

The paradox of stereotyping and disapproval

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I. The Paradox

I am interested in the intersection between two phenomena that are common and contribute to the marginalisation of whole groups of people (because of their gender, race, class, etc.). Each one of them 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 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 generates a double negative bind also 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”. In other words, 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; while if we celebrate women who are not feminine, 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 whose 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 it), 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 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 S.J. Leslie has already noticed that this has direct consequences on the marginalisation of social groups, and in particular women. 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. (That is why they have called these “dual character concepts”).

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 my reasoning.

I have thought about it and I cannot find a non ad-hoc way out, like arguing that disapproval tendencies are stronger than approval ones, so any help here would be greatly appreciated.

III. An example:

“Lastly, regarding to the question of whether non-gendered and non-sexualized toys, dolls in particular could be possible, I would like to mention an endeavor of an artist, Sonia Singh who changes Bratz dolls in a way that they look like **more real** kids. She makes second-hand

fashion dolls re-usable; and while doing so, she totally changes them. (See the examples below) 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 “natural”, “innocent”, and non-sexualized**, while the before one is hypersexualised, too fancy and coquettish.



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 I concede, even, that the dolls are part of a larger trend of sexualizing ever younger girls. This is certainly worrisome — not because young girls cannot or should not be sexual, but because when young girls are sexualized by adults, priority is always placed on others’ pleasure before their own. 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 general — and the femininity of women of color in particular.

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...”

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.