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Implicit Identity: Spiritual Influence on Multi-Racial Women of Cherokee Ancestry

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Abstract

A qualitative mixed-methodology was employed to conduct this research. The study places primacy on the relative purity of spirituality sans the constraints of religion to inform identity. This heuristic-case study revealed six core themes that gave ‘voice’ to the implicit identity development of socio-politically racialized women who are labeled outside of their intuitive and familial connection with Indigeneity. The findings extend and support literature on historical trauma, the significance of spirituality in counseling and introduces the concept of *soul wisdom* as crucial in identity construction. It implicates the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924, and emphasizes significance of symbolic interaction, on constructions of race and identity.

Keywords: spirituality, identity, Cherokee, African American, Native American, heuristics, Indigeneity, Virginia Racial Integrity Act, historical trauma

Introduction

Identity has been portrayed as a linear, stagnant, and relatively simplistic concept, especially in the United States of America, until recently. The ideology of “race” as a binary with ascribed meanings and stereotypes is firmly entrenched in the American psyche as constructed by the creators of whiteness. The process of colonizing brought forth more variations of diversity along with imposed ‘racial’ constructions of identity. Simply, if you appeared to *look* racially ‘Black’ or ‘White’, then that is the category in which you were placed. These racial categories were created by society and have been fluid to fit the needs of the *white* dominant culture. Several identity constructs, models, and theories assist in understanding the negotiation of ethnic identity from a historical Westernized perspectiveserving as the foundation (Helms, 2007; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Nobel, 1973; Saunt et al., 2006). These constructs take into consideration some historical factors such as racism, cultural oppression, privilege, and processes of assimilation and acculturation. Although these factors contain societal and historical influences, implicit identity considers more than just historical and societal factors. The formation of ethnic identity is more complex than one realizes especially for persons descending from the Indigenous Peoples of the America’s (i.e., American Indian or Native) who also embody additional ethnicities.

The intention of this research was to gain insight into the way spirituality influences and contributes to the depth of identity for *racially* “African American” or “Black” women who are also *ethnically* Cherokee. What emerged from the findings illustrates the power of *pure* spirituality as a conduit through which one experiences her implicit identity. To date, research on this specific topic is non-existent. There have been many attempts to define spirituality (Cashwell, Bentley, & Yarborough, 2007; Jung, 1933; Rich, 2005; Wiggins-Frame, 2005 as cited in Cashwell & Young, 2005) while, at the same time, acknowledging the variations of manifested transcendent experiences (Jung; 1933; Rich, 2005). However, there is a prevailing tendency to intertwine spirituality with religion or religiosity (Helminiak, 2006) in counseling literature. Thus, difficulty to define the nature of spirituality continues. The current study attempted to maintain a focus on the relative purity of spirituality sans the constraints of religion. Spirituality, as described in this study, refers to a connectedness with the Great Spirit, the universal source of energy, that creates an internal sense of balance, harmony, and peace (Thorne, 2009). This connectedness extends to all entities. Accordingly, “This spiritual connection resonates from the center of one’s physical being while simultaneously connecting one with the universe without the distraction of religious affiliation, influence or parameters” (Thorne, 2009, p. 17).

Pecchenino (2009) brought awareness to the intersection of spirituality and life experiences thus, providing context to identity. I refer to this implicit and intuitive depth perspective of identity, via spirituality, as *soul wisdom*. Soul wisdom reveals a deeper meaning to one's identity than the surface variables of race, gender, and ethnicity. This form of wisdom can be considered the link between our spiritual and physical selves where the soul holds on to previous experiences.

There is a myriad of research on identity formation based on race and gender (Carter, Helms, & Juby 2004; Cokely & Helm, 2007; Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009; Siu, 2005; Turner & Brown, 2007; Vandiver, Cross, Jr., Worrell, & Fhagen-Smith, 2002). However, research on racialized African American, or Black, women of American Indian ancestry is scant. Research conducted on this group has been primarily via the academic discipline of history (Yarbrough, 2004; Miles, 2005). The current study focused on the experiences of women who have been classified and socialized as African American or Black, but who are also of Cherokee and European descent and what this means in terms of identity negotiation. Instead of centering on the salience of race and societal classifications to determine "identity", this study focused on the influence of spirituality as the driving force of what is *implicitly* true for these women. The outcomes of this research have expanded the societal confines which automatically relegate these women into one perceived racial-social-political category which denies experiencing and/or expressing the whole personage.

