STEREOTYPING AND SOCIETY: A BARRIER TO ACHIEVING SOCIAL EQUALITY

By Shona Melissa Tritt

Introduction

Stereotypes function to organize the social world, acting as cognitive shortcuts and preventing us from becoming overwhelmed by the complexity of the social information that we encounter on a daily basis (Weary et al., 2001). As part of this process, people make automatic judgments about individuals of certain sexes or races, simplifying social reality and minimizing effortful thought-processing (Tajfel, 1969). Even in the absence of conscious endorsement, culturally available social stereotypes commonly affect our thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996). Indeed, some particularly insidious stereotypes appear to serve existential functions and to be formed largely in an attempt to rationalize, justify, or explain existing social hierarchies (eg. Jost & Banjii, 1994; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990). If we hope to be able to lessen the intensity and pervasiveness of such stereotypes, it is crucial that we begin to recognize the deeply-seated functions that such categorizations perform. The following paper, focusing on gender stereotypes in particular, examines 1) how complementary gender stereotypes perpetuate inequality; 2) how System Justification, Lay Epistemic and Terror Management theories account for the perpetuation of such stereotypes, particularly in times of uncertainty and stress; and 3) how an increased understanding of the exceedingly complex psychological processes involved in such labeling might enable us to find ways to diminish stereotyping and its pernicious effects.

Researchers suggest that the attributes of specific stereotypes often have social status implications (e.g. Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). According to the *rationalization hypothesis,* stereotypes are formed largely in an attempt to explain or rationalize existing social hierarchies. For example, various African-American stereotypes such as being lazy, irresponsible, and violent, seem to justify the lower social status of the group and thus satisfy humankind's inherent psychological need to validate the prevailing inequitable social order (eg. Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Kay, 2003; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990).

Two fundamental and universal complimentary stereotypes that attribute distinctive strengths and weaknesses to high and low status groups serve to justify the established social system (Fiske et al., 2002; Jost & Kay, 2005). The first stereotype concerns competence, which is usually characterized by perceived ability, intelligence, skill, creativity and efficacy. The second stereotype is associated with warmth, which includes attributes like friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness and morality. Low status groups are typically perceived as warm but not competent, whereas high status groups are regarded as competent but not warm. The idea that high and low status groups have unique complementary characteristics enhances the perceived legitimacy of the existing social system, in effect preventing changes in the status quo.

Gender Inequality: A Case Study of Stereotyping

Despite the narrowing gender gap over the past century, men continue to control more resources of value than do women (Goodwin & Fiske, 2001). For example, in the USA, women occupy almost half of the mid-level management positions, but receive 28-30% less pay than males performing the same jobs (U.S. Department of Labor, 1999). Indeed, in almost every society, women are more likely than men to live below the poverty line, and women generally have less legal and political power

(United Nations Development Program, 1998). While this gender gap has certainly lessened in recent years, men continue to dominate fields like computer science and engineering, while women are represented more commonly in lower-status professions like teaching and social work (U.S. Department of Labor, 1999).

Gender stereotypes likely contribute to the unequal socioeconomic differentiation of men and women, thus providing, subtly at times, a rationalization of the prevailing social order (Eagly & Stephen, 2000). Females, perceived as high in warmth but low in competence, are often the targets of *paternalistic stereotypes,* whereas men, regarded as highly competent but lacking in warmth, are the targets of *envious stereotypes* (Eckes, 2002). Similarly, women are commonly associated with characteristics such as helpfulness, kindness, gentleness, warmth and empathy rather than with the qualities attributed to males such as competence, independence and industriousness (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989).

This combination of characteristics makes females seem better suited to low-status jobs, such as those related to domestic or child-related activities (waitressing, daycare center work, teaching and the like), while males appear better matched to higher-status, higher-pay positions (bankers, pilots, architects, engineers), which maximize income for the family. Thus, commonly conceived gender stereotypes seem to rationalize inequitable socioeconomic status.

How Stereotypes Perpetuate Inequality: Self-Stereotyping

Self-stereotyping describes the process of integrating a group stereotype into one's own self-concept; such labeling subsequently influences self-perception and behaviour (Oswald & Lindstedt, 2006). It is thus hypothesized that the respective low and high status of female and of male stereotypes propagate inequality through self-stereotyping processes.

Researchers have demonstrated that typecasting can sway behaviour and performance without conscious awareness. In a test group of Asian-American females, for example, those with a heightened sense of their Asian identity performed better on a mathematics test, in accordance with the Asian and female stereotype of mathematical competence, than those who conceived of themselves more generally as females (Pittinsky et al., 1999).

