

*lapse* (15): end  
*chastening* (18): humbling  
*edifice* (18): structure

1 Is a girl called Gloria apt to be better-looking than one called Bertha? Are criminals more likely to be dark than blond? Can you tell a good deal about someone's personality from hearing his voice briefly over the phone? Can a person's nationality be pretty accurately guessed from his photograph? Does the fact that someone wears glasses imply that he is intelligent?

2 The answer to all these questions is obviously, "No."  
 3 Yet from all the evidence at hand, most of us believe these things. Ask any college boy if he'd rather take his chances with a Gloria or a Bertha, or ask a college girl if she'd rather blind-date a Richard or a Cuthbert. In fact, you don't have to ask: college students in questionnaires have revealed that names conjure up the same images in their minds as they do in yours—and for as little reason.

4 Look into the favorite suspects of persons who report "suspicious characters" and you will find a large percentage of them to be "swarthy" or "dark and foreign-looking"—despite the testimony of criminologists that criminals do not tend to be dark, foreign or "wild-eyed." Delve<sup>o</sup> into the main asset of a telephone stock swindler and you will find it to be a marvelously confidence-inspiring telephone "personality." And whereas we all think we know what an Italian or a Swede looks like, it is the sad fact that when a group of Nebraska students sought to match faces and nationalities of 15 European countries, they were scored wrong in 93 percent of their identifications. Finally, despite the fact that horn-rimmed glasses have now become the standard television sign of an "intellectual," optometrists know that the main thing that distinguishes people with glasses is just bad eyes.

5 Stereotypes are a kind of gossip about the world, a gossip that makes us prejudice people before we ever lay eyes on them. Hence it is not surprising that stereotypes have something to do with the dark world of prejudice. Explore most prejudices (note that the word means "prejudgment") and you will find a cruel stereotype at the core of each one.

6 For it is the extraordinary fact that once we have typecast the world, we tend to see people in terms of our standardized pictures. In another demonstration of the power of stereotypes to affect our vision, a number of Columbia and Barnard students were shown thirty photographs of pretty but unidentified girls, and asked to rate each in terms of "general liking,"

# 15

## Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgments

Robert L. Heilbroner

### Preview

"A priest, a rabbi, and a minister were playing golf . . ."

"After the minor traffic accident, this Italian got out of his car . . ."

"She's a typical blonde, you know the type . . ."

We've all heard—or made—jokes and comments that begin with phrases like these. What they have in common is that each plays on or involves a stereotype, a kind of mental shorthand that allows us to believe we "know" what certain categories of people are like. Stereotypes can produce some amusing jokes. But, as this selection shows, they can also produce effects that are anything but funny.

### Words to Watch

*delve* (4): search deeply  
*yokels* (8): awkward or unsophisticated country people  
*dinned* (8): repeated forcefully  
*stock* (8): typical  
*perpetuated* (8): caused to continue  
*synchronized* (9): occurring at the same time  
*semantics* (11): the study of word meanings  
*preconceptions* (11): judgments made ahead of time  
*impovertish* (12): make poor  
*reactionaries* (12): opponents of change  
*inimitable* (12): not able to be copied

"intelligence," "beauty" and so on. Two months later, the same group were shown the same photographs, this time with fictitious Irish, Italian, Jewish and "American" names attached to the pictures. Right away the ratings changed. Faces which were now seen as representing a national group went down in looks and still farther down in likability, while the "American" girls suddenly looked decidedly prettier and nicer.

Why is it that we stereotype the world in such irrational and harmful fashion? In part, we begin to typecast people in our childhood years. Early in life, as every parent whose child has watched a TV Western knows, we learn to spot the Good Guys from the Bad Guys. Some years ago, a social psychologist showed very clearly how powerful these stereotypes of childhood vision are. He secretly asked the most popular youngsters in an elementary school to make errors in their morning gym exercises. Afterwards, he asked the class if anyone had noticed any mistakes during gym period. Oh, yes, said the children. But it was the unpopular members of the class—the "bad guys"—they remembered as being out of step.

We not only grow up with standardized pictures forming inside of us, but as grown-ups we are constantly having them thrust upon us. Some of them, like the half-joking, half-serious stereotypes of mothers-in-law, or country yokels, or psychiatrists, are dinned<sup>o</sup> into us by the stock jokes we hear and repeat. In fact, without such stereotypes, there would be a lot fewer jokes. Still other stereotypes are perpetuated<sup>o</sup> by the advertisements we read, the movies we see, the books we read.

