

Native American Attitudes: History & Modern Views

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Introduction: The Complexity of Attitudes Toward Native Americans

The attitudes held by non-Native populations toward Native Americans constitute a deeply complex and historically entrenched area of study within social psychology and sociology. These perceptions are not monolithic but rather fluctuate dramatically across time, geography, and specific tribal interactions, rooted fundamentally in the historical context of colonization, displacement, and power differentials. Understanding these attitudes requires examining centuries of interaction, beginning with initial contact and evolving through eras of conflict, forced assimilation, and modern struggles for sovereignty. These attitudes often function as justifications for systemic inequality, reflecting deep-seated cognitive biases that categorize Native peoples as an inherent out-group, thereby minimizing empathy or responsibility for historical injustices. The study of these attitudes reveals much about the mechanisms of **prejudice**, **stereotyping**, and **cognitive dissonance** within dominant societal structures.

Historically, the formation of these attitudes served a distinct psychological and political purpose: to validate the territorial expansion and resource acquisition pursued by European settlers and subsequent American policy makers. When a dominant group seeks to displace or control a minority population, negative attitudes and dehumanizing stereotypes become powerful tools for moral disengagement. This process allowed individuals and institutions to reconcile the democratic ideals they espoused with the violent and exploitative actions taken against Indigenous populations. Consequently, the attitudes that developed were often paradoxical, simultaneously romanticizing certain aspects of Native culture while systematically undermining the political, economic, and social autonomy of Native nations. The enduring legacy of this attitudinal framework continues to influence public policy, media representation, and interpersonal interactions today, highlighting the critical need for robust psychological analysis.

Furthermore, these attitudes are not static; they are constantly reinforced or challenged by contemporary events, educational curricula, and popular culture. While overt hostility has largely been replaced by more subtle forms of **implicit bias** and structural discrimination, the underlying assumptions often remain. These include the perception of Native nations as relics of the past, the minimization of ongoing socioeconomic challenges stemming from historical trauma, and a general lack of awareness regarding tribal sovereignty and contemporary cultural vitality. Analyzing these attitudes necessitates a multi-disciplinary approach, integrating historical data with modern psychological theories on intergroup relations, stereotype threat, and the psychological effects of systemic invisibility.

Early European Perceptions: The Noble and Ignoble Savage Dichotomy

Initial European encounters with Native populations produced a polarized set of attitudes often framed within the dichotomy of the "Noble Savage" and the "Ignoble Savage." The concept of the

Noble Savage, popularized during the Enlightenment, idealized Native Americans as innocent, uncorrupted inhabitants living in harmony with nature, representing a critique of decadent European society. While seemingly positive, this romanticized view was inherently reductive, stripping Native individuals of their complex political structures, technological innovations, and individual agency. It positioned them as purely historical or mythological figures, rather than contemporary political actors, thereby setting the stage for future paternalistic policies based on preservation rather than self-determination. This attitude often manifested as aesthetic appreciation for certain cultural elements while simultaneously dismissing the validity of their governmental systems or land claims.

Conversely, the **Ignoble Savage** stereotype became the dominant justification for conflict and displacement. This negative framing portrayed Native Americans as inherently barbaric, heathen, savage, and resistant to civilization. This perception was crucial for justifying aggressive military action, land expropriation, and forced conversion efforts. By labeling Native peoples as fundamentally inferior or morally deficient, European settlers could invoke the doctrine of discovery and later, Manifest Destiny, without incurring significant moral or psychological cost. This negative stereotype was disseminated widely through early colonial literature, religious sermons, and political tracts, solidifying a foundational narrative of Native people as obstacles to progress that needed to be either controlled or eliminated for the benefit of "civilization."

