

# 3.7 Stereotypes

## Aim

- To understand that much of communication relies heavily on the stereotypes we have of people.
- We recognise people by the roles they play.
- The roles we play in society determine and specify our communication and communication style.
- To note the goodness and negativity of stereotypes in communication.

## Materials Required

- Pen and Paper

## Procedure

- Ask for 10 volunteers, preferably those who like to act.
- Call them apart from the rest of the group and instruct them as follows:
  - \* Give the story presented below.
  - \* They are to decide among themselves who is to act which role in the story.
  - \* There must be neither verbal communication in their acting nor any sound effects.
  - \* They are not to disclose who they are to the rest of the group except through their acting.

## The Story:

*In a certain village known as Nyakach, there lived a beggar who stayed with his mother. This family of two was very poor such that they could not even provide for themselves a meal. One day during the harvest season, the beggar went out to look for a meal to quieten his growling stomach. By the hillside, there was a young couple coming from their garden and an elderly man who was tilling his land. All of a sudden, as the beggar was walking down the hill, a ferocious gigantic dog attacked him and he cried out for help. The young couple and the elderly man came running to his rescue and managed to scare away the dog while the beggar limped away slowly to the nearest thatch of grass. The young couple as well as the elderly man also noticed that the dog which had attacked the beggar belonged to Mr. Mambo, the richest man in the village. At the same moment, a handful of other villagers had also gathered around the poor man. Among them was a medicine man who confirmed that the beggar had been badly injured by the dog. Since this was not the first time that Mr. Mambo's dog had attacked a village member, the small crowd had reason to be angry at him for not taking precautions to keep his dogs secured. They therefore staged a small protest to express their anger and word went round to Mr. Mambo that the villagers were angry at his dog's numerous attacks. Being a peaceful man and not wanting to cause any havoc, Mr. Mambo got into his 1945 Volkswagen and drove to the site of the attack. As he approached the hillside, the small crowd ran up to his car and surrounded it, demanding recompensation for the poor beggar. Mr. Mambo, not wanting to anger the crowd further, tried to calm it and promised to take the beggar and his mother as his servants to live and eat in his homestead. Pleased at this offer, the crowd calmed down and slowly began to disperse. When all the people had left the site of the attack, the beggar's mother jumped from behind a bush in which she had been hiding and looking around to make sure no one was around, quickly patted the son, who was now resting on the patch of grass and told him that the coast was clear. The beggar then jumped up in joy and together with his mother, ran towards their house. Finally, they would no longer have to beg in the village for their next meal.*

THE END

- After the play is staged, ask the rest of the class to list the roles the characters played.
- Share the findings.
- Those roles that are not recognised could be explained by the actors themselves.
- Ask the group to state why certain roles were easy to recognise and why some were not.

## Input

- Stereotyping is the assigning of attributes to another person solely on the basis of the class or category they belong to, e.g. "All Tongas are short"; "All Kikuyus are shrewd and grasping". It involves projecting one's selective perceptions of a group of people onto an individual member of the group. However, stereotypes are not always harmful.

- A stereotype is expressed in the form of a generalisation.

#### Roles

- We recognise each other primarily through the roles each of us play in society.
- We understand and accept people according to our experience of them in their roles. We form an opinion of people based on the roles they play in society.

#### Different Kinds of Stereotypes

##### Stereotypes of Roles:

The roles we play shape and determine our communication styles. Each person may have more than one role to play in society. The communication style of a working mother, for instance, is not the same at home and at the office. Furthermore, these two roles are not interchangeable in the two situations – she cannot be mother at the office and secretary at home.

##### Stereotypes of Identities:

These are the ways we think about people, not merely with respect to how they perform in society but with respect to who they are. These stereotypes refer to gender, personality traits, age, family lineage, culture, religion, ideology, etc. They concern the core of a person. Thus we have stereotypes of an adult, a child, a man, a woman, etc.

##### Group Stereotypes:

We have various kinds of group stereotypes based on family, social class, religion, ethnic origin, culture, political stance, etc. This is an important stereotype because we often assume that an individual has the traits of the group he/she belongs to. Hence our tendency is to know the group a person belongs to even before we know their name.

