Multicultural training intervention to address American Indian stereotypes

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Abstract

This manuscript describes a multicultural training intervention that addresses American Indian stereotypes perpetuated through the use of American Indians and corresponding imagery as mascots by schools and athletic teams. Using AMCD’s tripartite model of multicultural competence (e.g., awareness, knowledge, skills) as a framework, the description of this intervention is organized into three components: perspective-taking to facilitate awareness of attitudes about Native-themed mascots, specific knowledge about race-based mascots, and social justice skills that can empower counselors to become advocates for change. This training intervention can help counseling programs provide enhanced multicultural counseling competency training on issues salient to American Indian communities.

Keywords: multicultural counseling, race-based sports mascots, training intervention, American Indian, Native American, stereotypes
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The crowd roars as the mascot enters the gym. The student section of the East High School *Catholics* erupts with the anticipated entrance of Father Guido. He is dressed in flowing robes, with golf-ball sized rosary beads flopping around his neck, and an oversized mitre atop his head with the words “CATHOLICS RULE” written on this tall cloth hat. He begins his much anticipated halftime routine by tossing faux-Eucharistic hosts into the crowd, much to the delight of the fans who gobble them up or toss them back and forth to each other. Throughout the routine, his genuflections are accompanied by his pantomimed crucifix consecrations of the crowd. After his flamboyant flipping of holy water into the crowd, Father Guido goes for the money shot—he grabs the incense urn and completes his frenzied blessing of the crowd before suddenly becoming stoic, dropping to a knee in prayer, then rising to scream in unison with the crowd, “Pope Benedict, lead us to victory!” The fans feel honored to receive Father Guido’s blessing, in hopes that it will inspire the crowd to cheer diligently for the *Catholics’* second half surge to victory. Now, given that East High School is predominantly Muslim (and Father Guido is incidentally a student of color who paints his face white to play the role), I wonder how the small handful of Catholic students at East High feel about this portrayal of their people, of their faith. How does it make you feel? How likely is this scenario to occur? I want you to reflect on these questions as we walk together on this journey.

This vignette represents an element of a training intervention designed to address stereotypes of American Indians among master’s level counseling students. The use of American Indians and corresponding imagery for sports mascots, nicknames, and logos is a common societal practice that perpetuates stereotypes of American Indians in society (Baca, 2004; Davis,
Results of an empirical investigation of this training intervention indicate that it is effective in increasing counseling graduate students’ awareness of the offensiveness of Native-themed mascots (e.g., *Redskins, Indians, Chiefs*), and in also reducing levels of color blind racial attitudes, thereby increasing awareness of racism in society. A separate manuscript describes the details of this empirical investigation (see Author, 2010), but space constraints disallowed a detailed description of the training intervention. Thus, due to the paucity of research on this issue in the counseling literature, this manuscript provides a detailed description of the components of this training intervention for counselor educators.

Counseling programs can use the information presented in this manuscript to augment current multicultural competency curriculum on American Indian issues. Doing so can provide students with enhanced multicultural counseling training by developing awareness, knowledge, and social justice skills in regard to stereotypes perpetuated by the use of Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos.

**Native-themed Mascots, Nicknames, and Logos**

In 2005, the American Psychological Association (APA) joined the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2001) and other prominent organizations by publishing a resolution condemning the use of American Indian imagery and symbols as mascots by schools and athletic teams. According to the APA resolution, Native-themed mascots should be immediately retired because they undermine the educational experiences of members of all communities, establish an unwelcome and hostile learning environment for American Indian students, have a negative impact on the self-esteem of American Indian children, and undermine the ability of American Indians to portray accurate and respectful images of their culture (APA, 2005). The ACA
resolution (2001) encourages its members to work toward the elimination of these stereotypic American Indian images in institutions where they are employed.

