



CULTURE TIPS

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Most likely, all of us grew up hearing comments from different people about certain individuals or the way they acted. At some point, we began to wonder why those people had said something awful or funny about a person having to do with their being gay, Jewish, Arab, Muslim, Black, Latino, Chinese or a member of some other identifiable social or ethnic category.

When we were young, we probably didn't have a name for this sort of comment, but as we grew older, we learned to label such comments as cultural stereotyping. Stereotypes are generated by ignorance and/or fear of a person or group that is different from us. Initially, these comments may sound funny but we may realize later how inherently harmful these comments are at best or very cruel at worst.

Although stereotypes can sometimes reveal certain tendencies or attitudes, existing in a certain culture, they are normally highly oversimplified and exaggerated views of reality. They are especially attractive to people who are judgmental of others and who are quick to ostracize people who are different from them. Stereotyping has been used to justify ethnic discrimination and systematic prejudices against whole categories of people. Far from arising out of careful and systematic study and analysis, stereotypes arise out of idle talk and limited knowledge. Instead of helping our understanding of a person or a group, stereotypes always stand in the way of accurate and fair understanding and assessment.

We cannot help generalizing about cultural differences, as this is the main way humans organize their cultural knowledge. However, Stereotypes sometimes arise out of people's need to classify everybody they encounter in order to know how to deal with them and define themselves as members of their own group. Thus, stereotypes, in certain social situations serve to provide answers to questions about how we should act toward people that we do not know well. The problem is that stereotypes are often distorted generalizations and assumptions that classify people by putting them into groupings that are familiar to us. They reflect misconceptions and misrepresentations of the socio-cultural landscape.

Stereotypes are part of the social dynamics and can be humorous at times. However, the question we need to ask ourselves, individually and collectively, is whether the misinformation, negative consequences, and bias they spread are proportionate with the humor they generate.

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