

Stereotypes

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Definition: A *stereotype* is "...a fixed, over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people." (Cardwell, 1996).

For example, a "hells angel" biker dresses in leather.

One advantage of a stereotype is that it enables us to respond rapidly to situations because we may have had a similar experience before.

One disadvantage is that it makes us ignore differences between individuals; therefore we think things about people that might not be true (i.e. make generalizations).

The use of stereotypes is a major way in which we simplify our social world; since they reduce the amount of processing (i.e. thinking) we have to do when we meet a new person.

By stereotyping we infer that a person has a whole range of characteristics and abilities that we assume all members of that group have. Stereotypes lead to social categorization, which is one of the reasons for prejudice attitudes (i.e. "them" and "us" mentality) which leads to in-groups and out-groups.

Most stereotypes probably tend to convey a negative impression. Positive examples would include judges (the phrase "sober as a judge" would suggest this is a stereotype with a very respectable set of characteristics), overweight people (who are often seen as "jolly") and television news readers (usually seen as highly dependable, respectable and impartial). Negative stereotypes seem far more common, however.

Racial Stereotypes

Researchers have found that stereotypes exist of different races, cultures or ethnic groups. Although the terms race, culture and ethnic groups have different meanings, we shall take them to mean roughly the same thing at the moment.

The most famous study of racial stereotyping was published by Katz and Braly in 1933 when they reported the results of a questionnaire completed by students at Princeton University in the USA.

They found that students held clear, negative stereotypes – few students expressed any difficulty in responding to the questionnaire.

Most students at that time would have been white Americans and the pictures of other ethnic groups included Jews as shrewd and mercenary, Japanese as shrewd and sly, Negroes as lazy and happy-go-lucky and Americans as industrious and intelligent.

Not surprisingly, racial stereotypes always seem to favor the race of the holder and belittle other races. It is probably true to say that every ethnic group has racial stereotypes of other groups.

Some psychologists argue that it is a “natural” aspect of human behavior, which can be seen to benefit each group because it helps in the long-run to identify with one’s own ethnic group and so find protection and promote the safety and success of the group. There is no evidence for this view, however, and many writers argue that it is merely a way of justifying racist attitudes and behaviors.



Katz and Braly (1933) – Racial Stereotyping

Aim: To investigate stereotypical attitudes of Americans towards different races.

Method: Questionnaire method was used to investigate stereotypes. American university students were given a list of nationalities and ethnic groups (e.g. Irish, Germans etc.), and a list of 84 personality traits. They were asked to pick out five or six traits which they thought were typical of each group.

Results: There was considerable agreement in the traits selected. White Americans, for example, were seen as industrious, progressive and ambitious. African Americans were seen as lazy, ignorant and musical. Participants were quite ready to rate ethnic groups with whom they had no personal contact.

Conclusion: Ethnic stereotypes are widespread, and shared by members of a particular social group.

Research Evaluation

The Katz and Braly studies were done in the 1930’s and it can be argued that cultures have changed since then and we are much less likely to hold these stereotypes.

Later studies conducted in 1951 and 1967 found changes in the stereotypes and the extent to which they are held. In general, stereotypes in the later study tended to be more positive but the belief that particular ethnic groups held particular characteristics still existed.

Also, it should be noted that this study has relied entirely on verbal reports and is therefore extremely low in ecological validity. Just because participants in a study will trot out stereotypes when asked does not mean to say that people go around acting on them. People do not necessarily behave as though the stereotypes are true.

The limited information that the experiments are given is also likely to create demand characteristics (i.e. participants figure out what the experiment is about and change their behavior, for example give the results the psychologist wants).

Finally, there is the problem of social desirability with questionnaire research – people may lie.

Stereotype Threat

A “stereotype threat” arises when one is in a situation where one has the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype. It is cued by the mere recognition that a negative group stereotype could apply to you in a given situation.

It is important to understand that the person may experience a threat even if he or she does not believe the stereotype. Simply, in the context, the person perceives that the stereotype is a plausible characterization of himself or herself by others (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Steele and Aronson (1995) conducted an experiment involving African American and White college students who took a difficult test using items from an aptitude test (American GRE Verbal exam) under one of two conditions.

In the stereotype threat condition, students were told that their performance on the test would be a good indicator of their underlying intellectual abilities. In the non-threat condition, they were told that the test was simply a problem solving exercise and was not diagnostic of ability.

Performance was compared in the two conditions and results showed that African American participants performed less well than their white counterparts in the stereotype threat condition, but in the non-threat condition their performance equaled that of their white counterparts.

In another study (Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady, 1999) Asian women were subtly reminded (with a questionnaire) of either their Asian identity or their female identity prior to taking a difficult math test. Results showed that women reminded of their ‘Asianness’ performed better than the control group and women reminded of their female identity performed worse than the control group.

According to Steele, stereotype threat generates “spotlight anxiety” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 809), which causes emotional distress and “vigilant worry” that may undermine performance. Students worry that their future may be compromised by society’s perception and treatment of their group so they do not focus their full attention on the test questions.

Students taking the test under stereotype threat might also become inefficient on the test by rereading the questions and the answer choices, as well as rechecking their answers, more than when not under stereotype threat. It also can induce “attributional ambiguity” – a person gets a low grade and asks, “Is it something about me or because of my race?”

References

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