Training counselors to be advocates for change in this regard requires counseling programs to first address their own awareness and knowledge of stereotypes perpetuated by race-based mascots. “Because the counseling profession has, in large part, held a privileged position in the United States, many counselors have been unaware of and complacent to many forms of societal injustice that continue to be perpetuated in marginalized communities” (Duran, Firehammer, & Gonzalez, 2008, p. 289). According to the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development’s (AMCD, 2009) multicultural counseling competencies, culturally skilled counselors need to be aware of stereotypes that they may hold toward racial and ethnic minority groups. Because Native-themed mascots provide society with an abundance of deleterious stereotypes of American Indians (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008; King et al., 2002; Russel, 2003; Staurowsky, 2004), counselors need to be aware of these stereotypes in order to work effectively with American Indian clients (Sutton & Broken Nose, 2005). Counseling programs would benefit from addressing how the use of American Indians as mascots fits into their conceptualization of multicultural counseling training.

Arredondo and colleagues operationally defined AMCD’s multicultural counseling competencies by using a tripartite model of awareness of attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Arredondo et al., 1996). Accordingly, the detailed description of this training intervention has been organized into three components: perspective-taking to facilitate awareness of attitudes toward race-based mascots, specific knowledge about Native-themed mascots, and skills that can assist students in becoming advocates for change.

**Multicultural Awareness**
The first portion of the training intervention facilitates awareness of attitudes toward Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos by providing students with multiple perspectives on the issue. The perspective-eliciting aspect of this intervention aligns itself with Allport’s (1954) social categorization theory, which is considered an effective framework to conceptualize the function of stereotypes in our society (APA, 2003). The training intervention seeks to increase awareness of attitudes toward Native-themed mascots by exposing students to perspectives that address both the ingroup and outgroup categories (Allport, 1954).

The vignette about East High School provides students with the perspective of what it might be like to have their own group (i.e., ingroup) portrayed as a mascot. By using the Catholics mascot, the training intervention intends to elicit a sense of indignation about the inappropriate use of acts that are considered sacred (e.g., Eucharistic hosts, consecrations, genuflections). While the students may not be Catholic, the prevalence of Christian privilege in society (Schlosser, 2003) suggests that most students will have familiarity with the religious practices that Father Guido uses for his routine. Thus, the East High School Catholics vignette allows students to consider, perhaps for the first time, how they would feel if that which they hold sacred was used in such a flippant manner at a sporting event.

The training intervention intends to triangulate student awareness from multiple perspectives by also utilizing Allport’s (1954) outgroup category. Examples are given to students that allow Native-themed mascots to provide a connection between American Indians and other marginalized groups. Many authors (Russell, 2003; Sigelman, 1998; Williams, 2006) have commented on the paradoxical nature of society’s acceptance of Native-themed mascots, particularly in comparison to portrayals of other minority groups that would be considered socially unacceptable (e.g., no team would be named New York Negroes). To elicit relevant
outgroup perspectives that highlight this paradox, this training intervention provides narrative (and visual) descriptions of fictional matchups between teams with human mascots. The following vignette provides commentary on potential matchups of offensively named teams:

On the college stage Saturday, the Indiana Wetbacks take on the Purdue Jews in an exciting Big Ten matchup. The Wetbacks, who are known for their lackadaisical, listless and sometimes just plain lazy effort on the court, will have to find a way to solve the Jews’ stinging defense. These Jews have a nose for the ball, and they are covetous of victories. The professional matchup on Sunday features the Washington Redskins against the Nashville Nigg... [stopping mid-sentence]... oops, sorry, my fault. I need to update this slide. You see, Nashville recently caved to the pressures of political correctness and changed their team nickname despite tremendous pressure from fans, boosters, and supporters who cited years of vaunted tradition—not to mention the massive merchandising empire—surrounding their beloved team mascot, “Sammy Bo.”

