

The Relevance of Cultural Activities in Ethnic Identity Among California Native American Youth

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Abstract—This study analyzed data from a large statewide sample of Native American adolescents throughout California to determine whether participation in cultural practices was associated with stronger ethnic identity. The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) scale was used to measure the ethnic identity of 945 Native American adolescents (416 male, 529 female) aged 13 – 19 across California. Respondents who participated in cultural activities including pow-wows, sweat lodge, drum group and roundhouse dance reported significantly higher Native American ethnic identity than their counterparts who did not take part in cultural activities. The association between cultural activities and ethnic identity was only significant among urban youth and not among reservation youth. Higher grades in school were associated with ethnic identity among females but not among males. Findings from this study show a strong association between cultural activities and traditional practices with tribal enculturation among Native American youth in California. Cultural-based practices to enhance Native identity could be useful to improve mental and behavioral health among Native American youth.

Keywords—academic achievement, cultural activities, enculturation, ethnic identity, Native American traditional practices, Native American youth

Despite the widespread notion that involvement in cultural activities benefits Native American adolescents by strengthening their ethnic identity, no empirical studies have actually evaluated this association. This study analyzed data from a large statewide sample of Native American adolescents throughout California to determine whether participation in cultural practices was associated

with stronger ethnic identity. We also examined whether the association between participation in cultural practices was consistent across genders and between adolescents who lived in urban areas or those who lived on reservations.

California has the highest population of American Indians in the United States according to the 2010 U.S. Census (720,904) which is approximately 2% of the

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state population (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). In California there are 108 federally recognized tribes, with many non-federally recognized tribes as well (U.S. Department of Interior 2011). In addition, a large proportion of Native American residents belong to tribes outside the state, in part due to U.S. Government policy such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs Federal Relocation program (Lobo 2002). American Indians and Alaska Natives in California have elevated rates of binge drinking, number of drinks monthly, and riding in a vehicle with a drinking driver when compared to non-Hispanic Whites (CTEC 2009).

Traditional medicine use has been shown to be strongly associated with cultural affiliation (Buchwald, Beals & Manson 2000). When compared to Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic and other ethnicities, Native American young adults have greater levels of ethnic identity (McNeil, Kee & Zvolensky 1999). A strong sense of ethnic identification may serve as a source of resiliency in Native American youth (Galliher, Jones & Dahl 2011). Ethnic identity has been associated with higher self-esteem in Native American adolescents (Jones & Galliher 2007; Pittinger 1998). Therefore, it is widely believed that cultural interventions and the ability to integrate cultural knowledge are vital in alleviating social and health problems including substance abuse in Native American communities (Weaver 1999).

CULTURAL PRACTICES

Pow-wows are community social gatherings that include traditional activities, such as native dance and song. It is also a celebration of tribal customs and cultural connectedness. Pow-wows begin by way of a Grand Entry with all dancers participating in honor of the event. A master of ceremony is the voice of the pow-wow to keep the singers, dancers, drum rotation, and general public informed. Different styles of dancing with traditional regalia are accompanied by drum and native songs. Traditional and contemporary foods are provided or sold along with the event. Commercial vendors and information/outreach booths often accompany pow-wows, usually on the outskirts of the central dancing area (Wright et al. 2011).

The sweat lodge ceremony is a traditional purification ceremony that incorporates traditional singing, prayer, counseling, and sharing similar to a talking circle. It takes place in an enclosed space (lodge) with heated rocks, heat, and steam (Mails 1978). Tribes may vary to integrate their own customs, philosophies and traditional use of medicines during the facilitation of the ceremony (Wright et al. 2011). Sweat lodge is widely considered to be more than a cultural activity, but also as a traditional medicine practice.

Drumming groups are accompanied by native singing of traditional songs and intertwined with dancers at pow-wows or other cultural based tribal events. Roundhouse is a large ceremonial house where American Indian

people gather together for ceremonial dances, singing and prayer (Bibby 1993).

