

Status symbols

'Status symbols' are those visible marks that celebrate the individual's or group's difference and superiority. Erving Goffman (1972) calls status symbols 'specialized means of displaying one's position'. Symbolic value can be lent to almost any object or situation. Language, etiquette, gestures, material objects, particularly if they are difficult to acquire, can distinguish a group and set it apart. Whatever connotes the individual's or group's place in the social order can be used to elevate it symbolically and, by reference, to demean outsiders. During periods of rapid social change or in urban settings where the individual's status is unknown, status symbols can be manipulated and fraudulently used by individuals laying claim to higher status, and indeed the bearer can gain greater deference and privilege than deserved.

A major criticism of status theory is that it is politically conservative, that the gradations of increasing or decreasing status obscure the reality of sharp class lines (Vanneman and Pampel 1977). Yet inequality is hardly explicable by reference *only* to a class system of discrete categories, nor, for that matter, to a concept emphasizing achieved status positions. Neither adequately accounts for the continuing troubles of subordinate groups. Status analysis, which emphasizes the relations between groups and the long-term effects of ascriptive status, might more effectively explain a world piloted by organized honour, privilege, and power when used together with other stratification theory.

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See also: prestige; role; stratification.

stereotypes

Stereotypes are usually defined as relatively fixed and oversimplified generalizations about groups or classes of people. In practice, they generally focus on negative, unfavourable characteristics, although some authorities include in their conceptions of stereotypes positive social overgeneralizations as well.

The term derives from the Greek *stereos*, meaning solid, and *tupos*, meaning image or impression, from *tuptein*, to strike. A stereotype was originally a solid printing mould or plate which, once cast, was difficult to change, but the word was adapted for its present usage by Walter Lippmann in his classic book, *Public Opinion* (1922). Lippmann was the first to articulate the 'cognitive miser' theory, according to which stereotypes serve an important function as cognitive simplifications that are useful for the economical management of a reality that would otherwise overwhelm us with its complexity. The phenomenon of stereotyping has become a standard topic in sociology and social psychology. Early empirical studies (e.g. Katz and Braly 1933) stressed the surprising degree of consensus in the stereotypes depicting different ethnic groups. Labelling theorists in sociology have emphasized the power of stereotypes in generating invidious emotional responses to deviant individuals or minority group members. Frustration-aggression theory in psychology also stimulated interest in the dynamics of prejudice and emphasized the motivated nature of many of our stereotypes (Dollard *et al.* 1939).

Two important developments in social psychology shortly after the Second World War accelerated interest in the processes of stereotyping. One was a growth of interest in the role of motivation and past experience as determinants of our perceptions. A capstone of this development was an article by Jerome S. Bruner (1957) linking perception to the concept of pre-established cognitive categories. Bruner explicitly stressed the

assimilation of incoming information to the 'typical instance' of a category, thus providing a fruitful context for the discussion of stereotyping.

The second development was the hugely influential research project, *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno *et al.* 1950). This represented an attempt to illuminate some of the hidden dynamics of anti-semitism, ethnocentrism, and of more general predispositions towards oversimplified thinking associated with fascist belief systems. Stereotypic thinking was found to characterize high scorers on the F scale, which was designed to measure authoritarianism.

Gordon Allport's (1954) analysis of prejudice and stereotyping began a general movement towards treating stereotypes as a consequence of normal cognitive functioning rather than looking at them as a by-product of frustration or pathological defensiveness. In this and subsequent treatments, stereotypes have been viewed as the often unfortunate end-products of useful and even necessary strategies of information processing.

As the field of social psychology has become explicitly more cognitive, there has been renewed interest in stereotypes and the experiences and settings that contribute to them. The edited volumes by Mackie and Hamilton (1993) and Zanna and Olson (1994) summarize much of the research into the phenomenon of stereotyping; for a critical perspective based on social identity and self-categorization theories see also the monograph by Oakes *et al.* (1994). Although it is still generally acknowledged that stereotypes may at times be motivated and serve as a justification for hostile or prejudiced attitudes, more stress is currently being placed on the contention that processes of prejudgement and categorization are built into every act of perception or information processing. Thus stereotypes are nothing more than cognitive categories that often satisfy emotional needs, prove quite resistant to disconfirming information, and operate as powerful cognitive magnets to which such information is assimilated.

Although stereotypes are generally viewed as the maladaptive extreme of the cognitive processing continuum, and serve to perpetuate social conflict and discrimination, there is also much evidence that they may be readily discarded when judging individual group members. Thus it appears that some individuals are quite capable of maintaining strong and rather rigid views of typical group members even when these views do not necessarily influence how a particular member is perceived or evaluated.

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See also: labelling theory; prejudice; social psychology; stigma.

stigma

The sociologist Erving Goffman is usually credited with introducing the term stigma into the social sciences. He began his influential text, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), with a brief etymological summary:

The Greeks . . . originated the term *stigma* to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor -- a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places. Today the term . . . is applied more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily influence of it.

(Goffman 1963)

The concern with stigma fits well into a broader and older concern with deviance and its labelling. The labelling perspective favoured by many sociologists of deviance (especially those who share the orientation of symbolic interactionism) emphasizes the social construction of boundaries separating the normal from the deviant. These boundaries serve an important symbolic function of affirming in-group values and are relevant in several different domains. Goffman distinguished between blemishes of character (for example, mental illness, homosexuality, criminal behaviour), abominations of the body (physical deformities of various kinds) and the tribal stigma of race, nation or religion. Although it is important to note that stigma can emerge in each of these domains, it should also be recognized that the tendency to avoid disabled or deviant persons may stem from the awkwardness of not knowing how to