

**American Indian Social Representations:  
Do They Honor or Constrain American Indian Identities?**

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The question I want to address is whether contemporary popular representations of American Indians such as those created by the Disney Corporation in the movie *Pocahontas* or those employed by various sports teams as mascots (e.g., Cleveland Indians, University of Illinois Fighting Illini) honor or constrain American Indian identities? I will suggest that all people live within a network of other people's views of them and are constrained by these views, but that individuals who are identified with ethnic minority groups are decidedly more likely to be constrained by these types of representations because there are relatively fewer representations of their group in mainstream contexts. The experience of one's identity is directly related to how one's group is publicly represented and to the meanings and associations other people ascribe to one's identity.

The phenomenon of having one's identity constrained by the prevalent social representations is often referred to as being "pigeon-holed" and runs counter to how most laypeople and also how most social scientists have described the identity formation process. The following quote from James (1890/1950) is a good example:

Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a bon-vivant, and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher; a philanthropist, statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a 'tone-poet' and saint. ... So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. (pp. 309-310)

According to James' view of the identity process, first you spell out the identities-doctor, fireman, Indian chief, lawyer-and then you choose one of these identities on which to stake your salvation. But how does this process work for people who are associated with ethnic groups for which there are relatively few available social representations? To address this question, the present research draws from two lines of research: Stereotype threat and social representation theory.

## **Stereotype Threat**

Steele, Aronson, and colleagues (Aronson & Salinas, 1997; Aronson, Quinn, & Spenser, 1998; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997) call the risk of being personally reduced to a negative stereotype a stereotype threat and argue that it has a variety of disruptive effects on psychological functioning depending on the particular nature of the situation. Specifically, they contend that stereotypes are: 1) "in the air" among us, meaning that they exist in the world and not simply inside individual minds; 2) reflected and inscribed in the practices, policies, and institutions that comprise society, 3) enacted in our everyday, interpersonal behaviors; and 4) powerful and influential in the performance of minorities.

## **Social Representation Theory**

According to Moscovici (1984; 1988; 1998), social representations refer to the ideas and meanings that are essential for societal functioning. They are taken-for-granted understandings of the world that are widely shared and that play an enormously important role in our approach to the world and in our behavior. Specifically, social representations are defined as a system of values, ideas, and practices with a two-fold function. First, they allow people to orient themselves in the world and second, they allow people to communicate with each other. Social representation theory helps us understand more precisely how the stereotypes or social representations, as Moscovici calls them, that are in the world or in the air, actually function.

For example, following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the American flag was displayed prominently on office buildings, schools, homes, cars, and clothing. The American flag is not just a symbol of nationalism, it captures and represents a whole set of powerful American ideas (e.g., freedom, democracy, independence). The flag communicates to the world and to ourselves what matters in American society. This is the orienting function of social representations. However, the American flag is also a bit of material reality in the world that continually re-presents these ideas. Following the events of September 11th, the American flag was used to re-present the American ideas of freedom and independence, but it was also used to communicate to the world and to ourselves that we will not live in fear. This is the communicating function of social representations.

When images of American Indian Disney characters or sports team mascots are projected in the media, they too become powerful social representations. Take this cartoon from Indian Country Today as an example:

When stereotypes, like the stereotypes of Indians in the cartoon are projected in the media, they too become powerful social representations. They say "this is what an Indian is" and if you want to refer to Indians or communicate about them or even be one, you have to use the available representations. Without these social representations, the identity is not shared by others and thus does not exist within the shared collective conscious. Thus, to create an identity as William James instructs, there have to be many shared social representations that you can use to identify yourself.

