

Understanding and Confronting Stereotypes

Created by NFTY-Southern, Adapted by UAHC Youth Division Staff

Goals:

1. To gain a deeper understanding of the danger and harm of stereotypes
2. To offer participants (PP's) the skills to respond to stereotypes
3. To gain an understanding of how misconceptions (in the form of stereotypes) can lead to greater conflict

Objectives:

1. PP's will engaged in activities that increase their awareness of stereotypes in their own minds
2. PP's will participate in role-plays and discussions on scenarios to strengthen their ability to respond to these scenarios in real-life
3. PP's will approach the subject of stereotypes from a particularly Jewish perspective

Materials:

- Paper
- Pencils
- Background Information on *Conflict at Home and Abroad: Striving for Insight*

People:

- Program Leader
- Group Leaders
- 2 Improvisational Actors (Participants)

Timetable

0:00-0:15	Introductory Improvisation
0:15-0:17	PP's Divide into Smaller Groups
0:17-0:25	Exercise 1: Word Association and Discussion
0:25-0:45	Exercise 2: Real Life Scenarios
0:45-1:00	Exercise 3: Discussing Our Responsibility
1:00-1:15	Wrap-up

Detailed Procedure:

0:00-0:15 Introductory Improvisation

The program leader will ask the group at large to name a traditionally Jewish male role – not a specific person, but a “Jewish male role”(possible answers might be doctor, lawyer, rabbi, etc.). Then have suggestions for a situation he could be in (e.g., Sunday school, court, talk with his kids, a date, anything relating to the character). The program leader will do the same for a Jewish female role. Two PP's will then improvise the given scene involving these two characters.

Following the skit, the program leader will ask the group the following questions:

- Why did you suggest scenarios and/or characters that they did? Did you notice any stereotypes in the skit? What were they?
- Was the skit representative of Jewish men and women, as perceived by society? In reality?
- What do other stereotypes of American Jews include? (possible answers include intelligence, sophistication, realism, responsibility, obsession with money, stubbornness, conceitedness, etc.)

0:15-0:17 PP's Divide into Smaller Groups

The PP's will divide into smaller groups, depending on the size of the group at large. Each smaller group should involve less than 10 PP's.

0:17-0:25 Exercise 1: Word Association and Discussion

The group leaders will distribute paper and pencils to the PP's. The program leader will call out the words, one by one, from this following list, instructing the PP's to write down the first thing that comes to mind:

Nose, doctor, gossip, Polish, lawyer, lisp, money, Islamic

Group leaders will go through the list again, inviting the PP's to share their responses to each word. Many of them most likely will make stereotypes throughout this game. Group leaders facilitate a discussion around the following questions:

- Based on this game, do you think we each have an almost natural tendency to stereotype? Where do these associations come from?
- As we make some of these associations almost thoughtlessly, do we know that they are not realistic portrayals, true to each individual?
- What causes people to perpetuate stereotypes, if they know that they are not, in fact, realistic?
- What other groups of people do you see stereotyped on a day-to-day basis?

0:25-0:45 Exercise 2: Real Life Scenarios

The group leaders will challenge the group with the following scenarios (5-7 minutes per scenario):

1. You're walking home from school alone. You see ahead of you 4 kids walking your way; they are African American; all are dressed in baggy clothing, some with visors backwards.
 - Do you feel threatened? Do you consider taking an alternate route home? Why or why not?
 - If this were a group of 4 aerobically power-walking adults, it's likely that the individual would feel more comfortable. Why? What is the difference between the two scenarios? Is there any harm in this distinction?
 - Do you know any African Americans that do/do not fit this stereotype?
2. You are flying to Florida to visit a relative. Next to you is a man who looks Arab American and in his twenties. He is quiet and does not have any companions on the trip.
 - Describe your thoughts on this flight? Do you feel fear, comfort, or indifference?
 - Do you think the average Arab American feels differently in public places since the attacks of September 11th?
 - Do you know any Muslims or Arab Americans that have experienced post-9/11 discrimination?

