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What is a Stereotype?

How to
Counter
Intolerance



The **League for Human Rights**, an agency of B'nai Brith Canada, is dedicated to combating antisemitism and racism. The objectives of the League include advocating for human rights for all Canadians, building bridges between communities, and fighting racial discrimination and bigotry in all its manifestations. The League accomplishes these goals through educational outreach programs, anti-racism initiatives, community action and legal/legislative interventions.

The *League* operates a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week Anti-Hate Community Hotline (1-800-892-BNAI [2624]) offering assistance to victims of antisemitism and hate-motivated crimes. *League* members interact on an ongoing basis with the community, the police, synagogues and schools, legal and legislative experts, and government agencies that deal with racism.



What is a Stereotype?

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What is a Stereotype?

A **stereotype** reduces a lot of information about a person or a group or people down to just a little information. This often simplifies the choices we make in our everyday lives. For example, pretend you are picking a basketball team from a group of total strangers. Since you know nothing about the individual basketball skills of each group member, you might rely on your assumption that taller people can generally shoot farther and jump higher than shorter people, and pick the tallest people from the group. This makes sense – when making a decision based on little information, people use whatever they *do* know to make their choice.

If stereotypes are a part of our everyday lives, why worry about them at all? To answer this question, let's go back to picking a basketball team from a group of strangers. What if you relied on a stereotype you had heard from a friend (say, that black people are better at basketball than non-black people) and picked only black people?

Obviously, the non-black people in the group might feel disappointed at being left out based on a **negative stereotype** which claims that non-black people are poor basketball players. However, even the black people on your basketball team might feel disappointed at being picked because of a stereotype. Even though the stereotype being used is a **positive stereotype** claiming that black people are particularly good at basketball, the team members might be upset they were picked not for their individual skills, but on the sole basis of their skin colour.

Recognizing Stereotypes

Stereotypes can come from any number of sources. We often develop our own personal stereotypes based on our individual experiences, or they can be passed on by family members, friends, and acquaintances. Stereotypes can also be transmitted through different media sources such as television, film, music and literature.

So how do you know a stereotype when you see or hear one? It is important to recognize that stereotypes are often based on perceptions of an individual's race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class or age – in fact, any identifiable group can attract related stereotypes. Look at the cartoons below and consider the statements made in each scenario. Then answer the following questions:

- 1) What group is being stereotyped in this situation?
- 2) What are the specific stereotypes being portrayed?
- 3) Are these positive or negative stereotypes?
- 4) How might the stereotypes in each situation make an individual belonging to the stereotyped group feel?

Recognizing Stereotypes

Scenario I:



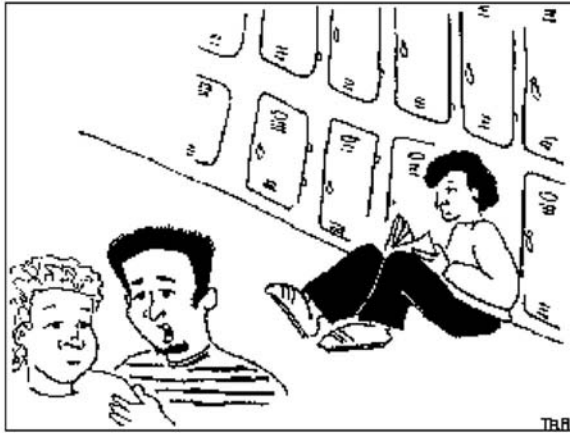
"Hey! That clerk just jew'd me!"



"It figures. They're all alike."

Recognizing Stereotypes

Scenario 2:



"Don't get too close.
You might catch something..."



"He's GAY you know!"

Recognizing Stereotypes

Scenario 3:



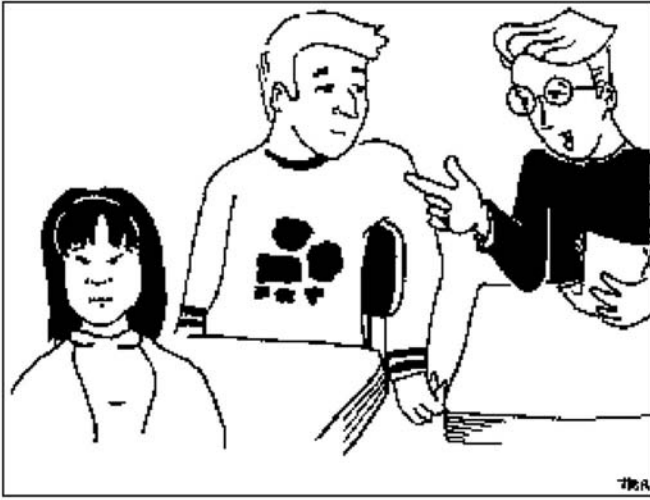
"Hi! It's great to finally meet you. You'll like it in Canada. Women were liberated l-o-n-g ago!"



