



Stereotypes and Social Behaviour

This Factsheet is about stereotypes and how they affect social behaviour. The Factsheet includes examples to demonstrate how our behaviour is influenced by stereotypes and there are opportunities for you to apply what you have learned to exam style questions. Words in **bold** are explained in the glossary.

The examiner will expect you to be able to:

- Explain how stereotypes inform our behaviour – including the link between our understanding of a stereotype and how we modify our subsequent behaviour.
- Describe the process of social cognition in the formation of stereotypes.
- Apply theories of stereotypes and social behaviour to everyday life.

A. What is a stereotype?

A **stereotype** is a **social construct** that categorises people, often in relation to their environment, in order to predict their behaviour. Social psychologists suggest that a stereotype is formed by assigning a set of characteristics to a group of people and making an assumption that all individuals belonging to that group will share those characteristics. One of the earliest stereotypes to form during infant development relates to **gender identity**.

Social learning theory can be used to explain the process of how children **assimilate** information about society, then process and classify this information. This helps them to shape their own gender identity and their ideas about gender in the wider world.

Gender stereotypes support behaviour modification from an early age and are reinforced by the media, culture and religion. Individuals who deviate from gender stereotypes may be considered **deviant** and in some instances their behaviour may be punishable by law.



The stereotypical nuclear family

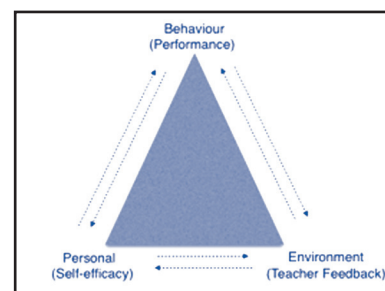
Exam Hint: The word *stereotype* comes from the Greek words **stereos** which means firm/solid and **typos** which means impression.

B. Stereotypes and Cognition

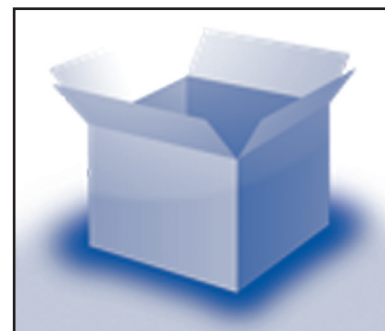
Bandura's **social cognitive theory** examines the importance of behavioural models in forming stereotypes and this is demonstrated in the **reciprocal causation model**. The model suggests an interaction between three factors: the person, the environment and the behaviour. In terms of gender identity, children's behaviour is reinforced by role models including parents, caregivers, teachers and celebrities.

Children form stereotypes and learn how to behave by observing individuals of the same and different gender to themselves.

Each individual experiences the world in a different way and **schemas** inform the cognitive processes that help us to organise information in order to make sense of it. A schema enables us to apply meaning to the information and direct our social behaviour. Schemas can be viewed as little boxes of knowledge, which simplify the world in order for us to act more efficiently. This is one cognitive function of stereotypes.



Schema affects how our memories are encoded and retrieved. If we experience a situation where someone has behaved in a certain way, schemas assist in the formation and prediction of what is expected in a similar situation. Schemas facilitate retrieval of information that allows us to anticipate the behaviour of others. They are also necessary for us to form stereotypes. There are a number of different types of schema, including self-schema (information about ourselves) and person-schema (information about other people). People tend to ignore information that does not conform with their schema and use information that does, in a process known as **confirmation bias**.



Exam Hint: For top marks in evaluation use **TEACUP**.

Testable: Is it possible to set up experimental study to test the theory?

Empirical evidence: Is there research to support the theory? Is there research that contradicts or challenges the theory?

Applications: Can the theory be used to explain or change behaviour?

Construct validity: Are the concepts that make up the theory well defined? Are they observable and measurable?

Unbiased: Is the research ethnocentric? Androcentric? Is the research upon which the theory is based representative of a global population?

Predictive validity: Does the theory enable us to predict behaviour?

<https://www.thinkib.net/psychology/page/1458/schema-theory>

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C. Stereotypes, Conformity and Appearance

Social influence and our understanding of stereotypes can modify our behaviour in order to conform to the rules of society. Society assumes that people will accept stereotypes and follow the rules that are applied to specific groups. To this end the behaviour of a group is defined by expectation. For example, schools will reinforce the stereotype they want society to perceive about their students by setting clear boundaries about behaviour in the school rules.



