

**Asserting Identity:
An Examination of American Indian and Alaskan Native Professionals' Experiences
with Identity and Context**

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Dedication

For Clare and my family, for giving me the light:

*The light that shines is the light of love,
Lights the darkness from above,
It shines on you and it shines on me,
and it shows what the light of love can do.
I'm gonna shine my light both far and near,
I'm gonna shine mine light bright and clear,
where there's a dark corner in this land
I'm gonna let my little light shine.*

(Harry Dixon Loes)

Abstract

The enduring impacts of colonization on American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) people are evident in the significant physical and mental health disparities that they face. Efforts advanced by AI/AN professionals within these communities have led to improvements, but challenges remain in addressing said disparities in manners that are contextually- and culturally- situated. It is thereby important to understand the experiences, meaning making, and perceptions of AI/AN professionals who are engaging in this work. Guided by constructive grounded theory, the researcher interviewed 10 AI/AN professionals who are employed in urban agencies that promote the health and well-being Native people. Using this methodology, the ways in which culture, community, and career shape personal and professional identities vis-a-vis one's career were explored. These findings show an emerging understanding of the importance of peers, education, and community in shaping – and providing context for – each individual's self-determined identity, and how this reciprocally influences work in AI/AN communities. These findings support the need to address and evolve our grasp of culture and character within the context of one's profession and the community she/he/they serve. By extending our current understanding of these intersections and by creating structures that support culture and identity, this research offers an emerging theory to improve future professionals' preparation in their support of AI/AN communities.

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Introduction

Numbering approximately 5.2 million, American Indians and Alaskan Natives (AI/ANs) have suffered over 400 years of injustices (Warne). Settler colonization – which brought with it genocide, forced removal from land, illegalization of spiritual practices, loss of language(s), boarding schools, and other sequelae – has led to unresolved historical trauma and a myriad of negative structural, institutional, economic, climate, and social inequities that compound negative individual outcomes (Epey et al., 2014; Gee & Ford, 2011; Sarche & Spicer, 2008). These individual and community consequences are evident in significant disparities across the life course for AIs/ANs and their families compared to other ethnic and racial groups – spanning across physical (e.g., diabetes, obesity, lung cancer, infant mortality), mental (e.g., anxiety, alcohol misuse, suicide, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder), educational (e.g., drop-out and graduation rates), and psychosocial (e.g., violent victimization, exposure to domestic violence) domains (Brave Heart, 2016; Gone & Trimble, 2012; Warne & Lajimodiere, 2015).

Understanding the ancillary effects of these histories, and intervening through systemic approaches that are both culturally situated and community supported, is a guiding ethos of those committed to reclaiming a healthy community (Gone & Trimble, 2012; King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009; Walters & Simoni, 2002). However, for AI/ANs dedicated to addressing disparities brought on by historical and current-day injustices, the culture(s) of their profession and the culture(s) of the community can create significant barriers. These barriers include a lack of culturally informed and/or based interventions, a

paucity of other AI/ANs serving in these spaces, and pervasive distrust maintained by AI/ANs related to Western education and medicine (Gone, 2007; Phillips & Malone, 2014).

Learning more about the perspectives and meaning-making processes of AI/AN professionals in their communities is imperative, insofar as they are uniquely situated to address these effects as individuals who navigate multiple worlds and belief systems. Findings in health and educational outcomes data show that greater representation from AI/AN professionals is paramount in addressing disparities in the health and education of Native people. For instance, extant research shows that racial and ethnic matching of educators and physicians to patients/clients and students is associated with reductions in mortality and increases in educational success (Hill, Jones, Woodworth, 2018; Gershenson et al., 2018).

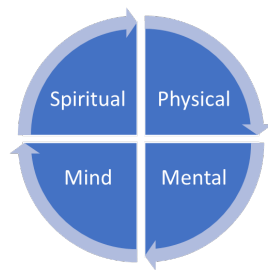
The Whole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts

A goal of many AI/AN professionals is addressing historical trauma from colonization and the physical, mental, educational, and spiritual imbalances within the AI/AN community that have resulted from it (Gone & Trimble, 2012). For them, power differentials between assumed roles as professionals and the lay community, limited or under-developed resources for care (e.g., inadequate or absent health insurance), and underfunding for AI/AN-specific programming limit the effectiveness of prevention and intervention efforts. Similarly, monolithic understandings of established truths and a general lack of theories and interventions specific to AIs/ANs create a number of barriers to effectively prevent and intervene on issues related to community health. The

representation and inclusion of diverse Native voices through collaborative community- and culturally- focused scholarship and approaches have been called for as necessary to effectively address these disparities (Donovan et al., 2015; Sequist, 2007; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

Supporting, promoting, and including more of these voices into and alongside those who serve in the helping professions might better address health disparities (Phillips & Malone, 2014). However, this vision can be challenging in light of the historical, structural, and institutional artifacts that privilege individualistic and Westernized patterns of practice. More specifically, the message is that our current political, cultural, and social climates can limit Native professionals' ability to facilitate and/or intervene on behalf of – or in collaboration with – AIs/ANs. They face policies, institutions, structures, and community pressures that limit diversity in professional education programs and leadership; these struggles lead to decreased recruitment and retention of AIs/ANs within the helping professions. Therefore, it is important to understand how AI/AN professionals understand, operate, and ultimately address societal injustices so that greater capacity and resources can be used to address and minimize the observed disparities in health outcomes.

For generations of AIs/ANs, the Medicine Wheel (see Figure 1) has come to



represent a model for health and healing through symbolizing central tenets of well-being and cycles of life. The four quadrants of the circle represent interdependent relationships between

Figure 1: Medicine Wheel

physical (e.g., body), mental (e.g., emotions), mind (e.g., education) and spiritual (e.g., relationship with one's Creator) facets of health. Imbalances, usually experienced as a consequence of disconnections or disruptions in any one of these domains, negatively impact the others. Understanding the importance of the Medicine Wheel to the holistic health of AI/AN people provides context for describing how disconnections between these phenomena have led to disparities across all areas of health and well-being (e.g., life expectancy, diabetes, liver disease, mental illness, alcoholism and/or other drug addictions, low education attainment, unemployment / under-employment, disconnections with faith practices, displacement from land). Engaging AI/AN professionals in this study, wherein they were asked about the intersection of their history, context, and identity development helped to elucidate how AI/ANs can better be supported in their personal and professional domains vis-a-vis their work to address health disparities in the AI/AN community.

Method

This section presents research methodology based on postmodern and social constructionist epistemologies. Social constructivist, and not social constructionism per se, is used to denote Charmaz's (2013) attempts to situate her methodology with a discipline and approach that had not previously given value (or situated findings within social, cultural, economic, and political contexts and times in history).

Interview Protocol

Using constructivist grounded theory, intensive interviews were conducted to understand the perspectives, meanings, and experiences of AI/AN helping professionals. The interview

protocol allowed participants to reflect on targeted topics in a manner that facilitates dialogical space for new insights and viewpoints to emerge (Charmaz, 2014).

Accordingly, the constructivist grounded theory approach calls for interviews to elicit the following processes: (a) mutuality (e.g., the interview process elicits new ways of understanding and meaning that further build the interviewee's preferred identity and lead to emergent questions for the interviewer); (b) exploration (e.g., emergent questions are pursued based on the piqued interests and emotional states of the interviewee that suggest further inquiry); (c) emergent understandings (e.g., new meaning and understanding results from the interview); (d) legitimization of identity (e.g., multiple identities and preferred identities are explored); and (e) validation of experience (e.g., the participants are allowed to give their own value statement to their experiences). An example of an emergent question would be "Can you tell me if, and how, this experience has changed how you see yourself?" (see Appendix B).

Intensive Interviewing is distinct from other types of interviewing because it is less focused on gathering facts (i.e., informational interviewing) or uncovering and exposing hidden actions (i.e., investigative interviewing). Instead, it aims to gather perspectives and meaning in the moment from interviewees regarding a specific topic (Finlay, 2012). Further, intensive interviewing allows for the conceptualizing of implicit and explicit meaning, knowledge, perspectives, and wisdom to emerge based on guiding questions and emerging questions that arise during the interview (Charmaz, 2014; Finlay, 2012; Olson, 2011).

Intensive interviewing is also a response to other forms of interviewing and disciplines that denounce subjectivity, emotion, and connection within the interview process (Finlay, 2012). The intensive interview process is described as one sided, as the interviewees guide the interview inquiry versus preconceived questions and ideas on the part of the researcher. Likewise, attention to emotion and nonverbal cues are suggested as openings for further questions and inquiry – not barriers that impede time and structure (Ezzy, 2010). These processes stand in-contrast to other interview processes wherein interviewees are guided by modernist assumptions of empirical objectivity and validity of the interview process and questions (Finlay, 2012).

Sample

Participants included AI/AN professionals working within non-profits, school systems, and other Native organizations who collectively serve urban-dwelling youth, adults, and families. Inclusion criteria were: (a) identify as American Indian / Alaska Native; (b) 18 years of age or older; and (c) history of working in the AI/AN community in a professional helping capacity for more than five years. All potential research participants were members of an existing research collaborative who identify as insiders with the community (i.e., Native heritage). There were 16 members who met the criteria for inclusion. These individuals were contacted through personal conversations and email, wherein they were told the nature of the research process and asked if they would participate in an interview. Of the 16, 10 responded that they would. Of those who did not participate, extraneous reasons were given. The researcher and advisor agreed that this was a sufficient pool of research participants; this number was also in accord with the

proposed range of interviewees that was approved by the researcher's dissertation committee before the study commenced. Of the 10 participants who agreed to participate, all 10 participated.

IRB approval was secured before the study began, and each of the respective participants' consent was obtained before interviews commenced. Interviews were conducted at the respective community settings that participants work within; each took between 45-90 minutes to complete. Follow up questions, emerging ideas, and individual differences in participants led to varying interview lengths. Interviews were carried out until theoretical sufficiency was reached through theoretical sampling of emerging categories, ideas, and connections between these categories (Dey, 1999). As theoretical categories began to emerge through analyzing the interview data, ideas and connections were followed up through additional questions of interviewees, discussions between the researcher and his advisor, through reflexive memoing, and through empirical research to obtain theoretical sufficiency. It was determined that through the reflexivity process that categories, ideas, and connections were emerging from the interview process to a level of theoretical sufficiency. Dey's (1999) use of the term theoretical sufficiency (instead of saturation) is relevant to idea of saturation being a subjective determination and the desire to not overgeneralize the findings. Therefore, saturation through theoretical sufficiency was the process of developing the properties of the emerging categories and relationship between these categories (e.g., theory) (Charmaz, 2014).

Data Analysis

An important part of constructivist grounded theory analysis is the iterative process of data gathering, transcribing (verbatim), coding, memoing, and going back to participants to follow-up on areas of theoretical interest. This process took place from the beginning of the interviews and represented an integral part of further interview inquiries and data analysis. According to Charmaz (2014), grounded theory data analysis consists of many parts presented linearly; however, the process is often iterative, interactive, and ongoing. For example, follow-up questions that emerged during the interview process were often discussed through consultation with the researcher's advisor and brought forward for reflexive memoing, and additional empirical research, along with follow-up conversations with study participants over a 10-month period.

