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Native American cultural influences on career self-schemas and MBA fit

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to develop two new constructs (career self-schemas and career locus) and present a conceptual model of the influence of Native American culture on MBA fit.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a social cognitive lens on career theory, the authors examine the possible effects of cultural influences on the fit between Native Americans' career goals and an MBA. Specifically, the authors propose that cultural factors contribute to career self-schemas inconsistent with Native American perceptions of business graduate education. Career self-schemas are an individual's cognitive map of the self in his or her career.

Findings – The conceptual model proposes that aspects of career self-schemas may explain lagging Native Americans' MBA fit: the MBA is culturally inconsistent, and a community career locus.

Research limitations/implications – The model needs to be tested empirically. This research has implications that extend beyond Native Americans to help explain the career aspirations of other diverse groups.

Social implications – Native Americans are, in recent years, engaging in economic development that would benefit from Native Americans with MBAs. The authors make recommendations for increasing Native American interest in MBA programs.

Originality/value – This paper introduces the constructs of career self-schemas and career locus to explain lagging MBA fit for Native Americans. The constructs may also be applied in other cultures and with other ethnic groups to explain differences in career choice. It may be particularly helpful in an international context.

Keywords Native Americans, MBA, Career theory, Career locus, Career self-schema, Cultural influences

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Native Americans[1], also called American-Indians, are the indigenous people of the USA. Approximately 1.7 million American-Indians and Alaska Natives are enrolled in 566 tribes recognized as sovereign nations by the United States Bureau of Indian

Affairs (BIA). Native Americans have higher poverty rates and lower income and employment rates than non-minorities (Aud *et al.*, 2010). Tribal economic development requires educated managers, thus increasing graduate business education will help to reverse such rates. However, the number of Native Americans pursuing graduate education is small (LaFromboise and Low, 1989). Unlike other minority groups, where there has been an increase in the number of MBA students, Native American enrollment remains flat (Ogunwole *et al.*, 2012). In 2011, just 750 self-identified Native American students took the GMAT®, a number which represents approximately 1 percent of all GMAT® examinees and only 5 percent of all minority examinees. Of that group 72 percent planned on earning an MBA (Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), 2011). Using a social cognitive lens, we develop a conceptual model as to why these numbers are not higher and recommend ways to increase Native American interest in earning an MBA.

Social cognitions play a critical role in career issues (Eddleston *et al.*, 2006; Hall, 2002). According to social cognition theory, schemas, or cognitive maps, contain knowledge that guides perception, memory, and inference in a given domain (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Wyer Jr, 2004). Self-schemas organize memories about ourselves (Markus *et al.*, 1985). A person is "schematic" in a domain only if her knowledge in that domain allows encoding, storage, and retrieval of memories and information related to that domain (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Under this social cognitive approach, we define career self-schemas as an individual's current ideas about the self in the career domain and focus on two aspects: the cultural appropriateness of an MBA; and Native Americans' ideas about the place that career holds in their lives.

We focus on the cultural appropriateness of an MBA because career development differs in cross-cultural contexts, including in Native American cultures within the USA (Leong and Serafica, 2001; Meir and Tziner, 2001). There are vast cultural differences between Indian Country[2] and the dominant culture, evident in the few career studies that focus on Native Americans (see, e.g. Hoffmann *et al.*, 2005; Juntunen *et al.*, 2001; Juntunen and Cline, 2010; Thompson, 2013; Turner and Lapan, 2003; Turner *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, Thompson *et al.* (2013) found culturally relevant differences for Native American students with respect to college persistence that were not reflected in traditional, widely accepted survey instruments. Exploring this cultural divide may inform strategies for increasing Native Americans' MBA fit.

Understanding Native Americans' career self-schemas is relevant to careers scholars and cultural diversity scholars as well as college recruiters and career centers. It represents a new lens for investigating career aspirations and barriers affecting different racial and ethnic populations. This could also be useful to: practitioners and businesses interested in workforce diversity using culturally appropriate targeting of underrepresented minorities such as Native Americans, and business schools committed to increasing enrollment of underrepresented minorities in MBA programs.

