



Image from: [It is both reality and stereotype that many women... in Encyclopedia of Leadership](#)

Summary Article: **Stereotypes**
From *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media*

Stereotypes are overly simplified conceptions, images, or beliefs about individuals and specific social groups. Popular stereotypes rely on assumptions, are often mistaken for reality, and usually have negative connotations. The term *stereotype* was first coined in 1798 in the field of typography. It originally meant “duplicate impression” and described the process of casting a print mold. In 1922, American journalist Walter Lippmann redefined the term as a perpetual “picture in our heads.” The power of the image in our heads is its ability to perpetuate without change. Unfortunately, that image, the stereotype, is usually negative and constricts individual identities to preconceived group characteristics.

Theories of Stereotypes

Perspectives on the development of stereotypes vary; views range from a belief that stereotypes help to frame an individual's experience with different groups of people to a belief that stereotypes are patterns of communication that are, by definition, inaccurate representations and projections of one to another. Early studies suggested that stereotypes were used only by repressed authoritarians as a form of prejudicial thinking. More recent theories acknowledge the complexity of stereotypes and stereotyping and conclude that both are commonplace.

Social psychologists attribute the stereotyping process to the human need for mental categorizing. There are two generally agreed-upon perspectives about stereotypes and how they operate. The first perspective suggests that stereotypes are automatic (subconscious) and explicit (conscious). Automatic stereotyping is the stereotyping everyone does without notice and is accompanied by an explicit stereotype, which creates more concrete ideas in the mind. In this case, stereotypes act first as mental categories with which to contain new information (people, groups, places, and so forth) and then as a set of perceptions about the new information. For example, the stereotype of people from New Jersey as loud and obnoxious, with a taste for ostentatious clothing and usually Italian-American, will cast all state residents in such a light even though the state's population is quite diverse. The power of stereotypes is reinforced when the stereotype is mass-produced in the media, as in shows like *The Real House Wives of New Jersey*, *The Jersey Shore*, and *Jerseylicious*.

The second perspective on stereotypes relies on the notion of in-groups and out-groups. In-groups are perceived as normal and thus the superior group of which to be a member, whereas out-groups are simply all other, less desirable groups. In this second perspective on stereotypes, the members of the in-group are not stereotyped because they are seen as normal individuals with distinct identities. Members of the out-group are treated en masse and are ascribed few discernible or notable differences. In the United States, heterosexuals are an in-group, leaving all other sexual orientations to be stereotyped as deviant. There are no stereotypes about heterosexuals, because heterosexuality is the nonstereotypical in-group.

In general, stereotypes are constructed for people and groups of people with whom individuals have little to no contact. Lack of familiarity encourages the lumping together of unknown people. Most

often, the lack of distinction combined with the lack of specific knowledge results in stereotypes that are largely negative assumptions about a group or individual person within that group. However, social scientists and psychologists tend to agree that stereotypes help humans manage the complexities of other people as individuals. Even though stereotyping can be problematic, it is an efficient way to organize large blocks of information. The need to categorize is an essential human characteristic that allows people to simplify and operate within the world. By assigning general traits to members of groups, humans are more apt to avoid processing new information and are better able to predict the social world in a general sense.

A very different view of stereotypes suggests that the reason people stereotype is that they need to feel good about themselves. Stereotypes enhance self-esteem and protect people from feelings of anxiety by designating one's own group as normal and superior and making all other groups abnormal and inferior. In other words, stereotypes can help provide people with a sense of worth and pride in their identity. It is important to note that groups that are negatively stereotyped can, over time, enact the labels that are placed on them and assume, even if subconsciously, that a negative stereotype applied to them by a dominant group is a norm to emulate. Furthermore, stereotypes can prevent or discourage members of an in-group from forming any emotional identification with members of an out-group, leading to erroneous judgments and scapegoating. Characteristics subject to stereotyping range from age and gender to race and religion, always with the idea that there is one ideal way to be and all other identities can be lumped together and stereotyped.