The significance of the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924, the Cherokee worldview, American Indian spiritual beliefs and practices prior to colonization, and the conceptual introduction of *race* rhythmically set the backdrop as the need for this study. Historically, voices of this particular group of women have not been heard and continue to remain greatly silenced creating another layer of complexity in their struggle to understand and be recognized as who they are. Thus, the legacy of historical trauma and sub-marginalization for these women continues.

The inspiration for this study stemmed from the primary researcher's feelings of incompleteness around understanding the wholeness of her identity, but also from an intense spiritual influence moving her in a direction that embraced her Native American lineage. These feelings and experiences were a result of a lifetime of experiences and influences that attempted to be framed by societal and religious parameters, yet moved beyond both. As a result, internal conflict ensued between external ascriptions of racial identity and internal connections with implicit identity. Simply stated, there was an internal conflict between being referred to as "Black" or "African American" when my ancestry encompassed Cherokee (and European) lineage as well. This internal conflict was greatly heightened by the fact that my spirit responded in very distinct ways when surrounded by Native culture and spiritual practices. Telling is the fact that my family is not tribally affiliated. These same responses were not evident with what is considered African American or Black cultural or religious practices. However, community is complex and often borne out of allyship.

I began to wonder what, if any, importance my Cherokee ancestry had on my identity and spirituality. As I continued with my internal questions, I realized the possibility that I may not be the only person entertaining these questions or having this type of self-experience. My personal experiences and questions about my true identity coupled with an intense desire to delve deeper into my self-journey propelled me to formalize this quest for knowledge using a qualitative heuristic approach. What would I find? Would there be a sense of healing? What would this heuristic exploration yield? For a full review of the background and literature review, please refer to the full dissertation: *The Influence of Spirituality on the Implicit Identity of Racially African American Women of Ethnically Cherokee Ancestry*.

Brief Review of Related Literature

The Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924

According to Smith (2002), The Virginia Racial Integrity Act, formally instituted from 1922-1967 and granted as state law in 1924, gave representatives of the Bureau of Vital Statistics the authority to change (or reassign) racial designations of any person NOT of Northern European lineage on legal documents. This applied not only to persons suspected of having African or Indigenous blood lines, but also to Southern Europeans. Dorr (1999) indicates that this form of genocide occurred to dissuade white women from having relations with black men in an effort to maintain the façade of racial purity.

However, these practices did little to stop miscegenation and greatly affected the surrounding Native families and communities. During this time period, and slightly before, the “Colored” category was created to maintain the status quo. This practice was applied to birth certificates, death certificates, and marriage licenses in the state of Virginia. In some respect, it was safer to be considered Colored (not negating the implication of being ‘African’ American) rather than “Indian” as it was a mission of Walter Plecker, a major proponent of eugenics, to eradicate the American Indian as the recognized indigenous people of the land in Virginia (Smith, 2002). The intentionality of the eugenics movement created distinctive racial divides, yet significant ambiguity in areas of identity negotiation for future generations of Virginia families with Native American lineage.

Historical Trauma

Historical trauma is a term which denotes the longstanding historical and psychological pain experienced by the American Indian community, at large, which began upon first contact with the Invaders (Normalized as: colonizers/settlers). The immediate and severity of attack on the physical, cultural, spiritual and psychological well-being of the many tribes of what is now called the Americas continues to have devastating effects in the Native American community. Szlemko, Wood and Thurman (2006) assert this form of trauma as a “deep layer of scars that have crossed generations and continue to impact Native Americans today [in the United States]” (p. 439). The effects of historical trauma are manifested in alcohol use and abuse, violence, poverty, spiritual interruption, and identity crises to name a few. This is the legacy of historical trauma. Aspects of this trauma are felt by Native American descendants regardless of the social construct of race.

Self-Concept

Self-concept is a reflexive process inherent in the formation of identity. Rosenberg’s (1986) work on self-concept critically examined the interplay between thought and feeling (as cited in Rosenberg, 1989). This examination urged an objective personification of one’s own identity by, metaphorically, removing oneself from thoughts and feelings to form an opinion about self.

