MALLEABLE STEREOTYPES:

HOW MEDIA IS IMPROVING THE IMAGE OF AMERICAN MUSLIMS

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Popular film and television has relied on stereotypical portrayals of Muslims and Arabs since its existence. There is, however, a quiet revolution afoot inside of the entertainment industry, and the predictable box of the "Muslim-as-terrorist" is slowly fading. But will this shift make a difference in ending Americans' growing prejudice toward Muslims?

Neuroscience, a field that has been undergoing its own quiet revolution, may provide some answers. For the last two years, I have been presenting papers at the Muslim Mental Health Conference[1] on how recent advances in neuroscience and social psychology might help us find ways to reduce anti-Muslim prejudice in the media.

On election night 2008, Republican political operative Karl Rove pointed out that then Senator Barack Obama became the first African-American president due, in part, to a generation of Americans who had come to hold positive views toward blacks because their general image in the mainstream media had improved.[2] Rove commented that the American people had already been prepared for an African-American first family because they had lived with one in the popular television series *The Cosby Show*. Referring to this phenomenon as the "Huxtable effect," he pointed out something that neuroscience and social psychologists have known for a couple decades: changes in media portrayals of out groups (in this case, African Americans) can and often do lead to policy changes, as well as reduced prejudice toward that group overall.

Fast-forward to the peak of the "Ground Zero Mosque" controversy of 2010, when American attitudes toward Muslims registered a 63% "unfavorable" rating, the highest point since 2001.[3] Katie Couric posed the idea that a Muslim Cosby show might be a catalyst for reforming some of the anti-Muslim stereotypes that have become so commonplace in the popular media.[4] What might the impact of such a show be on mainstream attitudes? Before we can answer this question, we must first understand how media images affect popular perceptions of out groups.

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I have spent the last two years collecting data in a systematic review of recent advances and research in neuroscience and social psychology and applying my findings to analyzing how anti-Muslim prejudice might be reduced. My review looks at how changes in the media environment, as well as the introduction of new and more positive media images and content, can promote a shift and change in prejudice, bias, and stereotyping vis-à-vis a particular out group. At

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Daniel Tutt is a fellow at ISPU and an activist, speaker, and PhD student in philosophy and communication. His work seeks to build greater understanding across religious and cultural lines with a particular emphasis on Islam and Muslims. Daniel frequently delivers presentations, lectures, and trainings at conferences, colleges, and other institutions both in America and abroad. As the Outreach Director of Unity Productions Foundation, he has been instrumental in engaging tens of thousands of Americans in personal, film-based dialogues. As part of UPF's 20,000 Dialogues initiative, he has implemented several national outreach initiatives, and built partnerships with foundations, non-profit, faith-based, and policy-based organizations. These projects use film and social media combined with dialogue to help address crucial policy, cultural, and civic problems between Muslims and American mainstream culture. He has a Masters of Arts from American University in Ethics, Peace, and Global Affairs, an interdisciplinary program combining philosophy and religion with peace studies and human rights. Currently, Daniel is a doctoral student in philosophy and communication at the European Graduate School; a Switzerland-based university.

the Muslim Mental Health Conference in 2010 and 2011, I presented my conclusions to a room full of psychologists, neuroscientists, social workers, and activists. Subsequent conversations with them indicated that my analysis presents several important insights that can assist policymakers, creative professionals in Hollywood, and everyday citizens to more effectively change the ways in which Americans engage with Muslims, both domestically and internationally.

This policy brief examines recent contributions from social psychologists and neuropsychologists who are devising and applying stereotype and prejudice reduction techniques to the present media environment. After presenting the background to the general climate of negative media images of Muslims, I will offer some recent examples of television shows that have introduced nuanced and multi-dimensional Muslim characters and shed some light on the phenomenon of automatic prejudice and the "affective turn" in neuroscience more generally by applying key lessons from important case studies in the field.

