Why Stereotypes are Harmful

We all have stereotypes. But the reality is, they can be very harmful. Read on. Stereotypes are the idea that everyone within a certain group shares the same characteristics. We can all think of stereotypes we've heard about different races, cultures, or genders. Stereotypes don't just appear out of nowhere – they are based on ideas and experiences with certain groups and then extended to apply to an entire group. The problem is that people don't function solely as members of a group. We know this to be true about ourselves and our close friends. Most of us fit into different categories and have a variety of interests. We might like watching sports but be non-athletic. We might like rock and roll as well as classical music. But when we think about other people, particularly people who are a different race from us, we often have a harder time understanding that complexity. So we put people into categories and thus – stereotypes are formed.

Many stereotypes are negative, such as assuming that certain people are lazy, criminal or poor. Some are seemingly positive, such as assuming that people are athletic, religious or musically inclined. Others are just neutral such as assuming that people eat certain foods or share similar hobbies. But all of them are harmful.

Here's the reality about stereotypes: **they contribute to a dysfunctional class system**.

According to Dr. Monnica Williams, both negative and seemingly positive stereotypes continue to keep people of color in a disadvantaged status. How can this be? Negative stereotypes are harmful to people of color because assumptions, rather than personalized information, can justify the denial of educational, employment, housing and other opportunities. Even so-called positive stereotypes can be harmful. Dr. Williams shares that stereotypes about athletic skill and musical abilities push African American youth away from college in favor of efforts to become athletes or entertainers, professions in which statistically speaking, the vast majority are destined to fail.

One stereotype that is perpetuated and often not challenged is that "people of color are lazy". If not addressed, it can leave one to infer that this stereotype is true. If one has never worked with a person of color and has repeatedly been taught that people of color are lazy, it's easy to generalize that assumption to all people of color. It takes many experiences with diverse populations to challenge stereotypes.

There has been a lot of work in attempting to challenge gender stereotypes. Old-fashioned ideas that some toys are just for boys, or that women should stay home while men work have been challenged and progress has been made. (There is still a long way to go, but the proportion of women with college degrees in the labor force has almost quadrupled since 1970. Statistically, more women now graduate with degrees than men.) While the fight for gender equality is far from over, the same efforts to challenge assumptions and provide equal opportunities for people regardless of race must be given the same attention.

The first step is to identify stereotypes. When you find yourself filling in the gaps about a person, stop and ask yourself, "Is this true, or am I assuming it based on experiences with other people who look like her?" And make an intentional effort to get to know people from different backgrounds. Bryan Stevenson talks about the need to get proximate. Often when we begin to interact with people who are different from us, our experience of the "other" expands. It's important to surface the rolling tape of narratives about others that plays in our head. Once stereotypes are challenged repeatedly, it makes it harder to stereotype in the future.

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