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## STEREOTYPING

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*Stereotypes* are the characteristics that are believed to be true of a particular social group and its members. They are generally traits (Blacks are athletic; women are emotional) but can potentially include other attributes (\_\_\_ are likely to be lawyers; \_\_\_ are likely to be on welfare). Stereotypes may be positive in valence (Italians are romantic; Asians are good in math), but most are negative. Stereotypes represent the cognitive component of intergroup beliefs and are related to the affective component (prejudice) and the behavioral component (discrimination) of intergroup relations. Stereotypes often predict, and serve as a rationalization for, both prejudice and discrimination. As trait dimensions, stereotype beliefs fall into the basic dimensions used to judge people more generally. For instance, a large part of the variance in stereotype beliefs is captured by the important underlying dimensions of warmth and competence, and the beliefs about many social groups are captured by these two factors.

Stereotypes have been studied extensively by social psychologists, in part because they represent a form of person perception more generally, in part because they can be used to understand how social information is mentally encoded, represented, and activated, and in part because they have significant societal outcomes.

Stereotypes are held by individuals, but because there is general consensus on beliefs

across individuals in a culture or society, they can also be conceptualized as a cultural- or societal-level phenomenon. Stereotypes are part of the culture itself and are represented and expressed in the media, in everyday conversation, and in humor. Stereotypes are in large part social norms—they represent our underlying theories about the world of social groups and group relations—our cultural beliefs about the fundamental essence of social groups.

Stereotypes develop from the process of social categorization, which is the assignment of individuals to groups based on culturally important or otherwise salient characteristics. The most common categorizations, and thus the most common basis for stereotypes, arise from the categories of sex, race, age, and sexual orientation. When we categorize another person, we move away from individual person-based judgments to group-based judgments.

The application of a stereotype to a target person is known as *stereotyping*; it frequently occurs in an unconscious, automatic way, often without the knowledge of the person doing the stereotyping. Once developed, stereotypes become available in memory and highly cognitively accessible. They pop into mind easily and quickly when we encounter a member of the stereotyped group, and they are difficult to suppress. In fact, attempting to suppress stereotypes can make them even more highly accessible, leading to more stereotyping. The mere presence of a member of the particular social group is enough to activate the stereotype beliefs, and applying the activated beliefs—stereotyping—can inform social judgments and influence interactions between individuals in a pervasive way, on a daily basis.

### Outcomes of Stereotypes

Holding stereotypes and applying them to social judgments may in some cases be informative, functional, and mentally efficient, particularly if there is some truth to stereotypes. If stereotypes are in part accurate, then stereotyping increases one's ability to predict the behavior of others. Stereotyping may also be self-protective because in dangerous situations, one can make quick judgments about possible outgroup members who may pose a threat. These quick judgments are also mentally

efficient because they free up cognitive resources for other things. Instead of our evaluating each new individual as a unique person, stereotyping allows us to quickly retrieve and apply information about the new individual's group, thereby allowing a likely summary judgment of the individual himself or herself.

Stereotyping is more likely to occur when one has little motivation or capacity to individuate others or when one is tired, distracted, or cognitively busy. When we do not have much interest in the other or when we have power over the other, thinking about the other person as an individual (individuation) is not necessary, and instead we will rely on stereotypes. Alternatively, when we know the other well or when we are dependent on the other for outcomes, individuation is likely to occur without the use of stereotypes.

Stereotypes have important societal implications because they create a variety of social difficulties and problems for those who are stereotyped. For one, because stereotype beliefs are frequently overgeneralized, they have the potential to be unfair to those who are judged. Stereotypes may lead individuals to act as if characteristics believed to be true of a social group are true of every member of the group, when this cannot be the case. Not all members of the category possess the stereotyped characteristics, and assuming that they do—and particularly acting as if they do—is unfair to those who are categorized and stereotyped. Furthermore, stereotypes create anxiety and produce cognitive load during interactions. As a result, substantial effort on the part of those in interaction is required, which inhibits and reduces the quality of the social interaction.