Background and literature review

To understand why more Native Americans are not seeking an MBA, we focus on the social cognitions that provide an internal impetus for pursing the degree. The Graduate Management Admission Council® (GMAC®) identified four relevant cognitions contributing to a decision to apply to MBA programs:

(1) fit between an MBA and career goals;

(2) preparedness for a graduate business degree program;

(3) sufficient financial resources to finance the degree and receive a return on investment; and

(4) commitment to the goal of attaining the degree despite challenges and personal sacrifices (Edgington and Garcia, 2005).

All four cognitions are relevant to perceived barriers that may lower Native American MBA aspirations. Although our model addresses cognitions that are expected to affect the perceived fit between an MBA and career goals (the first cognition), the other cognitions also influence graduate degree aspirations.

The GMAC® second cognition suggests that individuals must account for how prepared they are for graduate education before deciding to pursue a graduate degree. Native Americans are underrepresented in higher education at all levels, a problem exacerbated by high undergraduate attrition rates (Shotton *et al.*, 2007). In addition to under-preparedness, attrition is also partly caused by pressure to assimilate and feelings of cultural isolation (cf. Huffman, 2008). Thus cultural identity is also a strong predictor of college attrition (Huffman, 2008; Thompson *et al.*, 2013). In the 2000 Census, only 11 percent of American-Indian and Alaska Native reported at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 24 percent of the overall population (Ogunwole, 2006), and these percentages remain unchanged ten years later, even though African-American and Hispanic percentages increased during that time period (Ogunwole *et al.*, 2012). The Native American students of interest herein have, or will have, a bachelor's degree and so have negotiated the first hurdle of success in an undergraduate program.

Census statistics confirm that Native Americans have lower employment rates, lower incomes, and higher poverty rates than the overall US population (Aud *et al.*, 2010). With fewer personal financial resources and less fellowship financial aid for MBA students compared to undergraduate students, there are financial barriers to pursuing an MBA (GMAC®'s third cognition).

The GMAC® fourth cognition may loom large for Native Americans as perceived or actual discriminatory treatment marginalizes and isolates Native American students in predominantly white universities (Lin *et al.*, 1988; Pewewardy and Frey, 2004). Persistence in college depends on support from a number of sources: family, social (including school friendships and social support), faculty and staff, and being given opportunities to develop and deal with racial needs, along with cultural needs, issues, and questions (Jackson *et al.*, 2003). Although this research investigated undergraduate students, it likely applies to graduate students too.

Researchers suggest that racial homophily can limit racial minority students' inclusion and networking (Mollica *et al.*, 2003). Since people's social networks can help or hinder career performance (Mehra *et al.*, 1998, 2001), Native students may be at a disadvantage when groups form in class. Marginalization of underrepresented racial minorities in one prominent MBA program was documented to be a result of racial homophily and exclusion from friendship/social networks based on race, although the underrepresented minority students tended to have tight links among themselves (Mehra *et al.*, 1998). One drawback of this homophilous social structure is that it serves to limit minority student access to resources and critical information in their MBA program. The stronger the MBA student's racial identity salience, the stronger this pattern is among racial homophilous relationships. When this pattern is developed early on it persists, despite attempts to promote diversity within that MBA program (Mollica *et al.*, 2003).

Social cognition theory influences two cultural factors that may impact the first GMAC-identified cognition for Native Americans. Social cognition theory is a broad

social psychological approach to understanding the self, behavior, motivation, attribution, among other things (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Self-schemas organize memories of past social experiences and facilitate processing new information affecting the self in a particular domain (Markus *et al.*, 1985). We propose that individuals develop a career self-schema that includes career salience, how individuals define career including what it means to them, the place that work holds in their life, who they are at work, their self-expectations in the career domain, and ultimately whether or not they choose to enter a particular career.

Specifically, we consider how two dimensions of a career self-schema may influence MBA fit. As shown in Figure 1, we consider the cultural appropriateness of an MBA and how Native American career locus may differ from the dominant culture. Overall, these career self-schemas clash with the values that underpin an MBA and, therefore, may reduce MBA fit.

MBA and cultural appropriateness
There are deep cultural values and experience-based wounds that predispose Native Americans to view education cautiously. Past government policies were based on a goal of assimilation, forcing Native Americans to disappear into white society (Ward, 2007). BIA forced American-Indian children into boarding schools that forbade Native languages, tribal rituals, and other cultural practices (Grover and Keenan, 2006; Ward, 2007). As a result, the dominant culture's educational system carries implications of breaking apart families and communities, weakening Native American culture, and removing future generations from the tribe.

