

## Cultural Identity Silencing of Native Americans in Education

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### Abstract

This descriptive phenomenological study investigated: *How is cultural identity silencing psychologically experienced by young adult Native Americans in education?* Cultural identity silencing is the denial of the existence of cultural identity. Phenomenological interviewing and Giorgian analysis resulted in a descriptive structure of how cultural identity silencing is psychologically experienced by Native Americans in educational settings. These results contribute to a greater understanding of how Native Americans experience colonialist educational systems and thus has implications for survivance, identity development, and the decolonialization of education.

**Keywords:** cultural identity silencing, Native American/Alaskan Native, descriptive phenomenological analysis, education, survivance

### Cultural Identity Silencing of Native Americans in Education

Throughout history Native Americans have experienced harm within Western colonialist educational systems through acts of cultural genocide (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisan, 2014; Grande 2004), microaggressions (Quijada Cerecer, 2013), and language denial (Lee 2009). Extant research has focused on Native American concerns while illustrating these communities as causes of their own suffering and thus tasked with the responsibility to heal (Grande, 2004; Quijada Cerecer, 2013, Tuck, 2009). This focus contributed to the pathologizing of Native communities rather than acknowledging the contexts of colonialism, trauma, and privileged positionality while speaking to Native issues; in other

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words, research without ever becoming engaged witnesses of Native experiences (Grande, 2004). Predictably, research largely continues to remain confined within proving/disproving causes and effects rather than providing in-depth subjective description of the underlying essence of phenomena that contribute to precipitating conditions. Phenomenological research which incorporates the ethics set by indigenous research methodologies, can provide scholars and practitioners with an understanding of how Native American students subjectively experience education through reconstruction of their experience while honoring and protecting their narrative as truth.

The active denial of the present living existence of a culture and/or cultural identity as expressed through language, behaviors, norms, values, history, and assets defines cultural identity silencing. This definition was co-constructed with participants during the research process. Although a new construct, cultural identity silencing is an integral aspect of the educational experiences of Native American/Alaskan Native students (Bombay et al, 2014; Brayboy & McCarty, 2015; Grande 2004; Quijada Cerecer, 2013) that began with Indian boarding schools that existed from 1860-1978 with the expressed intention to eradicate the cultural identity of Native students. This persisted beyond boarding schools through policies, research, and educational practices which even today continue to force the assimilation of Native students into dominant colonialist ideology (Knowles, 2012; Quijada Cerecer 2013; Wilcox, 2015). This includes research in psychology and counseling which have historically used research methodologies and interventions which promote Western ideals that negate the experiences and perspectives of Native Americans (Duran & Firehammer, 2015).

The impact of years of cultural genocide and forced assimilation is reflected in the current struggle for academic success; with the graduation rate of Native American students remaining the lowest compared to their White, Black, and Hispanic peers (National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], U.S.

Department of Education, 2017). While cultural genocide may not be the explicit purpose when educating Native American students, cultural identity silencing is a salient aspect of education, tasking Native American/Alaskan Native students with the obstacle to navigate and succeed within institutions that have historically been, and continue to be, agents of harm (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins & Altschul, 2011; Whitebeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004).

This study investigated how cultural identity silencing of Native Americans is experienced in education using descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis. Although previous research has critically examined the effects of colonialist educational systems, including historical trauma, there remains a need to explore the related phenomenon as they are psychologically experienced. Cultural identity silencing is one such phenomenon and investigating this phenomenon called for acts of courageousness by the participant to voice their *dangerous memories* defined by Zembylas and Bekerman (2008) as memories that are “disruptive to the status quo, which is the hegemonic culture of strengthening and perpetuating existing group-based identities” (p 126). These courageous narratives of eight young adult Native American college students exist within and in-between both colonialist and Native worlds (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2009; Tuck., 2009; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008) and describe the underlying essence of how cultural identity silencing in education is psychologically experienced.

To conduct this research required strict adherence to protect, respect, and honor the knowledge shared by participants throughout every step of the process. Meaning, the methodology existed within the paradoxical boundaries of institutional structures and indigenous research methodologies (Berryman et al, 2013; Duran & Firehammer, 2015; Muhammad et al., 2014; Tomaselli & Dyll-Myklebust, 2015). The result, a methodology framed within Giorgian (2009, 2012) descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis, guided by the ethics

of Indigenous research methodologies (Berryman et al, 2013; Duran & Firehammer, 2015; Muhammad et al, 2014; Tomaselli & Dyll-Myklebust, 2015), and pursued with Seidman's (2013) phenomenological interview model.

### **Methodology**

Descriptive phenomenological design using Giorgian analysis was the foundation used to investigate the psychological essence of cultural identity silencing of Native American/Alaskan Natives in education. Phenomenological approaches aim to capture how phenomena, in this case cultural identity silencing, are experienced through participants' subjective descriptions as they mirror the underlying core psychological essence of phenomena (Bevan, 2014; Giorgi 2009, 2012; van Manen, Higgins, & van der Riet, 2016). The analysis honors individual experience as truth by creating a structural description of underlining psychological experience grounded in constituents derived from meaning units formed by direct words of participants. These meaning units were found through examination of the psychological shifts described within each transcript. Meaning units were then transformed into descriptive parts, called constituents, of the phenomenon using phenomenological reduction. "Constituents" are the psychological lifeworld meaning units that are interrelated and whose relationships form the structure of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). In this study, the resulting constituents create the structural essence of the phenomenon providing a rich in-depth subjective psychological understanding of how young adult Native Americans experienced cultural identity silencing in education (Englander, 2016; Giorgi, 2009, 2012).

