

Stereotypes, Racism, and Identity

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As an Organizational Behavior Consultant, it is my belief that everyone has deeply-ingrained stereotypes about different groups of people – particularly those who are “different” from us. Stereotypes are formed by generalizations that we make about others based on preconceived assumptions. We use them to predict possible behaviors and patterns and assume moral and ethical values that make them trustworthy or dangerous. A “generalization” is a form of deductive reasoning that helps us understand phenomena and build hypothesis about what we witness or experience before reaching a conclusion. Most of the time, we shortcut the process and end up turning a generalization into what we consider to be a factual statement. When we attach a value judgment of good or bad to that generalization, it then becomes a stereotype.

As humans, we need to belong to a group or tribe in order to define our identity and feel a sense of belonging. This tribe provides the context, or universe, where our fundamental beliefs and assumptions are formed and constantly reinforced. Through this process, we develop our own perceptions of right and wrong. Most of our core stereotypes are established through our socialization process and based on the truisms of our tribe, or identity group. These groups can be defined by many things such as religion, nationality, color or tone of skin, place of origin, socio-economical condition, degree of education, ideological or political ideas, occupation, or any other segmentation that provides us with a sense of identity and differentiates us from others.

An essential part of belonging to any given tribe is the adherence to, and integration of, the tribal narrative – the doctrines we hear, the “should’s” and “should not’s,” what is or is not acceptable behavior, who is to be welcomed and trusted and who is not. It defines who WE are and who THEY are. It differentiates “us” from “them” – which, in most cases, translates into what makes us better than or superior to them. We create myths and revise history; we write books, paint images, adhere to dress codes, and use material possessions to reinforce our identity, confirm our paradigm, and differentiate ourselves from others.

Here is where our stereotypes become the essence that will guide how we engage with others. Are we going to discriminate against them? ... Destroy them? ... Subjugate them? Are they friends or enemies?



If we have a common ground and/or similar values and are similar in appearance or demeanor, perhaps we will try to befriend them, integrate them, or even procreate with them. But if they look, act, or dress differently, and have dissimilar values and beliefs, we may try to vanquish them, exterminate them, or devalue and minimize them. THIS is what racism is – and unfortunately it is part of the human makeup.

The first time I encountered discrimination, I was only 9 years old – and I still remember the incident like it was yesterday. Most of my friends and neighbors were Mestizo Catholics, but there were also a few Jewish kids like me – all born in Mexico to refugee parents from Russia, Poland, or other Eastern European countries. My best friend was my next-door neighbor, and we’d play with all the other kids in the neighborhood. As kids we didn’t pay much attention to, or even think about, our religious or ethnic tribes. We were just kids and our “tribe” was the name of the street we lived on. In my case, it was Ensenada Street. We were the “kids from Ensenada” and our “enemies” were the kids from Cholula Street. We often had dinner or snacks at each other’s homes and watched black-and-white TV at the home of one of the few kids whose family was able to afford such a luxury. My best friend was one those who had a TV.

Every Sunday his mother, a very devout Catholic, would lead her family of seven to church to attend mass. One particular Sunday, my friend came back from church and said to me, “You killed our Lord Jesus and all Jews need to be punished for it.” I was both surprised and terrified – I had no idea what he was talking about. I only knew that I didn’t kill anyone, and that I was completely innocent. I also knew that neither my mom or dad would do such a thing. After that Sunday, I was not welcome at my friend’s house anymore, and for several weeks we did not talk or play with each other. Our relationship eventually went back to being “normal,” but deep inside I always felt a great divide. I was a Jew, I was not part of his tribe, and I was hated by his mom for being a Jew.

Core Identity Groups or Tribes

When we are born, we automatically belong to an identity group: our family. At the same time, our family is also part of other identity groups that provide the family unit with values, beliefs, history, and truisms about the world and others in it. Core identity groups are defined by ethnicity (color of skin, facial features, eye color, color and texture of hair) gender, religion, place of birth (country/region) and parents’ origin. These five fundamental elements overlap and define our initial tribe or identity group.

In my case, I was born in Mexico City to Eastern European parents. I'm white with blue eyes, blond hair, and a prominent Semitic nose. My tribe of origin is white, Mexican, and Ashkenazim (Jews born in Eastern and Central Europe, i.e. Russia, Poland, Hungary, Germany and Austria). Throughout my formative years, I attended a school that only accepted kids like me where I learned about the virtues of our tribe and our suffering at the hands of the others. I learned about the Inquisition, the Holocaust, *pogroms* against Jews throughout Eastern Europe, and the creation of the State of Israel as a place for our tribe to endure and prosper. I learned about Mexican history, the Conquistadores, the Mexican War of Independence, the Mexican Revolution, our Mexican Heroes, and the Mexican progressive Constitution of 1917 that developed my identity as a Mexican. I attended exclusive summer camps and belonged to the only Mexican Ashkenazi Jewish Boy Scout Troup. We also belonged to a synagogue whose congregation came to Mexico at the same time as my parents from the same part of Europe. We lived in a very exclusive, isolated, and comfortable bubble, where everything and everyone outside of it were potential anti-Semites, or the enemy. This tribal bubble was so extreme that we took pride in differentiating ourselves from the Mexican Sephardic Jews or the Mexican Arab Jews. We tolerated them, but looked down on them; they were Jews, but not our kind of Jews, and marrying one of them was shameful and consider an intermarriage.

Secondary Identity Groups

The characteristics that define our secondary identity groups are those that by nature, or by intentional selection, become part of our identity through our life. They are a source of further differentiation, and some become critical in how we define ourselves or how others define us. Each one of these groups, or differentiators, are based on values, norms, paradigms, assumptions, and stereotypes of themselves or others. It would be impossible to list all of them – they are the ecosystem of every human being and they are fluid and constantly evolving over time. Examples may include political affiliation, age, marital status, occupation, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious affiliation, social class, financial stature – the list is endless. Our identity is constantly shifting, relative to the dominant majority and how that majority chooses to define “others” – and how others define themselves relative to the dominant majority or the tribe in power.



We, as people, are blinded by and afraid of our racism. We are a country divided by those who overtly let racism control their lives and those who deny their racism and pretend to live in a colorblind society. There are also people who are aware of their biases, and mindfully work to overcome them by engaging in education and exploration, seeking to build a bridge of understanding. Adversely, when a tribe or group base their collective identity on the destruction of others, there is no bridge to build –

there is only hate, violence, and destruction. Furthermore, we only tend to let go of our biases and stereotypes when we are in the presence of a catastrophic event, or when facing a common powerful enemy that threatens our existence or freedom. I also believe that we shift the truisms or doctrines of the tribe based on the context around us.

The best thing we can do is to practice self-awareness and pause if we find ourselves giving into stereotypes without provocation. The next time you feel suspicious about someone who is “different” than you, take a step back and realize that this person may have values, feelings, and ideas similar to yours. Compassion for others is always an effective way to work towards greater understanding. The first step toward creating a diverse and inclusive society and community is to individually acknowledge our racism and take responsibility for it. The second step is to be mindful of it when dealing with others that may look, think or sound different than us – and identify the overt, covert, or latent racism or stereotyping we are engaging in when passing judgement on that individual or group of people. The third, and possibly the most crucial step, is discovering the origin of our racism and bigotry. We need to dissect and question the archaic beliefs and assumptions that were passed onto us by the narrative of our identity group or the bubble in which we have lived.

