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Noble, but not savage: Difficulties in racial-mythic conception of media stereotypes.

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Noble, but Not Savage:
Difficulties in the Racial-Mythic Conception of Media Stereotypes

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Abstract:

To overcome conceptual difficulties in earlier media stereotype research, Seiter (1986) and Gorham (1999) propose that we think of stereotypes in ideological terms, especially as perpetuators of racial myths. Racial myths reinforce negative views of oppressed groups and positive views of the powerful. In this study, however, empirical data about preconceptions and film portrayals of Native Americans suggest that in some instances powerless groups can be "stereotyped" much more positively than powerful ones are.

Introduction

When we hear the word "stereotype," many of us automatically think of negative images in the mass media. Moreover, we probably envision those negative images to be portrayals of women or ethnic minorities. Indeed, most formal research on stereotypes in the mass media focuses in exactly this area (Seiter, 1986, p. 19). The underlying assumption is that stereotypes are "overgeneralizations made by socially dominant groups about socially oppressed groups" and that such overgeneralizations "*must* be bad" (Gorham, 1999, 229). As an example of this assumption, one research team states, "The major concern with the presentation of stereotypes on television is that the result of such portrayals may be the acquisition of negative attitudes towards certain groups by the audience and the solidification of sexual and racial stereotypes" (Schuetz and Sprafkin, 1978, p. 71).

In spite of the ubiquity of such thought, two scholars who have written carefully considered treatise on the subject of media stereotypes (Seiter, 1986; Gorham, 1999) perceive a weakness here. Conceptualizing stereotypes in a way that leads only to research of negative stereotypes of oppressed groups causes considerable theoretical problems. Even so, little research is done on positive stereotypes of oppressed groups, or negative stereotypes of dominant groups.

The following study is an attempt to address this lacuna in stereotype research by providing empirical evidence in these specific areas. More precisely, we attempt to measure both positive stereotypes of a historically oppressed group and negative stereotypes of a historically dominant group. In addition, we attempt to determine the level of existence of either of these (presumably uncommon) stereotypes in a popular media product, the SKG Dreamworks animated feature *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*. Our results suggest that scholars need to

continue theoretical discussion of the concept of "stereotypes" as well as empirical research on the stereotypes of both oppressed *and* dominant groups.

Native Americans in Stereotype Form

As a good example of the situation described at the beginning of this paper, numerous articles and books have been written about media stereotypes of Native Americans. Those wishing a good survey of this area of scholarship might wish to consult Hirschfelder, Fairbanks, Molin, and Wakim (1999). They provide a useful bibliography of works about stereotypes of Native Americans. The bibliography contains more than 300 entries.

Though space does not permit us to review these entries here, some common themes in the studies cited are evident and can be summarized. In fact, many recent writings on Native American stereotypes offer such summaries in their introductions or as the bulk of their work. For example, Ganje (1996, p. 41) suggests, "stereotypical images of Native people have become part of America's culture." She lists four common "stereotypical images." Those are: The bloodthirsty savage; The noble savage; Indian as "spirit guide;" and Indians as protesters. Mihesuah (1996) devotes a small book to a similar task of listing common stereotypes. She begins her list of twenty-four entries with the stereotype that "Indians are all alike." Others in the list are that "Indians were warlike and treacherous," that "Indians have no religion," and that "Indians are a vanished race." Though Bird (1999) does not layout a clear set of stereotype categories in her review of media representation of Native Americans, she does make reference to frequently used stereotypes. Among those are the stoic Indian, the doomed warrior, and the wise elder. As a final example of recent scholarship and its summary views of Native American stereotypes, we can examine the work of Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht (1997). They conducted a study of Native American stereotypes and their relation to direct or vicarious contact. In the literature

review of the study, the authors also recite common stereotypes of the minority group. The four that they introduce are that Native Americans are alcoholics, that they have "supercitizen" status, that they are lazy, and that they live on reservations because they cannot "make it" in the outside world (p. 266-267).

In addition to this recap of common stereotypes, however, Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht (1997) use wording that is useful in advancing our present discussion. In the process of reviewing the literature, the researchers introduce two very important issues with less certainty than they show in their declaration of Native American stereotypes. First, they state that, "Racial stereotypes are often negative" (p. 265). Secondly, they tell us, "The stereotypes listed above [e.g., that Native Americans are alcoholics] are not entirely accurate."

The hesitancy of these authors might raise serious questions in the minds of some readers. Readers might note, for example that racial stereotypes are *often* negative (but presumably not always so). In noting this, readers might wonder whether this issue of negativity has anything to do with the identification of a stereotype. If stereotypes are *often* negative, stereotypes are *sometimes* positive. And, readers might think that if some stereotypes are positive, the positive/negative nature of images has nothing to do with determining them to be stereotypes.

Likewise, when Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht declare that the images they are describing are not "entirely" accurate, we might begin to wonder how we measure accuracy and if the accuracy of images has anything to do with declaring (or not declaring) them stereotypes. Perhaps if some stereotypes are accurate and others are not accurate, the accuracy of images has nothing to do with determining them to be stereotypes.

The difficulty encountered here is also made manifest by a recollection of some of the lists of Native American stereotypes introduced earlier, or at least made manifest by the

conceptualization of those lists by their authors. As example, Mihesuah's (1996) book is titled *American Indians: stereotypes and realities*. Each chapter offers recitation of a Native American stereotype, and then a more truthful description of the people. For example, Mihesuah counters the stereotype that "Indians are all alike" with the reality that there are over 700 historical tribes of Indians with very different cultures (p. 20-25). The author is clearly placing stereotypes in opposition to accurate depictions of Native Americans. For Mihesuah, stereotypes are untruths.

