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Making Meaning of Urban American Indian Identity: A Multistage Integrative Process

Nancy M. Lucero

The cultural identity and tribal connectedness of American Indians are commonly believed to have been negatively affected by the urbanization process in which American Indians have been involved during the past half century. This phenomenological study examined the processes through which cultural identity was formed and maintained by a group of American Indians who had lived since childhood in urban areas, away from their reservations or tribal communities. Seven urban Indian adults, each from a different tribe, shared their experiences related to coming to understand what it means to be American Indian and the development of their American Indian cultural identity. Four themes emerged from participant interviews and were seen to correspond to stages that participants passed through, from their teens through their 30s, that led to understanding and integration of their American Indian identity. Findings point to the importance of considering issues of cultural identity development when providing social work services to urban American Indian young adults.

KEY WORDS: *culture; ethnic identity; phenomenology; urban American Indians; young adults*

American Indians (also referred to herein as “Indians” or “Native people”) who live in urban areas can find themselves constructing and negotiating their cultural identity from a complex social location. Moreover, the frequency, intensity, and quality of their interactions with the dominant culture and other ethnic groups may be quite different from those of American Indians living within the sociocultural boundedness of the reservation or tribal community setting. Cultural identity and tribal connectedness are often thought to be negatively affected by living in an urban area (Straus & Valentino, 1998). Indians in urban areas have been “negatively stereotyped by reservation people as ‘fallen’ or diminished Indians, ‘sell-outs’ who abandoned tribal homeland, practice, politics and problems for the good life in the city” (Straus & Valentino, 1998, p. 109). American Indians living in the urban environment may be considered to have lost much of their understanding of tribal-specific traditions and practices because of the deemphasis on tribal identities that appears to have accompanied urbanization (Thornton, 1997).

Urban Indians are often conceptualized as being conflicted about their ethnic identity and having developed generalized or “detrIALIZED” pan-Indian identities that meld beliefs, values, and practices from various tribal groups while lacking identification with any specific tribe (Nagel, 1982; Nakao, 2002;

Thomas, 1968). The cultural identity of urban Indians is continually scrutinized and questioned, even to the point of provoking the question of whether an American Indian living in an urban area can still be considered “Indian” (Peroff & Wildcat, 2002). The increased contact with non-Indians that has accompanied urbanization is also thought to have had a significant effect on cultural identity. Rates of intermarriage between Indians and non-Indians have increased almost exponentially since the 1960s and 1970s, hand in hand with urbanization (Sandefur & Liebler, 1997; Sandefur & McKinnell, 1986). Eschbach (1995) estimated that in the mid-1990s, approximately 80 percent of all Indian people were biracial or multiracial. Moreover, Thornton (1997) predicted that mixed-bloodedness would continue to rise among the American Indian population, with the result being that only 8 percent of American Indians will have one-half or more blood quantum by the end of this century.

Oetting and Beauvais’s (1991) orthogonal model of cultural identification posited that “identification with any culture is essentially independent of identification with any other culture” (pp. 661–662). Although not developed to assess cultural identity specifically in American Indians, the orthogonal model has provided a theoretical foundation for a number of studies measuring cultural identity in this population. Moran, Fleming, Somervell, and

Manson (1999) found that it was possible for American Indian youths to identify with both mainstream culture and Indian culture. These researchers further classified the cultural identity of each participant as “traditional,” “assimilated,” “bicultural,” or “marginalized” by determining whether he or she identified most highly with Indian values, most highly with white values, equally with the values of both groups, or at a low level with the values of either culture. Similar to Moran et al., other studies that have used the orthogonal model to classify American Indian respondents’ cultural identities as traditional, assimilated, bicultural, or marginalized (for example, Clark & Mendoza, 2002; Weaver, 1996) have not gone on to assess how individuals come to hold the values associated with these classification categories.

In a study attempting to move the understanding of American Indian cultural identity beyond the four identity categories just identified, Walters (1999) assessed identity in an urban American Indian sample and found that respondents’ acculturation levels and held identity stances might be quite distinct. Walters argued that acculturation and identity are two very different constructs—related but far from synonymous with one another. However, as in other studies of urban American Indian cultural identity, she did not attempt to identify the factors or processes that lead urban Indians to develop and maintain certain stances toward their identities.