3. Every year, your extended family gathers on Yom Kippur to break the fast. It's such a hectic scene, with 10 bodies and 21 opinions in the dining room at all times – each person has 2 opinions except for your 9-year-old sister who actually has 3. In the middle of the meal, your older brother opens his mouth and says, “today in Calc class, I ended up sitting next to some Muslim kid – I was terrified he was gonna blow himself up or something.”
 - Do you say something in response to your brother? If so, when and how?
 - Will your brother's comment affect people in the room? (If the group responds, “no,” the group leader will ask: What about your 9-year-old sister?) What is the harm in *not* responding to his remark?
 - We reflect upon the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Intolerance anywhere is a threat to tolerance everywhere.”

0:45-1:00 Exercise 3: Discussing Our Responsibility

The group leaders will reframe the discussion the following questions, relating to our own Jewish perspectives and responsibilities:

- In Genesis we learn that each and every one of us is created *B'tselem Elohim*, “in the Image of God” (1:27). We can interpret this to mean that we each deserve to be treated as though a piece of the Divine is within us all. How might stereotyping violate this teaching?
- Historically, when have Jews been victims of stereotypes? On a daily basis, do you notice any of the stereotypes that were acted out in the beginning of this program?
- Do you think our responsibility to fight stereotypes is more *historical*, reflecting upon our own tradition as the victims of discrimination based on stereotyping, or *Biblical*, relating to *B'tselem Elohim*? Simply stated, why do *you* think stereotyping is wrong, Jewishly?
- Assuming that we do have a Jewish obligation to fight stereotypes, is it reasonable and realistic to say that we should not feel threatened in scenarios #1 and #2?
- Concluding question: How do we begin to fight stereotypes?

The group will write down the single most effective way to begin fighting stereotypes and choose a representative to present this idea to the group at large.

1:00-1:15 Wrap-up

The groups will reconvene. The representatives will summarize their discussions, sharing their reflections on how we begin to fight stereotypes. The program leader will conclude by sharing information about the NFTY 2003-2004 Study Theme, *Conflict at Home and Abroad: Striving for Insight*.

Stereotypes are dangerous misconceptions, responsible for a startling number of conflicts – cultural, racial, international, and interpersonal. By thinking critically about stereotypes, in programs such as this, we can each play a more responsible and compassionate role in our world, building relationships that truly reflect the lessons of our people's history and the teachings of *B'tselem Elohim* (“the Image of God”).

Question Stereotypes

Stereotypes are essentially assumptions that are made about a person or group's character or attributes, based on a general image of what a particular group of people is like. Just as people assume that all cars have four wheels, while all bicycles have two, they also assume that all men have certain attributes that differ from women. In reality, a few vehicles that might be called "cars" have three wheels-as do some bicycles. So, these stereotypes about cars and bicycles are not always accurate. Stereotypes about men and women are even less likely to be accurate, as people's characteristics vary much more so than do vehicles. Some men have physical or psychological characteristics that are more characteristic of women, while some women may resemble men in certain ways. So stereotypes are generalizations that are often oversimplified and wrong.

Stereotypes are especially likely to be wrong in conflict situations. When people are engaged in a conflict, their image of their opponent tends to become more and more hostile. As communication gets cut off, people make generalizations and assumptions about opponents based on very sketchy and often erroneous information. They see faults in themselves and "project" those faults onto their opponent, preferring to believe that they are good and their opponents are bad. Eventually, opponents develop a strong "enemy image," that assumes that everything the other side does is evil or wrong, while everything they do themselves is good. Such negative stereotypes make any sort of conflict resolution or conflict management process more difficult.

A first step toward overcoming these problems is becoming aware of the tendency to hold negative stereotypes of opponents, and then making a conscious efforts to correct the inaccuracies. Often this is done by increasing person-to-person contacts between people from different groups. Usually, when people meet each other, talk together, and/or work together, they will soon learn that the opponents are not nearly as awful as they had earlier believed. (Of course, sometimes opponents will confirm the negative images, which makes overcoming them even harder.) Small group workshops-dialogues, analytical problem solving workshops, mediation sessions, joint projects, and training programs are all ways in which stereotypes can begin to be broken down and more accurate images of the opponents developed.

