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**How do we compel our youth to speak Navajo?:
Intersections of Language, Identity, and Power**

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In a small, rural community in an interior location of the Navajo Nation, there is a school that has achieved world-wide recognition for their incorporation of Navajo language, literacy and cultural knowledge in every subject area and in every grade kindergarten through twelfth. The school's former director reported that in the early 1980s, 90% of the students who entered their school were Navajo speakers. The school reinforced these students' intellectual, personal, and social development through their first language. Some ten to fifteen years later, the director reported that the first language of 90% of kindergarten students at this school was now English. Language shift occurred among these families in this community despite the school's efforts and success at implementing Navajo language curriculum.

Why were families, who assumingly attended this school and benefited from the Navajo language focus, selecting to raise their children in English? What was influencing their language choices in their homes, in the schools, or in the community? This study attempts to address these questions through the lens of Native youth and young adult perspectives. Native youth and young adults are cognizant of the nature of language shift and language loss in their communities. There is much rhetoric in Native communities about the importance of language for cultural sustainability. Yet Native youth are also cognizant of messages they hear that equate success in life with American mainstream goals, such as job security and material wealth. Often, the two are positioned at opposition to one another as though one cannot be both successful in society while also maintaining Native language and cultural lifeways. This study attempted to learn how Native youth are interpreting messages of language loss and vitality, and how they are

defining their place or role in society as a member of their Native language group, whether or not they can speak their language.

Mixed Messages

There is an abundance of research that has examined the nature of language loss, change and revitalization efforts among Native American and other Indigenous populations (Benjamin, Pecos, and Romero, 1996, Crawford, 1996, Holm and Holm, 1995, Hornberger, 1996, Hornberger and Coronel-Molina, 2004, McCarty and Watahomigie, 1998, Romero Little and McCarty, 2006, Sims, 2001, Pease-pretty on Top, year?). Native Americans are not alone in their experiences with language loss as most of the world's heritage languages are also vanishing (Fishman, 1991, Hinton and Hale, 2001, Krauss, 1992).

There is less research on Native American young adult's language use or attitudes. In one important study that included many interviews with Native youth in the southwest, messages and perceptions regarding language attitudes and language use between youth and adults were vastly different. In some cases, the youth expressed feelings of shame or the teachers attributed apathy on the part of youth with regard to their language (McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda, 2006). However, these feelings of shame or apathy may be misunderstood by teachers. McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda 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 percent of youth in their school could speak Navajo. On the other hand, the Navajo youth perceived this percentage to be between 75 and 80. To explain this difference, the authors explain that

the youth viewed speaking Navajo as “emblem of shame” (p. 38) and hence, give the impression they do not have Navajo language skills when in school.

This is similar to findings in a study I conducted in early 2000, where Navajo teenagers expressed fear of stigmatization, in particular fear of being labeled a “John,” if they demonstrated a Navajo accent in their speech (Lee, in press). Being labeled a “john” is the same as being called uneducated, poor, unsophisticated, and unintelligent. The shame the students in my study reported was with regard to the label associated with the language, not necessarily with the language itself. The students actually expressed great respect and value for their language but were pressured to abandon learning or speaking the language in school-based contexts.

Conversely, if students felt scolded or teased by their relatives or peers for mispronunciation or grammatical and syntax error of Navajo words and phrases, this also negatively influenced their language use (Lee, 1999). Students heard rhetoric in school that speaking Navajo is 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. McCarty, Romero, and Zepeda found that the critical factor in reversing this shaming effect for students was the presence of caring adults. The misunderstanding continued with the teachers in their study who viewed students as not caring about their language, yet the youth viewed the teachers as not caring about them (2006).

These studies show that both youth and adults in school contexts continuously have to negotiate the status of Native languages against the privileged position of

English. May (1999) argued that this type of negotiation is a result of the tendency for the dominant society to connect English with a “modern” world and Navajo or any other Native language to “tradition” where it is located in a marginalized and disenfranchised position. He explained, “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).

