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# Research Note: Beasts and Babies: Styles of Stereotyping

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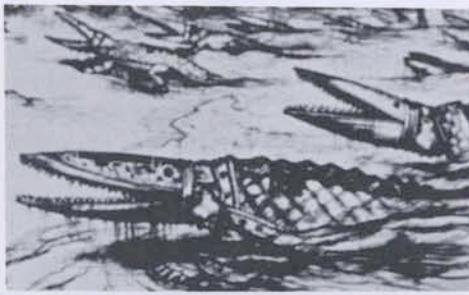
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# RESEARCH NOTE

## Beasts and Babies: Styles of Stereotyping

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Dehumanization:  
Catholic Irish as Crocodiles

**T**his research note presents a very brief summary of the argument we are developing for a much longer and more detailed journal article. Our aim here is to present the basic hypotheses that: 1) two main styles of stereotyping are used to either dehumanize or infantilize a target group, and 2) the selection of a style of stereotyping depends upon the extent to which the target group is perceived as a threat.

The examples included here are necessarily few and brief. But, as Thomas Nast's cartoon dehumanizing Irish Catholics illustrates, such stereotypes can be harsh and damaging to the lives of minority groups.

**I**n the words of Walter Lippmann, stereotypes are "pictures in our heads," beliefs that we hold regarding the members of a category. As sociologists we are particularly concerned with those beliefs about minority groups which have harmful effects.

The distinction between majority and minority groups is not one of numbers but of social power. In South Africa, for example, more than eighty-five percent of the population is non-white, yet they are the ones who must carry identification cards, obey curfews and settle for the lowest paying jobs. Majority groups, then, are those who control their own destinies and those of others, while minority groups are assigned subordinate positions based on the cultural and/or physical characteristics attributed to them.

Stereotypes are more than just privately held beliefs. They are often widely held negative images which are used to justify and excuse the unequal treatment, or discrimination, directed against minority groups, ranging from petty indignities of everyday life to outright slavery and genocide.

The need to justify discrimination is served by two distinct styles of stereotyping; dehumanization and infantilization. Dehumanization typically involves reducing the members of a minority group to the level of *beasts*, either animals, demons or some other less than human form. Once people are depicted as vicious, murderous or mindless, even the most brutal treatment of them may seem appropriate. By contrast, infantilization reduces minority members to the status of *babies* or children whose lack of moral, intellectual or physical development "justifies" their dependence.

The selection of a particular style of stereotyping, whether dehumanization, infantilization, or both, depends upon how threatening or competitive a minority group is perceived to be by the majority group. In the following table we show examples of styles of stereotyping which are associated with the extent to which minorities are seen as threatening to majority group domination. The table depicts, 1) the presence (+), or absence (-) of the two styles of stereotyping by majority group members, 2) examples illustrating each of their four combinations, and 3) characteristics of the majority-minority relationship for each case.

		DEHUMANIZATION (BEASTS)	
		(-)	(+)
INFANTILIZATION (BABIES)	(-)	<p><b>A</b> Neither Infantilized nor Dehumanized Example: Majority Groups Only</p> <p>Since minority groups are, by definition, stereotyped by majority groups, then the condition represented by this cell (neither dehumanization nor infantilization) can only occur when no minority group is present.</p>	<p><b>C</b> Dehumanized but not Infantilized Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blacks during reconstruction</li> <li>Jews</li> <li>American Indians during white territorial expansion</li> </ul> <p>Minority group(s) perceived as "uppity" and threatening. The more such a perception develops the more open and severe the conflict(s) between majority and minority.</p>
	(+)	<p><b>B</b> Infantilized but not Dehumanized Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pre-liberation Women</li> <li>Slaves</li> <li>Old People</li> </ul> <p>Minority group(s) perceived as no threat to the majority since they are kept under control, submissive, dominated.</p>	<p><b>D</b> Both Dehumanized and Infantilized Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women during the liberation movement</li> <li>Blacks during the civil rights movement.</li> </ul> <p>Majority-minority relations are mixed or ambivalent during periods of social change. Some people perceive the minority group as under control while others perceive them as "uppity--and threatening."</p>

## Beasts and Babies ...continued

A) *Cell A* - represents the condition in which a group is neither dehumanized nor infantilized. The only group for which this is true must be the majority group since the power to discriminate with effect is theirs alone. Of course, minority groups may, and often do, direct prejudice in the form of stereotypes against majority group members. By definition, however, they lack the power, prestige and wealth to effectively change their position relative to the dominant group.

