Gender Stereotypes: What are they and what to do about them?
Some suggestions

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This essay will seek to illuminate the paths we might take towards eliminating gender stereotypes, and the problems that plague each of these routes. It will do this in four parts. Firstly, it will try to get clear on what a stereotype is, finding that while there is much written on the topic, there is a lack of a truly systematized view. Secondly, it will propose such a view by incorporating what each author gets right about stereotypes, to provide a logical structure for stereotypes. The result is one that views them as a type of tool – as *patterns of inference.* Thirdly, it will provide support for this view by arguing that it manages to capture the agreed upon features of stereotypes, while adding precision to the term. Finally, it will use this systemization to propose three paths for eliminating gender stereotypes, and evaluate each of them.

I. Stereotype, what?

What exactly do we mean by 'stereotype'? Ironically, there seems to be an absence of definite agreement as to what the term refers to. Lawrence Blum identifies them as false or misleading "associations between a group and an attribute" (288), that tend to be resistant to counterevidence (288). Cook and Cusack share a similar view, that they are a form of generalization about a group, but do not include a reference to the Truth-Value of the claims (9). They also go further in including group-based behaviour prescriptions under the types of views that can be called stereotypes (ibid). What's more, stereotypes clearly tend to take the appearance of knowledge, although they lack the substance of the term (Harvey, 40). These views each seem to get something right. They do have at least the appearance of knowledge, as those who hold them generally include them in their corpus of 'facts'. They also do seem to be rigid – the Stereotyper does not immediately change their belief when presented with counter-evidence. They seem to be about groups, and they also seem to be both descriptive and prescriptive – both 'Women are X' and 'Women ought to do X' strike us intuitively as stereotypes.

Beeghly, building off the psychological literature on the topic, provides a more nuanced view. Dubbed the 'Descriptive View', she says stereotypes are either concepts, or the psychological pre-conditions that allow us to form and use concepts of social groups, to categorize and form expectations about others (ibid, 680). Moreover, in our expression of these concepts, we generally use the generic form, i.e. without a specific quantifier attached to the statement (ibid). In a later article, she develops this view further to cover the role stereotypes play in our lives (54). On this she says that stereotypes "serve as controlling images and ideas" that affect how we categorize, make predictions, and perceive the world (ibid). They also serve to set expectations of behaviour, thus having an evaluative function, and impacting behaviour by shaping social interactions (ibid).

Now, I think Beeghly gets it nearly right. This is especially true regarding the absence of a normative tilt of the view. The 'Descriptive View' does not determine whether any individual instance of stereotyping is morally bad, as it is consistent both with all instances being bad, and that only some instances are bad (Beeghly, 686). Moreover, it is also consistent with the rejection of the Falsity Hypothesis: we can maintain the view that sometimes stereotypes are true, and sometimes they are false, without having that impinge on their rightness or wrongness (Beeghly, 54-55). Although, my agreement on this point, which I will expand on later, is actually more so that talking about the Truth-Value of a stereotype is not what we actually care about. However, her view, and all the others, lack a truly systematized description of stereotypes.

In what follows, I will attempt to provide such a systemization, an effort that is essential to tackling the gender-stereotyping, and gender-based discrimination.

II. A second pass: Patterns of Inference.

In this pursuit, we should begin at the beginning, and consider how the word 'stereotype' became a part of our vernacular. Cook and Cusack point to the term's origin in print making, and its adoption by social scientists to describe the cognitive act of conceiving others as "reprints from a mold" (9). This idea provides us with a solid foundation. It implies that when we use stereotypes, we are using them to express some sort of identity relation, namely that each member of the group in question are *identical* to each other, like prints from a mold. If these members are identical, then they must have all the same properties; the law of the substitutivity of identity tells us that $\forall x \forall y (x = y \rightarrow (Fx \rightarrow Fy))$ (Kripke, 2). This is an incredibly powerful tool, since it allows the Stereotyper, the one who employs stereotypes, to be confident in their ascription of properties to an individual based solely on that individual's group-identity.

It might be objected here that, strictly speaking, all this identity business does not apply to human beings. After all, one need only to observe the differences in character traits between identical twins, who share 100% of their genes, to make this case. This objection misses the point, however: we are not attempting to construct a true picture of the world, but rather describe the way that people think about it. It is this implied singularity – identity between individuals – that allows the stereotypical inference to be applied universally to all members, even though they may be demonstrably different along all other properties.

A second step, in line with Cook and Cusack, is to divide the stereotypes associated with a group into the categories of Descriptive, i.e. those that aim to describe the group in question, and Prescriptive, i.e. those that aim to prescribe modes of being to members of the group. By separating them into distinct categories, we can see that Prescriptive Stereotypes correspond to Descriptive ones: "Xs are Y, so they should do Z". I am not intending to pick a fight with Hume

here, however. The idea is not that one derives an *ought* from an *is*, but rather certain *oughts* are justified through certain *ises,* but which *oughts* these are is not predetermined by its corelated *is*. That is to say, Perscriptives are *tethered* to Descriptives, not entailed by them. We could choose from a number of possible Prescriptives to tether to any Descriptive, although this choice is generally made for us by social forces.

