**Stereotypes**

Stereotypes are usually defined as relatively fixed and oversimplified generalizations about groups or classes of people. In practice, they generally focus on negative, unfavourable characteristics, although some authorities include in their conceptions of stereotypes positive social overgeneralizations as well.

The term derives from the Greek *stereos*, meaning solid, and *tupos*, meaning image or impression, from *tuptein*, to strike. A stereotype was originally a solid printing mould or plate which, once cast, was difficult to change, but the word was adapted for its present usage by Walter Lippmann in his classic book, *Public Opinion* (1922). Lippmann was the first to articulate the 'cognitive miser' theory, according to which stereotypes serve an important function as cognitive simplifications that are useful for the economical management of a reality that would otherwise overwhelm us with its complexity. The phenomenon of stereotyping has become a standard topic in sociology and social psychology. Early empirical studies (for example, Katz and Braly, 1933) stressed the surprising degree of consensus in the stereotypes depicting different ethnic groups. Labelling theorists in sociology have emphasized the power of stereotypes in generating invidious emotional responses to deviant individuals or minority group members. Frustration-aggression theory in psychology also stimulated interest in the dynamics of prejudice and emphasized the motivated nature of many of our stereotypes (Dollard *et al.*, 1939).

Two important developments in social psychology shortly after World War II accelerated interest in the processes of stereotyping. One was a growth of interest in the role of motivation and past experience as determinants of our perceptions. A capstone of this development was an article by Jerome S. Bruner (1957) linking perception to the concept of pre-established cognitive categories. Bruner explicitly stressed the assimilation of incoming information to the 'typical instance' of a category, thus providing a fruitful context for the discussion of stereotyping.

The second influence was the hugely influential research project, *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno *et al.*, 1950). This represented an attempt to illuminate some of the hidden dynamics of anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, and of more general predispositions towards over-simplified thinking associated with Fascist belief systems. Stereotypic thinking was found to characterize high scorers on the F scale, which was designed to measure authoritarianism.

Gordon Allport's (1954) analysis of prejudice and stereotyping began a general movement towards treating stereotypes as a consequence of normal cognitive functioning rather than looking at them as a by-product of frustration or pathological defensiveness. In this and subsequent treatments, stereotypes have been viewed as the often unfortunate end-products of useful and even necessary strategies of information processing.

As the field of social psychology has become explicitly more cognitive, there has been renewed interest in stereotypes and the experiences and settings that contribute to them. The edited volumes by Mackie and Hamilton (1993) and Zanna and Olson (1994) summarize much of the recent research into the phenomenon of stereotyping; for a critical perspective based on social identity and self-categorization theories see also the monograph by Oakes, Haslam, and Turner (1994). Although it is still generally acknowledged that stereotypes may at times be motivated and serve as a justification for hostile or prejudiced attitudes, more stress is currently being placed on the contention that processes of prejudgment and categorization are built into every act of perception or information processing. Thus

stereotypes are nothing more than cognitive categories that often satisfy emotional needs, prove quite resistant to disconfirming information, and operate as powerful cognitive magnets to which such information is assimilated.

Although stereotypes are generally viewed as the maladaptive extreme of the cognitive processing continuum, and serve to perpetuate social conflict and discrimination, there is also much evidence that they may be readily discarded when judging individual group members. Thus it appears that some individuals are quite capable of maintaining strong and rather rigid views of typical group members even when these views do not necessarily influence how a particular member is perceived or evaluated.

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See also: *labelling theory; prejudice; stigma.*