

Maintaining cultural ties in the city: Perspectives of four generations of urban-based American Indians on the evolving nature of cultural connectedness

Nancy M. Lucero, Ph.D., LCSW

University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work

Denver, CO

Statement of the Research Problem

Most members of the general population are astonished to learn that urban-based American Indians comprised more than 64% of the total Native population in the 2000 Census, and that this figure is expected to rise when 2010 Census data are released. Much of their surprise at learning that American Indians are a part of the multicultural mix of urban America is that the experiences of this largest segment of the Native population have been rendered nearly invisible and without voice by the portrayal of American Indians in the media and popular literature as based solely on isolated reservations that exist well outside the American mainstream. Social work and other social science disciplines, too, have played their part in maintaining the invisibility of urban-based American Indians and the marginalization of urban Indian communities by privileging the reservation-based perspective in teaching, research, and publication.

Furthermore, within the body of social sciences literature there is a clear lack of empirical information—as well as the presence of much theoretical misinformation—on the urban Indian experience. Despite the fact that the majority of Indian people now live in urban areas, American Indians living in American cities exist largely as an unseen group. Their experiences remain relatively unexplored and, as a result, are poorly understood. The absence of the urban perspective has also played a part in the continued essentializing and romanticizing of American Indians as historical Others, who are mistakenly believed to remain ensconced on their reservations and well apart from contemporary urban life. To counter this, it is essential that information on the lifestyles, worldviews, and value systems of urban-based American Indians, and the ways in which they develop and maintain connectedness to their Native cultures while living away from their tribal communities, is available within the body of social science knowledge, alongside that on tribally-based American Indians.

Research Background and Hypothesis

The existence of American Indian communities found today in major urban areas such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Denver can be directly traced to the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) Voluntary Relocation Program. This program began officially in 1952 and resulted in upwards of 150,000 to 200,000 American Indians leaving their reservations and moving to urban areas for employment and training (Fixico, 2000; Snipp 1992; Sorkin, 1978). During the Relocation period (roughly 1952 through the mid-1970s), stories abounded about the negative and tragic experiences of many Relocates, often times fueled by assimilationist fears stemming from federal government policies of the 1940s through 1960s that sought to terminate the legal status of tribes (and successfully terminated more than 100 tribes). These stories and fears helped to create a negative image of urban Indian life that continues generations later to strongly color beliefs about the ability of contemporary Indian people to maintain connectedness to Native culture when living in the city.

Those research studies on urban-based American Indians that can be found in the social sciences literature are often many decades old, and are frequently focused on the struggles and hardships of individuals who were among the first to be making the transition from reservation to city. Updated examinations of the experiences of Native people in the urban environment, awareness and consideration of the cultural issues that have arisen out of their diasporic movement from their reservation homelands to American cities, and their experience-based perspectives are difficult to find. A significant gap also exists in our understanding of the effects on cultural identity and cultural connectedness of the large scale movement of Native people from reservation to urban life, and especially how long-term urban residence may have resulted in generational differences in how members of this population conceptualize what is required to achieve a sense of being connected to their tribal cultures.

The current study contributes to the existing body of social science research literature by giving voice to a group of urban-based American Indians who provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the following three research questions: (a) How do urban-based American Indians construct and maintain their cultural identities?; (b) What strategies (i.e., cognitive, behavioral, emotional and/or spiritual) do urban-based American Indians employ to achieve a sense of being connected to their specific tribal and/or a generalized American Indian culture?; and (c) What differences related to cultural identity and cultural connectedness can be found between generations of American Indians whose families have maintained long-term residence in an urban area?" (Note: While the qualitative study upon which this paper is based compared both the cultural identity and cultural connectedness of members of the generation who left their reservation or tribal community to settle in the study city to that of their children,

grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren, this paper will focus only on the findings and generational perspectives regarding cultural connectedness.)

Methodology

A descriptive phenomenological design was employed in this qualitative study to examine how members of a group of urban-based American Indian families each achieved a sense of “cultural connectedness” and whether this connectedness might be changing over decades of urban living. Nineteen members of 3 or 4 generations of five families, each from a different tribe, shared their perspectives and experiences. These families, whose members had resided continuously in the study city for a period of 50-60 years, were selected for this study because they represented a group of American Indians with long-term and stable urban residency.

