



EDUCATORS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

## **Stereotypes of the Middle East: More Than Meets the Eye**

by Barbara Petzen

**Grade levels:** 9-12

### **Lesson in Brief:**

In Part 1, we discuss the concept of stereotypes and assign homework. In Part 2 we analyze images and discuss patterns of stereotyping

**Time:** 45 minutes over two days or two class periods, with homework

### **Materials:**

- Blackboard or flip chart
- Markers
- Magazines, television, movies, etc., for homework

### **Learning Outcomes:**

- Students will develop a better understanding of the concept of stereotyping.
- Students will think critically about images in the media that portray the Middle East and its inhabitants, make determinations about the impact of the images on perceptions, and consider ways to overcome these stereotypes.

**NCSS Standards:** For more information, see the National Standards for Social Studies Teachers, Volume I.

Culture: Interpret patterns of behavior reflecting values and attitudes that contribute to or pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding.

Individual development and identity: Compare and evaluate the impact of stereotyping, conformity, acts of altruism, and other behaviors on individuals and groups.

Global connections: Explain conditions and motivations that contribute to conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among groups, societies, and nations.

## Lesson Sequence:

### Part 1

1. Be sure students understand the concept of stereotyping.

Notes: Stereotypes, or incomplete and inaccurate beliefs that some people hold about groups of other people, abound across the globe. Stereotypes can be positive or negative. Generalizing is a natural human behavior and is an attempt to simplify and categorize experiences. We naturally compare what we don't know to what we do know -- or think we know.

There is a distinction between stereotypes and generalizations. For example, generalizations bring together a series of observations or experiences relating to an area or group in simplified way. It's a generalization, therefore, to say that men like professional sports, but this does not imply that all do. Stereotypes, on the other hand, ascribe certain characteristics invariably to an entire group.

The most critical stage of learning about these concepts is to think of their consequences and prevent generalizations becoming stereotypes by seeking new information against which generalizations can be tested.

2. Ask students to provide examples of stereotypes and to explain typical characteristics associated with the stereotype (e.g. athletes, lawyers, farmers, etc.).

Notes: Other examples of stereotyping include news items, movies advertisements, and jokes that characterize the way that Middle Easterners feel about the West and the way that people in the West feel about the people of the Middle East.

3. Divide the class into small groups. Have half of the groups brainstorm a list of stereotypical images people in the West associate with the Middle East, Arabs, Muslims, Islam, Israelis, and Jews. The other half of the groups will brainstorm a list stereotypes people in the Middle East might hold about the and Americans. Emphasize that this activity is to generate stereotypes without regard to their validity at this point.

Notes: American portrayals of the Middle East and Middle Easterners have changed over time, from the Arabian Nights and medieval Baghdad prevalent in movies and songs of the 1920s to images of terrorists and oil sheikhs current today.

Popular culture employs powerful representations of the Middle East; for example, pyramids, the lore of the desert, exoticism/eroticism and sexuality (belly dancers), and arches, domes, and minarets. These images often operate on a subliminal level, such as when they are used to market products, from consumer items (tobacco) to residences (Moorish-style homes).

Another example of stereotyping can be found at Epcot in Disney World. Here, Morocco becomes a generic North African restaurant, and Israel is a three-dimensional ride through the Old City.

Other stereotypical images have to do with the ways that Middle Eastern and Muslim women are shown (or are invisible) in film, on television, in books, etc. When they are included at all, they are usually veiled and silent or, more rarely, gun-running terrorists.

4. After 10 minutes, bring the class together and compile two lists, using the blackboard or a flip chart. List stereotypical images in two groups -- one for possible stereotypes held by people of the Middle East about the West, and one for Western stereotypes about the Middle East.
5. Next, discuss with the class how stereotypes originate and are reinforced over time. Ask students to give examples of this phenomenon *unrelated* to the Middle East (perhaps going back to the original discussion).

Notes: Stereotypes are often used in regard to groups that are seen to be either threatening or inferior.

Islamic states have been rivals -- and sometimes allies -- of Western powers since Islam arose in the seventh century. Until the 18th century, Islamic states were seen as significant challengers to Europe. Some stereotypes of the Middle East are born out of fear of this challenge. For example, a common image of Arab soldiers is with a sword in one hand and a Quran in the other.

Other stereotypes of the Middle East arise from assumptions of Western superiority that developed in the 18th and 19th centuries and are still powerful today. These stereotypes include generalizations of backwardness, violence, or laziness of Middle Easterners.

Some stereotypes grow out of our desire to romanticize the "exotic."

6. Ask how might stereotypes of the West (for example, about our government, business models, the life of an "average" American) have originated and grown in the Middle East? What factors contribute to stereotyping (for example, ignorance, fear, feelings of superiority, ideas of noble savagery, jealousy, etc.)?

Notes: The news and entertainment media often use and perpetuate stereotypes. They depend on these characterizations to create a common understanding of events -- a kind of cultural shorthand -- or as a basis for humor.

7. As homework, have students collect stereotypical images, descriptions, and other stereotypical attributions of the Middle East and its peoples. Students may clip news stories, cut pictures out of magazines, or note images in their neighborhoods. Examples might include falafel trucks with pejorative names, advertisements for belly dancing, models of Moorish architecture, ads for Camel cigarettes, travel enticements for the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas, Disney movies, etc.

## Part 2

1. Return to the list of stereotypes of the Middle East generated by the class. Using the images students collected and their original list, have each student team explain the power of media in forming stereotypes.

