

Are All Stereotypes Created Equal?

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

All stereotypes are wrong because they label all members of a certain group or class as the same. Individuality is crushed, and stereotyping is a very lazy, and usually unfair, way of “thinking.”

However, some stereotypes are far more damaging than others. (What is worse, some are downright deadly, such as the stereotype of criminally-inclined Blacks that led to the death of Trayvon Martin in Florida not long ago.) Some people stereotype Blacks as stupid, while they stereotype Asians as smart. Yet it would be naïve to contend that both of these stereotypes are equally damaging. Many people that buy into the notion that their people are stupid tend to live down to that expectation. Many powerful individuals and institutions that accept the stereotype engage in discriminatory practices against Blacks. Mistakes of Blacks are magnified and they are often set up to fail.

Conversely, those that stereotype Asians as intelligent necessarily respect their minds. They do not associate Asians with menial labor, buffoonery, incompetence, laziness, and so on. They are far more likely to hire Asians than they are to hire African Americans.

None of this means that Asians have it easy. Many Asians complain about being deemed a “model minority.” They are expected to be meek and accepting of ill treatment from those outside their group.

This problem was brought to light in the news when New York police Officer Peter Liang was convicted for shooting a Black man, 28-year-old Akai Gurley, in the heart, killing him, in November 2014. The officer’s gun went off and the bullet bounced off a wall before killing Gurley. Many Asian citizens in New York City claimed that a Chinese man was being unfairly convicted, and they referred to Liang as “Peter Scapegoat.” Over 10,000 Asians took to the streets to protest in New York in April 2016. (Liang ultimately received no prison time.)

Asians and Blacks experience opposing stereotypes in other ways. Blacks are stereotyped as great athletes and Black men are stereotyped as having large

penises. Conversely, Asians are stereotyped as lacking athletic ability and Asian men are stereotyped as being sexually dull and having tiny penises.

While it might be tempting to say that athletic talent is highly desirable, the flip side is that athletes are also stereotyped as being stupid, which feeds right back into another Black stereotype. Moreover, while most men seem to covet a big penis, again, Black sexuality is often associated with animalistic urges.

Still, most people admire athletic talent and most men want to be well-endowed and great lovers. Once, when the late humanist and civil rights activist James Farmer was arrested during a civil rights protest, he and other Black protesters were forced to strip naked in a southern jail. Farmer noticed that one of the Black men had a small penis and joked to him that he was disappointed because that was one stereotype he did not want to see exploded.

A Black comedian once told an audience that he hated the stereotype that all Black males have large penises. He said that it was simply not true. "Just me and a couple of other brothers," he cracked.

Some people do not hesitate to buy into stereotypes if they believe they can get some advantage. One Black teenager from a Black community in Pittsburgh was an average basketball player but never participated in organized sports. However, he moved to a majority White community where most of the White athletes just assumed that he was a great athlete. He took full advantage of the opportunity to get a letter in basketball. He never played organized sports again and never complained about being stereotyped.

According to some experts on Italian-American culture, many young Italian-American males used to falsely claim that their families had ties to the Mafia, just to receive admiration from their friends.

One Vietnamese-American teenage male had some experience in the martial arts. However, he falsely claimed that his mother was a martial arts master that used to beat up several men at the same time in her Vietnamese village. He loved buying into the stereotype of the Asian martial arts master.

Getting back to sexuality, there is the stereotype of the promiscuous Black woman and Latina, the docile obedient Asian woman, the sexless Black mammy, and the frigid Jewish woman. All of these stereotypes, at least by today's standards, seem to be equally damaging.

The model minority versus the terrible minority offers a fascinating contrast. The model minority is stereotyped as being law-abiding. The bad minority is stereotyped as being a criminal – even a terrorist. The model minority is punctual, but the bad minority shows up on CP or Colored People's time. The model minority is sexually responsible, but the bad minority makes and has babies out of wedlock. The model minority is industrious and the bad minority is lazy.

Stereotypes are always wrong. But clearly, some stereotypes are much more damaging than others. All stereotypes must be recognized and combatted. However, those found to be the most damaging deserve the highest priority.