

# Intercultural Communication

*An Interdisciplinary Approach: When Neurons, Genes,  
and Evolution Joined the Discourse*

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Amsterdam University Press

Cover illustration: Photo by Mai Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, taken in 2012 in La Habana, Cuba.

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Typesetting: Crius Group, Hulshout

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 94 6298 541 4  
e-ISBN 978 90 4853 651 1 (pdf)  
NUR 612 / 757  
DOI 10.5117/9789462985414

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## 3. Stereotype – A Necessary Evil

### Objective

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the origin of stereotypes and prejudices from biology's point of view.
- Explain the pitfall of stereotypes and prejudices with accurate examples.
- Given a specific case, recognize stereotypes, prejudices and explain the reasons.
- Given a specific case, propose alternative solutions.
- Describe strategies to live with stereotypes and reduce prejudices.

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Everybody knows a joke that stereotypes a cultural group. The most common is the one about “Heaven and Hell”:

Heaven is a place where: The police are British, the chefs are French, the lovers are Italian, and everything is organized by the Germans.

Hell is a place where: The police are French, the chefs are British, the lovers are Germans, and everything is organized by the Italians.

The fact that people in each cited country can laugh about this suggests that there is at least a grain of truth in this joke. In general, many of us have an overwhelmingly stereotypical perception that the Italians are both erotic and chaotic, and that the Germans are slightly better than the Italians at structuring their lives, but at the same time can be quite uptight about expressing emotion. As for the British, their gastronomy is not quite on par with that of the French (in fact, French cuisine is so tasty that it has been awarded World Heritage status by UNESCO), but the British are known for seeing authority as a professional privilege, while the French may perceive authority more as a right and make it less open to question.

Jokes aside, why do we form stereotypes? Are they all bad? How do stereotypes lead to prejudices and discrimination? What are the consequences? What can we do to deal with this tendency to lump people together, to judge? And what can we do to make sure this inner voice does not transform into discriminatory behavior? These are the questions that we will address in this chapter. These issues are essential in cross-cultural communication, not only because *nobody* can avoid stereotypes, but also because the biological mechanism behind them can both enrich and impede us, and, when stereotypes escalate to prejudices and discrimination, they can destroy us and others.

### 3.1 Stereotype

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A stereotype is a fixed, oversimplified idea about a particular social category or collective culture that strongly influences our expectation and behaviors.<sup>1</sup>

At the second level of the Inverted Pyramid model, all units of analysis (global, national, organizational and group culture) are subjected to this tendency of being seen as a homogeneous mass: what “men” and “women” can do, what “young” and “old” people can achieve, or how a particular “profession” can be an indicator of an individual’s personality. This is not a new phenomenon, and it is there for a reason.

### 3.1.1 The Origin of the Stereotype

We will incorporate insight from evolutionary biology and neuroscience to gain a more thorough understanding of what stereotypes are really about.

#### 3.1.1.1 *A Survival Skill*

At the origins of the human race, in Africa, our ancestors were constantly coping with situations that required them to react quickly and avoid danger. A rattle in the bush signals a poisonous snake or a dangerous predator, and it would be much wiser to run away, rather than stay and investigate what the curious noise is. Better safe than sorry. Such a cautious reaction is probably the *wrong response* 99.9 per cent of the time (there is, usually, no snake), but it only takes a single occasion for the guess to be correct to save a life. This tendency to make such a systematic error is called *bias*.

Thus, stereotyping has evolved as a survival mechanism that allows our brain to make a snap judgment based on the immediately visible characteristics of a situation. We are in the “bush,” the territory is known to have “predators,” and we can’t see what/who caused the “rattle.” These bits of information (bush, predators, rattle) are sent to our brain, where they reach first the amygdala – a subcortical structure in the anterior-temporal lobe that acts as a danger detector or warning system.<sup>2-3</sup> Here, these bits of data are connected, creating a big picture from the separate pieces of information. If the outcome of the connection fits a *pattern*, the amygdala immediately ignites a fight-or-flight reaction. The whole process is extremely fast and does not involve any thinking, it is conducted completely by the subconscious. From an evolutionary point of view, those who failed to stereotype by making this kind of quick call were much less likely to leave behind offspring.

As humans, we are often put in a situation where we fail to see any similarities or where we lack relevant experience. At the same time, we still need to make sense of the situation and react in short space of time. Stereotyping is the result of this mismatch. Our mind forms a stereotype by connecting bits of *loose information* in order to reach a significant *whole* – something that gives us a meaning that enables us to make a decision and react quickly. It is not for nothing that sales pages are often very long, with a lots of bullet points, experts’ recommendations and testimonies from satisfied customers. This is done in the hope that our mind will connect the loose information and create a big picture of “a good product,” prompting a swift decision to buy it without having used it first. This mental shortcut of “judging a book by its cover” helps us to retain knowledge using minimal

thinking effort and provides us with a sense of structure to deal with an otherwise chaotic universe.<sup>4</sup> Thus, stereotyping is bad, but it is also crucial. Some call it a “necessary evil,” and that is a pretty good way to describe it.

### 3.1.1.2 *A Social Mechanism*

Our brains categorize objects and people in more or less the same way. Suppose you have never had a chance to get to know the Italians. There are about 60 million of them, thus at least 60 million sets of information – a number that is impossible to process. This is where stereotypes step in, using categories to help simplify and systematize information and, in this case, attributing a fixed set of characteristics to *all* Italians. For example, in our “heaven and hell” joke, they are portrayed as having a chaotic approach to work and a passionate approach to love affairs. In a nutshell, stereotypes maximize the differences *between* cultures (the Italians are completely different from the British, etc.), and maximize similarity *within* a culture (all Italians share this characteristic). Now that things have been “sorted out” and put into boxes, the world should look much simpler, and thus easier to understand. We can save time and energy to act more efficiently. Next time we meet an Italian, we can quickly draw on this stereotype (e.g. [s] he would make a great lover; [s]he would mess up the whole project), and consequently make a decision or form an opinion.

Stereotyping as a social mechanism has some disadvantages in our modern time. While this survival skill saved our ancestors from being bitten and eaten, in today’s world, it is not poisonous snakes that we constantly have to worry about. Our everyday decisions do not always involve matters of life and death. However, the automatic reaction meant to save our life is still being used, including for very *complex* tasks such as negotiating a contract with a business partner. The ability to make a snap judgment is not very useful here, because your important decision will be based on subconscious instead of actual thinking; on gut feeling instead of rationality; on a lack of information rather than a clear bigger picture; and on the perceptions formed by *others* in the society, instead of the situation’s uniqueness.

Furthermore, modern life *overloads* us with information, something that our ancestors didn’t have to experience. In any given moment, we receive 11 million bits of information, but we can only consciously process 40 bits,<sup>5</sup> which leaves 99.999996 per cent of the information for the subconscious to take care of. This means, like it or not, we are biased. We tend to think of stereotypes as a bad thing, and that only racists and bigots engage in pigeonholing others. Despite the fact that our knowledge may be based on nothing more than a grain of truth of a half-truth, all of

us are guilty of putting others in a box. When things do not fit the boxes, we are surprised. Whenever we are surprised, it probably means we have just stereotyped.

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*Stereotyping is a survival mechanism that helps us to make quick judgments based on limited information. However, in modern times, decisions do not always involve “survival” matters, and we are “overloaded with information.” Hence, quick calls based on subconscious thinking can have shortcomings.*

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#### ACTIVITY

Are you racist, sexist, homophobic or discriminatory? Many of us would say no, and it is probably true in terms of any *explicit* bias. Those with explicit, overt and ideological bias have a *conscious* belief that race, age, religion, ethnicity, gender, etc. are the determinants of human traits and ability. They also say it out loud, advocating this idea, even killing for it, as we have seen with right-wing or supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan Nation, neo-Nazi groups, etc.

The second type of bias is implicit, conditioned, subconscious or covert. It is not visible. We don't know we have it. We even deny we have it. We get extremely offended when accused of it, because we oppose such an idea. This is exactly the reason why *implicit* bias is more harmful and widespread, since we hurt others unknowingly. The truth is, all of us harbor more biases than we think. This comes from our brains' automated response that has been conditioned and shaped by various social cues.

Please take the Implicit Association Test<sup>6</sup> (free on the internet), but be prepared to be surprised at how racist or sexist you actually are.

### 3.1.2 The Methodological Flaw in Stereotyping

Looking at stereotyping from the perspective of cognitive function, there is nothing wrong with the act of categorizing. Our mind has evolved to conduct this vital process so that, as humans, we can effectively manage our life, develop our skills, and conquer the world that is otherwise too big, too complicated, and impossible to know in all its details.