As a counter example to this approach, however, Ganje's (1996) article is a chapter in a book titled *Images that injure: pictorial stereotypes in the media*. In this case the definition of "stereotype" appears to be based not on truthfulness, but harm done to the target of the stereotype. A stereotype is an image that harms those who are represented by it.

Clearly then, Tan, Fujioka and Lucht's choice of words alludes to a significant difficulty facing any researcher who intends to understand stereotypes of Native Americans. Are stereotypes defined as such because of their lack of accuracy/truth? Or are stereotypes defined as such because they cause harm? Seiter and Gorham, two scholars who have taken a more broadly theoretical approach to the discussion of stereotypes in the media, suggest that neither is the crucial issue though their focus on evaluation and ideological power is much closer to the second definition than the first.

The Problem of "Media Stereotypes"

The obvious incongruity presented above should demonstrate that some stereotype research is lacking in conceptual clarity. Two scholars who have sympathy for many of the aims of stereotype research and wish to create a higher degree of clarity are Seiter (1986) and Gorham (1999). Both trace the sources—indeed, some of the difficulties—of the study of stereotyping back to its earliest theorist. Many of our conceptual difficulties in stereotype research are rooted

in the earliest work in the field, the seminal writing of Walter Lippmann (1965). Lippmann popularized the sociological use of the term "stereotype." When he did so, he denoted two very different notions of the term. One of those notions was of a cognitive function that is a means of simplifying the overwhelmingly complex nature of human experience. In a world of millions of stimuli, humans need to develop shortcuts for coding perceptions. Stereotypes do this by allowing us to order that experience based on previous experiences with some similarity.

But Lippmann did not assume that the stereotyping was always an innocent cognitive necessity. He also suggested that stereotyping could be used by the powerful to keep the powerless in their place. Stereotyping also related to ideology in the sense that stereotypes of some groups could be created and disseminated with the purpose of privileging some members of a community.

Seiter (1986) suggests that much research in media stereotyping fails to recognize this distinction and often proceeds without a clear definition of the concept. In addition, she suggests that much work in the field relies heavily on the first notion of stereotyping without giving adequate attention to the second. This problem exists in both social psychological studies and in humanistic ones. Those in the social psychological camp tend to get bogged down in distinctions of the truthfulness of stereotypes (what Seiter refers to as the "kernel of truth" issue). Those in the humanities camp focus on the over-simplistic nature of stereotypes and the fact that uni-dimensional fictional characters are often the product thereof.

In Seiter's view both the social-psychological approach and the humanistic approach stumble over the key difficulty with Lippmann's first definition. Both are overly concerned about truth. In the case of empirical researchers, the issue is whether real social groups are portrayed accurately in the media, whether their media images are true images. Inaccurate representations

of social groups amount to stereotypes. In the case of humanistic critics, the issue is whether characters in drama (in any medium) are as multi-faceted as true human beings are. Poorly conceived characters are stereotypes because the author has presumably drawn on his or her limited experiences when creating them.

But all of these concerns are red herrings in regards to the importance of stereotypes. The truthfulness of images is of little import in Seiter's understanding of them. In this she is suggesting that issues of truthfulness obscure the most important aspect of stereotypes. In her own words, "we are dealing not with a question of truth and falsity, but with ideology" (Seiter, 1986, p. 21). For Seiter, the ideological dimension of stereotypes is what should draw the greatest research interest. Simply defining characters as stereotypical/non-stereotypical, or noting the preponderance of such in the media is of little value.

Almost 15 years after Seiter expressed her concerns about stereotype conceptualization, Gorham (1999) restated them. Early on in his essay he cites the work of Seiter suggesting that his theorizing is an extension of hers. In fact, he need not reiterate the weaknesses in most stereotype research as the earlier investigation did. Instead, his task is to lay out a framework for understanding the way stereotypes work as ideological apparatuses in modern societies. His suggestion is that we need to make such understanding evident if we expect our "arguments to carry any weight outside the academic world" (Gorham, 1999, p. 229).

To give such weight to the body of stereotype research, Gorham (1999) proposes that stereotype researchers see ideology as a form of "collective symbolic self-expression" that "promote and legitimate the interests of social groups" (p. 230). This definition is adapted from Eagleton (1991). The definition also leans heavily on Marx in Gorham's sense of the legitimation of interests can be more accurately described as the legitimation of the interests of the powerful.

In Gorham's paraphrase of Marx, "the dominant understandings of a society tend to be the understandings of the dominant social groups of that society" (p. 232).

Gorham goes into great detail to demonstrate the mechanisms by which this symbolic self-expression occurs, relying heavily on the semiotic theory of Barthes (1973) as well the psychological theory of Hintzman (1986) and Livingstone (1990; 1992). In using this combination of semiotics and psychology, he comes to conclude that stereotypes are basically manifestations of racial myths. Put succinctly, stereotypes are "the operationalization of racial myths as social reality beliefs concerning members of racial groups based on perceived group affiliations (Gorham, 1999, p. 233).

What this definition does is allow Gorham to reissue Seiter's concerns about current stereotype research and to propose alternatives. Along these lines, Gorham agrees with Seiter that our focus on the descriptive character—and related issues of truthfulness—of stereotypes causes us to ignore the evaluative component of them. In addition, Gorham claims that his work should also assist in the study of "stereotypes of the majority" (Gorham, 1999, p. 43). As he briefly concludes his theoretical discussion, he claims that the framework he proposes "can accommodate both of these criticisms" (p. 243).

