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# STEREOTYPING AND YOU

## A PROGRAM FOR AWARENESS AND ACTION

VERMONT ADVISORY COMMITTEE to the  
UNITED STATES  
COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS



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The Vermont-National Education Association

## **PREFACE**

### Stereotyping—Prejudice—Discrimination

While almost everyone agrees that stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination are wrong, people rarely stop to define those terms or to analyze how they affect themselves and others.

"Stereotyping and You: A Program for Awareness and Action," developed by the Vermont Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, is an attempt to look at the problems of stereotyping and prejudice and at the discrimination that often results from them.

This pamphlet is one part of that program. Many of the ideas discussed here were derived from Gordon Allport's classic study, *The Nature of Prejudice*, originally published in 1954.

Included in the program is the film, "Bill Cosby on Prejudice," as well as a self-survey to help participants learn about their own tendencies to stereotype others, and a bibliography of materials available through Vermont libraries. The program, about one hour in length, is designed for presentation to almost any kind of group or organization.

The Vermont Advisory Committee hopes that this program will stimulate thinking and discussion about the problems of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, and in turn, will create an increased awareness that will lead people to act to combat these evils.

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## **BACKGROUND**

Vermont is viewed as a very homogeneous State because it has proportionately fewer minorities than other states. According to the 1980 census less than 1½ percent are black or are of Hispanic, Asian, or Native American ancestry. Actually there is a great deal of ethnic diversity in Vermont.

The absence of racial minorities does not mean that stereotyping and prejudice do not exist in the State. Indeed, lack of contact with other racial groups may serve to reinforce existing stereotypes.

Prejudice and discrimination are not only directed at racial and ethnic groups. People hold stereotypes and prejudices about other regions, and about religious groups, women, the aged and the handicapped. Many people hold stereotypes without being aware of them, but they are just as damaging because they tend to dehumanize people and set the stage for discrimination. Stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination are deeply ingrained in our culture and will not be eradicated quickly or easily. The first step in overcoming them is understanding and becoming more aware of them.

Before examining each phenomenon, brief mention should be made of two concepts—generalizing, and group loyalty—both of which are important to an understanding of the origin and nature of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.

The human mind tends to categorize or to generalize about things. For example, after observing some trees, we generalize that trees are tall and have leaves. Without this basic mental process, each experience would be totally new and unrelated to any previous one. Generalizing helps us communicate, but generalizations can be wrong. Some trees are not tall, and some do not have leaves.

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Generalizations about people are hardly ever completely accurate. People are unique and complex and cannot be accurately described by generalizations. The main difference between generalizing and stereotyping is that generalizations are modified to accommodate new information, whereas stereotypes tend to stay fixed when confronted with new or conflicting information.

The tendency for people to identify with and prefer others like themselves is also linked to stereotyping and prejudice. We are members of certain groups: our family, religion, nationality, and race are but a few examples.

Many people are less comfortable with those outside their group. Sometimes, lack of experience with a group gives rise to misunderstanding, fear, and the rejection of a group which is different from ours, and can be a factor causing prejudice.

With these thoughts in mind, let us look more closely at stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.

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## **STEREOTYPES**

A stereotype is a fixed belief or standardized mental picture, usually about a group of people. Stereotypes are learned and are transmitted by society. They usually are negative and always are over-simplifications ascribing a particular trait to an entire group and all its members.

Stereotypes allow us to rationalize our conduct toward the group being stereotyped and prevent us from making separate judgments about individuals within a group. Stereotypes sometimes contain an element of truth which may reinforce people in justifying their feelings or actions toward a group. Unfortunately, stereotyping persists even when people encounter evidence which contradicts the stereotype.

Mental pictures or stereotypes about groups affect our behavior when we encounter members of that group. For example, teachers who think that blacks are slow will most likely expect poor performances from black students. They may not give them the attention or encouragement they give other students, contributing to the black students' poor performance. This situation is bad for both students and teachers.

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## **PREJUDICE**

While stereotypes are beliefs, prejudices are attitudes or feelings—often negative—about a person or group without sufficient basis. Prejudice is a bias, or preconceived judgment, often directed against a racial, religious or national group.

People are prejudiced when they have a negative attitude toward a person simply because he or she is a member of a certain group. Sometimes people may have a prejudiced attitude against a whole group because they may have had a bad experience with a member of that group.

Attitudes are even more difficult to change than beliefs, which, to some extent, can change when confronted with the facts. Indeed, one of the characteristics of prejudice for some people is its persistence despite its lack of basis in fact.

Like stereotyping, prejudice harms both the victim and the perpetrator. The victim may suffer psychological, physical or financial harm when he or she is the recipient of unfair, negative feelings from others. The perpetrator harbors ill feelings and is shut off from meaningful relationships with people belonging to the group against whom he or she is prejudiced.

Where does prejudice come from? Some prejudice serves the function of allowing the perpetrator to transfer or project his own frustrations onto some innocent group. This is known as scapegoating. Other prejudice is simply people conforming to what they perceive to be prevailing customs or habits. Prejudicial attitudes are often the springboard to discriminatory behavior.

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## DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination involves behavior as opposed to beliefs (stereotypes) and attitudes (prejudice). It is the act of treating someone or something differently because of a special characteristic. The dictionary defines discrimination as the act of distinguishing. In this context we are not dealing with things, we are dealing with people. Discrimination against people because of perceived group membership is harmful because it denies them equal access and opportunity. Such discrimination is usually rooted in prejudice.

