

Study demonstrates evolution of stereotypes

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(Phys.org)—Researchers from Scotland suggest that stereotypes form and evolve over time through social transmission of information, similar to the way in which languages evolve.

The research team led by Dr. Doug Martin of the Person Perception Lab at the University of Aberdeen used a technique they have used previously to study the evolution of language. They invented a series of aliens and randomly assigned them different colors, shapes and attributes such as selfishness, adventurousness, [arrogance](#) or trustfulness.

A volunteer was then called in to learn about the aliens and memorize their personality traits and [physical attributes](#). The volunteer then relayed this information to the researchers, who passed it on to the next volunteer, and so on down a communication chain.

What they discovered was that stereotypes began to form almost immediately and particular shapes and colors became linked with [personality traits](#). As it passed down the communication chain the information was unintentionally changed and simplified, and became more structured and thus easier to learn.

Dr. Martin said the process seen in the research reflects the oversimplified nature of stereotypes, with [social groups](#) (and ourselves) categorized and assigned attributes, and he suggested that they form to help us make sense of the world around us and to give us some basic information as a starting point. The stereotype may turn out not to be applicable to a particular individual, but is nevertheless useful initially.

Dr. Martin also pointed out that stereotypes are not fixed and do change over time. For example, a hundred years ago boys were traditionally dressed in pink, while blue was regarded as a "dainty" color more suitable for girls. Both genders wore dresses and played with dolls.

The Person Perception Lab team studies many aspects of the transmission of information from person to person and the way in which the brain processes this [information](#). Dr. Martin said their work on stereotypes could lead to being able to predict and even manipulate changes to [stereotypes](#) in the future, which could be of benefit to society.

Dr. Martin presented his findings in a talk earlier this week at the British Science Festival, which is held in a different city each year. This year the Festival is being held in Aberdeen from 4-9 September.

More information: www.britishtscienceassociation.org/british-science-festival/

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