Finally, we must attach these to the social group which they are about. We will do this through a conditional relationship between one's group membership, and the application of a stereotype to them. Recall: stereotyping treats all members of a group as identical, so the quantifier in front of this relationship will have to be a universal one. Here we must engage with Beeghly's assessment of the semantics of generics, at least insofar as they pertain to stereotypes. She notes that stereotypes often take the form of generics, and that generics are not universal statements because competent language users can assert "X are Y" while simultaneously holding that "Not all X are Y" (Beeghly, 676). Beeghly takes this to mean that statements of the form "women are X" do not have hidden universal quantifiers in front of them (ibid). This may be true, but if it is true it is only the case for *statements* of stereotypes, not stereotypes themselves. Note that when people talk about stereotypes of certain groups, they do not talk about one belief but generally have a whole host of associated beliefs. This is especially true about social groups that have been salient for some time, like that of 'woman'. Thus, it seems that when we stereotype, we do not limit ourselves to the singular term, but rather the set of terms that we have internalized as being entailed by one's group-membership.

This conception frees us to use the universal quantifier. Consider the following: all apples are tasty or sweet; there exists an apple that is not tasty. This is a perfectly consistent set of sentences, as the disjunction of 'tasty' or 'sweet' need only one of its terms to be affirmed to

come out as True. Consequent terms taken individually fall short of satisfying the implicature condition of Beeghly's generics, but we do not stereotype in individual terms. This involves individual beliefs, both Descriptive and Prescriptive, and the linking of these beliefs to group-membership. These beliefs then form disjunctive sets in our cognition that are available to us when we want to say something about an individual based on their group-membership. They form *Patterns of Inference.* Put formally, this view results in something like the following:

Let φ be the set of Descriptive stereotypes: $\varphi = \{Ax \lor Bx \lor Cx \dots\}$
*and let δ be the set of Prescriptive stereotypes, each corresponding to a member of φ
that it shares a predicate letter with, with the differentiating factor being the value
of the subscript number* : $\delta = \{A_1x \lor A_2x \dots \lor A_nx \lor B_1x \dots\}$

*Then we can describe a stereotype as the conditional relationship between group
membership and these two sets*:

Taking 'Woman' as an example: $\forall x(Wx \rightarrow (\varphi \land \delta))$

This is the systematized version of the patterns of inference we call 'stereotypes'. For all things, if they have the 'woman' predicate, then they must possess the set of Descriptive predicates associated with their group, and the set of tethered Prescriptives.

In the following two sections, I will show, first, that this picture matches the agreed upon features of stereotypes, and second, that it provides us with clear strategies for tackling gender-based stereotypes.

III. Feature matching.

I have proposed this view in an attempt to systematize our understanding of stereotypes. The question remains, though, as to whether or not it captures what we want it to. I believe that it does. As we have already seen, it retains the initial meaning of the term stereotype in that it treats every member of the group in question as identical, and it allows for both Descriptive and Prescriptive sentiments to be entailed by group-identity. Both characteristics are integral parts of our concept of stereotyping. And finally, as a *pattern of inference,* it takes the guise of a priori knowledge, while falling far short of the mark.

IIIa. Rigidity

This view also has the added benefit explaining how stereotypes may be rigid, i.e. how they might be resistant to counter-examples (Blum, 261). Since the predicates are connected through disjunctions, finding counterexample of a specific trait does not render the tool useless, as the sets φ or δ require every disjunct to come out as False to be False themselves. Thus, the specific woman in question need only possess one of the traits to make the set True, and therefore vindicate the use of the tool itself. While finding a counter-example to an entailed predicate means that the Stereotyper cannot use the tool in the way they intend on that individual, it does not break this tool in general.

IIIb. Rejecting Falsity

In order to break the tool itself, one would have to find an individual that has the woman predicate, but has none of the Descriptive predicates (and thus none of the Prescriptive ones either). As Beeghly points out, though, the Falsity Hypothesis when considering predicate possession, is suspect (48). That is to say, the generics that involve predicates from the

Descriptive set tend to come out as true. Thus, the tool is consistent with, and vindicated by, rejecting the Falsity Hypothesis. So long as all the members of the group have at least one set predicate, the set itself comes out as true. And rejecting the Falsity Hypothesis leads us to this conclusion, i.e. that the Descriptives do tend to correspond. Understanding stereotypes as *Patterns of Inference,* allows us to give a systematized, formal definition, while retaining our intuitive understanding of their features. It also allows us to disambiguate between 'stereotype' and 'stereotypical belief', the former being the *pattern of inference,* and the latter being the inferences themselves - a Stereotyper being a person who relies on these patterns to infer properties of individuals.

