Stereotypes / Characterization Frames

By

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**What Stereotypes Are**

Stereotypes (or "characterizations") are generalizations or assumptions that people make about the characteristics of all members of a group, based on an image (often wrong) about what people in that group are like. For example, one study of stereotypes revealed that Americans are generally considered to be friendly, generous, and tolerant, but also arrogant, impatient, and domineering. Asians, on the other hand, are expected to be shrewd and alert, but reserved. Clearly, not all Americans are friendly and generous; and not all Asians are reserved. But according to this study, others commonly perceive them this way.[1]

**Why Stereotypes Matter**

Stereotyping is especially prevalent -- and problematic -- in conflicts. Groups tend to define themselves according to who they are and who they are not. And "others," especially "enemies" or "opponents" are often viewed in very negative ways. The opponent is expected to be aggressive, self-serving, and deceitful, for example, while people in one's own group are seen in generally positive ways. Similarly, if problems occur, blame is often placed on "the enemy," while one's own contribution to the problem is ignored. For example, problems may be attributed to the opponent's lack of cooperativeness, not one's own; or the enemy's aggressiveness, not their fear of one's own aggressive stance. Even similarities between parties can be viewed differently: one's own competitiveness may be seen in a positive light as "tough, effective negotiating," while the opponent's competitive actions are seen as "hostile and deceptive."

Such stereotypes tend to be self-perpetuating. If one side assumes the other side is deceitful and aggressive, they will tend to respond deceitfully and aggressively themselves. The opponent will then develop a similar image of the first party and respond deceptively, thus confirming the initial stereotype. The stereotypes may even grow worse, as communication shuts down and escalation heightens emotions and tension.

**The Positive Side of Stereotypes**

Although stereotypes generally have negative implications, they aren't necessarily negative. Stereotypes are basically generalizations that are made about groups. Such generalizations are necessary: in order to be able to interact effectively, we must have some idea of what people are likely to be like, which behaviors will be considered acceptable, and which not.

For example, elsewhere in this system there is an essay about high-context and low-context cultures. People in low-context cultures are said to be more individualistic, their communication more overt, depending less on context and shared understandings. High-context cultures are more group-oriented. Their communication is more contextually based, depending more on shared understandings and inferences.

Such generalizations are, in essence, stereotypes. They allow us to put people into a category, according to the group they belong to, and make inferences about how they will behave based on that grouping. There will still be differences between individuals from one culture, and with the same individual in different situations. But the stereotype is reasonably accurate, so it is useful. Stereotypes are only a problem when they are inaccurate, especially when those inaccuracies are negative and hostile.

**What Can Be Done to Deal with Negative Stereotypes:**

The key to reversing negative stereotypes is to contradict them, in direct interactions between people, in the media, and through education.

Between Individuals. Once people get to know a person from "the other side," they often will determine that the other is not nearly as bad as they originally had assumed. (Though sometimes they might find out they are just as bad -- or even worse!)

More often, however, people really are much more reasonable than their stereotypes would suggest. In that case, getting to know people personally helps to break down negative images. This is especially true when people determine that they actually have things in common with people from the other side. Such things can range from enjoying the same music, hobbies, or sports, to having the same worries about children or aging parents.

Even when people learn that they share fear or sadness, they can begin to understand each other more. When they come to understand that the other is afraid of being hurt, or losing a loved one in war, just as they are, that brings people together. Such shared emotions make people seem human, while stereotypes typically "dehumanize" people. Likewise, shared emotions make empathy possible, which opens the door to new forms of interaction and trust building, at least among the individuals involved.

Depending on the context and other interactions, the image of the group as a whole may become more positive as well. (At other times, people rationalize that their one new acquaintance is "not like the others.") But even learning that one person can deviate from the stereotype is a start. The challenge then is to expand such transformative experiences beyond the individuals involved to larger groups, communities, and eventually whole societies.

