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Stereotype Content: Warmth and Competence Endure

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Abstract

Two dimensions persist in social cognition, whether people are making sense of individuals or groups. The Stereotype Content Model terms the basic dimensions perceived warmth (trustworthiness, friendliness) and competence (capability, assertiveness). Measured reliably and validly, these Big Two dimensions converge across methods: survey, cultural, laboratory, and biobehavioral approaches. Generality across place, levels, and time further support the framework. Parallel pairs have emerged repeatedly over the history of psychology and in current theories. The SCM proposes and tests a comprehensive causal theory: perceived social structure (cooperation, status) → stereotypes (warmth, competence) → emotional prejudices (pride, pity, contempt, envy) → discrimination (active and passive help and harm). The SCM uncovers systematic content and dynamics of stereotypes, with practical implications.

Life and theory both demand an explanation of the groups that surround us. In everyday life: Immigration, globalization, multiculturalism, and inequality are changing personal experience with other kinds of people, so as individuals we need to make sense of them. In scientific theory: Social cognition and prejudice research spent the last century devising process models of how people relate as individuals and groups. What researchers neglected (mostly) were content models—taxonomy—of the systematic kinds of impressions that people form.

On closer conceptual and empirical investigation, a simple model explains much. What favors social cognition's Big Two dimensions—warmth/communion and competence/agency—are converging methods, cumulative data, generality, history, conceptual parallels, coherent theory, and evolutionary plausibility. In emphasizing these points, this review omits others, referring the reader to other reviews emphasizing issues not detailed here: validities (Fiske, 2015), cultural analyses (Durante & Fiske, 2016), as well as implications for interpersonal status (Swencionis, Dupree, & Fiske, 2017), social class (Durante & Fiske, in press), and political perception (Fiske & Durante, 2014).

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Recommended Readings

Abele, A. E., & Wojciszke, B. (2014). (see references)

Durante, F., & Fiske, S. T. (in press). (see references)

Fiske, S. T., & Durante, F. (2016). (see references)

Fiske, S. T. (2015). (see references)

Stereotype Content Model

Humans are complicated stimuli, distinguished from most other objects by having intent and autonomy. Presumably, then, people first want to know each other's individual or collective intent toward them and their groups. The stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) calls this dimension *warmth* (trustworthiness, sociability). Warmth is fundamental because intent predicts behavior. For survival, sentries call out, "who goes there: friend or foe?"

Second, one needs to know if the other can enact that intent, namely how *competent* (capable, agentic) they are. Perceivers often operate on such stereotypes (Bodenhausen, Kang, & Peery, 2012), shared beliefs about common groups' warmth and competence. Even impressions of individual, including the self, use similar dimensions (Abele et al., 2016; Russell & Fiske, 2008; Wojciszke, Abele, & Barylą, 2009).

Warmth x competence space maps basic, recurring intergroup relationships (see Table 1).

- Society's defaults (reference groups) are allegedly high on both warmth and competence: middle class, citizens, dominant religionists. People report pride and admiration for these groups.
- Opposite them are the lowest of the low, stereotyped as untrustworthy and incompetent: homeless, refugees, undocumented migrants, drug addicts, nomads. People report disgust and contempt for them.

These extremes of all-good ingroups and all-bad outgroups could follow from decades of intergroup research (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010) or even individual halo effects (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). The SCM adds ambivalence.

- Groups seen as warm but incompetent include older people and people with disabilities, as well as young children. People report pity/sympathy, itself an ambivalent emotion (feeling sorry for someone holds only as long as their status remains lower).
- The opposite kind of ambivalence describes groups stereotyped as competent but cold: rich people, businesspeople, technical experts. People reported that they elicit envy, also an ambivalent emotion, admiring but resentful.

The four clusters include different ethnic groups, depending on social context, national history, and immigration circumstances (Bergsieker et al., 2012, Study 4; Lee & Fiske, 2006). For example, in the U. S., Americans and Canadians appear allegedly high on both dimensions. Mexicans, other Latinos, and Africans appear stereotypically low/low. Irish and Italians appear allegedly warm but less competent, while Asians, Jews, British, and Germans appear supposedly competent but less warm.

