Exploring Indigenous Identities of Urban American Indian Youth of the Southwest

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Abstract

This study examined the indigenous identities of urban American Indian youth using measures related to three theoretical dimensions of Markstrom's identity model: identification (tribal and ethnic heritage), connection (reservation ties), and involvement in traditional cultural practices and spirituality. Data came from self-administered questionnaires completed by 142 urban American Indian middle school students in a southwestern metropolitan area with the largest urban American Indian population in the United States. Using both quantitative and qualitative measures, descriptive statistics showed most youth were connected to all three dimensions of indigenous identity. Hierarchical regression analyses showed that youth with the strongest sense of American Indian ethnic identity had native fathers and were heavily involved in traditional cultural practices and spirituality. Although urban American Indians may face challenges in maintaining their tribal identities, the youth in this study appeared strongly moored to their native indigenous heritage. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords

Although the majority of American Indians—over 60%–now live in urban rather than tribal or rural areas, relatively little is known about the cultural identities of urban American Indian youth. This rapidly growing population is quite diverse, reflecting differences by region, tribal background, and family migration history. Urban American Indians share some of the challenges facing other ethnic minority and immigrant populations in the United States who navigate complex paths between their cultures of origin and mainstream society. Unlike other ethnic minority peoples in the United States, however, many urban American Indians live with a unique history of colonization that carries into current lived experiences. In addition, many retain deep connections to reservation or tribal communities within U.S. borders that help preserve and sustain their cultures and the roots of their identities. Research on the indigenous identities of urban American Indian youth is important not only to trace identity processes but also to advance understanding of how to promote the health and well-being of these youth. There is ample evidence that strong American Indian indigenous identity can be a source of resilience for American Indian youth, contributing to

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their academic success and well-being (Lester, 1999; Walters, Simoni, & Evans-Campbell, 2002; Whitbeck, Hoyt, McMorris, Chen, & Stubben, 2001).

This study explores how a group of American Indian youth from five public middle schools in the Phoenix, Arizona, metropolitan area described their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and connections to their indigenous heritage. Following Markstrom's (2010) model of indigenous identity, the study examines several groups of identity-related variables, how well these variables predict strength of American Indian ethnic identity, and how prominently these variables appear in the youths' own open-ended descriptions of the sources of their indigenous identities.

American Indian Identity

Much prior research on American Indian identity has been framed around the concepts of enculturation and bicultural competence. Enculturation involves socialization into the values and norms of one's indigenous culture (Zimmerman, Ramirez, Washienko, Walter, & Dyer, 1994), while bicultural competence is "the ability to function effectively in two cultures without losing one's cultural identity or choosing one culture over the other" (LaFromboise, Albright, & Harris, 2010, p. 69). Research on biculturalism for American Indians has paralleled some of John Berry's work which views acculturation as a multidirectional cultural change process that is propelled by intercultural contact and resulting changes in attitudes, norms, behaviors, knowledge, and identity (Berry, 2003, 2007). The four quadrants of Berry's acculturation typology—representing those who adopt only their origin culture (separatist), the host culture alone (acculturated), both cultures (bicultural), or neither (marginalized)—has been incorporated to some degree in measures of bicultural orientations developed specifically for American Indians (Moran, Fleming, Somervall, & Manson, 1999). However, the models for American Indians emphasize the possibility of developing a deep connection to native heritage through enculturation while learning to navigate successfully within the culture of the dominant society (Moran et al., 1999). Emerging models of indigenous identity recognize how enculturation and bicultural competence are related and not mutually exclusive (Markstrom, 2010).

Numerous researchers have reported that a strong connection to and understanding of one's tribal traditions may support the well-being of American Indians in general, and adolescents more specifically. Walters et al. (2002) suggest that enculturation may buffer the negative effects of historical trauma and experiences of discrimination on health and mental health in American Indian women. An enculturation process that connects American Indians to their tribal cultures has been identified as a source of resilience that improves academic performance (Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, & LaFromboise, 2001), lowers the risk of suicide (Lester, 1999), decreases susceptibility to substance abuse, and improves treatment for it (Brady, 1995; Gray & Nye, 2001; Herman-Stahl, Spencer, & Duncan, 2003; May & Moran, 1995; Moncher, Holden, & Trimble, 1997; Spicer, Novins, Mitchell, & Beals, 2003; Stubben, 2001; Whitbeck, Hoyt, McMorris, et al., 2001; Zimmerman et al., 1994).

However, researchers have reported conflicting findings regarding the relative benefits of enculturation versus bicultural competence. Some report that, compared to those who are less biculturally competent, American Indians who have adapted to the dominant "White" culture while maintaining a close identification with their tribal culture are less likely to turn to alcohol and other substances for coping, and are more likely to turn to their tribal cultural beliefs to cope with adversity (Garrett & Carroll, 2000; Whitbeck, Hoyt, McMorris, et al., 2001). Bicultural competence has also been associated with positive mental health outcomes, especially for urban American Indian youth (LaFromboise et al., 2010). On the other hand, LaFromboise, Trimble, and Mohatt (1990) and Schinke et al. (1988) suggest that

American Indian youth may use alcohol and drugs to cope with increased pressure to fit within both their dominant and minority cultures. Moreover, at least for American Indian adults living on reservations, there is evidence that biculturalism is associated with increased risk of severe substance abuse while stronger enculturation, either pan-Indian or tribally specific, lowers that risk (Herman-Stahl et al., 2003).

