The Nature and Problem of Stereotypes

Professor William Wei
Department of History
University of Colorado at Boulder

Stereotypes are an ingrained feature of American society and an integral part of our socialization process, transmitting a patchwork of traditionally inaccurate images and clichés from one generation to another. They are based on preconceptions that are derived from existing sources of information about certain people and selective perceptions developed to explain their behavior. Stereotypes are a function of social relations between groups or political relations between nations, not extensive personal experience or knowledge. We use them to justify certain prejudices that we have and to strengthen our self-image at the expense of someone else. Indeed, their primary purpose is to degrade others as a means of accentuating our own humanity.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of stereotypes is that they weaken our ability to think critically and serve as a major source of disinformation about others, especially women and minorities. Instead of challenging the stereotypes that we encounter in our daily lives, we accept them as representing reality and erroneously equate them with valid generalizations based on accurate data about a group of people. In actuality, they are nothing more than standardized mental pictures reflecting an oversimplified opinion and have little or no ascertainable basis in fact. They project unidimensional caricatures, masking the diversity that is an inherent feature of every group of people. Only Euro-Americans are depicted as representing the entire spectrum of humanity. Stereotypes, however, do accurately reflect one social reality: unequal relations in society and in the world.

Using Asians and Asian Americans as illustrations, I would like to suggest a way for you and your students to deal with the problem of stereotypes. But first, a cautionary note is in order: The issue is not whether specific stereotypes are politically correct or incorrect, negative or positive, but rather that they are, by definition, basically false and misleading. A case in point is Asian Americans as a "model minority," a positive stereotype that emerged during the 1960s and is used to make invidious comparisons with other people of color. It embodies a "cultural determinist" argument, that Asian Americans have overcome extraordinary adversities through the strength of their cultural heritage.

For educators, what makes Asian Americans a model worth emulating is their exceptional school performance. This perceived performance, however, is excellence in a limited number of areas. It is an article of faith that Asian Americans are "born" mathematicians or scientists, but are unable to master English even if they try. While many have certainly done well in school, many others have not, a fact that is conveniently ignored or overlooked. Moreover, the "Model Minority" stereotype fails to take into consideration the high psychological costs of academic achievement.

1. Before you can successfully address the problem of stereotypes, you have to recognize not only that it is a universal problem but also that it may be a personal one as well. So it will probably be necessary first to ask, "Am I burdened with race, gender, and class stereotypes?" It is a difficult question to ask and answer, since none of us want to believe that we harbor and promote stereotypes. The beneficial result of this self-examination is self-empowerment, for when it is over you will have greater control over what you think and who you are, and a better understanding of what Carlos Cortés (1979) refers to as the "school curriculum," that "massive, ongoing, informal curriculum of family, peer groups, neighborhoods, mass media, and other socializing forces that educate us throughout our lives."

2. The best way to tackle the question of whether you have unintentionally stereotyped a group of people is to do so head on and on paper. Writing out your thoughts and feelings enables you to see more clearly what is in your mind's eye and, equally important, take ownership of it. One way is to write it out in the form of a tree, with the more fundamental ascribed characteristics where the roots are, and
derivative ones where the leaves are. Another way is simply to write down five adjectives that you think best describe a people. For example, given the Japan bashing that has been going on in the United States, it might prove instructive to compare what you have written down about the Japanese, who are increasingly perceived as our newest "enemy," at least in the economic arena, and what scholars know about them.

3. After identifying potential stereotypes, it is essential to subject them to critical scrutiny and factual verification. Asking Asian Americans to tell you what is true and false about the portrait that you have created may seem convenient but is foolish. Unless they have studied their group's history and culture, they will probably know as little as you do. Even though Asian Studies has been in existence since shortly after World War II and has produced a wealth of information about Asia and the people who live there, and even though Asian-American Studies was established in the late 1960s, there is no certainty that Asian Americans (or other people, for that matter) have studied either field. Besides, you risk embarrassing them if they cannot answer the question.

4. If what emerges is a stereotypical portrait of a people, then the question becomes: What are the origins of these stereotypes? A Gallup Organization public opinion poll about the Chinese is instructive (China Council). In 1966, Americans described Chinese as hardworking, but also as ignorant, warlike, sly, and treacherous. But by 1972, the highest ranking adjectives for Chinese in the same poll were hardworking, intelligent, progressive, artistic, practical, and honest. Within the space of six years, negative opinions were replaced with positive ones. It is no coincidence that these changes occurred during a period of improved Sino-American relations.

5. Since stereotypes permeate popular culture, an effective way to engage students is to have them collect examples from a medium of their choice. For instance, a survey of advertisements in national magazines or on television could yield a wealth of images for analysis and discussion, activities that will impart critical thinking skills. Among the questions that could be asked are the following:

- Are these images accurate? What purpose do they serve?
- Do these images affect Asian-American self-identity? How do they affect the rest of society, especially Euro-Americans?
- Are counterportrayals useful? Or do they simply promote a different stereotype?
- Are there any perceptual, moral, or marketing reasons for advertising agencies to alter these images in any substantive way?
- What do these images imply about American culture?

6. Ultimately, someone will ask, "If these images are inaccurate or unidimensional, what are Asians and Asian Americans really like?" Since students know that there are characteristics that distinguish one group of people from another, they will want to learn what these traits are. This is the most demanding part of the process, since it requires real knowledge that can be acquired only through study.

References

Recommended Reading
For those interested in learning more about the problem of Asian-American stereotypes, the following books are recommended:


**William Wei**

**Biography**

William Wei was born in Tinghai, China, and raised in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in an ethnic neighborhood consisting of East Europeans and Puerto Ricans. It was in New York City that he developed an awareness of cultural pluralism and an appreciation of its significance for American society. Influenced by social movements of the 1960s, he became involved in the Asian-American Movement, an ethnic-consciousness movement for equality and empowerment. It was when he began working as an Asian-American curriculum specialist for the Ann Arbor public school district during the seventies that he realized the need to change America from a predominantly Euro-American culture to a multiethnic one.

William Wei is an Associate Professor of History. He has been active in service to the University, especially in Asian Studies and minority affairs. He organized the "Colors of Colorado," a project to integrate minority scholarship into the college curriculum, and was a founding member of the Center for Studies of Ethnicity and Race in America. In 1988, he received the University of Colorado faculty award for Equity and Excellence; in 1985, he won the Kayden Faculty Book Manuscript prize for *Counterrevolution in China: The Nationalists in Jiangxi during the Soviet Period*. 