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Stereotypes and Ethnocentrism: The Latino Community in US Media

The ideas of liberty and equality are often presented as the standard of American living, but in its social relationships, the United States fails to show a truly egalitarian attitude towards different ethnic and racial groups within the nation. The complexity of the racial and ethnic relationships is complex. One particular manifestation of these interconnection of structures is the prevalence of ethnocentrism in the nation’s social, cultural and political landscapes. Ethnocentrism is a process by which a series negative attitudes of a particular group of people are perpetuated, including “seeing one’s own group (the in-group) as virtuous and superior” and out-groups as contemptible and inferior” (Hammond & Axelrod, 2006). For the latino community, this can be manifested at both an institutional and a cultural level. The former is presented through the statements of elected officials, who hold particularly contemptuous views on the ethnic group. The latter, on the other hand, is perpetuated through various social mechanisms. Stereotypes, which are often reproduced in popular media, in both fictional and real life productions, can aid in this purpose. As a result, the individuals can begin to internalize the negative conceptions that are presented about particular ethnic groups. Prejudice is fostered under these conditions which hinders the relations between groups. As a result, ethnocentrism, and stereotypes as one of its most insidious manifestations, can be said to create a series of cultural preconceptions that can make communication difficult between members of the in-group (White Americans) and the out-group (Latino-Americans).

Though in definition ethnocentrism sounds an abhorrent practice, in reality, the way in which this systems are perpetuated often go unnoticed. Popular media, for example, is a very efficient channel for the proliferation of societal ideals. Stereotypes are one of the most common manifestations of ethnocentrism that is manifested through these channels. They can be defined as “any collection of trait-names which are found to be appropriate in characterizing a class of persons” (Vinacke, 2010, p.230). On their own, stereotypes are not meant to be inherently negative. It is possible for individuals to develop stereotypes about other groups of people without meaning malicious intent; for example, the assumption that people from France would enjoy cheese due to the many kinds that are produced in the nation. Though this serves as an example of an all-encompassing sentence, that might be reductive for some French individuals, it is not meant to be inherently pejorative. Some of the racial stereotypes that are presented about Latino individuals, and other ethnic groups, on the other hand, do carry these connotations.

In film and series, for example, the representation of the Latino community is not usually favorable -- though, in recent years, attempts have been made to include a more humanizing perspective of the community. It should be noted, too, that the representation of the latino community is also limited. In the early 2000s, though the latino community made up 12.5% of the nation’s population, only 1% to 3% of the characters presented in primetime television were latino (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). When latino characters are included, their characters are not often portrayed benevolently. Male latino characters, in particular, are often presented as participants in stories that relate to criminal activities and will be more involved in conversations about crime and violence than people of other ethnic groups (Rivadeneyra, et al., 2007). Similarly, latino individuals are presented as being disorderly and defiant of authority. The representations of men and women will differ, as well. The way in which latino women and latino men are presented are a bit different. Men will be portrayed as less intelligent and hot-tempered: women will be portrayed as lazier and having a poorer work ethic (Rivadeneyra, et al. 2007). When these negative concepts of latino individuals are presented, over and over, in the media that is consumed, they can quickly become a societal constant.

The existence of negative stereotypes can have a detrimental effect in inter-group communication. The portrayals of the latino community in popular media can become internalized by the population, to varying degrees. These notions are bound to be present in almost any individual; the Latino community, too, will be have their own set of stereotypes for White Americans. It is necessary, therefore, to challenge these preconceptions, in an effort that could serve to both enhance the communication process and ease on the popular, stereotypic conceptions of the community. To do this, the latino community needs to be presented in a less prejudiced notion. Against popular conceptions, the Latino community tends to lean towards the acceptance of power as a beneficial tool for society (Liu, 2016). While this is often translated unto criminal organizations in mediatic appearances of latino people, in reality, this tendency should point towards a more orderly and respectful community, as it is a high power-distance culture. The fact that Latino culture also leans towards high uncertainty avoidance, making it more prone to the acceptance of rules and structures (Liu, 2016), add another layer of contradiction to these popular presentations. The differentiations made between men and women, though, can be said to hold some weight; not in their presentation of latino men and women, but in the need to differentiate between the expectations of both. As latino culture can be patriarchal in nature, the traits of aggression, violence and power can be expected of the men in the subgroup. However, the portrayal of women as being lax in their work ethic, would be contradictory to the cultural paradigms imposed on women, which require their due diligence and service.

The internationalization of stereotypes, and the larger ethnocentric notions that come with it, can even get in the way of common interactions between individuals. Even when there exists an awareness of their interaction within society and the detrimental effects that can be brought upon marginalized communities, unlearning societal notions is not an easy task. As a result, these notions can become included into our daily interactions. Personally, I have found myself having subconscious reactions that would fall under these stereotypical notions.

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