Stereotypes also influence task performance. For instance, because Asian students are aware of the stereotype that Asians are good at math, reminding them of this fact before they take a difficult math test can improve their performance on the test. On the other hand, sometimes these beliefs are negative, and they create negative *self-fulfilling prophecies* (*stereotype threat*) such that one may perform more poorly due to knowledge about the stereotypes. Thinking about negative stereotypes that are relevant to a task that one is performing creates stereotype threat—performance decrements that are caused by the knowledge of cultural stereotypes.

## Stereotypes as Mental Representations

Information that is encountered on a daily basis must be categorized and stored so that it is easily retrievable and can be used in future situations. At the individual level, social information about groups is stored in memory as cognitive representations of the groups, or stereotypes. In this sense, stereotypes allow one to make inferences about social targets, to “fill in the blanks” regarding information that is ambiguous or unknown about the social target, to interpret events that are uncertain, and to help encode new information about a social group. Several models have been used to understand the cognitive structure of stereotypes, how the social information contained stereotypes becomes activated, and how stereotypes are applied during social judgment.

Most broadly, stereotypes can be considered as schemas that contain a general set of information about a group. Individuals acquire this information through direct personal experience or through indirect cultural experiences. For instance, an individual may learn that Blacks have dark skin, or that immigrants speak English as a second language. These general characteristics will be stored in schemas about the groups and will subsequently inform the stereotypes of the groups.

Stereotypes have also been considered as *prototypes*, which are more specific group representations. They are developed through the integration of all attributes that are observed and learned about over time in many different contexts and social group members. Thus prototypes represent the average of group attributes and contain the most “typical” characteristics of the group. After multiple experiences with lawyers, one may consider the typical lawyer to be extroverted, hard-working, and argumentative. During encounters, lawyers will be judged on their “goodness-of-fit” with the prototypical lawyer, such that lawyers whose characteristics seem to be similar to those of the typical lawyer will be assimilated into the cognitive category *lawyer*, whereas lawyers whose characteristics appear to be less similar to those of the typical lawyer will be thought of as an exception and will not be assimilated into the cognitive category *lawyer*.

Within each group representation, there may be several specific exemplars that come to mind as

good examples of a social group. These exemplars are most likely memories of specific group members the individual has encountered. Exemplars allow the individual to store more detailed information about the social group that may not necessarily be represented by the averaging of group characteristics. For instance, when thinking of the group *politicians*, an individual may think of George Bush or Bill Clinton. Both exemplars are good category fits, but they are quite different from one another. In certain contexts, the individual characteristics of George Bush or Bill Clinton may provide useful additional information that would not be provided by simply thinking of the most typical characteristics of politicians.

These different models of the cognitive representation of stereotypes allow researchers to understand the various ways in which stereotypes develop, function, and change. Each of these conceptual approaches allows slightly different predictions to be made about the activation and application of stereotypes. It is important to remember, however, that although stereotypes are stored as cognitive representations, they are not entirely rigid. The particular categories that are activated, as well as the particular stereotypes that are applied, vary across social context and often depend on the individual's processing goals.

### Measuring Stereotypes and Stereotyping

Stereotypes are assessed through a variety of techniques. The most common approaches are self-report methods, which include thought listings, Likert-type scales (e.g., How true is this trait of the group?), and probability or percentage estimate measures (e.g., What proportion of the group possesses the trait?). However, because self-report methods are likely to be influenced by self-promotion demand characteristics, a variety of nonreactive, indirect, or unobtrusive measures have also been used. Methods that measure the specific words or characteristics that become activated after exposure to members of different categories have been used to assess group attitudes with more validity. A variety of reaction-time measures, including the Implicit Association Test (IAT), have also been used to assess associations between category labels and stereotypes of the category. Research using the IAT has shown that, based on

very large samples, most people associate stereotypes with many social groups. However, implicit measures of stereotyping such as the IAT are generally uncorrelated or only slightly correlated with responses on more explicit measures.

