

Heuristics as a Process for Healing: The Recognition of Implicit Identity

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The construction of self-identity in a postcolonial society is complex at best. The history of the United States (U.S.) is laden with residual influences of colonization as are highlighted throughout this work. This paper begins with a focus on political and societal impacts of colonialism as they effect postcolonial identity construction of mixed-ancestry Native Americans. The terms mixed-ancestry First Nations and mixed-ancestry Native Americans are used interchangeably referring to descendants of Indigenous/Aboriginal People of the Americas and Canada having African and/or European ancestors. Second, the paper briefly addresses the conceptual nuances and implications of psychological constructions of self-identity in the face of the ‘other.’ Finally, this paper introduces the use of heuristics as a process for healing for marginalized and oppressed persons of Native American descent.

A significant and often overlooked component of identity construction and healing for the aforementioned group of people is spirituality. This once simple and engrained concept has become insignificant, misunderstood and convoluted by the unnecessary racialized projections of identity as ascribed to mixed-ancestry Native Americans. The healing potential of exploring and connecting to one’s personal identity is liberating and powerful. Constructions of identity in a postcolonial society, for mixed-ancestry Native Americans, continue to play into societal intricacies (i.e., race, ‘blood quantum’, etc.) which were unheard of prior to colonization. Hence, coming to terms with the fluidity of identity through the deconstruction of the psychological and societal impact of European colonizing practices belies postcolonial politics of identity while expanding the margins of self-discovery.

Providing contextual background of this subject matter is essential as it guides the reader through the often overlooked lived experiences of mixed-ancestry Native Americans and the

internal process of identity negotiation. History, politics, and multicultural identity are typically recorded and studied from an objectified and removed manner. The subjectivity of mixed-ancestry Native American identity development in a postcolonial society is rarely a focus in academia.

Power taken and asserted by self-designated dominant groups is cast as an inevitable necessity by these same self-appointed groups within their published accounts. These accounts of imposed identities are then disseminated as objective truths without questioning the epistemological philosophy or underpinnings. Cruz's (2000) critical analysis of postcolonial inheritance of identity construction between two distinct indigenous South American groups sheds light on the politics of the time as these political nuances began to be played out in the form of *identity*. The political meanings depicted in Cruz's work illuminate the subtle yet powerful practice of taking on ascriptions of marginality within the rhetorical framework of the dominators. Cultivated by colonial interactions with the 'other', in this case the Spanish conquerors, instilled a less stable sense of Indigenous identity by nurturing an environment of postcolonial mistrust within the society. Translated, this means that beginning with the colonizing process by the Spanish, the once secure identity of the indigenous became disjointed and fragmented. When anything is disjointed or fragmented it becomes broken which is interpreted as not whole, in disarray, and ultimately susceptible to being seen as easily manipulated.

The importance of the aforementioned scholarly effort in relation to healing for mixed-ancestry First Nations is that in allowing oneself (individually or collectively) to continue replaying storied beliefs, historical assumptions, and meanings regarding ethnic identity from the framework of the dominant culture furthers the experience of looking towards the other for

definition and validation. Critically analyzing and understanding the multitude of historical perspectives regarding the 'creation' of identifying mixed-ancestry First Nations is an important factor in the process of self-empowerment and historical healing around issues of identity.

Scholars (Hirschman, 2004; Nagel, 1995) have painstakingly traced the historical paper trails of colonized America regarding the illusive nature of identity for historically marginalized and oppressed persons. Specifically, the creation and plight of identification for mixed-ancestry Native Americans in the United States has been documented (Yarbrough, 2004, 2008; Miles, 2005) yet discussions have been relatively constrained within historical or racial academic dialogue. The pervasiveness of dialogue is continuously foreshadowed with racist ideology which continues the less blatant social and political hierarchies espoused within the construction of identity. These constructions reside within boundaries set by the 'dominant' culture.

The psychological impact of this feeds a growing sense of dissonance by consciously claiming and asserting the meaning of mixed-ancestry Native identity while continuing to subscribe to societal meanings of categorical race. Fittingly, Meyers (2004) places emphasis on the social construct of race within Native American/First Nations communities mattering more than ethnicity. Hirschman (2004) argues the point that Europeans created and propagated racial ideologies parallel to the colonial invasion and expansion which ultimately birthed the fallacy of white supremacy.

