

Oversight Hearing before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
on  
The Impact of Stereotypes  
Testimony by Chaske Spencer  
Thursday, May 5, 2011

The Impact of Stereotypes

My name is Chaske Spencer and I am an actor and producer. I am testifying today as someone who has been directly impacted by racist stereotypes of indigenous peoples. Although I have experienced this as a Native man it is not a Native Issue it is a HUMAN issue and I believe we need to approach it from a humanistic approach that fosters dignity, equality and valuing diversity of all cultures.

I wish to thank the Committee and the Chairman for bringing this important topic into the public spotlight and for inviting me to speak in these proceedings. I am honored and grateful for this opportunity to express my thoughts and stand in the matter.

As a child, I was very confused when I saw mascots and propaganda about Native Americans. I experienced feelings of shame and guilt since a lot of media and propaganda portrayed us as "savages, people of ignorance and unsophistication. I spent the majority of my childhood struggling to understand my people and identifying with a current-day role model since most of my Native Heroes were historical.

I was frustrated because I was the target of racism as a child. I was called "prairie nigger" and "Injun." I went to a school where the vast majority of kids were Caucasian. I was one of 4 or 5 kids that were Native American, and we were ignored most of the time. Needless to say, I got into a lot of fights as a kid. Through the years, I learned to deal with it in better ways, but the underlying frustration remained.

When our children are targeted with racist comments and actions, regardless of their race, religion, culture, etc...it impacts them for life, whether they show it or not, their self-worth, their drive and the relationships they create with other people are effected in a myriad of ways.

In today's society, it is almost impossible to escape the influence of stereotypes in media, sports, entertainment and politics. There are people in the spotlight who have transcended stereotypes such as Will Smith, Denzel Washington, Jennifer Lopez, Oprah, Hillary Clinton, Halle Barry, President Obama....For the most part, the vast majority is still impacted daily by them.

Where team names and mascots are concerned, all I will say is you would never call a team a wetback. A lot of people just don't understand the negative impact.

A couple hundred years ago, Native Americans were considered terrorists to some people, and these stereotypes still prevail in media today. For example, the hunt for Bin Laden has been portrayed with Wild West imagery and has been nicknamed Geronimo. When in reality it's thanks to the Native American's legendary bravery that two of America's elite army units received the legendary nick name Geronimo.

Whether it's intentional or unintentional we need to be more conscious of the associations we make. When we associate GERONIMO with someone like Osama Bin Laden, even if it is to depict the courage necessary to capture him, the negative connotations are inevitable.

As a culture, we need to focus on expanding the opportunities of all people, after all we are the land of opportunity. Any stereotype of ANY people, will inhibit or narrow the opportunities for that people.

As a young actor, I was faced with limited opportunities in terms of roles, other than stereotypically native roles. These were roles I had to take because I needed to work that at this point I would pass on. While that has dramatically shifted over the years, it is still by no means where it could be. We have seen this struggle for women throughout the years, standing for equality and empowering portrayal in all forms of media, and yet a woman still earns less than a man in this country for the same job in many instances. We see it with almost every ethnic group you can think of, and while it is moving in the right direction, without a concentrated united effort, without legislation, without new accepted practices in industry and communities, the movement will not match the much needed paradigm shift.

I do think that things are changing. In this younger generation the teens have a more positive view of Native Americans and I think that is because of movies such as Twilight, which really has a lot of young people, are looking at natives differently.

Recently, I have turned down roles that somehow portray Native American people in a negative light. It is a pivotal time where we have a unique opportunity to break beyond the stereotypes, and I try to make decisions in my career that support that as much as possible.

I have been fortunate enough to have opportunities that go beyond the stereotypes with projects like Twilight.

As a producer, my company and my partners at Urban Dream Productions are conscious to only choosing material that is not stereotypical in nature, whether it be stereotypical to Native American people or ANY people. Stereotypes by their inherent nature, limit the opportunity to that group of people. I am committed to expanding opportunity for people of all kinds

The work that companies like Summit are doing is crucial to positively impacting young people all over. Not only Native young people, but when I go to conventions for Twilight, what becomes obvious is that all youth from every race or community is excited about these modern beyond the stereotype roles that are being portrayed by young native actors...we are not just Native actors we are actors. I have seen more and more roles being open to any ethnicity which has impacted the opportunities that I have been privileged to have. It is rare that specifically NATIVE roles go beyond what has been traditionally known as LEATHERS AND FEATHERS types of roles...That is why films like Twilight are so important to us as a people. The reason I chose to do my last film, an independent film called SHOUTING SECRETS is because it is about FAMILY; it could be a Caucasian family, an African American family an Asian American family, an Southeast Asian family, really any family and it happens to be a Native American family. That factor is the biggest reason I was attracted to the project.