### **Researcher Positionality**

As an instrument of the analysis process, it is imperative to acknowledge the implications of the primary researcher's positionality. As a non-Native, biracial, cis-gender, female the desire to investigate the phenomenon of cultural identity silencing originated from personal experiences of denied cultural

existence. Previously conceived theories such as microaggressions and identity models did not offer a picture which grasped the complexity of what was experienced when systems, self, and other collide to deny existence. Theories which also fall short in including the unique experiences of Native communities and identities. Ultimately, I, the primary research and first author, chose to use my position to explore the complexities of survivance existing within the harm of colonialization by investigating how cultural identity silencing was experienced within education (Grande, 2004; Tuck, 2009; Vizenor, 1994).

This project required decolonizing the researcher-participant relationship (Kovach, 2009; Muhammad et al, 2015; Tomaselli & Dyll-Myklebust, 2015), inclusion of Native communities (Berryman et al, 2013; Duran & Firehammer, 2015) and epoché (Englander, 2016; Giorgi, 2009. 2012; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen et al, 2016) to protect the narratives of participants and honor the participants' knowledge as sacred. Furthermore, it required the primary researcher to engage in purposeful naiveté, active reflexivity, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation in which the words of the participant were upheld. This required a bracketing out of the researcher's interpretations beyond their *natural attitude* (Giorgi, 2009) allowing the essential aspects of the phenomenon to emerge such as: only including literature that was necessary to establish the research frame and strict adherence to the *invivo* text of the participant throughout analysis.

In alignment with indigenous research methodologies, the co-construction with participants took place through validity checks during the exploration of each phenomenon within the research process i.e. how they experienced cultural identity silencing; how they experienced their interview process; and how they experienced the researcher's analysis of their individual experience. The first check occurred over the three phenomenological interviews, the second, during the last 20 minutes of the third interview, the last after the analysis of the

transcripts. Due to the boundaries set by the academic institution and the primary researcher's Non-Native, doctoral student status, the methodology of this study primarily utilized descriptive phenomenology instead of Indigenous research methodologies. The researcher attempted to address the insider/outsider relationship between Indigenous research methodology and Western qualitative research through intentional steps to build authentic researcher-participant relationships with respect, responsibility, and reciprocity (Kovach, 2009).

### **Participants**

The participants were eight emerging adult college students, three self-identified as male and five self-identified as female, between the ages 18-26. Five of the participants were undergraduates, while the remaining three were graduate students. All self-identified as Native American/Alaskan Native from nine distinct nations with several identifying as multiple-heritage. Their Nations were located in the Northeast, Mid-west, North-west, and South-west regions of the United States, and Alaska. Nation names are not included in this article to protect the participants' confidentiality. There was no Nation membership requirement for participation in this study. To require it would have upheld colonialist construct of "blood quantum", in itself an act of cultural identity silencing. Furthermore, the analysis describes a shared psychological description of how cultural identity silencing is experienced, while honoring each participant's unique cultural identity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The primary researcher took intentional steps to minimize any actions that would contribute to the colonialization of participants and Native American communities. The project was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board as well as Native communities to meet the Western institutional research standards as well as Indigenous methodology. The study was first reviewed by a Native American psychologist/counselor education faculty member before it was

submitted to the institutional review board. Once approved by the institutional review board at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, the researcher sent the information to Nation Councils, community leaders, and Native academics for review and approval. This included an additional three institutional review board processes, approval by one Nation council, and a review by an academic listserv whose membership includes Native American/Alaskan Native scholars and researchers. The study was not exclusive to one Nation, and the recruitment materials were distributed by-way of members of the communities. In addition to inclusion of Native communities within the recruitment, a preliminary interview was conducted with a Nation council member to gain feedback on the interview protocol as well as honor the desire of this elder to share their experience of cultural identity silencing in education with the primary researcher.

In accordance with NIH ethical standards, participants were informed of their right to end the interview and withdraw their participation at any time. Participants were also made aware of the research methodology. This was most important given that the resulting structure would not include their entire narrative. The results were also shared with individuals who contributed to recruitment. Specific transcription rules omitted Nation cultural details as well as identifiers of the participant. The omitted identifiers included Nation name, educational institution names and locations, gender, and any specific details about cultural ceremonies. Ultimately, these considerations created protected space for the participants to engage in an authentic cross-cultural researcher-participant relationship and share their unique experience.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment primarily consisted of emails sent to faculty and advisors of Native American student groups at over 25 college/universities. Emails were also sent directly to community leaders and Nation research review boards. The emails contained details about the research study including the question,

methodology, protocol, and IRB approval number. A flyer was also included in the email. Additionally, the study information and recruitment material were also shared through the Society of Indian Psychologists listserv. Study participants were provided the recruitment information from someone within their community and then contacted the primary researcher. Six out of the eight participants were connected to the study by a close friend/family while two discovered the study via an admin approved social media post to Native student association Facebook pages. In appreciation of their time and knowledge, every participant received a \$50 visa gift card upon completion of the third interview. These gift cards were funded by the University of Missouri-St. Louis E. Desmond Lee dissertation grant.

