

Chapter 7

The Joys Of Stereotyping

Let's suppose I am a lowbrow. I am vulgar and have uncultivated tastes. I am boorish, rude, ill-mannered, coarse, rough, crude and ignorant. In addition, I stereotype everyone I meet. I have even managed to stereotype myself.

Uh oh. No one is supposed to ever stereotype anyone, according to the current politically correct movement. Stereotyping people is bad because we might accidentally typecast an innocent person in an undesirable mold. However, the problem as I see it, lies with this politically correct approach, not the stereotyping itself. Stereotyping is appropriate some of the time, but deliberately avoiding stereotyping can get you into trouble. Equally vehemently, I am claiming that stereotyping can also cause problems. Most importantly, on occasion, reacting to an unknown subject by stereotyping the person will provide an added level of safety.

This chapter's Area of Enlightenment clarifies why there are times and certain conditions when stereotyping a person is far safer than adhering to the politically correct caveat. The use of *appropriate* stereotyping can protect us physically and socially.

Here is an illuminating example. The Reverend Jesse Jackson was walking alone at night in Washington DC.¹ He heard footsteps behind him and was afraid he was about to be mugged—which is a common occurrence in Washington, especially at night, and especially when you are alone on a street. The Reverend turned around and saw a white man. Immediately he felt relief that he was not going to be assaulted. Then he felt shame because he had just stereotyped kindred black men. He understood during that split second of observation, that he

¹ Duke, Lynn, "Confronting Violence: African American Conferees Look Inward," *Washington Post*, January 8, 1994.

had assumed the worst of his own race; he assumed he would be mugged if the man was black, but that he would be safe if the man was white. Reverend Jackson felt shame because he was not thinking in the recommended politically-correct approach. The truth is, he could just as easily been mugged by a white man (after all, there are white muggers). If he had seen a black man, he most likely would have been safe (after all, most black men are not muggers). So, why did Jesse Jackson, a very intelligent gentleman, make the assumption he was safe if the person following him was white, and that he might be mugged if the person had been black? The answer will not please the politically-correct person.

Because stereotypes are based upon sound statistics, the serious harm is in *not* paying heed to stereotypes when danger is present, and *in* paying attention to stereotypes when no danger is involved. In the former case, we risk physical, emotional, and financial harm. In the latter case, the downside is, at best, embarrassment for having committed a social gaff, at worst, you could be swindled.

It is an unfortunate fact that there are a higher percentage of black muggers among the black population than there are white muggers among the white population.² While the absolute number of black muggers and white muggers is perhaps about the same, you are more likely to be mugged if you see a black person, than you are if you see a white person while walking down a street in any inner city late at night. So, the Reverend Jesse Jackson was simply and wisely reacting to his odds. *Anyone* walking the streets of Washington, D.C. has a higher probability of being mugged late at night than while walking those same streets during daytime. They also have a higher probability of being mugged in Washington, D.C.—any time of day or night—than in almost any other city in the United States.

The Reverend was perhaps naïve in his belief that he was safe when followed by a white man—he was simply *safer*. Since there are far more law-abiding black people than there are black muggers, the chances are good he would have been safe in either case; however, with bodily harm a strong chance if he were mugged, it was wise of the Reverend to be on guard. For the Reverend Jackson, it was better to err by stereotyping. If he was in a safe social setting and had time to chat with the person, he could have afforded the luxury of ascribing to the politically

² 2000 US Department of Justice statistics: Among men, blacks (28.5%) are about six times more likely than whites (4.4%) to be admitted to prison during their life. Among women, 3.6% of blacks and 0.5% of whites will enter prison at least once; Based on current rates of incarceration, an estimated 7.9% of black males compared to 0.7% of white males will enter State or Federal prison by the time they are age 20 and 21.4% of black males versus 1.4% of white males will be incarcerated by age 30.

correct approach of waiting to find out, over time, if this new acquaintance fit the stereotype being projected.

Note that the assumption so far has been that the stereotyping placed the subject in an undesirable group. In a polite, safe, social setting, you might stereotype someone as an honorable, honest, and genteel person. However, the person may well be a swindler using elegant dress and manners to disguise his true character. There is just as much potential of getting into trouble whichever direction we stereotype; the difference is in the degree of danger. The goal should be to train ourselves to examine the situations we find ourselves in, and base our method of response on probability statistics and the degree of danger.

