

# What Is a Stereotype?

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Archie Bunker, the main character of this year's most popular television series "All in the Family", each week expresses a lot of biased feeling about people and things. This article is not about Archie Bunker, but rather about stereotypes — no, a particular kind of stereotype! A stereotype that set men apart and that makes the beholder a notch above his stereotypes. But first, what is a stereotype?

A stereotype is prejudice: a prejudgment of human character that is generally simple rather than complex of differentiated; erroneous rather than accurate; acquired secondhand rather than through direct experience with the reality it is supposed to represent; and it is usually resistant to modification by new experience.

Because of its simplicity, a stereotype is learned easily. From an early age, children hear adjectives attached to certain racial groups: shiftless Mexicans; sneaky and ever-bowing Japanese; crude and loud Negroes; and drunken, dirty, and lazy Indians (the same is true in Alaska about the natives). The concept of "less intelligent" is also believed inherent in all of these racial groups. The racial prejudice is reinforced when the child sees a character fitting this description on either the television or a movie. For a child, this schooling requires no conscious effort.

In addition, the simplicity of a prejudice comes from it being memorized easily. A simple stereotype is easy to remember. This saves the person a great deal of mental effort in recalling and categorizing his stereotype.

The stereotypes of the racial groups are generally erroneous (although some are true) in that they generally reflect only the negative view about the people. Not every individual in that minority group behaves like the movie character neither do all the people have the same character. No stereotype can accurately describe a racial group.

The over-simplified descriptions of certain racial groups that a child has learned are second-hand information acquired largely from the parents either through verbal direction or by inheritance of attitudes (does the good little child ever disbelieve his parents?) The information he receives from the movies and television is also second-hand. The child perceives what the director wanted him to experience. Later when he is older and able to read, he is influenced by the printed word — themselves the opinion of the author. Most, if not all, stereotypes are, in fact, acquired through other sources.

Because a stereotype is a prejudiced attitude, it is resistant to modification. The possessor of these simple and erroneous images is convinced that they are true and apply to every individual in that group.

Mr. Stephen Steinberg, a research sociologist for the Survey Research Center of the Berkeley campus of the University of California, sums it up beautifully when he states . . . "once these images are adopted, they operate as filters on the individual's perception and understanding of the world around him. Should he encounter a black who appears lazy, he interprets this as confirming the stereotype. At the same time, he filters out all those cases that contradict the stereotype (or interprets him as an exception). Since our (white dominant) society has no images of whites as lazy, the unambitious white, like the industrious black, receives little notice. The self-confirming mechanism is part of the reason people cling to their prejudices with so much conviction."

Who do you think the television series "All in the Family" is so popular with? The series' main character, Archie Bunker, is the mouthpiece of the "silent majority" — he voices the unexpressed prejudices of the dominant society. Secluded in their homes, they converse with Archie.

Although there are many types of stereotypes, e.g. age-groups, professions, trades, nationalities, races, politics, religious, and family-relations, I have directed my attention to the one that is most prevalent in the American society — the racial stereotype. The indicative social, economic, and educational reality, plus the exploitive nature of racial stereotypes of the white race, makes it the worst kind, the most damaging, and the most damnable.

In conclusion, I quote directly the words of Mr. Steinberg again because he articulates what I've felt but have been unable to write (as distinctly):

"One of the lesser inequities of prejudice is that the dominant group is rarely subjected to the same abusive characterization. It is not difficult to understand why this is so. The dominant group is able to set the standards of what is worthy and respectable in physical appearance, cultural values, and social behavior. Unsur-

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prisingly, it chooses the styles of its own groups, so defined that they can only be imperfectly approximated by members of other groups. The clearest example is the high value that has been placed on white skin, which automatically diminishes the prestige, and life chances of large groups and entire cultures."