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How do Akwesasne Mohawk People Define their Cultural Identity?

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Final Research Project
Dr. Alvarez / EDG 5707
Cross Cultural Studies in Education

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the cultural identity of the St. Regis Akwasasne Mohawk Indians. First, it will explain my rationale for choosing to examine the cultural identity of this particular group followed by the objectives of the research. The paper will give some history and background on the Akwasasne Mohawks. It will review the literature on cultural identity specifically focusing on the identity of Native People.¹ Next, will be a review of the interviews conducted followed by an analysis and discussion of the data. Finally, the paper will conclude with some educational implications based on the research.

Rationale

Objectives

The objective of this research involved investigating the identity construction of five St. Regis Akwasasne Mohawks. The research entailed interviewing five St. Regis Mohawks between the ages of 33 and 41 who currently live on the St. Regis Akwasasne Indian reservation. The research attempts to determine what symbols are part of the cultural identity of Akwasasne Mohawks. It examines the feelings the five interviewees have about being Akwasasne Mohawks. It will examine some of the social and psychological layers that the five Akwasasne Mohawks have constructed. It notes affective states and their sense of belonging. However, before proceeding some background and history of the Akwasasne Mohawks is necessary.

¹ Throughout the paper, I will use “Native People,” “American Indian,” “Native American,” and “Indian” interchangeably.

Background and History

The Akwasasne Mohawks are one of eight Mohawk Nations. (Mohawk Nation Council of Chiefs). (See appendix a for the current location of the Mohawk Nations.)

The Mohawks or the People of the Flint (KANIEN'KEHAKE) are one of the five founding nations of the Iroquois Confederacy (Mohawk, 1996). The Iroquois Confederacy or Haudenosaunee consists of Cayuga, Onondaga, Seneca, Oneida, and Mohawk (with Tuscorara joining in 1722) (Iroquois Confederacy, 1996).

The Haudenosaunee or People of the Longhouse was created in the 15th or 16th century during a time of fighting between the nations. The Haudenosaunee was based on democratic decision-making. The Great Law of Peace (Iroquois Constitution)² promoted democratic principles with equal and fair representation from all nations (Iroquois Confederacy, 1996).

Traditionally, the Iroquois resided in longhouses, which served as communal dwellings and ceremonial buildings. Mohawks were matrilineal and clan families were linked by female members (Mohawk, 1996). However, much of this was lost when the Europeans came.

The fur trade and the introduction of Christianity were two major factors that dissolved some of the traditions and collective ways of life (Goodman-Draper, 1994). Many Mohawks were forced to convert to Catholicism. The fur trade introduced a number of diseases that resulted in a 2/3's decline in the Mohawk population (Goodman-Draper, 1994). During the American Revolution, the Mohawks were forced out of the Mohawk Valley and lost 95% of their land. Some Mohawks went north to Canada.

² To read the Iroquois Constitution, see the reference to the Iroquois Constitution in the *Essential Documents in American history*, Essential Documents, 1492-present.

Catholic Mohawks broke away from Kahanawake and formed a new community at Akwasasne. This community remains there today.

In the 19th Century Mohawks like other Native nations were forced to assimilate into the dominant culture. They lost language, culture, and traditions. In the 20th Century, a number of industries were developed near Akwasasne territory. Not only did the people lose land but the land and rivers became polluted and contaminated. Farming ceased to be a way of life for most Akwasasne people. Many of the men became ironworkers. Today ironwork is a source of immense cultural pride among Mohawks. “Akwasasne Mohawk ironworkers have participated in almost every large steel construction project in North America” (Wells, 1994).

