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NATIVE AMERICAN RETURN MIGRATION TO RESERVATION AREAS

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Abstract

This research investigates the question, using qualitative methodology, why Native Americans return to reservation areas in South Dakota after living elsewhere. Rational choice theory helps explain this return migration more successfully than other orientations. Interviews were conducted with 36 return migrants using a key informant and snowball sampling techniques.

Native Americans¹ maintain a history of migration in the United States (Snipp, 1989). More than 22 percent of the total Native American population and over 13 percent of the Native American population on reservation areas in South Dakota changed their county of residence between 1985 and 1990 (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1993a; U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1993b). Some of the movement included return migration. Why did Native Americans return to reservation areas in South Dakota? Why did they initially leave? These questions were answered using qualitative methodology and implementing rational choice theory as a perspective for helping to explain Native American return migration.

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The term Native American will be used throughout this paper to denote persons who self-identify as American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut.

Migration is broadly defined as a permanent or semipermanent change of residence, which involves the movement of population from one clearly defined geographical location to another (Lee, 1966; Mangalam and Schwarzweller, 1975; Shryock and Siegel, 1973). Migration explanations vary in that structural variables, in particular economic factors, are presumed to operate as push-pull mechanisms (Beshers and Nishiura, 1960; Cadwallader, 1992; Lee, 1967; Massey, 1988; Ravenstein, 1885). Noneconomic variables such as duration of residence (Morrison, 1967), family ties (Uhlenberg, 1973), educational attainment (DaVanzo and Morrison, 1982), community or residential satisfaction (Heaton, Fredrickson, Fuguitt and Zuiches, 1979) and perceived physical or psychological deprivations (Mangalam, et al., 1975) are also associated with migration.

Population movement from one specific location to another also has been studied. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, much attention focused on turnaround migration, the movement of people from urban, metropolitan or nonmetropolitan areas to rural or nonmetropolitan areas (Adamchak, 1987; Schwarzweller, 1979). In addition, there has been some study of migration streams involving people returning home (Campbell and Johnson, 1976; DaVanzo, et al., 1982; White, 1983).

A number of factors are associated with return migration. Economic considerations often are cited; however, DaVanzo, et al. (1982) introduced the concept of location-specific capital (the presence of family, property, and experiences) to explain return migration. DaVanzo, et al., hypothesized that when people move, they will tend to favor a place where they lived before because the migrant has location-specific capital there. Pertaining specifically to Native American return migration, Brinker and Taylor (1974) found that economic reasons for returning were the number one reason given for returning, while personal reasons were second.

Graves (1966), seeking to explain why Native Americans initially left reservations, suggested that the decision to leave the

reservation reflected economic limitations which existed on Joffer and Wagner, Native American Return Migration to Reservation Areas
reservations. Snipp (1989) identified the lack of higher educational institutions or economic advancement as compelling people to leave. He also found that entry into the labor force was the most common reason for leaving.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Endemic to the migration and return migration explanations are push-pull factors, which denote that people move because factors push them from an area or factors attract them to an area (Lee, 1996; Weeks, 1992). There are problems, however, associated with this perspective. Weeks (1992) suggests that the concept of push-pull is simplistic in that the reasoning is analogous to a cost-benefit approach where the individual weighs the cost of relocating against the benefits to be gained at the destination area. He contends that the decision to move is dependent on a more complicated set of circumstances.

This paper suggests that through analysis of an individual's hierarchy of preferences, information, opportunity costs and institutional constraints, and an aggregation mechanism, Native American return migration can be understood. These factors may help explain why earlier circumstances which either pushed migrants from reservation areas, or pulled them to nonreservation areas, now prompt their return to those reservation areas. A family of theories taking a micro-macro approach includes such factors. These theories can be subsumed under the category of rational choice (Coleman, 1990; Friedman and Hechter, 1988; Hechter, 1989).

Friedman and Hechter (1988:201-204) offer an overview of rational choice theory assumptions:

1. The behavior of actors is deliberate and rational. Actors act in accordance with an individualistic set of hierarchically arranged preferences to attain a prespecified end or goal.
2. Actors have sufficient information to make choices among alternative courses of action.
3. There are two types of constraints which limit action. One constraint originates from a lack of or scarcity of resources and is referred to as opportunity costs, in that actors have differential access

to and possession of resources. The second type of constraint originates from social institutions and takes the form of laws, rules and policies which restrict feasible courses of action and affect social outcomes.

