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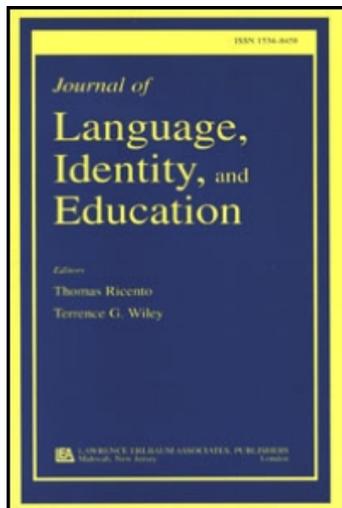
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Language, Identity, and Power: Navajo and Pueblo Young Adults' Perspectives and Experiences with Competing Language Ideologies

Tiffany S. Lee

University of New Mexico

Native American languages, contemporary youth identity, and powerful messages from mainstream society and Native communities create complex interactions that require deconstruction for the benefit of Native-language revitalization. This study showed how Native youth negotiate mixed messages such as the necessity of Indigenous languages for cultural continuity and a belief in the superiority of English for success in American society. Interviews and reflective writing from Navajo and Pueblo youth constituted the counter-narratives that expressed the youth's concerns, values, frustrations, celebrations, and dilemmas with regard to their heritage language and identity. The youth perspectives extended across 5 thematic areas: respect, stigmatization and shame, marginalization, impact on identity, and agency and intervention. These counter-narratives demonstrate that the Indigenous language plays an important and complex role in contemporary youth identity. Yet, their Indigenous consciousness was not diminished by limited fluency in their heritage language—an important finding for inspiring a commitment to language revitalization.

Key words: Indigenous language, language ideology, language revitalization, youth identity, counter-narrative

In a small, rural community in the interior of the Navajo Nation, there is a school that has achieved worldwide recognition for its incorporation of Navajo language, literacy, and cultural knowledge into every subject area and every grade, kindergarten through 12. The school's former director reported that in the early 1980s, 90% of the students who entered the school were Navajo speakers. The school reinforced these students' intellectual, personal, and social development through their first language. Some 10 to 15 years later, the director reported that, at that time, the first language of 90% of kindergarten students at this school was English. Language shift (when a child's first language is no longer her or his primary language) occurred among the families of these children in this community despite the school's efforts and success at implementing a Navajo-language curriculum. Why were the parents of these families, most of whom had attended this school and benefited from its Navajo-language focus, electing to raise their children in English? What was influencing their language choices in their homes, in the school, and in the community?

In the Native American Studies courses I teach, I have many students from the various New Mexico Pueblo communities. They have shared many of their stories of the language change and choices of their families, which often included a prevalent use of English in home and community activities despite the communal value placed on their Native language for religious and ceremonial practices. Smolkin and Suina (1996) depicted a similar story of a Pueblo teacher, Laurencita, who recognized the disappearance of her Native language in the daily village functions. This prompted the community to call on the school to provide a bilingual program, which contrasted strongly with stances by many Pueblos who believed their language belonged in the home and village, not in school.

This study addresses the issues presented in the previous scenarios by specifically examining the perspectives of Native youth and young adults on the place of their heritage language in their lives, their communities, and their future. The study examines contemporary Native life, which provides a unique set of circumstances and experiences that shapes youth perspectives. Native youth and young adults are cognizant of the nature of language shift and language loss in their communities (Lee, 2007; McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda, 2006). They have expressed their concern with their language vanishing, and they are negotiating what it means to be a Native person in today's society with or without their language.

Native youth recognize messages in their communities about the importance of retaining cultural and linguistic knowledge for cultural sustainability, and they recognize messages about the importance of English and Western education for achieving success in life equated with U.S. mainstream goals, such as job security and material wealth. Often the two are perceived to be in opposition, as though one cannot be both successful in the larger society while also maintaining Native languages and cultural lifeways. Both positions about retaining the Native language from the community and the importance of English emanating from school and society represent powerful influences on Native students' language choices and sense of identity.

