and 43% because they are proud to be NA. Some specified that they revealed their NA identity to non-NA people because they were proud of their NA heritage/ancestry (27%), their NA or tribal identity (19%), their NA culture (11%), and NA survival or thriving (5%). As one NA participant declared, “I would want [my Native American identity] to be known wherever I go because...I take incredible pride in my heritage and culture!” Another NA participant explained:

Why do I want non-Native Americans to know that I am Native American? I am so proud of the fact that I’m Choctaw. I’m so proud to be Native American [as] our culture is rich in history. It’s what I identify as being...It is what I am. And no matter what has come to happen to my ancestors, we are thriving in America...I’m proud of that...So I want anybody to know I’m Native American.

The context of NA identity work

The majority (60%) of NA participants discussed their NA identity in the context of oppression faced by NA people, including prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, offensive comments/questions, being made fun of, and cultural appropriation. For example, one participant observed that “a lot of people...make fun of...[Native American] dancing and singing,” while another specified a particular instance of this when “a group of teenagers,” upon identifying the participant as NA, started “dancing around singing hey ya

Table 1
Results for Native American sample.

Finding	Percent Sample
WISH NON-NA AWARE OF NA IDENTITY BECAUSE...	
NA is “Who They Are”	12
Proud to be NA (in Any Way)	43
Proud of NA Heritage/Ancstry	27
Proud of NA or Tribal Identity	19
Proud of their NA Culture	11
Proud of NA Survival or Thriving	5
NA IDENTITY DISCUSSED IN THE CONTEXT OPPRESSION:	
Any Mention	60
Conceal NA Identity to Avoid Oppression	5
NA IDENTITY DISCUSSED IN CONTEXT OF LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF NA:	
Any Mention	28
Contemporary or General Knowledge	20
Historical Knowledge	12
Invisibility or Belief Not Exist	10
POSITIVE OR NEUTRAL NON-NA REACTIONS TO NA REVELATION:	
None or Indifferent	10
Nice, Polite, or Respectful	6
Apologized	5
Interest and Desire to Learn	22
INDICATIONS OF STRAIN ON NA PARTICIPANTS:	
Directly Admits Strain	37
Any Indication of Strain or Struggle	87
Bothered by Misidentification	20
Non-NA React with Disbelief or Challenges	17
Among NA Who Wish to Be Seen as NA When Not, Wish Due to Misidentification, Disbelief, or Challenge	39
Non-NA React with Shock or Amazement	26
Non-NA React with Stereotypes or Prejudice	23
Non-NA React with Disrespect	10
Non-NA Romantic Fetishization of NA People	11
Non-NA Claims NA Ancestry	9
Any Negative Emotions	24
Emotions of Bother, Annoyance, Frustration, Irritation, or Tired	14
Emotion of Anger	5
NA ACTIVISM VIA IDENTITY WORK AS MEANS TO...	
Reduce Oppression [Among NA Who Wish to be Seen as NA When Not]	26 [30]
Educate (Any)	20
Educate to Make NA People Visible or So Know NA Exist	10
Educate about NA History	8

Note. Abbreviation: NA = Native Americans

while they laughed.” Another participant related:

People have the presumption that I receive monthly checks from my tribe, [which] I haven't. Also, people assume my education would be paid in full, [while] I received \$1,800 out of my \$88,000 tuition...I have also had grown people assume my family lived in or currently lives in a teepee...and also that because I'm a Native American that I am automatically an alcoholic, which I am not.

This oppression can be so consequential that five NA participants sometimes conceal their NA identity to avoid oppression:

Yes, I have [concealed my Native American identity]...because there is a lot of discrimination towards Indigenous people and I try to avoid that because it can be dangerous. Especially in situations where you have to engage with law enforcement or any kind of person in power such as a traffic stop or in a court of law. I've purposely not given my status card when asked for identification, said I was from the white town that is directly next to my reservation, [and] made sure to talk properly as to let them know that I was educated. I've taken off my beaded jewelry and taken down my dream catcher when pulled over before so the police would not see it. There are many, many things that I've done and do every day to white wash myself to avoid getting discriminated on, or hurt by people in these positions...I fear judgment based on the stereotypes of indigenous people. I fear discrimination. I fear for my safety as an indigenous woman when my sisters all over the United States and Canada are missing and murdered without anyone looking for them. I feel shame because I want to be proud and I'm not strong enough to show pride in some situations because of fear. I feel like a coward.

