

Confusing Culture: What is the Value of Self-Reported Race Data?

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Introduction

In a NIMH funded mental health services research project in the rural Midwest (n = 837), an unexpected proportion of participants (6%) self-identified as American Indian. Two questions arose out of this occurrence: 1) What are participants' level of identification with American Indian culture? 2) What impact did being American Indian have on participants' mental health services? Of the 52 individuals who self-identified as American Indian, 14 face-to-face interviews were completed before reaching thematic saturation. Participants' American Indian ancestry was several generations removed. None of the participants had any particular knowledge or experience with American Indian culture. Few had informed their mental health provider of their heritage or felt that this information would affect their mental health services. The following are the explanations and understandings of these individuals in their own words.

Family History

"Yeah, my great, not my great, well I guess it would be my great. My grandmother was Cherokee. I believe she was full blooded. Or at least that's my understanding of what my aunt said and my momma said. There's Indian on my father's side, but I couldn't say whether it was my grandmother that was full blooded or not. She was already gone before I was born." - Thelma

"I have a great grandmother. She's an Indian. She's, I think she's Cherokee. And my great grandfather is part another Indian tribe. They was already dead when I was alive. My grandmother, my mother's mother told me about that." - Debra

"One fourth Cherokee, maybe more. ... Well I've got a great-great grandfather from Texas. He was an Indian chief. And I've got another great grandfather he's a Mexican Indian." - Kathleen

"My mother's mother mother was a full Cherokee Indian. Then my daddy's daddy's mother was a Chickasaw Indian." - Cynthia

Cultural Identification

"Yes. I mean somewhat with my dad I did. I'd go through hunting through the woods. He does Boy Scouts where he does the Indian ceremonial dance, Order of the Arrow. And he and I would go through the woods looking for arrowheads." - Christina

"Well I don't know. My cousin June, she visited some reservation and she was into the turquoise jewelry and all that sort of thing. There's a lot of family members in my family have psychic ability. We feel that that goes back to the Indian side of the family." - Alesia

"When we would watch cowboys and Indians [my mother] always let us know we were on the Indian side." - Alesia

Participant: "It's hard to explain. I guess I just have the genetic gene of it. I don't know. I'm not real sure."
Interviewer: "But you don't really feel a cultural connection?"
Participant: "No, no." - Michelle



Greta



Edie



Paul



William



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Impact on Mental Health Care

I: "And even in this good relationship [with your therapist] you didn't talk about your Native American heritage?"

P: "No, I had a lot going on right then too." - Greta

I: "Do your case manager or clinician know you're American Indian? Did you tell them?"

P: "No, I never did do that." - Harry

"I haven't told them myself. It doesn't seem important." - Pamela

"When I first met [my case manager], I'm sure she has Indian blood in her family. I mean she's tall, black raven hair and all that. I just felt I could trust her.... We've talked about [me being American Indian]. It's been a part of it but not the main part. We've always concentrated on getting business done: certain aspects of depression; getting me on the right medications. But yes it has played a part because, like I say, when I first met her, I go on first impressions, I always have, and my first impression of her was very good, very good.... I've never asked her point blank if she has any Indian blood coming in her family but I can tell. I can tell." - Paul

"Not really. A lot of things I try to tell these people they just say, "Well, you're delusional. You don't know what you're talking about." But see they don't know. They only know what they see and what people have told them. They don't know nothing about me. They don't know where I've been or what I've done or nothing." - William

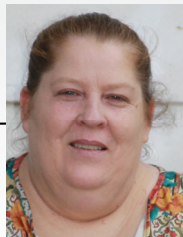
Conclusions

Since the 1960s the US Census has shown a consistently greater increase in the American Indian population "than can be accounted for by deaths, births, immigration, and improvements in census coverage" (Council of Economic Advisers for the President's Initiative on Race, 1996, p. 4). This increase can be partially attributed to ethnic pride movements and greater acceptance of multi-ethnic identities but the increasing number of individuals identifying as American Indian while lacking a cultural connection has resulted in tensions around identity authenticity in the American Indian community (Nagel, 2000).

Most researchers using self-reported race data assume that racial identity is imbued with cultural meaning. Our findings, in addition to previous research, suggest that American Indians are currently a racial group for whom this can not be assumed. If investigators continue to use self-reported race data this may result in misjudgments about health disparities experienced by American Indians. While it is objectionable that incorrect assumptions may be made about non-culturally identified American Indians it is particularly troubling to realize that information from this group may obfuscate vital findings for individuals who live with the more proximate and immediate impacts of belonging to American Indian families and communities. We recommend that researchers present findings related to American Indians with caution. In studies where the researchers hope to target American Indian participants it may be beneficial to expand standard racial checklists to include additional questions gauging the level of participant cultural identification.



Geanene



Alesia



Kathleen



Cynthia



Thelma



Christina



Harry



Debra