

# *Stereotypes and the Media: A Re-evaluation*

by Ellen Seiter

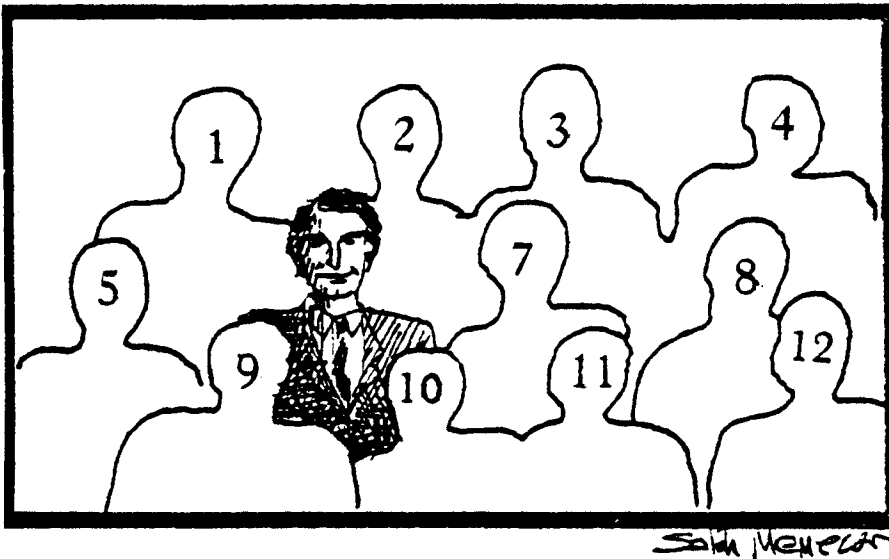
*In research and pedagogy, the failure to account for the evaluative and historical as well as descriptive aspects of stereotypes has led to a use of the concept as a “dirty word.”*

It is a commonplace that the mass media are populated with stereotypes. They are readily recognized on television, where their frequency has been ceaselessly documented by researchers. Why, then, return to the problem of defining stereotypes at this time? I believe that by re-evaluating and clarifying the term we can improve the way we study the media, particularly television, in the academy, in our research, and in our teaching.

The study of stereotypes provides a point of intersection between quantitative and qualitative research, between social science and humanities perspectives, between the cultural studies and administrative approaches. Assumptions about stereotyping influence the way we think about media effects, uses and gratifications, and the ideological analysis of television. While television content analysis has been useful—even essential—its methods could be refined if researchers were to scrutinize their use of the concept of stereotype.

Scholars in social psychology, mass communications, and popular culture have used the term differently and often approach different areas in their research: the audience, for social psychologists; television in general, for mass communications researchers; and specific texts and genres, for popular culture critics. In each case, the definition of a

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stereotype and the kinds of assumptions employed raise political and pedagogical questions.

Let us begin with social psychologists. The authors of a textbook in the field maintain:

*Like most (if not all) social psychologists we believe that stereotypes are universal, used by every human being in processing information about the social environment. In our opinion, stereotypes are not only inevitable but also are usually quite functional for effective social interaction. . . . Stereotypes are generalizations about social groups—characteristics that are attributed to all members of a given group, without regard to variations that must exist among members of that group. Stereotypes are not necessarily based on people's first-hand experiences with members of stereotyped groups. They may be learned from others or from the mass media. . . . The lack of regard for differences within a stereotyped group makes stereotypes into "over-generalizations," and as such they are always at least somewhat distorted. However, many stereotypes may have valid grounds and a "kernel of truth" to them (4, p. 75).*

Such a definition of stereotypes differs substantially from that implicit in a great deal of mass communications research. Social psychologists<sup>1</sup> explain stereotypes in terms of cognitive skills, as one form of mental

<sup>1</sup> I am referring here primarily to psychological social psychology; see 6, 23, 29.

category among many that allow us to organize information. The term does not necessarily connote falseness or a perversion of social reality, as it often does in mass communications research. In its emphasis on the universality of basic cognitive processes, however, the social psychology definition can obscure the ideological nature of many stereotypes.