Students are expected to conform to what is acceptable when in the community and there are consequences if the standards of behaviour are not met. Uniforms or dress codes are a way of creating identity and verifying that you belong to a particular group or a community. They allow a person to apply a stereotype to a student dependent on the uniform they wear. One of the reasons that people often conform rather than express individuality, is because they want to be accepted. Conforming means that they are prepared to comply with the rules in order to fit in. An individual will take on the stereotypical characteristics of a social group to ensure that they are not rejected from that group.

Exam Hint: Ensure that when answering questions about stereotypes, the focus of your response links explicitly to the question. If you are referencing other concepts, such as conformity, make it relevant to the question.

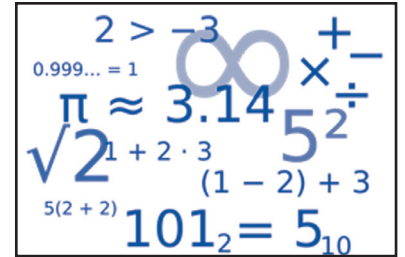
Society uses the way a person dresses and associated stereotypes to predict how someone will behave. This is clearly indicated in sport. Everyone knows what team they are on by the kit they are wearing. It tells the players and the supporters how to interact in relation to each other and the environment. One team may also use the previous performances or experience of another team to make assumptions about the players and the supporters. In the past, football supporters have been associated with negative behaviours such as hooliganism which had the effect of football supporters being stereotyped negatively as hooligans. In this case, the stereotype causes prejudice against the supporters.

Exam Hint: Make sure that your answers clearly explain how stereotypes influence social behaviour and provide appropriate examples to support your answer.

Exam Hint: When evaluating the theory / concept that stereotyping has a greater impact on those who are stereotyped than those who do the stereotyping, top marks would be awarded for considering a number of different factors including conformity and prejudice.

D. Stereotype Threat

The term **stereotype threat** was originally used to describe how the opinion of others can negatively impact behaviour (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Any categorization of people in relation to stereotypes can potentially provide the opportunity for stereotype threat. This can include categorization by gender, ethnicity or profession. If someone is aware of stereotype threat, anxiety around the fear of confirming the stereotype can have a negative effect on behaviour. The consequence of stereotype threat can sometimes be associated with prejudice and discrimination and there are laws to prevent this. The Equality Act 2010 protects individuals from discrimination according to nine protected characteristics.



The characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010 are:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage or civil partnership (in employment only)
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

Steele and Aronson (1995) provided evidence of racial stereotype threat in studies where the performance of black students was negatively affected when reference was made to their race. They worked with a group of African American and Caucasian college students from Stanford University. One group was told they were being tested for intellectual capacity while the control group was told they were taking part in an exercise. Implicit stereotype threat about the underachievement of African Americans in the test for intellectual capacity was applied by asking students to either state their race or not include this information dependent on which group they were in. The results confirmed that there was a negative impact on the performance of African Americans.

There have been several studies examining the impact of stereotype threat on the performance of girls in maths. Research has found that girls as young as six can experience **unconscious bias** relating to their ability in comparison to boys. They start to believe the stereotype that boys perform better in maths than girls, stop engaging and therefore confirm the stereotype. This is an example of gender stereotype threat.

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Exam Hint: Applying research studies that demonstrate the impact of stereotypes on behaviour will allow you to access top band marks.

E. Stereotype Lift

Schemas are not fixed which allows us to challenge our own stereotypes in order to behave in a way that does not have a negative impact on behaviour. This can be observed in **stereotype lift**, which is where an awareness of negative stereotypes allows knowledge to be applied in order to have a positive outcome. Stereotype lift has the opposite effect to stereotype threat, which has a negative effect on behaviour. Stereotype lift can be used to motivate a group by highlighting their advantage over another due to a particular attribute. For example, telling someone that they are good at spatial awareness problems because they are a visual thinker increases the performance in tests that require these skills. This is because the person believes in the value of the stereotype. Stereotype lift allows a person to live up to the expectations they place upon themselves.

Annie Duke was a professional poker player who used stereotype threat and gender stereotypes to her advantage. She relied on the assumptions that people would make about her behaviour because she was a woman, that she might not be such a competent poker player as it is viewed as a male dominated game. Due to stereotype threat, there is an assumption that her performance would be negatively affected. In 2004 she won the World Series of Poker gold bracelet and \$2,000,000. She has been nicknamed “The Duchess of Poker”.



