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**Why Educators Can't Ignore Indian Mascots**

**By** [**Dr. Cornel Pewewardy**](#cornel)

Why should educators know about the issues of American Indian[1](cornelconclusion.htm#Notes) mascots, logos, nicknames and the tomahawk chop? My response has always been because these trappings and seasonal insults offend the intelligence of thousands of Indigenous Peoples in this country. Invented media images prevent millions of Americans from understanding the authentic human experience of First Nations People, both from long ago and today. This article speaks to the American educator and discusses how, as educators, we are responsible for maintaining the ethics of teaching and for helping to eliminate racism in all aspects of school life.

As someone who has spent his entire adult life teaching and administrating elementary schools for Indigenous children, I see that the way Indian mascots are used today is about "dysconscious racism" and a form of cultural violence. This includes many Indigenous Peoples as well. Dysconscious racism is a form of racism that accepts dominant white norms and privileges. For example, if you have seen these racial antics and negative behaviors portrayed by Indian mascots hundreds of times for most part of your life, you may become absolutely numb to it. That's what I mean by dysconscious racism. However, the thousand of ways in which Indian mascots are used today in American sports culture is racist and should be eliminated, with education used as the tool for liberation.

**The Issues**

Many schools around the country exhibit Indian mascots and logos, using nicknames, and doing the tomahawk chop in sports stadiums with inauthentic representations of Indigenous cultures. Many school officials think they are honoring Indigenous Peoples and insist their schools' sponsored activities aren't offensive, but rather a compliment. However, I argue otherwise. There's nothing in Indigenous cultures that I'm aware of that aspires to be a mascot, logo, or nickname for athletic teams. Teachers should research the matter and discover that Indigenous Peoples would never have associated the sacred practices of becoming a warrior with the hoopla of a pep rally, half-time entertainment, or a side-kick to cheerleaders. *Even though this issue has become as American as apple pie and baseball, making fun of Indigenous Peoples in athletic events across the country is wrong!*

This behavior makes a mockery of Indigenous cultural identity and causes many young Indigenous people to feel shame about who they are as a cultural being, because racial stereotypes play an important role in shaping a young person's consciousness. Subjective feelings, such as inferiority, are an integral part of consciousness, and work together with the objective reality of poverty and deprivation to shape a young person's worldview. Beginning with Wild West shows and continuing with contemporary movies, television, and literature, the image of Indigenous Peoples has radically shifted from any reference to living people to a field of urban fantasy in which wish fulfillment replaces reality. The challenge that we have today is to deconstruct a reality that has been manufactured by the American media and scholars.

**Manufactured Images**

The portrayal of Indigenous Peoples in sports takes many forms. Some teams use *generic Indigenous names*, such as Indians, Braves, or Chiefs, while others adopt *specific tribal names* like Seminoles, Cherokees, or Apaches. Indian mascots exhibit either idealized or comical facial features and "native" dress ranging from body-length feathered (usually turkey) headdresses to more subtle fake buckskin attire to skimpy loincloths. Some teams and supporters display counterfeit Indigenous *paraphernalia,* including tomahawks, feathers, facial paints, symbolic drums and pipes, as well as mock-Indigenous *behaviors*, such as the "tomahawk chop," dances, chants, drumbeating, war-whooping and symbolic scalping.

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So-called Indian mascots reduce hundreds of Indigenous tribes to generic cartoons. These "Wild West" figments of the white imagination distort both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children's attitudes toward an oppressed -- and diverse -- minority. Schools should be places where students come to *unlearn* the stereotypes such mascots represent. The Indigenous portrait of the moment may be bellicose or ludicrous or romantic, but almost never is the portrait we see of Indian mascots a real person. Most children in America do not have the faintest idea that "Indigenous Peoples" are real human beings.

Children's self images are very pliable and susceptible to external forces, especially if they are steeped in violent and negative images. Unfortunately, for Indigenous Peoples many false images of ethnicity still dominate the consciousness of the American psyche. I have found that many ethnic images have been manufactured and created in the image of other racial groups. The manufactured "savage," "pagan," "retarded," "culturally deprived," non-European is the flipside of the European Civilization myth. Many ethnic images distort reality while creating new and seductive realities of their own. Students in schools cannot understand the realities of modern American life and the prospect for the next generations without understanding the popular images of the past and the present.

Today, the perceptions and negative image of Indigenous Peoples by the American mascroculture that is a part of the history of the motion picture industry evolved from stereotypes created by the earliest settlers and chroniclers of this country. The contradictory views of Indigenous Peoples, sometimes gentle and good and sometimes terrifying and evil, stem from the Euro-American's ambivalence toward a race of people they attempted to destroy. The treatment of Indigenous Peoples in the movies is the final expression of white America's attempt to cope with its uneasiness in the face of a sense of cultural guilt. Therefore, *Indian* began as a white man's mistake, and became a white man's fantasy, because of white guilt, white fear, white insecurity.