*The definition of stereotypes used by many social psychologists today includes only a part of the meaning originally invested in the term by its coiner, journalist Walter Lippmann.*

In his 1922 book *Public Opinion*, Lippmann emphasized the commonsense aspect of stereotypes as well as their capacity to legitimize the status quo—the latter aspect being substantially lost in many of the recent textbook definitions of the term (e.g., 2, p. 254; 42, p. 90). For Lippmann, stereotypes are “pictures in our heads” that we use to apprehend the world around us. They result from a useful and not necessarily undesirable “economy of effort” (this “cognitive” part of the definition has been retained by social psychologists). At best, individuals would hold these “habits of thought” only lightly and would be ready to change them when new experiences or contradictory evidence was encountered—an ability that Lippmann suspected was related to education. A series of survey research projects in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s used this definition to study the correlation between belief in stereotypes and personal contact with members of the stereotyped group, or the persistence of national stereotypes (see 9). Lippmann’s original discussion of stereotypes emphasized their use *within* a society, a use that was often obfuscated by later studies involving different nations.

Stereotypes contain an evaluation that justifies social differences. The question of the truth or falsity of stereotypes is immaterial for Lippmann and cannot account for their origin, which is to be found in social divisions:

*A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy (28, p. 96).*

Described in this way, the significance of stereotypes as an operation of ideology becomes clear: they are full of hegemonic potential (see 19).

Perkins (34) developed this aspect of Lippmann's definition in ideological terms, suggesting that stereotypes primarily function by inverting cause and effect. Stereotypes about blacks, for example, often describe differences in education between blacks and whites. The complex, deeply entrenched factors that keep blacks from succeeding in a white-dominated educational system—an effect of their subordinate position in society—is represented in the stereotype as a single, racial characteristic: blacks are less intelligent than whites *by nature*. Such stereotypes attempt to explain and to justify obvious inequalities in a society whose official ideology is racial equality (see 22, pp. 51–86; 26).

Perkins uses the example of the “irrational, illogical, inconsistent ‘female logic’ stereotype” to explain this ideological process. The housewife's job demands that a woman develop a variety of skills and be able to change from the performance of one skill (say, housework) to another (childcare) very rapidly:

*What the stereotype does is to identify this feature of the woman's job situation, place a negative evaluation on it, and then establish it as an innate female characteristic, thus inverting its status so that it becomes a cause rather than an effect. It is these features of stereotypes which explain why stereotypes appear to be false—indeed, are false. The point is to identify their validity, because the strength of stereotypes lies in this combination of validity and distortion (34, p. 154).*

The “flightiness” associated with women in the stereotype of female logic is, in fact, a desirable characteristic for those who must perform the job of housewife. In the stereotype, it is negatively evaluated, ascribed to nature, and used to justify women's unsuitability for other kinds of labor.

A great deal of stereotype research in social psychology has been concerned with documenting knowledge of stereotypes within a population and persistence of belief in them (at times failing to distinguish between the two). Often stereotypes are treated as simple falsities that no liberal-minded and educated citizen should be guilty of entertaining (8, pp. 170–175). (Current definitions of stereotypes in social psychology attempt to deal with the assumption of falseness by distinguishing between stereotypes and prejudice.) Other research introduced the “kernel of truth” hypothesis to account for the persistence of stereotypes despite first-person contact with the stereotyped group. This hypothesis fails to analyze the social origins and ideological motivations behind stereotypes and conflates their descriptive and evaluative dimensions. Its implications are profoundly reactionary.

