

Resource 3: Ways of Thinking About Other Times and Other People

What do Historians Mean by “Deficit Past?”

It is not uncommon for people to think of themselves as better than other people. We may try not to think this way, but it can be difficult at times. Historians use the term “*deficit past*” to describe the idea that many people living today think that people in the past were dumb or not as smart as we are today. The word *deficit* is used to describe a failing or a shortcoming.

Consider this - in many ways, people in the past may have been just as smart if not smarter than us. Thousands of years ago people could predict the movements of stars and planets without telescopes and use that information to sail ships great distances without getting lost. How many people do you know who can do that today?

Thousands of years ago people invented alphabets and words to communicate. We take alphabets for granted but there was a time when they did not exist. Imagine what we could not do without an alphabet - write, read books, pass notes in class etc. Anyone who communicates in English like you is relying on what people long ago invented. Try to go one day without being able to communicate with letters or words. Good luck!

There is one more thing to think about. Thousands of years ago people invented things like the wheel (widely considered to be one of humankind’s greatest inventions), the clock, the compass, paper, the printing press etc. Think about how important all of these are for us today. Again, people who lived in the past were smart and gave us all of this so we can build on these things and do equally smart things.

Misconceptions - What are They?

Most human beings have misconceptions. A **misconception** is an idea or opinion that is not correct because it is based on faulty thinking. For example, some people have the misconception that the reason that we have seasons is because the earth moves closer and further away from the sun during the year. This is not true. The reason we have seasons is because the earth is tilted, and the sun’s direct rays hit the earth in different places throughout the year.



Think of another misconception that people have and share it with a partner.

Stereotypes - What are They?

Many people also hold stereotypes. A **stereotype** can be defined as an unfair and untrue belief that a person has about other people or things. For example, many people have stereotypes about tall people. They assume that tall people enjoy and play basketball. This is simply not true.



Think of another stereotype that people have and share it with a partner.

So, What is the Point Here?

Ways of thinking that include deficit pasts, misconceptions, and stereotypes can prove dangerous. Why? Because they can lead people to think of others as inferior. When people think of other people or things as inferior, they are more likely to think that they can mistreat them. Sometimes people stereotype entire places because they are different.

This has happened throughout history and has led some people to do things to other people that are not only unfair, but extremely harmful. An example that you will be learning about later is that, throughout history, some people enslaved other people.

As we begin to think about things that have happened in American history, it is helpful to be aware of deficit ways of thinking as well as misconceptions and stereotypes because they will help us understand what caused some people to do bad things to others. Studying history can help us understand and, hopefully, not repeat this.



What is the main idea of the three paragraphs that you just read? What detail does the author offer to support this main idea?

What is an Example of a Significant Stereotype that People Had in History?

People who lived on different continents like Europe, Asia, Africa, and America had little contact with one another before 1491. When they encountered one another, they realized that they were different in many ways - their languages, their customs, their religions, their technology, the clothes they wore, the colors of their skin, hair, and eyes etc. They viewed the people who they encountered as “others” who were not like themselves, and often as inferior because they were different. In some instances, people living on entire continents came to believe that the “other” people living on “other” continents were inferior. This was true then, and it is still true in some cases today.

It is also true that people lived in very different ways even within every continent. Some hunted, some fished, some grew food on farms. Some lived in huts and small villages while others lived in houses and cities just like we do today. In some places people wore few clothes because the weather was usually warm, while people in other places wore clothing not that much different from what we wear today (skirts, pants, shirts, coats etc.), in part because the weather was different or there were different resources available.



*What negative effects can arise when people encounter “other” people and places that are different?
How might you use what you learned from this to become a better person?*