The messages in schools promote the ideology that English and mainstream ways of life are “in line with modernity, economic development, and social integration” (Crawford, 1996, p.5). At the same time, students receive messages about the importance of speaking Navajo. Often, they are scolded for their limited Navajo (Lee, in press) or assumed to be feeling shame for their language. Students expressed the value and respect they feel for the language and heritage, but this contradicts the expectations they feel in school to live in a “modern” world. This study intended to reach beyond the simplistic and over-stated notions of “living in two worlds” which is a problematic notion (Henze and Vanett, 1993). Instead, this study attempted to understand how Native youth negotiate the world in which they live that encompasses varied, and often oppositional, expectations from sources in their homes, schools, and communities. The study explored the power relations and interactions Native youth experience with regard to learning and using their heritage language. It offers insight into how they are responding, resolving, and internalizing mixed messages from powerful sources at home, school, and in the community regarding the place of language in defining their identity, and their place and role at home, in school, and in community. As Benally and Viri (2005) suggest, this

generation of youth and young adults may be one of the last generations to hear active language use in their communities making their insights and experiences all the more imperative.

Methods

The data for this analysis was taken from two separate studies that incorporated the use of counter-narratives through 1. interviews with Navajo teenagers and the transcriptions of those interviews, and 2. written reflection papers from Native college students. In one study, I interviewed twenty Navajo teenagers from five different high schools across the Navajo Nation. I interviewed students about their socialization experiences related to language learning and language use in their families, in their schools and in other social contexts. In the second study, 19 Native college students (representing southwest tribal backgrounds, mostly Navajo and Pueblo) enrolled in a course on Native language issues wrote four personal reflection papers each on topics related to their experiences with language shift, language loss, language revitalization, and intersections of language and identity. For the purposes of this study, I characterize counter-narratives to include the students' stories from both the transcriptions of the interviews and the reflection papers.

Counter-narratives, also known as counter storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002), offer the space for people of color to voice their knowledge and experiences which counter dominant and hegemonic narratives of their place and role in society. They interrupt and challenge dominant rhetoric and ideologies (Gilmore & Smith, 2005 p 69). The counter-narratives in this study were the means by which the Indigenous youth in this study voiced their concerns, values, frustrations, celebrations and dilemmas with

regard to their heritage language and identity. In addition, the method of collecting these counter-narratives in their original studies are a result of “microinteractions” (Cummins, 2005, p. 291) that provided an opportunity and the space for the students to voice their resistance of power structures located in their communities, in their schools, and in the wider society. The use of these students’ counter-narratives was also an exploration of ways to accurately represent their “funds of knowledge” (Moll et. al., 1992) and presentation of self.

Analysis

I analyzed the interview transcripts and reflection papers through an inductive process, or theorizing process, (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) that was informed by relevant themes in the literature to identify statements that were related to these themes. I expected to find statements relevant to the perceptions of respect for their heritage language, stigmatization and shame toward their language, marginalization of their language, and embedded in all this, the resulting impact on identity. Each of these respective themes was apparent in the literature. In locating statements in the transcripts and reflection papers that related to these themes, I identified statements that occurred often, statements that were related to one another, statements that were rare or unusual, and statements that were absent despite my expectations for them.

Respect

Not one student in their counter-narratives throughout each interview and each reflection paper questioned the intrinsic value of their heritage language. Many students, from the range of 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, Kelly¹, a 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 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, who 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 was alluding to experiences where 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 a student 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 his negative feelings toward his experiences in speaking Navajo, 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

¹ All names are pseudonyms

emphasis because Native Americans are losing their language. When he sees children who speak “perfect” Navajo to their grandparents, he is proud. He feels all Navajo children should know their language.

Stigmatization and shame: toward language or toward self?

What was absent from the students’ counter-narratives were direct expressions of shame for their heritage language. Instead, students revealed expressions of embarrassment of 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.

Natalie, a college student who did research to understand the impact of language shift in her community made 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 earlier remarks made by the Navajo teenager Angie, a college student who I call Marjorie was also embarrassed about her limited Navajo skills and 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?