The focus on description inherent in the phenomenological approach permits a phenomenon under study to begin to emerge through each participant’s construction of the narrative of his or her experience. The *epoché*—the inhibiting of previous knowledge and experience and the setting aside of preconceived notions of how things are (Moustakas, 1994)—and drive to return to “things themselves” (Husserl, 1970/1900, p. 252) at the heart of the phenomenological approach, position the methodology as a mode of discovery rather than verification (Giorgi, 1985a). The descriptive phenomenological approach assumes that “there is an essence or essences to shared experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 106), and supports a belief in the existence of commonality among individuals who have group experiences. Qualitative research studies employing a descriptive phenomenological approach focus on an individual’s experiences and engagement with a particular phenomenon in order to identify the underlying meaning structures contained within the individual’s engagement with that phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

A note on terminology: The study participants who originally left their reservations or tribal communities and moved to the study city to settle permanently at a point between 1948 and 1968 are referred to herein as Generation 1 participants. Generation 1 participants represent (a) the parents of Generation 2 participants, (b) the grandparents of Generation 3 participants, and (c) the great-grandparents of Generation 4 participants. In the results section of this paper, references to participants as being from Generations 2, 3 or 4 are in relation to their position within their own families rather than within a larger societal cohort. As a collective group, all study participants who represent a discrete generation in their particular family are referred to as a generational group. Together, the members of a specific generational group are also referred to as Generation 1s, 2s, 3s, or 4s.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual interviews, each lasting from one-and-one-half to 3 hours, were conducted with participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and converted to media files; audio media files of interviews were transcribed verbatim. The intention of each interview encounter was to assist the interviewee to create a narrative account of his or her experience of and engagement with the phenomenon under study—cultural connectedness of urban-based American Indians. Narrative interviewing techniques utilized in this study incorporated the principles suggested by Singer (2004) and the conversational interview guidelines from Kvale (1996).

Philosophically, the phenomenological stance believes that the structures of experience of a phenomenon emerge from the biographical, contextual, and personal data contained in a narrative interview (Giorgi, 1975). Thus, the interviewing approach was intended to support and encourage participants, while relating their narratives, to develop detailed descriptions of their experiences and, while with the interviewer, to reflect upon and interpret these experiences in relationship to their cultural connectedness.

The analysis of each interview transcript proceeded through the steps described below of Giorgi's methodology for achieving the phenomenological reduction of psychological and experiential sociological data, and the identification of meaning structures contained within a particular phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; von Eckartsberg, 1986). The first step was to read the entire transcript through to its end in a manner which attempted to conceptualize it as a holistic account or perspective of the phenomenon. This step helped the researcher obtain an overall sense of the description—to know where it began, and importantly, to see where it ended. The second step began the phenomenological reduction, which involved identifying and delineating natural meaning units contained within an interview transcript (Giorgi, 1975). *Meaning units* are sections of the textual representation of the interview in which a participant focuses on a particular aspect of his/her experience or shares a particular story (Giorgi, 1985b). The boundary of such a meaning unit is identified when the participant changes topic, a story comes to an end, or a new question is asked by the interviewer.

In the third step of Giorgi's reduction process, there was a "progressive refinement of the original description with respect to its sense" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 254). The researcher began by stating the central theme of each meaning unit, using the language of the participant, and avoiding the addition of the researcher's interpretation of the participant's experience or information not contained in the meaning unit. In the fourth step of the analysis, themes that were originally expressed in the ordinary language of the participant were expressed in psychological and sociological terms with respect to their relevance to the phenomena under study; subjects' descriptions were stated so as to illuminate the psychological aspects of their experiences in a way that gave them depth

and complexity (Giorgi, 1985b), and through which the structures of the phenomenon emerged.

Following completion of the phenomenological reduction, the intergenerational analysis was conducted. Participants were clustered into their appropriate generational groups and the structures of cultural connectedness were examined to determine shared experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that characterized the group. From these characteristics, generational descriptions of cultural connectedness were created for Generations 1, 2, and 3-4 (the latter two groups were combined due to their similarities on numerous characteristics). In the final step of the intergenerational analysis, the characteristics of each generational group were compared to the other two groups to determine similarities and differences across and between generations.

Results

Participant narratives indicated that the phenomenon of cultural connectedness is a very complex and multifaceted aspect of the urban Indian experience. Thus, it would be beyond the possible scope any single paper to fully discuss all of the rich details and nuances of the phenomenon as it was revealed by study participants. Given this, the findings presented here outline and summarize a framework of phenomenological structures that emerged from study participants' lived experiences. Participant narratives also exposed generational characteristics in how cultural connectedness was achieved and demonstrated that have changed and evolved over the past four generations.