4. There exists an aggregation mechanism through which separate individual actions are combined to produce the social outcome. In a market economy, the aggregation mechanism is assumed to be the economy. It is assumed that actors have similar preference orderings over choices.

This study can be seen as an exploratory study, applying the assumptions of rational choice theory and the push-pull perspective to Native American return migration.

METHODOLOGY

Interviews were conducted with 36 return migrants over a four-month period. A sample of participants was selected using a combination of key informant (Cerase, 1974; Taietz, 1987) and snowball sampling techniques. Because these techniques were used, the resulting sample can be considered a convenience sample (Fraenkal and Wallen, 1990).

To be a participant in this study, the individual had to be a return migrant, self-identify as a Native American and presently reside on or near a BIA designated reservation area or trust lands. The individual also must have been born or raised on or in close proximity to the BIA designated reservation area or trust land where he/she currently resides.

Return migration was conceived of in this study as the voluntary movement of an adult individual who self-identified as Native American, to his/her place of birth or where the individual was raised, with the intention of residing either permanently or semipermanently.

Three sets of factors were suggested to precede or relate to Native American return migration. These factors were identified in the migration and return literature and were economic, environmental and social considerations. Economic factors included employment opportunities and financial considerations. Environmental factors

included adverse housing conditions and residential overcrowding. Social factors were community integration, family ties and retirement.

Interviews utilizing a guide were conducted on or near six BIA designated reservations in South Dakota. The guide took a semi-standardized (Berg, 1989) format in that predetermined questions were used and asked of all participants where suitable, but additional questions and probes, appropriate to the situation were added when pertinent. The guide contained 31 open-ended questions and was divided into four parts: demographic characteristics; reasons why Native Americans left the reservation; satisfaction with initial migration and integration in the destination area; and why the individual returned to the reservation. Data from 36 interviews were used in the final analysis.

FINDINGS

The majority of participants in this study were born or spent most of their formative years on a reservation in South Dakota. More than half of the respondents were female; this corresponds to the sex composition of reservation residents. The median age of participants at the time of the interview was 56.5 years. The majority of participants at the time of the interview were married and almost all of the respondents had a high school education or more. All of the participants who were in the labor force were employed at the time of the interview, and the majority of those were employed in white collar occupations. The participants in this study generally surpassed other reservation residents in educational and occupational attainment. This, however, is not surprising in that migration is selective rather than random in a population. Additionally, many participants indicated that they had initially left the reservations to gain such human capital.

Most of the participants returned to the reservation between 1975 and 1979 after having lived off the reservation an average of 21.8 years. The majority of participants left the reservation when they were between the ages of 15 and 19. The average age a return was 45.6 years.

Earlier literature pertaining to return migration indicates that there is a strong attachment to or identification with the place the

return migrant refers to as home (Cuba and Hummon, 1993). This is true for this sample of return migrants. Thirty-three (91.7%) individuals indicated that home was on a reservation or trust land in South Dakota. When asked what made the reservation home, 58 responses were given by the 36 participants. The responses are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: **Concept of Home. n=58**

	1ST	2ND	3RD	TOTAL	PERCENT
INDICATOR					
Family/Friends	13	7	3	23	39.7%
Born Raised	11	3	0	14	24.1%
Own Land/Home	4	3	1	8	13.8%
Where I Live	4	1	0	5	8.6%
Native Ams	1	3	0	4	6.9%
Lifestyle	2	1	0	3	5.2%
Same Situation	1	0	0	1	1.7%
Total	36	18	4	58	100%

Twenty-three (39.7%) respondents indicated that the presence of family and/or friends is what constituted home. To describe home, an elderly woman state:

"You know...home is where your heart is. And especially to the Indian people, when your family connections are so strong and so far fetched, the extended family, your aunts, uncles and cousins and even when your aunts and uncles are your other parents in our way of thinking."

Fourteen (24.1%)f persons said that home was where they were born or raised. An elderly man remarked:

"Well, I would say I think your experience makes it home. Learning to swim in the creek down the road, whatever kind of an

emotional attachment you have to the damn dirty creek. But I would say the experiences we had makes it a home... where we used to fight and fish. We sued to be able to hunt and fish wherever we wanted without a license. If the game warden got too close, we hid from him. We had that."

