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Warmth and Competence: Stereotype Content Issues for Clinicians and Researchers

Susan T. Fiske

Department of Psychology, Princeton University

Abstract

Stereotypes are often accidents of history, based on passing configurations of groups' societal interdependence and status. This article overviews our framework for understanding all this: the Stereotype Content Model, focused on two fundamental dimension of intergroup and interpersonal cognition, perceived warmth (from interdependence) and perceived competence (from relative status); then it discusses immigrant images as a case study; next, the article focuses on the toxic and potentially curative effects of each dimension.

Keywords

stereotyping; social cognition; warmth; competence; groups

Americans admire Canadians, and we are neighbors with much in common. Both Canada and the United States have among the world's longest continuous histories of receiving immigrants, and Canada is clearly good at it. The United States has a more uneven record regarding immigrants, which has informed my lab's work. We now have evidence that a country's stereotypes of immigrants—and by extension, their ethnic and racial groups—are accidents of history. This insight opens up the larger question of status hierarchies in general, an issue only sometimes acknowledged in clinical practice, and a topic underresearched by psychological scientists, though that trend is improving (Fiske, 2010b, 2011). This article overviews our framework for understanding all this: the Stereotype Content Model; then it discusses immigrant images as a case study; finally, it closes with some hopeful antidotes to stereotyping.

Stereotype Content Model and a BIAS Map

Many groups are oppressed, and as anyone who has attended an institutional diversity meeting knows, one can't prioritize one group's oppression over another. Each societal group has a unique history and particular concerns. The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) aims to capture the texture of each group's situation, at the same time identifying the fundamental underlying dimensions that help explain some shared experiences (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; for reviews, see Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). The SCM starts by analysing what people need to know about each other, in order to function in the same social space.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Susan Fiske, Department of Psychology, Green Hall, Princeton University, Princeton NJ 08540 USA. sfiske@princeton.edu.

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Two Dimensions

When a stranger enters your office, or a boatload of immigrants arrives at your shores, the first thing to know is their intentions: friend or foe? Do they come to cooperate, share our goals and values, or do they come to compete, exploit, and threaten our goals and values? If the Others intend well, then we assume they are warm, trustworthy, sincere, and friendly. If not, then they are cold, untrustworthy, and dangerous. Knowing a person's or group's intent matters because, unlike objects, people are autonomous agents, origins of action, so we need intent to predict what they will do next.

People infer others' intentions from their mutual relationship. If the relationship is structured as cooperative (shared goals, joint outcomes, common values), then people infer that the other is warm and trustworthy (Fiske et al., 2002; Kervyn, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, under review). Our friends and allies are well-intentioned. Our foes, not. Intentions are the first of two fundamental dimensions of social perception.

If intentions are key, then the ability to enact them matters too. As the second priority, we need to know whether the stranger or group of strangers has competence to act on their positive or negative goals. If they do have competence, then they matter more to us than if they do not. People infer competence from status, to an astonishing degree. In samples around the world, people seem to endorse meritocracy, that the high status are more competent than the low status. Status is measured by economic success and job prestige, in these studies (Cuddy et al., 2009; Fiske et al., 2002; Kervyn et al., under review). The demographic indicators (status, prestige) predict trait inferences (competence, capability, skill).

The warmth and competence dimensions have antecedents in older person-perception work (e.g., Zanna & Hamilton, 1972), but they are distinct from Osgood et al.'s evaluation and potency/activity dimensions (Kervyn & Fiske, under review). They emerge spontaneously from multidimensional scaling (Kervyn et al., under review; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968) and describe a variety of societal groups, as well as individual interactions (Russell & Fiske, 2008).

Four Kinds of People

Armed with the basic dimensions of warmth and competence, we make sense of our social worlds. Our ingroups and reference groups—our friends and allies—seem both warm and competent; in Canada, this includes of course Canadians, but also anyone either middle-class, Christian, educated, adult, heterosexual, white, or female¹ (see Figure 1; from Durante et al., under review²). People report pride and admiration for these groups, and they say these groups receive both active help and protection, as well as more passive facilitation, such as associating and obliging them.

¹This is the only nonobvious group to emerge as a societal reference group; this finding is not unique to Canada, as we see it elsewhere, and it is not because the majority of the sample is female. Men rate women this way also. We are still trying to make sense of this one counterintuitive (to us) result. Below, I elaborate on subtypes of traditional and nontraditional women; this generic female result may be an amalgam of the two subtypes. All the other groups match common sense, as they should, in this model of people's images of other people.