Oddly, Seiter addressed those criticisms in more detail, and at this point it may be helpful to return to her discussion of them. Like Gorham, Seiter sees stereotypes as ideological. More specifically, she sees them as "full of hegemonic potential" (Seiter, 1986, p. 16). This potential is evidenced in the "political power of stereotypes over those who may be most affected by them: poor and working-class women of color" (p. 18-19). The evaluative component of stereotypes and their relation to the "powerful"—in contrast to the powerless—is found here.

Seiter's claim is that the evaluative element of stereotypes of oppressed groups is best understood in contrast to concurrent stereotypes of oppressing groups. We can only understand the views we hold of those who are victims of ideology by placing them beside the views we hold of those who benefit from ideology. This is best understood when we examine images of powerless groups that *could* be interpreted to be positive. To give us an example of this, Seiter provides a quote from Perkins (1979):

> There is a male (he-man) stereotype, an upper class (leader) stereotype. These stereotypes are important because other stereotypes are partially defined in terms of, or in opposition to them. The happy-go-lucky Negro attains at least some of its meaning and force from its opposition to the "puritan" characteristics (somber and responsible) of the WASP. Positive stereotypes are an important part of the ideology and are important in the socialization of both dominant and oppressed groups. (p. 144).

Thus, one way of addressing Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht's hesitance about accuracy, negativity, and stereotypes is to think of stereotypes largely in ideological terms. Truth is of little importance, as the evaluative element is just as important as the descriptive. Harm is a factor, but only as a function of ideology itself. The immediate harm done by stereotypes is difficult to measure and is an end result of a more important factor. That important factor is racial myth (to use Gorham's term).

Racial Myths, Native Americans, and the Mass Media

Given what has been addressed thus far, we propose that an appropriate way of examining media stereotypes of Native Americans is to attempt to measure the racial myths that people hold about that oppressed group. Along with this, an additional task that would seem

worthy of our energies would be measurement of interrelated racial myths about the empowered group that interacts most with Native Americans, namely, European Americans.

Of course, given both Seiter and Gorham's perspective, the pictures inside people's heads (in Lippmann's words) are only part of the equation. Both Seiter and Gorham suggest that media images are a crucial part of the creation and maintenance of racial myths. We therefore propose that along with studying the nature of myths people hold about Native Americans we should also examine the presence or absence of those myths in the mass media.

Stated in rather detached form above, the results of these tasks would seem to be oblique, as if we have no expectations in entering into this investigation. Using the framework of Seiter and Gorham, however, both the objectives and the anticipated outcomes of this study become clearer. Presumably, the images that we (United States citizens in the early 21st century) have of Native Americans are reasonably negative, especially when placed in contrast to European Americans. Moreover, the images of these two groups in mainstream mass media should mirror this pattern. Media portrayals of Native Americans should reinforce negative racial myths. Media portrayals of European Americans should reinforce positive racial myths.

We hope this investigation (though limited in ways that will be discussed in the conclusion) gives us a better understanding of the presence of racial myths about Native Americans both in the populace and the media. In examining these myths, we also hope we can further advance our understanding of the concept of "stereotype" as it relates to the mass media in general, or—at a minimum—demonstrate continued weaknesses in the field.

Method

Based on the above discussion, the primary goals of this project are to: Determine commonly held stereotypes of Native Americans; Compare/contrast those stereotypes with those

held of European Americans; Compare/contrast both sets of stereotypes with those presented in a contemporary media product.

We determined that the first two goals could be achieved by employing a method similar to that used by Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht (1997). We gave self-administered questionnaires to undergraduate students at two mid-sized American universities. One of these universities is in the Northwest; the other is in the lower Midwest. The specific classes used were lower division communication classes. Students/subjects were not informed of the specific nature of the project, only that researchers were interested in understanding perceptions of different racial and ethnic groups.

Following the example of Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht (1997), we chose to use two forms of questionnaire, one qualitative in nature and the other quantitative. The qualitative questionnaire was very similar to that used by Tan, Fujioka and Lucht, who borrowed the idea from Neimann, Jennings, Rozelle, Baxter, and Sullivan (1994). The methodology was intended to encourage a "free response" (Tan, Fujioka and Lucht, 1997, p. 273) on the part of the subjects. Three open-ended statements were provided, one for Native Americans and one for European Americans. As example, for this initial form the wording was, "If asked to describe what 'Native Americans' were like in the 1800s, how would you respond? Please fill out the following three sentences with descriptive words to reveal three different perceptions you have about this group." Sample elements from this form are presented in the Appendix.

The quantitative form was also similar to that used by the earlier investigation. Subjects were presented with ten common stereotypes, each placed on a seven-point scale. Instructions were: "Please think of 'Native Americans' who lived in the 1800s. Check a space between each of the descriptions below to indicate how you would describe 'Native Americans' in the 1800s."

For the first stereotype, on one end of the scale was "Traditional," on the other end was "Not Traditional." Respondents checked the appropriate place between the two. Again, segments of the actual form can be seen in the Appendix.

Some of the ten attributes selected for the quantitative form were borrowed from the previous study. Some were chosen because of their appropriateness for the film we wished to show the subjects. As in the previous study, the positive and negative ends of the each measure were determined by a group of upper division communication students. These students were presented with the ten attributes and asked to reach consensus on the issue of which end of the measure was positive. With the exception of one of the ten items, these students had little difficulty determining which end of the measure was positive. They could not reach agreement on "Traditional-Not traditional." Readers should keep this in mind when examining the quantitative data.

