“Women Like Me Are Bad at Math”: The Psychological Functions of Negative Self-Stereotyping

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Abstract
The impact of negative stereotypes can be harmful, and as a result, stigmatized targets are often motivated to deny their accuracy. However, at times, targets of even the most unflattering stereotypes embrace them as valid. Early stigma researchers conceptualized this self-stereotyping as a form of internalized self-hatred. However, within the last few decades, stigma researchers have challenged this notion. This more contemporary approach asserts that there are situations where endorsing negative stereotypes can actually be of use to those who are targeted by them. For instance, endorsing negative self-stereotypes can be used to help justify the status quo, fulfill assimilation and differentiation needs, and protect against personal and social threats. The purpose of the present paper is to review both traditional and contemporary explanations for the causes and consequences of negative self-stereotyping. In doing so, we highlight strengths and limitations within the self-stereotyping literature and suggest future directions for research.

“I’m good at tolerating pain, I’m bad at math, and I’m stupid.” – Leslie Knope, Parks and Recreation

Negative stereotypes about ourselves and our group can be harmful, and as a result, we are often motivated to deny their truthfulness. But as the above quote suggests, this is not always the case. At times, people will embrace even the most unflattering self-stereotypes. For example, prior studies show that women may endorse the idea that their gender is inferior at math tasks (Burkley, Andrade, Stermer, & Bell, 2013; Burkley & Blanton, 2008, 2009), Black students may endorse the idea that their group is not as academically skilled as White students (Okeke, Howard, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2009), and gay men may endorse the idea that their group suffers from certain mental health disorders (Boysen, Fisher, DeJesus, Vogel, & Madon, 2011). But why would people endorse such negative and often detrimental beliefs about their own group? Such a response seems to contradict the wealth of research suggesting that people like to perceive themselves and their group in a positive light (i.e., self-enhancement motive; Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). In this article, we review both traditional and contemporary explanations regarding the motives that drive negative self-stereotyping. Some of these reasons run in contrast to the need for self-enhancement, but in other cases, they actually are in service of this need. We also highlight limitations within the self-stereotyping literature (e.g., focuses primarily on gender stereotypes) and suggest directions for future research.

Before we begin our review, it is important to note that the term “self-stereotype” has been operationalized in two ways within the literature (Latrofa, Vaes, Cadinu, & Carnaghi, 2010). The first definition is based on social identity theory’s notion of “prototypicality” and can be defined as the tendency to feel similar to the typical group member (e.g., Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997). The second definition portrays self-stereotyping as the tendency to view stereotypic traits as descriptive of the in-group or the self (e.g., Biernat, Vesco, & Green, 1996;
The present article is concerned with the latter behavior and therefore adopts that definition of self-stereotyping.

1. Traditional Views of Internalizing Self-Stereotypes

The traditional view of negative self-stereotypes asserts that such stereotype endorsement directly contradicts people’s basic need to view themselves positively (Allport, 1954; Erikson, 1956; Goffman, 1963; Lewin, 1948; Jones et al., 1984). Such endorsement was thought to be driven by self-hatred for one’s group and was viewed as an inevitable consequence of being a member of a stigmatized identity. One of the earliest references to this self-hatred view was provided by Lewin (1948) who described how Jews’ interaction with higher-status groups led to an internalization of these others’ negative perceptions about their own group. Allport (1954) expressed a similar view, stating that the victim of discrimination comes to see their own group through the dominant group’s eyes, and as a result, “his natural self-love may, under the persistent blows of contempt, turn his spirit to cringing and self-hate” (p. 143). The self-hatred account is also evident in one of the most famous studies on race, in which 66% of African American children showed a preference for a white-skinned doll over a dark-skinned doll (Clark & Clark, 1939). According to Kardiner and Ovesey (1951), there were “no exceptions to this rule” of internalizing negative perceptions for Black individuals and the “final result is a wretched internal life” (p. 81). Thus, early research argued that the internalization of negative self-stereotypes was an inevitable and unescapable consequence of belonging to a stigmatized group.