Recent developments in the field of social cognitive neuroscience have generated several techniques to measure neural activity in response to various social stimuli. *Functional magnetic resonance imaging* (fMRI) has become an increasingly valuable tool because it quickly produces precise images of specific brain structures. Other methods include using electrodes to measure *evoked potentials*, which are the changes in electrical activity immediately after exposure to particular stimuli. Research using neuroimaging methods has found that the medial prefrontal cortex responds to social stimuli in general. More specifically, the amygdala is an area of the brain that is involved with social categorization. In addition to becoming activated during emotional experiences, it becomes activated in response to outgroup members and social targets that are stereotyped as threatening. The anterior cingulate, a region of the brain that detects conflict, is activated when stereotypes are used, signaling the awareness of bias, and the lateral prefrontal cortex becomes activated when stereotypes are inhibited.

### Accuracy

It is generally assumed that stereotypes contain some kernel of truth, and most research suggests that this is the case, although some stereotypes are more accurate than others. There are observed correlations between stereotypes ascribed to outgroups and the traits that members of those groups ascribe to themselves, as well as correlations between perceptions of stereotypes and actual observed group behavior. However, it is difficult to determine whether group traits inform the stereotype or whether the stereotype informs group traits.

In some cases, stereotypes may reflect the average roles of different groups. For instance, the stereotypes that women are nurturant and that men are dominant may occur in part because, on average and across many cultures, men are more likely to have high-status occupations, such as doctor or lawyer, whereas women are more likely to

have low-status occupations, such as homemakers and child care workers. In this sense, the stereotypes are at least partly “true” for many of the members of the social categories, in terms of their actual behaviors in these roles. Consistent with this idea is the fact that stereotypes can change as a result of changes in social contexts. When individuals from a social group perform behaviors that are inconsistent with existing stereotypes, or are in different contexts, beliefs about the social group may change as well.

In many cases, however, behaviors of group members are also determined by the stereotypes of their group because stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Expectations that outgroup members possess certain traits often lead to the perception and even the expression of the trait in the outgroup. For example, during a hiring process, if an interviewer expects a Black interviewee to be aggressive because of a stereotype about Black people, the interviewer may unintentionally phrase questions in a way that elicits aggressive responses, thus confirming the interviewer’s initial belief about the social group’s aggressiveness. Stereotype-based self-fulfilling prophecies are ubiquitous—even teachers’ expectations about their students can influence the students’ school performance

### Stereotype Development

At a basic level, individuals like similar others, perhaps because, over the long course of evolution, those who were similar were more likely to be helpful and benign, whereas those who were different were more likely to be threatening. Stereotypes are formed through a variety of cognitive and affective processes. As discussed earlier, stereotypes develop through the organization of social stimuli into various categories that contain both general and specific information about the social groups. In some cases, these categories develop out of relatively accurate perceptions of everyday behaviors, but in other cases, they develop from misperceptions of behaviors. These misperceptions can be driven by preexisting expectations or by processing errors. For instance, *distinctiveness-based illusory correlations* occur when a perceiver assumes a relationship between minorities and negative behaviors after exposure to one or

some minorities behaving negatively. Because of set size effects, infrequently performed and negative behaviors tend to be particularly salient. As both minorities and negative behaviors are infrequent and therefore salient, an individual may incorrectly perceive a relationship between them when they occur together. The result is that negative stereotypes easily develop about minority groups.

Individuals also learn useful social categories and stereotypes through social processes such as everyday discourse and exposure to the media, just as they learn any other social norm. Indeed, individually held stereotypes are generally very similar to the stereotypes held by others in the same social contexts. Individuals use stereotypes when they perceive, on the basis of social norms, that it is appropriate to do so, and they refrain from using stereotypes when it is perceived as inappropriate. Stereotyping is so normal and natural that children learn stereotypes as early as 3 or 4 years of age, and their stereotypes remain quite rigid until around the age of 10. There is only a small relationship between the stereotypes of children and those of their parents, however, possibly because children’s unique experiences with various social groups are more likely to inform the way they categorize social stimuli than are their parents’ attitudes.