The ways in which American Indians living in urban areas develop a strong sense of being Native, a positive Indian identity, and a sense of being part of a Native community have not been explored adequately. Although common experience shows that many Native people living in urban areas do develop strong ethnic identities and connections to their tribal cultures, the existing literature falls short of adequately describing the types of experiences or human interactions that may play a role in that development.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the processes associated with how American Indian cultural identity develops in Native people living in urban areas by examining the experiences of urban American Indian adults who considered themselves to have a strong and positive cultural identity. Guided by the gap in the literature just identified, this study explored the following research questions:

- What life experiences contribute to the development and maintenance of a strong and

positive American Indian cultural identity in urban American Indians?

- What does being Indian mean to urban American Indian adults?

Previous research indicates that the construct “urban American Indian cultural identity” is complex and multidimensional (Clark & Mendoza, 2002; House, Stiffman, & Brown, 2006; Moran et al., 1999). In the current study, *American Indian cultural identity* was operationalized as a personal sense of belonging to a particular group of people collectively identified as an American Indian tribe. It includes the internalization of the values, worldview, history, practices, and experiences of one’s own or another American Indian tribe, and it is expressed by identifying oneself to others as an American Indian and feeling racially, ethnically, or culturally Indian. *Cultural identity integration*, a construct that arose from participants’ descriptions of their cultural identity development, is considered herein to be the process of first deliberately asserting and claiming one’s American Indian cultural identity and subsequently coming to make meaning of that identity.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive phenomenological mode of inquiry (Giorgi, 1992) was chosen for this qualitative study examining urban American Indians’ cultural identity development. Moustakas (1994) situated the phenomenological approach as “a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (p. 13). The goal of this study was to understand how urban Indians come to understand the meaning of their American Indian cultural identity. This goal is congruent with the aim of identifying and describing the subjective experiences of individuals, which lies at the foundation of contemporary, and especially North American, phenomenology (Schwandt, 2001).

Sampling

The sample for the current study was chosen from American Indians living in a large western metropolitan area in which more than 100 different tribes are represented (King, 1992) and where there has been a sizeable, established Indian community for more than 50 years (Burt, 1986; Philip, 1985). The two inclusion criteria for the study were that an

individual (1) identify as an American Indian adult who had lived since childhood in one or more urban areas, away from his or her reservation or tribal community, and (2) self-identify as having a strong and positive cultural identity. Thus, the selected participants were individuals who had experienced the phenomenon under study—developing and coming to make meaning of an American Indian cultural identity while living in an urban area. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended sample selection to the point of redundancy. In the current study, this point was reached after the seventh interview, resulting in a sample size large enough, as Patton (2002) suggested, to give reasonable coverage of the phenomenon while also being appropriate to the exploratory nature of the study.

Participants

Of the seven participants in the sample, two were men and five were women, ranging in age from their mid-30s to late 50s. Exemplifying the wide diversity of tribal regions represented in the study locale, participants included members of Lakota/Dakota, southwestern, northern plains, southern plains, Oklahoma, and southeastern tribes. Specific tribal affiliations are not included here so as to preserve confidentiality. Participants' actual names have also been changed to further preserve their confidentiality. The following is a brief description of the participants in terms of their origins and extent of exposure to urban living.

Four of the participants were mixed-blood people of Indian and European ancestry who identified solely as American Indian. June, a woman in her late 50s, was the eldest participant in the study. Her family left their northern plains reservation and moved to an urban area when she was three years old. Both of June's parents were mixed-blood people. Anne, in her late 30s, was a member of a tribe located in Oklahoma. She also had mixed-blood heritage; her father was Indian, and her mother was white. Anne was born on another tribe's reservation but grew up in a small city in the Southwest. David, also in his late 30s, was Lakota. He too had an Indian father and a white mother. David had lived most of his life in a medium-sized city in the Midwest, but he had spent some summers on the reservation with his grandparents. Valerie, in her late 40s, was a member of a southeastern tribe. Both of her parents were of mixed Native and white ancestry. Valerie was of the first generation of her family to be born in the city

after her father's family moved there in the 1950s as part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Relocation Program.

