

Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts

by Leslie C. Aguilar

We're all familiar with stereotypes — they are simplified, fixed beliefs about a group of people. Most of us can quickly call to mind stereotypes about lots of groups. Think for a moment about the stereotypes you have heard expressed about older people, teenagers, Jews, Muslims, Christians, women, black men, white men, blondes (blonde women that is), overweight people, welfare recipients, rich people, lawyers, politicians, New Yorkers, or vegetarians. There's no doubt stereotypes exist in our society.

The Effects of Stereotyping

Many of the negative stereotypes are brutal. What may surprise you is that even so-called positive stereotypes can have a negative impact.

Consider these...

“Asians are good in math.”

“African Americans are good at sports.”

“Men are good leaders.”

“Women are good nurturers.”

Stereotyping affects both the person who holds the stereotype and the person being stereotyped. By seeing all people in a group as the same, you deny people their individuality. If you apply fixed beliefs about a group to an individual, you distort your ability to get a clear view of that person. This may lead you to prejudge or misjudge others.

If you have ever been stereotyped, you know it is often demeaning and offensive. If others treat you as less valuable or limit your opportunities based on negative preconceptions about “your group,” it can have serious consequences on your life.

This is true even with the positive stereotypes. Imagine being the Asian-American student who loves marketing, yet the guidance counselor steers you to accounting, based on the counselor's beliefs that Asians are good in math.

How to Recognize Stereotypes

In our society stereotyping is prevalent. The key is this – become cognizant of stereotypes when they occur so you can make conscious choices about how to address them.

Some stereotypes are blatant, such as “*They all look the same*” or “*They are all _____.*” Most stereotypes surface in more subtle ways. They may be mixed in with other information and passed off as facts. They may be “just a joke.” Regardless of the packaging, stereotypes are all based on the same thought process that clumps individuals together as members of a group, with no acknowledgement of individual differences.

Stereotypes typically have three characteristics:

- 1) They imply that *all* people in the group are the same.

“You know how men are.”

- 2) They contain a *judgment*. Notice that the judgment often reveals more about the stereotyper’s beliefs or expectations than it does about the stereotyped individual.

“Young people today don’t have a good work ethic.”

This reflects the mindset of the stereotyper – everyone should structure work the same way he or she does. It does not acknowledge that many younger people work very hard, or that there are different ways to accomplish meaningful work.

- 3) Stereotypes are fairly *inflexible*. When we encounter someone who does not fit our stereotype, it’s easier to consider that person the “exception to the rule,” rather than question the validity of the stereotype.

I met an engineer at a large national conference who was a good-looking, dark-skinned man from the Caribbean. In the few minutes that we sat together, two people who were introduced commented: “*You don’t look like an engineer.*”

Even if you personally try to avoid using them, you may still occasionally slip into stereotypes. And you *will* encounter them in the workplace and in society. In order to deal with stereotypes, you must first be able to recognize them when they occur.

Following is a tool that makes recognizing the subtle and not-so-subtle stereotypes easier. The left column identifies common ways stereotypes are packaged. On the right are examples of each type of stereotype. As you scan the list, notice if you have ever heard similar kinds of stereotypes about various groups.

EIGHT COMMON WAYS STEREOTYPES SURFACE AND ARE PERPETUATED

1) Jokes	<i>"Do you know what happens when you get three _____ together?"</i>
2) Name-Calling/Labels	<i>"Blue Hair" • "Computer Geek" • "Trailer Trash"</i>
3) Oversimplified Statements Applied to ALL People in a Group	<i>"Young workers today _____." • "Immigrants don't want to learn English." • "Latinos are _____." • "You know how Southerners are."</i>
4) Stereotypical Descriptors	<i>"Crotchety old man" • "Women are very emotional." • "Typical white male"</i>
5) Personal Assumptions About Individuals (based on stereotypes held about a group the individual is a member of)	<i>Assuming a woman's career is secondary to family. Therefore, not offering a career opportunity to a woman that would require her to relocate her family. • Assuming front-line employees don't have the skill sets for a special assignment, and therefore not considering any front-line employees.</i>

6) Spokesperson Syndrome

Viewing one individual as the spokesperson for an entire group. *"Marta, what is the best way to deal with the Hispanic market?"* • *"Glenn, what do black people think about this?"* Identifying an individual from a minority group as a "community leader" if he or she speaks up on an issue (i.e., in the media).

7) Descriptors That Evoke Stereotypes Because They Are the Opposite or a Contradiction to an Existing Stereotype

"We're looking for qualified minority candidates." • *"A sensitive man"*

8) "Statistical" Stereotyping

"Statistics show that most criminals are _____." Then treating an individual based on the "statistic."
Note: The statistic could be real or perceived.

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Note: Stereotypes are so powerful that often we hold on to them even when evidence disproves the stereotype.

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"You don't look like a(n) _____." •
"You're not like most _____." •
"She's really articulate for a(n) _____."

Your Choice: Moving Past Stereotypes

Moving past stereotypes requires a conscious choice to treat people as individuals rather than as members of a set – to interrupt stereotypes rather than perpetuate them. In a society where stereotypes abound, this takes vigilance to identify and engage to address.

This article is excerpted from "Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts: Communicating Respectfully in a Diverse World" by Leslie C. Aguilar, 2006. The book provides tips and guidelines for addressing stereotypes and other forms of bias in communication. For further information, contact the author at 407.859.1191 or visit www.DiversityInclusionCenter.com • www.DiversityInclusionStore.com