

Native American Indian Women: Implications for Prison Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the ability of a Native American Indian ethnic identity questionnaire in capturing identity data from a prisoner population. Survey questionnaire data from Native American Indian women incarcerated at the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW) were compared to data from the Southern Ute Indian Community Safety Survey (SUICSS). It is hypothesized that women who hold a Native American Indian identity will report specific information about their ethnic identity. This is important in determining a valid accounting of imprisoned Indian women. It is further hypothesized that women who hold these identities are proud of them and may rely upon them as a source of strength even while they are violently victimized because of them. Findings from this study suggest that pride in one's Indian identity may be an area upon which to target as part of a comprehensive rehabilitative effort.

Key Words: Native American Indian, women prisoners, ethnic identity, ethnic pride

INTRODUCTION

It is believed that incarcerated Native American Indians (hereafter, Indian) comprise a small segment of the U.S. prisoner population. Because the overall female prisoner population is increasing (Harrison & Beck, 2004), Indian women may constitute a smaller, yet, simultaneously growing segment of incarcerated individuals. Recently the notion of marginality of the Indian prisoner population has been questioned because of emerging research about incarcerated Indian women (Abril, 2002 & 2003).

In this paper, I examine the ability of an ethnic identity data questionnaire to capture such data from incarcerated women. I show it captures the same data from prisoners as it does from confirmed Indians. Confirmed Indians are those enrolled in a federally-recognized tribal group and whose names appear on their respective tribal enrollment roster. Tribes designated as a federally-recognized American Indian Tribe are recognized by Congress and the President to be legal and semi-sovereign nations. Enrolled members of these tribes are entitled to specific

rights afforded to them by Congressional and Presidential mandate. I hypothesize that if a confirmed Indian retains and reveals familial heritage knowledge, then an imprisoned Indian may do so, too.

Survey questionnaire data from Native American Indian women incarcerated at the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW) were compared to data from the Southern Ute Indian Community Safety Survey (SUICSS). It is hypothesized that women who hold a Native American Indian identity will report specific information about their ethnic identity. It is further hypothesized that women who hold these identities are proud of them and may rely upon them as a source of strength even while they are violently victimized because of them. Findings from this study suggest that pride in one's Indian identity may be an area upon which to target as part of a comprehensive rehabilitative effort.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Little empirical research on incarcerated Indians has been conducted. The data that do exist are believed to be an inaccurate reflection of the true Indian prisoner population. This is conceded in two reports published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

“Official Government Statistics”

In February 1999, the Bureau of Justice Statistics published *American Indians and Crime* (Greenfeld & Smith, 1999). This was the first comprehensive statistical report on crime among Indians issued by the United States Department of Justice. It was reported then that of the 1,131,581 offenders incarcerated in the United States, only 1 percent were Indian (Greenfeld & Smith, 1999, pg. 26). This means that Indians appear to make up only a small fraction of all incarcerated persons. These data do not include Indians incarcerated in federal prisons, on parole, or otherwise under felony-level supervision by authorities as those data were not reported. There is no breakdown indicating the gender of those so incarcerated.

In 2004, the Bureau of Justice Statistics again reported that of the approximately 171,000 people in Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) confinement, 2.4% ($n = 1,662$) were Indian. In 2001, of the 69,900 total people entering BOP custody for violent crimes, 16% ($n = 913$) were Indian. Again, there were no data reporting the breakdown indicating the gender of those so incarcerated.

Empirical Work

Few studies have been focused on incarcerated female Indians' ethnic identities. There has been some empirical work that attempted to determine the number of Indian women under state prison supervision. In her 1998 study of Indian women in prison, Abril reported that state officials argued that there were only two Indian women in their prison (personal communication, 1998). A significant finding from that study was that there were actually 255 women reporting they identified as Indian (Abril, 2003). According to Abril, much of the difference in accounting may be explained by the reality that people are, as one ORW respondent noted, identified by others by “how they look.” That is, if one “looks Black” then they will be identified by others as Black, regardless of their actual ethnic identity. Another possible explanation for the discrepancy is that upon initial imprisonment, perhaps during the intake phase, prisoners may be unwilling to reveal this personal data to prison staff. Thus, the staff may be left to rely upon

the “how they look” standard or the identity data from the court and arrest file, which usually employs the “how they look” standard as well. There have been no other published works in this area found during the search of the literature.

