

The Controversy of American Indian Mascots and Names in Sports

Spencer Kellogg-Clarke
A04273853

SOCI 4309
Dr. Harris

Spring semester

2018

Abstract

My topic concerns how American Indians are portrayed in popular culture. My topic is sociologically relevant because although there has been much debate about it, furthermore in-depth study of the topic isn't as plentiful. My question of how Native Americans are portrayed in sports media, specifically using often scandalized Indian mascots and names is an interesting question that involves a people with an appreciable culture. To answer my question, I will do a content analysis of academic peer-reviewed journals on the matter as well as analyzing sports media to provide a thorough understanding. My major findings include several themes found throughout my research, a strong one being the obvious factor of the controversy of Indians mascots and names which was well documented throughout my research. Out of the first broad theme consists two more that branch out from it so to speak. They are the oppressed and ignored Indigenous natives, and the largely non-native population who insists that the imagery isn't offensive and who consistently work to downplay it all.

Introduction

The focus of what my research question is about is often a topic of much debate today. My research looks at the controversy surrounding the portrayal of Native Americans in professional sports with the use of often deemed racist mascots and caricatures. A professor of mine Dr. Riley, who specializes in Native American beliefs, told me they prefer to be called Indian and often refer to themselves as ‘real people’ or ‘real Indian’. According to Wikipedia, the Trademark Trial and Appeal Board or TTAB voted against the Washington Redskins trademark registrations in 2014 for example, but several years later the United States Supreme Court came to an agreement that was a violation of freedom of speech. Controversy concerning the Cleveland Indians famous Chief Wahoo logo has continued to swirl and in 2019 the team will no longer be sporting the chief on their uniforms at all, which is something easily found on MLB.com or the Cleveland Indians website. Furthermore, my question is sociologically relevant because these images put pictures in people’s heads of a world beyond their reach, promoting stereotypes which foster the misunderstanding and further the cultural oppression of a people who have already been quite battered. A content analysis of sports media, specifically *Sports Illustrated*, will develop a clearer picture of what messages are being sent through examining manifest and latent content.

Literature Review

To start things off, “The stereotype of American Indians historically falls under two broad categories, one with a positive evaluative component, that of the noble savage

(brave, religious, silent, and nature loving) and the other with a negative connotation (lazy, lecherous, superstitious, untrustworthy, thieving, drunken Indian)” (Fryberg et al. 2011: 579). Studies of American Indian athletic imagery shows there are people in support of its use as well as those are heavily against it. Social representation theory indicates that whether these mascots are viewed positively or negatively they are still likely to have negative unwanted consequences (Fryberg et al. 2008). This is because these caricatures limit how Indians see themselves as well as how others see them. The reduction of these people to a mere stereotype is reiterated with the following excerpt: “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” (Davis 2002: 26). Fryberg et al. use social representation theory and social identity theory in explaining their findings. The article goes on to maintain that since self-understanding is so heavily influenced by certain social categories having a multitude of social representations makes it particularly challenging to formulate an identity of one’s self, and that trying to define one’s self outside of these representations is even more challenging (Fryberg et al. 2008). This is even more so true for young Native Americans as content analysis by Fryberg of “national newspapers and major films” show that they are “seldom” depicted as ‘contemporary people with everyday social roles’ (Fryberg et al. 2008). The issue is further explored by Todd M. Callais of Ohio Dominican University. Using symbolic interactionist and conflict theory his paper examines the ‘public framing’ of Chief Wahoo. In a paragraph about brief history the origin of the mascot cites the organization as saying that Sockalexis was inspiration for their name and

that they should be thanked as his memory is not forgotten. There are other stories involving the origin of the name, but the one involving Native American player Francis Sockalexis is widely used by those who are in support of the Chief. Conflict theory suggests that conflict in society arises between groups with varying levels of power. Extending the concept to the discussion of American Indian mascots Callais says that “those who have authority are the large number of individuals that positively define Chief Wahoo and the name ‘Indians’ and the persons in ownership of the franchise who need to maintain a fan base and continue to make profits from Chief Wahoo merchandise” (Callais 2010: 67). Symbolic interactionists explain the Mascot debate considering two significant aspects of it which is the “use of symbols as social objects that are used for communication and the importance of perspectives in dictating how objects are defined” (Callais 2010: 67). A Texas Tech university article cites Fryberg concerning the belief that race-based mascots are part of the “construction and maintenance of stereotypes” (Laveay, Callison and Rodriguez). They use Fryberg’s research concerning how the exposure of people to mascots and popular depictions of Native Americans like Pocahontas lowered participants self-esteem scores and community worth. in supporting the claim that Native Americans not only suffer because of demeaning mascot imagery but that they are the most affected by these stereotypes.

