

LISA PYTLIK

Stereotypes attack correctness

“Down with stereotypes! Stop your prejudice!” some people accuse, wagging their fingers at the politically incorrect.

“We are not prejudiced! Leave us alone!” their disillusioned targets cry. Ironically, these two groups are lamenting the same ongoing problem: inter-group conflict.

One way which those striving to be “politically correct” (PC) may try to influence the problem is by changing minority labels, eliminating stereotypes and angrily accusing non-conformers of racism. Unfortunately, however, the ongoing ethnic violence here in America, the conflict in Bosnia and the Neo-Nazi activity in Germany are but a few situations attesting to the apparent ineffectiveness of those efforts. Furthermore, many people have noticed this ineffectiveness and become disillusioned and resentful of what they see as useless PC attacks.

Why is it that, over the years, we can make such monumental leaps in terms of technology, but make so little progress towards learning to live together peacefully? Part of the problem is that our focus is wrong.

Too often our focus is to blame conflicts and violence on impersonal concepts such as “stereotypes” and “prejudice.” Or, if we do choose to blame people instead of concepts, we often blame others for their discriminatory actions while defensively claiming our own innocence. Both of these tactics not only serve to distance ourselves from taking any personal responsibility or action, they are also dishonest.

The tactics distance us from the problem by making us feel as though there is nothing we could do and, therefore, that we have no personal responsibility.

However, this is dishonest because none of us can claim to be immune to using stereotypes. Studies have shown that situations where there is little time to think on where we are lacking more specific information, both prejudiced and unprejudiced people will use stereotypes to make decisions. At first this may seem like a frightening



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thing, suggesting that we are all racist by nature.

But, in the correct contexts, having and using stereotypes is also very adaptive because it helps us to organize information, remember things and make decisions despite time and information constraints.

For example, we all share conceptions about animals that can be very useful. Let's say that, for some unknown reason, I am walking on a fence separating a pitbull from a golden retriever and begin to lose my balance. In this case, I do not have time to personally get to know each dog to find out which one is friendlier. But by relying on previously formed stereotypes and prejudices about these two breeds, I can quickly, almost unconsciously, discriminate against the perhaps more dangerous pitbull and try to direct my fall toward the retriever, possibly saving my life.

Because the tendency to use stereotypes does seem to be both innate and useful, it doesn't make sense to either condemn others for using them or to deny our own use of them. What we could do, however, is accept that we all use them and that we often do so unknowingly. Then, since we are all in the same situation, we could stop condemning others, stop deny-

ing our own part and focus on learning from each other how to use stereotypes more appropriately.

One problem with using stereotypes concerning people, for example, is that we often fail to see how inaccurate they are. And stereotypes may be inaccurate for a number of reasons. They may never have been true, as in the past when it was commonly believed that Caucasians had the largest heads and therefore were more intelligent than other races.

Moreover, stereotypes may have once been true but then changed over time, as in the case of women's occupations. Or, stereotypes may be inaccurate because they represent either an average or a somewhat common occurrence of behavior that applies to only very few but very visible members of a group, as is often the case with stereotypes concerning gays and lesbians.

In addition to simply using inaccurate stereotypes, we often overuse them. That is, we use them even when we don't have to. We use them in situations where there is little danger and where we have access to enough time and information to make a well-thought out decision. Sometimes, though, we simply forget to question our conceptions or to wait and find out if they apply to a certain individual. Other times we are simply too impatient to take the time to get to know an individual, and stereotypes seem like good alternatives. With practice, however, we can learn to see when we show these tendencies and then learn to overcome them.

At the very least, the approach of ceasing to condemn each other and deny our own tendencies to use stereotypes, prejudices and so on, would create a bit more peace between the PC and non-PC. Ideally, it would also result in the increase of individual inter-group communication skills, because the only way to really stop inter-group conflict is to start by changing the individuals within those groups.

Pytlík is a graduate psychology student and a Summer Daily Nebraskan columnist.

WHAT DOES UNL THINK?

What do you think about the proposed tuition increase by the NU Board of Regents?

“I think that education should be affordable to all students — education is expensive enough as it is. I don't feel that a tuition increase would benefit students.”

Amy Lind
Sophomore
Journalism

“I don't like it because college is expensive enough the way it is...but I personally don't really care, because I don't pay for it, financial aid does.”

Kyla Rawley
Junior
Engineering

“If the money is going to pay for a program like the Academic Success Center, then the increase doesn't bother me. But if the Chancellor's going to get another raise, or if the money is going to send administrators to the Orange Bowl, then forget it.”

Jim Crable
Junior
Accounting

—Compiled by Kristin Armstrong

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