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## The Harmful Psychological Effects of Washington's Redskins Mascot

MICHAEL A. FRIEDMAN, PH.D. | 9/27/13

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The simplest way to dismiss the intensifying national controversy over the word *redskin* is to insist that the NFL's use of the slur is merely a victimless crime. This rationale suggests that the Washington football team's name may be an ugly epithet, but nobody is really harmed by its continued use, and therefore those who want it changed are just part of the PC police.

The problem with this flippant line of

reasoning, though, is that this is not just an issue of political correctness. Promoting such an epithet with millions of marketing dollars creates very real mental health consequences—and not just for the indigenous populations the word denigrates. Not only does the use of this slur risk causing direct damage to the mental and physical health of our country's Native American population, it also puts us all at risk for both participating in and being harmed by ongoing prejudice.

The effect of prejudice on minority populations is well documented throughout our country's history. Evidence from studies of obese, gay and lesbian, African-American, Latino, Asian and female populations suggest that prejudice perpetuates major mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and alcoholism, as well as physical health problems such as cardiovascular disease. These health problems are caused not only by the direct biological effect of increased stress on the body, but also worsening self-concept as a result of prejudicial behavior. Harmful prejudicial attitudes underlie systematic discrimination in education, employment and housing that destroys quality of life, health and well-being.

These findings are consistent among Native Americans. The effects of systematic prejudice and discrimination against Native Americans can be best illustrated in that Native American/Alaska Natives have among the highest suicide rates in the country. The rate of suicide among Native Americans has risen 65% in the past decade alone. The acknowledgement of the catastrophic effects of prejudice on the Native American population prompted the American Psychological Association in 2005 to strongly urge the banning of all Native American mascots for sports teams.

Yet the potential effects of the use of the term *redskin* go far beyond Native Americans. Findings indicate that use of the term may cause stress among the nation as a whole. Consider the fact that the use of racial slurs among children constitutes bullying. There is considerable evidence that those who witness bullying develop the same negative stress effects as those who are bullied. This

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effect appears to be consistent among bystander adults witnessing sexism. Two rationales proposed are that witnessing others being bullied triggers memories of an individual being bullied themselves, and that watching bullying leaves witnesses thinking "it could happen to me."

Without question, we as a country are watching a group of people being publicly bullied on a national scale. The United States is made up of many groups who have faced prejudice and discrimination, and the strong possibility exists that watching this organizational prejudice may trigger stressful memories of being the victim of prejudice. Not unlike a child in a schoolyard being picked on for being small, we witness a group of people being bullied and run the risk of stress wondering if it could happen to us. When considering our country's long history of prejudice and discrimination against various groups, this fear is not unfounded.

It is unlikely that the Washington Redskins organization is intentionally being prejudiced towards Native Americans since the team name has a long history and was created by prior owners. However, continued refusal not only to refrain from changing the team name, but to even acknowledge the potential harmful effects of the team name runs the risk of suggesting that the organization is complicit in prejudice and discrimination against Native Americans and insensitive to the effects of witnessing such discrimination on our population. To remedy this matter, several actions must be taken:

- The Washington football team should change its name
- The NFL should create a commission to study the effects of race and ethnic team names and mascots to determine the limits of this practice
- The Washington team and the NFL should engage in outreach to Native American groups to determine how to mend perceptions of prejudice
- We as citizens should actively speak out against such prejudice

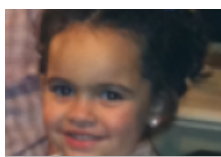
Currently, the Washington football team has a wonderful opportunity to correct what has been an ongoing stress on the Native American population and to our country as a whole. Not doing so runs the risk of not only appearing apathetic, but being complicit with the harmful effects of prejudice.

*Dr. Michael Friedman, a clinical psychologist, serves on the Medical Advisory Board of Executive Health Exams (EHE) International and practices psychology in Manhattan.*

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