

Fighting Stereotype Stigma

Studies chart accuracy, usefulness of inferences about social groups

By BRUCE BOWER

P sychologist Yueh-Ting Lee received an electronic mail message several years ago that included some barbed observations about the quality of life in several countries. "Heaven is a place with an American house, Chinese food, British police, a German car, and French art," Lee's correspondent wrote. "Hell is a place with a Japanese house, Chinese police, British food, German art, and a French car."

While these national stereotypes fall short of absolute truths, asserts Lee of Westfield (Mass.) State College, they are accurate enough to give the aphorism its humorous punch. Houses in the United States indeed boast more space, on average, than Japanese dwellings. A Chinese inn probably holds greater culinary potential than a British pub.

In this respect, stereotypes, rather than representing unjustified prejudices, typically function as thought-efficient starting points for understanding other cultures and social groups, as well as the individuals who belong to them, Lee holds.

"Stereotypes are probabilistic beliefs we use to categorize people, objects, and events," Lee proposes. "We have to have stereotypes to deal with so much information in a world with which we are often uncertain and unfamiliar."

Many psychologists find this opinion about as welcome as a cut in their research grants. They view stereotyping as a breeding ground for errant generalizations about others that easily congeal into racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry.

In the squalid realm of stereotypes, mental acumen goes begging, while misjudgment reigns, maintains Charles Stangor of the University of Maryland at College Park. People employ stereotypes mainly to simplify how they think about others and to enhance their views of themselves and the groups to which they belong, Stangor holds. In the hands of politically powerful folks, stereotypes abet efforts to stigmatize and exploit selected groups, he adds.

Stangor's argument fails to give stereotypes their due as often helpful, if not absolutely precise, probes of the social world, Lee responds. He contends that a growing body of research suggests that

in many real-life situations, stereotypes accurately capture cultural or group differences. Much of this evidence appears in *Stereotype Accuracy: Toward Appreciating Group Differences* (1995, American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.), a book edited by Lee and two other psychologists, Lee J. Jussim of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., and Clark McCauley of Bryn Mawr (Pa.) College.

For more than 60 years, scientists have treated stereotypes as by definition erroneous, illogical, and inflexible. This view harks back to journalist Walter Lippman's 1922 book *Public Opinion*, in which he argued that stereotypes of social groups invariably prove incomplete and biased.



In the 1950s, psychologist Gordon W. Allport characterized stereotypes as invalid beliefs about all members of a group. Allport treated the opinion "all Germans are efficient" as a stereotype, but not "Germans, on average, are more efficient than most people in other countries." Debate arose at that time over whether some stereotypes encase a "kernel of truth."

Lippman's fear that stereotypes wreak social havoc gained particular favor after 1970, as psychologists flocked to expose errors and biases in social judgments.

Over the past decade, however, psychologists have shown more interest in delineating the extent to which decision making proves accurate in specific contexts (SN: 10/29/94, p. 280).

Lee's approach to stereotypes falls squarely within the focus on accuracy of judgment. His interest in how people comprehend ethnic and cultural differences

intensified after he emigrated from China to the United States in 1986 to attend graduate school. At that point, he began to suspect that a keener scientific understanding of stereotypes might have valuable applications. For instance, Lee asserts, efforts at conflict resolution between ethnic groups or nations may work best if both sides receive help in confronting real cultural disparities that trigger mutual animosities.

"Group differences, not prejudice, are the root cause of tension and conflict between various cultural and racial groups," he contends. "The most effective way to improve intergroup relations is to admit and to discuss frankly the existing differences, at the same time explaining that there is nothing wrong with being different."

Bridge-building efforts of this kind counteract the natural tendency to emphasize negative features in stereotypes, argues Reuben M. Baron of the University of Connecticut in Storrs. Humans evolved in groups that negotiated a dangerous world, he states. Our ancestors must have relied on stereotypes to marshal quick responses to potential threats, such as distinguishing predators from prey, friends from enemies, and fellow group members from outsiders, Baron asserts.

The ability to categorize individuals into "types" may also have been crucial for communicating with others as groups grew in size and complexity, Baron proposes. In large communities, stereotypes capitalized on people's propensity to fill social roles that match their own personal qualities. Warriors in an ancient society, for instance, might reasonably have been stereotyped as aggressive and unemotional, while storytellers and musicians were accurately tagged as expressive and friendly.

Despite their handiness, even accurate stereotypes can result in mistaken beliefs about others, according to Baron.

Consider the misunderstandings over punctuality that crop up between Mexican and U.S. businesspeople. Lee says that north of the border, Mexicans get

stereotyped as “the mañana people” because of their tendency to show up for meetings considerably after prearranged times and to miss deadlines for completing assigned tasks. U.S. officials may see this trait as unforgivable deal breaking, whereas their Mexican counterparts—who do not dispute their own tardiness—deride Americans as “robots” who rigidly reach conclusions by specified dates before gathering all relevant data and fully grasping the issues.

Businesspeople from each culture perceptively categorize the behavior of those in the other group but misunderstand the cultural roots of their different time perspectives, Lee says.

Such subtleties of stereotyping have gone largely unexplored, remarks David C. Funder, a psychologist at the University of California, Riverside. Most research of the past 25 years has tried to catalog the ways in which expectations about social categories distort a person’s judgment, usually by placing the individual in laboratory situations intended to elicit racial or sexual stereotypes.