As the third general goal listed above was to compare/contrast pre-held stereotypes with those visible in a contemporary media product, we wanted to have the same subjects assist us in determining the Native American and European American stereotypes in a recent Hollywood film. After filling out the initial questionnaire, subjects were shown segments from *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarro*n. A number of criteria were used in the selection of this particular motion picture. The film is the product of a major film studio and experienced a reasonably high level of box office success, with gross profits just over 73 million dollars for the year (see "2002 Domestic Grosses"). It ranked 37th among the films released for the year 2002. These factors indicate that it was a mainstream media product with a reasonably large American audience and thus potential ideological power.

In the interest of time, some segments from the film were edited out. Much of the film tells the story of a wild stallion's interaction with other horses and wild animals. As our purpose was to measure the film's portrayal of Native Americans and European Americans, only those scenes in the film that showed human interaction were included in the edited tape.

Immediately after seeing the film, subjects were asked to fill out a second version of the questionnaire used earlier. Rather than asking for preconceptions of the two groups, this form (a form using ten predetermined stereotype items for some and a form using open-ended questions for others) asked students to relate their perceptions of portrayal of the groups in the film. Even so, the measurement devices were constructed with nearly identical wording. Again, a sample can be seen in the Appendix.

Results

Our sample consisted of students from two universities. Total number of respondents who provided preconceptions of Native Americans and European Americans before viewing the film was 98. Of students reporting their gender, 39 were male and 49 were female. The average age was 22.3 years. Table 1 shows the breakdown of respondents.

Table 1
Breakdown of respondents

	N	Male	Female	Average age
Midwest University	90	32	58	18.5
Northwest University	96	46	50	25.5
Total	186	78	108	22.3

The qualitative data show that most preconceptions were positive toward Native Americans and negative toward European Americans. Of the 290 comments about Native Americans, 130 were positive, 133 were neutral, and 27 were negative. Of the 278 comments

about the European Americans, 56 were positive, 106 were neutral, and 116 were negative. Tables 2 and 3 give summaries of these findings and examples of positive and negative statements.

Table 2
Preconceptions of Native Americans in the 1800s

Positive Responses (130)	Neutral Responses (133)	Negative Responses (27)
Adaptable (4)	Assimilated (3)	Angry (4)
	Dark colored skin (2)	Frustrated (1)
Caring (2)	Different (5)	Lazy (1)
Community, family-oriented (10)	Disliked (1)	Less intelligent (1)
	Dressed with feathers (1)	Loud (1)
Cultured, artistic, skilled (11)	Farmers (1)	Poor (1)
	Hard life (3)	Sad (1)
Hard working (5)	Hunters (20)	Savages (5)
	Indians (6)	Sly (1)
Helped America (2)	Killed (3)	Threat (1)
	Lived on reservations (2)	Uncertain, disoriented (1)
Independent, self-sufficient (14)	Lived outdoors (2)	Uncivilized (2)
	Lived in teepees (6)	Uneducated (1)
Loving (3)	Lived on Great Plains (2)	Unfriendly (1)
	Misunderstood (4)	Violent (5)
Nature-oriented (14)	Nomadic (7)	
Not wasteful (1)	Original people in America (7)	
Peaceful (3)	Protectors of land, culture,	
Powerful but humble (1)	heritage (12)	
	Secluded (4)	
Proud (12)	Sick (1)	
Resourceful (22)	Treated unfairly (37)	
Respected (1)	Tribal (2)	
Simple life style (1)		
Spiritual (10)		
Strong (2)		
Tolerant of differences (2)		
Traditional (1)		
Wise, smart (5)		

<u>Examples of positive statements:</u>
"Changing their lives to fit how immigrants were changing their world"
"There for each other – more group oriented"
"Hard working people who lived off the land"
"Self sufficient not needing outside assistance"
"Kindhearted, loving people who did what they needed to survive"
<u>Examples of neutral statements:</u>
"Completely different in culture to those from Europe"
"Hunters, territorial, and segregated among the different tribes"
"Would hunt for food and make their own clothing"
"People that first lived in the new world"
"Trying to prevent the eradication of their tribes by the new settlers"

Examples of negative statements:
"Angry with European Americans, for taking what was once theirs"
"Not industrious or advanced technologically"
"Hard workers but not good thinkers"
"Somewhat lost because of all the changes that were taking place"
"Fierce warriors and could be very brutal"

Tan's adjectives (Tan, Fujioka, & Lucht, p. 276) were used when they adequately described the student statements. Additional, descriptors were added to cover themes not covered in the Tan study.

Table 3
Preconceptions of European Americans in the 1800s

Positive Responses (56)	Neutral Responses (106)	Negative Responses (116)
Adventurous (7)	Civilized (3)	Arrogant, egocentric (16)
	Colonists, settlers (17)	Bigoted, discriminatory (12)
Cared for others (4)	Comfortable, wealthy (8)	Conquerors, warlike (30)
Classy (1)	Defenders (1)	Cruel (4)
	Diverse, different (3)	Dirty, diseased, lazy (9)
Courageous (1)	British (1)	Eccentric (1)
	Entrepreneurs (3)	Greedy (21)
Curious (6)	Explorers (15)	Ignorant (6)
	Founders (14)	Imperialistic (3)
Enthusiastic (1)	Hard, rough lives (3)	Liars (1)
	Looking for better life (16)	Opportunistic (2)
Family oriented (2)	Mostly men (1)	Poor (4)
	New comers (1)	Scared (1)
Hard working, industrious (15)	Old-time dress (2)	Disliked (2)
	Religious (2)	Wasteful (4)
Independent, freedom loving (3)	Strong, powerful (5)	
	Traders (3)	
Inventive (2)	Traditional (2)	
Loyal (1)	Unrecognized (2)	
Positive (2)	White (2)	
Wise (11)		