The Akwasasne Mohawks have not been without their problems and political strife. They have faced a number of adversarial events, however they remain a strong and proud people. There are a number of great success stories to tell. According to Green (1999) the achievement levels of American Indians are among the lowest of all racial groups in the United States. This is a grim reality backed up by Census Data in 1990 and 2000. However, among all native groups, the St. Regis Mohawks have made the greatest strides in education. 48% of Akwasasne Mohawks between the ages of 18 and 24 are enrolled in college or graduate school compared to 16.3% for all native groups. In addition, only 5.6% of 16 to 19 year olds are not enrolled in school and not a high school graduate. This is in comparison to 15.1% for all American Indians (United States Census).

Today the St. Regis Akwasasne Mohawk Reservation straddles two countries (United States and Canada) and three states – New York, Quebec, and Ontario. (See

appendix b for location of Akwasasne). The Akwasasne Mohawks have 14,648 acres of land on the American side and 7,400 acres on the Canadian side (George-Kanentiio, 1995). According to the latest United States Census, only 2,699 people claimed to be Akwasasne Mohawk (United States Census, 2002). Other statistics show the number of Akwasasne Mohawks on the American side to be as high as 5,632 (George-Kanentiio, 1995). On the Canadian side, statistics show the number of Akwasasne Mohawks to be 7,766 (George-Kanentiio, 1995). It is difficult to arrive at an accurate total because of the international border and duplicate enrollment and the refusal of some traditional Iroquois to be counted in the Canadian and U.S. Census (George-Kanentiio, 1995).

Literature Review

Social and Contextual Construction of Identity

There are over 500 American Indian tribes in the United States (Begay, 2002). (See appendix c for state breakdown of Native populations). This figure doesn't consider Canada or other parts of the Americas. According to the United States Census (2000), 2,475,956³ people counted themselves as Native American. Due to the fact that each tribe or nation of Native Americans has their own culture, religion, language, and ethnic identity, scholars (Green, Nagel, Champagne, and Hirschfelder) agree that the identity of Native Americans is socially constructed. Depending on context and situations, Native Americans may define themselves differently. Natives may identify themselves at the supratribal level (Native American) when dealing with non-natives, at the tribal level

³ This is according to Census 2000 Table QT-P4 Race, Combination of Two Races, and not Hispanic or Latino (used figure of those who counted themselves as One Race). The total people who counted themselves to be Native American only or in combination with another race is 3,793,562.

(Mohawk) when dealing with other tribes, at the subtribal level (Akwasasne or by clan, kin, or traditional) when dealing with fellow Mohawks (Cornell, 1988).

According to Nagel, (1996) American Indian ethnic identification is multitiered or multilayered. A native of mixed blood (Mohawk and Oneida) would perhaps define his/herself as Mohawk when with his/her Mohawk family. However, if this same person is not familiar with the traditions of the Mohawk culture, his or her family may not consider him a ‘real’ Mohawk. On the other hand, when he is at Oneida, he will be recognized by other Native Americans as an Indian and fully accepted as an Oneida, Mohawk, or Oneida-Mohawk depending on what he or she chooses to emphasize.

Nagel (1996) continues to explain that there can be a certain layering of ethnic identity or the idea that a single ethnicity can be multiple choice. In the case of Native Americans, some of the choices include where he or she lives (on or off the reservation), degree of Indian ancestry, whether he/she speaks the language, how traditional his/her upbringing was, and cultural practices.

Political Construction of Identity

In the last 40 years there has been a 75% increase in the number of people who count themselves as Native American according to the US Census (United States Census). See Table 1.

Table 1

Year	Population of Native Americans
1960	523,000
1970	792,730
1980	1,364,033

1990	1,878,285
2000	2,475,956 ²

With such an increase in Native American populations, Green (1999) notes how fluid Native American ethnic identity is. Green argues that the 75% increase can be attributed to a resurgence of Native pride with increased political, economical, and cultural activities among Native people. He further argues that in the 1950's and 1960's, as a result of the termination policies, Natives switched their ethnic identity to white, the dominant culture (Green, 1999).