And finally, we tend to stereotype because it helps us make sense out of a highly confusing world, a world which William James once described as "one great, blooming, buzzing confusion." It is a curious fact that if we don't know what we're looking at, we are often quite literally unable to see what we're looking at. People who recover their sight after a lifetime of blindness actually cannot at first tell a triangle from a square. A visitor to a factory sees only noisy chaos where the superintendent sees a perfectly synchronized<sup>o</sup> flow of work. As Walter Lippmann has said, "For the most part we do not first see, and then define; we define first, and then we see."

Stereotypes are one way in which we "define" the world in order to see it. They classify the infinite variety of human beings into a convenient handful of "types" toward whom we learn to act in stereotyped fashion. Life would be a wearing process if we had to start from scratch with each and every human contact. Stereotypes economize on our mental effort by covering up the blooming, buzzing confusion with big recognizable cut-outs. They save us the "trouble" of finding out what the world is like— they give it its accustomed look.

Thus the trouble is that stereotypes make us mentally lazy. As S. I. Hayakawa, the authority on semantics<sup>o</sup>, has written: "The danger of stereotypes lies not in their existence, but in the fact that they become for all people some of the time, and for some people all the time, substitutes for observation." Worse yet, stereotypes get in the way of our judgment, even when we do observe the world. Someone who has formed rigid preconceptions<sup>o</sup> of all Latins as "excitable," or all teenagers as "wild," doesn't alter his point of view when he meets a calm and deliberate Genoese, or a serious-minded high-school student. He brushes them aside as "exceptions that prove the rule." And, of course, if he meets someone true to type, he stands triumphantly vindicated. "They're all like that," he proclaims, having encountered an excited Latin, an ill-behaved adolescent.

Hence, quite aside from the injustice which stereotypes do to others, they impoverish<sup>o</sup> ourselves. A person who lumps the world into simple categories, who typecasts all labor leaders as "racketeers," all businessmen as "reactionaries," all Harvard men are "snobs," and all Frenchmen as "sexy," is in danger of becoming a stereotype himself. He loses his capacity to be himself—which is to say, to see the world in his own absolutely unique, inimitable<sup>o</sup> and independent fashion.

Instead, he votes for the man who fits his standardized picture of what a candidate "should" look like or sound like, buys the goods that someone in his "situation" in life "should" own, lives the life that others define for him. The mark of the stereotype person is that he never surprises us, that we do indeed have him "typed." And no one fits this strait-jacket so perfectly as someone whose opinions about other people are fixed and inflexible.

Impoverishing as they are, stereotypes are not easy to get rid of. The world we typecast may be no better than a Grade B movie, but at least we know what to expect of our stock characters. When we let them act for themselves in the strangely unpredictable way that people do act, who knows but that many of our fondest convictions will be proved wrong?

Nor do we suddenly drop our standardized pictures for a blinding vision of the Truth. Sharp swings of ideas about people often just substitute one stereotype for another. The true process of change is a slow one that adds bits and pieces of reality to the pictures in our heads, until we learn not that Jews and Negroes and Catholics and Puerto Ricans are "just like everybody else"—for that, too, is a stereotype—but that each and every one of them is unique, special, different and individual. Often we do not even know that we have let a stereotype lapse<sup>o</sup> until we hear someone saying, "All so-and-so's are like such-and-such," and we hear ourselves saying, "Well—maybe."

Can we speed the process along? Of course we can. First, we can become aware of the standardized pictures in our heads, in other people's heads, in the world around us.

Second, we can become suspicious of all judgments that we allow exceptions to "prove." There is no more chastening thought than that in the vast intellectual adventure of science, it takes but one tiny exception to topple a whole edifice of ideas.

Third, we can learn to be chary of generalizations about people. As F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote: "Begin with an individual, and before you know it you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find you have created—nothing."

