**Choosing the right level of analysis: Stereotypes shape social reality via collective action (Commentary on Jussim)**

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Abstract

Jussim argues that the self-fulfilling prophecy and expectancy effects of descriptive stereotypes are not potent shapers of social reality. However, his conclusion that descriptive stereotypes *per se* do not shape social reality is premature and overly reductionist. We review evidence that suggests descriptive stereotypes do have a substantial influence on social reality, by virtue of their influence on collective action.

Jussim presents a compelling case against the notion that the self-fulfilling prophecy and expectancy effects of descriptive stereotypes (hereafter ‘stereotypes’) are potent shapers of social reality. We accept Jussim’s claims that (a) the evidence for self-fulfilling prophecy and expectancy effects is weak, fragile, and fleeting, and (b) stereotype beliefs are not inherently inaccurate. Nevertheless, it is premature and reductionist to conclude that stereotypes do not shape social reality. Stereotypes have a substantial influence in shaping social reality through their influence on collective action.

Tajfel’s (1974) and Moscovici’s (1981) critiques of social psychology as overly reductionist emphasised that explanations of social phenomena, *particularly coherent collective behaviour*, must incorporate the psychology of shared social perception. Theory must account not only for the interpersonal level of judgment and perception, but also for the consensual understanding of the macro-level social relations in which different groups are embedded (Abrams, 2015; Abrams & Hogg, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Specifically, the common collective behaviour of geographically dispersed, socially diverse, groups of individuals is grounded in their understanding of consensually shared stereotypes (Tajfel, 1981). The case that more complete explanations in social psychology require attention to both the micro- and macro-levels of analysis has been reinforced by numerous scholars (e.g., Abrams & Grant, 2012; Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012; Oishi, Kesebir, & Snyder, 2009; Pettigrew, 2006; Wright & Baray, 2012). The self-fulfilling prophecy and expectancy effects described by Jussim exist at the *interpersonal* level of analysis: they involve a perceiver and a (stereotyped) target interacting directly or indirectly. Though Jussim notes the macro-level influence of stereotypes, this is typically to refute the assumption that stereotypes are inherently inaccurate. However, the effects of stereotypes on behaviour extend beyond the issue of whether they are accurate or not: after all, the accuracy of a belief is not a prerequisite for that belief to affect behaviour. Thus, irrespective of veracity, the role of consensual stereotype beliefs in motivating or justifying the *collective behaviour* of groups of individuals is overlooked in Jussim’s argument, thereby missing an important route by which stereotypes shape social reality.

“Collective action against collective disadvantage is one of the major pathways to social change” (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2012, p.52). History is replete with examples of collective action (CA) stimulating pervasive and profound changes in social reality. Prominent examples include the end of apartheid in South Africa, the abolition of slavery in the New World, and the host of civil rights movements throughout the 20th century (e.g., see Dixon et al., 2012; Hardin, 1982; Tilly & Wood, 2003). We note that CA can range from violent revolutions and terrorism, to peaceful demonstrations, petition signing, campaigning, and voting (Abrams & Grant, 2012; Tausch et al., 2011). Furthermore, CA can be directed at improving the position of one’s *own* group, or can be ‘sympathetic’ on behalf of *another* group (Saab, Tausch, Spears, & Cheung, 2014; Stewart et al., 2015). We now present evidence to support our contention that stereotypes influence engagement in CA and thus shape social reality indirectly.