*“Sex-role stereotypes” have dominated the increasingly active field of stereotype research since the early seventies.*

Brown's (8) discussion of the problems with stereotype research in social psychology can especially illuminate sex-role studies:

*Stereotypes are not objectionable because they are generalizations about categories; such generalizations are valuable when they are true. Stereotypes are not objectionable because they are generalizations that have been proven false; for the most part we do not know whether they are true or false—in their probabilistic forms. Stereotypes are not objectionable because they are generalizations acquired by hearsay rather than by direct experience; many generalizations acquired by hearsay are true and useful. What is objectionable then? I think it is their ethnocentrism and the implication that important traits are inborn for large groups (p. 181).*

Like many of the earlier studies of national stereotype, sex-role research measuring respondents' beliefs in stereotypes frequently uses word-choice tests (see 3). The Adjective Check List, for example, measures the association of words such as “aggressive,” “courageous,” “fussy,” “sensitive,” and “assertive” with men as against women (see 41). “Male and female sex stereotypes may be defined as the constellation of psychological traits generally attributed to men and women respectively” (4, p. 327). Such a definition emphasizes the psychological dimension of stereotypes at the expense of their grounding in the social structure. The definition results in part from the use of the term “sex roles,” to which feminists have objected because it “tends to mask questions of power and inequality. The notion of ‘role’ has tended to focus attention more on individuals than on social strata, more on socialization than on social structure, and has therefore deflected attention away from historic, economic and political questions” (30, p. 719).

The research on sex-role stereotypes often addresses the fact that what is described in a stereotype is held to be inborn: that it evaluates men's and women's natures, and does so differentially. Sex-role research is much less sensitive to ethnocentrism. Instruments such as the Adjective Check List dissociate personality traits from their social context, ignoring the fact that qualities such as “assertiveness” are evaluated very differently depending on the race, class, and age of the group to whom they refer and the group that makes the judgment. The same behavior may be evaluated as “assertive” in the white professional or as “bitchy” and out of line in the woman who is poor and black. Many studies of sex-role stereotypes tell us a great deal about what white middle-class students think about the psychological make-up of men and women who are white and middle-class. But they obscure the political power of

stereotypes over those who may be most affected by them: poor and working-class women of color (see 24).

*Stereotypes have been associated with the mass media since the term first gained currency.*

Mass communications researchers have often used stereotype to mean representations of reality that are false and, by implication, immoral, and have proceeded without further clarification to document their frequent appearance in the mass media (33, p. 149). Television content analyses, my primary interest here, have focused on the frequency with which women and minorities appear on TV and in what kinds of roles. The results have been startling in their indictment of television as a medium overwhelmingly dominated by white males (11, 37, 38).

The limitations of content analysis as a method have been compounded, however, by a lack of theoretical discussion (see 10). There is a frequent failure to specify what is meant by stereotype (often it is just used as a “dirty word”) and how it is related to ideology (20). Blanket assumptions are often made concerning the effects of media stereotypes without drawing distinctions as to the kind of stereotypes and the kind of audience being referred to. Notice how in the following rather typical statement stereotypes are associated with minority groups and the audience is implicitly white: “The major concern with the presentation of stereotypes on television is that the result of such portrayals may be the acquisition of negative attitudes towards certain groups by the audience and the solidification of sexual and racial stereotypes” (36, p. 71). The origins of stereotypes, their relationship to the social structure, and their history are typically left aside in these studies, while a vague effects model is used to justify the research.

Stereotypes of socially powerful groups are studied less frequently, and the relationships among individual stereotypes are rarely examined (except in sex-role stereotype research, which as mentioned earlier rarely focuses on differences in the content of stereotypes based on race, class, and age). This suggests that positive, “majority” stereotypes are somehow more realistic and do not warrant the kind of examination “minority” stereotypes deserve. To understand the ideological aspect of stereotypes in the mass media, we must look at their evaluative as well as their descriptive aspects. For example, stereotypes usually describe all women in terms of their personal relationships to men and in terms of their sexuality, while white men are rarely described in this way. As Perkins explains:

