"Frozen in Time": The Impact of Native American Media Representations on Identity and Self-Understanding

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Mass media plays a substantial role in the way social groups understand themselves and are understood by others. Some social groups, like Native Americans, are rarely portrayed in mass media and, in the rare cases they appear, they are typically depicted in a stereotypical and historical fashion. The lack of contemporary representation of Native Americans in the media limits the ways in which Native Americans understand what is possible for themselves and how they see themselves fitting in to contemporary domains (e.g., education and employment) of social life. In this article, we contend that the invisibility of Native Americans in the media undermines self-understanding by homogenizing Native American identity, creating narrow and limiting identity prototypes for Native Americans, and evoking deindividuation and self-stereotyping among contemporary Native Americans.

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Mass media messages are a nearly inescapable feature of modern life. Media displays and perpetuates shared ideas and images, or social representations, of the social world. For example, mass media offers an array of characterizations that associate different identity groups with different possibilities for how to be a person (i.e., how to act or behave) in society. These representations typically reflect and reify stereotypes of groups (e.g., African Americans as athletes and musicians, women as sexualized beings) that vary in quality (e.g., accuracy and valence—positive or negative representations) and quantity (e.g., number and breadth) (e.g. Assibey-Mensah, 1997; Aubrey, 2006; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). For some social identity groups, such as White, middle-class individuals, the media provides an abundance of positive, varied representations, whereas for others, such as working-class and racial-ethnic minority individuals, it provides a limited number of predominantly negative and narrow representations. The purpose of this article is to examine how the quality and quantity of media representations influence identity and self-understanding, particularly when a group, such as Native Americans, is greatly underrepresented.

According to the theory of invisibility (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008), when a group is underrepresented in the media, members of that group are deprived of messages or strategies for how to be a person. Although media effects are typically small (e.g., Morgan & Shanahan, 1996), the ability of media to shape how individuals experience and understand various groups, contexts, or domains, is well documented (see Mastro, 2009). Notably, it is not merely the quality of media characterizations of groups that contribute to identity and shared understanding (e.g., public perceptions about the defining characteristics and behaviors of the group and about norms for how to treat the group), but the quantity of portrayals (e.g., the sheer number of portrayals) also communicates a message about the group's vitality in society (Harwood & Roy, 2005). Accordingly, the limited representations associated with minority groups in the media, in terms of both quantity and quality, are likely to convey to group members that they do not belong and cannot be successful in a number of achievement-related fields (e.g., education, business) where minority groups are scarcely (if ever) seen in the media (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014; Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005; Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

The invisibility of Native Americans in mass media provides a unique vantage point for examining how media representations impact both identity and self-understanding. Native Americans are typically depicted as 18th and 19th century figures (i.e., as teepee dwelling, buckskin and feather wearing, horse riding people) and, in the rare cases in which they are shown as contemporary people, they are negatively stereotyped as poor, uneducated and prone to addictions (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008). This type of limited and negative

representation of Native Americans is referred to as relative invisibility (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). Many groups experience relative invisibility (e.g., Latino Americans, gay and lesbian, and working class individuals), but what differentiates Native Americans is that they uniquely experience absolute invisibility in many domains of American life. Specifically, they are rarely (if ever) seen as contemporary figures in the media, which means they are absent from depictions of mainstream public spaces, such as schools and hospitals, and from many professional positions, such as teachers, professors, doctors, and lawyers. In this way, Native Americans, more than other social groups, are seen and learn to see themselves through the lens of negative stereotypes or they look to the messages projected about the contemporary world and simply do not see themselves represented. In the remainder of this article, we will provide an overview of the available media representations of Native Americans and highlight the impact of these representations on Native American identities and self-understanding. First, we will examine the pervasiveness and the influence of media content in American society for different social groups. Second, we will review the quality and quantity of Native American representations in the media. Finally, we will discuss the psychological consequences of Native American invisibility in the media on identification and self-understanding.

