

Research Brief - December 2018

## Overview

This research brief summarizes three articles focused on the negative influence that limited and stereotypical social representation has on the Native American community. For Native American students in particular, the lack of social representation in the media and within educational institutions could lead to a negative self-image, difficulty relating to positive academic role models, an inability to visualize a future self, and feeling disconnected from school.

The articles provide recommendations to remedy this situation, including additional research into the relationship between social representation and the well-being of the Native American community and media accountability for the way Native Americans are portrayed. For educational institutions specifically, the authors highlight the importance of positive representation of all student ethnic and cultural groups. Positive representation can be promoted through graphic representation of a diverse student body on school walls, an ethnically and culturally diverse staff, and curriculum that highlights the positive achievements of the Native American and other under-represented communities.

### ***Frozen in Time: The Impact of Native American Media Representations on Identity and Self-Understanding<sup>1</sup>***

In this article, the authors discuss how the absence of positive representation of Native Americans in the media, referred to as invisibility, negatively influences Native Americans' sense of identity and self-understanding. Using a content analysis of multiple forms of media, the authors found that the percentage of Native American characters in the media falls far below their percentage in the United States population. The authors also found that when represented, Native Americans are identified as either stereotypical historical figures or a modern community experiencing poverty, lack of education, and addiction. In addition, the authors cite studies revealing the lack of Native American representation in educational institutions.

The authors then cite research findings documenting the negative consequences of limited and stereotypical representation including: *homogenization of identity* (being unable to imagine oneself beyond consistent negative media portrayals); *identity prototypes* (associated by society with negative group stereotypes, or if non-prototypical, no longer considered a member of the group); and *deindividuation and self-stereotyping* (considering oneself as identical to one's group, even if the group is negatively represented). For Native American students, this can lead to a negative self-image, feeling excluded from the societal perception of a *good student*, and associations with media stereotypes as opposed to academic role models.

To remedy this, the authors recommend that educational institutions be *free from limiting and negative representations that influence the future potential of Native American students* (p. 49). More generally, the authors recommend that media organizations assess their role in Native American representation. In addition, the authors recommend additional research to better understand: Native American de-individuation and self-stereotyping; the impact more and higher quality representation would have on Native American psychological well-being; and the differences among Native Americans or between Native Americans and other racial-ethnic minority groups related to the impact of media representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Leavitt, P.A., Covarrubias, R., Perez, Y.A. & Fryberg, S.A. (2015). Frozen in time: The impact of Native American media representation on identity and self-understanding. *Journal of Social Issues*, 71(1), 39-53. doi: 10.1111/josi.12095

### ***When the World is Colorblind, American Indians are Invisible: A Diversity Science Approach*<sup>2</sup>**

This article reports on the use of diversity science to analyze the impact a colorblind approach to race has on American Indians. A colorblind approach suggests that race is irrelevant to social life. Diversity science establishes concrete tools researchers can use to investigate various approaches to racial diversity.

Using the diversity science approach, the researchers first assessed the representation of American Indians in various domains of American society. They found an absence of contemporary social representation, concluding that American Indians experience invisibility, an extreme form of color blindness. The researchers then cite two studies on the effect of invisibility through experiments with European American and American Indian high school students (p.117). American Indian students who identified fewer people they knew who attended college (less representation) felt less belonging at school and were less able to describe their future selves than their European American counterparts. Drawing on this and other research, the authors contend that representation or lack of representation shapes individuals' opportunities, psychological functioning, and life outcomes.

It is the authors' hope that diversity science provides research-based evidence of the impact of approaches to race in society. This would move the race discussion beyond ideologies and political or philosophical arguments related to race.

### ***The Impact of Self-Relevant Representations on School Belonging for Native American Students*<sup>3</sup>**

This article reports on two studies investigating the influence of *positive group representation* (p.10) on feelings of school belonging for Native American middle school students. Study 1 ( $N=90$ ) investigated the impact different role models had on school belonging: *self-relevant role models* - defined as successful Native American students; *self-irrelevant role models* - defined as successful European American students; *ethnically ambiguous role models* - defined as successful students with an unidentified ethnicity; and *no role model* (control group). The research found that Native American students' feelings of school belonging were significantly increased when they were exposed to self-relevant role models compared to self-irrelevant, ethnically ambiguous, or no role models.

Study 2 ( $N=117$ ) investigated the impact the number of identified self-relevant role models had on school belonging. Self-relevant role models were defined as people the students knew who had attended college. The research found that European American students were able to identify more self-relevant role models than Native American students. The study also found that Native American students who identified many role models (eight role models) expressed increased school belonging compared to those who identified few (two role models) or no role models. Moreover, Native American students who identified many role models expressed comparable feelings of belonging to European American students.

The authors contend that the findings related to Native American students are relevant for other underrepresented students. They make the following recommendations to teachers and school administrators for increasing a sense of school belonging for students:

- The ethnicity of school personnel, including administrators, teachers and staff members, mirrors the ethnic and cultural diversity of the student body.
- The curriculum includes information about successful members of students' ethnic and cultural groups.
- Schools displays graphic representations of students that mirror the ethnic and cultural diversity of the student body.

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<sup>2</sup> Fryberg, S.A. & Stephens, N.M. (2010). When the world is colorblind, American Indians are invisible: A diversity science approach. *Psychological Inquiry*, 21(2), 115-119. doi: 10.1080/1047840X.2010.483847

<sup>3</sup> Covarrubias, R. & Fryberg, S.A. (2015). The impact of self-relevant representations on school belonging for Native American students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 21 (1), 10–18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0037819>