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Identity, Communication, and Values of the Native American Discourse Community

Introduction

A discourse community is comprised of a group of individuals who claim, organize, communicate, and evaluate shared meanings (Schmidt,1). As a discourse community that is comprised of unique identities, communications, and values, Native Americans have repeatedly united together and battled against threats to their land, their families, and their livelihoods. Despite encountering oppression, prejudice, and discrimination throughout history, they have repeatedly resisted commands to conform to Western civilization in order to maintain their unique heritage. In order to understand how their shared identity, communication, and values distinguish them as a unique discourse community, I conducted an interview with a devoted member of the Native American community.

Methods

I interviewed Jessa Rae Growing Thunder, member of the Native American community and Native American Studies Teaching Assistant at UC Davis, in order to gain better insight into Native American identity, communication, and values. In order to better understand Native American identity, I asked Jessa Rae about her beliefs on the criteria for being categorized as Native American, how Native Americans define themselves, and how non-Native Americans perceive Native Americans. I also asked Jessa Rae about how Native Americans communicate

with each other, how they communicate with non-Native Americans, and whether Native Americans appreciate interaction with those outside of their discourse community in order to better understand communication and interaction of the Native American community. To obtain insight concerning the values of the Native American community, I asked her about the activities and traditions that Native Americans share, and why Native Americans practice such activities and traditions. I also asked Jessa Rae to explain what difficulties Native Americans have encountered, how these difficulties have affected the Native American community, and how Native Americans have influenced society through their response to these difficulties. Lastly, in order to better understand the future of the Native American community, I asked Jessa Rae about the hopes of Native Americans for the generations to come.

Results

In regards to Native American identity, Jessa Rae's belief in the power of self-identification provided insight into the challenges of identifying as Native American, and how she believes "not everyone can fit within these categories that the federal government has laid out." She also provided awareness of the customs of preferred identification to members within the community by stating "I've been taught that when I introduce myself... when I give my own identification... I acknowledge myself as a Dakota Nakota woman...I acknowledge myself based on the names we have for each other." Jessa Rae's response concerning "the idea of Indians being in the past," and "the image that Indians did not communicate with each other," contrasted how "communication has always been a part of our [Native American] livelihood." Describing humility as "a major value in Native culture" in order to help their community provided insight into one of the shared values of Native Americans. Explaining that "every community will have their own practices" provided further awareness concerning the different

practices that make the Native American community entirely unique. By stating “We’re [Native Americans] still fighting colonialism...every single day,” Jessa Rae emphasized an obstacle that Native Americans continue to encounter, which thereby also provided insight into the future of the community.

Analysis/Discussion

Identity:

The Native American community has continually encountered opposition concerning their belief of the right for self-identification. American Indian peoples in the United States are subjected to criteria created by the federal government that determines who is able to identify as a member of the Native American race and ethnicity (Growing Thunder). Jessa Rae relayed the shared struggle of Native Americans being categorized based on blood quantum. For example, the Navajo Nation tribal council distributed identity cards in 2012 as proof of Navajo Nation membership that was based upon the meeting blood quantum requirement of at least one quarter Navajo heritage (Bonvillain, 339). Jessa Rae described such an act of measuring an individual’s blood to define their identity as “unethical.” She further conveyed the challenge of identifying as Native American by stating, “We are the only race that has to carry around an actual card...an actual identification card to prove that we are federally recognized.” By explaining that no other race or ethnicity is required to present proof of their identity, Jessa Rae provided insight into the shared belief of Native Americans in the power to self-identify.

Despite orders to assimilate, Native Americans continue to value their ancestral identities by returning to their traditional names (Growing Thunder). Jessa Rae relayed how American Indian peoples have been instilled to introduce themselves to others based upon how they prefer

to be acknowledged. She also explained the challenge of identifying as Native American by continually being stereotyped and perceived as “a piece of history.” She elaborated upon the difficulty of identifying as Native American due to the misconception that all Native Americans are alike. However, classifying all Native Americans as the same strips away “the very essence that makes us [Native Americans] unique human beings” (Growing Thunder). By emphasizing the importance of correctly perceiving Native American identity, Jessa Rae evidenced the incredible complexity and uniqueness encompassed within the Native American community.

