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Assumption of Attributes

Chimamanda Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story", examines the social and individual implications of the various cultural expectations and stereotypes that are attributed and assigned to specific cultural and ethnic groups. Adichie's TED Talk effectively illuminates the problems that occur in today's society because a single cultural expectation or stereotype is believed to represent the complete story of who an individual, and often the complete story of the entirety of their ethnicity, is. This is further complicated by the way in which such assumptions of cultural expectations and stereotypes are also often prone to ethnocentrism. The result is that, in the United States, an individual from another culture or ethnicity is likely to be labeled based on the expectations and stereotypes assigned to their cultural/ethnic group. They are then further evaluated based on the belief that their culture/ethnic group is inferior to the Anglo-American approved norms.

The existence, belief and propagation of expectations and stereotypes that are based solely on cultural and ethnicity produces negative results for individuals and society as a whole. This assumption of attributes, behavior and worth is harmful to the individuals and groups who

are directly impacted as well as the society in which such cultural expectations and stereotypes are propagated and supported.

Chimamanda Adichie asserts that “it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person”. Adichie also argues that the acceptance and application of cultural stereotypes and expectations through an ethnocentric lens makes it nearly impossible to recognize the “equal humanity” of people who are from different ethnicities and cultural tradition than we are. The example used by Adichie is from her own life. At nineteen Chimamanda Adichie moved from Nigeria to the United States of America to attend college. Her roommate was American. Adichie’s roommate was “shocked” by her ability to speak English fluently. As Adichie explains, “She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language”. Adichie’s roommate also asked to listen to her “tribal music” and made the assumption that Adichie, being from Nigeria, would not have any understanding of, or experience with, cooking on a stove.

This reaction by Adichie’s roommate illustrates the ethnocentric way in which white Americans tend to view foreigners, and especially people of color, as inferior in various ways. Adichie explains that “she had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity”. The roommate had blindly accepted the stereotypical understanding of Africa as a wild and uncivilized place. She had accepted that the people of such a place must also be wild, uncivilized, uneducated and diametrically different than she was; white, civilized and educated. The cultural expectations and stereotypes and other attributes that Adichie’s roommate had blindly accepted left “no possibility

of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals” (Adichie).

Anna Lisa Raya is the daughter of a second-generation Mexican American father and Puerto Rican Mother. In her essay “It’s Hard Enough Being Me”, Raya explores the cultural expectations and stereotypes that are associated with being a non-white minority of mixed heritage in the United States of America. Raya was raised in El Sereno, which is “a predominately Mexican neighborhood in L.A.” (Raya 122). Growing up, Raya’s close friends were all Mexican, and she saw herself as “just Mexican” (Raya 122). When she was with her mother’s side of the family, Raya saw herself as “just Puerto Rican” (Raya 122). Raya admits that she had never really questioned her ethnicity or “who” she was or “where” she had come from (Raya 122). In this way Raya existed outside of cultural expectations and stereotypes throughout her childhood. This is largely due to the fact that “at home” in El Sereno, Raya was a member of the majority cultural/ethnic group. There was no ethnocentric judgement of Raya in this community because her culture represented the majority-view.

Things changed when Raya went to college in New York. She suddenly labeled as “Latina” (Raya 122). This label came with cultural expectations and stereotypes attached. She discovered that “as an ethnic group in college” she and other Latinos “are forced to define” themselves “according to some vague, generalized Latino experience” because they are minorities. Adichie’s concern about the negative effects of the “single story” are applicable here. There is an ethnocentrically based assumption that as individuals from “related cultures” that produce brown people, the Latinos share a history. Language, music and religion (Raya 122). Raya will “face discrimination for being a minority” in America and will also be criticized “for

being “whitewashed” or a “sellout” in the country of her heritage (Raya 122). There is no way for her to rectify her own identity and society cannot come to a conscious either. Raya describes the negative impact that this experience has had on her life. She states that “now I feel pushed into a corner, always defining, defending or proving myself to classmates, professors or employers” (Raya 123). This is a result of being defined by cultural stereotypes that seek to magnify how people are different as opposed to their similarities.

This approach of labeling and categorizing ethnic and cultural groups based on differences can create a system of perceived racial inequality and resentment between minority groups. Ronald Takaki examines the presence of this problem and its results in his essay “The Harmful Myth of Asian Superiority”. Takaki asserts that “Asian Americans have increasingly come to be viewed as a “model minority” in American culture (124). This population has been described as “successful in gaining admission to universities” and as being successful entrepreneurs (Takaki 124). This type of praise has created the cultural expectation of Asian Americans as being “better” than other ethnic groups at becoming successful when viewed through the ethnocentric lens. It has also created an expectation of the possibility of “Americanizing” ethnic groups as a whole. This “model majority” image also “homogenizes Asian Americans and hides their differences” (Takaki 124). This is another example of Adichie’s concern about the negative effects of the “single story”.

The praise is not based on factual evidence according to Takaki who argues that facts and figures have been manipulated to obscure reality (124). The placement of this cultural expectation and stereotype which on the surface seems positive has resulted in negative effects for Asian Americans. It has led to conflicts with other minority groups such as African

Americans. Takaki states that “such comparisons pit minorities against each other” and generate “resentment” (124).

Today’s society has issues that arise from the application of cultural expectations or stereotypes are believed to represent the complete story of who an individual, or ethnic group is. Such assumptions of cultural expectations and stereotypes are often linked to ethnocentrism. In the United States, such individuals and cultural/ ethnic groups are labeled based on the expectations and stereotypes assigned to their cultural/ethnic group. Each of these group are then subjected to the belief that their culture/ethnic group is inferior to the Anglo-American approved norms. These practices of focusing on difference is harmful to the individuals and groups who are directly impacted as well as the society in which such cultural expectations and stereotypes are accepted and applied.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." TED.com. TED Global, July 2009. Web. 01 July 2017.

Raya, Anna Lisa. "It's Hard Enough Being Me." Current Issues and Enduring Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking and Argument, with Readings, 11th ed. Eds. Sylvan Barnet, Hugo Bedau, and John O'Hara. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2017. 122-124. Print.

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