Developing such mutual understanding is the goal of many intervention efforts in war-torn areas, and in places rocked by social unrest. Dialogue groups and problem-solving workshops are two common ways of doing this. So are joint projects such as war-reconstruction efforts, children's programs, recreational programs, medical programs -- any kind of program that brings individuals from opposing groups together in a cooperative venture. Although they have additional goals beyond the breaking of stereotypes, working together cooperatively can do much to break down negative images people hold of the "enemy."

In the Media. The media also plays an important role in both perpetuating and in breaking down stereotypes. If they characterize particular groups of people in certain ways, their viewers (or readers) are likely to do the same. So if a movie -- or the motion picture industry in general -- characterizes a group of people negatively, they are likely to be perpetuating negative stereotypes and making conflicts worse. If they emphasize the positive aspects of groups that contradict prevalent stereotypes, they can have a significant role in building mutual understanding.

In Education. Educational institutions and teaching materials also have the opportunity to affect stereotypes, and hence influence inter-group relations. Efforts to teach about different cultures, and the history of different racial or ethnic groups can help build inter-group understanding if it is done in an effective and sympathetic way.

However, the opposite is also true. If textbooks teach about the treachery and villainous actions of the enemy, this, obviously, will only perpetuate stereotypes from one generation to the next, entrenching the conflict for many years to come. This does not mean that history should be ignored. The holocaust, for example, did occur and must be acknowledged. But it can be acknowledged as a grave mistake that is now recognized as a mistake, rather than painted as "typical" or "acceptable" behavior.

**What Individuals Can Do to Breakdown Negative Stereotypes**

Changing stereotypes is largely the job of individuals. Each of us should examine the assumptions that we make about others and ask ourselves where those assumptions come from. Upon what information are they based? Are they based on personal experiences with others? In what context? Might "the other" be different in different situations? Are your assumptions based on things you have heard from others? Learned from the TV or movies? Learned in school? Is it possible that some of your negative images are wrong -- at least for some people?

In most cases, the answer to that last question is likely to be "yes." Even in the most escalated conflicts, not all of the "enemy" is as vicious and immutable as they are often assumed to be. Most groups have moderates and extremists, people who are willing to listen and work with the other side, and those who are not. Rather than assuming all of "the enemy" are evil and unwilling to hear your concerns, try to get to know people as individuals. Just as that will reduce the stereotypes you hold of others, it is also likely to reduce the stereotypes others hold of you.

**What the Media Can Do**

Steps the media can take to reduce stereotypes are dealt with elsewhere in this system, but fundamentally, it is important that the media paint as accurate a picture of both sides of a conflict as is possible. This generally means painting a complex picture. While extremists tend to make the most noise and hence the most news, the media can do much to lessen conflict by focusing attention on moderates and peacebuilders as well. Heartwarming stories of reconciliation can replace or at least stand side-by-side with heart-wrenching stories of violence and loss. Showing that there is hope -- helping people visualize a better life in a better world -- is a service the media can do better than any other institution, at least on a large scale.

**What the Educational System Can Do**

This, too, is dealt with elsewhere in this system, but the educational system (teachers, schools, textbooks) needs to also try to paint a fair and accurate picture of the conflict and the different people involved, being aware that different sides of a conflict will view (frame) what is happening very differently. Through stories, discussions, and exercises, teachers can help students (of all ages and levels) understand the complexity of the conflicts that surround them, and develop age- and situation-appropriate responses to the current conflicts in their homes, communities, and nations. To the extent that classrooms contain students from both sides of the conflict, teachers can help students learn to understand and appreciate each other better, while protecting the safety (physical and emotional) of those on both sides. If the classroom only contains one group, reaching such intergroup understandings is harder, but still worth the effort through books and articles, discussions, TV and movies, and when available, online exercises (such as those provided in the links below).

[1] Breslin, J. William. 1991. "Breaking Away from Subtle Biases" in Negotiation Theory and Practice, eds. J. William Breslin and Jeffrey Rubin (Cambridge, Mass., U.S.: Program on Negotiation Books, 1991), 247-250.

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