**Why stereotypes should be avoided**

By Nadra Kareem Nittle, ThoughtCo.com; 11/14/2017

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

For example, someone who meets a few individuals from a particular country and finds them to be quiet and reserved may spread the word that all citizens from the country in question are quiet and reserved.

A generalization such as this doesn’t allow for diversity within groups and may result in stigmatization and discrimination of groups if the stereotypes linked to them are largely negative. That said, even so-called positive stereotypes can be harmful due to their limiting nature. Whether stereotypes are positive or negative, they should be avoided.

**Stereotypes Vs. Generalizations**

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 generalization. Photo: Chad Cooper/Flickr. [click to enlarge]

![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 generalization. Photo: Chad Cooper/Flickr. [click to enlarge]]()While all stereotypes are generalizations, not all generalizations are stereotypes. Stereotypes are widely circulated oversimplifications of people groups. 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 basketball. In short, when one stereotypes, one repeats the cultural mythology already present in a particular 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. Based on her encounters with these folks, she may oversimplify and conclude that anyone from this ethnic group must be an excellent cook.

In this instance, she would be guilty of generalizing, but an observer might think twice about calling her conclusion a stereotype since no single group in the U.S. has the distinction of being known as excellent cooks.

**They Can Be Complicated**

While stereotypes may refer to a specific sex, race, religion or country, often they 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 blacks generally, it’s still problematic to insinuate that black gay men are all a certain way. Too many other factors make up any one black gay man’s identity to ascribe a fixed list of characteristics to him.

![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. Photo: Yanping Nora Soong/Wikimedia. [click to enlarge]]()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.

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.

Stereotypes are also complicated because when they factor in race and sex, members of the same group may be pegged very differently. Certain stereotypes apply to Asian-Americans generally, but when the Asian-American population is 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. A case in point is that stereotypes about black Americans differ from those about blacks from the Caribbean or blacks from African nations. Such discrepancies indicate that stereotypes make little sense and aren’t useful tools by which to judge others.

**Can They Ever Be Good?**

Both negative and positive stereotypes exist, but even the latter 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 known for being highly intelligent. This particular child, however, suffers from a learning disability and struggles to keep up with his classmates in school. Because his teacher buys into the stereotype that this child is supposed to excel in class because “his people” are so smart, she might assume that his poor marks are because he’s lazy and never do the investigative work needed to discover his learning disability, saving him from years of struggle in school.

**Is There Truth In Stereotypes?**

It’s oft said that stereotypes are rooted in truth, but is this 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. Arabs are naturally one way. Hispanics 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 came about not because of any inherent talent in these fields but because they were the professions that allowed them to survive. Those who spread stereotypes ignore social factors and make links between groups of people and certain skills, activities or behaviors where none inherently exist.

**Wrapping Up**

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’s why it’s important to judge specific individuals rather than the groups of which they’re part.