In media, the recognizable nature of stereotypes has assured their use in contemporary advertising and comedy. Moreover, throughout history, literature and art have relied on stereotyped stock characters. Storytellers have used clichéd or predictable characters and situations in order to quickly connect with readers and audiences.

Gender and Sexual Stereotypes

Stereotypes about gender and sexuality are the most prolific form of stereotyping. Stereotypes about sexuality work to maintain society's strict notion of a gender binary. That is, male and female stereotypes perpetuate the idea that only male and female genders exist. Common gender stereotypes claim that men are promiscuous whereas women are sexually repressed, men are aggressive and brutish whereas women are demure and passive, and men are insensitive and detached whereas women are naturally caring and nurturing. These stereotypical gender roles place women at home, raising children and completely satisfied by their husbands, and men away at work, with few emotional ties to their families and eyes for every woman who passes them by. Gender stereotypes assume that all men must act stereotypically male, all women must act stereotypically female, and any deviation from the norm is intensely problematic. Living up to sexual stereotypes is damaging for people and creates ideas about one gender being better than another, leading to the notion of one person being better simply because of the person's biological reproductive capabilities or genitalia.

Sexual stereotypes also affect how we conceive of hetero-, homo-, and bisexuality. Heterosexuality is often considered the norm, or in-group, which causes all other sexual orientations to be stereotyped as out-groups and thus deviant and abnormal. Sexual stereotypes are damaging to nonheterosexual people and often result in the denial or limitation of civil rights, as well as violence and discrimination. Some sexual stereotypes suggest that lesbians are unrefined, unattractive, and overweight (similar to heterosexual men) and that gay men are stereotypically thin, effeminate, and vain (similar to

heterosexual women).

Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes

In the United States, some of the longest-held and potentially most detrimental stereotypes are those about African Americans. Stereotypes about African American people date back to the colonial years of settlement, particularly after slavery became a racial institution. Blacks have been stereotyped as lazy, primitive, religious, and violent. They have been depicted as loving fried chicken, Kool-Aid, and watermelon. The archetypal African American image comes primarily from the minstrel shows of the 19th century. In these shows, white people wore blackface makeup and performed African Americans as buffoonish and ignorant characters. Some of the most well-known black stereotypes are the Sambo (a trickster), the Mammy (a large, dark-skinned woman who raises white folks' babies), the Uncle Tom (an African American man who acquiesces in everything white people want), the Magical Black Man (a character who saves white people from their own mistakes), and the Welfare Queen (an African American woman who has babies only to get money from the government). In news media today, the stereotype of angry, violent black men and women has led to some of the most racist images seen in American culture. Sports are the one place where African American stereotypes are somewhat positive, but the assumption that all black people are natural-born athletes can still be damaging and limiting: The more positive image is only made negative by the resulting stereotype that assumes that black communities place a low priority on education.

Similarly, Hispanics are cast as a group of people uninterested in education. Rather, the stereotypical Hispanic person cares only for his or her family and having more and more children—especially because the most prominent stereotype of Hispanic people is that they all hail from a common country of origin. In the United States, Hispanic and Latino people are incorrectly given racial identities and are often depicted as part of one homogeneous culture or ethnic group with no defining characteristics. If a country of origin is specified, it is invariably Puerto Rico or Mexico, regardless of an individual's actual home country.

Recently, a rise in stereotypes about Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim people has occurred. Although a fascination with the Near East has long existed in literature and film and characters have long been depicted as billionaires on camels or belly dancers in tents, the more common stereotype today is of a bomber or terrorist. After the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, a wave of anti-Arab images and stereotypes emerged. Racial profiling done at airports has become a common form of stereotyping and another example of the ways in which out-groups are demeaned and degraded by stereotypes.

