GREGORY SAWIN
HOW STEREOTYPES INFLUENCE OPINIONS ABOUT INDIVIDUALS

STEREOTYPING is a way of thinking. It means that someone already has made up his or her mind about what a stranger is really like based only on the stranger's race, age, sex, etc. Having a stereotype about other people can lead you to having an opinion about them before you get to know them. Basically, a stereotype is a belief that all people of a certain type have some common quality—for example, "All old people are politically conservative." Someone who has this stereotypical belief will be inclined to expect a conservative attitude in the next old person he sees.

In everyday life, a map we use when traveling is most useful to us when it is up-to-date and is a good match to the territory. We can rely on a new map of California to tell us how to get from one place to another. The layout of the cities and roads on the map is a close match to the actual layout of the cities and roads in the territory of California. The stereotype "All old people are politically conservative" serves as a kind of mental map a person has inside her head that supposedly tells her about a part of the territory of the outside world called "all old people." Such a mental map influences a person's perception and judgment; so a person with this stereotype may say, "I *know* that old man over there is politically conservative because *all* old people are conservative."

One theory of stereotyping, complexity-extremity, seems to sup-

port the idea that good mental maps are based on reliable knowledge of the territory.(1) One way of acquiring reliable knowledge is first-hand experience. The more experience we have with certain things, the more reliable is our knowledge about them. This theory says that someone is likely to stereotype another person inaccurately when he has had little direct experience with people who are "like" the other person. For example, a teenager is more likely to have a more inaccurate stereotype about "all old people" than about "all teenagers" because the teenager knows more teenagers than old people. The teenager would have a more accurate, more detailed mental map of "all teenagers" compared to his mental map of "all old people." So his answer to the question "What are teenagers like?" probably would be more specific and detailed than his answer to the question "What are old people like?" Knowing first-hand that there are many kinds of teenagers would prevent him from saying that all teenagers are alike. But his few experiences with old people may have resulted in a simple mental map of old people that leads him to believe that all old people are more alike than all teenagers; so he might say that all old people are politically conservative.

Most people are not concerned about the map–territory idea as it relates to everyday thinking and living. They just automatically *assume* that their beliefs, attitudes, and opinions are the right ones to have. But no one is born with beliefs; they are learned. So each person learns many mental maps (beliefs, opinions, and knowledge in general) in the course of a lifetime.

Realizing that stereotyping is a way of thinking that is learned leads to the question "What does the map–territory idea tell us about stereotypes?" The map–territory idea points out that maps that don't match the territory are often useless and sometimes even harmful. Such bad maps may lead us to jump to conclusions that will result in an unnecessary bad experience for someone. For example, the stereotype "All old people are politically conservative" may lead a nonconservative young person to automatically dislike an old person. That dislike may lead to making hostile remarks to the old person, who, in fact, may agree with many of the youth's political ideas. This whole chain of events, from stereotype to dislike to hostile remarks, is based on a fantasy—an inaccurate mental map.

But creating and using mental maps that are a good match to the territory of the outside world can help us avoid bad experiences and even have more successful experiences in life. A good mental map

doesn't just happen; it is carefully built on reliable knowledge of the territory. This is an important point—what we observe about the nature of the territory tells us how to create the map. The map should not come first and tell us how to judge the territory, especially in terms of what attitudes to have regarding other people. We can't have a good match between mental maps and the territory of the outside world when we try to "warp the territory to fit the map."(2) We should observe the territory, then create a map to match it. If we use this approach in dealing with old people, for example, we will observe and listen to many old people *before* creating a mental map about them. If we do this, we can never say, "All old people are politically conservative," because we will never meet *all* old people.

Observing the territory before we create the map should lead us to choose our words carefully in forming our map. If we tried to observe and meet as many old people as possible, we would find that no two old people are exactly alike and some old people are not conservative. Since we would have no use for the term "all," our mental map would be something on the order of "Some old people are conservative, while some are liberal, some are middle-of-the-road, etc." That "etc." is important because it indicates that even this more accurate mental map does not tell us everything about old people—just as a real map doesn't tell us about every detail in a territory. Any map must leave out some details of the actual territory it is supposed to represent. When we realize that our mental maps also must leave out some details, then we are less absolute and simpleminded in our attitudes and statements about the territory of the world around us.

If we have this kind of *awareness* of the limitations of our mental maps plus the desire to make our statements correspond more accurately to the facts, we can reduce the chance of jumping to wrong conclusions about other people.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. L. Jussim, L. M. Coleman, and L. Lerch, "The Nature of Stereotypes: A Comparison and Integration of Three Theories," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 3 (1987), 536–46.
2. Harry L. Weinberg, *Levels of Knowing and Existence* (New York: Harper, 1959), 76.