

# Potential and downfall of stereotyping



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The Downfall and Potential of Stereotyping At some point in our lives many of us have stereotyped or fallen victim to a stereotype threat. We categorize the complex world into sections that fit our schema. Often times these ‘categories’ we create are inaccurate and harmful to others, and affect our mental process. The articles “ Don’t let stereotypes warp your judgment” by Robert Heilbroner and “ The many experiences of stereotype threat” by Claude M. Steele analyze and examine the effects of stereotyping.

In “ Don’t let stereotypes warp your judgment”, Heilbroner covers the issue of stereotyping the origins of it and the negative effects of it on people. The author explains that stereotypes have negative effects on people because it sways them from the truth, blocks their perception of what individuals are really like, and is often the source of racism and prejudice. In addition to the negative effects, Heilbroner offers solutions to how people can rid themselves of stereotyping. In “ The many experiences of stereotype threat” Steele seeks to find the driving factor behind stereotype threat.

He uses a real-life incident that took place in his class to explain that anyone of any race, gender, ethnicity, or age is prone to stereotype threat if they are put in situations or settings where a person is exposed to a negative stereotype. Steele then makes a connection between people under stereotype threat and intellectual performance. Steele includes several studies conducted that led him to the conclusion that that participants who were put under a stereotype threat tend to conform to the negative stereotype thus, negatively affecting intellectual performance.

Steele concluded that that when participants are under a stereotype, positive or negative, that person will likely perform according to the stereotype they are exposed to. Although Steele and Heilbroner identify the problems and negative effects of stereotyping, Heilbroner discusses how stereotyping blinds our judgment of others and offers solutions to stop stereotyping whereas Steele discusses that when a person is treated according to a specific social identity, people tend to conform to it.

Both articles made me question the seriousness and severity of stereotyping and stereotype threat and persuaded me of the need to stop judging others based on stereotypes and at the same time prove it wrong with positive stereotypes. Although Heilbroner and Steele both view stereotyping as having negative effects on people, Steele goes in depth with analyzing stereotyping and proves that positive stereotyping have positive effects on students taking standardized tests.

Steele believes that situational pressure feeds stereotype threat and that it might be possible to change performances on standardized tests depending on which stereotype participants are reminded of. To test his theory Steele asked undergraduate Asian women to participate in a math test. Steele picked this group because, “ Members of this group have two math-relevant identities: their gender identity, which is negatively stereotyped in math, and their ethnic identity, which is positively stereotyped in math” (Steele 253).

The results found supported Steele’s theory; Asian women whose background questionnaire reminded them of their gender identity got 43 percent of questions attempted correct whereas those who filled

questionnaires that didn't remind them of their gender identity got 49 percent of questions correct. However, when the background questionnaires reminded the participants of their ethnic background, performance improved drastically and got 54 percent of the items they attempted correct.

Steele claims that “ These findings suggest a possible remedy for stereotyping threat effects: remind test takers of identities that counter the relevant stereotype” (Steele 254). Steele analyzes that negative stereotypes affects peoples' intellectual performance negatively, but if countered with positive stereotypes, the results are reversed. Steele declares that stereotype threat is bad, but people should use it to their advantage and motivation to get out and prove the stereotype and those who created it wrong.

Although Steele sees potential in stereotyping, Heilbroner sees the need to eliminate stereotypes and erase them from people's mind completely because of their negative effects on ourselves and others. Heilbroner believes that people stereotype to conserve the confusion of the world. It saves people the trouble of finding out what the world and people are really like, and as a result make people mentally lazy. Stereotypes can become for some people all the time, and this substitutes for observation, Heilbroner explains, “ Someone who has formed rigid preconceptions of all teenagers as “ wild,” doesn't alter his point of view when he meets a calm and serious-minded high school student. He brushes them aside as “ exceptions that prove the rule. ” And, of course, if he meets someone true to type, he stands triumphantly vindicated. “ They're all like that,” he proclaims, having, an ill-behaved adolescent” (Heilbroner 244). In addition to making us mentally

lazy and destroying our ability to observe, Heilbroner believes that stereotyping degrade ourselves because a person who divides the world into simple categories such as “ snobs”, “ lazy”, and “ sexy” is apt to becoming a stereotype themselves and loses the capability to be oneself.

