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Implicit Bias and Native Americans: Philanthropy's Hidden Minority

By Crystal Echo Hawk

As a dual citizen of the U.S. and the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, and a nonprofit professional for more than 18 years, my work is to challenge my colleagues in philanthropy to examine implicit racial bias within our sector. In recent months, there have been encouraging developments on this front, such as the National League of Cities' recent launch of its "Race, Equity and Leadership" initiative "to facilitate an honest discussion around race and equity ... to examine critical issues of implicit and explicit bias and how it shows up in our individual lives, communities, policies, systems and structures."

However, too many times in recent years, I have spoken with colleagues in philanthropy for whom I have great respect who, despite their work to address disparities and create strategies to achieve equity, are only inclusive of data and realities pertaining to Blacks, whites and Latinos. I am by no means advocating an "Oppression Olympics." Rather, if we are truly to confront, address and begin to overcome all implicit and explicit racial bias, it must be a fully inclusive conversation had by all – including Native Americans.

In the course of writing this essay, I reached out to both Native and non-Native colleagues for their thoughts. As you'll see, I'm not alone in believing that implicit bias against Native Americans exists in philanthropy. And, however well intentioned, it begins with ignorance and the ease of believing in stereotypes.

According to Michael Roberts, a member of the Tlingit tribe and president of First Nations Development Institute, a nonprofit institution and grantmaker that has been a fixture in philanthropy for almost 35 years:

"I would say that American Indians are mostly invisible to philanthropy, and where there is some semblance of awareness, that there is definitely implicit bias. [For] most foundation program officers, most of what they know is what they were taught in school. Generally, Indians are examined in one of two ways, that they are either relics of the past (lived in tipis, hunted buffalo and were either savages or at one with nature; the mythical Indian), or that the study of them is like a tourist visiting a culture."

Rick Williams, a member of the Oglala Lakota tribe and former president of the American Indian College Fund, the largest and arguably one of the most successful Native nonprofits, noted:

"The current myth of wealthy Indians not needing help relates directly to misguided media presenting only information about [Native] nations that have done well financially and have casinos. The other myth is that we no longer exist. And if we do exist, it is easy to ignore our plight. Im-

PLICIT bias carries all the stereotypes and subconsciously influences one's actions. I often see/feel that bias even when it is unintended or sublimely disguised."

Jasmine Hall Ratliff, program officer at The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, stated:

"In many areas of this country, Native Americans are quite literally an invisible community. When a foundation wants to address disparities in communities of color, when you look at data, Native Americans are completely left out. Data is so often displayed for Black, white, Latino and sometimes (though not always) Asian populations; it is incredibly rare to see Native Americans included. So unless you pause to ask, 'Who's missing?' and make the concerted effort to ensure that all people of color are included, it can be easy to have an implicit bias against Native Americans."

That bias is documented by a 2011 study published by Native Americans in Philanthropy and the Foundation Center that found that giving to Native Americans accounts for only 0.03 percent of all foundation giving. This is despite the fact that Native Americans consistently score the lowest on almost every social indicator in the country.

In my former but recent life as an executive director of the Notah Begay III Foundation (NB3F), a national Native nonprofit, I heard justifications like "The Native American population is too small" and "We've made grants to Native communities before and they haven't gone well" to explain the dismal rates of giving. These program officers worried that the return on their investments was too small to warrant sizable grantmaking

to Native communities. They gave examples of Native grantees lacking the capacity for financial management and having difficulty achieving stated deliverables.

When I shared these explanations with Williams and Roberts, they acknowledged the difficulties, but challenged the underlying logic. Williams explained,

"These reasons for not giving are real. However, the question that is not asked is, 'How do you deal with these issues to consistently create successful projects?' The underlying premise is of course that the 'Indians failed' when in reality it is the foundations that

failed to understand and learn different ways to create success."