Many laws—Federal, State and local—have been passed declaring certain kinds of discrimination to be illegal. Discrimination because of *race, nationality, religion, sex, age and handicap* in the areas of *housing, employment, education, voting, government services and public accommodations and credit*, is prohibited by law. It is when a person's race, religion, sex, age or handicap is used as a criterion for making distinctions in the areas covered by law, that unlawful discrimination occurs.

If an employer does not hire a job applicant because the applicant is black, or a banker does not approve a loan application because the applicant is female, and these decisions are not based on the person's individual capabilities but rather on a supposed group trait, unlawful discrimination has taken place. (If the black applicant was unqualified or the woman had insufficient credit that would *not* be race or sex discrimination.)

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## **WHERE TO GO FOR HELP**

If you or someone you know believe that discrimination has taken place because of *race, religion, sex, nationality, age or handicap*, a complaint may be filed. Most discrimination complaints must be brought to the government agency designated to handle that kind of complaint, rather than into court.

### **Enforcing State Anti-Discrimination Laws**

Complaints may be filed with the following agencies:

**EMPLOYMENT**— Public Protection Division, Vermont Attorney General's Office, 109 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05602, (828-3171)

**CREDIT**— Vermont Department of Banking and Insurance, 120 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05602, (828-3301)

### **QUESTIONS AND REFERRALS —**

Public Protection Division of the Attorney General's Office (828-3171) should be contacted for referrals concerning complaints of discrimination in housing, public accommodations, education and social services. Unlike most states, Vermont has no human rights agency to handle discrimination cases.

### **Enforcing Federal Anti-Discrimination Laws**

Complaints may be filed with the following agencies:

**EMPLOYMENT**— Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 150 Causeway Street, Boston, MA 02114, (617/223-4535)

**HOUSING**— U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, Room 510, JFK Federal Bldg., Boston, MA 02203, (617/223-4317)

**EDUCATION**— U.S. Dept. of Education Office for Civil Rights, 14th Floor, 140 Federal Street, Boston, MA 02110, (617/223-0691)

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**HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES** – U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services Office for Civil Rights, Room 2403, JFK Federal Bldg., Boston, MA 02203, (617/223-6397)

**CREDIT** – Federal Trade Commission Public Information Office, 150 Causeway Street, Boston, MA 02114, (617/223-6621)

**QUESTIONS OR REFERRALS** – U.S. Commission on Civil Rights New England Regional Office, 55 Summer St., 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110, (617/223-4671)

**Criminal Civil Rights Violations**

If you have been injured, harassed, or threatened or your property has been damaged because of your *race, nationality or religion*, call your local police, or the FBI in Burlington (863-6316), Rutland (773-6455), or Montpelier (229-0055).

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## WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Learn more about prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination and about the groups which suffer from them by reading books and articles on these subjects.
2. Look at your own attitudes and behavior toward groups which are traditionally discriminated against. Do you use stereotypes? Do you have negative attitudes toward certain individuals or groups without justification?
3. Do not use words or tell jokes which may be degrading or insulting to others.
4. Object when you hear others making prejudicial statements.
5. Become more aware of stereotyping on television, radio and in advertising and inform those responsible about your concern.
6. Survey your workplace and the organizations to which you belong to determine how minorities, women, the elderly and handicapped are situated and treated.
7. Encourage your local school board to eliminate stereotyping and to use materials about the history and contributions of minorities and women.
8. Contribute time and funds to organizations working to combat prejudice and discrimination.
9. Arrange to share this program, *Stereotyping and You*, with a group to which you belong.

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## **HOW TO ORDER THIS PROGRAM**

This program is available without charge to organizations in Vermont. The program is designed to be presented in an hour. A discussion guide, a self-survey, a bibliography and the film "Bill Cosby on Prejudice" are included in the program package.

To order the kit, call or write:

Laurie B. Huse  
Communications Director  
Vermont-National Education Association  
Box 567  
Montpelier, VT 05602  
223-6375

There may be a waiting list for the program. Please select alternative dates for your presentation. Be sure to specify how many persons will attend your meeting.

### **For further information contact:**

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights  
New England Regional Office  
55 Summer Street, 8th Floor  
Boston, MA 02110  
617/223-4671

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## **THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS**

The United States Commission on Civil Rights, created by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, is an independent, bipartisan agency of the executive branch of the Federal Government. By the terms of the act, as amended, the Commission is charged with the following duties pertaining to discrimination or denials of the equal protection of the laws based on race, color, religion, sex, age, handicap, or national origin, or in the administration of justice: investigation of individual discriminatory denials of the right to vote; study of legal developments with respect to discrimination or denials of the equal protection of the law; appraisal of the laws and policies of the United States with respect to discrimination or denials of equal protection of the law; maintenance of a national clearinghouse for information respecting discrimination or denials of equal protection of the law; and investigation of patterns or practices of fraud or discrimination in the conduct of Federal elections. The Commission is also required to submit reports to the President and the Congress at such time as the Commission, the Congress, or the President shall deem desirable.

## **THE STATE ADVISORY COMMITTEES**

An Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights has been established in each of the 50 States and the District of Columbia pursuant to section 105(c) of the Civil Rights Act of 1957 as amended.

The Advisory Committees are made up of responsible persons who serve without compensation. Their functions under their mandate from the Commission are to: advise the Commission of all relevant information concerning their respective States on matters within the jurisdiction of the Commission; advise the Commission on matters of mutual concern in the preparation of reports of the Commission to the President and the Congress; receive reports, suggestions, and recommendations from individuals, public and private organizations, and public officials upon matters pertinent to inquiries conducted by the State Advisory Committee; initiate and forward advice and recommendations to the Commission upon matters which the State Advisory Committee has studied; and attend, as observers, any open hearing or conference which the Commission may hold within the State.