In conclusion, this brief will examine how an accurate portrayal of Muslims as emotionally complex, nuanced, and "human" actors can itself serve as a catalyst not only for reducing stereotypes, but also for improving American citizen diplomacy with Muslims both here and abroad. Such a positive change promotes a greater sense of identity development among American Muslims and, moreover, will improve our democratic processes by giving the public access to portrayals that further develop positive and inclusive Muslim-West relations.

STEREOTYPING AMERICAN MUSLIMS AND ITS IMPACT

Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, mainstream Americans' favorable view of Muslims fell below 50 percent[5] and continues to decline. This growing trend of negative attitudes reached its zenith in September 2010, at the tail end of the "Ground Zero Mosque" controversy,

when an ABC News poll revealed that 63% of Americans had an unfavorable view of the community. Public opinion polls also reveal that a majority of Americans formulate their views about Muslims and Islam based on media depictions.[6]

Due in part to this fact, social scientists John Sides and Kimberley Gross argue that Muslims rate more negatively than most other groups on trustworthy/untrustworthy and peaceful/violent scales.[7] Empirical studies of popular media content show that the vast majority of media images related to Islam and Muslims depict characters and stories as foreign, violent, and disproportionately associated with political issues. Social scientist and expert on Muslim and Arab media depictions Jack Shaheen points out: "On screen, the Muslim Arab lacks a human face. He/she lives in a mythical kingdom of endless desert dotted with oil wells, tents, run-down mosques, palaces, goats and camels."[8] Since 9/11, over 200 movies have portrayed Arabs and Muslims in prejudicial dialogues that have nothing directly to do with either group.[9]

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As other reports have shown, this climate of negative and stereotypical portrayals leads to harmful identity development among Muslim Americans, particularly the youth.[10] Such portrayals also prevent this community's healthy integration into American society by painting it as fundamentally outside of what it means to be an American. Despite the relevant demographic information, which indicates that the community's ethnic and racial diversity is nearly identical to that of the United States, Muslims still tend to be portrayed as violent,

predominately Arab, and backward.

Despite the steady decline in negative attitudes toward Muslims since 9/11 and the media's representation of them in popular television as uniformly negative, the "sinister Muslim stereotype" of the 1980s through the post-9/11 period has begun to fade away.[11]

NEUROSCIENCE AND STEREOTYPING

Studies that document prejudice and stereotyping in neuropsychology reveal that the majority of stereotyping is tied to moral decision making, which is driven by emotional centers of the brain and not by reason-based decision making.[12] Leading neuroscientist and social psychologist Joshua Greene claims that recent advances in neuropsychology, enabled in part through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) testing and other non-invasive brain mapping technology, has led scientists to evolve from a "cognitive revolution" to an "affective revolution." The central tenet of affective revolution is that emotion, as opposed to reason or rationality, is the more significant driver of moral reasoning, moral problem solving, and understanding prejudice.

Early research in stereotyping by social psychologists points out that stereotypes consist of emotional responses to threats and the buildup of stress. One might think that the person who deploys a stereotype displays an ingrained hatred for another group's culture or way of life.[13] Walter Lipmann and Gregory Allport, however, state that stereotypes are the result of individuals conforming to situational demands and social customs. In other words, they are not necessarily the result of a deep hostility or conviction that an individual holds toward a particular out group. Rather, they represent an emotional response.[14] The perception of an out-group stimulus sets in motion two processes at the same time, the activation of the stereotype and of an egalitarian impulse, both of which will inhibit one another and then influence judgments.[15] Once articulated, the stereotype tends to ameliorate fear and anxiety within the person deploying

it. Stereotyping functions in an automatic process that is highly directed by affective (emotional) regions of the brain, and the release of the stereotype serves to soothe the fears and anxieties built up about the out group.

