The Politics of Social Change: The Case of the Thorold Blackhawks and Their Offensive Indigenous Logo

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The increased attention to social responsibility and social change in the sport industry has included a recurring argument for the elimination of the use of offensive Indigenous team names and logos (cf. Davis-Delano, 2007; Robidoux, 2006; Staurowsky, 2004; Turner, 2015). The attention is most prominent when discussing professional and intercollegiate sport, most contentious in North America, for example with teams in Cleveland (Major League Baseball), in Washington D.C. (National Football League), and in the National Collegiate Athletic Association. The use of these logos and team names, however, are not exclusive to professional and intercollegiate sport. Recently, the debate has been raised in local community and school sport. This presentation is based on a larger ongoing case study of the City of Thorold’s ice hockey association’s recent elimination of an offensive Indigenous team logo. The purpose of the study is two-fold: a) contribute to and build upon the current efforts to eliminate the use of offensive Indigenous logos and team names in sport and b) theorize what Ganz (2005, 2009) calls the “strategic capacity” and “strategic resourcefulness” of those who lead social change. Specifically, we examine social change and the role played by an Indigenous community changemaker and the strategies he undertook to effect a change in the logo used by an ice hockey team in Thorold. The offensive logo was used by the Thorold Blackhawks (a Junior B team playing in the Golden Horseshoe division of the Greater Ontario Junior Hockey League) and minor hockey teams affiliated with the Thorold Amateur Athletic Association (TAAA). The changemaker worked tirelessly to convince numerous stakeholders involved to change the team’s offensive Indigenous logo as the symbols representing the team’s identity. This presentation focuses on the relationship between the social-cultural context in Thorold, a city with a population of almost 19,000 residents located in the Niagara Region (Canada), the changemaker, and a key organizational context—local government stakeholders.

The recent literature on social change has highlighted the role of leadership (Ganz, 2005, 2009; Sinek, 2009) and social entrepreneurs (Bornstein, 2007; Waddock, 2008). The social entrepreneurship organization, Ashoka, uses the term “changemaker” to define anyone who takes action to solve a social problem. Changemakers are described as tenacious in their commitment to social change, creative in their means of seeking it, connected to the issue, and play many different roles (Rahman, Herbst, & Mobley, 2016). Ganz (2005, 2009) and Gladwell (2013) both use the story of David and Goliath to explore how “underdogs” challenge those with power, the status quo, and/or promote social justice. Their arguments are particularly helpful when aiming to explain how to change dehumanizing institutional practices that are at best maintained because of a lack of awareness or cultural blindspots and are at worst leveraged to promote and widen marginalization based on race, class, and/or gender. This work highlights the need to further examine what strategies are used and how power, interests, and coalition building shape negotiations, the process of change, and outcomes (Narayanan & Fahey, 1982; Thomas & Davis 2005).

Our aim is to contribute to theory building about social change using a case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As such, we adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach to inform our critical inquiry (Charmaz, 2014, 2017) where there was an iterative and emergent process of data collection, sampling, and analysis while acknowledging both the specificity of the context of our case and our relationship as researchers to it and the research process. Data collection involved relevant documents (i.e., media reports, minutes of city council meetings, documents and reports produced by advocacy groups) and in-depth interviews with the changemaker, local government politicians, local government employees, and community stakeholders. For this presentation, we focus on interviews with the changemaker and local government staff and elected officials.

Preliminary findings show that the changemaker, an Indigenous member of the community (i.e., resident) who
worked in the community, initiated the change process by consciously adopting a collaborative and educative/awareness approach avoiding a confrontational strategy, protests, or legal channels (i.e., formal complaint to the Canadian Human Rights Commission). His approach involved a strategic and deliberate use of informal communications, building relationships of understanding, using social connections to assist with informing and increasing awareness about the issues and impact of a caricature of an ‘Indian’ as a team logo. Engaging in numerous discussions with the mayor, city councillors, and staff, the changemaker shared empirical research that highlighted the social and psychological impact of offensive Indigenous logos. In addition, he highlighted the fact that the logo was visible in various locations within the local government ice arenas (i.e., on centre ice, on rink boards, beside scoreboard, on walls) and in many public spaces throughout the city—emphasizing the potential legal and/or economic impact that such visible placement on public and city-owned space might cause. City politicians and staff moved quickly to remove the logo from city property. Although the Junior B Blackhawks and the TAAA operated independently, they adopted the same logo and relied on subsidized local government sport facilities for their games. Building on his social and professional relations with elected officials, the changemaker could leverage his social capital and gain support for his goal of removing the offensive logo from the City of Thorold. Discussions between the changemaker and local politicians and staff took place over a three-year period before the City imposed a deadline date for the Junior B team and the TAAA minor teams to eliminate the use of the logo or forgo the use of City property.

Although the process of change was complex involving stakeholders from the community (e.g., team owners, executive of the TAAA, residents group, community groups, parents of minor ice hockey players) and requiring a great deal of negotiations, building support from local politicians and city employees ensured the changemaker had the ability and power to enact the change in a more collaborative approach rather than a confrontational approach. Implications for community sport and social justice movements and changemakers are discussed in terms successfully challenging policy and practices that marginalize citizens.