

The stereotype rebound effect: Universal or culturally bounded process? ☆

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Abstract

Stereotype rebound occurs when people experience an increase in stereotype use following attempts to suppress them. Two studies were conducted to examine cultural variability in the rebound effect. We hypothesized that, due to their experience suppressing unwanted thoughts, people from collectivist cultures would be less likely to experience the rebound effect than would people from individualist cultures. In both studies, U.S. and Chinese participants wrote two stories about gay men that were coded for stereotype use. Participants in the suppression condition were instructed to not to use stereotypes in their first story. As predicted, in both studies, U.S. participants in the suppression condition showed an increase in stereotype use in the second story, but Chinese participants did not. Potential explanations for cultural differences in the stereotype rebound effect are discussed.

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Introduction

Stereotypes frequently affect people's judgments and behaviors (e.g., Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985; Fiske, 1998). When individuals suspect that they are being influenced by stereotypes, they often attempt to suppress those beliefs because of concerns appearing biased (Devine, 1989; Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Monteith, 1993). However, stereotype suppression is a difficult, resource-intensive process that is easily disrupted and may lead to an unintended "rebound" of increased stereotype use (Macrae,

Bodenhausen, & Milne, 1998; Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994; Monteith, Spicer, & Tooman, 1998; Wegner & Erber, 1992; for a review, see Monteith, Sherman, & Devine, 1998).

To date, research on the stereotype rebound effect has been conducted exclusively with U.S. and European participants. However, a considerable amount of research has demonstrated that cultural values, practices, and modes of thinking influence many important social psychological phenomena (for reviews, see Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that culture may moderate the stereotype rebound effect. Collectivist cultures place a strong emphasis on inhibiting personal beliefs and desires in order to maintain group harmony (Heine, 2001; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Because individuals from these cultures have more experience suppressing unwanted cognitions, they may not be as vulnerable to the stereotype rebound effect as are people from individualist cultures, who are more accustomed to freely expressing their views.

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In this article, we present the first research to investigate cultural differences in the stereotype rebound effect. We begin by reviewing previous research on stereotype suppression and discussing possible cultural influences on related psychological processes. We then report two studies showing differences in the stereotype rebound effect between U.S. and Chinese participants. Finally, we discuss the implications of those findings for understanding cultural influences on stereotype use.

Stereotype suppression and rebound

Although stereotypes can be automatically activated (for reviews, see Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998; Fiske, 1998), individuals who are sufficiently motivated can inhibit stereotype-relevant thoughts through effortful processes. Such suppression seems to be effective in the short-term; however, it is hampered when individuals have to dedicate cognitive resources to other tasks. When individuals stop consciously trying to suppress stereotypes, they often experience a rebound of stereotypical thoughts, leading them to be more strongly influenced by stereotypes than they were prior to suppression attempts (Macrae, Bodenhausen, et al., 1994; Macrae et al., 1998; Monteith, Sherman, et al., 1998; Monteith, Spicer, et al., 1998; Wegner & Erber, 1992). For example, Macrae and his colleagues (1994a, Study 1) found that participants who initially were instructed to suppress stereotypes about a “skinhead” later wrote more stereotypical stories than did participants who never were instructed to inhibit their stereotypes.

According to Wegner’s (1994) theory of ironic processes in mental control, the rebound effect occurs because two cognitive processes must function simultaneously for suppression to occur. An automatic monitoring process searches for unwanted thoughts, and a controlled operating process replaces located thoughts with distracters. When cognitive resources are diverted from stereotype suppression, the monitoring process continues to identify unwanted thoughts, but the operating process does not have the resources to generate distracters. As a result, stereotypes become more accessible and influential than they were before suppression, leading to increased stereotyping.

Although the stereotype rebound effect has been demonstrated using different contexts and target groups, recent research indicates that it may not be inevitable. For example, individuals with low-prejudice levels may have smaller rebound effects than do high-prejudice individuals (Monteith, Spicer, et al., 1998). This pattern may reflect differences in suppression experience. Whereas low-prejudice individuals are likely to attempt suppression whenever they realize the possibility of being biased, high-prejudice individuals may attempt suppression only when motivated by situational or external pressures (Devine, 1989; Monteith, Sherman, et al., 1998; Monteith, Spicer, et al., 1998). Due to this practice, low-prejudice individu-

als may develop more efficient operating processes that can maintain stereotype suppression under higher cognitive loads (cf., Wegner, 1994). Low-prejudice individuals also may experience less rebound because they have weaker stereotypical associations (Lepore & Brown, 1997) and/or more non-stereotypical cognitions available to replace stereotypical thoughts (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987).

The influence of culture

An important, although to date unstudied, variable that may influence stereotype use and rebound involves the cultural background of the perceiver. In individualist cultures, which include Western countries such as the U.S., the self is constructed largely on the basis of internal attributes, such as traits and values. Because the self is seen as independent, personal expression and autonomy are highly emphasized. In contrast, in collectivist cultures, including East Asian countries such as China, group harmony and collective goals are valued more than personal beliefs and desires (Fiske et al., 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These cultural orientations have an important influence on cognition, motivation, and emotion (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994; Nisbett et al., 2001). For example, collectivists are less likely than individualists to experience the fundamental attribution error (Choi & Nisbett, 1998); they also are more accurate at detecting covariation between objects and contexts (Choi, Dalal, & Kim-Prieto, 2003) and pay more attention to other people’s emotions (Chua, Leu, & Nisbett, 2005).

Because collectivist cultures strongly emphasize the importance of group harmony, people in those cultures are likely to have a great deal of experience suppressing beliefs and desires that conflict with those of others (Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996). This experience may increase their ability to regulate unwanted thoughts (Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999), shifting it from a resource-intensive controlled process to a less effortful, potentially automatic process (Bargh, 1997; cf., Wegner, 1994). Applying this finding to stereotype suppression, collectivists may be able to inhibit stereotypes under greater cognitive loads or for longer periods of time. As a result, collectivists may be less likely to experience the stereotype rebound effect compared to individualists, who have less suppression experience.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted two studies comparing stereotype suppression and rebound across participants from the U.S. and mainland China. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that people in China are lower in individualism and higher in collectivism than are people in the U.S. (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). Using Macrae et al.’s (1994) paradigm, participants wrote two stories about targets from a stereotyped group. Half of participants received suppression instructions for their first

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