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0521800471 - Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups

Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears

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Stereotypes as Explanations

Stereotyping is one of the biggest single issues in social psychology but relatively little is known about how and why stereotypes form. *Stereotypes as Explanations* is the first book to explore the process of stereotype formation, the way that people develop impressions and views of social groups. Conventional approaches to stereotyping assume that stereotypes are based on erroneous and distorted processes, but the authors of this book take a very different view; namely that stereotypes form in order to explain aspects of social groups and in particular to explain relationships between groups. In developing this view, the authors explore classic and contemporary approaches to stereotype formation and advance new ideas about such topics as the importance of category formation, essentialism, illusory correlation, interdependence, social reality and stereotype consensus. They conclude that stereotypes are indeed explanations but they are nevertheless highly selective, variable and frequently contested explanations.

CRAIG MCGARTY is Reader in Psychology at the Australian National University. He is author of *Categorization and Social Psychology* (1999), co-author with Alex Haslam of *Doing Psychology* (1998), and editor of *The Message of Social Psychology* (1997).

VINCENT Y. YZERBYT is Professor of Social Psychology at the Catholic University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. He is co-author, with Jacques-Philippe Leyens and Georges Schadron, of *Stereotypes and Social Cognition* (1994), and co-editor, with Guy Lories and Benoit Dardenne, of *Metacognition: Cognitive and Social Dimensions* (1998).

RUSSELL SPEARS is Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Amsterdam. He is co-editor, with Penny Oakes, Naomi Ellemers and Alex Haslam, of *The Social Psychology of Stereotyping and Group Life* (1997) and, with Naomi Ellemers and Bertjan Doosje, of *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content* (1999).

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Contributors

MARIËTTE BERNDSSEN *University of Amsterdam*

PATRICIA M. BROWN *University of Canberra*

OLIVIER CORNEILLE *Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve and the Belgian National Foundation of Scientific Research*

BERTJAN DOOSJE *University of Amsterdam*

S. ALEXANDER HASLAM *University of Exeter*

CRAIG MCGARTY *The Australian National University*

STEVE ROCHER *Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve and the Belgian National Foundation of Scientific Research*

PENELOPE J. OAKES *The Australian National University*

KATHERINE J. REYNOLDS *The Australian National University*

RUSSELL SPEARS *University of Amsterdam*

JOHN C. TURNER *The Australian National University*

JOOP VAN DER PLIGT *University of Amsterdam*

VINCENT Y. YZERBYT *Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve*

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Preface

This book developed from a series of interactions between social psychologists at the Australian National University, the Catholic University at Louvain-la-Neuve and the University of Amsterdam. In fact, all of the contributors to the current volume were doing research at one or other of those institutions during the 1990s.

All of the contributors to the volume were motivated by a desire to get beyond some of the ideas about stereotyping that had so dominated work in the 1970s and 1980s and were showing remarkable powers of recovery in the 1990s. In doing this work several of us saw that despite differences in theoretical perspectives and/or our geographical location there were common threads in our work.

Many of the common ideas related to a view of stereotype formation as a search for meaning on the part of the perceiver. We used different terms for this search for meaning, such as explanation, understanding, deriving differentiated meaning, but the commonalities in what we were doing were obvious to us. The key ideas were consistent with the classic work of Bruner and had figured prominently in social psychology in work inspired by self-categorization theory and by social judgeability theory, which made the point about the link between stereotyping and meaning in a more general way.

It was perhaps in the domain of stereotype formation that the idea of sense-making had the most to offer. Stereotype formation seemed to be covered in every introductory social psychology textbook, but work in the field had very little to say about why stereotypes were formed, except under quite unusual (albeit interesting) circumstances. In our different ways, we have sought to apply the idea that people form stereotypes in order to make sense of their world, and this book is really a progress report on what we have discovered so far.

Many of our colleagues are contributors to this volume and their contributions will be readily apparent as you read this book. As editors we extend our sincere thanks to all of them, in their different ways they have all taught us a lot about stereotype formation. However, we would

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CRAIG MCGARTY, VINCENT YZERBYT
AND RUSSELL SPEARS