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“A Little Knowledge....”

By Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.



False information, rumor, misunderstanding – these problems are rampant when it comes to diversity issues. I am amazed how often a fact I am certain is true turns out to be completely wrong.

Here is a quick quiz designed to illustrate how much false information is out there. As you take this quiz, try not to second guess it – answer as you normally would based on your current knowledge and expectation:

1. Of the countries listed, which one sends the highest percentage of high school graduates to the U.S.?

- A. Africa
- B. England
- C. Ireland

2. Describe the average welfare recipient:

- A. An urban black female with more than three children.
- B. An urban black male with more than three children.
- C. A rural white female with fewer than two children.
- D. An Asian female with fewer than two children.

3. What percentage of native-born and immigrant Hispanics living in the U.S. think that new Americans should learn English?

- A. 90%
- B. 15%
- C. 3%
- D. 50%

4. True or False: Most Arab-Americans are Muslim.

5. According to American Demographics magazine, what percentage of white Americans live in neighborhoods that are overwhelmingly white?

- A. 90%
- B. 57%
- C. 75%
- D. 15%

Let's see how you did.

I was recently asked Question 1 and I, for all my education in this area, got it wrong. The answer is that Africa sends a higher percentage of high school graduates to this country than England or Ireland -- and, by the way, more than a great many other countries as well. This fact certainly brings to the lie to the assumption that Africa is composed of “underdeveloped” countries that have little to contribute to the world.

Question 2 points out the power of the media to distort what we believe and, in turn, how we feel about a whole group of people. The answer to this question is not “An urban black female with more than three children” – that is what most people answer. In fact, a typical welfare recipient is a white women living with her two children in a rural area.

Question 3 calls attention to one of the most destructive bits of misinformation in our culture. That is the belief that most immigrants, and, as our largest immigrant group, Hispanics take the brunt of this, are at least neutral to the need to learn English in this country. You probably answered something like 15 percent or maybe, if you’ve been keeping up on these things, you went as high as 50 percent. In fact, a whopping 90 percent of Hispanics feel very strongly that U.S. residents should learn English.

I hesitated to put in Question 4 as I didn’t want to imply in any way that there is something wrong with being Muslim – of course there is not. It is interesting, however, that probably the vast majority of people answer that this statement is true. It is true that Islam is fast becoming the second most common religion in the U.S., but, still most Arab-Americans do not fall into that category.

In this age of “integration” it looks like white flight is still the rule. Fully 90% of white Americans live in neighborhoods that are predominantly white. This is significant when we think about the importance of people who are different living and working together. It is only in this way that we can learn to overcome the fears, biases, and communication problems that plague our nation and our workplaces.

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