##### How are Stereotypes Formed?

- Through direct experience of people
- Through our inquiries about them
- Through hearsay
- Through the way they appear: their behaviour, dress, standard of living, etc.
- Through our group's collective opinion about them
- Through the media: the stereotyping of people in books, magazines, advertisements, songs, radio, films and TV

##### Are Stereotypes Harmful?

- Stereotypes *per se* are not harmful. In fact they help us recognise people from our past experiences of them. Without this reference it would be difficult to connect people with their roles, their identities and their communities. Thanks to stereotypes, we do not have to go over the whole process of learning about people every time we meet them. Besides, positive stereotypes, those that are in favour of people, help to enhance our relationships with them.
- Stereotypes are not always inaccurate. A selective process may bring together people who share a common characteristic. This in and of itself may not be bad or detrimental to effective communication. In fact, our ability to see similarities and respond to them is a basic in coping with large amounts of information and highly diverse events.
- The problem of a stereotype lies in the extent to which a person uses it without recognising differences. Failure to recognise our stereotypes, allowing our responses to be based on highly simplified beliefs and very selective perceptions, is a far greater problem than the act and process of making generalisations based on similarities.
- However, people are far more complex and unique than our stereotypes of them. We can often fail to acknowledge this. We prefer to think of people in and through our stereotypes, refusing to update and change our perceptions. When these static stereotypes are against people, we tend to be unfair and do much harm to them.
- History is full of episodes of bloodshed simply because people refused to change their negative stereotypes of their enemies. If Hitler was prepared to change his prejudice against the Jews, we would not have had the holocaust.

#### African Stereotypes

Many popular images of Africa especially in Western countries are based on stereotypes that present fragmented, inaccurate, and at times fallacious, images or representations of Africa. Africa is thought to be without history, stuck in a changeless socio-cultural present, prior to the coming of European colonialism. Many Americans believe that Africa is comprised of jungle, sparsely populated savannah, or desert. As Africans, we know first hand that these stereotypes are not true. We therefore need to challenge ourselves to understand our culture and our history as we are the carriers of Africa's story to the rest of the world. We also need to be rooted in our identity as Africans and secure a place in our personhood for our culture and history.

In Western countries, when shown pictures of modern African cities, individuals may accept that the cities are in Africa. However, if the dominant representation is not directly challenged in an attempt to maintain cognitive consonance, they will maintain their prior perception. (Consequently, we firmly believe that teachers as well as Africans themselves must be aware of and understand the prior knowledge of other cultures and aggressively confront stereotypes, misrepresentations, and explanatory constructs that are misleading.)



## Review

1. Stereotyping is the assigning of attributes to another person solely on the basis of the class or category they belong to.
2. We recognise each other primarily through the roles each one of us play in society.
3. There are three types of stereotypes: Stereotypes of roles, stereotypes of Identity and Group stereotypes.
4. Stereotypes are formed through direct experience of people, enquiries about them, hearsay, through the way that they appear, through group's collective opinion of them and through the media.
5. Stereotypes *per se* are not harmful. They help us recognise people from our past experiences of them.
6. The problem of a stereotype lies in the extent to which a person uses it without recognising differences. Failure to recognise our stereotypes, allowing our responses to be based on highly simplified beliefs and very selective perceptions, is what makes stereotyping negative. Thus, we should strive to recognise our own stereotypes and then evaluate whether we use them to segregate people or to better understand them.
7. Many popular images of Africa especially in Western countries are based on stereotypes that present fragmented, inaccurate, and at times fallacious, images or representations of Africa.
8. As Africans, we need to challenge ourselves to understand our culture and our history as we are the carriers of Africa's story to the rest of the world. We also need to be rooted in our identity as Africans and secure a place in our personhood for our culture and history.

## Reflection

In the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the white man discriminated negatively against the African's black skin and culture terming it as witchcraft and seeing him as inferior and only fit to be a slave. In what ways do we stereotype against our fellow African men? Are our stereotypes justified? Resolve to exploit your talents and opportunities to the full and to support and uplift others, especially your fellow Africans, as they do the same.

## Relevant Skills

Reflect on your first day in college. What was your first impression of your environment, your teachers and your fellow students? How did your stereotypes influence your perceptions?

## Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA. 'SHEPHERDS' FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini, 2000.

## References

AMECEA & IMBISA. Communication, Culture and Community. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999.

Pace R Wayne, Brent D. Peterson and M. Dallas Burnett. Techniques for Effective Communication. USA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company Inc., 1979.