Here is where I bring in the Area of Enlightenment to analyze the stereotyping conundrum. Since I am trying to show that being politically correct is sometimes a problem, the assumption is that in Figure 7.1 the subject appears to be a *bad* person. Figure 7.2 will show the opposite: the subject appears to be *good*.

In Figure 7.1, the vertical axis deals with **stereotyping**, with DOES STEREOTYPE at the top and the politically correct approach of DOES NOT STEREOTYPE at the bottom. The horizontal axis concerns **analysis**, meaning, a person takes the time to analyze a situation regarding an unknown subject. ANALYZES FOR ACCURACY is placed at the extreme right end and DOES NOT ANALYZE on the extreme left.

In the scenario for this figure, the assumption is that a guy who appears to be bad—a possible mugger based on his dress and demeanor—approaches an innocent person, our “observer.” The observer will make two choices: he will or will not stereotype the bad-looking guy, and he will or will not analyze the situation. The top line in each quadrant describes the result *to the observer* when this bad-looking subject turns out to be, in fact, a mugger. The second line (shown in parenthesis) describes the result *to the observer* when the bad-looking person turns out to be a good person in spite of appearances.

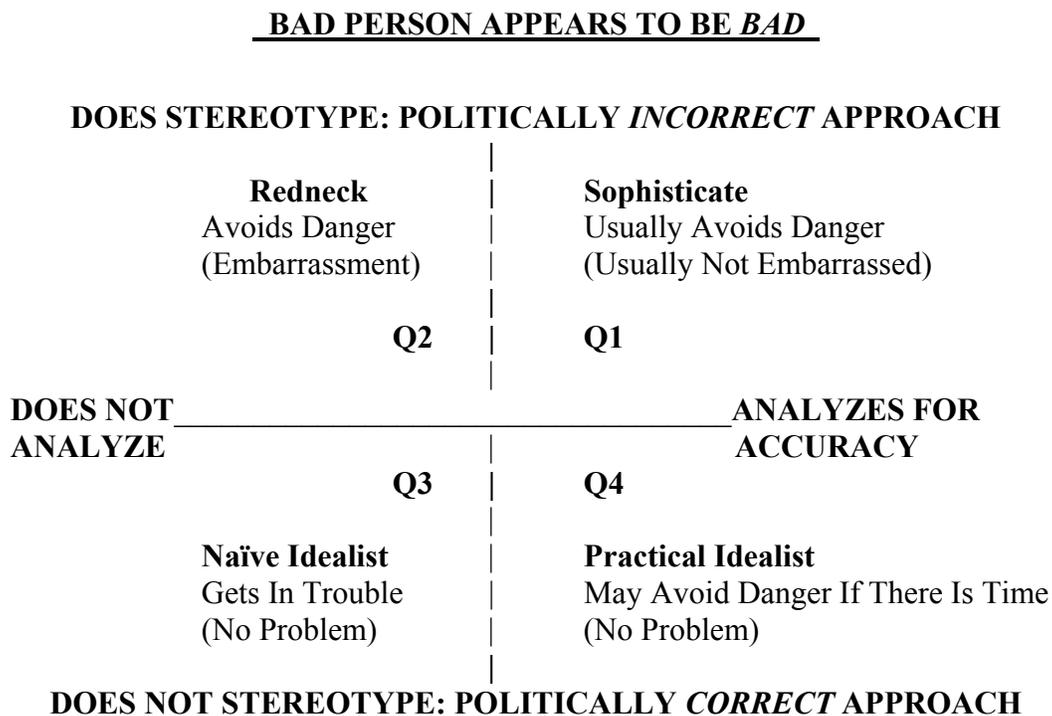


Figure 7.1

In quadrant Q1, are the people who take the politically *incorrect approach*—they **Stereotype**, but they also take the time to **Analyze For Accuracy**. The person in this quadrant is a “sophisticate,” they have been successfully imbued with city ways, manners and customs. They appear clever. In the first line, the sophisticated observer stereotypes the subject as a bad person based on that person’s appearance. And, because he is correct—the subject truly is as bad as he appears—our observer will take advantage of all opportunities to avoid danger. However, the sophisticated observer does not condemn a person to that initial stereotype because he takes the time to analyze the person over a longer period. Perhaps he chats with the potential mugger as a stall while he seeks safety.

