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Beyond Labels: The Role of Stereotypes in Shaping Segregation in Society

Imagine walking into a room and being judged before you even speak—a silent wall built by stereotypes, separating us before we've had a chance to connect. Now, travel back in time to a moment when societal norms and laws openly reflected such segregation: Two people walk into a milkshake shop, but only one is permitted to sit at the counter and order. These examples, past and present, reveal how stereotypes create and perpetuate division, shaping behaviors and systems that isolate and discriminate. Though people have been stereotyping and segregating for far longer than historians care to admit, stereotypes and segregation are intricately linked. By following modern-day stereotypes, the impact of stereotypes on segregation, stereotypes and media, and the psychological and social effects of stereotyping, the ways to reduce stereotypes and segregation begin to come into focus.

Historical Background Information

First, clarifying the main points and key terms is vital to understanding the research. These terms are defined as *structural racism*, which is the systemic policies and social norms that put certain racial groups at a disadvantage while privileging others; *implicit racism*, which is the prejudice that individuals may hold without recognizing, even when they consciously believe in equality; *implicit bias*, which is people's automatic judgments and attitudes about others based on stereotypes, often without realizing it. These terms are essential in understanding and recognizing how deep-rooted stereotypes reinforce division and inequality, regardless of whether they are explicitly acknowledged. When addressing the psychology of stereotypes, the cognitive processes behind how stereotypes form and persist in one's mind and how that leads to biased actions and decisions are examined. To be certain, stereotypes are generalized beliefs or ideas about a particular group of people based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, or

nationality. Segregation is the practice and action of separating groups of people based on traits such as ethnicity, race, religion, or social class. Furthermore, understanding the mechanisms behind societal divisions, such as structural racism, implicit racism, and implicit bias, helps clarify their existence and, therefore, leads to methods of prevention and reduction.

Stereotypes in history have been relevant and often used as a tool to justify discrimination. Many racial, gender, and social class stereotypes were created during slavery, solidifying grudges and prejudices that positioned certain groups as lesser than others. For example, in the Jim Crow era in the United States, African Americans being stereotyped as uneducated or dangerous was deliberately spread to make it okay and justify segregation and unequal treatment (“The Jim Crow Era”). Even though segregation laws aren't around anymore, the stereotypes that used to be justified have not entirely disappeared, as they have evolved in more subtle but equally harmful ways. For example, while businesses or facilities no longer refuse service based on race, modern-day segregation still exists in areas such as education, housing, and employment (Simmons-Duffin). Implicit biases, structural racism, and social limitations continue to form societal interactions, holding together subtle divisions in ways that are difficult to recognize.

Another example is that predominantly white neighborhoods that are well-funded have schools that look and operate differently from underfunded schools in minority communities, contributing to economic discrimination (Baker, Di Carlo, and Green III). Additionally, stereotyping certain racial groups as being more prone to crime has contributed to racial profiling ending up in the criminal justice system. Therefore, the impact stereotyping has on the psychological development of one experiencing racism, bias, and implicit bias is necessary to understand.

Psychological and Social Evolution Effects of Stereotyping

Stereotypes not only influence how people see others but also deeply affect how individuals perceive themselves, which can lead to stress and underperformance. The stereotype is where individuals underperform for fear of confirming a negative stereotype. If kids of a certain group believed that they would have no future, either being dead or in jail, because they were being told so, this can have lasting effects on brain function and cognitive performance. Research shows how stereotypes can trigger stress in the brain, making it harder to problem-solve and make decisions. Over time, this creates less confidence and more mental fatigue. Stereotyping as a threat can determine burnout or work engagement, mediating the role of positive and negative emotions.

Stereotyping and segregation absolutely impact and affect one's psychological health. Communities that have been divided often have less access to good education, good healthcare, healthy food, and safe places to live. Stereotypes can have profoundly detrimental psychological impacts. An unfortunate consequence of racism is stereotype danger, affecting how people function in social, professional, or educational settings when feeling pressured to hold beliefs in negative assumptions about their group. For example, studies show that when reminded of racial stereotypes, Black students may perform lower on tests, not because they are less competent but because they are more tense and nervous. Essentially, they bring it into existence. The pressure not to confirm a stereotype can easily create self-doubt. Over time potentially lead to imposter syndrome common in marginalized groups, where people doubt their achievements, feeling as if they don't belong, regardless of their qualifications. In school settings, students from marginalized groups may consistently question themselves about whether they believe they are fit or have earned their place or position in classes or schools. This can lead to hesitation in

participating or seeking help. Ultimately, it damages their academic performance and self-esteem.