However, the major problem with this seemingly natural process is that while our brains can be adept at categorizing inanimate objects, we run into problems when categorizing people, because people are much

more complicated than objects. In this section, we will look at two basic methodological mistakes in the process of stereotyping people.

### 3.1.2.1 *Applying Collective Norms to Unique Individuals*

The primary problem with stereotyping is the tendency to put every single person into a fixed category. This pigeonholing measures the wrong level of analysis on the Inverted Pyramid model. Starting at the *collective level*, we assume that certain groups may share some outward expressions and values. We then jump to the *individual level* and assume that every single person at this level also shares exactly those same expressions and values: you are a man, so you should be tough; you are a nurse, then very likely you are a woman in a white outfit with a little cap; you are Irish, well, for sure you drink like a fish, etc.

Let's unpick the stereotypes we have just listed: It may be true that, in general, men are *expected* to hold back emotion, but a study has found that young men are more emotionally affected by relationship woes than women.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, it may be true that many nurses are female, but 21 per cent of nurses in Italy and 32 per cent of nurses in Saudi Arabia are male, and these numbers are rising.<sup>8</sup> To make matters even more interesting, the patron saint of nursing is a man: St. Camillus de Lellis.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the Irish may drink a lot, ranking 21<sup>st</sup> with regard to total alcohol consumption per capita, per year,<sup>10</sup> but only 3 per cent of Irish people consider themselves heavy drinkers, and a quarter of all Irish adults do not drink at all.<sup>11</sup> If drinking were an Olympic sport, the Irish would probably come home empty-handed.

Obviously, a trait at the collective level, no matter how pervasive it is, let alone how wrong it can be, should not be applied to everyone at the individual level. A person is not her/his culture or nationality. In fact, the cultural background of a person tells us very little about her/his personality. To make matters worse, when we use stereotypes, we *deny people their individual identity*. By insisting that a person is just a random unit of many similar copies from a mass collection, we deny this person a sense of self and personhood, the right to be special and unique. We appease our minds and turn a blind eye to the complex reality. Edward Said, the founder of postcolonial studies, reflecting on his Palestinian origin, has put this to words: "An Oriental man was first an Oriental and only second a man."<sup>12</sup>

In Chapter 2, we emphasized the nature of multiple identities. Everyone is a member of many collective cultures. Under the impact of globalization, technology, immigration and interracial marriages, individual identities can become *lego identities*, which can be both ascribed and situational. Behavioral<sup>13-14</sup> and neural studies<sup>15-16-17-18-19</sup> have showed us that we are capable



of a multicultural mind,<sup>20</sup> (sub)consciously changing our perspectives and switching our value frames when the context requires it. Hence, using stereotypes not only risks pigeonholing people in a simplistic box, but also risks pigeonholing them in the *wrong box*, which is what we will look at in the next section.



*This is a stereotypical image of video game players, who are all boys. In reality, the ratio of female to male gamers is balanced, mirroring the population at large: Australia (47:53),<sup>21</sup> New Zealand (46:54),<sup>22</sup> Finland (49:51),<sup>23</sup> etc., with Japanese female gamers surpassing males (66:34).<sup>24</sup> By being trapped in this stereotype, oblivious to sexism in video gaming and the underrepresentation of women as characters in games, the industry has failed to capitalize on a massive potential market. However, the tide is changing fast. In 1989, women constituted only 3 per cent of the gaming industry. It is predicted that by 2020, the games development workforce will be 50 per cent female<sup>25</sup> / "Children playing video games," GAMESINGEAR.<sup>26</sup>*

### 3.1.2.2 *Creating Incorrect Group Norms from Individual Information*

The process of stereotyping can go wrong the other way around too, i.e. using the individual level to judge the collective level of the Inverted Pyramid model. This is due to the influence of misleading information. This incorrect data then forms a framework that we apply to the whole group, assuming that it is representative of *typical* values and outward expressions of that group: Some black people commit a crime, so black people are criminals, and being criminal is a typical trait of black culture; some Muslims are terrorists, so Muslims are terrorists, and being a terrorist is typically Islamic; some white people are racist, so white people are racists and discrimination is a normal part of being white, etc.

The danger of creating incorrect norms has been exacerbated by media and social networks. Many stereotypes spread by mass media are exaggerated and based on half-truth. What should be seen as a non-typical and exceptional incident is blown out of proportion, creating the illusion that it is the *actual norm*. A good example of this phenomenon is the connection between air travel and fear of a plane crash. Although flying is the safest of all transportation modes, each time a plane comes down, the whole world is shaken by the constant and excessive amount of news and reports, creating an impression that it is dangerous to fly. Similarly, the abundance of media attention on a certain topic can trick many of us into making a wrong assumption, such as, people from the Gulf are oil millionaires, the standard beauty of modern women is exactly the same as that of a catwalk model or a Barbie doll, or the entire Middle East is an everlasting war zone, etc. The incredible network of media and literature is partly responsible for creating a distorted image of many collective cultures, focusing on *irregular traits* and turning them into *typical trademarks*. When exceptions become the norm, stereotypes that stem from this categorization can be destructive, since they are incongruent with reality, and yet, they are considered to be the standard.



*The media often focuses on irregular traits and turns them into typical trademarks. Regular women rarely look like these models, but the normalization of extremely skinny figures has made many women believe themselves to be “not good enough,” causing insecurity and reinforcing sexism. Young women put their health in danger by attempting to slim down to the unrealistic body image portrayed by the fashion industry. Size 0 and 00 were invented due to changing clothing sizes over time. For example, a size 0 in 2011 is the equivalent of a size 2 in 2001 and is larger than a size 6 in 1970 and a size 8 in 1958. In other words, a regular woman in the past could be seen as a plus-size woman by today’s standard. The social effect is so destructive that France followed the example of Israel and banned ultra-skinny models in 2015, requiring a minimum healthy BMI of 18.5/”Modern fashion standards,” JULIA KISHKARUK.<sup>27</sup>*

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When stereotyping people, we risk making two mistakes:

- Using the “Collective level” to evaluate the “Individual level”: Group norms are applied to every unique person.
  - Using the “Individual level” to evaluate the “Collective level”: Exceptional cases become incorrect norms for the whole group.
- 

### 3.1.3 The Pitfalls of Stereotyping

In this section, we will discuss the “evil”’s side of stereotypes.

#### 3.1.3.1 *Stereotypes can be Stronger than Fact and Rationality*

When our ancestors lived in small bands of hunter-gatherers, analyzing what was right and what was wrong didn’t add too many advantages. In contrast, winning arguments helped to bolster their social status. Hence, humans embraced the tendency to accept facts and opinions which reaffirm our view, and reject those which challenge it, especially when we do not have the resources to counter such information.<sup>28</sup>

Stereotypes are persistent. They can trap us in a frame that filters out all information that is not consistent with our assumptions. Even when we are confronted with instances that contradict stereotypes, we tend to assume that this is just a special case. For example, if we hold the common stereotype that gay men are soft and unathletic, when meeting an athletic and assertive gay man, we are more likely to conclude that this person is *not* a typical gay man, and that gay men, in general, are *still* soft and unathletic. Further, this selective filter *only* reinforces information that suits our assumption. In a nutshell, we only see what we want to see. It is a solution for so-called “cognitive dissonance” – a dilemma between our own belief and facts. Consequently, we are misled into making decisions based on half-truths.

To make matters worse, neuroscientists tell us that the brain even *distorts* facts to fit our stereotypes.<sup>29</sup> For instance, female faces are perceived as “happy” and male faces as “angry,” even when the opposite is the case. Black faces tend to be seen as “angry,” even when they are objectively happy. This is the result of a society where women are constantly told to smile and men, especially black men, are associated with masculine aggression.

This helps to explain why people tend to have an even *stronger* belief when they are confronted with facts and overwhelming evidence against their point of view.<sup>30</sup> This “backfire effect” happens when facts threaten a

worldview or self-concept. In a series of studies,<sup>31</sup> researchers reported that those who held a negative belief about Aboriginals didn't change their view when provided with correct information. Similarly, those who believed the misinformation on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq *strengthened* their belief after being made aware of the correction that suggests otherwise.<sup>32</sup> The power of information and transparency is not always guaranteed and can even be counterproductive. Like an underpowered antibiotic, facts can actually strengthen misinformation and false belief.

