

Kids think stereotypes reflect how world should be

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Once children believe that a group is characterized by a certain trait, they think individual people within that group should also be judged by that trait, according to a University of Michigan study.

U-M researchers introduced participants to unfamiliar groups—"Hibbles" and "Glerks"—who differed from each other in harmless behaviors, such as the kind of food they eat, language they speak, music they listen to and games they play.

They then showed participants conforming or nonconforming individuals (e.g., a Hibble who played with toys that Glerks typically played with), and asked them to evaluate those individuals.

The study, which appears in the current issue of *Cognitive Science*, involved four age groups: 4-6 years, 7-9 years, 10-13 years and adults.

Children between ages 4-13 believed that individuals should behave like others in their own [group](#), and that it was bad for them to not do so. This tendency declined with age, the research showed.

"These data suggest a thought process through which [children](#) enforce group stereotypes," said Steven Roberts, U-M psychology doctoral candidate and the study's lead author. "Once they believe a group is a certain way, they quickly believe that group members should be that way."

Adults did not show the same judgments as children, the study found.

Importantly, children were less negative when the researchers introduced characters as individuals (e.g., "This one listens to this kind of music"), rather than groups (e.g., "Hibbles listen to this kind of music").

That is, when children focused on individuality and were then shown characters who did not conform to the behaviors of the first characters, they were significantly more likely to say that it was OK for a character to listen to whatever kind of music or play with whatever kind of toy that they want to.

"This suggests that when children focus on individuality, rather than group membership, they are less likely to use group stereotypes to guide how they think about individuals," said Roberts, who collaborated on the study with Susan Gelman, U-M professor of psychology and linguistics, and Arnold Ho, U-M assistant professor of psychology and organizational studies.

Roberts explained further that these data are important for understanding how children think about real-world social groups, such as those based on gender, race or ethnicity.

"From an early age, children often believe that girls do not play with trucks, and that [white people](#) do not befriend black people, for instance," he said. "These data suggest that once children believe this, they intuitively believe that girls should not play with trucks, and that white people should not befriend [black people](#), and that it is bad if they do.

"However, teaching children about individual differences can prevent this bias. For instance, teaching children that girls do play with trucks, and that white people do have black friends, teaches them that social stereotypes do not accurately reflect how the world is and that they certainly don't reflect how the world should be."

More information: Steven O. Roberts et al. So It Is, So It Shall Be: Group Regularities License Children's Prescriptive Judgments, *Cognitive Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/cogs.12443](https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12443)

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