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Stereotyping From the Perspective of Perceivers and Targets

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Abstract

This article provides insight into the process of [stereotyping](#) from two different perspectives: the perceiver and the target. From the perceiver's perspective, motivational and cognitive reasons for relying on stereotypes for judgment are discussed. From the targets' perspective, [stereotype threat](#) research is reviewed. From both perspectives, it is clear that stereotypes represent a dual-edged sword for both perceiver and target group members. Finally, research incorporating both perspectives provides useful interventions for [prejudice](#) reduction.

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Introduction

Defining concepts such as prejudice, stereotypes, and [racism](#) helps us to think about how they relate to each other and how they may influence social interactions. Prejudice can be thought of as one's affective or emotional response to members of a particular social group. Stereotypes are most generally defined as "beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups" (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996, p. 240). Racism is behavior that is discriminative against a particular social group. Each of these concepts can be examined separately or in concert. Past characterizations of stereotypes include "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922) and the definition, "exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category" (Allport, 1954, p.191). Documenting the impact of stereotypes on intergroup relations has been a major interest of social psychologists across cultures. This article will examine the process of stereotyping from both the perceiver and the target group's perspective. From the perceiver's perspective, the formation and use of stereotypes will be discussed. From the target's perspective, stereotype threat will be covered. Finally, research offering solutions to offset the negative impact stereotypes and prejudice have on both the perceiver and target is discussed.

Stereotyping from the Perceiver's Perspective

There are multiple perspectives from which to understand stereotypes. At its most basic level we can examine the cognitive and motivational reasons for relying on stereotypes for judgment. In the section below, cognitive reasons will be discussed. Distinctions between [implicit and explicit attitude](#) will be made. For an overview of motivational reasons for stereotype use, please use the following [link](#).

From the cognitive perspective, stereotypes are viewed as a type of mental shortcut we rely on to obtain information quickly and effortlessly. The study of judgmental heuristics (see Gigerenzer, 2008; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) teaches us that at any moment in time, there are a number of stimuli competing for our attention. Given our cognitive limitations in processing all that information, we deploy certain mental strategies to make some decisions very quickly and effortlessly so that we can allocate our attention to information critical for what we consider important decisions. Empirical research has uncovered a variety of mental heuristics we rely upon for quick judgments. Stereotypes are seen as a heuristic that allows us to simplify our world and form quick judgments about other people based upon their group membership. On the one hand, stereotypes can be seen as functionally useful to the perceiver; on the other hand, stereotypes can unintentionally lead to inaccurate judgments and discriminatory behavior.

Going back to the definition of stereotypes, they can be thought of as trait associations for a particular social group. These trait associations contribute to our overall attitude and its members are deemed to possess the same variation of a particular trait regardless of the actual within group variation that might exist (See [Outgroup homogeneity effect](#)). A simple definition for attitude is one's overall evaluation of a particular social

category. Attitudes can be divided into two parts: [unconscious and conscious](#). Asking people directly about their beliefs is thought to capture their conscious or explicit attitudes towards a particular social group. In early attitude research, participants used Likert scales ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree to indicate their evaluation or feelings. Researchers assumed that examining attitude provided insight into the perceivers' tendency to endorse or use stereotypes. In classic stereotyping research studies, participants listed the traits associated with particular social groups (Gilbert, 1951; Karlines, Coffman, & Walters, 1969; Katz & Braly, 1933). In these studies, American college students listed traits they thought best described different ethnic or nationality groups. The results demonstrate the remarkable consensus in the traits ascribed to each group as well as how over time, trait descriptions shifted according to realistic economic and social threats or conflicts experienced by dominant group members with the specific ethnic or nationalistic groups in question. Furthermore, these series of studies demonstrate that the content of stereotypes about ethnic and nationalistic groups did overall shift somewhat favorably over time (Madon et al., 2001).

The traditional method of assessing only conscious attitudes through self-report techniques gives us limited insight into the full impact of stereotypes on attitude formation and behavior. Research has shown that some people are reluctant to report their negative attitudes about certain social groups either because their personal guilt or their reluctance to appear prejudiced to others (Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). Technological advances led to development of new measurement techniques to assess [implicit or unconsciously held attitudes](#) that are not reliant on self-report. Unconscious or implicit attitudes are defined as

introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action toward social objects (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p.8).

