CHAPTER 5

Social Psychology and Maintenance of Stereotypes

It was intended to be an enticing billboard ad for Tecate beer. Viewed on billboards throughout the Phoenix area, the ad featured a tipped bottle of the popular Mexican beer and the tagline: "Finally, A Cold Latina." However, the "cold Latina" ad turned into a local hot issue in the press when many Latinas and women of other ethnicities denounced the ad as a Latina stereotype and took their protests to the beer distributor. After complaints to the company and the press about the ads, the company pulled them from billboards.

"Your ad is offensive, it promotes racist stereotypes, and is a slap in the face to the many advancements of women in our country," stated a letter to the beer company from the Democratic Women's Caucus of Arizona. The letter, which was quoted in a newspaper story, also requested removal of the ads along with a public apology. "From the Seneca Falls Convention to the modern-day struggles that women face, we would hope that corporations such as yours would want to promote only positive images and be good stewards to our various communities."[1]

A Latina college professor told the press she objected to the beer ad because it built a major campaign on a Latina stereotype. "The idea of one of the stereotypes of Mexican-American women as the hot-blooded Latina bursting out of her dress is offensive," she said. "People obviously have private jokes and laughs, but you don't start building a major ad campaign."[2]

In response to the protests, the beer distributor's marketing director, Victor Melendez, issued a statement saying: "This billboard was created to be tongue-in-check and humorous, for a mature adult audience.... We intended no disrespect in any way, and in fact, we heard from many Tecate drinkers who told us the ad is clever and funny." Still, many women viewed the ad as a racist stereotype of Hispanic women as being overly sexual. Labeling the ad as "tasteless and demeaning to women," protesters assailed the beer company and pressed it to drop the ad campaign.

Protest of the Tecate beer billboard represents simply one of numerous complaints about racist and sexist media stereotypes. One of the most common media criticisms from people of color and women is that negative media stereotypes may influence the way people view them. Although today there are far fewer of the blatantly racist and negative AHANA stereotypes found in much of U.S. history, stereotypes persist in media portrayals.

This chapter examines the role and social psychology of stereotypes, how media exposure impacts development of racial stereotypes and ways in which stereotypes may be countered. Social scientists have amassed considerable research reflecting that media depictions can contribute to racial stereotyping, which in turn, may be used to rationalize negative social attitudes towards people.

Stereotype Formation Psychology

You may have seen something similar to this on local television news before. In this case, the local television newscast shows a video clip of two young Latino males talking to a White police officer, while in a voiceover a newscaster reports that an elderly woman was robbed while putting groceries in the trunk of her car around noon in a local grocery store parking lot. Many television viewers, when first seeing the clip, may have assumed the Latino males to be the robbery suspects. However, upon showing the clip a reporter voiceover makes it clear that the two young men, actually, were the heroes of sorts who gave chase to the culprit and retrieved the stolen purse. The news story ended showing footage of an arrested suspect in a police squad car.

Some viewers at first may have thought the young Latino men were the criminal suspects, due to the story format in which they were shown in the video clip as the story was reported. But did race have anything to do with possible assumptions that the two young Latinos in the clip were the perpetrators? According to social-psychology studies, race and stereotyping played a role in how viewers processed the reported story. Cognitive psychologists have examined the role of media in activating positive and negative messages that typecast members of different ethnic groups. It is important, therefore, to look at the psychological mechanisms that may shape our perceptions when we process media messages.

Observations of the media's role in shaping public perceptions go way back. Journalist **Walter Lippmann**, in his well-known and widely cited book *Public Opinion*, focused on media stereotypes when he articulated the idea that the media give us "the pictures in our heads." Lippmann discussed the role of the media in defining our world and suggested that we all use stereotypes to simplify our thinking. Lippmann wrote:

> The real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. Although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it.[3]

As Lippmann notes, stereotypes are part of our cognitive processing and we all use them to create simplified pictures of our environment and to manage our world. Since Lippmann's seminal book, numerous social psychologists have probed the media's role in constructing and maintaining ethnic and racial stereotypes. There is overwhelming consensus in much of their research that repetitive-media messages about race can cultivate attitudes and perceptions that mirror these messages. Social psychologists' research strongly reveals that the media operate as stereotypical information sources and socialization agents that lead to maintaining stereotypes.[4] It is important, therefore, to understand the psychological mechanisms that can support the existence of stereotypes and how these cognitive categories are activated by media representations.

