

## Elevating the Significance: What's Wrong with Indian Mascots?

### *Creating a Racially Hostile Environment*

Aside from debunked Sports Illustrated polls, the honor refrain by many and tradition touted by alumni, there is strong, empirical research showcasing the harm of Indian mascots. Misappropriation of symbolism, bias against Native Americans and stereotype threat are just a few of the findings that create a racially hostile environment for Native students. As a Native American ally, actively fighting the Indian mascot in my school district, I have gathered just a few pieces of the voluminous research on the harm of these mascots. The research comes to us from psychological research, in this case by Native authors and non-Native alike.

Despite the demise of Frito Bandito and Little Black Sambo, sports teams still stubbornly cling to the tradition of Native mascots. Ethnic images of Native Americans are the only ethnic group repeatedly targeted for mascots. Baca (2004) reports that a popular clothing manufacturer once produced a t-shirt with an Asian American caricature on it which read, "Two Wongs don't make it White." Protesting by Asian Americans rendered the shirt gone from stores within days.

The term "hostile environment" was first used in the workplace. Baca (2004) a Pawnee and the past president of the National Native Bar Association states, "Although I am offended by the image of Chief Wahoo and the Washington Redskins, clearly I do not have to go to the stadium and subject myself to them...The choices of a child in a public elementary school are not so clear" (p. 72). The Office of Civil Rights has determined that harassment can be verbal, written or graphic besides the usual examples of physical or sexual harassment. And, if the harassment negatively affects the enjoyment of an educational program, the school can be liable for sanction. Furthermore, schools are to absolutely provide non-discriminatory educational services. Indian complainants often lose these cases because school officials mistakenly believe that these images are benign and often find in favor of the school district or university.

The Indian child who is confronted in schools with these fake and negative images all day long, does not see any other race of people singled out for this kind of treatment. And they are approved by the state. This points to a separation of their race from others. The images, often false and offensive, could be a caricature with a large belly and an over-exaggerated nose with a bent feather in a headband. These images in no way represent Native Americans today. The child internalizes that her race is treated differently and is looked on by her classmates as different. These images use mockery which "trap Indian people and their culture in a pre-Colombian amber and also represent the failure to recognize the continued existence of Indians as living cultures and peoples" (p. 77). When people are used as stereotypes, they are dehumanized. This creates a racially hostile environment.

The National Congress of American Indians (2013) began a campaign in 1968 to bring an end to these images in popular culture. They exacerbate racial inequity and perpetrate feelings of inadequacy among Native youth. The Congress further points out that these mascots defame, slander and vilify Native cultures with savage or clownish mages. The “savage” stereotype freezes Native peoples as an ethnic group frozen in history. They are particularly inappropriate and insensitive in light of the long history of massacres, forced assimilation and genocide. Mocking Native identity diminishes the status and humanity of contemporary Native citizens. As well, Native communities have led longstanding efforts to get teams to change their names. It is not a matter of political correctness, but rather racial equity.

According to Steinfeldt (2011), the rise of Indian mascots for sports teams is a pervasive form of societal marginalization of American Indians. It is a misuse of cultural practices and sacred symbols, perpetuates stereotypes, denies them control over their own images, has a negative impact on the self-esteem of Indian children and creates a racially hostile environment for all students. This undermines the ability of American Indian Nations to portray accurate and respectful images of their cultures. The American Psychological Association as well has posited that it may represent a violation of the civil rights of American Indian people. Activists and allies of Native Americans are often in a contentious position fighting these mascots and are met with the honor and tradition argument. This places Indian people in the position again of Whites having power over them which maintains an oppressive power structure. “Honoring” Native Americans through Indian mascots forges a false sense of unity between Native Americans and European Americans. As well, “honoring” kidnaps the genocide, dispersion and forced assimilation of Indian people in US history from the early days of colonization. Tim Wise (2011 ) states that here are only two sides to the tradition argument; you are either in favor of the tradition of Andrew Jackson or in favor of the tradition of schools which are now changing their long-debated Indian mascots.