Urban American Indian Identity

There are a number of reasons to expect that urban American Indian identities are complex and diverse. Particularly in large urban settings with rapidly growing American Indian populations, American Indian youth may differ widely in tribal background, family histories of reservation life, forced relocation and migration, and intermarriage across tribes and nonnative ethnic groups (Moran et al., 1999). These differences not only produce variations in the complexity and diffuseness of their identities as American Indians but also present opportunities to recognize and sustain cultural heritages based upon common values. For example, urban American Indians often have shared experiences due to their ethnic minority status, such as similar acculturation related stresses, family legacies of forced migration, encounters with discrimination, and reactions from nonnatives who do not differentiate across tribes. Their relatively small proportional representation in urban schools may encourage formation of heterogeneous American Indian social networks that cross tribal lines, and promote sharing and mixing of cultures. They also share the experience of having to live simultaneously in more than one cultural world (Moran et al., 1999). They operate daily in social settings where American Indian cultural traditions may not be practiced regularly and social interaction with nonnatives is pervasive. Unlike youth from other racial or ethnic groups, American Indian youth may be citizens of two sovereign nations, their tribal nation and the United States. They may have multiple tribal affiliations or belong to one tribe but live on a reservation or in a community where another tribe is predominant. These experiences may heighten struggles between American Indian intertribal, traditional values and those of the dominant culture (Stubben, 2001). Prior research has emphasized that identity for urban American Indians is inextricably interwoven into their complex relationships to kin and to other urban American Indians who are brought together principally through Indian-run organizations, other non-Indian organizations, and significant cultural events (Ramirez, 2001).

Despite the cultural differences among urban American Indian youth whose families come from different tribes and reservation communities, these youth may come to share a sense of their common "Indianess." Such "pantraditional" or "pan-Indian" concepts—resonating across different Indian cultures—have been used to create prevention programs that target people from multiple tribal backgrounds (Garrett & Carroll, 2000). It is unclear to what extent urban American Indian youth identify themselves in "pan-Indian" rather than specifically tribal ways. Walters' (1995) stage model of Urban American Indian Identity (UAII) attitudes suggests that a pan-Indian identity occurs in the externalization stage, which is associated with feelings of anger and an inability to integrate one's American Indian identity with dominant culture. On the other hand, a tribal focus is associated with the actualization stage in which one achieves bicultural competence, the ability to operate in mainstream culture as well as one's culture of origin.

Existing theoretical approaches to understanding the identities of urban American Indians have emphasized multiple sources, the complexity of the process, and the importance of context. Walters' (1995) Urban American Indian Identity (UAII) model focused on identity as composed of multiple cognitive and affective dimensions including self-identity, group identity, urban context, and the historical relationship of the individual with the dominant culture. According to this approach, urban American Indians achieve an integrated identity as they experience attitude shifts in their awareness and incorporation of tribal/cultural

values, language, cultural knowledge, and spirituality (Walters, 1999). Walters presented a stage model that is valuable for understanding urban American Indian identity attitudes as fluid, multidimensional, and impacted by both past and current factors related to colonization.

American Indian Adolescent Identity

Building on Walters' model, Markstrom's (2010) conceptual model for American Indian adolescent identity articulates components of identity operating at local, national, and global levels (Markstrom, 2010). The local level of identity in this model, used synonymously with ethnic or cultural identity, was developed based on a review of the existing literature and is made up of three components—identification, connection, and culture/spirituality. Each of these three components is composed of subdimensions that, taken together, overlap and are integrated to form an overall identity. The subdimensions of the identification component include clan or tribe, self-perception, and blood quantum (or percent native heritage). Within the component of connection, kinship/clan/tribe, geneaology/ancestors, and land/place are identified as subdimensions in the model. And finally, the third component of culture/spirituality is comprised of language, history/origin stories, world view/values, and beliefs/practices (Markstrom, 2010).

This conceptual model, at the local level, provides a useful framework for understanding the current study and the interplay of elements of identity. Markstrom's local level of identity is framed around insights from Phinney's (1992) work on ethnic identity, a key developmental task of adolescence. At the individual level, ethnic identity is characterized by the way that youth interpret and understand their ethnicity and most importantly, the degree to which they see themselves as a member of their ethnic group. Phinney proposed that ethnic identity results from exploration of what it means to associate with one's ethnic group, such as through participation in ethnic group specific activities, traditional cultural events, and an interest in family ancestry. As youth acquire a sense of belonging and knowledge about the cultural nuances that are unique to their ethnic group, they also develop strong attachment, affinity, and commitment to the ethnic group and an increased sense of ethnic pride. Ethnic identity achievement can be viewed as the culmination of this process that involves creating cultural meaning, making a firm commitment to one's ethnic group, and achieving a stable comfort level with one's ethnic background (Umaña-Taylor & Alfaro, 2006).

The three components of Markstrom's model of local identity have emerged repeatedly in past research on the core aspects of identity, particularly those that can enhance well-being and serve as protective factors for a range of American Indian groups. Key factors associated with American Indian youth successfully transitioning out of foster care include spirituality (including language and connection to elders), tribal affiliation (including traditional practices and ceremonies), and storytelling (Long, Downs, Gilette, & Kills In Sight, 2006). Interventions in the areas of HIV prevention (Duran et al., 2010) and substance abuse (Gone, 2009) have built on the protective nature of connection to tribal culture and traditions to increase engagement and enhance program outcomes. Similarly, approaches to assessment and intervention have been developed to draw on the strengths of key identity components, such as spirituality (Hodge & Limb, 2009).

In addition, the Markstrom (2010) model recognizes multiple nonindigenous cultural influences through a layer of identity operating within a national context. This layer incorporates the impact of colonial oppression, historical trauma, and pressures to develop bicultural, multicultural, or hybrid identities, the latter constructed from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic subcultures that indigenous youth are increasingly able to access through technology (Markstrom, 2010). The national level of the Markstrom model is addressed in this study through an examination of bicultural identification.

The Current Study

The site for the current study, the Phoenix metropolitan area, overtook Los Angeles in 2010 as having the largest urban population of native residents identifying exclusively as American Indian or Alaska Natives, just under 100,000 (2.4%) of the area's 4.1 million inhabitants (National Urban Indian Family Coalition, 2008; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011). Surrounding Phoenix, the state of Arizona is home to 23 federally recognized tribes. The American Indian residents of Phoenix report many different tribal affiliations; the largest single tribe represented are the Navajo/Diné, whose tribal nation is the largest Indian jurisdiction in the United States in population and area.

This study has three broad objectives: (1) to systematically explore the relevance of the components of Markstrom's model of local identity to a group of urban American Indian adolescents; (2) to test how well these components explain the achievement of a strong sense of American Indian ethnic identity; (3) and to assess how these components are represented in the language that these youth use to describe their indigenous heritage.

