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My Life As A Labelmaker

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My Life As A Labelmaker

Abstract

It's easy to label to people. I find it particularly easy at Gettysburg College. When I assign a label to someone, it's like it appears in big red letters across their forehead. Sometimes my snap judgment comes from what they're wearing. Salmon colored pants? *FRATERNITY, BRO, PREP*. Sometimes it comes from what they say. "Dude that chick's a femi-nazi." *MISOGYNIST, PRIVILEGED, JERK*. My judgment comes from all sorts of different places but the important part is that my initial judgment sticks. It sits there, tattooed on people's foreheads, staring at me, and it's the only thing I see from that point forward. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, stereotypes, judgment, social labels

Disciplines

Demography, Population, and Ecology | Gender and Sexuality | Inequality and Stratification | Place and Environment | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

MY LIFE AS A LABELMAKER

March 25, 2013

*REPUBLICAN. TOWNIE. LIBERAL. CRUNCHY. FEMINIST.
CLOSE-MINDED. HIPSTER.*

It's easy to label to people. I find it particularly easy at Gettysburg College. When I assign a label to someone, it's like it appears in big red letters across their forehead. Sometimes my snap judgment comes from what they're wearing. Salmon colored pants? *FRATERNITY, BRO, PREP*. Sometimes it comes from what they say. "Dude that chick's a femi-nazi." *MISOGYNIST, PRIVILEGED, JERK*. My judgment comes from all sorts of different places but the important part is that my initial judgment sticks. It sits there, tattooed on people's foreheads, staring at me, and it's the only thing I see from that point forward.



My internal label-maker works subconsciously most of the time. But recently I've been trying to call it out a bit more on its judgments. The other day I was in a class in which we were discussing privilege and specifically how there are certain people who are simply born without the same opportunities as others. One student in the class decided he had something to say about the subject. He had an unkempt goatee, and was wearing a "Martha's Vineyard" shirt with khaki pants and boat shoes. I'd subconsciously assigned all sorts of labels to him already based on his appearance: *WEALTHY, DOESN'T CARE ABOUT SCHOOL, HUNGOVER, IDIOT*...And it didn't help my judgmental mindset at all when he contributed to the class conversation with the following thought:

"But what about being able to make it yourself in America? I've always thought that no matter where you come from, there are always opportunities to be able to improve your situation."

I rolled my eyes dramatically and instantly disregarded any validity in his point. My mind started running. *Geez, hasn't he ever heard of the [myth of meritocracy](#)? That boy doesn't know anything. He's too privileged to see what an easy life he leads. What a closed-minded jerk.* I shut him out immediately. I wasn't open for a dialogue. I had no desire to engage in any amount of conversation.

But my professor saw this differently. He looked at this as a learning opportunity. Instead of rolling his eyes, glazing over, and huffing to himself about privilege, he instead posed a scenario.

“What about people who are born into households and neighborhoods that are in poor socio-economic standings? Aren’t the schools in those areas going to have less money and therefore not have as many opportunities as, say, a prep school? Is getting into college or even finishing high school going to be as easy? Doesn’t starting at a disadvantage make it harder to make it to where you are today?”

AND THE STUDENT LISTENED—imagine that! And so did the professor. And they engaged in conversation.

Maybe his opinion didn’t change drastically, but he opened up and engaged in *conversation* nonetheless. If it had been just me talking with this student, I would have blocked him out of conversation immediately with the roll of my eyes and would have gone along my own pretentious, enlightened way.

But how productive would that have been for either of us? If I shut everyone out of a dialogue whenever they presented an opinion that I didn’t agree with, who would I have left to talk to? I’d be left entirely with people who agree with me and constantly reaffirm exactly what I believe. And what kind of conversation would that be, really? The only way to have a productive conversation is to engage with people who *challenge you*.

The reality is, if I continuously label people, I assign one label and, as a result, one single experience to them. Chimamanda Adichie addresses this very issue in her TED Talk “[The Danger of a Single Story](#).” She explains that if you continuously assign one quality, object, identifier, or label to a group of people, then that becomes all you see in any individual that is a part of that particular group. But Adichie makes a very important point about why this is such a problem:

“How [stories] are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”

This principle works on large scales and small scales. The student in my class had assigned a very particular story to Americans from lower socio-economic standings than himself. And I had assigned a very particular story to him based on his statement. In doing so, I nearly missed out on an opportunity for a conversation. After all, how do you break the cycle of “the single story” without challenging it and learning from others?

It’s not easy to take labels off of people. And to be honest, it’s impossible not to make judgments about others. It’s what we do as people: we’re serial labelers. In fact, I know that for as much labeling as I do, I’ve also been labeled hundreds of times. When I tell people I went to a college prep school, I get labeled *PRIVILEGED*, *PREP*. More recently when I worked with two other women on a blog about rape culture, I was undoubtedly labeled *FEMINIST* and maybe even *MAN-HATER* by some. Sure, maybe I am a feminist, and I’ll be the first to admit that I’m also privileged, but wouldn’t assigning only these labels to me limit the scope of my narrative? These labels disregard all of the other things that make me me.

It is unhealthy (and ignorant) to assume we know everything about a person based on either a first impression or a few characteristics. We need to challenge our subconscious label-makers. If we don’t, the individual experience is likely to get lost in a single, lettered label across the forehead.

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/03/25/my-life-as-a-labelmaker/>