#### **Data Collection through Phenomenological Interview**

Phenomenological interviews require a researcher-participant relationship which provides space for sharing of experiences while honoring personal narrative as truth (Bevan, 2014; Englander, 2016; Giorgi, 2009; van Manen et al., 2016). This aligns with Indigenous research mythologies focus on the reconstruction of experience through storytelling with the researcher as engaged witness (Berryman et al, 2013; Duran & Firehammer, 2015; Kovach, 2009; Tomaselli & Dyll-Myklebust, 2015). A preliminary phone call took place before the phenomenological interviews to provide space for introductions and address participant questions/concerns. All participants asked about the primary researcher's cultural identity, specifically their non-Native status and interest in issues experienced by Native American communities. This dialogue was necessary and meaningful given the history of non-Native researchers engaging in research which harmed rather than contributed to Native communities.

Giorgian phenomenological psychological method requires only one interview specific to experiencing the phenomenon, this study, however, utilized Seidman's phenomenological interview method which includes three in-depth



interviews (Seidman, 2013). This departure from strict Giorgian method intended to provide space and time for the participant to reconstruct salient aspects of their experience that would have been left out if restricted to just one interview. It also provided space to develop a trusting relationship that acknowledged and honored their whole story rather than just what was recommended by the phenomenology as necessary. Every participant completed three 60 to 90minute Skype interviews that were spaced at least four to seven days apart (Seidman, 2013). Seidman's phenomenological interview model places emphasis on honoring the participant experience, subjective depth, reconstruction of experience, and establishing a trustworthy researcher/participant relationship (Seidman, 2013). Elements necessary for exploring this phenomenon while abiding to ethical standards set by Indigenous research methodologies.

Aligning with descriptive phenomenology, Seidman's (2013) interview model asked participants to reconstruct their experiences within the boundaries of Native American identity, education, and psychological meaning. This foundation created a "house" of cultural identity silencing allowing the participants to walk through and reconstruct the rooms as they appeared into consciousness. Their rich descriptions included subjective elements which encompass their psychological intrapersonal, interpersonal, and spatial experiences (Giorgi, 2009).

The primary purpose of the first interview was to co-construct a researcher-participant relationship and trust. Its focus "*Please share with me your life experience of your identity, cultural education, and formal education*", provided space for the reconstruction of the participant's experience of their Native American cultural identity and education up to the present moment. The second interview centered on the primordial reconstruction of their cultural identity silencing experience by asking the participant: "*Please describe your experiences of cultural identity silencing of your Native American identity in education*" and was the primary space for data collection. Lastly, the third

interview asked: “*Please describe the meaning of your experiences of cultural identity silencing*”. This interview provided space to further explore specific details of their subjective experience while also providing space for the participant to share their experiencing of the interviews. Although the second interview provided the most data for the analysis, all interviews included rich subjective descriptions of the participants’ primary reconstruction of cultural identity silencing in education. Seidman’s three-part interview was essential in forming an authentic collaborative researcher-participant relationship which established space for the participant to share their experiences of cultural identity silencing.

### **Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Analysis**

The interview data was analyzed utilizing Giorgian’s phenomenological psychological method grounded in Husserlian philosophy to form a resulting descriptive structure of how cultural identity silencing of Native American identity in education was experienced. This analysis framework required the researcher to utilize “imaginative variation” and maintain each step of the analysis within the psychological meaning given by the participant (Bevan, 2014; Englander, 2016; Giorgi, 2009). The resulting descriptive phenomenological psychological structure expresses the eidetic generalization of the subjective experience of cultural identity silencing (Giorgi, 2009).

All 24 interviews were transcribed by the primary researcher to establish an understanding necessary to distinguish psychological meaning units and essential constituents from supportive details. Each interview was read twice during coding. The first was to gain a wholistic understanding of the description, and the second was to mark specific subjective meaning units (Giorgi, 2009). The datum of each participant was coded separately to ensure that the descriptions remained true to the individual participant narrative, and meaning units were marked by shifts in psychological meaning indicated by change in described ways

of being through emotions, focus, and object. These units were then organized under the three domains that created the foundation of the phenomenon, *education* (formal and cultural), *Native American identity*, and the construct *cultural identity silencing*. Once organized, the meaning units for each interview were read and weighted for subjective richness. Continuing with Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological psychological method, each weighted meaning unit was transposed into third person. This step separated the "I" of the participant from the essence of the phenomenon. These transformed *invivo* meaning units were maintained to validate the resulting essential constituents and preserve the authentic, lived experience of the participants.

Deviating slightly from Giorgian analysis, individual summaries were created using the third person transformations organized within the contexts of education, dialogue, community, and meaning. These contexts are the co-constructed four "universal rooms" of the cultural identity silencing phenomenon, neither predetermined nor essential to the final ontological structural description, but essential to epistemology of how each constituent was experienced by participant. These summaries were shared with participants who were given the opportunity to share how they experienced reading their narrative. Furthermore, this step in the analysis aligned with Kovach's (2009) Indigenous research methodology in which two processes occurred during the analysis: the creation of a summary or "condensed conversation" intended to preserve the shared knowledge of the participant, and the descriptive analysis to form the constituents. Thus, the individual summaries served two purposes, organization for the final phase of analysis, and acknowledgement of responsibility to witness and honor the participant's knowledge.