This is not the end of the story. The failure of facts and rationality can be accompanied by the "I know I'm right" syndrome. A political study shows that not only will most of us resist correcting our stereotypical belief despite the facts, it appears that misinformed people also often have some of the strongest opinions. In this study,<sup>33</sup> half of the participants indicated confidence in what they know, but only 3 per cent got half of the questions right, and the ones who were the *most* confident were also the ones who knew the *least* about the topic.

### 3.1.3.2 *Stereotypes Exclude Those Who Don't Fit*

Since stereotypes put people in boxes, they deny the existence of those who do not fit those assumptions. The story of this blogger vividly illustrates his frustration:

I'm a black man who grew up surrounded by white people. Growing up, I was the only black person in my neighborhood, my school, and sometimes it felt like the entire town. I never played basketball. I can't rap or dance well – I don't even like hip hop. I'm really good at video games and I watch baseball. When I got to college, my skin made me too black to fit in with the white kids, and my skills/hobbies weren't black enough to fit in with the black kids.

It sucks to feel like you're in the minority sometimes. It sucks even more to feel like you're not even good enough for the minority.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, every single one of us doesn't fit. The reason is simple, boxes don't mix, but identities do. You may fit the stereotype of how someone from Brunei looks like, but at the same time, you are not just a Bruneian but a Buddhist, an entrepreneur, a global citizen, single father, a wannabe rock-star, etc. Within and between each of these identities, there will always be something about you that does not fit the stereotypical assumptions. Sooner or later, you will face a few options: being forced into a box, being left out of the picture, or struggling to fit in a box that is not "meant" for you.

A good case in point is women and the numerous stereotypes they have to struggle with. The overwhelming stereotype is that they are homemakers, i.e. generally, women want to be, should be, or have to be a care-giver. This social expectation hampers women and they have to struggle much harder than their male counterparts to advance in the workplace. Popular profiles present girls and women as young, thin, beautiful, passive, dependent and often incompetent. At the same time, boys and men are portrayed as active, adventurous, powerful, sexually aggressive and largely uninvolved in human relationships.<sup>35</sup> This stereotype has popularized the meme “game over,” which variously depicts a bride victoriously or desperately dragging her groom into a wedding while the man shows a sad and helpless face. It perpetuates the false idea that a woman’s purpose in life is to get married and make a home, and a man’s mission is to escape this. It is not true, of course, but it has become something that few of us bother to argue against. Societies trapped in this stereotype fail to pay due respect and give equal opportunities to half of the workforce. There are countless women who are active citizens, who want to pursue serious careers, who strive to be executives, who desire to lead and make an impact, and who just want to be single or child-free.

### 3.1.3.3 *The Threat of Stereotypes and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies*

The stereotype threat is a situation where your performance is influenced by negative assumptions that others have about your collective culture, and hence, indirectly about you.<sup>36</sup> For example, if you told white men that, generally, they have *lower* athletic ability than black men, consequently, they would perform *worse* than those white men who were *not* made aware of this stereotype.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, women would perform math tasks worse if they were reminded of the stereotype, but perform equally well in comparison with men if free from this threat.<sup>38</sup> This effect of stereotyping is so detrimental that it can drive us away from putting more effort into solving a problem. Instead, we start to question our own ability and attribute this temporary failure to our age, race, gender, nationality, skin color, etc.: “Why can’t I do it? Is it because what people say is correct? Maybe the stereotype is correct! Oh dear! It *is* indeed correct!” In a self-fulfilling prophecy, this belief begins to guide our behaviors and, eventually, we create the reality that originally was just an idea, an idea that was not even correct. This phenomenon also works in our interaction with others. If you stereotype someone as intelligent, you will subconsciously act in a way that encourages an intellectual response. If you expect them to be dull, your behavior is likely to elicit this trait.

With Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), we are able to know what really happens when people experience a stereotype threat. Women free of such a threat showed increased recruitment of neural activity in the regions that are associated with math performance, including the inferior prefrontal cortex and bilateral angular gyrus.<sup>39-40</sup> In comparison, this increase was absent among women who had been reminded of their inferiority. Instead, there was increased activity in the ventral anterior cingulate cortex, a brain region associated with emotional self-regulation and processing social feedback.<sup>41-42</sup> This means that valuable cognitive resources are spent on emotional regulation, *rather than on the task at hand*; this, in turn, results in poorer performance.

#### 3.1.3.4 Positive Stereotypes

Logically, one would think: “If a negative stereotype makes people perform worse than their actual ability, then a positive one would make them perform better.” That is partly true. However, no matter how positive they are, stereotypes are still stereotypes, and we will always fail to grasp the whole picture by using them. Further, positive stereotypes can be detrimental since they set the bar unrealistically high, causing holders of stereotypes to be disappointed when confronted with the truth and, at the same time, loading unnecessary burdens on those viewed through such stereotypes.

A classic example is Model Minority – an assumption that Asians in Western societies achieve a higher degree of socioeconomic success than the population average. Despite the fact that Asian minorities have also been marginalized and face racism like other collective cultures, this positive stereotype creates an illusion that Asians do not suffer from social inequality. This dismisses problems and denies chances that the disadvantaged deserve. Worse still, this positive stereotype has been used to justify the exclusion of those in need in the distribution of government support.<sup>43</sup> In the 1980s, several Ivy League schools admitted that they chose other minority groups over Asian applicants in an attempt to promote a national agenda of racial diversity.<sup>44</sup> Holding Asians to a much higher standard also presses them to live up to unrealistic expectations, resulting in tremendous stress and mental illness, even suicide attempts among young people unable to deal with pressure from parents and society to be exceptionally high achievers.<sup>45</sup>

In a multicultural society, maintaining positive stereotypes about one specific group accentuates negative stereotypes about others. It can actually promote legal injustice, social hostility and racial hatred, creating platforms to blame other groups for not being a model, falling short in terms

of their contribution. In her book *Murder and the Reasonable Man*, Cynthia Lee argues that the verdict on the shooting death of a black teenager by a Korean shop owner was influenced by the positive stereotype of the shooter as “unfortunate victim of ‘bad’ African or Latino looters.”<sup>46</sup> This event contributed to the 1992 riots in Los Angeles and has left a tension between the two communities until this day.<sup>47</sup>

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*The pitfalls of stereotypes are:*

- *Stereotypes can be stronger than fact and rationality. People will strengthen their false belief if deep-seated values are challenged. Our brain can also distort images to fit our stereotypes.*
  - *Stereotypes exclude those who don't fit the boxes.*
  - *Stereotype threats create anxiety that results in lower performance and self-fulfilling prophecies (we become what we believe we are).*
  - *Positive stereotypes create burden, dismiss problems, and deepen group conflicts.*
- 



*African immigrants are described as an “Invisible Model Minority” because their high degree of success has been overshadowed by negative stereotypes. In the US, 48.9 per cent of all African immigrants hold a college diploma, more than double the rate of native-born white Americans.<sup>48</sup> Immigrants from Egypt, Nigeria, Cameroon, Uganda, Tanzania and Zimbabwe are among the best educated. A similar situation among different ethnic groups is found in the UK, Australia and Canada/ “High school students conducting experiments,” UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER, NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE.<sup>49</sup>*

## 3.2 Prejudice

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If stereotypes can be both positive and negative, prejudices are often deeply held negative feelings associated with a particular group. Built into the notion of prejudice is a sense of hostility and judgment. While stereotypes may be free from value and evaluation (e.g. people from Latin America are Catholics), prejudices are loaded with feelings about what is good and what is bad, what is moral and immoral (e.g. “my religion is the only true one, and my God is the only true God.”) Consequently, people with prejudices are likely to end up in hostile encounters where each side believes that their view is the right one.

### 3.2.1 The Origin of Prejudice

Similar to stereotyping, the tendency to form prejudices is the result of 25 million years of primate evolutionary heritage.<sup>50</sup>

#### 3.2.1.1 *Group Categorization*

In Chapter 1, we discussed how human beings are the only species capable of moving beyond family boundaries and forming different non-kin groups in order to maximize chances of survival. In fact, many think that our big brain evolved, in part, to cope with group living conditions. Since group living is directly connected to survival, our brains have evolved to be adept at recognizing who belongs to our ingroup (i.e. who we can trust) and outgroup (i.e. who we should watch out for or fight against). We do this by placing people into different categories. The tendency to categorize people into ingroup or outgroup is so pervasive that we often automatically locate others along simple dimensions such as skin color, gender and age. However, while this process can be quite accurate when categorizing inanimate objects, it can be faulty when categorizing people, since factors that define ingroup-outgroup are much more complex than visual elements such as skin color, gender and age.<sup>51</sup>

#### 3.2.1.2 *Group Love*

Our ancestors spent thousands of years in close-knit communities, where the group was their source of help, comfort and survival, protecting them against human and non-human enemies. By contrast, outgroup members can mean “threat.” Until today, the culture of our group provides us everything we need to survive: what to eat, how to seek support, where to study, when



to start a family, how to become successful, and why doing all those things in a certain cultural way is important. Naturally, we have evolved to build a strong affection for our ingroup and our culture. It becomes the center of everything, a yardstick that all other groups/cultures are measured and judged by. Our pride and sense of superiority leads to a tendency to look down on and distrust outgroup members (Social Identity Theory)<sup>52</sup> as we start forming certain prejudices towards others. In a nutshell, the love for our ingroup and culture automatically causes us to have negative attitudes towards outsiders.<sup>53</sup> Our cruelty to “them” is the result of our kindness to “us.”

