The Social Psychology of Stereotyping and Group Life

Edited by Russell Spears, Penelope J. Oakes, Naomi Ellemers, and S. Alexander Haslam

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Russell Spears
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Gmunden, 18 July 1996

2

Stereotypes as Explanations: A Subjective Essentialistic View of Group Perception

Vincent Yzerbyt, Steve Rocher and Georges Schadron

> Tel peuple a l'esprit lourd et stupide, tel autre l'a vif, léger, pénétrant. D'où cela vient-il, si ce n'est en partie, et de la nourriture qu'il prend, et de la semence de ses pères, et de ce chaos de divers éléments qui nagent dans l'immensité de l'air?
>
> *La Mettrie, 1748*, 1981, pp. 100–3[1]

The show we endure year in, year out on our TV screens provides us with far too many opportunities to be shocked by the behaviour of our fellow human beings. Wars and massive killings have become a common dish on the menu of our evening news. As human beings, but even more so as social psychologists, we feel something ought to be done to better understand the unfolding of relationships between human groups. Very early indeed, social psychologists displayed a great interest for intergroup relations and the various factors affecting their dynamics. Central among the variables involved are the views that people entertain about one another: stereotypes. Stereotypes can be defined as 'shared beliefs about person attributes, usually personality traits, but often also behaviours, of a group of people' (for reviews, see Duckitt, 1992; Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994; Messick and Mackie, 1989; Oakes, Haslam and Turner, 1994; Stroebe and Insko, 1989). Early research tended to locate stereotypes in the minds of those who suffered frustration (e.g., Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer and Sears, 1939), underwent deficient parental education (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford, 1950), or displayed a personality

prone to prejudice and ethnocentrism (e.g., Rokeach, Smith and Evans, 1960). Stereotypes were nothing but errorful generalizations made by prejudiced individuals, or under abnormal circumstances. Because of their shameful status, stereotypes long remained out of mainstream social psychology. Interest in intergroup relations and in person perception were mostly disconnected from each other.

The situation changed dramatically in the late seventies when social psychologists, highly influenced by the cognitive revolution in experimental psychology, looked at stereotypes in a different light. Actualizing early insights by Lippmann (1922), Allport (1954) and Tajfel (1969a), the basic tenet of the social cognitive approach was that social information is much too complex to be dealt with satisfactorily. As a consequence, human information processors need to simplify the environment. Categorization offers a means to treat individual stimuli as instances of larger groups about which prestored knowledge is available. Looking back at 25 years of scientific endeavours, there is little doubt that what has been called the cognitive miser view of social perceivers greatly contributed to our knowledge of the way people handle information about groups and individuals (Fiske and Taylor, 1984, 1991; Hamilton, 1981; Markus and Zajonc, 1985; Stephan, 1985; Taylor, 1981b; Wyer and Srull, 1984).

In the first three sections, we argue that stereotypes do not only stand as handy devices to facilitate our dealings with a puzzling environment. Stereotypes also serve another important function: they provide subjective meaning to the world (Bruner, 1957b; Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1992, 1994; Fiske, 1993b; Oakes and Turner, 1990; Tajfel, 1981b; Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994). In our view, stereotypes work as *enlightening gestalts*; they supply perceivers with extra information by building upon a rich set of interconnected pieces of data. Moreover, stereotypes comprise more than the list of attributes that help describe a particular social category. They also, and perhaps most importantly, include the underlying explanation that links these attributes together (Schadron and Yzerbyt, 1993; Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994, 1996).

As we will show, the explanation view has long intruded the research on person and group perception. While people may well view others in terms of simple lists of attributes, they more likely represent them in terms of well-organized sets of features. We examine the work on hypothesis confirmation and suggest that perceivers build up a causal scenario that allows them to integrate incoming information according to their specific views about people and groups. We also ascertain the relevance of an explanation view for the issue of inconsistency management and provide some new data from our laboratory clarifying the impact of the explanatory activity in the maintenance of stereotypes.

In the following sections, we outline our subjective essentialistic view of stereotypes and propose that stereotypes enable perceivers to understand why the instances of the category are what they are and thus justify their being treated

the way they are (Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994). The first idea, what is it that makes the group a group, may be linked to the idea of subjective essentialism, as it has recently been developed by some cognitive psychologists. The second one, how to account for what happens to the group, refers to the function of rationalization of the stereotypes. We will argue that these two ideas are, in fact, highly interconnected.

We first review the current debate on categorization in cognitive psychology, showing that the validity of classic similarity approaches is largely questioned and that the use of essentialistic theories is now offered as an alternative account for categorization learning and use. Turning back to the field of stereotyping, we then examine a series of theoretical (and sometimes old) contributions showing the importance of essentialistic explanations in social categorization. Next, we suggest that a functional view of explanations as they underlie stereotypic beliefs has come of age. We argue that stereotypes play a key role in the rationalization of the existing social order. We then spell out possible differences between essentialistic versus non-essentialistic categorization. We examine how subjective essentialism relates to group perception phenomena such as beliefs about group entitativity or group homogeneity and prejudice. We suggest a continuum of social categorization and conclude by proposing a syndrome of essentialistic categorization. Our final section brings subjective essentialism and the rationalization function of stereotypes together. Drawing again on research insights in the field of person perception, we suggest a series of mechanisms that may contribute to create and perpetuate existing social theories. We also offer empirical evidence that an essentialistic definition of social groups may polarize observers' impressions and thus lead them to neglect situational constraints that impinge on the groups.

1 Lessons from Impression Formation Research

When Solomon Asch (1946) launched his research on impression formation, his goal was very clear. As a faithful gestaltist, he thought that the processes by which people perceive others needed to be understood even if such mental constructions proved to be globally inaccurate. Asch asked his subjects to imagine that a short list of traits belonged to a real person. Subjects were asked then to produce an open description of the person and to checkmark one of two traits in a series of pairs. Using this simple paradigm, Asch managed to demonstrate two of the most robust effects in social psychology namely the primacy effect and the centrality effect. The primacy effect corresponds to the fact that the initial traits in a list influence the general meaning more than the final traits. Asch either presented a list comprising positive traits in the beginning and negative traits in the end or the same list in the reverse order. For both lists, the resulting impression was somewhat positive but, more importantly, the impression

was more positive for the first than for the second order. The centrality effect refers to the fact that some traits in a given list may more or less influence the impression. So, for instance, replacing the trait 'warm' in Asch's list by its opposite 'cold' had a huge impact on the final impression. In comparison, using 'polite' instead of 'blunt' changed the impression to a lesser extent.

For Asch, these effects stem from the active construction of an impression by observers as they gather information. His interpretation was soon to be challenged. In 1954, Bruner and Tagiuri launched the concept of implicit theories of personality (ITP) to indicate that people possess a working knowledge of the way various traits of personality go together. So, for example, if a person is warm, then that person is also generous. In this associationistic view, people would form impressions on the basis of trait covariation (Wishner, 1960). With the advent of new statistical tools, researchers examined the ITP from a somewhat different perspective. The main idea was to uncover global underlying dimensions that would organize the set of personality traits. Most well-known is the work by Rosenberg and colleagues using Multidimensional Scaling techniques (Rosenberg, Nelson and Vivekanathan, 1968; Rosenberg and Sedlak, 1972). Subjects rated the extent to which two traits are similar and the resulting matrix is then submitted to MDS. Typically, two evaluative, almost orthogonal dimensions emerged: one concerned sociability and the other intelligence. This dimensional view seemed quite an improvement over the associationistic view. It was now possible to explain the centrality effect as uncovered by Asch on the basis of the composition of the list. A pair of traits would be central to the extent that they are extreme on a dimension not touched on by the other traits in the list. So, for instance, the traits warm and cold both concerned sociability whereas the remaining traits pertained to intelligence (for an insightful presentation, see Brown, 1986).

Anderson and Sedikides (1991; Sedikides and Anderson, 1994) recently challenged both the associationistic and the dimensional views of implicit theories of personality. According to their typological view, people think about others in terms of person types. Each person type comprises several personality traits and the knowledge of a given trait within a person type can be used to infer the presence of other traits in the same person type. In other words, people perceive traits within person types to be interconnected through causal bonds. Anderson and Sedikides (1991) presented their subjects with a list of personality traits. The task consisted of grouping the traits into piles according to their degree of similarity. Cluster analysis was then used to uncover the various person types underlying subjects' solutions. Let us make things concrete with a simple example. One person type identified by Anderson and Sedikides is Extroverted, defined as being *ambitious, outgoing, enthusiastic, energetic and confident*. Although the trait *confident* belongs to the cluster Extroverted, the average correlation between *confident* and the other members of the type is lower than a number of alternative traits, such as *intelligent, humorous, friendly,*

warm, helpful or pleasant. Still, compared to its competitors, the trait *confident* performs better on a series of important criteria. To take but one significant measure, subjects who read the four strong members of the type, that is, *ambitious, outgoing, enthusiastic and energetic*, more often generate the trait *confident* than any of its competitors. Clearly then, this approach highlights the fact that first-order correlations are not always a reliable predictor of the link between a trait and a person type. A typological view thus offers an ideal means to understand how two apparently inconsistent traits can be assigned to the same individual. Although laziness correlates negatively with intelligence, both these two traits prove quite compatible with our view of an artist. The type 'Artist' makes these two characteristics appear consistent because, we would argue, a general explanation makes it possible to reinterpret the semantic clash between these two traits.

