

# The Problems with Native American Mascots

By Laurel R. Davis

## Introduction

Sport has not been widely discussed in the field of multicultural education. Yet, sport is central to the lives of many students. It is critical that multicultural educators attend to the field of sport, because it plays a significant role in the socialization of youth. There are many sport-related topics that multicultural educators could address. This article focuses on the existence of Native American mascots in school-sponsored sport.

Because of the prevalence of stereotypes of Native Americans in United States popular culture, many have difficulty understanding the problems with Native American mascots. Even those who oppose these mascots often have trouble clearly articulating the reasons for their opposition. The purpose of this article is to lay out the main arguments against the use of Native American mascots. All of the arguments mentioned in this article are used by activists who are working to eliminate these mascots.

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*Laurel R. Davis is an associate professor of sociology in the Department of Social Science and Human Services/Administration at Springfield College, Springfield, Massachusetts.*

## The Mascots Are Racist Stereotypes

The most common argument against Native American mascots is that they represent racist stereotypes of Native Americans. Stereotypes of Native Americans appear throughout United States popular culture, such as in: movies; government seals; advertisements and symbols for products like butter, beer, and paper; and statues and paintings that non-Natives have in their homes. Scholars have observed two main stereotypes: the "bloodthirsty savage," which conveys the notions that Native Americans are wild, aggressive, violent, and brave; and the "noble savage," which conveys the notions that Native Americans are primitive, childlike, silent, and part of the natural world (Bataille & Silet, 1980; Hilger, 1986; Lyman, 1982; Williams, 1980).

It is the stereotype of Native Americans as bloodthirsty savage that led non-Natives to choose Native American mascots for sport. Traits associated with this stereotype, such as having a fighting spirit, and being aggressive, brave, stoic, dedicated, and proud, are associated with sport, and thus selecting a Native American mascot links sport teams with such traits. The appeal of this stereotype to many in sport is illustrated by the following quotations from supporters of Native American

mascots: "I can think of no greater tribute to the American Indian than to name a team's warriors after courageous, cunning—and feared—warriors of the Indian nations, the braves" (Shepard, 1991, p. 14A); and "I look at that mascot, that Indian head, and it stirs me up. I think of getting real aggressive, and it brings out the aggressiveness in me. And it makes me go out there and really wrestle hard and fight hard, you know, because that's what those Indians were" (cited in Davis, 1993, p. 15).

When all the mascots representing Native Americans are considered (e.g., Indians, Redskins, Braves, Chiefs), it turns out that Native Americans are the most common mascot in United States sport. The other mascots that are most common are animals, most of which are also associated with aggression and fighting (e.g., tigers). Of course it is offensive that Native Americans are perceived, and used as symbols, in the same way as animals.

Stereotypes are misleading generalizations about a category of people. When people believe stereotypes they tend to think that all, or almost all, people who belong to a particular category behave in the same way, and they tend to ignore the wide diversity of behavior exhibited by people within the category. So, regarding the stereotype associated with the mascots, not all Native Americans in the past were aggressive, brave, dedicated fighters. And today, most Native Americans do not occupy their time

fighting. And many non-Natives are aggressive, brave, dedicated fighters. Of course, many Native Americans take pride in their ethnic/racial background, and are dedicated people. But, do they have more pride and dedication than other groups? And, since Native Americans have extremely high rates of suicide, health problems, and poverty, asserting that this racial group has more pride than other groups is shallow.

The stereotype of Native Americans as aggressive is particularly offensive because it distorts the historical reality of European and European-American aggression (i.e., white invasion of Native American lands and conquering of people on these lands). Belief in this stereotype works to obscure the oppression, violence, and genocide initiated by European Americans against Native Americans, and serves as justification for these acts. This stereotype is part of a mythological history of the Western United States, according to which cowboys and so-called pioneers led a glorious and adventurous life fighting Native Americans. One reason the resistance to elimination of Native American mascots is so vigorous and emotionally-charged is because when the activists critique the mascots they are also criticizing a form of American identity that is linked to myths about the Western United States (Davis, 1993).