Racial Schemas and Media

Most often the term *stereotype* is perceived as a dirty word, even though every one of us at some point commonly uses stereotypes in daily life. There are various definitions for stereotypes but, simply put, we can say stereotypes are images, ideas, and traits we associate with groups of people.[5] Or, as defined by some social psychologists, a **stereotype** is "a cognitive structure that contains the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about some human group."[6] Thus, one important

characteristic of stereotypes is that they are structures in our thought processes or in our minds. Psychologists call these brain-classification patterns (or mind categories) **schemas** and say they are used to help us organize our complex social environment and essentially our world. Schemas help people sort out the world around them without a lot of mental effort, by telling them the basic characteristics of the things they encounter.[7]

Social-cognition studies of how stereotypes are formed indicate that the information we gain from the mass media may produce stereotypes that help us simplify our environment. People also commonly use stereotypes to fill in details about people who are not members of their in-group and when they are not motivated to get to know them on a more personal basis.[8] The schema one has for a group of people would be applied to encounters with any person from that group. People generally see others as group members before responding to them as individuals. The role schemas we have for a group, whether based on ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, or occupation, tell us what features or traits we should expect when we encounter a group member. Stored in our long-term memory, these stereotypes can be activated automatically by the perception of social stimuli (such as group labels or exemplars of the group).[9] Taken together, what this all reflects is that stereotypical perceptions are held about people of every race and ethnicity.

Stereotypes often are not based on people's firsthand experience with group members, social psychologists note, but rather are learned from others or from mass media. Studies reflect that the media's ability to shape and form cognitive structures or racial attitudes is stronger when a person's experiences are limited with an ethnic or cultural group. In essence, media content and how it is presented can trigger role schemas or cognitive categories that support these stereotypes.[10] Mass-media depictions are replete with various social stereotypes that link to schemas that people have in their heads, whether pertaining to race and gender categories or other classifications such as college Greeks, blonde females, politicians, rednecks, southerners, hippies, and so forth. Research suggests that many of the racial stereotypes found in media portrayals, such as perceptions that African Americans are athletic and aggressive or that Asians are smart and quiet, are widely held among adults in society.[11] Stereotypes perhaps are considered most dangerous when the attributions people make or take from them work simply to damage others.[12]

Independent of bigotry, however, we are all aware and familiar with most of the stereotypes that circulate throughout our culture that associates certain characteristics with specific ethnic groups, according to Patricia Devine, a long-time social-psychology researcher. Devine's landmark 1989 experimental study of stereotypes and prejudice shows the link between stereotypes, schema, and priming. **Prejudice** can be defined as a hostile or negative attitude toward people in a distinct group based largely on their membership within that group. **Priming** takes place after schema is activated when we expect to see more features associated with the social stereotype. Devine investigated the hypothesis that when we encounter someone from another social or ethnic group, the stereotypes for that group are primed and activated automatically.

To test the hypothesis, she primed an all-White panel of research participants with words on a screen that were flashed too quickly to be interpreted consciously. Some were shown words associated with African-American stereotypes and some were shown words inconsistent with the stereotypes. The participants were then given a paragraph to read about a person (unidentified race) and were told to evaluate that person. The paragraph gave information about the person doing things in nature that could be interpreted as play or aggression.

Devine found that the subconsciously primed words were linked with the stereotype. People were more likely to think the person in the story was aggressive and hostile if they were primed

with the African-American stereotype. The primed words avoided references to hostility, but people still activated that schema. She found that almost everybody (both prejudiced and non-prejudiced people) evaluated the racially unknown person in line with the stereotype. Devine concluded from this study that stereotypes are so well learned that they become automatically triggered in people whenever a person from that particular group is encountered. Again, it did not matter if people were not bigots. Devine writes: "Even for subjects who honestly report having no negative prejudices against Blacks, activation of stereotypes can have automatic effects that resemble prejudice responses."[13] What Devine concluded from her study also is that the broad awareness of stereotypes we have acquired throughout generations can be ascribed to the pervasiveness of the media and our daily social interactions.[14]

Taken altogether, therefore, these social-cognitive aspects indicate that the way stereotypes are represented and stored in people's memory influences how they understand and evaluate different groups. The way the media talk about an issue determines whether people use stereotypical thinking to understand that issue. How people process and understand media messages can be influenced by stereotypes, even if they are not aware of it and even if they don't endorse the stereotypes.