Related to the context of oppression faced by NA people, 28% discussed their NA identity relative to limited non-NA knowledge about NA Peoples. This included concerns about limited knowledge of contemporary NA Peoples or general knowledge of NA Peoples (20%), limited historical knowledge (12%), and invisibility of NA people or belief that they do not exist (10%). As one participant articulated, “I think non-Native people forget that we exist. We've been erased.” Another communicated, “I work for an outdoor education camp. My license plate is one from the Choctaw Nation. Many of my fellow teachers would approach me and ask about it but none really knew anything about Native Americans or Oklahoma...[or] the Trail of Tears.”

NA identity revelation as a strained experience

Given some White participants' stereotypical perceptions of racial and cultural indicators, which we discuss elsewhere (Davis-Delano et al., 2021b), as well as the oppression discussed above, it is not surprising that most NA participants experience strain associated with conveyance and interpretations of their NA identity. Before we discuss these experiences, it is important to mention that strain was not omnipresent, as some NA participants remarked that their identity revelations were met with no reaction or indifference (10%), nice, polite or respectful reactions (6%), or apologies (5%). Yet, when directly asked, 37% of NA participants indicated that they were negatively affected by conveyance and interpretation of their NA identities. When we examined all participant answers, 87% described strains or difficulties associated with this conveyance and interpretation. As discussed elsewhere (Davis-Delano et al., 2021b), 81% of NA participants indicated that non-NA people misidentify them, and 20% indicated that this misidentification bothered them. Below, we discuss other evidence of strain.

For 17% of NA participants, revelation of their NA identities to non-NA people was met with disbelief or challenges. One NA participant wrote about non-NA people expressing disbelief: “Generally speaking, as soon as I tell someone I am Cherokee, the response is ‘Yeah, sure you are.’ I just feel frustrated when people don't believe it, because it is a very important part of my family's history.” And, this NA participant discussed having their NA identity challenged: “Two years ago I was mistaken for Mexican. When I said I was Native American, I was not believed and was told to stop faking. It has been this way my whole life...Because it is my race and heritage and I take pride in who and what I am, I take high offense when others call me a fake.”

Although not overtly expressing disbelief or challenges, 26% of NA participants experienced reactions of shock or amazement when they revealed their NA identity: “When I tell them I am Native American it does come as a shock. Most non-Indians react the same.” Another participant recalled a reaction of amazement:

I remember being on a family vacation in Orlando Florida and meeting a 11 yr [old] boy and his family at the resort. Upon meeting us he asked if I didn't mind [telling him] what race I was...I didn't mind and told him I was a full blooded Native American from the Passamaquoddy tribe in Maine. He was amazed...He was excited to go back home and tell people he met a real life Native American like in the books.

Reactions of shock or amazement may generate strain because these reactions suggest that non-NA people expect NA people do not exist or fit stereotypical criteria.

Beyond disbelief, shock, and misidentification, 23% of NA participants indicated that non-NA people responded to revelation of their NA identity with stereotypical or prejudicial comments, questions, and/or actions. In one instance, this occurred while shopping:

My roommate and a couple of others went to the local mall to window shop, and...it seemed out of nowhere a pair of older white ladies maybe in their 70's approached me and randomly asked if I was Native American, and I answered yes, not really understanding the situation. My roommate was watching me as these ladies asked all sorts of questions like...“Do your people live in tepees?” “Do my people still scalp people or if they have ever done it in the past?”

In another instance, this bias occurred in the context of socializing:

Once at a mutual friend's home, she had [an]other guest over. Her guest told me that I look exotic and continued to ask me where I was from. I told her guest that I am from Louisiana, and she asked where I was really from. I was more specific and told

her that I was from New Orleans. Later she realized that she wanted to ask my ethnicity. I told her that I was Native American, and she asked me if I can braid her hair and if I dance around fire screaming songs. I explained to her what a powwow was and the sacredness of our hair.

