

**Paper Title:** Confrontation and Collaboration

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Audra Buck is an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Maryland and former Assistant Professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, both in the USA. She holds an MFA in graphic design from Cranbrook Academy of Art and a Bachelors of Journalism from the University of Missouri-Columbia. She is the co-author of *Sticks + Stones: A Collaborative Exchange Exploring Labeling and Stereotyping*. Her experimental design work is an investigation of storytelling through a cross-pollination of journalism and fine art. She explores these subjects through a variety of media, including motion graphics.

## **Confrontation and Collaboration**

Not two days after they first met, Pamela Beverly and Audra Buck started planning what would become *Sticks + Stones*, a cross-country, multi-university collaborative project exploring stereotypes and labeling, racism, religion, and the power of graphic design to create change. Professor Beverly, at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, and Professor Buck, at University of Alabama at Birmingham, wrote curriculum inspired by the similarities and differences in their teaching in regions known for their strong religious cultures yet disparate racial makeups<sup>1</sup> and the assumptions made of their regions.

## **The Potential of Design**

At its core, graphic design is about message crafting, the products of which often transcend language and cultural barriers. The most successful design communicates with impact and needs no additional explanation. Design reaches mass audiences more directly than fine art and more accessibly than technical or scientific papers. Traditionally young designers have been trained to serve the interests of brand, commerce, and information visualization. Graphic designers are responsible for shaping the visual communication environment of our world.

The *Sticks + Stones* project began out of a concern that graphic design pedagogy was becoming too isolated and irrelevant in its skill-based curriculum and out of a perceived need for that curriculum to integrate humanities addressing broader belief and communication issues, such as stereotyping and racial and religious intolerance. Connecting students from diverse backgrounds and regions in the United States provided the opportunity for instructors to focus on visual communications that bridge cultural differences and to present the design profession as a vital, contributive force in the larger world.

Project collaborators sought to provide the next generation of designers with first-hand experience of the social volatility of visual communications and arouse the awareness and sensitivities that can lead to more responsible message making. Graphic design students have the potential to engage in a global dialogue, modeling international conversations that shape opinion and lead action, and they can assume this greater power and responsibility in affecting a positive course for the world when design curricula are as informed by history, sociology, current events, and philosophy as by post-modern experimentation with form.

## **Power and Responsibility**

What the Danish saw as an expression of free speech in a newspaper cartoon depiction of Mohammed, Muslims saw as blasphemous. Culturally accepted images in one country might not be welcomed in another, and visual language can be easily misunderstood and misrepresented. Unintended offensive messages steal into the projects we create, reinforcing expected behaviors, social norms, and hackneyed stereotypes. Designers can't assume that because they did not intend to offend or did not mean to use an image or a particular connotation of an image, that others will not make other meaningful

associations. If individuals believe in stereotypes, they will use them.<sup>2</sup> Humans use stereotypes to help them categorize and make sense of the world, but they are also often damaging.<sup>3</sup>

“Beyond design, other media-based stereotypes wield considerable influence. For instance, research has shown that:

- White television viewers who watch a stereotyped comic portrayal of Black people are later more likely to judge a Black defendant guilty of an assault.

- Males who view movie scenes objectifying women are later more likely to believe that a date rape victim experienced pleasure and “got what she wanted.”

- People who watch a music video objectifying women later rate a woman as more sexual and submissive when she returns a man’s advances.”<sup>4</sup>

Having an awareness of the power of stereotypes doesn’t mean designers must sterilize their messages to politically correct blandness. Design has the potential to excite, incite, and provoke, but in stereotype-challenging ways. Ultimately, messages have consequences in ways we might forget or fail to imagine, and it is important to teach students to recognize these undercurrents in their work. Designers can’t just shrug the responsibility for message and intent off on the client and be absolved of ties to harmful results; we have a role, after all, in whatever lasting affects our work might produce.

Stereotypes are malleable—if society allows them to be. In the early 1800s, Irish Americans were the largest group of U.S. immigrants but were also heavily discriminated against.<sup>5</sup> Today, the Chicago River is dyed green every year in honor of the Irish holiday St. Patrick’s Day. Although visual communication, historically, has served extreme and despicable agendas (such as Nazi propaganda), it is just as powerful as a tool to bridge communities, set goals, motivate communities to address global problems, and be a catalysts for ideological shifts, as with the Irish Americans. National borders and political barriers standing in the way of global unity can be dissolved if our mass message crafters are both aware and responsible.

