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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/29p8z7f2>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2007-03-01

DOI

10.17953

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Tribal Teachers Are Important to American Indian Adolescents' Tribal Identity Development

**CARRIE M. BROWN, JUDITH L. GIBBONS, AND
KIMBERLY ERETZIAN SMIRLES**

In our original article in the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, we presented the results of a study conducted with adolescents aged thirteen to seventeen of a northeastern tribe.¹ The purpose of our study was to achieve an understanding of the bicultural (tribal and nontribal) ethnic identity of the adolescents, highlighting their unique history and experience as members of the tribe. Northeastern tribal adolescents have a distinct history of longer length of contact with settlers and more intermarriage. Despite this, they have been relatively overlooked in the research literature. Most research on the ethnic identity of American Indian adolescents has focused primarily on tribal identity, and samples have primarily come from those living on reservations.² Our study departed from previous research, which focused on tribal and nontribal identity of northeastern tribal adolescents without residential reservation land.

We have conducted some additional analyses that have provided some interesting and important findings. In the results of our original article, twenty-one females and nine males returned the mail-out survey; they had an average age of 15.57 years. Eleven of the adolescents lived in the tribe's home state, and nineteen resided out of state.

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We hypothesized that the adolescents would have equivalent moderate levels of tribal and nontribal identity, but the adolescents' tribal identity was found to be significantly greater than their nontribal identity. We also hypothesized that tribal identity would be positively correlated with participation in cultural activities, and nontribal identity would be positively correlated with noncultural activities. Our results supported this hypothesis. Considering the impact of a given social context on human expression, we ran the analyses comparing adolescents living in the tribe's home state versus adolescents living outside the home state, and adolescents living in the home state reported a greater tribal identity.³ Participants in the tribe's home state were also found to participate in more cultural activities than participants living in other states, while participants living outside the home state participated in more noncultural activities. However, when comparing adolescents living in the northeast versus adolescents not living in the northeast, we found none of these significant differences.

Another topic of interest revolved around tribal adolescents' relationships with family members. We found the number of tribal members living in the adolescents' homes to have no impact on tribal identity. However, in response to the question "From whom have you learned the most about your tribal background?" the number of people that the adolescents reported turned out to be significantly related to tribal identity. Although these findings do not provide evidence that the number of tribal family members living with the adolescent is related to his or her tribal identity, the number of tribal members from whom an adolescent *learns* does affect the strength of tribal identity. We believe this highlights the importance of tribal adults being active in the education and encouragement of tribal youth.

Our further analyses focus on the differences found between adolescents living in the tribe's home state and adolescents living out of state. We found adolescents in the home state to have a significantly greater tribal identity, participate in more cultural activities, and have recognition of more tribal teachers than adolescents living out of state. These findings are presented in table 1, and the correlations among the variables are found in table 2.

Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviation of Values for Adolescents in Tribal State and Out of State on Teachers, Cultural Activities, and Tribal Identity

	Tribal State ($n = 11$)	Out of State ($n = 19$)	t(df)	Significance
Teachers	2.27 ± 1.00	1.31 ± .67	3.13 (28)	< .01
Cultural activities	2.00 ± 1.34	.89 ± 1.41	2.10 (28)	< .05
Tribal identity	4.38 ± .62	3.55 ± .63	2.39 (28)	< .05

Table 2
Correlations among the Variables

	Tribal State vs. Out of State	Teachers	Cultural Activities	Tribal Identity
Tribal state vs. out of state	—	.51**	.37*	.41*
Teachers	—	—	.38*	.57**
Cultural activities	—	—	—	.39*
Tribal identity	—	—	—	—

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$; tribal state coded as 2, out of state coded as 1

By observing the data, we could conclude that simply living in the tribe's home state has a direct effect on the adolescents' tribal identity. However, there may be more to the story. For example, living in the tribe's home state may provide more opportunities for specific situations or interactions, which might, therefore, have an effect on tribal identity. The goal of our new analyses was to examine possibilities for the greater tribal identity among adolescents living in the tribe's home state. More specifically, what is the mechanism through which the location of adolescents influences their tribal identity?

