
The Social Psychology of Stereotyping and Group Life

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Russell Spears
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Alex Haslam
Gmunden, 18 July 1996

2 Stereotypes as Explanations: A Subjective Essentialistic View of Group Perception

Vincent Yzerbyt, Steve Rocher and
Georges Schadron

Tel peuple a l'esprit lourd et stupide, tel autre l'a vif, léger, pénétrant. D'où cela vient-il, si ce n'est en partie, et de la nourriture qu'il prend, et de la semence de ses pères, et de ce chaos de divers éléments qui nagent dans l'immensité de l'air?

La Mettrie, 1748, 1981, pp. 100-3

The show we endure year in, year out on our TV screens provides us with far too many opportunities to be shocked by the behaviour of our fellow human beings. Wars and massive killings have become a common dish on the menu of our evening news. As human beings, but even more so as social psychologists, we feel something ought to be done to better understand the unfolding of relationships between human groups. Very early indeed, social psychologists displayed a great interest for intergroup relations and the various factors affecting their dynamics. Central among the variables involved are the views that people entertain about one another: stereotypes. Stereotypes can be defined as 'shared beliefs about person attributes, usually personality traits, but often also behaviours, of a group of people' (for reviews, see Duckitt, 1992; Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994; Messick and Mackie, 1989; Oakes, Haslam and Turner, 1994; Stroebe and Insko, 1989). Early research tended to locate stereotypes in the minds of those who suffered frustration (e.g., Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer and Sears, 1939), underwent deficient parental education (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford, 1950), or displayed a personality

prone to prejudice and ethnocentrism (e.g., Rokeach, Smith and Evans, 1960). Stereotypes were nothing but errorful generalizations made by prejudiced individuals, or under abnormal circumstances. Because of their shameful status, stereotypes long remained out of mainstream social psychology. Interest in intergroup relations and in person perception were mostly disconnected from each other.

The situation changed dramatically in the late seventies when social psychologists, highly influenced by the cognitive revolution in experimental psychology, looked at stereotypes in a different light. Actualizing early insights by Lippmann (1922), Allport (1954) and Tajfel (1969a), the basic tenet of the social cognitive approach was that social information is much too complex to be dealt with satisfactorily. As a consequence, human information processors need to simplify the environment. Categorization offers a means to treat individual stimuli as instances of larger groups about which prestored knowledge is available. Looking back at 25 years of scientific endeavours, there is little doubt that what has been called the cognitive miser view of social perceivers greatly contributed to our knowledge of the way people handle information about groups and individuals (Fiske and Taylor, 1984, 1991; Hamilton, 1981; Markus and Zajonc, 1985; Stephan, 1985; Taylor, 1981b; Wyer and Srull, 1984).

In the first three sections, we argue that stereotypes do not only stand as handy devices to facilitate our dealings with a puzzling environment. Stereotypes also serve another important function: they provide subjective meaning to the world (Bruner, 1957b; Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1992, 1994; Fiske, 1993b; Oakes and Turner, 1990; Tajfel, 1981b; Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994). In our view, stereotypes work as *enlightening gestalts*: they supply perceivers with extra information by building upon a rich set of interconnected pieces of data. Moreover, stereotypes comprise more than the list of attributes that help describe a particular social category. They also, and perhaps most importantly, include the underlying explanation that links these attributes together (Schadron and Yzerbyt, 1993; Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994, 1996).

As we will show, the explanation view has long intruded the research on person and group perception. While people may well view others in terms of simple lists of attributes, they more likely represent them in terms of well-organized sets of features. We examine the work on hypothesis confirmation and suggest that perceivers build up a causal scenario that allows them to integrate incoming information according to their specific views about people and groups. We also ascertain the relevance of an explanation view for the issue of inconsistency management and provide some new data from our laboratory clarifying the impact of the explanatory activity in the maintenance of stereotypes. In the following sections, we outline our subjective essentialistic view of stereotypes and propose that stereotypes enable perceivers to understand why the instances of the category are what they are and thus justify their being treated

the way they are (Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994). The first idea, what is it that makes the group a group, may be linked to the idea of subjective essentialism, as it has recently been developed by some cognitive psychologists. The second one, how to account for what happens to the group, refers to the function of rationalization of the stereotypes. We will argue that these two ideas are, in fact, highly interconnected.