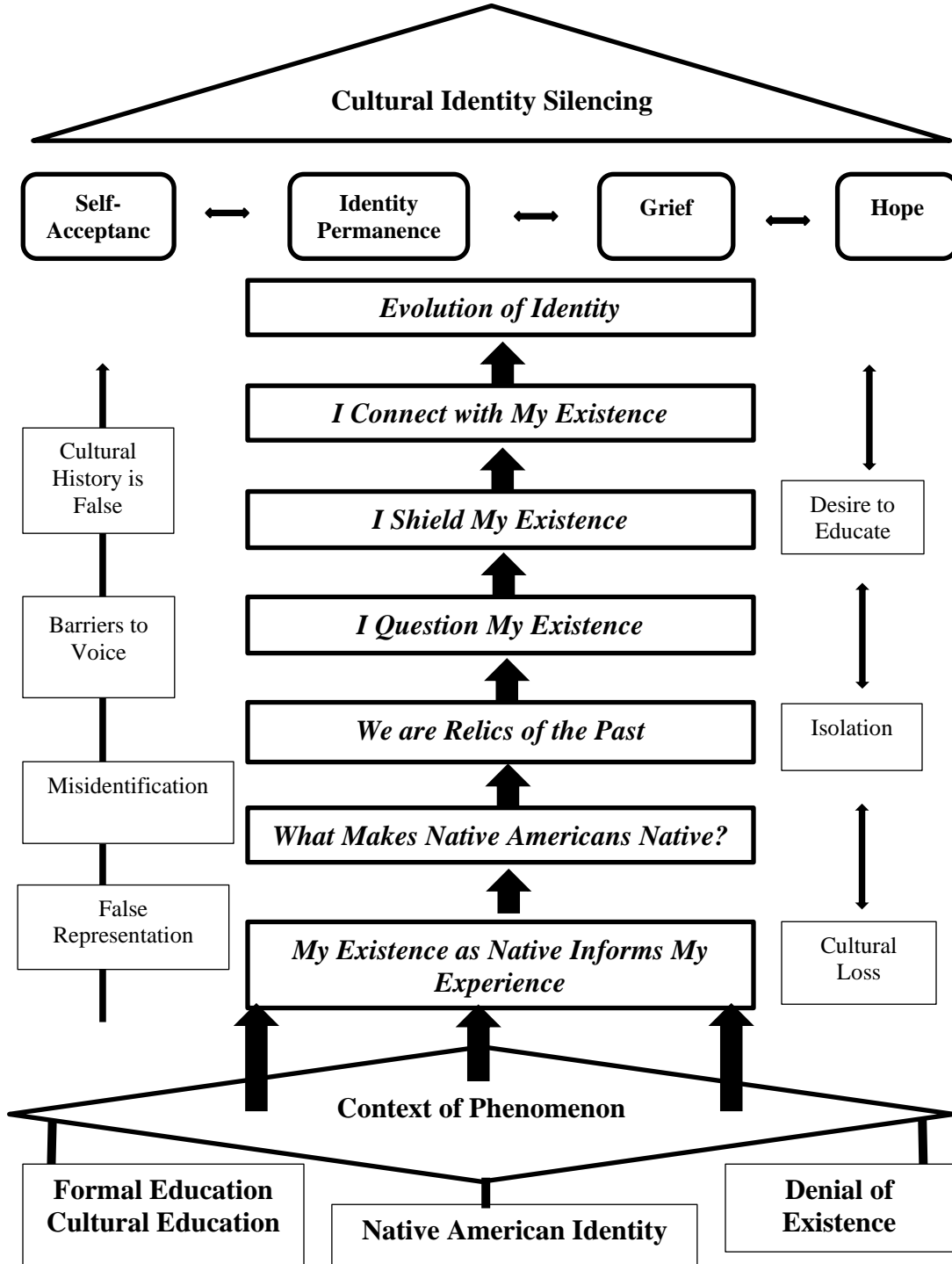
The final phase of analysis, phenomenological reduction, transformed the meaning units into the essential constituents that form the descriptive structure (Giorgi, 2009, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher used imaginative

variation and horizontalization within a psychological lens to examine the descriptions equally across datum as how they were universally experienced by the participants slightly beyond the way they were described (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The resulting seven constituents are the morphological essences of cultural identity silencing which describe how it is psychologically experienced *not* its causes, conditions, nor outcomes (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1983). The seven constituents are: *my existence as Native informs my experience; what makes a Native American Native; we are relics of the past; I question my existence; I shield my existence; I connect with my existence; and identity evolution*. These pillars of morphological essences that form the cultural identity phenomenological “house” are inexact only existing within the psychological edict generalization of the phenomenon which sits upon the foundation of Native American identity, education, and the construct of cultural identity silencing (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1983).

