

Stereotypes

Stereotypes.

They're all around us.

She's a woman? She's not as strong or intelligent as a man.

He's Muslim? He must be a terrorist.

It's easy to stereotype. They're all built on a shred of truth, right? We all make assumptions based on someone's gender, race, sexual orientation, culture, etc., subconsciously or consciously. The Four-Way Test, a moral code used for analyzing relationships and situations, can apply to most situations. It can also be used, in this case, for thinking before judging based on outdated generalizations. The four founding principles can be summed up in a mere 24 words:

1. Is it the *truth*?
2. Is it *fair* to all concerned?
3. Will it build *goodwill* and *better friendships*?
4. Will it be *beneficial* to all concerned?

It may be simple to talk before thinking, or make a judgement about races or individuals, but it is even easier to consider the repercussions using the Four-Way Test. I personally have been a victim of gender stereotyping, and pledge to always create relationships with an open mind.

Being a female in a male-oriented activity such as computer science and robotics, it has always been difficult to be seen as an equal in intelligence. Our culture portrays the typical programmer as a white male, and encourages young girls to play with dolls instead of computers

and robots. Stereotypes, such as these, can lead to lives driven by fear, hate, or bullying. The Four-Way Test is a code to live before making these stereotypes that have serious consequences.

Is it truth?

Stereotypes are empirical generalizations, and have many individual exceptions. There is no such thing as a positive stereotype, because all judgements lead to inaccurate views of a certain group or culture. Even if the typecast is partly true, it is still based on prejudged notions that will not encourage them to succeed.

Is it fair to all concerned?

Stereotypes are far from fair, and lead to beliefs that can affect future relationships. An example of an unjust stereotype is that heavier women are unhealthier and should make a change in their lifestyle. Anti-weight prejudices stem from misconceptions about health, and the arguments about beauty are completely biased. Prejudices such as these are unfair to the parties involved, and do not fit the moral constraints of the Four-Way Test.

Will it build goodwill and better friendships?

Stereotypes, even if appearing as positive, do not build goodwill and can even harm relationships. Positive stereotypes set expectations unrealistically high, like the stereotype that all Asians are intelligent and do well in their studies. These beliefs can lead to feelings of depression and lack of self-worth, and can damage friendships.

Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Using the Four-Way Test as a principled guide, stereotypes are hardly beneficial to any of the parties concerned. Stereotypes hurt the individuals, and bullies may impose their labels in order to receive attention or feel better.

The Four Way Test, the ethical compass used by Rotarians globally, can be applied to most situations and should be used for preventing conflict. Its principle of examining the consequences and analyzing the situation at hand proves useful in many cases, especially in my own life. It utilizes and builds upon the fundamental precept that you should think before you talk.