The paradox of stereotyping and disapproval

Axel Arturo Barceló Aspeitia
early draft :: comments very welcome
abarcelo@filosoficas.unam.mx

I. The paradox

I am interested in the intersection between two common phenomena that contribute to the marginalisation of whole groups of people (because of their gender, race, class, etc.). Each one of them by itself contributes to this sort of marginalisation, no doubt, but their interaction generates new challenges to the understanding of the phenomenon of marginalisation. The first one is stereotyping and the second one is disapproval. I call "stereotyping" the phenomenon of expecting people belonging to a certain group to exhibit certain traits and not others, like expecting women to behave in feminine ways, men to be masculine, native people to be spiritual and in touch with the earth, good looking people to be dumb and shallow, etc. I call "disapproval" the phenomenon of approving of or otherwise valuing, without justification, certain human traits while disapproving of or devaluating others. When we value rationality over intuition or intelligence over strength, we engage in this sort of devaluation. I will not say much about how each one of them contributes to the marginalisation of groups of people, for I hope that to be clear enough: they restrict human autonomy by pressuring us to behave in a certain socially sanctioned way.

The phenomenon that interests me is how their interaction generates a sort of paradox, so that marginalised groups *cannot win* and escape the circle of marginalisation. The paradox occurs when the traits expected from a particular human group in a context are also the ones devaluated

in that same context. For example, when we expect Latin people to be passionate, but disapprove of behaviour ruled by passion instead of reason; or when we expect women to be domestic while devaluating domesticity, etc. I hope it is fairly straightforward to see how expecting from a group of people traits that are devaluated contributes to the marginalisation of that group.

Now, the paradox I am interested in occurs because there seems to be a natural or constitutive link between expectations and evaluations: expectations generate value and value generate expectations. If we approve of a certain trait, we will expect people to behave that way and, vice versa, if we expect people to behave a certain way, we approve and thus value when they actually behave that way. This is so because we approve of people behaving the way they are expected to behave and we expect people to behave the way we approve of. This seems to be tautologous.

Now it is easy to see how this generates a paradox where we expect people of certain groups to behave a certain way (the way that fits the corresponding stereotype) but also to **not** behave that way (because we disapprove of it). This means that, if you belong to any one of this groups, you cannot escape disapproval: if your behaviour fits the stereotype, your behaviour is devaluated by disapproval because the traits that conform the stereotype are devaluated in your context, but if your behaviour challenges the stereotype, then it is devaluated precisely for not conforming to social expectations.

This paradox is specially insidious in so far as it also generates a double negative bind within efforts to challenge marginalisation: for common efforts to challenge stereotypes strengthen disapproval and common efforts to challenge disapproval strengthen stereotypes. How do we commonly challenge stereotypes? By celebrating and promoting people who exhibit traits and behaviours outside their stereotypes, like when we celebrate strong women, successful

minorities, caring men, family oriented gays, etc. In other words, we value in people of marginalised groups traits that do not fit the stereotypes associated to those groups. However, since these traits that do not fit the stereotypes are also the ones also traditionally valued, we in fact contribute to the devaluation of the traits in the stereotype; in other words, we engage and reinforce what I have here called "disapproval". By challenging stereotypes, we reinforce the disapproval of the traits and behaviours expected from minorities and other marginalised groups.

On the other hand, how do we challenge this disapproval? By celebrating and promoting people who exhibit traits and behaviours unjustifiably disapproved of by society, like when we celebrate sexual perversions, street-smarts, sensibility, effusive displays of emotion, etc. However, when we celebrate this traits in people for whom those traits are part of their corresponding stereotypes, we are *de facto* reinforcing those stereotypes. And therein lies the paradox: if we celebrate people whose behaviour fits the stereotype we reinforce the stereotype and when we celebrate people whose behaviour does not fit the stereotype, we reinforce the devaluation of the traits associated with that very people. When we celebrate, for example, feminine traits in women, we challenge the disapproval of feminine traits, but reinforce the stereotype that women ought to be feminine; on the other hand, if we celebrate women who are not feminine and thus challenge the stereotype, we reinforce the disapproval of feminine traits. If we celebrate the value that the hard manual labor performed by immigrants adds to our society, we reinforce the stereotype of immigrant as hardworking manual labourers; but if we celebrate immigrants who do not engage in hard working manual labor, we reinforce the devaluation of hard manual labor. Either way, marginalised groups cannot escape the circle of marginalisation.