*Complementary* stereotyping may serve to pacify CA engagement by enhancing support for the status quo. Complementary stereotyping involves the assignment of benevolent traits that off-set the presence of negative trait assignments, or vice versa (e.g., see Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Studies show that people who engaged in more complementary stereotyping of Northerners and Southerners as agentic and communal respectively (in Italy), or communal and agentic respectively (in England), viewed the social system as fairer and more legitimate (Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005). Even in countries where general support for the status quo is low, people who endorse complementary stereotypes express greater satisfaction with the current socioeconomic and political reality (Cichocka, Winiewski, Bilewicz, Bukowski, & Jost, 2015). Indeed, across 37 different countries, such complementary stereotype beliefs are strongest in societies where income inequality is higher (Durante et al., 2013). The proposition that the consensual complementary stereotyping of various social groups pacifies engagement in CA that might otherwise change prevailing socioeconomic inequality is confirmed by experimental evidence. Jost and colleagues revealed that complementary stereotypes of the “poor” as “happy/honest”, or the “rich” as “unhappy/dishonest” (compared to unhappy/dishonest or happy/honest, respectively) led college students to report increased satisfaction with the socioeconomic and political status quo in the US (Kay & Jost, 2003; also see Kay, Czapliński, & Jost, 2009). Furthermore, exposure to similar stereotypes of the poor were found to increase support for government policy, and diminish support for disruptive protest against government pension reform, among demonstrators at a 2008 May Day rally in Greece (Jost et al., 2012).

Effects of complementary stereotyping on CA engagement are also evident in research on benevolent sexism (e.g., stereotyping women as more ‘caring’ than men, see Glick & Fiske, 1996). Across 19 countries, women endorsed complementary stereotypes of their own gender (e.g., women as more communal and less agentic) most strongly in countries where average levels of sexism were highest (Glick et al. 2000; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Thus, complementary stereotypes may pacify engagement in CA to change a prevailing social reality of substantial gender inequality. Experimental evidence supports this proposition. In four studies Becker and Wright (2011) found that women’s engagement in CA to address gender inequality (e.g., petition signing, flyer distribution, self-reported intentions) decreased when they were exposed to complementary stereotypes of their gender (also see Becker, 2012). Moreover, when women are exposed to such complementary stereotypes they show greater satisfaction with the status quo of gender relations (Jost & Kay, 2005), reduced CA engagement (Foster, 1999), and a greater resistance to changing the social order (Di Bella and Crisp, 2015).

In contrast to complementary stereotyping, which pacifies CA of either kind (own-group-directed or sympathetic), *hostile* stereotype beliefs (overtly negative stereotypes, e.g., ‘women are less intelligent than men’) tend to have divergent effects; promoting *greater* CA engagement among stereotyped targets, whilst attenuating sympathetic CA engagement. For example, when targets of hostile stereotypes see such beliefs expressed publicly, they demonstrate greater engagement in CA (Becker & Wright, 2011; Ellemers & Barreto, 2009). A number of studies have documented the association between perception of hostile stereotype beliefs and anger amongst the stereotyped (Bosson, Pinel, & Vandello, 2010; Ellemers & Barreto, 2009; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Given that group-based anger is a critical driver of engagement in CA (Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2006; Tausch et al., 2011; van Zomeren, Spears, & Leach, 2008), this provides one mechanism through which hostile stereotype beliefs operate to shape social reality. Indeed, Ellemers and Barreto (2009) found that women who were confronted with the stereotype that women are less intelligent than men reported significantly greater anger, support for CA, and intentions to protest.

Moreover, those who endorse hostile stereotypes are lesslikely to engage in, or may even oppose, CA on behalf of the stereotyped group (i.e., *sympathetic* CA). Considering the critical role of sympathetic CA in social change movements (e.g., Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Tilly & Wood, 2003; Simon & Klandermans, 2001), this constitutes an equally important avenue through which stereotypes influence social reality. Stewart et al. (2015) combined data from twelve countries to examine sympathetic support for Arab CA in the Arab uprisings that began in 2010. Endorsement of the hostile stereotype ‘Arabs are not competent enough to govern themselves’ predicted reduced intentions to engage in sympathetic CA for the Arab peoples. Similarly, across five studies, participants who more strongly stereotyped the agents of social change(e.g., feminists as ‘militant’) were less likely to engage in sympathetic CA on their behalf (Bashir, Lockwood, Chasteen, Nadolny, & Noyes, 2013).

