Condoning stereotyping?: How awareness of stereotyping prevalence impacts expression of stereotypes

It is common knowledge that promulgation of stereotypes in the workplace is harmful precisely because any internalization of negative stereotypes can lead to negative outcomes for individuals who are the object of these stereotypes. Managers who are looking to create the most productive and rewarding work environment for their employees should understand the negative outcomes that can result from the promulgation and resultant internalization of negative stereotypes. Recent surveys suggest that managers do give this issue importance as almost nine-tenths of managers in Fortune 1000 companies report spending $8 billion annually on diversity and inclusion training for their employees. Such education and awareness makes one think that managers are headed in the right direction and that we can look forward to stereotype-free workplaces in the future, at least from an intuitive perspective. However, recent research suggests otherwise. It turns out that the intuitive solution of educating people about the deleterious effects of stereotypes has not proven to be much of a solution after all. Researchers Michelle Duguid and Melissa Thomas-Hunt detail these findings in their latest paper through a series of four studies that demonstrate that increasing awareness about the prevalence of stereotyping does not motivate individuals to resist their natural inclination to stereotype. Their research shows that individuals who received a high prevalence of stereotyping message expressed more stereotypes than those who received a low prevalence of stereotyping message or no message. The researchers reason that increasing awareness of the prevalence of stereotyping creates a norm for stereotyping, in effect encouraging rather than discouraging the promulgation of stereotypes. The first study looked at individuals’ stereotype expressions about a commonly stereotyped group – the elderly. Results of this study demonstrated that individuals who received a message indicating that the vast majority of people stereotype expressed more stereotypes about the elderly than those informed of stereotyping infrequency. Building upon these findings in their next study, the researchers found that working professionals who were told that the vast majority of people stereotype were less willing to work with an individual who violated a dominant stereotype than those who received a message that few people stereotype. In a similar vein, the third study found that individuals who are exposed to a high prevalence of stereotyping message, will rate a female candidate, but not a male candidate, who attempts to negotiate for a higher compensation as less warm and be less willing to work with her than individuals who are told that few people stereotype. This indicates that if an evaluator has knowledge that many others hold stereotypical preconceptions, this may diminish their own motivation to dismiss their stereotypes. The final study showed that individuals who are exposed to both a high prevalence of stereotyping message and who are competing against members of a group stereotyped as performing poorly in competitive situations will behave more assertively and perform better than those exposed to a low prevalence of stereotyping message.

Taken together, the results of all the studies reveal the usefulness of structured recall in mitigating stereotyping in certain contexts. Specifically, these studies suggest that in order to reduce stereotype expression and its effects, it might be more useful to capitalize on social norms by highlighting the pervasiveness of individuals’ willingness to exert effort against their unconscious stereotypes rather than merely informing them about the prevalence of stereotyping. Within organizations, managers should take note that the degree to which negotiators are motivated to work against these biased expectations can significantly impact the negotiation outcomes of negotiators from traditionally stereotyped groups. Furthermore, this results of this study also imply that the documentation and lamentation of the dearth of women and minorities in the top tiers of organizations which was meant to serve as a catalyst for positive change, may instead have given decision-makers the underlying message that this issue does not need to be a priority since other organizations are also lagging in this regard. Overall, managers need to take a serious look at these findings and work on their policies to ensure that negative stereotypes play a smaller role at the workplace.

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