Which brings us to the second line in quadrant Q1—our sophisticated observer is incorrect; he stereotyped the subject as bad guy, but the guy turned out to be a good person after all. Because the observer is on guard and did not rush to judgment, he is able to modify his initial assessment and thus is usually able to avoid embarrassment even when he was initially wrong. After considering the situation further, he was able to see that the potential mugger was

merely a wino looking for spare change. Analysis saves him from improper stereotyping.

The person found in quadrant Q2 also takes the politically *incorrect* position and **Stereotypes**, but he **Does Not Analyze**. I define the extreme of this type as a “redneck”—a disparaging term for some members of the white rural laboring class, especially one from the southern United States. This person has a provincial, conservative, often bigoted sociopolitical attitude. Since the stereotype of a redneck is of a person who stereotypes others, I am probably not stepping on anyone’s toes here (^_^)

A redneck will generally avoid trouble because he comes to immediate and inflexible decisions based on initial impressions. When the alert redneck correctly interprets the subject who looks like a mugger as a mugger, he gets himself out of harm’s way. But if the redneck is wrong—the potential mugger turns out to be a Jehovah’s Witness—he will probably just be embarrassed. The redneck, if he recognizes his errors in judgment, is frequently embarrassed because he leaps to conclusions based on appearance; he does not analyze the uniqueness of situations. The quadrant Q2 redneck inappropriately typecasts people before they have a chance to reveal their true nature. And, because the redneck does not take the time to reassess the situation later, he leaves himself open to making severe social gaffs because he stubbornly insists on sticking with his initial impression. But he is safe when out late at night (a Darwinian adaptation?).

The quadrant Q3 politically-correct person who **Does Not Stereotype** and who also **Does Not Analyze** can easily get into harm’s way when potential danger is present. The people of quadrant Q3 run the greatest risk of all four quadrant’s inhabitants when it comes to danger because they mistakenly assume (stereotype?) all people are good in all situations. The extreme in this quadrant is the “naïve idealist,” blind to the dangers of reality. If the politically correct idealist does not stereotype a bad person, and does not analyze, then he will surely get in trouble; he is simply too socially naïve when it comes to the reality of the world. The good news, however, is that he will probably not offend anyone. The naïve idealist will actually apologize to his mugger, claiming the mugging is not their fault—society is the true culprit; society drove the mugger to a life of crime (^_^) If the apparently bad person is not bad after all, then the quadrant Q3 idealist experiences no problem since he did not stereotype the subject in the first place.

The politically-correct person found in quadrant Q4 is an individual who **Does Not**

Stereotype but who will **Analyze For Accuracy**. This “practical idealist” also does not often offend others, but is usually able to stay out of harm’s way as long as there is time and maneuvering room. The politically correct movement staunchly approves of this person. The practical idealist’s redeeming quality is that they take the trouble to analyze their situation, and thus have a chance to avoid trouble as long as there is sufficient time. If a mugger is present but there is no time to chat, the practical idealist will lose his wallet. However, when he finds himself in social settings, he will generally have time to analyze the situation and come to a sensible assessment of his level of danger and be able to determine if a rough-looking person is truly a swindler.

This is what it comes down to: The sophisticate in quadrant Q1 will do okay whether he is correct on initial impression or not. He will do best in social situations where there is time to analyze. The redneck in quadrant Q2 risks only embarrassment because if he truly is in sudden physical danger, he will quickly sidestep out of it. If real danger is present, the Q3 naïve idealist will suffer the worst. The practical idealist of Q4 has half a chance of escaping danger, as long as he has enough time and maneuvering room.

In Figure 7.1 above, I used the example of a guy who appears to be bad, and turns out to be just as bad as we thought; the stereotyping observers were correct in their initial assessment. I also explored what happens if the stereotyping was wrong. In this next figure, Figure 7.2, I use the inverse: a guy who appears to be good, but turns out to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing. In this case, a social setting is used—a fellow church, (synagogue, mosque, country club?) member approaches us. We assume he is honest because, after all, he is a member of our very own group and he presents a respectable appearance. However, our initial impression is wrong.