Because we naturally feel safer among our ingroup, the contact with outgroups consequently triggers the nervous system to go into an automated fight-or-flight mode, similar to the stereotype mechanism. Again, better safe than sorry. That is how the brain has evolved, to protect us against any possible danger as it constantly gauges whether people are “friends” or “foes.” Physical traits (e.g. race, gender, age) and social cues (e.g. employees of the competing firm or members of other political parties) can be indicators that signal threats. For example, the amygdala becomes more active when we see someone who racially looks different from us, indicating a potential threat.<sup>54-55</sup> Not only is the fear-detector alert, evolution has also prepared us to feel less empathy towards outsiders. Watching people in pain, we tend to have more sympathy for those in our ingroup rather than outsiders,<sup>56</sup> even when they are just supporters of a rival team.<sup>57</sup> This makes sense, if we think about the moment we need to wield the sword to kill enemies. If we were to empathize with them as much as with our ingroup, we would likely stop and think, which would do us a disservice. In fact, demonizing others is a frequent practice to trick our brain into a prejudiced mode, enabling us to hate, discriminate, and destroy others without too much feeling.<sup>58</sup> In the end, killing people who have been made to look bad is easier than killing someone who is the same as us.

However, while being helpful in basic and closed societies, the machinery of detecting us vs. them and automatically treating “them” as a potential threat has become increasingly disadvantageous as we cross ever more borders throughout history. Furthermore, our environment is filled with racial stereotypes and prejudices, and the amygdala can wrongly adapt to prejudicial information about those who look different and, consequently, put us on *false alarm*. The amygdala operates extremely fast, long before our conscious thoughts have time to react.<sup>59</sup> Obviously, if left unchecked, the combination of all three factors (our tendency to categorize people into ingroup and outgroup; our love for ingroup; and our constantly [and falsely] alarming amygdala) can result in quite a nasty cocktail.

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*Prejudices are rooted in the biological need to categorize other groups and to love our own ingroup/culture – the source of our survival strategies.*

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### 3.2.2 The Expression of Prejudice

The attachment that we naturally have towards our ingroup is so strong that we not only favor our own group based on skin color, ethnicity, class, age, religion or gender, but we are even capable of feeling attached to a group that is *randomly* formed and based on something trivial. Divide any number of people into two different camps and, after no time, participants will exhibit ingroup favoritism, giving preferential treatment to their own members. Prejudices stemming from this group-based environment can escalate to *acts of discrimination* through the following forms and factors:

#### 3.2.2.1 Conflict of Resources

According to Realistic Conflict Theory, prejudices are formed when one group perceives the other(s) as a threat to their economic, political or cultural interest.<sup>60</sup> If one group has the potential to compete in the job market, and the other wants to maintain their privilege, power and status, a frequent strategy is to exploit or put down the minority group in order to maximize profits and to justify the hostility.

Understandably, prejudice often finds its peak during crises. In the recent global economic downturn, many minority groups in the West became victims of suspicion or hatred. A historic case in point is the “roller coaster” of prejudice suffered by Chinese immigrants in the US. This is what happened to them before they were lumped together with other Asian ethnicities as a Model Minority of exemplary citizens:

In the nineteenth-century American West, Chinese immigrants were hired to work in the gold mines, potentially taking jobs from white laborers. The white-run newspapers fomented prejudice against them, describing the Chinese as “depraved and vicious,” “gross gluttons,” “bloodthirsty and inhuman.” Yet only a decade later, when the Chinese were willing to accept the dangerous, arduous work of building the transcontinental railroad – work that white laborers were unwilling to undertake – public prejudice toward them subsided, replaced by the opinion that the Chinese were sober, industrious, and law-abiding. “They are equal to the best white men,” said the railroad tycoon Charles Crocker. “They are very

trustworthy, very intelligent and they live up to their contracts.” After the completion of the railroad, jobs again became scarce, and the end of the Civil War brought an influx of war veterans into an already tight job market. Anti-Chinese prejudice returned, with the press now describing the Chinese as “criminal,” “conniving,” “crafty,” and “stupid.”<sup>61</sup>

In the US, the Asian threat, presented as the “Yellow Peril,” would later also be associated with the Japanese, as a result of their military ambitions and the Second World War; other South Asian immigrant groups were labeled as the “Turban Tide” and the “Hindoo Invasion.” Similar prejudice towards blacks were found in white groups that were just *one rung* above the blacks socioeconomically, implying a close competition for jobs.<sup>62</sup>

Even when there is no conflict, resources can also be a factor that triggers prejudice. Many people justify discrimination against other groups because it helps maintain their own economic advantage: “These immigrants have little education, so they are lucky to have the jobs we offer. We really don’t need to pay them more.” In this case, assuming immigrants are ignorant people is useful, because it justifies the discriminatory act of paying them less.

### 3.2.2.2 *The Blame Game*

As hatred rises, society becomes destabilized, and people then start looking for a way to ease their frustrations. This is the point where an individual or a group is singled out and given all the blame. This unfortunate individual or group is called a *scapegoat*. If a scapegoat is killed, social order will be restored, since everyone believes that they have removed the cause of the trouble. Scapegoating acts as a psychological treatment, much like sacrifice in worship rituals.

Due to the snowball effect of antagonism, the original and genuine cause of the problem is often too big or too vague for direct retaliation. Situations such as a bad economy, unemployment, loss of status and confidence or failure in management can cause unhappiness and frustration. However, it is not possible to strike out against the whole system. Instead, people lash out at something or someone more specific, ideally a minority. Tarring an individual or a group with negative prejudice convinces us that they are the bad people and they deserve their fate.

History is replete with horrific cases of scapegoating, at all levels of society. We love the blame game and love to hold someone responsible for our problems. In Greek mythology, it was Pandora, who opened the box of trouble; in Christianity, it was Eve who asked Adam to eat from the

forbidden fruit and, consequently, we still bear the brunt of original sin; in Nazi Germany, it was the Jews; when an economy struggles, nationalists tend to scapegoat minorities for economic woes and immigrants are quickly seen as those who “steal our jobs”;<sup>63</sup> when confronted with domestic problems, country leaders are adept at using a “perfect enemy” to divert public attention elsewhere.<sup>64</sup> At the micro level, scapegoats are individuals, such as a staff worker who gets the blame for mismanagement.



*Homosexuals have frequently been made scapegoats and blamed for AIDS, natural disasters, even terrorist attacks. Pastor Jerry Falwell is believed to have said: “Thank God for these gay demonstrators. If I didn’t have them, I’d have to invent them. They give me all the publicity I need!” Shah Abbas 1 of Persia with a boy,” MUHAMMAD QASIM.<sup>65</sup>*

Scapegoats are not always a person or a group. Many believe the 2008 financial and economic collapse was due to “greed,” and that the desire to accumulate more than we need was the root of the crisis. Facing economic problems in Europe, another study in 2014 reported that governments made “public sectors” scapegoats and punished them with wage cuts and

retrenchment.<sup>66</sup> According to the authors, the real culprit is inequality and the dysfunctional regime of financial accumulation. By cutting public expenditure, governments allow more inequality, more debt, and further bubbles, continuing the vicious cycle.

### 3.2.2.3 *Institutionalized Discrimination*

A great deal of prejudice is embedded in the social systems of our societies through laws, regulations, operating procedures, objectives of governments and targets of corporations and other large entities. Together, they help “maintain the power of dominant groups over subordinate ones.”<sup>67</sup> The unjust treatment can be conscious or subconscious, but it is always codified in the process of the institution.