One of the biggest opportunities that we as Native Americans, now have, given the more mainstream spotlight and attention, is to shine a light on issues that have impacted us for decades and in some cases, generations.

One issue that I am personally working on is the issue of water rights, not only to Native American people, but to all Indigenous people. This is a crisis that cannot be ignored given the limited amount of water on our planet and the undeniable need for it in order to survive.

In addition, three weeks ago this Committee held a hearing on Senator Cantwell's *tsunami protection legislation*, S. 636, to help save our children and elders. Since that time, there have been many media stories on the tsunami danger to our Tribe and the legislation. The majority of responses to the legislation have been very positive. The Tribe is very grateful for this support. Unfortunately, some of the on-line responses to the reports and editorials have reflected the worst of racist stereotyping: the subject of today's hearing. I am attaching a letter from the tribal council to my testimony to further support that issue as well.

Also in support of this issue I submit the following from the MEDIA AWARENESS NETWORK:

Media stereotypes are inevitable, especially in the advertising, entertainment and news industries, which need as wide an audience as possible to quickly understand information. Stereotypes act like codes that give audiences a quick, common understanding of a person or group of people—usually relating to their class, ethnicity or race, gender, sexual orientation, social role or occupation.

But stereotypes can be problematic. They can:

- reduce a wide range of differences in people to simplistic categorizations
- transform assumptions about particular groups of people into "realities"
- be used to justify the position of those in power
- perpetuate social prejudice and inequality

More often than not, the groups being stereotyped have little to say about how they are represented.

Also from the same source:

The Impact of Stereotyping on Young People  
Generations of North American children have grown up watching "cowboys and Indians" films and TV shows and reading books such as *The Adventures of Tom*

*Sawyer* and *Little House on the Prairie*. Popular films and novels reinforced the notion that Aboriginal people existed only in the past—forever chasing buffalo or being chased by the cavalry. These images showed them as forever destined to remain on the margins of "real" society. Such impressions and childhood beliefs, set at an early age, are often the hardest to shake.

While the old-style Westerns are long gone, today's media producers still continue their tradition. For instance, Disney's *Peter Pan* may be a new take on an old tale, but its stereotyping of Indians as cruel and malicious, with their articulation reduced to "ugh" and their dress to loincloths, is as strong as ever. The same can be said for *Pocahontas* even though that film was more politically correct. How can a child negotiate the distance between portrayals like these, and "real" First Nations people?

Canadian Cayuga actor Gary Farmer is most concerned with the effect of such portrayals on young Aboriginal people themselves. "Consider the impression left when they see themselves portrayed this way time and time again. It's hard for them to have a positive image of themselves." Even Disney's arguably positive portrayal of Pocahontas, Farmer says, "will have kids walking away with the stereotype of the 'sexual savage.'" It's worth noting that Pocahontas' appearance falls well within white mainstream media norms. In fact, her facial features were a composite of several non-Aboriginal models, one of whom was British fashion star Kate Moss. Anyone who understands or studies the social development of children and young people knows that attitudes, values and self-esteem are well developed by the mid-teen years, or even earlier. What young people see and hear in the media helps them to figure out how the world works and who and what is valued in our society. If the media's take on Aboriginal people is interpreted at face value, then kids are growing up with a skewed vision of what it means to be part of a First Peoples society. If they get their impressions from the news, they'll likely view Aboriginal people as a negative force. And if their impressions come from films and TV programs, they'll learn to think of Aboriginal people as inferior (passive, aggressive or drunk) or simply as non-entities, obliterated by omission.

When young Aboriginal people read the newspaper or turn on the TV, how often do they see their own life experiences reflected? Almost never, says Children Now, the U.S. research organization that analyzed the presence of Native American children on TV in 1999, and conducted focus groups with children from 20 tribes.

Furthermore, they contend, those children have learned to associate positive attributes with white television characters, and negative attributes with non-white characters.

"The media have a lot of power to endorse stereotypes," says Susan Swan, an Ojibway from the Lake Manitoba First Nation. "We go into First Nations communities to talk to youth about gangs. When asked, the kids estimate that about 95 per cent of Aboriginal youth is involved in gangs. The actual number is three per cent. Why do they think these numbers are so high? It's because this is what they get from

television and newspapers."

The popular media are "cool" in the eyes of most kids. If the existence and value of a group of people is not affirmed by inclusion in media information and entertainment, the message is clear—they're not important. In Aboriginal communities, this can contribute to, as one community sociologist calls it, "learned helplessness, alienation, and a sense of having no control."

In Canada, new sensitivities and support for cultural diversity have brought some positive changes. Aboriginal children are periodically featured or interviewed in children's after-school television; the National Film Board has made films for years that document real Aboriginal lives; the CBC has had many seasons of successful dramas that focus on Aboriginal communities; and Aboriginal entertainers have been "going mainstream" for two decades. (See *Aboriginal Voices in the Arts and Media*, below.) These measures, along with the establishment of Aboriginal television and radio networks, all contribute to a more balanced view and more diverse voices.