Considering the identity challenges facing urban Indian communities and the multicultural influences impinging on youth from these communities, we expected considerable variation in the extent to which youth in the sample would report identification with the various components in the Markstrom model. In the second study objective, we expected that variables representing each of the three components of the Markstrom local identity model would be salient predictors of the strength of indigenous ethnic identity. Given that the youth in the sample were at a very early stage in the ethnic identity achievement process, we expected great variability in their open-ended descriptions of the sources of their ethnic identity, but primarily within the categories outlined by the Markstrom model.

Identity for adolescents is dynamic, evolving, multidimensional, and complex, and therefore difficult to capture in a cross-sectional analysis. American Indian identity can be uniquely interpreted by each of the youth as a pan-Indian identity, a tribal identity, or some other form that allows a young person to make sense of the interconnected elements of a cultural heritage that is both rooted in ancestry, tradition, and history, and under threat. Thus the purpose of this study is not to categorize the adolescents nor identify stages of identity development. Instead, it explores a range of sources of identity that may influence how youth view themselves as American Indians in an urban setting. When asked to describe what made them American Indian, one of the students in this study wrote, "Because I am." This simple statement illustrates the efforts of these young people to not only lay claim to their indigenous identities but also the way that identity is often difficult to unpack and put words to. It is this complexity that the current study has sought to better understand within a structured framework.

Method

The data for this study come from the pilot phase and randomized control trial (RCT) of a multistage project designed to develop and test a culturally grounded substance use prevention program for urban American Indian youth. Self-administered questionnaires were completed by urban American Indian youth in five middle schools in the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years. The current analysis is based on pretest questionnaires that were administered before a version of the prevention curriculum was delivered to the youth. There were 36 youth who participated in the pilot and 106 who participated in the RCT. The pilot and RCT groups did not differ significantly on age, gender, or identity-related variables examined in this analysis.

The student respondents for this study were American Indian youth in urban middle schools from two school districts of the Phoenix metropolitan area. The youth were identified to the school as American Indians by their parents at the time of school enrollment. The students attended voluntary programs for American Indian youth focused on academic enrichment, programs that were delivered during regular school hours by a native facilitator provided by their school district or by the largest social and educational service agency serving American Indians in the metropolitan area. Official school district reports indicate that youth of American Indian background account for between 5% and 11% of enrolled students.

The study followed policies for protecting human subjects of the researchers' university IRB, of the students' schools and school districts, and of the social service agency sponsoring the academic enrichment program. Every American Indian student in the academic enrichment programs within the study site schools was invited to participate in the study, both in the pilot and RCT phases of the original study. Active parental and student consent were obtained, which included a letter sent home to parents/guardians. Every effort was made to obtain consent and assent in a noncoercive manner. For those with parental consent, at the time of the survey, students were given the option to return an unsigned assent form and blank questionnaire without drawing attention to their choice not to participate. Survey proctors from the research team (native graduate students) administered a 1-hour written questionnaire in the classrooms where the academic enrichment programs for native students were held. Students were informed that the survey was part of a university research project, their participation was voluntary, and their answers were confidential. Consenting students who were absent on the initial survey date, or were unable to finish within the allotted time, were able to complete the survey in school within the subsequent 2-week period. A total of 142 youth—over 95% of all native students enrolled in the academic enrichment programs—had parental consent and completed at least some parts of the questionnaire. All of the youth were between the ages of 11 and 15 with a mean age of 12.5.

Measures

The questionnaire included measures of the three components of Markstrom's model of local identity. Measures of the "identification" component included tribal backgrounds, parental ethnic heritage, and ethnic self-identification. The "connection" component was measured through ties to a reservation or tribal community. Measures of the "cultural/spiritual" component included level of spirituality, exposure to and proficiency in a tribal language/s, and involvement in American Indian cultural practices. There were additional measures of bicultural orientations and strength of ethnic identity (see Table 1). Also included was an open-ended question that asked the youth to identify in their own words the key characteristic(s) of what constituted their American Indian heritage.

Tribal Background—Respondents used a checklist to indicate their American Indian tribe and/or the multitribal reservation communities to which they belonged. The largest tribes in Arizona were included on the checklist as well as spaces to detail any other tribal affiliation.

Ethnic heritage and self-identification: Multiracial and multiethnic identity was assessed with another checklist where students could acknowledge a non-Indian ethnic or racial heritage (African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, Mexican American or Chicano, Hispanic or Latino, White, Other, None of these) that also described them in addition to their American Indian ancestry. Using these same categories plus "American Indian," students indicated the ethnicity that "best" described their mother and father. To assess whether respondents had adopted multiethnic or blended identities, a single item asked if they considered themselves "American Indian only," "an equal member" of multiple ethnic

or racial groups, "more American Indian" than other ethnicities, "more a member of (another ethnic/racial) group than American Indian," or not "a part of any of these groups."

Reservation Connections—Students indicated whether they had been born on an Indian reservation in-state or out-of-state, whether they had ever lived on a reservation (and if so, for how many years), and how often they visited a reservation (daily, weekly, monthly, several times yearly, once a year, less often, never). The latter item was reverse coded to indicate more frequent visiting. They also checked whether their mother, father, siblings, grandparents, or other family members lived currently on a reservation.

Spirituality—Respondents were asked, "How involved are you in private American Indian spiritual activities?" "How important is being spiritual to you?" and "Are spiritual values a part of your life?" These items had Likert-type scaled responses (1 = *Not at all*, 2 = *A little*, 3 = *Some*, 4 = *A lot*). An additional item asked, "How important is it for you to follow traditional American Indian beliefs?" (1 = *Not at all*, 2 = *Not very*, 3 = *Somewhat*, 4 = *Very important*). These items were combined into a mean scale (α = .83).