Measurement

With experience, data, and psychometrics, the SCM has honed reliable and valid indicators of warmth and competence, as well as other variables in the model (Fiske, 2015; Kervyn, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2015). Warmth items include *warm, trustworthy, friendly, honest, likable,*

sincere (in order of priority). Note the mix of sociability and morality (cf. Abele et al., 2017). Competence items include *competent*, *intelligent*, *skilled*, *efficient* as well as *assertive*, *confident* to pick up the agency dimension (Abele et al., 2017, supplementary materials).

Social structure predicts stereotype content (Fiske, 2015). Stereotypic warmth follows from a group's perceived cooperation/competition, best measured as both economic interdependence (zero-sum resources) and symbolic values (shared versus conflicting): "If resources go to . . . , to what extent does that take resources away from the rest of society?" and "The values and beliefs of . . . are NOT compatible with the beliefs and values of most [Americans]" (Kervyn et al., 2015). Stereotypic competence follows from perceived status: "How prestigious are the jobs generally held by . . .?" and "How economically successful have . . . been?" (Kervyn et al., 2015).

Converging Methods: Survey, Comparative, Laboratory, and Biobehavioral Approaches

Descriptive research has long supported the SCM. Surveys ask for groups in a given society, and those reported by at least 15% of the sample meet the SCM criterion of consensus. A second sample then rates society's reported view of each group's warmth and competence, as well as (sometimes) the emotions they evoke, the behaviors directed toward them, and the social-structural predictors (see Measurement). Because respondents report society's views, this minimizes social desirability concerns, and it means that samples need not be representative, because everyone knows (compare the representative sample in Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; versus the convenience samples in Fiske et al., 2002). Individual differences and ingroup favoritism are rare (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008).

Generalizing the U.S. results, cultural comparisons reveal consistencies and differences. Most countries sampled to date (more than 40) show groups in the quadrants illustrated earlier. But countries differ in their warmth-competence correlations, which index use of the ambivalent quadrants (Durante et al., 2013). The U.S. and other countries with moderate-to-high inequality (Latin America, South Africa) show many groups in the ambivalent quadrants, so they have low warmth-competence correlations. In contrast are highly equal countries as in Scandinavia, Australia, and much of Europe, where groups align along more of a vector, from those included in the social-welfare safety net (citizens, young and old), to exclude all those outsiders (refugees, Roma). Inequality apparently generates more complicated lay theories (e.g., deserving and undeserving poor, deserving and undeserving rich).

Even when the warmth-competence correlation is moderate, respondents still use both dimensions. For example, in more equal countries, the pity cluster moves into the mainstream. But rich people (envied groups) are persistently viewed with ambivalence, respected but mistrusted. Their apparent competitiveness is judged as neither warm nor competent in more equal countries.

Besides national (in)equality, national peace-conflict moderates the use of SCM ambivalent clusters (Durante et al., 2017). As noted, equal countries such as Scandinavian ones, have a more inclusive ingroup and one smaller cluster of outgroups. This pattern characterizes peaceful countries as well. The other pole, extreme conflict (external or internal warfare) also creates a simple us-them dynamic. It is the countries intermediate on peace-conflict, such as the U.S., that most display the clearest stereotype ambivalence.

As a final example of cultural comparison, Asian samples show outgroups similar to the Western ones: low-low groups include homeless and immigrants, envied groups include rich and professionals, and pitied groups include older and disabled people (Cuddy et al., 2009). But the societal ingroups (citizens, hometowns) appear in the moderate middle, consistent with cultural modesty norms.

Besides surveys and cultural comparisons, SCM evidence draws on laboratory experiments demonstrating causality. As noted, the predictors of stereotypic warmth and competence are perceived social structures (Fiske et al., 2002). Groups viewed as cooperative are awarded warmth. Groups viewed as high status are deemed competent. Experimental vignettes manipulating the cooperativeness and status of hypothetical groups support the hypothesized causal patterns (Caprariello, Cuddy, & Fiske, 2009), as do in-person laboratory encounters with parallel manipulations (Russell & Fiske, 2008). Using photographs instead of labels to elicit group-based ratings of warmth and competence yields similar responses (see next section).

Finally, neural signatures distinguish reactions to photographs of groups in each quadrant, consistent with perceivers having absorbed the cultural stereotypes reported in the surveys. For example, apparently homeless people and drug-addicted people (the low-low contempt quadrant) fail to activate the brain's medial prefrontal cortex, otherwise reliably implicated in social cognition (Harris & Fiske, 2006). Participants also report difficulty in imagining their experience and other verbal responses consistent with dehumanization (Harris & Fiske, 2009). Both disgust ratings and insula activation also fit this quadrant.

