

Chapter Six: Stereotypes in *Star Trek*

"The prejudices people feel about each other disappear when they get to know each other"--Kirk.ⁱ

The second part of the first floor of the House of Popular Culture moves into stereotypes. A stereotype is "a generalized idea about a group of individual items" that is shared by the members of culture.ⁱⁱ Such a generalization is something that the human mind does naturally in order to organize a massive amount of information it is fed daily. Therefore, unlike popular conception, stereotyping itself is not necessarily negative and a stereotype can have a positive function. For instance, the naive image of freshman encourages "professors to construct introductory courses for those with no experience in the subject matter."ⁱⁱⁱ According to Geist and Nachbar, the function of stereotype can be determined by "a) whether or not there is any accuracy in the stereotype; b) the positive or negative emotions aroused by the stereotype; and c) the positive or negative actions caused by the stereotype."^{iv}

Mass media floods audiences with hundreds of negative and positive images of stereotypes each day. Pepsi's advertising catch-phrase is that it is the "Choice of the New Generation" and commercials emphasize how drinking Pepsi can change senior citizens from being boring and behind the times into party animals dancing to the latest hits by Bon Jovi or Madonna. That generalization that senior citizens are out of touch with current society is a negative stereotype that is used by Pepsi to appeal to the audience. On

the other hand, positive stereotypes of the portrayal of "dynamic, ambitious, and talented" African-American men in movies such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Shaft* as well as on television shows like *Roots* and *The Cosby Show* reversed the image of being lazy, superstitious, and cowardly. Moreover, conventional characters are part of popular formulas and heroes and allow writers to leapfrog the long dramatic descriptions of why the bad guy is a bad guy, much like why a tyrant wants to take over the world.^v

During the 1960's. *Star Trek* tackled the issues of race, sex, and vocation, the three areas where stereotyping is common. *Star Trek* broke some stereotypes in these areas but reinforced others. In the original series, which was set in the 23rd century, prejudice and discrimination between human races were non-existent, but human prejudices against alien races and racism among other aliens were brought into the forefront in episodes such as "Balance of Terror" and "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield."

"Balance of Terror" provided audiences (and the Federation) a first look at a long-time, faceless enemy of the Federation, the Romulans. Previous wars were fought between the two sides, but they had never made visual contact. It had been seventy-five years since the Federation's last military conflict with the Romulans.^{vi} Lieutenant Andrew Stiles shows that humans still had the twentieth century "faults" of making rash accusations based on prejudice. Members of his family were killed during the last confrontation with the Romulans and this encounter sets the officer on edge. One of the few things known about the Romulans was that they were an off-shoot of the

Vulcan race. In his paranoia, Stiles accuses Spock of being a spy because Spock was a Vulcan.^{vii}

While the "failings" of humans were shown, third season's "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield" showed "the stupidity of prejudice."^{viii} An entire race of people with half-black, half-white faces killed each other because "the colors [were] on the wrong side."^{ix} The allegory was obvious to viewers during a time of racial tensions and riots.

Between other races, it was all right to show prejudices, but among the crew, the thought of racism was intolerable. Roddenberry's strive to have a multi-ethnic crew reinforced his idea that racism between humans had diminished in the 23rd century, and he was quite "pleased in those days not only to have a black woman, but a black officer" on the bridge of the *Enterprise*.^x As mentioned before, Nichelle Nichols was one of the first African-American women to have a regular role on a television series.

There was a time when Nichols wanted to leave because her character had been regulated to only saying "Hailing frequencies open..." and "Captain, I'm scared" lines, but she opted to stay on. She credits her decision to Dr. Martin Luther King telling her that she was needed on the show as a positive sign to all African-Americans.^{xi} Actress Whoopi Goldberg says that Nichols was her childhood inspiration because Nichols held her own on the show.^{xii} Nichols's Uhura and Shatner's Kirk even kissed, albeit against their characters' wills, in "Plato's Stepchildren," marking television's first interracial kiss.^{xiii} Another taunt at racism came in "The Savage Curtain"

when Abraham Lincoln remarked about Uhura, "What a charming negress." Uhura's fiery response, "We've learned not to fear words," and Kirk's subsequent speeches reminded viewers "how `perfect' [the original series] society was."^{xiv}

While Kirk argued for racial tolerances in "The Savage Curtain" and "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield," *The Undiscovered Country* portrayed him as being a very prejudiced man and afraid of change which all revolve around the death of his son, David, in *The Search for Spock*. When David was killed by Klingons in *The Search for Spock*, Kirk's stunned reaction was "You Klingon bastard. You killed my son," but the events that took place in *The Final Frontier* showed a completely recovered Kirk.