Native American mascots, and most other images of Native Americans in popular culture, are stereotypes that focus on the past, and thus these stereotypes reinforce the problematic view that associates Native Americans only with the past. Thus, this stereotyping works to obscure the lives of contemporary Native Americans. As one interview subject said, "Respect the living Indian, you know. Don't memorialize us...[The mascots are] almost like a monument to the vanished American Indian" (Davis, 1993, p. 13). Of course, recognizing and understanding the lives of contemporary Native Americans challenges this stereotype.

Native American mascots misrepresent, distort, and trivialize many aspects of Native American cultures, such as drumming, dancing, singing, and some aspects of religion. As an interview subject stated, "I compose memorial songs, I compose burial songs for my grandmothers and my grandfathers, my family. And, when people [imitate] that at an athletic event, like at a baseball game, it hurts me, to see that people are making a mockery of me. We don't do that, what they're doing, this chanting" (Davis, 1993, p. 13). Most of those who support the mascots do not understand the meanings or realities of Native American

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lives and cultures. Thus, it is particularly ironic that many who want to retain Native American mascots think they are honoring Native Americans. As an interview subject asserted, "How can you honor me, when you don't know the first damn thing about me" (Davis, 1993, p. 14)?

Another irony related to the belief that Native Americans are being honored by the mascots is that "positive" views of Native Americans, and the practice of using symbols of Native Americans to represent sport teams and the like, began soon after the last of the Native American nations were conquered or subdued (Davis, 1993). Thus, one has to ask, who is being "honored" by Native American mascots, Native Americans or those who subdued Native Americans?

The mascots, and most other images of Native Americans in popular culture, lump all nations (i.e., "tribes") of Native Americans together, incorrectly conveying that there is a single Native American culture, and rendering the diversity of Native American cultures invisible. For example, only some Native American nations have political structures that are dominated by a male chief, and headdresses are worn by members of only some nations.

Ethnic/racial groups other than Native Americans have occasionally been used as mascots. There are several reasons why these mascots are not as problematic as Native American mascots. First, these other mascots tend to either represent a people

that lived in the past and are not alive today (e.g., Spartans), or were selected by people from this ethnic group (e.g., Scots). Second, most of the mascots that represent other ethnic groups do not have the same association with aggression (e.g., Irish). And third, Native Americans should not have to condition their responses to be the same as other ethnic/racial groups.

One of the reasons many do not see Native American mascots, and other images of Native Americans in popular culture, as stereotypes and as racist is that the majority of these images seem to be positive. Most stereotypes of racial/ethnic groups are obviously negative, such as African Americans as criminals and Mexican Americans as lazy. It is easier to understand that overtly negative stereotypes are stereotypes and are racist. On the other hand, some stereotypes appear to be positive, such as Asians as intelligent, Jews as good at business, and Native Americans as brave. Yet, despite their positive tone, these are problematic stereotypes, in that many people from these groups do not fit the stereotype, and underneath the positive facade lies some problematic beliefs and consequences. For example, the stereotype that all Asians are intelligent contributes to the extra pressure and discrimination many Asian Americans face, and this stereotype is often used to disparage other Persons of Color. The stereotype that all Jews are good in business serves as a foundation for another stereotype—that Jews are taking over the world economy, a stereotype which has been used to legitimate anti-semitic actions such as the Holocaust. There are problematic beliefs and consequences that stem from the so-called positive stereotypes of Native Americans as well.

Some people argue that they should be able to retain their Native American mascots if they portray the mascots in a culturally authentic and non-stereotypical manner. There are three problems with this idea. One is that a school/team cannot control how others, such as the media and other schools/teams, use their mascot. For example, the media might print a headline announcing an "attack" by the school/team with the Native American mascot. The second problem with this idea is that the schools/teams with the Native American mascots will not be able to avoid stereotypes. Native Americans are a category of people that live in many different societies, each with a different culture, and within each Native American society there is much diversity. Thus, how does one portray what Native Americans are "really like?" Imagine creating a mascot that represented African Americans, Jewish Americans,

Puerto Ricans, or European Americans. Because of the wide diversity of people within these categories, any mascot one could imagine would be a stereotype. Third, it is inappropriate for non-Natives to imitate Native Americans, even if they do so in a culturally accurate way. We would find it offensive to see a Christian portray her/himself as Jewish or an European American portray her/himself as African American, even if the portrayal is culturally accurate (e.g., using an authentic dialect and clothing). Imitating another's culture, even if we do it accurately, seems like we are mimicking and mocking the other, especially if the imitation is done for entertainment, like it is at a sporting event.

