Stereotypes: Understanding for Overcoming

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Abstract and Learning Objectives

Students will develop a better understanding of the concept / process of stereotyping. They will think critically about images and media that portray the peoples and cultures of the Middle East, make determinations about the impact of the images on their perceptions, and consider ways to overcome these stereotypes.

Grade Level: 9-12

Time Estimate: 45 minutes over two class periods, with homework

Relevant NCSS standards

Culture

- Interpret patterns of behavior reflecting values and attitudes that contribute to or pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding.

Individual development and identity

- Compare and evaluate the impact of stereotyping, conformity, acts of altruism, and other behaviors on individuals and groups.

Global connections

- Explain conditions and motivations that contribute to conflict, cooperation, and inter-dependence among groups, societies, and nations.

Part 1: Discuss the Concept of Stereotype, and Assign Homework

- Be sure students understand the concept of stereotyping.

- Stereotypes, or incomplete and inaccurate beliefs that some people hold about groups of other people, abound across the globe.

- Stereotypes can be positive or negative but mostly negative.

- Generalizing is a natural human behavior and is an attempt to simplify and categorize experiences. We naturally compare what we don't know to what we do know -- or think we know.

- There is a distinction between stereotypes and generalizations. For example, generalizations bring together a series of observations or experiences relating to an area or group in a simplified way. It's a generalization, therefore, to say that most men like professional sports, but this does not imply that all men do. Stereotypes, on the other hand, ascribe certain characteristics invariably to an entire group.

- The most critical stage of learning about these concepts is to think of their consequences and prevent generalizations from becoming stereotypes by seeking new information against which generalizations can be tested.

- Ask students to provide examples of stereotypes and to explain the typical characteristics associated with the stereotype (e.g., athletes, lawyers, farmers, etc.).

- Other examples of stereotyping include news items, movies, advertisements, and jokes that characterize the way that Middle Easterners feel about the West and the way that people in the West feel about the people of the Middle East.

- Divide the class into small groups. Have half of the groups brainstorm a list of stereotypical images people in the West associate with the Middle East, Arabs, Muslims, Islam, Israelis, and Jews. The other half of the groups will brainstorm a list of stereotypes people in the Middle East might hold about the West and Americans. Emphasize that this activity is to generate stereotypes without regard to their validity at this point.

- Some typical stereotypes include the following:

  - American portrayals of the Middle East and Middle Easterners have changed over time, from the *Arabian Nights* and medieval Baghdad prevalent in movies and songs of the 1920s to images of terrorists and oil sheiks current today.

  - Popular culture employs powerful representations of the Middle East; for example, pyramids, the lore of the desert, exoticism/eroticism and sexuality (belly dancers), and arches, domes, and minarets. These images often operate on a subliminal level, such as when they are used to market products, from consumer items (tobacco) to residences (Moorish-style homes).

- Another example of stereotyping can be found at Epcot in Disney World. Here, Morocco becomes a generic North African restaurant, and Israel is a three-dimensional ride through the Old City.

- Other stereotypical images have to do with the ways that Middle Eastern and Muslim women are shown (or are invisible) in film, on television, in books, etc. When they are included at all, they are usually veiled and silent or, more rarely, gun-running terrorists.

- After 10 minutes, bring the class together and compile two lists, using the blackboard or a flip chart. List stereotypical images in two groups -- one for possible stereotypes held by people of the Middle East about the West, and one for Western stereotypes about the Middle East.

- Next, discuss with the class how stereotypes originate and are reinforced over time.

- Stereotypes are often used in regard to groups that are seen to be either threatening or inferior.

- Ask students to give examples of this phenomenon *unrelated* to the Middle East (perhaps going back to the original discussion).

- Islamic states have been rivals -- and sometimes allies -- of Western powers since Islam arose in the seventh century. Until the 18th century, Islamic states were seen as significant military challengers to Europe. Some stereotypes of the Middle East were born out of fear of this challenge. For example, a common image of Arab soldiers is with a sword in one hand and a Quran in the other.

- Other stereotypes of the Middle East arise from assumptions of Western superiority that developed in the 18th and 19th centuries and are still powerful today. These stereotypes include generalizations of backwardness, violence, or laziness of Middle Easterners.

- Some stereotypes grow out of our desire to romanticize the "exotic."

- How might stereotypes of the West (for example, about our government, business models, the life of an "average" American) have originated and grown in the Middle East?

- What factors contribute to stereotyping (for example, ignorance, fear, feelings of superiority, ideas of noble savagery, jealously, etc.)?

- The news and entertainment media often use and perpetuate stereotypes. They depend on these characterizations to create a common understanding of events -- a kind of cultural shorthand -- or as a basis for humor. In addition, stand-up comedy by Muslim comics can be used to humanize the struggles of Muslim-Americans.

- As homework, have students collect stereotypical images, descriptions, and other stereotypical attributions of the Middle East and its peoples. Students may use images from news media or social media, or note images in their neighborhoods. Examples might include halal carts, advertisements for belly dancing, Disney movies, etc.

Part 2: Analyze Images and Discuss Patterns of Stereotyping

- Return to the list of stereotypes of the Middle East generated by the class. Using the images students collected and their original list, have each student team explain the power of media in forming stereotypes.

- Are the stereotypes' underlying assumptions made by peers or relatives?

- Are they seen on the news, in editorials, movies, advertisements, books, comics, or speeches of political leaders?

- Record students' observations. Does any pattern emerge?

- Do they think that these same forces are at work in the Middle East to create and reinforce stereotypes of the West?

- Are stereotypes helpful in understanding different groups? Why or why not? Ask students to recommend ways in which media sources might contribute to helping people move beyond stereotypes.

Assessment

- How well can the student explain the concept of a stereotype?

- How well can the student identify imagery that supports stereotypes of the Middle East and its people?

- To what extent can the student offer alternatives to the use of stereotypical imagery?

Resources and Related Activities

- Stereotypes
  http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/types/index.html
  What are some typical misperceptions and stereotypes Westerners hold about Islam and the Middle East, and vice versa?

- Implicit Bias Self-Test
  https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html

- Reaching Across the Divide
  http://www.npr.org/news/specials/sixmonths/muslim.html
  Attacks prompt a Muslim woman to teach others about her faith, dispel myths, and build understanding.

- Tolerance in Times of Trial
  http://www.pbs.org/americaresponds/tolerance.html
  Students will explore the problems inherent in assigning blame to populations or nations of people. Students will also look at contemporary examples of ethnic conflict, discrimination, and stereotyping at home and abroad.

- Arab Americans: In the Aftermath of the Terrorist Attacks on the U.S.
  http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/lifeafter911/arabamerican.html
  Students will begin to understand who Arab Americans are, where they come from, and the cultural diversity and complexity of what it means to be Arab American.

- Stereotypes and Myths about Islam
  http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/muslims/activities.html
  Students will explore what they know about Muslims and/or Islam, and then they will look for information that confirms or contradicts what they know.

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summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching

on religious diversity, visit www.religiousworldsnyc.org.