In *Star Trek V: [The Final Frontier]*, which took place less than a year after David's death, he displayed no such prejudice [against Klingons]. He interacted with those Klingons just fine. He even invited them to a party aboard his ship (at the end of the film), and made no mention at all of any distaste at having to be in such close quarters with them.^{xv}

Ten years later, however, he is still bitter about David's death and admits that "I still haven't forgiven them for the death of my boy."^{xvi}

Kirk has never had a prejudiced bone in his body. On the contrary, in [the original series] he was always rushing to the rescue of the downtrodden and oppressed. He was always making eloquent speeches about high principles such as equality and justice and tolerance. And what's more, he believed in what he said.^{xvii}

In the novelization of the film, Jeanne Dillard gives reasons why Kirk's hatred comes to the forefront in the film. A raid on an outpost leaves Carol Marcus, Kirk's former flame from *The Wrath of Khan* and David's mother, dying in a starbase hospital. Starfleet has reason to believe the Klingons

were behind the raid. Kirk is reliving his dealings with the Klingons and at exactly the worst moment he is presented with the news that he has to have them on his ship. None of these explanations are given in the film, however, and audiences are left to believe that Kirk's hatred has been burning for ten years.

In *The Next Generation*, like the original series, racism exists again between alien races, but not between humans. Worf is the only character to have shown strong racial prejudices, but it is seen as reflecting both current Klingon political views and his personal views. Worf's natural parents were killed in a Romulan sneak attack on the Khitomer Outpost.^{xviii} In "The Neutral Zone," Worf states that Romulans have no honor, something prized highly to the Klingons, and that the feeling is mutual between the two races.

This is further emphasized in "The Enemy" when a Romulan would die without Worf's blood. Worf debates on whether or not to give the needed transfusion, and both Crusher and Picard make arguments for saving the Romulan's life. In the end, however, Worf refuses because it does not conform to his sense of ethics. His prejudice has its foundations in the death of his natural parents, but Riker quietly points out that at one time, humans and Klingons hated each other as much as the Romulans and Klingons do now. There is a plea for tolerance, but Worf is never ordered to compromise his values.

Chief O'Brien is the only other recurring character to show any kind of racism, although it is not to the extreme that Worf's is. In "The Wounded," renegade Starfleet captain Ben Maxwell hunts down and destroys Cardassian ships. O'Brien had served with Maxwell during the time that the Cardassians and the Federation were at war, and Maxwell's wife and children were killed by Cardassians. When a Cardassian delegation is brought on board the *Enterprise*, O'Brien's hostility towards them comes forth. During his service with Maxwell, he was forced to kill a Cardassian in self-defense and O'Brien had never killed anyone before. O'Brien's hostility towards the Cardassians is only a fraction of what Maxwell's is, but O'Brien explains his feelings quite clearly: "It's not you I hate, Cardassian. I hate what I've become because of you."^{xix}

The evolved humans do recognize and do exhibit prejudice against alien races in both the original series and *The Next Generation*. Like in "The

Savage Curtain" where Uhura retaliates against Lincoln's racist remark, *The Next Generation's* "The Masterpiece Society" features moments of racial tension between Geordi LaForge and the members of the human colony on Moab IV. This society "has been genetically planned and engineered to be the perfect society" with perfect members.^{xx} LaForge's blindness, which is a genetic defeat, would never have occurred on Moab IV. To their prejudice against his handicap LaForge testily replies, "I can see *you* just fine."

On a more subtle note, "Time's Arrow II" has LaForge at the end of another racial slur. When the crew are thrown back in time to late 19th century San Francisco, there is a confrontation between a Caucasian man and Geordi. The man snatches the walking stick LaForge is using to guide himself (he could not wear his VISOR because it would draw attention to him) and asks what LaForge is doing with a "gentleman's cane." Andy Harman applauds the lack of reaction LaForge has to this statement:

Having Geordi ignore (if not completely *miss* the remark altogether) was much more of a sign of ultimate color blindness. Geordi did not recognize the racial remark as such because he grew up in a society where such attitudes don't exist. That is the optimistic future of the Trek universe, not the defensive, explanatory, gotta-git-em-back-for-this-one righteousness that permeates today's television.^{xxi}

The subtle comment, which would have undoubtedly caused Uhura to expound upon human virtues and equality, was left alone in *The Next Generation*.

