

Stereotyping

I: We're going to have a round table discussion here about typical traits of countries that we know. And perhaps we could begin with Sophie here, from Great Britain. What typical traits would you say are part of England?

S: It's a difficult question really. England is very much affected by being an island. And the sense that you should be able to decide over yourself.

I: Individualistic, would you say?

S: Individualistic, yes. Not wanting other people to decide over you. Also actually quite a lot of tolerance for people being different. There isn't just one type of English person, so you accept that people can be slightly different, do different things from you. There's not a sense of everyone having to do the same thing just because it's a Sunday or a Friday evening.

I: So you're thinking individualism, tolerance. So would you agree with that, Mercy? I know that you're from Great Britain also, but you have a background which includes other cultures as well.

M: Yes, to some extent I would agree with that. I've found that, for example, in England, they're a bit more strict, I find. Quite contrary to what you see there, Sophie. Probably because I have a different colour skin.

I: Because you have an Indian background.

M: That's right.

I: Or that is to say your parents are Indian.

M: Yes, that's right.

I: Okay. Did you... Were you able to see a difference between the way that your parents were culturally and the way that other people living in Oxford were? I know you come from Oxford, England.

M: Yes, I remember on quite a few occasions where... where we experienced that young children threw rocks at our windows, just because we were the only coloured family on the block.

I: Oh, I see.

M: So in that respect, we had quite a dramatic upbringing, really. But as time went on, I think people began to mellow more, and were more accepting of other people.

I: Is that true of the country as a whole or just because of the neighbourhood you were living, do you think?

M: I think it varies. I mean, I know that in London, in Southwark, for example, you would find it difficult to spot the white man, because there's so many coloured people there. So it becomes like a little India, you know, so they made their own little village there, almost. But I think after a while, when people are more open to differences and are accepted, it becomes a lot easier.

I: I see. Well, I said this was going to be a round table discussion, so I'm going to throw myself in here as well. I come from the United States and I have a very different background, but when I think of what's typically American, I become affected. I've lived abroad for many years and I've come to view the United States from people who see it from other angles. And there the stereotypes are very clear. Americans eat junk food. They drive big cars. They're very loud. They like to be first in line, if there's going to be a line at all when they come somewhere. These are the stereotypes, and I find that interesting because, coming from the United States, I know that America is not one culture at all. We're a whole set of different cultures. So for me it was sort of curious to see that somebody thought of Americans as one thing at all.

S: It's the same thing I've experience, actually, coming to Norway, that people say things like, "Oh, you're English. You must like tea." As if the whole country does nothing but drink tea. Actually. I think coffee's more of a common drink than tea these days in many homes. This kind of thing often happens when you're a foreigner coming to another country, that you're labeled and that you're just given a few characteristics, and they expect you to do this, that and the other.

I: Stereotypes, they're called.

S: Absolutely.

I: Yeah, my stereotype is of course when I meet people, it's like, "Would you like a Coca-Cola? Can I offer you a hamburger?" That kind of thing. Were you also subject or were your parents subject to such stereotypes?

M: I do remember they would ask us if we wanted hot chilli pepper, extra chilli pepper on our food when we went out for a meal or something, you know.

I: Oh, I see.

M: So in that respect, they thought that all Indians really liked hot, hot food.

S: In a way, I've had a slightly different experience than you, because having a white skin colour, I've just blended in, whether I've been in Norway with my English

background or come from Norway to England. So the thing I've found is actually a complete lack of interest in the other part of your background. So you're assumed to be completely English in England if you speak English, as I do. And nobody is at all interested in Scandinavia. It was just irrelevant. So when I was growing up in school for example in choosing foreign languages, I actually did Norwegian as an extra exam subject, where I was coached by my dad. And the school thought this was absolutely extraordinary. Why on Earth did I want to do Norwegian? Whereas these days you talk about multicultural identity, keeping up your other language and so on. But then? No, you're in England. You should just be English now.

I: This is kind of funny because I come from a quite different direction. I've come to live in Norway and I've lived here for many years, but everybody thinks I know a lot about America. So my problem isn't that they don't know or aren't interested. My problem is they already figure they know it, and then they come and say, "But tell me, how can you kill people in America, in the electric chair? I know you do." And then I'm supposed to personally stand for this. It's sort of curious. As a matter of fact, they don't kill people in the state I come from, but, you know, I can't begin explaining things, so I have a awful lot of baggage that I have to deal with when I talk to people.

S: Do you think that's because it's a question of Norwegians' attitude toward a big world power like the States, or do you think you'd experience the same thing if you were, say, in Germany or France?

I: I have been in Germany and France and there is a bit of the same, although the larger the country, the less they're interested in other countries, that's for sure.