These judgments can be thought of as automatic gut responses or feelings in contrast to explicit attitudes that are comprised of conscious deliberative evaluations. The Implicit Association Test is designed to tap into the perceiver's implicit attitudes towards a variety of social groups and categories (to test your implicit associations see [IAT, LINK](#)). The precise relation between the implicit and explicit mental systems and their connection to discriminatory behavior is under investigation (see, [Implicit Association Test: Validity Debates](#)).

Although perceivers may be unaware of the nature of their implicit attitudes; explicit attitudes and behavior may still be subject to their influence. For example, Dovidio, Kawakami and Gaertner (2002) investigated whether implicit and explicit racial attitudes of Caucasian participants predicted bias and in verbal and nonverbal behaviors while interacting with an African American conversation partner. Self-reported racial attitudes predicted explicit verbal behavior, whereas response latency times (an implicit measure representing the amount of time between the presentation of a stimulus and subsequent action taken) significantly predicted nonverbal "friendliness".

One of the most exciting aspects of this research program is the insight it might provide into the formation of stereotypes in the first place. The documentation of how our unconscious and conscious processes shape our beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors may ultimately offer effective suggestions for reducing inter-group (religious, ethnic, racial) conflict.

Stereotyping From the Perspective of the Target

Examining the stereotyping process from the perspective of the target is typically devoted to documenting the impact of stereotypes and prejudice on members of stigmatized groups. It is important, however, to keep in mind that real life social interactions consist of both people occupying simultaneously the roles of perceivers and targets. That is, both individuals within a social interaction can be seen as perceivers who rely on stereotypes to judge each other and both individuals can be seen as targets of stigmas associated with their particular group identities. Typically though, when it comes to examining the content and the impact of negative stereotypes, individuals from dominant or majority groups in power suffer less psychologically and materially than the lower status or minority group member. Moreover, because the majority group holds greater power in society, they have a greater hand in developing the accepted "wisdom" about particular groups. It is not uncommon to find that people belonging to majority groups have greater difficulty coming up with stereotypes about their own group than about minority groups (Simon & Hamilton, 1994). Unfortunately, minority members sometimes adopt the majority group's characterization of their own group as well. Even if group members do not personally believe the stereotypes to be true, they may suffer from what is referred to as "[stereotype threat](#)" – the anxiety felt by group members that their behavior or performance might be used as confirming evidence for existing negative stereotypes (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Since the initial research regarding stereotype threat (Steele, 1997; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002), the concept has been tested in over a 100 research articles. Experiencing stereotype threat has resulted in performance deficits for African American students and Latino students completing purported intelligence tests (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Schmader & Johns, 2003), American women completing math tests (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999), and older adults performing memory tests (Levy, 1996). A few notable findings suggest that stereotype threat is not exclusively limited to minority group members. Rather, threat is experienced situationally when one's group is perceived to be inferior in a particular domain compared to the reference group (Aronson, Lustina, Good & Keough, 1999; Frantz, Cuddy, Burnett, Ray, & Hart, 2004; Leyens et al., 2000; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999).

A review of stereotype threat research studies reveals that definitions and conceptualizations of stereotype threat vary between studies. Furthermore, how researchers manipulate, measure, and assess the concept also differs across studies. In response to these variations, Shapiro and Neuberg (2007) propose a Multi-Threat Framework to describe six different forms of stereotype threat that vary systematically

along the target of the threat (the self vs. one's group) and the source of the threat (self/outgroup others/ingroup others). Regardless of these nuances, it appears that there are systematic conclusions that can be drawn about the negative impact stereotype threats have on individuals and groups.

Reducing and Intervening Stereotypes

Providing solutions to real life social problems is what makes the study of stereotypes and prejudice so prominent in psychology. Various theories and interventions have emerged regarding how to reduce stereotyping and its impact on others. The classic theory, [the Contact hypothesis](#), as well as the recategorization process, [the bookkeeping model](#) and [the situational attribution training intervention](#) all provide models for how social interactions between groups can decrease negative stereotyping and prejudice.

Contact Hypothesis

Gordon Allport popularized the Contact Hypothesis in his book, the [Nature of Prejudice](#). This hypothesis proposes that more than just simple contact between groups is needed to improve intergroup relations. Meaningful interaction between groups is necessary. Allport outlined the following four prerequisites for successful intergroup contact:

- 1) equal status within the contact situation;
- 2) intergroup cooperation;
- 3) common goals; and
- 4) support of authorities, law, or customs.