Notes: Are the stereotypes' underlying assumptions made by peers or relatives? Are they seen on the news, in editorials, movies, advertisements, books, comics, or speeches of political leaders?

2. Record students' observations. Does any pattern emerge?

Notes: Do they think that these same forces are at work in the Middle East to create and reinforce stereotypes of the West? Are stereotypes helpful in understanding different groups? Why or why not?

3. Ask students to recommend ways in which media sources might contribute to helping people move beyond stereotypes.

### **Extensions:**

Have students list films and television programs which deal with the Middle East and/or Muslims. Film examples include Aladdin, The Siege, Three Kings, True Lies, The Sum of All Fears, Thief of Baghdad, Arabian Nights, Return of the Jedi (scene in Jabba the Hutt's palace is modeled on a Middle Eastern despot), and The Adventures of Baron Munchausen. Television shows with relevant episodes include West Wing, Law and Order, Diagnosis Murder, The Simpsons, and others. Have students view a movie or television show with Middle Eastern content and discuss the stereotypes portrayed. The Web site of the UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies (<http://www.isop.ucla.edu/cnes/me-us/orientalism/>) includes a feature that illustrates representations of the Middle East in American popular culture (past and present).

### **Assessment:**

- How well can the student explain the concept of a stereotype?
- How well can the student identify imagery that supports stereotypes of the Middle East and its people?
- To what extent can the student offer alternatives to the use of stereotypical imagery?

### **Web Resources:**

- Culture: A Rich Mosaic  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/themes/culture/index.html>  
Culture, a shared set of traditions, belief systems, and behaviors, is shaped by history, religion, ethnic identity, language, and nationality, among other factors. The Middle East consists of approximately 20 countries, with many different religions and a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups.
- Religion: Three Religions, One God  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/themes/religion/index.html>  
Three of the world's major religions -- the monotheist traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam -- were all born in the Middle East and are all inextricably linked to one another.
- Economics: It's More Than Oil  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/themes/economics/index.html>  
National economies throughout the Middle East struggled in the 19th and 20th centuries to

develop their natural and human resources, to modernize their societies, and to raise their standards of living.

- Roles of Women  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/women/index.html>  
What factors determine the changing roles of women in the Middle East and Islamic societies?
- Stereotypes  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/types/index.html>  
What are some typical misperceptions and stereotypes Westerners hold about Islam and the Middle East, and vice versa?
- Reaching Across the Divide  
<http://www.npr.org/news/specials/sixmonths/muslim.html> Attacks prompt a Muslim woman to teach others about her faith, dispel myths, and build understanding.
- Arab Stereotypes and American Educators  
[http://www.adc.org/index.php?id=283&no\\_cache=1&sword\\_list\[\]=stereotype](http://www.adc.org/index.php?id=283&no_cache=1&sword_list[]=stereotype)  
An overview of American stereotypes in popular culture
- Center for Near Eastern Studies: Media: Veiling and the Media  
<http://www.isop.ucla.edu/cnes/outreach/media/veiling/>  
This site provides a variety of viewpoints and resources in the Western popular media that look at veiling of Muslim women.
- Video: The Portrayal of the American in Arabic Literature  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/video/cmcs1.html>  
Dr. William Granara Harvard University discusses a common portrayal of Americans in modern Arabic literature.

#### Related Activities:

- Global Connections Lesson. Dissecting the Media  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/educators/types/lesson2.html>  
Do journalists shape the news or just report it?
- Global Connections Lesson. "Reading" Political Cartoons  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/educators/types/lesson3.html>  
Cartoons express editorial viewpoints and often rely on stereotypes.
- Global Connections Lesson. How Many Wives?  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/educators/women/lesson3.html>  
A closer look at excerpts and interpretations of the Quran on marriage
- Global Connections Lesson. Muslim Women Through Time  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/educators/women/lesson2.html>  
An exploration of the effects of culture and personal circumstances on women

- Global Connections Lesson. Who Wears a Veil?  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/educators/women/lesson1.html>  
Exposing and exploring common stereotypes of Muslim women
- A Woman's Place  
[http://www.pbs.org/visavis/resources\\_mstr.html](http://www.pbs.org/visavis/resources_mstr.html)  
Students will learn about women's status in Iran and the U.S. across different points in history, explain why women in Iran dress and interact with men in specific ways, and relate this to certain groups/religions in the U.S., and adopt the perspective of a woman living at a different time in the U.S. or Iran.
- Tolerance in Times of Trial  
<http://www.pbs.org/americaresponds/tolerance.html>  
Students will explore the problems inherent in assigning blame to populations or nations of people. Students will also look at contemporary examples of ethnic conflict, discrimination, and stereotyping at home and abroad.
- Arab Americans: In the Aftermath of the Terrorist Attacks on the U.S.  
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/lifeafter911/arabamerican.html>  
Students will begin to understand who Arab Americans are, where they come from, and the cultural diversity and complexity of what it means to be Arab American.
- Advertisers Tread Lightly  
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/october01/warads/index.html>  
Students will analyze how one national company responded to the recent tragedy by incorporating special messages into its advertising.
- Stereotypes and Myths about Islam  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/muslims/activities.html>  
Students will explore what they know about Muslims and/or Islam, and then they will look for information that confirms or contradicts what they know.

Source: Global Connections Web site, pbs.org/globalconnections. 2002. Reprinted with permission of WGBH Educational Foundation.