This finding is key for understanding anti-Muslim stereotyping and, for that matter, anti-American or anti-western stereotyping in the context of a "clash of civilizations." Part of this supposed clash's narrative is the idea that "they hate us for our freedoms" or that their hatred is based on our religion. One of the first lessons of research into stereotyping is that the majority of stereotyping is tied to automatic processes conditioned from societal structures. They are therefore highly malleable and capable of rapid change in part because they are tied to automatic processes in the brain that are outside of conscious awareness.

REDUCING STEREOTYPES

Social psychologists and other theorists have created dozens of methods for reducing and eliminating stereotyping.[16] In this section, I will examine intentional and unintentional methods. The first one involves using conscious means (e.g., anti-racism training, contact with out groups, or person-to-person interaction), whereas the latter one entails change in the social environment (e.g., introducing a Muslim into a television show or passing legislation).

In one study, white participants viewed images of African Americans in different contexts, after which fMRI results were portrayed in a matter of milliseconds. The results showed that stereotypes were highly contingent on context. African Americans seen at churches or barbeques, as compared to in the ghetto or in other negative conditions, elicited automatic stereotypes more frequently. Another study conducted longitudinally on prejudice comprised two undergraduate seminars, one on conflict prevention that focused on intergroup dialogue intensively and the other on a research methods course. Student participants in the first course showed clear

signs of diminished automatic capacities of prejudice; those enrolled in the second one did not.[17] In a 2004 study conducted by social psychologists Nilanjana Dasgupta and Shaki Asgari, social environments containing stereotypical or counter-stereotypical exemplars were proven to impact automatic stereotypic beliefs. At an all-white school, consistent exposure to generally liked blacks (e.g., Denzel Washington) and disliked whites (e.g., Jeffrey Dohmer) lessened the prevalence of stereotypes toward the entire category of blacks.

Studies in automatic bias have shown that stereotypes are not rooted in unconditional biases; rather, they are highly prone to environment, influences, and processes. No response to stimuli is completely "process pure," as psychologist Patricia Devine notes in her research in automaticity. Subjects tested using fMRI scans to detect stereotypes show that when distracted or busy, the capacity to draw stereotypes is significantly diminished.

In studies that looked at overcoming stereotypes through intentional approaches or when the subject expressly wanted to overcome the stereotype, a different picture emerges. Those who sought to "search and replace" their stereotypes often confronted new recurring stereotypes. One study found that for most subjects who had admitted to harboring stereotypical thinking, the effort of replacing the negative stereotype often led to that very same stereotype reemerging into conscious awareness. This phenomenon, known among psychologists as "rebound effects" is, however, less prevalent among subjects who had internalized egalitarian values; they do not appear to be as susceptible to rebound effects as high-prejudiced individuals.[18] An important caveat in this research is that individuals, usually induced by a morally compelling experience, who seek to consciously reform their stereotypical thinking are more likely to succeed and thus avoid any "rebound effects." People who are forced by various training programs or other intervention (e.g., AA for prejudiced individuals) are more likely to exhibit rebound effects.[19] Daniel M. Wegner's research proves that the more

people seek to deliberately suppress their stereotypical thinking, the more their automatic processes are open to new stereotypes entering their perception.

Overall, this research points to three major insights: (1) positive associations with out groups may be generalized beyond initial specific exemplars to the general social category. In other words, positive representations of a single Muslim on television does reform and change one's perceptions of the entire category of Muslims; (2) there is a high degree of malleability and environment-contingent variability in any project that seeks to change stereotypical thinking or present positive images of out groups; and (3) sustained exposure to new images over sustained periods of time have the potential to reconfigure negative associations that have been learned about a particular group. The long-term impact of new positive images of out groups over time, however, remains unmeasured. Collectively, these studies indicate the need for conducting more research at the intersection of automatic processes and how they interact. One issue is that there still is not enough cross-disciplinary work going on between social psychologists and neuroscientists.