Chief Illiniwek, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign from 1926-2007 is a great example of controversial mascot in sports. Work by Fryberg (2008) and King (2015) both talk about how Chief Illiniwek is celebrated among a community of students and fans, but how it was voted that the Chief be retired. This is because images like the Chief limit American Indians’ sense of themselves and in many eyes reduces a very

historically rich proud culture to a shallow stereotype. I remember Dr. Riley telling me it tends to be the “lesser” the Indian one is the more contentious or sensitive they are to the use of these sports logos. It’s as if they want to prove they have the right to be Indian. I know there those are offended, but I also see how there are those who say it honors them, after all American Indian sports logos are among some of the most decorated. The Chicago Blackhawks uniform, especially their home red uniform, has been referred to as the greatest in sports. They are also named after Black Hawk, a war chief of the Sauk who fought in the War of 1812. The same principle is true for the Cleveland Indians as their early name and logos were in honor of an actual Native American baseball player Louis Sockalexis, whose nickname was The Deerfoot of the Diamond, and who is commonly referred to as the first Native American to play baseball in the MLB. Opponents of these mascots however argue that no matter the intended use there is always a negative impact, which is why they should be gotten rid of (Freng and Willis-Esqueda). As the paper points out though research is limited, and to Freng and Willis-Esqueda’s knowledge only Kim-Prieto and colleagues and Fryberg and colleagues have examined consequences of exposure to this imagery. Freng and Willis-Esqueda reiterate the findings of Fryberg and colleagues, specifically how exposing “American Indian students to mascot imagery lowered students’ self-esteem, collective self-efficacy, and the number of reported academic possible selves (e.g., belief that next year they would “get good grades,” “find a job,” etc.)” (Freng and Willis-Esqueda 2011: 579). They also talk about how mascot imagery limits the ways in which others see them and consequently how they see themselves. Freng and Willis-Esqueda stretch the interpretation to include how they feel that American Indian Mascots may trigger positive

and negative stereotypes, in the minds of perceivers. “Clyde Bellecourt, executive director of the American Indian Movement says that protests are about trying to convince people we’re human beings and not mascots” (Miller 1999: 189).

Methodology

A content analysis is well suited for answering the ‘what’ is being communicated. How American Indians are depicted in sports media is an open-ended question that asks about portrayal and therefore a content analysis is appropriate. The ‘so what’ of my question can be answered by doing a content analysis of specific content concerning *Sports Illustrated*. *Sports Illustrated* is a major American sports media franchise and the first magazine to win prominent awards. Besides being a major source for sports related information, *Sports Illustrated* having access to technology of modern times like twitter and the internet further prompted me in choosing the franchise to analyze. By examining manifest and latent indicators I will get a more thorough understanding of what messages are being communicated.

A lot of early issues of *Sports Illustrated* magazines featured Cleveland Indians players such as the 1963 issue with a player named Bob Hope and an issue in 1966 with pitcher Sam McDowell. A 1987 version of the magazine featured to Indians ballplayers with the caption ‘Indian Uprising’. *Sports Illustrated* also has many issues featuring other teams with athletic imagery like a 1973 issue featuring the Washington Redskins with Duane Thomas and a February 2011 issue with well-known players within the MLB community Freddie Freeman and Jason Heyward. With all of this often-scandalized Indian imagery in the media a good question pops up into my head relating to my

research, is the media promoting racism? Some media sources would say that it's only their job to report the news.

For the content analysis of the media I studied both manifest and latent indicators. Manifest indicators include demographics of the people sporting these logos which are pretty much exclusively non-Native men, as well as things like the setting and colors. Latent indicators consist of stereotypes, facial expressions, tones, body language and things that are seen again or tropes. Stereotypes within the media include the gleaming eyes of Chief Wahoo as well as the broken down sad face the Washington Redskins used to sport. I chose to use *Sports Illustrated* because they are top when it comes to sports media. Continuing my study of manifest and latent indicators, the ways in which American Indians are portrayed in the media are easier understood.

Findings

A major reoccurring theme is the expressed offensiveness of many Indian team names and mascots. There is a huge active debate over the morality of Indian names and mascots. Among the most controversial are the Washington Redskins and the Cleveland Indians. In a *Sports Illustrated* online article a Lakota man Billy Mills who won a gold medal at the 1964 Olympics insists that “a team named Redskins in the capital of the nation that committed genocide against Native Americans is the equivalent of a soccer team in Germany being called the Berlin Kikes.” Another *Sports Illustrated* article discusses the 1987 Cleveland Indians and the *SI* magazine with the “jarring” caption ‘Indian Uprising.’ American sports journalist Joe Posnanski remembers how weird and nuts it was looking back. How the team had aging pitching and ended up with the worst