The persistence of this dichotomy demonstrates a key psychological mechanism: the tendency of a dominant group to categorize an out-group based on the immediate needs of the in-group. When Native groups were useful for trade or required minimal land, the Noble Savage narrative might prevail; however, when conflict arose over resources or territory, the Ignoble Savage narrative was immediately deployed to justify violence. This cognitive flexibility allowed European and American authorities to maintain a consistent self-image as morally superior agents of progress, regardless of the brutality of their actions. The lasting impact of this early dualistic thinking is still evident in contemporary media, where Native characters are often either mystical guides or dangerous antagonists, rarely complex, modern individuals.

Manifest Destiny and the Justification of Displacement

The 19th century saw the formalization of attitudes toward Native Americans through the powerful ideological framework of **Manifest Destiny**. This belief asserted that American expansion across the continent was divinely ordained, inevitable, and morally justified. Within this framework, Native Americans were fundamentally viewed not as sovereign nations but as temporary impediments to the realization of America's destiny. This attitude necessitated a psychological shift away from viewing Native groups as merely different, toward viewing them as inherently incompatible with American progress. The resulting policies, such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830, were predicated on the attitude that Native land ownership was invalid because their use of the land was

deemed "inefficient" or "uncivilized."

The justification for displacement relied heavily on the psychological mechanism of **dehumanization**. By portraying Native people as subhuman or inherently backward, the moral implications of forced marches, broken treaties, and massacres were significantly reduced for the dominant population. This narrative was reinforced by scientific racism of the era, which purported to prove the biological inferiority of non-white races. Consequently, the prevailing attitude was one of paternalistic superiority combined with aggressive opportunism: Native people were seen as children needing guidance (assimilation) or obstacles needing removal (relocation or extermination). This pervasive belief system created an environment where violence against Native groups was framed not as aggression, but as a necessary step toward national development.

Furthermore, the concept of Manifest Destiny fostered an attitude of entitlement and inevitability among settlers. This belief system encouraged settlers to view the land as empty or wasted, ignoring the complex agricultural and ecological systems maintained by Native nations for millennia. This attitude, often termed the "terra nullius" mentality (empty land), provided a powerful cognitive shield against guilt or accountability. The success of the westward expansion cemented these attitudes, validating the belief that American civilization was superior and destined to dominate, leaving a psychological legacy that continues to undervalue Native contributions and rights in contemporary land disputes and resource management decisions.

The Role of Government Policy: Reservations and Assimilation

Federal policy throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries reflected a controlling and paternalistic attitude toward Native Americans, centered on two core objectives: physical segregation onto reservations and cultural eradication through forced assimilation. The establishment of **reservations**, while ostensibly guaranteeing land rights, was primarily a mechanism for control, isolation, and resource consolidation for the surrounding non-Native population. The attitudes driving this policy were rooted in the belief that Native Americans could not coexist with white society unless they were contained, thereby minimizing conflict over resources while simultaneously facilitating federal oversight and dependency. This created an environment where systemic poverty and lack of infrastructure became chronic features, reinforcing negative stereotypes about Native inability to manage their own affairs.

The most aggressive expression of the assimilationist attitude was the establishment of **Indian boarding schools**, beginning in the late 1870s. The explicit goal, as articulated by proponents like Richard Henry Pratt, was to "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." This attitude reflected a profound belief in the intrinsic superiority of Euro-American culture and the corresponding need to forcibly strip Native children of their language, religion, clothing, and kinship ties. This policy was supported by a widespread public attitude that viewed Native cultures not as valuable societies, but as destructive

impediments to individual salvation and national unity. The psychological impact of these policies, which involved systematic abuse and cultural trauma, continues to shape attitudes today, particularly regarding issues of cultural preservation and educational equity.

Even policies intended to be beneficial, such as the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, were often implemented with an underlying paternalism. While this act promoted self-governance, it often imposed Euro-American governmental structures (like constitutional governments) onto complex, existing tribal systems, reflecting an attitude that true self-governance must conform to Western norms. Furthermore, the later Termination Era (1950s-1960s), which sought to dissolve the federal relationship with tribes, was driven by an attitude of impatience--a desire to rapidly integrate Native populations into the mainstream and eliminate the perceived burden of treaty obligations. These shifts in policy consistently demonstrate that prevailing attitudes were less about supporting Native sovereignty and more about managing the "Indian problem" according to the dominant society's economic and ideological priorities.