Personal identity for women who descend from Native American-African-European ancestries is a continuous negotiation. For these women, the socio-political identity assigned is typically African American or Black. This reductive label is less than accurate. Both Noble (1973) and Bird (1999) highlight the importance of the *tribe* as contributing to the identity of its members. But, what happens when an individual does not have access to the tribe? How is a sense of identity formed? Do tribal customs (African or Native American) completely define this identity? In response to this Nagel (2000) asserts, “ethnicity is a negotiated status, determined by the interplay between external ascription and individual self-identification” (p. 94). This highly reflexive process becomes even more complex when elements of *pure* spirituality are considered in the exploration of implicit identity.

Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic Interaction (SI) is a theoretical framework used in the construction of ethnic identities. Perez (2005) used SI in his research on the Indigenous identity negotiation of the Chamorro people of Guam. It eloquently captures the subtle nuances of Native identity negotiation. SI considers the historical effects of racism and the recognition that descendants of post-colonized Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans have been affected by the social constructions of race. However, the effects of racism are less limiting with this theory as it supports the interplay between intuitive experiences of the psyche and spirit in the construction of identity.

Spirituality

For the purposes of this study, the focus and experience of one’s *pure* spirituality is of utmost importance. *Pure* spirituality, as noted earlier, is a concept closer to what is thought of as experienced (traditionally) in various Native American cultures. It is experiential and encompasses the felt connections between a person’s inner spirit, the Great Spirit, and the physical world crossing the time-space continuum (Garrett & Wilbur, 1999; Hunter & Sawyer, 2006). The essence of *pure* spirituality is often difficult to put into words though people who have had *pure* spiritual experiences recognize their intra-psyche experiences as such.

Jung (1933) suggested that Western thinking move beyond a religious orientation of spirituality to an appreciation of the more complex *numinous* (Schlamm, 2007) and unexplainable context of spirituality. Accordingly, Thorne (2009) states, “Exploring the contribution of spirituality, as distinguished from a religious sense, in understanding the deeper meaning of *who [one is]* gives identity a depth meaning which transcends the surface variables of race, gender, and ethnicity” (p. 46).

Overarching Question(s)

Qualitative research using the heuristic approach is interested in discovering the deepest meanings of intense experiences. The general interest of this study was exploring the ways in which spirituality has subconsciously influenced and shaped the implicit identity of participants who are *racially* African American (or Black) and yet are *ethnically* Cherokee. An additional interest that emerged through the heuristic process was the connection between the spirits of the co-researchers Cherokee ancestors that may have manifested in similar spiritual influences and themes. Co-researcher is the proper term for participants in heuristic studies. Therefore, the overarching questions this research project aimed to answer were: “*Does the experiencing of our connection with The Great Spirit (spirituality) strengthen our implicit Cherokee identity? Or, does this connection point towards our implicit identity as spiritual, which may be strengthened by our Cherokee ancestry (lineage)?*” Interview questions are included in the procedure section.

Method

A mixed qualitative methodology was used to conduct this research. The heuristic case study approach was used to collect and analyze the data. This method allowed the flexibility needed for the co-researchers’ individual experiences and meanings to emerge while establishing specific boundaries of the ‘case’. Given the intensely personalized and subjective nature of the research topic, the heuristic process was used to collect and analyze the data and to display the findings while the case study method was used to recognize the frame and set parameters of what would be considered the ‘case’. Yin (2009) suggests that case study methods offer researchers a clear advantage of creating boundaries within which to study “...complex social phenomena” (p. 4). In this study, women who met the necessary criteria were deemed the ‘case’.

Heuristics as developed and refined by Clark Moustakas was used to collect and analyze the data. Moustakas (1990) acknowledges the stages and scientific processes inherent in this approach as necessary for discovery of phenomena that are prone to subjectivity. Heuristics demands that the primary investigator (researcher) use her internal frame of reference and intimate internal experience with the phenomenon as the base of information from which the research process begins. Therefore, researcher bias and acknowledgment are expected, welcomed, and considered necessary aspects of this scientific method to study the human experience.

Moreover, the primary investigator is the research instrument, as is the norm in qualitative studies. The credibility and role of the researcher are positioned directly within her experiences with the subject matter and by her ability to accurately capture the intense experiences of the co-researchers using the approach as dictated by the heuristic design. My credibility as a qualitative researcher, in the heuristic tradition, is strengthened by my intense experience negotiating my identity from the perspective of a woman embodying the racial, ethnic, and spiritual experiences this study desired to deeply understand.