Language—Respondents were asked how often an American Indian tribal language has been spoken in their home (1 = *Rarely*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Often*, 4 = *Almost always*). In addition, they reported the extent to which they can understand their tribal language when it is spoken to them, and speak a tribal language (1 = *Not at all*, 2 = *A little*, 3 = *Some*, 4 = *A lot*). These three items were combined into a mean scale (α = .76).

Cultural traditions and practices: Questionnaire items reflecting involvement in American Indian cultural practices included a set of 11 specific ceremonies or traditions that are widely practiced across native communities of the southwest (memorials/feasts, powwows/dances, giveaways, healing ceremonies, sweats, religious events, naming ceremonies, talking circles, spiritual running, drumming groups, sacred tobacco use). Degree of involvement in each practice was assessed on a 4-point ordinal scale (1 = *Not at all*, 2 = *A little*, 3 = *Some*, 4 = *A lot*). The 11 items formed a reliable mean scale assessing the degree of involvement in these practices collectively (α = .90). The items were also examined as a count of how many different practices the respondent had participated in, irrespective of the degree of involvement.

Cultural orientations: To assess the overall cultural orientation of the respondents, we drew upon two items from the Bicultural Ethnic Identity Scale [BEIS] (Moran et al., 1999). Developed explicitly for American Indians, this scale is designed to measure the cultural alignment with native and nonnative ways of living. The two items we used asked about the respondent's personal value orientation: "Do you live by or follow the American Indian way of life" and "Do you live by or follow the White or Anglo way of life." Response options were 1 = *Not at all*, 2 = *A little*, 3 = *Some*, 4 = *A lot*. The remaining items in the BEIS scale were not used because they did not directly assess the respondent's own current value orientation, but referred instead to how much the respondent's family follows each way of life, or asked the respondent to project which way of life they will follow as adults. Each of the two retained items were dichotomized by collapsing the first two and the last two response options, and then cross-classified to sort respondents into a fourfold typology: those following both ways of life (i.e., answering "some" or "a lot" to both items), the American Indian way ("some" or "a lot" to this item only), the White or Anglo way ("some" or "a lot" to this item only), and neither way ("not at all" or "a little" to both items).

Strength of American Indian ethnic identity: The overall strength of American Indian identity was measured with items forming Phinney's (1992) Multi-group Ethnic Identity

Measure [MEIM]. The 11 original scale items were adapted to refer specifically to American Indian identity, including "I have tried to learn more about my American Indian background, such as its history and customs"; "I have often talked to other people, like my parents, to learn more about my American Indian background"; "I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly American Indians"; "I have a clear sense of my American Indian background and what it means to me"; "I think about how my life will be affected because I am American Indian"; "I am happy to be American Indian"; "I feel like I really belong to an American Indian community"; "I am involved in American Indian customs, such as food, music, or celebrations"; "I understand pretty well what it means to be American Indian"; "I feel strongly attached to my American Indian community"; and "I feel good about my American Indian background." Responses to the items were coded 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, 4 = *Strongly agree*). The items were combined into a mean scale (α = .92). The items were also examined after constructing two subscales that are designed to distinguish theoretically distinct aspects of identity development processes. The first five items form a subscale measuring ethnic identity exploration and achievement, or active engagement with one's ethnic identity (α = .81). The remaining six items form a subscale measuring attachment to one's ethnic identity (α = .90).

Open-ended identity descriptors: In addition to the close-ended questions assessing cultural identities, an open-ended question was included to explore the youth's language and categories for describing their cultural identities. Included only in the RCT survey, this question asked them to "list three things about yourself that make you an American Indian." The responses to these prompts were extracted from questionnaires verbatim and then coded by multiple research team members into thematic categories. Because some respondents listed only one or two rather than three responses, the distributions of responses into these categories were analyzed in two ways: examining only the response listed first, and examining all responses but after weighting so that each respondent's collective set of answers—whether they listed one, two, or three—contributed equally to the distribution.

Analysis

Exploratory data analysis techniques were employed to investigate how these different measures reflected facets of the respondents' identities as they relate to the components of Markstrom's indigenous local identity model. Data reduction occurred after assessing scale properties with correlations and factor analyses, and verifying scale reliability, producing several summary scales. Distributions and means for the remaining single item indicators were inspected and response options were collapsed when indicated. Descriptive results are presented through frequency distributions, mean scores, and their interpretation. Results from hierarchical multiple regression analyses are presented to identify the aspects of American Indian heritage and culture that are the best predictors of strong American Indian ethnic identity.

Finally, a qualitative analysis of the open-ended identity descriptions provided by the youth is presented as a complement to the quantitative analyses. One team member was nonnative and the other was a member of the Navajo Nation. Once each team member had individually sorted the responses into thematic categories, then the team members came together to compare coding and come up with an agreed-upon set of thematic categories. The few changes that were made were based on one of the coder's in-depth knowledge of both the context in which the responses were given and the cultural world-view of the adolescents. For example, the nonnative coder had identified dress as a separate category, whereas the native coder had incorporated it into a category that included behaviors such as participation in native customs and association with native peers.

Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics on key characteristics of the sample and the identity-related variables. Frequencies and percentage distributions are presented for categorical variables. Means, standard deviations, and observed ranges are provided for variables treated continuously in the multivariate analyses. Reliability (Cronbach's α) is reported for multi-item scales. Because so little is known about urban American Indian youth, in discussing Table 1, we provide some details from supplementary descriptive analyses that do not appear in the table.

The sample was nearly gender balanced with only slightly more females than males. Most students were of middle school age, with a concentration of seventh and eighth graders. A large majority (81%) were either 12 or 13 years of age.

Tribal heritage

All but one of the students said they belonged to an American Indian tribe or reservation community, with most listing a single tribe/community and 21% listing multiple affiliations. Over 95% of the affiliations mentioned were with Arizona tribes or reservation communities, with a small remainder from outside Arizona. Reflecting the tribal backgrounds of the American Indian population in Phoenix, the tribal affiliation mentioned most often (by 57%) was Navajo (Diné). Sixteen percent of the students said they belonged to one of the several reservation communities in close proximity to Phoenix, which include many members who have historical connections to northern Arizona tribal nations. Among those who mentioned multiple tribal affiliations, about half were Navajo/Diné and either Apache or Hopi, and about a third mentioned combinations of affiliations with both a tribe and a Phoenix area reservation.