Psychological Dimensions of Prejudice and Discrimination

The attitudes toward Native Americans are maintained by several powerful psychological mechanisms characteristic of intergroup conflict and prejudice. One significant factor is the **out-group homogeneity effect**, where non-Native individuals tend to perceive all members of various Native nations as being similar to one another, overlooking the vast linguistic, cultural, and political diversity that exists among over 574 federally recognized tribes. This homogenization simplifies the out-group, making it easier to apply broad, often negative, stereotypes, such as the "stoic warrior" or the "dependent reservation resident." This lack of differentiation prevents personalized interaction and reinforces generalized negative schema, thereby maintaining social distance and justifying differential treatment.

Furthermore, attitudes are significantly influenced by **implicit bias**. While overt expressions of prejudice have declined in many areas, subconscious associations linking Native Americans with negative traits (e.g., poverty, alcoholism, historical figures) remain persistent in the minds of non-Native individuals. These implicit biases, often absorbed through media, historical narratives, and subtle societal cues, influence hiring decisions, interactions with law enforcement, and educational expectations, even when individuals consciously reject explicit racism. The subtle nature of implicit bias makes it particularly insidious, as discriminatory outcomes occur without conscious malice, reinforcing structural inequalities that perpetuate negative attitudes about Native competency and capability.

Finally, the concept of **system justification theory** helps explain the enduring nature of these attitudes. Members of the dominant society often possess a psychological need to believe that the existing social, economic, and political order is fair and legitimate. To maintain this belief,

individuals may unconsciously adopt or reinforce negative attitudes about marginalized groups, thereby justifying their lower social status. For instance, rather than acknowledging that historical oppression and resource theft caused chronic poverty on reservations, system justification encourages the belief that Native Americans are poor due to their own lack of motivation or inherent cultural deficiencies. This cognitive mechanism provides emotional comfort to the dominant group while actively impeding recognition of systemic injustice and the need for structural reform.

Contemporary Attitudes and Media Representation

Contemporary attitudes toward Native Americans are heavily shaped by persistent, often outdated, media representations that contribute to both invisibility and misrepresentation. Native individuals are often rendered invisible in mainstream media, leading to a profound lack of understanding about modern Native life, tribal governance, and urban Native communities. When they are represented, they frequently appear in one of three highly stereotyped forms:

The **Historical Figure**: Confined to the 19th century or earlier, emphasizing conflict with settlers.

The **Spiritual Guide**: A mystical, non-individualized character whose sole purpose is to aid the white protagonist.

The **Tragic Victim**: Defined solely by issues of substance abuse, poverty, or historical trauma, lacking agency.

These limited portrayals perpetuate the attitude that Native Americans are not dynamic, contemporary contributors to society, but rather figures frozen in the past or defined exclusively by their suffering.

The controversy surrounding **Native American sports mascots** serves as a potent example of how deeply entrenched stereotypical attitudes remain in popular culture. For many non-Native fans, the use of Native imagery is defended as a form of "honor" or tradition, reflecting an attitude that treats Native culture as a generalized aesthetic commodity rather than a living, sacred identity. This perspective demonstrates a failure to recognize the psychological harm and dehumanization inherent in reducing diverse peoples to caricatures used for entertainment. The resistance to changing these mascots highlights a pervasive attitude of entitlement regarding cultural appropriation and a dismissal of Native voices calling for respect and recognition.

