

Christopher D. Petsko

Research Statement

Research Overview

When we learn that someone is a member of a social group—that a person is gay, female, Latinx, older, poor, Swedish, or anything else—stereotypes relating to that group become highly accessible in our minds. Although we often reject these stereotypes and their implications for those we perceive, these stereotypes nevertheless exert a powerful influence over us: they distort how we evaluate each other, what we expect from each other, and they distort how we treat each other. In short, stereotypes have the power to bias social perception. I use social psychological theory and experimental techniques to investigate how it is that stereotypes exert this influence. My primary program of research is in the domain of intersectional stereotyping; my secondary program of research is in the domain of political stereotyping.

Intersectional Stereotyping

My primary program of research is concerned with the question of how people stereotype and perceive one another in light of one another's multiple social groups—that is, how people engage in intersectional stereotyping. I argue that perceivers' minds operate in a compartmentalized way. This is to say that there are moments, for example, when perceivers will categorize Black women as *Black*, other moments when perceivers will categorize Black women as *women*, and still other moments when perceivers will categorize Black women as *Black women* specifically. In contrast to most theoretical perspectives in this research area, I argue that these categories trade off in the minds of perceivers. Thus, when perceivers are categorizing Black women as *Black*, they should not, at least in these moments, be paying much attention to these women's gender (or to any other social group). A summary of this argument and its utility for advancing research on intersectional stereotyping can be found in my recent submission to *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* (Petsko & Bodenhausen, 2020).

How, exactly, does one test this idea? In one recent experiment, participants viewed a conversation between twelve people: three Black men, three Black women, three White women, and three White men. By random assignment, participants either saw a version of this conversation in which all the men disagreed with all the women; a version of this conversation in which all the Black targets disagreed with all the White targets; or a version of this conversation in which targets' patters of agreement had no correlation with either their race or their gender. Afterwards, participants had to try and remember who said what from the conversation. The results of these experiments were clear; when participants saw a version of the conversation that emphasized targets' gender groups, participants tended to mistake Black women's statements for those of other women, but not for those of other Black targets. In contrast, when participants saw a version of the conversation that emphasized targets' racial groups, they did the reverse—that is, participants tended to mistake Black women for other Black targets, but not for other women. In a separate experiment, I replicated these effects among participants' perceptions of older women. When participants mistook older women for other older adults, they did not, in these moments, mistake older women with other women (and vice-versa). Thus, perceivers' minds indeed make use of social categories in a compartmentalized way: when perceivers are attending to women's gender groups, for example, they are not attending to women's race or age groups (Petsko, dissertation in progress).

This theoretical perspective was designed to explain contradictory findings in my earlier research on intersectional stereotyping. That early research was focused on the question of how perceivers stereotype men at the cross-sections of different race and sexual orientation categories. On the one hand, I had been finding that perceivers tend to regard gay men as de-racialized relative to their heterosexual counterparts. For example, one set of experiments—published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*

(Petsko & Bodenhausen, 2019a)—revealed that perceivers stereotype gay Black men as substantially “less Black” and even as “Whiter” than their heterosexual counterparts. Thus, learning that a person is gay, according to this early research, could fundamentally distort the race-related attributes that we ascribe to that person. On the other hand, other experiments found no evidence that race perception was contingent on targets’ sexual orientation groups. In that latter set of experiments, participants reviewed court case descriptions of various defendants (some Black, some White, some heterosexual, some gay), and they made judgements about the extent to which defendants seemed culpable of various crimes (e.g., gang violence). Surprisingly, participants did exhibit a racial bias in this context, but this racial bias was in no way moderated by defendants’ sexual orientation. Thus, while there were clearly situations in which perceivers’ stereotypes of gay *vs.* heterosexual Black men were different, clearly too there were situations in which perceivers’ stereotypes about these men were more or less the same—for more details on this latter project, see my recent paper in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (Petsko & Bodenhausen, 2019b). According to the theoretical perspective I have been advancing, these divergent findings can be accounted for by a simple psychological principle—that when a social context makes race especially salient to perceivers, perceivers do not, at least in these moments, pay much attention to other social categories to which a target belongs. For example, because the criminal sentencing context is a stereotypically racialized context, perceivers focus, in this context, on targets’ racial groups at the expense of focusing on targets’ sexual orientation groups. A summary of the psychological principles that govern category salience—including category accessibility, fit, and distinctiveness—are discussed in my recent submission to *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* (Petsko & Bodenhausen, 2020).

