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Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears

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[More information](#)

1 Social, cultural and cognitive factors in stereotype formation

Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears

The purpose of this book

Imagine for a moment a busy city intersection with a police officer controlling traffic. All of the users of that street are individuals, but they are also members of society and, like the police officer they are members of groups that help us to explain why those people act in the way they do at particular times. Indeed, individuals and groups can be said to be the central facts of society. Without individuals there could be no society, but unless individuals also perceive themselves to belong to groups, that is, to share characteristics, circumstances, values and beliefs with other people, then society would be without structure or order. These perceptions of groups are called stereotypes.

If we accept that perceptions of groups are so important for people to understand the social world, then understanding those stereotypes is also extremely important for social psychology. Social psychologists such as Asch (1952) have argued that understanding the relationship between individuals and groups is the master problem for social psychology. In addressing this problem we need to recognize though, that individuals and groups tend to have their effects on each other through their psychological representation within individual minds. That is, social objects affect us through the way they are perceived rather than through the application of physical force.

Think again of the police officer controlling traffic at a busy intersection. The police officer does not (normally) need to physically restrain the traffic from passing through the intersection. He or she can signal to drivers to wait and, because they accept that the police officer has that responsibility, or because they believe there will be a risk of an accident or fine if they proceed through the intersection (or for any one of a myriad of other reasons) they do in fact stop when signalled. Our perception of the authority of the police officer rests on our perception of the membership of that police officer in the police service. Interpretations of that police officer's actions are largely shaped by our understanding of the role of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears*

the police service. Drivers will respond to a police officer's signals in one way, but would respond in a completely different way to someone they *believed* to be a prankster dressed as a police officer.

Thus, interactions with other people are powerfully constrained by group memberships and these are usually effective through the psychological representation of those groups. We say 'usually effective' because there are obvious circumstances where social interactions do involve physical forces. If the truck in front obeys the police officer's signal to halt then our car will stop as well, regardless of our psychological representation of the situation: either because we apply our brakes or because we have run into the back of the truck.

If it is true, though, that groups and individuals have their effects on us through their psychological representation, and in particular the representation of individuals as members of groups, then a particular and important problem emerges that needs to be solved in order for social psychology to progress. How do people represent groups and how do these representations form? These are precisely the questions that we propose to address in this book.

Such representations or impressions of groups (such as the impressions of police in the example above) are called *stereotypes*. These are psychological representations of the characteristics of people that belong to particular groups.

What are stereotypes?

To understand what stereotypes are it is useful to consider three principles which guide work on the social psychology of stereotyping. No perspective shares all principles to the same degree, rather different perspectives sample from each of the principles to greater or lesser degrees. Nevertheless the three guiding principles we can identify are as follows: (a) stereotypes are aids to explanation, (b) stereotypes are energy-saving devices, and (c) stereotypes are shared group beliefs. The first of these implies that stereotypes should form so as to help the perceiver make sense of a situation, the second implies that stereotypes should form to reduce effort on the part of the perceiver, and the third implies that stereotypes should be formed in line with the accepted views or norms of social groups that the perceiver belongs to.

Guiding principle 1: stereotypes are aids to explanation

A widely accepted view in social psychology stemming from the work of Tajfel (1969, 1981a; Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963) is that stereotyping is an

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

instantiation of the categorization process. We cannot have an impression of a group unless we can tell the difference between that group and some other group. Categorization is the cognitive process by which we detect those differences and similarities.

In Tajfel's analysis (aspects of which are prefigured in the work of Allport, 1954; Campbell, 1956; Bruner, 1957a) categorization is the process by which categories become coherently separable and clear through the detection and accentuation of relevant similarities and differences. This accentuation can be seen as a means of crystallizing important regularities amongst the stimuli so that they can be recognized, remembered and responded to.

Bruner (1957a) argued that perception proceeded on the basis of the fit between category specifications and the readiness of the perceiver to use those categories. This argument is echoed in the stereotype formation literature: stereotype formation involves the perception or encoding of new information but it also enlists prior knowledge. Rarely is the mind a blank slate on which a fresh stereotype can be inscribed, but, continuing the analogy, its surface is marked with many well-worn grooves that make certain stereotypes more likely to appear.