Native Americans generally value humility and modesty which can weigh against education. Status and material gain are not as important in traditional Native American culture (Garrett and Garrett, 1994), instead many Native American students value getting a business degree so that they can give back to their community (cf. Thompson *et al.*, 2013). Thus, business schools will be largely unsuccessful when attempting to promote an MBA as a path to financial measures of success.

Many western cultural assumptions and practices are anathema to Native American values and culture. Self-interested and rational behavior, individualism, competitive interdependence, and bottom line thinking, all represent economic assumptions and practices have been woven into the fabric of business culture and the practices that are taken for granted in business schools (Ferraro *et al.*, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004). Instead, traditional Native Americans value the well-being of families, tribe, and community, participative decision making, cooperative behavior, deep respect for elders, and greater gender equity (Garrett and Garrett, 1994; Ward, 2007). In a multitude of ways, management education is inconsistent with traditional Native American values (Verbos *et al.*, 2011).

Native American business people are less concerned about the bottom line than providing jobs and contributing to the community (Garsombke and Garsombke, 2000).

Figure 1.
Conceptual model of expected Native American's career self-schemas affect on fit
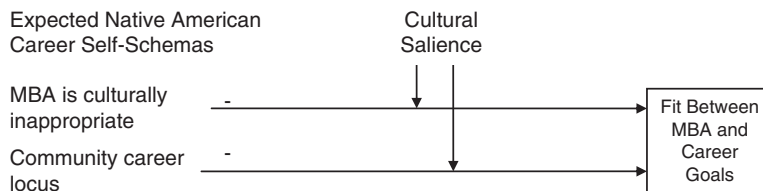
The idea of material success in career or attaining a higher status than others is not consistent with traditional Native America values (Garrett and Garrett, 1994), and are incongruent with the typical profit-driven approach of management education. As a result getting an MBA may not be viewed as being culturally appropriate. Thus, we propose:

P1. Native Americans' perceptions of an MBA as culturally inappropriate will be negatively related to MBA fit.

Career locus

We propose that a career self-schema may have a particular career locus, or central perspective underlying one's expectations about how their career will unfold. Extant career theory implies that career loci include an organization or employer, a career field, and the individual (see, e.g. Clarke, 2013; Inkson *et al.*, 2012; Rousseau, 1995; Vidyarthi *et al.*, 2014). Traditional notions of careers were organization centered; i.e., a career unfolds in one organization (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002). Thus one career locus may be the individual's employer. This traditional career pattern was disrupted in the 1980s and 1990s by social and economic changes, changing the nature of the psychological contract (the exchange agreement between employees and employers), and careers became more self-directed (Rousseau, 1995). Yet organizational careers still exist (Clarke, 2013).

Under boundaryless career theory, an individual expects to remain in the same field but work in multiple organizations (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Here, the career locus is the individual's particular career field. Under protean career theory, an individual expects that his or her career will evolve across different fields and organizations (Briscoe and Hall, 2006). Moreover, there may be a hybrid career loci, focused on the internally contradictory notion of self-directed careers in organizations (cf. Craig and Hall, 2006). However, these theories implicitly assume that an individual defines career from a western, individualistic perspective.

An individual career locus is consistent with the norm of self-interest which is prevalent in individualistic, western cultures, including the USA (Miller, 1999; Ratner and Miller, 2001). It is inconsistent with Native American values, identity, and definitions of career and career success. A Native American focus on the extended family and tribe (Juntunen and Cline, 2010) contradicts the norm of self-interest institutionalized into business culture (Ferraro *et al.*, 2005). Native American students who have clear post-college plans are more likely to be committed to making a difference by returning to their communities than pursuing individual success (Lopez, 2010). Researchers suggest that education may better meet the needs of Native students by incorporating "knowledge and use of the social and political mores of the community" (Demmert *et al.*, 2006, p. 10). Taken together, we believe that Native Americans are likely to view careers as having a community career locus.