Given the identification with the reservation as home, participants were then asked why they left the reservation. A total of 48 responses were given by the 36 interviewees and are listed here.

Table 2: Reasons for Leaving the Reservation. n=48

	1ST	2ND	TOTAL	PERCENT*
REASON				
Economic				
Employment	15	5	20	41.7%
Drafted Military	1	0	1	2.1%
Environmental				
Better conditions	0	2	2	4.2%
Social				
Schooling	10	2	12	25.0%
Prejudice/ Discrimination	1	0	1	2.1%
Join family	0	1	1	2.1%
Forced off	1	0	1	2.1%
Emergent Theme	7	2	9	18.8%
Religious Calling	1	0	1	2.1%
Total	36	12	48	100%

*Does not equal 100 due to rounding

The number one reason given for leaving the reservation was economic, in particular, to seek employment. A man who left for economic reasons said, "Of course it was the wages...;" and a woman who left the area with her husband stated, "I got married...and there was no work for him here."

The second most often given reason for leaving the reservation was social. To receive an education, to escape prejudice/discrimination or join family or friends were reasons given for leaving. A man who left the reservation to attend school said:

"At that time there was nothing. The only thing that was on the reservation was to work for the BIA or go into the service. I couldn't go to college because I didn't have any money so I signed up for the Navy. And the principal at the time said to go to school. I used to play basketball, he said I'll get you a scholarship and you'll go to school. So he got me a scholarship...I think that we were almost just forced to get out of the reservation."

Nine persons (18.8%) indicated that curiosity about the world, wanderlust, the desire to learn new things, experience life and the idea that the city would be more exciting were reasons given for leaving. Because these factors were not identified in the migration and return migration literature, they were coded as an emergent theme. A skilled laborer said:

"I worked for the government on the reservation and I was doing heavy duty mechanical work, but I wasn't happy...I wanted to venture out, explore the working conditions. What I really wanted to do was to learn different things. Something that I wouldn't learn here on the reservation."

In the destination area, 29 of the participants were members of the labor force. All of these individuals were employed. The majority were employed in the managerial/professional (31%) or technical, sales and administrative support (37.9%) occupations. These were the positions they held prior to their return to the reservation. Pertaining to satisfaction with the destination area, one (2%) individual disliked everything, while the remaining participants said they liked the physical environment (38%), social environment (32%), economic climate (26%) and one individual liked everything (2%).

Since most of the participants apparently seemed satisfied

with their life in the destination area, they were asked, "why did you return to the reservation?" The 36 participants gave 81 answers. The results are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Reasons for Returning to Reservation Area. n=81

INDICATOR	1ST	2ND	3RD	TOTAL	PERCENT*
Economic					
Job	11	2	0	13	16.0%
Cost of Living	1	1	2	4	4.9%
Own Property	0	0	1	1	1.2%
Environment					
Social	3	3	3	9	11.1%
Social					
Family	6	12	5	23	28.5%
Cultural Practices	2	2	0	4	4.9%
Better Community	3	1	2	6	7.4%
Retirement	1	1	0	3	3.7%
Education	3	1	0	4	4.9%
Break-up	3	1	0	4	4.9%
Emergent Theme					
Native American Identity	2	5	3	10	12.3%
Total	36	29	16	81	100%

*Does not total 100 due to rounding

Over 54.3% of all responses were social reasons for returning. Some returnees indicated that the family required some form of help from the participant. For example, a woman and her family returned because her mother needed help raising the children of a relative. She

stated:

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"And so we thought we could help. So we gave notices at our jobs, two weeks notice, got ready and moved. We didn't think it through, we just, they need help so we came back."

Not all returnees came back to fulfill family obligations. Some returned to join family who lived on the reservation. For example, an elderly woman who returned said:

"Like I said, my roots are here. My children all moved back here. My sister lived here, I had two sisters living here at that time and some brothers. I had three brothers living here. And that's why I returned, this is home."

Economic considerations were the second most frequently given category of responses. One man returned because "I had a good job lined up and I'd come home." Another man stated: "I was always trying to come back this way and the job opened so I took it." A man who followed his wife back reported:

"We'd always come back for our annual pow wows here. Then she (spouse) found out about a job opening and she applied for it. I wasn't really too sure. I hated to leave a job and come back where there wasn't a job guaranteed for me to get a job."

