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Why we stereotype influences how we stereotype. Self-enhancement and comprehension effects on social perception

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Chapter 1

General introduction

“For as the temper of the Gauls is impetuous and ready to undertake wars, so their mind is weak, and by no means resolute in enduring calamities”

Julius Caesar (56 BC, Commentarii de Bello Gallico)

Stereotypes are beliefs about the characteristics of groups of individuals (Fiske, 1998; Kunda, 1999). Julius Caesar for example, held the stereotype of the ancient Gauls being impetuous, belligerent, spineless and weak-minded. Stereotyping is the application – or use - of these beliefs when one is interacting with an individual member of a given group. Since the term “stereotype” was first coined in 1922 by journalist Walter Lippman, researchers have studied stereotyping toward a wide variety of groups (e.g. based on gender, ethnicity, age) and it has become a central concern of social psychologists.

In daily life, people routinely categorize each other on the basis of group membership (e.g. Fiske, 1996; Hilton & von Hippel, 1999). When this happens, rather than thinking about another person as an unique individual, we think of this person as a member of a certain group, accompanied by specific stereotypes. This can be problematic for at least three reasons. First of all, stereotypes are often viewed as innate personality characteristics of all group members, thereby overlooking the possibility of contextual or societal factors as the driving force behind the stereotypical beliefs. For example, referring to Caesar’s quote above, it might well be the Roman invasion and the prospect of being enslaved, instead of their violent disposition, that made the people of Gaul war-minded. Second, stereotypes are typically overgeneralizations. Considering that even monozygotic twins – albeit being genetically similar - can differ in personality, surely individual members of a certain group can. Therefore, even when there resides a kernel of truth in a given stereotype, applying this stereotype on a specific individual can be erroneous because not every group member is alike. Third, stereotypes are often - unconsciously and automatically - used as a template to perceive and interpret behavior (Bargh, 1997; Darley & Gross, 1983; Hilton & von Hippel, 1996; Fiske, 1999; Macrae, Stangor & Milne, 1994). Thus, by using stereotypes as reference points to interpret social information instead of the other way around; having an objective reality to test the validity of stereotypes, people are prone to an overall stereotype confirmation-bias, making it difficult to change erroneous stereotypes or discount their influence on social behavior.

In order to acquire a deeper understanding of the functionality of stereotyping and its consequences for actual stereotyping behavior, in the present thesis I will elaborate on the question *why* people stereotype. Specifically, I will examine in which way the motives underlying stereotyping influence the perception of other people. By focusing on two main functions of stereotyping, I will assess the unique and diverging influences of comprehension and self-enhancement motives on the use of stereotypes in person perception. In other words, the influence of two basic social motives - the goal to understand information one is confronted with and the goal to increase self-esteem - on stereotyping behavior will be examined. But first, I will return to the question why we stereotype.

Why do we stereotype?

Knowing that stereotyping often leads to inaccurate perceptions and judgments and given the fact that there is so much negativity attached to the practice of stereotyping, why do we do it? A commonsensical, functional, or Darwinian perspective would suggest that over time people are likely to refrain from behaviors that have negative effects. And indeed the existing stereotyping literature suggests that there are at least two positive functions stereotyping may serve. On the one hand, stereotyping is a way to understand the world by allowing the perceiver to rely on existing knowledge structures (stereotypes) when encoding and judging incoming information. Thus, stereotyping can assist in making more sense of the world by going beyond the information given (e.g. Allport, 1954, Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). On the other hand, stereotyping is often linked to situations that pose a threat to the self. Using stereotypes when judging others is seen as one of the possible strategies that may be used to repair or maintain a positive self-image or self-evaluation (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Steele, 1988; Tesser & Cornell, 1991; Schimel, Simon, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, Waxmonsky, & Arndt, 1999). Related to this, stereotyping can assist in providing a more positive social identity by helping to differentiate others in terms of in- and outgroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1976; Hogg & Abrams, 1990). In their seminal work on the motivations and goals behind stereotyping, Kunda and Spencer (2003) offer a goal-based framework of stereotyping in which they integrate these two functions of stereotyping by suggesting that stereotyping is mainly motivated by comprehension goals and self-enhancement goals. I will now expand on these two functions of stereotyping in greater detail.

