Stereotypes and the -isms

Introduction

It is probably safe to assume that nearly everyone has personally been the victim of stereotyping behaviors. In fact, most people have committed the offense of stereotyping others. Stereotyping can be loosely defined as the grouping together of persons based solely on one factor, characteristic, or feature. Stereotypes in many cases allow us to fill in the blanks when we cannot complete the whole picture. Our society often innocently creates and perpetuates stereotypes, but these stereotypes often lead to unfair discrimination and persecution when the stereotype is unfavorable.

Terminology

Largely, these stereotypes can then be broadly categorized into an -ism. There are the more notable terms of racism and sexism, but others have evolved in the last few decades. In general, an -ism can be explained as an attitude, typically negative, towards a particular group. Prejudice is another variation of definition, which is the act of forming a judgment or opinion before an examination of the facts. Based upon these definitions, application to different concepts can be made. For instance, racism is the belief that a person’s race determines their abilities, superiority or inferiority, and their character. Sexism is the discrimination of persons based upon their gender, typically against women. Ageism and classism are two more examples of prejudice.

Origins and Perpetuation

The development of stereotypes and prejudices may be a result of several influences. First, the influence of the media—news, television and movies—can perpetuate negative attitudes. If a specific group of persons are portrayed through the movies as inferior in performance, ability, or appearance, then this portrayal is promoted by the initial innocent acceptance and approval by the viewing audience. These attitudes are then passed on to the people around them.

Secondly, the influence of an individual’s family, friends, and associates are also integral to the development of stereotypes and prejudice. For example, a prejudice of race by a Caucasian family against an Indian family can thus influence all the family members to have dislike for Indians. If the father had experienced humiliation as a boy by an Indian boy who performed better in sports, then he may develop a general dislike against all Indian people. This attitude may then be passed onto his family when he is grown and his children are in sporting events with some Indian children. Lastly, the fear of the unknown may cause prejudice. This fear often develops from the fear of experiencing personal danger. For instance, the fear that all mental health patients are violent and aggressive could cause an individual to treat them poorly.

These concepts of influence are cyclically related as one builds off and into another origin of prejudicial development. Simply stated, this cycle of stereotyping and -isms
can be prevented from continuing when one individual makes the personal decision to voice his or her disapproval and disagreement that diversity is not wrong, harmful, or negative.