The mascot stereotypes, and other images of Native Americans in popular culture, influence the way non-Natives both perceive and treat Native Americans. The poem on this page by Deb Smith (1991) addresses the link between the mascots and perceptions of Native Americans.

The mascot stereotypes, and other similar images, limit the abilities of the public to understand Native American realities. As the late Michael Dorris (1992) put it, "War-bonnetted apparitions pasted to football helmets or baseball caps act as opaque, impermeable curtains, solid walls of white noise that for many citizens block or distort all vision of the nearly 2 million native Americans today" (p. 19A).

### The Mascots Have a Negative Impact on Native American Lives

A second argument against the mascots, and many other images of Native Americans in popular culture, is that they have a negative impact on Native American lives. Many people argue that symbols, such as images and language, are trivial issues that do not matter. Yet, reams of scholarship demonstrate that symbols exert a significant influence on both our perceptions and behaviors.

Native American mascots create a hostile climate for many Native Americans, and sensitive non-Natives, in the schools and communities with these mascots. It is hard to feel comfortable in and committed to a school/community, and perform to the best of one's ability in school or work, when constantly surrounded by stereotypes that offend.

The mascots, and many other images of Native Americans in popular culture, negatively influence the self-image and self-esteem of Native Americans, especially children. One activist tells the story of how

she instilled pride in her children regarding their Native American heritage and she thought her children were secure. Yet, when she took them to a game with a Native American mascot she witnessed a major "blow to their self-esteem" as they "sank in their seats," not wanting to be identified as Native American (Davis, 1993). Another activist called the mascot issue a "mental health" issue (Ode, 1992, p. 2E).

Mascot stereotypes (and other images of Native Americans in popular culture) affect more than mental health and comfort within a school/community. Other problems Native Americans commonly face, such as poverty, cultural destruction, poor health, and inadequate education, are intertwined with public images of Native Americans. These images played a role in creating such problems, and now these images constrain Native American efforts to effectively address such problems.

Because of the current power structure in the United States, the quality of lives Native Americans will lead in the future depends on whether the general public has an accurate understanding of past and present Native American lives. If the public cannot understand the problem with Native American mascots, and other images of Native Americans in popular culture, they certainly will not understand sovereignty or other issues that affect the quality of Native American lives.

### Native Americans Should Control Images of Themselves

A third argument against the mascots is that Native Americans should have control over societal definitions of who they are. Currently, Native Americans have little power to shape public images of themselves, and the voices of Native Americans are rarely heard. Non-Natives continually assert that the mascots are honoring Native Americans, despite the fact that most pan-ethnic Native American organizations (i.e., organizations consisting of Native American nations from throughout the United States) have stated otherwise (Rosenstein, 1996). One Native American writer said: "I'll decide what honors me and what doesn't...Minority groups have had enough of whites telling them what to think" (MacPhie, 1991, p. 19A). It is plain arrogance, and lack of respect, for Non-Natives to think that they know more about Native Americans, and what honors them, than Native Americans themselves.

Of course, one can find some people from every racial/ethnic group to agree with any opinion, as people from one racial/ethnic group never all have the same opinion, so supporters of Native American mascots have been able to find Native Americans (and other People of Color) to defend their use of these mascots. Many Native Americans have learned stereotypes of Native Americans from the same sources that non-Natives have. Some Native Americans have even profited from selling images of these stereotypes to non-Natives. It is important

Hey World Series chanters—

pull out your tomahawk chop and use it to cut open old wounds...

Make an image of us as a hating people like you see us

Burn that image like a wood carving in America's psyche

Show the world this face.

The farce face image you portray us the way you want us to be

The way you want to see us...