These students 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. Messages and expectations they encounter with regard to their Native language position these students to blame themselves for their lack of ability. Those that realized the unfairness and injustice in this blaming game become resistant and frustrated, 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. In turn, students redefined and reasserted their sense of Native identity given their personal level of Native language fluency. These testimonies will be shared later in the paper.

Marginalization

As mentioned earlier, May (1999) asserted 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. Conversely, non-dominant 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 recognized this marginalization of their Native language not only within their school systems, but also within their own communities. For one college student I 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 associated with the dominant culture and dominant society. She 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 recognized the marginalization of her own 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.

She attributed a discrepancy to her identity as a Tewa person and an incomplete understanding of her culture because she cannot understand nor speak her language. This type of desire to know their language in order to fully understand their culture was very apparent in the counter-narratives. Yet, the students’ also expressed frustration with their own communities’ differences in priorities. Danielle, a 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 quantity requirements, and personal conflicts as more important than preserving our language

Similarly, another student I named Don, 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 their Native languages from the people within their communities based on a lack of language programs and a preferred use of English. Danielle offered further insights into what Crawford hypothesized as one reason for language shift. Crawford (1996) suggested that modernity, economic development, and social integration are more dangerous than the repressive language policies of schools because the former are signs from within of community change 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 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.

These students important insights, observations, and analyses have shed light onto a new theme that emerged from the data that had not been addressed in the literature. Throughout the college students' narratives, the students 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 held regarding language shift and 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

Many students articulated in the interviews and through their writing their desire to make an impact in their community, such as by bringing more awareness to the issue of language shift and by implementing their own strategies to influence young people's mindsets about their Native languages. Kelly 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 can have an influence on their family's thinking and behavior just by bringing more awareness to the subject of language shift. Kristie, 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 Native 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 fluency in their language. For example, Christine 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 disrespect. 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 we are and will never generate shame as to our identity.

Additionally, 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 being a contributing member to 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. (italics in original)

After becoming cognizant of the language shift occurring in their families and across Native communities, these students expressed desire to intervene through their own research, through methods to implement at home, and through their own efforts to learn their language. It is hopeful to see that such motivation exists as the status of Native languages today needs youth who are committed to learning, using, and passing on their language.

Implications

The implications of this research center on the importance of understanding current Native youth identity, specifically whether learning and speaking their Native language is an integral part of or supplementary to their self-perceptions of what it means to be a Native 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 show that language is a large part of their identity, but they struggled with how to learn their language and maintain it in a world that often makes such choices difficult. Yet, they remained strongly assertive in their sense of self as a member of their heritage language community, even when they felt they were limited in fully accessing and understanding their culture and its associated worldview.

Sociolinguist Joshua A. Fishman said to maintain or revitalize a language that is not being inter-generationally transmitted naturally within a community, there has to be change within that community. There has to be “consensual advantages for changing from the new ways to the old ways....There has to be something that they are gaining, that they believe they are gaining, something that means so much to them that it is a worthwhile gain to them.” (1996, P. 7). He goes on to say that this can be done by a small group of people and the more dislocated the language, the smaller the group will be. This study is about trying to create those small groups of Native individuals by sparking a critical Indigenous consciousness important for language revitalization efforts. The students' counter-narratives demonstrated that awareness of the issues surrounding language shift and language loss and their personal impact on the students' families and communities can motivate students 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 families' 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, promotes Native language learning and use in her family with games she invented to play with her younger relatives. These games

require her younger relatives 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. The list of these type of examples goes on and on.

These students are trying to make a difference. At the same time, they are redefining and reasserting their own personal identity as Native people within this realm of language change. As one student, Doreen, 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.

Her statement succinctly describes a role many Native students now feel responsibility to fulfill. While many students 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 intrinsic value of their language, but to act on that value by committing to their language in a world that often sends them powerful and mixed messages that often marginalize, stigmatize, and influence feelings of embarrassment or shame with their own limitations in their language. The students who can commit to confronting this challenge are inspirational.

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