The relationship between language and identity is also complex. How Native youth interpret the connection of their heritage language to their sense of self is not well understood. Hence, language, identity, and power are juxtaposed in ways that require deconstruction and understanding. A better understanding is needed of how Navajo and Pueblo youth relate language and identity and how powerful sources of influence in their lives from their communities and the larger society affect their perceptions. This study attempted to examine how Navajo and Pueblo youth are interpreting messages of language loss and vitality, and how they are defining their place as a member of their Native-language community, whether or not they can speak their ancestral language.

MIXED MESSAGES

Native youth receive contrasting messages from within their families and communities regarding the role of their Native language in their lives today, and they receive competing messages from school and the larger society about the superiority of English over Native languages and about the importance of English for achieving success in life. This section examines what the literature tells us about these mixed messages in various contexts.

An abundance of research has examined the nature of language loss, change, and revitalization among Native American and other Indigenous peoples (Benjamin, Pecos, & Romero, 1996; Crawford, 1996; Holm & Holm, 1995; McCarty & Zepeda, 1998; Pease-pretty On Top, 2004; Sims, 2001; Wilson, 1999). Native Americans are not alone in their experiences with language loss, as most of the world's heritage languages also are vanishing (Fishman, 1991, 2001; Krauss, 1992).

There is less research on Native American young adults' language use or attitudes. In one important study that included many interviews with Native youth in the U.S. Southwest, messages and perceptions regarding language attitudes and language use between youth and adults were vastly different (McCarty et al., 2006). In some cases, the youth seemed to express feelings of linguistic shame. However, teachers attributed this to apathy, not shame, on the part of these youth. McCarty, Romero, and Zepeda (2006) also found that Navajo youth and their teachers had different perceptions of the number of Navajo speakers in their school. The adults reported that between 30% and 50% of youth in their school could speak Navajo, whereas Navajo youth perceived this percentage to be between 75 and 80. To explain this difference, the authors noted that many youth viewed speaking Navajo as an "emblem of shame" and hence, give the impression they do not have Navajo language skills when in school (McCarty et al., 2006, p. 38). In this example, Navajo youth exhibit their agency by marking Navajo language use as shameful and generating a conscious response not to speak or demonstrate ability to speak the language.

Additionally, students chose not to speak their language if they felt scolded or teased by their relatives or peers for mispronunciation or grammatical errors of Navajo words and phrases. Students heard rhetoric in school that speaking Navajo was not popular, yet they also received messages from their families and communities about the necessity to speak Navajo to truly identify as a Navajo person. When they were shamed for their efforts, students expressed frustration and reluctance to keep learning (cf. Lee, 2007). Complicating this is the existence of clashing perspectives: while teachers viewed students' behavior as not caring about their language, students viewed teachers as not caring about them (McCarty et al., 2006). Quijada (2008) found similar sentiments among Pueblo students. She described how Pueblo students' attachment to their home and community was often disregarded by their teachers, thus negatively affecting their relationships. The varied perceptions of and misunderstanding between youth and adults and between teachers and students create a complex web of messages youth interpret in various ways. Youth resolve these interactions in multiple ways as well, but as the present study shows, they nonetheless maintain their sense of agency and power over their decisions to use or not use their language.

Several Pueblo peoples' perspectives demonstrate similar complexity and mixing of messages from family and society. Nicholas (2005) shared her response to disenfranchising messages about her Hopi language from family and school by "putting aside" her language and culture so that it would not interfere with her educational success. She now works to fill the void left by putting her language and culture aside and in this effort is reclaiming her Hopi identity (see also Nicholas, 2009).

