



Too Close for Comfort: The Effects of Threatening Stereotypes and Perceptions of Proximity

Anissa Maffett

Advisor: Erin O'Mara

Introduction

Stereotypes are a pervasive tool used to navigate our social world.

The Good Side of Stereotypes:

- Help us understand what to expect
- Allow us to quickly process new information.

The Bad Side of Stereotypes:

- Overgeneralize characteristics of group members
- Distort perceptions of reality

People's perceptions of reality are not always as accurate as they believe them to be.

- Preference and desire influence processing of visual stimuli (Balcetis & Dunning, 2006)
- People's emotions effect perceptions (Proffitt, Bhalla, Gossweiler, & Midgett, 1995).
- Threatening stimuli appears closer than non-threatening stimuli (Cole et al., 2012)

The Current Study

Can perception of threat be created by stereotypes, resulting in perceiving threatening stimuli as physically closer?

Hypothesis: Participants, will perceive an individual as more threatening, and therefore physically closer compared to a nonthreatening individual when the threat assessment is based on the individual's adherence to the stereotype.

Method: One-way design, two conditions

- Stereotype consistent
- Stereotype inconsistent

Approximately 100 undergraduate female participants will be recruited from a fall 2015 introductory psychology course and participate in exchange for course credit.

Asked to evaluate the total distance they believe separates them from a confederate who either conforms to or differentiates from the stereotype associated with those most likely to carry the ostensibly dangerous (fictitious) disease.

Implications

Projected results could indicate the ability of stereotypes to influence physical, and not just social, perceptions

Help illustrate just how influential stereotypes can be in distorting reality in our physical world.

Could shed light on the role that stereotypes play on interactions between different groups.

One way to understand why these interracial acts of violence are occurring is by examining how stereotype could play a role in altering perceptions of physical distances.

References

- Balcetis, E., & Dunning, D. (2006). See what you want to see: Motivational influences on visual perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 612-625.
- Cole, S., Balcetis, E., & Dunning, D. (2012). Affective signals of threat increase perceived proximity. *Psychological Science*, 24, 34-40.
- Proffitt, D. R., Bhalla, M., Gossweiler, R., Midgett J. (1995). Perceiving geographical slant. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 2, 409-428.