Pervasiveness of Media Content and Influence

Many of the impressions people form of diverse individuals and groups are the result of vicarious or indirect experience through media rather than direct, in-person contact (Mastro, 2015). To illustrate, 98.9% of American households have a television set (Television Bureau of Advertising, 2009) and 92.6% of Americans watch television regularly (Proquest, 2012). In the past two decades, new media technologies have also become central and influential in American life. For instance, 80.9% of households have personal computers (Television Bureau of Advertising, 2009), 78.7% of households use the Internet regularly, and 78% of adult Internet users read the news online (Proquest, 2012). Eighty-five percent of adults own a cell phone (Proquest, 2012), 63% of cell phone owners use the Internet on their phone (Duggan & Smith, 2013), and more than 40% of Americans play video games regularly (Slagle, 2006). These media vehicles offer messages or representations about different groups and about how to think about or understand the social world.

These social messages or representations reflect the widely shared, yet taken-for-granted, ideas, practices, and policies that individuals use to understand or orient themselves within their everyday social contexts and to communicate with one another (Moscovici, 1973/1988; Moscovici, 1984). These representations convey information about the good or right way to be a person, including how individuals represent or think about themselves in the past, present, and future

(Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Oyserman & Markus, 1993). Social representations communicate, for example, that this is how a certain kind of person talks and behaves, this is how to interact with this kind of person, and this is what this kind of person can achieve.

Due to its pervasiveness, mass media is a potent channel by which social representations are created and maintained in mainstream society. They provide a surrogate representation for real-world exposure in cases where interpersonal contact between majority and minority group members is limited and/or nonexistent (Mastro, 2015). Popular media is, in many cases, the only exposure some people have to members of other groups. This is problematic when the media conveys inaccurate or stereotypical representations about social groups, or when the media fails to provide a representation at all (i.e., a group is invisible).

Media Representations of Native Americans

Media is not an "equal-opportunity self-schema afforder" (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008, p. 174); that is, it does not provide equal social representations of how to be a person for all groups. Some groups are represented less often and in more negative ways than others. We contend that this inequality puts groups, such as Native Americans, at a psychological disadvantage compared to groups who are abundantly and positively represented. Close examination of the population statistics and media portrayals of Native Americans reveals that they are largely invisible in contemporary American life.

In the United States, individuals who identify in the census as Native Americans constitute 1.6% of the population, whereas individuals who report being Native American and some other racial-ethnic group(s) constitute 4.1% of the population (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). In contrast, content analyses of primetime television and popular films reveal that the inclusion of Native American characters ranges from no representation to 0.4% of characters being Native American (Fryberg, 2003; Mastro & Behm-Morazwitz, 2005; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). Similarly, less than 1% of children's cartoon characters (Klein & Shiffman, 2009) and 0.09% of video game characters (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009) are Native American. Taken together, whereas Native Americans make up a small portion of the population, they are considerably more underrepresented in the media. In fact, they are often invisible in the media.

The representational issue, however, is not simply that Native Americans are numerically underrepresented, but that the quality of representations is also constrained. For instance, whether Native Americans are depicted as sports team mascots (e.g., Washington Redskins) or Hollywood film characters (e.g., Pocahontas), they are typically portrayed as 18th and 19th century figures (King, 2008; Lomawaima, 1999). Furthermore, these representations not only locate Native

Americans as historical figures, they also depict them as particular types of Native Americans (e.g., Sioux, Apache, Navajo). Considering the diversity of Native American groups, these narrow representations not only define Native Americans as a homogeneous group "frozen in time," but also render invisible hundreds of diverse tribal cultures.

Moreover, the advent of the Internet has allowed these types of portrayals to reach a wide audience. A simple Internet image search for Native Americans via Google and Bing—the two most widely used search engines (eBizMBA, 2013)—directs the searcher to the same historical imagery. For the purpose of illustration, we examined the first 100 image results for each of the terms "Native American" and "American Indian" returning 200 images total from both search engines. We found that 95.5% of Google ($n = 191$) and 99% of Bing ($n = 198$) images were historical representations. These search results highlight the extent to which media consumers are inundated with a narrow set of historical images of Native Americans.

Finally, as noted above, the absence or misrepresentation of contemporary Native American media representations is amplified when Americans have no direct, daily contact with Native Americans. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), only 14 U.S. states have Native populations greater than 100,000 and nearly one fourth of Native Americans live on reservations. Hence, the likelihood Americans would have direct in-person contact with Native Americans that could counter the misrepresentation or invisibility of Native Americans in the media is quite small.