NVIVO, a computer program used in qualitative studies developed by QSR International (2018), was used for data management and analysis; line-by-line examination and focused coding, data analysis, and auditing data and codes were carried out by the researcher and his academic advisor. Initial line-by-line phases of coding involved naming each word, line, or segment of data. During this step, the researcher stayed close to the words of participants and coded actions (e.g., gerunds; coding using verbs instead of nouns) of the interviewees, as opposed to general topics or themes. Additionally, Charmaz (2014) suggests that identifying sensitizing subjects can be a starting point for initiating an analysis, but that does not determine its content. In this instance, social justice, tribal critical theory, and critical race theory were used as a sensitizing subject to identify actions related to ideology, power, privilege, equity, and oppression.

Next, focused codes were created and used to synthesize, analyze, and conceptualize larger pieces of data. This phase of coding took place through increased scrutiny of data, comparing codes with codes, and reflective practice on the part of researcher. Theoretical coding then followed; during this phase, codes were compared and contrasted to identify areas for further theoretical sampling. Memo-writing, which does not represent a singular step, was used through the entirety of the research and data analysis process to guide further inquiry, insights, and engage in critical reflectivity. Notes from the memos are presented in Appendix D. The final step of data analysis encompassed theoretical sampling, which – through memo-writing, careful analysis of emerging codes, and understanding of thin areas – identified areas for further inquiry through interviews and theoretical abstraction (Charmaz, 2014).

Validity Criteria

Important criteria to meet when conducting constructivist grounded theory include credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz 2017). To address credibility, this study utilized member checks to ensure that the researcher's results are supported by participants, and that said findings are backed with adequate evidence (e.g., quotes). Member checks were conducted through an abridged document that highlighted the results and emerging findings from the study. Participants were asked to confirm if the results and analysis accurately represented their intent, meanings, and knowledge. Additionally, participants were asked if there were any corrections or omissions they would like included in the revised document. Participants were also informed that the document was meant to help inform goals of the current and

future groups addressing health disparities in urban American Indian and Alaskan Native communities. Originality (i.e., identifying gaps in literature) was assessed through a priori conversations with community members and reading of literature across disciplines to situate the text in social, historical, political, and economic terms. Resonance was addressed through aforementioned member checks, alongside having an additional coder to situate the analysis within larger social, historical, and political discourse – and to examine deeper insights that were offered. Finally, usefulness will be determined through observing, presenting, and analysis of the application of findings to the AI/AN community of professionals serving AI/AN in urban areas.

Results

Findings from this investigation show several points of transition that represent significant relationships between participants' selves with their family members, peers, and community – all of which served to influence and inform identity development.

Navigating Identity

The emerging theory, the *theory of asserting identity*, developed by the current researcher is comprised of four interdependent stages: (a) finding balance; (b) finding identity in context; (c) renegotiating identity; and (d) asserting identity. Each state represents aspects of identity development throughout the participants lifespan to their current role serving the AI/AN community. See Figure 2.



Figure 2: Theory of asserting identity

Stage 1: Finding Balance

Finding balance implies historical forces that led to destabilization among components outlined in the Medicine Wheel (i.e., physical, mental, mind, spiritual). All of the participants described personal, familial, spiritual, and communal desires to find balance among these components. Balance represented a sense of identity and connection for them with other AI/AN people.

Finding home. A reservation is a factor that impacted individual perceptions of identification with particular tribes. For some participants, their proximity to reservations created a subculture of AI/ANs who were not fully considered “Indian enough” by others. Participant 1 was not considered “Indian enough” in reference to archetypes of Native people. She described how she was considered even in close proximity geographically to other AI/ANs:

The people that were called so-called “traditional Indians,” as my grandma would call them, moved up into the hills and isolated from what they called the “city Indians,” which would be us, even though we weren’t really in the city.

Participant 7 describes a similar scenario of not fitting in culturally with family and relatives who lived on the reservation and whom he spent time with during the summer. Participant 7 reflected: “ I always grew up thinking that I never got a lot of culture, being in the urban area”.

Questioning Indian-ness. For all the participants, colonization impacted their ability to self-identify as an AI/AN person. Participant 3 summarized the major processes that individuals faced regarding these questions: “Hmm... ‘What makes me different?’, you know? ‘Is it my education? Is it my parents? Is it my Christian faith? Is it the way I dress?”

For several participants, questions about being “Indian enough” were questions they asked themselves when one of their parents was (is) not AI/AN. Those with mixed race parents (i.e., one parent was Native, another parent identified with a different race/ethnicity) often described how it was generally socially unacceptable for their parents at the time to be together. Corresponding responses of these participants’ families were to cut them off from one part of the family and culture. Participant 5, whose parents were of mixed-race descent, respectively, described how her family dealt with having a mixed-race child.

I wouldn’t say it’s lost, but it’s not something that was very strong, because it was something that – particularly, that was verbally expressed from my grandmother –

as something that you just did not want. They did not want that present in the family. “Don’t talk about it, don’t tell people you’re Native. Like, you just – we are who we are, but don’t tell anyone.”

Participant 7 stated that stereotypes perpetuated by Hollywood challenged his and other urban AI/ANs feelings around identity.

But through that, and the promotion through Hollywood about what Indians are, it’s - we’ve kind of got - the stereotype has been created about Indian people. I think that we have to break through, and it hasn’t been very positive.

Losing language. All participants discussed how federal policies and governmental actions to assimilate AI/AN people lead to generations of their families losing their language or speaking very little of their Native language at home. Several shared that for many, including themselves, this led to questioning their own AI/AN identity. Participants recounted “hear[ing] things, and learn[ing] things”; however, they did not fully understand the language. Participant 10 recalled a story between his grandparents and his father, and their decision to intentionally not speak Ojibwe to their son. He recalled his grandparents saying to his father: “You have to learn English if you’re going to survive in this new world.”

Grappling with spirituality. A majority of participants shared complicated histories with spirituality. These stories often started with their parents’ inability to actively participate in AI/AN spiritual practice. The history of religious doctrines (e.g., Manifest Destiny) and the subsequent trauma inflicted on AI/AN people was

complicated. Participant 4, an ordained member of the Christian church, described ongoing tensions between traditional Native beliefs and the Christian faith:

Well, this would be a whole ‘nether interview, would be about the, you know, like, what’s going on in the churches, and . . . because, that’s a system, too, but you know, there’s a big division in the church, and – on the reservations, it’s a really big problem right now, is the Christian – the Christian faith, and the traditional – you know, Native American traditional ways.

Many participants, too, described varying relationships that their parents had with religion. Participant 1 described the abuse that her father endured while in a religious boarding school. She said that: “Dad talked about having to kneel on rice with his pant legs up. He’s still got scars from that. Having to kneel on – and he’s a very strict Roman Catholic.”

For many of the participants, these scars were represented through disruptions to traditional ways of thinking. Participant 3 described how religion divides us by a common canon that “We all do our best to try to help people. It’s . . . not really, really getting that we’re all one.” A common cannon of assimilation is that we are all one, with overtones of doing the best for everyone masks that harm that causes to groups with less power (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012).

Emerging self through others. For some participants, interactions with non-AI/AN minorities served to support their identity as an AI/AN person. Several spoke about the impacts that other cultures had on them during adolescence and adulthood. Living during a time of segregation in urban areas and racial and political identity

movements created a sense of identity that deviated from younger participants. Their stories reflected greater interaction of race of diversity during a significant time in this country's history. Participant 7 recounted a time growing up in a racially diverse urban context:

I could – just hanging around with my friends in the neighborhood who were non-Native, it was very clear and evident that I didn't quite look like them. And so, they were reminding me all the time of how I was Indian, and that just became my culture. Head to toe, that's just – I don't know any other culture than that.

For Participant 8, their upbringing in a diverse urban context for many years brought a comfort level for one's own identity and embracing diverse others.

Maybe being in close proximity all these years has really helped, maybe my comfort level, or maybe for some other people, it may not be. I don't know. I don't know. It could be our mixed heritage, too, that I'm comfortable.

Stage 2: Finding Identity in Context

All participants discussed how their attempts to find balance in their identity impacted their desire to pursue higher education. Many described their desire to understand more about their identity, family, culture, and desire to impact future generations of AI/AN people. During higher education, participants described the ways their identities were and were not supported by other AI/ANs and non-AI/ANs.

Resisting alienation within higher education. For some participants, pursuing higher education created feelings of alienation from others within the AI/AN community. Participant 1 described the experience of an AI/AN who left to pursue undergraduate and

graduate degrees: “What happens is a lot of people who end up from the reservation, who end up getting their degree, and going back, their own people run them out.”

Likewise, Participant 7 described feeling proud that his father was not alienated by participating in higher education.

He only went to school to the eighth grade. Maybe that’s a part of why I thought he was so wise, because he didn’t get inundated of a Euro-centric education.

Feelings of isolation. When participating in educational settings, many participants described feeling isolated as one of the only AI/ANs on campus. These feelings were mediated by lack of AI/AN representation among the student body, “looking Native”, being designated as a charity case, and being chosen as a “token Indian” by teachers and peers. Participant 2 described having to stand up for herself after another student accused her of having her education paid for just because she is AI/AN. She recalls saying:

You know, I’m Native, and I don’t have any of my education paid for. My parents both work, and fortunately for me, make enough money where that puts me above the poverty guidelines. So, I don’t qualify.

Often events on campus or discussions of textbooks created situations where many of the participants felt simultaneously hyper-visible and socially-isolated. Many of the participants talked about events where they were called on to speak on behalf of all AI/AN people. Participant 1 recalled a conversation over the racist name of a mascot:

I just put my head down. And he [the class instructor] called on me in front of 200 people, and asked me my thoughts on it. And later on, I went to him, and asked

him not to do that. And I explained to him, I said, “You know, I’m always” – I said, “Well, I don’t know. I guess my suggestion would be to you, would be that you go and talk to somebody from the Dakota community, and Sioux community. I am not Sioux, I can’t speak for them. And it’s not my right.”

Finding community. All participants described the importance of finding a community within higher education for combating feelings of isolation. Some of the participants described finding a community that was supportive. Several described finding an AI/AN student group that supported them and created community for other AI/AN students. Through these groups and organizations, several of the participants described the leadership roles, mentoring relationships, and opportunities for advancement in education and job opportunities that came from these experiences. Participant 8 described the leadership position she obtained while part of an AI/AN organization:

I got elected president when I wasn’t at a meeting. So I took it on. I really grew in leadership. I didn’t realize how great that was because every year I could go to National Indian Education, and it really, I think changed my whole view of wanting to get more involved in education and working with my people.