Examples of positive statements:
"A hard-working people who triumphed over many hardships"
"Receptive people who didn't mind if others were different"
"Intelligent and interested in the rest of the world"

Examples of neutral statements:
"Physically strong enough to endure the hardships of settlement"
"Poor people working towards their goals the best they could"
"Looking for a place to exercise freedom"
"Trying to build a newer, better nation"
Examples of negative statements:
"Gluttonous, they are environmental hogs."
"Takers, wanted to take and not to give"
"Greedy – taking land and treasures from people they conquered"
"Not hygienic and died at young ages"
"Haughty and often inhumane"

Material from the qualitative form that measured perceptions of film portrayals can be presented in a manner similar to that used for the qualitative form that measured preconceptions. Table 4 shows perceptions of film portrayals of Native Americans. Table 5 shows perceptions of film portrayals of European Americans. Most descriptions of group portrayal in the film were positive in regards to Native Americans and negative in regards to European Americans. Of the 282 comments about Native Americans, 224 were positive, 44 were neutral, and 14 were negative. Of the 278 comments about the European Americans, 245 were negative, 16 were neutral, and 16 were positive. (One comment was unclear in its meaning).

Table 4
Comments about portrayal of Native Americans in the film

Positive Responses (224)	Neutral Responses (44)	Negative Responses (14)
Brave (11) Community, family-oriented (9) Cultured, artistic, skilled (1) Friendly (8) Good guys, heroes (10) Happy (2) Independent, self-sufficient, free (15) Kind and caring to animals (48) Kind, caring, nice, gentle (51) Loving (6) Loyal, honorable (6) Nature-oriented (25) Peaceful (13) Proud (2) Resourceful (1) Respected (1) Simple life style (1) Sincere (1) Strong (12) Wise, smart (1)	Afraid (1) Dying breed, losing (2) Disliked, hated enemy (2) Dress, color, lifestyle (3) Indians (1) Minority, outsiders, outnumbered (4) Treated unfairly, victims (31)	Bad (1) Not adaptable (1) Not normal (1) Poor (1) Poor fighters (1) Savages (3) Sly, untrustworthy (2) Threat (4)

<u>Examples of positive statements:</u>
"Caring to animals and aware of nature."
"Heroic, idealized, beautiful, dignified, personable - fun, dynamic, having integrity."
"Loving and willing to fight for freedom."
"Proud for their land, compassionate and understanding for animals."
"Easy going people who are under attack by the Army."

Examples of neutral statements:
"Abused and harassed by white men."
"A dying breed of people."
"Persecuted and killed by European-Americans."
"Wearing feathers in hair, buckskin clothing, and living in tepees."

Examples of negative statements:
"Hating Americans and resistant to 'conquering of the wild west.'"
"Danger to the Europeans and the railroad."
"Savage people that needed to be reformed."
"Very stubborn and set in their ways.

Table 5
Comments about portrayal of European Americans in the film

Positive Responses (16)	Neutral Responses (16)	Negative Responses (245)
Do what is right (1) Friendly (1) Gains respect of Natives (1) Good military (1) Good people (2) Hardworking, industrious (4) Leaders (1) Loyal (1) Strong, bold, determined (2) Wise, smart (2)	Acceptable (1) All men (2) Civilized (1) Defenders (1) Dress, appearance (6) Modernized (1) Strong, powerful (4)	Angry (4) Arrogant, egocentric (15) Bad guys, evil (11) Bigoted, discriminatory (2) Conquering, destructive, controlling (50) Cruel, mean, unkind, uncaring (111) Greedy, selfish (19) Ignorant (8) Impatient, rigid (3) Not loyal (1) Unfair (2) Unfriendly (1) Unruly (1) Violent (9) Wasteful (8)

Examples of positive statements:
"Industrious and wanting to advance the country."
"In the end, good people, just like everybody else."
"Good people after you earn their respect."

Examples of neutral statements:
"Thin and most had brown hair."
"Homogeneous group, similar clothing, faces, stature, focus, etc."
"Civilized and well dressed."

Examples of negative statements:
"They were only concerned about themselves."
"Static, faceless, 'zombies,' clearly the antagonist."
"Prejudiced against Native Americans."
"Destroying anything or anyone that got in the way."
"Dominating. Wanting to have complete control."

As mentioned in the methods section, we used a quantitative measurement device in addition to the above qualitative device so that we could crosscheck our findings. The data from these quantitative forms is provided in four tables below. Recall that we gave subjects two forms. One form was distributed before viewing the film and asked the students to reveal their preconceptions about European Americans and Native Americans in relation to ten stereotypes. After students finished filling out this initial measurement device, we showed them the segments from *Spirit.* When the tape was finished, we distributed the second measurement device that asked for perceptions of the film portrayal of European Americans and Native Americans in relation to the ten stereotypes. Each of the four tables below reveals differences that can be demonstrated using the two forms.

Table 6 uses only data from the first form, showing comparison between the mean scores for European Americans and Native Americans on each of the ten stereotype variables. As noted at the bottom of the table, a higher score demonstrates a more positive stereotype for that variable. Thus, we can see that on each of the ten items subjects had more positive preconceptions of Native Americans than European Americans. Eight of the ten differences were clearly significant at the .05 level. Difference measured on one variable (Intelligence) was not statistically significant. The difference measured for the variable “Savagery” was on the border of significance.