**Conscious discrimination.** To this day, a number of countries maintain a pronounced system of disparity among various groups. For example, Saudi Arabia still does not allow women to drive and open their own bank account. Every woman needs to be in the presence of a male guardian, regardless of their age, whenever they go out, and the King only granted Saudi women the right to vote in local elections in 2015. The system also extends to foreign workers. They need sponsors to provide entry and exit permission, and cannot keep their passports during their stay – a control practice that makes them greatly dependent on the mercy of employers. In Dubai, where foreigners make up almost 90 per cent of the population, nationality largely decides one’s salary rank: Europeans on top, Arabs follow, and different Asian and African groups cover the middle and lower rungs.<sup>68</sup>

**Subconscious discrimination.** However, institutionalized discrimination is often much less obvious, but still pervasive. Those with prejudices even twist merit to justify job discrimination. Recruiters can *redefine* criteria for success and use these new requirements as an excuse for rejecting the applicants they don’t like.<sup>69</sup> In the Netherlands, more than half of recruitment agencies complied with clients’ requests not to accept candidates of Moroccan, Turkish or Surinamese origin.<sup>70</sup> Even when applicants don’t have to endure this discrimination, their non-Western names and addresses, which signal non-White neighborhoods, can subconsciously influence the selection process. In the UK, people with foreign sounding names are a third less likely to be shortlisted for jobs than people with white, British sounding names.<sup>71</sup> Emily and Greg are more employable than Lakisha and Jamal, even when they have exactly the same curriculum vitae.<sup>72</sup> The Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, was apparently oblivious to this fact when in 2017, he called anonymous job applications, which omit the name

and country of origin, “terrible.”<sup>73</sup> As a country leader, his remark used the cover of “sameness” to justify a policy that disregards subconscious discrimination, rubbing salt into the wound of many whose inequality is part of everyday life.

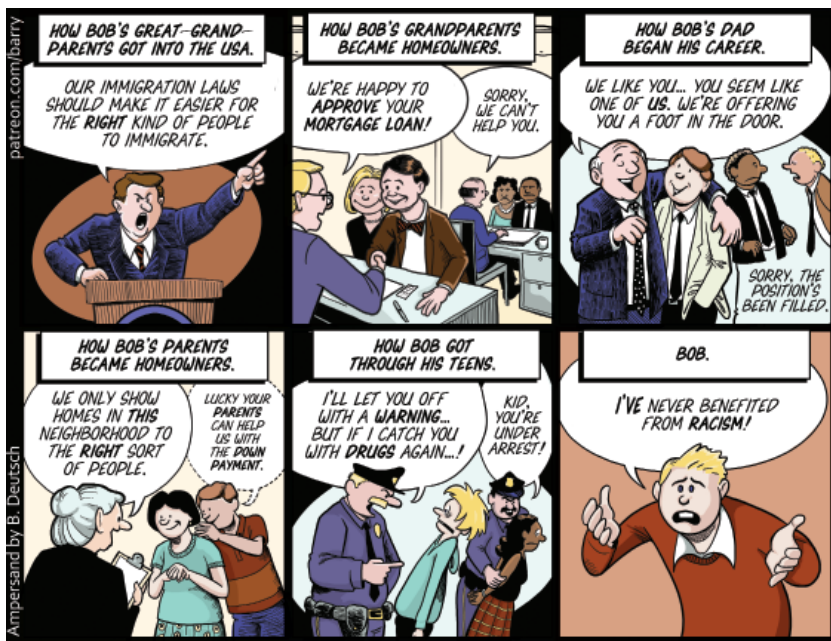
Business owners also suffer from institutionalized economic prejudice. Women of color start businesses at rates three to five times faster than all other businesses. However, once in business, their growth lags behind all other firms due to the negative impact of race and gender.<sup>74</sup> In capital investment markets, banks are often accused of not providing loans and other financial instruments for minority owned businesses, abusing the legal system in order to avoid clients perceived as “high risk” while failing to provide reasons to back up their denials.<sup>75</sup> Minority business owners pay interest rates that are 32 per cent higher than the rates whites pay for loans.<sup>76</sup>

In the same discriminatory way, prejudices subconsciously influence decision making processes in other social aspects. For example, in many multicultural societies, racial profiling has been blamed for much harsher punishment of non-white people. In the US, black men are reportedly 12 times more likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses, even though both blacks and whites use and sell drugs at almost the same rate.<sup>77</sup> Black drivers are 31 per cent more likely to be stopped by police than a white driver and twice as likely to be searched during routine traffic stops.<sup>78</sup> Criminologists have proved that the disproportionate number of marginalized groups in prison is linked to their socioeconomic disadvantages. In a vicious cycle of poverty, discrimination and negligence, it takes more than a strong will to wrench oneself out of the orbit of endless problems.

Similarly, many of the social issues we are facing today are the indirect consequences of institutionalized discrimination: gender pay gap, shortage of women and minorities in leading positions, achievement differences in education, higher suicide rate among men and marginalized groups, etc. It’s easy and convenient to attribute these disparities to factors such as inherent capacity or particular cultural values (e.g. “they don’t get there because they simply can’t,” “they don’t try hard enough”). This is a form of *symbolic* racism/discrimination where we assume the problem is “lack of effort,” rather than external disadvantages. The focus is switched from visual traits such as skin color to an abstract value, staying away from the direct racial slurs and hiding behind “value” as a justification, which is more politically correct in liberal democracies.<sup>79</sup> Here is an example: Support for Obama would have been 6 per cent higher if he were white. In fact, he lost votes from those well-educated

whites, who genuinely believe in racial equality, but unconsciously have no intention of voting for a black president. They may have criticized him for lack of experience, but this would not have been an issue if he were white.<sup>80</sup>

Using value as a justification to discriminate is so pervasive because it sounds like common sense. At the same time, it disregards many burdens and disadvantages that are out of a person's control. The root cause always has a lot to do with the systematic, institutionalized inequality that is built upon (sub)conscious prejudices. We may think a tiny little bias can't possibly lead to such a huge setback, but a computer simulation has proved that an edge of just 1 per cent given to a particular group at the starting line will quickly lead to 65 per cent of the advantages at the finish post.<sup>81</sup> It is often the case that someone who is not a member of the dominant culture will need to try many times harder than those with privileges (e.g. native, white, male) in order to reach the very same position.



*Those with privileges often unknowingly benefit from institutionalized discrimination through biases. It's easier for them to be recognized, to be chosen, to be employed, to make an impression, to be pardoned, to be accepted in a circle or network, etc./"Bob's privileges," BARRY DEUTSCH.*

**ACTIVITY**

When Johana Brurai – a graphic designer from Sweden – searched for pictures of “hands” on Google, she found that most of the images were white. When she searched for “black hands,” they often came with added information, such as a white hand reaching out to offer help. White images also dominates search results for “man,” “women,” or “child.” Even the search for “beautiful dreadlocks” – a hairstyle strongly associated with African culture – yields images of white people with dreadlocks.

Do a Google search for other concepts such as “leadership,” “business” or “expert.”

1. Who are the majority in the images? What is the environment? What are they doing? What is the hidden message?
2. Why does this group dominate Google’s search results?
3. What can you do to balance the situation?

**Media.** Institutional discrimination can be amplified through media.<sup>82</sup> In fact, journalists in both the Nazi Holocaust and the Rwandan Genocide were convicted of charges related to inciting genocide. Although journalism is expected to be objective, it is conducted by humans, and humans are biased. Reporters reflect reality through their own eyes and are not completely free of stereotypes and prejudices. More often than not, newspapers tend to identify the racial or religious background of a suspect who belongs to a minority or scapegoat group (immigrants, guest workers, gays, women, religious or ethnic minorities, etc.). At the same time, they *ignore* the wrong-doer’s background if this person belongs to a dominant culture. This selective exposure undoubtedly creates a distorted picture of the number of bad things committed by non-dominant groups. If a man parks his car badly and hinders others, he is just a bad driver. But if a woman parks her car badly, it is because she is a *woman*. If an employee fails to reach the target, it is because (s)he is simply not an effective worker. But if an immigrant fails to reach the target, it is because (s)he is *not from here*. After the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* was attacked in January 2015, a tweet from political commentator Sally Kohn snowballed into a trend because it attacked exactly this hypocrisy and prejudice:

Muslim shooter = entire religion guilty

Black shooter = entire race guilty

White shooter = mentally troubled lone wolf.<sup>83</sup>



So, white people see such white criminals as exceptional individuals who do not represent their white identity. But Muslims also strongly condemned these attackers as not Muslims. They were simply horrible and exceptional individuals who do not represent their identity. Thus, it is clear that also for Muslims, these bad guys = mentally ill lone wolves.