record in baseball despite *Sports Illustrated* picking the team to win it all. The cover of that specific edition sure is the stuff of controversy for many people though at the time the Cleveland Indians put Chief Wahoo on the hats at the request of a few players and *Sports Illustrated* reportedly loved it. *SI* features Indians players sporting the Chief on several other magazines covers like the February 2011 edition with Freddie Freeman and Jayson Heyward. Another major theme across the media content I studied is the finding that Native Americans suffer because of stereotypes brought on by Indian mascot imagery. I read how natives have been reduced in terms of culture, language, self-esteem and in terms of a sense of community worth. The article quoted Fryberg in its defense saying, “critics believe race-based team mascots are part of the construction and maintenance of stereotypes.” Another piece of media I studied supports how Native Americans ignored as logos like Wahoo have lingered despite many protests by the indigenous peoples of the United States. One American Indian and Cleveland native writes how as a society we are repulsed by black or Asian caricatures, but Native people are not regarded the same. There is plenty of evidence from the media to back up the claim that Indian mascots diminish the Native community in many ways. The American Psychological Association released a paper showing how the use of these mascots again directly results in lower self-esteem and mental health particularly for young people. All of these impacts a community already affected exponentially more by things like alcohol abuse and suicide. An overwhelming majority of the media I studied was filled with excerpts from supporters of this imagery who firmly believe that it isn’t offensive, and even honors them. It seems to be that the question of whether they do pay homage to American Indian peoples should be left up to them. As I read, many of these sports towns

with Indian athletic imagery live in a 'bubble' in terms of how they see mascots like Chief Wahoo for example. One Cleveland fan describes what is going on as "Cleveland pride" as a definite majority of non-natives are in support. In a poll conducted for *SI* 351 Native Americans and 743 fans were interviewed for their opinion on the matter. 83% of the Indians thought that pro teams "should not stop using Indian nicknames or symbols with 79% of fans agreeing with them. These results are also indicative of the large disagreement over the situation as there are many activists who think otherwise. Former president Barack Obama chimed in on the issue saying there is no excuse for these mascots to persist and referenced Adidas for their help with schools in providing financial and design resources to help with creating new mascots, which is great. Going back to the issue of 'Cleveland pride' former GM on the Indians Mark Shapiro even said that the Chief Wahoo logo even "personally bothered" him, but upon considering how passionate the fans are about the team, not to mention the money made of all the Wahoo merchandise, Shapiro wanted the Chief to very much be a part of the team and city of Cleveland. Considering the historical greed of mankind combined with a massive fan base it is clearer understood why the Chief has lingered on for so long.

Discussion

My findings match previous research on the topic in that we all found that Natives suffer because of Indian names and mascots. According to social representation theory whether this imagery is viewed in a positive or negative light they are still likely to bring on negative consequences. My findings also coincide with previous research done involving social identity theory, conflict theory and symbolic interaction theory to name a few. Sociological theory fits into my research because as I have explained these silly

racist mascots stereotypically portray Native Americans and especially for the youth they limit how Indians see themselves as well as others. Conflict theory also fits well into my research because it maintains that social order is maintained by domination and power rather than unity. As one Sports Illustrated article I read pointed out when talking about the treatment of Native Americans both past and present, and reflecting on people thinking these racist mascots are okay, “colonization has really taken hold.” Symbolic interaction provides the essential framework needed to understand the debate. It involves the use of symbols as social objects and the importance of perspectives in defining them. Social identity theory says that a person’s sense of identity is tied into their group membership, and with many parts of Natives’ culture being forgotten like lost languages these crude stereotypical images shallowly define the group, which individuals define themselves off, according to social identity theory. This relates to the ‘so what’ question because racism is one of the biggest social issues today and as I said sociological theory can help understand my topic excellently.

Conclusion

Upon considering how Native Americans are portrayed in the media there is much to ponder about. My major findings have a lot to say about my research question, though there were some limitations. One of the biggest was time. Because of the time span in which my research had to be completed there were other limitations as well. If I had more time, and other resources like money I could have interviewed actual American Indian activists for their opinion on the matter. Of course, this would include formalities like ethical concerns, especially when conducting research with a population who rightfully has much to be sensitive about, not just historically speaking either. Future sociologists

could really gather some rich data by exploring firsthand the issue surrounding debate over controversies like the use of the team name Washington Redskins. Many Indians have knowledge that can only be understood firsthand, meaning that a lot of what they know is not written down. This includes personal feelings and opinions as well as many stories and knowledge related to their rich culture and history.

References

- Freng, Scott and Cynthia Willis-Esqueda. 2011. "A Question of Honor: Chief Wahoo and American Indian Stereotype Activation Among a University Based Sample." *The Journal of Social Psychology* 151(5):577–91.
- Callais, Todd M. 2010. "Controversial Mascots: Authority and Racial Hegemony in the Maintenance of Deviant Symbols." *Sociological Focus* 43(1):61–81.
- Fryberg, Stephanie A., Hazel Rose Markus, Daphna Oyserman, and Joseph M. Stone. 2008. "Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses: The Psychological Consequences of American Indian Mascots." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 30(3):208–18.
- Laveay, Fraser, Coy Callison, and Ann Rodriguez. 2009. "Offensiveness of Native American Names, Mascots, and Logos in Sports: A Survey of Tribal Leaders and the General Population." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 2(1):81–99.
- Miller, Jackson B. 1999. "'Indians,' 'Braves,' and 'Redskins': A Performative Struggle for Control of an Image." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85(2):188–202.
- Davis, L. R. 2002. "The problems with Native American mascots." *Multicultural Education*, 9(4), 11-14.