We conducted mediation analyses to answer this question.⁴ A mediator is a link that explains the relationship between the initial or independent variable (in this case, location) and the predictor or dependent variable (tribal identity). By testing for mediators, we can explore if there is a third variable that helps clarify the relationship between location and tribal identity. Because the adolescents living in the tribe's home state and those living out of state significantly differed on the quantity of reported teachers and degree of participation in cultural activities, either of these variables may be a mediator that more closely explains the relationship between location and tribal identity. True experimental research permits the clearest identification of causality among variables. In our research, the variables "location" (home state vs. out of state) and "tribal identity" are attribute variables and, therefore, cannot be manipulated experimentally. Although we cannot affirm causality, the mediation approach utilized here provides an acceptable compromise in gaining a closer understanding of relationships among the variables.

If "teachers" is a mediator, we would conclude that the location of adolescents (home state vs. out of state) is related to the number of teachers, which then contributes to the strength of tribal identity. Or we can state that the differing degree of tribal identity between adolescents living in the home state and those living out of state can be better understood by examining their differing number of teachers (see fig. 1).

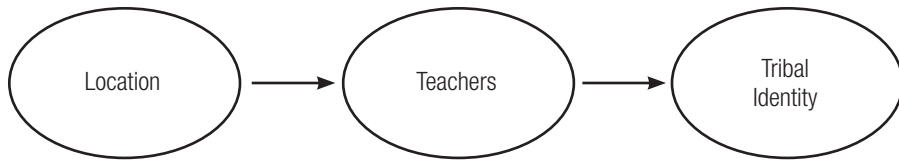


FIGURE 1. *Tribal Teachers as Mediator between Location and Tribal Identity.*

In order for a variable to be a mediator, three conditions must be met: (1) “location” must be significantly associated with the dependent variable “tribal identity,” (2) “location” must be significantly associated with the hypothesized mediator “teachers,” and (3) the impact of “location” on “tribal identity” must be less after controlling for the mediator “teachers.” These three conditions can be tested with three multiple regression analyses: (1) the path from “location” to “tribal identity,” (2) the path from “location” to “teachers,” and (3) the path from “location” and “teachers” to “tribal identity.” If “teachers” is a mediating variable, “location” should be less associated with “tribal identity” in the third regression model than it was in the second condition.

In order to interpret the analyses, a brief discussion is needed regarding the test of the beta (β) coefficient (table 3, col. 3). This test is a measure of the direct relationship, or path, between the independent variable and the outcome (dependent) variable. The beta coefficient is a measure of how many units of standard deviation the dependent variable changes when the independent variable is incremented by a unit of standard deviation while holding all other variables going into the dependent variable constant. In other words, it is a test to determine if the independent variable significantly predicts, and is related to, the dependent variable.

Table 3 provides the results of the regression analyses to determine if “teachers” is a mediating variable. Steps 1 and 2 show that “location” significantly predicts “tribal identity” and “teachers.” However, in step 3, when “location” and “teachers” are both the initial variables to predict “tribal identity,” “location” is no longer associated with “tribal identity.” It becomes nonsignificant, although “teachers” remains a significant predictor (observe the test of the β coefficient column). Therefore, we can conclude that “teachers” is a mediating variable to help clarify the relationship between “location” and “tribal identity.” Through the analyses, we see that the difference in strength of tribal identity between adolescents living in the home state and adolescents living out of state can be better understood by considering that adolescents in the home state reported more teachers.

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression of Tribal Identity on Teachers and Location
(Tribe’s Home State vs. Out of State)

Step and Predictor Variables	β	R-square Increment	Test of β Coefficient	
Tribal identity as dependent variable				
Step 1				
Location (home state vs. out of state)	.61	.17	.41*	Significant
Teachers as dependent variable				
Step 2				
Location (home state vs. out of state)	.96	.26	.51**	Significant
Tribal identity as dependent variable				
Step 3				
Location (home state vs. out of state)	.24	—	.16	Not significant
Teachers	.38	.34	.49*	Significant

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Because tribal adolescents living in the tribe’s home state reported participating in significantly more cultural activities than adolescents in other states, it is possible that “cultural activities” is also a mediating variable for location and tribal identity. Perhaps as a resident of the home state, participation in more cultural activities has an influence on the adolescents’ tribal identity (see fig. 2).