Joseph Suina of Cochiti Pueblo described his first experiences at school in the 1950s and how being forced to speak only English and take on Western American values competed with his Cochiti language and Pueblo lifestyle. It created ambivalent feelings toward his beloved grandmother's home. He eloquently stated the effect of Western values and schooling on Native people:

The Indian was both attracted and pushed toward these new ways that he had little to say about. There was no choice left but to compete with the white man on his terms for survival. For that, I knew I had to give up a part of my life. (Suina, 1988, p. 299)

In response to language change and shift, many Pueblo communities have begun community-based language planning to develop language programs for Pueblo youth. This has involved community-wide self-assessments of the languages spoken and learned, raising awareness of language shift, and planning language learning programs in the community and in collaboration with local school sites (Sims, 2006).

The studies and perspectives described in the preceding paragraphs outline a common experience of Native youth and adults with the hierarchical positioning of Native languages and English. There is a continuous negotiation by Native youth and adults to determine the place of Native languages in relation to the privileged position of English. Influences on youth's perceptions of their language include what May (1999) asserted as the tendency by the dominant society to associate English with a "modern" world and Native languages with a "traditional" world relegated to the past. In addressing the rights of Indigenous peoples in nation-states today, May explained that agendas to create a national identity privilege the dominant group of the nation-state. In the case of the United States, privilege is afforded to an English-speaking society based on Western European values. To create this national identity, May adds, "the language and culture of the dominant group comes to be viewed as the only vehicle of modernity and progress, and the only medium of 'national' identity. Alternatively, other cultural and language affiliations are viewed pejoratively as merely 'ethnic' and relatedly, as regressive and premodern" (p. 45). This ideology can have a potent influence on Native youth's perspectives on the relevancy of their Native language in their lives today.

The modern/premodern dichotomy sets up the problematic notion of "living in two worlds." This notion is problematic, first, because it centers the "problem" with Native peoples themselves (Deyhle, 1998). It also fails to recognize the multiple realities that youth negotiate in all settings, including home, community, school, and society. All people negotiate multiple realities, but the two-worlds notion makes problematic Native peoples' abilities to adapt to (or resist) the dominant society, when in fact Native peoples have been adapting to (and resisting) other peoples' cultures, values, and worldviews for hundreds of years.

Instead of a two-world dichotomy, this study focused on how Native youth negotiate the one world in which they live, a negotiation that encompasses varied, and often oppositional, expectations from sources in their homes, schools, and communities. The study focuses on young adults' reclamation of self with or without the heritage language in all the settings that they negotiate. The study explored the power relations and interactions Native youth experience at home, in school, and in the community with regard to learning and using their heritage language. It offers insight into how young people are responding, resolving, and internalizing mixed messages from powerful influences on the status of language use at home, in school, and in the community; the resulting impact on their identity; and the effect on how they define their place and role at home, in school, and in their community. As Benally and Viri (2005) suggest, this generation of youth and young adults may be one of the last generations to hear active Native language use in their communities, making their insights and experiences all the more imperative.

METHODS

Study findings were derived from examining youth and young adults' counter-narratives taken from (a) interviews with Navajo teenagers and the transcriptions of those interviews (Lee 1999), and (b) written reflection papers from Native college students representing Navajo and Pueblo tribes. Counter-narratives, also known as counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), is a methodology derived from Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT began as a movement in legal studies that expanded to many disciplines, including the examination of race within the social and political context of schooling. Its main objective is to place *race* at the center of analysis and perspective. CRT utilizes counter-storytelling, or narratives, to tell the stories that have often been ignored or marginalized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

In the present study, counter-narratives offered Native youth and young adults the space to share their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences that actively counter the dominant society's and/or their Native community's narratives of their subdominant social place and role (Gilmore & Smith, 2005). The counter-narratives were the means by which Indigenous youth voiced their concerns, values, frustrations, celebrations, and dilemmas with regard to their heritage language and identity.