"Here Lisa. She's been waiting to meet you to explain how its works."

Recognizing Stereotypes

Scenario 4:



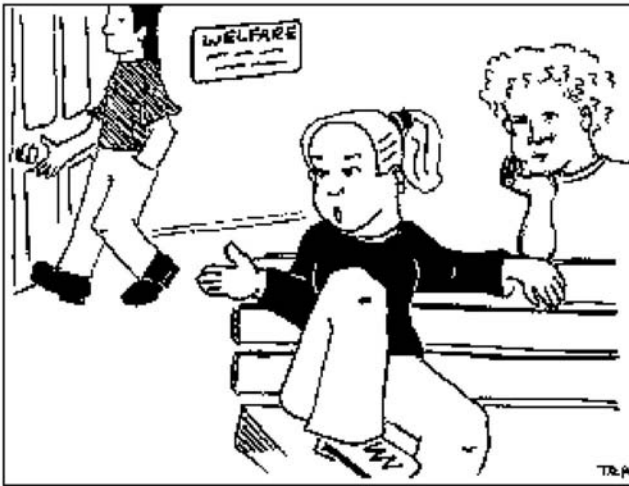
"It figures she aced the math test."



"She's Asian you know."

Recognizing Stereotypes

Scenario 5:



"They get welfare and they don't pay taxes either!"



"Those Indians...they got it good."

What Are The Effects of Stereotypes?

Stereotypes can create or perpetuate intolerant or hateful attitudes towards a particular group of people. Holding stereotypes can lead to **bias**, a general preference for one group over another. A particularly dangerous form of bias is **prejudice**, which is a negative opinion about a group or individual. Prejudice can lead to **discrimination**, where an individual is actively treated differently than others. Discriminatory behaviour can include harassment and persecution.

To understand the possible effects of stereotypes, let's return to our basketball example. This time, instead of stereotyping black people as good basketball players, imagine that you believe a stereotype claiming "black people are poor team players". This kind of stereotype could cause a bias towards choosing non-black players, based on a prejudice formed without any knowledge of the actual players' team-playing abilities. In turn, this prejudiced attitude could lead you to actively discriminate against the black candidates by refusing to pick any of them. In this way, a simple stereotype can lead to hurtful decisions based on prejudice. It reduces an individual's unique personality down to just a label, and can ultimately make someone feel less human.



Do You Hold Stereotypes?

In a world filled with stereotypes, they can be hard to avoid. The best way to prevent common stereotypical beliefs from becoming hateful attitudes is to confront them head-on. By discovering the stereotypes held by yourself, your friends, and your family, you can better realize how they might lead to bias and prejudice in your life.

Exercise: Match the stereotypes

Listed below are a number of identifiable groups, and a list of negative stereotypical behaviours or personality traits commonly associated with those groups. Try to match the groups with the stereotypes, and think about where you might have heard them. Some stereotypes may be associated with more than one group, and some groups may be associated with multiple stereotypes.

Identifiable Groups

- A) Women
- B) Homosexuals
- C) Jews
- D) Hispanics
- E) Blacks
- F) Poor People
- G) Muslims
- H) Aboriginals
- I) Chinese
- J) The Elderly

Stereotypes

- 1) Alcoholic
- 2) Lazy
- 3) Cheap
- 4) Violent
- 5) Confused
- 6) Effeminate
- 7) Greedy
- 8) Emotional
- 9) Oppressive
- 10) Ignorant

What Can You Do About Stereotypes?

The easiest way to fight stereotypes is to challenge your own perceptions about groups of people who are different from yourself. Ask yourself why you hold certain stereotypes, and think about where they might have come from. Learn about other communities that are often stereotyped.