The following Area of Enlightenment will demonstrate the consequences of stereotyping even when the error elevates the person to a position higher than they deserve. I will use the exact same figure structure as applied to the earlier figure.

The vertical axis deals with **stereotyping**, with DOES STEREOTYPE at the top and the politically-correct approach of DOES NOT STEREOTYPE at the bottom. The horizontal axis concerns **analysis**, meaning, a person takes the time to analyze a situation regarding an unknown subject. ANALYZES FOR ACCURACY is placed at the extreme right end and DOES NOT ANALYZE on the extreme left.

The first line in each quadrant will deal with the consequences *to the observer* when our

initial impression is wrong—the subject who appears to be good, turns out to be a bad guy. The second line in each quadrant, the consequence shown in parenthesis, assumes no error was made—our initial impression that the subject was a good person is correct. The word “problem” could mean that you get swindled, mugged, or merely embarrassed. It could have to do with physical, financial or social issues. The magnitude of what goes wrong is widely varying, so I simply say the observer will have a “problem.”

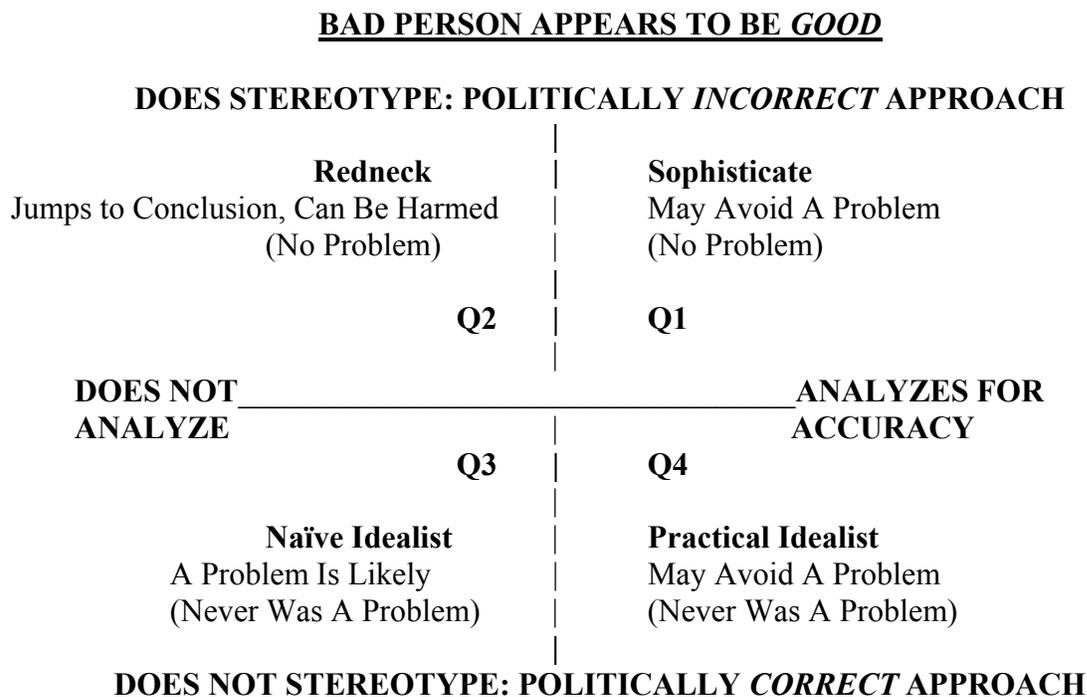


Figure 7.2

The person in quadrant Q1, an individual I am stereotyping as a “sophisticate”, **Stereotypes** but takes the time to **Analyze For Accuracy**. This person knows stereotyping is a two-edged sword but relies on sudden judgments to keep himself out of danger. He knows he will correctly type most people most of the time, but is willing to admit his mistake when he was wrong. The alert sophisticate saw the well-dressed, slick fellow church member and assumed the best. Unfortunately, the subject was using the group’s membership list to perpetrate an investment scam. The person who appeared good was really a bad character. Luckily, the sophisticated thinker takes the time to analyze and soon realizes his stereotyping conclusion was wrong. He sees through the subject’s genteel appearance, senses a swindle, and stays out of

harm's way.

On the other hand, if in fact the subject who appears good *was good* (the consequence shown in parenthesis in quadrant 1), no harm is done and everything works out well. The stereotyping was correct, and because the person is good, there is no problem to anyone.