The students are informed that although this commentary on the offensively-named matchups may seem unrealistic or excessive, contemporary media still uses this race-specific language to describe teams with Native-themed mascots. Headlines such as “Lady Indians on the warpath after rolling over Seahawks” (Mitchell, 2009) and “Dream day for Owings as D-backs scalp Braves” (Reuters, 2007) have the same harmful effect as “Purdue Jews steal a victory from Indiana.” By allowing race-based mascots to exist, permission is implicitly granted for deleterious stereotypes to freely permeate the fabric of our society. This hegemonic and subconscious mechanism makes Native-themed mascots insidiously powerful, with “deliberate and destructive effects on Native Americans” (Fenelon, 1999, p. 27).
In conducting this portion of the training intervention, the authors are acutely aware of the potential to offend people from marginalized groups. Providing stereotypic images (e.g., visuals, corresponding epitaphs) of other marginalized groups illustrates powerful parallels to society’s portrayal of American Indians as sport mascots. However, doing so unfortunately exposes those from marginalized groups to the insensitive rhetoric and practices that this training intervention intends to address and eliminate. Thus, the presenter needs to explicitly acknowledge this paradox of perspective-eliciting, both prior to and during the presentation. Presenters should also create space and make themselves available afterward to students who potentially may feel victimized by a portrayal of the marginalized group they identify with.

The third and final aspect of the awareness component of the training intervention deviates from previous alignment with Allport’s (1954) social categorization theory by providing perspectives from the experience of children. Borrowing directly from Baca (2004), the training intervention encourages students to envision the reality of an American Indian child who attends a school with a Native-themed nickname (i.e., Brave). The following vignette is read to students while the picture on the screen depicts an American Indian girl standing next to a school banner that says, “Home of the Braves” below a picture of the school mascot:

When she gets off the bus at school, she is greeted by this gigantic picture of a “Brave.” When she enters the school doors, on the wall she may see a cartooned/caricatured version of an Indian with a big belly, an over-exaggerated nose, wearing only a loin cloth and a headband with a bent feather. When she gets to class, she sees the faux image on textbook covers. When she goes to gym class, she watches her classmates run and bounce balls over the same ubiquitous image painted on the floor. If she goes to a sports event, it is likely that a White student will dress up in some form of Indian costume and perform
fake ritualistic dances to the delight of her peers. These images are omnipresent in the life of this Indian child, and given the fact that it is a public school, it is all done with the acquiescence of the state. She doesn’t see any other race singled out for this caricatured, mocking treatment. She internalizes that her race is treated differently, and her classmates see her as different. This isn’t the “I’m interested in learning more about you” or “I want to be your friend’ kind of uniqueness. Rather, it is the kind of different that allows others to mock and ridicule freely, thus perpetuating this badge of racial inferiority. This little girl receives this message weekly, daily, hourly.

After reading this vignette, students are rhetorically asked to consider the effects this experience could have on the developmental trajectory of this young girl. Students are then asked to consider the effects this experience may have on non-Indian children. Again borrowing directly from Baca (2004), the training intervention provides a vignette that illustrates how non-Indian children are aware that their culture is not caricatured. Their religious heritage is held with respect such that their iconography would not be used in a secular manner at school. No person of another race would paint their face White and engage in imitations of what they associate with their race. The conclusion of the White child is that their culture is superior to this other culture. The vignette concludes by stating that when people are reduced to stereotypes, they are not real. They do not have to be listened to. It is easier to hurt them (Baca, 2004).

This perspective-facilitating experience intends to raise awareness of how Native-themed mascots allow mainstream society to appropriate American Indian culture while systematically teaching the ideology of White supremacy (Pewewardy, 1991). The continued acceptance of race-based mascots demonstrates how schools are constructed as White public spaces (Farnell, 2004). Because “assumptions of Whiteness circulate undetected throughout discussions and
debates about the continued use of American Indian imagery” (Staurowsky, 1999, p. 385), society rarely questions the possibility that Native-themed mascots could create a racially hostile educational environment (Baca, 2004). Part of the problem with Native-themed mascots is that their unquestioned acceptance cloaks racism in a benign disguise (Staurowsky, 2007).