FIGURE 2. Cultural Activities as Mediator between Location and Tribal Identity.

The regression steps outlined above and presented in table 3 were also performed for the variable “cultural activities.” However, when the regressions were performed, “cultural activities” was not found to be a mediator. When combining “location” and “cultural activities” in step 3 (see table 4) to predict “tribal identity,” both “location” and “cultural activities” were nonsignificant. Therefore, we can conclude that “cultural activities” is not a mediator to help understand the relationship between location and tribal identity.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression of Tribal Identity on Cultural Activities and Location
(Tribe’s Home State vs. Out of State)

Step and Predictor Variables	β	R-square Increment	Test of β Coefficient	
Tribal identity as dependent variable				
Step 1				
Location (home state vs. out of state)	.61	.17	.41*	Significant
Cultural activities as dependent variable				
Step 2				
Location (home state vs. out of state)	.96	.26	.51**	Significant
Tribal identity as dependent variable				
Step 3				
Location (home state vs. out of state)	.46	—	.31	Not significant
Cultural activities	.14	.23	.27	Not significant

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

It is surprising to find that “cultural activities” is not a mediator for “location” and “tribal identity,” considering the emphasis many tribes place on cultural activities and the learning of tradition. In our analyses, the number of teachers whom adolescents reported appears to play a role in strength of tribal identity, whereas participation in cultural activities does not. We recognize that the small size ($N = 30$) of our sample may present limitations in the analyses. One final mediation analysis was conducted in order to observe more closely a possible relationship between teachers and cultural activities. We noted whether or not the number of reported teachers was a factor in mediating the relationship between participation in cultural activities and tribal identity. In our analyses, we found participation in cultural activities to correlate positively with tribal identity, indicating that participation in more cultural activities is

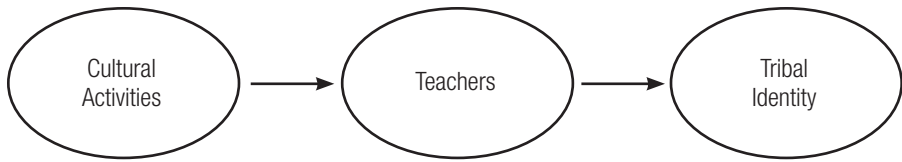


FIGURE 3. *Tribal Teachers as Mediator between Cultural Activities and Tribal Identity.*

related to a stronger tribal identity. This relationship might be more closely understood through the role of teachers. Perhaps adolescents’ more frequent participation in cultural activities, and subsequent strength of tribal identity, can be understood through a greater number of teachers. When performing this analysis, “teachers” was found to mediate the relationship between “cultural activities” and “tribal identity.” Adolescents’ participation in cultural activities influences their tribal identity through their interaction with teachers (see fig. 3). The results are in table 5.

Table 5
Hierarchical Regression of Tribal Identity on Teachers and Cultural Activities

Step and Predictor Variables	β	R-square Increment	Test of β Coefficient	
Tribal identity as dependent variable				
Step 1				
Cultural activities	.19	.15	.38*	Significant
Teachers as dependent variable				
Step 2				
Cultural activities	.24	.15	.38*	Significant
Tribal identity as dependent variable				
Step 3				
Cultural activities	.10	—	.20	Not significant
Teachers	.39	.36	.49**	Significant

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Why are our findings important? What does our conclusion that the variable “teacher” serves as a mediator tell the Native community? Although it is certainly beneficial for tribal adolescents to live close to their tribe’s location, as it may connect them with more family members and provide more opportunities for interaction and participation, what is even more important in establishing the strength of their tribal identity is having several active and engaged teachers. These teachers can share oral histories, encourage participation, teach language and songs, and do many other things to foster pride

and encourage identity development in the adolescents. According to our mediation analyses, teachers have an impact on the adolescents' tribal identity and their participation in cultural activities.