Data analyzed here derive from two studies, one, undertaken in 1999, focused on Navajo teenagers and the other focused on Native college students in 2006. In the first study, I interviewed 20 Navajo teenagers from 5 high schools across the Navajo Nation in the southwestern United States. All of the students lived on the Navajo Nation; fluency levels for understanding and speaking Navajo varied among the students. On average, the students rated themselves as "limited fluency," which entailed understanding most conversational Navajo when it is spoken slower than normal and the ability to say basic sentences and phrases in Navajo (Lee, 1999). The students volunteered to be interviewed, and each interview lasted about one hour. Except for greetings and introductions in Navajo, interviews were conducted in English. I interviewed students about their socialization experiences related to language learning and language use in their families, schools, and other social contexts. For example, students were asked to reflect across their lives about their families' and their own language use; their observed and preferred language used in school; their experiences in home, school, and religious contexts; and their values or ideas about the importance of their language.

In the second study, I asked students enrolled in a course I taught on Native-language issues to participate by sharing their reflection papers from the course. I taught this course in the fall of 2006. Nineteen Native college students representing Southwest tribal backgrounds, mostly Navajo and Pueblo, participated by allowing me to analyze their papers (4 each), which were on topics related to their experiences with language shift, language loss, language revitalization, and intersections of language and identity. I informed the students about the study but did not analyze their papers for this study until after I submitted their course grades. The reflection paper assignment was open-ended. I encouraged the students to reflect on their personal experiences as they related to the topics of the readings and discussion. Students wrote 4 papers each over the course of the semester.

The majority of students who participated were between 18 and 30 years old; 2 students were older than 30. They were all Native students, and their life experiences were very diverse, with some residing in their reservation community, some having recently relocated to the city with their families, and others having been born and raised in cities. Their Native-language fluency

also ranged widely, with several students who spoke and understood their language fluently and many others who were English-only speakers.

The interviews with teenage youth and the reflection papers collected from the college students serve as the foundational data for this study. The words, stories, impressions, and attitudes revealed in the interviews and papers are understood as examples of counter-narratives.

It is important to note that in order to elicit the personal stories from the students during the interviews and in the college class, several aspects of the research methods coincided with Indigenous-research methodologies (Smith, 1999) and highlighted the importance of the researcher's position and relationships with participants. My background as a Navajo/Lakota person influenced my interactions, relationships, and interpretations. I conducted this study from the position of someone who is personally affected by language shift and who is working toward language revitalization and sustainability by understanding youth perspectives.

My relationship with the participants was based on a personal connection. In the first study with Navajo teenagers, I had attended the schools and/or taught at the schools they were attending. I was able to relate to them on a personal level regarding my own reservation life experiences, school experiences, and home-based language experiences. I believe establishing this personal connection with the students allowed me to gain their trust and provide a comfortable environment, which allowed for more frank, open, and honest discussions.

As for the college students, I had known many of them from previous courses, but for all the students over the course of the semester, I related many personal experiences with our topics of study. I shared my passion for the topic and my stories with them. In this sense, I developed a relationship with the students that was more than academic—the relationship was also based on our shared Indigenous heritage and on a shared passion for Indigenous issues such as cultural sustainability, community transformation, and love for Indigenous cultures and people.

An additional important aspect of the research process in the case of the college students was my intentional facilitation of their inquisitiveness toward language issues in their families and communities. I asked them to listen, observe, and name what was happening in their families and communities regarding language use and language ideologies. I stimulated their critical consciousness about the language issues we learned about in class as they pertained to their own lives. Many students went beyond this by directly questioning their own family members about historical experiences and current opinions about the role of language in their communities.

ANALYSIS

I analyzed the interview transcripts and reflection papers through an inductive theorizing process (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) informed by relevant themes in the literature to identify statements that were related to these themes. The literature on Southwest Native-language attitudes and choices has identified 4 relevant themes I expected to find in the students' statements: (a) expressions of respect for one's heritage language (Benjamin et al., 1996; Sims, 2006), (b) stigmatization and shame toward one's language (Benally and Viri, 2005; McCarty et al., 2006), (c) marginalization of one's language (Holm and Holm, 1995; Lee & McLaughlin, 2001), and, embedded in all this, (d) the resulting impact on identity (Benally and Viri, 2005; Lee, 2007). I expected to find statements that supported these previous research findings with similar populations.

