



Indian psychologists support retiring of offensive team mascots

The Society of Indian Psychologists (SIP) wants sports teams such as the Washington Redskins and the Florida State Seminoles to find new names.

The 300-member group, which meets twice each year, issued a statement on Jan. 27 in support of retiring all American Indian personalities as team mascots. The symbols, they say, promote stereotypes and offend American Indians.

"It's distressing when Native people who are searching for their own identity or attempting to present their tribal identity as accurately as possible have to combat the dominant culture over the offensive use of our images and symbols," says Dennis Tibbetts, PhD, a SIP member and the director of the Center for Native American studies at Northern Michigan University.

Such mascots also lead to misinformation about American Indian cultures, say SIP officials. The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, mascot "Chief Illiniwek," for example, dons the clothing of the Lakota people, not the Illini tribe the mascot is supposed to honor. And his game "dance" resembles no traditional or contemporary dance known to Native people, says Joe Gone, a member of the Gros Ventre tribe and a doctoral candidate in the clinical and community psychology program at the university.

"Chief Illiniwek reinforces all of the stereotypical conceptions of native people so prevalent in the American consciousness, effectively reducing the fullness of our humanity to a unidimensional farce," says Gone.

Institutions such as Dartmouth College and Stanford University, as well as the public school systems in Dallas and Los Angeles, have dropped their American Indian mascots and team names over the years. But hundreds of junior high and high schools, colleges and universities and national sports teams hold on to the symbols. In February, controversy over a possible name change for the mascots at Erwin High School in Asheville, N.C.--the "Warriors" and the "Squaws"--spurred the Justice

Department to open an investigation into possible civil rights violations.

Often alumni and community groups protest a name change by insisting a mascot is a tribute to American Indians, which is what is happening at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

"It has been very difficult to convince those people--even when the very people they are 'honoring' say they don't feel honored," says Michelle Fryling, director of media relations at the university and head of a task force that has pushed for a name change. The school recently decided to keep the Indian as its team name and use a black bear as its symbol.

SIP president Mary Clearing-Sky, PhD, hopes the society's statement prompts other psychologists to support their cause.

"As psychologists we have information and skills about people's self-images and self-esteem. That knowledge, information and research can be helpful to all of us working on this issue," she says.

--J. Chamberlin

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