Practically speaking, though, these voices still represent only a small proportion of the popular media that kids consume today. The evening news, the "Indian" images in sports-culture hype, the products of the Disney empire, and the misrepresentation (and non-representation) of Aboriginal people in most mainstream media—all continue to influence kids' views of Aboriginal cultures and peoples.

In 2000, two young Canadians, Ojibway journalist Laura J. Milliken and Saulteaux entertainer Jennifer Podemski, conspired to buck this trend. They produced *The Seventh Generation*, a television series presenting the lives of empowered and successful Native people—doctors, scientists, journalists and performers. "We want Aboriginal youth to see these stories so they will strive for their goals, make decisions educationally and career-wise," said Milliken, "but above all else, just feel secure about who they are and that they are part of this generation."

#### FROM THE ASSOCIATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE: Stereotypes Can Impact Self-assessment and Learning Ability

Research has shown that stereotypes can impair the standardized test performance of African Americans. A recent psychological study, which examined the long-term effects of stereotypes, suggests that stereotypes may also impact a person's academic self-assessment and overall learning ability.

Authors Joshua Aronson, New York University, and Michael Inzlicht, Wilfrid Laurier University, found evidence that stereotype vulnerability - the tendency to expect, perceive, and be influenced by stereotypes about one's social category - is associated with uncertainty about one's academic self-knowledge. These findings are presented in the study "The Ups and Downs of Attributional Ambiguity: Stereotype Vulnerability and the Academic Self-Knowledge of African American College Students," published in the December 2004 issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the American Psychological Society.

Psychologists have long argued that people need a clear sense of their intellectual abilities and liabilities in order to develop their academic potential. Accurate answers to questions such as *Which talents should I develop? Which should I abandon? and Am I smart enough to go to college?* can help people set appropriate goals, spend their time and efforts wisely, and avoid being embarrassed or demoralized by failures.

But research makes clear that some groups of people, such as African Americans, are at a disadvantage in this development, because they experience chronic *attributional ambiguity*, which is an uncertainty about whether their academic accomplishments truly reflect their abilities, or whether they were given an easy ride because teachers had lower expectations. This uncertainty may be the result of negative stereotypes (i.e. "blacks are less intelligent"). While this uncertainty alleviates the pain of receiving negative feedback ("my work is fine, but my teacher is prejudiced"), it could eventually leave people unclear about their competence.

In one study, black and white participants took a verbal test and indicated the probability that each answer was correct. The results indicate that stereotype-vulnerable black participants predicted their abilities less accurately than other participants. In a second study, participants completed measures of self-efficacy twice daily for eight days. In line with the first study's results, the efficacy of stereotype-vulnerable blacks fluctuated more frequently and more extremely than that of other participants.

"Social scientists have long been puzzled about why African American students seem to maintain high aspirations, even in cases where their own past performances make these aspirations unwarranted," Aronson said. "These studies are important in that they tie this 'unrealistic optimism' to students' expectations of prejudice - and to actual prejudices, as well - that they encounter." The researchers conclude that the study demonstrates the fragility of academic perceptions, creating a roller-coaster ride of self-confidence for stereotype-vulnerable students.

From BETTER ASIAN MAN:

### The real effects of negative mainstream media stereotypes

My name is William, and I am an Asian American man. I once believed:

1. that white women would not date me because mainstream media portrayed Asian American men as non-sexual beings, socially retarded individuals, and sexually awkward lovers.
2. that Asian American women would not date me because mainstream media constantly portrayed Asian American women with white men. Never would an Asian American man be shown as a romantic interest for an Asian American woman
3. that in the modern-day American dating scene, I was inferior to white men

FROM BURKISA.com

## **The Impact of Media Stereotypes on Diversity and Assimilation**

Jul 3rd, 2010, by [Sarah Ganly](#)

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For example many middle eastern people are not portrayed in a positive light in the media. This detracts from support of diversity. Also different political groups are negatively portrayed, and this detracts from the cause of diversity. There are times when the media recognizes stereotypes and shows that they are false. For the most part stereotypes are displayed in a negative light.

Many news shows will shun people because of their political views. Sometimes the media seems like it wants to promote assimilation instead of celebrate diversity. Many news broadcasts cater strictly to certain political stand points. Many political campaigns slander and degrade other political views in the media. These stereotypes promote assimilation instead of diversity, and this can be harmful to society.

The effect of media portrayal on diversities consciousness in the workplace can be both positive and negative depending on the form of media or the subject portrayed. For instance when talking about a crisis or conflict the subjects may be looked upon in a negative light for being diverse. If the media is reporting or portraying a positive event or news story, then diversity might be positively emphasized.