²The Canadian data were collected by Romin W. Tafarodi, University of Toronto, as part of the Durante et al. project. The Canadian sample was $N = 272$ (56 male; 212 female; 4 missing); Mean age = 19.13, $SD = 2.70$; Ethnicity: East-Asian (114); White (47); South-Asian (33); European (32); mixed (12); Middle-East (11); South east-Asian (8); African (4); Black (1); Hispanic (3); Asian (1); Guyanese (1); 5 missing data.; Religion: Christian (100); Muslim (25); Hindu; (11); Buddhist (12); Jewish (8); atheist (24); none (72) other (7); 13 missing data.

In contrast to these societal defaults, the societal ingroups, are the societal outgroups, those seen as low on both warmth and competence. In Canada, the most negative outgroups include uneducated and poor people. In the United States, the most negative outgroups include poor people (of any race), welfare recipients, homeless people, drug addicts, and generic immigrants (to whom we return later). All over the world, poor people reportedly appear low warmth (untrustworthy, unfriendly) and incompetent, and when generic immigrants are salient, they also appear as extreme outgroups (Cuddy et al., 2009; Durante et al., under review). The outcasts apparently evoke disgust and contempt, as well as active attack and passive harm such as neglect and demeaning. In some of our related work, people viewing pictures of apparently homeless people or drug addicts dehumanize them by failing to engage typical cognitive and neural processes that normally activate whenever people encounter another person (Harris & Fiske, 2006).

Contrasting the all-good “us” against the all-bad “them” is not a new insight, but what our SCM data uniquely reveal are the mixed cases: groups seen as high on one dimension but low on the other. Groups seen as well-intentioned and warm, but incompetent, include older people and younger people in Canada and elsewhere, and in places where they are salient, also people with disabilities. They evoke pity and sympathy, as well as active help and protection, but also passive neglect and demeaning. Pity itself is a top-down, paternalistic response, and this mix of active help and passive harm reflects it. These ambivalent responses would seem a chilling description of institutionalizing people to ensure their physical care but isolating them from the rest of society.

The last quadrant contains the other mixed combination, groups seen as competent but cold. In Canada, these include rich people, business people, and Asians, the same groups as in the United States, where Jewish people also appear. Outsider entrepreneurs appear in this quadrant all over the world, seen as admittedly competent for their success, but resented for not being “one of us.” Seen as competitive with the rest of society, they may be viewed as exploitative and they evoke envy, an unpleasant emotion communicating a wish to have what they have and maybe bring them down a notch. Reported behaviours include both associating with them, going along to get along, but also active attack. Consider the looting of minority businesses during riots. Under total social breakdown, these groups are targeted for worse: genocide and mass killing.

Relevant Examples

Our lists of groups that respondents rate come from the same population; the first sample nominates groups, and the second sample later rates the most-mentioned groups on the two dimensions (warmth, competence), perceived relationships (cooperative/competitive, status), evoked emotions (pride, contempt, pity, envy), and targeted behaviours (active and passive help and harm). In practice, this means that the dynamics of groups’ mutual images can apply in any domain, that is across societies, or as subtypes within generic stereotypes. And, like a kid with a new hammer, we have been hitting several domains with the SCM.

Mental illness subtypes

People with mental illness are stigmatized as a whole (Corrigan, 2004; Link, Yang, Phelan, & Collins, 2004). What’s more, as SCM shows, varieties of mental illnesses carry distinct stereotypes in society’s mind. After undergraduates listed common kinds of mental illnesses, another sample rated how society views these subtypes.³ Although people with mental illness in general may be either pitied or feared, the different types appear distinct to lay

³These data were collected by Gabrielle Moore, during the summer of 2005, supervised by members of Fiske lab at Princeton.

people (see Figure 2). For this sample, people with attention deficit disorder or eating disorders seemed “normal,” both competent and warm. Probably many of these undergraduates were, or knew people who were, living with these issues. For them, the most stigmatized mental disorders, those without redeeming features, included people with schizophrenia or generic psychopathology. These most extreme mental illness images are probably what comes most often to mind when people imagine someone with mental illness as unrelatable.

More mixed responses target people with depression, bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, who are seen collectively as competent but not warm and trustworthy. This view fits the romantic and unrealistic mad-genius image. The other mixed cluster contains people with mental disabilities, such as what our respondents termed mental retardation and Downs Syndrome, people viewed as incompetent but warm and trustworthy.

These images suggest that some mentally ill people will be stigmatized with disgust and contempt—for example, schizophrenics—whereas people with bipolar disorder may be admired as brilliant but mistrusted. Both clusters, being in the low-warmth part of the space, may be feared and resented, if these data fit earlier such instances (Fiske et al., 2002). In contrast, other types of mental illness may be greeted as trustworthy and even familiar, as is the case with eating disorders (competent, so respected, even perversely admired) and mental retardation (not competent, so pitied).