**Multicultural Knowledge**

While awareness through perspective-taking is established, the training intervention presents information specific to the nature of race-based mascots. Students need to acquire specific knowledge of American Indian issues in order to address misinformation they have been taught about American Indians (Loewen, 2008), particularly sources that minimize opposition to Native-themed mascots (Farnell, 2004; King et al., 2002; Staurowsky, 2004). Proponents of Native-themed mascots often minimize the potential psychological harm of this practice. Instead, they prioritize tradition of the sports team, purport that they are honoring American Indians by using them as mascots, and insist that this is simply an issue of political correctness gone awry (Author, in press; Davis, 2002; King et al., 2006; Springwood, 2004; Staurowsky, 1999).

The first informational aspect of the training intervention addresses how Native-themed mascots perpetuate stereotypes of American Indians (e.g., noble savage, bloodthirsty savage, non-existent people; King et al., 2002; Staurowsky, 2004; Baca, 2004). When relegated to mascot status, American Indians are stereotypically seen by mainstream America as people of the past that no longer exist (Staurowsky, 2004). The training intervention addresses this stereotype by presenting a contrast between Native-themed mascots and other human mascots that represent past civilizations (e.g., Vikings, Spartans, Trojans). Unlike American Indians, Vikings are in fact people of the past. However, because society is filled with images of contemporary Swedes and Norwegians, images of Vikings in sport do not serve as default
representations of contemporary Scandinavians. The National Football League’s Minnesota Vikings do not represent Scandinavians in the same way that Major League Baseball’s Cleveland Indians represent American Indians. Unlike Vikings, Indians are not people of the past. However, their portrayal as mascots, without ample societal images to counter stereotypes perpetuated by mascots (Fryberg et al., 2008), locks American Indians into this past tense status.

Another piece of specific information presented in the training intervention is that American Indians are uniquely subjected to this race-based practice. Proponents of Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos often cite the argument, “I’m Irish, and I’m not offended by the Notre Dame Fighting Irish nickname, so why are Indians offended?” (Author, in press; King et al., 2002). The training intervention addresses this discrepancy by discussing aspects of self-identification that differentiate the Fighting Sioux from the Fighting Irish nickname. If we overlook Notre Dame’s use of a mythical creature (i.e., leprechaun) as opposed to an actual human being (i.e., Indian warrior), self-identification can explain why people of Irish descent can purport not to be offended by the Fighting Irish nickname. Notre Dame is a Catholic institution with strong historic and current connections to the Irish-American community. As such, people of Irish descent have a vested interest (and pride) in Notre Dame’s nickname, and they exercise a degree of control over how the image presented. In contrast, no American Indians play baseball for the Cleveland Indians, American Indians do not profit or gain from this logo, and American Indians do not have control over how their images are used by teams that employ Native-themed mascots (Farnell, 2004; Fenelon, 1999; Staurowsky, 2007).

The training intervention provides an example that illustrates how people of Irish descent can exert control over their self-identified race-based nickname. The example involves an incident that occurred during a college football game between Stanford and Notre Dame in 1997.
(Stanford Online Report, 1997). The Stanford band performed a halftime routine entitled, “These Irish, Why Must They Fight?” This routine included a parody of an Irish potato famine, complete with a band member dressed in a Catholic cardinal uniform. The response from Notre Dame and the Irish American community was swift and overwhelming. They were outraged at how the image of their people was appropriated and used in such a demeaning and offensive manner. As a result, Stanford’s band was banned from performing at Notre Dame from 1997 through 2000 (Stanford Online Report, 1997). The reality of the situation is that people of Irish heritage can protect their image, and thus they have the power to say they aren’t offended by their own race-based mascot. In contrast, American Indians do not have the power to say they aren’t offended. University of North Dakota Fighting Sioux fans have worn t-shirts depicting a fat, slovenly-looking Indian figure sodomizing a bison to show support for their team against their rivals, North Dakota State University Bison (see Figure 1). American Indians could not exert any institutional power to protect the misuse of an image that they did not authorize the university to use in the first place. In this context, American Indians cannot regulate how their race-based nickname is used, whereas people of Irish descent have the power to regulate the use their self-identified nickname.