**Controlling Ethnic Images**

Authors have disagreed on whether sports speculating has positive or negative consequences for individuals and society. The impact of power on stereotyping evolved over many years. The powerless attend to the powerful who control their outcomes, in an effort to enhance prediction and control, so forming complex, potentially non-stereotypic impressions. The powerful pay less attention, so are more vulnerable to stereotyping. The powerful (a) need not attend to the other to control their own outcome, (b) cannot attend because they tend to be attentionally overloaded, and (c) it they have high need for dominance, may not want to attend. Stereotyping and power are mutually reinforcing because stereotyping itself exerts control, maintaining and justifying the status quo.

Children begin to learn the cultural stereotypes about race during the preschool years. These stereotypes provide the basis for race schemas that influence cognitive processing of social information. Virtually all research on race stereotypes and race schemas has confounded social desirability with race. More recently, psychologists have started to apply schema-based models of social cognition to the study of racial stereotyping in young children. In these cognitive models, schemas are thought to be cognitive structures that mediate the processing of information involved in person perception.

Many accurate books about Indigenous Peoples have been written, yet misinformation abounds and inundates our children at an early age. Racist television cartoons, which were drawn in the 1940s and portrayed Indigenous Peoples as befeathered savages, are shown today as entertainment. Years of research recognized that television and movies have shaped children's values, attitudes, and subsequently, their behaviors. Children learn by observation and readily imitate complex behavior patterns, even without reinforcement.

Racism is the social-psychological threat that rises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies. This predicament threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype. While these images help shape people's perceptions, stereotypes aid in the dehumanization of Indigenous Peoples.

As we enter the new millennium, it seems clear that neither in theory nor in practice did the Europeans succeed in developing a universal point of view. The European nations themselves were built up largely as a result of a process of internal colonization in which a supposed trans-ethnic and trans-cultural nation was created by the extinction and/or assimilation of other cultural groups. External colonization was often a continuation of the process of internal colonization. Indigenous Peoples faced two such civilizing processes that arose from the Europeans.

So why do some teachers allow their students to uncritically adopt a cartoon version of Indigenous cultures through the use of a mascot portrayed by sports teams? To understand why this is racist consider how euphemisms and codewords for ethnic persons and groups are used: scalp, massacre, redskin, squaw, noble savage, papoose, Pocahontas, Cherokee princess. These words represent a new generation of ethnic slurs that are replacing the older, more blatant and abusive nicknames.

**Detrimental to Children**

Today, as a teacher educator, I show future teachers why Indian mascots are one cause for low self-esteem in Indigenous children. *This is the point where this issue becomes detrimental to the academic achievement of students in school*. To make my point clear, I point to the American Indian Mental Health Association of Minnesota's 1992 position statement supporting the total elimination of Indian mascots and logos from schools. "As a group of mental health providers, we are in agreement that using images of American Indians as mascots, symbols, caricatures, and namesakes for non-Indian sports teams, businesses, and other organizations is damaging to the self-identity, self-concept, and self-esteem of our people. We should like to join with others who are taking a strong stand against this practice."

The tomahawk chop is a racist gesture in athletic arenas because it perpetuates a stereotype that is not true for all Indigenous Peoples. And it certainly is not true today in America. Most of the resolutions to eliminate negative ethnic images came for grassroots people, mostly Indigenous parents. Resolutions to ban Indian mascots and logos from schools have also been drafted by American Indian organizations like the National Indian Education Association, Kansas Association for Native American Education, Wisconsin Indian Education Association and Minnesota Indian Education Association. Other groups that have passed resolution to ban Indian mascots and logos include the National Education Association, Governor's Interstate Indian Council, United Indian Nations of Oklahoma, Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin, National Congress of American Indians and American Indian Movement.

**Power and Control**

I believe that the hidden agenda behind Indian mascots and logos is about cultural, spiritual, and intellectual exploitation. Therefore, the real issues are about power and control. These negative ethnic images are driven by those that want to define other ethnic groups and control their images. To me, power and control is the ability to make you believe that someone's truth is the absolute truth. Furthermore, it's the ability to define a reality and to get other people to affirm that reality as if it were their own. Remember that media commercials are carefully designed and expensively produced to stereotype groups and help us, as consumers, "realize" we are far less than we should be. This is an additive systemic approach to power and control.

**Social Construction of Reality.**

Furthermore, I contend that American racism as we inherit it today is a social construction of reality. Prior to Columbus, the world functioned for millennia without the race construct as we understand it today. Therefore, we must understand that racism is the primary form of cultural domination in the United States over the past four hundred years. It is cultural construction by social scientists and other students of group life as well as the mass media. Together with schools, legal systems, and higher education institutions, these forces participate in a major way in legitimizing and reifying the invalid construct. Consequently, the race construct is now internalized by the world's masses. All these voices together have helped to perpetuate this ignorance and distortion. The primary issue in American racism is hegemony.[2](#2) This author believes that racism is a mental illness, especially among those who are the advocates and inventors of hegemonic systems. It is a mental illness because it requires functioning with the academic falsification of the human record, distortion of cultural identity, and delusions of grandeur about white supremacy. At the ideological level, this is mental illness that requires continued systemic study, massive financial resources toward the deconstruction of the European colonial mind-set in the same way that such resources were devoted to the structuring of domination.

