

Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

Fall 2013, Northern Illinois University

Geoff Pynn

Handout 10: Are Stereotype-Based Judgments Epistemically Rational?

The last handout discussed the following claim:

The existence of a negative stereotype about group X can have detrimental epistemic effects on members of group X, even when it is disavowed.

Today's paper by Uhlmann, Brescoll, and Machery suggests a different claim:

Judgments made about members of group X on the basis of a negative stereotype about group X are typically epistemically irrational.

A *negative* stereotype is *value-laden*. For example, consider a stereotype about women that includes the generalization that *women do not make good leaders*. This is an *evaluative* generalization, and it involves a *negative* judgment. So a stereotype about women that includes this generalization is, to that extent at least, a negative stereotype.

But the fact that a stereotype is negative doesn't mean that it's *inaccurate*. If a negative stereotype is *accurate*, then since our epistemic goal is (in part) to form true beliefs, wouldn't it be epistemically rational to employ the stereotype in our thinking? For example, if the stereotype about women making poor leaders is accurate, then wouldn't it be epistemically rational to use that stereotype when making a judgment about whether a particular woman would be a good leader?

Today's reading argues that there is evidence that people who rely on negative stereotypes about stigmatized groups in their thinking are not, generally speaking, epistemically rational in doing so:

"[E]ven when a social perceiver honestly believes that his stereotypic judgment was driven by rational motives, and third-party observers believe his use of the stereotype appears to have been driven by rational motives, this may not be the case. People are often unaware of the influences on their judgments and, in the cases of stereotyping, those influences are often unsavory" (p. 12).

It's crucial to see that the article is *not* claiming either of the following things:

- (a) Negative stereotypes are typically inaccurate.
- (b) It is epistemically irrational to rely on negative stereotypes when making judgments about members of a group.

It is fair to say that the authors assume that (a) is true, and I do too. And if (a) is true, then there is a straightforward argument for (b) --- it's epistemically irrational to make judgments on the basis of a false generalization. But they do not make this argument. They are suggesting instead that *independently* of whether (a) is true, people who *do* rely on negative stereotypes about stigmatized groups when making judgments about members of those groups typically do something epistemically irrational.

A key presupposition of the paper:

- (A) When a judgment results from some motivation other than a concern for accuracy, it is not epistemically rational.

It is interesting to think about (A) in connection with evidentialism and reliabilism. Do both theories support something like (A)?

The paper consists in discussion of a wide range of empirical research that they say suggests that subjects who rely on negative stereotypes in their thinking are motivated by concerns other than accuracy. Thus, given (A), the research suggests that reliance on negative stereotypes is generally not epistemically rational.

The authors present many different strands of evidence. I want to discuss three.

1. *Threatened egotism*. The authors discuss studies indicating that threats to one's ego increase reliance on negative stereotypes. For example in Sinclair and Zunda (1999), some participants were given feedback on a test by a white man, and some by a black man. Those who had received negative feedback from the black man were subsequently more likely to engage in negative stereotyping about blacks than were those who had received negative feedback from the white man. (Interestingly, those who received positive feedback from the black experimenter showed a *decrease* in negative stereotyping.)
2. *Accuracy motives*. The authors discuss research indicating that when incentives for accurate thinking are increased, reliance on stereotypes decreases. There are two exceptions. First, when the only information subjects have about A is that A is a member of group X; second, when subjects are informed by A herself that her membership in group X is highly important.
3. *"Bayesian racism"*. This is what they call "the belief that it is rational to discriminate against individuals based on stereotypes about their racial group" (p. 10). The authors did research revealing that sympathy for Bayesian racism correlates with:

endorsement of existing social group hierarchies
belief that group differences in violent behavior are biologically based
appreciation for racist jokes
negative attitudes about Blacks, Hispanic, and Arab Americans

But sympathy for Bayesian racism correlates negatively with:

endorsing the use of statistical information in decision-making
an affinity for abstract thinking