A more modern take on this self-hatred account suggests that internalization of negative self-stereotypes can occur but does not necessarily occur for all group members. If all stigmatized members internalized the negative stereotypes about their group, then all should show evidence of low self-esteem. However, the empirical evidence does not appear to support this claim. For instance, a recent meta-analysis of over 700 studies compared self-esteem levels among Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, American Indians, and Asians (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). The results indicated that Hispanics, American Indians, and Asians all had lower self-esteem than Whites. However, the results also showed that Blacks had the highest self-esteem, despite the fact that they were the most devalued and negatively stereotyped group. This suggests that being a member of a negatively stereotyped group does not automatically lead to self-hatred.

In light of this evidence, a modified version of stereotype internalization emerged. This new perspective argued that not all group members internalize negative self-stereotypes, but those that do will evidence lower self-esteem. For example, Crocker and Major (1989) suggested that belonging to a stigmatized group may offer self-esteem protection but argued, “those who have internalized society’s negative views of their group should be at particular risk for low self-esteem” (p. 619). Consistent with this assertion, the endorsement of negative self-stereotypes has been linked to lower self-esteem among women (Whitley, 1983), juvenile delinquents (Chassin & Stager, 1984), individuals with mental illness (Ritsher, Ottingam, & Grajales, 2003), and gay, lesbian, and bisexual men and women (Luhtanen, 2003).

Even more alarming are studies showing that the endorsement of negative self-stereotypes is linked to poor health and even death. In a series of longitudinal studies, Levy and colleagues found that people who endorse negative stereotypes about aging when they are younger, show greater declines in memory and physical health as they age (e.g., Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002; Levy, Zonderman, Slade, & Ferrucci, 2009; Levy, Zonderman, Slade, & Ferrucci, 2012). For instance, people who endorsed negative age stereotypes (measured 23 years earlier)
were found to live 7.5 fewer years than those who endorsed positive age stereotypes (Levy et al., 2002). The clear message here is that internalization of negative self-stereotypes threatens both psychological and physical health.

2. Two Types of Stereotype Endorsement

So far, the evidence reviewed suggests that people who endorse and internalize negative self-stereotypes are more likely to suffer negative consequences than people who reject such stereotypes. If this is the case, why would anyone ever voluntarily choose to endorse negative self-stereotypes? The answer to this question may have to do with how we define stereotype endorsement. Most discussions of stereotype endorsement in the literature assume that the internalization is a long-term, dispositional endorsement that remains stable across varying situations (e.g., Allport, 1954; Crocker & Major, 1989; Levy et al., 2002). Burkley and Blanton (2008, 2009) refer to this type of endorsement as chronic internalization of negative stereotypes. However, more recently, theorists have argued that sometimes stereotype endorsement is only temporary and occurs as a function of the individual’s needs in a particular situation. Burkley and Blanton refer to this type of short-term, situationally determined endorsement as functional internalization. Functional internalization is thought to be a strategic response that allows stigmatized individuals to use stereotypes in a short-term, adaptive manner to fulfill a particular motive. For example, a woman may reject the notion that men are superior in most situations but may temporarily endorse this belief after failing a stereotype-relevant task (e.g., math test; Burkley & Blanton, 2008). So, according to the principle of functional internalization, stigmatized group members can selectively endorse and reject negative self-stereotypes, depending on what their needs are in the given situation.

Although research on the functional internalization approach has not been represented in the literature to the extent that the traditional, chronic approach has, an emerging body of research is beginning to examine the causes and consequences of this new form of internalization. One important distinction between chronic and functional internalization that has received attention has to do with the consequences that result from these two types of self-stereotyping. Because chronic internalization is stable and does not serve a particular motive, it likely results in negative consequences for the individual in the way described by the traditional view (e.g., low self-esteem). Alternatively, because functional internalization is temporary and is enacted in service of a particular motive, it likely results in positive consequences for the individual. In the next section, we review the many surprising ways in which negative self-stereotyping can provide positive outcomes for the stigmatized individual.