In addition to acknowledging that Native-themed mascots deny American Indian communities control over societal representations of themselves (Davis, 2002; Pewewardy, 1991), the training intervention addresses how Native-themed mascots misuse cultural symbols. The continuing use of eagle feathers, dancing, and chanting during mascot performances violates the sanctity of these aspects of Native American culture (Russell, 2003; Staurowsky, 1999). Immediately prior to reading the East High School Catholics vignette, the training intervention opens with a two-minute video clip of the University of Illinois’ former mascot, Chief Illiniwik,
dancing his last dance before his retirement in 2007. In tandem, these two scenarios illustrate the ramifications of having a White student dress in a faux-Indian costume to perform fake ritualistic dances that mimic American Indian religious ceremonies. These practices violate sacred American Indian customs while simultaneously continuing to contribute to mainstream America’s ignorance of American Indian culture (Staurowsky, 1999).

Finally, the training intervention addresses the way that Native-themed mascots serve to dehumanize American Indians (King, 2004). Visual comparisons are made between racist images of African Americans (e.g., sambo) and the Cleveland Indians Chief Wahoo logo (see Figure 2). Both caricatured images employ exaggerated facial features that bear little human resemblance, yet these images inundate society with bigoted representations of the depicted group (King, 2004). Additionally, the training intervention conveys the etymology of the word “redskin” in an effort to address contentions that the Redskin sports nickname serves to honor and respect American Indians (Sigelman, 1998; Staurowsky, 1999). Redskin is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as an “offensive slang [word that is used as] a disparaging term for a Native American” (redskin, n.d.). In colonial times, scalps of Indian women, children, and men (i.e., red skins) were exchanged for bounty, and were bought and sold at trading posts along with beaver pelts and other animal hides (Sigelman, 1998).

The goal of the knowledge portion of the training intervention is to provide counselor-trainees with the ability to be critical consumers of information society perpetuates about American Indians. Much of the daily clinical work conducted with American Indian clients is influenced by societal stereotypes (Duran, 2006). Therefore, counselors need to possess knowledge of the life experiences, cultural heritage, and historical background of clients who are culturally different (Arredondo et al., 1996). “An increase in accurate information about Native
Americans is viewed as necessary for the achievement of other goals such as poverty reduction, educational advancements, and securing treaty rights” (King et al., 2002, p. 392).

**Multicultural Skills**

After facilitating awareness of attitudes and then conveying specific knowledge about the nature of Native-themed mascots, the training intervention focuses on providing skills to help students begin to conceptualize how they can engage in advocacy at multiple levels. Suggestions include educating other counselors about Native-themed mascot issues (professional level), speaking out against the use of Native-themed mascots in schools and colleges (organizational level), and advocating for non-stereotypic media representations of American Indians (societal level; Sue, 2001). However, if social justice skills are to be fully developed, counselors need to understand advocacy experiences not only in abstract form, but also in concrete terms (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998). For example, counselors are made aware of activist discussion groups they could join (e.g., “Say NO to Mascots” on http://www.yahoo.com) that provide information on current events related to Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos. Counselors learn about letter writing campaigns that convey consumer dissatisfaction concerning corporate partnerships with organizations with a racialized nickname or logo (e.g., FedEx, the naming-rights sponsor of the Washington *Redskins* football stadium). Additionally, counselors are exposed to multimedia presentations (e.g., YouTube video that expresses the perspective of American Indians subjected to racialized mascotery) that are intended to inspire creativity among counselors as they contemplate ways they can develop social justice action plans. These examples highlight a few of the variety of options counselors can explore as they cultivate a concrete understanding of social justice skills and strategies.
In addition to mentioning specific strategies for advocacy, students are presented with theory and research on race-based mascots to equip them with theoretical and empirical skills to develop appropriate questions to conduct social justice research. In the first empirical study published in the psychological literature, Fryberg and colleagues (2008) discussed the deleterious effects of Native-themed mascots. American Indian students in this study reported higher levels of depressed state self-esteem, lower levels of community worth, and fewer achievement related possible selves. Race-based mascots remind American Indians of the narrow view society has of them, which serves to limit the possibilities they see for themselves (Fryberg et al., 2008). Contexts that activate stereotypic representations of racial groups are likely to threaten group members’ psychological functioning.