Most of the time, when we typecast the world, we are not in fact generalizing about people at all. We are only revealing the embarrassing facts about the pictures that hang in the gallery of stereotypes in our own heads.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. What do you think of when you picture each of the following?
  - Someone named Helga
  - A professional wrestler
  - A funeral director
  - A computer programmer
  - Someone named Percy
  - An accountant
  - A hair stylist
  - Someone who rides a motorcycle

Write about as many of these as you can in the time provided. Tell what they look like and how they speak and act. When you finish, look at what you have written. Does any of it contain the kind of stereotyped thinking Heilbroner describes in his article?

3. Have you ever felt that someone stereotyped you? If so, explain what happened and how it felt. Did you do anything about it?

## VOCABULARY CHECK

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

1. In the sentence below, the words *conjure up* mean
  - a. destroy.
  - b. produce.
  - c. shrink.
  - d. reward.

"In fact, you don't have to ask: college students in questionnaires have revealed that names conjure up the same images in their minds as they do in yours." (Paragraph 3)

2. In the sentence below, the word *typecast* means
  - a. left.
  - b. grown tired of.
  - c. forgiven.
  - d. judged ahead of time.

"For it is the extraordinary fact that once we have typecast the world, we tend to see people in terms of our standardized pictures." (Paragraph 6)

3. In the sentences below, the word *vindicated* means
  - a. amazed.
  - b. world-famous.
  - c. silly.
  - d. proved right.

"He brushes them [a calm Genoese or a serious-minded high-school student] aside as 'exceptions that prove the rule.' And of course, if he meets someone true to type, he stands triumphantly vindicated." (Paragraph 11)

4. In the sentences below, the words *chary* of mean
  - a. encouraging about.
  - b. cautious about.
  - c. optimistic about.
  - d. proud of.

"Can we speed the process [of getting rid of stereotypes] along? Of course we can. . . . [W]e can learn to be chary of generalizations about people." (Paragraphs 16 and 19)

B. Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following four items. Each item uses a word (or form of a word) from "Words to Watch."

5. The researchers *delved* into the question of family violence.
  - a. for a few minutes.
  - b. for months.
  - c. carelessly.
6. The mayor's *stock* response, "We'll form a committee to investigate that," was one we'd
  - a. never heard before.
  - b. heard over and over.
  - c. been hoping, but not expecting, to hear.
7. The *reactionaries* on our club's board of directors
  - a. are constantly suggesting new activities.
  - b. want to go back to the old ways of doing things.
  - c. agree with whatever the majority wants.
8. Since my subscription to *Newsweek* has *lapsed*, I
  - a. haven't gotten any copies.
  - b. read it every week.
  - c. get two copies every week.

## READING CHECK

### Central Point and Main Ideas

1. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the entire selection?
  - a. Stereotyping, which is common for various reasons, harms our thinking, but we can learn to avoid it.
  - b. We stereotype in order to make sense of the world.
  - c. There are several ways to get rid of stereotyped thinking.
  - d. We can learn to stereotype better.
2. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 8?
  - a. Many jokes are based on stereotypes.
  - b. Stereotypes make growing up difficult.
  - c. As adults, we are surrounded by stereotypes.
  - d. Advertisements, movies, and books use stereotypes.

3. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 15?
  - a. Minority groups are not "just like everybody else."
  - b. We need to stop depending on stereotypes.
  - c. Changes in our thinking about people often involve the substitution of one stereotype for another.
  - d. Learning not to stereotype is a gradual process.

### Key Supporting Details

4. According to the article, which of the following does *not* encourage stereotyping?
  - a. Childhood influences
  - b. Careful observation
  - c. Advertisements, movies, and books
  - d. The urge to make sense of the world
5. When asked to guess people's nationalities from their photographs, a group of Nebraskan students
  - a. were right 93 percent of the time.
  - b. were wrong 93 percent of the time.
  - c. correctly identified most of the people from European countries.
  - d. reported a higher "general liking" of those who had fictitious Irish and Italian names.
6. According to the author, stereotyping
  - a. is rare.
  - b. is often accurate.
  - c. makes us mentally lazy.
  - d. broadens our view of the world.

### Inferences

7. \_\_\_\_\_ TRUE OR FALSE? The author implies that prejudices is based on stereotypes.
8. From the experiment with Columbia and Barnard students (paragraph 6), we can infer that
  - a. names have nothing to do with stereotypes.
  - b. college students are good judges of beauty.
  - c. the students tended to prefer nationalities different from their own.
  - d. the students tended to prefer people who were not members of minority groups.