Ethnic heritage and self-identification

Most students had two American Indian parents. Students typically described their mothers' "best" ethnic label as American Indian (82%), while their fathers were somewhat more ethnically diverse, with 68% described as American Indian, and most of the remaining nonnative fathers identified as Mexican or Latino (20% overall).

The substantial minority of the students who had parents of mixed native and nonnative heritage was reflected in the considerable variation in the students' own ethnic group self-identification. Just over half reported that they considered themselves to be "American Indian only," and 44% reported some degree of mixed native and nonnative self-identification. Those with a sense of mixed heritage typically reported equal identification with their native and nonnative backgrounds (33% of all respondents), while fewer considered themselves "more American Indian" than nonnative (10%), or the reverse (2%). In multivariate analyses, these categories were collapsed into a dummy variable distinguishing those who identified as American Indian only versus all others.

Students specified the nature of these nonnative identities on a separate nonmutually exclusive checklist that detailed their ethnic group heritage (not reported in Table 1). Consistent with the ethnic self-identification results above, just under half (49%) of the students checked a nonnative heritage in addition to their American Indian background. In most cases this was a Mexican or Latino identity (34% of all respondents), which mirrored the reported ethnicities of the students' fathers. Nine percent of students identified with a White background, 5% identified as African American, and 1% as an unspecified "Other" ethnicity.

Reservation ties

Most students (72%) had lived at some point on a reservation, and the average length of reservation residence was 4.3 years overall (7.9 years for those who had lived for some period on a reservation). A substantial proportion of the students (41%), their mothers (55%), and their fathers (37%) were born on an American Indian reservation (data not presented in Table 1). Most students (89%) indicated that they visited a reservation at least occasionally. As reflected in the mean for this variable, most typical was to visit monthly to several times a year. However, 22% reported daily or weekly visits. All except 7% of the students had family members currently living on a reservation (data not presented in tables). In most cases this included a grandparent (65% of respondents) and other extended family members (aunts, uncles, cousins; 78% of respondents). The average respondent had two relatives living on a reservation.

Spirituality

The four measures of spirituality formed a reliable mean scale, and each of the individual items indicated that spirituality was salient for most respondents. When rating the degree of their involvement in American Indian spiritual activities, the importance of spirituality, and whether spiritual values were part of their lives, about one fourth of the students reported the highest response ("A lot") with an equal or slightly larger proportion reporting the next highest response ("Some"). A large majority reported that it was either "very important" (41%) or "somewhat important" (42%) for them to follow traditional Indian beliefs.

Tribal languages

The three indicators that were combined into a reliable scale measuring tribal language showed that most students were exposed to tribal languages at home and a substantial minority had some level of proficiency in their tribal language. While 81% of the respondents reported that an American Indian tribal language was spoken at home at least sometimes, and 42% said it was spoken often or almost always, fewer students reported high levels of fluency in native languages. Only 22% reported "some" or "a lot" of ability to speak a tribal language, and 37% reported "some" or "a lot" of ability to understand a tribal language.

Cultural practices

The questions tapping the students' involvement in 11 American Indian cultural practices showed that majorities of the students participated to some degree in all except two of them (talking circles, putting out tobacco). When combined into a highly reliable mean scale, the average degree of involvement in each practice fell between "a little" and "some" involvement. Equally revealing as the level of involvement was its breadth: the typical student had participated in an average of 7 of the 11 practices (data not presented in tables).

Cultural orientations

Examining the two items that jointly formed a fourfold typology (data not presented in tables), students aligned themselves more closely with their American Indian cultural backgrounds than the White cultural mainstream. Two thirds of the respondents reported that they lived by or followed the "Indian way" of life "some" or "a lot," while only 21% responded similarly about following the "White or Anglo" way. When these two items were cross-classified into quadrants, about half (51%) of the respondents followed the "Indian way" alone, 16% were bicultural and followed both the "Indian" and "White" ways, 5% followed the "White" way alone, and a substantial minority said they followed neither way strongly (27%).

Ethnicity and strength of ethnic identity

Students reported relatively high scores for strength of American Indian ethnic identity on the adapted MEIM scale. The mean score on the overall scale corresponds to a response falling between "Agree" and "Strongly agree" to the items collectively. Large majorities of respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with each of the scale items, but there was stronger agreement with the items on the ethnic identity attachment subscale than on the exploration subscale, which is reflected in the lower mean for the latter subscale.

Predicting strength of American Indian ethnic identity

Table 2 reports the results of hierarchical regression analyses that examine how various aspects or components of identity contributed to the students' overall sense of being American Indian, with the adapted MEIM ethnic identity scale as the dependent variable. In addition to controls for gender and age, four blocks of variables were entered in succession as predictors: the student's tribal and ethnic heritage, ties to reservation communities, involvement in American Indian spiritual and cultural practices, and overall cultural orientation. In the first block, only the father's ethnic background was a significant predictor, showing that students with native fathers had a stronger American Indian identity than youth with nonnative fathers. Whether their mothers were native, whether the student self-identified as American Indian alone, and whether they felt an affiliation with multiple versus single tribes were not salient predictors. There were no significant predictors in the second block of variables measuring ties to reservations. In the third block, a stronger sense of spirituality and more involvement in American Indian traditions and practices predicted stronger American Indian identity, but exposure to and proficiency in tribal language did not. The fourth block showed that, compared to students whose cultural orientation was to the "Indian" way of life alone (reference category), those following the "White" way and those who were bicultural had a weaker sense of American Indian identity. Somewhat surprisingly, those who felt they were not following either way of life were not significantly different from those following the Indian way of life. Of the demographic controls, only age was a significant predictor, with younger students reporting a stronger sense of American Indian identity than older students reported. There were no significant gender differences.