One theme, not identified by previous research, also emerged. This was the theme of agency and desire to intervene on behalf of one's heritage language. Students expressed a desire to reclaim their language and their identity for themselves and their community. The following sections present the results for each thematic area.

Respect

An examination of the students' counter-narratives showed that no student questioned the intrinsic value of his or her heritage language. Many students, from fluent speakers to non-speakers, expressed great respect for their language and heritage. Some acknowledged its necessity for accessing their spiritual beliefs and practices. For example, Kelly (all names are pseudonyms), a Pueblo¹ college student, stated, "I believe that the teachings of our culture, traditions, and beliefs are more meaningful when learned in our Native language than when we try to teach our children these beliefs and customs using another language." Other students connected their respect for their language with their respect for the elderly. Lawrence, a Navajo teenager, felt it was important for students to learn the language out of respect for older Navajos and to ensure that the language will not be lost. He said,

I'm not saying students should have to take Navajo, but they should at least know some of it. *Why?* Because that's who we are, so they can talk with elderly; they were here before us and they know more than us. Some of them have passed on and that's why we're losing our language.

This association of respect for the elderly and the language of the elderly was also expressed by Angie, another Navajo teenager. Angie said, "I wish I knew Navajo so I could talk to older people. I feel bad when I can't talk to an older person. It's not my fault. I wish someone had taught me." She described experiences in which an older person would approach her speaking in Navajo and she was not able to respond. Implicit in her remark is her sense of frustration with not being taught her heritage language.

Interestingly, even when students had negative experiences with regard to their language, they still held value and respect for it. One Navajo teen, Mark, said he had many negative experiences in trying to speak Navajo, such as scolding from adults and teasing from peers. Despite those negative experiences, he still held high value for the language. When asked about whether schools should place more or less emphasis on Navajo language, he said they should place more emphasis because Native Americans are losing their languages. When he would see children who spoke "perfect" Navajo to their grandparents, he was proud. He felt all Navajo children should know their language.

Stigmatization and Shame: Toward Language or Toward Self?

Interestingly, absent from the students' counter-narratives were direct expressions of shame for their heritage language. Instead, students revealed expressions of embarrassment for their own limited Native-language ability, not necessarily embarrassment or shame with the language itself. They also shared how this impacted their identity and sense of self.

¹Many Pueblo students in this study come from very small communities. To provide more protection of their anonymity, I list their tribal affiliation as "Pueblo" without naming their specific Pueblo community.

Natalie, a Pueblo college student who conducted a class research project on the impact of language shift in her community, shared this insight about young people's embarrassment with their limited fluency in their Native language:

Many times fluent speakers believe that the younger generations simply don't want to learn their Native Tewa language; however this is not always the case. From my research, there are many young people who respect the language but have a difficult time putting themselves out into the community where they should be speaking the language. Their reasons for not taking part in community activities are due to their own fear of making mistakes and feeling embarrassed in front of elders.

Similar to the remarks made by the Navajo teenager Angie, remarks by a Navajo college student named Marjorie showed embarrassment about her limited Navajo skills; she resorted to lying to people about her heritage to avoid the criticism from her own people.

I worked a full-time job as a tax preparer . . . and I recall some of the times when I needed to get another Navajo to interpret for me, since I was unable to speak Navajo. I remember comments from my clients, especially the elders, words being said such as, "Why don't you speak Navajo? What is wrong with you? Why don't you know your language?" I did get tired of this and started to tell people that I was of a different tribe. It made me feel guilty, but what else was I supposed to say or do?

