



Department of Sociology  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

## DISSERTATION DEFENSE

### Examining the Politics of Recognition in Native American Identity and Mental Health in Parts of the Great Lakes Region: A Semi-Decolonized, Mixed Methods Approach



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**ABSTRACT:** While a growing literature addresses mental health in Indigenous nations/tribes, it rarely examines those who identify as Native American but do not have tribal membership. This dissertation examines the relationships between mental health, Native American/Indigenous identity, and the politics of recognition (tribal membership) in parts of the Great Lakes region, using a semi-decolonized, mixed methods approach. Building on descriptive statistics from the American Community Survey (ACS), US Census, and Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) to shed light on Indigenous identity and mental health outcomes of the American Indian/Alaskan Native (AIAN) population in the region, this dissertation analyzes 42 interviews conducted with self-identified Indigenous/AIAN people living in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin on how tribal enrollment status (or lack there-of) affects identity and mental health.

Using a framework that recognizes minority stress in relation to settler colonial structures, results show that Indigenous identity is dynamic and complicated and affects mental health outcomes, but not necessarily through enrollment. Analysis of interviews shows that those who were enrolled suffered from many of the same disorders/substance use issues as those who were not enrolled. However, a few participants who could be characterized as “Tribal Elite” stood out for their good mental health outcomes and no evidence of substance use disorders. Additionally, the politics of recognition does affect identity and access to social support and coping resources. Findings have implications for future research on Indigenous identity and mental health and improving mental health outcomes.

**Committee: Stephen Gasteyer (chair), Ning Hsieh, Zhenmei Zhang and Heather Howard (Anthropology)**

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457 Berkey Hall

Zoom option: <https://msu.zoom.us/j/99467119976>

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