Significant effects remained largely unchanged as different sets of predictors were added to these models, suggesting that the salient predictors have independent and additive effects in explaining overall American Indian ethnic identity. In all models in Table 2, the standardized effects for three predictors remained quite sizeable: father's ethnicity, spirituality, and involvement in American Indian traditions or practices. The final model explained a sizeable portion of the variance in overall identity, over one-third. These results were also confirmed in several additional models that are not presented, for example, when each block of predictors was entered separately without the other predictors, and when switching the outcome variable to each of the two subscales—exploration and attachment—of the Phinney ethnic identity scale.

Open-ended identity descriptors

A final way of assessing how native identity is experienced by urban American Indian youth comes from open-ended questions that tapped the students' language and categories for describing their identities. The responses were short—ranging in length from 1 word to 10 words. Eighty-three participants gave at least one response to the question. When asked to list three things that made them American Indian, the responses fell into a number of clear categories and a miscellaneous group of single mentions (Table 3). The distribution of responses was quite similar for the first descriptor mentioned and for all descriptors mentioned, after weighting. Over half of the items listed fell into three categories—family

lineage or ancestry, tribal or clan affiliation, and association with native peers, dress, or customs.

Most common among all responses was to attribute their native identity to their family lineage or ancestry, and over half of those in this category mentioned that they traced their ancestry through their mothers or their grandparents specifically. "My mom is Native American" (male, age 12). "Where my mom came from" (female, age 12). A few responses referred to the tribal or clan affiliation of a family or parent. "My dad is Navajo" (female, age 12). "My mom is black beard" (male, age 14). And a few respondents referred to ancestry or lineage further back than two generations. "I am related to sitting bull" (male, age 12). "My great great great grandma" (female, age 13). For some, the response related to one's whole family rather than a specific family member. "All of my family is native" (female, age 13).

The second category of responses, nearly as common as the first, linked native identity to a tribe or clan. Responses in this category either simply listed the word "clan" or "tribe", or stated affiliation with a specific tribe or clan. "I am Pima" (male, age 12). "My clan is mini goat" (male, age 12). A few responses illustrated emotion behind such an affiliation. "Love my tribe" (male, age 13).

The responses in the third group, which associated identities with native peers, dress, or specific customs, most often made mention of either attendance or participation in powwows or ceremonial dances. "Go to a lot of tribe activities" (male, age 13). "I go to a pasque powwow" (male, age 12). A number of others made reference to wearing native dress and jewelry. "Wear Indian jewelry and shirts" (female, age 12). "Wear sometimes necklaces for Hopi tribes" (female, age 12). One reference was made to association with peers. "Hang with Native kids" (male, age 12).

Following the top three categories were another set of three, each accounting for about 9% of the responses. These included references to speaking or understanding a tribal language: "My language" (female, age 12); "I talk in zuni a little bit" (male, age 15), phenotype: "My cool brown hair" (female, age 13); "My skin color" (female, age 14), and having a family connection to reservation land: "I have a grandma that lives on the rezz" (male, age 12); "Going back to zuni" (male, age 15); "Living on the reservation" (male, age 14).

Another, smaller group of responses fell into a category of more general incorporation of native culture and traditions. Less concrete than the prior category of association with peers, dress, and customs, these more abstract responses conveyed a sense of cultural attachment and ownership: "My culture" (male, age 13); "My stories" (male, age 13); "very traditional" (male, age 12). The remainder of the listings included a small number of references to food and self-identification: "because I am" (male, age 12); "I'm Native" (male, age 12). The last set of uncategorized "other" listings included some personal attributes, such as "always happy" and "I'm smart."

Discussion

Most of the urban American Indian youth in this sample reported a strong and multifaceted sense of connection to their indigenous background on all three components of Markstrom's local identity model. Reflecting the first component of identification, virtually all the youth belonged to a tribal community, most of which were located in Arizona and reasonably accessible by car to their current urban home. For most this was a single tribe, with only one in five reporting multiple tribal affiliations. Most youth traced their native heritage through both their parents although one-fifth had nonnative mothers and one-third nonnative fathers. Just over half the youth said they considered themselves to be "American Indian only," and

for the remainder the most prominent other ethnic background paralleled that of their nonnative fathers: a Latino heritage. The open-ended identity descriptors listed by the youth also reflected the Markstrom identification component more often than the other components. They mentioned most often that what made them American Indian was either their ancestral lineage or their affiliation with a tribe or clan.

The salience of the second component of the Markstrom model— connection—emerged in the youths' ties to reservations. A substantial minority of the youth had been born on a reservation, and even more had reservation-born parents. All but a few had relatives currently living on a reservation whom they visited regularly. In their open-ended descriptions locating the source of their American Indian identity, a small but appreciable proportion of the youth said it was their connection to a reservation or their land, which one described as "going back home."

The youths' incorporation of the third component of the Markstrom identity model—culture/ spirituality—was extensive but varying. A majority was involved in American Indian spiritual activities and followed spiritual values. Most were hearing their tribal language spoken at home, and some were beginning to master the language themselves. Nearly all were actively involved in American Indian cultural practices, and most had been practicing several of their cultural traditions although with varying frequency. These cultural practices and use of tribal language were the third and fourth most commonly mentioned source of identity in the youths' open-ended descriptions of what made them American Indian.

The alignment of most of the youth with several separate indicators of each component of Markstrom's indigenous identity model provides substantial evidence of the salience of the model in describing identity processes for urban American Indian youth. However, the variability in that alignment was also notable. A substantial minority had a nonnative parent, only about half self-identified ethnically as American Indian alone, and a substantial minority was involved very little or not at all in native spirituality, tribal language, and cultural traditions. Similar variability might therefore be expected in measures of the strength of their American Indian ethnic identity. Results, however, showed the opposite: relatively high mean scores with little variance on the adapted Phinney ethnic identity scale and both its subscales. This strong and fairly consistent sense of American Indian ethnic identity was also notable considering that this was a fairly young sample of adolescents at a developmental stage where ethnic identity is beginning to take shape.

