Hesitant to label, yet quick to judge: How cultural mindsets affect the accessibility of stereotypic knowledge when concepts of the elderly are primed

Geetanjali Saluja [a,*], Rashmi Adaval [b], Robert S. Wyer Jr. [b]

[a] Marketing Discipline Group, University of Technology Sydney, Australia
[b] University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

ABSTRACT

The processing strategies that are activated by cultural mindsets can influence the type of stereotypic knowledge that people draw upon when they encounter a member of a social category. Five experiments show that participants with a collectivist mindset are less likely to use trait descriptions and respond more slowly to traits when they are primed with a concept of the elderly than when they are not. However, they are more likely to use trait-related behaviors and respond more quickly to behaviors in the former condition. These differences suggest that cultural mindsets do not simply affect the likelihood of applying stereotypes. In addition, they influence the type of stereotypic knowledge that comes to mind when people encounter a member of a stereotyped group. This has important implications for how elderly employees are judged and treated in an organizational setting.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Numerous newspaper articles have highlighted the economic implications of an aging workforce for different countries around the world. In China, where nearly 10% of the population is over the age of 65, this will pose challenges both socially and economically in the years to come. When other economies (e.g., the United States) have faced problems caused by an aging workforce, they have encouraged people to retire later and to continue working. However, despite these changes, perceptions of the elderly in the workplace have not always been positive suggesting that even if they continue to work reactions to them within an organizational setting might not be that favorable.

Much of the evidence that bears on how the elderly are perceived comes from research on social stereotyping. Brewer and Lui (1989) suggest that age-based social categorizations are quick and often automatic. Once the person has been categorized, stereotype-related knowledge is spontaneously activated. However, the stereotypes that people hold about the elderly are not consistent. Several sub-groups of elderly people have been identified (e.g., a grandparent, recluse, shrew/curmudgeon, etc.), each of

which can possess either positive or negative traits or in some cases a mix of the two (Brewer, Dull, & Lui, 1981; Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994; Schmidt & Boland, 1986). Perceptions of the elderly in the workplace are particularly relevant to the concerns of this article. Cuddy and Fiske (2002; Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005) suggest that in this context, the elderly are perceived to be low in competence and high in warmth. Interestingly, in their studies, attempts to change people's perceptions of the competence of elderly workers had no effect, whereas perceptions of warmth were relatively malleable (Cuddy et al., 2005). Thus, when elderly persons were seen as less competent, they were described as warmer. However, judgments of competence did not change even when the elderly performed well. The observation that perceptions of competence remain low and stable whereas perceptions of warmth are adjusted accordingly suggests that in the workplace, the elderly are likely to be disparaged independently of their job performance (Finkelstein, Burke, & Raju, 1995).

Although the impact of stereotypes is pervasive, little research has examined individual or cultural differences in the *use* of stereotypic knowledge (traits or behaviors). The amount and type of knowledge that people acquire about a social category undoubtedly depends on their exposure to category members and the role of these members in their society. Consequently, a social category is likely to be perceived differently across cultures (Arnhoff, Leon, & Lorge, 1964; Chan et al., 2012; Giles et al., 2000; Löckenhoff

* Corresponding author at: University of Technology Sydney, UTS Business School, Ultimo NSW 2007, Australia.
E-mail address: Geetanjali.Saluja@uts.edu.au (G. Saluja).

et al., 2009). For example, attitudes towards the elderly are likely to be particularly favorable and respectful in Asian cultures. Thus, people acquire different subsets of concepts and knowledge about a category that are specific to the culture with which they identify and the activation of these concepts in any given situation might affect their reactions to a member of the category. However, cultural differences could exist not only in the content of a stereotype (e.g., the traits and prototypic behaviors) but also in the processing of this content (i.e., what aspect of stereotypic knowledge people draw upon – i.e., do they retrieve traits or behaviors).

Separating the effects of stereotype content from the effects of processing is inherently difficult. For example, if people differ in their views of the elderly across cultures, any differences in judgments could easily be attributed either to differences in the knowledge they have available about the elderly or to the type of information they draw upon. In the present research, we drew upon Oyserman's (2011; Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber, & Chen, 2009) observation that individuals within a culture can acquire different processing strategies, or *cultural mindsets* that can be applied to new situations when situational factors activate these mindsets. We examined how activating different culture-related mindsets leads individuals to access and use different subsets of stereotype related knowledge (especially, traits vs. behaviors) in processing information about the elderly and the consequent effects of this difference on judgments. The manipulation of mindset within a culture allowed us to minimize the effects of content differences in stereotype knowledge on judgments and allowed us to uncover the effects of using different types of features of the stereotype.