*There is a male (he-man) stereotype, an upper class (leader) stereotype. These stereotypes are important because other stereotypes are partially defined in terms of, or in opposition to, them. The happy-go-lucky negro attains at least some of its meaning and force from its opposition to the "puritan" characteristics (somber and responsible) of the WASP. Positive stereotypes are an important part of ideology and are important in the socialisation of both dominant and oppressed groups. In order to focus attention on the ideological nature of stereotypes it might be more useful to talk of pejorative stereotypes and laudatory stereotypes, rather than to conceal the "pejorativeness" in the meaning of the term (34, p. 144).*

If we fail to examine the evaluative as well as the descriptive components of stereotypes, there is a danger of mistaking the *presence* of white, bourgeois values for the *absence* of stereotypes and, therefore, for more true and realistic representations. Professional achievement, ambition, puritanism, and individualism may be heralded as components of new "positive images" of white women and of men and women of color. But such representations may obscure economically based social divisions and circumvent the recognition of shared experiences of oppression. Television content analysis should be carefully scrutinized in terms of this kind of ethnocentrism, especially since so many studies use white college students as coders.

Our agendas for "progress" in TV representation need to be similarly analyzed. Many quantitative studies of television content conclude with conspicuously weak statements about the need for greater diversification of character types. Sometimes a plea is made for more "democratic" representation, where the population of television characters would reflect audience demographics proportionately: "The common culture of American society cuts across ethnic lines in dozens of ways but the phenomenal degree of integration which has been achieved in America has not become as visible as it could" (37, p. 288). This line of argument is dead-ended by the rejoinder that the commercial television industry is interested in a market of white, young, middle-class consumers.

A second conclusion offered by quantitative analyses explains the repetition of stereotypes in terms of narrative conventions: "stereotypic portrayals may provide the lowest common denominator on which to build storylines; perhaps without exaggerating or distorting writers and producers have difficulty creating interesting yet credible characters and situations" (39, p. 238). This explanation constitutes one kind of "return of the repressed" in television content analysis: having banished context in order to isolate units of content that are quantifiable, the research leaves conventions of genre, modes of narration, and visual and thematic codes outside its scope. Both kinds of conclusion negotiate a tenuous

position between idealism and apologism, and reduce the “problem” with television content to the audience itself.

A third and less frequent conclusion compares television stereotypes to social and economic divisions among the groups they represent. Gross and Jeffries-Fox voice the typical discomfort with this issue when they say, in discussing sex-role stereotypes, that this “sort of bias is in some moral sense more ambiguous than the others. Many of the more stereotyped features of the portrayal of women on television are also accurate reflections of the sexist reality of our society” (18, p. 253). This is the mass communications research equivalent of the “kernel of truth” hypothesis in social psychology and stems from the initial tendency to think of stereotypes as both pejorative and false. If the *descriptive* aspect of stereotypes can be seen to be accurate (albeit in highly selective ways), their evaluative aspect cannot. For we are dealing not with a question of truth and falsity, but with ideology.

*In humanities criticism, stereotypes are distinguished  
from well-rounded, individuated characters.*

Dyer (17) has outlined the qualities associated with the novelistic conception of character as particularity, interest, autonomy, roundness, development, interiority, motivation, discrete identity, and consistency (p. 104). When these standards for the representation of fictional characters are applied to the mass media, the media inevitably come up short. Critics may suggest that the fictions created by the mass media are stereotypical because they are both false (characters portrayed are one-dimensional, undeveloped, not true-to-life) and aesthetically bankrupt (plots and characters evidence formulaic repetition). A hierarchy of cultural forms exists within the humanities based on the suitability of negative aesthetic judgments such as “stereotypical” to describe them. Critics rarely speak of stereotypes in opera or ballet. Novels fare better than plays; theater fares better than film; film fares better than television. The word “stereotype” condemns any individual product of the mass media: TV critics Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel use it to describe films they dislike; newspaper columnists complain that series are “full of the same old stereotypes.” Popular genres such as soap opera or science fiction are deemed full of stereotypes; the troubled, alienated white intellectuals who populate the art films of Bergman, Fellini, or Antonioni are deemed individual characters. In this view, Art never resorts to such crude conventional techniques as stereotyping and remains untainted by ideology.