Other participants described that institutional practices to create community around identity created further feelings of isolation. Participant reflected on their experience of being in a group with other AI/AN students:

But when I first came there, we were lost. The Indian students were really lost. Everybody looked the same. We were huddled together. And these were people

who, normally, we didn't hang out with each other, but we were just depressed and isolated, and we had no place to go. And so, I was a nerd, so I was in my head, so I hung out with the nerdy people.

Finding community was also found through shared understandings of shared culture between the participants and those from other cultures. One participant relayed the "altering moment" that happened when they realized a medicine from home was seen as important in another cultural dish. For Participant 6, this experience exemplified the idea that culture and identity could be defined through similarities and through differences between identities and communities.

Stage 3: Renegotiating Identity

Participants described renegotiating identity through their educational experiences, calls from the community to serve AI/AN people, and affirming one's identity in the community. Many described the support and challenges to maintaining a sense of identity as they began and pursued careers.

Responding to community. For some participants, elders in their family and community members called them to service of the AI/AN community. Participant 7 explained:

I felt a push from the community . . . Because, hearing it from parents, I felt like it was a . . . request, or a calling. It was just a push from the community. So, I applied, and was accepted, and then offered the job, and started.

For many, establishing trust among community members was an important aspect of their work. It was important for professionals in the AI/AN community to gain trust of

community members by spending significant time immersed in AI/AN contexts. For most community members, there is a desire to understand if the participants' values have been compromised through their "Euro-centric" education. Participant 8 described the process as she started a new job:

When I first came on at [the program], a lot of elders came to visit me and I had to stop my work and really, I remember one day it was a two hour conversation . . . just trying to figure out if I was trustworthy and if I could listen to him that long.?

While passionate about their work, some participants found making time to build relationships and participate in all the AI/AN culturally specific events challenging given the demands of their new job. Participation in events such as pow-wows and ceremonies were desired, but some of the participants described feeling the negative effects of stress because of the relational time commitments that were required for the position.

Being a chameleon. For many participants, multiracial/multicultural histories lead to acceptance and use of their identity to navigate spaces where they occupy liminal space. For example, Participant 3 described how they navigate the personal and professional spaces they occupy:

I want to go into a space and be accepted. And I think I'm pretty good at learning how to maneuver into a new space, and watch and observe, and then integrate myself. Whereas, he's somebody who will just be him, no matter where he is. Like, "I'm me, and that's" – and maintaining his integrity. For me, maintaining my integrity is . . . It includes accommodating, otherwise, I feel like I'm not being true to who I am. If I won't accommodate for other people.

Participant 5 spoke about how the term “ethnic chameleon” accurately fit with her experience. This sentiment – of accepting one’s identity and ability to navigate many contexts – was a common theme among those with bicultural/biracial identities: “I would say, I’ve heard the term – I love it, because it accurately describes the experience. We are ‘ethnic chameleons’. We can kind of blend in.”

Holding multiple identities, while beneficial for navigating colonized spaces and advocating for AI/AN people, was a challenge at times for some participants. Beliefs about self-identity created feelings of isolation from the AI/AN community. Participant 2 commented, “It’s just like, on one hand I never felt closer to another culture and people that looked just liked me. But then, on the other hand, I never felt more isolated.” For another participant, privacy and ethical considerations presented challenges to her participation in community events. This participant felt that connection to community could present challenges to theoretical understanding of therapeutic relationships.

Stage 4: Asserting Identity

During adulthood, many participants expressed a merging of self, community, relationships, and a distinct understanding of holding discrepant ideologies.

Finding support in family, friends, and community. Several participants discussed seeking ongoing mentorship as adults. Participant 6 spoke about the elder who: has taught me a lot, as far as not only just the language, but how to – the respect, and how to conduct yourself as a man growing up. And I still talk to him, to this day, asking any kind of questions. And he’s always just been a very insightful

individual. We call him, he's kind of like our, I guess, our medicine man around here.

Engaging children in identity. All of the participants expressed a desire to create or sustain change for future generations. Some talked about these changes for their own children. Participant 9 described her learning process as such:

I definitely took it upon myself to try and learn. I would get language resource materials, and by the time my sister and I both started having children, we asked our grandmothers to hold a family immersion camp, so that way, we would all come together and they would speak [our language], and do cultural activities and traditions with us for an entire week.

Participant 3 discussed the impact of having her own children had on her identity as a mixed-race AI/AN woman. She commented, "I got to know who I am. I got to know what I'm about, if I'm going to teach another person how to be a person." This was a similar experience for some of the participants who had children – the impact of children on identity.

Two individuals talked about the impact of children on how they saw the world and alternative narratives that were now evident regarding their own identity. Participant 10 commented:

It's been interesting to see how having my child in a local – in a school program that's thrown me into being more of a community member, being more recognized as a community member than as a professional who comes in for – drives in from who knows where, you know?

Participating in traditional activities. Participants described the importance of the traditional activities and life cycle events on their identity as AI/AN. Participant 5 described struggling with identity earlier in her life and commented on the importance of a participating in a traditional activity had on her life. After participating in a ceremony and receiving an eagle feather she recalled the elders' comments and her reaction. "And then, they said, 'Now you're part of the family.' So, really was like, kind of like adoption ceremony." Participant 3 talked about the importance of including her father who grew up Christian in a healing ceremony of a different tribe. She commented

And so, that's been interesting. I talk with my dad a lot about stuff like that. And my dad is actually coming up to do the Dakota 38 Memorial ride. I think it will be a really profound experience for him to participate in that kind of deep, ceremonial healing, you know?

Fusion of cultures. Several participants described their approach to forming and integrating multiple identities. For some, a suspension of dichotomous narratives that necessitated the picking of one identity over the other led to a new feeling of perspective.

Whatever an Indian wants to be, we don't – you know, I'm not any one of those proponents that says you're either traditional or you're not. I don't think that's the path for every Indian person. I think that they know that when they come in here, that that's something that they can have, if they want that.

Participant 6 described how his approach to food merges different cultures. When talking about his profession, he talks about how many foods are Indigenous, albeit from different

cultures. He remarked, “So, I’ve always had that thing, you know, what we call fusion, you know, taking all the different cultures, and infusing them together.”

Creating universal perspectives. Some participants talked about creating identities that are outside of culture. Participant 3 commented that:

I don’t know. It is still based on my family culture, but it’s also a lot more based on who I want to be in the world, and as a mother, and as a professional, like, trying to bring healing into the world, from a different place – from a different kind of foundation that is a little more universal, you know.

Similarly, Participant 2 talked about the need for AI/ANs professional to provide support for AI/ANs to find their own ways of healing and to have a voice in society. She described how historical trauma has impacted the ability for many to advocate and have voices of disagreement:

Can’t let anybody tell you that your thoughts are wrong about yourself. Don’t let anybody dictate your belief system, your values. Believe that you know where you need to go. And if you think something’s wrong, then it’s wrong.

For Participant 7, an evolving understanding of food created the ability to deepen his understanding of Indigenous foods. He described this understanding as analogous to melding: “taking all the different cultures, and infusing them together”. An example he gave was of buffalo, an animal not familiar to his own tribe, but a staple of his current menu. Similarly, he described bringing a Mediterranean salad to a pow-wow, and the how people were looking at him “very differently”. He described that his practice is

about ideology, and using items available from the land (versus from institutionalized ideas of what can be considered “AI/AN”).

Creating healthy lifestyles. Several of the participants described the changes in lifestyles and health they hope to maintain. Participant 9 described her desire to not “perpetuate any use of drugs or alcohol in my life – only because I, too, grew up with it.” This motivation led her to a life-changing training centered on AI/AN teaching. For this participant, the changes and program were so profound, she has used them successfully with youth to intervene on and even prevent drug and alcohol abuse.

Participant 9 described the use of wearable technology to create a community of AI/AN youth engaged in physical activity. She described a sense of community and cultural pride experienced by the youth – collectively sharing barriers to physical activity, alongside opportunities to be physically active.

Engaging in traditional spiritual practices. Many of the participants discussed continuing to reconnect and engage in spiritual practices. Participant 4 described the beauty of her AI/AN community reengaging with traditional and cultural practices. She commented that “even the ground felt good” as she reflected on her experience of participating in a pow-wow. Others talked about engaging themselves in cultural opportunities within their communities and families. Participant 9 stated her family’s commitment to yearly immersion camps that teach each other and youth cultural and spiritual practices.

Engaging in protest was another spiritual act that some participants took part in. Many of them described their obligation to future generations. For example, protesting

the planning of oil pipelines was one way that participants engaged in spirituality.

Participant 3 retold her feelings and thoughts after returning from a protest.

Like, when I went out to Standing Rock. I think some of them were kind of surprised. Not anymore. I think now, they expect me to be a little radical, and a little activist “Oh, yeah, this is . . . This is the kind of stuff she does.”

Engaging future generations. All of the participants talked about their mission to create a positive cultural identity for future generations. They identified the need to continue the integration of culture and traditional teaching within primary and post-secondary education, health care, and in connection to the land.

The utility of new technology was cited by some as helpful for connecting themselves and youth to tribes and resources if they are located in an urban area. Participant 9 commented on her own experience of language:

The tribe has offered online language classes, which makes it accessible for me to live here in Minnesota, and not be around any fluent speakers, but to use technology and practice speaking with somebody, having a conversation. And so, yeah, I think, even though there’s distance and not any fluent speakers here in my area, technology definitely is able to bridge that gap.

Emerging among interview participants was an increasing role of self in determining and renegotiating and asserting identity in relationship to one’s personal (e.g., family) and professional self (e.g., merging Western medicine and Traditional teachings).

Embracing intersectionality. Although AI/AN identity was salient for many of the participants, for some, other identities were equally as important and salient. For instance, several of the participants discussed how the church, and specifically Christianity, was important to their identity. Participant 4 described growing up in a religious family and later becoming ordained as a minister, something she “love[s] to do”. For this participant, work opportunities and mentors engaged her in “old ways” during her time severing the AI/AN community, but she sees the seminary as second career and identity. Others sought out and asserted themselves in communities that embraced intersectional and liminal identities. Participant 3 described their involvement in a mixed race group. “I’m also part of a group here called Midwest Mixed, like mixed race dialogues, and stuff. Like, there is no place where I’m the norm, you know”?

Discussion

The *theory of asserting identity* developed from this study by the researcher describes the emergence of self and professional identity through one’s relationship(s) to elders, peers, and community. The present findings extend AI/AN epistemological and ontological beliefs regarding identity emerging through, and being understood in, relationship to others through the knowledge and wisdom of interviewees. Further, the *theory of asserting identity* expands on key questions posed by critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and tribal critical theory (Brayboy, 2005) that highlight areas of ambivalence and resolution regarding one’s identity as an AI/AN professional in an urban context.

The stories of study participants explicate the impact of historical trauma on their ability to self-identity as AI/AN. They highlight the ongoing effects of this trauma through their loss of Native languages, geo-identity, and traditions, alongside structures and institutions that limited participants' ability for self-determination and flexibility of identity. These stories also speak to how participants navigated and asserted identities that counteracted the impact of colonization and racism on their own ability to self-identify and navigate what is perceived as conflicting epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies.

