

**SEMPRE AVANTI COLUMN**

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**THE STIGMA OF THE STEREOTYPE**

**By Dona De Sanctis**

First in line to purchase five lots on which he planned to build homes for family and friends in Myrtle Beach, S.C., Nick Francovilla learned that, mysteriously, all the lots were already sold. “We have enough New York wanna-be Italian gangsters here,” the realty agent told him.

Every month, the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice (CSJ) receives letters and emails like this one from Italian Americans, who believe they have been the target of discrimination or defamation because of their heritage.

Not one of these Italian Americans is connected in any way to organized crime – they are hard-working people from all walks of life: businessmen and civil servants; teachers and other professionals. Yet all are linked, jokingly or sometimes not, to the Mafia because their last names end in a vowel.

**WHO’S A GUIDO?**

Others write to the CSJ because they have been given offensive ethnic nicknames. Even when this event occurs in front of witnesses, the offender routinely pays no penalty and often is not even forced to apologize.

A particularly egregious example of this occurred recently in New Jersey, when Evan Ferrier, 15, asked his lacrosse coach at North Hunterdon County High School how he could earn more playing time.

“Well maybe if you didn’t slick your hair back like a guinea, we’d play you more,” Coach Robert Donnelly told him. Donnelly also refers to Ferrier and team-mate, Nicholas Dignazio as “the Gotti boys.” The school declined to discipline the coach.

Not even our most accomplished and talented Italian American leaders are spared this disrespectful and discriminatory treatment. **Catherine DeAngelis, M.D.**, currently the first woman editor of the respected Journal of American Medicine, recalls that years ago, when she interviewed for medical school, she was told, “We already have our quota of guineas for the year.”

The situation has not improved since then. In his column, **Bernie Miklasz** of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch persistently refers to St. Louis Cardinals Baseball Manager **Tony LaRussa** as “Don Tony,” while Newsday’s sports columnist **Wallace Matthews** likens NY Yankees’ Bench Coach **Lee Mazzilli** to “a character straight out of *Saturday Night Fever*.”

### **WHAT’S THE HARM?**

Advocates and activists who fight this kind of defamation are often challenged to prove that stereotyping is damaging to the average Italian American. But since Italian Americans are considered part of the “white majority,” there are very few reliable studies or statistics indicating that qualified Italian Americans are being turned away from jobs, schools and housing, fired or denied promotions because of their ethnicity.

Researchers do not gather information about ethnicity. It is even impossible to know with certainty how many Italian Americans fought, were wounded or died while serving in the U.S. military in wartime because the U.S. Defense Department only

collects information about a military person's religion, sex and race. Ethnic heritage is ignored.

The lack of statistical evidence makes it nearly impossible to “prove” that because of the unfavorable portrait of them so pervasive in American society today, Italian Americans are being discriminated against. So while the anecdotal evidence is powerful and compelling, the scientific proof is unavailable.

### **SCIENCE TO THE RESCUE**

Fortunately, there are ways around this impasse. Given our current “politically correct” climate, more and more scientists and behavioral psychologists are studying the impact that stereotyping has in America today. One of them, Richard Robins, a psychologist at the University of California, studies how people perceive and evaluate themselves and others.

When it comes to stereotyping, he believes we may be “hard-wired” to believe the stereotypes because we rarely notice or remember information that contradicts them.

For example, despite the impressive record of achievement of today's Italian American leaders like Nancy Pelosi in Congress; Justices Antonin Scalia and Samuel Alito on the U.S. Supreme Court; General Peter Pace and Admiral Edward Bastiani, heading the Joint Chiefs of Staff – Italian Americans are still perceived as being under-educated and largely blue-collar workers.

Even when the average American meets an Italian American neighbor, colleague or acquaintance who contradicts the stereotype, he perceives him or her

as the exception to the rule rather than as representative of most Italian Americans.

### **HARVARD'S HIDDEN BIAS TEST**

But how to prove these biases affect Italian Americans? The answer may be found at Harvard University where researchers have developed an “Implicit Association Test (IAT) that reveals hidden biases against people of different races, religions and genders, and predicts how these hidden biases affect people’s behavior toward these groups for jobs, housing, court cases, etc.

Since it was developed in 1994, it has been taken by more than 2 million people and used in hundreds of research studies.

What is striking about the IAT is that it reveals how even people in the target groups being tested have hidden biases. For example, 88 % of white people in one IAT testing for bias against blacks were pro-white but so were 48% of the blacks who took the test. In other words, the blacks had absorbed the same biases about black people as white people had.

If such an IAT were to target Italian Americans we would be able to prove that the general American population has hidden biases against Italian Americans. We also would have concrete evidence that a portion of Italian Americans themselves have absorbed these very biases, especially younger Italian Americans since young people are particularly susceptible to these hidden biases.

Imagine the impact of a Harvard study that reveals how America really feels about Italian Americans.

The Sons of Italy CSJ is investigating the feasibility of commissioning such a study. But in the meantime, what do you say to someone like Mike D'Agostino who was fired from his job at Dick's Sporting Goods after complaining to his superiors that someone kept putting pictures of Marlon Brando as "the Godfather" on his desk and taped the words "Al-Queda" to a photograph of his children?

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