B) *Cell B* - represents the condition in which a group is infantilized but not dehumanized. This is the style of stereotyping which occurs only so long as majority group domination is perceived as effective; that is, the minority group continues to be dependent and act that way.

For example, women before the liberation movement of the 1960's were often called "baby," "girl," "babe," "honey," and "cutey pie." Their fashions were made to reflect the appearance of children, frequently imitating the clothing worn by infants or teenagers of a previous generation.

The "little black sambo" image was used to sell the ideology of a "white man's burden," whereby slavery was justified on the grounds that blacks would actually perish if the paternalistic "protection" of the master were denied them. To this day the epithet "boy" remains as a vestige of the infantilization of the slave.

Currently, infantilization is directed against the elderly who are commonly described as incapable of directing their own lives due to the incapacities of "second childhood." The image of the toothless, hairless, wrinkled, bent, drooling newborn is applied to the elderly in order to justify their mandatory retirement and even involuntary institutionalization.

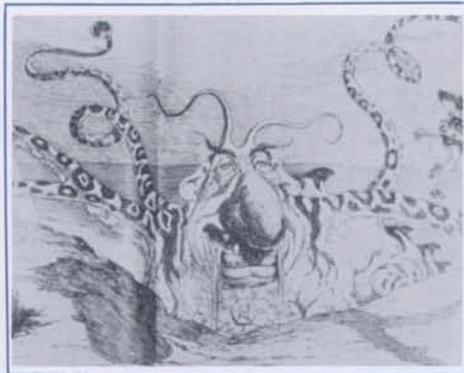
C) *Cell C* - represents the condition in which a group is dehumanized but not infantilized. This is the style of stereotyping which occurs when a minority group refuses to "stay in its place." The majority group begins to perceive it as a threat and open conflict develops. The particularly cruel character of dehumanizing stereotypes is necessary in order to justify and excuse the often brutal measures taken by majorities to suppress a perceived threat. Control is no longer considered a realistic goal. The protection of an advantaged position then takes the form of accelerated denial of jobs, civil rights and even the extermination of minority members.

During *Reconstruction*, former slaves were suddenly in a position to compete for jobs and political power. The paternalistic, childlike "sambo" image gave way to the depiction of freed blacks as apelike beasts, justifying the violent Ku Klux Klan lynchings and burnings of the era.

During the middle ages women began competing with men for jobs in the cities and in the medical area as midwives. The result was that thousands of women were accused of being demons and witches who "deserved" to be put to death.



Dehumanization:  
Irish as Apes



Dehumanization  
Jews as Octopus

Jews in Medieval Europe were accused of being horned devils who drank the blood of Christian children. Jews have historically been dehumanized rather than infantilized because they have always been perceived as a threat (even as a controlling conspiracy) economically, and religious heretics as well.

American Indians were severely mistreated (murdered, in fact) by land-hungry white Americans who eagerly accepted the view that they were "treacherous and cruel savages who could never be trusted," especially since they could not be controlled enough to be used as labor.

D) *Cell D* - represents the condition in which a group is infantilized and dehumanized. This style of stereotyping occurs under conditions of social change, specifically

when a previously dominated minority begins to threaten the control of the majority by making efforts toward equality. The result is ambivalence in their depiction by and relationship with the majority group.

During the women's movement of the 1960's, the "little girl" image of women was joined by the more ominous stereotypes depicting them as animals and demons. In everyday conversation, where women had been referred to almost exclusively in infantile terms, they were now also labeled with animal references such as "chick," "bird," and "fox." Members of the liberation movement, but especially their leaders, were called "Amazons" and "bitch-goddesses." The most extreme dehumanization appeared in sado-masochistic pornography in which women were shown as slave-like animals and sexual objects to be used and tortured.

In a similar way the civil rights movement and riots of the 1960's abruptly altered the stereotype of the happy-go-lucky, lazy, black "boy." Those perceiving the threat of the movement resurrected the *Reconstruction* stereotypes of the black as vicious animals.

Stereotyping is as old as the history of relations between groups, and in a wide variety of circumstances has served the function of justifying the domination and ill treatment of one group by another. The distinction that we have made between styles of stereotyping is intended to help identify the mechanisms in our thinking and institutions which maintain domination. We hope that such distinctions will allow us to recognize and reduce discrimination, not only in the context of race and gender relations, but between powerful and powerless groups generally.

*William Levin is author or co-author of a number of journal articles and three sociology books, two of which deal with the issues of discrimination and prejudice. The most recent is The Functions of Discrimination and Prejudice (Harper and Row, 1982). He is currently completing an introductory sociology text for Wadsworth Publishing Company.*

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