### **Social Representations of American Indians**

According to the 2000 census, there are approximately 4.1 million individuals who identify as American Indian and approximately 40% of these people live on Indian reservations. Given the relatively small population of American Indians in the U.S., Pewewardy's (1995) finding that most Americans know very little about American Indians and further that most Americans have never met a living native person is noteworthy and thus brings into high relief the role of social representations in the identity formation process. Given this, we will argue that the social representations of American Indians presented in the media become ever more powerful because they constitute the only representations most Americans have of American Indians. According to Joseph Trimble (1987) this relative invisibility allows historical images of American Indians to permeate American consciousness and thus helps to shape current perceptions of the group:

For many non-Indians, an Indian must resemble a historical image, one frozen in the past and in historical archives--the noble, proud warrior dancing about and worshipping nature's mysteries. (p. 214)

Take, for example, Chief Illiniwek, the University of Illinois mascot. The "Chief" is typically represented at university events by a European American male undergraduate who performs gymnastics and quasi-traditional dances while wearing traditional American Indian regalia (Spindle, 2000). There is considerable debate in this country about this particular mascot, and others like it. Many who support the use of Indians as sports team mascots commonly argue that these mascots are positive social representations that honor native people. American Indians are portrayed as the victor, or as Trimble says, "the noble proud warrior".

At the University of Illinois, fans experience strong emotions with respect to Chief Illiniwek and attempts to eliminate the mascot has been met with great opposition (Spindle, 2000). One claim is that the mascot is a shared American image that represents their team, it is not about American Indians. The mascot elicits positive feelings and associations for them, and thus makes it difficult for them to understand why the image can elicit a negative reaction for those individuals who are the target of the representation. So, while majority group members may experience the world in terms of choosing between an elaborate set of representations of how to be, as James suggests. American Indians, who are the targets of these social representations, may find the available representations of their group to be confining and unpleasant. In the remainder of this talk, I will discuss five studies that chart the prevalent social representations of American Indians in the media and examine the impact of American Indian social representations on both American Indian and European American identities.

## Charting the Social Representations of American Indians

The first step in exploring how American Indian social representations influence identity is to chart these social representations. Namely, what are the prevalent social representations of American Indians? We examined this question using content analyses of popular movies from 1990-2000, two newspapers, The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times, for one year, and student's associations to American Indians.

*Major Motion Films:* Of the major motion films produced between 1990 and 2000, few were both widely viewed and had a major American Indian character (i.e., had a notable speaking role in the movie). Of the 5868 movies made in the U.S., 12 fit the criteria.

Several representations dominated these 12 films. All of them portrayed Indians as being spiritual or in-tune with nature, 10 portrayed Indians as warrior-like, 10 as impoverished, desolate, and/or beaten down by society, and 10 as continually in conflict with Whites. However, representations of American Indians as business people, teachers, professors, mechanics, professional athletes, and other contemporary jobs were largely absent from these films.

*Newspaper Articles:* The two newspapers coded were The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times. Similar to the major motion films, there were few articles that either discussed or represented an image of American Indians. Of the approximately 80,700 articles in the two newspapers, 190 articles mentioned American Indians. In essence, American Indians are relatively invisible in these newspapers, just as they were relatively invisible in the major motion films.

With respect to the types of representations portrayed in the newspaper articles, we found that three categories were prevalent. Of the articles that mentioned or portrayed American Indians, 70% portrayed them as spiritual or in-tune with nature, 59% as impoverished, desolate, or beaten down by society, and 48% as warrior like. American Indians as being in conflict with whites was also prevalent (30%), but less than half as much as it was in the major motion films. Two other representations were also evident. One third of the articles showed American Indians as contending with the legal system (e.g., treaties, sovereignty issues) and nearly a third showed them as being progressive people (e.g., business people, educators, or students).

*Student Associations:* 214 non-native students at the University of Michigan were asked to write the first thoughts or associations that come to mind when thinking about American Indians. Each word or phrase was coded for frequency. The top 20 associations include the following:

Rank	Categories	%	Rank	Categories	%
1	reservation	30.4	11	dark hair	11.2
2	teepees	22.9	12	hunters	11.2
3	brown skin	17.3	13	bow	10.3
4	tribes	16.8	14	nature	10.3
5	feathers	16.4	15	Thanksgiving	9.8
6	arrow	14.0	16	corn	7.9
7	buffalo	14.0	17	dance	7.9
8	casino	14.0	18	horses	7.9
9	chief	12.1	19	Trail of Tears	7.0
10	Cherokee	11.2	20	powwow	6.5