This approach neglects to ask whether people in a wide array of real-life situations incorporate accurate information into their stereotypes, Funder holds.

“We desperately need to know which of the judgments we make of each other, and of ourselves, are right, which are wrong, and when,” Funder contends.

Some researchers suspect that even if stereotypes draw on genuine group differences, they routinely get exaggerated as people selectively seek evidence that confirms their biases toward others or makes convenient scapegoats of them. Accumulating evidence suggests otherwise, according to McCauley.

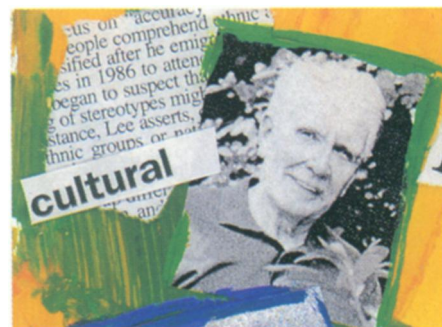
In one study, directed by McCauley, five groups of white adults—consisting of high school and college students, graduate students in social work, members of a church choir, and members of a labor union—estimated the percentage of black U.S. citizens and all U.S. citizens matching each of seven characteristics. These included having finished high school, living in a family receiving welfare, living in a family headed by a woman, and having been unemployed in the previous month.

Most of the volunteers’ estimates coincided closely with U.S. Census figures, McCauley states. The few areas in which participants disagreed with government tallies involved underestimates of actual differences between blacks and the entire population.

Members of ethnic minority groups, on the other hand, may pay particular attention to differences between themselves and others in order to bolster a positive sense of their social identity, proposes psychologist Carey S. Ryan of

the University of Pittsburgh.

In a study of black and white students at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Ryan found that blacks reported a stronger tendency to note certain stereotypical attributes in themselves (such as “dance well,” “strong emotional bonds to family,” and “financial support from athletic scholarships”) and other attributes in whites (such as “high SAT math scores,” “at least one parent has a college degree,” and “spends money frivolously”).



However, black students were more adept than their white counterparts at gauging the prevalence, as reported by the students, of these features in both groups—but particularly in whites. White students judged their own traits more accurately than those of black students.

These results support the theory that members of ethnic minority groups have a greater stake in understanding a more powerful majority population than majority members have in understanding minority groups, Ryan argues.

Exaggerations of stereotypical characteristics may arise most commonly when one group perceives another as an enemy, McCauley suggests. For instance, many U.S. citizens held stereotypical caricatures of the Japanese during World War II and vice versa. These highly charged assumptions have since eased on both sides, although negative stereotypes can still arise during conflicts over issues of national importance, such as trade practices.

Stereotypes exert an insidious effect in the schools, another influential line of research suggests. Children perform much better on achievement and IQ tests if their teachers have positive expectations about their intellectual ability, whereas intellectual decline occurs for kids held in low regard by instructors, these studies find. Robert Rosenthal of Harvard University, who first described this phenomenon in 1968, refers to it as the Pygmalion effect.

However, evidence of Pygmalion’s classroom shenanigans comes mainly from studies in which teachers were fed information about students whom they had not yet met, notes Jussim. Participating teachers typically have no opportunity to interact with students or observe

their achievement over an extended period, he adds.

In the real world of elementary education, however, teachers exhibit a good deal of sensitivity to which of their students do and don’t have the right academic stuff, according to a project conducted by Jussim and Jacquelynne Eccles of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Their investigation consisted of nearly 100 mathematics teachers and 2,600 of their students in the Michigan public schools. At the end of the first month of sixth grade, teachers rated each of their students’ performance, talent, and effort at math; students also rated themselves on these attributes. Final grades in fifth-grade math classes offered an objective measure of each student’s performance; scores on standardized math achievement tests completed in late fifth or early sixth grade served as a measure of talent.

Teachers’ perceptions of their students closely matched the students’ self-reported motivation and their actual performance, Jussim and Eccles contend. No evidence emerged for teacher bias against black students, girls, or students from poor families.

When teachers evaluated students from one group more favorably than those from another group, their ratings usually reflected actual disparities in math ability and effort, the researchers assert. For instance, teachers perceived girls as performing slightly better than boys, and girls indeed had obtained somewhat better fifth-grade math marks than boys had.

In one exception to this overall trend, teachers felt that girls tried harder than boys to do well at math, although the self-assessments showed no such disparity. This may have stemmed from the fact that girls tend to adopt a more cooperative and pleasant attitude in class, two traits that teachers prefer in their students, Jussim and Eccles propose.

Stereotypes that teachers held about particular groups of students probably assumed less importance as they became familiar with individuals from those groups during the first month of the school year, the researchers theorize.

“Social problems associated with gender, social class, and race undoubtedly exist and are terribly important,” Jussim remarks. “But the role of individuals’ stereotypes in creating those problems is less clear.”

A sharper picture of how stereotypes can go awry will emerge only if researchers strive to understand the advantages they confer in the social world, argues Lee.

“A concern for stereotype accuracy would also have the beneficial effect of coaxing social psychologists out of their ivory tower laboratories and into the field, where real people perceive and interact with other individuals and groups,” Lee holds. □