

# When and why do we rely on stereotypes



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Stereotyping has been a great topic of debate since the beginning of the 21st century with numerous experiments conducted in order to discover the underlying causes, motivations and situations under which they occur.

As well as building an intricate and wide-ranging answer to these questions, the results have shown that it would prove difficult to generate a singular explanation as to why or when stereotypes are used owing to the many possible reasons and different circumstances in which they can be utilized (Hilton and Von Hippel 1996). It is for this reason that they have been described as overdetermined, as they are affected and governed by many underlying processes and influential factors (Mackie, Hamilton, Susskind, and Rosselli, 1996). Despite this, overall definitions have been produced, such as that by Lippmann (1922, as cited in Stangor and Schaller) stating that they are “ pictures in our heads” that we use to form opinions on people. Hilton and Von Hippel (1996) defined a stereotype as a highly simplified and widely held generalization of a particular group and Allport (1954, as cited in Mackie, et al. emphasized the role of categorization in stereotyping.

Stereotypes are not always produced as a result of defective thinking or even always negative as they are simply expectations we have as a result of our own experiences or other means of socialization (Moscowitz 2005)

Without the option to easily infer information otherwise unavailable so quickly, it would be impossible for anyone to be able to interpret the sheer diversity of people and objects surrounding us.

Unfortunately, this causes us to go past the realms of objectivity, possibly making inaccurate judgements based on a very minor superficial factor. The stereotyping process is greatly affected by the person’s inward motivation

(Hilton and Von Hippel, 1996) as they will strive to alleviate social awkwardness caused by uncertainty about people whom the subject has never met, thus relying on stereotypes to do so. This was discovered by Hogg and Mullin (1999) who found that in a socially important but ambiguous situation, membership to a homogeneous group helps relieve the uncertainty. This leads people to self categorise more readily and therefore exhibit group behaviours such as stereotyping. Eagly (1995) discovered that stereotypes will be used when social roles are unclear, as it helps establish where you stand against another person without having to use any information other than that which is readily available; it is unfeasible to require a conversation with someone at a bus stop in order to determine whether socially you feel right stepping in front of them and so alternatives must be found.

Stereotyping can also increase a person's sense of in-group identity, possibly due to the accentuation principle (Tajfel and Wilkes 1963) that proposes in-group similarities and out-group differences are subconsciously exaggerated. Additionally, a negative stereotype held of an out-group will make an in-group appear more favourable and will therefore increase the feeling of self-worth associated with membership to that group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Negative stereotypes will consequently be reinforced by the positive feeling gained by applying them, encouraging further use. This is concordant with the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) which emphasises the need for group membership in self-enhancement and states that differentiations between groups are used as a way to produce a positive self-evaluation.

It could be assumed that because of this, when faced with a fragile emotional state or when feeling insecure about group membership one might be more likely to rely on stereotypes. However, as the Social Identity Theory dictates, it is not only emotionally maladjusted people that require ethnocentrism to increase self-esteem, and so it could be said that in this case, stereotypes will be relied upon whenever a social situation is present not simply when the individual Fiske and Taylor (1991) coined the term “cognitive miser” in order to explain a possible reason why people stereotype. It refers to the notion that people are inclined to limit the amount of mental resources used at any given time and promote cognitive “energy saving” (Macrae, Milne and Bodenhausen, 1994), using simple and easy ways to complete tasks. Stereotyping is used as a result of this as it requires minimal cognitive effort while still allowing an apparently rational and sufficient view of the world to be obtained. The time-consuming and mentally straining task of discovering and recalling the characteristics of each individual person we encounter can be avoided, allowing us to create a social judgement quickly and easily. Pendry and Macrae (1994) found that limiting the amount of mental resources available inhibited the ability to judge a subject as an individual and thus caused them to rely on stereotyping to form an impression.

Kruglanski (1989) suggested that this could also be attributed to the increased predictability and structure offered by this approach. Therefore, it would be expected that increasing the cognitive load would create a situation in which people would be inclined to ‘cut corners’ and stereotype to conserve mental resources. However, these results have been disputed by

Nolan, Haslam, Spears and Oakes (1999) who found that increasing the cognitive load actually decreased the level of stereotyping, suggesting that this view is oversimplified and neglects reality-based factors that may play more of a part than was accounted for. Despite this, it has generally been accepted that although this process does not operate in the exact way predicted by Fiske and Taylor, stereotypes are used because they do benefit the perceiver when they are faced with stimulus overload as it produces “information gain” (Mackie et al 1996) through being able to attribute characteristics to all members of a group, with a seemingly small amount of “information loss” as a result of the lack of appreciation of individuality. Because of this, according to this theory, stereotypes are produced and relied on because of a natural tendency to reduce the amount of information we have to attend to and increase the amount of the information acquired about a stimulus. The original definition of stereotypes proposed they arose from defective thinking and although this has been greatly disputed especially in recent years, some truth remains in it.

Despite the realisation that stereotypes are a product of everyday categorization and are used universally regardless of how well adjusted and ordinary the person is, there are ways in which stereotypes are used negatively. For example, Campbell (1967) highlighted that stereotypes can be used to justify hatred or anger towards a particular group, as it believed that if it weren't for the out-group possessing the characteristics inferred by the stereotype, they would be liked. This is where stereotypes are employed as part of prejudice or discrimination. It has been argued that stereotypes alone do not produce discrimination, as they are simply “primary

rationalisers” (Allport 1954 as cited in Stangor and Schaller 1996) and it is much more likely that stereotypes are a consequence of discrimination, not the cause.