Psychological Consequences of Native American Invisibility

Of course the psychological consequences of invisibility extend far beyond the media. Take education as an example. In primary and secondary schools, only 0.5% of teachers are Native Americans, and in higher education, only 1% of college students and 0.5% of professors are Native American (Coopersmith, 2009; Keigher, 2009; Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009; Snyder et al., 2009). Native American students can go their entire academic career without the presence of a Native American teacher or peer and, as a result, are more likely to question their belonging in school contexts (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014) and to experience a heightened "spotlight" effect (Kanter, 1977; Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978) wherein the situation itself highlights the individual's atypical status in the context. Accordingly, every Native American model (real or mediated) takes on increased importance. In the remainder of this section, we will outline the psychological implications of invisibility in the media on how both Native Americans and non-Natives understand what it means to be Native American in contemporary society. Specifically, we will discuss how invisibility contributes to the

homogenization of identity, development of identity prototypes, and deindividuation and self-stereotyping among contemporary Native Americans.

Homogenization of Native American identities

In mainstream media, the limited and narrow depictions homogenize Native American identities. The result being that it stifles self-understanding such that it limits perceptions of how Native Americans should appear and behave. The homogenization of Native American identities inhibits the ability of Native Americans to see their group or to imagine themselves as anything other than the limited media portrayals. Moreover, in the absence of direct, in-person contact, the homogenizing of Native American identities creates a reference point around which Native Americans must orient themselves as they negotiate their identities.

Fryberg et al. (2008), for example, tested how homogeneous media portrayals of Native Americans impact self-understanding and perceptions of potential. Using the most common media portrayals, Native American students were exposed to either the Cleveland Indian mascot, Disney's Pocahontas, negative stereotypes (dropout rates, rates of alcohol abuse, and depression rates), or no media image (control), and then answered questions about self-understanding (e.g., self-esteem, community worth) or potential (e.g., achievement-related possible selves). Compared to the control group, exposure to prominent media portrayals led Native American high school and college students to have more negative feelings about their self (i.e., decreased self-esteem) and community (i.e., decreased community worth), and depressed academic future possibilities (i.e., diminished achievement-related possible selves).

By creating a homogeneous identity reference group, media portrayals of Native Americans also constrain self-understanding for Native Americans; inhibiting the opportunity to explore a variety of atypical identities. The limited representations convey to Native Americans that they do not belong and cannot be successful in atypical domains. Interestingly, these representations need not be negative to have pernicious effects on self-understanding (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Fryberg et al., 2008). Homogeneous positive stereotypes, such as "Asians are good at math and science," also undermine self-understanding and performance because they also deny group members a variety of atypical identities (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Siy & Cheryan, 2013).

Prototypes of Native American identities

Invisibility also contributes to the development and perpetuation of prototypes or socially agreed upon "best examples" of what it means to be "Native American" by non-Native Americans in contemporary society. In the absence of direct in-person contact or other pertinent sources of information, media representations

emerge as prototypes that establish the quality and quantity of characteristics people associate with different groups and, thus, influence the psychological resources afforded to individual group members.

When individuals are seen as prototypical of groups with more privileged media profiles—greater quantity and more favorable quality—they are afforded status, esteem, and identity benefits (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Conversely, when individuals identify with groups who are not afforded privileged media profiles (i.e., lesser quality and/or unfavorable quality), they are (1) viewed as prototypical of their group and thus associated with the less privileged media profile or (2) viewed as non-prototypical of their group and thus not recognized as members of their group (e.g., Cheng, Fielding, & Terry, 2011; Machunsky, Meiser, & Mummendey, 2009; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Rubin, 2012; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Being prototypical or not is related to access to various psychological resources.

Overall, being prototypical of one's group is associated with higher in-group status (Rubin, 2012), suggesting additional incentives to be seen as prototypical. In fact, nonprototypical group members are not only viewed as lower status, but they also experience greater degrees of invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008), greater insecurity about fitting in with their group (Cheng et al., 2011), and less positive feelings (Machunsky et al., 2009) about their group. Of course, when the group prototype is negative, being seen as highly prototypical can also have harmful effects. Eberhardt et al. (2006), for example, demonstrated that when African American criminal defendants were seen as more prototypical of their group (i.e., appeared more stereotypically African American), they received harsher sentences. The issue is not simply that the prototype influences equitable sentencing, but that these prototypes are so tacit and invisible that they influence individuals who may otherwise believe that they hold egalitarian values (Costa-Lopes, Dovidio, Pereira, & Jost, 2013).