II. What to do?

In the previous section, I argued that when we expect people of certain groups to behave a certain way (the way that fits our stereotype of the group they belong to) but also to **not** behave that way (because we disapprove of such behaviour), we condemn people from these groups to unavoidable disapproval: if their behaviour fits the stereotype, their behaviour is devaluated by disapproval because the traits that conform the stereotype are devaluated, but if their behaviour challenges the stereotype, then it is also disapproved of precisely for not conforming to social expectations.

One might respond to my diagnosis by arguing one of two things. First, that the paradox emerges from an equivocation in the term "expectation". Second, that there is a symmetry at the heart of the paradox that would allow us to derive the opposite conclusion: that there is a positive double bind such that whatever people from these marginalised groups do we cannot but get social approval for our actions. I will address each one of them in turn.

First, one might argue that the kind of expectation at play in stereotypes is very different from the kind of expectation we talk about when we say that values engender expectations (i.e., that approving of a certain behaviour P from an agent a implies expecting such agent to behave as to P): the one is descriptive (or predictive, if you will), while the other is prescriptive. And while it is is true that expectations, in general, have no normative value, recent work by Knobe, Prasada and Newman (2013) reveals that, when dealing with social concepts, our expectations *do* have a strong normative dimension and, as S.J. Leslie has already noticed, this has direct consequences on the marginalisation of social groups. Thus, what we expect from women, men, etc. is not only

descriptive of our very concept of men, women, etc. but has also a normative dimension about what makes someone a "real" woman, a "real", man, etc.

The second issue is harder to deal with, for it is true that the paradox could be run "in reverse": when we expect people of certain groups to behave a certain way (the way that fits the corresponding stereotype) but also to **not** behave that way (because we disapprove of it) this could mean **both** that if you belong to any one of this groups, you cannot escape disapproval **and** that if you belong to any one of this groups, you cannot escape approval: if your behaviour fits the stereotype, your behaviour is approved precisely for conforming to social expectations, but if your behaviour challenges the stereotype, then it is approved of because the traits that conform the stereotype are devaluated in your context. So it should be a win-win situation for members of these groups. Yet, we know *de facto* that this is not so, so there must be a flaw in the previous reasoning. However, even though I have thought deeply about this I cannot find a way out that is not ad-hoc (for example, byarguing that disapproval tendencies are stronger than approval ones).

III. An example: Feminism and Femininity

A few years ago, Tasmanian artist Sonia Singh started recycling plastic dolls into what she called "Tree Change Dolls". In 2015, they became a sensation on news and social media with coverage on media from different parts of the world. Repurposing and customising fashion dolls has been a very extended practice and common hobby for years. However, Singh's dolls touched a nerve because of her choice, both of source material and end result. For her Tree Change Dolls, Singh favours Bratz dolls, a brand of fashion dolls very popular in the early 2000s, notorious for their

before after

heavy made up faces with big pouty lips and non-conservative outfits.[1] She erases her features, draws new faces on them, with no make up and smaller lips [See figure 1] and dresses them in plain clothes: knit sweaters and loose pants. According to Singh, she tries to give them a "more down-to-earth, natural looking style".[2] Most news coverage of the dolls presents them as a welcome reaction to what many perceive as the over-sexualization of childhood. In the words of Didem Şalgam:[3]

> "…Sonia Singh who changes Bratz dolls in a way that they look like **more real** kids. … She removes seductive and coquettish make-up on the faces of those dolls and repaints a new and realistic faces. She also puts on non-sexualized clothes which are sewed or knit by her mother. As can be seen in the picture below, **the after dolls seem much more**

---

[1]. Another distinctive features are their big heads, small torsos, extremely long legs and big feet. Sonia Singh also gives them new, more realistically proportional sized feet.

[2]. From the Vice Land documentary "Tree Change Dolls", retrieved on January 1st, 2017 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lG-7e1vaB18.

[3]. Didem Şalgam: (2015), "The Roles of Toys in Gender and Sexual Identity Construction in Early Childhood", *International Play and Toy Congress Proceedings*, Publisher: Ataturk University, pp.434-441.

"natural", "innocent", and non-sexualized, while the before one is hypersexaulised, too fancy and coquettish."

