Learning outcome: Explain the formation of stereotypes and their effects on behaviour

**Command term ‘Explain’**, - Give a detailed account including reasons or causes.

What is a stereotype?

Do people ever stereotype you?

List three stereotypes that you think are prevalent in your society.

Follow the link to find out to what extent you hold stereotypical attitudes.

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

Watch the following clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMD81M_W0b4>

Write down your own ideas about how stereotypes are formed.

Definitions.

A **stereotype** is a social perception of an individual based on group membership or physical attributes. It is a generalization that is made about a group and attributed to all group members. It can be positive or negative.

Stereotyping is a form of **social categorization**. It affects the behavior of those who hold the stereotype, and those who are labelled by a stereotype.

The formation of stereotypes

There are many different theories of stereotype formation. We will focus on social –cognitive theories, specifically **schema theory** and **illusory correlation**. We will also look at **social identity theory**.

Social-cognitive theories

**Schema theory**

Our social world is very complex and presents us with too much information. Since our capacity to process information is limited there is a need to simplify our social world. One of the ways in which we avoid information overload is social categorization. The categories used in social categorization are stereotypes. In addition, these stereotypes are **schemas**. According to Lipmann schemas are “ simplified mental images which act as templates to help interpret the social world”. Schemas are energy saving devices, which are automatically activated, they are resistant to change and they affect behavior.

Cohen (1981)

Aim: This study looked at the effect of stereotypes on memory.

Method: Participants were presented with a video showing a woman having dinner with her husband. Half the participants were told that the woman was a waitress and the rest that she was a librarian.

Findings: At a later memory test, participants showed better recall for stereotype consistent information based on **schemas**. Those who thought she was a waitress remembered her drinking beer. Participants who thought she was a librarian were more likely to remember that she was wearing glasses and was listening to classical music.

Like the studies on the effects of schemas, Cohen’s study shows that we are more likely to notice and subsequently remember information which is consistent with our stereotypes. This is called **confirmation bias**. Generally, this means that people tend to overlook information that contradicts what they already believe. In a social context, they pay attention to behaviours that confirm what they believe about a group and ignore those behaviours contrary to their beliefs.

**Illusory correlation**

Several proponents of cognitive approaches to stereotypes have tried to identify the specific cognitive processes that underlie their formation.

Negative stereotypes of minority groups may be based on **illusory correlation.** This is the phenomenon whereby observers conclude that two factors are associated despite the lack of real association between them. People form a false association between group membership and specific behaviours. This is an example of a “cognitive bias”, that is, a person’s tendency to make errors in judgment based on cognitive factors. Attribution errors are also examples of cognitive bias.

Hamilton and Gifford (1976)

Aim: To demonstrate the illusory correlation.

Method: Participants were asked to read descriptions made about two made up groups (Group A and Group B). The descriptions were based on a number of positive and negative behaviours. Group A (the majority group) had twice as many members than Group B (the minority group).

In the descriptions, Group A members performed 18 positve and 8 negative behaviours. Group B members performed 9 positive and 4 negative behaviours. So, for both groups, twice as much of the information involved positive, rather than negative, behaviours. Clearly, there was no correlation between group membership and the types of behaviours exhibited by the groups.

Findings: Participants did seem to have perceived an illusory correlation. More of the undesirable behaviours were attributed to the minority Group B, than the majority Group A.

Hamilton and Gifford’s explanation of their findings is based on the idea that distinctive information draws attention. Group B members and negative behaviours are both numerically fewer and therefore more distinctive than Group A members and negative behaviours. The combination of Group B members performing negative behaviours, therefore stands out more than the combination of Group A members performing such behaviours. This causes the **illusory correlation.**

Members of minority groups are numerically distinctive. So are the negative behaviours (e.g. criminal acts) often attributed to them.

**Social identity theory**

According to SIT, Stereotype formation is based on the **category accentuation effect** and **positive distinctiveness**. Category accentuation, an outcome of **social categorization**, refers to the exaggeration of within-group similarities and between-group differences. Positive distinctiveness refers to the motivation to show the superiority of one’s in-group over some out-group.

Tajfel et al (1971) can be used as evidence as positive distinctiveness is shown

Sherif et al (1961) can be used as intergroup competition

Effects of stereotypes on behaviour

***Stereotype threat*** occurs when one is in a situation where there is a threat of being judged or treated stereotypically, or a fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm the stereotype.

Steele and Aronson (1995) Stereotype threat

Aim: Can you inadvertently confirm the stereotype held against you when performing a task under stereotype threat?

Method: Gave participants a 30 min verbal multiple choice test.

One group told *it is a laboratory task to study how certain problems are solved.* The other group was told *it is a genuine test of their verbal abilities*.

Findings: African Americans performed lower compared to European Americans when told it was a genuine test of verbal abilities. However when told it was a lab expt the results for each group was the same.

Conclusion: If stereotypes are believed they can lower the performance of a group.

According to Steele (1997), stereotype threat turns on ***Spotlight anxiety,*** which causes emotional distress that undermines performance.

Spencer et al (1977) Stereotype threat

Aim: Does stereotype threat lead to intellectual under performance?

Method: A difficult Maths test was given to men and women who were good at Maths.

Findings: Women who were equally well qualified as men, significantly underperformed compared to them in Maths tasks. They performed equally well in literature skills.

Conclusion: Women are stereotype threatened in Maths and therefore under-perform. There is no stereotype for literature and they do equally well. This threat can limit educational prospects.

Questions:

1. Find two examples of stereotypes in the media (newspapers, magazines, books, packaging, products, posters, films). Bring the images to the next lesson and explain why the image represents a stereotype and why you think this image persists.
2. In 1994, a controversial book, The Bell Curve, was published, discussing the IQ’s of different ethnic groups. One of the stereotypes it perpetuated was that all Asians are very intelligent. In spite of this being a rather “positive” stereotype, how could this also be an example of stereotype threat? What are the negative effects of such a stereotype?
3. Why is research in stereotyping hard to carry out?