Gender subtypes

The warmth and competence dimensions correspond to some work in gender perceptions, described there as communality and agency (Abele, 2003; Bakan, 1966; Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Indeed, gender subtypes for both women and men array across the warmth × competence space, in a German student sample (Eckes, 2002). For women, the admired and pride-inducing (warm and competent) included so-called society ladies and confident types, whereas the disdained low-low subtypes included chicks, trendy, bourgeois, and naïve types.

Among the ambivalent were the “typical” subtype, who appeared incompetent but warm, along with housewives, secretaries, and wallflowers, all traditional subordinate roles. The opposite ambivalence, competent but cold, captured nontraditional women, such as feminists, career women, intellectuals, vamps, punks, and hippies. The polarity of ambivalent types reflects Glick and Fiske’s (1996) distinction between hostile sexism (directed toward nontraditional women) and subjectively “benevolent” sexism (directed toward traditional women).

Men do not escape the gender subtyping predicted by SCM space. For the same population, the admired male subtypes included the high-high confident type, professor, and (male) intellectual. The low-low male cluster contained so-called bums, cads, rockers, and (male) punks.

Male ambivalent types identified in the incompetent but warm cluster including softies, senior citizens, radicals, and (male) hippies. In contrast were managers, career men, yuppies, Mr. Joe Cool, egoists, social climbers, and typical men. Again, these ambivalent types capture Glick and Fiske’s (1999) ambivalence-toward-men distinction between hostility (toward the competent and cold) and maternalistic benevolence (toward the nice but incompetent).

Gay male subtypes

Some gender role ambivalence also appears in SCM’s map of gay male image subtypes (Clausell & Fiske, 2005). Feminine or flamboyant subtypes both appear incompetent but

warm, as do traditional women. In contrast, hyper-masculine, as well as straight-acting and in the closet—all apparently masculine male—gay stereotypes appear competent but cold. They are joined by gay activists and body-conscious gay men, both muscular, agentic subtypes. The only less-ambivalent subtypes are artistic gays (the most warm and competent) and leather-biker or cross-dressing gays (the least warm and competent).

Black subtypes

The story for Black racial subtyped images implicates class more than gender. Generic Black Americans were rated neutrally in our first studies, but when we specified social class, Black poor versus professionals, the images polarized into respectively low-low or high-to-moderate warmth and high competence (Fiske et al., 2002). Black Americans' own images of their racial subtypes also expresses primary social-class distinctions (Fiske, Bergsieker, Russell, & Williams, 2009): low-low are uneducated Blacks and self-termed “niggas,” with poor Blacks approaching this cluster. At the opposite, high-high extreme are middle-class and Christian Blacks, as well as Black mothers and elderly. Ambivalence targets high competent, low warmth educated and rich Black people.

Canadian ethnic outgroup stereotypes that appear moderate in the generic case may also differentiate by culturally important subtypes such as class or gender. If the U.S. case is any guide, Canadians might have in mind contrasting subtypes under generic neutral stereotypes for Blacks, Muslims, Jews, and Middle Eastern people. Likewise, other allegedly neutral groups might represent true indifference or polarized subtypes identified in the Canadian sample: working-class, small income, and lower class, as well as lesbians and young people. The puzzles would require additional Canadian data.

Culture

The SCM warmth-by-competence map does differentiate many cultures' own societally recognizable groups, arraying them across the space in some predictable patterns—and regardless of who reports the society's stereotypes, because everyone knows them, even if their own group is implicated. Across the world, middle-class people are admired, rich people are envied, poor people are disdained, and older people are pitied (even in rural China, old people were not respected; Chen & Fiske, unpublished).

Nevertheless, within this two-dimensional space, some cultural variations appear (Cuddy et al., 2009; Durante et al., under review): The salient groups vary by culture; for example, different countries identify different immigrant populations, religious groups, and ethnicities, as well as culturally unique designations, such as Mexico's “fresas” (strawberries, the spoiled prep-school students), Japan's “full member of society,” Ireland's “travelers,” Italy's “Mafiosi,” and the U.K.'s “chavs” (adolescent townies).

Other cultural variations differentiate the shape of the overall cloud of group locations in space. For example, in East Asian samples, what would be the high-high ingroup/reference groups in Western samples tend to move to a more modest neutral centre of the space, though all the outgroups remain in the other three corners (Cuddy et al., 2009). This matters because apparently one can have outgroup prejudices without explicit ingroup favoritism.