Marjorie's comment points out the importance of bilingualism. Marjorie's experience counters the messages that students hear about the need for English for upward social and economic mobility. In this scenario, she clearly needed to be bilingual in Navajo and English, to interpret and translate, as part of her job skills. Her comment also counters messages of the Navajo language as a disenfranchised and marginalized societal language. It is undoubtedly of necessity and useful in this "modern"-day activity of tax preparation. Unfortunately, the message Marjorie takes away is one of embarrassment and shame for not knowing how to speak her heritage language.

These youth's counter-narratives suggest that the "shame" youth and young adults express has more to do with the feelings they attribute to their own limited ability and limited fluency in their Native language. In response to messages and expectations they encounter with regard to their Native language, these students blame themselves for their lack of ability. Those that realized the unfairness and injustice in this blaming—such as the many teenagers who stated in their interviews that their tribal government and schools should take more responsibility in providing more and effective opportunities for them to learn—became resistant and frustrated. In turn, students redefined and reasserted their sense of Native identity given their personal level of Native-language fluency. These testimonies are examined later in the article.

Marginalization

As mentioned earlier, May (1999) asserts that, by nature of the dominant society's hegemonic position, the dominant language is the only language that signifies "progress" and is associated with modernity and advancement. In other words, the dominant language is positioned in a place of privilege and higher status in comparison to Indigenous languages. Conversely, nondominant cultures and languages are relegated to a position in the past, as static, and as vanishing. This message is perpetuated in school systems through a hidden curriculum and through the school's

celebrations, holidays, and activities. The students in the present study recognized this marginalization of their Native language, not only within their school systems, but also within their communities. For one Navajo college student named Kristie, this sense of marginalization extended to her family's Navajo ways of life:

During the years I attended public school, I realized I was not learning my Navajo language, and I felt I was drifting away from my culture. . . . I used to think my family was not meeting the aspects of the Anglos' way of life.

The "aspects of the Anglos' way of life" represents those things that are associated with the dominant culture and society. Kristie used to believe her family needed to achieve this way of life in order to "progress." Her education has helped her to see this viewpoint through a more critical lens.

Natalie (Pueblo) recognized the marginalization of her participation in the ceremonial life of her community. She expressed an intense desire to participate through her Native language:

Cultural reasons greatly motivate me to learn my language. Although I practice my culture in many ways, I can't say I truly know my culture if I can't speak my language. The two are tied together and one can't exist without the other. Because of this interdependency, I feel scared not to learn my Native language since I will also be losing my culture. I no longer want to hear the English version of the meaning behind our traditional songs; instead I have a strong desire to understand our songs as a Tewa person.

Natalie attributed a discrepancy between her identity as a Tewa person and an incomplete understanding of her culture because she could not understand or speak her ancestral language. This desire to know their language in order to fully understand their culture was very apparent in the youth's counter-narratives. Yet they also expressed frustration with their own communities' differences in priorities. Danielle, a Pueblo college student, analyzed it this way:

Personally, I feel that the reason why there has not been a successful language revitalization program in my community is because people have ranked other issues such as economic development, infrastructure development, blood quantum requirements,² and personal conflicts as more important than preserving our language.

Similarly, another student, Don (Pueblo), who is older and a fluent speaker of his language, shared this insight with regard to his community:

Every morning, I dread walking out the door of my house for fear of facing another day of speaking English to people who should be speaking our Keres language. Everywhere I turn, someone is talking in English to other Keres-speaking people in our community.

Danielle and Don recognized the marginalization of their Native languages from people within their communities based on the absence of language programs and a preferred use of English. Danielle offered further insights into what Crawford (1996) hypothesizes as one reason for language shift: that modernity, economic development, and social integration are more

²Blood quantum requirements are utilized in many Native communities to determine eligibility to enroll in the Nation. The federal government initiated this form of enrollment and set the standard requirement at one-fourth blood quantum to enroll. Recently, some Native nations have modified or changed this requirement altogether, while many maintain and enforce the federal standard.

dangerous than the repressive language policies of schools because the former are signs from within of community change and assimilation. Danielle's observation is indicative of Crawford's position. She said,

The most obvious cause for our lack of knowledge in our language and culture points to the fact that we are no longer spending time at home learning traditional aspects of our culture from our grandparents and elders, instead we are off learning things about the modern, English-dominated world around us. The scary thing is that the BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] schools are no longer the obvious threat to our survival as a culture, now the danger is internal; it is within us as a community.

