

Stereotype Thinking

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Stereotypes are widely held fixed thoughts and beliefs adopted by common members of a group, that represent a particular group of individuals or behaviors as a whole. Attitudes people hold reflect in-group beliefs, values, and everyday life choices that are transgressed throughout multiple generations. Stereotypes are intertwined into society, and although many people would like to deny these attitudes, they are implanted on individuals when we are young and occur without conscious awareness. Stereotype thinking is adaptive in nature, which serves the purpose to help people make sense of the world around them, by explaining social events, justifying one's actions, and assists to distinguish in-groups in a more positive light from out-groups. Stereotype thinking permits people to have the capability of understanding others and simultaneously shapes the way individuals encounter situations.

Overestimation with scarce availability of information can lead to inaccurate stereotypical perceptions. For instance, the increasing of age into older adulthood has been found to have negative associations, such as being frail and unhappy. Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996) conducted a study that used scrambled-sentence test of older adult stereotypes to activate commonly held ageism stereotypes. The participants that were primed with the ageism stereotypes, compared to the control group who were not primed with stereotypes, walked slower when leaving the research laboratory. This suggests that the primed stereotype thinking made the participants act in a way elders would act, which is consistent with the content of that stereotype. This can reveal that stereotype thinking can be negatively associated with self-fulfilling prophecies, in which the inaccurate perceptions of a group lead people to behave in a way that

validates the stereotype. Additionally, stereotype thinking influences the way we treat and perceive others, which can result in discrimination of individuals and of entire groups.

A study by Clark and Clark (1947), found that black children preferred to play with “white” dolls and thought of the “black” dolls as mean and ugly. These children were racially aware of their inferiority of their racial group that illustrates the internalization of attitudes toward groups, which resulted in these children having lower self-esteem and a negative sense of self.

Another long standing stereotype involves the long term label of socially accepted stigmatization on mental health. This endorsed stereotypical thinking has lead the mental health group to be seen as fearful and inferior, which is consistently being reinforced and confirmed by media when catastrophic events occur, such as a mass murder. This affects the entire mental health group, although most do not have these stereotypical characteristics. West and Turner (2014) revealed that extended intergroup contact, with a schizophrenic actor acting non-stereotypically, allows for explicit behavioral responses, such as being more positive towards this mental health group, to be mediated by explicit attitudes. This is imperative for acknowledging how society, through the use of media especially, can implement stereotypes on groups. This negative extended intergroup contact to the public creates internalization of negative associations with mental illness. This stereotypical thinking consequently marginalizes mental health even further.

Activation of stereotype thinking automatically influences people’s thoughts and behaviors. Stereotype thinking can be adaptive in nature, such as being useful for responding quickly to threats and to be cognitively resourceful. However, the unconscious processes of stereotypes can have detrimental effects to various groups that are being further marginalized.

Evidence has shown that it is possible to reduce automatic activation of stereotype thinking by being trained to initiate counter-stereotypic information. Kawakami and colleagues (2000) found that after negation training, in which participants were taught to respond yes to non-cultural associations and no to cultural associations, automatic activation of stereotypes decreased. People have been primed throughout their lives to believe in these negative associations, but with training and ongoing exposure it is possible to learn to change these internalized beliefs that affect social and cognitive behavior.

Further Reading

Bargh, J. A., Chen, M., & Burrows, L. (1996). Automaticity of social behavior: Direct effects of Trait construct and stereotype activation on action. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 71(2), 230.

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Kawakami, K., Dovidio, J. F., Moll, J., Hermsen, S., & Russin, A. (2000). Just say no (to stereotyping): Effects of training in the negation of stereotypic associations on stereotype activation. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 78(5), 871–888.
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West, K., & Turner, R. (2014). Using extended contact to improve physiological responses and behavior toward people with schizophrenia. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 50, 57-64.