Obviously, all of us are influenced by the tendency to stereotype a whole group of outsiders as a one-dimensional group, based on the acts of some individuals. At the same time, we also want to protect our own group's interest and to isolate the bad individuals as non-group members. This double standard is endemic in all cultural groups, without exception. In essence, it is evolutionarily part of our fundamental need for group love and cultural attachment. The viral power of media accentuates this tendency and turns a group's self-defense mechanism into an ugly battle of prejudice and discrimination towards others.

#### CASE STUDY

Racism is the idea that genetic endowment implies the inherent superiority of a particular race and defines success or failure of a group. Nowadays, the concept of race has moved on to imply a culture, at the same time focusing on simplistic and visual signals of race and culture, such as skin color, attire, body features, national origin, ancestry, religion and sexual preference. Consequently, racism is easily ignited, even as a result of very superficial contact.

Racism directed at the Jews was used for economic gain. Today, the practice of lending money at a rate of interest is the basis of our economy, but before capitalism emerged, usury was seen by many as a sin or inferior work, practiced mostly by Jews who were excluded from many professions and trades and had no job alternatives. This is one of the reasons why Jews excelled in business and finance as merchants and middlemen, but they also suffered from hatred of those who borrowed money.

In fact, even this "sinful" job was given to the Jews out of economic interest in the medieval European economy. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century, greater commerce and urbanization became possible due to new agricultural surpluses, which made the economic function of lending money more important. However, lending money was condemned. The church solved this dilemma in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century by allowing Jews to practice this "sinful" activity, since Jews were not subject to Canon law. Medieval Kings exploited the new situation, now that they were able to exact heavy taxes from Jewish usurers in exchange for protection.<sup>84</sup> In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the medieval economic landscape changed as cross-border trade flourished. Jews became economic rivals of the new merchant

class. Together with the rise of capitalism, anti-Semitism was cultivated in order to eliminate economic competitors, turning Jews into scapegoats for popular discontent and they were blamed for all social problems. Although there is no Jewish race, they were portrayed as a people of “greedy,” “self-interest,” “cheating on non-Jews,” “secretly dominating the whole economic system,” or “cooperating with their communist counterparts to topple Christian civilization.”<sup>85</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the expansion of industrialization, with many people being driven from the land and forced to work in factories. Anti-Semitism was used to shift the blame from those who actually profited from their suffering. Later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Nazi’s creation of a “master race” condemned Jews as an inferior race, leading to the genocide of six million Jews whose confiscated wealth paid for 30 per cent of the wars waged by the Nazis.<sup>86</sup> Even today, Jews are identified with the nation of Israel, mixing political grievances with racism, creating a “perfect enemy” to seek unity, to divert criticism away from the country, or to blame Jewish conspiracies for homegrown problems.

1. Collect at least five stereotypes and prejudices about the Jews and explain the root of these assumptions, based on the history provided in the text.
2. Compare the discrimination against Jews with the Yellow Peril, Turban Tide and Hindoo Invasion (section 3.2.2.1).
3. Conduct a quick research and discuss why immigration is essential for an economy, yet immigrants are often the scapegoat in their new country.

#### 3.2.2.4 Positive Discrimination

**Tokenism.** Like positive stereotyping, positive discrimination can also do harm. A “token” is someone who is employed or placed in a certain setting as a symbolic representation of the entire minority group. Tokens often feel very visible and suffer from stereotype threat, because they stand out from the rest of the group.<sup>87</sup> In addition, others view them not as unique individuals, but rather in terms of the collective culture they represent: as *the* transgender or *the* millennial, which allows stereotypes to easily be formed or connected. Tokens, therefore, are under great pressure to behave in an expected, stereotypical way. Yet, at the same time, they have to perform and any mistakes they make will be more likely to catch attention. This leads to more frequent reprimands and more severe punishments. And because tokens are perceived as representatives of a collective minority group, they are stripped of their individual identities and their failures will be perceived as inherent weaknesses or characteristics of the whole collective culture.<sup>88</sup>

**Affirmative action.** The quota system of affirmative action is useful for creating a level playing field, but if not done carefully, especially when

institutions are forced to implement it without full understanding, it can be seen as reverse discrimination and backfire. In South Africa, where the past has left a legacy of racial hostility that still leads to violence,<sup>89</sup> such a quota system is believed to discriminate against white people.<sup>90-91</sup> As a consequence, skilled laborers, know-how, and capital are leaving the country,<sup>92</sup> resulting in a lack of economic growth and fewer international companies wanting to invest. While working in Cape Town, the author met an Asian colleague who bitterly complained: “During Apartheid, I was not white enough. Now I’m not black enough.”

Further, the categorical recruitment based on race, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. may undermine merit. In a rush to conform to a quota, we may put not-fully-ready people in positions that are constantly under the spotlight and rigorous scrutiny from others. Such a situation can lead to both tokenism and stereotype threat, which is a double disadvantage for the individuals. It can also perpetuate prejudices against the collective cultures of those individuals unfairly.

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- *Prejudices prevail when there are conflicts of resources. The victims of prejudices are scapegoats and can suffer from both conscious and subconscious discrimination.*
  - *Institutionalized discrimination is embedded in rules, process and operating systems. It creates barriers through (sub)conscious biases, tougher selection processes, increased caution, more blaming, and quicker rejection.*
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### 3.3 Strategies for living with stereotypes and reducing prejudices

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The world is changing fast, and it seems genes do not co-evolve fast enough to support useful cultural traits. In the era of globalization and cooperation, we still carry some part of the psychological and biological baggage of our hunter-gatherer predecessors. However, with the capacity for culture, we are not prisoners of these *lingering traits*. By the means of social learning, we have overcome the worst aspects of our nature. We may not be born ready to assess facts and arguments carefully, but we are capable of learning from mistakes, choosing from the best ideas, and reducing the impact of impulsive reactions.

### 3.3.1 Training Our Brain

It is wrong to say that our brain is racist or sexist. The brain does not see skin color or gender, but rather information that fits various patterns of stereotypes and “fight-or-flight.” Most patterns of stereotyping people and “fight-or-flight” are socially constructed by our cultures. This means, we can change the patterns and train our brain.

#### 3.3.1.1 Acknowledging Stereotypes

The first step to cope with the disadvantages of stereotypes is to acknowledge that, despite awareness and good intention, we all stereotype. Let’s look at a neural study that used the classic scenario of “lawyer-engineer.”<sup>93</sup>

Imagine you are in a room with 995 lawyers and five engineers. Then you are introduced to Jack, who is 45 years old with four children. He has little interest in politics or social issues, and is generically conservative. He likes sailing and mathematical puzzles. Is Jack a lawyer or an engineer?

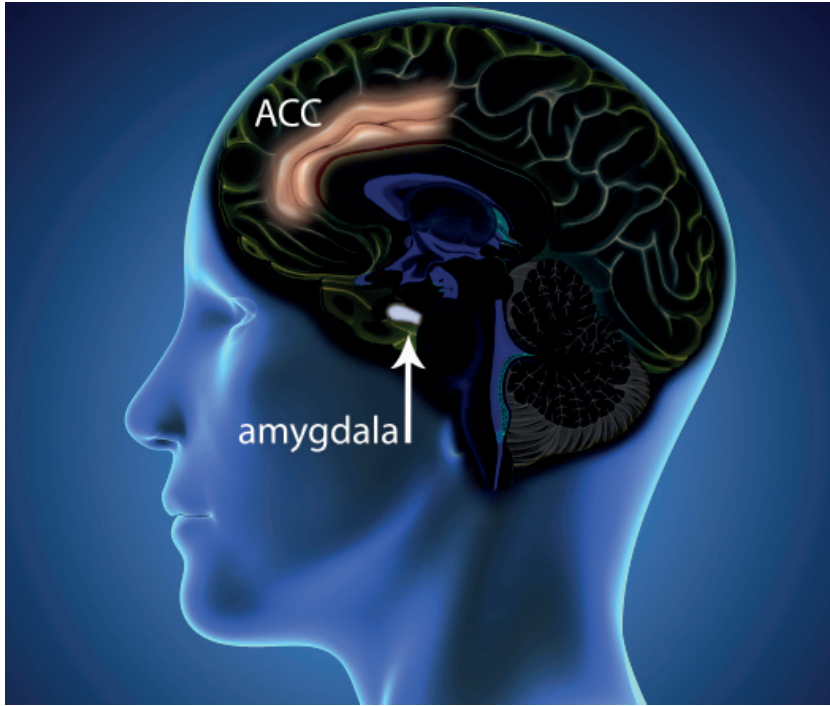
Logically, you have only a 0.005 per cent chance of meeting an engineer in that room; yet, many of us would still make Jack an engineer, simply because he fits the stereotypical pattern. The twist is that our brain does not blindly lead us to that decision. In this scenario, there is obviously a conflict between rationality (Jack is more likely a lawyer) and stereotype (He fits the engineer’s profile). When we encounter such a conflict, the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) of the brain’s frontal lobe becomes active.<sup>94</sup> The ACC is crucial in helping us to judge and elicit error, controlling emotion and rational thinking.