Of the three full-blooded Indian participants, Marie, in her early 50s, had lived in urban areas her entire life. Her father was from a tribe in Oklahoma, and her mother was from a northern plains tribe. Her family traveled extensively and lived primarily among non-Indians. Darlene, in her mid-30s, identified as being from her mother's small midwestern tribe. Her father was also Indian and from another tribe. At the age of six, she came to the city where she resided at the time of the study but occasionally had visited her mother's reservation for short periods of time during childhood. Finally, William was a full-blooded Navajo man in his late 40s. He reminisced about going back and forth, as a youngster, between living with his mother in a large city and his father in a rural area. At age 16, he came to live permanently in a major metropolitan area.

Data Collection

Data collection proceeded after study approval by my university's institutional review board, participant selection, and provision of informed consent by each participant. A one-and-a-half- to two-hour open-ended interview was held with each participant. Because the purpose of the interview was to elicit a personal narrative of each participant's engagement with the study phenomenon, a formal instrument or interview schedule was not used. Instead, consistent with narrative interviewing techniques (Singer 2004), data were gathered through a conversational process that respected cultural norms for talking about personal information (Strickland, 1999) and allowed knowledge to unfold as the interviewer obtained additional detail or clarified information (Harala, Smith, Hassel, & Gailfus, 2005).

To construct the single interview question, I rephrased the study's research questions (derived from an identified gap in the literature). At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to reflect on and discuss this question: "How did you come to the sense that you were American Indian, and were there events and experiences that contributed to helping you develop or maintain your sense of being Indian?" Although unprompted to do so, participants individually presented their information in the form of a life-progression narrative, describing significant identity factors related to events in their

early childhood, late teenage years (ages 16 to 19), early to mid-20s, and late 20s to mid-30s.

Analysis

The phenomenological reduction process for each interview in the current study proceeded using the steps outlined in Giorgi's (1975) phenomenological data analysis methodology. In summary, these steps were reading through each transcript to conceptualize it as a holistic account, delimiting natural meaning units—sections in which participants focused on a particular aspect of their experience—and identifying a central theme or themes for each unit, and interrogating each central theme by asking two questions of the data about the phenomenon being examined (Giorgi, 1986): (1) What does this statement tell me about the participant's cultural identity? (2) How (in action or behavioral terms) does the participant express his or her cultural identity? The answers to these questions were then stated in ways that captured the psychological or sociological relevance of the phenomenon and revealed its structure. It is noteworthy that the phenomenological reduction process yielded a general structure and set of "key constituents," or themes (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), that clearly indicated a developmental-like progression within the phenomenon.

To enhance the validity of the study, I shared preliminary results of the analysis with participants for verification, feedback, and discussion. In addition, a form of triangulation was used wherein these results were presented to a group of 12 urban American Indians—representing providers of social, educational, and mental health services to Indians in the study city—for additional feedback on the structures, themes, and developmental nature of cultural identity.

I am an insider researcher, an urban Indian person studying the community in which I grew up and continue to live. I am also an insider in the sense that, while living in an urban area, I have been involved, like the participants, in the process of developing, negotiating, and maintaining an American Indian cultural identity. For some critics, this high level of insiderness may call into question my objectivity, whereas for others it may be seen as giving me the ability to see nuances of the phenomenon that those more distanced might not see.

Giorgi (1986) contended that a rigorous phenomenological analysis involving participants' "unprejudiced verbal descriptions as data" can yield objective

and trustworthy findings. Prior to beginning this study, I engaged in discussions with colleagues and hours of self-reflection to bracket possible biases so that it would truly be the participants' voices that revealed the phenomenon emerging from this study. In the end, I believe that the descriptive phenomenological approach used to analyze the data, combined with the similarity of my experience to those of each study participant, strengthened the findings of this study.