In other words, when a person already holds discriminatory beliefs, they will create and apply a stereotype in order to justify it and explain other factors of the group members’ status or situation, for example. Therefore, following this line of thought it can be concluded that a stereotypes will be relied on when negative views are already held in order to make these opinions appear founded. The situations outlined in the above paragraph are unfortunately not the only ones in which negative stereotyping will occur. Sherif (1966) developed the “ realistic group conflict theory” as a result of his investigation involving observation of the behaviour of two randomly appointed groups of boys attending a summer camp (Sherif 1956). It was discovered that negative stereotypes of the opposing group were the most prominent when the two groups were competing for scarce resources and when the situation was such that if one group succeeded, the other would suffer. This highlights another situation in which stereotypes will be relied upon, namely when competitive attitudes are encouraged and one group’s victory is reliant on the other’s failure.

This could be partially attributed to ethnocentrism, although it does emphasis the role of conflict in stereotype use; stereotypes are more likely to be applied if the groups In question are in conflict, The ecological validity of the study has been criticised as many other outside factors are at work in real-life situations that were not controlled or present in this study. However, the hypothesis has been supported by subsequent studies such as Wolfe and <https://assignbuster.com/when-and-why-do-we-rely-on-stereotypes/>

Spencer (1996) despite the suggestion that it is slightly outdated. Another reason behind stereotyping that has been proposed is the bias to infer inner dispositions from observable behaviour. Bassili (1989) found that people frequently infer inward intentions from behavioural acts, in accordance with the Correspondence Inference Theory (Jones and Davis 1965) This has been dubbed correspondence bias and has been assumed to be a very influential in stereotyping due to their similar nature; correspondence bias is also the assumption of certain characteristics based on something more observable, although on an individual rather than group level. This idea was extended by Pettigrew (1979) into the ultimate attribution error theory which proposed that when out-group members committed negative acts, these were more likely to be attributed to dispositional causes than those committed by in-group members. Therefore stereotypes, especially negative ones, will be produced and subsequently relied on because of a readiness to interpret members of other groups' behaviour as being an expression of inward malevolence or driven by ill motives, with positive ones being 'luck' or 'exceptional'.

Jussim and Fleming (1996) suggest that a possible reason for stereotyping is that they form a self-fulfilling prophecy. Although the ideas held about a certain category may have been incorrect, the fact that this opinion is held will influence the interpretation and recall of behaviour exhibited by members of this category in order to support the original beliefs (Brewer, 1996) thus acting as a reinforcement or confirmation. Conversely, targets of a self-fulfilling prophecy stereotype are likely to conform to the erroneous view held of them, such as in von Baeyer, Sherk and Zanna (1981) where

women who were told that they would be interviewed by a sexist male adapted both their behaviour and appearance accordingly, acting much more feminine and in line with the stereotype believed to be held than those who were not. This works to maintain the stereotypes and therefore will encourage the person to rely on stereotypes again in a similar situation, because as far as they understand, their opinion has been proven to be fact. Stereotypes have also been found to be used when people have been classically conditioned to believe them. Classical conditioning involves learning through association and has been applied to stereotype application.

Vanman and Miller (1993) state that anxiety and distress were typical emotions felt when confronted with out-groups, suggesting that these negative feelings could begin to be associated with what is perceived to be the cause, namely the out-group. Additionally, the less frequently the person encounters the out-group, the more intense these emotions will be as harmful consequences will be anticipated (Stephan and Stephan 1985) thus leading to a negative stereotype being held of the out-group to explain the negative reaction felt by their presence. According to this account, stereotypes will be relied upon when out-group contact is limited and when associations are made with unconnected responses. Inequality between people within a society can also be a reason people use stereotypes. This is because this disparity between social statuses seems to require justification, and stereotypes can do this as they assume all these groups share certain qualities which could be held responsible for their position. An example of this is that two thirds of white Americans interviewed in the 1980s believed that the reason black people are usually disadvantaged is because they



don't have the same work ethic or level of motivation as white people have (Kluegel and Smith 1986); this discrepancy cannot be put down to racial inequality as this doesn't support their view of a just world.

This opinion that good things happen to good people was noted as a very prevalent notion (Jose 1990) and this leads to the assumption that the victim can be held responsible for anything that happens to them. This need for justification of Status Quo leads to the prediction that stereotypes will be used whenever there is a disadvantaged group to whom responsibility must be shifted to make the person feel as though it is not unfair or likely to happen to them. In conclusion, due to the nature of stereotypes, there is no singular account of when or why they are relied upon. However, many factors have been found to be associated with including many that have not yet been mentioned, such as the affect of illusory correlation, in which a nonexistent relationship between group membership and a characteristic is perceived. Additionally, the different schools of psychology such as psychodynamic or cognitive have generated theories which attempt to explain stereotypes in their entirety rather than different aspects or occurrences of them, as with the majority of the studies outlined here. From this evidence though, it would appear that stereotypes will be relied upon in situations of uncertainty because conforming to a homogeneous group relieves this tension, when social roles are unclear because it helps to clarify them and in most social situations because they help to increase in-group identity and self esteem especially if the person has a low self value beforehand.

They can be used when hatred towards a certain group requires justification or because of cognitive resource conservation. Conflict between groups can produce negative stereotypes, as can the interpretation of others' behaviour to conform to already held beliefs in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Overall, it could be concluded that stereotypes are a very prevalent feature of society and so occur as a result of many unavoidable situations.