METHODS

Survey Procedure

In 2008, survey data were collected at 49 sites in rural and urban areas of Northern, Central, and Southern California. To obtain a sample of at least 1,000 Native American adolescents, data were collected in three primary settings: (1) high schools where at least 90% of the students were Native American ($n = 6$); (2) Native American youth programs such as after school cultural enrichment and tutoring programs ($n = 22$); and (3) cultural events attended by Native American families such as pow-wows ($n = 21$). These data collection sites were identified by a six-member Advisory Committee that included Native American cultural and tobacco control experts from Northern, Central, and Southern California.

Data collection was administered by the program manager, project assistant and trained data collectors. The staff attempted to recruit all Native American adolescents who were 13 to 19 years of age and were California residents at each data collection site. After verifying eligibility (self-identification as American Indian, Native American or Alaska Native, 13 to 19 years of age, and California resident), the data collectors explained the purpose of the study, that it was an opportunity to share their opinions and feelings, and that their responses were completely anonymous, before obtaining the adolescents' written assent. If teachers, coordinators, directors, or parents were present, they were instructed to give the adolescents' privacy to maintain confidentiality. The paper and pencil self-administered survey took approximately 30 to 40 minutes for each participant to complete. Upon completion of the survey, each student received an incentive worth \$6. Additionally, organizations who agreed to have a data collection at their site, received a \$100 gift card to purchase supplies for their program or school. The University of Southern California Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this research study. Because the survey was completely anonymous, the IRB approved a waiver of written consent.

Study Participants

There were 1,265 completed surveys. Of those, 159 were excluded because they did not self-identify as American Indian, Native American or Alaska Native on the survey. Another 131 were removed because they did not report living on either a reservation or an urban area. Twenty participants were excluded because they reported out-of-state zip codes. Birth date, gender, and tribe(s) of all participants were compared to determine any replication. Based on the comparisons, 10 participants were removed because they completed the survey twice (e.g., the same student could have participated at school and then

participated again at a community event). The remaining 945 (74.7%) respondents were included in the analyses. Of those, 529 were female and 416 male.

Measures

Dependent variables. Ethnic identity was assessed using the 12-item Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney 1992). Items were rated on a four-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree through 4 = strongly agree, so that high scores indicate strong ethnic identity. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.93.

Independent variables. Participants were asked if they had ever participated in pow-wows, a sweat lodge, a drum groups, and/or roundhouse. Answer options were "yes" or "no." Although the Cronbach's alpha of this scale was low (.49), an exploratory factor analysis indicated that all of the items loaded on a single factor. The cultural activities score was the sum of these items, i.e., the number of events that the respondents had ever attended.

Live in urban area. To stratify by those who live in an urban area of California, self-reported zip codes of participants were used. If the zip code had a population density of more than 1,000 (based on U.S. Census Bureau definition), it was coded as urban.

Live on a reservation. To stratify by those who live on a reservation in California, participants were asked, "Where do you live most of the time?" The response options were, "on a reservation" and "not on a reservation." Answer options were cross referenced with reported zip code to verify that the respondent's zip code was truly on a reservation.

Covariates

Covariates included age, gender, grades in school, and socioeconomic status (SES). Age was coded in years. Gender was recoded to 0 = females and 1 = males. Grades in school were self-reported and coded mostly A's, mostly A's and B's, mostly B's, mostly B's and C's, mostly C's, mostly C's and D's, mostly D's, and mostly D's and F's. SES was created from two questions, "How many people live in the home where you spent most of your time (including you)?" and "How many rooms does your house or apartment have (excluding kitchen and bathroom)?" SES was calculated by dividing the number of rooms in the home by the number of people living in the home. This "overcrowding index" is strongly correlated with SES (Myers Baer & Choi 1996); thus, higher scores indicated higher SES.

