Stereotypes and the Damage Done

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COM 305

Final Project

26NOV2012

In the “Land of Opportunity” and “Where Freedom Reigns”, the inescapable division of race and class is ever present. The United States has long been seen as a haven for foreign seekers of success, but does that perception still ring true? The United States has become the melting pot of the world with conditional open arms for those who would wish to legitimately try their hands at freedom and democracy. The inscription within the Statue of Liberty, from the poem by Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," (1883) reads, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shores, Send these, the homeless, tempest-lost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” These words were written with pride and zeal, epitomizing a country that sees blindly and accepts unconditionally. Things have changed a bit since those words were written; people, tend to see a bit more critically and accept a little less unconditionally. Reasons abound for the loss of confidence in open-ended acceptance; acts of terror, acts of criminal nature, and unfounded prejudice still run rampant. In an age where the media is more prevalent in people’s lives than ever before, are people’s opinions and attitudes toward foreign immigrants and racial diversity shaped and altered by the views offered by these media types?

As much as America claims that liberty is blind, both race and culture play a huge part in the perception of its people and how they are treated. Stereotypes and other harmful propaganda have created numerous hurtful misconceptions about the people living in this country. Some of these stereotypes are only relevant because they are reinforced by practiced behaviors and cultural anomalies that seem odd to some and are perceived as negative differences. For example, the biggest stereotype currently available due in large part to the terrorist act of 9/11 is that all Middle Eastern men are terrorists. Everyone has seen it once or twice, a nervous look shared by some as a Middle Eastern man enters the economy cabin on the airplane. It does not matter that the man is not even Arabic or Afghani, he has a long beard and dark skin, his eyes may look a bit more intense against the angular shape of his face, anything to rationalize the irrational feeling that has come over your body. The man is from Brooklyn, he is of Persian descent and a practicing Christian. He attended the University of Michigan and graduated with honors in Engineering. Yet, in the mind’s eye, he is pegged and stereotyped as a potential terrorist. “In the post-9/11 era, “Middle Eastern–looking” people, men in particular, have been verbally harassed, physically attacked, and sometimes killed, regardless of their actual nationality or association with Islam or the Middle East. In Mesa, Ari- zona, an Indian Sikh was shot and killed for being dark-skinned, bearded, and wearing a turban (Delves 2001).” (Marvasti, A. 2005). This is not the only harmful stereotype in the country. The misconception of African Americans in regards to employment for instance, “…the enduring fact of blacks' disadvantaged position in society is interpreted by whites as evidence confirming the existing stereotypes, such as the belief that most blacks are unmotivated or that they fail to try hard enough.” (Brezina T., 2003) This type of understanding is just part of what continues to oppress the African American culture. The research offers a clear view of a society that obviously runs on a system predicated on stereotypes. America was once seen as the “Land of Opportunity”, but for whom? Select few individuals are able to navigate that dream unchecked and unscathed but for much more of the masses, this journey is much more difficult and riddled with challenging boundaries.

Intercultural relationships are viewed with something like apprehension when entering into them. The unknown of a different culture and the thought process of someone raised in a completely different portion of the world could not possibly be similar to what has become the standard. This thought process only furthers a stereotype that diversity is not beneficial. A study conducted amongst 140 students of diverse nationalities was conducted regarding communication with members of different races, “Theoretical frameworks were developed from these empirical findings. According to Neuliep (2003), whenever we communicate with someone from a different culture, we experience much uncertainty. We may not know anything about a person's culture, values, habits, behavior, dress or other factors. Berger (1988) further theorizes that when we interact with a stranger (especially a person from a different culture), our primary concern is to reduce uncertainty.”(Mustafa, H., Hamidah, A. H., Ahmad, J., & Siarap, K. 2012). In most cases, diversity in fact offers an outside perspective that may not have been visible from where the original party stood. Often times, a member of another culture has seen certain issues before that may not have been present in the environment which he/she has migrated towards. The difficult part is getting beyond the predetermined notions that have been bred and beaten into the heads of every person on the planet; Asians are smart, white people are materialistic, African Americans are loud, Spanish people are lazy, these thought patterns could be the inhibiting factor that prevents a lifelong union or the cure for cancer. The inability to look beyond the physical and cultural differences could be large and small, depending on the “Who” and the “What”. Unique and individual techniques combined with ones own individual techniques provide the best options for any relationship (whether personal or professional.)

In addition, differences between two people who are dating are often pegged with some negative stereotype regarding financial status or satisfaction of some sexual fetish. While in certain situations these presumptions may be true, the majority of people are just interested more in actual connection and less about the package that it comes in. Interesting as well is the fact that there are stereotypes within stereotypes. Within the gay community, an alleged racial profiling incident at the doors of a local bar in New York, "They [bar managers] have stereotyped blacks: they're all poor and don't know how to talk or how to behave or maybe they think there is something we're going to do that other people don't do in a bar. It's consistent with the kind of nonsense that's been going on in this community for years. We are in trouble as a community if we allow this to be put on our own kind. For gays to support this kind of behavior is quite disturbing." (Clark, J. 1981). Granted this research comes from the early 1980’s but it also illustrates that this is a long-standing issue that is still unresolved.

The stereotypes that plague our society appear to be tools utilized by the common person to attempt to classify and categorize people not as individuals but as groups. Perhaps it is too large a concept for individuals to be just that, and the simplistic understanding that a certain culture is more easily defined by a few simple and highly inaccurate assumptions than a complex and relatable set of choices and beliefs. Does society take responsibility for the connotations when someone makes a culturally grey joke in an office? Does society claim responsibility when those workers laugh hysterically? Ultimately, should it be a person’s responsibility as a moral member of society and a resident of the United States of America to treat all others with the same respect and integrity that they wish to be treated? The later is preferable in almost all situations, although, many do not share or practice this belief. “In Tesoriero's (2006) view, differences such as values, attitudes, culture, ethnicity, social practices, political beliefs, sexuality and religion obviously influence people all around the world who ascribe various meanings to their surroundings according to their individual attitudes.” (Zhou, C., & Griffiths, C. 2011). That being said, it is important for everyone to attempt to understand that diversity means a lot more than just defining a person by his or her appearance and unfounded cultural beliefs. Lately it seems Lady Liberty’s words have fallen upon deaf ears as immigrants come and cultural tourists go without batting an eye at the treatment received in “The Land of the Free.”

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