There is emerging data that links an Indian identity to increased reports of violent victimization (Abril, 2007). This is relevant to the study reported here because it is known that female prisoners have a high prevalence of violent victimization experiences previous to incarceration (Belknap, 2001). Now, there is developing evidence that supports the claim that simply being an Indian leads to a higher prevalence of violent victimization and, consequently, more reports of the same (Abril, 2007).

Indian Identity and Violent Victimization

There have been minimal, if any, studies linking an Indian ethnic identity to reports of violent victimization. Abril’s 2007 analysis of violent victimization among a group of Indians and non-Indians living in the same community found that those who identified more as an Indian both ethnically and culturally, are more likely to be targeted for violence and to report such victimization to authorities than others who do not identify so (Abril, 2005 & 2007). As one interview subject from the SUICSS reported, “It’s a hard life to be an Indian...the way you work, the way you pray, the way you try to raise your kids.” The pressure that comes from trying to live up to the standards of two worlds, a possible source of tension, may be mitigated by increased ethnic pride.

Increased Self-Esteem Mitigates Effects of Violence

Increased self-esteem is believed to be beneficial for mitigating the effects of violence. Bennett (2006) found that racial socialization may be a protective factor for ethnic minorities exposed to violence, especially among African Americans. Development of self-esteem based upon ethnic pride, one can then reason, may be essential in mitigating the effects of violence among other populations, especially Indians (also see, Ungar, 1980). Salazar, Wingood, DiClemente, & Harrington (2004) further found that social support acted as a buffer of negative effects in the relationship between victimization and psychological well-being. One may then conclude that social support via racial socialization may aid in the development of ethnic pride.

The links between a substantial, yet unacknowledged, female Indian prisoner population which is likely based upon the “how they look” standard for identity classification, increased violent victimization among both prisoners and Indians in general, and the significance of pride to good self-esteem in mitigating the effects of victimization is somewhat clear.

In the search of the literature, I was unable to locate any other sources focused on Indian ethnic identities among both reservation residing women and female prisoners. This study seeks to aid in filling the relative void in the literature on female Indians in prison.

METHODOLOGY

SUICSS: The Indian Study

Data were collected during the Southern Ute Indian Community Safety Survey (SUICSS), a U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics-sponsored study of crime and violence on the Southern Ute Indian reservation. The SUICSS had three prongs: (a) distribution of a survey questionnaire, (b) personal interviews, and (c) an examination of the Tribal Code. This report focuses only on data emanating from the first two stages of the larger study.

First, I sent a 72-item survey questionnaire to 996 adult Southern Ute Indians and 1,100 adult non-Indians living on the reservation. The contact information for the Southern Utes came from The Tribe's enrollment roster, while the information for the non-Indians came from a randomized selection from the voter registration list from La Plata, Colorado, the county surrounding the reservation. A total of 667 completed questionnaires were returned. Of those, 312 (46.7%) were from Indians and 355 (53.2%) from either Whites/Anglos or Hispanics. There were no self-identified African Americans or Asian Americans in this study. The Southern Ute Tribal Council approved and fully supported the study, so that I was allowed to use the tribal seal on all the study materials and in advertisements. This was important because some tribal members may not have received notice of the endorsement and the study's approval but would be convinced that the Tribal Council had approved it if the official tribal seal was used.

Second, I conducted structured personal interviews with 85 Indians living on the reservation. Subject recruitment notices were placed on bulletin boards around the tribal community. Advertisements were also placed in the tribal newspaper, *The Drum*, and aired on KSUT, the tribal radio station. Of those who took part in the personal interviews, most (79%, $n=56$) were Southern Ute Indian. The subjects who participated in the structured personal interviews were self-selected Southern Utes and Other Indians. "Other Indians" means members of other Indian tribes who live on the Southern Ute reservation. Subjects were paid \$50 for their cooperation. Personnel of the Southern Ute criminal justice system who were interviewed were not compensated since their participation fell under the rubric of their employment duties. The open-ended questions were designed to provide additional in-depth information about social conditions on the reservation as they related to the subjects' cultural and spiritual practices and violent victimization. The interview data are used to make clear the survey information that was provided by the 312 Indians.