### **Sticks + Stones: Purpose and Ultimate Goals**

From the start, Sticks + Stones was an experiment for all involved. With the goal of connecting design education to larger national and world issues, collaborators encouraged students not only to talk about stereotypes but to shed some political correctness and provoke viewers on the touchy issues of race, religion, regionalism, and socioeconomic status. Faculty admitted to not having all the answers and insisted that students work towards original solutions to the identity problems that have challenged generations.

Sticks + Stones employed a series of design projects, critiques, workshops, and discussions to lead students to the realization that:

1. Images and text used irresponsibly or maliciously can and will be harmful.
2. The history of graphic design illuminates how design has been incorporated to oppress and hurt populations of people.
3. Open dialog leads to the transparency necessary to understand and manage our own personal stereotypes.

Multiple viewpoints were absolutely necessary for meaningful conversations. The design students at the four 2006 participating American universities—University of Alabama at Birmingham; Weber State University in Ogden, Utah; Northeastern University in Boston; and San Francisco State University—represented a cross section of diverse religious, ethnic, sexually orientated, and socioeconomic demographics of the United States. Specifically these students embodied 22 ethnic backgrounds, 13 religious affiliations, and eight countries including Iran, El Salvador, Spain, the Philippines, Japan, and Columbia.

The group's diversity offered a wide range of political perspectives, life experiences, and spiritual practices that informed discussions and created a larger knowledge base. Students grappled with impressions of the people from different regions and how they are viewed as similar or dissimilar. How do expectations differ when you learn someone is from the Middle East or China or Boston or Utah or the Deep South of the United States?

Throughout the term, students read and discussed articles on stereotyping and relevant social activism design precedents. By broadening the Sticks + Stones curriculum to include non-graphic design readings and discussions, students were asked to focus on how their work lives outside of the designer's sphere. Every piece of communication design makes a statement of some sort. What, then, is the true nature of this message in all of its more subtle dimensions?

Along with five distinct phases, the curriculum included the following readings:

On social psychology: (*Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation and Images that Injure*), giving detailed accounts of the roots of, damage done by, and perpetuations of stereotypes;

On human geography (Lucy Lippard's *Lure of the Local*), offering perspectives of how an artist's sense of place or home influences the resulting work;

On graphic design activism (*Conscientious Objectives, Graphic Agitation 1, Graphic Agitation 2, and Citizen Designer*), explaining designers and their specific ways of creating powerful and responsible imagery;

On information graphics (Richard Saul Wurman's *Information Architects* and Edward Tufte's visual imagery series), revealing organized ways of depicting complicated information. The latter articles might find their way into typical design curricula, but the former articles were decidedly outside the usual design reading assignments.

They also participated in a video conference discussion with Mark Randall of World Studio Foundation in New York, a socially minded, non-profit organization that was formed to use graphic design to create change in communities.

### **Phase 1: Postcard Project**

To open the students' belief systems for examination, collaborating professors invited behaviors that some would have considered unacceptable if not ethically perverse.

The first phase project focused on the quick judgments we make every day based on someone's appearance, friends and/or belongings. The less we know about an individual, the more inclined we are to paint that person in broad, general strokes that characterize

his or her particular subculture by reputation. But we may discover, after getting to know our acquaintance, that stereotypical assumptions shadowing a certain group don't fit the individual at all. To draw out this profiling tendency and to generate meaningful discussion on important ethical responsibilities as communication designers, collaborators asked students to respond briefly to the following questions:

1. Male or female?
2. What are the brands of the clothes you're wearing today?
3. What kind of car do you or someone from your family drive?
4. What color are your eyes?
5. How do you greet your friends (such as a special handshake, language or phrase)?
6. How long have you owned the shirt you are wearing?
7. What is one item you routinely wear?
8. Answer only one of the following: Where do you live? *or* What religion do you practice? *or* What is your ethnic background?

A response to this mini-survey was randomly given to a student at another school who created a quick, postcard-sized image of the respondent. With only a few bits of information on which to build a portrait, some stereotyping was expected to occur naturally. The results provided the material basis for an investigation into the stereotyping phenomenon in general. In a few cases the profiles revealed so little about the individual that the designer inclined toward bland, non-descript imagery. In others, the brevity and superficiality of the survey information was actually liberating. It meant that a more unhindered interpretation could be explored.

One portrait of an international student from Spain referenced the stereotypical Spanish images including bull fighting and dancing wine glasses. The student, who had spent considerable time in Spain as well as the United States, laughed easily at the resulting over-the-top portrait.

