Arguably, one of the greatest influences on norms and values today is the media. By way of the television and the Internet, much of how people learn to act and behave—or how people think others act and behave—has come from images portrayed in commercials, TV shows, movies, and magazines. Often, these images are distorted representations of racial and ethnic groups and even gender. For example, consider the covers of popular men's or women's entertainment magazines. Images of both males and females are digitally enhanced and depict someone's notion of idealized physical images, which may not even be anatomically possible.

What you know about different cultures and races may also come from portrayals of images and stereotypic behavior in the media. A stereotype is the attribution of a quality or physical trait to an entire group of people. It is a generalization of group behavior based on scant observation. Many common stereotypes that exist are based on gender, physical characteristics, race, ethnicity, and age. Some familiar adages include the following:

- Blonde people are not smart
- Overweight people are lazy
- Caucasian men do not dance well
- African-Americans are better athletes
- Jewish people are frugal
- Women are emotional
- Men do not cry
- Asian people are smart

A problem with stereotyping is that people do not evaluate others based on their actions; instead, they look at other people through a filter that often defies reality. When a group experiences a negative attitude based purely on membership in that group, that is called prejudice. Used primarily to describe racial or ethnic groups, the definition of prejudice extends to any group. Prejudice and stereotyping can also include assumptions about others, such as obese people buying ice cream necessarily meaning that they are lazy and have no self-control. You might think that a slow-moving car on the interstate is necessarily driven by an older person. There are exceptions to common stereotypes, and because there are exceptions, any blanket assumption cannot be true. Further, we are subject to being stereotyped, too.

People tend to associate with others who are like them: people who hold the same values. People tend to live in areas where other families are similar in terms of culture, ethnicity, race, and class. We learn about people who are
not like us—other cultures or races—through stereotypic behavior gleaned from something we saw or heard or read. But the media may present unfair images and information about how other cultures, races, and ethnicities talk and behave. *Ethnocentrism* is defined as the feeling that one’s own culture is superior to any other culture. When viewed this way, the practices and customs of other cultures are compared to your own and deemed inferior. Such feelings can often lead to a feeling of superiority. Although maintaining a sense of pride about one’s background and culture can be positive, ethnocentrism can lead to discrimination and even racism.