Media Exposure and Racial Stereotypes

In our complex and fast-paced society, with growing competition for our attention, we learn from media, live vicariously through media, and experience large parts of our world indirectly through the mass media. Social psychologists note that media exposure can influence public perceptions about race—particularly frequent and repeated media exposure.[15] The media not only are powerful sources of ideas and attitudes about race, they also are central to race matters since what they do is produce representations of the social world—including images, descriptions, explanations, and frames for understanding how the world is, and why it works as it is said and shown to work.[16] Social researchers view the media, most notably television, as one of numerous sociocultural means through which ideas about race are perpetuated and reinforced.[17]

An examination of the research on media exposure and racial stereotyping reveals that, although studies have been conducted across various media forms (news, television entertainment, advertising, video games, and music videos), the majority of these investigations have focused on television portrayals. Television, of course, has powerful visual impact in society, and despite competition from new media, it is still the dominant medium Americans of all ages turn to for entertainment. It also is often the place millions of people go to daily for information.

Television content analyses that have examined the frequency and nature of depictions by race repeatedly have confirmed for a number of years that White Americans and African-American representation on television exceeds their U.S. population proportions. Yet for African Americans negative images abound at deeper levels. Latino Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans typically appear on television in numbers below their U.S. population proportions. Given the media's critical-socialization role in society, the frequency in which various social groups are depicted may indicate how far we have come in terms of social integration. It also conveys messages about the value, status, and vitality of various ethnic groups in society. Moreover, whether images of social groups are favorable or negative also is a critical consideration, given that particular media messages communicated about race shape the characteristics that become associated cognitively with the groups.[18]

Television research of the past two decades reflects distinct racial differences in media treatment. One consistent finding is that White Americans can be seen in a wide variety of roles on television, running the gamut of portrayals. Secondly, Whites are more likely to be in positions of power, prestige, and authority. By contrast, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans most likely are portrayed in secondary roles, do not appear in a wide range of roles, and are far less likely to hold positions of power.[19]

For African Americans, depictions dramatically vary across genres and the types of media. In television sitcoms African Americans, for example, have professional socioeconomic status while in dramas they are linked with limited educational achievement. On the other hand, it is in the news media that African Americans have the most negative portrayals in which we see both explicit and implicit links to aggression, criminality, and societal threat.[20]

The majority of the research on media-exposure effects and racial stereotypes has utilized social learning, framing, priming, and cultivation approaches. You may recall that these theories are examined in Chapter 3. While some of these studies have investigated diverse populations, they have focused a bit more on African Americans' media depictions for several reasons. First, no other American group has such a long history of oppression through slavery, genocide, disenfranchisement, and centuries of skin-color discrimination—with the largest and bloodiest civil-rights protest in American history led by African Americans. Second, the nation's social system and racial hierarchy often is viewed as a dichotomy in which Whites are at the top and most Blacks are at the bottom. Third, studies of race images in media often utilize content-analysis methodology wherein identifying African Americans by skin color and afro-centric features is more reliable than classifying Asian, Latino, and Native Americans. We will now look at some of the research on media-exposure effects.

Media Stereotyping Effects Studies

A vast body of research exists across disciplines on the consequences of media stereotypes. There also is much evidence that the way the media frame issues can affect whether and how stereotypes are applied to certain groups and certain issues, particularly in hot-button social matters such as crime and immigration. For example, in a study involving news framing, Domke, McCoy, and Torres found that news framing of political issues can trigger existing racial stereotypes held by individuals that may factor into their political decision making.[21] The study notes that even when specific racial images are not present, political coverage still intersected with race perceptions in important ways. When news coverage of immigration emphasized jobs and the economy, respondents were more likely to draw upon stereotypes of immigrants. However, when news coverage focused on humanitarian issues respondents were less likely to draw upon the stereotypes when making that same judgment. By priming subjects in news frames to focus on certain considerations regarding immigration and not on others, news coverage influenced the subjects' racial perceptions about Hispanics and their political judgments on the issue.

Visual-news images of Brown and Black Americans in print media also have been assessed for favorable and negative photos. In a content analysis of newspaper photo coverage of Hispanics, African Americans, and Whites, Bramlett-Solomon and Hernandez found that Hispanics and African Americans were much more likely than Whites to be depicted in negative news photos.[22] The study found constant use of Hispanics and African Americans in stories about social problems and suggested that constantly using people of color to depict societal ills constructs these groups as troubled people beset by problems, which perpetuates racial stereotypes.

