Playing Indian: Dehumanization or Development? 
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LITERATURE REVIEW

Primary Source Data

To better understand how Indigenous people and cultures were represented in narrative and activities, this study examined a primary source document produced by the YMCA in 1936 called the Friendly Indians boys manual. The Friendly Indians was the first of three age-graded youth development groups that together comprised the YMCA’s Christian Citizenship program (each running in parallel to a corresponding racial stage). The manual describes the program, its aims, activities, expectations and rewards, as well as details the process necessary to complete the program and graduate into the next stage of development.

Data Analysis

The manual was read and coded by two independent researchers (the McNair student the professor/advisor). Coders utilized a method called theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which includes a search “across a data set to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p. 86). The first round of qualitative analysis followed a whole, part, whole process with each coder reading the manual in its entirety (van Manen, 1990). In the 2nd round of coding, data was noted by the individual research team members and “data or evidence” was categorized into potential codes. This data was then compared with other team members and themes and codes were identified. In the 3rd round of readings, theme and code definitions were generated and refined. Verbatim or visual evidence from the manual was gathered as assigned under each code.

METHODS

How were Indigenous people and cultures represented in the YMCA’s Friendly Indians Manual and activities (1936)?

THEME 1: WHITENESS AS PROGRESSIVE CIVILIZATION

A boy’s “age” was used to signify his universal, developmental trajectory toward Whiteness or the progressive assimilation to Western culture, values & norms. Advancing from Buck, to Warrior, to Brave, and eventually Sachem in the Friendly Indians’ program, advancement to subsequent programs was evidenced by the accumulation of points & buttons awarded through “playing Indian.” This program promoted Whiteness in 4 primary ways: normalizing settler colonization, assimilation to Christianity, allegiance to nationalism & promoting Western values.

CODE 1A: Normalizing settler colonization: The Friendly Indians manuals accepted settler colonization as a natural or inevitable process. It presented a romantic narrative of colonization. Evidence of resistance, violent conflict, native treaties or federal assimilation was absent.
- The manual described settled settler colonization in romantic terms such as “the Indians once held sway in this great land of ours...as civilization advanced the Pioneer and Indian settled down together in their own worlds of hunting, stock raising and trading” (FIM, 1936: 20).
- It represented early pioneers such as Captain Jedidiah Smith as ideal men whom Native peoples sought to emulate. Captain Smith was said to be the “Savages’ first kind Christian” and the Indians learned how to prepare their clothes and trade. Smith believed Native people to be “children of nature,” “unintelligent type beings,” and the “intermediate link between man and brute creation.”
- Participants could earn badges by studying “Local History” and telling of “the Indians who used to live where you now live” (24).

CODE 1B: Assimilation to Christianity: The Friendly Indians was designed to produce developed, civilized young men. Native American spiritual practices were romanticized and presented as almost Christian but acceptance of Jesus Christ as God and Savior was required for promotion to higher levels in the program.
- Participants were allowed to pray to the “Great Spirit” or mimic Native spiritual practices such as the Snake Dance (FIM, 1936: 30).
- The Friendly Indians represents Jesus as the ideal man. To be “Indian” is not enough. You must be “friendly” through his worship of goodness, [the boy finds] those finer qualities which show him the way to be friendly. If you would like to be a good friend you should learn more about the FRIENDS’ WAY of the Boy of Galilee. Jesus.”
- Badges could be earned by: “attending church and Sunday school” (15), “repeat Lord’s prayer” (13), “pray to God daily” (22) and pledging “allegiance to the Savior” (20) and performing activities like: “Bible Treasure Hunt” (19), “Indian Missionary: Name and tell about one man who helped the Indians to become Christians” (25).

CODE 1C: Allegiance to nationalism: The United States as a nation was represented as the primary force of modernity and progress, as encouraged in activity and artifact but Indigenous sovereignty, structures of government or self-determined politics were ignored in favor of the colonial government.
- “Knowing the aim of the Friendly Indians and the pledging allegiance to the United States flag” earned a button for the participant (FIM, 1936: 14).
- The manual described “Friendly Indians” as those who “respect their nation’s flag” (21) and “honorlander and flag” (21).

