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Ms. Johnson

English 1101

December 6, 2011

Understanding over Labeling

I was apprehensive about writing this paper: a paper in which I discuss my experience of being an American of Indian descent. This apprehension surfaced because I was worried that readers would immediately stereotype me as “the Indian kid.” However, my reluctance to share my thoughts was, at the same time, a perfect example of my motivation for writing this paper in the first place. Although I was born in Decatur, Georgia, and grew up with the standard American lifestyle of school, baseball games, and cheeseburgers, at times in my life, I have felt that others do not accept me as easily because of my Indian ethnicity. In our society, there exists a tendency to label individuals based not only on race, but other physical traits as well such as body type and attractiveness. Nearly all people have experienced being labeled at times in their lives. Although the extent to which labels have impacted my life remains unclear, I believe that labeling is the leading cause of false judgements and prevents a person's true self from being seen.

Playing basketball is an example of a situation in which I have experienced limitations caused by labels. I played on a community basketball team for many years of my life, and at my high school, I even played pick up basketball along with varsity players. After lots of practice, I have gotten fairly good at the game. Yet when I used

to go to the gym in Atlanta to play basketball, I was often picked close to last by the players who didn't know my skill level. I also have noticed that African American players are often picked first even if their skill level is unknown. Without knowing a person's true abilities, labels are given and assumptions are made. While these assumptions exist based on facts, such as the fact that 80 percent of players in the National Basketball Association are African American, labeling can cause a person to choose a teammate who is not as good of a player. As an older person looking back, I now understand that just as one can lose out on choosing a good player, a person can lose out on making a good friend or even dating a special person if judgements are made instead of seeing a person for who he or she truly is.

As we learn to look past the outside appearances of the people in our lives, we become better able to understand who a person truly is. Overcoming our tendency to label can be very difficult. The study of Interpersonal Communication tells us that the physical appearance of a person is the leading influence on our perception of that person. Appearances help us put others into categories and decide on those who we can best relate to (West and Turner 33). The study of Interpersonal Communication tells us that labeling others is natural and instinctive (West and Turner 34). I myself have often judged others based on their appearance. I have even stereotyped other Indian kids as nerds! While labeling may be natural, if we only choose who we communicate with based on externalities and avoid breaking out of our comfort zones, we miss out on getting to know many great individuals.

The limiting effect that labels can have on a person is well portrayed in Marilyn Schiel's, "Levi's," an essay that was read in my English class. Schiel describes her experience as a young girl who grows up watching her brother participate in activities such as riding bikes, building tree houses, and shooting

squirrels (Schiel 1). Her brother was out doing “boy activities” while she “had to be content triking [her] embroidered bunnies...[and] settle for building domino houses on the living room floor” (Schiel 1). These limitations were, to Schiel, represented by her brother's pair of Levi jeans that she could not wear. Because of Schiel's external traits of being a girl, she is limited to playing girl games and wearing girl clothes. These limitations existed for her because of society's strong gender roles during her time. Despite the fact that on the inside, her desires were similar to her brother's, she was unable to participate until she received her brother's jeans and broke the gender roles. Schiel's essay shows us how a person can be prevented from being their true selves because of the labels that society attaches to physical traits.

This issue of stereotyping has been discussed countless times because it is a huge issue in our society. In a 2008 study by CNN, researchers asked young children a series of questions and had them answer by pointing to one of five cartoon drawings of people that varied in skin color from light to dark. Older children were asked the same questions using the same drawings, and were then asked a series of questions about a chart that showed light to dark skin tones. The study revealed that our tendency to label others based on skin color begins at a young age. A black child was recorded saying that a white child was ugly because he is white. A white child was also recorded saying a black child is dumb because she has dark skin (“Study”). These children may grow up with a tendency to label others as dumb or ugly based solely on skin color. While these are only stereotypes, they are limiting because even a truly intelligent or attractive person may be labeled as something otherwise.

Every day as we see people in the office, the classroom or even on television, we are constantly making judgements based on physical appearances. These

judgements are often false judgements, which can limit an individual and society as a whole. For example: A person may not be picked to play basketball because of his or her race, a girl may not be able to play with the boys because of her gender, or a young child may call another child dumb or ugly because of skin color. Labeling is the leading cause of false judgements and prevents a person's true self from being seen. We must make the effort in our daily lives to see others for who they truly are. I encourage us all to break out of our comfort zones and interact with everyone openly. It can be tough, but when we avoid labeling and allow ourselves to connect with all people equally, we can stop assuming the false about others and begin discovering the truth.

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Works Cited

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