The generally high scores on the Phinney ethnic identity scale need to be kept in mind in interpreting the significant predictors of that scale. Much of the variance that these predictors explain is a matter of difference of degree among the large proportion of youth who reported that they embrace this identity. Whether the youth's father was native or nonnative was the sole significant predictor from among the variables measuring the identification and connection components of Markstrom's model, while two measures from the third component, spirituality and cultural practices, were significant. The salience of the father's heritage may reflect the fact that it was the most variable aspect of the youth's ancestry or lineage (nonnative mothers were far more uncommon) and may be due to the infusion and mixture of Latino cultural heritage that most of the nonnative fathers represented. This is a complex matter beyond the scope of the measures in this study, one that calls for a careful and nuanced consideration of the historical context in which indigenous and Latino cultures and communities have influenced each other in the southwest over hundreds of years.

The other two strong predictors—native spirituality and traditional cultural practices—are notable both for their size and for representing ways that the youth were active agents in

embracing and deepening their connection to their heritage. Their special relevance to a strong sense of indigenous ethnic identity may be a reflection of the internalization of culture and values, which is expressed as a personal cultural connection. Involvement in spirituality and cultural traditions for adolescents is to some degree externally motivated by parents or other adults. However, the high level of spiritual importance reported by these youth is an indicator of the balanced nature of their identities given that spirituality is integrated throughout identity and well-being in traditional American Indian culture. Perhaps their extensive engagement in cultural practices serves a dual function in the urban environment, maintaining a connection to spiritual values and culture while also creating a sense of community in settings where American Indians are geographically dispersed and quite diverse in tribal backgrounds. The dual function is illustrated by the many students who mentioned in open-ended responses that attendance at powwows was a key part of their American Indian identity. Powwows emerged, in part, out of a need to create space for intertribal connection in settings such as those in which these youth reside.

Most of the identity-related variables that were not significant predictors were matters determined to a large extent by the youths' parents, where the youth had much less agency than in their embrace of native spirituality and traditional practices. The youth have little or no control over their tribal and ethnic heritage, reservation residence, and visiting frequency, and even their exposure to tribal language and opportunity to learn it. Youth at this age are dependent on parents or other adults to access spaces and activities that support cultural connection, something that is clearly happening for most of these youth. This may change as youth mature. A possible implication of the finding that older youth had a weaker sense of American Indian ethnic identity than younger youth is that the parental and familial influences that connect youth to their native heritage may weaken as the adolescents gain independence.

While exposure to culture creates an opportunity for integration in the lives of young people, the difference in the ethnic identity subscales—with higher mean scores for ethnic identity attachment than ethnic identity exploration—suggest that the youth feel surer about their sense of belonging and ownership of their American Indian heritage than they feel they are consciously exploring what it means. The lower scores on the exploration scale may reflect the early developmental stage of the youth, at the beginning of ethnic identity explorations. The results also suggest that there is an opportunity to encourage students to initiate further learning and to equip them with the skills and resources they need to deepen their cultural understanding and connection to their indigenous heritage.

Results addressing the "national" level of identity in Markstrom's model showed that more youth were culturally oriented to the American Indian than to a bicultural way of life. The substantial minority who said they followed the bicultural pathway, like the much smaller number following only the "White" way, reported significantly weaker American Indian ethnic identity than those following only the American Indian way. Another sizeable minority— more than a quarter who said they followed neither the native nor the nonnative way—were statistically indistinguishable from those following the native way in strength of American Indian identity. These findings raise questions for future research about the relationship between enculturation and biculturalism, and how each of them contributes to indigenous identity and well-being for urban American Indian youth. What level of biculturalism is necessary or desirable to navigate successfully in "both worlds?" Early in adolescence, do urban American Indian youth think of themselves as making bicultural choices, and how do they define that biculturalism relative to their indigenous identity? Our findings suggest that most urban American Indian youth are discovering ways to maintain strong levels of enculturation that cut across tribes and reservation communities, with fewer youth viewing themselves as acculturating to the dominant society. And it is the most

enculturated group, not the biculturally oriented, that reports the strongest American Indian ethnic identity.

Limitations

This exploratory study was based on a nonprobability sample in a metropolitan area of the southwest, one with the largest American Indian population in the country. Although the study drew on respondents from different school districts, the results cannot be generalized reliably to the rest of the metropolitan setting, or to other urban Indian communities in the United States. The study's recruitment methods were a source of possible selection bias, as the respondents were all students who participated voluntarily in a cultural enrichment program for native students, a program to which they were invited if their parents had identified them to the school as American Indian. Thus the sample is likely to represent students from families that actively claim their native heritage and native students with some interest in learning about that heritage in structured programs with other native students. Another study limitation is that the results provide only a cross-sectional view of the dynamic identity development process during early adolescence, without the ability to measure changes in enculturation and bicultural competence that past research highlights as key identity challenges for indigenous youth.

Finally, the study methods were not able to account for the unique urban context within which the youth live and the school context in which the surveys were administered. For example, the proximity of the youths' urban neighborhoods to their families' original reservations, the proportional representation of American Indian students in the school, and the diversity of tribal backgrounds among those students, may figure prominently in how the youths encounter, explore, and integrate the different sources of their indigenous identities. As such, the context may have significantly impacted the identity descriptors (particularly in the open-ended responses) the youth chose to use. Future research using measures to better understand context and/or more in-depth qualitative data collection methods would allow for further exploration of this aspect of Markstrom's model.

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, the study sheds light on a number of questions about the nature and sources of identity for urban American Indian youth, such as whether they have problematic connections to the traditional sources of their cultural heritage. Most of the youth in this study reported a clear sense of indigenous heritage and identity, extensive connections to tribal or reservation communities, a strong but not exclusive alignment with American Indian culture, and deep and extensive involvement in Indian cultural practices and spirituality. Although urban American Indians may increasingly face challenges and uncertainty in maintaining their cultural identities due to interethnic and intertribal marriage, long-distance migration, and pressures to acculturate into the cultural mainstream, most of the youth in this study did not emerge as unmoored from their cultural heritage. Immersion in traditional spirituality and traditional cultural practices was closely associated with the development of strong indigenous ethnic identity. The students showed evidence of having to navigate regularly between cultural worlds but placed themselves closer to the American Indian way than the White way. Future research can profitably explore the potential benefits and consequences of such identity formations for the majority of urban American Indian youth, and, for others, continue to identify those elements that support the development of their strong cultural identity.