Communication:

By denoting that non-Natives often possess the idea of Native Americans not communicating with each other, Jessa Rae provided insight into how various methods of communication have always existed, and how methods of communication continue to develop between Native American peoples. Despite the Native American community being filled with various languages and traditions, she explained that, “even though we [Native Americans] all spoke different languages...we had ways to communicate with each other.” By functioning as “a mobile hub for us [Native Americans] to communicate and relate” social media has enabled Native Americans to maintain the “tradition of making relations” in order ensure the prosperity of their community (Growing Thunder).

Throughout history, Native Americans have been subjected to commands to cease practicing Native American beliefs, languages, and traditions in order to assimilate. Because Indians were perceived as “fierce savages” who would be impossible to govern, they endured forced removal from their homelands and suffered treaty violations by the federal government (Merijan, 611). For example, by disregarding their rights for their Native land, and prohibiting

Native Americans from selling or leasing their land without permission from the government, the act of “allotment” coerced Native Americans to conform to Western culture, thereby depriving Native Americans of their sovereignty (Merijan, 616). Jessa Rae relayed the irony of how the Western institutions that were previously established to force Native Americans to conform to Western culture are now comprised of non-Native scholars that write forms of Native American communication such as books and articles. In terms of non-Native Americans addressing Native American communication, Jessa Rae explained that there is a level of respect that must be maintained. Although perspectives from individuals outside of the Native American community may present valuable insight, it is also important for Native Americans to analyze the histories and issues of their own people as well (Lobo, 28). Jessa Rae further described how contemporary forms of communication have provided Native Americans with a platform to communicate with members both inside and outside of their community. Social media has presented Native Americans with the opportunity to use words as their “new arrows,” and communicate to non-Native Americans the difficulties that Native Americans to encounter such as their continuous fight for sovereignty (Growing Thunder).

Values:

The Native American community possesses their own unique perspectives and values. They emphasize the importance of spiritual relationships, they perceive education as a means of contributing to the community, and they recognize that relationships should empower one another (Kirkness, 9). In addition, Native Americans have continually practiced and valued reciprocity. Jessa Rae provided insight concerning how Native Americans define reciprocity as the idea that “if you take something, whether it’s a physical object or knowledge, you have to give something in return to maintain the balance in the world.” She conveyed how Native

Americans practice reciprocity as a means of demonstrating respect and maintaining humility in order to ensure the prosperity of the community.

Jessa Rae provided insight into the unique features of this discourse community by explaining that the Native American community is comprised of smaller communities that possess their own activities and traditions. She described how “powwows” that are practiced by her community provide “a space for people of all different cultures and backgrounds to come together and practice their own uniqueness...but also engage in the traditions and values of community and communication.” Arndt denotes that the cultural performances and the history of such powwows have been impacted by colonialism, but further explains how powwows incorporate tradition and modernity into the community, and how powwows continue to uphold the cultural traditions that represent the unique values of the Native American community (Arndt, 117). By practicing reciprocity and cultural expression, Native Americans continue to successfully maintain their values and ancestral heritage despite opposition throughout history.

Conclusion

Although many believe that historical opposition remains in the past, the Native American community continues to resist colonialism, and fight for their basic human rights. “Every single day we have to walk within two worlds...a world in which our ancestors lived where we have to uphold our traditions, our languages, our cultures...but then we also have to walk in a world that is this Western world...the world that was meant to break us and destroy us. We have to walk in these two worlds and find the balance between them” (Growing Thunder). Jessa Rae explained how the federal government continues to disregard their history, their culture, and their generational interactions with their land, thereby depriving Native Americans

of sovereignty. However, despite identifying as the most oppressed minority group in the United States (Growing Thunder), Native Americans are determined to preserve their people, their languages, and their cultures. Jessa Rae explained how the widespread communication of the current generation has enabled them to embrace opportunities and “become the next leaders.” She explained how Native American values have influenced their responses to current issues thereby enabling them to not only redefine sovereignty, but to also ensure their future prosperity. Through their identity, communication and shared values, Native Americans will continue to fight for their community, their culture, and their rights, and will continue to impact history.

Works Cited

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