The importance of this current dialogue is in voicing the very real outcomes of formulating self-concept and identity in the aftermath of colonial rape. Rape, of any sort, leaves post traumatic wounds that are not visibly seen. However, deep and layered psychological and spiritual damage lingers indefinitely. The dichotomy of this internal-external struggle runs the

risk of continued psychic pain for mixed ancestry Native Americans who entrench themselves in constructing their identity in the face of the other.

Politically, the advantage for dominant Eurocentric groups, in the U.S., has been the reorganization and creation of distinct racialized groups, a ‘divide and conquer’ mentality, if you will, which methodically sets the stage for disharmony and reinvention of power structures (Cruz, 2000). Confronting the explicit postcolonial creation, ascriptions and meanings of race (read: explicit identity) assertively challenges the political, societal, divisive, and oppressive motives of the colonial legacy of domination by the other. As a way to ensure racial hegemony the ‘one-drop’ rule was created. This rule presumed any amount of perceived African blood placed a person in the African American or Black social and racial category, thus ensuring political advantages to those who were conveniently socialized as racially white regardless of ethnicity. Becoming consciously aware of this ‘rule’ is important. This directly impacts mixed-ancestry Native Americans especially those who are racially categorized as African American.

The work of Hirschman (2004) illuminated the conceptions of race as cemented by the U.S. Census Bureau. Based on years of scientific and socio-political manipulation, the acceptance of racial categories became normalized terms of identity by the masses with advantages afforded to ‘whites’.

However, where there is one distinct category that denotes white racial identity, there are several categories reflecting non-white categories – divide and conquer. For mixed-ancestry Native Americans, the 1960’s census provided the following directives:

“Negro [includes] persons of Negro or mixed Negro and white descent...and persons of mixed American Indian and Negro descent unless the American Indian ancestry predominates...American Indian [includes] full blooded American Indians, persons of

mixed white and Indian blood...if enrolled in a tribe...or regarded as Indians in their community” (as cited in Hirschman, 2004, p.402).

Interestingly, there was no concept of mixed-ancestry, ‘mixed-blood’ or race in any Native American (Indigenous) language. Hence, no division within Native American/First Nations communities existed until the U.S. and Canadian governments, distinctly defined by white-Eurocentric ideals with land interests at heart, set out to dissect tribal people with race as the instrument.

Doerfler (2009) paints an eloquent picture of the unadulterated intention of the U.S. Government’s postcolonial quest to chip away at the unity of identity of the Ojibwa of North America with unknown terms and qualifiers of the time. Terms such as “mixed-blood” and “full-blood” were not common as were espoused by the U.S. Government’s early 1900s investigation of who could be considered “mixed” blood with white European blood as the deciding factor (Doerfler, 2009). Ultimately, governmental powers determined that less than 10 % of those residing on White Earth Reservation in the early 1900’s were “full-blood” Ojibwa (Doerfler, 2009). Similarly, Lawrence (2009) delves into the history of the Metis in Canada where Indian Act laws were passed forcing Indian women married to white men to relinquish their “Indian status”, while white women married to Indian men magically became Indian, losing their white status. Children born to white mothers and Indian fathers were considered Metis while children of Indian mothers and white fathers became white per the Canadian Government (Lawrence, 2009).

The United States and Canadian Governmental impositions created grave disruptions within Native communities and continue to create identity disruptions for their descendants. The postcolonial political irony of this decision, as tied to identity and land property, is not lost on

those who descend from the oppressed and marginalized Native-African-European American groups who are easily classified as “mixed-blood”, mixed-ancestry, or the newest catch all identifier “multiracial”. As the history of objectified identity manipulation continues White Earth Anishinaabe scholar Beaulieu states,

“It is a rare moment in the historiography of the relationship of anthropology and the other social sciences to American Indians to find an example where the colonial nature and political purposes and the uses of academic enterprise seem so obvious and direct” (as cited in Doerfler, 2009, p. 317).

Reflecting on the idea of reclaiming and constructing personal identity for mixed-ancestry Native Americans directly challenges the status quo. This challenge potentially poses a threat to both the oppressed and the other by unearthing fears of self-worth grounded in themed stories of alleged dominance vs. alleged inferiority. Research (Hirschman, 2004) on pre-Colonial periods revealed early Europeans recognized the value of the dominant gene linked with darker pigmentation which guaranteed greater numbers of descendants in response to migration and climate change (i.e., natural selection). The forced progression of European colonization with Euro-ethnocentrism leading the way begins to paint a picture of hostile takeovers rooted in fear of inferiority and the potential of self-destruction.