However, Didem Şalgam notices that this situation places women in a loose-loose situation. She continues:

> "I understand people's discomfort with Bratz dolls. Like most fashion-type dolls, Barbie being the most (in)famous of these, they present beauty ideals that are mostly unattainable: impossibly large eyes, perfect makeup, thin bodies. … And certainly **compulsory femininity can be harmful, particularly (though not only) to gender non-conforming kids. But even conceding all these points**, I am left with a gnawing concern about the ways society at large, and mainstream feminism by extension, consistently devalues femininity …"

In other words, if we celebrate Bratz dolls, we collaborate with the oppression of women by strengthening the prevailing stereotype and feminine ideal for women, but if we oppose them, if we literally erase these feminine features from their faces and bodies   as happens in the Tree Change Dolls case   we perform also a rejection of actual features of the actual faces and bodies of actual women who perform gender the feminine way.[4]

_____

4. This example is specially pressing because it laso deals with intersectionality. As Şalgam herself points out: "You see, Bratz dolls are stylized as "urban" — that is, in the style of Black and Latina women in segregated and low-income neighborhoods across the United States. Bratz dolls have four characters, one of which is white, and all of whom wear the same "trashy" style. And it makes me uncomfortable to see mainstream feminism praise the removal of characteristically Black and Latinx style markers from these mostly brown dolls and call them then more beautiful..." In this respect, The Change Dolls are another example of the "endless pop culture and political debates that are easier to talk about if we remember that people have multiple, intersecting identities that color their experiences and our reactions to them." (Jenée Desmond-Harris, "Washington, you need to understand intersectional feminism: It's much bigger than 'check your privilege'." Voxmedia.com. Jan 21, 2017, retrieved on february 14th, 2017) In particular, it ignores that some people are both women and urban and American and Latinas, for example, an as such their relation to Bratz dolls is substantially different from a white Tasmanian woman such as Sonia Singh.

Feminity thus becomes a double-edged sword in the feminist struggle. It is not rare for artists who celebrate traditionally feminine images and traits (both in nature and culture) in order to challenge the devaluation of such images and traits to be accussed of reinforcing a femenine stereotype that has been traditionally oppressive to women. On february 2017, for example, American singer Beyoncé Knowles performed live during an important American awards show, noticeably pregnant a medley of recent songs of hers that, in the words of Olivia Blair, "honed in on the themes of motherhood, family and feminism",[5] while dressed in a golden suit that evoked traditional images of femenine goddesses.

breezyhuizy:

> I feel that 'transphobic' isn't fair. But Beyoncé is definitely sticking to what's she's been doing for a long time: lipstick-divine-femininity feminism. It absolutely erases trans bodies and queer bodies bc she's limiting gender definitions to specific performances and she's narrowing the space by which gender can be defined.

It was clear for many interpreters of her performance that hers was a celebration of feminity with a feminist intension. Nevertheless, her performance was also criticized, from within feminism itself, precisely because of her celebration of traditional images of feminity. An anonymous comment on a social network that circulated widely afterwards serves as a good example of such a reaction. It claimed that her performance "absolutely erases trans bodies and

5. Olivia Blair: "Grammys 2017: Watch Beyoncé's showstopping performance in full: The night belonged to one woman", *The Independent,* online edition, Tuesday 14 February 2017. Retrieved on Tuesday 14 February 2017 at http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/grammy-awards-2017-beyonce-lemonade-video-full-performance-a7577121.html

queer bodies bc she's limiting gender definitions to specific performances and she's narrowing the space by which gender can be defined."[6]

Both examples are structurally analogous and serve as clear examples of the paradox I have presented here. In both of them, we see two ways of trying to challenge the way stereotypes contribute to the marginalisation of a group of people pitted against each other. Those who choose to celebrate the stereotypical features of the gorup in question are criticised for their strengthenign the stereotype, while those who choose to challenge the stereotype are criticised for their contibuting to the already widespread disapproval of features associated with the group in question. The paradox lies in that both camps are well intentioned and challenge an actually important factor in the disenfranchisement of the relevant group, while at the same time the charges brought against their actions are also both well intentioned and justified. In this case, the group is women and the steretype is femininity, but the same pattern repeats itself for other disempowered groups.

---

6. Originally at http://breezyhuizy.tumblr.com/post/157192910954/i-feel-like-noones-gonna-say-it-cause-its-beyonce. Currently deleted. The argument is further developed in a folloqing post:

On another comment on the same social network further she developed this criticism: "It's not that she's saying that's the ONLY way to be a woman, but I think a lot of mainstream spaces only celebrate womanhood in one specific way, or a narrow way that isn't inclusive to trans people. [Her] performance of Divine Womanhood is reaffirming a widely held idea about what being a woman means. So yes, her story matters; I would just like to see more trans and non-feminine definitions of womanhood." Originally at http://breezyhuizy.tumblr.com/post/157197106144/i-dont-understand-how-beyonce-celebrating-her-own. Currently deleted.