Navigating Stereotypes

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**Introduction**

Merriam-Webster defines a stereotype as a noun “a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment” (2019). While a stereotype may seem harmless, there are many negative perceptions that are typically presented alongside of the stereotype, making the stereotype damaging to that particular group or idea. So how can stereotypes be overcome within cultures and whose responsibility is it to enact necessary changes?

**How a stereotype manifests**

While humans are always thinking, at times, our brain attempts to make thinking easier for us. As an effort of efficiency, our brains like to categorize. Placing a person or a group of people into a category eases the burden of always having to remember the nuances of each. Instead, we are able to apply a blanket statement known as *social categorization* to that group, giving us an easier way to understand the social world (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2014). As young children and young adults, these categories and ideas can be absorbed from influential adults in our lives, the media or even peer pressure (Paul, 2016). So what one generation learns of the categories is easily passed on to the next generation unless there is a need for redefinition.

Not all stereotypes are negative. Professor of psychology, Alice Eagly comments that stereotypes are “grounded in the observations of everyday life” (2015). However the stereotypes negative in nature seem to be the ones receiving focus and the ones doing the most damage to society and communication. A stereotype may begin with a single interaction. Our brain then categorizes details about that interaction so that next time we are able to take a shortcut when we have a similar interaction (Paul, 2016). The trouble begins when those details are incorrect and then are applied to a larger population.

**The damage stereotypes cause**

If stereotypes are not challenged and corrected, they can affect many facets of life. Imagine a Human Resources manager as they are looking to hire for a new position. If the manager has unfounded bias towards or against a certain culture or ethnicity, the manager may overlook a well-qualified candidate based on the last name sounding as if it fits a certain ethnicity. Another example is how a non-disabled student may go out of their way to avoid a new student in class that uses a wheelchair because the non-disabled student perceives those with disabilities as dependent and emotionally unstable. When in reality, people with disabilities want to be treated as a person and find things they have in common with the non-disabled person (Samovar, et al., 2012). Simply put, stereotypes can lead to discrimination (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2014).

**Conclusion**

So is there a way to end stereotypes and correct perceptions? Eagly believes that it is possible to change perceptions by changing “the reality that people observe” (2015). By providing education and opportunity, Eagly believes that more minorities will take place in social roles such as male nurses, and it will give people no other option than to change their perception (2015). However, this isn’t always the easiest solution, the most timely or the most inclusive to the various forms of stereotypes. Further, it does not stress personal responsibility to end such negative views of others. “We must understand how our own attitudes, values, and perceptions intervene when we observe, predict and evaluate the behavior of others” (Samovar, et al., 2012). We must also understand the limits of our control by teaching our children to value uniqueness in characteristics, honoring individuality and trusting that this education may stand up to the other influences within their lives. It is through education and remaining open to learning from others that we will be able to curb stereotypes and enhance our worldview.

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