Tomahawk chopping cuts deep.

I just thought I should tell you

It's not just a game or symbol to me

A war of my people's image isn't over yet

I can see & hear.

—by Deb Smith (p. 5)

not to blame these Native Americans, but to recognize the social forces that affect them, such as the media, extreme poverty, and inadequate education. In light of the fact that most pan-ethnic Native American organizations have issued statements against the mascots, it is offensive for non-Natives to use Native Americans, or other People of Color, to justify the position that the mascots should be retained.

### Other Issues Associated with the Mascots

Finally, there are several other issues associated with the Native American mascot controversy that need to be addressed. The first issues are tradition and intent. Supporters of Native American mascots regularly point out that they do not intend to offend anyone, they intend to honor Native Americans, and they are just having fun and affirming tradition. It is worth pointing out that not all traditions are good ones. Some examples of bad traditions are racially-segregated facilities and the exclusion of women from schools. Many people have benefited from the elimination of such traditions.

It is also crucial to note that intent is not the most important issue here. If a belief or action has problematic consequences (i.e., if it has negative societal effects), then we should eliminate it, regardless of intents. For example, drunk drivers or men who continually comment on the sexual attractiveness of women they work with, usually do not intend to harm anyone, and yet the consequences of such actions are often problematic and thus we should work to eliminate these behaviors. Many times, despite our best intentions, when we lack the necessary knowledge, our behavior can be quite harmful to others. Although most people who support Native American mascots do not intend to harm Native Americans, the consequences of the mascots are problematic and therefore the mascots should be eliminated.

The final issue is the small percentage of people who object to Native American mascots. Many supporters of Native American mascots argue that the mascots must not be problematic because only a small number of people object to them. Polls do indicate that if this issue were put to voters, the majority of people in most parts of the United States would vote to retain the mascots (Sigelman, 1998). Yet, there are two reasons that the focus on numbers and majority rule is problematic.

First, it is important to note that the

majority of people in the United States are uncritical of stereotypes of Native Americans, including the mascots, because of lack of education about Native American issues. Most Americans have had little to no substantial contact with Native Americans, and thus have distorted perspectives that come from television, movies (especially "Westerns"), and "tourist traps" that feature stereotypes of Native Americans. We have been inundated with stereotypes of Native Americans in United States popular culture from birth, so we have come to believe these stereotypes (Green, 1988). So, it is not surprising that large numbers of people do not understand this issue.

It seems that in areas of the United States where the Native American population is larger and politically active, the non-Native population has a greater understanding of Native American issues because they have been educated by local Native Americans and media coverage of these Native Americans (Davis, 1993). The task of educating the United States public or regional populations about Native American stereotypes and lives is a difficult one.

Second, Native Americans represent only about one percent of the United States population, so issues they care about, and most others do not, will not likely win public approval. People who are Jewish, and people who travel in wheelchairs, also represent a small percentage of the United States population, yet this does not mean that others should ignore their feelings and concerns. Even if the percentage of people who are offended is small, others should still try to be sensitive. Part of being a good citizen is trying to empathize with other people, especially those who are different from ourselves. Of course, we should attempt to understand why other people are offended by something, but even if we cannot achieve this understanding the considerate thing to do is to respond to others' concerns.

Those who support the use of Native American mascots often claim that they want to retain the mascots because they "respect" Native Americans. Respect is a meaningless word when the positions of most pan-ethnic Native American organizations are ignored. Real respect is carefully listening to, attempting to understand, and addressing Native American concerns about this issue. On a related note, it is not accurate to say that every possible symbol or mascot will be objectionable to someone. There are many symbols, including most other sport mascots, that are not offensive to any groups of people.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, equality and justice in society depends on our abilities to empathize with those who are different from us. If we listen carefully to the Native American individuals and organizations that call for an elimination of Native American mascots it will be clear that there are valid reasons why we should work to eliminate these mascots, and other problematic images of Native Americans, in society. The state of Minnesota has made a coordinated effort to eliminate Native American mascots in its public schools and has been quite successful. The rest of the country needs to follow their lead.

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