How Stereotypes Perpetuate Inequality: Societal Reinforcement

Based on personality traits, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and physical appearances, individual women and men are categorized into well-differentiated subtypes. Those who violate dominant gender expectations are cast in a negative light. For instance, female leaders are rated by both genders as less likeable, more interpersonally hostile, and less desirable as bosses when compared with males (Heilman & Okimotto, 2007). Similarly, men who attempt to join the nursing profession, which has a history of being predominated by females, are commonly labeled negatively, or considered to be 'perverts,' 'sissies,' and homosexuals (Evans, 2002). Thus, women may accept low-status occupations and males may opt for higher-status roles in order to avoid negative stereotyping, regardless of their true interests.

Individuals retain their preexisting global stereotypes even when they are aware that exceptions exist, because those who violate conventional expectations are characteristically felt to be unrepresentative of the group as a whole. Negative stereotypes, in particular, resist change. In the face of intense manipulations involving cooperation with the stereotyped group over extended periods of time, people still do not generalize from the positive members whom they have encountered to the group as a whole (Kunda & Oleson, 1995).

Psychological Motivations to Perpetuate Stereotypes

System Justification Theory

According to the System Justification Theory, people have an ideological motive to believe in the legitimacy of the current social system (Jost & Banaji, 1994). The notion that every group in society possesses some strengths and weaknesses creates the overall sense that the social system is fair (Kay & Jost, 2003). Stereotypes explain and justify the disproportionate number of women who are homemakers (because they are perceived as warm), and men who are workers (because they are perceived as competent) (Goodwin & Fiske, 2001). According to this theory, individuals sacrifice personal or group interests out of the greater desire for fairness in the social order and for the perpetuation of the status quo.

To the extent that complementary stereotypes are motivated by the need to validate the prevailing social order, such forms of stereotyping should be more pronounced when there is a perceived threat to society. Jost and colleagues (2005) assessed the System Justification function of complementary stereotypes among higher-status Ashkenazi Jews and found, indeed, that complementary stereotype differentiation was significantly more pronounced in study participants in the presence of a perceived threat to the stability of the social order. These researchers generalize from their results to suggest that, in effect, by making the system seem more reasonable and fair, communal stereotypes compensate for the advantaged social status of individuals and groups. Thus, in the face of perceived risks to the status quo, complementary stereotypes are increasingly drawn upon to rationalize inequality.

In another gender-specific study, some participants were exposed to complementary, others to non-complementary gender stereotypes, or to no stereotypes at all. Only the complementary stereotypes increased female participants' support for the status quo. In addition, the experimental manipulation had no effect on men, who consistently scored highly on the measure of gender-specific System Justification (Jost & Kay, 2005).

The creation – and sustainment – of complementary stereotypes supports the perceived fairness of the social system and thus prevents social change. In particular, the finding that the association of women with communal traits (e.g. warmth, kindness, empathy) makes them more tolerant of sexism in society implies that members of low-status groups accept their disadvantaged position due to the perceived flattery implied in the complementary stereotypes. Furthermore, threats to the social system enhance System Justification needs (Jost et al., 2005). When the terror alert was raised in the U.S. between 2001-2004, for example, support for George Bush notably increased (Willer 2004). Situations of political instability, war and social change, as with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, appear to increase support of the prevailing social system, and one can speculate about the implications of such complimentary stereotypes.

Terror Management Theory

Terror Management Theory (TMT) similarly proposes that humans are motivated to support the prevailing social fabric. Yet this theory uniquely argues that it is specifically an underlying, subconscious awareness of death that prompts a system justification response as a means of buffering the anxiety and terror felt in response to mortality. Most importantly, TMT asserts that culture allows people to perceive themselves as being able to transcend death through a type of symbolic immortality. Once established, culturally prevalent stereotypes may become important components in one's cultural worldview. To the extent that such stereotypes contribute to a meaningful, orderly, secure conception of the social world, they provide protection against existential anxiety (Schimel et al., 1999). The TMT framework anticipates that encouraging individuals to

ponder mortality would lead to a greater likelihood of identifying with culturally accepted stereotypes. Various experiments have confirmed this expectation.

In one study, for example, when college students were induced to think about death, they attributed more stereotypical traits (positive and negative) to German people compared with a control group prompted to think about the prospect of dental surgery. Moreover, in a follow-up study looking specifically at the effect of death anxiety on gender-role stereotyping, and using the same methodology, participants induced to think of mortality consistently offered more gender stereotype-consistent responses, compared with the control group (Schimel et al., 1999).