Stereotyping people from “the Orient” has long been a cultural fascination of Americans. A major stereotype of East Asia is its exotic and mysterious nature compared to the bland, ordinary aspect of Western culture and customs. An interestingly detrimental effect of the East's mystique places all Asian cultures in a perpetual state of ancient timelessness, whereas the West is seen as constantly emerging, innovating, and reconstructing itself. In the late 19th century, a fear of the “Yellow Peril” overwhelmed Western countries, including the United States, where anti-Asian sentiments were readily expressed on the West Coast as Chinese, Japanese, and other Asians began immigrating to America. Since then, Asians have been stereotyped as the “model minority;” that is, positive traits have been ascribed to all Asian individuals as part of their stereotype. Asians are seen as studious, productive, intelligent, and inoffensive people who have elevated their social standing through diligence and hard

work. Asians are also stereotyped by their choice of professions: as dry cleaners, grocery store owners, and scientists. When Asians are not performing a stereotypical job or operating as part of an ideal minority, then they fall into one of these even more limiting roles: the Fu Manchu (an evil, Satan-like character), the Charlie Chan (a “good” Asian who has good manners), the Dragon Lady (a hypersexual woman manifested in the war bride as well as the prostitute), and the China Doll (a subservient maiden).

Another minority that has been subjected to both positive and negative stereotypes are Jews. Throughout the centuries, Jewish people have been made scapegoats for a multitude of societal problems. However, they are also praised for their ability to survive and be successful. Jews have been cast as greedy, cheap, loud, and obnoxious. They are often depicted counting money or diamonds. Jewish female stereotypes include guilt-inflicting mothers and spoiled, materialistic daughters (the Jewish American “princess”). Caricatures of Jews show them as having curly hair, large hook noses, thick lips, and olive-brown skin. Usually somewhere in the picture is also an image of a bagel, yarmulke, or menorah, and the character is often playing the violin, haggling with a customer, or undergoing circumcision. One of the most famous Jewish stereotypes is William Shakespeare's character Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock is a moneylender who insists on being repaid in full and attempts to claim his “pound of flesh” when Antonio (the lead character and clearly a member of society's in-group) is unable to repay him with money.

The gendered specificity of ethnic and cultural stereotypes adds a layer to the process whereby groups are belittled through stereotypes. In the United States, because the ideal in-group woman displays the characteristics of attractive, demure, and nurturing, stereotypes of nonwhite women are the opposite. For example, the African American Mammy may take care of children, but they are not her own and she is usually depicted as obese and thus unattractive. The China Doll may be demure, but too much so; white men cannot take her seriously enough to consider her worthy of marriage. Nonwhite stereotypical women are never pretty and almost always overly sexual if not completely asexual. Likewise, the stereotypical nonwhite male is also always “too much” or “not enough;” he is either too weak, like the Uncle Tom; too aggressive, like the Fu Manchu; too smart and cunning, like the Jewish Shylock; or too lazy and unintelligent, like African American and Hispanic men. Particularly damaging nonwhite male stereotypes have marked many minority males as not only defective but also completely nonhuman, as animals to be handled.

Because stereotypes affect at least one aspect of everyone's identity, the potential damaging or limiting impact of stereotyping is endless. However, awareness of and education about stereotypes, and of how they are proliferated in various media depictions, can work to mitigate, if not fully correct, that damage. With that awareness and a fuller personal experience with people different from ourselves, how we as individuals choose to use stereotypes—whether as guides and mental frameworks about large quantities of information or as distinctive and determinative knowledge about individuals in groups—is up to us.

See also

Affirmative Action, Class Privilege, Cultural Politics, Diversity, Empowerment, Gender and Femininity: Motherhood, Gender and Femininity: Single/Independent Girl, Gender and Masculinity: Black Masculinity, Gender and Masculinity: Fatherhood, Gender and Masculinity: Metrosexual Male, Gender and Masculinity: White Masculinity, Hegemony, Heterosexism, Homophobia, Identity, Ideology, Intersectionality, Minority

Rights, Misogyny, Patriarchy, Prejudice, Queer Theory, Racism, Sexism, Social Construction of Gender, Transgender Studies, Tropes

Further Readings

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Silverman, Rachel E.

APA

Chicago

Harvard

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