3. Positive Outcomes of Negative Self-Stereotypes

3.1. Negative self-stereotypes justify the status quo

According to system justification theory, people are motivated to see the current social system as fair, legitimate, and stable (Eidelman & Crandall, 2012; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Hamilton, 2005). As a result, people will go to great lengths to satisfy this motivation by justifying the status quo. For instance, the stereotype that men are more competent and assertive justifies the gender inequalities that still exist in the workforce (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Kay & Jost, 2003). Importantly, this need to justify the status quo — often through the endorsement of stereotypes — not only exists for groups who benefit from the current system but also from groups who are disadvantaged by it (Haines & Jost, 2000; Jost, 2001; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). This means that members of low-status, stigmatized groups are just as motivated (or possibly even more motivated) as high-status groups
to endorse negative stereotypes that justify their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy. So, when women endorse the self-stereotype that men are more suited for the workplace, doing so may be in direct opposition to their need for self-enhancement, but it justifies the status quo and offers fairness and legitimacy to their lower social status (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Laurin et al., 2011).

According to the principles of system justification theory, stigmatized members may be motivated to endorse negative self-stereotypes because doing so leads them to perceive the status quo as fairer and therefore more satisfying. To directly test this assertion, Laurin et al. (2011) conducted two experiments investigating negative gender stereotypes. In their first study, they ignited women’s system justification motive by exposing them to information indicating the prevalence of income gender inequality. The results indicated that exposure to the gender inequality information led women to rate themselves in more stereotypically consistent ways (e.g., warm, sensitive, and emotional) than women exposed to neutral information. In their second experiment, women who were told they were high in stereotypically feminine traits (e.g., emotional and caring) and low in stereotypically masculine traits (e.g., ambitious and aggressive) were more likely to perceive their society as fair and were more satisfied with their society than women who were given counter-stereotypic feedback. Thus, negative self-stereotyping benefits stigmatized group members because it allows them to fulfill their need to see society as fair and good (see also Jost & Kay, 2005; McCoy & Major, 2007). As a result, low-status members can strategically use negative self-stereotypes to rationalize societal injustices and help them feel better about the world around them.

3.2. Negative self-stereotypes fulfill assimilation and differentiation needs

Another function of self-stereotyping is its role in assimilation and differentiation needs. According to social identity theory and its successor self-categorization theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), the groups we belong to are a major contributor to our sense of identity (for a review, see Hornsey, 2008). As a result, we have a strong need to form groups and to perceive our in-groups as superior to out-groups. These tendencies form the basis for our need for assimilation, which states that people need to feel connected and similar to others. When it comes to this need for assimilation, self-stereotypes play an important role (Turner et al., 1987). When our assimilation needs are met and we feel as if our personal identity is interchangeable with our group identity, we self-stereotype and consider group traits as descriptive of the self (Turner et al., 1987).

If assimilation needs are linked to self-stereotyping in this way, then factors that increase our sense of assimilation and connectedness with the group (e.g., minority status and group salience) should also increase self-stereotyping. In support of this assertion, Cadinu, Galdi, and Maass (2013) found that minority status group members (homosexual men) were more likely to self-stereotype than majority status group members (heterosexual men), and this was especially the case when their minority group status was made salient (via a sexual orientation questionnaire). Furthermore, Latrofa et al. (2010) found that minority status group members (i.e., women) felt more identified with their gender group than majority status group members (i.e., men), and as a result of this increased identification, they were more likely to self-stereotype on gender-relevant traits. Similarly, other studies have also found that people high in in-group identification are more likely to self-stereotype (e.g., Cadinu et al., 2013; Eidelman & Silvia, 2010; Pickett et al., 2002). Interestingly, this pattern has even been found when in-group identification is measured implicitly (via the Implicit Association Test) rather than explicitly (Cadinu & Galdi, 2012).
So far, this research indicates a link between assimilation needs and self-stereotyping. However, the need for assimilation is not the only group motive people experience. According to optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991, 2012), people want to feel connected and similar to others (i.e., assimilation need), but they also want to feel as if they are a unique (i.e., differentiation need). The constant tension between these two opposing motives suggests that when people feel similar to others, they will seek out ways to feel unique; whereas when they feel unique, they will seek out ways to feel similar.

We already know that self-stereotyping is linked to our need for assimilation, but it is possible that self-stereotyping is also linked to the opposing need for differentiation as well. Although endorsing negative self-stereotypes can increase the sense of closeness with fellow in-group members (i.e., assimilation need), at the same time, it can provide a sense of uniqueness because such stereotypes distinguish our group from other groups (i.e., differentiation need). Thus, stigmatized members may be motivated to endorse self-stereotypes because doing so allows them to achieve optimal social identity in the presence of both assimilation and differentiation needs. If this were the case, a woman who is made to feel different from others may endorse negative gender stereotypes as a way to feel closer to her gender group, thereby fulfilling her need for assimilation. Conversely, a woman who is made to feel different from others may endorse negative gender stereotypes as a way to differentiate her in-group from surrounding out-groups, thereby fulfilling her need for differentiation. If this were the case, self-stereotyping could be used strategically to fulfill either assimilation or differentiation needs.

