Labels & Categories

The University of New Hampshire has listed the word "American" as "problematic" in the school's recent Bias-Free Language Guide, because the term "assumes the U.S. is the only country" in North, South, and Central America. The guide recommends "U.S. citizen" instead, and also warns against using "rich," "poor," and "gendered" terms such as "mothering." *(The Week magazine, August 7, 2015)*

A California college student was detained for five hours at Philadelphia's airport for having Arabic flashcards in his luggage. Nick George says he should have been released after he showed ID and explained that he was teaching himself Arabic. Instead, he says, he was handcuffed and thrown into a holding cell where a TSA official asked him, "Do you know what language Osama bin Laden spoke?" *(The Week magazine, September 25, 2009)*

The 1990 census shows that one-fifth of American families – the poorest – received less than five percent of all money income in the United States, while another fifth – the richest – received over 40 percent. These numbers change little from year to year. From this, one might conclude that those born poor are doomed to remain poor, while those born rich will remain so. In fact, people move up and down the income scale continuously. Between 1987 and 1988, for example, almost one-fourth of the families in the highest income category fell into a lower group. Conversely, 17 percent of those in the lowest fifth were in a higher group the following year. The dynamic movement explains why Americans have never sympathized with class warfare. They know instinctively that those who are on top today could easily be down and out tomorrow, and that luck and hard work can turn today’s poor into tomorrow’s rich. *(Bruce Bartlett, in The Wall Street Journal)*

A friend of mine liked to bake cookies ahead of time for the holiday season and store them in the freezer. Her family always found them, and by Christmas not a crumb would be left. Last year she baked as usual, and then put all the cookies in special containers before freezing them. This time not one cookie was touched. She had labeled all the containers "Four Cups Sliced Zucchini." *(Janet Nelson, in Reader's Digest)*

I am not a diabetic. I am a person with diabetes. I can never forget that. I can't let it define me either. *(Kelly Kunik, in Guideposts magazine)*

Yes, virtue can be very rewarding: Doing well by doing good: It's an attractive theory of business, but it hasn't been scientifically tested, said Ray Fisman in Slate.com. Until now. Two Harvard researchers recently "set out to discover whether consumers prefer to buy from do-gooder companies." For their experiment they chose ABC Carpet and Home, an upscale home-furnishings store in New York City. First, they set out two brands of towels and candles and stuck a "fair labor" label on one brand of each item. Sure enough, the labeled items sold much better than the unlabeled ones. Then the researchers marked up the prices on the "fair labor" towels and candles by 10 percent. "Quite remarkably, this increase made people buy even more towels and candles," possibly because "the higher prices made the products' fair labor claims more credible." Granted, this experiment was carried out in liberal, affluent New York. Would shoppers at a Midwestern Wal-Mart behave the same way? There are two Harvard researchers who would be "happy to spend a few more nights in the stockroom with a label gun to find out." *(The Week magazine, November 2, 2007)*

As first-year medical-school students at Wayne State University in Detroit, we were instructed to forsake the competitiveness that dominated our undergraduate studies. The faculty urged us to do our best and to forget about class rankings. However, this message did not sink in until one instructor asked what people call the person who graduates at the bottom of his or her medical-school class. No one knew. The professor smiled and said, "Doctor." *(Ronald L. Fong, in Reader's Digest)*

**William Ferguson, chairman of Nynex Corporation, once told this story about Albert Einstein in heaven: Einstein was having difficulty finding people on his intellectual level to talk to, so one day he decided to stand at the pearly gates and ask people who entered what their IQ was. Before very long he was having a lot of success guessing what people did for a living on the basis of their level of intelligence. For instance, a woman was ushered through the gates and in response to Einstein’s question, said she had an IQ of 190. “Why, you must be a physicist,” Einstein said. “Indeed I am,” said the woman. “I’d love to chat with you about the progress being made in nuclear fusion and in superconductivity, as well at what’s going on in space,” said Einstein. “Please wait over there.” He stopped a man who was entering the gates, and the man told him his IQ was 140. “You must be a physician, probably a surgeon,” said Einstein. His guess was right. “Wonderful,” said Einstein. “I want to talk to you about the latest organ transplant techniques and their effects on life expectancy. Can you wait a few moments until we can get together?” Another man walked in and told Einstein he had an IQ of 75. “Is that so?” said Einstein. “So what do you think is going to happen with interest rates?” *(The Best of BITS & PIECES, p. 54)***

**Labels are for filing. Labels are for clothing. Labels are not for people. *(Martina Navratilova)***

**Bellevue College in Washington state now offers applicants seven different options for their gender: "feminine, masculine, androgynous, transgender, gender neutral, other, and prefer not to say." The college says the question will help it create better services and classes for gender-variant students. *(The Week magazine, December 13, 2013)***

Long ago, humans began labeling and cataloguing each other. Eventually, lighter-skinned humans became “whites,” darker-skinned humans became “blacks,” and people with intermediate skin tones became “yellow-,” “red-,” and “brown-skinned.” These labels don’t reflect reality faithfully, and if you lined up 1,000 randomly selected people from across the earth, none of them would share exactly the same skin tone. Of course, the continuity of skin tone hasn’t stopped humans from assigning each other to discrete categories like “black” and “white” – categories that have no basis in biology but nonetheless go on to determine the social, political, and economic well-being of their members. *(Adam Alter, in Drunk Tank Pink, as it appeared in The Week magazine, May 10, 2013)*

Husband, reading ingredients on cereal box, to wife: "If the label is correct, there's enough fiber in this cereal to make me a sweater." *(Lichty & Wagner, Field Newspaper Syndicate)*