“Question Stereotypes,” International Online Training Program On Intractable Conflict, **Conflict Research Consortium**, University of Colorado, USA
<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/fixstereo.htm>

Conflict At Home and Abroad: Striving for Insight The 2003-2004 NFTY Study Theme

The 2003-2004 NFTY Study Theme is Conflict at Home and Abroad: Striving for Insight. But what does that mean? What is conflict, how do we strive for insight, and what's the point of a study theme for NFTY?

BACKGROUND

Last February at the NFTY Convention in Washington D.C., the Regional Boards – members from NFTY's 19 Regions around North America – voted on this study theme to serve as a guide for Temple Youth Groups (TYG's) and NFTY Regions throughout the year. This is not a limiting theme, it is meant to be one general yet deep topic, which can be studied and programmed on within NFTY.

Over the course of this year, we will continue to provide resources online for as a means of gathering information about the topic of Conflict at Home and Abroad: Striving for Insight. The information is meant to encourage ongoing dialogue and exploration of the Study Theme.

Conflict is meant in a broad sense. It is not necessarily meant in the sense of violence or physical confrontation, but that is certainly a form of conflict. It takes the forms of verbal tension, strife within a community, problems within a family or friendship, and many other places. Conflict has a negative connotation but is both inevitable and, if not good at all times, has positive repercussions. To strive for insight regarding conflict is to understand what it means and how it can be best appreciated. As a leader in NFTY, it is your role to help this happen.

There have already been programs written and run at the UAHC Kutz Camp–NFTY National Leadership Academy this past summer, at Mechina (a meeting of NFTY's Regional Boards) just before the summer, and soon to be in regions and Temple Youth Groups as well. Some of these programs can be found on this web page. These are meant as a framework for a program to be adapted as appropriate.

Why Conflict?

Conflict is part of life. There are also specific conflicts that are part of a Jewish life, and all the more so with North American Jewish life. We find conflict on the worldwide political level, between communities within a country, within a given community (such as ours, that of Reform Jewish youth), between specific people, and within one's internal self. Ideologies and actions both conflict on all of these scales. As North American Reform Jewish teenagers in the 21st century, we are greatly affected by these issues on any scale and have a rich and intriguing history and morality to call upon.

Conflict between Jews is not new. That's what we get for being part of a religion whose favorite punctuation is a question mark, not an exclamation point. Disagreement of theological and political perspectives is a part of diasporatic Jewish life. Similarly, such arguments are part of the life of Jews in Israel. Some of this conflict has historically produced great results, as we see in the Talmud. It is filled with contentions and question marks, and it has helped form Judaism into a religion of people filled with knowledge in search of more.

There are always issues of contention concerning personality or morality with a group of people. Think of your youth group or regional board: mine have always disagreed. This is a conflict.

Jews have also always been the target of antisemitism. Here in Canada and the United States, we live as well as Jews have ever lived, with as little hatred towards our community as there has ever been, yet we still face it. This is a conflict resolvable by education of both the propagator and recipient of such hatred.

Perhaps the most unique issue facing the members of the NFTY community is found in what we call ourselves. What does it mean, on a personal level, to be a North American Reform Jew? What happens when being Jewish and North American becomes a conflict? What happens when being a Reform Jew becomes a conflict in and of itself?

I think you get the picture of the ever presence of conflict and, at that, the necessity to understand it. The questions I have set forth– or those, which you have asked yourself in reading this–can be the questions of the next program you have a hand in writing for your youth group or region. I think you'll find that the answers are certainly much harder to find.

Please, contact me with information, ideas, questions, comments, or concerns surrounding this theme.

B'Tikvat Shalom,
Adam Roe
2003-2004 NFTY Programming Vice President
NFTYpvp@uahc.org
917.822.6374

<http://www.nfty.org/resources/studytheme/index.html>