Nagel explains the huge increase in the number of people identifying themselves as Native American as individual ethnic renewal (Nagel, 1995). She identifies three political factors for Indian ethnic renewal. First is Federal Indian Policy. In the 19th century, Federal Indian policy encouraged and forced assimilation of American Indians into the dominant American culture. As a result of forcing Indians to learn English, taking children away from families to attend boarding schools, and loss of land, many Indians lost their language, culture, and moved to urban areas, intermarried and “switched ethnicities” (Nagel, 1995).

The second factor for Native American ethnic renewal is due to American Ethnic Politics. In the 1960's, civil rights legislation marked the emergence of the supratribal identity of American Indians. Through the use of political organizations, newspapers, and community programs, American Indian communities quickly mobilized into activism. This increased the appeal of Indian ethnicity and Indian self-identification (Nagel, 1995).

Finally, the third fact is American Indian Activism, Red Power. As a result of Red Power, individuals who did not identify themselves as American Indian in earlier censuses renewed their ethnic identity. Nagel concludes that the rise in American Indian ethnic identification is the result of political constructions (Nagel, 1995).

Review of Interview Results

Rationale for interviewees

This study interviewed five Akwasasne Mohawks; Spring, Winter, Midwinter, Autumn, and Harvest.⁴ The interviewees are similar in age (between the ages of 33 and 41) and friends with the researcher. Friends were interviewed to establish and comfortable and honest rapport. After the initial shock of the tape recorder each interviewee opened up sharing his/her feelings about cultural identity.

Profile of Interviewees

Spring is 33 and is an Akwasasne Mohawk. She is married to Winter and has four children. She has been living on the Reservation for approximately five years.

Winter is 35 and has been married to Spring for approximately eight years. He is an Akwasasne Mohawk and has lived most of his life on the Reservation.

Autumn is 33 and is a single Akwasasne Mohawk woman. She has lived on the reservation for the majority of her life.

Harvest was 41 when I interviewed her. She is an Akwasasne Mohawk woman with two children. She has lived the majority of her life on the Reservation.

Summer is 33 and is a married Akwasasne Mohawk woman with two children. She has lived the majority of her life on the Reservation.

Description of interview results

Each interview began with asking the interviewee to culturally define themselves. Each interviewee focused on different symbols. For example, Autumn discussed her family at length. Spring explained who she was by comparing life on the Reservation with life in Massena. Winter pointed to a lot of symbols including lacrosse, respect for

⁴ Names changed to protect privacy.

women, and the Great Law of Peace. Harvest discussed perceptions and context as important to identity. Finally, Summer explained who she was as not being able to put it in words, not really knowing any other identity.

Each attempted to define how it feels to be Native American. The responses range from I can't explain it to being a struggle to I am still learning, to being angry, to being very sure of who I am. Similarities among the interviews include a discussion of symbols and the Longhouse Religion. Every interviewee referenced a sense of belonging.

Analysis of Data and Discussion

In the interviews, the social and psychological constructions fed off one another. Each interviewee had different layers of social and psychological construction. The interviewees talked about their affective states and sense or lack of belonging. For example, when Spring was asked to culturally define herself she explained that she felt ashamed because she did not know a lot about her culture. It was revealed later that this was the result of social interactions with family who never made her feel like she belonged.

“Because I grew up in Massena I never thought about who I am. I guess I feel like I lost a lot because I grew up off the reservation. I didn't know what being a Mohawk was.”

“Feeling ashamed I don't know a lot about my culture. I never learned. In Massena I was considered the token Native girl. On the reservation I was called a little white girl from Massena in a very negative way from my own family. It was a Catch 22; I never felt like I fit in. It intimidated me from learning. Sometimes I felt like I didn't have the right to know or learn about the traditions because I didn't live there.”

