

Justification Statement

Resolution Recommending the Immediate Retirement of American Indian Mascots, Symbols, Images, and Personalities by Schools, Colleges, Universities, Athletic Teams, and Organizations

1. Historical perspective on this issue.

Through historical processes of colonization, boarding schools, disempowerment, and relocation, the U.S. government has sought to devalue, dehumanize and assimilate American Indian nations, cultures, and contributions (Witko, 2005). The legacy of the detrimental effects of these historical processes continues today through the devaluing and dehumanization inherent in the public use of American Indian symbols, mascots, images, and personalities (King, 2002; Springwood & King, 2000; Rodriguez, 1998; Davis, 1993).

This history has led to a legacy of internalized oppression that comes from centuries of dehumanizing practices intended to promote American Indian self-hatred and encourage non-American Indian's to believe that they are heroic conquerors (Munson, 2001; King & Springwood, 2000; Staurowsky, 1998; Adams, 1995; Drinnon, 1980).

Oddly enough, even though most American Indian leaders and organizations have been voicing their discontent with the mockery and trivialization of their religion and culture, no one seems to be listening (Sheppard, 2004; Springwood, 2001; U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2001; Sigelman, 1998; Pewewardy, 1991; Mechling, 1980). In fact many people, including some American Indians, continue to believe that American Indian mascots and symbols serve to honor American Indian people, even though less than ten percent of American Indians surveyed in a 2001 Indian Country Today poll felt that mascots and symbols generally honored American Indian communities.

Today there have been several groups and tribes that have advocated for the retiring of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities used by athletic teams and education systems, primarily citing the damage such images/symbols have on American Indian individual's self-esteem, self-worth, and identity (Society of Indian Psychologists, 1999; The Intertribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes, 2001; Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs, 2001; Eagle and Condor Indigenous People's Alliance, 2003).

2. Relevance to psychology and psychologists and importance to psychology or to society as a whole.

There are many negative psychological consequences of the use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities by schools, colleges, universities, athletic teams, and others. The damage to self-esteem and identity are the aspects that appear to be the most severely compromised (Witko, 2004; Springwood & King, 2001; Vanderford, 1996; Webster, Loudbear, Corn, & Vigue, 1971).

Issues Related to Self-Esteem:

When schools promote the use of American Indian mascots, it leads to a devaluing of self and a decrease in self-esteem for American Indian peoples (Chamberlin, 1999; Society of Indian Psychologists, 1999). Self-esteem is an important ingredient in resiliency and positive mental health adjustment. It is important that a group does not feel compromised in this important area of psychological functioning, as impairment of self-esteem can contribute to negative behaviors such as substance use and abuse, self-harming, and interpersonal violence (Witko, 2005; Cook-Lynn, 2001; Coombe, 1997).

Issues related to Identity:

It is especially difficult when American Indian peoples are trying to present their tribal identity as accurately as possible, to have the dominant culture employ symbols, mascots, images and personalities that depict American Indians in an inaccurate and offensive manner (Staurowsky, 1999; Pewewardy, 1991). This can be especially challenging for American Indian children and adolescents whose identities are still in the formative stage of development (Clark & Witko, 2004). Such challenges to American Indian children's identity can be equally challenging for their parents who are attempting to transfer cultural history in a positive way (Staurowsky, 1999). For a group that already occupies an ethnic minority status in this country and is not often depicted in a positive manner within mainstream media, literature, books, and education, the display of denigrating symbols, images, and mascots can be very damaging.

Infringement of Civil Rights:

The stereotyping of any racial, ethnic, or religious group by other groups and social institutions -- especially public educational institutions and educators -- has the potential to teach children and youth that stereotyping of ethnic minority groups is acceptable (U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2001). This is a dangerous lesson that can have harmful effects on communities of color and others. The use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities is a form of discrimination against American Indian people because they are an inaccurate portrayal of a cultural group (Dolley, 2003; King & Springwood, 2001a; Springwood & King, 2001b).

All people of this nation have a right to self determination. The use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities infringes on American Indian peoples' pride and right to self determination (King, 2001; King, 1998; Staurowsky, 1998). If not attended to immediately, the continued use of such symbols stands the risk of causing serious harm to future generations of American Indian people.

Cultural misinformation:

Depicting cultures in an inaccurate and inappropriate manner promotes a negative perception of those cultures by other groups and creates an environment in which one group may be perceived as less than another group. For American Indian people, whose history is not often portrayed accurately in public education systems, the stereotypes that mascots, symbols, images, and personalities portray become the norm and miseducate American Indians and non-American Indians about American Indian culture,

society, and spirituality (Gone, 2002; Connolly, 2000; Moses, 1996; Churchill, 1994; Nuessel, 1994; Banks, 1993).

3. Likely degree of consensus among APA constituents.

As psychologist we are bound by ethical standards that require us to: (1) Respect Peoples Rights and Dignities (Principle D), and (2) Have Concern for Others Welfare (Principle E) (American Psychological Association, 2002). Adherence to such standards would suggest unanimous consensus among APA constituents on the need to retire American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities

4. Likelihood that the proposed resolution will have a constructive impact on public opinion/policy, assessment, consultation, and training.

In view of knowledge that psychologists have on the negative impact of stereotyping on communities of color and others, APA could serve as a major resource for those wanting to end the dehumanization and racial stereotyping of American Indian communities. In addition it is likely that APA's bold step in this matter will encourage other national professional and scientific associations to take similar steps, therefore leading to an end of racial stereotyping of American Indian people through use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities.

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