### **Results**

The results of this study describe the interactions between participants and the phenomenon as it was brought to their consciousness. As such the results have both an ontological, a descriptive structure of the nature of the psychological experience of cultural identity silencing, and epistemological, the description of how each constituent came into consciousness of the participant through systems of knowledge and social interactions, layers. The essential psychological constituents that form the descriptive structure of the phenomenon occur throughout the experience of the phenomenon i.e. “process-long”, interdependent, fluid, reoccurring, and transformative (Giorgi, 2009). In order for each constituent to first exist, the former constituent had to have arisen to consciousness. Once arisen the constituent could be experienced independent of the others, however, in order for the phenomenon to occur all constituents had to be experienced.

Figure 1.1. Cultural Identity Silencing Descriptive Structure



The illustration provided in Figure 1 presents the order working from bottom to top of how each constituent arose to the consciousness of the participant leading up to the complete experiencing of cultural identity silencing. Accompanying the seven essential constituents are epistemological elements (boxes) consistently experienced in no particular order throughout the experiencing of the phenomenon. The boxes on the right indicate subjective and cognitive states, the left are encounters with other, and at the top are subjective experiences that were intensified by the experiencing of the essential constituents leading towards cultural identity silencing of Native American identity in education. While psychologically experiencing cultural identity silencing, all essential constituents arose in sequence, each dependent on the former, whereas elements could be experienced at any time. The following presents further epistemological description how each constituent was experienced in the words of the participants.

**“My existence as Native informs my experience”**

I mean probably in like between middle and high school, but I really did think especially in middle school, that like I was very secure in the notion that I was [nation]. And I knew that and I was very proud of it, and that whatever I did that by virtue of being [nation] meant that that's what a [nation] does [laughs]. I was I could not be wrong in what I did because that's just, it informs itself, I am [nation] therefore, whatever I do is what a [nation] does. (P2 interview 1)

The Native American identity of participants depends upon their lived existence. This existence as Native was lived as inherent with a sense of permanence. To be Native, before their first experience of cultural identity

silencing in education, meant to just live with a deep-felt pride and connection regardless of whether or not they lived within Native communities. The alterity experienced in formal education settings challenged their self-identity as Native as exemplified by their cultural languages being outcast and cultural history disregarded as myth. Being “other” created internal conflict in contrast to the non-Native world.

Since I was taught our language first then English since I was a really young and I was talking to everyone else like it's just a normal thing like in my own language, this or that. But no one was able, not able to understand me...since...I, a , I think I went to preschool in [town] which it has like no, no tribal representative persons over there. It was just completely White Caucasian and what not. So, and then there was the problem with the communication. So they couldn't understand what I was saying. So, they pretty much had to make me speak English for the entire time. And then since, a most of the time, I can only recall certain words or phrases [in first language] I can't really recall like a whole sentence or what not. So, I think that's partially because of that. I mostly used to English rather than my own language. (P3 interview 2)

To exist as Native within an academic setting was to feel dramatically isolated. “Just being a minority amongst everyone else you just don’t say anything about it. It’s just like a needle in a haystack sort of way” (P3 interview 2). Voicing their existence and experience was to feel silent discomfort from peers and educators. Their voices were singular entities with unique knowledge that could not be woven into the fabric with other cultural identities such as African American and Latino. Often participants’ interactions with non-Natives were the

first experiences that someone had with a Native American, therefore participants' inherent identity as Native American informed their experience in contrast to education; experiences that both validated and violated its permanence. **“What makes a Native American Native”**

As they continued to experience challenges to their Native identity a new psychological state emerged- “what makes a Native American Native.” Although their cultural history reinforced their identity, its inability to compensate or overcome the invalidation of their existence caused psychological strain. To ask family meant asking them to describe harsh realities which continue to cause pain; to ask educators meant receiving colonized history or complete dismissal of its importance. Shame, embarrassment, and self-doubt were, predictably, reported results of this internal exploration of Native identity coupled with external invalidation.

I myself never found myself um seeing the round face as an icon in the culture that was out today. And the way that it influenced me, I guess um because I never got to have Native American icons my Native American teachers were under represented and underappreciated-when I was a child, I guess I had, I had a rounder face than I do now, I don't know why it's changed but I did have a rounder face. and I found myself looking in the mirror a lot of the time and wishing I had more of a jaw line or just very narrow features and um then I, I really didn't like what I saw in the mirror every day. And it wasn't necessarily a hatred towards Native Americans it's just I feel as if that it, the round face was a disgust. (P1, interview 2)



Participants also began to experience a silent separation within their communities between degrees of “Nativity” fostered by the colonialist culture within schools. Blood quantum, created by the US government, was internalized, and reinforced by Nation membership ID cards which includes “Certified Degree of Indian Blood [CDIB]”. To identify with multiple heritages meant both legal and cultural challenges to their existence in both the Native and non-Native worlds. Ultimately, as their experiences started to challenge the authenticity of their existence as Native, participants grasped for knowledge, objects, and relationships that would validate their existence.

**“We are Relics of the Past”**

Well I think in school I only saw, like just savage, you know, the savage Native people and they didn't have clothes on, and they were... just you know, full of disease, and they were just in the way. So, they had to be wiped out...so that the settlers could be here. You know. I feel like that's the only kind of Native image that I really saw in school when I was growing up, and then like Pocahontas of course, but she wasn't...she didn't seem Native to me. Then in the textbooks it was just like...that like dehumanizing aspect of like talking historically about Natives it was just like... ‘they were there’ that kind of referencing them like the *other*. (P8 interview 2)

As participants worked to validate the authenticity and permanence of their Native identity, they became conscious of their existence within a dominant narrative in which Native Americans were cast as relics of the past. Their existence faced a unique challenge: how to exist as Native when it does not exist within the history taught in educational institutions?