Researchers watched the volunteers’ brains as they tried to decide whether Jack is a lawyer or an engineer, and they found that the ACC lit up in *both* situations: those who rationally think that Jack is a lawyer, and those who give in to stereotypes and think Jack is an engineer. Apparently, *we all detect the stereotype* and recognize that it is completely out of sync with reality. But the comfort of the stereotype is so tempting that many of us choose to listen to it anyway. This experiment shows that even when our brain points out the bias, we still tend to go the easy way.

#### 3.3.1.2 Training the Brain for Goals

There is hope, however. Studies tell us that people with bigger ACC tend to be more liberal thinkers (i.e. flexible, reliant on data, analytic reasoning) and those with bigger amygdala tend to be conservative thinkers (stability, emotion-driven).<sup>95-96</sup> The good news from the aforementioned study is that the ACC lights up regardless of the result, and we *do* see the stereotypes.

The question, then, is, when stereotypes loom and control is needed, how can we increase the ACC's activity and make it win over the amygdala.



*The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) predicts, detects and reacts to committed errors/"The ACC and the amygdala," PHAM HOANG MAI.*

Neuroscientists suggest that we should focus on the *goal* of the activity. Without a goal, stereotypes reign, but when eyes are on the prize, rationality has a greater chance. In a neural study,<sup>97</sup> participants had to categorize faces according to their race. Since we often stereotype black people, researchers observed greater amygdala activity when participants saw black faces on the screen. However, when participants had a specific goal in which race was not relevant, for example trying to guess what type of vegetable the person preferred, the amygdala response to black faces was *equal* to that for the white ones.

How does this play out in real life? Let's say when companies recruit, here are some suggestions that would help them to focus on the goal of hiring a good employee and *reduce* the impact of stereotypes: Using *recruitment agents* who can be more objective; having a *consensus in advance* about what success looks like; creating a *job description* with clear and measurable

selection criteria; avoiding any requirements that relate to age, sex, race, (dis)abilities or religion; declaring a *diversity statement* and commitment to adhering to such a vision; adopting a *name-blind resumé screening process*; having several persons of *diverse backgrounds* on the interview panel for cross-check and balance; *standardizing interview questions* with a clear justification for *why* each specific question should be asked; *recording the interview* and detecting any subconscious bias; justifying the recruitment decision on paper by *matching* each job requirement with the candidate's ability in order to avoid a decision based on gut feeling, etc.

In short, while our brain is evolutionarily conditioned to stereotyping and prejudice, it also has the power to recognize and override those biases. This is a fight we can win. But it requires more than just good intentions. We need to show *explicit* conscious efforts in order to challenge such *subconscious* impulses. We can reduce these automatic mechanisms by purposely looking twice. The more we are aware of it, the better we can overcome it. There is evidence that when we are told “Hey, you are biased” we can self-correct,<sup>98</sup> we will think harder about what we want to say. Our brain's plasticity means we can learn and regulate, since counter-stereotypic training,<sup>99</sup> such as taking the perspective of others,<sup>100</sup> has proven to reduce bias.

### CASE STUDY

Two passengers — one Asian-American, the other African-American — boarded a small “hopper” and were told by the white flight attendant that they could sit anywhere. So they sat at the front as it was easier for them to talk.

At the last minute, three white men in suits entered the plane, were told to sit anywhere, and promptly sat in front of the two first passengers. Just before take-off, the flight attendant approached the first two passengers, interrupted their conversation, and asked them to move to the back of the plane to distribute the weight more evenly.

Both passengers were frustrated, sharing the same sense that they were being singled out to symbolically “sit at the back of the bus.” When they expressed these feelings to the attendant, she indignantly denied the charge, saying “I don't see color” and that she was merely trying to ensure the flight's safety and give the two some privacy.<sup>101</sup>

1. Were the first two passengers overly sensitive, or did the flight attendant subconsciously stereotype?
2. If you were the flight attendant, what would you have done to avoid the issue and ensure the plane was balanced?

### 3.3.2 Challenging Available Social Cues

While the capacity to stereotype is an essential part of our survival mechanism, a great deal of what we stereotype is *socially constructed*, based on the available social cues around us. For example, we are not born with the biases that the British have awful teeth and the Venezuelans are addicted to plastic surgery. These generalizations have been created, popularized by various channels of information, and picked up by our brain. In one episode of *The Simpsons*, a dentist scared children into better oral hygiene by showing him *The Big Book of British Smiles*. The stereotype is the material for countless jokes and comedies, including the famous films about Austin Powers, a spoof British super-spy and would be sex-symbol with rotten teeth. Similarly, the idea that men and women in Venezuela are obsessed with plastic surgery is also socially constructed through beauty pageants, documentaries, news articles, and conversations with people, etc. Our brain receives and registers such information subconsciously and the next time that the topic of “British” and “Venezuela” pop up, the brain will do what it does best in the course of survival: make a snap judgment based on available social cues: linking “British” and “Venezuela” with “bad teeth” and “plastic surgery.”

While we can’t eliminate this impulsive reaction (besides, we still need it), what we can do is consciously regulate the “available social cues” around us. There are a few ways to put this in practice:

#### 3.3.2.1 Matching the Criteria for Cultural Fact

Most stereotypes and prejudices are not so straightforward when matched against research and statistics. We soon learn that nuances, grey areas, contexts and changes can turn even the most obvious stereotype into an endless debate and discussions. The act of checking is similar to the neural activity of the rostrolateral prefrontal cortex (RLPFC), i.e. overriding stereotypes, inhibiting subconscious impulses and forcing our mind to listen to facts and logics. For the record, and if you are curious, the UK’s dental hygiene is actually second to none,<sup>102</sup> and Venezuela ranked a cool 15<sup>th</sup> for levels of plastic surgery, behind South Korea, Canada, the US, Germany and many other Latin American countries.<sup>103</sup> Such a check tells us that the “available social cues” around us are not necessarily the reality.

There is a world of difference between a stereotype and an accurate cultural description. It is helpful to remember that stereotypes and prejudice are based on perception, and accurate cultural description is based on research. Here are four criteria for determining whether cultural information is valid and not just a stereotype or prejudice: (1) it is descriptive

and not judgmental; (2) it is verifiable from more than one independent source; (3) it applies at least to a statistical majority; (4) it compares between different populations.<sup>104</sup>

Consider the following statement: “The Dutch are tall.” The first criterion is justified, because the statement does not attach a moral connotation, good or bad. The second criterion is missing. There must be at least two studies confirming that the height of the Dutch is above the world’s average. The third criterion is also not met (What is the percentage? Obviously not *all* Dutch are tall). The fourth criterion is vague, since “being tall” without a frame of comparison is useless (Taller than whom?) Conclusion: the statement in its original form is more of a stereotype than an accurate cultural observation.



*The Middle East is stereotypically seen as conservative. However, Syria, Tunisia, Lebanon and many other urban communities embrace a liberal, progressive and modern lifestyle/ "A shopping mall in Beirut, (Lebanon)," MAI NGUYEN-PHUONG-MAI.*



### 3.3.2.2 *Checking Language and the Environment*

Implicit stereotypes are pervasive because they are hidden and invisible. We can't point a figure at them and yet, we are immensely influenced by them. For example, our language can convey subtle signals of stereotypes when we say: "hey guys" to a group of both boys and girls, when we say "Ni hao" ("hello" in Chinese) to Asian-looking people, or when we are surprised that a woman from Timor-Leste – a poor country in South East Asia – is *leading* a successful business in Europe, etc. These *micro-aggressions* can be so subtle that neither victim, nor perpetrator may entirely understand what is going on, thus making the consequences even more frustrating and toxic.

The power of subtle signals is incredible in the surrounding environment. How a place is designed can subconsciously influence our work productivity and emotion.<sup>105-106</sup> In one study,<sup>107</sup> both men and women chose to work with the science team whose office was not decorated stereotypically (i.e. generic items rather than computer gear, game devices, sci-fi posters, cans of drink, etc.), and more women chose to do so than men (an overwhelming 82 per cent). This means everything around us: the décor of an office, names of the buildings, colors of the walls, objects on the desk, advertisements on the streets, names of the districts, the cleanliness of a neighborhood, the diversity (or the lack thereof) of the pedestrians, etc. can result in an instant appraisal about whether someone will fit into and feel welcome in a certain culture.