These aesthetic judgments ignore the fact that the novelistic conception of character, with its basis in nineteenth-century realism, itself reflects a political position. As Dyer explains,



*the peculiarities of the bourgeois conception of individual/character are, first, that the stress on particularity and uniqueness tends to bar, or render inferior, representation of either collectivity and the masses or the typical person/character (types being relegated to a merely functional role in promoting the central character); and second, that the concern with interior motivation reinforces a model of history and social process in which explanation is rooted in the individual conscience and capacity rather than in collective and/or structural aspects of social life* (17, p. 108).

The novelistic conception of character implicitly demands certain things from the cultural producer (artist/writer/director) and from the artwork itself. Uniqueness and originality are used to define the cultural producer's talent in creative terms. The work must evidence complexity and detail, which, in realism, presumably derive from the maker's ability to observe and record reality (see 31, pp. 64–78). According to this aesthetic, characters should not be created for the purpose of political statement, for they could not then meet realism's demands for particularity. The cartoon, the soap opera, and the socialist realist film can all be condemned on the same aesthetic grounds, i.e., for using stereotyped characters. Humanities scholars on the Left have also despised mass culture for its use of stereotypes, as the work of George Lukacs, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer so clearly indicates (see 1).

Scholars of popular culture such as Robert Warshow, John G. Cawelti, and Paddy Whannel and Stuart Hall (12, 21, 40) dissociate themselves from high culture critics by arguing that *all* forms of fiction employ rules and conventions—stereotypes among them—and that such use does not necessarily reduce the work's value. Popular culture critics also take exception with empiricist mass communications researchers, whom they accuse of oversimplifying the relationship between culture and society by treating it as direct and unmediated. The popular culture perspective argues for the necessity of understanding intrinsic forms: the genres, narrational rules, visual and thematic conventions of mass culture.

This has brought about the salvation of the popular artist as creative genius in the work of André Bazin, Andrew Sarris, Stuart Kaminsky, and Jim Kitses, among many other film scholars who have embraced auteurism (5, 25, 27, 35). In television studies it has been more difficult to single out for this honor a creative force in the production process, but Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley have attempted to do so with the TV producer (32). Popular genres, such as the Western and the detective story, have also been elevated to the status of Art.

To avoid the pejorative connotations that surround the word “stereotype,” such critics describe popular culture's characters as archetypes. Cawelti describes the standards proposed:

*The good writer must renew these stereotypes by adding new elements, by showing us some new unexpected facet, or by relating them to other stereotypes in a particularly expressive fashion. The ultimate test of a truly vitalized stereotype is the degree to which it becomes an archetype, thereby transcending its particular cultural moment and maintaining an interest for later generations and other cultures (13, p. 11).*

Cawelti adds that “the addition of significant touches of human complexity or frailty to a stereotypical figure” is one of the primary means of “stereotype vitalization”: these are the same terms that describe the bourgeois conception of character. In Cawelti’s aesthetic scheme, uniqueness and individuality can be “added on” to debased stereotypes, and popular culture can thereby live up to the ideals of realism and durability.

Popular culture critics emphasize formal rules and a limited set of (often psychological) thematic concerns; they frequently exclude questions about the relationship between the products of popular culture and the society that produces them. They have failed to scrutinize the systematic exclusions, marginalizations, and vilifications of particular groups as represented in the fictional world. By analyzing stereotypes as part of a formal genre system, they exclude the social origins of character types. Stereotypes of white heroes are frequently elevated to the status of archetype and invested with deep psychological significance and social meaning (see 12, 25, 27). Analyses of the Western exemplify the tenuous position held by critics who choose to apologize for—or ignore—a text’s overtly racist premises, while claiming for it the privileged status of Art, above the vulgar scrutiny of sociologists. Although the work of early popular culture critics such as Warshaw and Whannel exhibited a sophisticated understanding of politics and a compelling analysis of the social meaning of stereotypes, popular culture studies since the 1970s have been dominated by a weak and often vague form of functionalist sociology, as indicated in this passage: “Formulas resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes towards particular values” (13, p. 35). If the tendency in social psychological and mass communications research has been blindness to dominant group stereotypes, popular culture criticism has suffered from inattention to stereotypes of socially oppressed groups.

