

# Why stereotypes should be avoided

11/14/2017

Just what is a stereotype? Simply put, stereotypes are characteristics imposed upon groups of people because of their race, culture, nationality, religion and sexual orientation, among others. These characteristics tend to be oversimplifications of the groups involved.



For example, someone who meets a few individuals from a particular country might find them to be quiet and reserved. The person might then spread the word that all citizens from that country are quiet and reserved as well.

A generalization such as this doesn't recognize diversity within groups because it assumes that all people in the group are the same. It may result in discrimination, or help give certain groups a bad reputation if the stereotypes linked to them are largely negative. Even so-called positive stereotypes can be harmful, and should be avoided.

## Stereotypes Vs. Generalizations

All stereotypes are generalizations, but not all generalizations are stereotypes.

Stereotypes are widely spread oversimplifications of groups of people. In the United

States, racial groups have been linked to

stereotypes such as being good at math, athletics and dancing. These stereotypes are so well-known that the average American wouldn't hesitate if asked to identify which racial group in this country has a reputation for excelling in



There are many talented African-American basketball players in the U.S. However, linking this sport with African-Americans culture as a whole is a

basketball. In short, when one stereotypes, one repeats the cultural myths already present in a society.

On the other hand, a person can make a generalization about an ethnic group that hasn't been perpetuated in society. Say a woman encounters individuals from a particular ethnic group and finds them to be excellent cooks. She may oversimplify and conclude that anyone from this ethnic group must be an excellent cook. She would be guilty of generalizing, but her conclusion would not be a stereotype. No single ethnic group in the U.S. has the distinction of being known as excellent cooks.

### **They Can Be Complicated**

Stereotypes may refer to a specific sex, race, religion or country, but they often link various aspects of identity together. This is known as intersectionality. A stereotype about black gay men, for example, would involve race, sex and sexual orientation. Although such a stereotype targets a specific segment of African-Americans rather than black people in general, it's still problematic to suggest that black gay men are all a certain way. Too many other factors make up any black gay man's identity to apply a fixed list of characteristics to him.

Stereotypes are also complicated because, when they factor in race and sex, members of the same group may be pegged very differently.



New York is home to the largest metropolitan Chinese population outside of Asia. Chinese-Americans and other people of mixed background might be American. But stereotypes and misconceptions still affect their layered identities.

Certain stereotypes apply to Asian-Americans generally, but the Asian-American population can also be broken down by sex. One finds that stereotypes of Asian-American men and Asian-American women differ. Stereotypes involving race and gender may peg the women of a racial group as attractive and the men as the exact opposite or vice versa.

Even stereotypes applied to a racial group become inconsistent when members of that group are broken down by national origin. Stereotypes about African-Americans differ from those about black people from the Caribbean or from African nations.

### **Can They Ever Be Good?**

Both negative and positive stereotypes exist, but even so-called positive stereotypes do harm. That's because all stereotypes are limiting and leave little to no room for individuality. Perhaps a child belongs to a racial group that people believe are highly intelligent, but that child happens to suffer from a learning disability. If his teacher buys into the stereotype that the child is supposed to excel in class because "his people" are so smart, the teacher might assume that his poor grades are because he's lazy. The teacher then might never discover his learning disability.

### **Is There Truth In Stereotypes?**

It's often said that stereotypes are rooted in truth, but this is not a valid statement. People who make this argument often want to justify their use of stereotypes. The problem with stereotypes is that they suggest that groups of people are inherently prone to certain behaviors. People may think that Arabs are "naturally" one way and that Latinos are "naturally" another. The fact is, science doesn't back up these kinds of assertions. If groups of people have historically excelled at certain activities, social factors no doubt contributed to this phenomenon.

Perhaps a society barred a group of people from practicing certain professions but welcomed them in others. Over the years, members of the group became associated with the professions they were actually allowed to practice. This did not come about because they were the only ones with a natural talent in these fields, but because these were the professions that allowed them to survive. Those who spread stereotypes ignore social factors. They make links between groups of people and certain skills, activities or behaviors where none naturally exist.

The next time you're tempted to stereotype a group of people, think about the groups to which you belong. List the stereotypes linked to those groups. Does each of those stereotypes apply to you? More than likely you'd disagree that all of the qualities commonly attributed to those of your gender, racial group, sexual orientation or nation of origin describe you. That is why it's important to judge specific individuals rather than the groups of which they're part.