These findings are consistent with existing literature that outlines the ongoing effects of historical trauma on identity development (Dvorakova, 2017). Dvorakova (2018) indicates that colonized knowledge and meaning associated with marginalized people presume identity crises, confusion, and stress from navigating identities from those of the oppressed to those of the oppressor. Similarly, in this case, the participants indicated many of these initial stressors from being born to mixed-race parents, implications of blood quantum and tribal status, loss of language, and loss of geo-political identity as influential in their identity development and their ability to navigate complex landscapes. These findings complement Dvorakova's (2018) findings regarding interaction of socio-cultural dynamics and ethno-racial identity to that of someone who is knowledgeable and able to navigate often discrepant ethno-racial and cultural knowledge systems.

Participants' desires to address the residual impact(s) of historical trauma on their community were often cited as motivation to pursue post-secondary education. However,

colleges and universities also served as source of ambivalence in relationship to the development of an AI/AN identity. These findings extend the work of others (e.g., Gone & Trimble, 2012; Suarez-Krabbe, 2012; Writer, 2008) who outline the history and continued assimilative practices and reward systems of post-secondary institutions. They suggest ontologies and epistemologies of Western university settings as conflictual; they make invisible the identities of marginalized groups during a significant stage of personality development.

Post-secondary institutions and environments are also a place where individuals seek to live out identities often tied to one's culture, history, and identity. For example, the desire to become an AI/AN identified professional addressing health and well-being within the AI/AN community exemplifies the interaction between identity and profession. Participants in this study described the desire to pursue and obtain education relevant to their identities as Native people. Common in the participants' experience was (is) the desire for self-identification – for specificity within that AI/AN identity. The findings suggest that to create opportunities to counteract anti-essentialism, the belief that all oppressed groups have something in common might, at times, be a barrier to self-identification (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012).

Peers and mentors were a significant factor in the participants' identity development. Peers and mentors who themselves identified as AI/AN or aligned with AI/AN values provided models of possible selves outside of those constrained by colonization. The participants' experiences mirrors that of Coates (2015), who recounted meeting peers of similar racial backgrounds who defied his constrained ideas of identity.

He described the environment as showing him profound possibilities of identities outside of the narratives that he and society had prescribed for himself. For study participants, role models in the form of peers and mentors during their time in post-secondary education provided new narratives that allowed them to counter anti-essentialism – defined as a society’s desire to homogenize diverse groups of people (Delgado & Stefaniec, 2012).

Expanding on the work of Blackstock (2011) and Cross et al. (2011), communities were also instrumental in guiding and shaping participants’ identity within AI/AN cultures. Both scholars outline the importance of community actualization (i.e., the process of identity development and well-being based on reciprocal relationships between the community and oneself) and working for one’s community rather than oneself (Moorehead, Gone, & December, 2015). Emerging findings demonstrated the ways that urban communities can create barriers and provide support for the emerging identities of the participants.

The *theory of asserting identity* also suggests a constitutive nature of politics, community, and identity. The impact of national politics and AI/AN identity has always been significant, given the federal government’s role in historical trauma experienced by AI/ANs. For instance, governmental recognition as a federally recognized tribe has shaped an individual’s ability to be recognized as AI/AN by those outside of AI/AN sovereign nations. Similarly, Brayboy’s (2005) *tribal critical theory* calls for the ability for tribes to obtain tribal sovereignty in the face of governmental and educational policies. Study participants described the varying ways that politics have shaped their

identity and ability to participate civically in their local governments. As an illustration, one participant described the challenges of finding identity within the American Indian Movement of the 1960s and the expectation of being an “angry Indian” was based in part by the movement and anger towards the federal government. Likewise, a younger participant described how current politics allowed her to engage in spirituality through her protest of government-supported pipelines. Understanding how self-identification vis-a-vis our current geopolitical landscape is of utmost importance as the current administration’s policies support the degradation of Indigenous lands in favor of capitalistic gains. Integrating understandings of civic engagement and identity is supported by existing identity theories that promote the meaning attached to identity as impacting and guiding civic and political action (Bouché, 2018).

Initial challenges in identity development evident in adolescence and throughout the education and advancement of their professions was reconciled by many of the participants. For instance, participants described their ability to navigate both traditional AI/AN perspectives and those considered Westernized as professionals in urban settings. An advantage of navigating multiple narratives is the ability to be pluriversal in their identities and in the participants’ ability to navigate epistemological and ontological contexts.

The present findings also extend conceptualizations of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and its adaptation by Fish and Syed (2018) for Native Americans in higher education. The emerging theory supports previous findings that identity development of study

participants is shaped by systems and factors that are more proximal (e.g., persons, objects, symbols) and those that are more distal macro-level factors (e.g., beliefs, ideologies, customs). Additionally, Fish and Syed (2018) suggested that chronosystems should be primary in our understanding of bioecological systems, through greater understanding of historical trauma and loss across time. This emerging theory supports how identity development can be understood through both perspectives by recognizing the bidirectional influence between individuals and larger systems understood through a lens of historical loss and trauma and the desires of study participants to impact future generations.

Strengths and Limitations

A strength of the current study is the use of reflexivity throughout the research process. Reflexivity addresses methodological concerns outlined by Smith (2012) in *Decolonizing Methodologies* that suggest that the researcher cannot separate oneself from one's research topic, and expands on Charmaz's (2014) understanding of constructivist thought. The use of reflection (memoing) throughout data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings supports both the emic insider (someone who identifies as AI/AN) and etic (graduate student) perspectives as a researcher, and situates the research in ways that are useful, resonant, and place-based for participants. These perspectives allow for the research findings to be readily useable and culturally relevant to the community. Additionally, this methodological approach is centered on mutuality, which acknowledges and values the co-creation of data and the desire that findings be mutually beneficial for the participants and researcher.

A limitation of the current research is the small sample size of interviewees. Constructivist grounded theory development calls for theoretical sampling, sufficiency, and sorting of ideas as new information emerges. A greater number of interviewees could lead to greater clarity of analytic categories and sorting of data, leading to greater sensitivity and nuance within the emergent theory. Additionally, the current study used a research methodology (i.e., constructivist grounded theory) legitimized and reified through Western Euro-centric means (e.g., publications). Brayboy (2006) indicates that epistemological differences in the theory conceptualization between Westernized and AI/AN perspectives whereby communities' stories and narratives are not typically seen as theories. The current research seeks to bring forth emerging meaning and knowledge from participants' stories in a way that is in line with Brayboy's (2006) conceptualization of theory.

Implications

The *theory of asserting identity* is useful for those looking to support AI/AN professionals who work in urban areas. Their stories implicate factors and potential pathways that support AI/AN identity development and intersect with important developmental and transitional benchmarks. The emergent theory outlines the importance of seeking balance (e.g., Medicine Wheel) in shaping individuals' identity in relationship to their peers, family, profession, and community. The current theory offers support for the inclusion of services in education settings and career infrastructures that support self-identification. Greater awareness and support of these processes may create innovative pathways to better address health disparities that impact AIs/ANs in urban areas.

Relational therapists (e.g., couple and family therapists / CFTs) are uniquely situated to support identity development from a social constructivist lens. A hallmark of CFT training is the identification and inclusion of systems thinking and meaning making that impact the ways we think, feel, and behave within cultural, economic, relational, and social contexts. Greater understandings of these contexts, alongside meaning and action derived from their interpretation, has implications to increasing the number of AI/AN professionals and support of these professionals throughout their educational and professional development.

McGoldrick and Hardy (2019) suggest that family therapy is limited in its usefulness to a multicultural society because, as a field, it has largely ignored multiculturalism within its models, training, and practice. One suggestion that they propose for family therapists is the intentional creation of space(s) (e.g., affinity groups, community based groups) for group connection and uniqueness by increasing our systemic perspectives to include nuance and understanding regarding the flexibility of identity that allows for greater inclusion. The implications of this assertion are to attend to processes and structures that can create greater opportunities for individuals to feel balanced and at home with their chosen identity.

Tenets of social constructivism suggest that interactions between people and environments create and support identities (Gergen, 2001). Doherty (1997) suggests intentionality as an antidote to entropy – the loss of cohesion and connection that can happen in modern societies. In higher education and in the work force, the introduction of intentional, repeated, and significant ceremonies and rituals to support liminal identities

could provide support for AI/AN professionals. Narrative therapy, a social constructivist approach to psychotherapy, recognizes the importance of supporting identity through definitional ceremonies. White (2007) suggests that definitional ceremonies and rituals provide opportunities to develop rich stories about ourselves that support our unique identities compared to our contemporary cultures that tend to marginalize our identities or suggest that identity is found through introspection. Both authors present ideas that support a main tenet of critical race theory (Stefanic & Delgado, 2013) and tribal critical theory (Brayboy, 2005) that outline the importance of retelling of narratives of identity and structures that support these retellings in ways that are repeated, coordinated, and significant.

Greater inclusion of cultural understandings of the Medicine Wheel into supports for education and career recruitment and retention is also imperative. Many of the participants discussed imbalances (i.e., physical, mental, mind, and spiritual) that were exacerbated throughout their education and career. For instance, several discussed the challenges of moving to a new urban area for their education or their job. However, they also offered knowledge regarding opportunities to create balance and support identity. One participant discussed their involvement and connection to spiritual when they were involved in protest over government funding of a proposed oil pipeline. Creating opportunities for connection to community is a necessary process for those involved in higher education and career retention of AI/ANs.

Moorehead, Gone, and December (2015) indicate the importance of working for one's community over Euro-centric ideas of individuality prevalent in many educational

contexts. Currently, many educational models support individuality through teaching, supervision, and curricula that values Euro-centric and individualistic ideas.

McGoldrick et al. (1999) has indicated the need for family therapy to increasingly incorporate literature and perspectives from outside the field of family therapy to meet the demands and needs of diverse family practitioners. Increasing support for AI/AN students in navigating these complex systems is needed so as to increase the number of AI/ANs within the family therapy field.

Conclusion

Many models of identity development and self-actualization focus on the relationship between individuals and their academic/professional success, which are based on Western ideas of achievement. For AI/ANs, these colonized values conflict with desires for identification within relationships, communities, context. More attention should be paid to the relationships between individuals and their pasts, their senses of identity, and their communities. For AIs/ANs, opportunities are missed to create better balance and relationships between oneself and the ability to self-define and determine Native identity. Expanding opportunities for reflective and purposive identity development is significant given the many factors that shape identity. Creating intentional, repeatable, and significant opportunities in educational and workplaces to support AI/ANs may help to recruit and retain the number of AI/AN professionals serving AI/AN people.

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Appendix A: Dissertation Proposal

Race, Racism, and Power:
An examination of American Indian and Alaskan Natives' experiences
addressing Health Disparities in Urban-Dwelling Communities

A Dissertation Proposal
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

Noah Gagner, M.A., M.Ed.