In another example, "long earrings" appeared in response to the survey question "What is one item you routinely wear?" The student who was assigned that portrait associated long earrings with prostitutes and "party girls." By the time the portrait of this student was complete, the subject's image had become a blue-faced, borderline hooker, whose face evidenced much drinking and drug use. (Fig.1) (The student who was profiled in this way was baffled by the depiction.) The designer asked her colleagues if she had taken the image too far. "Let it stand," was the response. It was a fact, they reasoned, that the vision did occur in the designer's mind, and besides, it's a good example of the way stereotyping works—wrong assumptions and lies based on inadequate information. In a curious twist to this exchange, the two students met in Los Angeles and were surprised to discover that the profiler was a Native American descended from the Sioux and the profiled was an African American single mother from the Deep South.



Fig.1  
 Postcard portrait of a UAB student by a WSU student in response to these responses:  
*gender:* female  
*brands:* Gap  
*car:* Chevy Tracker  
*eyes:* dark brown  
*greeting:* hey chick or wuz up  
*age of shirt:* three months  
*an item you routinely wear:* long earrings  
*where do you live?* Hoover, Alabama

The postcard paradox demonstrated the power of imagery to stir the emotions: some of the portraits were deeply affective even though all were based on shallow understanding. A Jewish student was portrayed wearing a sweatshirt bearing the word “Jesus” under a “no” slash symbol. Another powerful postcard depicted an oversized devil figure about to take a bite out of a helpless female figure. The text on the card read: “Should have believed in God, Jane.” The imagery was in response to one survey question: What religion do you practice? The student’s answer: “I don’t practice religion.” (Fig.2) Indeed, some of the most adventurous postcard portraits revealed far more about the designer than the subject portrayed.



Fig.2  
 Postcard portrait of a NU student by a WSU student in response to these responses:  
*gender:* female  
*brands:* lei, Gap  
*car:* Toyota Camry  
*eyes:* blue  
*greeting:* saying hi  
*age of shirt:* two years  
*an item you routinely wear:* silver ring  
*what religion do you practice?* I don't practice religion

In the context of assignment objectives, some designers had obviously tested boundaries more freely than others and most were not used to deliberately offending

people with their creative expressions. This was a risky exercise, largely without the cool and distant perspective more common to the academic classroom. Participants learned the power of design to misrepresent and to offend. But for students preparing for careers in visual communication, where mass audience considerations play a huge role in shaping messages, this was critical learning.

## **Phase 2: Self-portraits and Subsequent Exchange**

It is easy to dismiss that which we cannot see, even if we know it is harmful. Science fiction writer Bruce Sterling once queried if we might be more environmentally responsible “if carbon dioxide were red, and our wasteful emissions turned the sky to the color of blood, or if we had the eco-equivalent of a Geiger counter and sensors that would click, eerily, whenever we left the tap on.”<sup>6</sup> If we fail to recycle, we do not see the immediate repercussions. Likewise, what if we could see tangible evidence of the damage done by thoughts, words and printed stereotypical messages? How would our actions change with the discernible damage in its wake?

One of the ways Sticks + Stones made the power of stereotypes visible was to have students deliberately engage what is not politically correct. In the project’s second phase, students prepared self-portraits that mapped key information about themselves; these works revealed more personal, varied, and in-depth information than the postcard responses. The finished self-portraits were anonymously exchanged between universities. Students then assigned labels to the other schools’ portraits, characterizing what they saw in the individual represented. They were directed not to censor their reactions, despite the incendiary potential of the terms used. Phase 1 asked students to create imagery from words; Phase 2 asked the reverse: use words to describe imagery. Each portrait received between 15 and 30 labels.

One Boston student’s self-portrait received the labels “tree hugger,” “intelligent,” and “possibly retarded.” The latter term was flippantly assigned without a second thought. One San Francisco student’s self-portrait included a large onion image and was labeled “towel head.” The labeler from another school had initially mistaken the onion image for a turban and assigned a term for someone of Middle-Eastern descent who wears a kaffiyeh. This then led to discussions of 9/11, Al Qaeda, and the visualization of terror.

By deliberately labeling someone they knew little about, students were thrust into this common but divisive practice that alienates all of us as groups and individuals. Phase 2 focused on recognizing and understanding this behavior. Since assumptions drawn from fragmentary information about another person are often false, labeling is usually mislabeling.