Those at the bottom of the competence/status dimension are devalued as expendable, especially if also viewed as low warmth (Cikara, Farnsworth, Harris & Fiske, 2010). And those with less status may be viewed as having less autonomy (Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011). In subjecting some groups to suffer varieties of dehumanizing perception, the status/competence dimension elicits a more social form of neural processing than does other forms of ranking (e.g., weight; Mason, Magee, & Fiske, 2014). Social valuation by status activates networks implicated in other social decisions, so the process seems distinctive to human sociality.

Various bio-behavioral data converge for the envy quadrant (rich people and business people). Perceivers' smile muscles (zygomaticus major) typically respond to other people's good events over bad ones, but not so for the envy quadrant: Negative events happening to envied groups elicit smiles of Schadenfreude, reward-center activation, self-reported glee, and admitted aggression (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Cikara & Fiske, 2011).

The social neuroscience, cultural comparisons, interpersonal encounters, and survey research all are ongoing projects, some more established than others. Nevertheless, converging evidence seems usefully to support the SCM.

SCM's Generality across Place, Levels, and Time

Evidence converges across place, as noted in the overview of cultural comparisons. As to converging across levels of group perception, besides national groups and individual impressions, just noted, SCM data distinguish stereotypic subgroups of societal groups (see Fiske, 2015): subtypes of men and women, ethnic subgroups, and LGBT subgroups. For example, although the overall category, Native Americans, appears neutral in some samples (Fiske et al., 2002), the subtypes spread out across SCM space (Burkley, Durante, Fiske, Burkley, & Andrade, 2017).

SCM dimensions appear over time. Century-old Italian Fascist magazines systematically content analyzed revealed warmth and competence distinctions (Durante, Volpato, & Fiske, 2010). Italians and Aryans were the idealized ingroups, Black and mixed-race people were contemptibly low on both dimensions. Jewish and British people were threateningly competent dehumanized enemies. And no groups landed in the pity cell, consistent with Fascist ruthlessness.

In another look backwards in time, samples of Princeton students rated the same 10 ethnic and national groups on the same 84 adjectives four times over 70 years (Bergsieker et al., 2012, Study 4). Most adjectives were reliably re-coded along the warmth and competence dimensions, resulting in a coherent stereotype map at each time point. Consistent with changing norms, students became more reluctant to mention ambivalent stereotypes' negative dimension, instead omitting it, but still endorsing the groups' positive dimension, if any. This negativity omission left the groups in the same relative positions: Americans and English as high-high; Turks as low-low; Irish, Italians, and African-Americans as warm but less competent; Japanese, Chinese, Germans, and Jews as competent but less warm.

Big-Two Parallels

The twin dimensions of stereotype content have numerous precedents, the most prominent earlier inventions being *communion* and *agency*, in the context of psychology and religion (Bakan, 1966), as well as *social good-bad* and *intellectual good-bad*, in the context of impression formation (Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968). Various others have proposed similar dimensions (see Fiske et al., 2007 for a review).

The most active current parallel revolves around *communion* and *agency*, in the context of self-concept (Abele et al., 2017) and interpersonal attitudes (Wojciszke et al., 2009). These two research programs, separately and together, show the primacy of communion (morality) in impressions of others, but the importance of agency to self-concept. The total explanatory value of the two dimensions accounts for more than 80% of the variance in individual impressions (see Abele & Wojciszke, 2014, for references). The dimensions each break down into facets: communion includes both warmth and morality; agency includes both

competence and assertiveness, according to self-concept data in five cultures (Abele et al., 2017).

Building on both the warmth-competence and communion-agency frameworks, the two dimensions show some consistent dynamics. A compensation effect emerges in social comparisons: If one individual or group is high on one dimension, then a second individual or group in comparison is presumed high on the other dimension (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2010). This produces the SCM signature, predominantly ambivalent stereotypes. If rich people seem cold but competent, then working-class people seem warm but incompetent. This tradeoff holds only for these two dimensions, not just any two social comparisons. Perceivers differentiate two social targets in a comparative context on the two fundamental dimensions of social judgment by contrasting them inversely. Comparing two groups or individuals, the one judged more positively on one dimension is also judged less positively on the other dimension and vice versa, according to both experimental and correlational data.