There are six phases of heuristic research though each process is revealed in its own way (Moustakas, 1990). What remains consistent in heuristic studies is the desire of the primary investigator/researcher to delve into the deeper meanings of subjective phenomenological experiences. This yearning typically originates within the primary investigator and extends to the co-researchers. Since this research originated as a result of my intense experience of the phenomena, a heuristic approach to scientifically examine the essence of the human experience was appropriate and warranted. The reflexive process, prolonged engagement of the data, and reflections utilized throughout this approach solidify the scientific rigor necessary in qualitative research.

Trustworthiness in qualitative approaches determines the quality and soundness of the results they yield. Moustakas (1990) judges the validity of heuristic studies by the ability of the findings to answer the question, “Does the ultimate depiction of the experience, derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explication of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experiences?” (p.32).

If the answer is 'yes', then, the findings are deemed trustworthy. Trustworthiness of the findings in the present study was established by the confirmation of accuracy in the depictions and composite of participants' experiences regarding the phenomena under investigation.

Participants

The co-researchers were purposely selected as they fit the specific criteria for inclusion in the research study. Co-researchers were to have Cherokee ancestry (by blood), originate from Southern Virginia, racially identify as 'Black, African American, or Colored', possess and express the differences between spirituality and religion as well as the ability to meaningfully express their own spiritual experiences. It was also important that the co-researchers were not tribally connected as access to tribal rituals may have potentially confounded the naturalness of their spiritual connections. In other words, it may not have been clear whether participation in cultural traditions would influence the ultimate findings. Finally, the co-researchers had to have an intense experience with the subject matter. The co-researchers, who were related by blood though not a nuclear family, were deemed the 'case'.

The processes of purposeful selection and snowballing resulted in 5 potential co-researchers. However, only 3 women fit the necessary criteria, including the primary researcher. The potential participants identified via the snowball process did not fit the necessary criteria. The first was rejected due to gender. The second was rejected because she could not express the differences between spirituality and religion and appeared ambivalent about her Native American ancestry. The average age of the participants was 47. The reader is encouraged to refer to the original study for more detailed information.

Procedure

The remaining co-researchers were contacted by telephone. The co-researchers were provided with a detailed explanation of the nature, purpose, and possible risks of the study via telephone and mailed the necessary consent forms. Signed consent copies were received by the primary investigator prior to initiating any data collection procedures. Separate initial face-to-face interviews were scheduled immediately. The interviews with *Naomi* and *Nisa* occurred approximately two weeks and one month, respectively, after securing IRB approval. Co-researchers were assigned pseudonyms to maintain a sense of anonymity. As the third participant, and primary investigator, I maintained a journal where I recorded my thoughts regarding the subject matter. Although biases are inherent and welcomed in heuristic studies, maintaining a journal separate from the co-researchers' experiences served to bracket my experiences from theirs, as necessary. This also allowed an additional form of data-source triangulation. The initial semi-structured conversational style interview consisted of a two-part standardized question that was asked of each participant: "*What is spirituality to you and how do you experience it?*" The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed.

Core themes began to emerge within the initial interviews. The primary investigator continued to process the interviews, making notations of non-verbal communications (i.e., long silences, thoughtful and contemplative looks, etc.) and the tone of the overall conversations. The primary investigator's experiences related to the initial questions were kept by journaling. These experiences were used to develop and frame the questions as well as to confirm the intuitive understanding of the co-researchers' experiencing of the same. The conversational interview style coupled with the primary investigator's initial sharing of her experiences contributed to an intimate interview setting where the co-researchers were able to open up, providing a wealth of information (data). Subsequent questions were developed as a result of the core themes which were then emailed to each co-researcher using the blind carbon copy (bcc) feature to maintain confidentiality. The subsequent topical questions were more focused and intense questions that *spoke* to the heart of the co-researchers' experiences. This process continued until the point of saturation where no new themes emerged.

Analysis

Core themes began to emerge at the onset of the initial interviews and continued throughout the study which is crucial to the heuristic approach. Qualitative research relies on the inductive nature of analysis and interpretation. Inductive analysis, as described by Patton (2002), "discover[s] patterns, themes, and categories in one's data...[where]...findings emerge" (p. 43). The use of my internal frame of reference, and intuitiveness, allowed me to reflexively and methodically analyze the data.

The conversational dialog of interviewing encompassed a natural thematic process of accuracy checking while keeping the data flow alive. Meaning, as co-researchers shared experiences about spiritual matters, Native American influences, personal experiences, or identity I was able to probe for clearer understanding, and use my experiences in ways to ensure my understanding of their experiences. This confirmed the accuracy of the emerging themes and co-researcher experiences. The heuristic phases of incubation and illumination were instrumental in bringing forth new meanings of the participants' experiences and, thus their implicit identity.