The question remains as to what extent each perceiver brings in an idiosyncratic view concerning the particular pieces of information collected about a specific target person. Is it the case that people uniquely combine different pieces of information, thereby building up different impressions of the same target? Park, DeKay and Kraus (1994) recently addressed this question in a study that relied on Kenny's variance partitioning technique (Kenny and LaVoie, 1984). The basic idea of the study is fairly simple. Subjects read a series of behaviours performed by five target people in five different settings, that is, a total of 25 behaviours. In the 'unknown' condition, the 25 behaviours were randomly ordered and subjects were left to think that each behaviour was performed by a different person. Subjects' task was to rate each behaviour on 10 trait dimensions. In the 'known' condition, subjects were given the same 25 behaviours but, this time, the 5 behaviours performed by the same target person were always presented as a set. After writing their impression of the target person on the basis of the set of five behaviours, subjects then rated each behaviour on the 10 trait dimensions and, finally, gave their global rating of the person on the same 10 traits before moving to the next target person. There are two central questions. First, do subjects combine the behavioural information in such a way that targets appear more consistent across situations in the 'known' than in the 'unknown' condition? In other words, are ratings concerning the same target more consistent when the target's identity is known? Second, do perceivers form idiosyncratic views about target people? In other words, is it the case that different subjects' ratings of the same target person are different from one another? Park et al.'s (1994) data fully support both predictions and confirm the idea that perceivers construct different models of what the target person is like. Supposedly, these models enable explanations of events in a manner parallel to narrative explanations (Fiske, 1993b; Read, 1987; Sedikides and Anderson, 1994).

The work by Anderson and Sedikides (1991) and Park et al. (1994) stresses the importance of perceivers' naive theories and the role of causal connectedness in impression formation. Of course, due to the specific methodology adopted by these authors, it is not really the case that perceivers find themselves confronted with inconsistent sets of information. As it turns out and without the benefit of current methodological and sophisticated statistical tools, Asch had already tackled the issue of inconsistency and demonstrated people's extraordinary ability to construct theories in order to explain the association between various apparently inconsistent traits. In one variation of his classic set of studies, Asch (1946) confronted subjects with only three of the six traits used to demonstrate the primacy effect. After having written the description sketches and chosen the traits on the checklist, subjects were given the remaining three traits as applying to a new person and asked for a new description and for another choice of traits. No difficulty seemed to emerge in building up these two (very different) impressions. Asch then told his subjects that the six traits actually belonged to the same person and requested a new impression. Integration of the entire set of information seemed very difficult. Most likely, perceivers who integrated the two sets of three traits could not reconcile the two models into one (Burnstein and Schul, 1982). At this stage, it is important to remember how easily subjects built up an impression when they were told right away that all traits belonged to the same person (Asch, 1946). In a subsequent piece of research, Asch looked at the various strategies people rely upon to reconcile the inconsistent information contained in a description (Asch and Zukier, 1984). He was able to show that people easily explain how a target person may possess two semantically opposed traits such as cheerful and gloomy. For instance, perceivers select one trait to stand as the focal feature of the person and the other trait as only complementing the global picture (Park et al., 1994). Asch and Zukier's (1984) findings directly speak to perceivers' fantastic ability to reconcile apparently inconsistent pieces of information.

2 From Persons to Groups

The various efforts described above concern research on impression formation, a topic that is traditionally seen as separate from stereotyping. We would like to argue that a similar view gains credence in research on stereotypes. We therefore document the evolution of theoretical perspectives from purely associationistic to a more schematic conception of stereotypic knowledge.

The oldest methods for studying stereotype content mainly relied on the idea of association. Influenced by Katz and Braly's (1933) seminal work on the measurement of stereotypes, social psychologists devoted a lot of time and energy to examining those features that subjects saw to be highly correlated with

specific groups of people. The royal path to a better understanding of intergroup perceptions was to uncover the co-occurrence of a given feature and a group. To be sure, we have learned a great deal from the checklist approach. For instance, the successive waves of research among Princeton students allowed us to grasp the representational concomitants of historical events (Gilbert, 1951; Karlins, Coffman and Walters, 1969; Katz and Braly, 1933).

Despite its obvious merits and its continuing success, the checklist approach now tends to be complemented by a number of newer techniques building on what may be called the typological view of stereotypes. We owe the first empirical work in this perspective to Brewer and colleagues (Brewer, Dull and Lui, 1981). These authors verified that their American subjects distinguish elderly persons in 'grandmotherly', 'elder statesman' and 'senior citizen' types. In one study, subjects received a stack of photographs representing elderly people of the three types. Their task was to sort the pictures into what they thought were appropriate groups. Subjects' sortings closely corresponded to the authors' a priori classification. In a second study, subjects examined six clusters of three photographs forming either meaningful or non-meaningful subsets. Specifically, all pictures in a given subset belonged to the same type or each subset comprised one picture from each type. Subjects were provided with an adjective checklist and asked to assess the various attributes that corresponded to each subset. Results indicate that meaningful subsets led subjects to produce richer and more consensual descriptions than non-meaningful subsets. Brewer and colleagues (1981) built upon these findings as well as related information processing data to argue that psychologically meaningful cognitive representations of groups are likely to be organized into basic level categories, a level of abstraction below that of general categories such as age, race or sex (Deaux and Lewis, 1984; Taylor, 1981b). To summarize, people seem to rely on a series of types to infer the presence of other, related, characteristics (Devine and Baker, 1991). Moreover, research also indicates that stereotypes of groups or social roles, being richer and more concrete, are generally preferred to types based on abstract personality traits (Andersen and Klatzky, 1987; Andersen, Klatzky and Murray, 1990; Brewer and Lui, 1989; Grant and Holmes, 1981).

To recap, the research on impression formation witnessed a shift from associationistic views to typological views. The main feature of the latter perspective is the role of the relationships between the components of the schematic representation. We argue that a similar view has come of age in the field of stereotyping. Without denying the importance of looking at the discrete characteristics comprising stereotypes of various social groups, we promote the idea that stereotypes are better seen as an interconnected set of components. A key aspect of a typological conception of stereotypes is the importance of the coherence among the various pieces of information comprising the stereotype (Fiske, 1993b; Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994, 1996; see also, Worchel and Rothgerber, this volume).

3 Stereotypes as Explanatory Frameworks

The traditional view that stereotypes are labels associated with a list of features has generated an enormous amount of research (for reviews, see Hamilton and Sherman, 1994; Stangor and Lange, 1994). We now have evidence aplenty to show that people's stereotypic beliefs influence the encoding and the retrieval of information (Darley and Gross, 1983; Bodenhausen, 1988; Bodenhausen and Lichtenstein, 1987; Kunda and Sherman-Williams, 1993; Sagar and Schofield, 1980; Srull and Wyer, 1989; Wyer and Srull, 1980, 1981, 1989). Without denying the importance of these findings, our explanation view of stereotypes stresses a somewhat different aspect of confirmation processes. We argue that the internal causal structure of stereotypes plays a crucial role in guiding explanation and attribution processes. That is, people try to integrate the individual pieces of information in order to come up with a coherent story about the target person or the group and, in so doing, they quite heavily rely on their naïve theories to organize incoming information (e.g., Deaux and Emswiller, 1974; Duncan, 1976; Taylor and Jaggi, 1974; Jaspars and Hewstone, 1984). In sum, stereotypes serve as enlightening gestalts (Fiske, 1993b; Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994; Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994).

Several lines of research illustrate the importance of the explanatory activity in stereotyping. Wittenbrink, Gist and Hilton (1994) recently identified two major causal models that white Americans hold about African Americans. In the first model, African Americans are seen as being responsible for their current lot. An absence of motivation and proper values stands as the major reason for their being unable to achieve success in society. The second model states that structural disadvantages, that is, lack of job opportunities, inadequate education system, and so forth result in economic failure and lower social status. Whereas the first models characterizes African Americans as the perpetrators of racial problems, the second model sees them as the victims of discrimination. Importantly, although a series of features of African Americans may be present in both models, the underlying account is likely to provide them with a very different meaning. So, for instance, African Americans may be characterized as uneducated people in both models. Still, the 'perpetrator view' emphasizes the intellectual and motivational limitations of African Americans and so questions the impact of better school environments in critical neighbourhoods. In sharp contrast, the 'victim view' insists on the objective potential of African American people and stresses the shortcomings of public investment in the school system. To test the idea that people would rely on their stereotypic conceptual knowledge to construe the incoming information, Wittenbrink presented subjects with a jury decision task about an interracial assault. Clearly, high and low prejudiced subjects interpreted the evidence in line with the perpetrator or the victim view, respectively. As expected, subjects' judgement of guilt and

sentence reflected their level of prejudice. In our opinion, the specific contribution of Wittenbrink's study, however, lies in its reliance on open descriptions which were then coded for locus of causality. Subjects made up very different stories depending on their specific views about African Americans.