Danielle and Don's comments reflect their observations of their communities' internalized assimilation ideologies about language, which result in the marginalization of Native languages by Native peoples. Their perspectives counter and respond to community discourse about the importance of language in identifying oneself as a Native person. They name the internal conflict within their communities to place Native language at the center of learning and family life.

These students' insights, observations, and critical analyses shed light on a new theme that emerged from the data that has not been addressed in the literature. Throughout the college students' narratives, the youth described experiences of awakening to these issues of language shift and change in their communities. They became conscious of the denial they and their families have felt regarding language loss. With the awareness of the threat of language loss now more present, they demonstrated a sense of agency and proactive motivation to transform their families and communities toward language maintenance and language revitalization.

Agency and Intervention

Human agency has been discussed in the critical studies literature as encompassing individual motivation and ability to transform social injustices through collective action (Giroux, 1988). I use the term to emphasize the nature of the youth's attitudes and decisions. The realization of language shift in their families and communities empowered these youth to create positive change toward language maintenance or revitalization. In the interviews and their writing, many students articulated their desire to make an impact in their community, such as by bringing more awareness about language shift and by implementing their own strategies to influence young people's mindsets about their Native languages. Kelly (Pueblo) explained how she experienced the denial of language shift in her own family:

I was freaked out how much I was in denial, and also how much my family is still in denial [about language shift]. I would ask them how they felt about how little our youth and our elders were starting to speak our language. My family was like, that is not true, and we still speak our language. Then I would just start talking about other things going on in my life or some stories about my great-grandmother and other relatives. Then I would catch them talking in English, and I would raise my eyebrows and they would snap, too, that they were speaking more and more English. It angered many of my family members that I was being that observant about our use of our Native language.

The students realized that they have an influence on their families' thinking and behavior just by heightening awareness about language shift. Kristie (Navajo), the student who felt her family was not progressing because they were not conforming to the dominant society's ways of life, developed a renewed sense of agency in asserting her Navajo identity after she went to college.

After I graduated high school, I realized I must rediscover my Navajo identity because I didn't want to disrespect my family and my Navajo people or lose my Navajo culture. To this day, I present myself as a Navajo and learning to become fluent with my Navajo language.

Similarly, when students were confronted with challenges or opposition to their expressions of their Native sense of self through their language, they expressed resistance to those confrontations and reaffirmed their identity, heritage, and language, regardless of their level of Native-language fluency. For example, Christine (Navajo) explained how she counteracted an experience of degradation of her language and culture:

Now as I continue my life journey I have found that not everyone appreciates and respects another's culture or language. I was told not to speak my language at work and have once again been threatened. I have been through a lot of stress and realize that there will always be battles with those whom [*sic*] disrespect [Navajo language and people]. My children are currently learning Navajo and we continue to make it fun. My eldest son has enrolled in Navajo classes and has learned so much. We know whom [*sic*] we are and will never generate shame as to our identity.

Another Navajo student, Rose, took seriously the messages regarding the importance of her language as a means to connect to her culture and identity. But she did not allow these messages to diminish her sense of being a contributing member of her community.

Since I can remember, I have the thought stored in the back of my mind and I have been telling myself: "Yeah, *one day* I will learn my language." One day. The days are bypassing me and as each day elapses, I lose out on my language. When I think about this situation, it makes me feel bad. It almost makes me feel inadequate as a Navajo. Sure, language is like the backbone of a culture but just because I cannot speak my language does not entirely mean that I am not a *good* Navajo.