Sense-making approaches to social stereotyping are extremely numerous (for a review see McGarty, 1999). They include self-categorization theory (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987), social judgeability theory (Leyens, Yzerbyt & Schadron, 1992, 1994) the exemplar model of social judgement (Smith & Zárate, 1992) and a variety of approaches based on processes of assimilation and contrast (e.g., Biernat, Vescio & Manis, 1998). Many aspects of these approaches are considered in the chapters to come.

Although most social psychologists pay lip service to the idea that stereotypes involve sense-making or knowledge creation in practical terms this emphasis is often reduced to a very simple idea. In an environment that contains too much information the most adaptive response by the perceiver is to attempt to reduce this information overload by filtering out or ignoring much of it (see Medin, 1988; Oakes & Turner, 1990, for critical discussions from different perspectives). This idea is pursued in the next sub-section.

Guiding principle 2: stereotypes are energy saving devices

If stereotypes are devices which people form in order to help understand the world, why do they take the particular form they do and how do they achieve this explanatory function? The most common answer in social psychology is that stereotypes aid explanation by saving time and effort.

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0521800471 - Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears*

In particular, treating people as group members saves energy because it means that we can ignore all of the diverse and detailed information that is associated with individuals.

This idea, which was first clearly articulated by Allport (1954), became the cornerstone of the cognitive approach to social stereotyping in the 1970s (the key publication is the book edited by Hamilton, 1981a). The key ideas can be summarised as follows (see McGarty, 1999). Individual people have limited capacities to perform cognitive tasks such as processing information. Nevertheless they exist in a complex, multi-faceted world that places enormous demands on that limited capacity. This complexity is certainly true of the social environment, and the resulting overload of human information processing capacity leads people to take shortcuts and to adopt biased and erroneous perceptions of the world. Stereotypes are simply one example of the biases that can develop.

Over time this negative view of stereotypes has become the received wisdom. Stereotypes are not so much aids to understanding but aids to misunderstanding. Stereotypes have received such a bad press in social psychology for a very long time. As Asch (1952) noted 'The term stereotype has come to symbolise nearly all that is deficient in popular thinking' (p. 232). In particular, stereotypes have often been seen as rigid and distorted mental structures that lead people to make serious errors. The negative view has been rekindled in the last thirty years by the rise of social cognition in social psychology. For a variety of reasons that we will not explore here (but see Oakes et al., 1994; Oakes & Turner, 1990; Spears, Oakes, Ellemers & Haslam, 1997), social cognition has tended to focus on the limitations of human cognition, that is, it has tended to focus on what is defective, flawed or irrational in the way people think. The stereotype has been of interest because it has been understood to be the form of representation where defective thinking reaches its nadir. That is, researchers suggest that what seems most wrong about human thinking is encapsulated in the stereotype, to the point that some authors have argued that stereotypes are even held to be wrong (and are therefore unwanted) by the people who hold them (Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998).

This view of the falsity of stereotypes creates a tension in terms of the master problem of social psychology that we have already touched upon. If stereotyping is so central to our understanding of the world how plausible is it that the process could be so deficient? It also creates an enormous tension in relation to the first guiding principle. How can stereotypes assist with explanation if they produce falsehoods and distortions (i.e., misunderstandings not understandings)?

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0521800471 - Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups

Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The ubiquitous nature of the negative stance on stereotypes can be seen by the fact that it is sometimes adopted by writers who explicitly disavow it. In Hilton and von Hippel's (1996) review of stereotypes in the *Annual Review of Psychology* the authors commit themselves to the position that the functions of stereotypes are context-dependent, and that stereotypes may reflect existing group differences, but when addressing stereotype formation their discussion is restricted entirely to an 'attempt to identify those processes that cause stereotypes to emerge, *independent of preexisting differences among groups*.' (p. 244, emphasis added). In other words, the possibility of processes by which stereotypes could form on some basis that was not largely erroneous is excluded from consideration as part of the topic in a general review of the field. The need to explore the alternatives, including the possibility that stereotypes can form on the basis of valid information, provides much of the motivation for this book.