Table 6
Preconceptions of Native Americans vs. European Americans

Stereotypes	Native Americans		European Americans		T-Test Score	P-Value
	Mean	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**		
Traditional	5.73	1.467	4361	1.591	5.296	.000
(Not) Violent	4.56	1.318	3.57	1.415	5.194	.000
Nature Oriented	6.31	1.112	3.01	1.588	15.325	.000
(Not) Cruel to Animals	5.76	1.368	3.84	1.513	9.887	.000
Spiritual	6.36	.987	4.34	1.478	10.273	.000
(Not) Materialistic	5.37	1.748	2.62	1.556	9.717	.000
Intelligent	5.35	1.294	5.10	1.461	1.292	.199
(Not) Savage	4.78	1.695	4.31	1.707	1.995	.049
Stewards of the Environment	5.68	1.497	3.51	1.615	8.675	.000
(Not) Deceitful	5.20	1.525	2.97	1.512	9.604	.000
Overall Mean	*5.5282*	*.79171*	*3.7788*	*.71216*	*5.296*	*.000*

* Overall mean of items in each factor; for all entries,
7 = positive stereotype and 1 = negative stereotype

Table 7 shows data compiled from the form distributed after the film screening. One column shows mean scores for student perceptions of film portrayals of Natives in relation to the ten stereotypes. Another column shows the means of the same measures for Euros. Here the data clearly indicate that subjects perceived the film to portray Native Americans more positively than it did European Americans for every stereotype. In this instance, all ten differences were statistically significant.

Table 7
Perception of Film Portrayals of Native Americans vs. European Americans

Stereotypes	Native Americans		European Americans		T-Test Score	P-Value
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Traditional	5.84	1.578	3.93	2.074	6.122	.000
(Not) Violent	5.99	1.290	1.58	1.192	21.419	.000
Nature Oriented	6.59	.612	1.94	1.267	29.102	.000
(Not) Cruel to Animals	6.45	1.079	1.95	1.703	19.575	.000
Spiritual	6.10	1.124	2.09	1.204	21.823	.000
(Not) Materialistic	5.88	1.667	2.08	1.416	13.497	.000
Intelligent	6.03	1.098	4.33	1.734	7.478	.000
(Not) Savage	5.65	1.653	2.48	1.704	10.731	.000
Stewards of the Environment	5.98	1.581	2.92	2.044	9.800	.000
(Not) Deceitful	5.97	1.440	2.11	1.557	14.101	.000
Overall Mean	*6.0565*	*.73099*	*2.5348*	*.80129*	*6.122*	*.000*

* Overall mean of items in each factor; for all entries,
7 = positive stereotype and 1 = negative stereotype

Table 8 takes data about preconceptions of Native Americans (from the first form) and compares them with data about perceptions of film portrayals of Native Americans (from the second form). For every stereotype, film portrayal was measured more positively than preconceptions. In all but three cases the differences between preconceptions and perceptions of film portrayal were statistically significant.

Table 8
Differences Between Preconceptions and Perceptions in Film Portrayals of Native Americans

Stereotypes	Preconceptions		Perceptions		**T-Test Score**	**P-Value**
	Mean	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**		
Traditional	5.73	1.467	5.84	1.578	-.459	.647
(Not) Violent	4.56	1.318	5.99	1.290	-7.432	.000
Nature Oriented	6.31	1.115	6.59	.612	-2.149	.033
(Not) Cruel to Animals	5.76	1.361	6.45	1.079	-3.834	.000
Spiritual	6.35	.982	6.10	1.124	1.637	.103
(Not) Materialistic	5.37	1.748	5.88	1.667	-2.019	.045
Intelligent	5.35	1.294	6.03	1.098	-3.850	.000
(Not) Savage	4.78	1.685	5.665	1.653	-3.515	.001
Stewards of the Environment	5.68	1.497	5.98	1.581	-1.309	.192
(Not) Deceitful	5.14	1.562	5.97	1.440	-3.708	.000
Overall Mean	*5.4989*	*.79978*	*6.0565*	*.73099*	*-4.886*	*.000*

* Overall mean of items in each factor; for all entries,
7 = positive stereotype and 1 = negative stereotype

Finally, Table 9 takes the pattern of comparison from Table 3 and applies it to European Americans. Here perception of film portrayals was more negative for all ten stereotypes than were preconceptions.

Table 9
Differences Between Preconceptions and Perceptions in Film Portrayals of European Americans

Stereotypes	Preconceptions		Perceptions		**T-Test Score**	**P-Value**
	Mean	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**		
Traditional	4.64	1.602	3.93	2.074	2.562	.011
(Not) Violent	3.57	1.415	1.58	1.192	10.330	.000
Nature Oriented	3.01	1.588	1.94	1.267	5.084	.000
(Not) Cruel to Animals	3.84	1.513	1.95	1.703	7.962	.000
Spiritual	4.34	1.478	2.09	1.204	11.352	.000
(Not) Materialistic	2.67	1.585	2.08	1.416	2.687	.008
Intelligent	5.10	1.461	4.33	1.734	3.235	.001
(Not) Savage	4.31	1.707	2.48	1.704	7.245	.000
Stewards of the Environment	3.51	1.615	2.92	2.044	2.135	.034
(Not) Deceitful	3.00	1.537	2.11	1.557	3.890	.000
Overall Mean	*3.7897*	*.70843*	*2.5348*	*.80129*	*11.076*	*.000*

* Overall mean of items in each factor; for all entries,
7 = positive stereotype and 1 = negative stereotype

Discussion

Both the qualitative data and the quantitative data demonstrate patterns that were not anticipated at the beginning of this study. In the former, when recording their preconceptions of Native Americans and European Americans in the 1800s, freshmen communication students listed almost four times more negative statements of European Americans (116) as they did Native Americans (27). Similarly their positive view of Native Americans (130 statements) was greater than their positive view of European Americans (56). Although there were many similar positive and negative descriptors for both groups, the language of the students in describing the

two groups was also very different. Both groups were described as caring, family-oriented, hard-working, independent, and wise. Native Americans were also seen as adaptable, nature-oriented, powerful but humble, resourceful, while not wasteful. On the other hand European Americans were seen as adventurous, curious, enthusiastic, and loyal. Both groups were given negative epithets of poor and ignorant (less intelligent). Other negative stereotypes of Native Americans were similar to some widely accepted ones put forward by Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht (1997, p. 276), that of savage, violent, and uncivilized. European Americans were regarded as arrogant and egocentric, bigoted and discriminatory, conquerors and warlike, greedy and wasteful. Many of the neutral responses described characteristics and lifestyle, like dress, color and living conditions.