Stereotyping is for comprehension

A stereotyping motive that has been well-studied in the relevant literature involves the goal to increase comprehension of others. In fact, in mainstream social cognition studies of stereotyping effects, “comprehension” has typically been defined as the main motive behind social categorization processes in general and stereotyping effects in particular (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Kunda, 1999; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Strack, 2004). Without the use of categorical information it would be impossible to make sense of all incoming information; by generalizing and making use of stereotypes, people can use their limited cognitive resources more efficiently, thus enabling themselves to construe a comprehensible image of the social and physical world (e.g. Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). Correspondingly, when Caesar was invading foreign Gaul territory, the implementation of a few generalizations about the personality of its inhabitants was functional, because it allowed him to maintain and propagate a comprehensible, predictable and meaningful view of the world.

Furthermore, stereotyping may contribute to comprehension goals because it enables perceivers to go beyond the information given (Fiske, 2002; Stapel & Koomen, 2001). Thus, stereotyping assists in the construction of coherent meaningful person impressions and in the disambiguation of social information. For example, when wondering why Vercingetorix – the king of Gaul – lost the battle of Alesia, invoking the stereotype of the Gaul as weak-minded and lacking tenacity, literally makes sense.

Stereotyping is for self-enhancement

A second motive underlying stereotyping that can be identified is the need to maintain a sufficient level of self-esteem. Fein and Spencer (1997) have shown that when stereotyping is enhancement-driven, people stereotype to increase or repair their self-esteem (see also Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Stereotyping may thus constitute an indirect route towards self-repair: derogating others is one way to attain a positive self-view (see Schwinghammer, Stapel, & Blanton, 2006; Tesser, 1988). Thus, Fein and Spencer (1997) showed that people with a high need to enhance their self-esteem evaluated individual members of stereotyped groups more negative compared to individual members of other groups. Furthermore, this derogation actually resulted in self-esteem lifts for those with a self-enhancement goal. The rationale behind this is the following. Because stereotypes are often known throughout society and one is exposed to them from early life on, they represent an effective means to derogate others while maintaining an image of integrity. In

other words, when in need to feel better, stereotypes can come to the rescue, because stereotypes can provide an apparently valid excuse to derogate others through downward social comparison. So looking at Caesar's quote, by introducing the stereotype of the Gauls to his readers, he gives them a handle that allows them to test and corroborate their superiority over the Gauls and make them feel good about themselves when this is needed.

From why to when and how

As Hilton and von Hippel (1996) state: "stereotyping emerges in various contexts to serve particular functions necessitated by those contexts". Looking at the main functions of stereotyping, this could imply that one stereotypes when in need for comprehension or self-esteem, period. But would it be a matter of "either you stereotype or you don't"? Will situations where either comprehension or self-enhancement needs are notably present both lead to similar stereotype-infused perceptions and judgments?

To answer these questions, I start with a functional cognitive motivational perspective. According to this perspective, people selectively use cognitions to aid attaining their goals. It has already been argued (Kunda 1990, Dunning 1999, Sinclair & Kunda 1999) that motivation can influence the retrieval and representation of information, thereby personally tailoring one's construction of reality according to one's desires and needs. As Kunda (1990, p. 318) noted: "*people want to draw a specific conclusion, but feel obligated to construct a justification for that conclusion that would be plausible. So they often engage in biased memory-search and access only subsets of relevant beliefs and rules*". So, for example, when in love, the positive qualities of the loved one are frequently exaggerated and held under a magnifying glass, while the negative qualities are easily forgotten, ignored or marginalized.

Stereotypes can also be seen as cognitions: Stangor and Lange (1994) for example define them as the characteristics that are mentally associated with a social category label in long-term, semantic memory. Therefore, in the present dissertation, it is hypothesized that people can selectively use this stereotypical knowledge when judging others in order to attain their goals. Specifically, the hypothesis is tested that stereotyping to further comprehension will involve the use of negative as well as positive stereotypes because both may assist people in disambiguating others and making sense of the social world, while stereotyping to enhance self-esteem will involve mainly the use of existing negative (rather than positive) stereotypes because especially those may aid in the derogation of others.