The students thought about American Indians in fairly stereotyped representations. The majority of categories referred to places of residence (reservations, teepees), appearance (brown skin, dark hair), objects (feathers, arrows, buffalo, bows, corn, horses), activities (dance, powwow), roles (chief, hunters), and structure or type (tribes, Cherokee). However, these results also reveal particular representations of American Indians as being spiritual or in-tune with nature (dance, nature), warrior-like (feathers, bows, arrows, hunters, horses), and beaten by society (Trail of Tears). A number of other categories could fit within this framework, but not without more information about what the participants intended. In general, participants have a particularly limited set of representations they associate to American Indians and many of these representations may impact how American Indians choose to represent themselves. In conclusion, it is important to note that across domains the representations of American Indians included both positive and negative portrayals. In fact, those that most characterize the Indian (spiritual or in-tune with nature and warrior-like) could be thought of in both positive and negative ways depending upon the context in which they are used. The larger issue is that there exists a fairly restricted set of representations.

For minority groups in this country, this is hardly a surprising reality. For example, African Americans are now represented in many more domains of life than they were 20 or so years ago. For example, the representations of African Americans are still limited, Henry Louis Gate's book, 13 ways to be a Black Man, suggests that our society has made an important step forward from the invisibility referred to in Ralph Ellison's 1947 book, Invisible Man. One might argue that American Indians are invisible in many domains, much like African Americans were 50 or even 20 years ago.

### **Social Representations and American Indian Identity**

Given the limited set of representations revealed above, the next set of questions highlight the impact of these American Indian social representations on those who are the target of the representations and those who are not. While most of the stereotyping literature has focused on consensually negative representations, the following studies will use representations that at least some, if not a majority, believe to be positive. After being randomly assigned to a condition, participants in the experimental conditions were primed with an American Indian social representation (Disney's Pocahontas, Chief Wahoo, or Negative Stereotypes) and then completed a questionnaire. In particular, three studies focused specifically on how American Indian social representations influenced American Indian participant's self-esteem (Study 2), collective efficacy (Study 3), and achievement-related possible selves (Study 4). A fourth study focused on whether these representations influenced European American participant's self-esteem (Study 5)

#### **Study 2**

***Self-Esteem:*** In this study, contemporary social representations of American Indians (i.e., Pocahontas, Chief Wahoo, and Negative Stereotypes) were used to explicitly prime American Indian high school students, and then self-esteem was measured. Participants were told that people do not know a lot about American Indians, for example they know images such as those found in Disney's Pocahontas (or one of the other representations). Then they were instructed to disregard that image because we want to know how they really are today. Seventy-one American Indian high school students (41 girls, 30 boys) from an Indian reservation in Arizona participated in the study. Compared to the control condition, where no representation was shown, the

American Indian students in the three experimental conditions, who were primed with one of three American Indian social representations, had significantly lower self-esteem. Planned comparisons further revealed that Chief Wahoo and Pocahontas depressed self-esteem significantly more than the negative facts about their group.

### **Study 3**

**Community Efficacy:** Replicating the methodology of the previous study, the impact of these American Indian social representations on community efficacy was tested. Community efficacy is the belief that one's community has the power and the resources to improve itself. Community efficacy was chosen because it was thought to be more central to self-functioning for American Indians than perhaps self-esteem (Trimble, 1987). One hundred and forty-six American Indian high school students (86 women, 60 men) from an Indian Reservation in Arizona participated in the study. Results similar to Study 2 were found. Compared to the control condition where no representation was shown, the three social representations of American Indians significantly depressed community efficacy. Unlike Study 2, however, no differences between the three social representation conditions were found.

**Attitudes about American Indian mascots:** Following the initial study, participants in the Chief Wahoo condition and the control condition completed additional information regarding their attitudes about using American Indians as mascots. Half of the students agreed and half disagreed with using American Indians as mascots. More importantly, agreeing or disagreeing was a significant mediator between viewing or not viewing the Chief Wahoo representation and the subsequent community efficacy scores. Participants in the Chief Wahoo condition who agreed with using American Indians as mascots had significantly lower community efficacy scores than did both control groups (agree or disagree) and the Chief Wahoo-Disagree group. Studies 2 and 3 provide evidence that the social representations of American Indians are both powerful and, at least in these contexts, negative. However, the results regarding attitudes about the use of American Indian mascots indicate that while the prevalent representations influence American Indian identity, that specific attitudes may exacerbate or ameliorate this influence. Moreover, this finding is contrary to what one might expect given that agreeing with the use of the social representation dampened community efficacy. These results further highlight the power that social representations have in terms of both affording and constraining psychological functioning, as well as in impacting how individuals can participate in their social worlds.