Another 10% of NA participants described disrespectful reactions, including rude, hostile, mean and angry reactions, that they did not explicitly associate with stereotypes or prejudice. One participant simply noted, “I do come across a few rude people.” Another participant recounted a particular example of this type of negative reaction:

We had a cultural diversity day at work and I talked about my Cherokee heritage. Folks looked at me like I was a joke and sort of had a laugh because due to my mixed background I have blonde hair. It made me quite upset because I have a great respect for my father and our family and heritage and just because my looks may not fit the image doesn't mean I take it lightly or appreciate others disrespecting what I come from.

More generally, 24% of NA participants felt negative emotions related to conveyance and/or interpretation of their NA identity among non-NA people. Most often these negative emotions were feelings of being bothered, annoyed, frustrated, irritated, or tired (14%) and angry (5%). As one NA participant stated, “I just wish they knew/believed what I was...It's annoying. I'm mostly just irritated and pissed off.” Another NA participant communicated:

[My Native American identity] doesn't come up much in conversation, but when it does, I am normally asked really stupid questions, like do I live in a tepee, or do I dance on powwows. Which for the most part tells me how ignorant people can be, so most of the time I try not to discuss my heritage with uneducated people. I get tired of trying to get them [to] understand.

NA identity work as activism

Despite the strain discussed above, addressing NA oppression and the knowledge deficit motivate and shape identity revelation among some NA participants. Twenty-six percent of NA participants perceive their identity revelation as a means to address this oppression, sometimes as a response to oppression and other times as a strategy to reduce future oppression. Here, a participant explained how her identity revelation relates to her goal of reducing oppression:

I want people to know that I am Native American so they do not disrespect me, my heritage, my tribe, my people or my sacrifices...Going through history the teachers used vile language against my people and claimed it was true...When “non-Indians” say something harsh or false about Native Americans, I correct them and make sure they know the power of their words can be harmful and racist even if it's not intended.

Another NA participant revealed the role of her identity work in reducing oppression:

Sometimes I do wish that store owners [knew I was Native American so that they] felt the shame of selling shitty knockoff, mass produced “Native” accessories or art. But I usually am quite loud whenever I see any type of cultural appropriation in a store... It's frustrating for me that things like that are contributing to the theft of our culture and revenue for our people...I believe it's important for people to know that Indigenous people are still alive...Native people and their issues are pretty invisible in today's world so to create some visibility for my tribe and my race is very important to me. I also like for people to know when I'm at Native events so that they can ask me questions. I would prefer that they come and ask me about our people than to just assume or continue living with the stereotype.

Twenty percent of NA participants perceive their identity revelation as a means to educate others about NA Peoples (10% to make NA Peoples visible or make sure others realize that NA Peoples still exist; 8% to educate about NA history). Here one participant illustrated this goal: “So, when I tell people [I am Native American], it is...to tell people the history, the Trail of Tears, which most people know nothing about.” Another participant provided another example of this motive:

There are ~5 million AI/AN people in the US with a lot of social, political, and health issues. We are so diverse, but a lot of the general public do not understand or know of us. Visibility is a major issue, and at a certain point, it impedes progress for Tribal people and lands. Allowing people to know my heritage opens the floor for dialogue. Hopefully, I will be able to clear misconceptions or help to humanize our issues.

Lastly, 9% of NA participants indicated that they wanted non-NA people to be aware of their NA identity to honor the past suffering of NA people. When asked why she wanted non-NA people to know she was NA, one participant replied:

Because I am proud of my culture and also, I want them to acknowledge that it's my ancestors land that they stand on and not because it was given, but because my people were murdered, raped and tortured for it, then stuck on little corners of this land in highly unsustainable areas and forced to rely on government aid and suffer for decades without basic human rights or necessities. My people still don't have clean drinking water and continue to have their rights violated and ignored. That's why.

Thus far we have discussed how the vast majority of our NA participants want others to be aware of their NA identities because they highly value this identity. We have explained that NA participants discussed conveyance and interpretation of their NA identities to non-NA people in the context of oppression and ignorance. Although this situation generates strain for many NA participants, some use their identity work to reduce oppression and increase knowledge. Given these goals, it is important to consider whether non-NA persons are receptive to NA identity work that provides education and challenges oppression.

“Positive” reactions to NA identity revelation?