THE CHANGING MEDIA PORTRAYAL

This research raises the following question: What does it take to reduce stereotypical thinking? How different forms of bias effect types of behaviors remains largely unknown, in part because the various underlying forms of implicit bias are difficult to parse using behavioral measures.[20] What is clear, however, is that breaking down stereotypes requires sustained, deliberative processes over time. Individuals must take an active role in "saying no" to the influence of automatic stereotyping. Another complication is that as most neuropsychological tests have been examined intrapersonally, we have very little understanding of how "implicit biases" are activated. Thus, more research on interpersonal stereotypical processes is needed.

Reckless portrayals of Muslims as terrorists, overly violent men or oppressed women, and the blatant exclusion of more multi-dimensional portrayals in popular media leads to harmful stereotypes in the real world, not to mention hate crimes, and therefore jeopardizes all people who "look Muslim." In a recent Brookings Institution report, researchers found that such negative media portrayals harm our capacity to effectively build citizen diplomacy with Muslims outside the United States.[21]

CONCLUSION: INFLUENCING AND INSTITUTING MORE POSITIVE MEDIA PORTRAYALS

Recommendations for instituting and influencing changes to the media's portrayals of Muslims must occur on three levels: (1) the policy level (emphasis on citizen-to-citizen diplomacy), (2) inside the creative (particularly the writing) community in Hollywood, and (3) at the level of public education and access to American Muslims themselves. The nonprofit Hollywood Health and Society organization, which seeks to influence American television and film audiences with messages of healthy living, provides an appropriate model. Its members have discovered that direct messaging healthy lifestyles via public service announcements (PSAs) and advertising only went so far. After integrating more subtle messages that promote healthy lifestyles into television shows, they began to experience more direct results and have a greater impact.[22] How might a similar initiative offer creative professionals, writers, producers, and directors of television and film ideas and content for creating more positive media images of Muslims?

Currently, several organizational efforts are being conducted inside Hollywood to educate and provide access to information regarding Muslim culture. One of the more successful efforts is Muslims On Screen and Television (MOST), which offers a package of information on and access to experts in Muslim culture

and public opinion to television writers and Hollywood professionals.[23] By encouraging writers to use credible information and through suggesting compelling story lines, characters, and other ideas that can aid the creative process, MOST can have a positive impact.

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As studies in social psychology indicate, a steady and sustained introduction of positive images sustained over time can change stereotypes. There are signs of a changing media landscape that could facilitate such as positive change. In the last five years, there have been several examples of positive Muslim characters serving as models for future television writers, among them the following:

In Season 2 of the popular action drama show *24,* with Keifer Sutherland, one of the primary plots involved a seemingly innocent Muslim Pakistani-American family who secretly harbors a plot to destroy America. By Season 7, however, the show had reformed its Muslim-as-terrorist frames by introducing several "positive" Muslims, including a particularly interesting imam who offered spiritual consolation to Jack Bauer, the show's main character, when he was critically injured.

In ABC's crime drama television series *Bones*, Season 5, Episode 14 introduces a Muslim medical doctor who had served in Iraq as a nurse. In one scene, he comments: "I see the great Satan every day." The others immediately assume that he is exposing an anti-American sentiment. He then clarifies that he is referring to an experience he had while serving as a translator in Iraq: a heartfelt story of a fellow soldier who had died and how it haunts him daily. This example is unique, because it shows the characters testing their own assumptions and revealing their own biases while introducing a Muslim character who had served in the U.S. armed forces.

Showtime's "Sleeper Cell" features a Muslim FBI agent as a main character, again showing how Muslims are a part of American society at all levels.

This introduction of positive and nuanced Muslim characters that transcend traditional frames is a good start. Yet as the research shows, the stereotype holder must experience sustained exposure over time to positive settings in order for his/her automatic bias to decline. Research in social psychology shows that just presenting factual information about an out group alone cannot reform stereotypical thinking, for people who harbor stereotypes do not use the reason-based parts of their brain to make moral or ethical decisions. Only through increased and continued exposure to positive images of the out group can change and decreased negative biases and stereotypes occur.

ENDNOTES

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