We will provide a much more detailed exposition of the falsity of stereotypes and a range of arguments against this position later (see also Oakes et al., 1994; Oakes & Reynolds, 1997; and for a slightly different view see McGarty, 1999), but before we can go further we must settle a definitional problem. We use the term stereotype for any impression of groups held by anybody regardless of whether the accuracy of that belief is disputed. Stereotypes are impressions of groups held by people. The accuracy of those beliefs may be important in its own right, but it should play no part in the definition of stereotypes (Judd & Park, 1993). It may be tempting to describe our own views as accurate and logically justified (after all why would we believe something we knew to be wrong or illogical) and those of others with whom we disagree as stereotypes, but this is no more than name-calling and not a substitute for a scientific definition (see Oakes et al., 1994; Spears et al., 1997).

Guiding principle 3: stereotypes are shared group beliefs

Stereotypes attract little attention when they are not shared by many people. If every individual had a very different stereotype of some group then those stereotypes would be of little interest. Shared stereotypes, for example, are useful for predicting and understanding the behaviour of members of one group to another. If stereotypes are primarily interesting because they are shared it becomes important to understand why they are shared and how they come to be shared.

When we observe that many different people have similar stereotypes of the same group then we can offer a number of qualitatively different explanations for that state of affairs. One obvious explanation is the effect of coincidental processes operating on individual minds. There are two key

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0521800471 - Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups

Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears*

variants on this view: one is that a common environment provides similar stimulus experience to different people and therefore similar stereotypes emerge.

In simple terms this first version is not all that plausible. There is plenty of evidence of shared stereotypes where there is no direct stimulus experience (Katz & Braly, 1933, make this point, see also Haslam, 1997).

The second variant is a better suggestion. This is the idea that there is a shared cultural pool of knowledge, social representations, ideology or culture from which different people sample and it is this which produces the commonality of views. However, this idea in turn ignores the reality that people's views become similar to each other through mutual social influence: people systematically become more similar to or more different from each other. Indeed McGarty (1999) argues that increasing similarity and difference is a ubiquitous but not unique key marker of social organization. Green peas in a pod may be very similar to each other in relevant ways and very different from (say) snow peas. Unlike members of a human social group though, the peas do not become more similar to each other. Members of human groups therefore have the power to become more similar and different, and stereotyping needs to be able to capture this dynamism.

Thus, the most interesting way in which stereotypes can become shared relates to the argument that stereotypes are normative beliefs just like other beliefs. They are shared by members of groups not just through the coincidence of common experience or the existence of shared knowledge within society, but because the members of groups act to coordinate their behaviour. The processes by which this occurs are relatively well-understood. Group members engage in processes of differentiation to make their groups distinctive from other groups, but they also engage in processes of social influence within groups so that their members become more similar to each other on relevant dimensions. There is no reason to believe that impressions of groups will be less dependent on these processes than other phenomena. Indeed if we argue that stereotypes can entail behavioural outcomes such as (positive and negative) discrimination it would be remarkable if such behaviour were not guided by consensualized norms. In practice some of the most consensual behaviours performed within any group relate to the treatment of outgroups, and this is especially so in intergroup conflict (including the extreme case of war or other forms of intergroup violence).

Stereotypes as psychological constructs

The cornerstone beliefs that we have addressed so far suggest some of the central concerns in the field and point to aspects of the character of

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0521800471 - Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups

Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears

Excerpt

[More information](#)

stereotypes. They may be less directly informative about the psychological nature of stereotypes. That is, they do not tell us much about stereotypes as psychological constructs. Here we discuss two possibilities briefly.

The first is that a stereotype is a set of associated beliefs. That is, the stereotype can be thought of as a relatively enduring system of interrelated concepts that inform perceptions of members of certain groups. The large number of variants of this view make it the most popular within the field (Stangor & Lange, 1994, provide one such detailed statement but there are many other possibilities).