Not so subtle are discriminations based on sex and vocation. John Condry's study of "distortions and exaggerations on television" uses gender and job to classify the stereotypical roles of men and women on television.^{xxii}

The images that television uses are "quite outmoded" because they reinforce the "idea of males and females as opposites."^{xxiii} Men are traditionally aggressive and violent, going into action without worrying about the consequences, while women are passive and gentle. Condry goes on to note that "women are also depicted on television as being altruistic--caring about others--and socially conforming."^{xxiv}

When NBC rejected Roddenberry's female first officer in "The Cage," it was the opinion of the network that audiences would not accept a woman in such high command of a traditionally male field.^{xxv} The "test reports," or a selected audience viewing of the episode, of the pilot revealed that other women did not like the idea of "Number One." Roddenberry agreed with NBC officials to remove the character and the role was rewritten. Stephen Whitfield comments, "Although *Star Trek* was a show about the 23rd century, it was being viewed by a 20th century audience--who resented the idea of a tough, strong-willed woman ('too domineering') as second-in-command."^{xxvi}

As a result, the women took more subordinate roles in the original series. Clyde Wilcox comments that Lieutenant Uhura, the communications officer, was "reminiscent of [a] telephone operator[s]" while Nurse Christine Chapel only "took temperatures and administered medication."^{xxvii} Yeoman Janice Rand, who only appeared during the first season as a recurring character, served as Kirk's secretary. They were an active part of the crew, but were never actually part of the decision making process, although Uhura was occasionally present at staff meetings.^{xxviii}

Aside from not being part of the command crew, these women were also subordinated by their romantic pinings for members of the crew. Chapel's yearning for Spock is touched on in several episodes such as "The Naked Time" and "Journey to Babel." She wants to touch the human side of Spock that he always hid and explore it with him. When both of their inhibitions are suppressed in "The Naked Time," Chapel openly proclaims her

love for Spock, pleading with him to reconsider. Both know that there could never be a relationship between them, but while Spock accepts it, Chapel still longs for one.

Although she wants a relationship with Spock, Chapel already has a fiancé, Dr. Roger Korby, who appears in "What Are Little Girls Made Of?" Korby discovers ancient alien technology that allows him to duplicate humans into androids and wants to use the Enterprise as a means to spread his new android race across the galaxy. While Chapel wars within herself about her relationship with Korby, Kirk battles against an android of himself and tries to convince Korby that mechanized humans are wrong. At the end of the episode, it is revealed that Korby himself is an android and he is destroyed. "The Naked Time" aired before "What Are Little Girls Made Of?", possibly showing that Chapel was having second thoughts about her relationship with Korby.

Rand's interest in Kirk is seen throughout the first season and highlighted in "The Enemy Within." When Kirk is split into two beings, one passive and the other aggressive, his aggressive side attacks Rand in her quarters and attempts to rape her. She fends him off and then tells McCoy and Spock about the incident. Shown in tears relating the events to the two men, her disbelief that Kirk would do such a thing is clear because he had always treated her with indifferent respect.

While Chapel and Rand were longing for the two leading men, Uhura never actually had a romantic relationship in the series. Unlike Rand, who

was written to lust after Kirk, Uhura only showed mild interest in Kirk because "interracial romance was a bit too risqué for the times."^{xxix} Like almost every woman featured in the original series, she showed an admiration for him and loyalty to him, but she never actually took any action. It was only in *The Final Frontier* that any hint of romance between her and Scotty was mentioned, albeit rather briefly.

These women accepted their subordinate roles throughout the original series and also their failed romances with Kirk until the last episode of the series. In "Turnabout Intruder," Dr. Janice Lester uses an alien device to swap her mind into Kirk's body and vice versa. Her failed romance with Kirk, coupled with the fact that Starfleet did not allow women to be captains or command a ship, turned into hatred for Kirk and envy for his position as captain of the Enterprise. Ranting and raving that she was the captain and that the crew must follow her orders, Lester displays that she cannot, in fact, handle the position of a starship commander. Returned to her own body, Lester is punished for crime.

