



## How subtyping shapes perception: Predictable exceptions to the rule reduce attention to stereotype-associated dimensions

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### ABSTRACT

Two experiments examined the relation between stereotype disconfirmation and attentional processes. Using an instrumental learning-paradigm, we successfully simulated stereotype acquisition and the subsequent subtyping of disconfirming exemplars. While replicating established markers of subtyping, the present research demonstrates a hitherto neglected cognitive consequence of subtyping: Predictable stereotype disconfirmation increased attention to features that facilitated discriminating between confirming and disconfirming exemplars, and reduced attention to features associated with the original stereotype. These effects were not observed when stereotype disconfirmation was not easily predictable and, hence, subtyping proved difficult. The discussion focuses on implications for research on subtyping and stereotype change.

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As other concepts in memory, social stereotypes play an important role in helping humans to navigate through their social environment. To fulfill this function, they must be accurate to some degree (Judd & Park, 1993). Yet, negative stereotypes about social groups tend to persist even if they are fairly inaccurate. One important reason for the perseverance of inaccurate negative stereotypes presumably is the limited contact between people who hold stereotypes and the members of stereotyped groups (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003). External factors, such as spatial or cultural segregation of groups, as well as internal factors such as negative expectancies and resulting avoidance behavior (Fazio, Eiser, & Shook, 2004; Towles-Schwen & Fazio, 2003) contribute to limited contact, and prevent the experience of stereotype disconfirmation.

But even with sufficient contact, a correction of the stereotype may not ensue. One reason why stereotypes persist in the face of extended inter-group contact is the process of subtyping (Brewer, Dull, & Lui, 1981; Taylor, 1981). In its course, individuals who disconfirm the stereotype are grouped into a new subcategory that is mentally segregated from the rest of the group, thereby leaving the stereotype intact. For

example, encountering a lawyer who is very introverted may lead people to conclude that she is a very atypical lawyer, and therefore not representative for the group as a whole. The introvert lawyer may then be put in a new subordinate category (Kunda & Oleson, 1995). Because disconfirming exemplars are excluded from the superordinate category, subtyping maintains or even reduces the perceived variability of the stereotyped group (e.g., Maurer, Park, & Rothbart, 1995). Moreover, it maintains or makes the average of the stereotype more extreme (e.g., Hewstone, Macrae, Griffiths, Milne, & Brown, 1994).

Stereotype-disconfirmation is more likely to increase the perceived variability of the category and change its central tendency if there is little opportunity for subtyping. Research has established a number of preconditions of subtyping (Richards & Hewstone, 2001). For instance, subtyping is more likely to occur when the disconfirming exemplars deviate from the stereotype in an extreme (e.g., Kunda & Oleson, 1997) or atypical (e.g., Weber & Crocker, 1983) manner. For example, subtyping of a lawyer would be more likely if he was extremely vs. moderately introverted. Moreover, subtyping is more likely to occur if the disconfirming exemplars have some salient discriminative attributes (e.g., Kunda & Oleson, 1995). For example, an introverted lawyer would be more likely to be subtyped if, besides being introverted, he would have a particular style of clothing that distinguishes him from typical lawyers. Finally, research

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indicates that subtyping is more likely to occur if the social perceiver has relatively high cognitive capacity (e.g., *Zyerbyt, Coull, & Rocher, 1999*).<sup>1</sup>

Why do people engage in subtyping? As *Richards and Hewstone (2001)* argue, “much of the literature on subtyping either explicitly or implicitly suggests that perceivers are motivated to maintain rather than to change their stereotypes in the face of disconfirming information” (p. 56). The specific motives for this conservatism, however, may be quite diverse. For example, members of advantaged groups may be motivated to maintain negative stereotypes about stigmatized minorities “. . . because they use the stereotypes to justify their social order, their sense of superiority to others, or their own behavior” (*Kunda & Oleson, 1995, p. 566*). In addition to social motives of this kind, other motives may also be regarded as causes of fencing off stereotype-disconfirming observations. Revising one’s well established and simple stereotypes may collide with a need for simplicity and cognitive closure (*Kruglanski & Freund, 1983*), the need to think and behave consistently (*Festinger, 1957*), or the need to maintain positive self-views, such as being an unbiased person (*Olson & Fazio, 2004*).