Pickett et al. (2002) tested this assertion by examining stereotypes within the context of a range of different social groups. Across multiple studies, participants were given feedback indicating they were very different from their in-group members (activating assimilation needs), were very similar to their in-group members (activating differentiation needs), or neutral feedback (no need). The results showed that self-stereotyping increased in both need conditions and that this occurred for both positive and negative self-stereotypes. For example, sorority members were more likely to rate themselves as popular and outgoing (positive self-stereotypes) and also as materialistic and stuck-up (negative self-stereotypes) when they were made to feel very different or very similar to their fellow sorority members. However, consistent with prior research on self-stereotyping, this tendency was most pronounced among people who highly identified with their group. For people who are low in group identification, endorsing negative self-stereotypes appears to be too threatening to their individual-level need for self-enhancement. However, for people who are high in group identification, this cost is outweighed by the group-level benefits they receive. The fact that group identification was found to moderate how people use negative self-stereotypes is important because it suggests that people can strategically use such stereotypes to balance competing self-motives.

3.3. Negative self-stereotypes protect the self against threats

The research discussed so far asserts that although negative self-stereotyping can offer benefits, it still runs contrary to an individual’s desire for self-enhancement. It is assumed that when other motivations are activated — such as the need for system justification or optimal distinctiveness — they may override the need for self-enhancement and cause people to embrace negative self-stereotypes even though doing so threatens their self-esteem. However, Burkley and Blanton (2008, 2009) challenged this assumption and instead argued that, at times, negative self-stereotyping can actually work in service of our self-enhancement need. According to these researchers, negative self-stereotypes can serve as a viable excuse for a stereotypic failure or shortcoming. When an individual endorses such stereotypes after failure, it shifts blame away
from the self and toward the group. As a result, the individual is saved from the potential shame of admitting that the failure was the result of their personal merits. For example, older adults may blame a memory lapse on the stereotype that “old people are forgetful” or a white basketball player may blame a poor performance on the stereotype that “white men can’t jump.” Ironically, people may be able to protect their self-esteem from stereotypic failures by embracing the very stereotypes that would have predicted these failures.

To test their idea, Burkley and Blanton (2008) conducted several experiments that focused on the stereotype that women are less skilled at math than men. For example, in one study, men and women completed a math test and received failure feedback. Participants were also given a measure of endorsement for this stereotype; however, the order of this task varied across experimental conditions. Half of the participants completed this measure after the failure feedback, thereby giving women the opportunity to blame their failure on the stereotype that men are better at math than women. The other half of the participants completed this measure before taking the math test, thereby denying women the opportunity to use the stereotype. The results showed that women given the opportunity to endorse the stereotype after the math failure showed higher stereotype endorsement than women who received the stereotype-endorsement task prior to the math test. That is, women were more motivated to embrace the negative self-stereotype after failure because it offered a viable excuse for their failure. Men did not show this pattern, likely because the stereotype does not provide men with a viable excuse. Importantly, women given the opportunity to endorse the stereotype after the math failure also showed higher self-esteem than women denied this opportunity. This suggests that endorsing the negative self-stereotype after failure deflected threat of the failure and thereby protected their self-esteem.

In a follow-up study, Burkley and Blanton (2008) examined if this tendency to use negative self-stereotypes as excuses is more pronounced among women who are high in motivation to protect self-esteem. To do so, they relied on prior research that showed people high in trait self-esteem are more driven to protect their self-esteem. As predicted, they found that women high in trait self-esteem were more likely to embrace the math stereotype following a math failure than women low in trait self-esteem. When combined with their prior studies, this result provides strong evidence that negative self-stereotyping following failure is driven by a need to protect self-esteem.