Finally, cultures differ in the extent to which they use the ambivalent parts of the space (Durante et al., under review). Although across all our samples, the ambivalent (high-low and low-high) groups outnumber the univalent (low-low and high-high) groups, some places identify the ambivalent ones less often than others. We found across 37 samples—with a lot of help from our friends—that a country's frequency of outgroup ambivalence correlated with the country's income inequality. That is, the international Gini coefficient (measuring income inequality in each country) correlated with that country's warmth-competence

correlation (measuring whether the pattern of outgroup clusters is more a vector or a circular cloud). The ambivalent outgroups may help to justify the system (Jost, Kay, & Thorisdottir, 2009); for example, the idea that the rich have high status but are not nice people, or that people with disabilities are unfortunate but are sweet-tempered. Ambivalent images result in a zero or near-zero correlation of warmth and competence. In more equal societies, however, more groups fall into the ingroup social safety net, so the country emphasizes the us–them dynamic, excluding only a few fringe groups. In these cases, the country shows a higher warm-competence correlation, as the competent, high-status groups are accorded trust and liking, but the low-low groups are not.

History

Ambivalent stereotypes also justify the system in historical samples that yield stereotype content data. Even Fascists used this mental map of social space (Durante, Volpato & Fiske, 2010). A content analysis used articles in *La Difesa della Razza* (*The Defense of the Race*), from 1938–1943 a bimonthly Fascist propaganda magazine, which identified itself as a forum for “science, documentation, and debate,” but which focused on racism and anti-Semitism, as well as eugenics and other extremely prejudiced ideologies. Out of the archive, 159 articles focused on group comparisons, and the emergent structure fit the two dimensions of warmth and competence. For Fascists, the ideal ingroup and reference group were Italians and Aryans, and the worst were black or mixed-race people. The competent-but-cold, threatening outgroups were Jewish and British people. No outgroups were pitied as incompetent but well-intentioned: Fascism in a nutshell.

A contrasting contemporaneous study of stereotype content asked 100 American undergraduates to describe their images of 10 ethnic and racial groups by choosing among 80 adjectives (Katz & Braly, 1933), a study fortuitously repeated about every 15–20 years since that time (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, under review). Adjectives describing these groups array in the same warmth $\times$ competence space over the 80-year time span, with some consistency and some change in groups’ locations. But overall, groups remained in similar quadrants over time, with Americans and British mostly high-high and Turks mostly low-low; whereas Japanese, Chinese, Germans, and Jews have consistently been viewed as relatively competent but not warm; and the Italians, Irish, and African Americans⁴ appear stereotypically incompetent but warm.

The SCM coding revealed another historical pattern in these data: Each group’s more negative dimension fell away to neutral, in accord with increasing societal norms’ sensitivity to stereotyping. Initially neutral or positive stereotypes did not change. The most negatively viewed groups shifted to neutral, overall. Thus, on the surface, groups are described neutrally or positively. However, the omission of information on one dimension now implies that it is negative. So for example, when people describe African Americans as “loud, loyal to family ties, talkative, very religious, and musical”—all warmth-related adjectives—the innuendo is that they are not competent. Negativity omission increases with more public audiences (Bergsieker et al., under review), as implied by political correctness concerns. When the context increases the salience of the omitted dimension, as in failing to mention anything about competence in describing a job candidate (“well, she was really nice”), people infer the worst on the other dimension (Kervyn, Bergsieker & Fiske, in press).

⁴This result appears to contradict the Fiske et al., 2002 finding that generic “Blacks” were rated neutrally, whereas in this sample, “African Americans” appear warm but incompetent. Several factors might account for these differences: “Blacks” include not only native born but also Caribbean and African immigrants; the term African American cues “American” as well as black ethnic identity; and the adjectives differed.

Case Study: Immigrant Images

Most of the ethnic groups in the 1933 Katz-Braly study would have been understood as immigrants, and the SCM does map their differentiated images over time, as shown. More recently, we examined current American views of immigrants explicitly labelled as such and found consistent trends for the ethnicity of immigrants, as well as some new phenomena (Fiske & Lee, in press; Lee & Fiske, 2006). When ethnicities are labelled as U.S. immigrants, Irish and Italian immigrants still appear warm but incompetent, while East Asian immigrants still appear competent but not warm, associated with the tech industry. Americans share the ingroup high-high cluster with European and Canadian immigrants, Canadians ranking higher than generic Americans on both dimensions (!). Although we do admire our Northern neighbors, we scorn our Southern neighbors, associating Mexican, South American, Latino, and generic undocumented immigrants with farm workers, poor people, and first-generation status. That this is likely an issue of ethnicity is indicated by the appearance of African immigrants in the same cluster.