Data triangulation was used in both the collection and analysis processes which strengthened the results of this research. I alternated between listening to the digital recordings of interviews, reading recorded transcriptions and emails of subsequent questions as juxtaposed with my journal entries to highlight thematic experiences. This process continued throughout the research. Feedback from co-researchers regarding themes and findings served to confirm the accuracy of analysis. The findings were also analyzed within the framework of Symbolic Interaction as posed by Perez (2005) in his work on indigenous identity with the Chamorro of Guam. The significance of participant experiences and enlightened meanings of implicit identity were woven into a creatively synthesized poem as consistent with the last phase of heuristics.

Findings

The research generated six overall themes based on data from interviews, subsequent interviews, observations, and researcher journaling. It is essential to be reminded that although the co-researchers and primary investigator represent the 'case' under study, the individual co-researchers did not grow up in the same households or have shared experiences. The only commonalities were in familial bloodline relative to Cherokee ancestry, gender, college educations, and a sense of spirituality as experienced outside of a religious framework. Individual experiences of the phenomenon were not shared nor discussed by the participants prior to this research.

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which spirituality influenced the implicit identity of these *racially* African American (Black) women of *ethnically* Cherokee ancestry. Insight into the soul wisdom of these women revealed the following core themes: childhood connection, significance of attending powwows, natural Native spiritual pull or attraction, connection to nature, incongruence and isolation (accompanied by shame and fear), revelation and acceptance. Given the nature and brevity of research articles, it is not feasible to include lengthy descriptions or corresponding quotes for every theme. However, the voices of the participants are illuminated.

Childhood Connection

Each research participant, including the primary investigator, noted spiritually based experiences connected to Native culture dating back to childhood though it was not clearly understood at that time. As each participant matured this connection became more significant which is especially highlighted since none of the participants were raised within the Cherokee culture.

Naomi

What emerged from the initial interview with Naomi was the following:
“...And, even from a child, I was drawn to things not knowing that this was part of Native culture....And even though the Native culture is something that has not been drilled into us and shared with us, there is a connection. You know that there is something there growing up. I knew that there was something there, but I did not know what.”

Significance of Attending Powwows

Powwows are Native American cultural and social gatherings which have great symbolic meaning. The participants each noted the power of the drumming and dancing to her Indigenous connection. The significance of powwow attendance was expressed throughout as significantly impacting each participants' spiritual being. This theme evoked a depth of emotion expressed by each woman.

Primary Investigator

“As soon as I step through the powwow gates, I experience immediate emotion. My emotional experiences are typically a mixture of intense joy and deep sadness, but always gratefulness. The intense joy I feel can only be explained as [a total physical and spiritual connection]...My total (physical and spiritual) presence feels right.”

Nisa

“When I hear Native music, whenever I see Native dance, whenever I go to a powwow, it is almost like I feel the spirits. I really do! And, I have always been that way. A lot of people don’t understand it. They can’t relate to it, but I *know* it is something there...almost like you can just feel something, to hear you say that makes me feel a lot more comfortable, you know?”

Naomi

“Years ago, after [we went to our first powwow] I went to a powwow by myself. I noticed the first time we went to that powwow, like you said, I felt a kinship. It was almost like I felt like I was at home, *I felt home...*”

Natural Native Spiritual Pull or Attraction

The theme of a Native American spiritual and cultural connection was noted throughout this research process by these women. There was an emphasis on an “indescribable ‘pull’ towards or ‘drawing in’ feeling” (Thorne, 2009, p. 82) towards Native American ways of being experienced by all of the participants. These experiences were readily evident as the women expressed their experiences and feeling with the African American ‘box’ society, at large, typically relegates them to.

Naomi

“...And people were saying, ‘what are you?’...I always check off two or more races ... but *they* [the U.S. Government] said that you [have to] identify a particular tribe [in which you are enrolled]....Society says I’m an African American woman. A lot of things society says that African American women are suppose to do, be, think, act like, I do not do; I am not, I do not think...I cannot even relate to...assumptions are made about you just because of the way you look or the way *they* think you should look....[Again]...I [am] touched by the Native culture. I have tried to be touched by the African culture..., but I can relate to being drawn into two worlds...being split...things that I like and enjoy are not part of the physical world.