The second possibility is that the term stereotype is reserved to refer to a specific representation of a particular group at a particular time. The difference between these views is analogous to the difference between knowledge and perception. To see the difference consider whether you would term a statement like 'the unemployed are lazy' as a stereotype or see the stereotype as something deeper and more complex which contributes to the expression of statements such as the one given in the example, but is not exactly the same as those expressions. Clearly this definitional issue is important for the study of stereotype formation. We need to know whether we are dealing with the formation of individual beliefs that can be readily expressed (and hence measured). Generally speaking our approach is in line with the customary practice in the field: we assume individual stereotypical statements and beliefs are related to the expressions of underlying systems.

Why do stereotypes form?

Several possible motivations have been suggested for the process of stereotype formation. As we have seen, many authors suggest that the accentuation of differences between groups serves to clarify or make sense of reality by selectively crystallizing important differences from the current vantage point of the perceiver (Oakes et al., 1994; Spears et al., 1997) or by simplifying the overwhelming environment which confronts the perceiver (Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990).

Other motivations include self-enhancement, that is, accentuating or magnifying differences on relevant dimensions may serve to underscore the positive features of some ingroup with respect to outgroup members thereby contributing to a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Doise, Csepele, Gouge, Larsen & Ostell, 1972; Schaller & Maass, 1989). Other authors make the rather different argument that distortions are self-enhancing because they reflect self-serving biases.

A more multi-faceted motivational account is provided by social judgeability theorists such as Leyens et al. (1994), who, however, have suggested that stereotyping serves pragmatic functions by producing judgements

Cambridge University Press

0521800471 - Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups

Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears*

which are adequate at a number of different levels. The aim of each of these levels is to provide a useful fit with reality rather than an exact match with reality, and in particular, to allow people to interact with other people. The cultural level of adequacy reflects people's propensity to follow the social rules within a particular culture at a particular time. An example of such a social rule that is immediately relevant to this discussion (and is introduced by Leyens et al., 1994, pp. 5–6; for empirical work on this topic see Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens & Rocher, 1994) is that in many Western societies it is seen as wrong to treat people at the categorical level (i.e., to stereotype them) without paying attention to individuating information.

The integrity level relates to the personal and social integrity of the judge. The suggestion is therefore that people avoid applying categorizations which would threaten the identity of themselves as individuals or of groups to which they belong. Thus, a supporter of a political party may resist forming an impression of their leader as corrupt, despite evidence of dubious deals, because that impression would have negative consequences for the party, the supporter's self-esteem and so on.

The theoretical level of adequacy relates to the degree to which the judgement explains the relationships between the information that is to be integrated. Under this view a judgement should comprise an *enlightening gestalt* that gives meaning to the world and allows communication. These ideas closely correspond to the ideas of Medin and colleagues that the naïve theory of *psychological essentialism* underpins categorization behaviour (Medin, 1989; and as applied to social categories by Rothbart & Taylor, 1992) and in particular that some categories have essences. Put simply, theoretical integrity refers to the perceived correspondence between a judgement and some theory of the world.

Yet another rationale is suggested by the argument of Tajfel (1981b, for a somewhat different view see Jost & Banaji, 1994) about the system-justifying role of stereotypes. That is, stereotypes can serve to maintain the status quo. The stereotype that Blacks are less intelligent than Whites might serve to justify the maintenance of limited programmes for educational advancement by Blacks.

How do stereotypes form?

So far we have dealt with some very broad introductory questions. We now tighten our focus to deal with the more specific mechanisms by which stereotypes could form. For historical reasons the discussion of these mechanisms centres around the idea of the development of perceived erroneous relationships between group membership and behaviour. That

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0521800471 - Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups

Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Social, cultural and cognitive factors

9

is, stereotype formation has largely been understood as being about coming to see relationships which (a) involve behaviours and (b) are not based on objective evidence (i.e., the relationships do not actually exist). The analysis which emerged in terms of these ideas provided one of the clearest examples of the cognitive approach to social psychology.