**Politics of Colonization**

Through the politics of colonization, Indigenous Peoples were socialized into stereotypes that we were inferior, stupid, lazy, thereby fulfilling the need to be everybody's mascot. This list of stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples are well known (i.e., University of Illinois' Chief Illiniwek, Oklahoma's Eskimos Joes, Crazy Horse Malt Liquor, Land of Lakes Butter, Jeep Cherokee, etc.).

While the Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves, Washington Redskins, Kansas City Chiefs, Florida State University Seminoles, Southeastern and many more schooling institutions have resisted the pressure to change, scores of colleges, universities, and high school teams have adopted new names over the years. Stanford changed from Indians to the "Cardinals." Dartmouth changes from Indians to "The Big Green." Ohio's Miami University Redskins became the "Red Hawks." If these colleges and universities can change, so can other educational institutions. In the Big Ten Conference, the University of Wisconsin and University of Minnesota athletic departments established policy which banned out-of-conference competition with universities that use Indian mascots, names and logos.

While some colleges, universities, high schools and middle schools have dropped their racially insulting Indian mascot and logos, no professional sports team has felt enough heat or, perhaps, has enough conscience or respect to take a similar step. One exception is the Washington Wizards, who succumbed to the political pressure to change their mascot from the Bullets to the Wizards, which suggest that more changes are possible. This should be possible without the uninsightful alumni and student backlashes that smear Indigenous complainants as activists or militant.

**Conclusion**

Understanding the contemporary images, perceptions, and myths of Indigenous Peoples is extremely important not only for Indigenous Peoples, but also for mainstream America. Most images of Indigenous Peoples are burned into the global consciousness by the mass media. It was the Hollywood screen writers who helped to create the "frontier myth" image of Indigenous People today. In most every respect, it was challenging the worn-out theology of Indians as losers and victims, and was transforming tribes into powers to be reckoned with for a long time to come. It was, moreover, a revolution that had gone largely unrecorded by the national media and unnoticed by a public that still sees Indigenous Peoples mainly through deep xenophobic eyes and the mythic veil of mingled racism and romance. Each new generation of popular culture has, therefore, reinvented their Indian mascot in the image of its own era.

Those of us that advocate for the elimination of mascots of Indigenous Peoples appreciate the courage, support, and sometimes the sacrifice, of all those who stand with us by speaking out and drafting resolutions against the continued use of Indian mascots in schools. When you advocate for the removal of these mascots and logos, you are strengthening the spirit of tolerance and social justice in your community as well as modeling pluralism for all children. Therefore, this serves as a powerful teaching moment that could help to deconstruct the fabricated images and misconceptions of Indigenous Peoples that most school-age children have burned into their psyche by the American media.

If your team name were the Pittsburgh Negroes, Kansas City Jews, Redding Redskins, Houston Hispanics, Chicago Chicanos, San Francisco Asians, or Washington Whities, and someone from those communities found the invented name, stereotyped labels, and ethnic symbols associated with it offensive and asked that it be changed, would you not change the name? If not, why not?

The focus of this message has been to educators. As long as such negative mascots and logos remain within the arena of school activities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children are learning to tolerate racism in schools. Finally, I challenge educators to provide the intellectual leadership that will teach a critical perspective and illuminate the cultural violence associated with Indian mascots used in schools. Inaction in the face of racism is racism. As culturally responsive educators, we must understand that "*enslaved minds cannot teach liberation*." That's why educators can't ignore Indian mascots.

**Notes**

**1** Previous research focusing on aboriginal peoples in the United States have used American Indian, Indian, and Native American as the nomenclature for this population. For example, Indigenous Peoples in the United States are not from India and therefore *not* Indians. This article subverts this tradition by instead using the term "Indigenous Peoples" and "First Nations People." The term is capitalized because it is a proper noun (particular person) and not an adjective (words describing nouns). It is also capitalized to signify and recognize the cultural heterogeneity and political sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples in the western hemisphere.

In this respect, the consciousness of the oppressor transforms Indigenous identity into a commodity of its domination and disposal. Ceasing to call Indigenous Peoples or American Indians is more than an attempt at political correctness. It is an act of intellectual liberation and it is a correction to a distorting narrative of imperialist "discovery and progress" that has been maintained far too long by Europeans and Euro-Americans. Thus, American Indian and Indian are sometimes used interchangeably as a common vernacular in this article only when trying to make a point in an attempt to liberate and combat linguistic hegemony, which is both a direct and indirect power block to the identity of Indigenous Peoples.

2Hegemony, in this reading, becomes simply the establishment of preservation by a ruling class of identification between class and group.

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