### *Stereotypes*

In my dissertation, I studied stereotypes of Latin Americans in Spanish textbooks. I found that Latin Americans are over-represented in five ways: sports, entertainment, music-makers, fiesta-seekers and food creators. These stereotypes, which feature these particular talents, shows that some mainstreaming is allowed as long as it does not encroach White privilege. Page after page features Sammy Sosa, Roberto Clemente, Gloria Estefan, Shakira, Ricky Martin and many examples of food preparation and fiestas. Teachers’ editions of these texts often advise teachers and students to prepare food to help students “experience” the Spanish-speaking world. As well, there are many illustrations that feature all kinds of fiestas with page after page depicting ordinary people dressed in Mexican-style clothing dancing everywhere, seemingly breaking into song and dance for no apparent reason. Hall (1997) states that these excessive portrayals, meant to showcase their lives, create stereotypes which reduce people to a few simple and essential characteristics which then become “fixed” by nature. He explains that stereotyping as a signifying practice is central to the representation of racial difference. Stereotypes get hold of the few simple, vivid,

memorable, easily grasped characteristics about a person and reduce everything about the person to those traits. They are exaggerated and simplified and fixed without change to eternity. Characterizing Indian people as Indian chiefs with feathers and beads can be analyzed to make this representation part of their nature just as fiestas and sombreros characterize Latinos. Hall further states that this type of stereotyping tends to occur most often where there are gross inequalities of power.

This discussion represents as well, what happens as Indian mascots are excessively portrayed as fighters and chiefs with war bonnets and eagle feathers. This becomes who Native Americans are; not people with regular jobs, regular houses and real lives, but rather they are a strong and forceful, the perfect representation for a sports team.

As we have seen in our own country stereotypes abound about women not being able to work as well as men and this has lessened their life chances. Stereotypes about African Americans as weaker cognitively have lessened their life chances. Stereotypes lead to racist attitudes about what certain tasks certain people can do or cannot do well. How exactly do they also affect the psychological development of those in the stereotyped group?

### *Stereotype Threat*

Researchers have been using quantitative analysis since the 1990's with Steele (2003) of Stanford University being at the forefront of this research. He began by studying the academic underperformance of minority students first at the University of Michigan and currently at Stanford. He found that Black students at the university at every level of SAT scores had lower subsequent grades than their White counterparts. Reflecting on the possibility that they may not have been seen as equally prepared as White students, he felt there was something more detrimental at work. Something was depressing Black students' grades. After receiving grants to study the problem, he hypothesized that a "protective disidentification" with school achievement could result in a drop in grades as a basis of self-esteem. As well, he began to study women who underperformed in difficult math classes at each level of their entrance SAT score. As Steele groped with a reason, and studied the social science literature on African Americans, he posited that life-long exposure to negative images can lead to self-doubts, low self-esteem and low performance expectations.

At Stanford, he gave Black and White students a very difficult verbal test. Half were told this was a problem-solving test, not a diagnostic of ability, and the other half were told that this was a test of verbal ability. For the group who was told the test measured ability, Blacks scored a full standard deviation lower than Whites even after their scores were adjusted for their difference in SAT scores. However, the group who was told it was simply a measure of problem-solving, Black performance matched White performance. Study after study, these results were replicated and strongly suggested that the mere suggestion of an ability test was enough to activate racial stereotypes. Steele named this phenomenon "stereotype threat."

Fryberg (2008) carried out more studies like this using the stereotype threat theory with Native students. Due to Native American mascots, Native students are frequently and consistently associated with only a few traits. She found that these mascots have serious psychological consequences for Native American students. In her research, activating these negative stereotypes was associated with disengagement when participants were exposed to common images associated with Native Americans such as Chief Wahoo, the Redskins, the Braves and Pocahontas. She found that certain conditions within the experiment depressed self-esteem, decreased feelings of community worth and depressed students' achievement-related possible selves. Self-esteem and self-efficacy are essential tools for educational success, as Steele found as well. Fryberg concludes by stating, "American Indian mascots thus remind Indian students of the limited ways in which others see them. It is difficult, if not impossible, to think about one's self without contending with these social representations" (p. 216).

Bestowing "honor" through Indian mascots, relegates them to the past while cloaking the destructive deeds of Euro-American society. Indian mascots need to be eliminated. Native American mascots resemble a historical image as one frozen in the past and limit how students see themselves and therefore limit their achievement.

## References

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