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# The Persistence of Stereotypes in the Context of Familiarity

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Landy (2008) claims that biases in general, and stereotypes in particular, play a more limited role in personnel decision making than the research literature might lead one to believe. According to Landy, this is because of the artificiality of most stereotyping research, which involves strangers evaluating strangers. In most real-world decisions, he argues, the evaluator is familiar with the target and thus has individuating information about the target at his or her disposal, which prevents simple demographic categories from influencing personnel decisions. Although we do not believe that low-familiarity work situations are as rare as Landy suggests, we agree that people in organizations do often operate in a high-familiarity context and that much of the existing research designed to inform our understanding of stereotyping in the workplace is conducted in a low-familiarity context. We contend, however, that stereotypes affect

personnel decisions even when individuating information is available. In this commentary, we support this claim by identifying two relevant psychological mechanisms likely to operate regardless of the target's familiarity to the evaluator.

## The Anchoring and Adjustment Heuristic

Despite the fact that an initial encounter with an individual often provides little information, research suggests that such initial experiences play a relatively larger role in impression formation than do subsequent experiences (e.g., Tetlock, 1983). People base initial impressions on the available information and then adjust it as they accumulate more information. Thus, an impression formed based on a stereotype may be the starting point (or *anchor*) from which later impressions eventually diverge based on additional information (the *adjustment* process).

This adjustment process is often insufficient, however, with the original anchor carrying undue weight in the ultimate judgment (Epley & Gilovich, 2001). One potential explanation for this insufficient adjustment is that people stop adjusting too soon. Epley and Gilovich (2006) found that people only adjusted until they reached a plausible conclusion, not necessarily an accurate conclusion. This has been called the "can I?" versus

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“must I?” decision rule. Unless they are motivated to do so, people will conserve cognitive energy by seeking only enough information to meet the “can I believe this?” threshold—the “must I believe this?” threshold requires considerably more evidence. Future investigations should evaluate whether, in a personnel decision-making context, evaluators sufficiently adjust judgments of applicants or new employees away from initial impressions that may have been based on a negative stereotype.

### Confirmation Bias

Research in social psychology suggests another avenue through which stereotypes may impact judgments of even familiar targets. Demographic information can lead not only to an initial impression based on a stereotype but also to a biased process of information seeking to confirm initial impressions. Assumptions made about a person on the basis of demographic information are often tested in a way that is biased toward supporting those assumptions (Darley & Gross, 1983). Such *confirmation bias* operates through multiple processes, including unbalanced information-seeking strategies, greater scrutiny of disconfirmatory information, and differences in recall for confirmatory versus disconfirmatory information (Nickerson, 1998).

For example, Snyder and White (1981) gave students directions to test a hypothesis about another person's personality via data collected in an interview. Students chose interview questions that were likely to confirm their hypotheses, even when the hypothesis was based on an unreliable or unknown source. Pyszczynski and colleagues (Holton & Pyszczynski, 1989; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985) have shown that people actively seek information that they expect to match their desired evaluation of the person.

### Conclusions

Much of Landy's argument focuses on the suitability of the dominant paradigm in ster-

eotyping research to address questions regarding stereotyping in the workplace. Although we remain unconvinced that the expertise, tools, or training of managers differentiate them from students in a way that makes student samples inappropriate for this research, we agree that familiarity of the applicant or employee has important implications for stereotyping and that findings from “stranger appraising stranger” methodologies may only generalize to like situations in the workplace, such as the initial selection screening process.

Rather than suggesting, as Landy does, that individuating information eliminates the effects of stereotyping, we argue that in such situations, stereotypes will influence personnel decisions via different cognitive and motivational mechanisms. Taken together, evidence from anchoring and adjustment and confirmation bias studies suggests that stereotypes may have a lasting effect, even after the evaluator (i.e., hiring manager, supervisor) has gathered considerable individuating information about the target (i.e., applicant, employee). In other words, even if the stereotypes themselves do not persist, unwarranted negativity (or positivity) resulting from them may remain because of insufficient adjustment or biased information seeking.

We note that, although these processes are well established in the judgment and decision making and social psychology literatures, the boundary conditions within which they are likely to operate in an organizational context have not yet been established. For example, supervisors may rely more heavily on heuristics when faced with deadlines, imperfect recall, or information overload (Barnes-Farrell, 2001). Empirical investigations of these mechanisms in organizational settings are thus needed in order to move us toward a more complete and nuanced understanding of the true impact of stereotyping on personnel decision making.

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