

# Free essay on the effects of stereotypes

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The other night, I was watching an episode of the Showtime series Nurse Jackie. This program details the life of an emergency room nurse who is a drug addict. In the past year, she has had her husband leave her and try to take custody of the children from her because of her habit and has worked hard to keep her life together. In this episode, a young African-American male is in the emergency room because of a car accident. He is unhurt, but he was carrying some drugs in the car with him to take to a party. To avoid any police discovery of the drugs, he slid them into some condoms and swallowed them. It turns out that this young man is the quarterback of the city's NFL team. A little while later, while several trauma victims are being wheeled into the emergency room, another African-American male, somewhat older and with a beanie on, in addition to a hooded sweatshirt and jeans, is following one of the stretchers in. Nurse Jackie stops him and tells him that only hospital personnel may come in. The male argues at first, but the nurse is firm. Only then does the man pull out his hospital identification, showing that he is a doctor with privileges at that facility. He is the new doctor, just returned from duty in Afghanistan. At that point, the nurse apologizes. However, the point is clear: had he not been African-American, or had he been dressed in a suit and tie, the nurse would not have assumed that this was just a street person or other random trickster trying to get into the hospital. The stereotype is clear.

Stereotypes play a corrosive role in society, because they take away the desire to get to know one another. We make assumptions about other people based on the way that they look, the way they dress, or the way they sound. In the movie *The Inside Man*, one of the most storied banks in Manhattan is

robbed of some very sensitive items. The robbers take advantage of stereotype and distribute the same dark outfits, including sunglasses, face masks and hoods, to all of the hostages. The robbers wear the same clothes, and when it becomes clear that the police are about to storm the building, all of the people (except one) leave the bank at the same time. Because everyone is dressed identically, and because the hostages did not see the faces of any of the robbers, there is no way for the police to determine who the robbers are. The person who receives the most scrutiny is a Sikh, who comes out of the bank wearing (in addition to his outfit) the head covering required by his religious beliefs. The police order him to take off his turban and undo his hair – two actions that are sharp violations of his doctrine. They assume that he is an Arab, because of the color of his skin and because of his turban. He is not an Arab, but he is outraged because of this violation of his civil rights, and it makes the detectives' jobs much more difficult. The effect of this stereotype was to make the police department look like a less than even-handed in its treatment of everyone. For the Sikh, the police do not feel like the providers of justice. Instead, the police seem like just another band of thugs, not much different from the bank robbers, except their actions are sanctioned by the government. The time that the detectives have to spend calming this man down take away from time they could be using to solve the crime itself.

When I was in high school, several of my friends on my basketball team were African-American. During most of the school year, they liked to wear their hair in “cornrows.” However, the boys' basketball coach at our school did not allow his players to wear their hair that way during the season. They

could keep them during tryouts, but if they made the team, they had to agree to take them out. He did not find the “cornrows” to be consistent with the image of a well-disciplined, well-behaved basketball team. In his mind, the concern was that other people would see his team coming into a gymnasium and make assumptions about the way they would act, based on their hair. As you might imagine, this caused considerable controversy in the community. Many of the African-American parents in the community thought this rule was racist, because it focused on a hairstyle that was popular within the African-American community, even if it was not popular in the wider community. One student who made the team but refused to take out his “cornrows,” and was later cut for his decision, brought the case to the attention of the national media. His father even ran for, and won, a seat on the district’s school board because of his outrage over this particular situation. The fact that the team (without the student in question) went to the regional finals in the state playoffs that year – and might have gone further with the player involved – was lost in the hubbub about hair. The effect of this stereotype was to make a basketball team end its season far short of its goals and its potential. It also took a year out of the high school eligibility of the student, and it altered his relationship with his coach. The coach was so outraged by all of the negative attention that his decision received that he ended up retiring after that season.

Overall, we are a very visual species, and we tend to gravitate toward those who look like us. This is not true about the very young; if you go to a preschool or even a kindergarten class, you see students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds playing together happily. Not long after

that, though, children start to notice differences. It does not take many years past kindergarten for children to segregate themselves by ethnic and cultural groups, sorting themselves according to many of the same prejudices that are so harmful later in life. Dr. Seuss noticed this and describes this phenomenon in his book *The Sneetches*. In this book, everyone is yellow and feathery, walking around like an odd goose. However, some of the Sneetches have green stars on their stomachs, while others do not. Those who do have stars lord it over those who do not, claiming that they are better because they have one. However, whether you have one or not is completely arbitrary; there is no way to earn one. This is an excellent parallel for skin color or other physical characteristics, because there is no way to control what your ethnic background is. One day, a strange man shows up in town with a machine that lets you pay to put a star on your stomach. Within a very short time, everyone has a star; having one is no longer a way to separate yourself from others. The man then gets out a different machine, one that allows you to have your star removed. Soon, it becomes the “in” thing to be someone without a star, and the whole town romps through this second machine. Chaos ensues, with people running through the star addition machine and then the star removal machine as the trend fluctuates. When no one in town has any more money, the man goes on his way. It is not until this point that the entire town realizes how silly they have been. The stereotype, which had been that superiority comes from having (or lacking) a star, ends up taking the town’s wealth away. Stereotypes can be extremely harmful toward the self-concept that people develop. Instead of subscribing to stereotypes, it is much more helpful to

take the full measure of a person, by taking the time to get to know him or her, before making conclusions about that person. This takes time, effort and self-discipline. Ultimately, though, the fabric of society will be improved, as people will know one another, instead of thinking they know each other. Because it is harder to mistreat someone whom you know, the removal of stereotypes would also improve the ways that people act toward one another. When stereotypes disappear, it should be difficult to mistreat even the people you do not know, because your experience has taught you the value of each individual.