The third most often given response had to do with the emergent theme. Finding or reestablishing their Native American identity for themselves or for their children was a reason for returning. A man who returned to the reservation wanted his children to learn their heritage. He stated:

"...Because growing up I never really had, I wasn't involved culturally, liked with Native American religion or cultural events or things like that. I don't speak my language and so I wanted my children, because I'm very proud of my heritage, where I grew up and the culture that is here that I wanted to give my children an opportunity to have what I didn't have. And so coming here would provide that for us."

Participants were asked if they experienced problems when they returned to the reservation. Prejudice/discrimination was not experienced by the majority of returnees. However, for those who did encounter discrimination and prejudicial feelings, they experienced it from other Native Americans.

The findings of this study are generally supportive of rational choice theory. First, participants indicated that they had made a deliberate and rational decision, both when they left the reservation for education and/or employment, and when they returned for social and especially family considerations. Second, participants gave evidence of possessing information which facilitated their relocation from the reservation, and their later return to the reservation. Third, participants demonstrated awareness of constraints in terms of limited opportunities which initially led them from the reservation, and family obligations which later led many of them back to the reservation. Fourth, and finally, the findings of this study suggest that the aggregation mechanism which contributes to the social outcome of return migration from Native Americans is cultural in nature, including a Native American sense of and commitment to family and Native American identity.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this research suggest that the factors that lead migrants away from the area of origin are not the same as what leads them back. The reasons why Native American initially migrated centered around the achievement of extrinsic rewards such as gainful employment and educational attainment. The reasons for return concerned intrinsic rewards such as the desire to be near family. As a result, it is probably misleading to consider migration and return migration as the same phenomenon since migrants and return migrants apparently do not respond to the same pushes and pulls.

Rational choice theory, using the assumptions of preference hierarchy, information, opportunity and institutional costs, and an aggregation mechanism, prove useful in helping to explain these findings.

The first assumption is that the behavior of individuals is deliberate and rational, at least from the point of view of the actor (Cadwallader, 1992; Coleman, 1990; Friedman and Hechter, 1988). The findings of this research support this assumption in that the reasons most often given for leaving the reservation pertained to gaining an education and/or employment considerations. The employment and educational opportunities on the reservations at the

time participants in this research left were limited.

In contrast, the reasons stated most often for returning pertained to social considerations. In particular, the participants wanted to return because of the presence of family on the reservation. The family is a pre-eminent institution in Native American culture and is the foundation of social organization (Yellowbird and Snipp, 1994). The family is also the primary source of support, identity and respect (Maynard and Twiss, 1970). This assumption takes into consideration hierarchical preferences from which the actor chooses what course of action will be taken. Concerning leaving the reservation, the participants apparently chose extrinsic rewards over intrinsic, while in returning, the actors chose intrinsic rewards.

The second assumption that rational choice theorists make is that actors have sufficient information to make choices among alternative courses of action (Friedman and Hechter, 1988). The findings of this research support this assumption in that the Native Americans in this study who left on relocation had some knowledge of the destination area. Some participants joined family or had friends in the destination area. And they were not isolated from the effects of radio, television, and gossip concerning what it would be like to live off the reservation. Therefore, the participants in this study had some knowledge about the destination area, even though the information might have been incomplete.

The third assumption that rational choice theorists make concerns two types of constraints which affect behavior (Freidman and Hechter, 1988). The first constraint concerns opportunity costs that limit the behavior of individual actors or groups of actors sharing similar characteristics. Since the participants in this study had limited access to employment and educational opportunities, they had to leave the reservation to search of these opportunities.

The second constraint is institutional, and takes the form of laws, rules, and policies that limit courses of action. The findings of this research support this assumption in that family obligations limited their behavior and had an influence on their return decision.

The final assumption of rational choice theory concerns the aggregation mechanism that combines individual actions into one social outcome (Friedman and Hechter, 1988). Concerning Native American return migration, the findings of this research indicate that

the economy is not the foremost reason for Native American return as Joffer and Wagner, Native American Return Migration to Reservation Areas, the aggregation mechanism assumption suggests, but rather it was possibly the sense of family obligations, a desire to be with family, and/or reestablishing their Native American identity -- important aspects of Native American culture -- that drew people back.

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