Acknowledgments

Biography

Stephen Kulis is Cowden distinguished professor of sociology in the School of Social and Family Dynamics at Arizona State University (ASU) and the director of research at the ASU Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center. His research focuses on cultural processes in health disparities, such as the role of gender and ethnic identity in youth drug use and prevention interventions; cultural adaptation of prevention programs for ethnic minority youth; on contextual neighborhood and school level influences on individual-level risk and protective behaviors; on gender and racial inequities in professional careers, and the organizational sources of ethnic and gender discrimination.

M. Alex Wagaman is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University and has been both a graduate research associate and a doctoral intern for health disparities research at the ASU Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center (SIRC). Her research interests include the impact of discrimination on adolescents and empowerment-based interventions.

Crescentia Tso is an enrolled member of the Navaho Nation. She received her MSW from Arizona State University School in 2010 and will begin doctoral studies in social work. She was a graduate research assistant at the ASU Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center for the Living in Two Worlds project.

Eddie F. Brown is professor of American Indian studies at Arizona State University and the founder of the ASU American Indian Policy Center. An enrolled member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, he serves on that nation's advisory board. He is an active member in the NCAI Policy Research Center of the National Congress of American Indians and has served Presidents Clinton, G. W. Bush, and Obama on the President's board of advisors on Tribal Colleges and Universities. His research agenda focuses on building resiliency and strengthening cultural foundations of American Indian families and youth.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics for Variables in the Analysis.

	Freq.	%	M	SD	Range	α
Gender						
Male	69	47%				
Female	78	53%				
Age			12.47	0.81	11-15	
Tribal affiliation						
Multitribal	30	21%				
Single tribe	112	78%				
No tribe	1	1%				
Parental ethnicity						
Mother is American Indian	117	82%				
Mother is not American Indian	26	18%				
Father is American Indian	97	68%				
Father is not American Indian	46	32%				
Ethnic self-identification						
American Indian only	73	52%				
Mixed AI and non-American Indian	61	44%				
No ethnic group self-identification	6	4%				
Years lived on reservation			4.34	4.76	0-14	
Frequency visits reservation			4.36	1.68	1-7	
Tribal language exposure and proficiency			2.17	0.74	1-4	0.76
American Indian spirituality			2.74	0.80	1-4	0.83
American Indian traditions/practices			2.25	0.79	1-4	0.90
Cultural orientation						
Bicultural	21	16%				
"Indian way"	68	52%				
"White way"	7	5%				
Neither "Indian" nor "White" way	36	27%				
Strength of AI ethnic identity (MEIM overall)			3.09	0.59	1-4	0.92
AI ethnic exploration (MEIM subscale)			2.92	0.60	1-4	0.81

	Freq.	%	M	SD	Range	α
AI ethnic attachment (MEIM subscale)			3.22	0.67	1-4	0.90

Table 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Strength of American Indian Ethnic Identity.

	Model 1 Tribal and ethnic heritage $b(\beta)$	Model 2 Reservation connections $b(\beta)$	Model 3 Cultural and spiritual practices $b(\beta)$	Model 4 Biculturalism $b(\beta)$
Intercept	4.583[***] (0.00)	4.264[***] (0.00)	3.910[**] (0.00)[*]	3.713[***] (0.00)
Male vs. female	−0.080 (−0.07)	−0.075 (−0.06)	−0.011 (−0.01)	−0.041 (−0.04)
Age	−0.144[**] (−0.20)	−0.108[*] (−0.15)	−0.124[*] (−0.18)	−0.117[*] (−0.17)
Multitribal affiliation	−0.047 (−0.03)	−0.077 (−0.06)	−0.121 (−0.09)	−0.083 (−0.06)
Mother is American Indian	0.150 (0.09)	0.161 (0.11)	0.050 (0.03)	−0.033 (−0.02)
Father is American Indian	0.429[***] (0.33)	0.379[**] (0.30)	0.286[*] (0.23)	0.326[**] (0.26)
American Indian only identity	−0.108 (−0.09)	−0.138 (−0.12)	−0.074 (−0.07)	−0.045 (−0.04)
Years lived on reservation		0.007 (0.06)	0.008 (0.07)	0.013 (0.11)
Frequency visits reservation		0.032 (0.09)	0.022 (0.06)	0.001 (0.00)
Tribal language exposure and proficiency			−0.117 (−0.16)	−0.119 (−0.16)
American Indian spirituality			0.184[*] (0.26)	0.207[**] (0.30)
American Indian traditions/practices			0.168[*] (0.24)	0.175[*] (0.24)
Cultural orientation: Bicultural				−0.274[*] (−0.18)
Cultural orientation: "White way"				−0.514[*] (−0.18)
Cultural orientation: Neither AI nor White way				0.102 (0.08)
R^2	0.160	0.171	0.286	0.352
N	132	126	122	122

[*]
$p < .05$.

[**]
$p < .01$.

[***]
$p < .001$.

Table 3

"List 3 Things About Yourself That Make You an American Indian".

Categories	Examples from responses	% of first response mentioned	% of all responses, weighted[a]
Family/blood/ancestry	Its in my blood My mom's side of family I am related to sitting bull	21	21
Tribes/clans	My clan is mini goat I am Navajo	21	17
Association with native peers, dress, and/or customs	Wear traditional dresses & necklaces Hang with Native kids By going to a powwow	16	16
Language	Way we talk I speak the language.	9	10
Phenotype/physical features	How I look Skin color	9	9
Reservation/land	Going back home Live on a rez	9	8
Culture/traditions	I follow my beliefs/culture I love our stories and songs Traditional dancer	6	7
Food	I eat pima food Making frybread	4	6
Direct claim/self-identification	Because I am I'm Native	2.5	4
Other/uncategorized	Always happy	2.5	2
Total number of responses		80	207

[a] Weights are inversely proportional to the number of responses provided by the respondent.