Nisa

“It’s not that I don’t support my African American heritage. I am proud of that as well, but...it is more of a – it is all like a pulling-in; like a *surge* of something that, like you said, I don’t feel when I go to African dance or African Art shows. *I just don’t feel it.*”

A line of subsequent questions were posed to delve deeper into the subconscious experiences of these women in order to highlight seemingly powerful themes that appeared to speak to the heart of the phenomenological experiences of the women. Two of the more telling themes were captured in Subsequent Questions #1 and #2 which were gathered via email. They are as follows.

Subsequent Question #1

Attending powwows and a connection with the drumming appears to be one of several significant themes that were generated from the initial interviews. Describe how attending powwows affects you. How would you describe the connection? Lastly, share more of your thoughts regarding the inner spiritual comfort and connection when attending “Native” cultural and social gatherings versus not as much (if any) connection with African American cultural and social activities.

Naomi

“It is difficult to explain, but I only know that when I attended my first powwow and we entered the gates, I could hear the drums in the background and it suddenly stirred something emotional in me as any good music stirs something emotional in any of us. Then, as we walked among the grounds and saw many Native people, I could see a resemblance to many of my relatives. Typically, I don’t see resemblances to my family by walking among people on the street. It was like a big family reunion...I felt more of a kinship to the Native people than I [do] to many African Americans.”

Nisa

“Attending powwows used to be fun for me, but now (and it seems to be getting stronger as I age) they are an essential part of my life. I cannot fully explain the connection, but I know one is there. It may sound strange, but I also feel like my late father’s spirit is around me whenever I hear the Native drums and chanting. I feel empowered and attractive (you know, Native Americans are good looking people [smiling symbol]) during and after powwows. I appreciate and enjoy Native artwork, music, and jewelry; [this is] a feeling I’ve NEVER had when attending African American events and art shows. I am proud to be African American, but I enjoy celebrating and acknowledging my Native American heritage much more. It just feels better and more comfortable to me.”

Subsequent Question #2

Two of the most powerful themes that emerged were: 1) a sense of guilt/shame/conflict regarding the internal or implicit connection as “Native” when society has labeled you as African American, and 2) the natural soul-deep spiritual energy that awakens and connects so easily with Native American culture and ways. The participants shared the following in response.

Nisa

“I think the guilt comes from the same place as an African-American being called ‘oreo’ or ‘wanting to be white’. I think we, as African-Americans, are expected to maintain the status quo and ‘stay’ Black. Anything outside of that box or parameter is considered ‘weird, wrong, or not politically correct’. To step outside is taking a chance of being exiled and can be very intimidating. When you are not true to yourself (which is what I feel like I’ve been doing for years – not acknowledging my Native-American heritage) you *have* been awakened! You are a caged bird that’s been set free! I guess, in my opinion, it’s what a person who is gay feels like when they finally come out of the closet.”

Heuristic Presentation of Findings and Discussion

Narratives of the co-researchers’ experiences of the phenomenon were presented via portraits, individual depictions, and composites, in the original research. These representations are components of the heuristic design. The overall significance of the findings was displayed in a form of creative synthesis.

Developing individual depictions and portraits of each co-researchers’ experiences based on the primary investigator’s internal frame of reference and tacit knowledge served to further promote rigor and confirmation that participant experiences were clearly understood. Individual depictions provide clear and comprehensive views of co-researcher experiences with the phenomenon as understood by the primary investigator. The depictions were then shared with the co-researcher to determine the accuracy of said experience.

The composite depiction represented the experiences of all research participants to formulate a comprehensive overview of shared experiences with the phenomenon. In the case of spiritual influences as related to implicit identity of racially African American/Black women of ethnically Cherokee ancestry, the composite highlights the magnitude of importance placed on spirituality connected to their true sense of identity. The extension of historical trauma was illuminated with these women as they experience feelings of sub-marginalization within the ‘African American’ and American Indian communities, respectively. The spiritual influence as experienced by these women shows how deep the connection with their Cherokee ancestry is beyond that of ethnic or social identification. This sentiment is adeptly expressed by the following excerpt from the composite depiction.