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN FAMILY SOCIAL SCIENCE

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Specific Aim

American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) people are committed to addressing the negative consequences of oppression and subjugation that they have endured since the 15th century. Contemporary efforts to address these disparities target multiple barriers, including poor access to health care, limited or no insurance, lack of culturally competent providers, and distrust of healthcare services (Espey et al., 2014). Greater awareness, understanding, and determination for action is warranted for AI/AN professionals working in these communities.

The aim of this proposed research is to understand how AI/AN professionals work with AI/AN families and children in a society wherein they have been oppressed and subjugated. Using critical race theory as a guide, my pilot investigation will engage AI/AN professionals in a qualitative investigation to understand how race, racism, and power impacts AI/AN professionals and the work they do. More specifically, this theory will guide inquiry into injustices faced by the community and AI/AN professionals vis-a-vis their personal development, navigation of larger social-cultural-political structures and institutions, and accumulated wisdom regarding how to address health disparities within an urban AI/AN community.

These efforts will be conducted in a manner that advances social justice, defined here as a way to use critical consciousness to identify, deconstruct, and challenge – through action – oppressive conditions (Freire, 1970). To advance tenets of social justice, interviews will be conducted with the goal of raising consciousness about oppressive systems by identifying implicit assumptions and meanings, which will lead to actions that address health disparities. Further, interview processes will illuminate how health and education professionals have shaped larger systems through idealist and realist approaches.

Intensive interviews will be conducted with 10-15 AI/AN health professionals who identify as AI/AN and work with urban-dwelling AI/AN children and families. Interviews will serve to illuminate and develop theory regarding AI/AN professionals' process(es) for analyzing, creating meaning, and engaging in social justice action in their work. Key questions will target the following (see Appendix for an outline of all questions and possible-probes):

- 1) Historical-cultural-political antecedents that lead to need of current role;
- 2) How one identifies his/her role within the context of urban-dwelling AI/AN communities;
- 3) Identification of how social and institutional structures shape meaning, action, and identity;
- 4) Wisdom and advice to address disparities experienced by AI/AN children and families.

Data will be analyzed according to constructivist grounded theory. This is a methodological approach that utilizes relativity and subjectivity in the co-creation of experience, meaning, and identity – and leads to emerging theories (Charmaz, 2014). Data will also be scrutinized for credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (which represent key components in the evaluation and understanding of grounded theory).

Inquiry and analysis of participants' responses will elicit important themes and the beginning of an emergent theory regarding how AI/AN professionals create meaning and practice within an urban-dwelling community. These efforts will yield greater understandings regarding social processes, barriers, and actions that AIs/ANs have engaged in to address disparities in physical and mental health. This research will both illuminate the current knowledge and be used to inform further inquiry and practice.

Background and Significance

Numbering 5.2 million, AI/ANs have suffered over 400 years of injustices (Gone, 2007). Genocide, forced removal from land, assimilation, and boarding schools – among other factors – have led to unresolved historical trauma and a myriad of associated poor mental- and physical- health outcomes (Epey et al., 2014; Sarche & Spicer, 2008). These sequelae are evident in significant disparities across the life course for AIs/ANs and their families compared to other ethnic and racial groups, spanning across physical (e.g., diabetes, obesity, lung cancer, infant mortality), mental health (e.g., anxiety, alcohol misuse, suicide, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder), educational (e.g., drop-out and graduation rates), and psychosocial (e.g., violent victimization, exposure to domestic violence) domains (Brave Heart, 2016; Gone & Trimble, 2012; Warne & Lajimodiere, 2015).

Understanding the ancillary effects of these traumas and intervening through systemic approaches that are both culturally situated and community supported is the ethos of those committed to reclaiming a healthy community (Gone 2012; King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009; Walters, 2002). For generations of AIs/ANs, the Medicine Wheel (see Figure 1) has come to represent a model for health and healing through symbolizing central tenets of well-being and cycles of life. For many of the Midwest tribes, the four quadrants of the circle represent an interdependent relationship between physical (i.e., body), mental (i.e.,

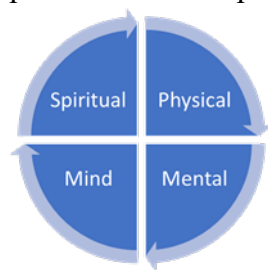


Figure 1: Medicine Wheel

emotion), educational (i.e., mind), and spiritual (i.e., spirit) facets of health. Imbalance, through disconnection or disruption in any one of these domains, negatively impacts the others. Understanding the importance of the Medicine Wheel to the health of AI/AN people provides context for describing how disconnections from these central aspects have led to disparities in areas of physical (e.g., life expectancy, diabetes, and liver disease), emotional (e.g., mental health, drug

use and abuse), intellectual (e.g., education, job opportunities), and spiritual (e.g., faith practices, loss of sacred land) health.

Historical Trauma's Impact on Physical Health

Forced relocation and separation from land and resources has significantly contributed to health disparities in AIs/ANs. Loss of traditional foods (connected with lost land), disconnection from preparation and preservation, and introduction to commodity goods on reservations has exacerbated these disparities. For example, Gurney, Caniglia, Mix, and Baum (2015) state that foods and diets were healthy and prosperous pre-contact,

however, contact and subsequent subjugation and relocation catalyzed AI/ANs' high consumption of low quality and nutritionally deficient foods. Further, food insecurity brought on by social and economic factors negatively impacts the availability of nutritious food sources for urban-dwelling AI/ANs.

Lack of food access and availability is a significant factor in disparities of chronic diseases and illnesses of AI/AN people compared to non-AI/AN peers. For instance, AI/ANs have a life expectancy that is 5.5 years shorter than the non-AI/AN peers. The mortality rate AI/AN adults from Type 2 diabetes, for example, is 3.2 times higher than their non-AI/AN peers (Indian Health Service [IHS], 2018). Likewise, AI/ANs have a 4.6 higher mortality rate from chronic liver disease and cirrhosis than the non-Native peers (IHS, 2018).

An even larger barrier in increase the physical well-being of AI/AN people is in health care access. For AI/ANs, under-insurance and no insurance, lack of culturally competent care, and lack of AI/AN health related providers present barriers to AI/AN individuals seeking help (Gone, 2007; Sequist, 2007, 2011). To effectively address current disparities in physical health, calls from AI/AN communities, elders, and health professionals seek to increase the number of AI/AN professionals in health care, recognize culturally situated ideas of well-being, and promote tribal autonomy and sovereignty.

Historical Trauma's Impact on Mental Health

According to Chandler and Lalonde (1998), oppressed cultures struggle to find identity because of fractures in cultural continuity. A fractured past through settler colonization and current systems of White supremacy limit what one sees possible for identity in the present and the future. More specifically, disconnection from tribal land, loss of spiritual traditions and practices, sovereignty, and the ability to be self-defined as AI/AN, rather than through racialized terms, challenges one's ability to find community and identity. Gone (2007) exemplifies this sentiment through a tribal elder who states: "If you don't know your own true oral history, your true oral traditions and customs and where you come from, and what's supposed to be important, you're going to feel empty" (p. 93).

These challenges are thought to contribute to high rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicide among AI/AN populations (Gone, 2007; King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009). Particularly alarming are the high rates of depression among AI/AN youth; they maintain the highest rate of lifetime diagnosed and self-reported prevalence rates compared to any other ethnic/racial group (APA, 2017). Further, among youth, AI/AN suicide is two to four times the rate of their non-AI/AN peers age 10-24 years old (National Center for Health Statistics, 2011 [NCHS], 2011). Causes driving these disparities focus on the intergenerational impact of loss of cultural continuity, community, and connectedness.

Wexler and Gone (2012) underscore the shortcomings of Western medicine in failing to address mental health in ways that are congruent with AI/AN cultures and contexts. For instance, they state that suicide is often treated in ways that separate AI/AN people from their culture and understandings of suffering. These thoughts are congruent with other scholars who see the need for systems to better understand the how culture, community,

and social relationships can be better included in prevention and intervention within mental health (Gone, 2007; King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009; Roh et al., 2014).

Historical Trauma's Impact on Education

A history of genocide, warfare, and forced relocation through the Indian Removal Act of 1830 led to United States policies focused on assimilation of AI/AN people. The aim of such policies was to assimilate AIs/ANs into settler life through education and land allotment (Glenn, 2015). Education was believed to be a way for settlers to “Americanize” a group of people they believed were inferior based on ideologies of religion and economic prosperity. As a result, a number of Christian domination boarding schools were funded by the federal government. Boarding schools often removed children from their families and communities in an effort to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Pratt, 1973, p. 260). Currently, scholars believe the education system continues to perpetuate this myth of European American values through the invisibility of AI/AN beliefs and values.

An education system that continues to be based in European American values is a factor in higher education that scholars point to as contributing to barriers in recruitment, retention, and graduation of AI/AN students (Fish et al., 2017). Among undergraduate students, AIs/ANs remain the most underrepresented in undergraduate and graduate enrollment (.5% & .4% respectively; Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2016), returning for second year (43%; Fish & Syed, 2008), and bachelor graduation rates of (14%; Chain et al., 2017). Based on our Western medical model and methods of reimbursement for health care, limited numbers of credentialed AI/AN health professionals exacerbate challenges to AI/AN individuals. For instance, lack of trust in Western medicine and ability to receive culturally competent care are common barriers of AIs/ANs. Understanding how our current educational system presents barriers and support for AI/AN student matriculation through undergraduate and graduate programs is imperative and a goal of the current research.

Historical Trauma's Impact on Spiritual Health

Doctrines of religious Manifest Destiny and Norman Yoke economics that promoted rights to land and efforts to assimilate AI/AN people led to the loss of land through broken treaties, forced removal, land allotment, termination of tribes' federal status, and acts of Congress (e.g., Dawes Act and Indian Relocation Act of 1956; Brayboy, 2005; Glenn, 2017). Because of land's significance for AI/AN sacred and spiritual practices, connections with ancestors, tribal sovereignty, and tribal autonomy, the results of these actions have led to significant disconnections from identity and resources central to AI/AN health and well-being (Brayboy, 2005; Gurney, Schaefer, Mix, & Baum, 2015).

Loss of land also exacerbated the loss of spirituality as settler colonialism was interested in replacing AI/AN spiritual practice(s) with forms of Christianity. AI/AN spirituality was deemed less-than through terms like “pagan”, a derogatory term meant to denote less than or subordinate to Christian beliefs, practices, and artifacts (Writer, 2008, p. 6). Further, federal government legislation and enforcement, over an 80-year time span, removed access of AI/AN people from sacred sites, banned ceremonies, and outlawed use of

religious objects. These policies continue to impact AI/AN through loss of access to sacred sites and symbols (Zotigh, 2018).