These future design professionals, soon to have their affect on the world, benefited from the exercise in two important ways. First, they gained critical insight into the ultimate power of words, whether intended to harm or not. They also saw that “true meaning” is variable depending upon context. For example, to be called “privileged” in Boston was not the same as “privileged” in Utah.<sup>7</sup>

Second, students learned to look critically at the signs and signifiers at work in their designs and at taking responsibility for them. One Alabama student who had created a

dark illustration full of graphic imagery was not expecting to receive labels such as “Sadistic,” “Morbid” and “Suicidal.” The interpretation of his audience could not be denied, even though it was a much different than the one he had intended.

The self-portraiture and labeling process offered many opportunities for semiotic analysis and helped set the stage for the third phase of the project: the Los Angeles workshop.

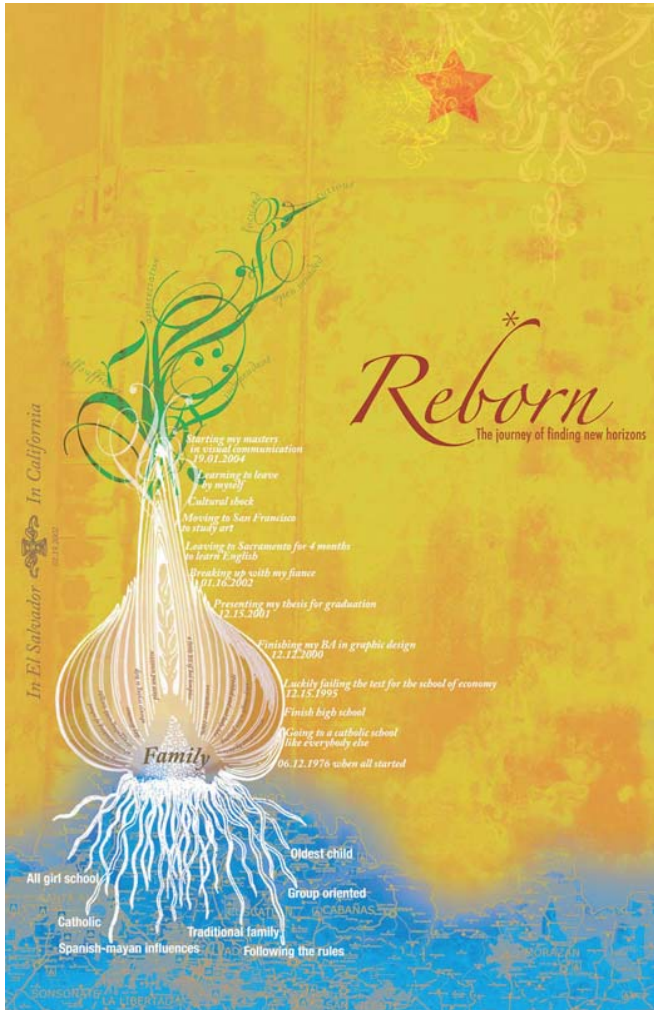


Fig.3  
Self portrait poster  
Maria José Banos, SFSU  
*labeled:*  
Life stinks  
Hate of family  
Confident  
Stuck-up  
Farmer  
Flavorful  
Strong  
Creative  
Driven  
Rooted  
Shrek-wants to break out of upbringing  
Future focused  
Towel head!  
Loves family  
Religious  
Well self-esteem  
Satisfied  
Sure  
Vegetarian  
Obsessive compulsive  
Type A  
Hard working  
Hungry  
Happy Californian  
Focused  
Grown up  
Onion loving  
Book worm  
Know it all

### **Phase 3: Los Angeles workshop**

Next it was necessary to get everyone together for honest, face-to-face discussions about the possible mislabeling and insults in the previous project phases. Students from the four university programs traveled to Los Angeles and met in conference together. The session began with a visit to the Museum of Tolerance, the educational arm of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. It was quite apparent that they were heading for something more than designing a logo or web site. The MOT experience enabled students to see how visual communication has shaped world history. The holocaust exhibit focused on Nazi propaganda's success at convincing the German people to allow genocide to happen (at the bare minimum) and to contribute willingly (at the extreme).

Next, Dr. Robert Corley, an expert in race, religion, and conflict resolution and the director of the UAB Center for Urban Affairs, led students through exercises aimed at sectioning the similarities and differences between students across universities. The "Privilege Walk" exercise created awareness about the socioeconomic status each student experienced during upbringing and how that influences where they are today. Another exercise enabled students from different regions to bridge to each other by exposing their commonalities. Dr. Corley's expertise was essential to the workshop as he led students through the difficult conversations about privilege, race, religion, and class.