Beyond a first impression

When investigating the influences of comprehension goals and self-enhancement goals on stereotyping, it is interesting to investigate how far these influences reach, what the “course of life” of comprehension and enhancement-driven stereotyping looks like. Therefore, the present dissertation aims to chart the dynamics of comprehension-driven and enhancement-driven stereotyping in greater detail. Considering that a goal is often defined as desired end-state, a question that requires answering is “what would happen when this end-state is reached?” Drawing from the goal literature, when a certain goal is fulfilled, it ceases to exert influence on behavior (e.g. Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005; Kruglanski & Shah, 2002) so that cognitive energy can be spent on other pressing issues. Does this mean that fulfilling a stereotype-related goal automatically puts stereotyping to a halt? In other words, does attaining comprehension or enhancing the self counteract stereotyping? Considering that comprehension and self-enhancement goals are often recognized as being two separate core social motives in human life (Fiske, 2002; Maslow, 1943), the hypothesis is tested that fulfillment of a stereotype-relevant goal does not automatically lead to a decrease in stereotyping, but only when the *right* goal is fulfilled. Put differently, fulfillment of a self-enhancement goal is only expected to decrease stereotyping when it is enhancement-driven but not when it is comprehension-driven. Vice versa, fulfillment of a comprehension goal is only expected to decrease comprehension-driven but not enhancement-driven stereotyping.

Motivations and stereotyping: goals and modes

Finally, I take a closer look at the link between comprehension and stereotyping from a priming perspective. Priming literature has shown that exposure to certain stimuli can influence behavior in different ways, depending on what kind of mental representation is activated. For example, goals, procedural routines and semantic concepts can all be brought to mind after exposure to certain stimuli (Förster et al., 2005; Bargh, 1999).

I will investigate whether it is possible for “comprehension” to be brought to mind both as a goal and as a non-goal “comprehension mode” (equivalent to being in a comprehension related situation without having the need to understand more, like watching Rodin’s “Le Penseur”) and how this affects subsequent stereotyping. Specifically, if stereotyping as a behavior is linked to the concept of comprehension, this would mean that if

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one is exposed to “comprehension” (goal and mode) - increased stereotyping will follow as a result of enhanced accessibility (Neely, 1977). However, there are pronounced differences between goal priming and non-goal priming. For instance, non-goal priming effects typically decay gradually over time, whereas goal priming effects remain relatively stable over time or even increase until the goal is fulfilled (for an overview, Förster et al., 2007). Thus, different hypotheses for the impact and duration of comprehension mode and comprehension goal effects on stereotyping are generated and tested.

Overview of the present dissertation

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, the influence of comprehension and self-enhancement goals on stereotyping is investigated. By introducing a method to pit both goals against each other in one experimental paradigm, both the valence hypothesis and the independence hypothesis are tested. In Study 2.1, a method of manipulating both a comprehension goal and a self-enhancement goal in a symmetrical way by means of a sentence-unscrambling task is introduced and validated. Subsequently, the impact of these goals on stereotyping is examined to test the valence hypothesis. Two different stereotypes (gender and religious) are used in these studies to increase the robustness of the findings. In Study 2.2, comprehension and self-enhancement goals are pitted against each other and their influence on the use of positive and negative gender stereotypes in person perception is investigated. In Study 2.3, the impact of comprehension and self-enhancement goals on the use of certain religious stereotypes is measured. Finally, in Study 2.4, the consequences of fulfilling comprehension and self-enhancement goals are further investigated and implications for reducing stereotyping are discussed.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, the origins of the link between the goals and stereotyping are further investigated by looking at the impact of the goals on the perception of groups. In Study 3.1 and Study 3.2, the impact of comprehension goals and self-enhancement goals on the perception of gender groups is investigated. Thus, instead of focusing on judging persons on the basis of behavioral descriptions (as in Chapter 2), the perception of group characteristics without any additional information are examined.

Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, the characteristics of goal-induced stereotyping are further investigated. By varying the way comprehension is made salient, diverging effects of a comprehension mode (non-goal) and goal are identified and consequences for theories about the link between mental representations and action are being discussed. In Study 4.1, a procedure for manipulating a comprehension mode and a comprehension goal through a sentence-unscrambling task is introduced and validated. In Study 4.2, the hypothesized diverging impact of a time delay on comprehension mode- versus comprehension goal-effects on stereotyping is investigated. In Study 4.3, the implications for comprehension mode- versus comprehension goal-driven stereotyping after attaining comprehension are addressed. In Study 4.4, comprehension effects on stereotyping are compared with accuracy effects on stereotyping. In Study 4.5, a subliminal priming procedure is introduced to test the influence of awareness of the prime on the previously found effects.

Chapter 5

In this final chapter, the results of all studies are summarized and further discussed. An integration of the findings is offered and relations to current studies concerning stereotyping and motivation will be addressed. Furthermore, implications for stereotype change and reducing prejudice are discussed.