I had a wide spectrum of interview subjects, spanning the social strata of the tribal community; the elderly, the young, working, unemployed, males, females, law-abiding, those who have had extensive involvement with the criminal justice system, and those who have had none. The modal subject, however, was an employed mid-40 Southern Ute Indian woman.

Most interviews took place in a centrally-located office provided by the Tribal Council. This had both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, the subjects would be assured I had Tribal Council approval, as that was required in order to gain access to the interview area. On the negative side, while all interviews were confidential and conducted in a private conference room with the door closed, some subjects may have felt their participation in the study would be reported to the Tribal Council. They may have felt pressured to answer questions in a fashion that coincided with Southern Ute Indian Tribal Council policy.

Ohio Reformatory For Women: The Prisoner Study

The only data on Indian ethnic identities among women prisoners found in the search of the literature come from a study conducted during the summer of 1998 (Abril, 2003 & 2002). The data collected during this study were obtained from responses to open-ended questions distributed to all prisoners at the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW), in Marysville, Ohio. At the time, ORW had the largest female prisoner population in the state, with more than 1,700 prisoners. The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction demographic statistics, current at the time of the study, indicated that ORW's population was predominantly Black ($n = 1,134$; 56%); White was the next largest group ($n = 899$; 44.14%). The Ohio agency reported that only 1 Asian and 2 Native American women were housed in ORW (personal communication, 1998). U.S. census data from 1990 for Ohio indicated that the state's general population was almost all White (87.7%), with far fewer Blacks (10.6%). Other ethnic groups, according to official government statistics current at the time of the study, constituted less than 2% of the state's residents.

The participants in this prisoner study were all adult women housed in ORW. They ranged in age from 17 to 70 years. Prisoner participation for this study was requested by ORW's warden, who posted a memorandum to all prisoners on bulletin boards throughout the institution, including each housing unit. The memorandum advised prisoners of the nature of the study, reported the steps the institutional staff would take to facilitate distribution and collection of the questionnaire, and included a request for their participation. The warden also issued a memo to ORW staff advising them of the study and instructing them to assist participants with completing the questionnaires. In particular, staff would read and interpret any questions from prisoners and provide referral services for any prisoner who may become in need of counseling as a result of the study.

Blank questionnaires were sent to the ORW warden. Prison staff distributed and collected the instrument from the prisoner population during the morning and afternoon counts on two days during the week of August 5th, 1998. The warden had instructed the staff to make certain the prisoners, who were away from their usual posts at count, be given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire. More than one third (35.6% or 601 out of 1,700) of the prisoner population of ORW returned a questionnaire to the researcher.

The questionnaire included an introductory letter requesting participation. Many culture- and class-specific terms and phrases were used throughout the instrument. See Abril (2002 & 2003) for complete discussions of the methodology and the study's strengths and weaknesses.

MEASURES

Regarding the questionnaire, ethnic identity was constructed as a dichotomous variable and measured by self-reports. Anyone reporting a Native American Indian tribal affiliation was classified as Indian. Any prisoner self-identifying as Indian or providing cross-validating information that suggests the respondent is an Indian were also classified as Indian. All other cross-validating measures were coded as dichotomous variables (0 = Not Reported and 1 = Reported). Discussion of non-Indian identities is beyond the scope of this report.

Other measures of Indian identity included the following: (1) Reporting the name of one's tribe/tribal affiliation; (2) Reporting being an enrolled member of one's tribe; (3) Reporting family members enrolled in one's tribe; (4) Reporting knowing one's family Indian heritage; (5) Reporting a family members' attendance at an Indian school; (6) Reporting contact with a tribe; and, (7) Reporting visiting one's tribal land or reservation.

These cross-validating measures of Indian identity were not simply contrived by the researcher. They have their basis in knowledge of modern Indian tribal enrollment and practices grounded in the oral tradition of Indians. It would not be unusual for one to take their own ethnic identity for granted within a non-prisoner population. Where familial relations are less likely to be intact, such as those of a prisoner's (Belknap, 2001), this may not be so. Moreover, if one knows their ethnic identity, it is hypothesized that they would also know from which tribe they hail or tribal affiliation they maintain and, possibly, their own familial Indian heritage. Other measures such as enrollment of one's self and family members and family members' experiences in an Indian school may be information not shared with the prisoner and their family. Finally, contact with one's tribe and visits to one's tribal land or reservation may not be as likely for prisoners as the costs associated may be prohibitive, even if the correct tribal group or reservation name is known.