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The news-coverage literature is robust with studies indicating negative images of African Americans going back to the 1967 *Kerner Report* that indicted the U.S. press for contributing to the nation's racial polarization and for treating Black Americans as if they were invisible.[23] Studies beyond the Kerner era, however, still reflect that the news media routinely frame African Americans negatively, including both print and television news, typecasting them in frames of poverty, urban decadence, crime pathology, and with schemas that build on existing White fears and biases against African Americans.[24]

Yet, one of the most common and pernicious archetypes conveyed in news media is the "menacing Black male" stereotype. Numerous researchers have observed that local television news often contains Black images that reinforce the dominant-cultural stereotype of Black males as criminal and dangerous. Research across disciplines show that media coverage of crime conflates blackness with criminality. Political science scholars have noted, for example, that often when politicians talk about crime, they also are de facto talking about race.[25]

The Dixon and Linz study of race in local television news found that the news programs routinely overrepresented African Americans as crime perpetrators and underrepresented them as victims.[26] By contrast, Whites were found overrepresented as victims and underrepresented as crime perpetrators. Moreover, African Americans were found underrepresented as law enforcement officers while Whites were overrepresented as officers. The study suggested that television news portrayals can be significant conveyors of racial stereotypes that associate African Americans with lawlessness and Whites with law enforcement.

In another study, Dixon looked at how local television news representations of African Americans influence attitudes towards capital punishment.[27] He found that study respondents supported the death penalty more strongly after viewing a newscast with African-American suspects as compared with a newscast involving the same crimes but with the race of the criminal unspecified. The study revealed that depictions of African Americans or even simple association of the race of a person within the story influenced judgments. This study also suggests, according to Devine's research, that in how we process media messages, stereotypical associations can become so strong in people's minds that merely thinking about one of these links (e.g., crime or race) could prime thoughts of the other.

A study of cop shows or reality-based television also found African Americans stereotypically portrayed as dangerous and criminal. Oliver's examination of *Cops*, *America's Most Wanted*, *FBI*, and the *American Detective*, among other similar shows, found African Americans overrepresented as criminals compared to crime reports and underrepresented as police officers compared to labor statistics.[28] Similarly, Abraham and Appiah found that pictures of African Americans in news articles about three-strike crime laws resulted in White participants' perception that African Americans were more affected by the issues than Whites.[29] When the pictures were of White Americans, there were no differences in which group was viewed as more affected.

Research has found that the bulk of local news coverage tends to prime stereotypes of African-American males as dark and dangerous. Studies have found that African-American males with dark skin tones not only are depicted in more menacing images, but also may be judged more harshly in court cases and tend to get more incarceration time than those with light skin texture.[30]

In a study of skin-tone impact on crime news, Dixon and Maddox found an over-representation of African Americans with darker skin tones as criminals, whereas people with light skin were most likely victims.[31] Explaining the media cultivation effect, they found heavy local television news viewers were more likely to have a negative emotional reaction and judgment to news content that featured dark-skin perpetrators than those with light skin. Dixon and Maddox noted that

one implication of these findings is that after television viewers see so many dark-skinned people (especially males) committing crimes on their television sets, they may go into courtrooms as jury members with these negative stereotypes in their heads.

Cultivation studies also have demonstrated how mediated stereotypes are produced in the absence of personal experience. One study, for example, examined racial attitudes among White students at the University of Wisconsin who had little or no firsthand experience with African Americans. The more students watched entertainment television, the more likely they were to believe that African Americans were affluent and successful. However, the more they watched television news, the more likely their belief was that African Americans were worse off and deviant.[32]

A study by Power, Murphy, and Coover is among research that demonstrates how exposure to stereotypical depictions of African Americans can prime Whites to use racial explanations for subsequent, unrelated media portrayals.[33] The study reflects that priming in a news piece played a role in viewer reactions to the Rodney King police beating. Researchers presented a stereotyped version and a non-stereotyped version of a newsletter story about Chris Miller (an African-American student) to college students and then tested for racial treatment differences.

They found significant differences based on racial priming. Those primed with material that highlighted the lazy, unintelligent, aggressive, and socially destructive traits of Miller were more likely to judge that Rodney King brought his beating by Los Angeles police upon himself by his unresponsiveness when pulled over. Conversely, those who saw the counter-stereotypical newsletter story were more likely to say that King was an innocent victim of circumstance. These study findings, as the others reviewed here, suggest that media priming may result in stereotypes in reader- or viewer-message processing that supports the primed stereotype.