Does ethnicity trump immigrant status? In this sample, generic third-generation immigrants indeed reach the ingroup cluster, as do generic documented immigrants. But all is not well, because when targets are described as first or third generation, but with ethnicity specified (e.g., “third-generation Mexican immigrant”), ethnicity determines where they land; within the familiar clusters defined by ethnicity, generational and document status improves the various immigrants’ positions but does not overcome the effects of ethnicity (Fiske & Lee, in press).

We do not have comparable SCM data from Canada, though immigration evokes a lively set of research issues in Canada. For example, work on dominant and minority groups’ mutual attitudes (e.g., Berry, 2006) identifies a social component related to intergroup contact and a competence component (in communication, at least) that relates to mutual understanding; this analysis adds an identity component not salient in our own approach. Identity as determining immigration attitudes appears in another research program. For example, a common national ingroup identity (immigrant and nonimmigrant) promotes acceptance in Canada, but appears threatening in Germany (Esses, Wagner, Wolf, Preiser, & Wilbur, 2006), suggesting the need for more cultural comparisons of the SCM immigrant ethnic-group space. However, common principles have already emerged, linking our evidence for competition predicting perceived warmth and trustworthiness and more focused evidence linking zero-sum beliefs with anti-immigrant prejudice (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001). (For a broader collection, see Esses, Deaux, Lalonde, & Brown, 2010).

And in the SCM data we do have from Canada (See Figure 1), Asian immigrants appear in the same part of the space as in the U.S.: competent and respected, but not viewed as socially warm (see also Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005). However, another cluster of immigrants to Canada appears in the neutral part of the SCM space, indifferent on both warmth and competence ratings (Muslim, Mid-Eastern, Jewish, perhaps Black). Before celebrating this apparent tolerance, one must note, first, that they do not land in the high-high ingroup part of Canadian intergroup space, but in a lower, noncommittal middle. Second, in the past, apparently neutral outgroups have subdivided into more polarized subgroups, as described for Black Americans and for gay men. One would like to see whether Canadians have in mind a variety of subtypes for Muslims, for example. Subtypes, of course, pave the way for fully differentiated, individuating images, so they do represent progress.

Toxic and Curative Effects of Each Dimension

Standing back from specific examples, warmth and competence dimensions each have their own effects, for worse and better. Warmth and trustworthiness, the primary dimension, results from instantaneous judgments of faces as happy or angry (Todorov, Said, Engel, & Oosterhof, 2008); even beyond fleeting expressions, a structural feature (e.g., bushy eyebrows) that conveys an emotion (e.g., anger) has a predictable effect on trust. Beyond faces, the social structure of the interaction determines perceived trust and judged warmth. Interdependence makes or breaks social relations. Cooperation breeds trust and apparent warmth; competition breeds distrust and apparent coldness. Interventions that affect interdependence will influence mutual judgments of warmth. For example, immigrants can be framed as competing for natives' jobs and government resources, or they can be framed as taking jobs no one else wants, avoiding government handouts because they are self-selected to be independent, and thereby growing the economy for everyone.

The secondary dimension, competence, also can be inferred instantly from faces, based on cues to apparent physical strength, masculinity, and maturity, therefore apparent dominance (Todorov et al., 2008). Beyond immediate individual faces, the social structure again appears. As noted, apparent status (social class, occupation, wealth, education) predicts perceived competence and therefore significance, as we have seen. People value other people by their status (Cikara, Farnsworth, Harris, & Fiske, 2010). People looking up the status hierarchy display envy and Schadenfreude (malicious glee; Cikara & Fiske, in press-b). People looking down the status hierarchy express contempt (Harris & Fiske, 2006). Interventions that affect perceived status will influence mutual judgments of relative status (Cikara & Fiske, in press-a). For example, immigrants can be framed as losers who flee their own countries because they cannot make it, or as winners who self-select as ambitious and resourceful, whatever their current job.

Biography

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Figure 1.

Canadian groups rated by Canadians on warmth and competence, then cluster-analysed to display best-fitting clusters. Note the four corners (quadrants), as well as the indeterminate middle cluster (whose groups could be viewed either with indifference or in polarized ways that cancel to neutral in the aggregate, as proved the case in U.S. images of Black people, e.g., until they were split by social class, with poor Blacks in the low-low quadrant and Black professionals in the competent end, tending toward moderate warmth; see text.).

Society Bias Map

Figure 2. Mental illness stereotypes, as rated by American undergraduates. Note the four quadrants identified by cluster analysis.