#### ACTIVITY

Here are some examples of micro-aggressions, adapted from a study by Sue Wing and colleagues<sup>108</sup> – the passengers featured in the case study above. Please try to figure out the subconscious messages for each category of examples (the first one has been done for you), and add any examples that you find.

##### 1. Alien in own land

*Micro-aggression:* Asking someone who looks different from the dominant culture: "Where are you from?" / "Where are you *really* from?" / "Ok, where were your ancestors from?" / "What are you?" / "You speak good Arabic (English/Hindi) ..." / "You sound so White" / "How do you say this in your native language?" / "You people..." / "Your kind..." / Presuming that a judge cannot do his job fairly just because of his race (Mexican heritage),<sup>109</sup> etc.

*The subconscious messages:* No matter what, you are a foreigner here; You are not one of us – the real and original citizens.

*Alternative approaches:* "Please tell me a little bit about yourself" / "Do you happen to know anyone who can help me with this question?"

## **2. Assumption of inferiority and ascription of capacity**

*Micro-aggression:* "You are a credit to your race" / "Your achievement is amazing, given your origin and background" / "Oh wow, you *actually* can write so well" / "You go beyond those typical girly stuff" / Asking an Asian to help solve a math problem; or someone from the Middle East to talk about Islam/ Expecting or appointing a male or white person to lead a group / Asking a man to fix electricity / Asking a woman to take care of office housework such as organizing party or making coffee,<sup>110</sup> etc.

*The subconscious messages:* ...

*Alternative approaches:* ...

## **3. Color/Religion... Blindness**

*Micro-aggression:* "I never see you as a black man" / "There is only one race, the human race" / "Not *black lives matter* but all *lives matter*"<sup>111</sup> / "We are all children of God" / "We absolutely have a culture of equality and transparency here, sexism and racism don't exist in our office," etc.

*The subconscious messages:* ...

*Alternative approaches:* ...

## **4. Denial of individual bias or the impact of bias**

*Micro-aggression:* "I'm not racist (homophobic), I have black (Muslim/Jewish/gay) friends" / "Anyone can succeed as long as they work hard enough" / "May the best man win" / "You have only yourself to blame", etc.

*The subconscious messages:* ...

*Alternative approaches:* ...

### **3.3.2.3 Exposing Yourself to Counter-Stereotypes**

Because our brain is *subconsciously* tuned in to stereotypes, we need a constant reminder that we can *consciously* override this instinctive tendency. We may challenge that impulsive part of our mind by purposely reaching out to the opposite end of the bias. Studies tell us that female students who see female science professors and experts are more interested and self-confident in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math).<sup>112-113</sup> The influence of counter-stereotypical examples is so powerful that even a picture of "This is Rebecca. She is a bricklayer" or "This is Christopher. He is a make-up artist" can help to overcome spontaneous gender bias.<sup>114</sup> More

interestingly, this can also be done just by *imagining* a counter-stereotype. In a series of experiments, participants were asked to imagine a “strong woman.” Their subsequent implicit association test showed that this simple mental exercise *lowered* their level of implicit sexism.<sup>115</sup>



*In Oman, it is a norm that men carry children. Reaching out to counter-stereotypes is a strategy to train the brain and change the available social cues around us/ “Poster in a Muscat’s hospital,” “A man with his child in Muscat, (Oman),” MAI NGUYEN-PHUONG-MAI.*

The takeaway is, we can challenge our sub-consciousness by searching for stories that tell otherwise, making friends with those who are negatively stereotyped, finding role models that do not conform to the bias, consciously using non-typical cases and irregular examples in our work, putting an image of such a case on our desk or making it the screensaver on our computer, etc. By doing so, we are actively *alternating* the “available social cues” around us and hence, giving ourselves a reminder and a chance to be objective.

#### 3.3.2.4 Collecting Data

Collecting data is essential<sup>116</sup> because it is hard to improve what we can’t measure. In the absence of information, we have a tendency to use stereotypes to fill the empty space. For example, when women and men are evaluated separately, women score equally (7.57) in comparison with men

(7.33). But when they are collectively evaluated, women's work is evaluated with less quality (5.33) than that of men (6.50). This means the less information we have, the more likely we are to rely on stereotypes.<sup>117</sup> Organizations that want to combat biases should build a database with not only the usual demographics, but also continuous surveys and work records, which are useful indicators for areas that need improvement. By doing this, the available social cues that are the *material of biases* will be replaced by available social cues that help to *confront* them.

### 3.3.2.5 *Creating a Vigilant Culture against Biases*

If the destructive power of stereotypes is that they are implicit and subconscious, then we need to *purposely make it conscious*. One way to do this is to create an environment where biases can be exposed, where people have to justify their decisions, where everyone is constructively vigilant against any signals of biases. At Google for example, a majority of employees take training on subconscious biases, and it is showing impact, according to Laszlo Bock – the company's Human Resources executive:

During one recent promotion meeting in which a group of male managers were deciding the fate of a female engineer, a senior manager who had been through the bias training cautioned his colleagues to remember that they were all men – and thus might not be able to fully appreciate the different roles women perform in engineering groups. “Just raising the awareness was enough for people to think about it,” Mr. Bock said. The woman was promoted.

Another time, in an all-company presentation, an interviewer asked a male and female manager who had recently begun sharing an office, “Which one of you does the dishes?” The strange, sexist undertone of the question was immediately seized upon by a senior executive in the crowd, who yelled, “Unconscious bias!”

Mr. Bock saw all of these actions as evidence that the training was working. “Suddenly you go from being completely oblivious to going, “Oh my god, it's everywhere.”<sup>118</sup>

However, it is important to differentiate between such an open culture with one that is *threatening*. Psychologically, it takes incredible courage to admit that we are wrong. “Backfire” happens when people feel they are being cornered. The more threatened they feel, the less likely they are to listening to dissenting opinions, and the more easily controlled they will be.

### 3.3.2.6 *Being on the Same Side*

If group love is the origin of prejudices, it can also be the tactic to fight against it. A neural experiment shows that simply putting people in a mixed group reduces biases.<sup>119</sup> People form ingroup favoritism very easily, at the flip of a coin. The amygdala doesn't see race, gender, or religion. It only sees ingroup and outgroup. The implication of such a study is powerful, because it means we can deal with biases by the idea of *unity*, i.e. that we are on the same team, be it a work group, a company, a country or a planet.

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*Stereotypes and prejudices are created from available social cues. We can unlearn them, challenge these cues and change the culture around us by:*

- *Training the brain to resist the amygdala's impulse and listen more to the ACC.*
  - *Matching the criteria to distinguish between stereotype and cultural fact*
  - *Checking language and environment for microaggressions*
  - *Exposing counter-stereotypes*
  - *Collecting data*
  - *Creating a vigilant culture against biases*
  - *Creating and recreating groups to be on the same side*
- 

In sum, we acknowledge the role of stereotypes and our tendency towards group love. But we are also aware that, as human beings, we are capable of creating a culture that supports our own survival. And if our survival in the modern era relies on *cooperation* with different others and the ability to go *beyond the force of subconscious*, then combating stereotypes and prejudices is the right track to follow. By challenging the available social cues around us, we can take an active role in changing the culture in which biases are blown out of proportion and giving our amygdala a constant stream of false signals. By training the brain, we can take an active role in changing our behaviors and values, tapping into the incredible plasticity of our brain to learn and unlearn. After all, stereotypes and prejudices are everywhere and we cannot avoid them. We cannot even escape their immediate impact. However, we have the choice not to act upon them and, even better, to modify our natural tendency, regulate our own behavior and make an impact on society.

### Summary

1. Stereotyping is a survival mechanism that helps us make quick judgments. However, in our modern times, life-threatening dangers are not always around the corner and we are overloaded with information. Hence, quick calls based

on subconscious thinking have shortcomings when we stereotype people: using collective level for individual level, and vice versa.

2. Stereotypes can be stronger than fact. They exclude those who don't fit the box and create anxiety that can reduce performance. Positive stereotypes can cause burden, blurring the real problems while deepening group conflicts.
3. Prejudices are rooted in the biological need to categorize other groups and to love one's ingroup/culture – the source of survival strategies.
4. When there are conflicts of resources, prejudices prevail with a need for scapegoats.
5. Institutionalized discrimination is embedded (sub)consciously in processes, regulations, and operating systems. It creates barriers through biases, unfair selection procedures, increased caution, more blaming, quicker rejection, etc.
6. Stereotypes and prejudices are created from available social cues. We can unlearn them, challenge these cues and actively change the culture around us.