

Others identify us, and we may not like the label they give us. Continuing the vegetable analogy, what happens if one onion calls another a tulip bulb? To return to one of the major subjects of the last chapter: the labelling of some people as a „minority group“ may be done by others. Who are we? And who are they? Our social identity has to do with values and symbols. We divide people into groups because there seems to be a need to be different from others. We need to give values to our group (class, family, friends) which give us a positive value of ourselves. The danger lies in putting negative values on those who do not form part of our group. Putting people in boxes denies them the possibility of being anything else.

The Onion of Identity can be used as an activity in itself: what does your “onion” look like? It has proved very useful with groups as an introduction to discussions about identity, how we perceive others and how others perceive us.

You may like to follow up the discussion about people’s personal ‘onion of identity’ with either the activity ‘**Me too**’ or ‘**Dominoes**’. These are lively activities that help people to get to know each other and explore both their differences and what they have in common. Alternatively the group may like to do some research to identify the footprints of other cultures in the locality; see ‘**Trailing diversity**’.

? Name two simple (or silly!) characteristics which a foreigner might associate with the country you live in, for example, Switzerland = watches and banking, Russia = vodka and fur hats. Are these things an important part of your identity? You could call this a Word Association game.

? Is a nation a culture?

We All Live With Images


As we have seen, a person's identity cannot be summed up in just one label. Often though we tend to concentrate on limited or distorted aspects. This is because the responses of different human groups to each other are the product of a complicated system of social relations and power. To discover some of the mechanisms at work, we need to examine the role of stereotypes, prejudice and ethnocentrism.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes consist basically in shared beliefs or thoughts about a particular human group. A stereotype is an ensemble of characteristics that sums up a human group usually in terms of behaviour, habits, etc.

The objective of stereotypes is to simplify reality: “they are like that”. Bosses are tyrannical; these people are lazy, those are punctual; the people in that part of town are dangerous – one or some of them may have been, but all? Sometimes we use stereotypes about the group to which we feel we belong in order to feel stronger or

superior to others. (Or, indeed, to excuse faults in ourselves - "What can I do about it? We are all like that!"). Stereotypes are usually based on some kind of contact or images that we have acquired in school, through mass media or at home, which then become generalised to take in all the people who could possibly be linked.

 *It has been suggested that we need stereotypes in order to survive. How useful do you think they are?*

In everyday language it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between stereotypes and prejudices.

Prejudices

A prejudice is a judgement we make about another person or other people without really knowing them. Prejudices can be negative or positive in character. Prejudices are learned as part of our socialisation process and they are very difficult to modify or eradicate. Therefore it is important that we are aware that we have them.

To explain this concept more directly it could help to examine how deeply we know all of our friends. We may have different friends for different occasions, for going to the cinema, going walking, helping with homework, playing football, going to concerts. Do we know what music our football friends enjoy? Or do we just guess? Making assumptions is easy and common. If it is that simple to make assumptions about friends, think how easy it is to make false judgments about people you don't know.

 *Why do you think prejudices are hard to change?*

Prejudices and stereotypes are schemes that help us to understand reality; when reality does not correspond to our prejudice it is easier for our brains to change our interpretation of reality than to change the prejudice. Prejudices help us to complement information when we do not have it all. Siang Be demonstrates this process by asking his audience to listen to the following passage:

"Mary heard the ice-cream van coming down the street. She remembered her birthday money and ran into the house".

You could interpret this passage like this: Mary is a child, she would like an ice-cream, she runs into the house to get some money so that she can buy the ice-cream. But where do you find any of this information? Try changing any of the nouns in the passage ('money' to 'gun', for instance) and see what happens.

Prejudice and stereotypes about other cultural groups

We absorb prejudices and stereotypes about other cultural groups sometimes unconsciously - but they come from somewhere and they serve many purposes:

- to help us evaluate our own cultures
- to evaluate other cultures and ways of life
- to govern the pattern of relationships our culture maintains with other cultures
- to justify the treatment and discrimination of people from other cultures.

Ethnocentrism

Our judgements, evaluations and justifications are influenced strongly by our ethnocentrism. This means that we believe our response to the world - our culture - is the right one, others are somehow not normal. We feel that our values and ways of living are universal, the correct ones for all people, the "others" are just too stupid to understand this obvious fact. Mere contact with people from other cultures can actually reinforce our prejudices, our ethnocentric spectacles blinding us to anything but that which we expect to see. Other cultures may seem attractive or exotic for us but usually our view is coloured by negative prejudices and stereotypes and so we reject them.

Linking The Images And Their Effects

This reaction of rejection takes the form of closely related phenomena: Discrimination, Xenophobia, Intolerance, Anti-Semitism and Racism. Power is a very important component in the relations between cultures (and sub-cultures) and these reactions get worse whenever majorities are faced with minorities. Over time, definitions and their use change and you will find it interesting to compare this section to the valuable chapter on ***Discrimination and Xenophobia*** in Compass where more recent examples are given.

sam bi sarane
sam barabare

Discrimination

Discrimination is prejudice in action. Groups are labelled as different and discriminated against. They may be isolated, made criminals by laws that make their ways of life illegal, left to live in unhealthy conditions, deprived of any political voice, given the worst jobs or no jobs at all, denied entry to discos, subjected to random police checks.



Can you think of other examples of discrimination?

Within minority groups there are those who have fought against such negative discrimination, sometimes with support from members of the majority. They argue that in order to bring about equality it is necessary to promote measures of positive discrimination.



These measures are also referred to as "positive action". Can you suggest positive action necessary to combat the negative forms of discrimination listed above? (One example could be to provide suitable stopping sites, in consultation with Roma (Gypsy) or Sinti people, to ensure that they meet the needs expressed).