Phenomenological structures can be thought of as elements of an experiential phenomenon that if not present would render the experience incomplete or even to be a totally different phenomenon. Although each of the elements in the framework is presented separately in this section, they should not be considered to be discrete building blocks of cultural connectedness. Rather, each of the structures continually interacts with and informs the others, as for example, when involvement in culture-focused activities also provides opportunities for engaging in important social interactions with other Native people; or likewise, how family relatedness or tribal affiliation may be the source for gaining specific types of cultural knowledge.

Structural Framework of Urban Indian Cultural Connectedness

Four structures related to cultural connectedness emerged from the analysis of all participant narratives; these were: (a) relatedness, affiliation, and social interactions with other Native people; (b) cultural involvement; (c) cultural knowledge; and (d) negotiating the urban context so as to resist assimilation and cultural disconnection. From a subsequent analysis of each generational groups' engagement with these cultural connectedness structures, and comparison of each of the generational groups to the other three, it appears that the relationship between three of the structures—relatedness,

cultural involvement, and cultural knowledge—and the relative importance of each of these elements—has evolved and changed over time. These three structures and their theorized relationship will be the focus herein. Discussion of the fourth structure, negotiating the urban context so as to resist assimilation and cultural disconnection, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Relatedness, Affiliation, and Social Interactions with Other Native People

This structure revealed the primary importance that participants' placed on their relationships and interactions with other American Indians (what many referred to as their "connections") to being cultural connected. This structure involved the interaction of three relational elements: Indian family membership, affiliation with one's reservation and tribal community, and social interactions with other Native people. Participants stressed that it was difficult to develop or maintain a feeling of cultural connectedness when an individual was not around and interacting with other Indians.

Indian family membership recognized that an urban Indian person's strongest sense of connection to Indian culture may come through family members and kin. Family cohesiveness, continued observation of kinship traditions and responsibilities while living in the urban setting, culture-based interactional and communication styles within families, and maintaining ties with extended family members still living on the reservation or in a tribal community were identified as characteristics of urban Indian families that support and promote cultural connectedness. Further, family membership was seen as laying a foundation for cultural connectedness by being the primary vehicle through which an individual would learn about culture, traditions, and history, and see involvement with culture modeled.

Affiliation with one's reservation or tribal community referred to the role that an urban Indian person's tribal homeland plays in supporting important cultural connections, not only to extended family members and other Native people who continue to live there, but also to the individual's tribal culture and cultural representations such as language and traditions. Experiencing how one's tribal culture is expressed by those living on the reservation or in a tribal community, and being able to maintain connections to this location through relatives were important aspects of cultural connectedness and primary ways that many participants demonstrated their connectedness to others.

Social interactions with other Native people expressed participants' belief that regular social contacts with other Native people in the urban setting were essential to creating and maintaining an individual's sense of connection to both his or her specific tribal culture as well as to the intertribal and shared Native culture that also exists in many urban settings. Socializing with other Indians at powwows and cultural events in an Indian community, interacting with elders, and volunteering or in other ways being of service to Indian people, were all means through which participants found these social relationships.

Associating with Indians from tribes different than their own was also expressed by participants as something that imbued a sense of cultural connectedness. These cross-tribal relationships exposed participants to a range of tribal beliefs and practices that increased their knowledge of Native cultures and awareness of Indian political and social issues. At the same time it also supported a sense of being a part of a larger community whose members had similar values, worldview, and lifestyles, shared tribal histories involving struggles with the U.S. government, and common individual experiences with members of the dominant culture.

Cultural Involvement

The *cultural involvement* structure entailed both participating in culture-focused activities and events and engaging actively with tribal values, traditions, and practices. Immersing one's self in Indian culture, even if only those expressions present in the urban setting, was a way that participants saw it possible to be culturally connected. However, simply being around Indian culture was not seen by participants as synonymous with feeling connected to that culture; to have a sense of cultural connectedness required that an individual have some level of active involvement in cultural activities as well as values-driven or traditions-based interactions with other Indian people (for example, donating food and cooking for a community feed or providing elders with transportation to Indian Center events). Participants pointed out that behaving in ways congruent with cultural norms regarding family, kinship and community relationships and practicing tribal traditions and spiritual ceremonies, either in the city or on the reservation, created a feeling of connection to Indian culture.

