**Stereotypes and Prejudice**

Prejudice and stereotyping are biases that work together to create and maintain social inequality. Prejudice refers to the attitudes and feelings—whether positive or negative and whether conscious or non-conscious—that people have about members of other groups. In contrast, stereotypes have traditionally been defined as specific beliefs about a group, such as descriptions of what members of a particular group look like, how they behave, or their abilities. As such, stereotypes are cognitive representations of how members of a group are similar to one another and different from members of other groups. Importantly, people can be aware of cultural stereotypes and have cognitive representations of those beliefs without personally endorsing such stereotypes, without feelings of prejudice, and without awareness that such stereotypes could affect one’s judgment and behavior.

Prejudice and stereotyping are generally considered to be the product of adaptive processes that simplify an otherwise complex world so that people can devote more cognitive resources to other tasks. However, despite any cognitively adaptive function they may serve, using these mental shortcuts when making decisions about other individuals can have serious negative ramifications. The horrible mistreatment of particular groups of people in recent history, such as that of Jews, African Americans, women, and homosexuals, has been the major impetus for the study of prejudice and stereotyping. Thus, the original conceptions and experiments were concerned almost entirely with conscious, negative attitudes and explicitly discriminatory actions. However, as the social acceptability of prejudice and stereotypes has changed, the manifestations of prejudice and stereotypes have also changed. In response to these changes, and given that people who reject prejudice and stereotyping can still unwittingly internalize stereotypic representations, the study of prejudice and stereotyping has recently moved to include beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that could be considered positive and not obviously or overtly prejudiced. Importantly, even when prejudice and stereotypes are ostensibly positive (e.g., traditional women are wonderful and adored), they preserve the dominance of powerful groups: they not only limit the opportunities of stereotyped groups but also produce a litany of negative outcomes when those group members defy them. Because of these new conceptions of bias, there have also been methodological adaptations in the study of prejudice and stereotyping that move beyond the conscious attitudes and behaviors of individuals to measure their implicit prejudice and stereotypes as well. This article gives a quick tour through the social psychological study of prejudice and stereotyping to inform the reader about its theoretical background, measurement, and interventions aimed to reduce prejudice.

**Stereotypes**

The terms stereotype, prejudice, discrimination, and racism are often used interchangeably in everyday conversation. Let us explore the differences between these concepts. **Stereotypes** are oversimplified generalizations about groups of people. Stereotypes can be based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation—almost any characteristic. They may be positive (usually about one’s own group, such as when women suggest they are less likely to complain about physical pain) but are often negative (usually toward other groups, such as when members of a dominant racial group suggest that a subordinate racial group is stupid or lazy). In either case, the stereotype is a generalization that doesn’t take individual differences into account.

Where do stereotypes come from? In fact new stereotypes are rarely created; rather, they are recycled from subordinate groups that have assimilated into society and are reused to describe newly subordinate groups. For example, many stereotypes that are currently used to characterize black people were used earlier in American history to characterize Irish and Eastern European immigrants.

**Prejudice and Racism**

**Prejudice** refers to the beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes someone holds about a group. A prejudice is not based on experience; instead, it is a prejudgment, originating outside actual experience. A 1970 documentary called Eye of the Storm illustrates the way in which prejudice develops, by showing how defining one category of people as superior (children with blue eyes) results in prejudice against people who are not part of the favored category.

While prejudice is not necessarily specific to race, **racism** is a stronger type of prejudice used to justify the belief that one racial category is somehow superior or inferior to others; it is also a set of practices used by a racial majority to disadvantage a racial minority. The Ku Klux Klan is an example of a racist organization; its members’ belief in white supremacy has encouraged over a century of hate crime and hate speech.