Kim, Lee, and Hong (2012) extended this work by examining if negative self-stereotyping can also serve as a way to protect self-esteem from an anticipated failure. When people foresee an upcoming failure, they may create or claim an obstacle that would ensure the failure, a phenomenon commonly known as self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978). For example, a student anticipating a difficult exam may stay out late partying or claim lack of sleep as an excuse for the inevitable failure. According to Kim et al. (2012), negative self-stereotypes can also be used in this way. By endorsing such stereotypes proactively (i.e., before an anticipated failure), the stigmatized individual is able to protect their self-esteem from the threat of the anticipated failure. To test this idea, Kim et al. (2012) had men and women anticipate taking an easy or difficult math test. Prior to taking the test, the participants indicated their endorsement of the stereotype that men are better at math than women. Consistent with the self-handicap account, women (but not men) showed higher stereotype endorsement when anticipating a difficult rather than easy test. In line with the results of Burkley and Blanton (2008), this use of negative self-stereotypes was most pronounced among women high in trait self-esteem. Finally, a follow-up study found that men were more likely to endorse the stereotype “women are better at verbal tasks than men” when anticipating a difficult, rather than easy, verbal test. These studies by Kim et al. (2012) provide an important addition of the stereotype excuse literature. First, these studies showed that negative self-stereotypes can protect people’s self-esteem in an
anticipatory, rather than retrospective, manner. Second, their verbal stereotype study extended this literature beyond the gender–math stereotype.

The works by Burkley and Blanton (2008) and Kim et al. (2012) indicate that self-stereotypes protect people against threats to our personal identity. However, self-stereotypes can protect people against threats to their social identity as well. For instance, one study found that self-stereotyping among a group that had suffered from historical social stigma (i.e., Southern Italians) helped this group maintain positive well-being in the face of this social threat (Latrofa et al., 2009). To test this idea experimentally, Latrofa, Vaes, and Cadinu (2012) exposed stigmatized individuals (women) and non-stigmatized individuals (men) to a threat to their social identity. Specifically, threatened group members read an article indicating attributes characteristic of their gender group led to failures in life, whereas non-threatened members read these attributes led to successes. The results indicated that self-stereotyping was higher among women, but this was especially the case when these women were exposed to the threatening article. This pattern suggests that these women were using self-stereotypes as a way to cope with the threat to their gender identity. Thus, when people self-stereotype, they reaffirm their sense of social connectedness and thereby protect themselves against social identity threats (Latrofa et al., 2012, 2009).

Taken together, this body of work on self-stereotyping in the face of personal and social threats demonstrates that stigmatized individuals are not merely passive victims of stereotypes. These individuals can strategically use these stereotypes to their advantage by embracing or denying their validity, depending on the situation and their current motives.

4. Negative Outcomes of Negative Self-Stereotypes

A common principle in life is that the things that bring us joy in the short term are often detrimental to us in the long term. Eating dessert every night may give us a few moments of happiness, but in the long run, it will likely lead to weight problems and health issues. The same may be true of negative self-stereotypes. Stigmatized members may embrace such stereotypes as a temporary fix for their need for system justification or their need to protect their self-esteem, but the benefits that result may be short-lived. In the next section, we review the negative and often long-term consequences that can occur when people endorse negative self-stereotypes as a short-term fix.

4.1. Negative self-stereotypes reduce the pursuit of social change

What is good for the individual is not necessarily good for society as a whole. Although endorsing negative self-stereotypes may allow individuals to fulfill certain motives, the same behavior may serve to justify and perpetuate existing discrimination. In line with the principles of system justification theory, negative stereotypes are used to justify societal injustices and therefore make people less likely to question or challenge existing social inequities (Jost, 2001; Jost & Banaji, 1994). This feature of stereotypes makes them self-perpetuating; stigmatized individuals who internalize negative self-stereotypes (even temporarily) may be less likely to question existing social inequities or pursue counter-stereotypic roles (Laurin et al., 2011). As a result, social inequities remain unchallenged and unchanged (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 2005).