Distinctiveness and expectancy-based illusory correlations

The work of Hamilton and colleagues in the late 1970s and early 1980s made the distinction between stereotyping as the encoding of new information and the application of existing knowledge clear. These authors focused on the formation of new stereotypes in terms of *distinctiveness-based illusory correlation* (Hamilton & Gifford, 1976) and on the application of existing knowledge through *expectancy-based illusory correlation* (Hamilton & Rose, 1980).

The particular attraction of the illusory correlation effect was as an explanation of the formation and development of stereotypes of minorities. A distinctiveness-based illusory correlation is generally defined as the erroneous perception of the co-occurrence of rare characteristics. Normally, in social psychological usage, the effect is concerned with a perceived linkage between minority group membership and rare (usually undesirable) behaviours.

The details of the illusory correlation effect (ICE) and paradigm used by Hamilton and Gifford (1976) are well-known in social psychology and are discussed in several of the chapters to follow. For the time being we will just note that participants are exposed to a number of statements describing either positive or negative behaviours about members of Group A and Group B. Two thirds of the behaviours performed by members of each group are desirable and one third are undesirable. Participants are then normally asked to recall the group membership associated with each statement and to make judgements about the two groups. As there is no association between group membership and desirability of behaviour in the actual stimulus set then any observed association is said to be illusory.

The original explanation of the effect was Hamilton and Gifford's distinctiveness-based account. The cognitive process underlying ICE is as follows. The co-occurrence of two relatively infrequent events is especially noticeable or *distinctive*: it automatically triggers the observer's attention. These jointly infrequent events are hence better encoded, and more accessible to retrieval. Following Tversky and Kahneman's (1973) *availability heuristic*, the more easily they are retrieved, the more the subject perceives them as numerous, and therefore overestimates their frequency.

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0521800471 - Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups

Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears*

Hamilton and Gifford (1976, p. 405) do not 'deny, or even question, the importance of socially learned or culturally transmitted bases of stereotypes'. However, their core argument is that 'cognitive factors alone can be sufficient to produce differential perceptions of social groups'.

The illusory correlation phenomenon has been borne out by a number of studies (see the meta-analytic review by Mullen & Johnson, 1990). At the end of the 1980s almost all social psychology textbooks reported illusory correlation as a well established phenomenon that was best explained in terms of a universal cognitive bias (in the early 1990s, however, a range of explanations for the effect were proposed). (Fiedler, 1991; McGarty, Haslam, Turner & Oakes, 1993; Smith, 1991.)

The effect of this work on the field was two-fold. The first was that most discussions of stereotype formation were focused on stereotype formation as being a process by which erroneous views formed. The second was that the emphasis in the field became fixed on the formation of stereotypes of minorities. While this matched certain preoccupations in the societies within which the research was conducted, it meant that analyses of stereotype formation were necessarily incomplete.

At about the same time expectancy-based illusory correlation was demonstrated by Hamilton and Rose (1980). These authors showed that illusory correlation could be detected not just when people saw stimulus information but when people relied on expectations about the differences between social groups. That is, for meaningful social groups, expectations about those groups could serve as a basis for the perception of stereotypical differences.

There are two principal suggestions as to the ways in which stereotypes can emerge from expectancies. Both of these are contained in the work of Jussim (1991; Madon et al., 1998) and colleagues. The first is that stereotypes may emerge from actual differences between groups. This is the famous *kernel of truth* hypothesis (for a review see Oakes et al., 1994). Actual differences between groups may be detected and then become accentuated or magnified.

The second possibility is that stereotypes may actually be self-fulfilling prophecies (Snyder, 1981). Stereotypes may affect the ways that members of one group treat another and that in turn may lead to changes in behaviour of the stereotyped group. Perceiving the members of some group as violent and dangerous may, for example, lead to hostile treatment of that group which may in turn lead to a violent response from the stereotyped group.

In recent times there has been a range of new developments in the study of stereotype formation. These include fresh attempts to integrate distinctiveness and expectancy-based illusory correlation into the study