Data Analysis

Chi-square and t-tests were conducted to determine significant gender and regional (urban vs. reservation) differences in demographics, cultural activities, and ethnic identity. Linear regression was used to examine the associations between participation in cultural activities and

ethnic identity. Standardized betas were calculated and reported statistically significant when p -values < 0.05 . Interaction effects were also tested to examine gender and regional differences in the relationship between participation in cultural activities and ethnic identity. To explore the significant interactions in detail, the sample was stratified by gender and by region, and the associations between cultural activities and ethnic identity were analyzed separately. When regression analysis was conducted, 48 respondents had missing data on one or more variables in the model. All analyses were conducted with the Statistical Analysis System software (9.1 version; SAS Institute Inc. 2006).

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Sample

The average age was 15.5 years, and there were more females (56%) than males. Slightly over one-half of the participants (57%) lived in urban areas. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analyses, stratified by urban vs. reservation. The reservation youth in this sample were slightly younger than the urban youth and had a higher socioeconomic status than urban youth. No other variables showed significant differences between reservation and urban youth.

Associations Between Cultural Activities and Identity

Table 2 shows the standardized betas for the overall model ($n = 897$). Participation in cultural activities ($p < .0001$), higher grades ($p = .007$), and being female ($p < .001$) were significantly associated with higher ethnic identity. Age, region, and SES were not significantly associated with ethnic identity.

Interactions

To investigate whether gender, age, and region (urban and reservation) moderated the relationship between cultural activities and ethnic identity, tests of interaction effects were conducted. There were significant interactions with cultural activities by gender ($\beta = 0.1261$, $p = 0.001$) and cultural activities by region ($\beta = 0.094$, $p = 0.014$). Therefore, the regression analysis was repeated and stratified by gender and region. There was no significant interaction with cultural activities by age ($\beta = 0.007$, $p = 0.549$).

Stratified by Region and Gender

When stratified by region, among urban youth ($p < .0001$) there was a significant association between cultural activities and ethnic identity but not among reservation youth ($p = 0.08$). Among both urban and reservation youth having higher grades reported higher ethnic identity. No significant differences were found by region between SES and ethnic identity. When stratified by gender, cultural activities were associated with ethnic identity among both

TABLE 1
Demographics of Study Sample by Region

| | Urban N = 539 (%) | Reservation N = 406 (%) | Chi-square and t-tests (<i>p</i> -values) |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Gender (male) | 41 | 46 | Chi square = 3.00 <i>p</i> = 0.083 |
| Grades | | | |
| Mostly A's, A's and B's | 32 | 36 | Chi square = 2.77 <i>p</i> = 0.10 |
| Mostly B's, B's and C's | 34 | 34 | |
| Mostly C's, C's and D's | 22 | 22 | |
| Mostly D's, D's and F's | 9 | 7 | |
| Mostly F's | 3 | 1 | |
| Age 13-14 | 32 | 38 | Chi square = 9.23 <i>p</i> = 0.024 |
| 15-16 | 34 | 37 | |
| 17-19 | 34 | 25 | |
| SES (Mean and SD) | 0.78 (±0.37) | 0.86 (±0.35) | t = 0.303 <i>p</i> = 0.003 |
| Cultural Activities Measure (Mean and SD) (Participation in Pow-Wows, Sweat Lodge, Drum Group, and Roundhouse) | 1.82 (±1.08) | 1.74 (±1.10) | t = 1.11 <i>p</i> = 0.268 |
| Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Mean and SD) | 3.0 (±0.63) | 3.03 (±0.65) | t = 0.71 <i>p</i> = 0.476 |

TABLE 2
Standardized Betas for Main Effects of MEIM, Stratified by Gender and Region

| | Urban N = 512 | Reservation N = 380 | Male N = 385 | Female N = 507 | Overall N = 897 |
|--|--------------------|------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Cultural Activities (Participation in Pow-wows, Sweat Lodge, Drum Group, and Roundhouse) | 0.309** | 0.084 | 0.311** | 0.143* | 0.213** |
| Gender (Male) | -0.109* | -0.157* | - | - | -0.135** |
| Grades | 0.083 [^] | -0.104* | -0.029 | -0.175** | -0.087* |
| Age | 0.129* | 0.148* | 0.008 | 0.210** | 0.136 |
| SES | 0.056 | 0.050 | 0.055 | 0.023 | 0.043 |
| Region (Urban/Rez) | - | - | 0.002 | 0.083 [^] | 0.047 |

**p*-value < .05
***p*-value < .0001
[^]*p*-value is marginally significant

males ($p < .0001$) and females ($p = 0.0008$). Higher grades were significantly associated with ethnic identity among females ($p < .0001$) but not among males ($p = 0.58$).