Participants navigated education by adopting the essential knowledge that disregarded their history and casted Native people as historical objects. The absence of Native American cultural narrative in textbooks, popular culture, pedagogy, and class discussions hindered opportunities for an intersection between their authentic lived experiences and educational experience. Participants faced having to choose between what aspects of their identity to voice and what to let go in order to succeed in education. This complex experience of existence and loss soon evolved into a questioning of existence. “Where did all the Natives go?” (P1, interview 2).

### **“I Question My Existence”**

I mean for a while I was just like, I guess we're just not that important. Like, maybe we don't still exist. Or like, maybe they like wiped so many people out that they didn't make it to the book. I don't know. I was really confused like what, like I kept trying to rationalize what, why the culture wasn't in there at all. So, I think I just started, I get that it just really had me questioning a lot of things like about my culture. And I guess that impacted identity as well because I'm like, well if that's not a thing anymore, if Native's aren't around, I guess I can't be Native if they're not here. Like if we don't exist then I must not. (P8 interview 2)

This questioning of existence was present within relationships as well as academics.

I think it's a huge mix of just where I came from and then having this huge culture shock which I think the way that culture shock played out was, obviously transcending into a very hard time at

school, but it also translated into some sense of me feeling like I really didn't belong there almost. and it only got worse and worse because at the start of the year it was like, okay I'm here. I don't really know anybody, but I'm going to make some friends. And then eventually it kind of got to the same point of, oh I don't really feel like I belong here. And then having that result in bad grades kind of had like a snowball effect. I don't really want to, I feel like I don't belong here. And then I get my grades back and see that they are not what they use to be graded. There not A's or B's anymore they're like C's and stuff. So it's like, well I'm not really performing at school very well, is this someplace where I actually belong... (P5 interview 2).

### **“I Shield My Existence”**

I, often in 7th grade I never really practiced my culture very much I kind of forgot about it to be completely honest. I was more concerned with the American culture you know my hair, my clothes, and I remember in in 8th grade I kind of had this bias against this teacher who always had Native American stuff in their classroom and constantly, she'd constantly try to approach me and talk to me about my Native American culture and I was a little embarrassed to talk to her because it was almost as if she was singling me out... And she would constantly say things like '[name] you would know about this', and even though I would I couldn't and didn't really want people to know, it's not the attention that you want in middle school. Um in high school I just felt like. . . it felt almost as if the kind of a shame in high school. Not in the sense that I was ashamed

of who I was but almost as if I were to talk about it, people wouldn't care and um if I were to, if I were to discuss it um just wasn't as important as other things. (P1 interview 1)

Once participants experienced self-questioning of their existence, they became aware of the necessity to shield it to maintain its permanence in the midst of continued encounters which dismissed it in education. For some this was experienced as physical “fight or flight” reactions that ranged from tension to difficulty breathing when they were placed in a position to defend their Native identity. For others, turning a “blind eye” to maintain focus on educational success. Moments which required silent negotiation: to voice their experience and be viewed as disrespectful or overly sensitive, or to remain silent and miss opportunities to advocate and challenge ignorance.

...sometimes I have to let those smaller um... interactions pass by and say, well I wanted to go say something but at the time I just have something much more bigger that I have to focus on. [ in response to what it's like to let it “pass-bye”] it's incredibly hard, um it's, it's hard - it's hard because it's almost like you don't, if you think that, I guess it's that sum-cost fallacy. Like if you had gone to talk to this person what would have happened afterwards, or like you know, if you didn't. A lot of what if's and I think that's the hardest thing to deal with because it's, if I had spoken to this person maybe they would go and speak to someone else, but there's no guarantee of that either. Um and so it's incredibly hard, it's, it's sad almost, it hurts. Um because if you, if you're talking about indigenous rights a lot of the time, you know sometimes it's hard to see those interactions go by and be ... and not get addressed and so it hurts, it's sad but at the

same time at least the way I think about it is it hurts now but in the long run me coming here to get this education, you know in the long run hopefully this, that issue that I had just dealt with will get spoken of, and I can at least help in some capacity. (P5 interview 2)

### **“I Connect with My Existence”**

Existing, proving their authenticity, faced with the absence of their culture’s existence, self-questioning, and shielding provided space for connection to their existence as Native to arise into consciousness. Protection and preservation were replaced by a desire to actively engage in their Native American identity and culture. Participants acted to piece together their history through engagement in Native communities including Native student organizations and programs on college campuses.