Anderson and colleagues (Anderson, 1982, 1983; Anderson, Lepper and Ross, 1980) also demonstrated the impact of explanation on stereotype maintenance, something they call belief perseverance (see also, Koehler, 1991). For instance, Anderson et al.'s (1980) subjects were given two detailed case histories of fire-fighters suggesting that risk-seeking behaviour predicted either future success or failure. When informed that the descriptions were fictitious, subjects continued to believe in the relationship they had been presented with. Interestingly, half of the subjects were asked to generate causal explanations for the scenarios given to them, the others were not. Subjects who engaged in causal processing showed more belief perseverance than subjects who did not perform this kind of cognitive work. One important asset of Anderson's work is that both theories linking risk preference to job performance as a fire-fighter were provided to subjects who knew little or nothing about this issue. The findings underscore the impressive ability of theories to self-perpetuate if they are adequately backed up by an explanatory framework (Anderson, Lepper and Ross, 1980; Ross, Lepper and Hubbard, 1975). Anderson (1983) demonstrated that concrete data, that is, case histories, were much more efficient in feeding causal scenarios than abstract data, that is, statistical information, despite their obvious lack of reliability.

Not surprisingly, the explanatory activity is most tangible when people are presented with a person who combines seemingly conflicting features (Asch and Zukier, 1984). When a target individual turns out to belong to several social groups, is it the case that attributes are simply added up to a growing list of features or do people generate new explanations and come up with original materials to account for the surprising mix? In an ingenious set of experiments, Kunda and colleagues (Kunda, Miller and Claire, 1990) showed that people are capable of forming a unified impression of a person who belongs to a surprising combination of social categories. Subjects were asked to write a description of their expectations about a person who belonged to one of two constituent categories (such as Harvard-educated and carpenter; blind and lawyer) or to both categories. Results supported Kunda et al.'s (1990) hypothesis that people would engage in causal reasoning and rely on broad world knowledge in order to reconcile the apparent contradictions. A specific finding was that subjects often came up with emergent properties not contained in the definition of the constituent categories. So, for instance, some subjects perceived a Harvard-educated carpenter as being non-conformist and non-materialistic, two features mentioned neither for a Harvard-educated person nor for a carpenter.

Recent work on subtyping also exemplifies the role of explanation in the maintenance of stereotypes. Interestingly, the cognitive approach to the issue

of stereotype change very quickly relied on the typological view of stereotypes (Gurwitz and Dodge, 1977; Hewstone, Macrae, Griffiths, Milne and Brown, 1994; Johnston and Hewstone, 1992; Rothbart, 1981; Weber and Crocker, 1983; for a review, see Hewstone, 1994). The classic pattern of results is that the concentration of stereotype inconsistent information in a few members of the target group leads perceivers to form a subtype. As a result, the stereotype of the group as a whole is hardly affected. In contrast, when inconsistent information is distributed over several if not all of the members of the target group, subjects take the contradictory evidence into account. Judgements reveal a much more important modification of their stereotype of the group. The bottom line of this kind of research is that very inconsistent members of an otherwise consistent group are encapsulated into a subtype and seen as irrelevant to the rest of the group. One important question remains however as to the nature of the processes involved in subtyping. More recent work by Kunda and Oleson (1995) provides additional insight in this regard. These authors stress the role of construal processes, a strategy highly similar to what we call explanatory activity. According to Kunda and Oleson (1995), encounters with a deviant member of a group should not lead to generalization at the level of the group stereotype if other available information allows the perceiver to account for the inconsistency. The authors use the stereotype of lawyers, perceived by control subjects to be highly extroverted. In one condition, subjects are presented with a brilliant *introverted* lawyer. Compared to the control subjects, these subjects generalize to the group as a whole and evaluate lawyers to be less extroverted. In two other conditions, subjects also learn that the introverted lawyer works in a small or in a large firm. Importantly, pretests show that the size of the firm is totally unrelated to lawyers' introversion/extroversion. This time, however, no generalization takes place. Compared to the control subjects, subjects in these two conditions do not rate lawyers in general as being less extroverted. Additional data collected by Kunda and Oleson (1995) suggest that the size of the firm, an initially neutral piece of information, is used by subjects in order to account for the introversion of the target person and to stick to their view of lawyers as being extroverted people. Results such as these show that perceivers maintain their stereotype even in the face of inconsistent information. More importantly, they suggest that stereotype maintenance depends on the existence of a subjectively valid explanation (Crocker, Hannah and Weber, 1983; Kulik, 1983).

The lesson from subtyping research is that encounters with deviant members of a social category affect the expectations to the extent that a strong connection is forced between the information presented to the perceiver and the explanation that underlies group membership in the perceiver's mind. In other words, we suspect that not being able to rely on a biased account of the newly encountered evidence will force the perceiver to take stock and modify whatever stereotypic view is entertained. To the extent that explanation is at the heart

of what it means to hold a stereotypic view, we would argue that accounting for the presence of inconsistent information must be a time- and energy-consuming job. As a consequence, people will likely maintain their stereotypes in the face of inconsistent information to the extent that they can manage to reconcile it with their a priori views.

In a recent study, we addressed these important issues using a paradigm that combined Kunda and Oleson's procedure and more traditional cognitive business methodology (Yzerbyt, Coull and Rocher, 1995). Specifically, we decided to expose our subjects to a deviant member of a stereotyped category under distraction versus no-distraction conditions. We selected the category of computer engineers because it seemed highly associated with the idea of introversion. In contrast to Kunda and Oleson, subjects in all conditions were presented with a successful computer engineer who was attributed a number of consistent (i.e., rational), inconsistent (i.e., extroverted), and neutral (e.g., married) characteristics. Information about the target person was conveyed by means of a two-minute informal interview played on audio tape. Half of the subjects had to play a very simple video game on a computer screen while listening to the interview. The remaining subjects just listened to the tape. Immediately after the interview, half of the subjects had to rate the computer engineers in general on a series of personality traits including extroversion–introversion. The other half rated the target person. An additional group of subjects provided us with a baseline for the category of computer engineers.

Results supported our hypotheses (see figure 2.1). Whether distracted or not, subjects who rated the target person proved sensitive to the inconsistency of the information that was presented to them. This result indicates that our distracted subjects were not impaired to the point that they did not encode the relevant target information. Indeed, additional analyses indicated that there were no differences in recall of the target information between distraction and no-distraction subjects. Our main hypothesis concerned the evaluation of the group as a whole. As expected, non-distracted and baseline subjects rated the group in a similar way. This result is totally compatible with Kunda and Oleson's findings and suggests that non-distracted subjects were able to reconcile the inconsistent information with the stereotype of the category as a whole. Finally, compared to the non-distracted, subjects who were presented with the distracting video game rated the category as a whole to be less introverted. These findings are congruent with the view that stereotype maintenance is resource-consuming and that distraction prevents subjects from explaining inconsistent information away, thereby stressing the crucial role of explanatory activity in stereotype maintenance. In addition, our results suggest that one would be well-advised not to take the cognitive economy metaphor too literally (Spears and Haslam, this volume).

To be sure, people have been shown to benefit greatly from the existence of such devices as stereotypes in their dealing with incoming information (Macrae,

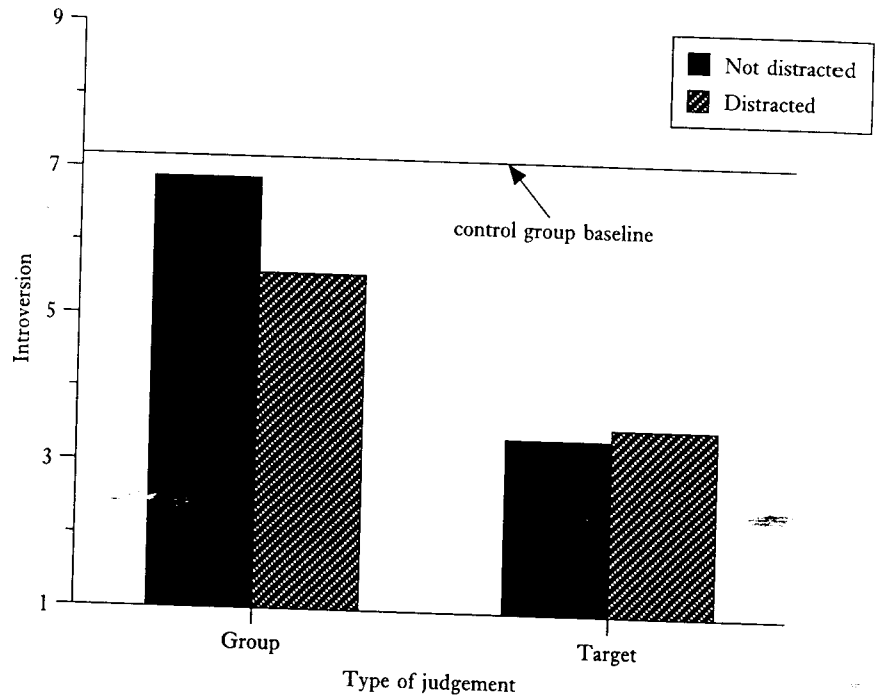

Figure 2.1 Judgement of introversion as a function of type of judgement and level of distraction.

Milne and Bodenhausen, 1994). However, the presence of a stereotypic label inconsistent with the remainder of the information may force subjects into resolving internal inconsistencies and finding appropriate explanations. As a result, the presence of a stereotypic label, compared to its absence, may actually increase the demands on the cognitive system and deteriorate performance on concurrent tasks. Yzerbyt, Rocher and Coull (1995) recently tested this hypothesis and confirmed that the provision of a stereotypic yet inconsistent label greatly impaired subjects' performance on a probe reaction time measure. Such a perspective has implications for the issue of stereotype change and one promising line of research for stereotype alteration would be to underline the link between inconsistent information and the explanation underlying group membership.