CODE 1D: Promoting Western values: Being a Friendly Indian was a character development process informed by western values and norms. Individually charitable behaviors were valued. Acquiescence to Western values was encouraged. A boy challenging social inequalities or harm was not considered “helpful” or “friendly”.
- The manual describes the behaviors or values of a good boy as: one who “wears good marks in school, observes a careful health habit, does faithfully and cheerfully all homework, helps others” (FIM, 1936: 22).
- Physical activity helped the boy develop himself into a “well-balaned Christian person” through the agencies of the home, church, school and club (14). This balance called “Muscular Christianity” by proponents of the Theory of Recapitulation, imagined a trifecta of mind, body and spirit, all normed to Western desires.

THEME 2: NATIVE AS PREMEDITATIVE: Native American culture was co-opted (and invented) by the Friendly Indian program. It was believed that white boys would progress into a more civilized character through “playing Indian.” This curriculum infantilized and stereotyped Native culture, cementing it as inferior to Western culture in 3 primary ways: nativization/mystification, Indian as simple and Indian as violent.

CODE 2A: Indian as mystic and natural: As presented in theory of Social Development, Native and other primitive peoples were seen as close to “nature and animals.” The Friendly Indians documents promotes civilization as domiciliation of and domination over land and animals. In contrast, it presents Native cultures as still and living in wilderness.
- The Friendly Indians and other programs such as summer camps imagined childhood as a time to learn “the wonders of nature” (30) through activities like “learning forestry rules” (12) “discovering nature and telling about something which you have seen,” “make a ‘point of leaves or plants” (25) or “making a model tepeo or other things in Indian life” (25).

CODE 2B: Indian as simple: Native Americans, despite being distinct ethnic groups, each with their own histories, languages, philosophies and knowledge paradigms are generically referred to as one, monolithic culture as if no distinction or unique qualities exist.
- Native people are referred to in intertribal terms such as “Indian” or “Red Man” (FIM, 1936: 4).
- The cultural practices are referred to as “Indian exalt” and “Indian Dance.”
- The manual draws upon at least 3 distinct, tribal languages but implicitly suggests English and other Western languages as more advanced. Indian “sign language,” “picture writing” and the learning of “Indian symbols” are encouraged as activities (24). The use of “double language” words (tong-tom) associated with lower-order languages are used to describe artifacts in the program (Heller & Millini, 2017: 68-69).
- Immolation was common and necessary, tribal culture was simply invented. These actions imply violence and negativity against Native people and contribute to experiences of everyday racism that increase psychological and physical health risks (Paradies, 2016).

CODE 2C: Indian as violent and archaic: Production of Indian crafts and activities developed the “Indian of the past” and the next stage. However, the program maintained harmful stereotypes of violence and simplicity including: “puffy races, lances, coup sticks and shields” which were “used by the Indians in their dances, and to show their bravery” (15-16).
- The manual included an activity to make an “Indian implement” such as a stone ax, bow and arrows or article of pottery (24).
- FIM promoted team sports as collective activities. Football, basketball and track, and field were encouraged as “things Friendly Indians do” outside of the club (30). This promotion of team sports is in alignment with the Theory of Recapitulation and the notion that late childhood and early adolescence were the appropriate “age” to engage young boys in facilitated tribal violence.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How were Indigenous people and cultures represented in the YMCA’s Friendly Indians Manual and activities (1936)?

IMPLICATIONS

Although outright “appropriation” is less common today, youth development programs continue to reinforce Western culture, values & norms through program design, curriculum & assumptions of youth. This study complicates widely held activities and values of youth development programs like: “leadership development”, “teaching to close the academic achievement gap” and “epistemological/ideological learning’ and ‘persecution and intervention efforts’. It suggests instead that Indigenous cultures and knowledge must be revitalized and revalued, efforts like language revitalization, and reclamation and Indigenous knowledge acquisition are relevant youth work practices with Native youth. It also suggests that stereotypes of the good Indian and bad Indian, Native as primitive and romantic narratives of colonization, must be dispelled, as they promote violence and negativity against Native people and contribute to experiences of everyday racism that increase psychological and physical health risks (Paradies, 2016).