

William Helmreich, Professor of sociology at the City University of New York, takes issue with the popular notion that stereotypes are always the result of ignorance and hostility. He offers evidence that some of our stereotypes about ethnic groups are rooted in history and experience.

Stereotype Truth

William B. Helmreich

"Stereotype" is a dirty word among some intellectuals and others who feel that, when used to describe members of a race, religion, or nationality, it indicates prejudices. Perhaps it is time we changed our thinking.

How have particular groups come to be identified with certain traits? Puerto Ricans are not thought of as grasping in business but Jews are. Blacks sometimes are categorized as musically inclined but the Chinese are not. We have the "fighting Irish," "stupid Poles," "clannish Italians," "stolid Swedes." Where did these ideas originate? How true are they?

Such stereotypes usually stem from the historical experiences of the group itself and the experiences of those with whom the group has had contact. Although stereotypes are often highly inaccurate, a good many have quite a bit of truth to them. Rather than deny their validity, we should make a greater effort at understanding and appreciating them. Let's take some examples.

Are Hispanics apt to be warmer and more emotional than members of other groups? There seems to be almost universal agreement on the validity of this stereotype among professionals and lay people who work with Hispanics. Latin American politics, for example, are known for warmth of personal relationships and are based more on mutual trust than on written agreements. The pattern is similar in business relationships but its clearest expression can be found in the family.

The anthropologist Oscar Lewis often observed that Hispanic families he studied had warm, emotional ties, especially between mother and child. Psychiatrists have pointed out that Hispanic mothers kiss and cuddle infants more than Anglo mothers, and remain intensely involved with their children throughout their lives.

Researchers have attributed such behavior to the extended family structure common among Hispanics. As a result, the child learns to regard a greater number of people with warmth and affection. Others note that, historically, Hispanics have come from societies where the individual was born into a social and economic system that remained fixed throughout his life. They therefore tended to place more importance on personal qualities to make distinctions among those with whom they lived.

Are Jews better businessmen than others? This is impossible to prove. Yet there is enough evidence present to suggest that they indeed right have an edge in this area. For one thing, Jews

have been in business for centuries. Forbidden to own land by the Roman Catholic Church and denied entry into the craft guilds during medieval times, Jews were forced to turn to moneylending to survive.

The Jewish religion and, in particular the Talmud, with its emphasis on abstract thinking, also has played a role. From childhood on, the stress was on sharpening the mind, and when economic opportunities arose the Jew was able to apply his intellectual acumen to that sphere as well. After all, interest, futures, options, stocks, and most importantly, money itself, were also abstractions. Yet another factor was that lacking a homeland for centuries, never certain when persecution might strike, Jews came to see money as the only means of survival, something with which to buy protection or acquire certain rights.

Are blacks more musically gifted than others? Certainly music was a central feature of the African heritage, which had hunting songs, drinking songs, work songs, funeral songs, etc. Music was integral to the black churches founded in this country. It was in them that African exiles were able to fully express themselves as they prayed, rocked, shouted, sang, and danced.

When white society's fascination with blacks reached unprecedented heights during the Harlem renaissance in the 1920s, music became a way in which blacks could move up the socio-economic ladder. That meant, of course, that black parents were more likely to encourage their children as soon as they demonstrated any abilities in this area. Whatever the reasons, probably no other group in the United States has contributed as much to music, song, and dance.

In my race-relations courses at City College, I caution students not to generalize, and to judge each person on his or her own merits. Obviously other nationalities also possess in varying degrees the characteristics I have discussed here. Moreover, there are many blacks who do not have any discernible musical talent, Jews who lack "business sense," as well as cold and unresponsive Hispanics. Still, there are such things as tendencies and traits, positive and negative, that are rooted in a group's history and culture. Ignoring or minimizing them can be as bad as exaggerating them.

Topic: Helmreich argues for the value of stereotypes as useful in identifying tendencies and traits within certain ethnic groups. To what degree do you find his views persuasive? Write your own essay in which you discuss the problem of stereotypes, Using your own observations, experience, and readings.