



Psychological Reality: Why We See the World the Way We Do

Video Transcript

Stereotypes – useful fictions

The *Interface Theory of Perception* and the *Error Management Theory* both suggest a provocative conclusion. What we experience as reality may not be a precise depiction of the world. It may be a simplified construction shaped by evolutionary pressures.

Heuristics are simplified decision strategies. They ignore part of the available information in order to act quickly under uncertainty. These shortcuts do not operate only in perception or individual choice. They also shape how we understand other people.

Humans live in complex social environments. We cannot evaluate every person in a fully detailed and objective way. Social interaction often requires rapid judgment. In such situations, the mind relies on social heuristics — simplified representations that reduce complexity and make interaction manageable.

Some of these shared representations take the form of a cultural narrative, myth, or stereotype. They provide compressed frameworks for interpreting others and make the social world more predictable.

In social psychology, a stereotype is a generalized belief about a group. It is simplified and often exaggerated. It may concern an out-group — those perceived as different — or an in-group — one's own community.

Throughout most of human evolutionary history, survival depended not on isolated individuals but on small, tightly coordinated groups. Cohesion within these groups was crucial. Shared expectations about others could help sustain cooperation and identify allies or potential rivals. In such environments, it was rarely possible to evaluate every individual in detail. From an evolutionary perspective, simplifications may have served a function.

Seen in this light, stereotypes can function as social heuristics. They reduce complexity and make the social world more manageable.

This does not mean that stereotypes are accurate. And it does not mean that they are ethically justified. An adaptive origin is not a moral endorsement.



Modern societies differ profoundly from the small-scale environments in which human cognition evolved. Social simplifications may still facilitate coordination, but they carry risks of misjudgment and exclusion. In large, interconnected societies, such effects can extend far beyond immediate group boundaries and can reinforce exclusion or injustice.

Political caricature offers a useful comparison. Like stereotypes, caricatures rely on exaggeration and simplification. They reduce complexity and amplify selected traits.

Yet simplification does not serve a single purpose. In some contexts, it may reinforce group boundaries or intensify polarization. In others, it serves satire and critique. By exaggerating particular features, caricature can expose patterns of power, hypocrisy, or contradiction that might otherwise remain less visible. In open societies, such exaggeration can contribute to public debate, even when it is uncomfortable.

The cognitive mechanism — exaggeration and compression — may be similar across these cases. The social purpose, however, depends on the context. The broader point is this: the same heuristic tendencies that help individuals act efficiently can also shape collective realities.

The question is not whether simplifications exist. They are unavoidable. The question is how we recognize them — and how we respond to them in contemporary contexts where their effects may be amplified.