***We have generally failed to teach or research the history and analysis of individual stereotypes and their relationship to social and economic power.***

Stereotypes provide an opportunity to connect theory and practice in teaching about ideology. We can use them to demonstrate to students in

a dramatic way the various forms of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia that circulate in our culture.

The shame associated with holding stereotypes, as well as the incentives in a liberal, academic environment to prove that one doesn't, may deter us from examining their content. The typical example offered in social psychology textbooks, for example, is the "safe" stereotype of the redhead. This is a comfortable example for classroom discussion among white students, but it also obfuscates the ideological function of most stereotypes. A more appropriate and meaningful discussion of stereotypes might ask: How does the corporate executive compare to the drag queen? The black matriarch to the society woman? The dumb blonde to the tragic mulatto? The criminal Asian to the Uncle Tom? The black prostitute to the femme fatale? The judge to the factory worker? The tennis instructor to the football player? Behind each stereotype lies a history that relates both to commonsense understandings of society and to economic determinants. When we start studying the content of individual stereotypes and their relationship to one another, a series of new issues are introduced in the classroom, many of which involve confronting and unlearning racism (see 22, 24, 26).

Too often communications students leave the university with a heightened sense of moral outrage over the grievous practices of television networks, while they remain smugly (and erroneously) confirmed in their own freedom from racism, or sexism, or elitism. (Homophobia still tends to be more openly acceptable; for a discussion of gay stereotypes, see 14, 16.) In television criticism classes, students may learn that public television is aesthetically superior to network TV because of its freedom from stereotypes. Students may hold a vague, utopian longing for a democratic medium whose character population would mirror the demographics of the United States, where men and women of color, white women, and the poor would be treated positively, i.e., as capable of aspiring to the same standards as middle-class white men. Following the aesthetic theory of Brecht (7), Citron (14), Cook (15), and Dyer (16) have argued that the deliberate use of stereotypes may be preferable to this aesthetic strategy.

We need a pedagogy that refuses to confirm white middle-class college students in their ability to evaluate objectively the quality of aesthetic products based on the presence of stereotypes without drawing any distinctions among types or understanding their social basis. We must not reinforce students' feeling of neutrality in relationship to the media by employing them as scientific coders of television content or as the subjects of psychology experiments where they can prove their enlightened position by disclaiming any knowledge of stereotypes. We must challenge the students' opinion of the audience as primarily like them, only poorer and not so well educated. When we presume a television audience that is white, straight, male, and middle-class we need to say so, and if we do not know much about the rest of the audience we must learn.

These same strictures apply to those who research stereotypes. The term stereotype has little explanatory value and less theoretical grounding; at the same time, its use suggests many simplistic assumptions about the debased nature of mass media. Research designs must make explicit their orientation to theories of ideology, must account for change in stereotypes, must be sensitive to context and the way meaning on television is produced, must conceptualize the differences—especially those of race, class, and gender—within the television audience.

All stereotypes were not created equal. We cannot afford to see media stereotypes defined primarily in psychological or politically neutral terms, nor can we see them as merely a symptom of our debased cultural life. We must consider carefully the relationship of stereotypes to the legitimation of social power. We must distinguish between their descriptive and their evaluative aspects, analyzing their history and content as well as their frequency. Finally, we must ask ourselves how different social groups will understand stereotypes, believe in them, laugh at them, embrace them, or despise them.

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