Furthermore, a significant challenge in contemporary discourse is the attitude of **historical amnesia** or minimization among the general public. While many Americans acknowledge that historical injustices occurred, there is a widespread tendency to view these events as isolated incidents of the distant past, disconnected from present-day reality. This attitude allows individuals to avoid confronting the ongoing socioeconomic consequences of historical policies, such as land loss, treaty violations, and intergenerational trauma. This minimization leads to attitudes of

skepticism regarding current Native rights claims, resource disputes, and calls for governmental accountability, reflecting a desire to close the historical chapter without addressing its lingering structural effects.

The Impact of Historical Trauma on Modern Perceptions

Attitudes toward Native Americans are inextricably linked to the concept of **historical trauma**--the collective emotional and psychological injury sustained by a group across generations stemming from catastrophic events like genocide, forced removal, and cultural suppression. Non-Native attitudes often fail to account for how this trauma manifests in contemporary Native communities, leading to misdiagnosis of social problems. When high rates of poverty, substance abuse, or mental health issues are observed on reservations, the prevailing non-Native attitude often defaults to internal, dispositional attributions (e.g., character flaws or cultural failures), rather than external, systemic attributions rooted in centuries of violence and disenfranchisement. This attribution error reinforces negative stereotypes and impedes effective policy solutions.

The lack of understanding regarding historical trauma also affects attitudes toward tribal jurisdiction and social services. Non-Native populations often exhibit skepticism regarding the need for separate tribal justice systems, health services, or educational institutions, viewing them as unnecessary or duplicative. This attitude stems from a fundamental ignorance of the unique legal status of Native nations and the specific mental health needs generated by historical oppression. A shift toward positive attitudes requires acknowledging that the current disparities are not inherent flaws in Native communities, but rather predictable, multigenerational responses to systemic violence and cultural disruption, necessitating culturally sensitive and sovereign-led solutions.

Positive change in attitudes relies heavily on educational reform that accurately portrays both the history of oppression and the resilience of Native nations. When curricula minimize or sanitize the violence of colonization, they perpetuate an attitude of ignorance that allows prejudice to flourish. Conversely, education that emphasizes the continuity of Native cultures, the complexity of tribal governance, and the ongoing struggle for sovereignty fosters greater empathy and respect. This shift moves the narrative away from viewing Native Americans solely as victims of the past toward recognizing them as **resilient survivors** and contemporary political leaders.

Movements for Self-Determination and Attitude Change

Positive shifts in attitudes toward Native Americans are strongly correlated with the increasing visibility and success of tribal self-determination movements since the mid-20th century. When Native nations assert their sovereignty--managing their own resources, developing economic infrastructure, and exercising legal jurisdiction--it directly challenges the long-held paternalistic attitudes of the dominant society. The assertion of **tribal sovereignty** forces non-Native institutions

and individuals to interact with Native leaders as governmental equals, shifting the dynamic from one of dependency to one of nation-to-nation relations. This structural change is crucial for dismantling underlying attitudes of superiority.

Key areas where positive attitude change is being fostered include:

Economic Development: Successful tribal enterprises challenge the stereotype of dependency and showcase Native economic capability and self-reliance.

Legal Advocacy: High-profile legal victories regarding treaty rights and land claims educate the public about the legal legitimacy and historical validity of Native rights.

Cultural Revitalization: The resurgence of Native languages, art, and ceremonies publicly demonstrates the vitality and continuity of Native cultures, countering the "relic of the past" stereotype.

These actions provide concrete counter-examples to negative stereotypes, encouraging the public to update their cognitive frameworks regarding Native life.

Ultimately, the transition toward respectful and equitable attitudes requires a societal commitment to **decolonization**--a process that involves more than just recognizing historical wrongs. It necessitates a critical examination of how current systems, institutions, and individual beliefs continue to privilege non-Native perspectives and marginalize Native voices. For non-Native individuals, this involves moving beyond passive empathy to active allyship, supporting Native-led initiatives, respecting tribal jurisdiction, and prioritizing accurate, contemporary knowledge about Native nations. This sustained commitment to learning and structural change is the only viable path toward dismantling centuries of ingrained prejudice and fostering truly collaborative relationships.