We first review the current debate on categorization in cognitive psychology, showing that the validity of classic similarity approaches is largely questioned and that the use of essentialistic theories is now offered as an alternative account for categorization learning and use. Turning back to the field of stereotyping, we then examine a series of theoretical (and sometimes old) contributions showing the importance of essentialistic explanations in social categorization. Next, we suggest that a functional view of explanations as they underlie stereotypic beliefs has come of age. We argue that stereotypes play a key role in the rationalization of the existing social order. We then spell out possible differences between essentialistic versus non-essentialistic categorization. We examine how subjective essentialism relates to group perception phenomena such as beliefs about group entitativity or group homogeneity and prejudice. We suggest a continuum of social categorization and conclude by proposing a syndrome of essentialistic categorization. Our final section brings subjective essentialism and the rationalization function of stereotypes together. Drawing again on research insights in the field of person perception, we suggest a series of mechanisms that may contribute to create and perpetuate existing social theories. We also offer empirical evidence that an essentialistic definition of social groups may polarize observers' impressions and thus lead them to neglect situational constraints that impinge on the groups.

1 Lessons from Impression Formation Research

When Solomon Asch (1946) launched his research on impression formation, his goal was very clear. As a faithful Gestaltist, he thought that the processes by which people perceive others needed to be understood even if such mental constructions proved to be globally inaccurate. Asch asked his subjects to imagine that a short list of traits belonged to a real person. Subjects were asked then to produce an open description of the person and to checkmark one of two traits in a series of pairs. Using this simple paradigm, Asch managed to demonstrate two of the most robust effects in social psychology namely the primacy effect and the centrality effect. The primacy effect corresponds to the fact that the initial traits in a list influence the general meaning more than the final traits. Asch either presented a list comprising positive traits in the beginning and negative traits in the end or the same list in the reverse order. For both lists, the resulting impression was somewhat positive but, more importantly, the impression

was more positive for the first than for the second order. The centrality effect refers to the fact that some traits in a given list may more or less influence the impression. So, for instance, replacing the trait 'warm' in Asch's list by its opposite 'cold' had a huge impact on the final impression. In comparison, using 'polite' instead of 'blunt' changed the impression to a lesser extent.

For Asch, these effects stem from the active construction of an impression by observers as they gather information. His interpretation was soon to be challenged. In 1954, Bruner and Tagiuri launched the concept of implicit theories of personality (ITP) to indicate that people possess a working knowledge of the way various traits of personality go together. So, for example, if a person is warm, then that person is also generous. In this associationistic view, people would form impressions on the basis of trait covariation (Wishner, 1960). With the advent of new statistical tools, researchers examined the ITP from a somewhat different perspective. The main idea was to uncover global underlying dimensions that would organize the set of personality traits. Most well-known is the work by Rosenberg and colleagues using Multidimensional Scaling techniques (Rosenberg, Nelson and Vivekanathan, 1968; Rosenberg and Sedlak, 1972). Subjects rated the extent to which two traits are similar and the resulting matrix is then submitted to MDS. Typically, two evaluative, almost orthogonal dimensions emerged: one concerned sociability and the other intelligence. This dimensional view seemed quite an improvement over the associationistic view. It was now possible to explain the centrality effect as uncovered by Asch on the basis of the composition of the list. A pair of traits would be central to the extent that they are extreme on a dimension not touched on by the other traits in the list. So, for instance, the traits warm and cold both concerned sociability whereas the remaining traits pertained to intelligence (for an insightful presentation, see Brown, 1986).

Anderson and Sedikides (1991), Sedikides and Anderson, (1994) recently challenged both the associationistic and the dimensional views of implicit theories of personality. According to their typological view, people think about others in terms of person types. Each person type comprises several personality traits and the knowledge of a given trait within a person type can be used to infer the presence of other traits in the same person type. In other words, people perceive traits within person types to be interconnected through causal bonds. Anderson and Sedikides (1991) presented their subjects with a list of personality traits. The task consisted of grouping the traits into piles according to their degree of similarity. Cluster analysis was then used to uncover the various person types underlying subjects' solutions. Let us make things concrete with a simple example. One person type identified by Anderson and Sedikides is Extroverted, defined as being *ambitious, outgoing, enthusiastic, energetic and confident*. Although the trait *confident* belongs to the cluster Extroverted, the average correlation between *confident* and the other members of the type is lower than a number of alternative traits, such as *intelligent, humorous, friendly,*

warm, helpful or pleasant. Still, compared to its competitors, the trait *confident* performs better on a series of important criteria. To take but one significant measure, subjects who read the four strong members of the type, that is, *ambitious, outgoing, enthusiastic and energetic*, more often generate the trait *confident* than any of its competitors. Clearly then, this approach highlights the fact that first-order correlations are not always a reliable predictor of the link between a trait and a person type. A typological view thus offers an ideal means to understand how two apparently inconsistent traits can be assigned to the same individual. Although laziness correlates negatively with intelligence, both these two traits prove quite compatible with our view of an artist. The type 'Artist' makes these two characteristics appear consistent because, we would argue, a general explanation makes it possible to reinterpret the semantic clash between these two traits.

