Social identity theory essay sample

In social psychology, theories are used as descriptors for various social and/or cognitive phenomena. One such theory is the schemata theory. Schemata are mental constructs that correspond to real world aspects; an example of this is stereotyping. A stereotype is a mental action that is based on physical appearances or conventional conceptions that conjecture behavior of a person or a group. The most prevalent of stereotyping is racial and gender stereotyping.

For example, Native Americans had been historically depicted in art, literature, and film as feather-wearing, scalp-hunting savages, without consideration to the actual behavior of early Native Americans. Arab Americans and Muslims found themselves branded as terrorists following the September 11, 2001 attack (Coryn, Beale, & Myers, 2004, pp. 166-168). According to Weathington and Moldenhauer (2008), other stereotyping can occur with gender roles, with the female role as expressive and the male role as instrumental (p. 7).

While mental organization of the real world may benefit humans conceptually, stereotypes can often be too simple, can lead to prejudice and mistakes, and can mask subtleties that could contribute to positive inter-group relationships. One example is the anti-obese bias. Such bias can occur throughout a person's life, from teenage years to occupational settings to familial behaviors, in which the physical characteristic of obesity is behaviorally linked to laziness or revulsion on the part of the critic (Weinstein, Wilson, Drake, & Kellum, 2008, pp. 1 & 58).

Anti-homosexual stereotypes also exist. The Christian right have used stereotypes of homosexuals being diseased and dangerous to support their argument such that homosexual parenting would render developmental problems in their children (Hicks, 2003). Studies have also been done that shows discrimination and prejudice against women and homosexuals by right-wing authoritarian and social-dominance groups, with such findings attributed to perceived social and moral norms (Case & Ritchey, 2008, pp. 3-24).

The election year 2008 draws to a close and during that time, presidential nominees and candidates have traveled the nation on their campaigns to generate support from voters. During this time, I have witnessed various forms of negative stereotyping within one particular political party in regards to a presidential candidate. Barack Obama was an extraordinary presidential nominee who has weathered various stereotypical accusations from members of the Republican Party.

Drawing on a tentative connection between Bill Ayers and Barack Obama, Sarah Palin famously coined the phrase " palling round with terrorists" on the campaign trail; CBS News reported that others in the right-wing made supported a comparison between Barack Obama to Osama bin Laden. The Huffington Post reported that Michele Bachman called Obama very anti-American; the same newspaper reported a Republican women's group head calling Obama a " Muslim Socialist".

Still others, such as Bob Lonsberry in The Ledger Tallahassee Review, claimed that Barack Obama held anti-American Marxist ideals that would

destroy the economy. Criticism from Barack Obama's opponent, John McCain, claimed that Obama's support of tax cuts and credits were " socialist". Each of these names can be linked to negative racial and social stereotyping of many layers, with the end result of gaining votes for the GOP candidate and maintaining dividing lines between Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals.

The most obvious negative racial stereotyping is that any person with an Arabic name, face, or background would be similar in values with Osama bin Laden or with terrorism. By accepting a link between Barack Hussein Obama and Osama bin Laden, the GOP hoped to use racial stereotyping so that the populace would believe Obama would behave like Osama bin Laden regardless of Obama's actual socio-political connections and stances on terrorism. The second stereotype emerges from the first: Arabs are also Muslims and vice versa, and someone who is either is a terrorist and a danger to the US.

The GOP's claim about Obama being Muslim or Arab draws its strength from the perception that being either one entails terrorist beliefs and behaviors. Thirdly, conventional conceptions of Marxism and socialism illustrate these philosophical ideals as anti-capitalistic and anti-American. By calling Obama both Marxist, socialist, and anti-American, Obama's opponents are again using a simplistic, archetypal schema to predict Obama's behavior regarding US economy without regard to context.

The use of stereotypes in political campaigns this year has been moderately effective in mobilizing and dividing people based on fear-based issues.

Although stereotypes can help humans organize the world conceptually, the examples that I have witnessed demonstrates that it is necessary for humans to move beyond the simplistic and archetypal " black or white" viewpoints and to learn to conceptualize in complex and subtle ways, within context.

There are consequences to using stereotypes. One consequence of using stereotypes discussed above was the GOP candidate losing many independent and moderate voters. Another consequence was the viewpoint of many citizens, including Republican Colin Powell, who saw the Republican Party as needing to seriously consider what issues it stands for. Also, many voters questioned if the GOP had any plans to stimulate the economy, deal with two wars and ameliorate the national debt.

If the GOP can cease the use of stereotypes to generate fear-based and divisive reactions, it could return to the stage as a strong political force. In summary, there is much to witness in the real world with regards to schema. Drawing on social psychology theory, I have been able to understand some of the psychology behind the various GOP members' claims. It has allowed me to acknowledge the GOP's mistakes, their consequences, and foresee a path with which the Republican Party can regain its political foothold in the future.