

Illustrating the Other

Becoming Aware of Racial Bias in the Design Process

Master's Thesis of Laura Doku, Design Making 2017, Savonia University of Applied Sciences



Research Questions

1. How does the awareness of one's racial biases affect the design process?
2. What are the factors contributing to the occurrence of racial stereotypes when a European designer illustrates African characters?

Method

Evocative autoethnography was used in a case of illustrating African characters for microstock image banks.

I sketched concepts and kept a blog on the process noting at the same time racial biases affecting the design. This data was used to write the autoethnographic narrative. I noted connections between the stereotypes and events in the history, mainly trans-Atlantic slavery, abolitionism, colonialism and post-colonialism. I then placed the identified stereotypes to the stereotype content model (Fiske & all, 2002) to find out the motives behind them. Finally I made a brief comparative analysis of illustrations I had done before.

Summary of the Narrative

I set out to illustrate African characters to microstock image banks. I wanted to provide illustrations with more depth and void of racial stereotypes.

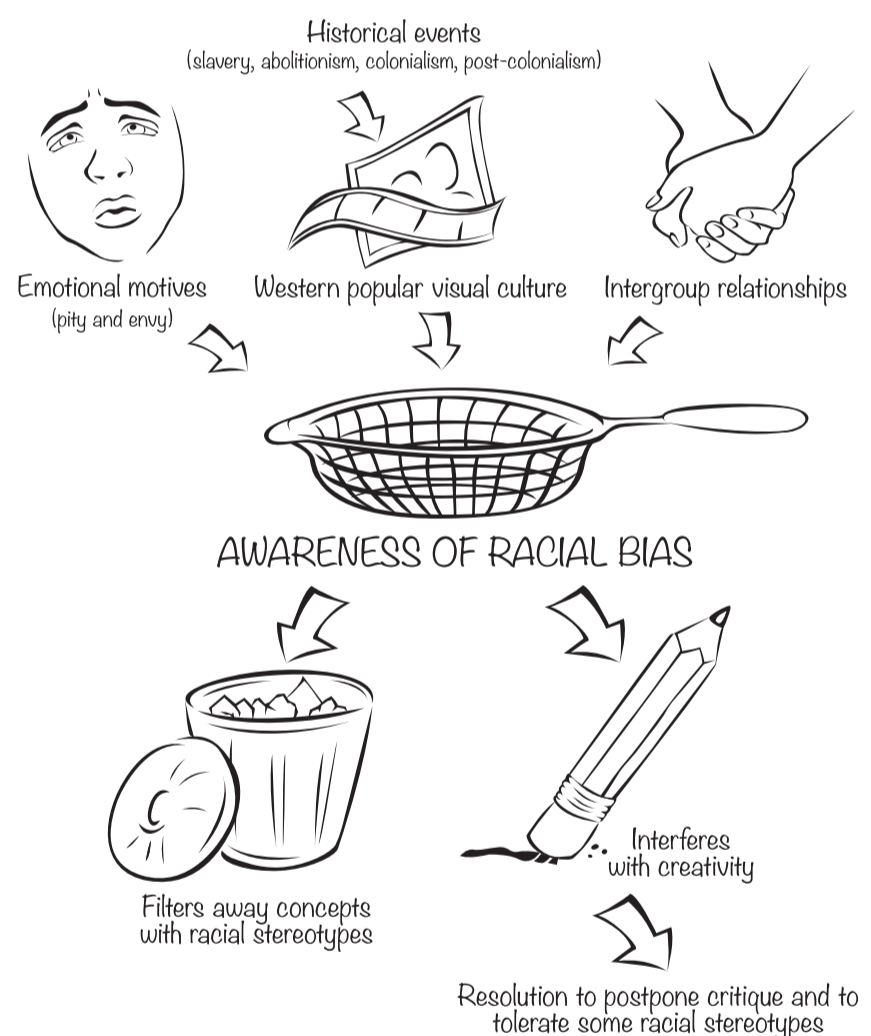
I sketched concepts and simultaneously judged them by the racial stereotypes they carried. Strict self observation led to low creativity.

I decided to postpone the critique to a later stage and to accept some level of racial bias in the design.

I found the topic of house help to be interesting and developed the concept of housegirl based on my relationship with "Araba", a minor who stayed with our family helping with house chores.



EFFECTS OF THE DESIGNER'S AWARENESS OF HER RACIAL BIASES DURING THE DESIGN PROCESS



Results

Factors leading to the stereotypes were envy and pity, Western visual culture (linked to historical events of trans-Atlantic slavery, abolitionism, colonialism and post-colonialism) and intergroup relationships.

Awareness of racial bias acted as a filter making it possible to recognize and get rid of concepts with racial stereotypes but also interfered with the creative process. This led to the resolution to postpone critique and to tolerate some racial stereotypes. As a result the final work had some racial stereotypes in it.

Conclusion

Though being aware of one's racial biases during the design process can interfere with the creative process it is nevertheless helpful in combating the use of racial stereotypes when portraying out-groups. Designers should be mindful of their responsibility as facilitators of social representations.