While negatively affecting ourselves, stereotyping harms others and is often the source of racism and prejudice, For example, in a study, a number of Columbia and Barnard students were shown 30 photographs of pretty but unidentified girls, and asked to rate each in terms of " general liking," " intelligence," and " beauty". Two months later, the same groups were shown the same photographs, this time with fictitious Irish, Italian, Jewish and " American" names attached to the pictures. Right away the ratings changed.

Faces which were now seen as representing a national group went down in looks and still farther down in likability, while the " American" girls suddenly looked prettier and nicer (Heilbroner 243). This study included by Heilbroner proves that people judge and prejudice against people before getting to know them. While Steele encourages people to be motivated by the negative stereotype so that one can prove the opposite, Heilbroner encourages people to become aware of standardized pictures in our heads and of the world in order to avoid stereotyping.

After reading both articles Steele’s approach to stereotyping strikes me as more practical than Heilbroner’s approach. Steele’s article looks into the negative effects of stereotyping, but focuses mainly on how stereotype threat can be used to one’s advantage and how working under positive

stereotypes can increase intellectual performance. Steele encourages people to look at a negative stereotype as motivation to prove it wrong.

I feel that this is more practical than Heilbroner's approach which is to rid oneself of stereotypes completely and "learn to be chary of generalizations about people" (Heilbroner 244) because stereotyping is a part of everyone's life and people are faced with it in several situations. Stereotyping is almost impossible to get rid of because "The study of unconscious[-> 0] bias is revealing the unsettling truth: We all use stereotypes, all the time, without knowing it. We have met the enemy of equality, and the enemy is us" (Paul 1).

Although stereotypes are difficult to rid oneself of; people should take a slow process of change that aids in eliminating the negative stereotypes. Reading the articles opened my eyes to the negative effects of stereotyping, stereotype threat, and the severity and seriousness of them. Reading the articles made me strongly believe that we should attempt to put an end to at least the negative stereotypes. Some may find that ridding themselves of negatively stereotyping people difficult because that is the "standardized" image in their heads and that's what they are used to.

However, as common and humorous as they are, people need to understand the dangers related to them. As difficult as it may seem eliminating negative stereotypes is possible. One just has to become aware of people and the world around them and "when mindfulness is induced, it can prevent automatic stereotype-activated behavior" (Langer, Stapleton 5). Even though negative stereotypes are discouraged, stereotypes in general are

sometimes necessary because “ Our ability to categorize and evaluate is an important part of human intelligence[-> 1]” (Paul 2).

Stereotypes have their potential when presented and used for intellectual performance. Participants who are under negative stereotype threat tend to perform worse than those who aren't under stereotype threat. However when these negative stereotypes are countered with positive ones, participants conform to the positive stereotype thus scoring higher in intellectual performance. I believe that people should be able to counter the negative stereotype with a positive one, that way one will avoid its harmful effects and reveal their true identity. In the end, stereotypes have negative effects and have potential.

Heilbroner and Steele offer us a warning about the perils of stereotyping, but while Heilbroner believes stereotyping harm ourselves and others and sees the need to eliminate it, Steele focuses on how positive stereotypes positively affects us when it comes to intellectual performance. I would encourage us not conform to the negative stereotypes because when we negatively stereotype, “ we take in the gender[-> 2], the age, the color of the skin of the person before us, and our minds respond with messages that say hostile, stupid, slow, weak. Those qualities aren't out there in the environment.

They don't reflect reality" (Paul 2). In addition to eliminating negative stereotypes from our minds, we should conform to the stereotype opposite that of the negative in order to show our true identity and escape from the dangers of stereotype threat. Works cited Djikic, Maja, Ellen J. Langer, and

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