But what can you do about stereotypes held by your family, friends and schoolmates? It is not enough just to address your own stereotypes, nor is it enough to ignore people when you hear them perpetuating prejudice. Being a bystander allows stereotyping to continue and sends the message that it is acceptable behaviour.

When someone you know uses stereotypical statements to describe a member of a group, the best thing to do is **speak out** and let that person know what you think.

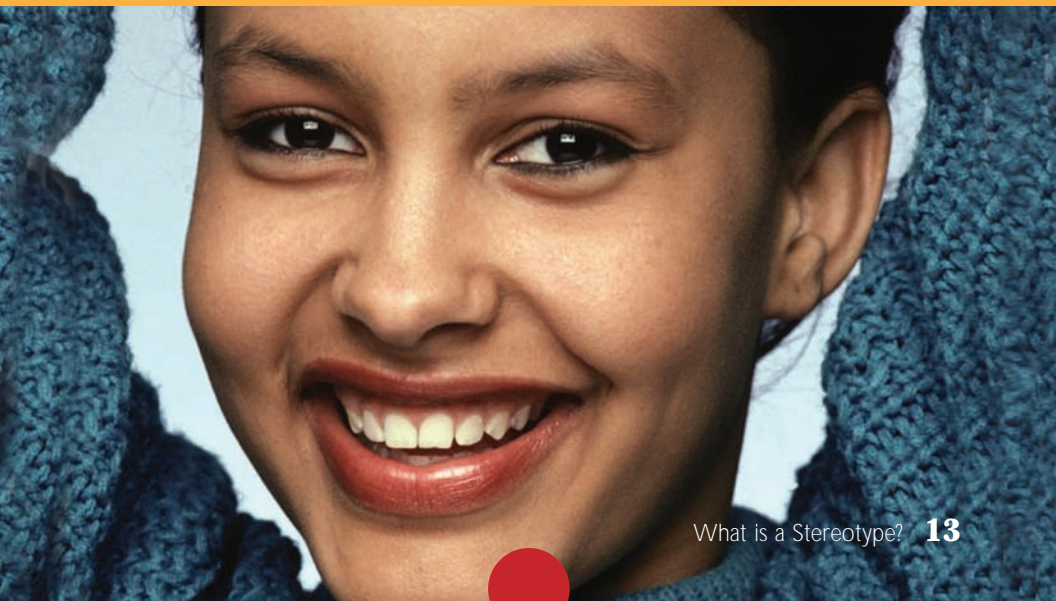


What Can You Do About Stereotypes?

You don't need to be mean or harsh in your criticism – many times, people may not even know realize they were using a stereotype. Rather than calling the person a “racist” or walking out on them, it may be best to simply alert them to their behaviour and tell them why you find it unacceptable.

If you explain calmly why you think stereotyping is dangerous, you might be surprised at how well people will listen. When confronting someone who makes a comment in a group setting, it may be best to wait until you can talk to that person alone, to avoid embarrassing them. This will also give you a chance to think about the best way to approach them, and to talk with other friends in the group to see what they think.

If you have any concerns about your own personal safety when speaking up against stereotypes, do not confront the person immediately. Make a mental note of the incident, talk about it with a trusted adult or friend, and think about ways you can address the problem in the future.



Conclusion

Canada prides itself as a multicultural society in which all kinds of people are accepted for their differences. In order to respect people for who they are, we must first respect them as unique individuals, regardless of their group membership. By recognizing the stereotypes we hold and challenging those held by others, we can help prevent the negative effects of prejudice and discrimination in Canadian society as a whole.



More Information

Contact information and complaint forms are available on-line for each provincial Human Rights Commission and the Canadian Human Rights Commission. Toll-free phone numbers are also available for each Commission, and a staff member will then advise you as to whether your complaints falls under the given *Code* (or *Act*).

The following is the contact information for Ontario:

Ontario Human Rights Commission:

<http://www.ohrc.on.ca>

Telephone: (416) 326-9511

Toll Free: 1-800-387-9080

Canadian Human Rights Commission:

<http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca>

Telephone: (613) 995-1151

Or (416) 973-5527

Toll Free: 1-800-999-6899

League for Human Rights:

The League's team of expert human rights lawyers is also available to provide advice and can direct you appropriately.

www.bnaibrith.ca/league.html

Telephone: (416) 633-6224 ext.130

Toll Free: 1-800-892-2624