

Native American Subjective Happiness: An Overview

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The scholarly exploration of what makes people happy has been ongoing for thousands of years, particularly in Western cultures. A lot is known about happiness among Euro-Americans, and only more recently have researchers begun to examine this construct among other cultures. Native Americans are a particularly underrepresented culture in the psychological and happiness research, and very little is known about what makes Native Americans happy. While many studies have been conducted on happiness and subjective well-being (SWB) of Euro-Americans, few studies have examined Native Americans.

One of the common variables that researchers use to study cultural differences is collectivism/individualism. Collectivism refers to cultures in which people are interdependent and interconnected with each other and are other-focused. Individualism refers to cultures in which people are more independent and self-focused. When discussing individual levels of collectivism/individualism, self-construal is often used. Interdependent self-construal corresponds to collectivism while independent self-construal corresponds to individualism. Native American has commonly been thought to be a more collectivistic culture.

Native American Culture & Happiness

To begin to understand Native American happiness, it is necessary to view the historical context that continues to affect and often plague Native American people today. Native American (NA) is just one term used to refer to the indigenous peoples who have inhabited the United States since prior to the arrival of Europeans in 1492. The literature also uses American Indian, Native, Indian, and Indigenous. While these terms all have their own historical and sociopolitical significance in referring to indigenous peoples, they tend to obscure “terrific cultural and linguistic diversity” (Gone, 2004, p. 11) and individuals of indigenous descent tend to prefer to be called by their tribal names (Gone & Trimble, 2012). For uniformity and space considerations, NA will be used throughout this article unless directly citing a source that uses another term.

After the arrival of Europeans to the American continent in the late 15th century, the population of NAs sharply declined dramatically due to plagues, diseases, and genocide (see Thornton, 1987, for a complete history of changes in the NA population). The religious based Doctrine of Discovery was developed by Europeans in the 15th century to rationalize genocide, enslavement, conquest and the taking away of land and rights from the NAs without their consent; this doctrine is seen to continue to negatively affect NAs to this day (see Miller, 2005 for further discussion of the Doctrine). Manifest Destiny was later used to rationalize Western expansionism which resulted in massacres of NAs in addition to the taking away of their land through often deceptive ways and forcing them onto reservations (see Horsman, 1981, for more details of how Manifest Destiny affected NAs). Later, in an attempt to “kill the Indian in him but save the man,” (Adams, 1995, p. 52) the federal government adopted policies that encouraged civilization of NAs instead of conquering them. These policies involved removing NA children from their homes, putting them in boarding schools, and forcibly teaching religion, American values, and English while simultaneously punishing cultural and linguistic expression resulting in further cultural genocide. Other policies outlawed traditional ceremonies and many practices were exterminated. Prior to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978 (see

Manz, 2012, for much more on this Act) NAs were not legally allowed to practice their ceremonies therefore many of them were done in secret or lost altogether.

NAs have a long historical context that is laden with institutional racism, forced assimilation and removal from homelands (Garrette and Pichette, 2000). Colonialism and the associated cultural genocide that accompanied it continues to have negative impacts on modern NAs' physical, psychological, and spiritual health through a process called intergenerational trauma (see Duran, Duran, & Brave Heart, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008). Despite this long history of oppression, it is a myth that NA is a dying race. In fact, although it took about 400 years since the arrival of Columbus for the depopulation of Native Americans to be reversed, the NA population has been steadily growing since about 1900 (Thorton, 1987). A small but significant part of the US population, 5.2 million people, self-identify as Native American, and there has been considerable growth in this population in all regions of the US from 2000 to 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Of these 5.2 million, 2.9 claimed NA and no other race. Approximately 1.9 million belong to one of the 566 federally recognized tribes according to the number of individuals the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) purports to serve (U.S. Bur. Indian Aff. (BIA), 2013). The validity of self-identification has been questioned and there is significant amount of controversy over what exactly (i.e., cultural experiences, blood quantum levels, ancestors on the rolls) makes someone NA (see Gone, 2006 and Gone & Trimble, 2012). Present day NAs represent a very diverse group who reflect an ancestry with a wide range of "social, political, and economic diversity" (Gone, 2004, p. 11). There are currently 566 federally recognized tribes ("tribal entity that is recognized as having a government-to-government relationship with the United States, with the responsibilities, powers, limitations, and obligations attached to that designation") (BIA 2013). In addition to vast cultural diversity, there is a great amount of linguistic diversity among NAs. Prior to European contact, there was a rough estimate of about 300 NA languages spoken in the US. There are currently about 210 languages that are being used to some extent today (Krauss, 2009).

Psychological research has primarily examined the negative aspects of well-being for NAs including high levels of poverty, substance abuse, violence, trauma, unemployment and suicide and lower education attainment (Gone & Trimble, 2012; Johnson & Tomren, 1999) that warrants "urgent attention and attenuation" (Gone & Trimble, 2012, p. 132). On the other hand, NAs have been seen to be very resilient to poor conditions and colonialism, with social support emerging as the most salient factor (Belcourt-Dittloff, 2007; King, 2011; Willetto, 2012). While one must live in adequate livable conditions in order to be happy, one can be happy despite hardship and may even thrive due to the challenge (Veenhoven, 2005).