IV. Eliminating Gender Stereotypes:

Now that we have the lay of the land, we may tackle the issue situated at the outset of this paper head on. That is to say, we can now offer some strategies on how to go about eliminating gender stereotyping and gender-based discrimination[1]. Our strategies follow from the construction of stereotypes in the previous section: W = woman, $\forall x(Wx \rightarrow (\varphi \land \delta))$. When we talk about eliminating gender stereotypes, and discrimination based on gender, this formulation gives us 3 different strategies:

1. We can work to eliminate the antecedent term – to eliminate gender as a social group.

2. We can eliminate the conditional relationship – to eliminate, or bar the use of gender in inference formation.

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[1] An interesting question would be: would this discussion be different had been considering other kinds of stereotypes, like those surrounding racial groups? Due to the discussion in the rest of the paper, I am inclined to say 'yes'. Gender stereotypes seem to be importantly different than racial stereotypes insofar as the intent behind them is not explicitly malicious. Thus, the proceeding discussion should be taken only to apply to Gender stereotypes.

3. We can aim to change the structure of the consequent terms – to change the predicates that are contained in the sets φ and δ in an effort to ameliorate the negative effects that stereotyping has.

I will now examine each of these in turn.

IVa. Eliminating gender as a social group.

By removing gender, or 'woman' as a social group, we would break the tool. Afterall, there are no gender stereotypes if there is no gender. That we admit this is an option forces us to adopt, rightly I think, a constructionist stance towards gender. Going by Hacking's gradations, this would be to adopt a 'revolutionary' attitude towards gender: gender was not inevitable, gender is a bad thing, and we would be better off without gender – emphasis on 'without' (Hacking, 19). In considering the negative effects gender stereotyping can have on women by being the cause of, and justification for, unjust treatment in all spheres of life (political, economic, familial, etc.), this looks like an appealing choice.

There are two reasons why I think this is not the best path. The first is a logically weak reason, but important to note. As Cook and Cusack remark, gender stereotypes tend to be persistent and pervasive (22). This highlights that gender as a concept has been in use for a significant portion of our social history. While this is not a reason to keep it intact – many ideas from the past ought to be rethought, it does point to the difficulty of doing so. The concept of gender is so intwined with our art and culture, that to untangle it may take longer than we intend or expect. If one's goal is to alleviate suffering, pursuing such an option may prove counter-productive.

Another, more serious difficulty might be that doing so would simply be 'kicking the can down the road', as it were. By eliminating 'women' as a group-term, we do not eliminate its constituent members or their needs and wants. Would we simply re-organize this group into

different sub-groups? This seems like it would not preclude harmful stereotypical beliefs from existing as they do now. More broadly though, we have the question of relations between the sexes. It seems to me that there is almost nothing one can infer about the optimal treatment of either male or females directly, or only from, the brute biological facts about them. If we removed all gender-terms and resorted only to groupings based on sex, we would have no guidelines at all as to how to comport ourselves around each other. It is true that sex entails certain physical characteristics, but optimal modes of behaviour do not simply follow from these physical characteristics. For example, what biological connection exists between one's having XX chromosomes, and another's having XY chromosomes, that would suggest that the XY individual pay for the XX's food when on a date[2]? However, once we start prescribing behaviour, we are back to square one – 'male' and 'female' have become functionally identical to the gender stereotypes we started with. This is a vicious circle indeed.

IVb. Eliminating the conditional relationship.

The second strategy would be to eliminate the conditional relationship, i.e. to deny that one's gender entails anything about them. Insofar as the association of Descriptive and Prescriptive predicates restrict the deliberative freedom of women and men, this path is well received. In some sense, any application of a stereotype fails to treat the person it is directed at as an individual. By thinking of every woman as an identical copy of another, the Stereotyper clearly denies their autonomy and negates the their ability to shape their own lives; the Stereotyper does not meet the necessary and sufficient conditions for treating someone as an individual (Eidelson, 216). Moreover, this looks even more promising when we note that the

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[2] This is not an endorsement of this prescription. In fact, I think it is rather outdated. It is, however, a reflection of my experience as a man.

Stereotyper, in using their tool, can only ever be correct in their inference by accident. Stereotypes do not speak about particular individuals *qua* individuals, since their whole purpose is to remove individuality by treating every member of the group as identical. Given the variability of human traits, it seems as though one is begging for trouble in using these kinds of inferences, so we would be better off without them.

This strategy is promising, but it cannot be the whole picture. When dealing with discrete individuals, respecting their deliberative freedom, autonomy, and ability to shape their own lives, is a step in the right direction. However, there are two aspects of why we stereotype that also make this path troubling.

