
Creating Social Reality: Informational Social Influence and the Content of Stereotypic Beliefs

Bernd Wittenbrink
University of Michigan

Julia R. Henly
University of California, Los Angeles

Three experiments tested the hypothesis that comparison information about other people's stereotypic beliefs is used to validate personal beliefs about a target group. A simple manipulation of questionnaire items and their response scales, presented as part of a political opinion survey, served as social comparison information regarding beliefs about African Americans. The comparison information influenced participants' subsequently measured beliefs about group as well as their evaluation of a Black target. When provided with negative comparison information, participants reported more negative racial beliefs and a more negative evaluation of the Black target than when provided with positive feedback. Moreover, this effect depended on participants' initial stereotypic beliefs. Only participants with initially negative beliefs about the target group were influenced by the comparison information; participants with relatively positive beliefs were not.

"The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it."

Walter Lippmann
(1922, pp. 89-90)

This statement by Walter Lippmann is reminiscent of one of the basic principles underlying social psychological analysis: our subjective construction of reality is shaped by the beliefs, thoughts, and actions of the people around us (Asch, 1952; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Festinger, 1954; Markus & Zajonc, 1985; Mead, 1934; Moscovici, 1985; Schachter & Singer, 1962). The way other people see the world often serves as a crucial frame of reference for our own understanding of a complex and ambiguous reality.

Stereotypic beliefs are among the most striking examples of the significance that the social environment has for the content of our cognitions. From last century's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to today's teenage welfare mother on the nightly news, American culture has always been an abundant source of images about various social groups. The importance of such images for the content of individual stereotypic beliefs has been recognized since the early writings on stereotyping and prejudice (see Allport, 1954; Katz & Braly, 1933; Kelman, 1958; Lippmann, 1922).

Yet, although there seems to be little doubt of the significance of social influences on the content of a person's stereotypic beliefs, little psychological research actually addresses this issue. Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985, p. 61), for example, assert that "there is an alarming dearth of experimental research" on the effects of social influence for prejudice and stereotyping. Moreover, the existing work that does address the relevance of social influence to prejudiced attitudes and beliefs has traditionally focused on aspects of attitude expression rather than on the formation or conversion of attitudes. That is, a number of studies have documented that normative social pressure is conducive to the expression of less prejudiced attitudes or less stereotypic target evaluations (e.g., Blanchard, Lilly, & Vaughn, 1991; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977; McConahay, 1986; Sigall &

Authors' Note: We would like to thank Eugene Burnstein, Phoebe Ellsworth, James Hilton, and Norbert Schwarz for their many helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. Correspondence should be addressed to Bernd Wittenbrink, who is now at the Department of Psychology, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0345, E-mail bwittenbrink@clipr.colorado.edu.

PSPB, Vol. 22 No. 6, June 1996 598-610
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Page, 1971; for a review, see Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980). In this article, we intend to focus instead on the informational value that other people's beliefs have for the *content* of a person's stereotypes. That is, rather than being interested in how existing social norms may coerce people into the expression of a given belief, we want to examine how these norms may actually serve as a validating basis for their own construal of the social environment.

The first empirical evidence, though rather indirect, that culturally dominant beliefs are relevant for the content of people's stereotypes comes from the classic work by Katz and Braly (1933). This study, as well as the replications carried out since (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Gilbert, 1951; Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969), documents a striking level of consensus among individuals regarding the attributes they considered to be characteristic of various target groups. Considerable evidence has also been accumulated demonstrating the prevalence of stereotypic portrayals of men and women, African Americans, or Asians in the mass media and educational materials (see Freedman, 1977; Greenberg & Mazingo, 1976; McArthur & Resko, 1975; Reid, 1979). Unfortunately, this work is rather silent on how the content of the media is translated into an individual's subjective beliefs, and it often seems to assume that "the members of the mass media audience simply 'absorb' what is portrayed" (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981, p. 25). In addition, because of the truly social nature of the media, those studies that do attempt to understand how media contents influence individual attitudes and beliefs often suffer from methodological shortcomings (e.g., inadequate control groups, lack of counterstereotypic media examples to serve as stimulus material, correlational and quasi-experimental designs; see Christenson & Roberts, 1983; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985).

In an effort to better understand the influence of socially shared beliefs on the content of a person's stereotypic beliefs, we conducted three studies that document the potential of such social influences for people's stereotypes of African Americans, a stereotype that has been frequently hypothesized to be based on culturally transmitted beliefs (e.g., Devine, 1989; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Karlins et al., 1969; Sears, 1988). In the studies reported, a rather trivial manipulation of feedback about other people's beliefs was capable of influencing participants' own stereotypic assumptions and their construal of a member of the target group.

A major problem for testing possible influences of socially shared beliefs on people's personal stereotypes derives from the difficulty of providing credible comparison information without making participants suspicious about the intention of the manipulation.

Recent findings from survey research may offer an elegant solution to this problem. Work by Schwarz and his colleagues demonstrates that the response scales in common attitude questionnaires provide crucial information for social comparison (for a review, see Schwarz & Hippler, 1991). For example, in one study, these authors varied the labeling of response scales so that for a question asking respondents how much time they spend watching television daily, half the respondents were provided with an answer scale that ranged from *up to 1/2 hour* to *more than 2 1/2 hours*, and the remaining respondents were given a scale with *up to 2 1/2 hours* at the low end and *more than 4 1/2 hours* at the high end (Schwarz, Hippler, Deutsch, & Strack, 1985). Not only did the scale manipulation influence respondents' reported hours of TV watching such that respondents reported higher frequencies when provided with the high-frequency scale but, importantly, the response scales also influenced respondents' subsequent judgments related to their TV-watching habits. For example, respondents rated the importance of TV for their leisure time higher when they had been provided with the high-frequency scale than when given the low-frequency scale; and respondents' evaluation of their satisfaction with their leisure time was lower when they had reported their TV consumption on the high-frequency scale than on the low-frequency scale. Of particular interest for the current article is the finding that respondents in the high-frequency-scale condition also estimated that *the average person* spends significantly more time watching TV than did respondents in the low-frequency-scale condition. Apparently, respondents use the range of response alternatives to infer existing social standards—that is, the distribution of possible answers in the population. A response in the middle of the scale is evidently considered to be the average, or "normal," response in the population, and responses above or below the scale midpoint are interpreted as a deviation from this normality. Thus response scales provide the respondent with implicit information about social standards regarding the issue in question. For our purposes, a similar manipulation seemed to be well suited for providing individuals with information regarding common beliefs related to the stereotype of African Americans.

Specifically, we asked participants about their beliefs regarding certain issues related to the common stereotype of African Americans (e.g., the delinquency rate among African Americans) while manipulating the scales on which participants made their responses. To enhance the potential impact of the social comparison information provided by this manipulation, we chose to ask participants about issues that required specific factual knowledge—knowledge that participants most likely did not have. This general notion that increased stimulus