Twenty years later, the roles of women changed in the 20th century and in the *Star Trek* universe, the rules had substantially changed as well. Gone was the "disposable female" who usually fell victim to Kirk's "shameless bagging of alien babes in tinfoil bikinis."^{xxx} Women held higher vocational positions than ever before, ranging from cooperation presidents to presidential advisors to state governors.

Tasha Yar reflected the cultural changes in a larger society from the time of the original series to that of *The Next Generation* by being the chief of security, always having her opinions heard by Picard and Riker as viable plans of action. She was tough, independent, and aggressive, yet attractive at the same time. To acknowledge those traits being desirable, "Code of Honor" has Lutan, the chief of Ligon II, kidnapping Yar because he is impressed with her strength and beauty and Lutan's wife, Yareena,

challenges Yar to a duel to the death because she feels her honor is threatened. She shows her sexual freedom in "The Naked Now" by seducing Data, but later regrets that action and tells Data to forget the event. Her physical prowess for

a precis squares tournament is recognized in "11001001" and for an on-ship martial arts tournament in "Skin of Evil."^{xxx1}

The Next Generation has two other women on the bridge, Dr. Beverly Crusher and Counselor Deanna Troi, and they, like Yar, participate actively in the decision making process. As chief medical officer, Crusher speaks from the humanistic point of view while Troi gives "important advice to the captain before contact with other ships and cultures."^{xxxii} While they are not subservient like Chapel, Uhura, and Rand, Wilcox states that:

...these two women represent an extension of traditional feminine values of nurturance and empathy. They thus represent social feminism, which holds that women differ from men, but that these differences can be a source of strength.^{xxxiii}

While all three participated actively in ship's operations and command, Yar was the only departure from traditional women's roles. Yar's death in "Skin of Evil" marked the end of the recurring dominant female in the first season. At the beginning of the second season, Crusher had accepted a position at Starfleet Medical and a new doctor, Katherine Pulaski, came on board as chief medical officer. The change between doctors can be seen as another experiment with a dominate female character. Wilcox comments that "Dr. [Pulaski] was perhaps less tradionally [sic] feminine, for while Dr. Crusher was often seen as a worrying mother, Dr. [Pulaski] has been portrayed as tough-minded and unsentimental."^{xxxiv} Pulaski's departure at the end of the second season, however, gave way to the return of Crusher in the third season.

Another change from the original series to *The Next Generation* was

romantic involvements with the female crew members. As mentioned before, Yar seduced Data in "The Naked Now" but it did not diminish her characterization. She was still tough and dominant although her inhibitions were suppressed. Troi's romance with Riker cooled down after "The Naked Now" because producers wanted both characters to have the ability to be romantically involved with the guest of the week. Troi went on to have several affairs, but not as many as Riker. In "The Price," Troi blew the whistle on a fellow empath who was using his powers to gain a better bargaining angle at a trade meeting. Her duty to the ship and Captain Picard outweighed her need for romantic involvement, much like the original series's Lieutenant Marla McGivers in "Space Seed," in which she saved Kirk's life when Khan, the man she was strongly attracted to, tried to kill Kirk and take over the ship.

Crusher's on-again, off-again relationship with Picard teased audiences for several seasons. In "The Naked Now," Crusher confesses her attraction to the captain, and it is subsequently touched on in "The Big Goodbye," "The Arsenal of Freedom," and "The Last Outpost" during the first season. With her return in the third season, Crusher distanced herself from Picard and their relationship became much more platonic.

Unlike Janice Lester, who, because she was female, could not command a ship, women are shown in very powerful positions within Starfleet. In *The Next Generation* episode "Conspiracy," Captain Tryla Scott, an African-American female, was the youngest in the history of Starfleet to

achieve that rank, beating Kirk's record of 34 years old. Captain Phillipa Louvois, one of Picard's former flames, decided whether or not Data had legal rights because he is an android in "The Measure of the Man" and it is revealed that Dr. Leah Brahms designed the *Enterprise's* engines in "Booby Trap." Sparks flew between Lieutenant Commander Shelby, perhaps one of the most aggressive female Starfleet officer, and Commander Riker when she made no bones about wanting Riker's position as first officer in "The Best of Both Worlds." She served as Riker's first officer after Picard was kidnapped by the Borg and Riker was promoted to captain, and then later Shelby was put in charge of rebuilding the fleet after the Borg were defeated. When Ensign Ro came on board the *Enterprise* as a semi-regular cast member, her aggressiveness almost matched Shelby's, but while there was great animosity between her and the rest of the crew in "Ensign Ro," she lost most of her edge by her third appearance, although it was never explained.