In our opinion, researchers should consider abandoning the simplistic view of stereotypes as simple lists of attributes and take more seriously the idea of stereotypes as well-organized theoretical structures. Interestingly, recent work on categorization has been dealing with related issues. In the next section, we review the current arguments relating to this issue proposed by cognitive psychologists. As it turns out, a number of conceptual and empirical advances

now stress the importance of explanation in object categorization. Similarity of surface characteristics is denied its primary role in the categorization process. Instead, object features are given a collaborative role in the organization of semantic memory along with perceivers' explanatory theories. In the fifth section, we examine the implications of a subjective essentialistic approach to categorization for research on stereotypes and stereotyping.

4 Categorization: From Similarity to Essence

The work on stereotyping and social categorization owes much to the research endeavours of a number of cognitive psychologists. For instance, most social psychologists would agree that the work by Rosch (1978) allowed them to re-examine with great success prevailing conceptions about person perception (Andersen and Klatzky, 1987; Brewer, 1988; Cantor and Mischel, 1977, 1979; Fiske and Taylor, 1984, 1991; Taylor, 1981b; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell, 1987). Similarly, insights of a number of cognitive psychologists about the role of exemplars in semantic memory were quickly adopted by social psychologists in order to challenge the dominant prototype model (Linville, Fischer and Salovey, 1989; Linville, Salovey and Fischer, 1986; E. R. Smith and Zaràte, 1990). We think that the ongoing debate in the cognitive literature points to a new conception of the categorization process (Komatsu, 1992; Murphy and Medin, 1985; Medin, 1989; Medin, Goldstone and Gentner, 1993; Medin and Ortony, 1989; Wattenmaker, Nakamura and Medin, 1988) and that the time is ripe for social psychologists to take advantage of these insights (Corneille and Leyens, 1994; Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994).

According to the Roschian perspective of categorization, the classical view that concepts have necessary and defining features needed to be challenged for a variety of reasons. For one thing, it proved to be impossible to specify the list of features that define psychologically meaningful categories. Wittgenstein (1953) made this argument very vividly when he used the example of games. One simply cannot establish a definitive set of characteristics that only games would have and the absence of which would indicate that the object to be categorized is not a game. A second problem is the fact that some members of a given category seem to be better representatives of the category than others. So, for instance, a cow seems to be a better example of a mammal than a dolphin. A classical view of categories cannot account for such typicality effects. Finally, the fact that members may be difficult to assign to a category is hardly compatible with the classical view of categories in which the membership is simply decided by looking for the presence of defining features.

As it turns out, the above effects can easily be accounted for by the probabilistic view of categories which holds that categories are 'fuzzy' or 'ill-defined' concepts (for a review, see Smith and Medin, 1981). In their pioneering

work, Rosch and Mervis (1975) showed that category members were perceived to be better representatives of a category to the extent that they possessed a high number of characteristic features. Characteristic features are defined as those features that most, but not necessarily all, members of the category possess. Abandoning a strict definitional conception of categories, the probabilistic view of categories argues that people form abstract summaries of the category, prototypes, and that prototypes are the basis for categorization. People decide about category membership on the basis of the similarity between the object and the various prototypes stored in memory.

Closer scrutiny of the probabilistic view indicates that it tends to stress the role of the perceived object and to downplay the importance of the perceiver. In other words, the external world is ruling much of the categorization process. An example will help clarify this point. People see birds and mammals the way they do because the members of each of these two categories share a high number of attributes and the overlap between categories remains minimal. The argument here is that the members of one category are similar to one another and different from members of another category in some observer-independent sense (Medin and Ortony, 1989). A cow and a horse are members of the same category, mammals, because they are the 'same' in an absolute sense. Even the exemplar view, the most successful competitor to the prototype view, gives the external world the central role. Specifically, the exemplar view states that perceivers categorize not on the basis of similarity to an abstract prototype that summarizes the evidence relevant for the category but on the basis of the similarity to any specific member using the entire set of category members stored in memory. In other words, the exemplar view holds that perceivers categorize a new instance by comparing it with stored knowledge and choose that category which contains the closest resembling exemplar (Hintzman, 1986; Medin and Shaffer, 1978).

By showing that categories can be created on the basis of pragmatic goals, Barsalou (1987) introduced the idea that perceivers' goals can shape the categorization process. So, for example, subjects seem quite capable of sorting out the kind of objects that one would like to give as birthday presents. Smith and Zárate (1992) similarly elaborated the exemplar view by arguing that the set of exemplars that are activated in order to categorize a specific instance are highly sensitive to the transient goals of the perceiver. While these two approaches question the imbalance of the dominant views in favour of the external world and give perceivers some importance in the categorization process, they hardly address the issue of the underlying comparison process: how is similarity between a new object and a prototype or a set of exemplars computed? Indeed, turning back to our mammals example, a real problem emerges when one questions the selection of features underlying the decision about membership. Why is it that these features instead of others were selected for consideration (Murphy and Medin, 1985)? Strictly speaking, any two objects can always be made to

differ from one another. All it takes is to select the right set of features. Conversely, any two objects can be made similar if the appropriate set of features is retained. Last but not least, similarity is highly sensitive to the comparative context (Tversky, 1977; Tversky and Gati, 1978). So, Austria is seen to resemble Sweden more than Hungary or Poland. In contrast, Austria looks more similar to Hungary than to Sweden or to Norway. As cognitive psychologists now widely recognize, what this all means is that the (perceptual) similarity of surface characteristics as a basis for category coherence is most slippery and unconstrained (Medin, Goldstone and Gentner, 1993).

Taking the above problems into account, Medin (1989; Medin, Goldstone and Gentner, 1993) suggests that we would be better off considering similarity as a product rather than a cause of conceptual coherence. Two things are seen to be similar because perceivers have a good theory that justifies seeing them as members of the same category. Such a theory would work at the level of deeper features of the category members and would explain why the surface characteristics are the ones that people witness. Such a knowledge-based categorization process not only stresses the role of the perceiver as opposed to a strict objectivist position but it also highlights the importance of conceptual coherence in semantic knowledge. In one illustrative study, Medin and Shoben (1988) found that people rated the terms 'white hair' and 'grey hair' to be more similar than 'grey hair' and 'black hair' but the terms 'white clouds' and 'grey clouds' to be less similar than 'grey clouds' and 'black clouds'. Supposedly, the presence of a theory of ageing in the first case and a theory of weather in the second accounts for the findings (Medin and Shoben, 1988). Thus similarity does not provide conceptual coherence but theories do. The basic idea here is that categories seem to be organized around an underlying explanation that links the features together (Wattenmaker, Nakamura and Medin, 1988).

Despite his questioning the status of similarity, Medin (1989) argues against throwing the baby out with the bath water. Were we to eliminate the notion of similarity, categories would be explained strictly in terms of perceivers' theories. Obviously, we would be left in no better condition as far as the constraint problem is concerned. One way out of this problem is to give similarity the important role of constraining our theories (Frazer, 1959). In this sense, theories and similarity join together and guide the categorization process. The interplay between surface and deeper features leads us to the notion of psychological essentialism. According to Medin (1989, p. 1476), 'people act as if things (e.g., objects) have essences or underlying natures that make them the things that they are'. In other words, we function on the basis of surface level similarities as if some deeper properties of the object supports the decision process. When people adopt a psychological essentialistic stance, their working hypothesis is that things that look alike tend to share deeper properties. We directly build upon this work to argue for a subjective essentialistic view of social categories.

5 Subjective Essentialism in Early Stereotyping Research

'Stereotypes are not objectionable because they are generalisations about categories; such categorisations are valuable when they are true. Stereotypes are not objectionable because they are generalisations that have been proven false; for the most part we do not know whether they are true or false – in their probabilistic forms. Stereotypes are not objectionable because they are generalisations acquired by hearsay rather than by direct experience; many generalisations acquired by hearsay are true and useful. What is objectionable about them? I think it is their ethnocentrism and the implication that important traits are inborn for large groups.' (Brown, 1965, p. 181)

Minimizing the significance of some of the most debated features of stereotypes, Brown's quote suggests that the usual evil aspects of stereotypes may not be so detrimental after all. What is seen as being more important, however, is that stereotypes entail a very special aspect: they link specific attributes to the very essence of what people are. A strong concern for essentialism in the stereotyping area can be traced back to Walter Lippmann, the father of the concept of stereotype. Lippmann not only anticipated the major developments of later research, he also outlined the danger of linking certain kinds of explanation to specific stereotypic contents. The clearest example of this view can be found in a debate about the relative role of nature versus nurture in the development of intelligence. Indeed, Lippmann strongly disputed Terman's (1923) use of intelligence tests. Of course, he worried about the validity of the measure itself. More importantly, however, his fears concerned Terman's conception about innateness. According to Lippmann, the power of the tester becomes dangerously exaggerated if the measure of intelligence is used to rank every member of the society and if the hereditary explanation is thought to justify the ranking once and for all. 'If the impression takes root that these tests really measure intelligence, that they constitute a sort of last judgement on the child's capacity, that they reveal "scientifically" his predestined ability, then it would be a thousand times better if all the intelligence testers and all their questionnaires were sunk without warning in the Sargasso Sea' (Lippmann, 1922, quoted in Gould, 1981). As a matter of fact, Terman (1916) considered education to be of little help in modifying people's level of intelligence and agreed with the idea that differences between various social groups are biologically based. Claiming that Indians, Mexicans or blacks all suffered from an hereditary deficit, he expressed explicit regrets that there was 'no possibility of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding' (pp. 91–2). To sum up, before empirical research on stereotypes even began, Lippmann was already warning against the terrible consequences of prejudice when it is backed up by a powerful explanation.[2]

