

How stereotypes can lead to success

April 22 2008

Stereotypes can boost as well as hinder our chances of success, according to psychologists from the University of Exeter and St Andrews University. Writing in the new edition of *Scientific American Mind* (out in the UK 22 April 2008), they argue that the power of stereotypes to affect our performance should not be underestimated.

Drawing on a large body of research, the authors argue that success or failure at work, at school or in sport cannot always be attributed solely to ability or incompetence. Studies suggesting that gender or race can play a part in performance have proved controversial.

The researchers argue that the roots of such handicaps lie partly in the preconceptions that other people hold about these groups. For example, a woman who has been led to believe that women generally do worse than men at mathematics, will perform less well in a maths test as a result. Following a similar logic, in the sporting domain, one reason why the England football team performs badly in penalty shoot-outs (winning only 1 of 7 in major tournaments) is that performance is impeded by knowledge of stereotypes associated with a history of failure.

However, the researchers also point out that stereotypes can have positive dimensions that are able to boost individual or group's performance. For example, research has shown that Asian women do better on maths tests if they identify themselves as Asian rather than as women. Another study has shown that white golfers tend to perform better against black opponents if they are told that they are being judged on their "sport strategic intelligence" than if they are told they are being

tested on their “natural athletic ability.”

“The power of stereotypes should not be underestimated. What we think about ourselves - and also, what we believe others think about us - determines both how we perform and what we are able to become,” said Professor Alex Haslam of the University of Exeter. “As well as holding people back, stereotypes and preconceptions can boost both individual and group performance. For example, if you belong to a group that is always exposed to the message ‘we are the best’, this can promote personal achievement. While we’re often told “believe in yourself”, it can actually be more beneficial to focus on beliefs about your group, as group identity is a powerful vehicle for both personal and social change.”

The authors argue that minorities can overcome their disadvantages by changing external perceptions of their group. The article highlights the flexibility of stereotypes and argues that rather than being fixed, they are very sensitive to change. Professor Stephen Reicher of St Andrews University commented: “In many ways our stereotype of the stereotype is wrong. Stereotypes are neither fixed, nor necessarily harmful. Indeed, in our own hands, they can be tools of progress”. As the authors note, it was precisely by challenging stereotypes that activists like Steve Biko and Emmeline Pankhurst were able to achieve emancipation for black South Africans and British women.

Source: University of Exeter

Citation: How stereotypes can lead to success (2008, April 22) retrieved 13 February 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-04-stereotypes-success.html>

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