Although there were no questions on the survey for White participants about their feelings about or attitudes toward NA people or NA identity revelation, many White participants indicated that their experiences with or views about NA people were positive (34% H; 27% L). However, some articulated problematic ostensibly positive stereotypes when expressing these feelings/attitudes. For example, one White participant (H) wrote:

My best friend is American Indian. And you [know] she [is] American Indian because of her looks and her beautiful hair. We met in treatment and she has been a wonderful friend ever since. I also had an ex-boyfriend who was American Indian as well. He was a wonderful person...I have great respect for the American Indians. They have a strong heritage and all the ones I've met have been very good people. Having a best friend that's Native American has really taught me a lot. They're such a good people. American Indians have struggled in this country starting with the pilgrims. But they have such a good outlook on life...I wish I had that much heritage and I feel that I can learn a lot from my friend who is American Indian. The women especially have beautiful hair and they seem to know what they want out of life.

Another White participant's (L) comments are less stereotypical: “When I had this interaction, the person was very nice and respectful...[In] the many encounters I have had with American Indians, they have always been nice.”

Corresponding with these findings, some NA participants observed positive reactions to their identity revelations among some non-NA persons. In particular, they observed indications of interest and desire to learn about NA people (22%). As one NA participant put it, “People are intrigued usually when I tell them I am American Indian [and] they want to know more information.” Another NA participant recounted a particular example of this interest:

I met a lady on the bus that asked me what my nationality was and I told her “I am Native American from the Comanche Tribe out of Lawton, OK.” She was pleasant and very curious. She wanted to know more about my tribe and [I] told her that we self-govern and we have our own police, we have our own Social Services, and our own businesses and we generate a good amount of money for 15 thousand plus members. And I told her that we have our own casinos. She wanted to know more [and] she was very curious and pleasantly surprised, but I didn't have time to continue informing her, but I could tell that she was intrigued.

Although NA participants seemed to appreciate this interest and desire to learn, some NA participants were critical of ostensibly positive reactions that involve “romantic fetishization” (11%) and claims to NA ancestry (9%). Here one NA participant described an example of “romantic fetishization”:

I was there for an “Indian Celebration” and was dressed in post-removal clothes so of course people asked me about it. When I told them their faces just lit up at the idea of seeing a real life Native. After they got over their amazement that Natives are allowed off their reservation, they asked to take a picture with me. And then went on about their business purchasing factory made feather bow and arrows.

When asked how non-NA people reacted to revelation of his NA identity, a different participant replied, “They always respond with some percentage of Native American they are. Most of those people are usually white or black...And somehow lots of people are some sort of Native American and it's usually only a fraction.”

Discussion

Since NA persons are a small percentage of the U.S. population and the vast majority live outside of reservations, many NA persons come into contact with non-NA persons on a regular basis. And, sometimes NA persons engage in identity work when interacting with non-NA persons. In this article, we have described NA identity work from the perspectives of both NA and White American participants. We found that although the vast majority of NA participants want others to know of their NA identity, conveyance and/or interpretation of their identity to non-NA persons often generates strain and struggle. The main source of this strain and struggle is present-day oppression and lack of knowledge about NA persons. This context generates non-NA reactions to NA identity revelation that include shock, disbelief, challenges, disrespect, and expression of stereotypes and prejudice. Yet, some of our NA participants employ identity work to challenge this oppression and educate others. Some non-NA persons, including some of our participants, have positive reactions to NA identity revelation that evidence a desire to learn, yet sometimes these so-called positive reactions evidence romantic stereotypes, fetishization, and claims to NA ancestry.

Our results suggest that NA persons are facing a great deal of stereotyping and ignorance at the micro-level, including when engaged in identity work. What macro-level social forces contribute to this stereotyping and ignorance among non-NA persons? First, in most parts of the U.S. there are few NA people (e.g., [Lichter, Parisi, Grice, & Taquino, 2007](#); [Wilkes, 2003](#)). In these cases, many non-NA persons do not have regular interpersonal contact with NA persons that could enhance their knowledge about and minimize stereotyping of NA persons. Second, most schools in the U.S. devote little attention to NA persons in their curricula, the vast majority of what is covered occurred prior to 1900, and some material is presented in a misleading manner (e.g., [Journell, 2009](#); [Shear et al., 2015](#)). Third, contemporary NA persons are virtually invisible in the media, while stereotypes about NA persons from the past are scattered throughout U.S. culture, e.g., mascots, as consumer product logos, and in films (e.g., [Davis-Delano et al., 2021a](#); [Fryberg & Eason, 2017](#)). All of these macro-level social forces contribute to stereotyping and ignorance about NA Peoples among non-NA persons in U.S. society. Thus, these social forces contribute to strain and struggle when NA persons engage in micro-level identity work among non-NA persons. The strain associated with NA identity work likely contributes to higher rates of mental and physical health problems among NA people (e.g., [Campbell & Troyer, 2007; 2011](#); [De Coteau, Hope, & Anderson, 2003](#)), as well as lower levels on other