In all of these studies, the main theoretical explanation for the priming effects found is that media coverage activates stereotypes in memory, which influence judgments of others in social issues. What is striking is that such priming occurs even when presented below conscious recognition and when there is no explicit reference to racial stereotypes. Even when there is no explicit reference to racial stereotypes, therefore, the media may implicitly prime stereotypes. This is a concern because it suggests negative consequences for the groups being stereotyped, whether intended or unintended, perpetuating negativity toward some groups while privileging others.[34]

Countering Negative Stereotypes

However, while the media (particularly television) can influence the shaping of stereotypical images, social scientists believe the media also have the power to break down stereotypes.[35] Social psychologists studying the stability and change in stereotypes over the decades have noted that racial stereotypes may fade over protracted time periods, particularly when there is increased sensitivity to media portrayals, but they also have observed that stereotypes may rebound.[36]

One of the main impediments to the fading of racial stereotypes, studies indicate, is that stereotypes are embedded deeply in the society's cultural fabric and are used automatically as shortcuts to more analytical thinking about people. Social psychologists also have observed that stereotypes continue to be transmitted social contact and by the media from one generation to the next.[37] Media portrayals can cause us to make generalizations about a particular group or they can make us see individual differences within that group. Social scholars believe long-term media exposure to media stereotypes of certain groups can have serious consequences, particularly those in news coverage, as news is traditionally viewed as truthful and accurate.

There has been research attention on the impact of countering stereotypes in media. Ramasubramanian investigated the utilization of media-based strategies to inhibit racial stereotypes activated by news stories.[38] The researcher tested two strategies, one was an audience-centered approach (that gave media literacy and critical-thinking training to respondents) and the other was a message-centered approach (in which respondents were exposed to messages that were non-stereotypical). Study findings reflect that a combination of media literacy education and exposure to news stories that counter-stereotypes had the best chance of reducing activated racial stereotypes. These findings suggest that people can curb stereotypical cognitive processing if they are aware of it and have the cognitive capacity to fight against it. Similarly, Holt's study of news frames also suggests that positive news can negate racial stereotypes.[39]

Studies also have explored the question of whether presenting nontraditional television characters relative to race can contribute to constructive-social change. *The Cosby Show,* for example, is cited as a successful example of portraying an African-American family in a counter-stereotypical light in the midst of largely stereotyped portrayals. While ABC rejected the program and the idea that American viewers would watch an upper-middle class African-American family, NBC added the program to its lineup and was rewarded with the show's immense popularity among viewers across the county. The show's intense acceptance and longevity reflected that using counter-stereotypical characters on television could be successful and may contribute to constructive-social change.[40]

And finally, if you have ever watched *The Dave Chappelle* Show, you probably have seen some of the comedian/actor's humorous skits tackle numerous stereotypes about people of various racial and ethnic groups. Some view Chappelle's satire as one means of debunking stereotypes by disarming them in ways that show common stereotypes as illogical and ridiculous, while others think Chappelle's off-the-cuff spoofs reinforce sexist and racist stereotypes. What do you think? Is racy humor, as exemplified by shows such as *The Dave Chappelle Show*, *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, and *The Cleveland Show* an effective way to combat stereotypes? You be the judge.

CONCLUSION

Social psychology indicates stereotypes can influence our processing and understanding of media messages, even when we are not aware of it. How the media frame an issue can influence whether people use stereotypes to understand that issue. The media play a role in perpetuating stereotypes related to race, gender and class identity. The way the media frame issues can affect whether or not and how stereotypes are applied to certain groups and certain media messages. Because schemas tell us what characteristics the category usually contains, they lead us to expect certain things once other traits of a category have been encountered. An especially nasty characteristic of many stereotypes is that not only can they tell us what people of a social group are like, but they also tell us why the people are like that. How people's brains process information, can make them think things they don't agree with.

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. Why did many women find the Tecate beer billboard ad offensive?

2. Discuss your views on whether the format of the television clip or race might lead to stereotyping the two young Latino men in the purse robbery news story.

3. Since we all use stereotypes, explain how they sometimes are helpful to us.

4. Who is Walter Lippmann, and what does he say about stereotypes?

5. What is a cognitive schema, and how is it used?

6. What is media priming, and how does it work?

7. According to social psychologists, what is the role of the media in creating race and crime stereotypes?

8. What are some ways stereotypes may be countered?