4.2. Negative self-stereotypes reduce personal strivings

Not only does negative self-stereotyping result in negative consequences for society, it may result in negative consequences for the individual as well. One such consequence is reduced personal striving. Research on non-stereotypic excuses indicates that when people use excuses to
blame their failures on external causes (e.g., the professor made the exam too hard), they are more likely to disengage from the task domain (Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994). Because excuses reduce a sense of personal responsibility and autonomy, they cause the excuse maker to be less motivated toward the task in the future (Tyler & Feldman, 2007). Since this is true for non-stereotypic excuses, it is likely to also be the case for stereotypic excuses. For example, if a woman temporarily endorses the stereotypic belief that men are better at math, this may protect her self-esteem from a math failure but will also likely make her less interested in pursuing math tasks in the future. After all, if women are bad at math, why should she bother?

To test this idea, Burkley et al. (2013) examined women’s motivation to improve their math skills after having failed a math test. These researchers provided half of the women with the opportunity to endorse the stereotype “men are better at math than women” after the math failure, thereby allowing them to use this self-stereotype as an excuse, and the other half were denied this opportunity. Next, all the women were told there would be a second math test and were given an optional math tutorial that they would work on as much or as little as they liked. The time they spent on this tutorial served as a measure of how motivated they were to improve their math skills. Lastly, the women completed a measure of identification with the math domain and indicated how interested they were in pursuing a math major and math career. The results revealed that women given an opportunity to blame their failure on the stereotype spent less time on the math tutorial than women denied this opportunity. These same women also reported less math identification and were less interested in pursuing a math major or math career. Finally, the reduction in math identification was found to be mediated by the level of negative self-stereotyping. So, women who strongly endorsed the math stereotype after failing showed less math identification than women who only weakly endorsed the math stereotype after failing.

4.3. Negative self-stereotypes produce negative reactions from others

Reduced personal strivings represent a personal cost associated with negative self-stereotyping, but there may also be interpersonal costs. Once again, research on non-stereotypic excuses is informative. According to such research, people who make excuses or who self-handicap are perceived negatively by others and invoke negative emotions in others (e.g., Allen & Leary, 2010; Levesque, Lowe, & Mendenhall, 2001; Rhodewalt, Sanbonmatsu, Tschanz, Feick, & Waller, 1995). Since this is true for non-stereotypic excuses, it is likely to also be the case for stereotypic excuses. Imagine a female student who performed poorly on her first calculus exam and exclaimed that it must have been because “women just aren’t good at math.” How would her math teacher or her peers respond to this action? On the one hand, they may “cut the student some slack” as Snyder and Higgins (1989) described, resulting in a neutral evaluation. On the other hand, they may become upset at the student for refusing to take personal responsibility for her poor performance.

To test this notion, Burkley et al. (2013) had women and men read a survey about a female student who either failed or succeeded at a math test. Next, the survey asked the target to reflect on her exam performance. Participants in the no stereotype conditions read a response that did not reference the math stereotype (e.g., “I did good/bad on the exam”), whereas those in the stereotype condition read a response that made reference to the math stereotype. Specifically, those in the success/stereotype condition read a response that augmented the exam performance (e.g., “my grade was good but that is because women are usually bad at math”), and those in the failure/stereotype condition read a response that excused the exam performance (e.g., “my
grade was bad but that is because women are usually bad at math”). After reading these materials, participants evaluated their emotional reactions toward the student. The results indicated that negative emotions were highest in response to a female student who blamed her failure on the math stereotype. Further analyses revealed that the increase in negative emotions in this condition was mediated by the perception that the student was lacking confidence but was not mediated by the perception that the student was less skilled. Thus, stigmatized individuals who blame their failures on negative self-stereotypes appear insecure to others, which in turn leads these others to feel negatively toward them.

5. Endorsing the Stereotype for My Group but Not Myself

Our discussion so far reveals that there are both benefits and costs to endorsing negative self-stereotypes. But is there a way to reap these rewards without incurring their costs? One resolution to this dilemma may be to ascribe the stereotypes to one’s group but not oneself. For example, stigmatized individuals readily admit that their group has been targeted by discrimination, but are less willing to admit they personally have suffered from such unequal treatment (Crosby, 1984; Crosby, Clayton, Alksnis, & Hemker, 1986). A similar process, known as selective self-stereotyping, may allow people to acquire the benefits of negative self-stereotypes without the costs.