With these cross-validating measures, I was able to determine if a research subject from either the SUICSS or the ORW study were accurately reporting a Native American Indian ethnic identity.

ANALYSIS

Comparison of SUICSS and Prisoner Samples

In the analysis, I separated the subjects into two groups: Indian and Prisoner. Descriptive statistics were identified in the first analysis. All between group statistics for each variable was significantly different ($p=.000$). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for this study.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS			
	Indian (%) (n = 186)	Prisoner (%) (n = 255)	Sig.
Reported an Indian Identity	186 (100.0)	255 (100.0)	---
Reported Name of Their Tribe	181 (93.7)	120 (47.0)	.000
Reported Enrolled	160 (86.0)	11 (.04)	.000
Reported Familial Enrolled	150 (80.6)	29 (.11)	.000
Reported Knowledge of Heritage	169 (90.8)	221 (86.6)	.000
Reported Attended Indian School	128 (68.8)	13 (.05)	.000
Reported Contact with a Tribe	154 (82.7)	15 (.05)	.000
Reported Visit to Reservation	159 (85.4)	35 (.13)	.000
Average # Years in Prison	---	5.5	---
Age			
29 and younger	0	80 (31.3)	.000
30 – 39	62 (19.2)	102 (40.0)	.000
40 – 54	41 (13.1)	65 (25.4)	.000
55 – 59	36 (11.5)	4 (.01)	.000
60 – 80	45 (44.4)	2 (.007)	.000

In the second analysis, mean scores and significance levels were determined for each variable in this study. There were statistically significant differences on the mean scores between the Indians and Prisoners ($p < .05$). Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations on the Indian cultural values scale for the Indians and non-Indians.

TABLE 2. INDIAN IDENTITY (MEAN SCORES AND SD)

	Indian	Prisoner	Sig.
Reported an Indian Identity	.47 (.499)	.43 (.495)	.000
Reported Name of Tribe	.46 (.499)	.20 (.403)	.000
Reported Enrolled	.40 (.490)	.02 (.135)	.001
Reported Familial Enrolled	.44 (.497)	.05 (.215)	.000
Reported Knowledge of Heritage	.56 (.497)	.38 (.486)	.000
Reported Attended Indian School	.37 (.482)	.02 (.152)	.000
Reported Contact with a Tribe	.61 (.487)	.03 (.157)	.000
Reported Visit to Reservation	.49 (.500)	.06 (.235)	.000

In the third analysis, binary logistic regression was used to determine which variables, when placed together and controlling for self-identified Indians, would be significant. With the exceptions of Indian school attendance and visits to one's reservation or tribal lands, all variables in the analysis are statistically significant. It should be noted that those who reported an Indian ethnic identity were 16.645 times more likely to report the name of their tribe ($p=.001$). The ability to name one's tribe should be, at least, a minimal standard for establishing an Indian ethnic identity. A woman reporting an Indian identity was 8.469 times more likely to also report that she was an enrolled member of her tribe ($p=.001$). Of those with an Indian identity, they were 14.277 times more likely to also report contact with their tribe. Table 3 presents the results of the binary logistic regression analysis.

TABLE 3. REGRESSION MODEL

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Reported Name of Tribe	2.812	.819	11.794	1	.001	16.645
Reported Enrolled	2.136	.672	10.102	1	.001	8.469
Reported Familial Enrolled	1.569	.644	5.942	1	.015	4.801
Reported Knowledge of Heritage	-3.376	.961	12.340	1	.000	.032
Reported Attended Indian School	.393	.591	.443	1	.506	1.482
Reported Contact with a Tribe	2.659	.647	16.907	1	.000	14.277
Reported Visit to Reservation	.814	.665	1.500	1	.221	2.257
Age	1.623	.293	30.567	1	.000	5.066

Qualitative Data

Ethnic Pride

“I am a strong independent woman!”—words spoken by a woman nodding in agreement with herself after revealing to me her early adult life was filled with violence and abuse. She, like other women interview subjects in the SUICSS, reported that their daughters, too, are living the lives they once led. Only now, they report telling them that they should feel proud of being an Indian because pride, several women reported, helped them “get through” the effects of constant attacks on their person. Involvement in cultural and spiritual activities, it was reported, helped many Indian women regain their sense of self and attachment to their heritage. More importantly, it gave these women a unique bond to their tribal history of honoring the women of the tribe.