Just having a community that I could kind of come back to and be like ‘well this happened in class’, and then I hear other people chime in ‘oh yeah this is what happened to me’, or ‘this is how I dealt with it’. And so kind of having those experiences to draw from was a major help in me being like ‘okay I can speak, I know how to speak’ and you know at least what I say, and the things that I say, at least I think some people, or even if they don't understand that's something we can go off of. And so yeah really within only the, only recently have I become more outspoken and gotten over that shy, well not really shyness but that just reluctance to just speak out. (P5 interview 2)

### **“Evolution of Identity”**

“I think that kind of cultural identity silencing or sort of um the identity evolution that I experienced in college, that we experienced in college is really

what is responsible for the type of work I'm doing today and where I think we'll be going in the future." (P2 interview 3)

"I feel like to kind of put it into an analogy It feels like I was rolling a dice and like constantly getting zero. but now I feel like I'm moving. It's only one or two spaces but I'm moving ahead regardless. And I feel like the energy that's pushing me forward is going to help like not only finding out more about myself but me just experiencing life in a whole new light." (P4 interview 2)

While consciously engaged in their evolution they no longer questioned if they were "performing" according to societal or community standards. Frustration whilst navigating academic spaces became action to challenge what denied their existence. Expressing their new voice when encountering threats to their existence felt freeing, and missed opportunities were set aside as future goals instead of self-disappointment and abandonment. New knowledge of how to integrate their experiences within dialogue was empowering and enabled them to voice their existence to a world that remained in denial. Standing firm against the academic backdrop that negated their existence, participants challenged systems and moved into the forefront of advocacy in reclaiming their power.

...coming back into the world and being Native, and being loud and being seen and heard. I don't have to- you know a lot of people um would think that I'm Hispanic. So I could like pass for Hispanic or in the summer, or like in the winter I get lighter, and so sometimes, it's been a long time. I don't get that light anymore [laugh] but I could sometimes pass for like um, which I don't remember the last time this happened, but somebody said I looked like a white girl with a really good tan. And so I would just kind of like let that go like 'oh it's fine, like I'm passing as different ethnicities' but now I'm just like 'no I'm Native'. Like I don't care what color I look like or what

season it is, like I'm Native today, yesterday, tomorrow. Like I will be forever now. So I think I'm more proud of it and I want people to know now. I'm not embarrassed of that. So me reclaiming my power is like standing up: 'I'm Native and I'm here, and I have something to say'. (P8 interview 2)

### Discussion

Cultural identity silencing of Native American/Alaskan Native identity in education was experienced as a series of psychological constituents which threatened and reaffirmed the living existence of Native identity. Experiencing the phenomenon of cultural identity silencing of Native American identity in education is to experience re-occurring challenges of existence and evolve each time with greater strength and voice. Through the use of Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis, seven essential constituents emerged that described the structure of the phenomenon.

*My existence as Native informs my experience* was the inherent freedom of existence as Native American. Their identity informed their interactions and experience. *What makes a Native American Native* was the psychological experience of external challenges to the authenticity of the participants' inherent Native American identity. Participants searched for objects and experiences to validate the authenticity of their identity and experience as Native. *We are relics of the past* challenged the being of their existence as Native American. As participants were faced with "facts" that completely erased the present living existence of their identity, *I question my existence* arose into consciousness and participants experienced threats to their living existence. When *I shield my existence* was awakened participants suppressed their freedom of authentic expression of their identity to maintain their inherent Native American identity. *I connect with my experience* followed, and the desire for freedom to express their

existence evolved into action. This constituent was experienced as reclamation of their existence as Native American in which participants engaged with relationships of acceptance, educated others, and challenged ignorance. Lastly, *evolution of identity* came into consciousness experienced by participants as an evolution of their existence which for some looked like a change from forced educator to activist as well as a desire to contribute to the evolution of their community.

Although the essential constituents came into consciousness at different times for participants, they did not all cease upon the awakening of the next (Giorgi, 2009). Once they arose, they were present throughout the experiencing of the phenomenon. As such, within the description of their subjective experiencing of *cultural identity silencing*, all constituents needed to be present for it to occur. The participants, however, could experience a constituent independent of the phenomenon. Also, the intensity, frequency, and duration of each constituent was unique to the individual. Furthermore, the phenomenon could occur in minutes, hours, days, etc. The results describe psychological experience not causes, conditions, nor outcomes.

### **Trustworthiness**

Using descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis required strict adherence to epoché and adherence to the personal textual descriptions of participant narratives through each phase of the research process (Giorgi, 2009). Phenomenological reduction required the researcher to approach the study with deliberate naiveté and continually balance between critical reflexivity and authentic presence to prevent unintended distancing from the data. Epoché was maintained throughout each phase of the study: (a) intention to restrict the literature review to only what was necessary to form the study; (b) utilizing Seidman's interview model to critically witness while participants reconstructed



their experience; and (c) bracketing out the “I” of the researcher focusing only on the textual descriptions in the words of the participants.

Traditional member checks were not utilized within this study because it contradicts the transcendental and primordial underpinning of phenomenological research (Giorgi, 2009). Alternatively, individual summaries were shared with the participants, who were then given the opportunity to share a written description of how they experienced their summary. This was in addition to the last interview in which participants were given 15 minutes to describe their experiencing of the interview process. Their descriptions provided an authentic portrait which further validated the results, and provided transparency into the dynamics between the descriptive phenomenological analysis process, researcher, and participant.

### **Participant Interview Reflection**

During the last 15 minutes of the third interview, space was created, for the participant to reflect on their current experience of the interviews and research study. Their reflections demonstrate the active and positive role of qualitative phenomenological research in validating participant’s existence. Below are some of those reflections.