### Stereotype Maintenance and Change

Because stereotyping and social categorization are basic human processes that provide some benefits for those who hold them, stereotypes are easy to develop but difficult to change. New, potentially contradictory information is discarded without influencing the existing category, whereas ambiguous information regarding the stereotype is frequently distorted to fit the existing beliefs. Furthermore, confirmation biases lead people to seek out information and ask questions about others in ways that confirm and thus reinforce their existing beliefs. Individuals pay less attention to, and are less likely to remember, information that disconfirms their existing stereotypes.

Although it is difficult, stereotype change is possible. One approach is to attempt to change the beliefs themselves. This is perhaps the most common approach, but perhaps also the most difficult,

because expectancies tend to support themselves in virtually every possible way. An alternative but related approach is to attempt to change the perceived variability of stereotyped groups such that the perceiver believes that the stereotypes, although perhaps true of some group members, are far from true for every group member and thus not very diagnostic for use in social judgment.

Changing beliefs occurs in part through education, as those with more education express fewer stereotypes, and in part through increased social interactions with outgroup members. Indeed, positive intergroup contact has been found to change stereotypes in many settings, including schools, work environments, the military, and businesses. However, this approach is not a panacea. Negative intergroup contact makes beliefs more resistant to change, whereas positive intergroup opportunities are limited, and the conditions required for positive contact situations are difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, contact with individual outgroup members, even if successful at the individual level, does not always change attitudes about the group as a whole. Beliefs about individual outgroup members change much more quickly than beliefs about outgroups as a whole because the individual outgroup members are *subtyped* into lower levels of group membership if they do not match expectations about the outgroup as a whole. Thus it is possible to know many individual outgroup members to whom stereotypes are not applied and yet nevertheless apply stereotypes to the outgroup as a whole. Generalization of stereotype-discrepant information to the whole outgroup is more likely when individual outgroup members behave in ways that confirm some existing stereotypes and yet disconfirm others such that, because the individual does seem representative of the group on some dimensions, the stereotype-discrepant information is more difficult to ignore.

There are several different approaches to changing beliefs that avoid the issue of generalization. One successful approach that has created long-term changes is to convince individuals that their prejudiced beliefs are nonnormative and that others do not hold stereotypes. Another approach is to allow the beliefs to remain intact but help people avoid applying them to individuals, thus preventing the stereotyping process. This approach is also difficult because stereotyping is very well

practiced and because it often occurs out of awareness and is difficult to stop. However, some social situations, including repeated practice in denying one's beliefs, awareness of one's moral hypocrisy when one stereotypes, and the presence of positive, stereotype-disconfirming exemplars, reduce the extent to which individuals apply stereotypes to outgroup members.

Stereotyping may also be reduced by changing social categorization processes such that outgroup members are recategorized as part of the ingroup. This recategorization process allows the members of different groups to be able to perceive themselves as members of a common group, to see each other as more similar, and to make friends with each other. Through fostering perceptions of shared identities, encouraging meaningful contact that defies group boundaries, and highlighting similarities on dimensions unrelated to group distinctions, the ingroup and an outgroup can begin to reduce negative beliefs and promote positive ones.

Finally, on a macro level, legal remedies can be successful in decreasing the use of stereotypes. When individuals are forced to individuate rather than categorize, learning about others as individuals may completely overwhelm the influence that their group membership would previously have had. Over long periods of time, legal remedies can also help change social climates so that stereotyping becomes less socially acceptable and so that increased opportunities for some social groups change social roles so that some stereotypes inevitably become obsolete.

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*See also* Categorization; Children: Stereotypes and Prejudice; Common Ingroup Identity Model; Illusory Correlation; Implicit Association Test (IAT); Intergroup Contact Theory; Perceived Group Variability; Prejudice; Self-Fulfilling Prophecy; Stereotype Threat; Subtyping

#### Further Readings

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