We define a community career locus as a belief that a career is embedded in, and responds to the needs of, a community. Native Americans more typically define career success as a collective experience that contributes to the well-being of others such as one's tribe, community, family, and/or future generations (Juntunen *et al.*, 2001). In Native American cultures, an individual is not separate from the community and community needs take precedence over individual wants in identifying and enacting a career. Extended family and tribe are stronger sources of identity and worth, and are more salient than career status, thus may take precedence over career preferences (Miller and Brown, 2005) despite the salience of work as a valued life role

(Juntunen *et al.*, 2001; Thompson *et al.*, 2013). Many Native Americans consider the most pressing needs in their tribe when choosing a career (Juntunen *et al.*, 2001). This is consistent with research about indigenous Māori (New Zealand) where Māori who identified with their traditional culture aspired to "work specifically with, and for the benefit, of Māori" (Reid, 2011, p. 192). Individuals with a community career locus are expected to have lower MBA fit because the typical MBA career path focuses on individual career achievement based on economic metrics over community needs. In addition, when Native Americans living on or near reservations pursue MBAs, it is more likely that they will use their degree for the benefit of the community (Lopez, 2010) in health care administration, government administration, or higher education (particularly at tribal colleges):

   P2. Increased community career locus will be negatively related to MBA fit.

Cultural salience
When examining any minority group, it is important to consider within-group differences rather than presume cultural uniformity (Worthington *et al.*, 2005). Researchers of other indigenous groups show that cultural values, the extent to which one is embedded in one's culture and has a relationship with or is acculturated into the dominant culture, affects career processes and subsequent work life choices (Reid, 2011). The Native American population is diverse and geographically dispersed. Although a substantial number of Native Americans remain close to reservations, many do not. Native Americans living within the dominant culture, away from tribal connections, often adopt dominant cultural values. Vocational psychologists refer to these individuals as assimilated (Garrett and Garrett, 1994). Others have varying degrees of acceptance of traditional values. Indeed, researchers recognize that not all Native Americans are fully embedded in their tribal culture (Huffman, 2008; Reid, 2011). Moreover, Native American students have few role models who live away from the Native American community yet are still actively connected with the community (Schmidt and Akande, 2011). Native Americans living on or near reservations may embrace traditional Native American values to a greater degree than those who do not (Juntunen *et al.*, 2001). Thus, we expect that Native Americans living on or near reservations will experience higher cultural salience and thus will have lower MBA fit than Native Americans who do not live on or near reservations:

   P3. Native Americans' perceptions of cultural salience will moderate the relationships between career self-schemas and MBA fit such that higher cultural salience will result in lower MBA fit.

Bridging the divide
Since the 1970s, US policy toward tribes shifted toward greater tribal self-determination and self-governance, and tribal governments are promoting long-term economic growth and social development (Jorgenson, 2007). Self-determination and self-governance provide the basis for greater opportunities for Native Americans with business degrees, and, by extension, for business schools to increase Native American's enrollment. Tribal economic development would benefit from more Native Americans with management expertise (Duffy and Stubben, 1998). Currently tribes place tribal members without basic management education or training into management positions, which creates a need for significant training (Gladstone, 2012).

   One thread consistently runs through literature dealing with Native American careers, economic development, and education is that to meet the needs of this population, it is necessary to develop programs that are culturally appropriate and consistent with traditional values (Badwound and Tierney, 1988; Buckley, 2004; Duffy

and Stubben, 1998; Garrett and Garrett, 1994; Muller, 2000). Programs which respect
and appreciate traditional Native American values should enrich management
education (Verbos *et al.*, 2011; Verbos and Humphries, 2014) and respond to calls in the
Principles for Responsible Management Education to create managers who support a
more inclusive and sustainable global economy (Muff *et al.*, 2013).

Previous research stresses the importance of MBA programs recognizing workforce
diversity (Cooper *et al.*, 2006; Gatenby and Humphries, 1999). Although diversity
is an important contemporary issue, the experiences and needs of Native Americans are
not being researched or reported in management literature. Because most
Native American businesses do not operate exclusively within the border of a Native
American nation, there is a need for business executives who run these businesses to
have competencies in both dominant culture business operations and Native American
cultural expectations/needs. As a result, research needs to address how to integrate
these two, sometimes conflicting, sets of needs.

Encouraging trends point toward possible ways to bridge this divide. Gonzaga
University has developed a unique addition to their traditional MBA program (Stewart
and Pepper, 2011). Initially created as a way to strengthen the capacity of tribal college
business instructors, the program is now open to anyone who wants to study business
within a Native American context (D. Stewart, personal conversation, November 10,
2014). The Gonzaga program adopts teaching strategies appropriate for indigenous
management education. For example, recognizing that Native American cultures are
collectivist in nature, the program utilizes a close-knit cohort system along with
curriculum changes appropriate for Native American cultural values. It also recognizes
challenges that Native American students face in accessing classes, so the program
teaches both on-line and on-campus courses.