The effects are not limited to the criminal justice system. Prototypicality in education, for example, impacts who is and who is not identified with academic representations. Take the prototype for a "good student." When people think about this prototype, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans are rarely included. As a result, it is difficult for individual members of these groups to identify with the prototype and thus to reap the benefits of enhanced feelings of self-worth and belonging that identification with this prototype provides (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000; Tesser, 1988).

In fact, for groups who are not typically associated with desired prototypes, research reveals that actively creating associations (e.g., creating in-group "good student" representations; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014) yields psychological benefits. In education, for example, enhancing the self-relevance of the "good student" prototype has been shown to alleviate performance decrements for

underrepresented students (Marx & Goff, 2005; Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009; Marx & Roman, 2002; McIntyre, Paulson, & Lord, 2003). Moreover, when groups who experience stereotypes about their academic abilities (e.g., women in math, Black students and intelligence) think about self-relevant role models who demonstrate competence and success, the performance-inhibiting effects of negative stereotypes are diminished (Marx & Roman, 2002; McIntyre et al., 2003). Similarly, reading about or identifying self-relevant role models increases school motivation and belonging (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014).

One limitation to fostering these self-relevant associations in the media is that high achieving nonprototypical individuals (e.g., John Herrington, the first Native American astronaut, Charles Curtis, the first Native American Vice President of the United States, or Wilma Mankiller, the first woman Chief of the Cherokee Nation) may be seen as an "exception to the rule." Research on "superstar role models" reveals that although exposure to such notable figures offers momentary cognitive and emotional benefits, it yields no long-term motivational effects (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). In other words, these high achieving individuals are so extraordinary that their success is also seen as atypical (i.e., nonprototypical) of Native Americans and thus unattainable for Native American students. This is not to say that such superstar role models are bad, but that they are not enough. Realistic, attainable, and plentiful positive role models are needed to yield lasting changes in self-understanding and potential.

Deindividuation and Self-Stereotyping

Alongside prompting homogenous and prototypical representations of groups, media invisibility also influences how individuals contend with and are impacted by these representations—specifically deindividuation and self-stereotyping. Deindividuation refers to the point at which an individual sees oneself as interchangeable with other members of the group (Turner et al., 1987). For individuals who are highly identified with their social group, deindividuation is a source of enhanced self-esteem and belonging (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). These psychological consequences are contingent on two assumptions: (1) that group members choose to belong or identify with the group and (2) that the group is valued in other's eyes. In other words, when individuals deindividuate with their group, they are perceived by other individuals as having selected from a variety of positive options. For some groups, however, these assumptions are incorrect. Their homogeneous, prototypic media representations are limited (or invisible) and/or largely negative, such that the choice in terms of self-understanding and identity is much more constrained.

Assibey-Mensah (1997), for example, demonstrated that the limited, yet widely held stereotypic and negative representations of African Americans influence how African American youth identify with various role models. That is,

African American youth do not identify with positive African American academic role models, but instead disproportionately identify with the publicly available stereotypic role models (e.g., athletes and film stars). The quandary for African American youth is that the choice to deindividuate to their group representation may yield immediate psychological benefits in terms of self-esteem and belonging, but also constrains individual potential by rendering invisible more viable personal and professional pathways.

The act of "choosing" to deindividuate with these group representations is referred to as self-stereotyping. What undergirds this process is a belief that if one wants to be regarded as a member of their group then they must identify, or self-stereotype, with the associated representations. For example, identification with negative representations of Native Americans is one way to justify and cope with failure (self-handicapping; "doing what everyone expects of me") (Burkley, Andrade, Stermer, & Bell, 2013). What self-stereotyping demonstrates is that members of underrepresented groups may be motivated to identify with any available representation simply because one representation is better than no representation (i.e., absolute invisibility). The one representation, no matter how unfavorable or inaccurate, provides answers to the "Who am I?" questions that people are motivated to answer and provides a reference point around which to negotiate one's identity with others.

