

Stereotypes' impact

Negative images can fuel injustice

It's a Saturday night in 2001, and I'm zigzagging through a plaza in Mexico City at intense cardio power walk speed with about five other Americans and one Colombian. We're trying to lose a group of young Mexican men that everyone in our group, except the Colombian, is convinced is following us.

The young men got off the bus when we did. They stopped every time we made a stop. We moved again, they moved. So when the only man in our group — an American who had spent much of his life in Mexico, had been directing study abroad trips like the one we were on for years and had seen and heard the worst-case crime scenarios the country had to offer (prior to the more emboldened displays by the drug cartels today) — said, "Follow me! Quickly!" and took off, we

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just don't know what they'll do."

He had mailed a list of crime statistics, crime examples and advice on how to avoid being a victim to us before we left the United States. (My favorite: Don't wear any jewelry, especially earrings that dangle. Thieves have been known to rip women's earrings right out of their ears, and you don't want to lose your earlobe in the process.) We were already conditioned to fear the people, particularly the men, around us, even as we stayed with Mexican host families.

obeyed. We believed we were in danger.

When the Colombian challenged his instinct, he rationalized his actions by saying, "When it's a group of guys like that you

And it worked. The next morning, two other women and I ran — as best we could in dresses and sandals — to breakfast at a restaurant a few blocks away because we were the only women we saw out on a quiet morning in a dangerous city.

Those may be two of many examples I could use to illustrate how I returned to the U.S. alive, untouched, unharmed and with all the money I didn't spend on silver during a day trip to Taxco. Or they may be examples of me being prejudiced.

I write this not to give people in general and white people in particular a pass for proceeding with caution when they find themselves around black men. Because a 17-year-old boy is dead, his parents are grieving, a community is divided, a nation is outraged and black parents are scared, I



...d, Fla., center, and her son, Calvin Simms, 12, right, gather early for a rally Thursday at Fort Mellon Park in ... teenager who was fatally shot by a neighborhood watch captain last month. AP

s, he's Latino, but does that excuse him?

ness."

In Florida, Zimmerman shifted his plans, enrolling in Seminole State College with hopes of becoming a law enforcement officer. He became the self-appointed protector of the streets around his home, although his neighborhood watch organization was not officially registered. He called the police department at least 46 times since 2004 to report everything from open garages to suspicious people. In 2005, according to police records obtained by the Orlando Sentinel and other news organizations, Zimmerman was twice accused of either criminal misconduct or violence. He had a concealed-weapon permit and had a black Kel-Tec semiautomatic handgun and a holster the night Martin died.

Zimmerman's father has sought to emphasize his family's diversity in hopes of saving his son from condemnation as a racist. While images of protests from across the country skitter past on television screens, the elder Zimmerman has tried to do what others have been doing, in various ways, for days: define his son. George is "a Spanish-speaking minority," the father wrote in a letter delivered to the



James Gilchrist of Orlando, Fla., attends a rally for Martin. AP

agery: the black man as a symbol of "violence, fear and deviant behavior." A young man could be susceptible to the influence of that image whether his "mother is from Peru or Norway."

Hispanics and black Americans have a shared history of discrimination in the United States. But they also have a shared history of tension — in neighborhoods, schools, even prisons. In Latin America, including Peru, Afro Latinos have frequently

at the University of Central Florida. Hispanics are an ethnic group, but within that group there are different races. There are black Dominicans and Cubans, for instance.

"Who is Hispanic and who's not is not as clear as other ethnic groups," said Martinez-Fernandez. "There's no such thing as a Hispanic race. It has to do with origin, culture and race. Some people argue that language should be a part. All this complicates identity."

Hispanics make up the nation's largest ethnic group at more than 13 percent of the population, while African Americans are the largest racial group, with more than 12 percent of the population. In the 2010 Census, more than half of people who identified as Hispanic said they were white, and only 3 percent said they were black.

"There's a sense that one group has been harmed historically more than the other," Martinez-Fernandez said. "There's been a history of the dominant group in power pitting one group against the other. I think we have not fought together. There have been few instances of that."

But there have been some signs in Florida that Hispanics

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want you to recognize how easily negative stereotypes imprint upon the human mind and give you the opportunity to think differently.

Whether or not Stand Your Ground laws in the states, including Kentucky, that have them are ever re-examined or repealed, Trayvon Martin's killing should warn us of how images, words and even statistics are used every day to recreate and reinforce narratives invented centuries ago to justify behavior people knew then was morally reprehensible.

People say things differently now. "Savage" has become suspicious, threatening, angry black man or woman, drug dealer or thug. "Inferior" becomes reverse discrimination, affirmative action beneficiary, lazy, dumb children in failing schools or poor children with no work ethic. "Sexually depraved" shows up in legislators joking about the first lady's "large posterior." "Don't be so sensitive" has replaced commands to stay in one's place. "You're not like us. You're not one of us, and you don't deserve the same rights we have," summarizes doubt about the president's religion, allegations he ascribes to a "phony theology" and demands he produce his birth certificate.

News outlets that African Americans rarely control verify the stereotypes with images of blacks in criminality disproportionate to the amount of crime they truly commit. Entertainment companies back up their claims with reality television shows starring black women with nasty attitudes, music videos featuring scantily clad black and brown bodies partying or thugging and nothing to counter or balance the debase-

ment. The shooting of this unarmed child also demonstrates how effective the new quiet, euphemistic rhetoric, fitting for few but applied too often to all, is. It's the reason black children ages 5 to 10 made up 25 percent of the children in Kentucky who had criminal complaints filed against them from 2009 to 2010, although they made up only 9 percent of the age group. It's why black males on free or reduced-price lunch in Jefferson County Public Schools receive more suspensions than any other group.

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It's why, according to a recent study out of the University of Pennsylvania, charities that help black teens struggle to get funding. It's the reason black teens and adults are followed in stores or stopped without probable cause by police and why white women can murder their kids and buy some time by blaming their disappearance on a mysterious black man. It's the reason President Obama held a beer summit after defending his friend, Henry Louis Gates Jr., when police arrested him for looking suspicious in his own home and why the president can call Sandra Fluke to extend sympathy for her in the wake of nine hours of verbal assault by a talk radio performer but hasn't (as of this writing) expressed condolences to Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton.

One page of scary statistics made me act and probably look at least a little foolish my first time in a foreign country. A lifetime of foreboding images, stories and stereotypes applied ubiquitously resulted in an innocent teen carrying Skittles and iced tea being shot point blank in the chest. What have the narratives constructed to justify the unjust done to you?

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