

Categorization and stereotyping, and their meaning for criminology

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Categorization (sorting into categories) is a mechanism which helps reduce the complexity of physical, linguistic, psychological and even physiological stimuli, thus making our interpretations of reality simpler and more predictable, supporting an illusion of stability. As research in the field of perception shows, categorization is a basic and unavoidable cognitive mechanism. Social categorization is of special interest to criminology since it extends to the value judgments we make about people. Since social categorizations are shared and often go unquestioned within a society, they can lead to the creation of stereotypes. Stereotypes as such are beliefs that we hold about individuals only on the basis of the social group or class to which we judge they belong. Among many effects of stereotyping two are of special importance for criminology: attribution effect and tendency to maintain status quo. Since in the criminological field we constantly deal with de-privileged/stereotyped individuals and groups, both mechanisms influence the impartiality of judicial decisions and contribute to miscarriages of justice or disproportionate punishment. For example, stereotypical images of what "criminals" are like contribute to mistakes in the identification of subjects; stereotypes about unattractive people also possessing unpleasant personal characteristics enhance the chance of them being convicted or receiving harsher punishment. National, racial or even gender-based stereotypes also play a role in compromising judicial impartiality and increasing the likelihood of disproportionate or inappropriate punishment.

Key words: categorization, stereotyping, criminology, prejudice, sentencing

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