

A Silenced Voice: Using Personal Experience to Unpack Stereotypes

Written by Jennifer Darch

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JENNIFER DARCH, FEB 21 2014

The following post is based on a guest lecture delivered as part of UWE Bristol's Politics and International Relations Seminar Series.

Our history books and much of academia has been written by individuals in a position of power. That power may simply lie in the writer's ability to articulate a subject well, but it is a form of power all the same.

Even today, in an era of digital media, the powerful can exert a disproportionate and controlling influence due to their resources. In political debate 'history' is often drawn upon by way of substantiating a point of view, presenting a truth or fact which cannot therefore be questioned.

'History', however is not a single truth, but rather a record of the powerful, who, (even with the best of intentions) are limited to recording events from a particular perspective. Such perspectives have value, of course, but inevitably when people are spoken 'about', or spoken 'for', stereotypes and generalisations become a necessity. Generalisations and stereotypes conjure assumptions, brush over intricacies and drown out human emotion. When history is told in the third-person in this way, stimulating empathy and understanding in the reader or viewer is limited.

Throughout the world there exists a tension between 'stereotypes', largely due to the assumption that generalisations conjure. In the UK the heated debate around migration centres not on an individual seeking a better life for the ones they love, but rather on a pauper in search of benefits. Likewise, the unemployed are portrayed not as vulnerable individuals but rather as idle beings that have 'chosen' to live off of the welfare state at the expense of the hard working tax payer.

Stereotypes are particularly powerful when they describe something unfamiliar. There is little reason to question a generalisation if we have no personal experience of it and hence we are more inclined to accept the stereotype along with the assumptions embedded within it. When we talk about human beings in terms of a stereotype, for example; the immigrant; the refugee; the unemployed; the criminal; the homosexual; the disabled, the stereotype becomes more of an object or thing expected to behave and look a particular way. Subsequently the human impact is muted by the dominant narrative. Personal affects, emotions and intricate details left to one side, leaving the story told unstable, incomplete and misleading.

After graduating from UWE Bristol I set up A Silenced Voice to tackle the dehumanising affects that stereotypes and generalisations can have on individuals. Our objective is to turn up the volume on more personal stories in order to break down stereotypes and assumptions. By sharing personal experiences through face to face interaction, complexities, emotions and intricate practical details are brought to life and the stereotype can be replaced by a human being with whom we can empathise, interact and begin to recognise and relate. As a result, tension and misunderstandings between stereotypes can be broken down and individuals can begin to understand one another more profoundly.

There are a number of different ways that people can share their experiences and/or stories, and we recognise that

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not everybody wants to speak in public. To that end we have a blog where individuals can find personal stories to which they can relate. We are currently creating a webpage of speaker profiles for those who wish to speak, and for those who are new to public speaking we deliver workshops focused on individual empowerment and/or enhancing your public speaking/story telling skills.

The long term goal is to lead the way in Equality and Diversity training in education and the workplace led by individuals who are with firsthand experience of what equality and diversity are supposed to represent. Rather than talking 'about' minorities, for instance, the disabled, the bisexual, the addict, or gender inequality we bring those affected by the stereotype to the table to speak for themselves.

It is early days; however the interest has been overwhelming. We are currently looking for experts from around the globe who may wish to share information with us, trustees (based in the UK), and speakers (either in the South West of England or able to travel there), bloggers (from around the world), and partner organisations who share our mission to give volume to the voices of individuals who are affected by stereotypes so that human understanding can flourish. Please be assured that as a blogger you may remain anonymous.

If you are interested in any of the above, or have some feedback for *A Silenced Voice* please do get in touch.

About the author:

Jennifer Darch is an alumnus of UWE Bristol and the founder of A Silenced Voice.