The question remains as to what extent each perceiver brings in an idiosyncratic view concerning the particular pieces of information collected about a specific target person. Is it the case that people uniquely combine different pieces of information, thereby building up different impressions of the same target? Park, DeKay and Kraus (1994) recently addressed this question in a study that relied on Kenny's variance partitioning technique (Kenny and LaVoie, 1984). The basic idea of the study is fairly simple. Subjects read a series of behaviours performed by five target people in five different settings, that is, a total of 25 behaviours. In the 'unknown' condition, the 25 behaviours were randomly ordered and subjects were left to think that each behaviour was performed by a different person. Subjects' task was to rate each behaviour on 10 trait dimensions. In the 'known' condition, subjects were given the same 25 behaviours but, this time, the 5 behaviours performed by the same target person were always presented as a set. After writing their impression of the target person on the basis of the set of five behaviours, subjects then rated each behaviour on the 10 trait dimensions and, finally, gave their global rating of the person on the same 10 traits before moving to the next target person. There are two central questions. First, do subjects combine the behavioural information in such a way that targets appear more consistent across situations in the 'known' than in the 'unknown' condition? In other words, are ratings concerning the same target more consistent when the target's identity is known? Second, do perceivers form idiosyncratic views about target people? In other words, is it the case that different subjects' ratings of the same target person are different from one another? Park et al.'s (1994) data fully support both predictions and confirm the idea that perceivers construct different models of what the target person is like. Supposedly, these models enable explanations of events in a manner parallel to narrative explanations (Fiske, 1993b; Read, 1987; Sedikides and Anderson, 1994).

The work by Anderson and Sedikides (1991) and Park et al. (1994) stresses

the importance of perceivers' naive theories and the role of causal connectedness in impression formation. Of course, due to the specific methodology adopted by these authors, it is not really the case that perceivers find themselves confronted with inconsistent sets of information. As it turns out and without the benefit of current methodological and sophisticated statistical tools, Asch had already tackled the issue of inconsistency and demonstrated people's extraordinary ability to construct theories in order to explain the association between various apparently inconsistent traits. In one variation of his classic set of studies, Asch (1946) confronted subjects with only three of the six traits used to demonstrate the primacy effect. After having written the description sketches and chosen the traits on the checklist, subjects were given the remaining three traits as applying to a new person and asked for a new description and for another choice of traits. No difficulty seemed to emerge in building up these two (very different) impressions. Asch then told his subjects that the six traits actually belonged to the same person and requested a new impression. Integration of the entire set of information seemed very difficult. Most likely, perceivers who integrated the two sets of three traits could not reconcile the two models into one (Burnstein and Schul, 1982). At this stage, it is important to remember how easily subjects built up an impression when they were told right away that all traits belonged to the same person (Asch, 1946). In a subsequent piece of research, Asch looked at the various strategies people rely upon to reconcile the inconsistent information contained in a description (Asch and Zukier, 1984). He was able to show that people easily explain how a target person may possess two semantically opposed traits such as cheerful and gloomy. For instance, perceivers select one trait to stand as the focal feature of the person and the other trait as only complementing the global picture (Park et al., 1994). Asch and Zukier's (1984) findings directly speak to perceivers' fantastic ability to reconcile apparently inconsistent pieces of information.

2 From Persons to Groups

The various efforts described above concern research on impression formation, a topic that is traditionally seen as separate from stereotyping. We would like to argue that a similar view gains credence in research on stereotypes. We therefore document the evolution of theoretical perspectives from purely associationistic to a more schematic conception of stereotypic knowledge.

The oldest methods for studying stereotype content mainly relied on the idea of association. Influenced by Katz and Braly's (1933) seminal work on the measurement of stereotypes, social psychologists devoted a lot of time and energy to examining those features that subjects saw to be highly correlated with