measures of well-being such as educational achievement and economic position (e.g., Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Harrington, Ni, Liebert, Wilkins-Turner, & Ellien, 2012).

Given this oppressive social context, and associated strain, why would NA persons endeavor to convey their NA identities to non-NA persons? One clear answer to this question is that many NA persons, including many in this study, strongly identify as NA. Most of our NA participants are involved in their NA cultures to some degree (Davis-Delano et al., 2021b) and many are proud of their NA Nations or NA Peoples more generally, and are thus proud of being NA. Given these positive feelings about NA identity, it is not surprising that scholars have found that Indigenous identification is associated with greater well-being in the face of discrimination (e.g., Fryberg et al., 2013; Galliher et al., 2011; Jaramillo, Mello, & Worrell, 2015).

A second possible answer to the question of why NA persons would endeavor to convey their NA identities in the context of oppression and ignorance is that there has been a decline in negative stereotypes and increase in ostensibly positive (romantic) stereotypes of NA people in many parts of U.S. society (e.g., Bird, 1996). This shift may reduce harm, and increase benefits, associated with NA identity revelation. In fact, this is likely one reason why the number of people identifying as NA has been rising (e.g., Garrouette, 2003). Research reveals that many people in the U.S. are uncritical of positive stereotypes and do not perceive them as associated with oppression, despite evidence that they are often harmful (e.g., Czopp, Kay, & Cheryan, 2015). In fact, ostensibly positive romantic stereotypes of NA Peoples seem to motivate appropriation of NA cultures and pseudo-culture. And these stereotypes likely contribute to questionable claims to NA ancestry and identity (i.e., claims without valid evidence), which is upsetting to many NA persons who are enrolled in, and regularly engaged with, their NA Nations (e.g., Riley & Carpenter, 2016). Although decline in negative stereotypes in U.S. society may encourage more NA identity revelation at the micro-level, some of our NA participants are critical of ostensibly positive stereotypes that reflect romantic fetishization of NA Peoples.

A third possible answer to the question of why many NA persons engage in identity work in the context of ignorance and oppression is that NA persons have a long history of struggle against settler colonialism (e.g., McKay, Kirsten Vinyeta, & Norgaard, 2020; Riley & Carpenter, 2016). Among other strategies, this struggle has included war, protests, lawsuits, resistance to assimilation, and initiatives to change public policy. It is clear from our study that this struggle is also waged at the more micro-level via identity work. For NA persons who do not resemble phenotypical stereotypes of NA persons nor display stereotypical cultural indicators, verbal NA identity revelation can be used to educate non-NA persons in a way that challenges both NA invisibility and stereotypes about NA cultures. Further, as clear from our findings, some NA persons directly challenge, via verbal statements, biased individual beliefs and aspects of the dominant culture.

NA Peoples did and do not cause settler colonialism and associated oppression, and thus are not responsible for addressing this oppression. Nevertheless, some of our NA participants use their identity work toward this end, and this likely makes a difference at the micro-level. Yet, White American settler colonial control over societal perceptions of NA identity (Davis-Delano et al., 2021b), as well as perpetuation of society-wide stereotyping and invisibility of contemporary NA people (e.g., Davis-Delano et al., 2021a; Fryberg & Eason, 2017), require a comprehensive approach that must involve non-NA persons. There is good news, in that some White participants wrote that they are interested in learning about NA people, and some of our NA participants corroborate this finding. This finding was also clear from the Reclaiming Native Truth Project (2018), which was a multi-study research project focused on understanding perceptions of Native Americans to inform social change. The degree to which non-NA people are knowledgeable and motivated enough to engage in activism to reduce oppression faced by NA people is an open-question, although there are some hopeful signs (e.g., Steinman, 2019).

