

# Don't trap people in racial boxes

It is wrong to treat members of an ethnic group as if they are all the same.

If someone says that all tall people are great singers, you know it is a ridiculous claim. Clearly, there is no connection between people's height and their singing talent.

But, sometimes you may hear claims about groups of people that sound believable, even though they are not true. For example, you may believe a statement that all tall people are good at basketball. This is not true because not all tall people are athletic, while shorter people could be very skilful basketball players. So, it would be unfair to select only tall kids for a basketball team, just as it would be silly to choose choir members based purely on their height instead of their talent.

When we believe that something is true about a whole group of people just because some members of the group are like that, such a belief is called a "stereotype". Stereotypes influence how we treat people, making the world a less fair place.

## How stereotypes emerge

One type of racial stereotype focuses on the jobs that people do.

Years ago, when people left home looking for a better life elsewhere, they were not fussy about what work they first did in the next place. Their friends and relatives there would have helped them to get jobs, often at their own workplaces. Many of them also started small family businesses.

This led to certain

jobs becoming very common in each new-immigrant group.

For example, Chinese immigrants set up laundry shops in many countries. A western stereotype developed that all Chinese are in the laundry trade. Even at that time, there were Chinese in many other occupations. Yet, the laundryman image was so strong that, during the Korean War, an American general once told his commanders, "Don't let a bunch of Chinese laundrymen stop you."

Other minority groups face similar stereotypes about occupations that may have been common in their communities. Here in Singapore, there are occupational stereotypes about ethnic minorities.

## Why stereotypes are bad

Stereotypes lead to faulty thinking. A stereotype basically says that members of a group belong in one box because they are all the same. Not only is that untrue, it is also harmful. If there is

a stereotype that your community is lazy, can you imagine how that might affect your application for university or a job? Imagine a stereotype of your race always committing crimes. The police might be more suspicious of you than of other-race kids. Such **racial profiling** can even lead to innocent adults being thrown in jail.

There are also racial stereotypes about low-wage occupations. Society has strong biases against certain kinds of work. Sadly, many people look down on, for instance, rubbish collectors, toilet cleaners, road sweepers, and domestic helpers. Many of these jobs are done mainly by foreigners from other parts of Southeast Asia as well as Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

There are also brilliant doctors, lawyers, and other professionals here from these same countries. The difference is that they are not as visible to the public. When we look around, we see workers doing **menial** labour in public spaces. So then, people might think that everyone from these

countries is a menial worker. Such stereotyping is a hurdle to minorities because it **pigeonholes** them as capable of only labourer-type work.

– By MARY GEORGE

## What you can do

Take charge of your own **racial literacy**. Learn about local ethnic communities. The more you know, the more clearly you will see the falsehoods in racial stereotypes.

Respect the dignity of labour. Stereotypes about occupations will dissolve if all honest work is equally respected and valued. Appreciate the contribution of all workers here.

Break through racial boundaries. Reach for your dreams. If you are facing a personal racial stereotype about going to college or aiming for certain jobs, rise above it. Sometimes, it means you have to believe in yourself more than others believe in you.

## Forced division of labour

In some cases, the British colonisers even decided which jobs should be assigned to each ethnic group in this region. Some of our current racial stereotypes have their roots in that British division of labour here.

Sadly, colonisers also captured locals and took them elsewhere as slaves. This is part of Singapore's story

as well. As far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, African slaves were brought to this region during the Srivijayan empire. Centuries later, South Indian slaves were shipped over by the British.

Freed slaves and even their descendants have to break through strong stereotypes when they start from scratch to rebuild their lives.

## VOCAB BUILDER

**racial profiling** (say "ray-shel pro-fy-ling"; noun) = using racial stereotypes to suspect or accuse people of doing wrong.

**pigeonholes** (say "pid-jen hoels; verb) = puts into rigid slots, like the compartments in a pigeon house.

**menial** (say "mee-nee-yal"; adjective) = unskilled and low-status.

**racial literacy** (say "ray-shel lit-re-see"; noun) = ability to make sense of stressful racial situations and respond wisely.

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