

## Handout

# The Impact of Stereotypes in the Media

**Directions:** Read the following article and then discuss the connection questions that follow.

In the UK, people spend hours every day consuming some form of mass media: 18- to 24-year-olds, for example, spend over five hours a day online, browsing the Internet, playing games, streaming entertainment services and/or using social media platforms.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, they may also consume media by watching television, listening to music, encountering adverts on the street and reading printed media, like magazines, books and newspapers. These high levels of media consumption are significant: what people view, see and hear in the media has the capacity to shape what they think and their understanding of the world around them.

By consuming media, people can be transported to different places, and can learn about a range of experiences and about people, both those from social groups they do and do not belong to. How different social identities are presented within the **mass media** has been shown to impact people's understanding of others and of themselves. This can be problematic if portrayals of individuals are based on stereotypes. Stereotypes are beliefs about an individual based on the real or imagined characteristics of a group to which that individual belongs. Stereotypical portrayals of groups in the media can influence how people view and relate to each other. In one study, male interviewers who watched **sexist** adverts on television were more likely to judge a female job applicant on her appearance and view her as less capable than those who were not shown the adverts.<sup>2</sup> The impact of stereotypes in the media can be particularly problematic if people are being introduced to social groups which they have no direct experience of as they are less likely to encounter information that challenges media stereotypes.

Stereotypes in the media can also impact how people view themselves. A 2012 study showed that watching television negatively impacted the self-esteem of all girls and black boys, but increased the self-esteem of white boys. These differences related to gender and race portrayals in the content the children were consuming – white male characters were more likely to be in powerful positions, while female characters were more likely to be sexualised and one-dimensional, and black male characters were more likely to be **criminalised**.<sup>3</sup> Limited media portrayals can therefore impact how people view themselves and their capabilities.

### Glossary

- **Mass media (noun):** All of the methods used to communicate information to people.
- **Sexist (adjective):** Prejudice or discrimination based on one's sex.
- **Criminalised (verb):** Turn into or treat as a criminal.
- **Conforming (verb):** Behave according to expectations.
- **Self-fulfilling prophecy (noun phrase):** When someone's expectations about a situation lead it to come true.

<sup>1</sup> ['Online Nation'](#), Ofcom, 1 June 2022.

<sup>2</sup> L. A. Rudman and E. Borgida, 'The afterglow of construct accessibility: The behavioral consequences of priming men to view women as sexual objects', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 31:6 (1995), 493–517. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jesp.1995.1022>

<sup>3</sup> N. Martins and K. Harrison, 'Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Children's Television Use and Self-Esteem: A Longitudinal Panel Study', *Communication Research*, 39:3 (2012), 338–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650211401376>

This can have real-world implications and lead to something called stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is the term given to a situation in which an individual feels they are at risk of **conforming** to a negative stereotype about a group to which they belong. This anxiety can impact their performance and/or behaviour. If, for example, before completing a mathematical test, women are reminded of the stereotype that suggests women are not good at maths, this can negatively impact their performance.<sup>4</sup> This can then create a **self-fulfilling prophecy**: individuals feel anxiety about confirming a stereotype; this impacts their performance and then reinforces the stereotype.

The impact of negative stereotypes is enhanced by the fact that humans have an in-built negativity bias and tend to remember negative information for longer.<sup>5</sup> This is thought to be an evolutionary mechanism because, in terms of survival, something negative could require our attention as it might be a threat to life.<sup>6</sup>

However, mass media can also be used to challenge stereotypes that exist in society. If individuals are portrayed in ways that run counter to stereotypes, this can help media consumers view people as more complex. Moreover, the media can also help build intergroup relations. If people watch shows that contain characters from different social groups and present them positively, it can help people feel more connected to people from those groups.<sup>7</sup>

Teaching young people to be media literate, to reflect on how and why groups are presented in a certain way, and to recognise and deconstruct stereotypes can also help counter the impacts of media stereotypes on how they view others and themselves.<sup>8</sup>

### Connection Questions

1. How does the media people consume impact them?
2. How can consuming media that promotes stereotypes impact people and their views of others? How can it impact their view of themselves?
3. What is stereotype threat? What causes it? What are its consequences?
4. What can be done to counter the impact of societal stereotypes?
5. How much time do you spend consuming mass media every day?
6. How, if at all, has reading this text impacted your view about your media consumption habits?

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine Good, Joshua Aronson and Jayne Ann Harder, 'Problems in the Pipeline: Stereotype Threat and Women's Achievement in High-Level Math Courses', *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29:1 (2008), 17–28.

<sup>5</sup> S. Soroka and S. McAdams, 'News, Politics, and Negativity', *Political Communication*, 32:1 (2015), 1–22.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Soroka, 'Why do we pay more attention to negative news than to positive news?', LSE, 25 May 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Amanda Sharples and Elizabeth Page-Gould, '[How to Avoid Picking Up Prejudice from the Media](#)', *Greater Good Magazine*, 7 September 2016.

<sup>8</sup> N. Bernam and A. White, 'Refusing the stereotype: Decoding negative gender imagery through a school-based digital media literacy program', *Youth Studies Australia* [Online], 32:4 (2013), 38–47.  
<https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.768985279375128>