“Our implicit identities were and are defined not by us, but by the spiritual energy and ties within and around us. We feed our implicit identities by being aware of and tuned into our spiritual selves. This awareness is heightened when we are surrounded by Indigenous culture. This unexplained pull, or intense attraction, to powwows and other Native ways is something we all have in common. There is an invisible energy that lingers and is full of longing to be recognized. It is when we are surrounded by reminders of our Indigenous lineage, whether in the form of Native American social gatherings, jewelry, rituals, artwork, documentaries, or etcetera we are home! *This* is significant to who we are implicitly” (Thorne, 2009, p. 103)

Creative synthesis is unique to heuristic studies and is the last phase of the heuristic approach where creative emphasis is encouraged as a way to display the findings. In the current study, the findings and the meaning of such emerged in poetic form. It must be noted that the poem arose as a result of the research findings; therefore, it remains part of the original research and not exclusive to this article. The author maintains full copyright ownership, intellectual property rights and reproduction rights of the resulting poem.

The Complexity of Identity: An Expressive Poem

I am not the covering of my skin
I AM my soul
I will no longer allow the confusion of others to tell me who I am
My Spirit is clear
I am connected to the earth, to the sky
To the ancestors who continue to guide me
My outer coverings create an illusion of truth
My soul and spirit continue to shout, ‘Here I am! *This* is ME!’
But, your eyes continue to blind you of truly *seeing* me
I will no longer allow the confusion of others to define me
Though it has taken years upon years to build this chaos and confusion,
The clarity of my spirit recognizes my true identity
Because I have been so carefully conditioned by ‘others’ ideas of me
Sometimes the reality of this recognition startles me
There are layers of pain and sadness beneath
But, the more I allow myself to embrace my true identity, the more I am *free* to be me
I will no longer allow the confusion of others to define me

Discussion

The lived experiences of the participants, inclusive of the primary investigator, revealed the complex nuances that continue to shape who they are at the depths of their beings. Implicitly, the spirits of these women resonate with Native American ways of being and culture. However, they have been categorized by society as “African American” or “Black” as they are connected by societal labeling based on surface identifiers that ignore additional familial ethnicities. Communal absorption within the Black and Indigenous Diasporas continues to be negotiated with more fluidity in the sociopolitical spaces of Blackness. The constructivism paradigm and humanistic nature of this study honors the realities of these women’s experiences as validating who they truly are - their *soul wisdom*. This research contributes to the body of literature on multi-ethnic Native American women from an intimate and depth-oriented perspective. It extends and provides ‘voice’ to the identity development and research of post-colonial racialized women who are conscripted into identity politics. Their experiences with this phenomenon extend and support literature on historical trauma which these women continue to face as there is felt incongruence with their explicit ascription and implicit truth – a form of dissonance. Finally, this study opens the door to exploring the role of *pure* spirituality in the identity construction process of multi-racialized Native/Indigenous women.

Symbolic Interaction (SI), the theoretical framework supporting this study, allowed the women’s subjective spiritual experiences to be considered within the context of historical, societal and ancestral realities in determining their identity regardless of societal categories. The reflexivity in negotiating self-concept and identity inherent in SI suggests that the women’s implicit identity is the truest sense of who they are. So, what does this mean for the field of counseling?

Implications for Counseling

The field of counseling has been increasingly moving forward to both recognize and embrace the ideas of multiculturalism and spirituality. However, there is still a tendency to objectify identity based on the dominant culture worldview which has been psychologically and historically ingrained in society. Recognizing the role *pure* spirituality plays in the holistic representation of self continues to be a struggle within counseling. The recognition that there are multi-ethnic Native Americans is also a novel idea. Finally, the transferability of this study's findings to other individuals or groups of people who may externally present in ways that are not congruent with implicit ascriptions of identity need to be highlighted. Credence to spiritual influences on identity is warranted.

Counselors. The outcomes of this study support the need for practicing counselors to remain open to the possibility that clients ascribed as Black or African American by US categorization may not be in alignment with how they implicitly identify. This signifies a reductionistic lens and can lead to presumptive treatment. Counseling that explores the depths of identity construction beyond social and historical constructions of race by considering spiritual influences invites a genuine sense of honoring the client's worldview and construction of self. Therefore, counselors are encouraged to expand their counseling-based worldviews beyond Westernized traditions. Becoming familiar with aspects of indigenous healing philosophies and traditions that honor the spirit of the person is urged when working with multi-ethnic Native women.

Counselor Educators. A paradigm shift in counseling programs is strongly encouraged. Incorporating non-Western ways of healing as well as spirituality, as differentiated from religion, in foundational courses is warranted. Using a heuristic approach within multicultural courses to encourage insight, personal and professional growth and healing is suggested.

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