Student descriptions of the Native American portrayal in the movie *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* were mostly positive (224 positive statements) while their view of European Americans was mostly negative (245 negative statements). Many of the same characteristics were attributed to both groups as were applied to them in preconceptions. Native Americans continued to be seen as community and family oriented, cultured, independent and self-sufficient, caring, nature-oriented, peaceful and strong. European Americans were described as arrogant and egocentric, bigoted and discriminatory, conquering, destructive and controlling, greedy and wasteful. Now, however, they also took on some of the negative characteristics previously attributed to Native Americans. The European Americans were angry and violent. Native Americans were clearly perceived as the good guys and heroes and the European Americans were the bad guys and evil ones.

These findings were almost perfectly mirrored by the quantitative data. Therein, students consistently held preconceptions of Native Americans that were more positive than their

preconceptions of European Americans. They also felt the film portrayal of Native Americans was more positive than the film portrayal of European Americans. Finally, film portrayals of Native Americans were more positive than student preconceptions and film portrayals of European Americans were more negative than student preconceptions.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

Admittedly, many earlier Hollywood movies such as the 1956 John Wayne film *The Searchers* portrayed American Natives negatively as violent and warlike and European Americans positively as protectors of the frontier; however, *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* does a role reversal. In this movie the oppressed Native Americans are (as described by the student respondents in this study) kind, caring, and peaceful. The oppressor European Americans are destructive and violent.

Few students had actually seen the movie before viewing the excerpts in class, but their preconceptions of Native Americans and European Americans were very much aligned with the movies' depiction of the two groups. Seiter and Gorham's theoretical orientation predicts such media/perception alignment, but with positive perceptions of Europeans, and negative perceptions of Native Americans. The findings here fly in the face of racial-mythic theory of media stereotyping.

What could explain empirical data that so completely challenges highly respected theory in our field? Certainly there are a number of possible explanations, not the least of which is the conceptual and methodological limitations of the present study.

For example, one might propose that self-reporting of preconceptions of a minority group is unreliable within the current milieu. Perhaps in a period where corporations declare their commitment to diversity, and "political correctness" is a common expression, subjects are afraid

to reveal their true feelings about a minority race. Of course, this in itself says a lot about ideology and suggests important areas for further study. In addition we should note that in this data set measures of positive and negative portrayal mirrored preconceptions (in direction, though the perception of film portrayal was actually more harsh). This would seem to have little to do with the students' desires to not offend. After all, in the second measurement they are reporting about how *others* view racial minorities, not themselves. We might even theorize that if "political correctness" played a role here, it would lead students to find *more* negative stereotypes in the media. One could see such stereotypes elsewhere even if he/she denied their internalized presence.

Or, perhaps the methodological limitations of this study have less to do with requests for self-measurement and more to do with *what* was measured. The current study might be limited by the researchers' choice to investigate subjects' preconceptions of Native Americans *in the 1800s*. Quite possibly student perceptions of Natives in this earlier period are much more positive than their opinions of contemporary Natives.

The weakness in this explanation is that it does not seem to explain how preconceptions of European Americans of the 1800s are so strongly negative. Moreover, the choice of the wording "in the 1800s" within the measuring device was based on the media product used. The researchers decided it would be inappropriate to ask students their general preconceptions of Native Americans when the film so clearly presents that group in a particular historical context.

But historical context seems important and worthy of further investigation in stereotype research. Certainly historical context is important in the development of racial myths. Gorham's work does not specifically address this but it is implied. And if Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht admit that films once portrayed historical Native Americans in a negative light, we should take note if

we find that today's films persistently portray historical Native Americans in a positive light. Admittedly, whether or not this is the case is beyond the scope of the present study.

This is not to say that nobody has recognized positive media stereotypes of Native Americans in the past. Ganje (1996) and Bird (1999) are two scholars who most recently have discussed the recurring "noble savage" stereotype. But such research often brings us back to key issues at the beginning of this paper. What is wrong with the "noble savage" stereotype? Ganje suggests that its negative aspect is that it "implies that indigenous people existed to serve Anglo society and were thankful to be 'civilized'" (Ganje, 1996, p. 42). But in *Spirit*, Little Creek, the key native character, fights "civilization," eventually wins his battle, and rides off into the sunset. He is of disservice to Anglo society and wants not part of what he has seen of the civilized world. Bird offers a different assessment of the danger of the noble savage stereotype. She suggests that it is often tied into the "doomed Indian" stereotype (p. 67). Again, this does not fit with the film studied here. Though at one point in *Sprit*, the protagonist stallion recognizes the impending doom of the west (as a railroad track is being built in the direction of his homeland), the end of the film is quite optimistic as Spirit and Little Creek together halt the progress of the railroad—in almost Luddite fashion—and escape to the wide-open spaces that began the film.