1.1. Stereotype content and structure

Early conceptualizations assumed that the use of stereotypes had motivational roots (Bettelheim & Janowitz, 1950; Blanchard, Lilly, & Vaughn, 1991; Brown, 1965; Christie, 1991; Fiske & Von Hendy, 1992). However, more recent theories (Bodenhausen, Kang, & Peery, 2012; Bodenhausen & Richeson, 2010; Hamilton & Sherman, 1994; Lambert & Wyer, 1990; Sherman, Sherman, Percy, & Soderberg, 2013) have focused on the cognitive processes that underlie their application. According to these conceptions, a stereotype is typically represented in memory by a central concept denoting its referent along with trait concepts that are associated with it. When a member of the stereotyped group is encountered, this representation is activated and used as a heuristic basis for inferring the attributes of the individual. Devine (1989), for instance, found that subliminally exposing participants to the category "African American" led them to judge a target person in stereotype-related terms (e.g., as "hostile"). She speculated that people learn stereotypic features in the course of early childhood socialization and that these features, once learned, can spring to mind unintentionally when an exemplar of the stereotype is encountered.

Research on stereotyping typically assumes that these representations are composed of *traits*. Thus, people who are exposed to a member of a stereotyped group typically extract trait information and use it as a basis for making judgments (Bargh, 1997; Devine, 1989). The extent to which trait-based stereotypes are used might vary across groups of individuals (Lambert et al., 2003; Lepore & Brown, 1997; see also Locke, Smith, Erez, Chah, & Shaffer, 1994; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997). However, the dominant assumption in the stereotyping literature has been that if trait-based information is available, it will be used.

Our work, however, assumes that the features of a stereotype can consist of not only traits, which presumably characterize a person in general, but also behaviors that are situation or context specific (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Milne, 1995). When the category is activated, a subset of features

associated with it might be retrieved (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). This subset could comprise trait information, behaviors, descriptive concepts, etc. Thus, a stereotype may be represented in memory as an associative network consisting of a central concept denoting the stereotyped group or category along with a set of features that have become associatively linked to the concept through learning (see Srull & Wyer, 1989, for a more formal conceptualization of this). When people encounter a person or group that exemplifies the central concept of such a representation, the representation is activated and its features are used as a basis for judgment. We further raise the possibility that people differ in the *type* of stereotypic knowledge that they access when they encounter a member of a stereotyped group. That is, they might use *either* traits *or* behaviors depending on the cultural mindset that is primed.

In accounting for this possibility, we make two assumptions. First, we assume that the features of a stereotype can consist of not only traits, which presumably characterize a person in general, but also behaviors that are situation or context specific. Second, these traits and behaviors can vary in their accessibility, depending on both the frequency with which they have been applied to group members in the past and the information processing strategies that are salient at the point of judgment. Consequently, the type of stereotype-based knowledge that is activated upon exposure to a stereotyped group or individual can vary for reasons we elaborate presently.

In the next section, we first discuss cultural differences in the disposition to process information and examine how this might play a role in the type of knowledge that is brought to bear on judgments and behavior. We then apply this to understand how stereotypes of the elderly might be operated on and how traits and behaviors that are likely to compose these stereotypes are used.

1.2. Cultural differences in the disposition to process information

Of the many differences between societies that have been identified (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 2009), the most extensively investigated has been that of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). *Individualism* is characterized by a disposition to think of oneself independently of others, whereas *collectivism* is characterized by a tendency to think of oneself as part of a group or collective. This difference, which is similar to the difference between independent and interdependent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), is particularly likely to distinguish Western and East Asian cultures, respectively. Such a difference in self-perceptions, which is socially learned, could give rise to a more general difference in the disposition to think of both one's own and others' behaviors as either situationally independent or in relation to the social context in which they occur (Chiu & Hong, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995).

More recently, Oyserman (2011; Oyserman & Sorensen, 2009) and her colleagues have suggested that culture should be thought of as a multi-dimensional construct that arises out of attempts to socialize individuals for the performance of various tasks. This leads individuals to acquire a variety of overlapping and contradictory processes and procedures that can be cued by features of the situation at hand. Thus, people are socialized to be unique and independent in some contexts (e.g., to foster innovation) but also to be interconnected in other contexts (e.g., to foster family and group relations). Consequently, each individual has the ability to act in ways that seem not only independent but also interdependent. Situational cues that make people think of themselves as independent or separate from the group can activate an *individualist mindset* whereas thinking of oneself as part of a group or interdependent might activate a *collectivist mindset*. These mindsets,