After becoming cognizant of the language shift occurring in their families and across Native communities, these youth expressed a desire to intervene through their own research, language practices at home, and personal efforts to learn their heritage language. That such motivation exists is a hopeful sign, as the survivability of Native languages requires youth who are committed to learning, using, and passing on their language.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION MOVEMENTS

The implications of this research center on the importance of understanding contemporary Native youth identities—specifically the role of their Indigenous languages in their perceptions of what it means to be an Indigenous person. Are their feelings toward their Native language a mixture of shame and pride? Is *shame* misunderstood in that their shame is with themselves, not the intrinsic value they place on their language? These students' counter-narratives demonstrate that language is a large part of their identity, but they struggle with how to learn their language and maintain it in a world that often makes such choices difficult. Yet they remain strongly assertive in their sense of self as a member of their heritage language community, even when they feel limited in fully accessing and understanding their culture and its associated worldview.

The students' counter-narratives generate a necessary and broader discussion of the internalized assimilation of Native peoples. Native language shift and change are unlike what Native

people have ever experienced, and their responses to that shift and change require many layers of negotiation from individuals to institutions within those communities. While the school initially had a dominant role, that is not the only factor that is promoting marginalization of Native languages today (Benally & Viri, 2005; Sims, 2006). The students' perspectives in this study can help to initiate those important discussions that need to take place within our Native communities about reclaiming language and reinserting it purposefully into everyday community and family life.

The ultimate purpose of this study is to help reclaim Native languages by sparking a critical Indigenous consciousness important for language revitalization efforts. Related to human agency and Freire's (1993) discussion of critical consciousness, I define critical Indigenous consciousness as an awareness of the historical and broad oppressive conditions that have influenced current realities of Indigenous people's lives. This awareness leads to acknowledging, respecting, and embracing one's role in contributing to and transforming their communities and families. It is also a realization that becoming a complete human being according to Indigenous worldviews is through service to family, and community (Cajete, 1994). By serving one's community, one's needs and goals are freed from a dominant, hegemonic position and viewed from an Indigenous perspective, which allows for transformation and is vital for the protection of Indigenous lands, people, culture, and languages (Smith, 2003).

The students' counter-narratives demonstrated that awareness of the issues surrounding language loss and their personal impacts on their families and communities can motivate youth to resist and transform these situations. For example, Natalie is continuing her research in her community to inform and implement a language program. Kelly continues to raise her family's consciousness about their language choices with her gentle reminders. In turn she has said her family views her as the "language police." Another student, Jolene (Pueblo), promotes Native-language learning and use in her family with games she invented to play with her younger relatives that require them to use their Native language. The older student, Don, has presented his observations and ideas to his tribal council about the nature of language shift in his community.

These young people are trying to make a difference; reflecting a critical Indigenous consciousness, they are asserting their agency in reversing language shift. At the same time, they are redefining and reasserting their own personal identity as Native people within the realm of language change. As one student, Doreen (Colville) articulated it,

Our miseducation, and even the loss of many of our Indigenous languages, painful and unjust as these things are, inform who we are now as Indian people, and provide the energy necessary to regroup, revitalize and even, in some respects, reinvent who we are.

Doreen's statement succinctly describes a role many Native youth now feel responsible to fulfill. The students demonstrate that defining a Native identity for youth and young adults is not a simple, uncomplicated process, and that youth's Native identity now encompasses multiple levels of cultural access, participation, and knowledge with or even without the Native language. While many youth in this study realized the inherent value of their language, maintaining and transmitting language is more difficult when they have to live with competing values and needs in their communities. Our Native languages and communities need our youth and young adults not only to realize the intrinsic value of their language, but to act on that value by committing to their language in a world that often sends them powerful mixed messages that marginalize, stigmatize, and induce feelings of embarrassment or shame with their own limitations in their

language. The students who commit to confronting this challenge provide an inspirational lesson for us all.

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