A stereotype is a generalized belief about the qualities or characteristics of a particular group of people. Although stereotypes can be positive or negative, a negative stereotype about a group often leads to prejudice (a negative judgment or unequal treatment toward a member of an outgroup). Negative stereotypes are usually directed from a member of an ingroup to an outgroup.

**Etymology**

Firmin Didot invented the word “stereotype” in the profession of the printing press during the late Eighteenth Century in France. Originally, a stereotype was a duplicate impression of a typographical element used for printing newspapers. The first common use of the word was in 1850 when dictionaries defined it as “an image perpetuated without change.” American journalist Walter Lippmann later coined a metaphor in 1922 while writing an editorial for Public Opinion. In it, he stated that the pictures in the press influence people’s perceptions of reality, and consequently, they develop their own stereotypes: “Whether right or wrong, our imagination is shaped by these pictures seen. Consequently, they lead to [our own] stereotypes that are hard to shake.”

**Validity of Stereotypes**

Some people have argued that stereotypes reflect truths about the realities that people face on a daily basis. Although this “kernel-of-truth” hypothesis (Prothro & Melikian, 1955) has been validated in some studies, it can be misleading. For example, one commonly held stereotype in the United States is that African Americans are poor. Although it is true that African Americans over-represent all people that live below
poverty in the United States, the vast majority of African Americans actually live above the poverty line. This illustrates how stereotypes are rarely completely true or completely fabricated. There may be some validity to stereotypes, but they are often over-generalized or exaggerated and not a true reflection of reality.

Formation of Stereotypes

Stereotypes are formed in a social context through a combination of observing others, learning, and mental processes. Although there are several theories that attempt to explain how stereotypes are formed, the prototype model has been most widely cited in research (Smith & Zarate, 1990). Essentially, the model posits that people develop perceptions about how a typical person in an outgroup looks, thinks, or behaves. Consequently, they form stereotypes of the group as a whole, based on these perceptions of the “average” outgroup member.

A variety of psychological mechanisms are also associated with stereotype formation. People may observe a relationship between a group and a concept when no relationship actually exists--this is referred to as illusory correlation (Hamilton & Rose, 1980). In other instances, a stereotype can be formed by learning from an ingroup member who is perceived to be an expert or high-credibility source (Sternthal, Phillips, & Dholakia, 1978)(e.g., a parent or a teacher may profess to a child that boys are better than girls at math). In addition, there is a tendency for people to think that outgroup members are more similar to each other than different; this is referred to as outgroup homogeneity (Linville & Fischer, 1998). People are also more interested in, and think more about, people who are more similar to themselves. This may result in a complex view of one’s ingroup and a simplified view of an outgroup.

These processes are especially likely to happen when there is limited social contact with the outgroup (Brewer & Kramer, 1985). For example, if a boy has only male siblings and male friends he is more likely to believe that girls perform poorly in math because an examplar that refutes the stereotype is not readily available. In sum, a stereotype is more likely to form when a person observes stereotype-related information either directly or vicariously, and there is no contradicting evidence available to refute the new belief.

The Function of Stereotypes

The question of why stereotypes exist has been debated for some time. Originally, they were thought simply to be a way in which people in positions of power maintain control over others (Johnson, 1976). More recently, researchers have argued that stereotypes exist to help the mind navigate through a complex and often contradictory environment (Hamilton & Sherman, 1994). Without stereotypes, people might have a
more difficult time making sense of the world and can often find an ambiguous situation time-consuming or confusing to understand. When people are in these situations, they usually rely on stereotypes to help them evaluate ambiguities and bring deliberations to closure. In fact, some research has shown that certain kinds of people who are "cognitive misers" rely on stereotypes in making rushed evaluations, especially when there is limited information available (Rothbart, 1978). Motivational processes also play a role in the function of stereotyping (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000). People are generally motivated to maintain certain stereotypes to enhance their own self-esteem (e.g., a person may feel much better about himself if he thinks that he is superior to an outgroup member in some way).

**Changing Stereotypes**

Clearly, many commonly held stereotypes have negative consequences in terms of unequal perceptions and unequal treatment of different groups. To address this, some researchers have devoted their work to studying how to change or extinguish people’s stereotypes. Although there are several hypotheses about how this might occur, researchers generally agree that the best known way to change people’s stereotypes is to continually provide new information in different ways that contradict the stereotype. For example, if a person believes that women are not assertive and cannot take on leadership positions, the best way to change this belief is to provide many different examples of women who are assertive and have achieved success in leadership positions. It is also important to make sure the examples are different enough from each other in order to prevent a person from subtyping (i.e., thinking of the examples as exceptions to the stereotype). If the examples of assertive women in leadership positions provided are all young, attractive and Caucasian, the person holding the stereotype might think that older, non-white, or unattractive women still lack leadership skills. On the other hand, if the examples of assertive women varied in age, race, ethnicity, nationality, and physical attractiveness, it becomes much more difficult for a person to create a subtype of women who are the exception to the stereotype.

Another effective way of changing a stereotype is to promote intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1997). It has been demonstrated that when people have stereotypes of an outgroup, one way to eliminate these beliefs is to expose them to various members of the outgroup in positive social contexts for an extended period of time. This may provide the person with new information about the outgroup that does not typify the stereotype, and may even contradict the stereotype completely. However, some researchers have argued that contact alone may not be sufficient in eliminating harmful stereotypes (Hewstone & Brown, 1986) and that other strategies must be synchronized alongside intergroup contact.