Egalitarian goals trigger stereotype inhibition: A proactive form of stereotype control ☆

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ABSTRACT

Stereotype activation is often described as beyond control, unable to be prevented by willing it or engaging the self-regulatory system. Four experiments illustrate that this initial stage of the stereotyping process is controllable. Stereotypes are shown to be implicitly inhibited as part of a goal shielding process. In each experiment, egalitarian goals are triggered through a task in which participants contemplate a past failure at being egalitarian to African American men. This is followed in each experiment by a task that measures stereotype activation/inhibition using reaction times to words (either control words or stereotype-relevant words) that follow the presentation of either faces of Black or White men. The first two experiments examine participants with egalitarian goals versus those with a control goal, whereas the last two experiments examine people with egalitarian goals versus those whose egalitarian strivings have been satisfied (by contemplating success at being egalitarian). Only participants with egalitarian goals exhibit stereotype inhibition, and this occurs despite the fact that they lack awareness of the inhibition and lack the conscious intent to inhibit stereotypes at the time the response is made.

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Introduction

Ironically, it is often the case that the conscious effort associated with goal pursuit and action control undermines achievement. The very act of trying is one's undoing. For example, thinking hard about losing weight can make weight-loss more difficult (one is focused more on food, especially fattening foods, than when not dieting at all). The current research illustrates how lack of consciousness in a goal pursuit can help us attain what we want. This is illustrated in the domain of controlling oneself from stereotyping or pursuing egalitarian goals.

Consciously trying to "not stereotype" may succeed, but can be quashed by a number of problems associated with *how* the goal is pursued. One may have a bad strategy for pursuing the goal (such as waiting until one recognizes oneself as biased before taking action; a bad strategy because such recognition rarely occurs). One may have a good strategy that is implemented poorly (detecting one's stereotypes and attempting to take them into account, but not adequately weighting their influence). One may have a strategy that increases stereotyping as an ironic and undesired effect of processes that accompany the steps one takes when pursuing the goal (such as suppressing a stereotype only to see it return more powerfully later in time; e.g., Wegner, 1994).

A nonconscious goal to not stereotype can yield success free of these pitfalls of conscious control. Our experiments reveal that stereotypes are

inhibited when one encounters a member of a stereotyped group. This is a *proactive* form of control because it prevents a stereotype from ever being retrieved from memory, despite perceivers having categorized the person to a social group. It occurs prior to awareness of either the goal or stereotype activation. It requires no effortful expenditure of mental resources (cf., Fiske, 1989), nor for one to be aware of the bias, nor for one to consciously try to prevent bias from having influence ("correcting" for the stereotype).

Stereotyping others is goal-driven

We begin with two statements about stereotyping that are likely intuitively obvious, and clear to experts and nonexperts alike. First, a stereotype is knowledge that exists in the mind of an individual that is associated with a group of people, knowledge that is learned from, and shared with, others in the culture. Second, stereotyping is a process that unfolds in phases (e.g., Kunda & Spencer, 2003): In an initial phase, the stereotype is pulled from memory due to its association with a category (e.g., old, fat, Black, Jew, woman) that has recently been used to identify a person. In the next phase, this "perceptually ready" stereotype is used to help one understand others and plan behavior toward those others. These two assertions lead to perhaps less obvious third and fourth statements. The third is that, regarding when stereotypes are pulled from memory, it is far more common and silent (we rarely recognize this has happened) than people know (e.g., Devine, 1989). The fourth is that *stereotypes are triggered and used for a reason; they serve a goal*. As such, they have

been likened to *tools* pulled from a "cognitive tool box" when people are encountered (e.g., Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000).

If stereotype activation is a *tool* that serves a goal, what goal does it serve? Given that stereotyping contributes to discrimination and prejudice (e.g., Allport, 1954), a natural initial answer to this question that received empirical attention was that stereotypes service goals, such as the desire to feel superior to others and have positive identity associated with one's social group (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979); the wish to attain and maintain social, physical, political, and economic power over others (e.g., Jost, 2001; Sherif, 1958; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and to protect oneself (and loved ones) from what seems alien, strange, and threatening (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). But stereotyping is found even among people who do not fear others, wish to dominate, or need to boost self-esteem (e.g., Devine, 1989).

Lippmann (1922) introduced the term *stereotype* in describing a cognitive process used by people because they have a goal of being efficient and economical with their time and mental energy when trying to make sense of (understand) the world around them. Meaning must be attained quickly and without much strain, given both the press of the external world (the speed of life, the multitude of things to process) and the limits of the human processing system.[1] From Allport's (1954) principle of least effort, up to and beyond Gilbert and Hixon's (1991) assertion that "people rely strongly on prior information to ease the burden of ongoing perception" (p. 514), stereotyping has been described as in the service of a goal to attain meaning; to know what thoughts and acts are appropriate. We shall refer to this as an *epistemic goal*.

Heider (1944) described this goal as a central pursuit, a "causal drive," that guides much of daily life. Because of its chronic and habitual pursuit, the epistemic goal comes to operate without consciousness. Moskowitz (1993) and Neuberg and Newsom (1993) illustrated that one need not consciously intend to a) categorize or understand another person, b) be efficient, or c) arrive at closure quickly. The epistemic goal is silently pursued, routinely. Stereotyping is an efficient, nonconscious process precisely because the goal it serves is not conscious to the individual.