Selective self-stereotyping refers to the process in which stigmatized individuals endorse negative stereotypes for the larger group (i.e., “In general, women are bad at math”) but not for the self or their closest in-group members (i.e., “but my friends and I are not;” Biernat et al., 1996; Oswald & Chapleau, 2010). By denying the stereotypes’ accuracy for themselves and their closest group members, people are able to avoid potential threats to self-esteem and motivation that occur with self-stereotyping. However, by recognizing the stereotypes’ accuracy for the larger group as a whole, people are not forced to deny an important social identity and may be able to reap some of the benefits described earlier.

The tendency to selectively self-stereotype has been shown to occur across a wide range of social groups. For example, fraternity and sorority members readily admit that “fraternities/sororities in general” are self-centered and promiscuous, but deny these traits as descriptive of themselves or their own fraternity/sorority (Biernat et al., 1996). Similarly, women endorse the stereotype that women are physically weak for “women in general” but are less likely to endorse this description for themselves and their closest female friends (Oswald & Chapleau, 2010). Finally, a similar process has been reported in older adults, whereby they distance themselves from their age group in response to negative in-group stereotypes (Weiss & Lang, 2012). As a result, older adults can claim that their fellow age group feels old but still maintain that they personally feel young. By simultaneously endorsing and denying stereotypes, selectively self-stereotyping offers the stigmatized individual the best of both worlds.

6. Conclusions and Future Directions

The present article provides a comprehensive review of the motives that drive self-stereotyping and offers a more complete picture of what it is like to be a stigmatized target in modern society. Contrary to traditional views on self-stereotyping, there are times when people actively chose to embrace negative self-stereotypes for reasons beyond self-hatred. Contemporary researchers have identified a number of functional motives that drive self-stereotyping behavior. Under certain contexts, negative self-stereotypes can justify current social arrangements, fulfill assimilation and differentiation needs, and protect against personal and social threats. Clearly, a variety of different motives underlies negative self-stereotyping.
However, the news is not all good. Regardless of the reason why it is endorsed, negative self-stereotypes can also result in several negative outcomes, including reduced social change, reduced personal strivings, and negative reactions from others. People who are tempted to endorse such stereotypes as a “quick fix” for a particular need should stop to consider the negative consequences that may result.

Although the studies reviewed in this article provide an important step in understanding the causes and consequences of negative self-stereotyping, several limitations exist. The first limitation is that the self-stereotyping research has focused almost exclusively on gender self-stereotypes (cf. Cadinu et al., 2013; Pickett et al., 2002). As a result, we know a great deal about the causes and consequences of gender self-stereotyping, but it remains to be seen how much of these findings generalize to other stigmatized groups. For example, it remains to be seen if race stereotypes, age stereotypes, or disability stereotypes could be used in this way and if doing so would incur the same positive and negative outcomes that have been seen with the use of gender stereotypes. Furthermore, it is rare that individuals only belong to one stigmatized group at any one time (Levy & Banaji, 2002), so it remains to be seen how people with multiple stigmatized identities navigate the use of multiple negative self-stereotypes (Sinclair, Hardin, & Lowery, 2006).

A second limitation is that the majority of these studies focused on a short duration of time. It is unclear how long the positive and negative consequences of self-stereotyping last. Does blaming a failure on a negative self-stereotype boost self-esteem and reduce motivation temporarily? Or does it influence the way the individual approaches the stereotyped domain for months or years to come? Only a longitudinal study would be able to address this question.

A third limitation is that these studies measured stereotype endorsement quite literally by having participants rate the truthfulness or accuracy of various stereotypes. But in everyday life, people may embrace or deny self-stereotypes more subtly. They may display their endorsement in their choice of clothes, their choice of activates, their mannerisms, or even in whether they disclose their group memberships to others. Future research should more fully explore the various ways that stigmatized members may choose to embrace negative self-stereotypes.

Short Biographies

Angela Bell’s research focuses on stereotypes, stigma, and perceptions of racism and egalitarianism. She received her Masters of Science in 2013 and is currently working on her PhD at Oklahoma State University under the supervision of Dr Melissa Burkley.

Melissa Burkley holds a PhD in Social Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is currently an Associate Professor at Oklahoma State University. Her research focuses on gender and racial stereotypes and the study of stigma. She has authored or co-authored papers in these areas for the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. Her research has also been featured in several media outlets, including Cosmopolitan, Men’s Health, and Oprah radio.

Note

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References