The cultural differences between the time of the original series and that of *The Next Generation* are very marked in the portrayal of women, but by the same token, the regular characters of Crusher and Troi in *The Next Generation* still conform to traditional female roles. Crusher simply represents a promoted version of Christine Chapel and her opinions are now considered by the captain. Troi, like Uhura, serves in the communications field, but instead of repeating messages, Troi uses her empathic ability to advise the captain. Every non-traditional *The Next Generation* woman has either be killed, transferred off the show, or lost their hard, dominant edge.

Even Shelby softened up to Riker by the end of "Best of Both Worlds II."

While some cultural stereotypes have been broken by *Star Trek*, others remain as a reminder of when the original series and *The Next Generation* were produced. Racism still exists, but it has been transferred to aliens instead of humans. Stereotypes of sex and vocation were also altered to fit the 23rd and 24th century, but some reflect those of the 1960's and 1990's. Those stereotypes can be seen as positive, though, because they are something that the audience can recognize and relate to.

Notes

ⁱThe original series episode "Elaan of Troyius."

ⁱⁱChristopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, "Part Three: Stereotypes and Popular Culture Introduction," *The Popular Culture Reader* Third ed. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), p. 153.

ⁱⁱⁱGeist and Nachbar, p. 153.

^{iv}Geist and Nachbar, p. 154.

^vAll quotes are from Geist and Nachbar, pp. 153-5.

^{vi}Edward Gross, *Trek Classic* (New York: Image Publishing, 1991), p. 54.

^{vii}"Balance of Terror" is a first season episode.

^{viii}Fred Freiberger interview, *Trek Classic*, p. 115.

^{ix}Gross, p. 115.

^xGene Roddenberry, *Star Trek 25th Anniversary Special*, syndicated two hour television special, September 1991.

^{xi}Nichelle Nichols interview, *25th Anniversary Special*.

^{xii}Larry Nemecek, *The Star Trek: The Next Generation Companion* (New York: Pocket, 1992), p. 64.

^{xiii}Clyde Wilcox, "To Boldly Return Where Others Have Gone Before: Cultural Change and The Old and New *Star Treks*," *Extrapolation*, Spring 1992, p. 89.

^{xiv}Andy Harman, "Times Arrow II," *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Spoiler! Conference (Cincinnati: 7 Oct 1992), Message #113.

^{xv}Gail Sakurai, "TUC as the Worst?" *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Trek Talk Conference (Cincinnati: 26 July 92), Message #341.

^{xvi}*The Undiscovered Country*.

^{xvii}Sakurai, Message #341.

^{xviii}Ironically, the Federation-Klingon peace conference was held on Camp Khitomer in TUC.

^{xix}*The Next Generation* episode "The Wounded."

^{xx}Larry Nemecek, *The Star Trek: The Next Generation Companion* (New York: Pocket, 1992), p. 190.

^{xxi}Andy Harman, "Times Arrow II," *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Spoiler! Conference (7 Oct 92), Message #113.

^{xxii}John Condry, *The Psychology of Television* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989), p. 68.

^{xxiii}Condry, p. 68.

^{xxiv}Condry, p. 69.

^{xxv}Majel Barrett-Roddenberry, Question and Answer session, *Space Station Cincy* (Cincinnati: 1 Aug 1992).

^{xxvi}Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), p. 128.

^{xxvii}Wilcox, p. 89.

^{xxviii}Wilcox, p. 89.

^{xxix}Wilcox, p. 89.

^{xxx}Karin Blair, "Sex and *Star Trek*," *Science Fiction Studies*, Nov 1983, p. 292 and Rick Marin, "Kisses Great!/Less Killing! Comparing the Captains: Kirk vs. Picard," *TV Guide*, 31 Aug 1991, p. 6.

^{xxxi}The rules to precis squares have never been explained nor the game actually seen in the series. It is known that it can be dangerous, leading to broken bones as seen in fourth season's "Future Imperfect."

xxxii Wilcox, p. 90.

xxxiii Wilcox, p. 90.

xxxiv Wilcox, p. 90.