Based on social interactions, psychologically Spring never felt like she fit in. Spring fell outside the ethnic boundaries of her culture when she lived in Massena (Nagel, 1994). Spring was marginalized (Alvarez, 2000) never fitting fully into the Akwasne Community or into the white world of Massena (Alvarez, 2000). Her family excluded

her and she was unable to self-identify with life on the reservation. However, when she moved to the reservation her situation changed. She began to feel a sense of belongingness (Nagel, 1994) and began to understand what it meant to be a Mohawk.

Over the past five years, Spring has learned a lot about what it means to be Mohawk. She is now an ironworkers wife even though her mother always told her, “Don’t marry an ironworker; it is such a hard life.” Now, she understands what her mother, friends, aunts, and grandmother meant when they said she is married to an ironworker. She has always heard the stories of how the women raised the children without the husband/father and how strong these women are.

“Before I never gave them that much credit. I just thought it was this trashy way of life. It is not. They made a lot of money but sacrificed time with family. Women are mom and dad and need to hand over the power when the men return. It is a delicate balance to be an ironworker’s wife. You depend on family more for social contact and emotional support. I became self sufficient so when [Winter’s] job ended a year later the roles changed. Now I was no longer the disciplinarian and everyone had to get to know each other again.”

Spring has fulfilled her sense of belongingness; socially she now understands what being an ironworkers wife is and psychologically, she is more comfortable on the Reservation with family as neighbors.

On the other hand, Autumn has always had a strong sense of identity and belongingness. Autumn believes her family and life experiences have helped her define who she is.

“My family especially my uncles have helped to install a strong sense of self identity. One uncle told me to get all of the education I could get, learn all you can from the white man because nothing scares a white man more than an educated Indian. Another uncle told me to get away from the reservation, experience life and dealing with others because there is a lot out there to learn.”

Autumn goes on to explain that she would never change who she is and doesn’t want to be anyone else. “I have never had to struggle with my

identity. I know where I came from and who I am. As long as you have a foundation of who you are you can go anywhere.”

She concludes with, “My family is full of role models. Not just my mom and dad. I get more from my grandmothers from the strength they have going through everything they have. My uncles and aunts are a strong influence. Family surrounds me and I look at different family members for different strengths. I don’t call my aunts and uncles aunt and uncle but Maw and Paw. What I can’t get from my mom and dad there is always someone else to fall back on. I think that I am that for my nieces and nephews. Both parents work so I fill in and help out so that they have the complete circle around them like I did.”

Regardless of the situation, Autumn feels secure.

“In college, when I looked around the room I could always pick out another Native American and just kind of zone in on them – instant connection. It became my security blanket away from home. It doesn’t matter what reservation or tribe they are from. We instantly bond.”

According to Nagel, (1994) identity is a construction in the mind. It takes place according to internal and external conditions and psychological and sociological factors. Based on the interview with Autumn, her family (sociological) and self-awareness (psychological), have led her to understand who she is from the inside. The strongest symbol in Autumn’s construction is her family.

Harvest talked a lot about her feelings and the perception of others.

“People have a preconception of who we are – looking at me as a representative of Mohawks. For example, I have heard someone say, “Oh those crazy Mohawks.” It was from another Native American. I took it with a grain of salt – in a way it was funny and they were joking when they said it but there was a grain of truth in it because of the way the media portrays the controversial things that have happened here. I wanted to challenge him and talk about it. We did a little bit; I tried to explain. It didn’t hurt my feelings; I was not angry but concerned that there was the misunderstanding.”

According to DeVos, identity is an umbrella made up of different symbols that respond to the fulfillment of needs including the need for recognition and validation. The recollection of history is an important symbol and people outside the cultural identity umbrella perceive events differently. Harvest felt the need to correct the misconceptions

that Mohawks are crazy because the preservation of Mohawk history is an important symbol to her (Class Notes, 2002).