Thus, both System Justification Theory and Terror Management Theory substantially account for cultural stereotypes, complementary or otherwise. Yet Terror Management Theory uniquely proposes that death anxiety motivates support for the existing social system. The TMT studies reviewed demonstrate that reminders of mortality elicit greater attempts to support existing cultural stereotypes. Thus, situations that bring to mind thoughts of death and, by extension, heighten awareness of our mortality (eg. the 9/11 terrorist attacks) may well prompt greater support and adherence to complementary (and other) stereotypes.

Lay Epistemic Theory

Lay Epistemic Theory proposes a fundamental human need for cognitive closure, the desire, at least partially unconscious, to hold on to firm opinions and beliefs on any given topic in order to avoid uncertainty (Festinger, 1974; Kruglanski, 1989; Wilson 1973). This need for closure perpetuates the current ideology, resulting in a tendency to 'seize' and 'freeze' the status quo (Jost, Glaser, & Kruglanski, 2003). Stereotypes allow people to feel assured by categorizing social information into diagnostic categories (Weary et al., 2001), and give people the opportunity to avoid uncertainty by using previously encountered information to make judgments (eg. Kruglansli & Freund, 1983). In one study, Israeli students and teachers were asked to evaluate Hebrew essays written by 8th-graders. When evaluations had to be completed within 10 minutes, there was greater 'stereotypic freezing' than in the control group that was given 60 minutes for such evaluation. The time pressure constraint significantly increased participant's ratings on the essays written by Ashkenazi Jews[1], who are stereotyped as 'highly educated', but had no effect on the ratings of essays written by those of other backgrounds (Kruglansli & Freund, 1983). These results suggest that an increased need for cognitive closure enhances a tendency towards stereotyping, and concomitantly, a propensity to maintain belief in the status quo.

System Justification, TMT, and Lay Epistemic Theory account for, at least in part, the difficulty of undermining complementary (and other) stereotypes. Lay Epistemic Theory uniquely predicts that the need to avoid uncertainty is a central factor in the resistance to social change. No doubt individuals differ substantially in the need to avoid such uncertainty, yet empirical evidence demonstrates that situational factors, such as time pressure, can enhance this trait in everyone.

Prospects for Social change

Despite the deeply-seated motivations underlying existing social stereotypes, female gender stereotypes nonetheless appear to be changing slowly, at least in some countries. An important study conducted in the USA, Brazil and Chile found that females are increasingly becoming associated with competency (e.g. ambition, intelligence, etc.) in the domains of politics, economics and relationships (Diekman et al., 2004).

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[1] Ashkenazi Jews trace their lineage to Yiddish-speaking ancestors who settled in central and northern Europe in the early Middle Ages.

Given the strong motivational factors to maintain the status quo, how is it that gender stereotypes seem to be changing? Kay, Jimenez, and Jost (2002) argue that when regime change is perceived as inevitable, people begin to rationalize the new system almost immediately.

As women gain power in society by adopting and succeeding in traditionally male-occupational roles, conventional gender roles should become increasingly unstable. Ultimately, a widespread consensus that a low-status group is gaining power might act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, thus undermining traditional gender stereotypes.

How to Promote Change

Male stereotypes, however, have changed little over the past few decades (Diekman, 2004). Gender equality necessitates not only that females are attributed with traits associated with competence, but also that males are linked with characteristics related to warmth and communality. Moreover, although female stereotypes are changing and women are gaining power in many domains, women currently remain at a severe disadvantage in society, and thus it is certainly worthwhile to investigate possible methods of speeding up the progress towards social equality. Reducing gender stereotyping would no doubt decrease gender-based discrimination; consequently, much research has focused on identifying effective means of accomplishing such reduction.

Suppressing traditional stereotypes/promoting awareness

The most common approach to eradicating stereotypes is to try to consciously suppress them (Monteith, Sherman & Devine, 1998). Such an approach would suggest the benefit of interventions aimed at raising awareness of our automatic social judgments and their negative consequences.

Controversy surrounds these attempts at the conscious suppression of stereotypes; Wegner (1987) found that efforts to keep in check stereotypic thoughts often backfire, leading to the increased prominence of stereotypical viewpoints. Asking people not to think of a white bear makes them think of a white bear. Thus, some researchers (e.g. Kawakami et al., 2000) argue that raising awareness of gender stereotypes may lead to a counter-intuitive increase in stereotyping, and they thus propose an alternative approach, one that replaces traditional stereotypes with less problematic automatic thoughts.