### **Study 4**

**Achievement-related Possible Selves:** In Studies 2 and 3, two hypotheses about why the representation of Chief Wahoo depressed self-esteem and community efficacy were made. One was that Chief Wahoo elicits negative psychological consequences because he is a caricature rather than a real person (e.g., Chief Illiniwek) or a realistic-looking image. A second hypothesis proposed that the image of Chief Wahoo elicits negative psychological consequences because he is an out-group's representation of American Indians. The purpose of study 4 was to expand the generalizability of these results to a different age group and a larger number of social representations. First, to increase the generalizability of findings to other American Indian age groups, American Indian undergraduates attending a predominantly American Indian university and deriving from a variety of American Indian contexts were asked to participate. This particular university is significant because it has an American Indian mascot that represents a predominantly American Indian student body.

To increase the number of primed social representations, two new American Indian mascots were included, in addition to Chief Wahoo—namely, Chief Illiniwek of the University of Illinois and the Haskell Indian from Haskell Indian Nations University. The use of three different mascots (Chief Wahoo, Haskell Indian, Chief Illiniwek) addresses the limitation of using a caricature (i.e., Chief Wahoo). If Chief Wahoo being a caricature is influencing participants, then one might expect that the other two mascots will not hamper the self or identities of American Indian students. However, if the other mascots do, in fact, influence psychological functioning, as did Chief Wahoo in previous studies, then one might consider the possibility that American Indian mascots have negative consequences for American Indians.

This led to a second, potentially related issue. Perhaps the negative effects of American Indian social representations in Studies 2 and 3 were capturing not just the issue of Indians being used as mascots, but rather reflect the fact that others (i.e., non-American Indians) were using them as mascots. If the Haskell Indian elicits a less negative response than the other two Indian representations, then one might conclude that it was not just the visual image of American Indians that induced negative responses, but the use of this image by non-American Indians. Study 4 also included a representation of a contemporary, progressive Indian. The American Indian College Fund released an advertisement that depicted a young woman with long dark hair standing in front of shelves of microscopes. The caption reads, "Have you ever seen a real Indian?" This advertisement associated American Indians with such positive attributes as being contemporary, young, attractive, smart, and engaged in academic activities like scientific research.

Finally, Study 4, while attempting to replicate the pattern of findings from Studies 2 and 3, utilized a third dependent measure deemed more relevant to this college population, namely possible selves. Possible selves have been defined as the ideal selves that people would like to become. They are also the selves that people might become or are afraid of becoming (Cross & Markus, 1994; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993). An individual's repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats. In keeping with prior research examining the content of high school and college students' possible selves (Markus & Oyserman, 1990; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993), we hypothesized that compared to a no-prime control condition, being exposed to one of the three mascot primes (Chief Wahoo, Chief Illiniwek, and the Haskell Indian) would decrease the number of achievement-related possible selves listed by American Indian students, while the progressive American Indian representation embodied in the American Indian College Fund advertisement would increase the number of achievement-related possible selves.

One hundred and seventy-two American Indian undergraduates (92 females, 80 males) from a predominantly American Indian university in the Midwestern United States participated in the study. Participants viewed one of four possible social representations of American Indians (Chief Wahoo, Chief Illiniwek, Haskell Indian, or American Indian college fund advertisement) or saw no social representation (control condition). After viewing the representation, participants answered four opinion questions about the representation and then completed the open-ended possible selves questionnaire.

When compared to the control condition, the three Indian mascots (Chief Illiniwek, Chief Wahoo, and the Haskell Indian) all led to fewer achievement-related possible selves. However, the three Indian mascots did not differ from one another, and similarly, no differences were found between the American Indian College Fund advertisement and the no-prime control condition. The data did not support the hypothesis that Chief Wahoo elicits negative psychological consequences because he is a caricature rather than a real person or that Chief Wahoo elicits negative psychological consequences because he is an out-group's representation of American Indians, but rather provided evidence that in general, using American Indians as mascots has psychological costs for American Indians.