F. Stereotypes, prejudice and behaviour

Racial stereotyping has had a negative impact on behaviour throughout history. The holocaust is an example of how stereotyping leads to prejudice and behaviour. Racial inequality has occurred in employment, housing and social opportunities to such an extent that people are protected against discrimination by law (Equality Act 2010). Racial stereotypes categorise a group by the colour of their skin, facial features, hair colour and texture. Characteristics or generalisations are then applied to the group, which encourage the belief that they can be applied to everyone. Prejudice is the idea an individual holds about a member of a group based on stereotyping. **Katz and Braly (1933)** suggest that ethnic stereotypes are often negative. The study into social stereotyping involved asking 100 students to choose 5 words from a list to summarise a particular racial group.

The results showed that 84% of the students associated African Americans with the word *superstitious* and 79% chose the word *shrewd* to describe Jewish people. **Gilbert (1951)** replicated the study, although there was less uniform agreement of stereotypical characteristics in the results than in the earlier study. This suggests that people had a more diverse experience of ethnicity, however there was still pronounced **in-group bias**. **Karlins et. al. (1969)** discovered that students were more reluctant to participate in the task of assigning key words to ethnic groups and the results were interpreted as a shift away from the more negative ethnic stereotypes of the original study.

To understand how difficult it is to challenge your own stereotypes which inform how you behave, go to Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>) and take a test.

The cartoon to the right appeared in a local newspaper in America in 1868. It is said to represent the political scene at the time following the Civil War. Prior to the Civil War slavery was still prevalent in southern states of America and it is cited as one of the reasons why the war started. The donkey in this image represents the Klu Klux Klan, who are often known for their prejudices against minority groups including Jewish people and African Americans.



Exam Hint: When evaluating the theory that stereotyping has a greater impact on those who are stereotyped than those who do the stereotyping, top marks would be awarded for considering a number of different factors including bias and prejudice.

G. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are strengths and limitations to stereotypes and how they influence our behaviour.

They enable us to act quickly in a situation where we have had a similar experience. However, stereotypes can cause us to ignore the differences between people, resulting in prejudice and discrimination such as in the example of Hitler’s persecution of Jews in World War II. An awareness of how stereotypes may determine our behaviour can allow us to identify with groups of people and feel that we are valued in society, which enhances our psychological wellbeing.

We can use stereotype threat to our advantage by ensuring that the potential negative impact on our behaviour is used to motivate us to challenge the way in which we are perceived. This could be done by educating ourselves about the way stereotypes impact on social behaviour and developing a more positive self-perception.

Glossary

Assimilate: Apply new information or knowledge of experiences to existing ideas.

Bias: To show preference or prejudice based on preconceived ideas.

Confirmation bias: Using our previous knowledge or understanding to make assumptions about similar information.

Deviant: Something that does not conform to the norms or accepted standards.

Gender identity: An individual's personal experience and interpretation of gender.

Implicit association test: A test designed to assess associations between concepts and memory.

Propaganda: Biased information designed to mislead and manipulate opinion.

Reciprocal causation model: A term introduced by Albert Bandura to describe a triad of factors that influence how people learn and behave.

Schema: A pattern of thought or behaviour that facilitate the categorisation of information.

Schema theory: The theory that knowledge can be organised into units.

Self-categorisation: How an individual perceives themselves and assigns their attributes to a group.

Social learning theory: The theory that people learn by observing others.

Social cognitive theory: A theory that explains how a person thinks and responds.

Social construct: An idea based on the collective views of a social group.

Stereotype: An oversimplified view or idea which is formed from our previous knowledge.

Stereotype lift: When performance is increased by the awareness of the effect of associated negative stereotypes.

Stereotype threat: The risk of confirming negative stereotypes.

Unconscious bias: Judgments based on pre-existing beliefs that are out of conscious awareness.

Worksheet: Stereotypes and Social Behaviour

Name: _____

1. Discuss the influence of stereotypes on behaviour with reference to social learning theory.

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2. Explain how stereotypes are formed with reference to schema theory.

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3. Explain how stereotype threat can affect behaviour.

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4. Discuss one or more explanations for the link between stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination.

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5. Briefly outline and evaluate the findings of a study demonstrating the effect of stereotype condition.

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