Working Together; Native American Tribal Relationships in Logos: A Case Study

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During the early fall of 2012, the Washington State Board of Education passed a resolution asking all school districts in the state to eliminate the use of Native American mascots (Ellin, 2012). The action by the board came in response to a study presented to the American Psychological Association by Dr. Stephanie Fryberg in 2011 where her work laid out the learning gaps between indigenous students and students of the majority culture as well as covert racism that is contained within schools that use Native American images and mascots. Many researchers have discussed racist images in sport and have called for the banning of Native American names and images for all sports teams (Moreley Johnson, 2011; Pewewardy, 2004: Black, 2002). It is believed that the mascotization of peoples objectifies and alienates them.

Sports organizations have had various reactions to governmental, media, and indigenous peoples’ requests to change names, logos, and imagery. Most recently the national media has focused on the National Football League. The Washington Redskins ownership has continually stated that they will never change the logo and that it is in fact not only a name, but a unique protected identity (Zirin, 2010). On the other side of the debate are scholars like Ward Churchill who make arguments against the perverse nature of mocking peoples and nations that Americans have tried to exterminate. Churchill compares the use of indigenous mascots and team names in sports to Germans using Jewish caricatures in a similar way (Morley Johnson, 2011). “No other race of people is used as mascots or tokens of luck for sports” (p. 108).

At the collegiate level, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 2005 banned the use of Native American mascots and logos in post-season tournaments. They have since tightened their rules, eliminating the ability of schools with Native American mascots and imagery to take part in post-season tournaments or to host tournaments at their sites (ESPNews, 2005). While it doesn’t ban the use of the mascots totally, the NCAA has used these rules as a type of economic sanctions to force change. However, the NCAA does give schools ways in which they can continue to use their Native American-based mascots. Schools who have the endorsement of area tribes can continue to use the names without risk of sanctions (Ellin, 2012). The Florida State University Seminoles continue to use their name because the Seminole tribe passed a resolution of support. Other teams have changed their names from Braves, Indians, Orangemen, and Redmen to less offensive mascots. One area of interest for further study in the use of “endorsed names and images” is literature that says the majority of indigenous people disagree with any use of native imagery and mascots in sports teams (Pewewardy, 2004).

In 2006, within this atmosphere of change for sports mascots, logos, and imagery using Native Americans, the Spokane Indians Baseball Club undertook a marketing re-branding project. Initially, the club had decided that it too would eliminate Native American images from their marketing, and even had preliminary discussions of potentially changing the team name (Wiley, 2006). However, as the marketing team began to do research, they met with the Spokane Tribe of Indians to discuss an endorsement, much in the line with NCAA standards. However, discussions with the tribe soon centered on the acceptable use of subtle and respective images within the new marketing materials and a redesigned baseball logo. When the logo came out, the president of the baseball club announced, "We are excited about our new look, but most of all we are proud of our strong partnership with the Spokane Tribe. We wanted this new identity to show respect for the Spokane Tribe and honor the rich 104-year history of the team. I think we accomplished both of our goals" (para. 5). The finished logo contains traditional Spokane Tribe images including salmon, eagle feathers, and the Salish language.

By reported media accounts, and as supported by a review of sport marketing and indigenous mascot literature, no cases have been presented where a partnership formed between a tribe and sports organization to create a logo using traditional wording and images. The case of the Spokane Indians Baseball Club appears to be unique, so this proposed research project seeks to tell the story from the perspectives of those who took part in the logo creation within both organizations, focusing specifically on the cooperative nature of the relationship between the tribe who
had very specific cultural concerns in the process, and the baseball team who had marketing and economic interests in the project. The logo project has lead to a deeper partnership between the tribe and the baseball club, including sponsorship monies and a heritage museum at the ballpark. The original process and ongoing relationship present an interesting case.

A review of the literature shows that no research has been published presenting the creation of a new logo as a partnership between a Native American tribe and a sport organization. There have been reports published on the discussions between tribes and organizations about mascots and appropriate naming of teams, but the Spokane Indians / Spokane Tribe partnership is unique in the level of discussions and the final logo that was produced. The main objective of this case study is to present the unique story and professional aspects of the cooperation between two organizations. The research project also presents the continued aspects of partnership between the two communities and discusses the future directions of the relationship.

While qualitative case studies are intended to present one particular case and should not be used in order to make broad generalizations, a secondary objective for this particular study is to examine any themes or ideas that come from the interview analysis that might lead to a baseline guide for other sport organizations seeking to recreate their branding and logos.

This case study uses qualitative interviews to collect data from the group of participants in the logo creation process for the Spokane Indians Baseball Club. Both members of the Spokane Indians and members of the Spokane Tribe who were directly in the discussions and design decisions for the team’s logo are being interviewed to gain a better experience of members' lived experiences and perspectives on the cooperative nature of the project.

Most studies on sport and physical education are quantitatively based, but there is a growing research base in qualitative studies, including ethnography (Sands, 2002; Sparkes, 2002). Sources like these, as well as Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) Qualitative Research Handbook present guiding methods for completing interviews within case studies to better understand the multiple facets of a case or project.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), three aspects of qualitative methodology include the desire to capture the individual participant’s point of view; examination of the constraints of the social world; and securing rich descriptions. All three of these aspects are present in the proposed research topic. Qualitative research methodologies are helpful in case studies because there are multiple perspectives involved. A case study presents a "system bounded by time and space" (Cresswell, 1998, p. 61).

In order to examine the case, interviews of key participants will be conducted in order to collect data. It is important for the researcher to use an interview guide and be consistent in data collection. For this proposed case study, the interviewing techniques and modes set forth by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) will be used in order to guide discussions.

Marshall and Rossman (1989) pointed to five steps to be taken in analysis of the data. These steps are organizing the data; generating themes, categories and patterns; testing the emergent hypothesis against the data; searching for alternative explanations of the data; and writing the report. Because interview questions can lead to great amounts of data, Marshall and Rossman explained each step in the process as having two pieces: data reduction in order to give "manageable chunks"; and interpretation as the "researcher brings meaning and insight to the words and acts of the participants of the study" (p. 114).

Moustakas (1990) outlined a six-step process to analyze the data. This list includes initial engagement, immersion, illumination, incubation, explicatation, and creative synthesis. This systematic process is meant to give rich meaning to the rich stories found in the interview process, and help explain the phenomenological experience and its meaning in the participant's lives. The proposed study will utilize Moustakas’ analysis process, but much of the steps are paralleled with Marshall and Rossman (1989).