There remains a strong interest from the AI/AN population to engage in traditional spiritual practices despite modern barriers. Hartmann and Gone (2012) suggest that urbanization presents challenges to the now majority of AI/sANs who live outside of the reservation and away from sacred land. Additionally, they suggest that modern barriers like lack of transportation and time to participate in traditional practices negatively impact the well-being of AI/AN people. Modern barriers, such as lack of time represent the interdependence of spirituality with factors with other factors on the Medicine Wheel.

Physical, mental, and educational pursuits are inextricable from spirituality. Several authors posit that spirituality cannot be separated from these other pursuits if interventions to effectively address disparities are going to be effective (Gone, 2007; Gone et al., 2017; Moghaddam, Momper, & Fong, 2015). They point out current disparities in well-being are catalyzed through interventions that subjugate cultural and community cohesion, important aspects of AIAN identity (Gone et al., 2017). Increased engagement in spirituality practices through existing interventions may increase the utilization and retention of AIAN people in current health practices.

“The whole is greater than the sum of the parts”

There are many barriers facing those addressing historical trauma and the physical, mental, educational, and spiritual imbalances with the AI/AN community (Gone & Trimble, 2012). Within larger systems, power differentials between professionals and the lay community, limited or under-developed resources for care (e.g., inadequate or no health care insurance), and underfunding for AI/AN-specific programming limit the effectiveness of interventions. Similarly, monolithic understandings of established truths and general lack of theories and interventions particular to AIs/ANs create a number of barriers to effectively preventing and intervening on issues related to the health of the community. The representation and inclusion of diverse American Indian voices through collaborative community- and culturally- focused scholarship and approaches have been put forth as necessary to effectively address these disparities (Donovan et al., 2015; Sequist, 2007; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

Supporting, promoting, and including more diverse voices into and alongside those in the helping professions might more fully address health disparities (Phillips & Malone, 2014). However, this vision can be challenging given the historical, structural, and institutional artifacts that privilege individualistic and Westernized ideas of practice. More specifically, the message is that our current political/cultural/social climate can limit the ability for professionals to effectively facilitate and/or intervene on behalf of – or in collaboration with – AIs/ANs as they actively face policies, institutions, structures, and community pressures that limit diversity in professional education programs and leadership and decrease the recruitment and retention of professionals in helping roles. Therefore, it is important to understand how AI/AN professionals understand, operate, and ultimately address societal injustices so that greater capacity and resources can be used to address and minimize the observed disparities in health outcomes.

Method

Efforts in participant recruitment, interviews, and data analysis within this pilot project will be used to create a mid-level theory that is grounded within AI/AN professionals' experiences and knowledge of addressing disparities of health within the AI/AN community.

Sample. Participants will include helping professionals representing four AI/AN serving organizations within an urban area in the Upper Midwest. They include those working within non-profits, school systems, and American Indian specific organizations who collectively serve urban-dwelling youth, adults, and families. They are members of an existing research collaborative who identify as insiders with the community (i.e., American Indian heritage). Intensive interviews will be conducted with 10-15 members of this collaborative until theoretical plausibility is reached – however, because this study is a pilot investigation, theoretical plausibility might not be met. Theoretical plausibility refers the privileging participants' statements over the need for accuracy, understanding that accuracy is a social construction (Charmaz, 2014). Inclusion criteria for participation are: (a) identify as American Indian / Alaska Native; (b) 18 years of age or older; and (c) history of working in the AI/AN community in a professional helping capacity for more than 5 years. IRB approval will be secured before proceeding with formal recruitment and conduct of interviews.

Interview protocol. Intensive interviews in constructivist grounded theory will be conducted to understand the perspectives, meanings, and experiences of AI/AN helping professionals. The interview protocol will permit participants to reflect on targeted topics in a manner that facilitates dialogical space for new insights and viewpoints to emerge (Charmaz, 2014).

Accordingly, the constructivist grounded theory approach calls for interviews to elicit the following processes: (a) mutuality (e.g., the interview process elicits new ways of understanding and meaning that further build the interviewee preferred identity and lead to emergent questions for the interviewer; (b) exploration (e.g., emergent questions are pursued based on the piqued interests and emotional states of the interviewee that suggest further inquiry); (c) emergent understandings (e.g., new meaning and understanding results from the interview); (d) legitimization of identity (e.g., multiple identities and preferred identities are explored), and validation of experience (e.g., the participants are allowed to give their own value statement to their experiences). An example of an emergent question would be “Can you tell me if, and how, this experience has changed how you see yourself?” (see Appendix B).

Intensive interviewing is a distinct from other types of interviewing insofar as it is less focused on gathering facts (i.e., informational interviewing) or uncovering and exposing hidden actions (i.e., investigative interviewing). Instead, it aims to gather perspectives and meaning in the moment from interviewees regarding a specific topic (Harkess & Warren, 1993). Further, intensive interviewing allows for the conceptualizing of implicit and explicit meaning, knowledge, perspectives, and wisdom to emerge based on guiding

questions and emerging questions that arise during the interview (Charmaz, 2014; Hochschild, 2009).

Intensive interviewing is also a response to other forms of interviewing and disciplines that denounce subjectivity, emotion, and connection within the interview process. The intensive interview process is described as one sided, as the interviewees guide the interview inquiry vs. preconceived questions and ideas on the part of the researcher. Likewise, attention to emotion and non-verbal cues are suggested as openings for further questions and inquiry and not barriers that impede time and structure, for example (Ezzy, 2010). These processes stand in-contrast to other interview processes wherein interviewees are guided by the modernist assumptions of objectivity and validity of the interview process and questions (Harkess & Warren, 1993).

These interviews will be accomplished at various community settings which function to serve AI/AN families. Interviews will take approximately 60 to 120 minutes to complete, but will allow for greater time and/or follow-up on emerging themes and theoretical sampling.

Data Analysis Plan

An important part of constructivist grounded theory analysis is the iterative process of data gathering, transcribing (verbatim), coding, and going back to participants to follow-up on areas of theoretical interest. Follow-up interviews, then (if/when/as indicated), will be utilized to ask emerging questions that arise during the transcribing and analyzing process.

Data analysis will take place from the beginning of the interviews and represents an integral part of further interview inquires, data analysis, and follow-up interviews for theoretical sampling. According to Charamaz (2014), grounded theory data analysis consists of many parts presented linearly; however, the process is often iterative, interactive, and ongoing.

Steps advanced will include: An initial line-by-line phase of coding that involves naming each word, line, or segment of data will be conducted first. During this step, it is important to stay close to the words of participants and code actions of the interviewees, as opposed to topics or themes. Additionally, Charmaz (2014) suggests that identifying sensitizing subjects can be a starting point for initiating an analysis, but does not determine its content. In this instance, social justice as a sensitizing subject will be used to identify actions related to ideology, power, privilege, equity, and oppression.

Next, focused codes will be created and used to synthesize, analyze, and conceptualize larger pieces of data. This focused phase of coding taking place through increased scrutiny of data, comparing codes with codes, and reflective practice on the part of researcher. After this, theoretical coding will follow focused coding. During this phase, theoretical codes will be compared and contrasted to identify areas for further theoretical sampling through interviews. Memo writing, which does not represent a singular step, will be used through the entirety of the research and data analysis process to guide further

inquiry, insight, and engage in critical reflectivity. Notes from the memos will be included as part of the final report (e.g., as an appendix and/or supplement).

The final step of data analysis will encompass theoretical sampling, which – through memo-writing, careful analysis of emerging codes, and understanding of “thin areas” – will identify areas for further inquiry through interviews and theoretical abstraction.

Validity Criteria

Important criteria to meet for conducting constructivist grounded theory according to Charmaz (2014; 2017) include: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness of the study. To address credibility, this study will utilize member checks to ensure that I have provided enough evidence of my claims and that members of the AI/AN community also feel this to be true through carefully readings and presentations. Originality will be assessed through conversations with community members and reading of literature across disciplines to situate the text in social and historical terms. Resonance will be addressed through member checks and having additional coders to both situate the analysis within larger social, historical, and political discourse, and to examine deeper insights that are offered. Finally, usefulness will be determined through observing, presenting, and analysis of the application of findings to the AI/AN community. Additionally, I along with other team members will interrogate the research to examine if it sparks further inquiries into other areas of knowledge.

Expected Outcomes

As purposed here, my research seeks to further illuminate and advance social justice within the context of AI/AN professionals working in urban areas. This will be achieved through the following outcomes: First, the research will provide greater understandings about how social, cultural, and historical contexts and interactions have shaped human actions, processes, and meanings relevant to our current understandings of social determinants of health. Second, the research will identify plausible theoretical understandings that give voice to the process of working with children, adults, and families in the AI/AN community. These outcomes will further inform critical inquiry and address injustices attributed to health disparities. Findings will represent a novel contribution to training programs focused on Indigenous health and professionals.

Feasibility

This project is feasible for a number of reasons. First, I have established relationships with many of those in the population in which I am interested in understanding through my clinical work within the American Indian community, my position at a local non-profit focused on culturally based health care for American Indian families, and through my engagement with community-based research to address disparities in health. These relationships are based on respect, mutuality, and understanding of power and positionality. These relationally based ethics will be held at the center of the proposed work. Second, although I am considered Alaskan Native, my position as an Indigenous researcher situates me as someone interested in helping his own people. Third, conducting intensive interviews requires particular skills, practice, and understandings of conducting open-ended, emergent, and decentered (yet influential) interviewing. My

clinical training in narrative therapy, an approach that espouses these same understandings, will allow me to conduct interviews in-line with the aims of constructivist grounded theory. Fourth, my advisor and committee members have significant experience working within and collaborating with Indigenous communities to identify barriers to well-being, engaging in collaborative understandings and interventions, and in honoring work conducted through decolonized practices.

Potential Problems and AlterNative Strategies

There are several potential challenges and problems associated with conducting research within AI/AN communities. First, although I am considered an insider within these communities, there is a longstanding history of exploitation related to University-related research conducted “on”, not “with”, AIs/ANs. I will address this problem through collaborative understandings, methodology, interpretation of findings and dissemination practices. Second, recruitment of participants for interviews may be difficult based on the community’s relationship with research, participants’ busy schedules, or other extraneous factors. I will address this through relationship development, engaging in practices that center relational ethics (e.g., culturally appropriate ways of asking for an elder’s assistance, meeting in locations that are convenient for interviewees). Third, familiarity with participants of this study could beget social desirability and/or responses different from those elicited from an outsider interviewer. While constructivist grounded theory encourages familiarity with one’s participants, the use of reflexive memos, consultation, and conversations with others will be utilized both to promote the collaborative nature of this project, and to ensure that responses are representative of participants’ positions, experiences, and viewpoints.

Timeline

The proposed investigation will be conducted in accord with the following timeline:

Activity	2018										
	J a n	F e b	M a r	A p r	M a y	J u n e	J u l y	A u g	S e p t	O c t	N o v
Background reading and literature review	X										
IRB application preparation and submission		X	X								
Committee proposal meeting		X									
Data collection			X	X	X						
Data analysis			X	X	X	X					
Results write-up			X	X	X	X	X				
First complete draft of dissertation					X	X	X	X			
Second complete draft of dissertation.								X	X	X	
Dissertation submitted to committee										X	
Final dissertation defense											X

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Appendix B: Interview Questions

Demographics: Can you tell me about yourself?