Meeting face-to-face made the "name calling" more real for all parties and offered an opportunity for students to re-examine the words they had used to characterize others. Terms once carelessly assigned to another's image assumed greater significance when the labelers met the labeled. References to terrorism, retardation, and Satan caused regret and lead to an emotional discussion, necessary in order to secure the "imprint" of responsible creating into each participant's experience. Next, students divided into small groups to create reaction pieces about the terms discussed.

### **Phase 4: Community Response Project**

At the conclusion of the Los Angeles workshop, students were assigned the fourth phase of the project: to create stereotype-awareness-raising messages for their home communities. They created posters and campaigns targeting the stereotyping of minorities, the negative portrayal of Asian women, and the power of words such as "nerd," "fag," and "minority," and designed interactive games and web sites aimed at challenging audience's stereotyping process. (Fig.4) Student groups also created campaigns to raise awareness about regional issues such as issues of under funded education in Alabama and high Hispanic school drop-out rates in Utah.

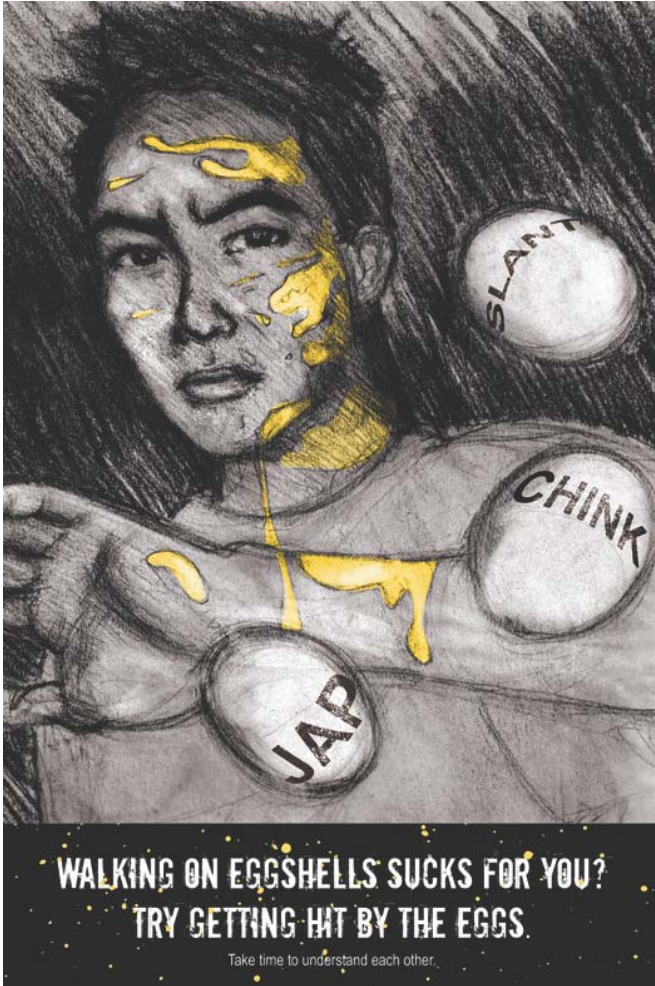


Fig.4  
Sticks Walking on Eggshells  
Michael Magtanong, SFSU  
“Walking on Eggshells” is a poster that was made in response to growing up Filipino. The term “walking on eggshells” represents the feeling of discomfort around those who are from another or unfamiliar ethnic background. The poster is meant to encourage those who may be perceived as “minority” or “other” to speak up and stand up for their rights, as “getting hit by the eggs” is the consequence for being silent.

### Phase 5: Traveling exhibit

Artwork from the project was compiled and curated for a traveling exhibit. Images and interactive components asked gallery attendees to consider how we label one another and what it might be like to walk in the shoes of a person of another race, religion or ethnicity. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute received more than 22,500 visitors during the inaugural show. Earlier this year, the exhibit traveled to Ogden, Utah; it is now on display in Boston through the end of the month. (Fig.5)



Fig.5  
Sticks + Stones traveling  
exhibit at Birmingham  
Civil Rights Institute,  
Birmingham, Alabama

A key component of the exhibit is the interactive kiosk, which allows gallery visitors to engage with the project on a more personal level. Along with providing additional information about the students and the projects, the kiosk offers viewers a chance to assemble their own self-portraits using imagery from the student artwork. When the portrait is finished each guest, too, is assigned a list of labels, just as the students had been.