Of the prisoner study subjects, 47% (n = 120) reported they felt some version of pride towards their ethnic identity, while 41.9% (n = 107) reported that their Indian ethnic identity “is just what it is.” Common comments written by prisoners included, “I want to meet my ancestors and the different tribes,” “(it’s) good healing blood,” “proud,” and “I am proud of who I am.” These data support the hypothesis that pride in one’s Indian ethnic identity is important for healing from the effects of violence; violence known to also be experienced by female prisoners.

DISCUSSION

Indian women in prison are under-counted (Abril, 2002 & 2003). The effects of this reality are discouraging. Official government statistics inaccurately reporting miniscule numbers of Indians in the Nation’s prisons work to facilitate the on-going notion that Indian women are too insignificant for intervention methods directed towards them. These women, who may have been victimized because of their Indian-ness, may also be being denied a supported method of victimization treatment (i.e., reinforcement of self-esteem via their ethnic identity).

The current social climate, however, may be motivating changes to how Indians are perceived. The changing social construction of Indian-ness, too, is helping to mitigate the effects of negative social perspectives about Indians. This century has seen a revitalization of Indian ethnic identities (Cornell, 1990). It is now socially acceptable to be an Indian (e.g., “It’s cool to be an Indian!”), where not long ago Indians were considered to be “wild” (Stremlau, 2005) and “savages” (Blackmar, 1892). Stereotypes still exist. For instance, an undergraduate student recently made a comment with a reference to all those “rich Indians” (personal communication, 2006).

The unspoken mandate that a person who claims to be an Indian should also “look like an Indian,” too, has lessened somewhat because of increased visibility of tribes and their members, especially their leadership while advertising their entrepreneurial ventures. Evidence was found in the words of an imprisoned subject when she stated, people identify you by “how you look”, which is likely the root cause of under-reporting.

The changing nature of multi-culturalism and multi-ethnicities in this century and in the future are likely to play a key role in changing the status of Indians in prison. It may even change the way their ethnic identity data are recorded.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Indian women who are incarcerated will provide the same ethnic identity data as confirmed Indians. Thus, the Native American Identity Questionnaire is a reliable instrument for gathering ethnic identity data from Indians whether they are incarcerated or not. This study further found that women are proud of their Indian identities. As Indian women are violently victimized more because of their identity (Abril, 2007), building upon the pride one feels about themselves may be beneficial to mitigating the effects of violent victimization whether the victimization is old or new.

Implications for Future Prison Research

Ethnic identity data collection would enhance and provide a more accurate accounting of Indians in prison if the Native American Identity Questionnaire were used in a number of institutions for women. It is unknown if males would respond the same as the women have. Further research on this topic in more institutions may provide the rationale for instituting an across the board overhaul of the current methods of identity data collection. This is important because researchers, policymakers, other stakeholders, and those interested in the well-being of female prisoners, need to have a better accounting of how many Indians are in prison.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Julie C. Abril earned her Ph.D. in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine in 2005. Dr. Abril has published in the areas of violent victimization, women in prison, Native American Indian crime and justice issues, identity, and policing. She is currently writing on tertiary power transformations as well as on the use of “Bad Medicine/witchcraft/magic/sorcery” as a means of social control by modern Native American Indians.

The author wishes to thank Janelle Doughty, Gilbert Geis, and Margit Averdijk for their assistance with helpful comments and support of this manuscript. The author wishes to acknowledge the much-valued aid of James Lynch, Tom Zelenock, and Christopher D. Maxwell. The data reported herein were analyzed during the 2006 summer session Quantitative Analysis of Crime and Criminal Justice at the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), held at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The Southern Ute Indian Community Safety Survey was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics (Award No. 2001-3277-CA-BJ). All views presented are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United States Department of Justice. A variety of other funding sources aided in the collection, processing, and analysis of both datasets, including the American Society of Criminology’s Minority Fellowship, the University of California, and California State University. Please direct all inquiries to the author at Julie.Abril@yahoo.com.