Conclusion

Media invisibility has notable consequences for identity and self-understanding. By promoting limited, homogeneous prototypes of Native Americans, the media inhibits the development of characteristics or abilities beyond those supported by these Native American prototypes and inadvertently promotes maladaptive self-strategies (e.g., deindividuation and self-stereotyping) that undermine individual potential. Media invisibility also highlights the fact that the representation and identification process is not necessarily a conscious and agentic endeavor (c.f., Abrams & Giles, 2007). Native Americans, like most Americans, make the choice to consume mass media, but the psychological consequences and, in particular, the consequences of being depicted by narrow and limited representations are rarely publicly shared or discussed. Moreover, Native Americans have little control over how or when their group is portrayed in the media. In other words, they are not making an active choice to be represented in these negative and limiting ways and although they can contest or reject these representations, they cannot control the impact of these representations on how other people think about Native Americans. By highlighting the impact of absolute and relative invisibility, this article brings to the foreground the process by which Native Americans and non-Natives develop expectations about how

Native Americans should look and behave and how these expectations influence self-understanding, identity development, and intergroup relations.

Although the nature of how groups are represented influences all social groups, we focus on Native Americans because as a small and geographically isolated population they experience absolute and relative invisibility across a wide variety of domains. In light of the limited research on invisibility for African American women (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Sesko & Biernat, 2010), we contend that the psychological effects of media invisibility are generalizable. Although African Americans now represent a higher proportion of media characters than their proportion of the U.S. population (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000), this does not suggest that more representation automatically yields more positive psychological consequences or that these groups are immune to misrepresentation and negatively stereotypic portrayals. Contemporary African Americans benefit from a greater diversity of representation than in the past, but few would argue that the current quality of representation is largely an accurate or fair portrayal of the group. African American athletes, for example, are overrepresented as criminals in news stories (Mastro, Blecha, & Atwell Seate, 2011). Hence, the impact of media representations for individual African Americans also depends on the intersectionality of their other consequential social identities (e.g., gender, social class, education level, region of the country; Babbitt, 2013; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

Given that different combinations of social identities and social representations may have different psychological consequences, one limitation of theorizing about media invisibility is that research conducted with Native Americans is relatively scarce. As a result, we draw from the most current research on Native Americans in the media, but we also rely heavily on research conducted with other racial/ethnic groups. This tempers the specific conclusions we can draw about Native Americans and highlights the need for additional research. For instance, future research is needed to examine the extent to which Native Americans actually deindividuate and self-stereotype in response to homogeneous media representations and how various intersectional identities augment or buffer these effects. Research is also needed to examine how a change in the repertoire of publicly available representations—more diverse and positive representations—might psychologically impact this group.

Another limitation is that, to date, there is no comparative research among Native Americans or between Native Americans and other racial-ethnic minority groups that supports whether greater invisibility or invisibility coupled with more negative representations has more pernicious psychological consequences. We anticipate that Native Americans are at greater risk than other groups, but this may not be true when considering intersectional identities. Perhaps the psychological consequences for Natives who reside on Indian reservations or whose parents do not have a high school or college education will differ, in more harmful ways, from

Natives who live in urban settings, or who have parents with college educations, or who have had more meaningful contact with non-Natives.

Even with these limitations in mind, given the pervasiveness of media in everyday life and the impact that media representations or a lack of representation can have on psychological well-being, the ideas presented here have widespread implications for public policy in general and policy makers in particular. First, media outlets have tremendous potential to either harm (by way of fostering negative stereotypes) or to help (by way of fostering new identities and new future possibilities) Native Americans. Given the inherent inequality in how different groups are represented, it may behoove policy-makers to create policies that require media outlets to attend to how and when they represent diverse groups. Moreover, groups that are underrepresented, such as Native Americans, often have little direct influence on the way they are portrayed in mass media. Policy-makers can play a critical role by ensuring that Native Americans are represented and included in decisions that represent and affect their communities. Take the issue of Native American mascots as an example. There is evidence that these mascots harm Native American students and influence intergroup relationships in college settings (Fryberg et al., 2008; Kim-Prieto, Goldstein, Okazaki, & Kirschner, 2010). Policy-makers should advocate for school environments that are free from limiting and negative representations that influence the future potential of Native American students.

Creating widespread and large-scale change in the way society portrays and thinks about Native Americans is no easy task. Such an endeavor will require the cooperation of many people in many different domains (e.g., media, education) of society. Fortunately, there is a precedent for this work. Policy-makers and educators have long been involved in changing the way minority groups are represented. Continued support from policy-makers and educators can and will go a long way in helping historically underrepresented and underserved groups, like Native Americans, be seen and understood as the unique, diverse, and contemporary people that they are.

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