The prominent advocator of the socio-functional perspective on stereotypes, Sherif, also alluded to the notion of essence. In his book *An Outline of Social Psychology*, he invites students of prejudice to pay attention to what he calls the 'substantive mode of mentality'. As Sherif (1948, p. 361) notes, 'by substantive mode of mentality, we mean the tendency to account for or describe events (social and otherwise) in terms of the "essence" of things instead of in terms of related processes. The great mass of bourgeois respectability shows a tendency to deal with human and social events in terms of an eternal "human nature", qualities inherent in this or in that group . . . This unscientific substantive mentality is clearly indicated in the Middletown attitudes concerning masculine and feminine characteristics. In spite of the facts that the masculine and feminine roles and statuses have actually undergone considerable changes in the United States since the Revolution, the prevailing conceptions of men and women are held to be *inherent*, immutable qualities of the sexes' (emphasis in original). A few years later, Allport (1954), in his classic treatise on prejudice, similarly stresses the role played by essential beliefs in the generation of prejudice. Presumably, a belief in essence develops because perceivers fall prey to 'the principle of least effort'. So, for instance, Allport (1954, p. 173) mentions that 'there is an inherent "Jewishness" in every Jew. The "soul of the Oriental", "Negro blood", Hitler's "Aryanism", "the peculiar genius of America", "the logical Frenchman", "the passionate Latin"'. All these comments concern the belief in essence. In fact, Allport (1954) spoke of the 'principle of least effort' not so much to describe the use of categories per se but, rather, to refer to the essentialist attitude.

Clearly, the question of the nature of the link between the group label and the stereotyped features surfaced in early social psychological views on prejudice and stereotypes. But how do contemporary positions deal with this aspect of stereotyping? A recent contribution by Rothbart and Taylor (1992; Anderson and Sedikides, 1991) can be seen as the most explicit attempt at stressing the role of essentialistic thinking in social categorization. These authors build upon the distinction between natural kind categories (such as mammal, gold, etc.) and human artefacts (such as furniture, car, etc.). Whereas for human artefacts category membership is based on the possession of a set of arbitrary defining characteristics, natural kind categories are thought to be organized around underlying essences. According to Rothbart and Taylor (1992), social categories are considered to be like natural kind categories rather than like human artefact categories. Social groups may easily be perceived as natural categories when they can be identified on the basis of physical features such as sex, race, age, etc. Supposedly, surface characteristics echo deeper, essential, features. In other words, psychological essentialism is likely to prevail when objective indicators are available. The idea of an underlying essence suggests that perceivers appraise category membership of social targets as reflecting their true identity, their real nature. Associated is a strong feeling of unalterability: membership to an essentially

defined social category can hardly be modified. Also, members of natural kind categories are perceived to be relatively homogeneous, thereby allowing for rich induction and complex theoretical construction to take place. Rothbart and Taylor's (1992) analysis gives a new insight about a number of issues in the area of social categorization and may explain the power of stereotypes.

This brings us to the final part of our journey concerning the 'stereotypes as explanations' model. After all, the critical question really is to understand why it is that people tend to adopt a subjective essentialistic approach about social categories. By asking such a question, we find ourselves reasserting the functional approach of stereotypes. In the remainder of this chapter, we argue that the stabilization of the current state of affairs is one important goal of people's reliance on stereotypic knowledge in general and essentialistic categorization in particular. After we outline what could stand as the essentialistic syndrome, we examine the mechanisms linking subjective essentialism to rationalization.

6 Stereotypes as Tools for Rationalization

Even a cursory look at the research carried out under the cognitive banner confirms the common intuition that characteristics encountered in the environment play a crucial role in the emergence of stereotypes. Some researchers stress the fact that we meet members of outgroups less often than members of the groups to whom we belong (Linville, 1982; Linville, Salovey and Fisher, 1986). Because people's knowledge basis is less complex and less differentiated for outgroups as compared to ingroups, judgements about outgroups end up being more extreme. The social learning approach to stereotypes as it has been promoted by Eagly and colleagues also emphasizes the role of direct observation in the emergence of stereotypes (Eagly and Kite, 1987; Eagly and Steffen, 1984). According to Eagly (1987), we hold stereotypes about groups of people because we observe individual members in a limited set of circumstances. So, for instance, our stereotypes of women and men are a simple consequence of observing these two categories of people occupying different social roles. Borrowing from research on prototypes (Rosch, 1978) as well as from earlier work on accentuation (Tajfel and Wilkes, 1963; Tajfel, 1972), Stangor argues that people select those traits that maximize category differentiation (Stangor and Lange, 1994). Using intelligence and friendliness as the underlying trait dimensions, Ford and Stangor (1992) provided their subjects with behavioural information about members of two groups, a 'blue' group and a 'red' group. Subjects preferentially described the groups in terms of the trait dimension for which the mean difference between the two groups was largest (Expt. 1) or the within-group variability was smallest (Expt. 2). These data suggest that stereotypes develop to help differentiate groups from each other. As far as the notions of comparative fit and meta-contrast ratio build upon the relative importance of

inter- and intracategory differences, self-categorization theory is partially grounded in this same tradition (Oakes, 1987; Oakes, Haslam and Turner, 1994; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty and Hayes, 1992).

From the perspective of the initiators of the cognitive approach of stereotypes (Allport, 1954; Tajfel, 1982), the monopolistic status of the cognitive economy function comes out as a surprise. For example, Tajfel (1982a) noted that the cognitive processes involved in categorization serve a higher purpose. Indeed, by selecting, accentuating and interpreting information, the process of social categorization actually 'fulfils its function of protecting the value system which underlies the division of the surrounding social world' (Tajfel and Forgas, 1981, p. 118). We think that most students of stereotypes would agree that stereotypes are here for some other reasons than strict information processing constraints. The fact is though that functional approaches have been forced into a long recess as the cognitive wave reoriented researchers' interests (Wyer and Srull, 1984). However, these concerns surface again and could well benefit from the findings accumulated over the years by the social cognition approach (Spears, Oakes, Ellemers and Haslam, this volume).

A number of findings substantiate the rationalization function of stereotypes. In a recent analysis, Jost and Banaji (1994) identify three versions of the functional approach, the ego-justification approach, the group-justification approach and the system-justification approach. The ego-justification function can be best illustrated by the work of Adorno and colleagues (1950). The basic thrust of this approach is that stereotypes stand as some sort of defence mechanism allowing the individual to rationalize conduct in relation to specific social categories. As it turns out, some renewed interest for this line of thinking can be observed in the area of attitudes and attitude change (Snyder, 1992; Snyder and DeBono, 1989; Snyder and Miene, 1990). By far the most popular, the group-justification approach stresses the fact that stereotypic thinking must be viewed in the context of group interest (Sherif, 1967). In this context, stereotypes are essentially tuned to the nature of the relations between and within social groups. In other words, one would expect group interactions to be of utmost importance in the variation of the content of the stereotypes (for reviews, see Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994; Oakes, Haslam and Turner, 1994). That stereotypes are sensitive to changes in relations between groups is in fact no new finding (Avigdor, 1953; Buchanan, 1951; Gilbert, 1951; Karlins et al., 1969; Katz and Braly, 1933; Meenes, 1943; Prothro and Melikian, 1955; Seago, 1947; Sherif, 1967). The work of Tajfel and colleagues (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975; Turner, 1987b) also illustrates the view that stereotypes stand as an ideal means to justify the ingroup treatment of the outgroup members. Negative views of outgroups offer the possibility to derogate the outgroup in an attempt to differentiate positively from outgroup members and thus serve the group members at the level of their social identity. When a group is not providing its members with reasons for positive social identity, people may want to alter the relative status of the group or, alternatively, to leave the group for a better one (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The choice between a strategy of social change or individual mobility largely depends on the subjective belief that group boundaries are or are not permeable (Doosje and Ellemers, this volume; Ellemers, 1993; Tajfel, 1978a).

According to Jost and Banaji (1994), the group-justification approach in general and social identity theory in particular has some difficulty explaining the phenomenon of 'outgroup favouritism' (for an example, see Hinkle and Brown, 1990). Members of disadvantaged groups are expected to strive for a better image. However, evidence exists aplenty that people internalize positive but also sometimes negative views of themselves and the groups to whom they belong. With respect to these issues, the system-justification approach suggests that stereotypes are best understood as a means to maintain the social structure in its current state. Indeed, social arrangements often involve several groups not all of which enjoy a satisfactory status. To the extent that the system perpetuates itself, one is forced to conclude that either some violent coercive power is exerted by those who enjoy a privileged position in society or that some form of acceptance characterizes the members of the disadvantaged group. System-justification thus refers to these processes whereby members of a given social system accept and justify prevailing social, economic, political, sexual conditions simply because they happen to exist. This means that, to the extent that a system-justifying attitude is encountered among members of the dominated group, they will put aside self or group-interest and value the maintenance of the existing arrangement. It then becomes easy to understand why group members sometimes entertain negative views of the ingroup and positive views of outgroups. In fact, the notions of 'legitimacy' and 'stability' of the system as they have been proposed by social identity theorists concur with the plausibility of the system-justification approach as a sensible account of stereotyping phenomena (see Ellemers, van Knippenberg, De Vries and Wilke, 1988; van Knippenberg and Ellemers, 1990). This view of system-justification is of course highly reminiscent of the notion of ideology (Althusser, 1970; Beauvois and Joule, 1981; Ibañez, 1994; Marx and Engels, 1846/1968).