In the workplace, imposter syndrome may cause more than capable individuals to degrade their accomplishments or feel isolated in predominantly white or male-dominated environments. Instead of prioritizing growth, their focus and energy is concentrated in trying to “prove themselves”. The pressure to meet unrealistic expectations or combat stereotypes makes confidence and security in the workplace difficult. As psychologist Dr. Valerie Young, author of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*, states that “People who struggle with imposter feelings often work harder to prove themselves, but instead of boosting confidence, it often reinforces the feeling of being a fraud.” Resulting in imposter syndrome becoming both a systemic and personal issue from the impacts of stereotypes.

Harvard researchers and researcher Tessa Charlesworth found that while the explicit descriptors of stereotypes have changed significantly over the years, the deeper negative biases associated with these groups have remained stable. For instance, stereotypes of Black Americans shifted from "lazy" to "helpless," yet both terms convey a sense of incompetence. This pattern suggests that societal changes in language can mask persistent biases (“How Have Social Stereotypes Changed Over the Last Century?”). This means that the substitution of one word for another word does not actually remove the negative connotation behind it. In fact, this type of thinking across society ultimately displays how little culture is actually evolving in terms of stereotyping, racism, and segregation. The long-lasting evolution of stereotypes leads to the inherent need for strategies to reduce stereotypes and segregation.

Strategies for Reducing Stereotypes and Segregation

Reducing stereotypes and segregation requires a comprehensive, well-rounded effort at multiple levels, including individual, institutional, and societal. Incorporating diversity and addressing prejudices at a young age makes inclusive education one of the best places to start. Schools significantly impact how people view other socioeconomic and ethnic groups. Teachings highlighting the accomplishments and hardships of diverse people should be included in schools to provide children with a broader perspective of the world. Stereotypes can be dismantled with programs that promote cultural interaction from different backgrounds and conversations about stereotypes. Educator training is also crucial to create more certainty that instructors can promote inclusive learning environments, confront prejudice, and address discriminatory incidents. This leads to how and in which one can engage and address stereotyping prejudice.

The media shapes public perception, often reinforcing stereotypes through biased portrayals or negatively represented or underrepresented people. Expanding accurate television, film, and social media representation can help challenge these adverse effects. Diverse characters and accurate real-world figures seen in roles beyond stereotypes contribute to normalizing diversity and challenging stereotypes. Encouraging media and programs within schools and communities can also teach people to recognize stereotyped portrayals.

In 2015, the average U.S. consumer consumed traditional and digital media for about 15.5 hours daily. In the same year, eight- to twelve-year-old children consumed an average of six hours of media daily, and teens consumed nine hours (“How Racial Stereotypes in Popular Media Affect People”). This mind-boggling amount of media consumption shapes how the youth and the rest of the U.S. see the world, and racial imagery in the media has increasing effects on society. Often, biased media’s portrayals of racial groups cannot be dismissed as mere

entertainment, especially if their impact on youth is taken seriously. Yuen discusses how the media plays a pivotal role in perpetuating stereotypes. The portrayal of racial and ethnic groups in television and film often reflects harmful biases. White men are frequently depicted as heroes, while minorities are relegated to villainous or secondary roles. These portrayals damage self-esteem, particularly among Black and Native American youth, who see their identities trivialized or commodified. Yuen argues for intentional inclusivity in media, advocating for diversity on-screen and behind the camera. By fostering equitable representation, the media can help combat stereotypes, enhance self-esteem in marginalized communities, and promote cultural understanding (“How Racial Stereotypes in Popular Media Affect People”).

Improvements in the workplace, media, and education are essential to preventing systemic prejudices from feeding into reinforcing stereotypes and creating segregation. Businesses and organizations should implement policies that support and foster diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, policies that include anti-discrimination training, mentorship programs, and diverse hiring procedures contribute to more inclusive organizations and businesses. Research shows that diverse workplaces boost decision-making, encourage creativity, and foster a more inclusive atmosphere. Promoting diverse leadership also guarantees that widened viewpoints are included in decision-making procedures, aiding in challenging and addressing prejudices in workplace rules and procedures. Organizations and corporations should also support community-based activities that foster social integration, like outreach campaigns, scholarships, and collaborations with varied groups (Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace).