Other researchers have found encouraging evidence suggesting that conscious suppression is possible. Kawakami and colleagues (2000) presented participants with photographs of African-American and Caucasian faces matched variously with a list of stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent traits. Participants were 'trained' to respond 'NO' to photographs paired with stereotypical traits and 'YES' to photographs not similarly paired. The experimental manipulation significantly reduced stereotyping. Most importantly, this effect lasted up to 24 hours after the training period. These results suggest that while stereotype activation seems to be automatic, it is neither inevitable nor uncontrollable, and can in fact be reduced by conscious effort (Kawakami et al., 2000).

Similarly hopeful results were obtained in another experiment by Lillis and Hayes (2007), who designed a cognitive-behavioural intervention for high school students, with the aim of making the students more aware of their prejudicial and stereotypical thoughts. Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) participants were asked to take note of their thoughts in the course of completing statements such as 'Most Black people tend to...' and 'People who live in this country and don't speak the language are....' Following this, subjects were trained to be self-conscious of the processes of automatic responses and to acknowledge the presence of prejudicial thoughts and emotional

reactions through a variety of exercises designed to heighten awareness of such thinking.

After a 75-minute intervention, the ACT group significantly lowered participants' scores on an explicit prejudice questionnaire which included items specifying behavioural intentions, such as 'I am likely to join a campus organization or participate in a campus event that is focused on cultural diversity' or 'I try not to think negative thoughts I have about people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds'. This reduction in prejudice was significantly greater than in the control group where participants were presented with material directly from a textbook dealing with the importance of recognizing and correcting bias. The difference was maintained after a one-week follow-up. Although the ensuing period was very short, the results suggest that ACT may be an effective intervention for raising awareness of prejudicial and stereotypical attitudes among students.

These findings imply that interventions targeting the awareness of stereotyping processes may be worthwhile: determined effort seems to reduce automatic thought processes. Raising awareness of more subtle forms of prejudice such as complementary stereotypes is particularly important, as such prejudices often go unnoticed.

Replacing traditional stereotypes with alternative thoughts

Given that stereotypes serve diverse and sometimes fundamental psychological functions, some researchers argue that a long-term solution must involve replacing traditional stereotypes with more egalitarian concepts.

Blair and Banaji (1996) demonstrated that automatically activated stereotypes can be modified by consciously replacing stereotypic thoughts with counter-stereotypic ones. In their experiment, male and female names were presented on a computer screen followed by a list of conventionally-conceived masculine or feminine traits. Participants were able to recall more quickly names which preceded a gender-congruent trait, demonstrating that gender stereotypes are activated automatically. Next, these researchers warned participants to expect a counter-stereotypical name and trait pairings on the computer task. Participants so notified were able to reverse the stereotype-priming effect. This research supports the view that stereotype activation is controllable and that ingrained stereotypes can potentially be replaced by exposure to alternatives. In other words, the best way to be rid of complementary stereotypes might be to replace them with neutral or egalitarian ones. However, since there are no known societies in which men and women are considered completely equal, we have no model of gender-neutral stereotypes. Without a model to emulate, it is indeed difficult to conceive of alternative gender relations.

Could a Liberal Worldview solve the Problem of Social Inequality?

Perhaps the closest we have to a model of social equality is represented by the liberal ideology. Jost (2006) proposes that political attitudes can be divided into the conservative right and the liberal left. He identifies two core dimensions that capture the most meaningful and enduring differences between liberal and conservative ideologies: (1) attitudes towards inequality and (2) attitudes towards social change and tradition. Jost (2003) found that self-reported conservatives were more likely to consider people to be inherently unequal, and also more likely to venerate tradition, order and authority than self-identified liberals. By contrast, those who conceived of themselves as liberals were more likely to be egalitarian and believe that planned changes bring the possibility of improvement.

Rather than simply replacing traditional stereotypes with gender-neutral ones, it might be beneficial to try to encourage a more inclusive and liberal viewpoint. People who identify themselves as liberals are less likely to hold prejudicial attitudes, consciously and unconsciously, towards racial minorities, homosexuals and women than self-identified conservatives (Cunningham, Nezlek, & Banaji, 2004;

Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Sidanius, Pratto, Bobo, 1996). Christopher and Mull (2006) found strong indications of a correlation between right-wing conservatism and complementary sexism. No research has yet focused on the relationship between liberal ideology and the endorsement of complementary stereotypes, yet it seems likely that this ideology would be characterized by tolerant, non-prejudicial attitudes.