But even without a direct and specific motivation to maintain the stereotype, the operation of more general mechanisms may prevent change. For example, being confronted with a person who disconfirms stereotypes may evoke surprise, which then triggers a search for specific reasons why this particular person deviates from the stereotype (*Kunda & Oleson, 1995*). Finding such person-specific reasons, however, then may protect the general stereotype from change. For example, finding that the introverted lawyer you just met is working full time for a human rights group may serve as a sufficient explanation for why he is different. At the same time, human rights activists may be perceived so different from typical lawyers that the particular lawyer is no longer seen as representative of the group of lawyers as a whole. Hence, in this case, the desire to explain unexpected findings triggers processes that may result in stereotype preservation. Also, subtyping may be an indirect consequence of action-control in general (e.g., *Hommel, Müssele, Aschersleben, & Prinz, 2001*). Social interactions are more or less rewarding not only depending on the interaction partners per se, but also depending on the specific behaviors performed during the interaction with those partners. Stereotypes may provide their holders with scripts, specifying how to interact with members of stereotyped groups. If single members, however, deviate predictably from the stereotype in an action relevant manner, cognitively separating them from the rest is a functional means for optimizing behavior and the ensuing outcomes. In line with this notion, *Shepard (1987)* proposed that objects with similar consequences are grouped together in memory. Consequently, disconfirming exemplars may be subtyped, because they yield different outcomes than the average category member.

While previous research has primarily studied the consequences of subtyping for the structure and stability of an existing stereotype, the present research investigates how subtyping may change people’s attention to and usage of perceptual dimensions related to the stereotype and subtype. Typically, social stereotypes are based on perceivable features of individuals, which signify a

group membership. For example, basic social categories such as gender, ethnic origin, and age are relatively clearly discriminable based on perceptual dimensions such as skin tone, skin structure or body shape. The same is true for other social categories, albeit the relation between perceptual features and group membership may be fuzzier. Examples are dress codes associated with certain professions, or verbal accents that may correlate with socioeconomic status. Similarly, specific perceivable features typically are related to subtypes. For example, Black businessmen sometimes have been considered as representing a subtype of the group of Blacks in general (e.g., *Kunda & Oleson, 1995*). In this case, subtype membership can be inferred from features relating to the ethnic descent, and features relating to the profession, such as wearing a business suit. It is the latter features that particularly help distinguishing subtypes from regular types.

As diverse as the mechanisms underlying subtyping may be, they imply similar changes in attention. According to the mechanism based on action-control, actors aim to discriminate between subtypes and regular types because they require different behaviors if one is to achieve favorable (or not unfavorable) outcomes. People should actively search for (and choose) the appropriate behaviors for a rewarding social interaction with the different targets. Consequently, attention towards those features that help distinguishing subtypes from regular types should be generally increased. Also, as a consequence of this need to match behavior to the target, attention to the major stereotype-related dimension should be reduced because it alone is not sufficient for action control. According to the mechanism based on expectancy-violation induced surprise (*Kunda & Oleson, 1995*), people are motivated to explain the violation, thereby potentially avoiding future surprises. To achieve this goal, focusing on the specific features that discriminate subtypes from regular types is a functional strategy. Similar to these non-directional motives, motives directed at protecting the stereotype from change may increase people’s attention to and usage of features that help identifying subtypes. If motives such as a need to justify social hierarchies, a need to view oneself as being consistent or acting according to norms of fairness fuel subtyping, it is essential for stereotype holders to recognize exemplars belonging to the subtyped category in an efficient way. Also, atypical features of the subtyped exemplars should be processed with priority, because they provide the justification for dismissing these exemplars as evidence against the validity of the stereotype.

In essence, although subtyping can be driven by different motives and cognitive mechanisms, it may uniformly shape attention to and usage of perceptual dimensions related to the stereotype and subtype. In other words, subtyping produces a change in the mental representation of the original category. In particular, we hypothesize that subtyping increases attention to certain perceptual dimensions, those that facilitate discriminating between the subtype and the superordinate category, such as dress in the case of the Black businessman subtype. Likewise, we hypothesize that subtyping decreases attention to perceptual dimensions that were originally thought to be predictive of the superordinate category, such as skin tone in the case of racial stereotypes. To our knowledge such attentional changes as a consequence of subtyping have not been demonstrated. Research on subtyping has emphasized that the content and valence of the original stereotype remain intact, despite the experience of disconfirming instances. The present research does not question the validity or significance of these effects. However, the novel possibility we wish to consider is that subtyping does produce changes in the attention given to the dimensions of relevance. In this way, subtyping may lead to changes in the mental representation defining the original category.

<sup>1</sup> Besides subtyping, which is the focus of the present work, stereotype-disconfirmation can also trigger a process called subgrouping. In this case stereotype-disconfirmation is processed in a way that promotes the formation of subgroups, and can increase the perceived variability of the category and change its central tendency if it. Unlike subtyping, subgrouping is not limited to individuals who disconfirm the stereotype, and the subgroups are not excluded from the original category. Instead, “subgroups may as likely be formed for clusters of individuals who are perfectly consistent with the group stereotype but who manifest the stereotype in some unique and different way” (*Maurer et al., 1995:p. 813*). Although superficially similar to subtyping, subgrouping occurs under different conditions and has quite different cognitive consequences (for a review, see *Richards & Hewstone, 2001*).

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