

# Racial Microaggressions Experienced by Native Americans



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## Method

This study used a qualitative research method to clarify the various forms of microaggressions experienced by Native Americans and their impact upon the recipients. The approach used in this study was designed based on the basic model used to identify microaggressions experienced by Asian Americans of Sue, Bucci, Lin, Nadal and Torino (2007). Data was collected through the use of focus groups, which served to capture the richness of participant's experiences through interactive social interchanges where meaning is co-constructed in social groups (Krueger, 1998). The qualitative approach of using focus groups to collect in-depth information on a relatively unexplored construct has been found to be effective in numerous studies (Sain-Germain, Bassford & Montano, 1993; Seal, Bogart & Ehrhardt, 1998; Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar, 2004) and used successfully to study racial microaggressions experienced by Asian Americans (Sue et al., 2007), African Americans (Constantine, 2007; Sue et al., 2008) and Latinos (Solorzano, 1998). This study focused specifically on experiences of subtle racial bias directed towards Native Americans through the description, discussion and classification of microaggressive experiences.

## Participants

As the ideal size for effective focus group analysis ranges between 4-12 participants (Seal, Bogart & Ehrhardt, 1998), we targeted developing focus group sizes in this range. Each participant in one of three different focus groups had to identify as Native American and agree that racism and discrimination against people of color (particularly Native Americans) exists in the United States. Group one was comprised of two adult women and two adult men who were all members of the Choctaw Nation. Group two was comprised of eight college students between the age of 19 and 25 who came from tribes in New Mexico and Oklahoma. Group three was comprised of five faculty and staff of a Midwestern university. A total of 17 adults participated in the study, 12 females and 5 males, who all identified as Native American.

## Conclusion

While this study has limitations with its generalizability due to sample size, gender and tribal representation it certainly offers insight as to the pervasive nature and types of microaggressions Native Americans experience daily. Because of the unique historical experiences of Native people, they too, like Asian Americans, African Americans and Latinos seem to experience microaggressions that are more associated with their particular group than others such as alcoholism, undeserving of assistance, laziness, not educable, and a minimizing of the affects of genocide, removal from ancestral lands and destruction of established, viable cultures and lifestyles. By identifying contemporary forms of microaggressive behaviors toward Native American people, we hope to better inform others and begin the process of bringing difficult dialogues to the forefront of much needed healing process.

## Resulting Microaggressive Themes

### LAZY

•Native Americans are not motivated, have no ambition or drive to 'succeed'. They often appear to be apathetic, indifferent to the majority culture, unconcerned and are disinclined to move quickly or to be active.

•There's an overwhelming idea that Native people, "live off the government" e.g. food, healthcare, and education are "free". The microaggressor gives little thought to what was taken away or what was sacrificed/lost in the historical and government imposed process of assimilation.

➤ "She said she deserved that scholarship and like Indians didn't. I think that's a big one. That Indians are just handed all this money and they just sit on their butts all day long and do nothing."

### UNTRUSTWORTHY

•Native Americans will lie, cheat and/or steal if you trust them with caretaking responsibilities or jobs, therefore do not entrust them with responsibilities.

•They will not be dependable or show up on time; they will be deceitful about the amount of hours worked; they may find covert/devious ways of deceiving you out of time or money.

➤ People become suspicious or think you are lying when you take time to think about your answer to a question in order to give a good response.

### UNDESERVING OF ASSISTANCE

•Native Americans are undeserving because they are 'lazy', they don't contribute to larger society, they are too savage/primitive, 'give the assistance to those who are "more" deserving, to those who contribute'.

•They obviously do not understand the "American" way of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps", because if they did they wouldn't continue to live in poverty.

➤ "I'm giving you guys business. I'm helping pay back something we took from you"...[and] as he was leaving, "You think this is so special, we've already paid back everything we owe you guys." (a casino customer to a Native American casino worker)

➤ "Or the we get everything for free we get our housing our education for free when what you said earlier is true we paid that price a long time ago when our lands were taken away from us."

### PRIMITIVE

•Native Americans are treated as if they are not only unfamiliar with the catchments of modernity, but as if they are basically primitive in nature and thus clueless about modern technologies and constructs.

➤ "Well a lot of people when they think Native American they think, Indians on horses. They think tepees. They think igloos, they think, you know. . . they have very old, old perceptions."

➤ "Whenever I always bring out that I am Native American, it all of a sudden just stops. It goes from "what do you think about those reservations in Oklahoma? Do they have stores? Do they have vehicles?"

### PRONE TO ALCOHOLISM

•Native Americans are perceived to be much more prone to alcoholism than others. This appears to be said most often whenever the microaggressor is speaking of how he or she believes that a Native American is incapable or irrelevant. This stereotype appears to be so deep and strong that it is often used to dismiss Native Americans with phrases such as "just a bunch of drunk Indians".

➤ "I've heard a lot of people make fun of my tribe ...as well as other Native American tribes for being alcoholics so and that's very stereotypical."

### POOR COMMUNICATORS

•Slow verbal responses may imply to the microaggressor that a lie is being developed/told, that they are not being listened to or that the Native speaker does not know the answer.

➤ "...My grandfather ...as a lot of ...the older generations, he does the same thing[as me], he sits back and listens first before he says anything and that's if he says anything at all but he's very smart, he's brilliant."

➤ "Then we have to balance that out when we come to school because then you're grade is based on participation then you have to force yourself to say something"

➤ Yeah I had a boss one time say, "You're so stoic." He said ...he was looking for immediate feedback to his suggestion. ... and I was listening to [him speak], and...he goes, "Well what do you think?" and I said, "I'm thinking about it". Later, as we got to know each other better he was saying that I appeared to be a very stoic Indian, and that he didn't know where I was with his idea. And I said, "Well, I was listening to you."

### UNEDUCATED AND INCAPABLE

•Native Americans are presumed to be uneducated or at least undereducated and thus not worthy of playing an active role in decision-making nor handling anything complex or challenging.

➤ "I notice that if the topic of education comes up they'll ask a lot of other people in the room but when it gets to me, maybe the only brown guy in the room,...they usually don't ever ask what my educational background is."

➤ "Because you are Native American, that's how you got into college, not because of how smart or intelligent you are but rather your minority status."

➤ "They think that sometimes I am not qualified that its just my race that gets me with my position of my job."

### EXPERIENCES ARE NOT VALID— UNDESERVING OF A VOICE

•Microaggressions that imply that the assimilation process was 'successful' and should be appreciated or overlooked.

➤ "When we talk about Native American mascots, and people say, 'Oh what are you talking about? We're not discriminating against you, we're honoring you', and trying to make us think that we're thinking wrong or that they're trying to honor us in some weird way."

➤ People assume that many Native people are Latina/o or Asian American instead of considering the possibility of them being Native American

### INVISIBLE OR SECOND CLASS

•Experiences of being invisible or second class occur through denial of certain jobs, non-verbal behavior and experiences of being ignored or overlooked.

➤ "My education level is higher than my boss's and I know that I have more work experience and I know that I'm not at [the same] level [as he]. And so there is nothing really subtle about that."

➤ "You just notice these little things, like they'll try to get ahead of you...if you're in line or trying to get in line, and they think "...you should be behind me."

➤ "The churches that I went to that were predominantly White, I didn't feel comfortable there, I didn't feel like my hand was shaken, nobody talked to me. Well, the pastor would talk to me. And it felt scary, and a place of worship shouldn't feel that way"