

Stereotypes and Prejudice

Cognitive schemas can result in stereotypes and contribute to prejudice.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are beliefs about people based on their membership in a particular group. Stereotypes can be positive, negative, or neutral. Stereotypes based on gender, ethnicity, or occupation are common in many societies.

Examples:

People may stereotype women as nurturing or used car salespeople as dishonest.

The Stability of Stereotypes

Stereotypes are not easily changed, for the following reasons:

When people encounter instances that disconfirm their stereotypes of a particular group, they tend to assume that those instances are atypical subtypes of the group.

Example:

Ben stereotypes gay men as being unathletic. When he meets Al, an athletic gay man, he assumes that Al is not a typical representative of gay people.

People's perceptions are influenced by their expectations.

Example:

Liz has a stereotype of elderly people as mentally unstable. When she sees an elderly woman sitting on a park bench alone, talking out loud, she thinks that the woman is talking to herself because she is unstable. Liz fails to notice that the woman is actually talking on a cell phone.

People selectively recall instances that confirm their stereotypes and forget about disconfirming instances.

Example:

Paul has a stereotype of Latin Americans as academically unmotivated. As evidence for his belief, he cites instances when some of his Latin American classmates failed to read required class material. He fails to recall all the times his Latin American classmates did complete their assignments.

Functions

Stereotypes have several important functions:

They allow people to quickly process new information about an event or person.

They organize people's past experiences.

They help people to meaningfully assess differences between individuals and groups.

They help people to make predictions about other people's behavior.

Everyday Use of Stereotypes

The word stereotype has developed strong negative connotations for very good reasons. Negative stereotypes of different groups of people can have a terrible influence on those people's lives. However, most people do rely on stereotypes nearly every day to help them function in society. For example, say a woman has to work late and finds herself walking home alone on a dark city street. Walking toward her is a group of five young men talking loudly and roughhousing. The woman crosses the street and enters a convenience store until the young men pass, then continues on her way. Most people would say she acted prudently, even though she relied on a stereotype to guide her behavior.

Dangers

Stereotypes can lead to distortions of reality for several reasons:

They cause people to exaggerate differences among groups.

They lead people to focus selectively on information that agrees with the stereotype and ignore information that disagrees with it.

They tend to make people see other groups as overly homogenous, even though people can easily see that the groups they belong to are heterogeneous.

Evolutionary Perspectives

Evolutionary psychologists have speculated that humans evolved the tendency to stereotype because it gave their ancestors an adaptive advantage. Being able to decide quickly which group a person belonged to may have had survival value, since this enabled people to distinguish between friends and enemies.

Xenophobia

Some evolutionary psychologists believe that xenophobia, the fear of strangers or people different from oneself, has genetic roots. They argue that humans are to some extent programmed by their genes to respond positively to genetically similar people and negatively to genetically different people.

Prejudice

A **prejudice** is a negative belief or feeling about a particular group of individuals. Prejudices are often passed on from one generation to the next.

Functions

Prejudice is a destructive phenomenon, and it is pervasive because it serves many psychological, social, and economic functions:

Prejudice allows people to avoid doubt and fear.

Example:

Rachel's parents came from a working-class background but are now wealthy business owners. Rachel might develop a dislike of the working class because she does not want to be identified with working-class people. She believes such an association would damage her claim to upper-class social status.

Prejudice gives people scapegoats to blame in times of trouble.

Example:

Glen blames his unemployment on foreign nationals whom he believes are incompetent but willing to work for low wages.

Prejudice can boost self-esteem.

Example:

A poor white farmer in the nineteenth-century South could feel better about his own meager existence by insisting on his superiority to African-American slaves.

Evolutionary psychologists suggest that prejudice allows people to bond with their own group by contrasting their own groups to outsider groups.

Example:

Most religious and ethnic groups maintain some prejudices against other groups, which help to make their own group seem more special.

Prejudice legitimizes discrimination because it apparently justifies one group's dominance over another.

Example:

Pseudoscientific arguments about the mental inferiority of African Americans allowed whites to feel justified in owning slaves.

Measuring Prejudice

Researchers find it difficult to measure prejudice. One reason for this is that people differ in the type and extent of prejudice they harbor. For example, a person who makes demeaning comments about a particular ethnic group may be bigoted or just ignorant. Also, people often do not admit to being prejudiced.

People may often have implicit unconscious prejudices even when they do not have explicit prejudices. Researchers assess implicit prejudice in three ways:

1. Some researchers assess attitudes that suggest prejudice, such as a strong emotional objection to affirmative action.
2. Some researchers observe behavior rather than assess attitudes. People's behavior in stressful situations may be particularly useful at revealing implicit prejudice.
3. Some researchers assess the unconscious associations people have about particular groups.

In-groups and Out-groups

People's social identities depend on the groups they belong to. From a person's perspective, any group he belongs to is an **ingroup**, and any group he doesn't belong to is an **outgroup**. People generally have a lower opinion of outgroup members and a higher opinion of members of their own group. People who identify strongly with a particular group are more likely to be prejudiced against people in competing out-groups.

People tend to think that their own groups are composed of different sorts of people. At the same time, they often think that everyone in an out-group is the same. According to the **contact hypothesis**, prejudice declines when people in an in-group become more familiar with the customs, norms, food, music, and attitudes of people in an outgroup. Contact with the outgroup helps people to see the diversity among its members.

Competition and Cooperation

Hostility between an ingroup and an outgroup increases when groups compete. Researchers have found that hostility between groups decreases when those groups have to cooperate in order to reach a shared goal. In such a situation, people in the two groups tend to feel that they belong to one larger group rather than two separate groups.

Reducing Prejudice

Research shows that prejudice and conflict among groups can be reduced if four conditions are met:

- The groups have equality in terms of legal status, economic opportunity, and political power.
- Authorities advocate equal rights.
- The groups have opportunities to interact formally and informally with each other.
- The groups cooperate to reach a common goal.

Kurt Lewin and the AJC

Kurt Lewin is widely considered the father of social psychology. He developed many concepts that both psychologists and the general public now take for granted, including his “field theory” that a person’s behavior is determined both by that person’s character and by his current environment. Lewin also did important work in the area of majority-minority relations. In the mid-1940s, the American Jewish Council (AJC) began talking with Lewin about ways to reduce anti-Semitism. Shortly before his death in 1947, Lewin became chief consultant for the AJC’s Commission on Community Interrelations, a ground breaking organization designed to combat prejudice through community intervention.