Encouraging cross-cultural interactions and perspective-taking is another powerful tool in reducing stereotypes. According to the article “Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination: How We Can Use Psychology to Reduce Discrimination,” engaging with individuals from different

social groups helps break down stereotypes by allowing people to see others as unique individuals rather than as representatives of a broad category (Anobile 31). Programs that foster cross-cultural dialogue, such as community events, exchange programs, and intergroup discussions, can create meaningful connections between individuals of different backgrounds. Volunteerism and other opportunities also allow people to engage with diverse communities, fostering empathy and challenging commonly held biases. Additionally, participation in multicultural festivals and workshops can widen perspectives and provide face-to-face experiences that counter stereotypes (Anobile 34).

Another critical strategy is challenging implicit biases through self-awareness. Many stereotypes are unconsciously ingrained due to societal conditioning, making individuals need to engage in implicit bias training and self-reflection. Psychological research suggests that when individuals become aware of their biases, they are more likely to challenge them actively.

However, people won't automatically know to challenge their biases. Being able to recognize and work against those biases would be typically modeled or taught through education or life experiences. Biases are more often unconscious, meaning that we aren't entirely aware that we hold them. Community, friends, family, social media, and school come into play if a person grows up in a home where stereotypes are questioned and diversity is embraced, it is more than likely that they will develop good habits, however if some is surrounded in environment where harmful stereotypes are reinforced or never confronted, it may easily be normalized.

For instance, Devine et al. (2012) developed a “habit-breaking intervention” that produced larger awareness of implicit biases with provided strategies to combat them, leading to reduced implicit race bias over time. More tools, such as Harvard’s Implicit Association Test (IAT), can help individuals recognize their unconscious biases, allowing them to take steps

toward unlearning stereotypes (“Take The Test: Implicit Association Test”). Personal development activities such as reading diverse literature, listening to marginalized voices, and discussing privilege and bias can help individuals become more self-aware and take responsibility for reducing stereotypes and leading to different changes in policies that will combat systemic biases.

Legislative and policy changes also play a significant role in dismantling systemic biases that contribute to stereotypes and segregation. Governments and policymakers should enforce and strengthen anti-discrimination laws and create larger equal opportunity policies and affirmative action programs to address historical inequalities. Reforming housing policies and educational funding structures can help break down barriers that have historically segregated communities. Advocacy for equitable policies ensures that marginalized groups have access to the same opportunities and resources as others, reducing systemic discrimination and the stereotypes that arise from it.

Additionally, family and community influence cannot be overlooked when shaping perceptions. Families, peer groups, and communities help reinforce or challenge stereotypes through daily interactions and conversations. Encouraging open dialogue within families about diversity, inclusion, and social justice can help younger generations develop positive attitudes toward different groups. Parents and guardians should expose children to diverse experiences, such as visiting cultural institutions, reading books with eclectic characters, and engaging in discussions that promote critical thinking about stereotypes. Religious institutions, community centers, and social organizations can also play active roles in fostering inclusivity and creating safe spaces for discussions about bias and prejudice.

Advocacy is necessary to reduce stereotypes and segregation on a broader scale. Individuals must take accountability for challenging stereotypes, whether in personal conversations, social settings, or the workplace. Advocating means calling out and addressing biased behavior, advocating for underrepresented groups, and using privilege to support marginalized communities. Social movements and organizations have significantly brought awareness to discriminatory practices and advocated for change. Supporting and participating in these movements can push for societal progress and greater inclusivity.

Conclusion

Reducing stereotypes and segregation requires consistent effort from the individual(s), institutions, and society by fostering inclusive education, promoting diverse media representation, beginning to reform workplaces and policies, encouraging cross-cultural interactions, challenging biases, and strengthening legal protections. Society can work toward breaking harmful stereotypes and creating a more equitable, unified world. While change may take time and not happen overnight, collectivism and commitment to these strategies can lead to meaningful progress in reducing prejudice and fostering a society that values diversity and inclusion.

Racial Stereotypes continue to maintain and reinforce modern-day day-segregation by holding harmful misconceptions and limiting opportunities for underrepresented groups. These stereotypes influence not only people and public perceptions but also practices and policies in schools, workplaces, and the media. Although efforts to promote healthier representation, challenging systemic biases, and encouraging one another create a more equitable society. A society where all individuals are valued and racial stereotypes no longer define us or limit our opportunities and experiences.

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