Possible probes:

- What tribe are you enrolled/affiliated with?
- How long have you been in the current role?
- Can you describe the overall mission of the organization you work for?
- Could you describe identities that are important to you (e.g., gender, tribal identity)?

Role: Can you describe your role – or roles – within your organization?

Possible probes:

- Can you describe a typical day (a typical week)?
- Can you tell me how you came into this role?
- Could you describe what motivated you to enter this profession (e.g., social; cultural; political)?
- What about this profession was important for you?
- In what ways does this role align with the identities you mentioned earlier?

Education: How has your education impacted your work with the AI/AN community?

Possible probes:

- Could you describe what parts of your education validated/invalidated your identity as an AI/AN person and community?
 - Can you give examples?
 - Were there particular teachers/mentors that supported this identity?
- What parts of your education contributed to your current profession?
- What aspects of your education acted as barriers?
- With your current knowledge of the educational system, what aspects of education would you improve?
- Currently, are there areas where your education/SES acts as a barrier to your identity as a AI/AN person?

Identity: How does your identity – or identities – impact your work?

Possible probes:

- How do your identities impact your work?
 - What challenges are there because of this identity?
 - What benefits are there because of this identity?
 - Have these changed over time?
 - Can you describe navigating these identities (e.g., double consciousness; professional-personal)?
 - Are there spaces where it is easy/difficult to navigate these identities within your culture?

- Are there other identities you have solidarity with? (e.g., POC, intertribal)
 - In what ways does this support your identity and/or community?

Visibility/Invisibility: How does your personal narrative inform your work?

Possible probes:

- How does the visibility/invisibility of AI/AN people inform your work?
 - How do you bring visibility to AI/AN people in your larger profession?
 - How do you adapt knowledge from outside your culture to the work you do?
 - Can you describe how the invisibility of AI/AN people impacts the people you work with?

Interventions: How does your culture impact your work?

Possible probes:

- How do you incorporate your culture into your professional work?
 - What makes this challenging? What makes this easier?
 - What/who/where is incorporating culture supported?
- Can you describe interventions that you found harmful to your culture?
- Can you describe interventions that have easily been integrated into your culture?
- As you think about challenges to addressing and preventing health disparities, who/what supported you?
- How important is building AI/AN identity in the people you work with?
- Could you describe how your current role supports your identity?

Future: What do you see as possible in terms of addressing health disparities in the future?

Possible probes:

- What policies/regulations/interventions do you think are needed to effectively address disparities?

Wisdom: After having these experiences, what wisdom would you have for an AI/AN entering the profession to address inequities in policies/regulations/interventions/narratives?

Conclusion: Based on our conversation today, what else would add about addressing AI/AN well-being?

Possible probes:

- Based on our conversation is there anything you might do differently regarding your work in the community?

Appendix C: Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Twin Cities Campus

*College of Education and Human Development
Family Social Science*

*290 McNeal Hall
1985 Buford Avenue
Saint Paul, MN 55108
Main office: 612-625-1900*

CONSENT FORM

Race, Racism, and Power: An examination of American Indian and Alaskan Native Professionals' Experience Addressing Health Disparities in Urban-Dwelling Communities

You are invited to participate in a research project that is being conducted by Noah Gagner, MA, M.Ed., a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota (UMN). He is being advised by Tai Mendenhall, Ph.D., LMFT, an associate professor in the Department of Family Social Science at the UMN. The purpose of this project is to understand how American Indian/ Alaskan Native (AI/AN) professionals in St. Paul and Minneapolis have navigated cultural barriers within established institutions and practices to serve the AI/AN community. You were selected as a possible participant for this study because of your identity as AI/AN person and your professional role within the AI/AN community.

We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 60-minute to 90-minute interview. Questions will be asked regarding how culture, racism, and institutions have impacted your professional role and identity with the AI/AN community. Your responses will provide greater understanding and knowledge that will inform future AI/AN education, mentorship, and policy of those who work within AI/AN communities.

Interview Questions:

The following queries represent the specific content / questions that we will cover:

Demographics: Can you tell me about yourself?

Possible probes:

- What tribe are you enrolled/affiliated with?
- How long have you been in the current role?
- Can you describe the overall mission of the organization you work for?
- Could you describe identities that are important to you (e.g., gender, tribal identity)?

Role: Can you describe your role – or roles – within your organization?

Possible probes:

- Can you describe a typical day (a typical week)?

- Can you tell me how you came into this role?
- Could you describe what motivated you to enter this profession (e.g., social; cultural; political)?
- What about this profession was important for you?
- In what ways does this role align with the identities you mentioned earlier?

Education: How has your education impacted your work with the AI/AN community?

Possible probes:

- Could you describe what parts of your education validated/invalidated your identity as an AI/AN person and community?
 - Can you give examples?
 - Were there particular teachers/mentors that supported this identity?
- What parts of your education contributed to your current profession?
- What aspects of your education acted as barriers?
- With your current knowledge of the educational system, what aspects of education would you improve?
- Currently, are there areas where your education/SES acts as a barrier to your identity as a AI/AN person?

Identity: How does your identity – or identities – impact your work?

Possible probes:

- How do your identities impact your work?
 - What challenges are there because of this identity?
 - What benefits are there because of this identity?
 - Have these changed over time?
 - Can you describe navigating these identities (e.g., double consciousness; professional-personal)?
 - Are there spaces where it is easy/difficult to navigate these identities within your culture?
- Are there other identities you have solidarity with? (e.g., POC, intertribal)
 - In what ways does this support your identity and/or community?

Visibility/Invisibility: How does your personal narrative inform your work?

Possible probes:

- How does the visibility/invisibility of AI/AN people inform your work?
 - How do you bring visibility to AI/AN people in your larger profession?
 - How do you adapt knowledge from outside your culture to the work you do?

- Can you describe how the invisibility of AI/AN people impacts the people you work with?

Interventions: How does your culture impact your work?

Possible probes:

- How do you incorporate your culture into your professional work?
 - What makes this challenging? What makes this easier?
 - What/who/where is incorporating culture supported?
- Can you describe interventions that you found harmful to your culture?
- Can you describe interventions that have easily been integrated into your culture?
- As you think about challenges to addressing and preventing health disparities, who/what supported you?
- How important is building AI/AN identity in the people you work with?
- Could you describe how your current role supports your identity?

Future: What do you see as possible in terms of addressing health disparities in the future?

Possible probes:

- What policies/regulations/interventions do you think are needed to effectively address disparities?

Wisdom: After having these experiences, what wisdom would you have for an AI/AN entering the profession to address inequities in policies/regulations/interventions/narratives?

Conclusion: Based on our conversation today, what else would add about addressing AI/AN well-being?

Possible probes:

- Based on our conversation is there anything you might do differently regarding your work in the community?

Risks and Benefits of Participating in the Study:

Participating in any part of this interview process may elicit the disclosure or discussion of personal or sensitive information. Questions about identity, the impact(s) of racism, the often-felt invisibility of AIs/ANs from common discourse, and/or other related topics might be brought up during the interview. These topics may be uncomfortable for you.

While it is our hope that participating in this interview will be generative of new knowledge and understanding, we cannot guarantee that you will directly benefit from being involved with any part of this study.

Confidentiality:

To ensure that we keep your study materials private and confidential, we will use a coded identification system in which you are assigned a unique identification number.

Trained personnel will supervise the conduct and securing of your data, and these processes will be carried out in a private and secure location. No identifying information (e.g., your name) will be placed on any study materials. All data will be securely stored at Noah Gagner's and/or Dr. Mendenhall's private and secure office site.

In any sort of report that we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it easy or possible to identify a research participant.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

You are free to decline participation in the study, in part or whole. If you begin participating, you are free to discontinue participation at any time. Your decision, if you do so, to decline or discontinue taking part in the study will not result in any negative consequence(s) from the researchers or the University of Minnesota.

New Information:

If, during the course of this study, there are any significant new findings discovered which might influence your willingness to continue, the researchers will inform you of those developments.

Contacts and Questions:

The researchers conducting this study are: Noah Gagner, MA, MEd (principal investigator) and his advisor, Tai Mendenhall. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact them at:

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If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I give my permission to participate in the study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Memoing Reflexivity

The examples below outline the reflexive memoing and constant comparison inherent within social constructivist theory and methodology. The following text are examples of the analytic process and discussion that is used to construct tentative analytic categories and emerging relationships between these categories.

Finding Balance

“But you know, thinking critically about things, asking questions, not accepting things. You know, I think that I’ve seen things, even within a larger environment, that have come out since Trump has been in office, that have been promising. I mean, he’s opened up people to start caring.”

Jessica also speaks to the elephant in the room and nobody talks about anything. Family therapy literature speaks to the impact of the family secret on the family. This is a form of trauma experienced by families and a part of its intergenerational impact. The role of conflict is another interesting comment that extends Sierra’s comment on religion limiting confrontation and its lasting impact on the individual.

“I think, that’s why, organizations - and I’m not saying just us. Multiple organizations need to create a safe place that is free of oppression as much as possible within the system that we currently have. But also, is free of vicarious trauma from other Indians.”

This speaks to the information from the text regarding being on the spectrum of traditional vs assimilated. That those on the periphery experience the greatest amount of trauma.

“So, it definitely has been a struggle, but it’s something that is rewarding, when you see a student gain a positive cultural identity through learning their language, and being able to say, “This is who I am,” and to see them carry it out, and begin to identify themselves with their peers, as, “I’m Native,” or even, “I’m Anishinaabe,” or, “I’m Ho Chunk,” and say that with a smile on their face, is awesome.”

One question I began to ask myself was why is language so powerful? Based on Foucault, language is constitutive of experience and that those in power control knowledge and similar those with knowledge have power. Perhaps Native languages are unique wherein they have had less interaction with oppressor languages.

Finding Identity in Context

The struggle to integrate cultures seemed to flow easier for Austin compared to John. What is it about Austin’s profession that makes this process easier? Is this because of his personality and/or his profession (not therapy) and the acceptance of fusion within the food industry.

One question to explore would be the impact of his profession on his personality development. My advisor spoke to how his personality has changed throughout his time at FEDS. How does being a chef impact how you express yourself in a given context? Could this be unique to the profession?

Maybe church is a part of that identity -even with the history - a place that offers community, one that is not always available to those of the AI community. This again speaks to God is Red (maybe) that there are similarities between the religion. It is also important to note that the practice of faith might be generational and that until the 70's the practice of Native religion and teaching was illegal.

Renegotiating Identity

“According to my data, the average Yelp reviewer connotes “authentic” with characteristics such as dirt floors, plastic stools, and other patrons who are non-white when reviewing non-European restaurants. This happens approximately 85 percent of the time. But when talking about cuisines from Europe, the word “authentic” instead gets associated with more positive characteristics”.