Diversity in the workplace is portrayed in some areas of the media such as promotional areas. I think the marketing area of the media portrays diversity as common place, and this is probably beneficial to their goals. Marketing experts know that diversity is reality and they cater to diversity to sell products. Many commercials show diverse cultures, races, and genders. This positively impacts their goals of consumerism.

Although marketing in the media may portray diversity like it is common place they also assist in assimilation. These commercials assert some sort unity through consumerism which is a form of assimilation. Unity is a positive idea, but an individual should not have to give up personal culture in order to bring about unity.

The media assists and detracts from cultural diversity in the world and the workplace. In many ways the media and the stereotypes used by the media detract from diversity by adding negative connotations to certain groups or cultures. The media also promotes diversity in order to sell products, but there is an underlying tone of assimilation.

Assimilation is not as powerful or productive as celebrating and welcoming diversity, and stereotypes are harmful to the world and workplace.

FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA:

## Youth learn about media and its impact on stereotypes

By [Ava Gutierrez](#)

Approximately 200 youngsters from South L.A. area schools like Dorsey, Crenshaw, Gardena and Washington Prep, and other teens from Bret Harte Middle School, Cerritos High School and Covenant House, participated in a Youth Media Education Conference on June 3rd at Cal State University Dominguez Hills. The conference featured youth-led workshops, panels and performances that examined the cultural and historical impact of media representation and how it affects their lives as youth of color.

The event was coordinated by writer and inter-group specialist Sikivu Hutchinson and was sponsored by the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission, the Gardena Health Start Collaborative and the Women of Color Media Justice Initiative. Conference themes focused on a number of provocative questions: What are gender stereotypes in the media and how do they affect cultural beauty standards vis-à-vis the self-image and self-esteem of black and Latina young women? How can youth of color dispel the dominant culture's negative images of who they are? How can undocumented youth advocate for themselves? What mainstream stereotypes and barriers contribute to the epidemic of homelessness amongst youth of color and lesbian and gay youth?

The conference was an eye-opener for Sonny Jones, an outspoken young man and member of Gardena High School's Beyond the Bell leadership of diversity group. Jones' group presented on the media's promotion of violent masculinity. The group began their workshop with a gender role reversal skit in which Jones played the part of a man going on a job interview for the first time and a female classmate played the part of his disapproving breadwinner wife. During the skit, Jones was cat-called by girls on the street, told he looked like he was applying for the secretarial position instead of the executive job and reminded that there was no childcare or leave time for the job. "It showed me that there should be equality between men and women, and people should be doing jobs, not on the basis of gender, but on what they can do," said Jones.

In another workshop, Gardena High School Women's Leadership Project students presented on the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes in advertising. Eleventh graders Dercy de la Cruz and Imani Moses discussed how, from early childhood, boys are taught to play with action figures and girls are encouraged to play with dolls. "We are being told, in subtle ways, that men are to be strong, aggressive and in control, while we should know how to clean house, cook and take care of children," one of the students commented.

Among the most touching group of youngsters were those who are AB540 undocumented students. These are teens that were born outside of the United States and are trying to go to college.

The Future Underrepresented Educated Leaders (FUEL) advocacy group from Cal State University Long Beach (CSULB) addressed the special hurdles AB540 youth face preparing for and funding college. CSULB student Marlene Felix led the workshop and received positive feedback from the culturally diverse group of African American and Latino youth participants. She made the point that undocumented status affects youth from culturally diverse backgrounds, not just Latino youth, and that they needed to establish a "network among themselves."

"Once you are out of school, you will be getting very little in the way of help," said Felix. "So relying on your network of colleagues and friends will be invaluable in moving you forward towards your goal."

Members of Gardena High School's Gay/Straight Alliance performed a poignant skit about the coming out process and parents' homophobic anxieties and misconceptions. Some of the audience members' responses surprised the actors. Some of the youth thought that one's sexuality was a matter of personal preference and not something that one is born with.

"It made me think about how much more work we need to do to educate other teens," said Crystal Perez, a member of the Gay/Straight Alliance who identified herself as bisexual. Crystal got into heated discussions with some of her peers about the "immorality" of being gay, while others expressed solidarity and called for tolerance.

Other workshop sessions focused on increasing one's sense of self-esteem, particularly in fostering healthy relationships, and the connection between the "normalization" of violence against women and increasing levels of sexual harassment and sexual assault among youth.

The Bricks, an eleven-member multiracial youth band, sponsored by the County, performed songs on xenophobia and anti-racism at the end of the day-long series of workshops.

**As you can see this is not a Native issue, it is a human issue and we must address it in a humanistic approach that fosters dignity, equality and the valuing of diversity.**