FINDINGS

Four overarching themes, identified from the structures of participants' experiences, emerged in the current study. These themes corresponded to a series of stages that participants identified as having passed through while attempting to make meaning of their American Indian identity and achieve the integration of this identity into psychological and cognitive structures. For each participant, this process culminated in a deeply felt connection to other Indian people and an understanding that one's Indian identity took on meaning through shared experiences with other Native people. The four stages were (1) the struggle; (2) the catalyst; (3) going back—returning to the People; and (d) "living on the red road"—integrating Native identity. Each stage is described in more detail in the subsections that follow.

Each participant described a very similar set of feelings and experiences in each stage, which they all had passed through at nearly the same ages. As participants examined and negotiated the tensions and challenges of each stage, growth and understanding of self and one's relationship to others increased, and cultural identity became better integrated into self-concept.

Moreover, as they progressed through the stages, the participants acquired the emotional tools needed to engage in increasingly complex and sophisticated analyses of the meaning of their identity and ethnicity. Positive feelings about being Native were reinforced by connections to other Native people who were perceived as understanding their culture and history and who were engaged in empowered actions in relation to both the dominant culture and other Native people. The ability to more accurately assess and discard stereotypes and negative portrayals of Nativeness as being contrary to the individual's experience of Native people grew at each successive stage.

Prior to examination of the four stages, it is important to situate participants in their connections to Indian culture and identity. Each recalled knowing from an early age that they were Indian and, therefore, different from non-Indians. June recalled, "We knew we were Indians. We went to powwows; we went to an Indian Catholic church. My whole world was Indian. I didn't know any white people." Darlene, too, articulated her awareness in young childhood that she was ethnically different from other nonwhite children in her neighborhood: "Kids used to tease me. They'd call me Vietnamese, Chinese. I knew I was a Native American. I'd say to them, 'No, I'm Indian.' I'd insist. I knew what I was, even at that young age."

Participants' families created an atmosphere in which awareness of Indianness was high and being Indian was reinforced by calling attention to the distinction between Indian and non-Indian through cultural traditions, spirituality, language, and association with other Indian people. David described having had awareness, as a child, of a distinction between Indian and white that was reinforced by his father's teaching about the Lakota way of life. "My dad, he always stressed, 'This is who we are and this is how we do things.'" Even while living as a young child in Europe, where her father was in the armed forces, Marie was given, by her family, a strong sense of being Indian that was reinforced through language, music, and cultural symbols. From their viewpoints as children, participants for the most part recalled feeling that being Indian was something positive, albeit only vaguely understood or even confusing. Differences related to being Indian did not become problematic for them until their teenage years, when the first of the stages identified in participants' narratives began.

Stage One: The Struggle

Participants related stories of intense emotional struggles during their teenage years, when they often felt "lost," "detached," or as if they "didn't fit in anywhere." During adolescence, most of the participants recalled feeling different because they were Indian and, consequently, moving away from the Native social group that had previously provided a positive and supportive sense of being Indian. Attempts to reject or rebel against Native cultural connections were common. Anne illustrated her rebellion in the following scenario:

I remember as a teenager I definitely knew I was different, and it was difficult. I didn't want anything to do with my Nativeness and the Native American church. I really rebelled against that. I was having a really, really difficult time with my identity and who I was.

William expressed how he moved away from his Native social group as follows:

There weren't other Indians in my high school, so I felt really alone. Because of my last name, people thought I was Mexican, so this gave me a place to fit. I'd heard Spanish spoken all my life, so I quickly picked up the street slang spoken in my neighborhood. I wanted nothing to do with being Navajo.

Also significant for many participants during this stage was a sense of confusion and questioning as to whether they were Indian. Valerie captured this feeling: "I wasn't sure for many years what it meant to be Indian; and, at the same time, I knew I wasn't white either." June also described struggling during adolescence with confusing messages about her ethnicity. She recalled knowing she was Indian but being told she was white and that, for various reasons, she was unacceptable to both groups.