Compensation has implications for sampling within the comparative context. When participants generate groups spontaneously, they generate only a manageable few, along dimensions that include warmth, competence, and political beliefs. But when forced to generate more (e.g., 40), they become more deliberate: using systematic strategies and mentioning competence- and belief-based groups more than warmth ones (Yzerbyt et al., 2017). In a deliberate mindset, competence seems more objective, has higher consensus, and depends more on the target group. In contrast, warmth seems more subjective and idiosyncratic, depending more on the perceiver. The distinction between societal structure and personal experience explains the difference. Status readily translates into competence, as the SCM predicts. However, a group's beliefs do not translate directly into warmth but instead gain interpretation via the lens of perceivers' own beliefs.

The two dimensions operate most clearly in individual, interpersonal contexts, as illustrated by the communion-agency work on self-concept and interpersonal attitudes, as well as the compensation effect for specific warmth-competence comparisons of individuals and groups. Further, in the SCM warmth-competence standard methods, respondents imagine how people in society relate to social groups, so the two dimensions are arguably relevant to the directly experienced pragmatics of interaction. Judging groups in the neighborhood generates SCM space. But sometimes judging groups at a more distant level generates other dimensions, such as ideology (Nicolas et al., 2017).

For example, one more abstract, deliberate context starts with larger numbers of groups (e.g., 40 or 80), then requires numerous paired similarity judgments, and derives dimensions from multidimensional scaling (Koch et al., 2016). Aggregated data do replicate the competence/status dimension, but instead of the warmth/communion dimension, they identify progressive-conservative beliefs as a basic dimension. This aggregate result contradicts other models.

Nevertheless, individual-level analyses do reveal warmth-communion as a function of ideological ingroups: Progressives rate progressives as warm; conservatives rate

conservatives as warm. In the aggregate, these ratings cancel out, leaving warmth only in the moderate middle, where progressives and conservatives can agree. Modeled and measured agreement on warmth/communion is lower than agreement on competence/agency and ideological belief; this warmth idiosyncrasy produces the misfit between aggregate and individual analyses of similarity ratings. In any case, individual-level stereotypes show all three dimensions can indeed be spontaneous (Koch, 2017).

Theory: Structure → Stereotypes → Prejudice → Discrimination

Our social thinking is for social doing. The SCM dimensions derive from the idea that social cognition focuses on the target's apparent intent, which determines social interaction. Other people's predispositions matter to us when we need them, that is, under individual or group interdependence, whether. As noted, perceived social structural relationships (cooperation/competition) imply the other's apparent intent for good or ill, that is, their warmth. Their believed ability to enact those intents, their competence, depends on their status (prestige and power). Interdependence-warmth correlations are reliable and medium-sized; status-competence correlations are reliably higher (Durante et al., 2013; Kervyn et al., 2015).

Specific stereotype content in turn predicts specific emotional prejudices, based on theories of social comparison and attributions for outcomes (Fiske et al., 2002). A cooperative ingroup's or ally's positive outcome evokes pride, while a competitive outgroup's positive outcome provokes envy. An ally's negative outcome evokes pity, whereas a competitor's negative outcome provokes contempt. These emotions predict behavior even better than stereotypes do (Cuddy et al., 2007).

Conclusion: Evolutionary Plausibility

Another's intent (warm/communal or not) can determine our surviving or at least thriving in their presence. Their competence/agency determines how much attention we must pay. Stereotype content is systematic, general, and pragmatic.

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Table 1

Warmth and Competence Stereotypes. Some are common across countries, mostly based on SES and age. Others vary by country; persistent American stereotypes appear here (Bergsieker et al., Study 4; Cuddy et al., 2009; Durante et al., 2013, see link to individual countries; Lee & Fiske, 2006).

	Low Competence (capability, assertiveness)	High Competence (capability, assertiveness)
High Warmth (friendliness, trustworthiness)	<i>Common:</i> elders, disabled, children <i>U.S.:</i> Italians, Irish <i>Emotions:</i> Pity, sympathy	<i>Common:</i> citizens, middle-class, defaults <i>U.S.:</i> Americans, Canadians, Christians <i>Emotions:</i> Pride, admiration
Low Warmth (friendliness, trustworthiness)	<i>Common:</i> poor, homeless, immigrants <i>U.S.:</i> Latinos, Africans, Muslims <i>Emotions:</i> Disgust, contempt	<i>Common:</i> rich, professional, technical experts <i>U.S.:</i> Asians, Jews, British, Germans <i>Emotions:</i> Envy, jealousy