When Harvest was asked how it felt to be an Akwasasne Mohawk she replied,

“To be a survivor. For a while there were generations who thought to be Native was synonymous with being negative– get rid of the culture. Negative things became a part of the culture – drinking became part of our culture too. It was a way we were manipulated with the traders bringing it in. It even became part of the warfare afterwards. After fighting, they would drink. In my parent’s generation, some people thought you showed whether you were a good Indian or not by how much you could drink. Popular culture became drinking. Culture is the way you live and in some ways our culture became the culture of the oppressed. I see a change taking a place. Negative things are not admired but put in perspective. Always a struggle one step forward two steps back. Positive aspects of culture are starting to be emphasized.”

The above quote is an excellent example of the contents of culture (Class Notes, 2002). At one time drinking was a symbol of Native culture. However the culture is going through revisions (Nagel, 1996) and the value of drinking is being de-emphasized. It also shows the fluidity of culture. It all depends on what contents you decide to put into your cultural identity basket (Class Notes, 2002).

Winter also had very strong feelings about his identity. Winter described his feelings,

“Right now I feel anger. There is so much potential so much skill, artistry, something want to explode but something is holding it back. I am trying to figure it out. Native Americans are oppressing themselves. It is too easy for Native Americans, go to school, get lots of money, we never learn the skills of responsibility, budgeting.”

“We are told to get our education and come back. Like me I got my education, I came back and I got shafted. Making \$7/hour [to start] using my education. Hell, now I am an ironworker with an education. I came back from college and was naïve. I wanted to save the reserve. The reserve doesn’t want to be saved. It takes a tragedy, turmoil to get action.”

He goes on to discuss the uniqueness of Akwasasne. “We are unique in that we border two countries, in Quebec, Ontario, and USA. One nation within a nation across nations. We have four types of governments whereas other natives have one ruling body. The main thing is the US and Canadian government love tribes who are in turmoil. When we are in turmoil – they are relaxing, watching.”

There is much to be said about his affective state. He is angry but also you might say that he is confused. He is trying to figure it out. Psychologically, he is angry and asking

why are things the way they are. There is a definite sense of belonging considering that he returned to the reservation; however he is frustrated with the results. He sees the United States and Canadian governments as external factors that limit the progress of the reserve.

Summer wasn't able to describe what it meant or how it felt to be Native.

"I don't know how it feels. It is like asking a non-native how does it feel to be a non-native. It is not something I know any differently. All I know is who I am. I have a good life. I don't have any bad feelings."

Based on this, one can only assume that Summer is socially and psychologically well adjusted to being a Native American. She has never thought about in concrete terms. She is who she is.

However, with the help of her daughter, Summer proceeded to discuss a number of symbols. One of the most significant symbols was that of land.

"Land is viewed differently. Land is more than property to us. We have our roots here. We don't sell a piece of property for money. It is worth so much more to us. We just don't get up and go at any time."

The symbol of land was alluded to in other interviews. For example, Spring talked about the open space of her property and Winter talked about the reserve being in two countries. For obvious reasons, land is probably an important symbol to most Native Americans.

Other symbols that came out include the game of lacrosse, basket making, the clan system, corn soup, hash, ironwork, respect for elders and women, family, community, sweet grass, the death feast, and the mother earth.

The Longhouse Religion came up in every interview. Every interviewee explained that they were not of the Longhouse Religion. Winter explained it as, “I don’t live it, I understand it, culturally I am not a participant within the Longhouse but I understand it and respect it. Summer explained that she is not part of the Longhouse, which may have traditions she doesn’t even know about. Autumn was raised in the Catholic Church. Spring explains that she is still learning about the culture from family and friends.

What significance is the Longhouse Religion in the identity of Akwasasne Mohawks? Because of the small sampling, it is hard to make concrete conclusions. However, every single interviewee brought it up when asked to culturally define him/herself. The Longhouse Religion is probably an important symbol of being Akwasasne Mohawk.