DISCUSSION

This study supports the important role of cultural activities in the development of ethnic identity among Native American youth. Respondents who participated in cultural activities that included pow-wows, sweat lodge, drum groups and/or roundhouse dance reported significantly

higher Native American ethnic identity than their counterparts who did not take part in cultural activities.

The association between cultural activities and ethnic identity was significant among urban youth but not significant among reservation youth. This suggests that in an urban context, where Native American youth are the minority in their communities and do not have the day-to-day support and enculturation from a co-ethnic community, participation in cultural events is especially important to help them maintain a strong connection with their Native American heritage. Due to the Federal Relocation program

that moved thousands of Native Americans from their tribal homelands to metropolitan areas, support systems emerged to retain ethnic and cultural practices that have been continued and reinforced through generations. The California urban Native American community consists of relocated families from other non-California reservations or urban areas, with many being born and raised in state from an indigenous California state tribe. There is concern that youth will lose their cultural identity if they do not maintain strong ties to their home tribe (Lobo 1998). Often times, urban Native American youth seek cultural activities such as attending a pow-wow or sweat lodge to feel connected to their culture. However, the cultural activities in this study may differ among reservation youth because only among urban youth was a significant association of participation in cultural activities and ethnic identity found. With well over 100 California tribal groups, there are differences in tribal culture, customs, and ceremonial practices. Tribal-specific cultural dances and ceremonies are unique to each tribe and it would have been difficult to include all California Native traditional ceremonies in our research survey. It is encouraging to learn that both urban and reservation youth in our study are maintaining strong ethnic identity as both have similar MEIM mean scores.

In the overall sample and only among females, a significant association was found between having higher grades and Native American identity. In contrast, a recent study by Whitesell and colleagues (2009) failed to support the link between cultural identity and academic success. The role of matriarchy is common among many tribes and reinforces the connection to Native community and increases ability to navigate within the majority culture as both leadership and assertiveness are valued qualities in both cultures (Galliher, Jones & Dahl 2011). These qualities can potentially benefit the academic success of an

individual and further increase their sense of self or ethnic identity.

Cultural-based practices to enhance Native identity may well be useful to improve mental and behavioral health among Native American youth. Martinez and Dukes (1997) found a higher level of ethnic identity to be associated with increased self-confidence and purpose in life. Similarly, another study found ethnic identity related positively to measures of psychological well-being such as coping ability, mastery, self-esteem and optimism, and negatively measures of loneliness and depression (Roberts et al. 1999). It is important to find ways to sustain strong ethnic identity especially when Native American youth who either live in the city or on a reservation face adversity that negatively influence their lives. Stronger ethnic identity among California Native American youth may be helpful in reducing and eliminating substance abuse problems. Due to the urgent behavioral health related issues such as substance abuse, suicide and violence in this group, it is imperative to understand and meet their mental health needs. Future research is needed to identify, measure, and ascertain the effects of cultural resiliency to improve and meet the changing needs of Native American youth as it relates to mental and behavioral health.

There are limitations to be taken into consideration in the results of this study. First, the sample is cross-sectional so no causality can be assumed with the associations. Second, the sample was not randomly selected and therefore may not be representative of both urban and reservation populations in California. Third, youth respondents provided self report information, and thus may be biased. Finally, the youth in this study live in urban and reservation areas of California, therefore the results cannot be extrapolated to all Native American youth in the country.

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