The person found in quadrant Q2, the politically *incorrect* “redneck” **Stereotyper** who **Does Not Analyze**, also assumes the subject who appears to be good is good, but he, too, is wrong. The difference between the people in Q1 and Q2 is the redneck jumps to a conclusion, and stays there. The well-dressed swindler posing as a group member has a good chance of bilking the redneck out of his money because the redneck does not take the time to examine the swindler's past.

As expected, if that new well-mannered and considerate church member who was behaving oh-so-properly was indeed good, no harm is done and there is no problem. When it comes to physical harm, the redneck was the safest of all people in Figure 7.1. However, financially, he is the one most at risk in Figure 7.2. The redneck would be a sucker for a well-dressed mugger (^_^) He is not likely to be physically attacked, but can be easily swindled.

The quadrant Q3 politically correct “naïve idealist” who **Does Not Stereotype** but who also **Does Not Analyze**, will be taken in by the smiling schemer. This person is one who thinks everyone is beautiful! Then whack, they get hit upside the wallet. People in quadrant Q3 could easily lose their shirts in an investment scam. If the smooth-talking gentleman turns out to be as delightful and kind as he appeared to be at first impression, then, again, there never was a problem. The subject was not prejudged by the naïve idealist observer and no mistake was made.

The politically correct “practical idealist” found in quadrant Q4 **Does Not Stereotype**—would never think of it—but he will take the time to **Analyze For Accuracy**. And because he pauses to evaluate his situation, he may very well detect a problem before it is too late. He did not stereotype in the first place—he just takes people at face value and then waits to see what happens. The practical idealist engages the smooth-talking swindler in conversation, catches him in lies, and when questions are posed, finds the subject evades direct answers. The quadrant Q4 observer is thus able to reconsider and downgrade his initial high opinion of the subject and avoids falling prey to the fraud. Of course, no harm is done if the subject really is as good as he appears; in such a case there never was a problem.

Studying Figures 7.1 and 7.2 makes the case that those who analyze are better off than those who do not. The graphs also prove that the politically-*incorrect* people of quadrant Q1 who analyze are the best off, in the sense of having no significant downside problems—as long as they have enough time to form an accurate impression. In social situations, you almost always have time to analyze. In the back-street barroom brawl, you do not always have a lot of time to assess the pros and cons of the situation.

The politically incorrect person in quadrant Q2, the person who fails to analyze, may be embarrassed if he misjudges a good person, who looks bad, and stereotypes them as bad. Also, a bad person whom he misjudges as being good will likely take advantage of him. Note that there are far more good people than bad, so embarrassment may be the most common outcome for a person in quadrant Q2. The upside is that he will generally escape the unusually dangerous situations better than others since he will waste no time in coming to the conclusion that a bad actor is present.

The politically correct person of quadrant Q3, who does not analyze, has the most risk as far as probability of getting into serious problems. The naïve idealist can get into danger any time he deals with a bad subject (apparent or not) because he is not properly on guard and does not take the time to check up on the subject. But even the politically-correct person who takes the time to analyze—the practical idealist of quadrant Q4—can get into trouble if he does not have time to analyze the situation and/or the subject.

This brings us back to the original dilemma—should we blindly conduct our lives as politically-correct people, or should we allow ourselves to react to new subjects by stereotyping them until we have more information? Obviously, based on the Areas of Enlightenment, it is best to train ourselves to analyze. We can protect ourselves both physically and socially when maintaining a politically incorrect stance because we are less likely to be a victim. It is also important to notice that when we respond blindly in a politically-correct manner, we stand the chance of getting into deep, deep trouble.

The bottom line here is that stereotyping, no matter how politically incorrect, is a more prudent approach to guarding our own safety *especially when we do not have the luxury of time or distance to maneuver*. The joy of stereotyping has few downsides if you take the time to analyze and if you are willing to concede when you make an initial mistake. The Sept. 11, 2001 events, involving Arab hijackers, is a demonstration of the need for sophisticated stereotyping.

One would be a fool for not recognizing that the suicidal Islamic fanatic is likely to be Arabic; however, most Arabic Islamic people are not guilty of being a suicidal fanatic. Fortunately, there is usually time to find out the motives of those boarding aircraft.