Along the same lines, religion in general, seemed to be an important component to the identity of the five interviewees. Spring, Autumn, and Summer all mentioned Death Feast Day. Summer explained Death Feast Day as part of the traditional culture where prayers are held for 7 to 10 days. The body of the person is not left alone and is laid out at home in full dress. At the end of the prayers there is a big feast with the favorite foods of the person who passed away. The food is left outside the home for the spirits to enjoy. No food is wasted or thrown away.

Harvest is dealing with some internal issues in regards to religion. Although she is not Catholic she has prayed to Kateri⁵ for guidance. In some ways she has feels Kateri is a kindred spirit because of her conversion during a time of strong Mohawk culture and traditions. She goes on further to explain,

⁵ Kateri, Lily of the Mohawk, Patron Saint. She converted to Catholicism in the 16th or 17th Century.

“Part of me knows the history and the church has done some really rotten things in the name of Christianity and Jesus. Part of me sees the other side. Traditional ways want to be kept strong and not mixed up. However there is a basis to each that is not against the other. In practice it is hard to know.”

Again, it is difficult to make assumptions to describe the cultural identity of a group of people based on five interviews, however religion seems to be a fundamental symbol for these five.

Another symbol that three of the interviewees brought up was ironwork. Ironwork is mentioned in the literature as a source of pride among Mohawks (Wells, 1994). Spring mentioned the strength it takes to be an ironworker’s wife and how ironworkers really appreciate the women who keep the home. Winter talks about being an ironworker. Harvest admires the work of ironworkers. She mentions the World Trade center and how Mohawks built and dismantled it. She explains that as a little girl she always put on her dad’s boots and talked about being an ironworker when she grew up.

One of the most important symbols that came up through the interviews was that of the importance of family. The pride was evident in Harvest’s eyes when she spoke of her dad being a WWII Vet and ironworker. Winter chose to become an ironworker to better support his family. Spring feels safer and more secure living around her family. When she lived in Massena she would call the police, now she calls her aunts. Summer was interviewed with her two children and husband in the same room. When Summer said, “I have a good life. I don’t have any bad feelings,” she looked around the room at her family. Finally, Autumn explains her strong sense of self as being the result of a strong family connection.

There are many other symbols that appeared throughout the interviews. Each symbol meant something to someone. It wasn’t in what they said, but how they said it.

Conclusions and Educational Implications

Each and every person is passionate about who they are. They may be confused, angry or unsettled, but their feelings are real. Facial expressions, hand gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice all portrayed something passionate about their cultural identity. Unfortunately, it is not easy to transfer these emotions onto paper.

It is difficult to make a lot of hard and fast assumptions because a lot of questions remain unanswered. Would the results have been different in different settings? For example, Summer was interviewed with her family in the same room. Would she have answered the questions differently one on one? Autumn was interviewed over lunch in a restaurant in Massena. Did she hesitate because of the people around us? You can only guess that perhaps the situation had some impact on the results. Additionally, the results probably would have been different with a Native person doing the interviews and conversely with a stranger doing the interviews. On the other hand, if the research had been done with strangers what would the results have been?

It is interesting to note that when each of the five interviewees were asked to define themselves, their answers crossed the supratribal, tribal, and subtribal levels. Spring, Autumn, and Winter answered Mohawk. Harvest answered Akwasasne Mohawk and Summer answered Native American. According to Nagel (1996) and Cornell (1988), the interviewees should have all answered on the supratribal level (Native American) because the researcher was not Native. However, it is impossible to make broad generalizations when referring to an individual's cultural identity.

Overall, there are a few assumptions that can be made regarding the identity of the five Akwesasne Mohawks interviewed. That is, there is a lot of passion among them about who they are as a people. There are some symbols that seem to be important including family, Longhouse Religion, religion in general, and land.

Does this research bring us any closer to understanding the cultural identity of Akwesasne Mohawks? Well, it all depends on what symbols each person chooses to fill his/her basket with. Perhaps, the research has brought us one step closer to understanding the five interviewees. However, culture is fluid and they may have added or subtracted from their basket already.

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