Participants commented that involvement in the social, political, and/or service efforts taking place in their urban Indian community and at urban Indian Centers had increased their sense of cultural connectedness. So, too, had attending powwows and/or powwow dancing, whether in the city or on their reservation/tribal community. In fact, powwows were identified by participants as one of the main ways that many urban-based American Indians maintain connections to Indian culture and for some Indian people, as being one of the only remaining elements of cultural connectedness they may have.

Cultural Knowledge

This structure expressed the importance for achieving a sense of cultural connectedness that participants placed on learning about both their own tribal cultures and tribal histories, and about Native culture and the history of American Indians in a broader sense. Participants recognized that when living in a tribally diverse urban area, in order to have cultural connectedness, an individual must find ways to learn about his or her specific tribal traditions and practices, his or her family members' experiences as tribal people, and the tribal-specific history and the contemporary experiences of his or her tribe. In addition, participants indicated that cultural connectedness was strengthened by knowing general Indian history and current happenings in Indian country, as well as

some information about the other tribes whose members were represented in the urban Indian community.

It is important in understanding the cultural knowledge aspect of cultural connectedness to note that participants expressed their experiences in this area in such a way that it could be seen that there was a continual interaction occurring between learning and knowing. As a participant would learn about his or her culture, and the experiences of his or her family and tribe, he or she would come to have an increased level of knowledge in these areas. However, this knowledge would often spur an understanding that the participant needed still more knowledge, and so a quest to learn more would ensue; frequently this cycle would continue over the course of a lifetime, giving a developmental-like quality to this aspect of cultural connectedness.

Family members and other Indian people represented the primary way through which participants acquired cultural knowledge, including knowledge of tribal practices, values, and traditions. However, for some participants (and even some of those who had strong connections to reservation-based people), reading was an important supplemental way of learning about history and tribal experiences.

Generational Differences in Cultural Connectedness

The intergenerational analysis of the structures discussed above indicated that the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral ways in which these elements were expressed, as well as their ordered importance, appears to have shifted over the course of the 50-60 years of urban living experienced by participant families. Further, the nature of cultural connectedness had distinctly generational qualities; how an individual would achieve this connectedness was conceptualized differently by family members from Generation 1 when compared to members of the other generational groups. The two most striking distinctions found related to the differential importance each generational group gave to either the relational component of cultural connectedness or to the knowledge component, and for Generational groups 2-4, whether the main intention behind the involvement in cultural activities was to be relational or to demonstrate to others that they were culturally connected.

To illustrate, participants from Generation 1 simply considered themselves and others to be culturally connected if they were from an Indian family, had significant relationships with other Indian people (either in the city or in the tribal community), and socialized with Indian friends, family, or community members. Involvement in cultural activities, such as powwows and Indian community gatherings, provided opportunities to be social, and to support and maintain one's relationships with other Indian people.

Participants from Generation 2 were much like their parents in their belief that family relationships and social interactions with other Indians comprised the foundation of cultural connectedness. In this generational group, however, members were aware that

maintaining these relationships was more difficult in an urban area. And, when members of this generational group were younger, they had internalized powerful discourses about the threat of cultural loss posed by life in an urban area and about their responsibility to be a part of cultural revival and revitalization efforts. Accompanying these discourses was another important message—that increasing one’s knowledge of culture and engaging in culture-focused activities was a way to confront the negative impacts of the urban context and stem cultural loss. Thus, among Generation 2 participants, the expectation that one possessed knowledge of Indian culture and history became positioned alongside relationships with family and other Indians as equally important components that defined cultural connectedness.

However, for Generation 2s, the knowledge component had a highly relational nature; for example, as when members of this generational group saw that learning occurred by being passed directly from one family or community member to another, rather than through reading or formal educational venues such as classes or seminars. Likewise, the cultural involvement and activities that many in this generational group identified as most important were concerned with relational behaviors, such as respect, generosity, and caring for elders.

It was among Generation 3 participants that some individuals began to express that they either did not feel very culturally connected or that they could not become culturally connected. At first glance, this was surprising in light of the fact that they all met the definition of being culturally connected held by participants in Generations 1 and 2. However, upon further exploration, what was found to prevent many of these Generation 3 and 4 participants from feeling as culturally connected as they thought they should be was their belief that they would be unable to acquire the extensive amount of information and knowledge about American Indians that they felt they should possess. At its most extreme, a number of participants reported that they must not only know at an in-depth level the history, traditions, and practices of their own tribe, but also have at least some familiarity in these areas as regards several other tribes as well. In addition, these individuals considered connectedness to require knowledge of Indian history as it pertained to the relationship of tribes to the United States government as well as major historical events. It was also important to them to possess knowledge of Indian law and political and social issues affecting their own and other tribes, as well as indigenous people in other parts of the world.

