Race × Class Stereotypes of Women

Hope Landrine
Stanford University

Forty-four undergraduates assigned traditional stereotyping adjectives to middle-class black, middle-class white, lower-class black, and lower-class white female stimulus persons. A multivariate analysis of variance revealed that these Race X Class stereotypes of women differed significantly by race and by social class, but there was no Race X Class interaction. The stereotype of white women was rated significantly higher than that of black women on dependent, passive, and emotional. The stereotype of lower-class women was rated significantly higher than that of middle-class women on confused, dirty, hostile, inconsiderate, and irresponsible. Although the stereotypes of women differed significantly by race and social class, all were stereotypically feminine. In addition, the stereotypes of white women, and of middle-class women were most similar to traditional stereotypes of women. Thus, it was concluded that both race and social class are implicit variables in sex-role stereotypes.

In traditional investigations of stereotypes, participants are required to assign adjectives to status groups. Usually two status groups are presented, and they are described in terms of a single, isolated, status variable (i.e., men and women, or blacks and whites). In this fashion many investigators have empirically derived stereotypes by sex (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Cowen & Steward, 1977; Ellis & Bentler, 1973; Feinberger, 1948; Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975). Others have derived stereotypes by either race, age, or national origin (Aaronson, 1966; Bayton, 1941; Brigham, 1969, 1973; Campbell, 1967; Child & Doob, 1943; Diab, 1963a, 1963b; Gardner, Kirby, Gorospe, & Villamin, 1972; Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969; Katz & Braly, 1933; McCauley & Stitt, 1978; Tuckman & Lorge, 1956, 1958a, 1958b). The results of these investigations reveal that either different adjectives, or different values on the same
adjectives, are attributed to the two status groups. From this investigators have concluded that the variance in the adjectives assigned to the groups is accounted for by the status variable chosen for the study. Bayton, McAlister, and Hamer (1956), however, demonstrated that such a conclusion may be erroneous.

In an investigation of Race X Class stereotypes Bayton et al. (1956) found that lower-class blacks and whites were described in the same negative terms and that upper-class blacks and whites were described in the same positive terms. That is, with both race and class varied systematically, Bayton et al. (1956) found that lower-class status accounted for the historically negative stereotypes of blacks and upper-class status accounted for the previously positive stereotypes of whites. Bayton et al. (1956) concluded that race stereotypes may actually be Race X Class stereotypes, and suggested that the variance in race stereotypes is accounted for not by race, but by the social-class status that participants assume correlates with race. These data were supported in a later investigation (Smedley & Bayton, 1978), and led Jones (1972) to suggest that any investigation of racial stereotypes that does not control for social class will yield results that are ambiguous at best. Nonetheless, stereotypes based on race, in isolation, continue to be derived.

On the whole these findings suggest that participants in stereotyping research do not necessarily assign adjectives to status groups on the basis of the status variable the investigator has chosen for study. Instead, they may attribute additional status variables to the stimulus person. Then they assign traits to this cognitive multiple-status stimulus, and as Bayton et al. (1956) suggested, those implicit status attributes may account for a greater proportion of the variance in the stereotypes than does the experimenter’s (the explicit) variable. Such behavior may be understood as a result of the fact that status attributes never appear in isolation in the real world, but instead appear in organized Gestalts or constellations (because we occupy more than one status position at a time). Thus, perhaps our research participants cannot imagine a “black” without attributing a sex to that stimulus; similarly, perhaps we cannot imagine “a woman” without attributing a race, a social class, an age, and even a degree of physical attractiveness to the stimulus. In any event, the Bayton et al. (1956) results suggest that single-attribute stereotypes may in fact be multiple-status stereotypes, and thus raise the following questions about the meaning of the sex-role stereotypes we have derived: Are sex-role stereotypes actually sex-race stereotypes? That is, do our participants attribute white race when “women” is the stimulus? Are sex-role stereotypes really sex-class stereotypes, with our participants attributing middle-class status to the female stimulus? Is our stereotype