During the struggle stage, active rebellion against being Native led many participants to become involved in a lifestyle that was unhealthy or dangerous. This involvement was often the precursor to the second stage, during which each individual experienced a powerful event that resulted in the feeling that he or she had been "brought back" to a sense of connection to other Indian people.

Stage Two: The Catalyst

A *catalyst* sets in motion or accelerates a significant change or action. Individually, the participants discussed a catalyst-like event or experience, occurring in their early to mid-20s, that was identified as so personally significant that, in retrospect, they recognized it as having propelled them forward on a path leading to the strong connection they currently felt to being Native. This catalyst event was usually sudden, unexpected, and initiated from outside the individual, often coming about as a result of the actions of a relative or other significant Native person. It was so hugely affecting that it could not be ignored, causing each individual to stop and

take notice of how he or she was living life. Anne explained how her grandmother set in motion her catalyst event:

I was on the plaza with all my punk rock friends, and my little Indian grandma comes up and grabs me by my ear. What do you do? There's like no cool way to get out of it, right? She literally swept me off to the reservation for a Sundance. And then they asked me to help cook feast for the dancers. They said, "This is a big responsibility. You're a woman now. You need to take care of your community." And that changed my life.

Valerie recalled unexpectedly meeting two previously unknown cousins who, on first meeting her, said, "You need to remember who you are and where you come from." In Valerie's words,

they said they would help me, because I was not living in a good way at that time. They said it was my choice: They could bring me back to who I really was, but that once I went back to Indian ways, I would not be able to go back to living otherwise. I didn't understand this at the time, but I went with it—I felt I had no other choice. It felt like they were a force that was sweeping me up and I had to go with it.

As it emerged through participant descriptions, the catalyst event came to have several distinctive characteristics: a sense of being inevitable and beyond the individual's control (as seen in Anne's and Valerie's stories) and of being connected to something spiritual. William spoke of the spiritual nature of the catalyst event he experienced as follows:

I had burglarized a house one night, but instead of speeding off, I found myself sitting outside in my car. I realized a voice was talking to me, telling me it was time to stop all my craziness, that I was not meant for this. I realize now it was a spirit talking to me, one of my ancestors. I ended up going to prison because of my actions that night. But that spirit stayed with me. It explained to me that going to prison was how I would be brought back to the People and to our spiritual ways. I changed after that and began to sweat and pray as a Navajo man.

One participant described the catalyst experience as something others do to you that changes you fundamentally. Respondents felt different after the catalyst event and could not go back to what they were before. The event inspired a change that caused each individual to begin to think intensely about his or her Indianness, experience a growing need to know more about who he or she was as a Native person, and want to learn about Indian ways. As this stage moved to a close, attempts to figure out what it means to be Indian suddenly seemed to gain momentum and propel participants forward into the next stage, in which a life-changing reconnection to other Indian people and their own Nativeness began.

Stage Three: Going Back—Returning to the People

Participants made numerous references to a time when they felt strongly the need to "go back" or "go home." In the participant narratives, going back or going home was more a symbolic course of action than a literal return to the reservation or tribal homeland. Going back, which occurred for participants in their mid- to late 20s, came to represent the act of searching for and finding connections to others in the Indian world, or, as one participant framed it, "returning to the People." Participants felt that an individual must go back and find to whom he or she belongs or is connected before being able to move forward to find him- or herself as a Native person. Marie, in talking about how her Indian identity developed, illustrated this idea:

Your identity. It's who you belong to, your sense of belonging—and then finding who's within that circle that you belong to, that you want to belong to. Identity. I think that you have it but you have to discover it. People come into your life and open it up and help you find it.

Participants often used the word "community" in the sense of becoming involved in or reconnecting to a community. Over the course of the seven interviews, community became a metaphor for the process of making the connection to one's Nativeness and being drawn toward other Indian people. Darlene recalled,

My daughter had a major surgery, and that really made the community aware of me, because they

never really knew me. I had to tell them who my sister was and who my brothers were and my mom . . . it was like all of a sudden I appeared and had a place among them.