Subsequent empirical research has shown support for Allport's ideas (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005; Ellison & Powers, 1994). Additionally, two other factors seem critical: (1) the opportunity to develop personal acquaintances and (2) the development of friendships between members, especially when interactions are counter-stereotypic. Developing familiarity with outgroup members allows people a chance to see each other as individuals not just representatives of their groups which in turn promotes trust and reduces anxiety. Furthermore, these interactions provide an opportunity to disconfirm negative stereotypes and help people see the heterogeneity that truly exists among outgroup members. Cross cultural studies have shown that intergroup friendships play a significant role in the reduction of prejudice towards those specific outgroups (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005).

Recategorization Process

From social cognitive research, we learn that a related benefit of intergroup social interactions is the opportunity to alter one's mental representations or categories of social groups and individuals. [The Common Ingroup Identity Model](#) describes the recategorization process that may occur through favorable interactions. According to this

model, intergroup social interactions allow for perceivers to change their mental representations so that they no longer see themselves distinctly belonging to one group while another person is categorized as being part of a different group. Now the categorization process operates in such a way that perceivers form one big inclusive category that includes outgroup members. With this common ingroup identity, intergroup bias and conflict is reduced in part because ingroup favoritism is now extended to people previously not considered part of the ingroup category.

The Bookkeeping Model

This model that was also coined by social cognition researchers describes the process by which perceivers unconsciously tally up stereotypically confirming versus disconfirming information. As the disconfirming information accumulates, the group category originally based on stereotypes becomes modified on the basis of this new information. The model assumes that extremely negative stereotypes about a particular group will weaken as the perceiver encounters each new target person who moderately disconfirms the group stereotype. However, if a perceiver meets someone who wildly disconfirms their stereotype, then the danger is that they will categorize the target as the exception to the rule and the original category will remain unchanged. Therefore, the bookkeeping model works so long as the target group members encountered represent reasonable examples of the group.

Situational Attribution Training

A much more active prejudice reduction technique that can be taught is called [Situational Attribution Training](#) (Stewart, Latu, Kawakami & Myers, 2010). Attribution theory is the study of how we infer causes of our own and other's behavior. At its most basic level, behaviors are either explained by internal or external attributions. Internal attributions describe our beliefs that there is something intrinsic about the person that led to an outcome or behavior (e.g., a personality factor). External attributions are used when it is believed that something about the situation led to a particular result or behavior. [The fundamental attribution error](#) refers to our tendency to overuse internal attributions and underestimate the impact of external factors in producing an outcome or action. Building off this basic idea, research has shown that perceivers also commit what is called [the Ultimate Attribution Error](#). People have a tendency to use [dispositional attributions](#) for *negative* behaviors of outgroup members especially if the behaviors are stereotypically consistent. In contrast, when it is a positive behavior, individuals are more likely to attribute it to situational factors. One of the many problems with this error is that it allows us to maintain our stereotypes even in the face of disconfirming information. The situational attribution training intervention is designed to undo the Ultimate Attribution Error. The results of a study conducted on this intervention shows that when participants were trained to consider the situation when judging negative actions by outgroup members, there was a reduction in the activation of negative stereotypes of that group compared to people who received no training at all.

Summary

In conclusion, there are four basic ways in which we can reduce the impact of our stereotypes and prejudices: contact, bookkeeping, recategorization, and changing our attributions. All of these situations require people to overcome their defensiveness and anxiety and actually interact with different people. At the heart of these solutions, diversity is the key to prejudice and stereotype reduction. Diversity in our neighborhoods, schools, and workplace may ultimately be most important for majority group members if we actually want to reduce the power of stereotypes and prejudice.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to provide insight into understanding the complexity of stereotypes from the target and perceiver perspectives. From the research covered in this chapter, we learned that stereotyping is part of the way in which perceivers process information. However, we saw that the effects of stereotypes can be negative especially for members of stigmatized groups. Meaningful intergroup social interactions offer ways to reduce the negative impact prejudice and stereotypes impose.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What are some reasons people rely on stereotypes for judgment?
2. What is the difference between implicit and explicit processes?
3. What are some ways stereotype threat can negatively influence target group members?
4. What are some ways stereotype threat can positively influence target group members?
5. Consider the long history of psychological research on stereotypes. Identify the major contributions to this tradition.
6. Develop a research strategy whereby you can gain some insight into how individuals form stereotypes about other people or cultures.
7. Survey some of the leading journals in social psychology. Identify research articles focused on stereotypes and prejudice. Based on your review, summarize what seems to be interesting to contemporary psychologists in this area.

About the Authors

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