

Misconceptions of and Microaggressions Toward Native Americans

Below are just a few examples of misconceptions about Indigenous communities, as well as common microaggressions many Indigenous people face — and information to disprove and denounce them.

MISCONCEPTION: American Indians do not have to pay taxes.

FACT CHECK: American Indians pay income tax, the same as any other Americans. This misconception likely comes from the fact that tribes — which operate as their own autonomous governments — are not taxable by the state or federal governments. The U.S. also does not levy taxes on federal payments used to compensate individuals for taking private or treaty land. Those who work within reservations do not pay taxes on their income, but those who work outside of them do. Because tribes are their own governments, they can tax people living on their reservations.

MISCONCEPTION: Native Americans are predisposed to alcoholism.

FACT CHECK: This way of thinking is inherently problematic. Ethnicity cannot predict substance abuse patterns. Do we say white people are genetically predisposed to opioid abuse?

MISCONCEPTION: Casinos make all American Indians rich.

FACT CHECK: Some blame Native Americans for being on welfare, while others claim they are rich from casinos. Like most stereotypes, neither are true. There are 459 gaming establishments in America on Indian land. Of the \$28 billion generated in 2014, 96 brought in between \$10-\$25 million. Eighty-eight saw less than \$3 million. Twenty-six made over \$250 million that year. Poverty rates of Native American communities are still high, regardless of this income.

MISCONCEPTION: The story of Thanksgiving proves the settlers and Native Americans had an amicable relationship.

FACT CHECK: Just like the story of Columbus, the story of Thanksgiving is complex. There is actually no recorded evidence that Indians were at the table. The pilgrims were not the first Europeans to reach the Americas. Squanto, a member of the Wampanog tribe, is remembered for helping the settlers through their first winter, but before that, he was captured and sold as a slave in England. He returned to find the majority of his tribe was killed by a smallpox epidemic before he met the Pilgrims.

MICROAGGRESSION: Saying something or someone is your "spirit animal"

Spirit Animals, Animal Guides and Spirit Helpers are all spiritual terms various Indigenous cultures use to describe benevolent spirits. The term describes something sacred and religious — It doesn't just mean you identify with or relate to something.

MICROAGGRESSION: Calling a meeting or get-together a "pow-wow"

Pow-wows are significant celebrations in many Indigenous communities that allow people in the tribe to feel a sense of community and to honor their heritage in a society that often marginalizes them. At these events, people dance, sing, socialize and celebrate their culture. An impromptu chat at the watercooler is not a "pow-wow." Real pow-wows require significant planning.

MICROAGGRESSION: Calling someone an "Indian giver"

This figure of speech, which refers to someone giving someone a gift and then taking it away is derogatory — and not factual. Ironically, it was the U.S. government who redistributed stolen Native American land to them and then continued to usurp it in violation of treaties.

MICROAGGRESSION: Using the figure of speech, "low man on the totem pole"

Again, totem poles have religious and cultural significance to many tribes in the Northwest. These carvings portray stories of lineage, mythology and important events. Totem poles are symbols of prestige in a community. Often, the figure portrayed at the bottom is the most significant.