The third stage concluded with individuals feeling they had “returned to the People” or found a place within their community or family from which they could begin to more fully understand and live out their Nativeness. Participants came to recognize themselves as related to other Indian people and feel recognized by them in return. A sense of being a part of the larger world of Native people and reconnecting to an Indian community had developed. Successfully negotiating this stage led individuals into the fourth and final stage, in which integration of Native cultural and ethnic identity allowed them to put meaning to their Nativeness and actively live their identity in relation to other Native people.

Stage Four: “Living on the Red Road”—Integrating Native Identity

The final stage, “living on the red road,” began when participants were in their late 20s to mid-30s; it marked a time in which the process of integrating their Indian identity ensued. Identifying as Indian and living in an Indian way came to be seen as a conscious choice, and participants conveyed a sense that they believed “I’m different because I’m Indian, and that’s good.” Participants talked about reinterpreting past feelings and experiences and coming to see these experiences, as well as current ones, from a new and Native point of view.

During the identity integration stage, each individual began a process of making meaning of being Native by thinking deeply about Native values and traditions, incorporating these into a personal belief system, and acting in accordance with these values. Actively clarifying one’s Native identity by analyzing Native values and examining how they were in opposition to many of the widely held values of the dominant culture was characteristic of the early part of this stage. In the act of values clarification, identity and spirituality often became connected, as David related:

What maintains my identity and what kind of drives it is a strong sense of spirituality, and that’s something that’s a relatively new thing for me that didn’t start for me until around the time my

grandpa passed away. Then the spiritual piece really became important.

Participants saw spiritual practice as one way in which Indian people could make deeper meaning of their Nativeness; it was also seen as a way in which Native people could find healing. All participants mentioned taking part in some type of spiritual practice, with the majority mentioning that traditional spiritual practices were especially important in supporting their positive feelings about being Native. Emotional and spiritual healing was mentioned by several individuals as the end product of the quest for understanding their Native identity. As Marie stated, “I think the spirituality—that really brought the balance in my life. That was what I was looking for.”

Finding community and solidarity with other Native people continued to grow in importance during this stage. As participants came to understand their Native identities more fully, they were strongly drawn toward working with or helping other Native people, and, conversely, by helping other Native people, they were able to achieve a greater sense of their own Native identity and connectedness. Darlene, who both works and volunteers in many capacities in her community, shared how she began to gain a greater understanding of herself as a Native woman through efforts to help others:

I was going to sweat lodges with my mom, but I wouldn’t go in. I was going there, helping out with the food, just helping out with whatever was going on. And if anybody needed help, me and my mom would take off and go and help them. Yeah, that was how I was getting drawn into the community and becoming aware, I guess, of who I was, what I can do for other people.

Looking across the participants as a group, there was a definite sense that each individual in this stage had achieved some measure of understanding of his or her Nativeness and that Native identity had been firmly integrated into each individual’s sense of self. Valerie captured this sense:

I eventually found my place. This is the gift that all the Native people in my life have given me—I know who I am, where I come from, and I think I know, as well as anyone almost 50

years old can ever know, what it means to be a Native person.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The findings of this exploratory study of seven urban American Indians suggest that achieving a strong Native identity may be an important process for individuals during young adulthood (their 20s and 30s). Furthermore, it involves integrating and making meaning of an established cultural identity and is arrived at through intensely emotional work as well as connections to other Native people. The degree to which an individual has integrated and made meaning of his or her cultural identity is often neglected as a factor in assessment and intervention in the provision of clinical and other social work services to urban American Indians. Study data support the importance of assisting and supporting urban American Indians in the process of coming to understand both the personal and communal meaning of their Nateness and how that Nateness can be actualized and expressed in the social realm.

