

How Group Stereotypes Are Changed by Changing the Roles in which Group Members Are Observed

In an article recently published in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (“Evidence for the Social Role Theory of Stereotype Content: Observations of Groups’ Roles Shape Stereotypes,” 2014, Vol. 107, 371-392), Anne Koenig and Alice Eagly applied social role theory to account for the content of a wide range of stereotypes of social groups. Their key hypothesis was that these stereotypes derive from people’s observations of the social roles in which members of the groups are overrepresented relative to their numbers in the general population. People thus infer group members’ traits from observing their typical role behaviors in everyday life, through direct experience and media exposure. Thus, even though stereotypes of groups can seem arbitrary, they reflect inferences of traits from everyday observations.

In this novel test of how stereotypes can develop from observations, preliminary research collected participants’ beliefs about the occupational roles (e.g., lawyer, teacher, fast food worker, chief executive officer, store clerk, manager) in which members of social groups (e.g., Black women, Hispanics, White men, the rich, senior citizens, high school dropouts) are overrepresented relative to their numbers in the general population. These beliefs about groups’ typical occupational roles proved to be generally accurate when evaluated in relation to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Then, correlational studies predicted participants’ stereotypes of social groups from the attributes ascribed to group members’ typical occupational roles (Studies 1a, 1b, and 1c), the behaviors associated with those roles (Study 2), and the occupational interest profile of the roles (Study 3). As predicted by social role theory, beliefs about the attributes of groups’ typical roles were strongly related to group stereotypes on both communion and agency/competence. In addition, an experimental study (Study 4) demonstrated that when social groups were described with changes to their typical social roles in the future, their projected stereotypes were more influenced by these future roles than by their current group stereotypes, thus supporting social role theory’s predictions about stereotype change.

An important implication of this research is that change in stereotypes about particular groups would follow from observing their members in new roles that create different demands. For example, if women were observed as particularly well represented in leadership roles, their stereotype would change to incorporate more agency and assertiveness. From this perspective, social change in role occupancies is the route to stereotype change.

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