Another important aspect of the exhibit was the catalog and its dissemination. Copies were made available at the exhibit sites and more than 350 were mailed to U.S. graphic design programs, offering other design professors an idea for creating more socially responsible curriculum.

One of the most rewarding events based around the exhibit has been the Birmingham Pledge Foundation's incorporation of Sticks + Stones into their Teen Conference, an annual event co-sponsored by the Foundation and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. More than 130 high school students from Birmingham metropolitan school districts gathered for the workshop to discuss diversity issues. The event provides students with the mediation and reconciliation skills to address racial problems in their schools. Sticks + Stones was used as a kick-off to a breakout sessions entitled "Discrimination Against Muslims: Are We That Different?" Students discussed the stereotypes of Muslims and what it would be like if they were Muslim, evidencing the exhibit's ability to initiate dialog about different tolerance topics.

## **Future plans**

Sticks + Stones 2006 took a step towards looking further into our world situation for design curricula. The next edition will go broader and deeper with the following anticipated changes:

In 2009, 30 graphic design students from the United States, 10 from China, 10 from the Middle East, and 10 from Europe will travel to Germany and the Netherlands to visit concentration camps, learn of graphic design's power in Nazi propaganda, and witness how today's designers are using their communicative skills to create awareness and socially positive messages. Workshop forums will target issues of tolerance and understanding and promote a free exchange among participants about home, values, and the global condition. Ultimately, these students will have the rare opportunity to see into the lives of their national and international peers and envision a critical role for themselves as global citizens and design professionals.

As a way of bridging time zones and distance, Sticks + Stones will also create a dynamic internet site encouraging verbal as well as visual exchange, allowing students to reflect on their experiences throughout the 2009 project. Assignment briefs, posted readings, follow-up questions delivered via video, a shared blog or communication space, and uploaded project presentations are planned as part of the site. In continuing to evolve the framework of Sticks + Stones, faculty aim to reflect not only the future of design but also the increasingly global arena and digitally connected world in which these future designers will practice.

## **Conclusion**

With the reach of existing technology, our ability to meet neighbors from around the Earth is more achievable than ever. Yet, even members of our own design profession continue to misrepresent and divide our worlds through a monocular vision of the other. In this, we're not only isolating ourselves from a rich cross-cultural exchange; we're also abrogating our duty to build a bright future for a global community. Every question about why we, as designers, should shape a message this way or that, circles back to the fundamental fact that resistance to change—not technology—is behind isolation and inaction for the social good. Sticks + Stones began as a way of training future designers to be more thoughtful about their messages and acknowledge our responsibility to at least, do no harm.

Our project is but a small step towards Milton Glaser's ideal of "good design is good citizenship." On world issues we may acknowledge that, if we're to see real progress towards sustainable humanity, designers must become part of the solution, not merely as image-crafters but as informed stakeholders in the outcomes. This will require a broadly educated, intellectually agile generation of design professionals who read beyond their own discipline. Design education is not "image" education; designers must be in it from the roots up.

More information about the project is available at  
<http://www.sticksandstonesproject.org>

**Endnotes:**

1. Southern Baptists are the dominant religious group in the South ([www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org)), and an estimated 76% of Utah residents are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or Mormons). ([www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org)). The most stark contrast of racial makeup existed between black and white. Weber County, Utah, is 88% white and 1% black. Birmingham's Jefferson County makeup is 58% white and 39% black. (<http://factfinder.census.gov>).
2. Penelope J. Oakes, S. Alexander Haslam, and John C. Turner, *Stereotyping and Social Reality* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994).
3. "Most stereotypes are dictated by prejudice, which usually is formed from a single perspective. Even if not done maliciously, they can lead to the more destructive process of ethnic and cultural profiling which is used to justify discrimination and persecution." Michael Pickering, *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).
4. Scott S. Plous, "The Psychology of Prejudice: An Overview" (*Understanding Prejudice*. [www.understandingprejudice.org/apa/english](http://www.understandingprejudice.org/apa/english), 10 Jan. 2006).
5. Timothy J. Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
6. John Thackara, *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).
7. Several Boston students connected the idea of "privileged" to wealth only, but through the workshop, they came to understand the term with a broader context: Their parents' push for quality education and extracurricular cultural experiences had in fact made them "privileged" over those who had not grown up with those expectations and opportunities.