Consequently, among Generation 3 and 4 participants, another shift in the balance between the three structures of cultural connectedness had occurred. For this group, an individual’s level of cultural knowledge defined connectedness equally or even more so than did his or her relationships and interactions with other Indians or involvement in cultural activities. This shift may, in large part, be explained by the fact that many Generation 3s and 4s identified that it had become extremely difficult to connect with

other Indian people in the urban environment. Moreover, many had less time to be relational with others, as they strove to meet their lives' demands and expectations.

At the same time, these individuals related that it was becoming easier to learn about culture, because forms of learning not available to prior generations are now commonly available and readily accessible. First, Generation 3s and 4s identified a growing collection of books and other materials that they considered to provide accurate and legitimate information about culture; thus, reading had become a more acceptable way to learn about Indian culture than it was for Generation 2 participants. Second, some Native learning was seen to be moving from individual and family settings to group and public venues. Participants from Generations 3 and 4 identified that they have numerous opportunities to learn about culture that are provided by Native people, such as through community programs, at seminars and conferences, or in college courses in Native American studies or Native languages.

Comparing the four generations of urban-based American Indians who participated in this study, marked generational differences in what constituted cultural connectedness were apparent. Members of the younger generational groups expressed that in order to feel that they were culturally connected, they not only had to be a member of a family that continued to identify itself as American Indian, but also must (a) seek out, develop, and nurture social relationships with other Indian people in a setting in which American Indians are a very small percentage of the population and may be widely dispersed geographically; (b) be actively involved in culture-focused activities, again in a milieu where these types of activities may be either few in number and/or difficult to locate; and (c) be intentionally involved in a process of seeking out and learning very specialized and detailed knowledge of American Indian culture, history, politics, laws, and social issues. Thus, awareness of the enormity of achieving these three elements had left a number of younger participants feeling that they might never be culturally connected, or at least would likely be less culturally connected than they wished to be.

Utility for Social Work Practice

This study has contributed experience-based knowledge regarding how a group of urban-based American Indians develop and maintain a sense of being connected to Native culture that can begin to inform future social work research, as well as social work curriculum content, and perhaps most importantly, culturally-responsive practice with this population. A thorough understanding of the generational differences in cultural connectedness outlined in this paper is a critical step in building the knowledge and skills base that will help social workers and other professionals to design and provide services that are culturally relevant and responsive to the urban-based Indian populations with which they work.

Cultural diversity or cultural competency trainings commonly address American Indians solely from a reservation perspective. In addition, American Indian clients are very likely to receive services from non-Indian workers (Pierce & Pierce, 1996). However, most workers report that they have little, if any, knowledge of Indian culture, the experiences of Indian people, or the context within which they live (Mindell, Vidal de Haymes, & Francisco, 2003). Engagement with Indian clients is reported by many workers to be “difficult,” and workers typically report that they have no knowledge or understanding of where to “start” with an Indian client in establishing rapport (Lucero, 2007). Workers also typically report that they have no knowledge of community or cultural resources that are available to support Indian clients.

Many Indian clients, in turn, have reported to the author that often they have difficulty working with non-Indian service providers because these individuals are unable to understand their cultural experiences, worldview, and value system. Given that each side in the helping relationship is reporting a disconnection from the other side, and that lack of cultural understanding is being identified as playing a role in this, it is vitally important that social workers increase their knowledge of urban Indian individuals, families, and communities. Increased cultural awareness and understanding is a step toward enhancing engagement and better supporting positive change through a strong helping relationship between worker and client.

Cultural connectedness is relevant not only in clinical or direct practice settings, but also in community practice aspects of social work, most specifically, program and service development and delivery. For example, the findings of this study, although not generalizable to all urban-based American Indians, should cause developers of programs for American Indian youth and young adults to consider how relevant these programs will be if they lack the knowledge component described by participants in this study or if they focus solely on the relational components important to older generational groups. Thus, it is essential in developing culturally appropriate programs and services for urban-based American Indians that consideration is given to the generational differences found in this study, to how urban-based American Indians connect to their tribal cultures and

the inter-tribal culture of many urban areas, and to the effects of the urban context on their conceptualization of cultural connectedness.

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