Along the same line, we argue that stereotypes are best seen as explanatory devices that serve a rationalization function: stereotypes allow people to provide an account for why things are the way they are. In that respect, our approach capitalizes on Jost and Banaji's (1994) work. However, we would like to take the argument one step further and suggest that rationalization is best served by an essentialistic approach to social categories.[3] When such a subjective essentialistic belief prevails, the differences between groups are seen to be phenotypic surface characteristics resulting from the existence of genotypic deeper features defining the groups. In a thoughtful analysis of the social classes composing various societies, Sherif (1948) stressed the fact that the dominated group often adopts the views of the dominant group. He further noted that 'the caste system in India . . . was not the idea of the ignorant or the frustrated "untouchables." It was the philosophical Brahmins and the British masters of the local

Indian princes and rulers who were interested in keeping these delineations intact. The psychological correlates of theses delineations in the form of alleged inherent capacities and "traits" corresponding to the politico-economic scales have certainly been effective at times in keeping various groups "in their place," sometimes of their own volition' (1948, p. 343). This quote represents very well what we mean by an essentialistic mechanism of rationalization. Members of a given social situation are likely to refer to some intrinsic feature of the parties involved in order to strengthen social stability.

A study by Hoffman and Hurst (1990) provides tentative support for the role of essentialism in stereotyping. These authors disagree with the idea that stereotypes acquire their meaning on the basis of a kernel of truth (Eagly, 1987) and argue instead that stereotypic views are ideal means to rationalize and justify intergroup relations. Subjects were to imagine that a fictitious planet was the home of two different species (depicted by way of drawings revealing family resemblance) versus two different subcultures (depicted by way of drawings revealing different clothing habits). Whereas, subjects were told, the majority of the members of one group work in the city (a masculine activity), the majority of the members of the other group raise children (a feminine activity). Instructions indicated very clearly that there were no sex differences within groups. Subjects received three pieces of information about each of the 15 members of each group, one consistent with the occupation of the member, one inconsistent and one irrelevant. Half the subjects were told to think about and write down a reason for the prevalence of a specific role in each of the two groups. Results show that subjects later associated feminine traits more with the child-rearing group than with the city-worker group. The reverse was found for masculine traits. Also, this pattern came out stronger when biology rather than culture was the basis of the categorization. Even more interesting is the fact that explaining the category-role correlation led to the formation of stronger stereotypes. This finding provides support for the idea that the explanatory function (rationalization) plays a major role in the formation and use of stereotype. In Hoffman and Hurst's (1990, p. 206) terms, 'stereotype formation of the kind at issue here is not purely an information processing phenomenon . . . role-based category stereotypes originate in a rationalisation process that operates by positing intrinsic differences between the categories in question'. In sum, stereotypes about a specific category of people will most likely be used when the underlying theory seems to account for the traits that happen to describe the group and when perceivers feel that they know a lot about the members of the group.

7 A Syndrome of Essentialistic Categorization

A number of criteria may help define essentialistic categorization (see also Rothbart and Taylor, 1992). At a core level, subjective essentialism is based on

the belief that the social category has a specific ontological status. In this respect, Campbell (1958) long suggested that perceptual factors and Gestalt principles govern the extent to which people consider others to comprise a 'real' entity. Both the similarity and the proximity of group members foster the idea that a significant social group is at stake. The common fate enjoyed by group members also contributes to increase group entitativity. Strong links thus exist between Campbell's (1958) early analysis of groups in terms of their entitativity and the current subjective essentialistic view of social categories. In our view, people who face a group having the nature of an entity tend to believe that there is a feature common to all category members. This happens despite the fact that people often remain unable to point out the exact nature of the underlying essence. A second aspect is that perceivers believe a member of a given category cannot cease to be a member. This seems to be somewhat trivial with respect to the most obvious categories such a gender, race and age. People's commitment to the unalterability of group membership plays a role in many contexts where categories are clearly the consequence of social definition. In Europe, working class people always seem to remain working class people, even if they become successful and rich business people. The sharp distinctions between castes in India may be an extreme version of this belief in unalterability. In that case, only the death of an individual authorizes a switch from one social category to another. The third characteristic of an essentialistic social categorization is the inductive potential. Informed about the category of a target person, perceivers feel that they know a lot about the person. A fourth related feature is the interconnectedness of the various features. Because the underlying essence provides an explanation for the category, all associated features are reinterpreted in light of one unifying theme. The fifth and final feature we would like to point out concerns the way essentialistic categorizations exclude other possible categorizations of the target. It is as if people with an essentialistic approach about others have a hard time thinking of them in alternative categorical terms. This aspect can be linked to a series of findings about the chronic accessibility of schemata (Higgins and King, 1981; Stangor, 1988).

Whereas all five features of a subjective essentialistic stance about categories have been framed in terms of the perceivers' beliefs, the same analysis can be applied to the targets' beliefs. Hypothesis confirmation (Snyder, 1984) and behavioural confirmation (Snyder, Tanke and Berscheid, 1977; Word, Zanna and Cooper, 1974) both contribute to make stereotypes become reality. This would appear as a very simple mechanism to account for the so-called kernel-of-truth hypothesis. Finally, all these notions are very much linked to the issue of prescriptive stereotypes and normative beliefs as defended by Fiske and colleagues (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux and Heilman, 1991; Fiske and Stevens, 1993). Indeed, members of dominated categories may embrace successful pathways but the major drawback remains the way other people expect them to behave. So, for instance, high-level female executives will be expected to conform

to their stereotyped role. This would involve being feminine, socially caring, responsive to male seduction, etc. One prediction in line with prescriptive stereotyping would be that people in the privileged position would be more willing to endorse an essentialistic view of existing social categories than members of the non-privileged groups. Data collected by Smith and Russell (1984) provide some evidence for this hypothesis. These authors found that boys were more likely to attribute sex differences to biological factors whereas girls were more likely to cite social factors. Of course, the perceived legitimacy of the social arrangement as well as the lack of permeability of group boundaries may lead members of a non-privileged group to share the views of the dominant group.

A recent study by Martin and Parker (1995) examined people's naïve theories about sex and race and provides empirical evidence concerning the role of an essentialistic syndrome in prejudice. These authors assessed their subjects' beliefs about the role of biological, social and circumstantial factors in sex and race differences, the difficulty of eliminating differences between sexes and races, and the variability within and between sexes. They also measured people's intolerance of ambiguity. In line with our reasoning, the more subjects thought that sex or race differences rested on biological factors, the less they believed that these differences could be eliminated. Not surprisingly, Martin and Parker found that a positive correlation emerged between the beliefs that sex differences could be eliminated and the variability within each sex. Still, the more subjects thought that men and women differed between as compared to within sexes, the more they thought that differences would be difficult to eliminate. More importantly, perceived differences between women and men were positively correlated with the belief that biological factors play a role in sex differences. Finally, Martin and Parker (1995) also found that intolerance of ambiguity correlated positively with the belief that biology is an important factor in sex and race differences and the perceived difference between women and men but correlated negatively with the perception of differences among women and among men.

The above pattern of results is consistent with our idea that subjective essentialism induces the belief that social categories differ from one another. To be sure, category differentiation may largely depend on actual group differences. In that case, the impact of essentialism would be limited to an increase of the difference in the eye of the essentialistic categorizers as compared to that signalled by the non-essentialistic categorizers. In more traditional terms, this corresponds to the well-known accentuation phenomenon (Eiser and Stroebe, 1972; McGarty and Penny, 1988; Tajfel and Wilkes, 1963; Wilder, 1986). A stronger hypothesis also entails the possibility that differences in perception arise despite the absence of a factual basis or that actual differences remain unnoticed simply because they do not fall under the umbrella of a unifying theory. Hoffman and Hurst's (1990) results can be seen as an illustration of the first of these two situations.

Examples abound in the literature that biology is not the only essence to play a major role in stereotypic thinking. A long time ago, Aristotle considered the uniqueness of the geography of Greece to be the main reason for the superiority of the Greeks over other people. In other words, the subjective essentialistic view on rationalization need not take the form of genetic essentialism. What is important, however, is the extent to which the various features of the essentialistic syndrome characterize the specific theory used by people. If anyone who comes to live in Greece may benefit from the weather and 'improve' as a person, category membership is fairly alterable. If no matter what, the birth under a given climate determines the person once and for all, there is not much that can be done to alter category membership. The latter case more closely reveals the influence of subjective essentialism.