Authenticity: Reading this article on authenticity speaks to this research and the title of the paper. What allows us to be authentic? This seems to be what I am addressing - what forces allow us to be authentic, how do we think about authenticity, and what inhibits our authenticity. With Native identity this can be challenging given institutions that have attempted to “kill the Indian, save the man”. This speaks to the self-actualization model of the blackfoot and the role of others. This also speaks to John’s discussion of graduation gowns and what’s considered normal, or authentic. Can I use these interchangeably?

How does time and place impact their identity development? Speaking of Charaz’s explanation of her use of constructivism instead of constructivist. She makes this distinction because others assumed objectivity separate from their places, space, or context.

Start identifying and putting pieces. This might inform follow up conversations that I have with the interviewees. What information do I still need that I don’t have now? Even something that I can send beforehand to the interviewees?

How has Barb’s personality been shaped by her own health as well as the health of others around her. Disposition: would do well as therapist. How stereotypes might impact personalities and the nuances within it. How we perform our personalities. We discussed Barb’s similarities to John in that the perception of not being an angry Indian might have influenced her personality. She speaks later in the interview regarding her health. How might this realization impacted her health and personality.

“And just from traveling around, especially in the community here, people have gotten to know me, gotten to know my style, and just one day, I get a phone call from the Executive Director here at the Indian Center, and asked me to come in to meet.”

Similar to others getting to be known in the community is important. Thinking of the Shrinkrap podcast on healing, the author speaks elders in a community context versus more traditional settings. It was easier to know and understand someone in a more intimate setting compared to the current settings.

Asserting identity

“Yeah. Yeah. You know what? It was very... It was eye-opening, but it was also very spiritual, and it was very - it was an inspirational thing, to go through. I started dancing. I made myself a dress, or a skirt, and then, I would dance at pow-wows. But it helped me to connect with those old ways. Yeah. So, I was learning a lot of things. I learned a lot of things when I moved up here to the Cities”.

McDowell (2015) speak of the term pluriversal world. The ability to hold the tensions inherent in maintaining traditional ways of knowing and doing while being members of the church. This ideas is inherent throughout a number of interviews conducted. One goal would be to conduct further research into this term.

“The choice – self-defined, yeah. That’s the whole point: define your own journey, your own path. Nobody should be - and as for Indian people, there’s so many people trying to control that through welfare, through jobs, through how you parent. Everybody’s controlling that, other than them”.

Perhaps it is the colonization that tells you that you aren’t good enough. Similar to capitalism, we pursue this but we tend to feel as though we aren’t good enough. Academic institutions sometimes don’t allow for touchy and feely thoughts. How do we look at these in a collective way? Is collective and touchy feely synonymous?

Another perspective that seems more explicit in this the path that individuals should follow is defined with the individual at the center as mentioned above.

Appendix E: Positionality

Positionality as a Starting Point

As an African American and Alaskan Native adoptee to two White parents and other adopted siblings, identity has been a fundamental concept in my life. At times, occupying space within different ethnicities, racial, and legal statuses have presented significant challenges based on difference(s) in cultural meaning systems and narratives. To me, there has been a search to define an essential, or true, self. However, this is challenged by the assertion that how one should look, act, feel, and think is confined within a given culture and context. In essence, my ability to find a *true self* became a tireless exercise to find and reconcile narratives that support an idea of a self that had yet to be realized.

In the text entitled *Interracial Couples, Intimacy, and Therapy: Crossing Racial Borders*, Killian (2013) discusses how racial identity is supported by gatekeepers who either support one's identity or become barriers to entry, participation, and recognition as such. As an adopted child, my English language dialect was most similar to those of my White parents, and less like those of my peers who identified mostly as African American. I recount a time in fourth grade when an African American girl wondered aloud about my racial group based on the way that I talked. She rhetorically explained, "You talk like you're White." I wonder about that statement often when I reflect on identity, the peculiarities of identity, and how they are bound within the social, cultural, historical, political, and geographical contexts in which I reside.

My past experiences have led me to opportunities where identity and culture are central to my work as an educator, researcher, and clinician. During my clinical work and

outlined in my reflection article entitled *Common Ground* (Gagner, 2013), published through the Collaborative Health Family Healthcare Association, I discussed the intricacies of working therapeutically in a community that both supported and challenged my sense of identity and community. My desire to work in the American Indian and Alaskan Native community was to find just that: community. However, I found this to be challenging given the social, political, and economic realities of many AI/AN people. My mental health suffered as I tried to reconcile my nostalgic longing for community versus the realities and histories of many AI/AN people living in urban areas. These feelings were similar for my identity as an African American. To (re)claim this identity also meant incurring the realities of African American male life in the United States. My reflections during this time, hiding behind the veil of academia, allowed me a certain objectivity and distance from the pain of these marginalized statuses, but left me feeling alone and isolated. To feel included and to find identity meant to accept the totality of identity, which meant both the tribulations of pain and acceptance.

Throughout my education, the concept of focusing and understanding identity has been omnipresent. An experience as I go back to often is discovering a theoretical and therapeutic orientation to the world that fits within my worldview and gave me language to better understand the world and others around me. In Freedman and Combs (1996), they state “The contrast of different experiences of self brings home the notion that ideas of self, like other constructions, are formed through social interaction within particular cultural contexts. We conclude then, that there is no such thing as an ‘essential’ self” (p. 34). Looking at this text, I wrote the word “wow” to illustrate my feelings at the time. The idea to me was not foreign, but the words gave power to the impact of social

interaction on our conception(s) of self. The words and ideas behind the idea of social construction and narratives indicated to me possibilities of understanding and having self-agency to create a sense of self that had not immediately been clear.

Conversations with elders, faculty, peers, and reading literature centered on power, race, and racism were suggestive to the ways that knowledge and social constructions of identity can impact one's ability to self-identify. Introductions to critical theories and inquires introduced me to critical theorists, who continue to question and deconstruct institutionalized power and identities. It was through these conversations and development of my own theories that texts related to critical race theory (Delgado & Stefania, 2012) and social constructionism became foundational to my research, education, and clinical interests and became a central question to this dissertation.

Critical race theory and tribal critical theory state the importance of engaging in processes and actions that decolonize processes long considered oppressive, like research based out of institutions whose objectives, in part, is assimilation of knowledge and identity. Understanding my position as a researcher, it was (is) important to not replicate these processes.

I often asked myself questions about how I could explore identity while maintaining some distance psychologically. Dr. Wieling and I discussed the possibility of a self-study ethnography for my dissertation, but after some reflection I felt this seemed too risky and vulnerable to dive so deep into myself while being judged in a such a public way. Ultimately, my research questions emerged through reflection and conversations with my advisor, Dr. Mendenhall, who suggested that I ask these questions in a community of people with whom I have established trust. This community would be a

collaborative of AI/ANs professionals who I have known since 2013. As I write this, I still struggle with this identity as someone who has Tlingit heritage, an Alaskan Native tribe located in Southeast Alaska. This tribe is culturally, ethnically, and historically different than the heritages and tribes of the interviewees. In this sense, I am considered an outsider from a different land and people. However, based on similar worldviews, my commitment to this community through my service, and our shared common core values, I am considered to be a part of the community.

This process impacted my understandings of who I was. The more I intended and want to be an insider within AI/AN community, the less I have felt a part of the African American community. During this dissertation, several events in the community highlighted tensions that exist here locally between these two identities. I began to question my ability to be authentic in my identity as a researcher and my identity as an individual. Constructions of society suggested that with one drop I was more than enough to be considered one identity of one – but barely enough quantum of blood to be considered a part of another.

Ultimately, I determined that it was important that I had an established relationship with interviewees based on mutuality and trust. My research question(s) and methods were based on the mutual desire to support others in the AI/AN community, our shared designations as professionals, and that the findings would be mutually beneficial. Therefore, the interviewees were selected from an established group of professionals who are collaboratively addressing physical health disparities in the American Indian populations within an urban area.

The choice of methods to answer the research questions was based on my postmodern and social constructionist orientations grounded in my understanding of identity. Utilizing constructivist grounded theory as a method and approach to the research allowed me to address an important tenet of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefania, 2012): the highlighting of counter-narratives that showcase the knowledge and wisdom of AI/ANs professionals who work in urban contexts. I also understood that my research goals often attempt to answer important questions that I have for myself around identity, belonging, and community. Therefore, it was important to utilize approaches and methods wherein dialogical understandings are valued rather than critique as inadequate or biased.

Positionality in Reflection

On the hypothetical eve of my receiving recognition as a Doctor of Philosophy, I reflect on how my identity changes yet again – how the receiving of a degree embodies many of the things I hope for those who seek out their preferred identity. That this process uplifts the public and social processes that acknowledge and affirm one's preferred identity among several identity choices. An identity I will now attempt to integrate among my other salient identities as I continue to ask the question: "Who am I in relationship to others, and myself?"

When I ask myself who I am in relationship to the AI/AN and Black community, I think back to reading Cornel West's *The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual* (1985) at the beginning of my graduate education. Here West (1985) lays out several dilemmas that the Black intellectuals face throughout their education and professional lives. He states that "[M]ost black intellectuals tend to fall within the two camps created by this predicament:

‘successful’ ones, distant from (and usually condescending toward) the black community, and ‘unsuccessful’ ones, disdainful of the white intellectual world” (West, 1985, p. 13).

This same sentence could have been written by an AI/AN intellectual speaking about their relationship with and within a Euro-centric based institutions.

Reflecting on the meaning of the terms successful and unsuccessful vis-a-vis identity has changed through this dissertation. Often when people hear I am working towards a Ph.D. they follow up with the question “Can I call you ‘doctor?’” to which I sheepishly say “I prefer not to be called ‘doctor’”, perhaps as means for acceptance and reciprocity in the relationship. However small, the implication is of reconciliation and acceptance of this identity, one that is admired by some and scorned by others. Revealed to me through this process is that intentionality and reflection on identity can bring about an identity that integrates and brings forth the ability to proclaim a successful AI/AN and Black intellectual. An individual that uplifts the community through their actions and social position.

A question I might ask differently of participants and their communities, is that of success. What does success as an AI/AN professional look like and how can we be more intentional in addressing these two identities together? For instance, as an educator I will be intentional in creating social processes that acknowledge, reflect, and create opportunities for preferred identities to emerge alongside one’s identity as an academic. How can we be intentional is giving meaning to actions in ways that are significant, repeatable, and intentional throughout the school year.

In the end I acknowledge the importance of seeking balance and asserting identity into the community and public spheres. I have learned through this meaning making

process (i.e., dissertation) the ongoing ways we can become out of balance with preferred identities. Likewise, the intentional ways we can seek balance and authenticity in identity that are supported by our communities. This process has normalized the myriad ways that AI/AN people have felt out of balance and the varying ways that we can seek balance and identity through our actions and communities.