Fryberg and colleagues’ (2008) research presented multiple theoretical paradigms to conceptualize Native-themed mascots (e.g., stereotype accessibility, stereotype threat, social representations). The training intervention utilizes the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1998). Social representations are ideas and meanings that are considered essential for social functioning because they lend organization and structure to the social world. By transforming abstract concepts into concrete forms, social representations provide meaning and definition to the object depicted. For example, social representations provide viewers of Native-themed mascots with a code to define and identify American Indians. Images used by mascots (e.g., tomahawk chop, feathers, faux dancing) concretely define the abstract construct of American Indian in the minds of the viewers. Having mascots serve as default representatives of a culture is dangerous because, “if representations are neither negotiated nor re-negotiated in social interactions, then they are likely to remain static” (Fryberg, 2003, p. 7). Counselors can
use theory, research, and examples of advocacy strategies to develop the skill dimension of their multicultural competency in the domain of Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos.

**Implications for Multicultural Counseling Training**

In a 45-minute session with power point slides that provide continual visual accompaniment to the narrative themes described in this manuscript, this training intervention intends to increase counseling students’ multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills as it relates to American Indian issues. Interested readers can contact the first author to access power point slides and information contained in the intervention. The overarching goal of the training intervention is to provide students with the ability to articulate reasons why Native-themed mascots are considered problematic (e.g., perpetuate stereotypes, misuse cultural symbols, deny American Indians control of societal images of themselves). Many people, even those who oppose race-based mascots, have difficulty articulating clear reasons for their opposition (Davis, 2002). Thus, counseling students exposed to this training intervention will be able to explain to others how Native-themed mascots can have a negative effect on society. Knowledge of stereotypes perpetuated by Native-themed mascots can help counselors serve as advocates for change at multiple systemic levels (i.e., professional, organizational, societal; Sue, 2001), and may help counselors better serve their American Indian clients (Sutton & Broken Nose, 2005).

Author (2010) tested the effectiveness of this training intervention among 46 counseling graduate students. Results demonstrated that students who received this intervention registered greater awareness of the offensiveness of Native-themed mascots at post-test assessment than did students who received a general training presentation on culturally sensitive counseling practices with American Indian clients (e.g., cultural beliefs, spirituality, indigenous healing practices). The results indicate that specific information on Native-themed mascots needs to be conveyed to
counseling students in order to expand their awareness of how American Indians are stereotyped in society. Counselors who graduate from their counseling programs without fully developing an awareness and knowledge of stereotypes of ethnic minority groups may impose these preconceived notions on their culturally different clients (Sue & Sue, 2008). Additionally, the results of the study indicated that after receiving this training intervention, students registered lower levels of color blind racial attitudes (Neville, Lily, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). Thus, the training intervention not only demonstrated the ability to increase student awareness of the way that Native-themed mascots stereotype American Indians, the intervention also increased counseling students’ awareness of racism in society (see Author, 2010 for complete results).

This training intervention represents an attempt to expand multicultural competence among counseling trainees. Multicultural counseling training should continue to focus on culturally sensitive practices that incorporate an awareness of problems afflicting American Indian communities (e.g., poverty reduction, health disparities, alcoholism, inadequate educational opportunities). However, the subject of societal stereotypes disseminated by Native-themed mascots is intertwined with these problems. These stereotypic images contributed to the problems, and they currently constrain efforts by American Indians to effectively address these issues (Davis, 2002). The lack of attention devoted to these stereotypes is emblematic of the disenfranchised position American Indians hold in society. According to Davis (2002), if mainstream Americans can’t understand the problem of Native-themed mascots, they can’t understand sovereignty or other issues affecting the quality of life for American Indian communities. In accordance with the ACA resolution (2001), counseling programs should be committed to training students (and themselves) to work toward eliminating these stereotypic American Indian images in institutions where they are employed, and beyond.
References


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Figure 1
Use of Fighting Sioux nickname by UND fans in support of their team
Figure 2
Comparison of images (Chief Wahoo and sambo) from training intervention