Roberts shared:

"All I ask is that funders hold all nonprofits to the same standard, and paint grantees of every race or sovereign nation equally. I can say that I have never heard a funder say something to the effect of 'Yeah, we funded a white nonprofit once that failed to deliver, so we are not going to fund white folks again.' I say this completely tongue-in-cheek, because, in most peoples' mind that sounds so absurd. Well if it sounds so absurd when we say this about white nonprofits, why does it not sound so absurd when Indian nonprofits are painted with the broad brush?"

At NB3F, my staff and I felt constant pressure to not make any missteps because that could mean potentially ruining it for other Native nonprofits seeking investments from grantmakers. This very real pressure was often crushing as we sought to pioneer high-risk, high-reward approaches and build programs to address the epidemic of childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes facing Native children.

It is evident that foundations often feel a great deal of uncertainty is involved when making grants in Indian Country, but this is often a direct result of the lack of grant diversification in this area. According to Roberts, the way to counter this is to "practice the same sort of diversification strategy that foundations use with their investments in universities, community foundations and organizations led by white folks: make sure that there are many of these investments so that a singular investment in this sector does not sink the entire portfolio."

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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has incorporated support of Native nonprofit intermediaries (such as NB3F), including technical assistance, to make its work in Indian Country successful. Ratliff explained, “When working with Native American grantees, we practice the essential philosophy from Steven Covey to ‘seek first to understand then to be understood.’ We learn from our grantees how to best succeed in Indian Country in a way that is culturally appropriate.”

However, increasing philanthropic investment in Indian Country is not the only means to overcome the impact of implicit bias. Change must happen at the board level. Williams explained:

“Only a handful of American Indians are serving on the boards of foundations. And currently there are none at the top 20 foundations. I have never heard of a single foundation board getting training to help members understand funding in Indian Country. Very few seek out knowledgeable consultants to help construct good funding programs. Most hire unqualified non-Indians who only have a perfunctory understanding with no real significant in-depth experience in complex funding of programs in Indian communities.”

Many Native colleagues polled noted that change also will come from hiring more Native Americans as program officers and foundation executives. In a recent conversation with a Native colleague, we could not name more than 15 Natives serving as program officers or in leadership positions at foundations.

Change will only come when we first acknowledge the dearth of data about Native Americans, which makes this population nearly invisible in an



Photo by Ryan Red Corn.

increasingly data-driven philanthropic sector. We must then work to invest in data collection efforts led by and for Native peoples. This means acknowledging that Natives are unrepresented in philanthropy and foundation giving, and also inviting Native nonprofit, community and tribal leaders to the table as active participants in confronting the very real challenges that do at times exist in funding in Indian Country, as well as other communities of color and/or low-income communities.

While calling out the existence of implicit bias within philanthropy with regard to Native Americans, we also must cite examples of foundations “doing it right” and taking steps to build positive relationships and increase investment in Indian Country. These include the Northwest Area Foundation (which has pledged 40 percent of its grant dollars to Indian Country projects), the Ford Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Walmart Foundation, American Express Foundation, Margaret A. Cargill Foundation, Marguerite Casey Foundation, Kalliopeia Founda-

tion, Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, CHS Foundation, Otto Bremer Foundation and many others.

Being inclusive of Native Americans in philanthropy does more than address injustice; it also recognizes that Native Americans and tribes are an equally important part of American society as other groups and can be partners to achieve social change across a range of communities and sectors. In the words of the late Cherokee Principal Chief Wilma Mankiller:

“The history, contemporary lives and future of Native America are intertwined with that of surrounding communities. Tribal governments and organizations do not conduct their lives and work in a vacuum. Tribal governments collectively contribute billions to the economy and employ thousands of people. When tribal governments build roads and water systems, develop business enterprises or provide family services, it benefits everyone in the community, not just tribal members.”¹

Mankiller’s words are easily applied to grantmakers invested in overcoming implicit bias against Native Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities – the interconnectedness of our communities mean that all must be welcomed in the process of devising solutions to the very real problems we face. ■

Crystal Echo Hawk is president & CEO of Echo Hawk Consulting.

Notes

1. Patricia Powers, *Native Americans and the Public: A Human Values Perspective*, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Winter 2006-2007, http://fcnl.org/assets/na_mediasymp_report.pdf.