Proactive versus reactive stereotype control

Given the efficient nature of both the stereotyping process and the goals served by this process, how can stereotyping be controlled? Until recently, control in general was seen as a conscious process, with intended responding equated with effort (Wegner & Bargh, 1998). This is one reason stereotype control has traditionally been depicted as a process whereby a) a stereotype is first triggered, b) the possibility for bias then exists, c) this possibility is detected by the person, and d) at that point a goal to prevent bias, or overturn it if it has already occurred, is pursued. In fact, until recently, stereotype activation was seen as inescapable—a necessary by-product of the categorization process (Allport, 1954; Bargh, 1999; Brewer, 1988; Devine, 1989). Such a view, by definition, precludes the possibility of stereotypes not being activated.

However, many perceiver-based and target-based factors are now known to disrupt stereotype activation. Perceiver-based factors include cognitive load (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991), holding counterstereotypic expectancies (Blair & Banaji, 1996), beliefs (Lepore & Brown, 1997), associative learning (Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000), chronic motivations (e.g., Glaser & Knowles, 2008; Moskowitz, Gollwitzer, Wasel, & Schaal, 1999; Plant & Devine, 1998), and the direction of gaze (Macrae, Hood, Milne, Rowe, & Mason, 2002). Target-based factors also prevent stereotype activation—typicality of a target's face, fame of a target, skin tone, category ambiguity (is the person clearly

a woman, Black, etc.?), and whether a target's other roles/categories are salient and used in categorization. Activation is not inevitable.

Yet, even as research has dispelled the notion of stereotype activation as inevitable, the ability to regulate this cognitive activity through the motivational system has been relatively ignored. Time and again, researchers stop short of claiming that the triggering of stereotypes can be willfully stopped and instead call for the importance of noticing implicit stereotypes so that one can then exert conscious attempts to curtail their influence. Stereotype control is still largely seen as rooted in dual process models (e.g., Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Posner & Snyder, 1975). These models describe one set of psychological processes inexorably giving rise to specific outputs, but a separate set of processes may be incompatible with those outputs and draw on conscious control to inhibit those outputs from influencing how one ultimately responds. Regarding stereotype control, a first process silently activates the stereotype. A second process, such as the recruitment of explicit goals that are incompatible with the use of stereotypes, prevents the already-activated stereotype from influencing responding.

This is a *reactive* strategy of stereotype control. Goals allow one to correct-for (e.g., Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991) or decontaminate (e.g., Wilson & Brekke, 1994) cognition from the biasing influence of *an already-activated stereotype*, overriding it with a more appropriate response ("putting the brakes on prejudice," e.g., Monteith, Ashburn-Nardo, Voils, & Czopp, 2002). A rich tradition of research has illustrated this approach to be a highly effective strategy (e.g., Devine, 1989; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Monteith, 1993; Wegner & Erber, 1992), even impacting a U.S. Supreme Court ruling regarding employer culpability for unintended workplace discrimination. Granting its impact, we argue that this conception of stereotype control is too limiting and can be extended by moving beyond dual process notions.

Control over stereotyping is not only attainable through subsequent intervention of the conscious will to overturn activated stereotypes. Control can be exerted on stereotype activation at the first step of the process. This is a *proactive* strategy of control, one focused at the level of basic social–cognitive functioning, arguing that goals disrupt the activation of stereotypes. This focus on the role of the control system distinguishes our approach from existing research on the prevention of stereotype activation described above (cognitive load, associative learning, gaze).[2]

What is often lost when discussing stereotypes is the fact that they are the product of a goal pursuit, and are, as such, willed, or wanted. Not realizing one stereotypes does not, mean one does not, or that such unnoticed stereotypes are unintentional. Indeed, explicitly wanting to not stereotype does not preclude having an unconscious goal that relies on stereotyping. Epistemic goals, for example, are compatible with stereotype activation—the goal controls stereotyping, with control here existing in the form of heightening the response tendency. Given this logic, it should also be true that control in the form of weakening the response tendency is also possible if one's goals are incompatible with stereotypes. One has the power to efficiently *not stereotype* by exercising the same self-regulatory system that at times promotes stereotyping. The cognitive process serves a goal, and whether stereotype activation occurs is thus an issue of what goal the individual is silently pursuing. We examine whether an egalitarian goal that is incompatible with stereotyping will inhibit, not activate, stereotypes. Any person can not stereotype, without even being aware of exerting control, dependent on

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[1] As proof of this efficiency, researchers have pointed to the functionality of stereotype use, such as the increased efficiency produced in one's thought when one is stereotyping (e.g., Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994; Sherman, 2001).

[2] Some of that research has focused on the question of shifting the type of category that is used to identify a person (by manipulating gaze, target ambiguity, fame, skin tone, etc.). Activating a stereotype requires first identifying a person as a member of a group, and such research reveals that shifting how a person is categorized affects how (and if) the person is stereotyped. Some of that research has focused on postcategorizing processes where stereotype activation is replaced as one's dominant reaction to the category due to new learning experiences—by forging new associations to the category or developing counterstereotypic expectancies. None of that research addresses how shifting a given individual's goals impacts the activation of stereotypes.