Certainly, there are other explanations that are worthy of further consideration. In "debriefing" our student/subjects, some of them suggested that they are more knowledgeable of American history than their parents were. To them, the fact that Europeans *were* brutal invaders and Native Americans *were* peaceable victims is assumed. Related to this explanation, some suggested that films such as *Spirit* serve as an opportunity for relieving corporate guilt, as we (those of us with European lineage) are able to walk back through that history and recognize our sins.

Of course, such an orientation is—at the very least—a convoluted extension of the "racial myth" orientation toward media stereotypes. The racial myth orientation suggests that stereotypes make the current world seem natural. What we appear to be seeing here is a complete reversal of earlier stereotypes. Given that, one must wonder how such a mythic shift serves ideology—which is where the current world is *made* to appear as natural. Gorham (1999) says that "myth is a system of communication that can turn history into nature" (p. 232). In this case—if our student/subjects are correct—the "history" is being completely re-written.

More than anything, then, the data presented here suggest a need for those who study stereotypes and ideology to be open to studying changes in both. We sometimes write as if little change occurs in the world of stereotypes. At least, we assume, the *end results* of stereotypes could not possibly change. The "noble savage" notion is a good example of this. The concept of the noble savage appears positive at first glance, but somewhere down deep this image *must* serve to denigrate those to whom it is applied. In this case, the "savage" portion of the description seems to have been transferred to European Americans, raising the question of how "noble" Native Americans can be disserved by the images in a film such as *Spirit.*

The notion of changes in stereotypes thus seems as important for future study as is any continued interest in positive stereotypes of oppressed groups and negative stereotypes of powerful ones. A quotation presented earlier in this paper provides a good example of this. Much of Seiter's insistence on the ideological power of stereotypes and their tendency to present minorities negatively and majorities positively was bolstered by words from Perkins (1979), whose pronouncement is worth revisiting. He stated:

> These stereotypes [of powerful groups] are important because other stereotypes are partially defined in terms of, or in opposition to them. The happy-go-lucky Negro attains

> at least some of its meaning and force from its opposition to the "puritan" characteristics (somber and responsible) of the WASP. Positive stereotypes are an important part of the ideology and are important in the socialization of both dominant and oppressed groups. (Perkins, 1979, p. 144).

One of the authors of this study showed this quotation to his students and made two interesting discoveries. One discovery was that many of the students had no idea what a WASP was. The second discovery was that (once the concept was explained to them) few of them thought it a good thing to be called a WASP or a puritan.

Obviously in the decades since Perkins theorized about the power of positive and negative stereotypes much has changed. People who once took pride in being WASPS and puritans might avoid those labels today because of changing connotations. Whether those "dominant" individuals have managed to maintain their power in spite of such changes—changes in which media stereotypes presumably play a significant role—is worthy of further study. Whether the oppressed groups who the media placed in contrast to the dominants have gained any power as a result of changing media stereotypes also seems so worthy. As researchers in media and stereotypes, we should not be afraid to face such delicate but important empirical issues head on.

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Appendix
SAMPLES OF VARIOUS FORMS USED IN THIS STUDY.

Form used to qualitatively measure preconceptions of Native Americans and European Americans.

If asked to describe what "Native Americans" were like in the 1800s, how would you respond? Please fill out the following three sentences with descriptive words to reveal three different perceptions you have about this group.

They were _____.
They were _____.
They were _____.

If asked to describe what "European Americans" were like in the 1800s, how would you respond? Please fill out the following three sentences with descriptive words to reveal three different perceptions you have about this group.

They were _____.
They were _____.
They were _____.

Form used to qualitatively measure perceptions of film portrayals of Native Americans and European Americans.

Some of the characters in the motion picture you just watched could be labeled “Native Americans.”

If asked to describe how "Native Americans" were portrayed in this motion picture, how would you respond? Please fill out the following three sentences with descriptive words to reveal three different perceptions you have about how this group was portrayed in this film.

In this film, Native Americans were shown to be: _____
_____.
(Question was repeated two more times.)

Some of the characters in the motion picture you just watched could be labeled “European-Americans.”

If asked to describe how "European-Americans" were portrayed in this motion picture, how would you respond? Please fill out the following three sentences with descriptive words to reveal three different perceptions you have about how this group was portrayed in this film.

In this film, European-Americans were shown to be: _____
_____.
(Question was repeated two more times.)

Form used to quantitatively measure preconceptions of Native Americans and European Americans.

Please think of "Native Americans" who lived in the 1800s. Check a space between each of the descriptions below to indicate how you would describe "Native Americans" in the 1800s.

Traditional	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not traditional
Violent	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not violent
Nature-oriented	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not nature-oriented
Cruel to animals	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not cruel to animals
Spiritual	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not spiritual
Materialistic	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not materialistic
Intelligent	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not intelligent
Savage	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not savage
Stewards of land	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not stewards of land
Deceitful	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not deceitful

Please think of "European-Americans" who lived in the 1800s. Check a space between each of the descriptions below to indicate how you would describe "European-Americans" in the 1800s.

Traditional	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not traditional

Etc., Etc., Etc.

Form used to quantitatively measure perceptions of film portrayals of Native Americans and European Americans.

Some of the characters in the motion picture you just watched could be labeled "Native Americans."

Please check a space between each of the descriptions below to indicate how you feel "Native Americans" were portrayed in the motion picture *Spirit* that you just viewed.

Traditional	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not traditional

Etc. Etc. Etc.

Some of the characters in the motion picture you just watched could be labeled "Native Americans."

Please check a space between each of the descriptions below to indicate how you feel "Native Americans" were portrayed in the motion picture *Spirit* that you just viewed.

Traditional	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	Not traditional

Etc. Etc. Etc.