Would a Liberal ideology satisfy Terror Management, System Justification, and Lay Epistemic motivations?

There has been much debate about whether a liberal ideology could satisfy Terror Management, System Justification and the nee for certainty, thus making liberal ideology a viable long-term solution for social change.

Greenberg and Jonas (2003) propose that the need to avoid uncertainty, System Justification, and the need to buffer mortality-related anxiety could potentially be satisfied by alternative stereotypes and/or a liberal worldview. They suggest that any ideological system entailing social stability would provide an equally effective means of satisfying existential needs for certainty and meaning, and that System Justification, once established, could be defended as the prevailing worldview.

On the other hand, Jost (2006) proposes that situations of threat and uncertainty cause 'conservative shifts' within individuals and populations, in response to enhanced existential needs for Terror Management, certainty and System Justification. The author describes how certain historical events such as 9/11 and the Great Depression heightened perceptions of threat and uncertainty, and consequently led to greater acceptance of conservative ideology. A meta-analysis suggests that the greatest predictors of conservative ideology are self-reported measures of system threat and fear of death (Jost et al., 2003). In light of the recent worldwide recession and the economic and, indeed, social turmoil that the recession is causing, we may need to be hyper-vigilant about the tendency to endorse social stereotypes, and conservative ideology more generally.

Conclusion

Although society may seem to be moving toward ever-greater egalitarian views, stereotyping is still pervasive. For instance, while the media has been applauded for its recent inclusion of homosexual characters on television and in films, Shugart (2003) describes how homosexual males have been marginalized by the restricted range in the homosexual characters portrayed in the media. Such restrictive depictions (eg. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*) perpetuate the inequality of sexual orientation by associating homosexual males with competence in traditionally feminine, low-status domains (eg. fashion, design, communication), but not in traditionally masculine, high-status vocational domains (eg. science, economics, management). The presence of such stereotyping, despite supposedly progressive attempts at greater representation, dramatizes the insidious entrenchment of stereotypes in society.

According to the System Justification perspective, stereotyping of high and low status groups rationalizes the prevailing social order. This process involves subtle psychological processes making significant and lasting amelioration of stereotyping exceedingly difficult. The threat of change in a liberalizing social hierarchy may lead, for example, to a reactionary endorsement of traditional stereotypes among higher status groups to perpetuate their superior status. Indeed, in a very recent study, Morton, Postmes, Haslam, & Hornsey (2009) found that when gender roles were portrayed as changing, men became increasingly resistant to change-affirming, essentialist gender-role stereotypes, whereas this effect is less pronounced when gender roles were depicted as stable (either consistently unequal or consistently equal).

Complementary stereotypes, perhaps because they often go unnoticed as a form of prejudice, appear to perpetuate inequality through self-stereotyping and societal reinforcement processes. Social stereotypes are additionally sustained through System Justification, Terror Management, and Lay Epistemic motivations. While females are associated increasingly with competent attributes, interventions are necessary to speed this process along, and to promote the association of communal traits with males. It is crucial to raise awareness of how social categories elicit automatic judgments, and how prejudicial thoughts have a negative impact on the target groups. Some researchers argue that it is more effective to replace existing automatic judgments with alternative, more egalitarian stereotypes. Yet, as there is no gender-neutral model for society to emulate, it is difficult to know how to proceed in this regard. The best approach may be to facilitate a liberal ideology that values equality and social change. But how, precisely, does one encourage a liberal worldview? Since in times of threat people appear to become more conservative, interventions may be necessary during times of uncertainty in order to prevent a conservative shift and to promote liberalism. If our current hierarchical system could be replaced by a liberal worldview valuing tolerance, equality and social change, then the need to justify inequality with complementary stereotypes would probably be decreased substantially.

At least in the short-term, it seems prudent to be vigilant during times of threat in order to prevent conservative shifts and increases in social inequality. In light of the recent economic events felt globally, it may be a particularly important time to make efforts to prevent a conservative shift in ideology. The media, schools and religious institutions need to promote the idea that people of all ethnicities, race, genders, sexualities, and religions are equal and should be treated in the same way. In this context, one can perhaps hope for an ever more tolerant and equitable society.

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MSc. Psychodynamic Developmental Neuroscience
Div. of Psychology and Language Sciences

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