Not all adolescents live near their tribal community, but they are still valued members and cannot be neglected. What can be done for adolescents who do not live in the tribe's home state? The adolescents outside the tribe's home state were found to have a significantly lower tribal identity than adolescents in the home state, and they also reported significantly fewer tribal teachers. Although independently relocating to the home state is probably an unlikely option for adolescents, the participation of more tribal teachers is a greater possibility. The tribe can work to reach out to adolescents in other states through publications, videos, and other media resources. The tribe may also provide opportunities for adolescents to travel to the home state and might even employ tribal adults to travel and serve in outreach programs for the adolescents. Parents and other relatives living with and near adolescents can be encouraged to teach adolescents about their Native culture and to involve other family members who may be less active.

It is important to share a bit of this tribe's history in order to understand why several of its members (and therefore adolescents) live away from the home state. The tribe has experienced various time periods of relocation of tribal members, due to a variety of circumstances. For example, major layoffs in the defense industry in the early 1990s resulted in the unemployment of several tribal members. Several made the decision to move their families to other areas in search of employment. Many tribal members belong to the military, and they and their families live in various locations across the United States due to military orders. Several tribal members married outside the tribe and left the area because of a spouse's occupation or the location of their in-laws.⁵

Who is teaching the adolescents about their tribal culture? Table 6 provides the percentages of the adolescents' responses (from our initial study). From the table, we see that tribal mothers and fathers hold the greatest role in the transmission of culture to adolescents, with tribal grandparents also active but to a smaller degree. However, it is evident that there is room for tribal mothers and fathers and tribal grandmothers and grandfathers to be more active in the teaching of tribal culture. Also, nontribal parents and grandparents can

Table 6
Percentages in Response to the Open-ended Question:
"From whom have you learned the most about your tribal background?"

Individual	Percentage
Tribal mother	43%
Tribal father	37%
Tribal grandmother	23%
Tribal grandfather	20%

Note: Adolescents were free to write down more than one person in their responses, as this was an open-ended question.

become active in teaching adolescents about their culture. Infrequent responses provided by the adolescents were uncles, aunts, stepparents, tribal historians, group leaders, storytellers, tribal friends, and tribal siblings. These responses, though small, provide us with evidence that immediate family members and the extended tribal community can be active in the education of tribal adolescents.

We hope that the additional analyses presented here have provided important insight. We believe the results of this reanalysis further underscore the value of the contributions of all tribal members in the education of tribal youth, both those living near the tribe and those living far away. Tribal adolescents need many people, tribal and nontribal, to encourage their cultural exploration and identification. We must work together to raise proud and knowledgeable tribal youth, the future leaders of Indian Country.

NOTES

1. Carrie M. Brown, Judith L. Gibbons, and Kimberly Eretzian Smirles, "Examining the Bicultural Ethnic Identity of Adolescents of a Northeastern Indian Tribe," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 29, no. 3 (2005): 81–100.

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3. P. Brown and S. Levinson, "Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena," in *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction*, ed. E. N. Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 56–310; Mary Jane Collier and Milt Thomas, "Cultural Identity: An Interpretive Perspective," in *Theories in Intercultural Communications*, eds. Y. Y. Kim and W. B. Gudykunst (London: Sage, 1988), 99–120, esp. 113.

4. For more discussion of mediators: Rueben M. Baron and David A. Kenny, "The Moderator-Mediator Variable Distinction in the Social Psychological Research: Conceptual, Strategic, and Statistical Considerations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51, no. 6 (1986): 1173–82; Grayson N. Holmbeck, "Toward Terminological, Conceptual, and Statistical Clarity in the Study of Mediators and Moderators: Examples from the Child-Clinical and Pediatric Psychology Literatures," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 65 (1997): 599–610; Brigid M. Rose, Grayson N. Holmbeck, Rachael Millstein Coakely, and Elizabeth A. Franks, "Mediator and Moderator Effects in Developmental and Behavioral Pediatric Research," *Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* 25, no. 1 (2004): 58–67.

5. A special thanks to the tribal historian for sharing her knowledge with the authors.