

# Research sheds light on the dangers of positive stereotypes

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(Medical Xpress)—We all know about the dangers of negative stereotyping. But what about positive stereotyping? Is it really bad to assume that women are more in touch with their emotions or that immigrants work harder than the majority population? Research led by Aaron Kay, a professor at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, reveals that positive stereotypes may actually be worse.

Kay and his research colleagues conducted a series of studies to test how individuals responded to both negative and positive stereotypes. In a first study, a group of 52 participants was exposed to two different fake newspaper articles describing scientific findings that are consistent with [common stereotypes](#) of African Canadians. In the fake positive scenario, the newspaper article showed that blacks were more athletic than whites. In the fake negative scenario, a separate article presented stereotypes about the African Canadians' intelligence. When asked if there were any [biases](#) in the two different articles, those who were exposed to a positive stereotype were less likely to report bias (44.4%) than those exposed to a negative stereotype (73.9%).

In a follow-up study, the researchers measured the extent to which the participants experienced a range of emotions when reading the two fake newspaper articles. The positive stereotype did not produce any notable increase in emotions, while the negative stereotype led to more negative emotion. "This shows that positive stereotypes may be especially adept at flying under the radar compared to negative stereotypes," said Professor Kay.

Even more dangerous, the researchers conducted tests that show how positive stereotypes impact perceptions negatively about the entire targeted group. A group of 154 participants took part in a survey in which they were asked to rate different groups and note differences that could be explained by nature or could be learned. The researchers noted that from this survey, positive stereotypes strengthened the belief that general differences between blacks and whites are biological.

"Such association can lead to socially problematic implications," states Kay. "Positive stereotypes are potent because they insidiously influence people's general beliefs about the nature of group differences and ironically trigger other negative stereotypical beliefs."

In a fourth study, participants were asked to rate the strengths and weaknesses of 10 male profiles, whose name, age and scores on personality tests were included. Two of the 10 names were stereotypical black names. The participants indicated how likely it would be for that person to perform an act of kindness, cheat, be involved in a crime and volunteer at a charity. Those who had higher exposure to the positive stereotype were more likely to associate the stereotypical African American names as cheaters and criminals.

"These studies show that beliefs in a biological underpinning of black-white differences in behavior are more likely to facilitate [negative stereotypes](#)," concluded Kay. "When we consider the extent to which positive stereotypes are often seamlessly integrated into public discourse, the implications of these findings are indeed significant."

**More information:** [www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0022103112002211](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0022103112002211)

Provided by Duke University

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