Future plans for this research program include, first and foremost, examining whether intersections themselves can serve as the dominant social categories to which perceivers attend. For example, when perceivers are categorizing Korean women as *Korean women*, does this inhibit the extent to which these women seem, respectively, like *women* more generally or like *Koreans* more generally? A test of this possibility is currently underway. Another project examines whether de-racialization effects extend to perceptions of gay *vs.* heterosexual women. Preliminary evidence suggests that perceivers do regard gay women as de-racialized relative to heterosexual women, but that these effects may be smaller in magnitude than those documented for gay *vs.* heterosexual men (Petsko & Bodenhausen, 2019a). A final project in this vein concerns the question of whether perceivers regard men’s heterosexuality as more precarious—that is, as more easily lost—than women’s, and if so, whether this depends on targets’ racial identities. I recently received a grant from the National Science Foundation’s TESS program to examine this question in a nationally representative sample of Americans.

In short, my research reveals that when perceivers sharpen their focus on a single identity that a target possesses, they do not, at least in these moments, notice other identities that a target possesses. The purpose of my dissertation research—and indeed, of my future research plans on this topic—is to identify the underpinnings of this compartmentalized process and to understand its consequences for intersectional stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

Political Stereotyping

My secondary program of research is on the topic of political stereotyping—that is, how perceivers’ stereotypes about others are inflected through the lens of their own political leanings. This secondary area of research centers on two related questions, which are: 1) when do liberals and conservatives (in the United States) engage in similar kinds of social stereotyping; and 2) when do liberals and conservatives engage in opposite kinds of social stereotyping?

Under many circumstances, liberals refrain from expressing overtly dehumanizing views of others. For example, liberals tend to be less likely than conservatives to stereotype Muslims, Arab people, and Mexican immigrants as being savage, aggressive, or as lacking self-restraint. Thus, in their consciously

expressed beliefs, there is a pronounced divergence in the stereotypes that liberals and conservatives endorse. In a recent set of reverse-correlation experiments, I replicated this pattern, but I also documented something else: that when one examines liberals' and conservatives' mental images of Arabs—rather than explicit beliefs about Arabs—one finds that these mental images are dehumanized to equivalent degrees. Thus, while on one level liberals and conservatives' stereotypes are in opposition to each other's, on another level their stereotypes are so aligned as to be indistinguishable. To examine the robustness of this phenomenon, I recently conducted a pre-registered replication of these findings in a quasi-nationally-representative panel of American respondents. This project is in the final stages of writing and will be submitted for publication in the coming months (Petsko, Kteily, Lei, Kunst, & Bruneau, in preparation).

Liberals and conservatives' levels of outgroup dehumanization are also equivalent in a rather different circumstance: when they are asked about their impressions of each other. In a set of recent experiments, participants completed a reverse-correlation experiment in which they called to mind either their mental image of the ingroup (e.g., conservatives calling to mind fellow conservatives), or their mental image of the outgroup (e.g., conservatives calling to mind liberals). According to naïve ratings of these mental images, both conservatives and liberals envision the outgroup as looking substantially more dehumanized than the ingroup—and they do so to equivalent degrees. What differs between liberals and conservatives is *how* they dehumanize one another. Whereas conservatives think of liberals as lacking maturity and sophistication, liberals think conservatives as lacking civility and basic self-restraint. These findings replicate in a six-wave longitudinal study of American voters that began just after the 2016 Democratic National Convention, and that concluded six months after the election of president Donald Trump. This project will be written up for publication in the coming year (Petsko, Kteily, & Bruneau, in progress).

As the above paragraphs illustrate, liberals and conservatives often stereotype one another as lacking basic human qualities. What are the psychological factors that can “switch off” this kind of intergroup animosity? In a final set of experiments, participants called to mind their mental image of either generic Republicans, Republicans who support Donald Trump, or—critically—Republicans who do *not* support Donald Trump. Findings from this experiment revealed, first, that participants' regard generic Republicans as being Trump-supporters by default. Second, these findings revealed that Democrats feel substantially more favorable toward Republicans when they learn that Republicans do not support Donald Trump. Thus, sharing a negational identity with a partisan—in this case an identity as someone who does *not* support Trump—can promote affiliative intergroup attitudes across party lines. This project is in the final stages of data analysis, and will be submitted for review this fall (Petsko & Molden, in progress).

In brief, political stereotyping can be consequential for how liberals and conservatives regard themselves as well as others. The purpose of my research is to identify the relation between political identities and social stereotyping. Future research on this topic will be oriented toward using this information to reduce animosity between conservatives and liberals.

Broader Aims

A broader aim of my research program is to develop models of social perception that integrate across (historically separated) theoretical traditions in social psychology. For example, I would like to create a model of social perception that leverages the insights of individualistic perspectives on social stereotyping (e.g., the heuristics approach, prevalent in North America) with those of interdependent perspectives on social stereotyping (e.g., the social identity approach, prevalent in Europe). My research on intersectional stereotyping and political stereotyping are already headed in this direction, but there is more work to be done on unifying these distinct approaches to thinking about intergroup thought and behavior. If we wish to fully understand the ways by which stereotypes enter our minds and distort our perceptions of each other—and indeed, to identify the ways by which stereotypes give rise to divisive conflict between groups—we need to be leveraging the insights of an integrated (rather than piecemeal) social psychology.