**Participant two.** I think what the main thing that this interview process has done for me is kind of, I think you asked me a lot of questions that I’ve never been asked before. - I knew what I experienced absolutely was connected to what I was doing now. That it really informed my, my career journey, my evolution of identity. Those things were readily, I noted those things more clearly. I think it's also been a bit cathartic too, to just kind of revisit some of my experiences from middle school and from high school or something. That talking to someone who is completely removed from the situation forced me to kind of, I had to explain

things in, in sometimes more general or more specific terms than I may have had to at any other point when discussing them. I think it was a, useful for me in that way too, that I had to pause and kind of consider how I would explain it to you. Which in turn kind of helped me make sense of some kind of things that maybe I hadn't ever had to breakdown in that kind of way.

**Participant five.** It's been so, it's been really enjoyable because it's showing me that there's interest in this world and interest in these issues. - there's interest in the struggle that Natives go through and what's really interesting about the way you describe what the project, like what you're doing it sounds really great because it doesn't sound like you are focusing on this idea of the struggling Indian. It doesn't sound like that stereotypical way, it's like really trying to find the root causes of these issues to move forward from that. And for me talking with you about these issues, you know, it's fantastic it's really excited to see kind of where it goes from here. I'm really happy that I got to share some of my viewpoint and experiences that I've gone through because hopefully in the end that will affect somebody else and you know be a source of, just be a different source for them. You know whether that's a source of strength or motivation you know anyone would be fine.

**Participant six.** It's been really good. You're really easy to talk to. Which is great. I don't think that it's necessarily something that I really thought about recently or that I've really been conscious of you know. I think it's good to reflect upon things, and kind of you know find meaning in things even if they are bad experiences. -I think that especially when talking about my experiences of

silencing I hadn't necessarily talked to really in-depth to other people about what I really had experienced, and what I, how that really felt. So, you know just being able to share that is kind of really cool, and actually having a space to kind of talk about it and um, having a safe space to kind of talk about it and analyze it a bit is really cool.

**Participant seven.** I think it's really helped me to reground myself, and think about how far I've come. You know I've just seen it on a paper and I was like 'okay I'll do it' and my friends like 'you'll be perfect for this' just because of all the work I've done, and um the fact that I try to use my voice as a tool. -But I was really curious about like the kind of questions you were going to ask and, but I was like 'well I'm just going to go with the flow' and so far it's been really great. I think every week that I've it's just given me time to think about how far I've come, and even some of the most recent incidences it's just made me realize how much better I have it in college than in elementary school.

### **Limitations**

The resulting descriptive ontological structure and epistemological description of constituents are confined within the eidetic generalization of the phenomenon under investigation, meaning external validity remains within psychological boundaries established by the research question and descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis (Giorgi, 2009). The descriptive analysis limited the epistemological depth which differentiates the unique experiences within different Nation identities, while the strict adherence to participant's experience limited the result's universality. Additional limitations include the Non-Native cultural identity of the primary researcher which contributed to difficulty in recruitment, shift in interview model to take time

establishing trust with participants, and a psychological lens which may not align with the psychological perspectives of Native communities. Lastly, the sample only included college students and does not acknowledge how cultural identity silencing in education is experienced by individuals who did not attend college or complete K-12 education.

### **Implications**

Vizenor (2009) stated “Native survivance is an active sense of presence over historical absence, the dominance of cultural simulations, and manifest manners. Native survivance is a continuance of stories” (p. 1). The participants of this study reconstructed their experiences of cultural identity silencing into narratives of Native survivance. Narratives which formed the descriptive structural essence of how cultural identity silencing of Native Americans in education is psychologically experienced. This psychological essence of cultural identity silencing includes constituents which interact with identity development, colonialism, cultural knowledge, and resiliency. Each constituent included metaphors tied to collective history, agency, identity, resistance, and empowerment (Kirmayer et al, 2011). In response to denied existence these constituents in concert with epistemological elements of emotional and relational adaptation culminated in an evolution of Native identity. This ontological essence and epistemological description of Native experience contributes to understanding Native American wellness through practices of anticolonialism as survivance in research, education, and counseling.

Regarding schools, the constituents of cultural identity silencing can inform therapists in schools (e.g. school counselors, psychologists, social workers) about the ways in which their actions can move towards the creation of therapeutic relationships critically engaged in anticolonialism contributing to the survivance of Native American students. By valuing, validating, and supporting Native students’ resiliency and agency, therapists in schools can actively

contribute to the countering of re-occurring threats to Native existence. Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE: Lemberger, 2010) is a humanistic social justice therapeutic model in which the therapist acknowledges the interrelatedness between the student and their social circumstance and assists the student in developing self-advocacy skills to confront injustice and critical consciousness (Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014). This model aligns with the epistemological elements which actively contributed to how participants experienced cultural identity silencing through self-agency, connections to community, and environments which supported the development of self-advocacy skills.

Cultural identity silencing of Native Americans is experienced as both a threat and reclamation of identity. It is a frequent within education experienced through objects, relationships, and discourse which dismiss the existence of Native identity. Through these eight survivance narratives, participants took courageous steps to challenge colonialist rhetoric and voice their pain, resilience, and healing. The results provide a foundation for continued exploration of what cultural identity silencing contributes to anticolonialism work as well as the pursuit of qualitative research grounded in indigenous research methodology.

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