

The Study of Stereotypes

Stereotypes are at the heart of racial and religious prejudice and intolerance. They are created by religious groups to target other religions, a form of persuasion that with just a few words causes mass hatred and conflict. The problem with stereotypes throughout antiquity to modern day is that people do not understand stereotypes— the reason they are created and the effect they are meant to cause— and therefore racial tension and hate crimes still exist today. It often becomes so blended with regular life that people do not realize that they are hurting others, and the ones taking the hatred continue to be battered. Thus, the best way to educate for racial tolerance is to reveal the nature of racial stereotypes: their use, immorality, and terrible potential.

Offensive stereotypes that lead to hatred and prejudice are actually a mixture of fact and opinion— to say that it is only one or the other would not be correct. Stereotypes are based on fact, sometimes a simple physical feature or reality. In our discussion, for example, Noah mentioned that “Jews have big noses”; in our reading, Jews were known as “greedy moneylenders” because many of them held the position of banking and sinning (according to Christianity) by collecting interest on loans (Anti-Judaism: A Case Study in Discrimination). Of these, both are believable: maybe Jewish people were observed to have large noses, a simple observation that became a widespread generalization; and Jewish people actually did hold many banking positions in the Middle Ages. The difference between the two is that the former is almost a silly joke, and the latter is offensive, a negative description of Jews. This is because although the big-nose idea is not based much of opinion, the idea of Jews as people who are greedy is twisted very far from the truth. To do fair banking doesn’t mean they steal money or are sinning even if a religion deems it so, but the stereotype was altered with some loathing opinion. Another way that facts are altered is if a generalization is created from an abnormality of a certain group, especially when Al-Qaeda, an extremist Islamist group, had terrorist attacks on the metropolises of the U.S. From then on, almost all Muslims immediately became despised and feared to be terrorists— even though Islam is a peaceful religion. As a result of this over-generalizations, many people have been falsely accused. For instance, Najwa Ahmed, a Muslim teenager, has been “spit at in the face. This guy literally tried to run over [her] and called me a suicide bomber,” among many other hateful actions (Zero Tolerance: Racial Harassment in

School Worsens for Scapegoated Students). Lastly, the most important part of form a stereotype is to be able to fully exploit the persuasive power by generating and using misunderstanding and lack of knowledge to their advantage. An example would be during the Middle Ages, when Jews were thought negatively of and separated into a ghetto part of the city. The Christians had little to do with them, but heard propaganda against them. In the book *A Boy of Old Prague*, a boy was sent into the ghetto to work for a Jew and was absolutely frightened, because what he had heard about them were “all the tales of witchcraft and black magic ... a Jew had cut himself up in pieces, and put himself into a flash, and had become immortal; another had made himself invisible with the herb Andromeda when the Devil came for his soul ...”—once he had met the Jewish person for himself, he discovered the falsity of what the public had taught him (Reading 18: A Return to Tradition?). It is essential to know that there is usually truth behind a stereotype in order to be somewhat plausible, and sometimes, in offensive generalizations, there is almost always some distortion in the truth, not based on fact, that creates the hatred. To be able to differentiate between the two will help many people lower their anger—most of the time, the anger is created by opinion *and* fact.

Another important point to consider about stereotypes is that they establish a justification to hurt others and consolidation of power. Therefore, stereotypes are a means to injure others that are different and less powerful (usually a minority) than themselves. This has been the case repeatedly throughout mankind, from the blaming of the Christians for the Great Fire of Rome to the Holocaust. By determining a scapegoat to direct all the blames at, the people have something to direct their anger towards *and* a way to get rid of people that are “different”; a two-fold benefit for them. Because of this, people should be taught that prejudice and hate towards another religion typically is irrational, done with no regards to human decency but only for personal benefit. Secondly, people don’t know the extent to which racial hate can injure others, so the numbers of hate crimes are enormous and rising. A long-term Muslim citizen of the U.S. said, “I don’t think there’s a single Muslim out there who hasn’t felt some sort of fallout since 9/11” (USA’s Muslims Under a Cloud). According to a 2009 survey of religious hate incidents, there were 1,211 hate crimes against Jews in the U.S., including a shooting and bombing plans (DL Audit: Anti-Semitic Incidents Across the Country in 2009). Another example of a hate crime is a

newly-immigrated boy from Afghanistan who was severely beat up in school and was severely injured. “He’s terrified. You can see how damaged he has been. He won’t look you in the eye; he just shrinks away. He won’t talk” (USA’s Muslims Under a Cloud). It simply isn’t humane to cause all that pain; if only they knew, many people can change their mindset on racial tolerance.

Besides causing pain in the scapegoats, blaming a weak group creates huge amounts of anger and fear, ingredients that inevitably mix to create unnecessary violence. For example, soon after a terrorist attack by Muslim extremists in India, Motaz Elshafi, a Muslim and American citizen, was sent an email by one of his coworkers as if he were a terrorist. The email warned him and other Muslims at the company that “such violent acts wouldn’t intimidate people. but only make them stronger,” and was addressed to him with, “Dear Terrorist” (USA’s Muslims Under a Cloud). ““I was furious,” said Elshafi. ‘What did I have to do with this violence?’” Obviously, he didn’t have anything to do with the incident, besides that the terrorists followed his religion. If he were younger and more naive, he may have started a fight and created more anger. As somebody else describes the situation, “Muslims have the same anxieties and anguish about terrorism as everyone in the U.S. At the same time, they’re being blamed for it. They’re carrying a double burden” (USA’s Muslims Under a Cloud). This misdirected blame has lead to, in more extreme cases, riots started by the angry victims. After a Christian church was bombed in Egypt, hundreds of Christians and Muslims fought, the Christians clearly angry about the injuring of their people, and the Muslims indignant, knowing that it was not the fault of their religion but only a few individuals. This only led to more violence, injuries, and anger between the raging groups— as a result causing more hate crimes and more retaliation. Hate crimes from prejudice only leads to more anguish and trouble in a vicious cycle, if it is allowed to continue.

Stereotypes can be simple, objective descriptions of a certain group of people, or they can be powerful statements quietly attacking those people. They are usually twisted ideas, but sometimes it is difficult to distinguish it from a logical observation. However, the gullible public and strong media associates untrue ideas with religions, such as the fear of Muslims in America after the 9/11 bombing, come together and create huge amounts of racial intolerance. Only when people finally learn that stereotypes are not true will they be able to learn to tolerate others.

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