Loyal, Kind, and True? Examining Distinctions in the “Warmth” Dimension of the Stereotype Content Model

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Background

Stereotype Content Model (SCM) focuses on how individuals perceive outgroups through two trait dimensions: competence and warmth. The warmth dimension focuses on the perceived beneficence of a group and is associated with characteristics like kindness, loyalty, and trustworthiness (Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002). These perceptions of others can predict whether an individual actively harms or helps an outgroup to attain their goals (Cuddy et al., 2007).

Research Aims and Methods

Aim: To understand if the distinctions within the warmth trait of the SCM change perception of the warmth of an outgroup as a whole.

Method: Data was taken from two focus groups (n=18) that were part of a previous study on public views of individuals within the criminal justice system. This project was funded by the Penn State Harrisburg Research Council Grant. The data was qualitatively coded to interpret the distinctions made between kindness, trustworthiness, and loyalty. Those distinctions were then compared to overall perceptions of warmth.

Focus Question: The focus group facilitator asked, “Would you describe a person involved in the criminal justice system as warm, or good natured?”

Results

Participants saw people involved in the criminal justice system as high in loyalty. Trustworthiness and kindness were described with more ambivalence, with participants placing both traits on context. Overall, participants’ immediate reaction to the question was that individuals involved in criminal justice are not warm, but eventually found it to be more contextual and based on the individual.

Discussion

There was variation in how participants talked about trait distinction. While loyalty is considered a characteristic of warmth, it may not be as closely associated with it as kindness or trustworthiness when it comes to individuals that are involved in the criminal justice system. If loyalty were to be made salient over kindness, then the first impression of the warmth dimension may have changed for participants. This ordering of characteristics may have an impact on how the warmth trait is studied within SCM research. Given that warmth perceptions are associated with behaviors toward outgroups (Cuddy et al., 2007) further research should be pursued into how we can use the trait distinctions to encourage facilitation towards others. Further, participants stressed the importance of context when talking about warmth. Future research on using individual contexts for group perceptions in regard to trait dimensions should also be considered.

References