Accordingly, challenging the fragile ego sense of self (identity) espoused by European-ethnocentrism suggests disagreeing with the others interpretation of self. This objectification, ironically, places the sense of identity outside of the others own purview which then subjects the other to their own rules governing ‘identity’ and politics. Such was the case as captured in the footnote of Doerfler’s (2009) research on the Anishinaabe tribalography. Doerfler noted the response of physical anthropologist Dr. Albert Jenks, who performed a series of physical

examinations on the Ojibwe to determine their First Nations status as either full or mixed blood. One year after Jenks and his colleagues, identified as the other, completed their work on the Ojibiwe, Jenks performed the same hair strand tests on himself and Dr. Ales Hrdlicka. The results indicated the hair of both doctors to be the most typical “Negro” type (Doerfler, 2009). Hence, subjecting the other to the same objectified and racialized identification processes as have been historically imposed on mixed-ancestry First Nations potentially levels the playing field. The politics of identity then becomes more about the complexity of the human experience and less about manipulation. Reclaiming and subjectively negotiating personal identity addresses identity construction for mixed-ancestry Native Americans in the face of the other without being defined by the other.

Questioning postcolonial ascriptions of identity for mixed-ancestry Native Americans forces thoughtful and critical self-dialogue regarding the continued acceptance of European-ethnocentrism, where Eurocentric values and beliefs are myopically overvalued and propagated across cultural divides. This became clearly evident with the passage of the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924 which legally sanctioned the state of Virginia to change racialized designations of residents as Bureau workers saw fit (Smith, 2002). This created two distinct groups of people: ‘white’ and ‘colored’. This mandate lasted, on paper, until 1967. However, these practices have become entrenched methods of objectifying and categorized groups of people and individuals with continued political ramifications. For descendants of the Original Peoples of what have become known as the Americas and Canada, continuing to define the self within the binds of the other furthers identity ambiguity. Identity ambiguity refers to questioning who you are. Corley and Gioia (2004) characterize identity ambiguity as a long process occurring over time by which familiar references of understanding personal and collective



identities become unclear. Further, Corley and Gioia state, “When we revise our familiar ways of describing our identity, or when our familiar ways of knowing who we are as [a People] lose their meaning or have no meaning in new circumstances, the context for identity change arises” (p. 173).

Many mixed-ancestry Native Americans have been arbitrarily placed in socio-political categories without their explicit consent. These identified “objective” categories preserve the postcolonial trauma as cultivated inside the binds of otherness. One’s identity is as sacred as one’s transcendence beliefs. Thus, experiencing and reclaiming personal identity for mixed-ancestry Native Americans initiates the healing process of the sacred self.

The power of healing for marginalized people begins via self-identity. A heuristic process that centers on spirituality and intuitiveness potentially lessens the impact and legacies of colonization as an influencing construct of identity. These legacies are the social construct of ‘race’ and marginality for many Indigenous groups and the descendants thereof. Committing to a process that acknowledges and supports self-discovery where experiencing one’s soul wisdom influences, clarifies, and redefines self-identity is the foundation of healing via heuristics.

Heuristics, as formally established by Clark Moustakas in the mid-late 1980’s, is a qualitative approach aimed at discovery and meaning. The *internal frame of reference* (Moustakas, 1990), or personal wealth of experiential information, is a foundational component of heuristic self-searches. This internal frame of reference serves as navigator or guide through the self-search process allowing the individual to tap into experiences that reach beyond societal orchestrations and into a place of value that other’s may not see, but that are intuitive and tacitly known.

Heuristics can be used as an empirical research methodology as readily as a therapeutic process. This approach uses specific concepts intended to assist its users in unearthing their subjective truths. Intuition, tacit knowledge, self-dialogue, concentrated gazing, indwelling, and reflection (Moustakas, 1990) are unique to heuristic processes. These concepts are inherent within all people. However, individual(s) have to be open to exploring their own intimate experiences.

Accessing the concepts throughout the phases of heuristics govern the process; thus, leading to new discoveries of meaning. The six phases are *initial engagement*, *immersion*, *incubation*, *illumination*, *explication*, and *creative synthesis*. Due to the nature and scope of this paper detailed descriptions of these phases is not feasible. I will note, however, that the phases are fluid except for the first and last phases which are fixed. Moustakas (1990) asserts methods employed via heuristic inquiry "...enables one to come to know more fully what something is and means" (p. 10). For individuals who are defined by the social construction of race, a deeper sense of personal identity exploration serves to illuminate and reaffirm a truer sense of self-identity which is not sanctioned nor limited by the politics and meanings of race.