Addressing the root causes of strain associated with NA identity work requires nothing short of radical transformation in U.S. society. We need to increase the quantity of representations of contemporary NA people in U.S. culture to enhance visibility. If successful, this will enable non-NA people to think about the possibility of NA people in their midst. Stereotypical representations must be eliminated and replaced by accurate representations. This would reduce the possibility that non-NA people rely on these stereotypes to identify people as NA and better enable them to respectfully recognize NA persons who do not fit these stereotypes. It is especially important for non-NA people to learn about NA Nation sovereignty, including the role NA Nations do and should play in determining NA identity (Rodriguez-Lonebear, 2021), as well as about the oppression experienced by NA Peoples. The latter must include recognition of problems associated with ostensibly positive stereotypes (e.g., Czopp et al., 2015) and fetishization (Keene, n.d.). This knowledge would render NA identity work more comprehensible to non-NA people and reduce problematic reactions to this identity work, thus ultimately generating less strain among NA persons.

Some NA Nations and pan-tribal organizations, along with non-NA allies, are engaged in substantial efforts to generate the transformations discussed above. One example in the media institution is that *Indian Country Today* recently joined the Associated Press, which enables mainstream news organizations to publish more stories focused on NA people. The Native American Journalists Association provides guides for reporters who are covering NA topics (e.g., on terminology, finding Indigenous experts), which can reduce bias in news coverage. Examples related to education include the Native Knowledge 360 Education Initiative, managed by the National Museum of the American Indian, which provides training and resources aimed to increase the quantity and accuracy of NA curriculum in schools. Debbie Reese created the blog *American Indian's in Children's Literature*, which reviews, critiques and endorses children's books that feature NA people, and thus reduces bias in books used in the field of education. More broadly, the National Congress of American Indians has many initiatives, including an initiative to eliminate NA mascots. IllumiNative strives to increase the visibility of, and shift the narrative about, NA Peoples, including a campaign to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. Efforts such as these have the potential to educate large numbers of non-NA people in a manner that reduces oppression faced by NA Peoples. In turn, reducing this oppression will lessen the strain and struggle involved in micro-level NA identity work.

Two strengths of our study are that the participants are from the majority of U.S. states (including those with higher and lower percentages of NA residents), and the NA sample is from 38 different federally recognized tribes. Despite this, a limitation of our study

is that our samples of White and NA participants are not representative of these demographic categories in U.S. society. Another strength is that we asked open-ended questions because we did not presume to know participants' perceptions about and experiences with Native identity conveyance and interpretation. Yet, because we used a questionnaire, a limitation of our study is that we could not follow-up with participants to clarify or urge them to greater depth in their replies, as can be done during interviews. Further, because we did not use observation, we were reliant on participant written accounts of their experiences and reactions.

In the future, researchers could use our findings to survey larger and more representative samples via closed-ended questions about NA identity work and non-NA reactions to revelations of NA identity. It is important to explore the degree to which White Americans are genuinely interested in learning about NA people versus consuming fetishized stereotypes, and factors associated with each motive. Experiments could be used to determine the degree to which, and in what ways, particular modes of NA identity revelation affect the attitudes of non-NA people. Lastly, scholars could explore the potential personal burdens or benefits to NA individuals of engaging in NA identity work as a form of activism (e.g., mental health).

Conclusion

In this research project, we used written replies from White American and NA participants to explore the phenomena of conveyance and interpretation of NA identity among non-NA people. Our inductive analysis revealed that NA participants are engaged in identity work in a settler colonial context in which many NA persons face invisibility, ignorance, stereotypes, and discrimination. For most of our NA participants, this social context generates strain associated with their identity work. Yet, some of our NA participants use their identity work to educate and challenge settler colonial oppression. Some White participants express "positive" attitudes toward NA people and NA identity revelation. Sometimes these positive attitudes appear to be genuine expressions of desire to learn, while other times these attitudes exhibit interest in consuming fetishized stereotypes of NA people. Society-wide social change is necessary to reduce the struggles associated with micro-level NA identity work.

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Declarations of Competing Interest

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