Designing courses specific for Native American MBA students is one way to bridge
the divide between Native American culture and management education. Because there
are many critics of the current state of management education and its impact on
business practices (Ferraro *et al.*, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2002; Pfeffer and
Fong, 2004), broadening management education's approach to include additional
perspectives, including the Native American perspective that has a greater emphasis
on community benefits, could address some of these concerns. Including Native
American values may expand our notions of why corporations exist and how they may
choose to operate – especially since Native American culture and traditions have not
been found to impede business growth and success (Stewart and Schwartz, 2007).

Implications for future research
Our conceptual model has two major research implications. One is to increase
awareness of the incongruity between Native American culture and the dominant
culture that has been overlooked in management research. Research is needed that
extends theory to better conceptualize Native American culture, its influence on
career self-schemas, and the repercussions for business. Moreover, businesses are
challenged to increase cultural diversity in their workforce (Fine, 1996), but often
fail to do so (Robinson and Dechant, 1997). Cultural diversity in the workforce is
often undertaken in ways that produce organizational dysfunctions (Ely and
Thomas, 2001). It may be that the way opportunities are presented to Native American
students are discouraging MBA aspirations. To increase their representation in
graduate management education, future researchers need to concentrate on the influence
of Native Americans cultural factors.

Second, research is required to test how Native American cultural factors influence MBA fit through career self-schemas. Qualitative data acquisition is needed to develop measures to evaluate career loci. Quantitative data is also needed to test relationships, assess trends, and model fit. Taken together, this research will bring to light nuances and advance the understanding of Native American culture and career self-schemas.

Implications for graduate management education

Management education is dominated by western thought and reason (Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003). Management education for Native students and tribal communities must blend current Native American worldviews with western-based business science, in part because Native American businesses do not operate in a vacuum and most need to balance tribal/cultural values with dominant culture ways of doing things. Integrating Native American philosophies with western business education benefits more than Native people; indigenous perspectives also provide insight useful for western management education in general (Gladstone, 2012; Verbos *et al.*, 2011; Verbos and Humphries, 2014). For example, Whiteman and Cooper (2000) discuss ecological embeddedness, as a construct describing Cree hunters who are embedded in the land, are able to personally identify with a deep belief that it is necessary to show the land respect, reciprocity, and care. Such a reflexive grounding with a physical space such as land is a unique way to approach business ethics as opposed to classical philosophies advocating interpersonal relationships. In order to bring these concepts into management education, business schools could consult with local tribal elders who are the keepers of Native American wisdom and traditions. Bringing elders, tribal education departments, and American-Indian education associations into stakeholder dialogues could help generate greater interest in graduate management education.

Native American economic development creates a demand for Native Americans with graduate management education. Native Americans often turn to tribal members that lack an MBA to fill corporate needs. In addition to the Gonzaga program discussed above, the University of New Mexico designed one class that course examines Native American business and how it differs from the business models taught in mainstream courses (Muller, 2000). Spreading such programs to other business schools is likely to draw Native American students as well as others who wish to expand their horizons.

Conclusion

In summary, there is an underrepresentation of Native Americans in higher education and there is scant research that explains Native Americans' lack of MBA fit. The small sample size of Native Americans relative to other minority groups marginalizes their impact on analysis. As a result, educator pro-diversity policies may not provide the appropriate avenues to attract the interest of all minority groups. We use a cognitive lens to understand the link between Native American culture and MBA fit. We contend that lagging Native American MBA fit is a result of Native American perspectives of MBAs as culturally inappropriate and due to a community career locus. This is important because employers, graduate education testing agencies, and universities, among others, need to understand Native American perspectives to promote and frame graduate management opportunities accordingly. Therefore, Native American culture and career self-schemas are essential to understanding how diversity outreach in graduate management education could become more effective and increase the number of Native American MBAs.

Notes

1. We use the terms Native American and American Indian interchangeably, using them to refer to the descendants of indigenous peoples of the 48 contiguous states in the USA. Where data has been aggregated with Alaska Natives, it is noted.

2. Indian Country is a general reference to all the self-governing Native American communities and their tribally held land.

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