The first is that we use stereotypes to "maximise simplicity and predictability" (Cook and Cusack, 14). Avoiding stereotypes in individual contexts is laudable, but most of our time is spent in a complex environment that requires social interaction without the requisite time to get to know the other as an individual (ibid, 14). Thus, we stereotype to alleviate this complexity – to have an a priori basis on which to structure our conduct (ibid, 15). This is another feature that seems unlikely to change. If anything, the world is becoming more interconnected and more complex. We might respond and say that the answer is to treat everyone the way we ourselves would like to be treated, but again, this fails to appreciate the real differences between men and women that might warrant differential treatment.

The second, is that we use stereotypes to "script identities" (Cook and Cusack, 18). Predicates in the Prescriptive set function to regulate how members of the gender-group in question should fulfill their social roles (ibid). This function has been especially problematic for women, as the predicates in the Prescriptive set tend to be tethered to Descriptives that place them in a position of inferiority in relation to men. This results in the Prescriptives that "objectify

and construct women as inferior, submissive, incompetent, or sexually provocative" (ibid, 19). Eliminating the conditional relationship would sever these ties, and eliminate these oppressive Prescriptives. However, it would sever ties with *all* Prescriptives. This would surely be undesirable, as there are some aspects of autonomy and deliberative freedom that we can agree we want to restrict, and there are certainly traits we want to inspire in members of gender groups based on their membership in these groups. For example, we would certainly want both men and women to behave themselves in romantic relationships – removing the Prescriptive that advises against unfaithfulness to one's intimate partner, i.e. "real men don't cheat on their wives", seems unwise.

IVc. Changing the content of the Descriptive and Prescriptive sets.

       The third option is to alter the sets that comprise the consequent. This option would keep gender categories, keep the conditional relation, but change the implication of one's gender-identity. This would involve changing both Descriptives and Prescriptives to better match the needs and desires of both women and men. Such a move would allow us to circumvent the process of eliminating gender, while also allowing us to maintain the inferential benefits of the tool. Moreover, this aspect of stereotypes appears to be the point of greatest contention. These sets are plagued both by Descriptives that assert moral difference, and Prescriptives that are fundamentally mismatched to the material conditions of modern (western) life. Take the Prescriptive that "women should be mothers, [and] homemakers" (Cook and Cusack, 22). In a world without proper contraception[3], motherhood was not so much a choice as a statistical probability. In the face of this fact, it seems almost reasonable to expect 'motherhood' to be prescribed to women. Raising children (I imagine) is difficult, so the knowledge of how one

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[3] The modern birth control pill was first released in 1960 (Nikolchev).

should go about it, and the desire to take on such a task, makes sense in this circumstance. In 2021, this sentiment feels rather outdated. Functional contraception means that children are increasingly becoming a true choice, rather than a fact of life. To then prescribe motherhood unequivocally to all women, when it would mean denying them their autonomy as individuals, is misguided[4].

This path is also open to the objection of persistence and pervasiveness: if these Descriptives and Prescriptives have been around for so long, as long as gender perhaps, then why should we think that we can change them? What would changing them look like? To this, we might give the following response. While the category of gender is persistent, this is so because the entities that we place in those categories are persistent, and different enough that they warrant a distinction between them. On the other hand, beliefs are changed when it seems that change is warranted, or forced upon us. The same is true for prescribed behaviours. For example, ancient cultures might have attributed an earthquake to one or another god being angry at them. A prescribed behaviour in this situation might be to sacrifice an animal, or pray extensively. Nowadays we would go about this very differently: we attribute earthquakes to shifting of tectonic plates, and if bad outcomes arise, we blame our politicians for defunding the seismology centre. We still categorize the same entities as earthquakes, but our beliefs about them, and the behaviours tethered to these beliefs, are vastly different. Changing our beliefs about men and women would follow a similar pattern. The same way we are educated about earthquakes, we would instill these Predicates through educating our children to think about men and women in ways that better match our modern condition.

V. Conclusion

Where does this leave us, then? We have taken the common themes of stereotypes from different views, and synthesized them into view that takes stereotypes to be Patterns of Inference. By revealing the structure of this tool, we have identified three possible paths for neutralizing its harm-causing capacity. Of the three, changing the predicates in the Descriptive and Prescriptive sets to better reflect the material realities of our world, and thus ameliorate the negative effects of this tool while retaining the benefits it provides, seems to me the best path. This leaves us, however, with a rather important question. What should replace them? I am not sure I am in a position to answer this, or that any single individual is, for that matter. They will have to emerge from interactions with our environment, and from dialogue between gender groups that aims to negotiate the way forward. This will surely be difficult, but the reward would be Descriptives and Prescriptives that enhance our lives rather than limit them. This is surely worth the trouble.

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