Indeed, reviewing literature on the impact of forced identity ascription and manipulation of Native Peoples and their descendants in the Americas (Doerfler, 2009) and Canada (Lawrence, 2003), exponentially encourages the need to recapture the sacred self and heal from the various forms of identity and land (an extension of the sacred self) rape. Postcolonial histories are politically entrenched with European manipulations of Native identity for the sole purpose of securing land rights using less than honorable means. However, tackling this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

The remaining focus of this paper is on healing the sacred self by recognizing and embracing ones implicit identity via engaging in a heuristic process. The heuristic process gently encourages a deeper and holistic examination of the self and experiences which shape identity. This process, when grounded in spirituality (sans religious constraints or doctrine), reveals what has been hidden or unacknowledged in the soul of the person forcing a reconciliation of sorts. Using my original research on spirituality and identity of *racialized* women (having admixtures of African and white European ancestry) who were also *ethnically* Cherokee (Thorne, 2009) as a reference, let's explore the heuristic process and its inherent healing potential in recognizing and embracing implicit identity. In the aforementioned study, the participants verbalized experiences and thoughts regarding the self at an intuitive and implicit level for the very first time to another person. Through their participation in this heuristic case study, the co-researchers (the heuristic term for participants) were able to experience a truer sense of self.

Research on the implicit identity of women socialized as *racially* African American of *ethnically* Cherokee ancestry (Thorne, 2009) is an example of using heuristics as a model for recognizing implicit identity and as a process toward postcolonial healing. Research findings suggested a sense of incongruence between explicit (ascribed by others) and implicit (subjective truth) identities for the women in the study (Thorne). The co-researchers in this heuristic case study were not tribally affiliated nor were they surrounded by their cultural or hereditary legacies; however, they all experienced similar spiritual connections which shaped their implicit identities as Cherokee. By voluntarily and purposefully accessing and *experiencing the pure essence* of their spirituality, and connections with nature, the women allowed themselves to reveal in their own truths. These truths revealed themselves as felt spiritual connections during

attendance at powwows and reflections of childhood experiential memories that were grounded in tacit knowledge filled with subtle Spirit-inspired human experiences.

Upon cycling through the various heuristic phases, which can become a lifelong process of discovery, the participants verbally expressed a sense of feeling free to be able to finally openly participate in discourse about the complexity of their subject identity. One co-researcher shared, "...as I am thinking about it [validation of her implicit identity and inner truth]...things are coming up that I've felt, but I guess I just never had the courage or the situation didn't present itself to *say* it..." (Thorne, 2009, p. 87). Another research participant noted feeling less isolated and more in touch with honoring her Native American ancestry and identity than she did prior to engaging in this heuristic process. She stated,

"I don't feel as alone as I did before in trying to find out...where my feelings were coming from...acknowledging my Native side [and my spirituality]...It has always been taboo to talk against if you got any disbelief or kind of question about what you've been taught or what you've been told, what you're suppose to believe, you know, whenever you question that it's *blaspheme*..." (Thorne, 2009, p. 88).

The feeling of not being alone in this fluid and renegotiated identity process proved inspiring and opened the door to healing for the participants in the study. Recognizing that other mixed-ancestry Native Americans struggle with similar postcolonial identity ambiguities can serve as an untapped source from which a unified energetic healing of fragmented identity can be ignited. Recently, one of the participants of the study contacted me and shared, "Now, after the research, I truly feel like I belong there [referencing powwows], not just as a 'visitor', but like a guest at a family reunion. I now understand that some of my beliefs and interests are not something that just happened, but [are] an innate part of me" (personal communication, July 16,

2012). Consequently, establishing and embracing implicit Native identities as birthrights designated by Spirit and not by man negates the idea of the “bewildered self” while simultaneously redefines the politics of identity placing it squarely within the purview of those embodying such identities. For mixed-ancestry Native Americans/First Nations, consciously choosing to engage in a heuristic exploration of one’s identity using your own internal frame of reference (your experience of *pure* spirituality) empowers and heals the sacred self in the context of postcolonial political and societal binds defined as otherness.

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