Let us be steadfast against stereotyping those different from ourselves especially after the General Election.

From board rooms to office cubicles, sitting rooms to local schools, and politicians to civil society, we must remain vigilant following stressful uncertain events that occur, like our elections.

In the aftermath of major occasions that yield doubtful outcomes, stereotypes, social identity, and experiential learning distortions all can combine to form potent ingredients for social dissonance.
Psychologically, the human brain is an extremely efficient categorising apparatus. We quickly label people as dangerous or safe, then layer on sub-categories upon sub-categories. The stereotyping process involves people developing categories and assigning traits to those categories. An example could be an assumption that Tanzanians walk slowly. Then, we assign people we meet and know to our categories based on observable information about those individuals, such as, “I notice that my workmate is Tanzanian”.

Next, we assign the traits of that category that we already had predetermined to that person, such that “therefore my colleague must walk slowly”. Categorisation helped us survive in ancient times in the Rift Valley, but proves problematic in today’s modern society. Social scientist David Kolb developed an experiential learning model that highlights how we actually do the categorisation process of others. First, we experience a concrete interaction with someone.

Second, from the very first meeting with another person, our brain makes immediate categorical assessments of them in less than one second.

Then we psychologically start to reflect on that person and refine our classification of them. Our reflection takes both subconscious and conscious forms. Third, we abstractly conceptualise that individual in different scenarios beyond what we experienced with them. Fourth, we start to actively experiment based on our categorisation assumptions about the individual.

Stereotypes form more concretely when we have less interaction with a certain group of people. So, if one ethnicity has less frequent interaction with another ethnicity, then stereotypes will be greater since they will make sweeping assumptions about the other group based on a small sample.

One of the downfalls of stereotypes is that even if humans meet someone who does not fit the confines of their assumptions they will usually shrug off that observation and instead stick to the preconceived notion. In social identity theory, Henri Tajfel and John Turner delineate humans’ “us” versus “them” mentality. In every category of our lives we detail others like ourselves as “us” and those outside the “us” group as “them”. So nurses might categorise doctors as “them”. University of Nairobi students may classify USIU students as “them”. Our brains do this across dozens of categories every day.

Social identities can involve our friend group, age group, organisation, work department, sports team, school or university, geographic location, ethnicity, nationality, political affiliation, physical attractiveness among many other identifiers.

Many Kenyans cling more to ethnic than national identity. We tend to look at positive attributes in the “us” category and negative ones in the “them” group. Inasmuch, we over-assume negatives in other ethnicities.

What is your social identity? Do you see yourself as merely your ethnicity or do you see yourself broader as a Kenyan? Perhaps your social identities are too closely defined and highly exclusive such that little heterogeneity exists within it such that you do not know a wide ranging diverse groups of people? Could your lack of exposure to diverse friends be biasing your stereotypes
about others during this post-elections period? Let us ponder the realities of stereotyping and try to minimise it from our companies, homes and everywhere in between.

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