Stereotypes

by Tina Gianoulis

A stereotype is a fixed idea about the characteristics or qualities of a certain group (that is, race, class, profession, etc.) of individuals. A stereotype about a group is usually created by people outside that group who may make observations about some members of the group, then generalize that all members of the group behave in certain ways.

While many stereotypes may be rooted in more or less accurate observations, they also usually include a number of other inaccurate and usually negative assumptions that are used not only to categorize members of the stereotyped group but also to condemn, dismiss, or trivialize them. Thus, stereotypes contribute to racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, including homophobia.

Members of different queer communities have not only been stereotyped by mainstream straight society, but are often also stereotyped by each other, causing damaging divisions and misunderstandings.

In day-to-day interactions, human beings are constantly deluged with sensory input that they must quickly organize into manageable categories. While stereotyping evolves from this simple need for classification, the rigidity of the stereotyped ideas and facts that they so broadly generalize about people make them counterproductive for dealing with real people in the real world. In fact, most observers of society agree that once stereotypes are in place, people tend to notice only those characteristics in others that agree with their preconceived notions and become oblivious to those qualities that do not fit the stereotypes.

Stereotyped Groups as "Other"

Though stereotyping represents a sort of cultural shorthand, enabling people to categorize groups of people quickly, it also effectively distances people from those they stereotype by defining the stereotyped group as "other." Because it is based on characterizing a group of people through pre-conceived ideas, stereotyping fosters ignorance, and because stereotyping often traffics in negative generalities, it is frequently used to justify the oppression of stereotyped groups.

Another significant characteristic of the stereotyping of oppressed groups is that a wide variety of disenfranchised (and often despised) groups of people, are stereotyped by mainstream society in remarkably similar ways. For example, Jews in medieval society, Blacks in the post-Civil War South, and gay men in the twentieth century have all been stereotyped as sexual predators.

Jews, people of color, women, and the poor have shared many other stereotypically negative characteristics with queers. Gay men, lesbians, Jews, and outspoken women are often stereotyped as "pushy" and "shrill." Jews, Blacks, gays, and poor people have also been seen as dirty carriers of disease.

Fear of the "other" has often caused members of dominant groups to see minorities as mentally unstable or threatening to women or children. These stereotypes have frequently been applied to members of queer communities as well as communities of color. In fact, one of the best-publicized anti-gay campaigns of the

late twentieth century, Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" crusade during the early 1980s, capitalized on the stereotype of gay men as child molesters.

Contradictory Stereotypes

Different queer groups have long been stereotyped in specific, if often contradictory ways. For example, gay men are just as often stereotyped as gentle sissies as dangerous, oversexed predators. Lesbians may be stereotyped as both the unattractive masculine gym teacher and the sultry, ultra-feminine seductress of straight pornography. Bisexuals are seen as both repressed and promiscuous. Transgendered people are assumed to be tricksters who deceive straights by impersonating the opposite sex, as well as tortured misfits who have themselves been betrayed by mother nature.

Gay men and lesbians are affected by stereotypes of queers as depressed loners who cannot maintain relationships, though research and life experience has often proved those stereotypes untrue. Perhaps the predominant contradictory stereotypes for all queer groups are the conflicting assumptions that, on the one hand, queers are just the same as straight people, and, on the other hand, that queers are totally different from straight people. While each of these stereotypes contains a germ of truth, neither encompasses the complexity of the queer experience within mainstream straight society.

Stereotypes within Queer Communities

Within queer communities, stereotypes also flourish. Lesbians may stereotype gay men as apolitical, wealthy, and misogynist, while gay men in turn stereotype lesbians as humorless, aggressive, and undersexed. Both gay men and lesbians may mistrust bisexuals because they believe the stereotype of the bisexual who abandons his or her same-sex lover in favor of a safer heterosexual relationship. These stereotypes, while sometimes used affectionately, like a community in-joke, can also create deep divisions within an oppressed group and prevent cooperation and unity.

Images in Popular Culture

Images of queers on television and film tend to perpetuate the same stereotypes that are found in the larger culture. For example, NBC's *Will and Grace*, which premiered in 1999, represents gay life as little more than a series of stereotypes, represented by the main gay characters, Will (played by Eric McCormack) and Jack (Sean Hayes). Will is the masculine "just-the-same-as-straight" gay man who cannot seem to find a lover, while Jack is the frivolous "flaming queen" gay man who has slept with everyone. Neither character ever steps far enough away from stereotype to reveal a realistic individual who just happens to be homosexual.

On the ABC sitcom *Roseanne* (1988-1997), Sandra Bernhard played Nancy, a bisexual character who reinforced the stereotype of the fickle bisexual by first coming out as a lesbian, then switching back to men with little explanation, only saying glibly, "Don't label me." The character of Nancy remained on the show as a humorous oddity, a token rather than a developed bisexual character.

Even a fairly gay-positive film such as Mike Nichols' *The Birdcage* (1996) relies heavily on the humor of the stereotypically mincing, self-absorbed, effeminate, funny gay man played off against the masculine, gay "straight" man. Though there is enough reality behind the stereotypes to elicit laughs from gay audiences, neither image reflects much depth. Straight audiences learn little about the queer experience from these depictions, and too often the characters serve to perpetuate the stereotypes they demonstrate.

The good-natured stereotyping of a television show such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003) is benign enough, but it plays off some unpleasant stereotypes of gay men as neat freaks and fashion mavens.

Conclusion

Stereotypes, in general, foster prejudice and discrimination. Decisions are often made about individuals based on their membership in groups. When the stereotypes of the groups are negative and inaccurate, as they are for glbtq people, the potential for damaging individuals is all the greater.

Perhaps equally damaging, stereotypes may also be self-fulfilling prophecies, especially for young queers just coming out. Having internalized the stereotypes, they may think, for example, that to be a lesbian, one must be hard and anti-male or that to be a gay man one must be flighty and bitchy. Although such stereotypes are inaccurate and one-dimensional, many glbtq people have attempted to conform to them in efforts to find their niche in the queer subcultures.

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