

Stereotypes: Understanding Their Impact and How to Overcome Them

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Illustration by Paul Windle. Source: <https://www.sexgenlab.org/post/research-blog-are-gender-stereotypes-evolving-with-the-times>

Definition of Stereotypes

Stereotypes are common beliefs or ideas about a specific group of people, based on factors such as race, gender, age, ability, religion, or even hobbies and interests. These **generalizations** tend to be oversimplified and assume that everyone with a shared identity feels or thinks the same. For example, if someone thinks all girls like to play with dolls and all boys like to play with trucks, that's a stereotype because it makes an **oversimplified** assumption about an individual based on their identity.

Impact of Stereotypes

Stereotypes also shape societal attitudes and behaviors. They contribute to discrimination, prejudice, and inequality. Stereotypes about certain racial or ethnic groups can lead to unfair treatment in areas such as employment, housing, and education. These stereotypes create social divisions and hinder progress towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

Stereotypes are often perpetuated through media, education, and cultural norms. For example, the media may portray certain racial or ethnic groups in a negative light, reinforcing stereotypes and shaping public opinion. These can be seen on the news, popular television shows for

comedic effect, or even music. In the United States, certain racial groups have been stereotyped to be seen as good at basketball, the best at math, or loud and sassy. If unchecked, these stereotypes oftentimes begin to shape the way we view others and the world around us.

Similarly, gender stereotypes can limit opportunities for individuals imposing expectations on them that may not align with their abilities or interests. For example, if a hiring manager believes the stereotype that women only excel in caregiving roles or can't do physical work, they may look over a quality female candidate for a construction job or not consider them for a promotion. Though our minds naturally categorize information to make sense of the world around us, it is crucial to recognize that the impact of stereotypes on individuals can be profound.

Helpful or Hurtful?

When someone is assigned a stereotype, it can influence how they are perceived and treated by others. For instance, a person of Asian descent may be assumed to excel in math simply because of the stereotype that Asians are naturally gifted in that area. This can create unrealistic expectations and pressure for individuals to conform to these stereotypes, potentially affecting their self-esteem and overall well-being. The model minority myth is the idea that certain minority groups, particularly Asian Americans, have achieved a higher level of success than other minority groups in the United States due to their hard work, intelligence, and cultural values. While it may sound like a compliment or an example of a good or helpful stereotype, this myth is actually harmful and not helpful. For one, it erases the struggles and challenges that Asian Americans face, including racism and discrimination. Second, the model minority myth is often used to pit minority groups against each other with the implication that if one group can succeed despite discrimination, then other groups should be able to as well. This ignores the structural and systemic barriers that certain groups face. The model minority myth, like many seemingly helpful stereotypes, are not helpful or good because it erases the struggles and challenges that minority groups face, ignores the **diversity** within each group, and perpetuates harmful stereotypes that pit minority groups against each other.

Intersectionality & Stereotyping

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 that helps us understand how different aspects of a person's identity can intersect and interact with each other, shaping their experiences and social privileges or disadvantages. It acknowledges that individuals can experience multiple forms of oppression or discrimination based on various factors such as race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, immigration status, or other aspects of what makes us who we are.

When we talk about intersectionality, we are recognizing that people are not solely defined by a single aspect of their identity. Instead, they are influenced by the complex and interconnected nature of their various identities.

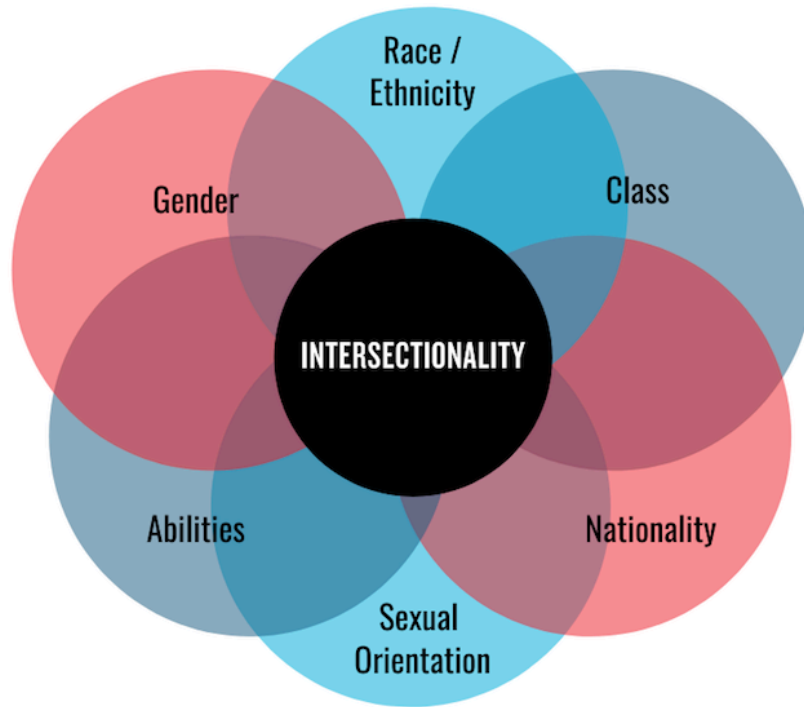


Image: First Book

Intersectionality is the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination combine

Image: First Book

Here are a few examples of intersectionality:

1. A Black woman who is both a woman and Black may face discrimination based on both her race and her gender. She may experience sexism from men and racism from white people.
2. A person who identifies as LGBTQIA+ and has a physical disability may face discrimination based on their sexuality and their ability. They may struggle to find accessible spaces and face additional barriers to healthcare.
3. A low-income immigrant woman may face discrimination based on her socioeconomic status, race, and gender. She may experience xenophobia, sexism, and classism.
4. A Muslim person who is also a person of color may face discrimination based on their religion and their race. They may experience Islamophobia and racism.

It's important to recognize the ways in which we all hold multiple identities and how they interact to shape our experiences. Intersectionality challenges stereotypes by highlighting the diversity within social groups. It recognizes that individuals within a particular group can have different experiences and face different forms of discrimination. For instance, stereotypes about young, Black, girls or undocumented, Latinx, men incorporate several aspects of their identity, including

race, age, ability, gender, and class. By understanding intersectionality, we can break down stereotypes and promote a more inclusive and accurate understanding of people's lives. It encourages us to consider the complexities of identity and recognize the unique experiences and challenges faced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups.

Challenging Stereotypes

Stereotypes are all around us, but it is crucial to challenge stereotypes and promote remember that everyone deserves respect and understanding. Stereotypes are often based on assumptions or limited experiences, and they do not represent the diversity and complexity of individuals and communities.

Everyone has the power to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusion. Here are some things you can do:

1. **Speak up:** If you hear someone using a stereotype, try to correct them. You can share what you know about the culture or group of people in question, or simply express that you don't agree with what was said.
2. **Educate yourself:** Take the time to learn about different cultures and perspectives. Read books, watch documentaries, or talk to people from different backgrounds. This will help you understand and appreciate diversity.
3. **Be a role model:** Treat everyone with kindness and respect, regardless of their race, gender, age, ability, religion, or sexual orientation. Stand up for your friends and classmates who may be targeted by stereotypes.

Remember, stereotypes can be hurtful and unfair. By speaking up, educating yourself, and being a positive influence, you can help create a more inclusive and accepting world.