Experimental evidence shows that hostile stereotypes can also directly affect public policy support. Johnson, Olivo, Gibson, Reed, and Ashburn-Nardo (2009) found that activating the ‘Black criminal’ and ‘promiscuous Black female’ stereotypes significantly diminished support for public policy intended to benefit Black males and Black females, respectively. Similarly, when Hurwitz and Peffley (2005) activated racial stereotypes (e.g., ‘Blacks are lazy’) using minor changes in the language presented to participants, this increased White participants’ support for punitive policies, such as the building of extra prisons (over less punitive policies such as antipoverty programs). Maurer, Park, and Judd (1996) provided specific evidence that the effects of stereotype beliefs extend beyond the interpersonal level of analysis. Participants’ endorsement of stereotypes of two different social groups (gay people and welfare recipients) predicted their public policy positions, independent of any interpersonal judgments made in individual cases involving welfare recipients and gay people. Indeed, Maurer et al. argued that “the nature of public policy judgments requires thought at the superordinate level – what the group-as-a-whole is like” (p.412). Other scholars have supported this, contending that public policy stance is *group-centric*, that is, “shaped in powerful ways by the attitudes citizens possess towards the social groups they see as [affected by] the policy” (Nelson & Kinder, 1996, p.1055).

These experimental studies reinforce conclusions from extensive field evidence. Gilens’ (2009) comprehensive analysis of survey data, opinion polls, and public policy actions identified hostile stereotypes (e.g., ‘Blacks are lazy’) as one of the primary factors in US citizens’ opposition to CA intended to address systemic socioeconomic inequality (also see Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Other scholars have identified that the adoption of a ‘racial frame’ in policy discourse (e.g., stereotyping Hispanics as undeserving and lazy) profoundly influenced support for, and engagement with, public policy action in the US between 1990 and 1997 (Brown, 2013). Similar patterns have also been observed in the UK. Bamfield and Horton (2009) examined large scale opinion surveys conducted in 2008-2009, and found that tacitly stereotyping the poor as irresponsible and lazy (i.e., attributing their socioeconomic status to individual fault) predicted opposition to welfare policy initiatives (also see de Vries, 2015). Though we are aware survey results cannot imply causation, we emphasize the diversity of evidence attesting to the influence of stereotypes upon public policy support (both experimental and correlational). We also note evidence that suggests people *spontaneously* generate the prototypical member (stereotypic exemplar) of a relevant social group (as opposed to other policy-relevant principles) when thinking about public policy actions that will affect that social group (Lord, Desforges, Fein, Pugh, & Lepper, 1994; also see Reyna, Henry, Korfmacher, & Tucker, 2006).

In sum, taken together, the weight of evidence supports the contention that stereotypes *do* exert a substantial influence upon social reality; through their impact on CA engagement and people’s priorities for public policy. We therefore note the irony of Jussim’s assertion that, having been liberated from their false assumptions regarding stereotype inaccuracy, scholars are now free to focus on addressing the ‘actual’ causes of social inequality and oppression (p.425, paragraph 2). There are multiple roots of inequality (besides stereotypes), such as socioeconomic disparity, deprived socialization, or inadequate healthcare. However, as our review demonstrates, stereotype beliefs are intimately related to motivating the necessary collective action that would address some of these alternative causes of inequality. Finally, we emphasize that our review makes no normative assumptions about the moral or political ‘rightness’ of engaging in CA (whether the means, or ends, are justified or desirable). Rather, we have advanced an empirical case that stereotype beliefs influence CA engagement, and thus, do have a hand in shaping social reality. We concur strongly with Jussim that the economic, political and other roots of group-based inequality need to be addressed by economic, political and other means. There are real differences between groups that have to be understood. However, we also contend that it is people’s shared, collective, understanding of these differences that is the vehicle for coordinated and meaningful social change.

As a consequence of distinguishing between the interpersonal- and-collective levels of analysis, we acknowledge the case for some key claims of Jussim’s book, namely that (a) the evidence for self-fulfilling prophecy and expectancy effects is weak, fragile, and fleeting, and (b) stereotype beliefs are not inherently inaccurate. However, we reject the conclusion that stereotype beliefs do not influence social reality.

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