After physicist Richard Feynman won a Nobel Prize for his work, he visited his old high school. While there, he decided to look up his records. He was surprised to find that his grades were not as good as he had remembered them. And he got a kick out of the fact that his IQ was 124, not much above average. Dr. Feynman said that winning the Nobel Prize was one thing, but to win it with an IQ of only 124 was really something. Most of us would agree because we all assume that the winners of Nobel prizes have exceptionally high IQs. If Feynman had known he was really just a bit above average in the IQ department, would he have had the audacity to launch the unique and creative research experiments that would eventually win him the greatest recognition the scientific community can give? Perhaps not. Maybe the knowledge that he was a cut above average, but not in the genius category, would have influenced what he tried to achieve. After all, from childhood most of us have been led to believe that ordinary people don’t accomplish extraordinary feats. Most of us fall short of our potential because of little things we know or assume about ourselves. And the most self-defeating assumption of all is that we are just like everyone else. *(The Best of BITS & PIECES, p. 10)*

**Somerset Maugham, the English writer, once wrote a story about a janitor at St. Peter’s Church in London. One day a young vicar discovered that the janitor was illiterate and fired him. Jobless, the man invested his meager savings in a tiny tobacco shop, where he prospered, bought another, expanded, and ended up with a chain of tobacco stores worth several hundred thousand dollars. One day the man’s banker said, “You’ve done well for an illiterate, but where would you be if you could read and write?” “Well,” replied the man, “I’d be janitor of St. Peter’s Church in Neville Square.” *(The Best of BITS & PIECES, p. 178)***

**We are all, to some extent, crazy. If you come to know any human being well enough, you eventually gain access to the basement where the traumas and wounds and deprivations are stored; rummage in there for a while, and you begin to understand the neuroses and fixations that shape his or her personality. The successful, reasonably happy people I’ve known are nuts in a way that works for them. Those who struggle and suffer fail to turn their preoccupations to some meaningful use. Next week, the American Psychiatric Association releases the latest version of its bible of mental illnesses, the DSM-5, which catalogs about 300 categories of crazy. Critics of all kinds have lined up to assail this dictionary of disorders as subjective and lacking in scientific validity – assembled primarily to justify the prescribing of pills of dubious value. About 50 percent of the population, the APA admits, will have one of its listed disorders at some point in their lives. Shy, like Emily Dickinson? You have “avoidant personality disorder.” Obsessed with abstractions and numbers? You have “autistic spectrum disorder,” like Isaac Newton. Suffer from “narcissistic personality disorder,” with some hypersexuality thrown in? You must be a politician. To be skeptical of these neat categories isn’t to deny that minds get broken, stuck, or lost, and need help finding their way out of misery. But psychotherapy remains an art, not a science; there is no bright line between nuts and not. If you’re an old lady who lives amid piles of newspapers and personal treasures, you have “hoarding disorder.” If you’re a CEO who exploits sweatshop labor to pile up countless billions, you’re on the cover of Forbes. (William Falk, in The Week magazine, May 24, 2013)**

**Not every pedophile is an abuser: Viewing child porn is despicable, said Janice Turner, but it doesn’t necessarily make you a child molester. At least 50,000 Britons visit illegal websites, but only about 15 percent of them will ever go on to attempt to molest a child. Many, in fact, don’t set out looking for child porn, but get sucked into it gradually while surfing adult porn. One site of sexy coeds leads to another marked “barely legal,” and that in turn links to others featuring younger and still younger girls. Until that moment, a man “may have been unaware of his own desires, but he clicks and clicks.” If all these men were to be locked away in prison, it would be “a social catastrophe.” A better solution would be to regulate the Internet so that men wouldn’t be tempted into illegal behavior. At one recent conference, “splash pages” were proposed that would pop up to warn viewers they were about to enter an illegal site. Yet the Child Exploitation and Online Protection agency said it didn’t want to warn men -- it wanted to catch them. That’s unfair: Just as porn degrades women, it can also “distort and deprave the sexuality of men.” Can we “try to stop them being groomed into criminality, abuse, and damned lives?” (The Week magazine, July 5-12, 2013)**

These racial labels impose boundaries and categories on an i8nfinitely complex social world, but once in place these boundaries are very difficult to dissolve. People are apt to resolve racial ambiguity by resorting to racial labels. *(Adam Alter, in Drunk Tank Pink, as it appeared in The Week magazine, May 10, 2013)*

We must reject not only the stereotypes that others have of us, but also those that we have of ourselves. *(Former U.S. Rep. Shirley Chisholm)*

The foolish war on RINOs: My fellow conservatives have an excommunication problem, said Peter Wehner. In their passion for their principles, many purists now insist on judging every Republican public official and conservative pundit by a series of litmus tests. This impulse is now on display in the bitter battle over Obamacare. Rep. Pete Sessions of Texas, "a rock-solid conservative" with a 97 percent rating from the American Conservative Union, is being denounced by Tea Party activists as a traitor and a RINO -- Republican in Name Only -- for opposing the government shutdown effort led by Sen. Ted Cruz. Sessions felt that shutting down the government would only hurt the GOP. Sadly, a growing number of conservatives now demand that any Republican who doesn't conform to a rigid ideology be kicked out of office. "This excommunication impulse" is not in the movement's interest. "If a similar litmus test had been applied to Ronald Reagan when he was governor of California, when he signed into law a record tax hike and liberalized California's abortion law," he would have been cast aside as a RINO. Pragmatism in the defense of liberty is no vice. *(The Week magazine, October 11, 2013)*

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