A more recent illustration of subjective essentialism can be found in a fascinating study by Steinberg (1974) about the relation between religion and university fields selected by North American professors. This author collected impressive evidence to show that Protestants outnumber other religious groups in traditional scientific fields (such as agriculture, technical schools, chemistry, geography, etc.), that one finds more Catholics than members of other religious groups in the humanities (such as art, philosophy, foreign languages, religion, history, etc.), and that Jews are relatively more numerous in medical schools and behavioural sciences (such as law, economics, sociology, psychology, etc.). For Steinberg (1974), the cultural values put forth in the various religious groups may account for this state of affairs. Such an explanation actually builds upon a long tradition in sociology relating the choice of curricula and religious background (cf. Weber, 1964). According to Boudon (1990), an alternative account of Steinberg's data could very well be that a conjunction of random factors together contribute to generate the observed pattern. What the cultural explanation illustrates is the fact that people are reluctant to explain important facts of life by referring to trivial, not to say meaningless, variables. Because the choice of a scientific field is a consequential behaviour, it ought to be grounded in factors that truly and significantly differentiate between the three groups. In other words, deep features of the groups appear to be the only acceptable way to account for such a critical phenomenon. Interestingly, Friedman (1983) showed that a combination of collective mobility of Protestants, Catholics and Jews in North American society and the successive waves of expansion within the academic world, two phenomena that prove to be largely independent, provides an excellent account for the observed data. In other words, it was when positions in behavioural sciences were made available that young generations of Jews had access to higher education. In our view, one could suggest a similar analysis of the advent of computer science and mathematics and the influx of Asian students on American campuses. It is to be noted here that people tend to rely on one cause to explain critical phenomena instead of considering several possible (e.g., situational) causes. Steinberg's (1974) viewpoint not only shows

the desire of researchers to isolate one plausible and preferably essentialistic cause for consequential behaviour but also the power of cultural, religious or ethnic explanations.

It is interesting to see how scientists and, more generally, experts in a given field may subscribe to the essentialistic view with even more faith than lay people. As it turns out, the very scientific status of a number of theories resides in the fact that the theorists have been able to account for surface differences anyone can observe in a way that none could ever suspect. Most often, the so-called 'real' difference boils down to some version of an essential difference between the categories. A well-known theory of personality, Eysenck's trait-type model (1983), provides a nice example of such a position. Lay people are very good at telling apart surface characteristics of introverts and extroverts. Eysenck, however, has the theoretical sophistication that allows him to account for these phenotypic differences in terms of more basic, more essential, genotypic differences. Our view regarding these claims is that one ought to be extremely cautious. In fact, showing that scientific and lay knowledge may not be so far apart from each other provides an elegant way to question the status of scientific claims. In a simple but fascinating study, Semin and Krahé (1987) presented their subjects with genotypic depictions of an introvert or an extrovert and asked them to evaluate the typicality of a series of introvert and extrovert phenotypic characteristics. Results indicated that subjects were quite able to make sense of the genotypic descriptions in the way Eysenck predicts. Indeed, all phenotypic characteristics were seen as being typical of their appropriate genotypic counterpart. A second study showed that the reverse inference resulted in near perfect correspondence as well. This work thus stresses the fact that scientific claims about essentialistic features and naïve conceptions are not alien to each other.

To recap, different essentialistic theories may underlie the division of humans into various social groups. Still, we think that one would generally invoke genetic or ethnic differences among people to account for observed inequalities because surface features more readily point to genetic or ethnic explanations. One should thus approach the issues of essentialistic theories in terms of a continuum on which the various features defined above vary. In combination with perceptual factors such as similarity and proximity, the significance of the behaviour and the specific group division for the larger social system are likely to influence the degree of essentialistic characterization of groups. When people are confronted with major social events, they are prone to rely on inherent features to characterize the groups involved. We expect an essentialistic view of groups to maintain the social status quo. The more members of certain categories find themselves in a dominant position or in what appears to be a legitimate system, the more they embrace an essentialistic view about the social system. Ironically, the extreme opposite stance, that is, a revolutionary agenda, could very well adopt a similar perspective about essentialism only it would concern a different hierarchy and possibly different categories: As the terrible events of Cambodia illustrate, it is not rare to see oppressed people become oppressors.

8 The Mechanics of Subjective Essentialism in Stereotyping

One important item on our research agenda is to better understand the processes involved in rationalization. We now present preliminary empirical evidence about the possible implication of subjective essentialism in the development of stereotypes and in the way they fulfil their function of rationalization. Before we address the issue of group perception, let us first illustrate the phenomenon at the interpersonal level. In a neat study, Humphrey (1985) told subjects that the study concerned the way people work in an office setting. Relying on an ostentatiously random procedure, some participants were assigned the role of 'managers' and the others the role of 'clerks'. The particular tasks to perform took about two hours. Managers and clerks then rated themselves and each other on a series of work-related traits such as intelligence, leadership, etc., and made several behavioural predictions for the future. Except for the prediction of hard-workingness, managers were consistently rated better than clerks. Clearly thus, the high-skill tasks and the directive role of the managers on the one hand and the low-skill, repetitive jobs and the lack of autonomy of the clerks on the other led all participants to believe that they were facing two different kinds of people (see also Sande, Ellard and Ross, 1986). So, people tend to attribute personality characteristics that are coherent with the observed occupation, allowing themselves to rationalize the behaviours specific to the various roles. But for such a correspondence to be possible, people must neglect the situational determinants of behaviour. We know that they do. Two lines of work are particularly suggestive in this respect: the work on the fundamental attribution error, on the one hand, and the research on compliance, on the other. In fact, both traditions of research concern the way people provide accounts of other people's and their own behaviour.

Researchers in the field of person perception have indeed documented the fact that, when people explain behaviours, they largely underestimate the impact of situational factors and, in contrast, overestimate the weight of person characteristics (for reviews, see Gilbert and Malone, 1995; Jones, 1990; Ross, 1977; Ross and Nisbett, 1991). Ross, Amabile and Steinmetz (1977) offered a deceptively simple illustration of this 'fundamental attribution error' or 'overattribution bias'. Randomly designated questioners, contestants and observers all took part in a quiz game. As predicted, both contestants and observers later rated the questioner to be more knowledgeable than the contestant despite the fact that role assignment was explicitly random. In fact, the questioner was the only one

to take into account the privileged position of being allowed to ask rather than to (try to) answer the questions (Sande, Ellard and Ross, 1986).

Cognitive dissonance and self-perception work and, more generally, the work on compliance illustrate how people's own behaviours stand as a very powerful weapon in order to modify (in the case of attitude-discrepant behaviour) or to reinforce (in the case of attitude-consonant behaviour) existing attitudes (for reviews, see Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Cialdini, 1988). The well-known studies on the forbidden toy suggest that mild as opposed to strong situational pressures can lead people to appraise their behaviours as being the consequence of their own decision (Aronson and Carlsmith, 1963; Freedman, 1965). Cognitive dissonance findings on insufficient-justification (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959) and on effort-justification (Aronson and Mills, 1959) make a similar point. To the extent that external constraints remain in the background, the author of the behaviour is seen as the primary culprit for whatever course of action has been taken. Turning to attitude-consonant behaviours, the foot-in-the-door technique nicely shows that people can take their own behaviour at face value. By first asking people to go along with a small request, one increases compliance with a larger request (Freedman and Fraser, 1966; for reviews, see Cialdini, 1988; Joule and Beauvois, 1987; for a frightening illustration, see Milgram, 1974). Again, people are shown to overlook situational pressures and favour instead the decisive role of the author of the behaviour.

Both lines of work thus prove useful to understand how people come to characterize the various groups in their environment and integrate particular beliefs about how things and people are in a given social context. Indeed, the question is to know what will happen when groups are at stake? We suggest that the above findings at the interpersonal and intrapersonal level can easily be reinterpreted at the intra- and intergroup level, that is people will also tend to perceive groups in a way that helps rationalize their situation. Of course, an attribution to the group has to be plausible. Such an attribution will be facilitated by the belief that the group is an entity for which a good explanation is available. We thus argue that rationalization is well-served by some sort of essentialistic stance. To the extent that stereotypes link specific behaviours to underlying dispositions of the members of the group, one should be able to find evidence for a pervasive tendency for perceivers to infer underlying dispositions among members of a group despite the fact that circumstantial factors offer an alternative account of the observed behaviours. As Jones (1990, p. 96) noted, 'converting the possibility of illusory correlation into damaging stereotypes, however, requires more than the association of particular actions with particular groups of people. It requires that these actions be attributed to the underlying dispositions defining the basic identity or nature of group members . . . This tendency toward "correspondence bias" is undoubtedly a crucial link in the formation of discriminatory stereotypes.' Moreover, these mechanisms

likely explain why people may entertain views about themselves and others that are not particularly self-serving in an absolute sense.

In our subjective essentialistic view of stereotyping, groups' 'inherent' characteristics are some sort of social creations, that is, arbitrary qualities, that are attributed to social entities in order to explain their behaviour in a given cultural and historical context and to perpetuate the social system. Put simply, we talk about others and define them in ways that are relevant for the social system we live in. The present argument is not alien to work by Beauvois and colleagues on the norm of internality (Beauvois, 1984; Jellison and Green, 1981; for reviews, see Beauvois, 1995; Dubois, 1994). These authors show that the reference to dispositional features of individuals as a means to account for behaviours is a norm that people acquire during their socialization (Beauvois and Dubois, 1988; see also Newman, 1991). Moreover, Beauvois and colleagues suggest that social status is associated with different levels of skill with regard to this norm: high-status children more often rely on dispositions than their low-status counterparts. Other research suggests that people may be differentially sensitive to dispositional inferences because they entertain different theories about human nature (Gervey, Chiu, Hong and Dweck, 1993; Dweck, Hong and Chiu, 1993; Newman, 1993) and that people's readiness to reason in terms of dispositional entities is culture specific (Miller, 1984; Morris, Nisbett and Peng, 1994; Morris and Peng, 1994; Newman, 1991; see also Quattrone, 1982; Krull, 1993). It thus appears that people's proneness to rely on individual overattribution and the relative status of individualism and personal freedom go hand in hand. By analogy, we suggest that a more collectivistic orientation or, for that matter, a judgemental context that promotes categorization in terms of group membership may foster a subjective essentialistic approach to categories.