Participants recalled clearly knowing that they were American Indian, even from a very young age. Ethnic group membership was never in doubt, although as teenagers—the stage of struggle—it was a source of difficulty and confusion that usually led to rebellion or rejection of ethnic group membership. It is common for agencies and programs that serve urban Indians to feel the need to provide cultural identity—strengthening programs targeted at urban Indian youths who may be in this stage of rebellion or rejection as a way of buffering them from the challenges of the urban environment. These programs, which are often developed informally, typically target youths between the ages of 10 and 16 with activities such as traditional craft making, powwow dancing, and participation in sweat lodges. There is no doubt that these activities can serve as both powerful tools in assisting urban Indian youths and sources of information about tribal cultures for which Native young people may be searching. What is missing in these agencies, however, are programs or interventions that seek to support Native people in their 20s and 30s regarding issues related to cultural identity and the cultural identity integration process described in this study. The findings of this study point also to the need for outreach to Native young adults in this age group to provide them with opportunities to connect with other Native people

and to begin exploring values, traditions, spirituality, and other areas that are important in the process of cultural identity integration.

Participants revealed that, following the struggle stage, some type of catalyst event had been critical in propelling them into wanting to understand their cultural identity and toward the third stage, reconnecting with other Native people. For those working with American Indian youths and young adults, this raises the challenge of finding ways of moving them toward this catalyst event or creating interventions that may produce the same effect. Furthermore, considerations for helping young adults reconnect with a Native community—as took place at the third stage—suggest a need for the development of individual, group, and community interventions that can not only support the cultural identity integration stages, but also provide opportunities to make the types of connections with other Indian people that were so important to the participants.

Successfully negotiating the third stage of reconnecting with other Native people led to the final stage, wherein cultural identity was integrated into participants' self-schemas and they began actively living out their cultural identity with other Native people. Seemingly, this was an automatic process, but in reality it came about after much introspection, analysis of values, and emotional work aimed at internalizing a cultural belief system and worldview. Clarifying the role of spirituality in their lives and discovering ways of helping and being of service to other Native people were important tasks that participants were also working to accomplish in this stage.

Overall, progression through the four stages, corresponding to the shared themes that emerged from the data, created a sense that the participants' experiences were interwoven in a complex and communal way and were linked to both the historical and contemporary experiences of other Native people. Brayboy and Morgan (1998) found a similar interweaving of themes in their study of the lived experiences of Native women. In the current study, participants' finding their connection to other Native people (stage 3) played a central role in helping them understand what it means to be American Indian. These relationships initiated a process of growth, both as an individual and as a member of a community, which led to strengthening both personal and communal Native identity. These two aspects of identity were felt to be essential for wholeness

and well-being. As the participants strongly conveyed, coming to have a strong and positive Native identity results in one becoming spiritually and emotionally healthy and taking one's place in a Native community.

The ability to understand cultural identity is a critical factor in social work with urban American Indians. Moreover, an understanding of cultural identity as occurring through a developmental process offers social workers and other service providers a new and innovative framework from which to work with this population. A thorough examination of cultural identity and cultural connectedness is also crucial to enhancing the profession's ability to design and provide services that are culturally relevant and responsive to different segments of the American Indian population.

CONCLUSION

It would be inappropriate to generalize the results of this qualitative study to the greater population of urban Native people; nevertheless, this study is of particular importance in several ways in terms of its contribution to an understanding of how urban American Indians develop and understand their cultural identity. The four-stage process uncovered from participants' narratives provides a helpful framework for theorizing and designing culturally appropriate interventions. Although it has commonly been thought that it is urban Native children and youths who are in need of interventions to strengthen cultural identity, results of this study suggest that many urban Native people in their early 20s through mid-30s could benefit from targeted and specialized programs focusing on cultural identity development and integration. Finally, this study distinguishes a process that has been given little prior attention in the literature on American Indian cultural identity—the importance to personal growth, emotional health and balance, and (most important) heightened social connectedness of achieving emotional and psychological integration of one's cultural identity.

Future studies are needed to thoroughly understand all aspects of the emerging phenomenon identified in this study as "cultural identity integration." Further research is also needed to examine the types of interventions that would most effectively support the efforts of this age group (late teens through mid-30s) to make meaning of their American Indian cultural identity. Also, for researchers to gain a broader perspective of the phenomenon under

study, it will be necessary to study the experiences of other groups of urban American Indians, such as those who do not have the strong family or community connections to culture seen in the present participants or those who do not feel strongly and positively about being American Indian. **SW**

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