## **Social Representations and European American Identity**

### **Study 5**

Because representations of American Indians are available in many public contexts in the form of decals, logos, sports team attire, clothing (e.g., Disney, National Football League and Major League Baseball paraphernalia), and food products (e.g., Land o' Lakes butter), understanding the psychological consequences of these representations for American Indians is extremely important. However, social representations may not only affect the people they represent; they may also affect other people in the same context.

Take, for example, Chief Illiniwek, the University of Illinois mascot. Why are these fans so attached to Chief Illiniwek? One explanation is that the mascot is associated with positive memories and images for them. Many Americans grow up "playing Indian" (Strong, 1998), and as Study 1 revealed, most media portrayals (if any at all) are likely to involve romantic portrayals of American Indians. Another explanation is that fans are experiencing a psychological boost as a result of downwardly socially comparing themselves to the lower-status caricatures of American Indians (i.e., "stereotype lift"). To explore further why European Americans use American Indians as mascots, Study 5 assessed the effect of American Indian social representations on European American participant's self-esteem. We hypothesized that when European Americans are overtly primed with images of American Indians, they will report increased self-esteem. This result would suggest that European Americans benefit from stereotype lift (i.e., they feel better in the presence of another group's stereotype) when American Indians are used as mascots.

One hundred and thirty-seven European American undergraduates (71 females, 66 males) at Stanford University participated in this study. We used a similar procedure and the same social representations of American Indians as in Studies 2 and 3, but the results were quite different. Social representations of American Indians from mainstream media had a negative impact on American Indians in Studies 2, 3, and 4, but the reverse was true for European Americans. When primed with these social representations of American Indians, European Americans experienced a boost in self-esteem compared to European Americans in the control (no prime) condition. Studies 2 and 5, both of which look at the impact of American Indian social representations on self-esteem, suggest that these images while similarly present in the context are producing different associations and different meanings for American Indians and European Americans. Specifically, when compared to the control conditions, in which both groups reported similar mean self-esteem scores ( $M = 3.7$ ), the American Indian social representations were associated with lower self-esteem for American Indians and higher self-esteem for European Americans.



## General Discussion

In general, we argued that members of ethnic or minority groups are more constrained in their identity formation process than those in the mainstream because they have less power to control the public representations of their group. This constraint on one's "freedom to be" is directly related to how one's group is publicly represented and is manifested in various factors of one's identity. In the present research three major findings are used to support these social constraints on one's identity. First, American Indian representations were relatively scarce and fairly limited in scope, with very few contemporary, progressive images. Second, American Indian social representation (i.e., Pocahontas, Chief Wahoo, or Negative Stereotypes) depressed how American Indian participants felt about themselves (self-esteem), their community (community efficacy), and what they want to become or are able to become (possible selves). Third, in the case of European Americans, who were not the target of these social representations, they experienced a psychological boost (increased self-esteem) from these American Indian social representations.

Given the social nature of identities, this research suggests that teachers in schools and employers in work places must ensure that the existing or relevant social representations do not devalue or limit individual identity or potential. Moreover, in the case where particular groups are narrowly represented, teachers and employers can counter existing stereotypes or social representations by providing new and positive social representations of these groups. Without these new and positive representations, many individuals may under-perform and may come to redefine themselves in unnecessarily negative terms for reasons even they do not understand.

Finally, while research on self and identity often implies that individuals can choose their identities, this research suggests that this choice is constrained. Individuals can try to contest these prevalent images or try to invent or construct other representations, but 1) they cannot live outside the prevalent representations of their group and 2) they cannot make other people contest them either-well, they can try, but they will not be effective unless other people also use new representations and contest old representations. Moreover, the motivation to eliminate particular social representations such as American Indian mascots may be fraught with tacit difficulties.

For example, given that the mascot image makes European Americans feel better about themselves, they may not be able to understand why this image makes the target of the representation feel bad and, for reasons they may not be able to calibrate, they may not be motivated to cease using the image. Thus, the power of these social representations is a societal problem, not an individual one, and the onus to change these representations lies within all of us-not just within those who are the target of the representation.

Thank you.

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