To begin to understand NA well-being and happiness, it is necessary to understand the role of how funding, particularly the lack of funding, affects their mental health services. NAs did not receive mental health care from the federal government prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (LaFromboise, 1988). Currently, the amount spent per capita on NAs for health services is only 40% of what is spent on non-NAs and "funding for behavioral health care through Indian Health Service (IHS) is less than \$30 per year spent per person served by the system, including hospitalization" (Goodkind et al., 2010, p. 387). IHS, a branch of the US Department of Health and Human Services, founded in 1955, is the entity that provides NA with the most mental health services. IHS is "responsible for providing federal health services to American Indians and Alaska Natives" from federally recognized tribes with the goal of raising their well-being "to the highest possible level" (IHS 2013). Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution established a government-to-government relationship between the federal government and tribes which allows for the IHS to exist and be funded federally. The federal

funding IHS receives equates to about 52% of what is needed for “adequate personal health services” (Gone, 2004, p. 10) and only 7% of those dollars is allocated to both behavioral health and substance abuse services combined. Additionally there is a huge lack of NA Psychologists as either practitioners or role models (LaFromboise, 1988).

Well-being and happiness may be perceived differently among NA. The NA view of mental health tends to be much more holistic and incorporates more spiritual and community aspects than the mainstream culture (see LaFromboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1998 for more on NA mental health). Religiosity and spirituality are important for many people’s happiness (Lopez et al., 2002), particularly Native Americans (Garrett & Myers, 1996).

Discrimination can affect minority individuals’ happiness (Liang, Nathwani, Ahmad, & Prince, 2010; Yoon, Hacker, Hewitt, Abrams, & Cleary, 2012). NAs reported higher stigmatization which was related to lower SWB as compared to Euro-Americans (Harvey, 2001). First Nations Canadian elderly were found to have lower SWB than Euro-Canadian elderly. This was seen to be due to health and social factors and not due to fact that they were NA (Blandford & Chappell, 1990).

Willeto (2012) predicts happiness among *Diné* (Navajo) NAs to vary depending on assimilation level. Happiness likely looks similar to mainstream American happiness for those fully assimilated and those who are bicultural or multicultural are likely to mix traditional conceptions of happiness with more mainstream ones. More traditional members’ happiness will look different and will be related to the traditional philosophy of “*walking in happiness* or *walking in beauty*” (sic) (p. 379). This principle of living in harmony, peace, balance and order with “oneself, one’s loved ones, one’s community, the natural world, and the universe throughout one’s life span” can bring “profound happiness” (p. 379). Others have stressed the importance of balancing family, clan, tribe and community life for well-being among NAs. Balance of thought, emotions, and behavior is also relevant (Garrett & Myers, 1996). Walking in happiness, therefore, is related to one’s lifestyle and behaviors of daily living. Traditional *Diné* ceremonies celebrate happiness or help physically, mentally or spiritually sick people restore “health, harmony, and happiness” (Willeto, 2012, p. 383). These ceremonies may be overseen by traditional healers whose job is to restore harmony and happiness to the people. An example of a ceremony that allows the people to celebrate and express their happiness is called Baby’s First Laugh Ceremony. Attendees of the ceremony will pray for the baby to experience lifetime happiness. *Diné* happiness (*Hozho*) comes from balance and harmony between body, mind, and spirit. Unbalance and disharmony cause unhappiness.

Non-Western cultures tend to be collectivistic; happiness in these cultures is often linked to social relationships (Kitayama & Markus, 2000). It has been suggested by researchers that NAs tend to more likely be collectivistic/have an interdependent self-construal than Euro-Americans and that this influences their well-being (Bobb, 1999; Hossain, Skurky, Joe & Hunt, 2011; Long, Downs, Gilette, Kills in Sight, & Konen, 2006). NAs are generally described as coming from a Non-Western society despite living within the more individualistic United States and are more likely to perceive themselves with an interdependent self-construal (Heine, 2008). Middle class people are more independent than working class people who are usually more interdependent (Na et al., 2010), and NAs tend to more often come from working class/lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Johnson & Tomren, 1999). In a study of Newe NAs, those living in city settings were still likely to be collectivistic although they tended to be less collectivistic than those living in country settings as older participants were more collectivistic than younger ones (Bobb, 1999). *Diné* from more traditional families were more

collectivistic than those from bicultural families. Family and cultural values shaped these participants' sense of self as interconnected (Hossaim, Skurky, Joe, & Hunt, 2011).

Collectivism/Interdependence is important for the well-being of Inuit Canadian First Peoples (Kral & Idlout, 2012). For them, interdependence consists of three tiers: nuclear family, extended kinship, and collaborative partnerships. In interviews asking about the meaning of happiness, the most important theme in relation to happiness was family for Inuit respondents. Family was mentioned four times more frequently than the next most important theme (Kral, Idlout, Minore, Dyck, & Kirmayer, 2011). The next important theme included communication and talking both with family members and friends. The third most important theme was related to values and practice of traditional knowledge with "cultural knowledge and identity" being "central to their wellbeing" (p. 393). All three themes were found to be interrelated.

Interdependence and relatedness are also pertinent to the happiness for Aboriginal Australians (Heil, 2012). For them, happiness is not about the individual's own pleasure. Rather, they consider the whole community's well-being. In an ethnographic study of these people, Heil demonstrates that happiness for them is "contingent upon whom they are with and the activities they participate in" (p. 204). Being with others, particularly kin and extended kin, takes precedence over other activities.

In sum, NAs have suffered a long history of cultural genocide and discrimination. They represent a population that has been neglected in the psychological literature in general, and in the happiness literature in particular. When they have been studied, the focus has been primarily negative and often the results were not used to help the people but rather to further exploit them. Rarely have researchers looked at what might be going well for NAs and what might contribute to their happiness. The extant research available shows a possible connection between collectivist values and social relationships and happiness for NAs.

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