The above reasoning led us to hypothesize that a subjective essentialistic approach to group membership would facilitate people's reliance on stereotypes to explain unrelated events that happen to the group. We tested this conjecture in a series of studies using a new paradigm (Schadron, Morchain and Yzerbyt, 1994; Yzerbyt, Schadron and Morchain, 1994). Subjects' task was to form impressions about six alleged participants in another study who were videotaped during a discussion. For half of the subjects, the six persons had been randomly selected among 200 students ('aggregate' condition). The other half was told that the answers to a series of personality and social background questionnaires had been used in order to constitute a very homogeneous group of six people ('group' condition). A second manipulation concerned the future fate of the six persons. In the 'positive fate' condition, subjects learned that these six persons had been randomly assigned to a special education programme: this very favourable program provided the students with closer attention from the staff members, better classrooms, unlimited access to computers, etc. In the

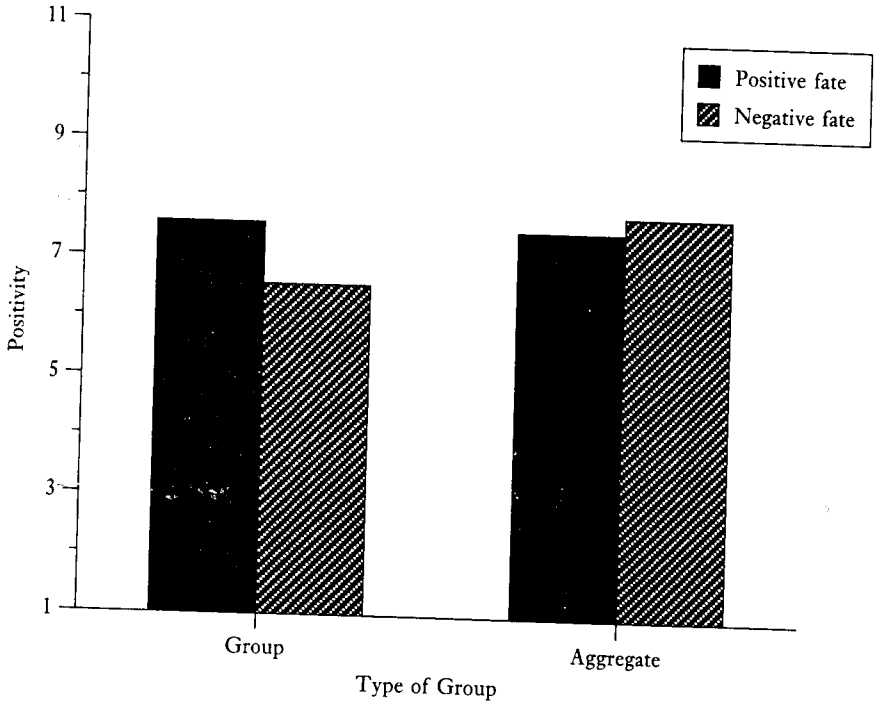

Figure 2.2 Positivity of judgement as a function of type of group and fate.

'negative fate' condition, the six persons were supposed to be the losers of the lottery: in spite of the existence of the special programme, they were to be the 'control group' who would have rather unfavourable educational conditions. To allow subjects to form an impression, all subjects then saw a 5-min discussion involving the six students. At the end of the tape, subjects evaluated the target people on a series of personality traits.

It is important to remember that the target people were clearly shown to be selected for one or the other educational context on a strictly random basis. There was thus no objective reason for subjects to perceive people differently in these two contexts. In line with our predictions, however, people saw the unfavourable context students in a less positive light that the favourable context students (see figure 2.2). We predicted that this difference would emerge only when the students were thought to belong to a meaningful group, to an entity (Campbell, 1958). As expected, the above difference emerged only when subjects believed that the students were distributed into homogeneous groups on the basis of personality and social background variables. Interestingly, our data also reveal the observed effects are mainly due to the unfavourable context students in the group condition. In other words, our subjects were especially

prone to account for the fate of the people in terms of their inner characteristics when the targets were both a homogeneous group and faced with an unfavourable fate. This pattern of results can be linked to similar findings in person perception. So, for instance, Lerner (1980) found that people easily attribute negative characteristics to victims. He further suggests that, in order to feel reassured as to their own lot, perceivers need to justify the occurrence of misfortune, accidents or any other bad event by putting some of the responsibility on the sufferer. Our results show a similar pattern for social groups only when a strong underlying theory was suggested to the subjects. These data demonstrate that the (random) fate of a group is translated into inherent features of the members of a category.

To recap, we propose that the rationalization function of stereotyping is well-served by an essentialistic approach to social categories. In other words, the best way to account for the existing social situation is to promote the idea that it stems from the nature of things. Extending well-established findings in the field of attribution and social influence, we suggest that people may overestimate the extent to which the current situation of group members is the consequence of their deep, inherent features. We have presented evidence from an ongoing research programme that an essentialistic stance about groups may facilitate the emergence of group overattribution. Indeed, our data reveal that what happens to a group tends to be attributed to characteristics of the group members particularly when the groups were defined in an essentialistic way. The rationalization function appears to be an important factor in determining people's use of stereotypes whenever some essentialistic reasoning applies.

9 Conclusions

Most researchers in the information processing tradition have stressed the cognitive economy function of stereotypes. We emphasize the fact that stereotypes are more than lists of features associated to a group label. To use more functional terms, stereotypes also help perceivers orient themselves in the environment as they provide them with rich knowledge about the social world. Based on recent developments in cognitive psychology and on a series of insights in the field of stereotyping, we argued that the 'stereotype as explanation' view may not only stress the existence of strong relationships between the components of the stereotypes. Any underlying explanation also accounts for why it is that these components hold together and why it is that the group is a group, to be differentiated from other groups. In this respect, a crucial function of stereotypes may be to rationalize the current social arrangement. The new and central message of our chapter is that the rationalization function of stereotypes is likely to be linked to a strong tendency for perceivers to fall prey to subjective essentialism.

Notes

We thank Olivier Corneille, Jacques-Philippe Leyens, Anouk Rogier and the editors of the present volume for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. The first author is also indebted to Bogdan Wojciszke and to the students of the Social Categorization group at the EAESP Summer School held in Serock, July 1994.

1 This quotation could be translated as follows: 'One people has a stupid and heavy mind, Another one enjoys a sharp, quick, and insightful mind. Where does this come from, if it is not partly from the food, from the seeds of its fathers, and from the chaos of various elements floating in the immensity of the air?' (La Mettrie, 1748/1981, pp. 100–3)

2 As a matter of fact, sterilization laws were enacted in sixteen US states between 1907 and 1917. Criminals in particular categories as well as epileptics, drug addicts, the insane and idiots were sentenced to compulsory sterilization. Shipman (1994) reports that 36,000 people had been operated upon by 1941.

3 By linking the system-justification view to the notion of 'false consciousness', Jost and Banaji (1994) question the veracity of stereotypes. Their position implicitly acknowledges the existence of 'true consciousness', something we do not take for granted. We would favour an intermediate stance that neither claims that stereotypes are correct nor that they are necessarily incorrect. In fact, the view that stereotypes are 'socially valid' (Oakes et al., 1994) or that they are 'pragmatic' (Fiske, 1993b; Leyens et al., 1994; Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens and Rocher, 1994) better suits our taste.

3

Asking the Accuracy Question: Is Measurement the Answer?

Penelope J. Oakes and
Katherine J. Reynolds

How accurate are social stereotypes? We might believe that Germans are scientifically-minded, Australians pleasure-loving and the English polite, but to what extent (and in what sense) do these stereotypical images reflect the true nature of these groups?

This question has had an interesting history in the stereotyping literature. It preoccupied researchers in the pre-cognitive era, but almost completely disappeared from the research agenda during the 1970s and 1980s. Just recently it has again become the focus of vigorous interest (e.g., Judd and Park, 1993; Lee, Jussim and McCauley, 1995; Oakes, 1993; Oakes and Turner, 1990; Oakes, Haslam and Turner, 1994; Stangor and Lange, 1994; Swim, 1994).

During the earlier period of interest in stereotype accuracy many argued that the only way to resolve the issue was through the comparison of reported stereotypes with criteria assumed to reflect the actual characteristics of group members (e.g., see Fishman, 1956). This argument has recently been revived by Judd and Park (1993), who aim 'to make explicit in a systematic and thorough fashion the issues involved in asking the accuracy question' (p. 110). They, too, advocate comparison of stereotypes with 'the true attributes of the group' (p. 110), and outline careful empirical procedures for optimal accomplishment of this task, together with a discussion of the specific forms potential stereotype *in*accuracy might take.

In this chapter we take a new look at the issue of stereotype accuracy. More specifically, we approach the accuracy issue from a primarily theoretical rather than empirical perspective. In our view, some fundamental theoretical questions – what are stereotypes? what is their purpose in social perception and group life? what is the nature of the processes responsible for them? – need to be