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**What’s Wrong with Stereotypes?**

**The Falsity Hypothesis**

When we call something a stereotype, we tend to mean it as a criticism, as if calling something a stereotype explains why it is wrong. In this essay, I focus my attention on one thought in particular: stereotypes are false or inaccurate. For shorthand, I call this *the falsity hypothesis*. The falsity hypothesis is widespread and is often one of the first reasons people cite when they explain why we shouldn’t use stereotypic views in cognition, reasoning, or speech. However, I will argue that the hypothesis should be jettisoned and, moreover, that theorists who care about social justice should welcome its dismissal.

The argument proceeds as follows. In Section 1, I contextualize the falsity hypothesis by sketching a pair of real-world cases. The discussion serves two functions: first, it clarifies the practical stakes of the falsity hypothesis, revealing why discussions of it are so heated; second, it highlights competing stances that justice-minded theorists could take towards the hypothesis. In Sections 2 - 3, I distinguish two versions of the falsity hypothesis and answer several questions about it. I also underscore this essay’s dual aims. Though the essay is arguably an exercise in metaphysics because I evaluate the falsity hypothesis as a thesis about what stereotypes are, it is also an exercise in social philosophy. Part of my argument against the falsity hypothesis will be that it fails to serve the critical function needed for a good ameliorative account of stereotypes. In Sections 4 - 6, I evaluate the hypothesis on empirical as well as ameliorative grounds and argue for rejecting it. In the essay’s final section, I sketch an alternative theory of stereotypes, which joins my earlier work on stereotypes in individual psychology (2015) with the work of Patricia Hill Collins on cultural stereotypes (2000). This two-part, hybrid theory—which characterizes stereotypes as controlling ideas or images of social groups that serve a regulative social function—avoids the falsity hypothesis. One of it key virtues is the ability to recognize the ways in which even true, justified stereotypes facilitate social oppression. A second virtue is the way in which the view foregrounds power relations and their capacity to shape human psychology in ways that entrench the status quo.

1. FALSITY AND STEREOTYPES: TWO DISPUTES

The falsity hypothesis is hotly contested. In this section, I present a pair of disputes—one legal and one interpersonal—that illustrate its political contentiousness, as well as its stakes.

Consider, first, *Nguyen v. INS* (2001). This case was brought to the United States Supreme Court almost twenty years ago over the following issue. Immigration law treats U.S. fathers and mothers differently. Suppose you are U.S. citizen living abroad, and you have a child out of wedlock with a non-citizen. If you are the mother, your child will automatically receive citizenship so long as three conditions are met: (1) you are actually a U.S. citizen; (2) you are the child’s biological parent as established on the child’s birth certificate; and (3) you have resided continuously in the United States for one year at any point. For fathers, the rules are different. In addition to meeting the above three criteria, fathers must prove that they are biological parents in court. Additionally, fathers must agree under oath to provide financial support for the child until they reach the age of eighteen. They must also prove that the child lives with them. The asymmetry is obvious. Men must spend a great deal of time and money in order to secure citizenship for their kids. Their commitment to being a father is doubted at every turn. Women get their children’s citizenship for free, and their motherly fidelity is never questioned. But there is more. Mothers are permitted to transmit citizenship to their children at any time throughout a child’s life. In contrast, men have this opportunity only until a child reaches eighteen years of age.

Fast forward to the case. When challenged, the U.S. government defended these asymmetrical rules by citing gender differences. The lawyer for the Bush administration noted the thirty million plus men living and traveling abroad. Men, he argued, “probably” produce far more children abroad with non-citizens than women (Oral arguments, *Nguyen v INS* 2001: 33:30). The resulting progeny—no matter how numerous—would be granted citizenship automatically if American fathers were subject to the same rules as mothers. The second claim was that women are more likely to develop caring relationships with their children. Men don’t have to be there for the birth of a child, the government argued. They don’t even have to know that a child was born. Even if they know, there’s no guarantee that men will care. Therefore, men should face a higher burden of proof to establish their parental commitment.

Here is what is interesting for my purposes. The plaintiff’s lawyer argued that immigration law was justified by gender stereotypes and, hence, discriminatory. A majority of Justices—Kennedy, Rehnquist, Scalia, Stevens, and Thomas—disagreed. Justice Scalia warned against “mechanistic classification of all our differences as stereotypes” (*Nguyen v. INS* 2001: 72). In a separate opinion, Justice Kennedy argued that stereotypes must be the result of “irrational or uncritical” thought processes (68). He linked this criticism to a claim about the content of stereotypes. Something couldn’t be a stereotype if it stated a true, justified generalization. Mothers “manifestly” have a better chance than fathers to develop loving relationships with their children, he insisted. Kennedy’s conclusion: “This is not a stereotype” (68). One of the reasons that it is not a stereotype, he implies, is that stereotypes must be false. On his view, true statements about gender difference could not possibly be stereotypes.

The dissenting Justices—Breyer, Ginsburg, O’Connor, and Souter—strongly objected to the analysis. Justice O’Connor wrote:

The majority articulates a misshapen notion of ‘stereotype’ and its significance in our equal protection jurisprudence. The majority asserts that a ‘stereotype’ is defined as a frame of mind resulting from irrational and uncritical analysis.’ This Court has long recognized, however, that an impermissible stereotype may enjoy empirical support and thus be in a sense ‘rational’ (69).

Gender stereotypes, for example, “may hold true for many, even most, individuals,” O’Connor noted (90). Statistically, women may be more likely to develop close relationships with their children, whereas men are less likely to do so. According to her view, ‘mothers are more nurturing than fathers’ and ‘mothers have close relationships with their children’ are statements that express stereotypes. Not all women have the opportunity or the desire to bond with their biological children. Some men are primary caregivers.

At issue in this case was the question: ‘Who gets to be a U.S. citizen and under what conditions?’ Endorsing the falsity hypothesis (or, perhaps more accurately, what I will later call a falsity-plus hypothesis), conservative justices upheld discriminatory criteria for citizenship. Not only did their decision set a problematic precedent, it had personally devastating results for the plaintiff. Nguyen was deported to Vietnam. Having lived with his father in Texas since he was six, he could not speak Vietnamese and knew almost no one. Because his father failed to submit the relevant paperwork in time, he was no longer eligible for citizenship.

Next, consider a quite different kind of example. In his book *Social Perception and Reality*, psychologist Lee Jussim describes a conversation with his in-laws. “Some years ago,” writes Jussim, “my wife’s parents (who are Jewish) asked me what research I was working on. I said, ‘I was studying the accuracy of stereotypes’” (Jussim 2012: 302).[[1]](#footnote-1) They asked for an example. He said: “Jews really are, on average, richer than other people” (Ibid.). In making this statement, Jussim presupposes familiarly with the following stereotype: “Jewish people are rich.” He told his in-laws that this stereotype was true based on presumptive facts about the average wealth of Jewish people, compared to people from other religious and ethnic groups. His in-laws flew into a rage. “They attacked me for being the worst kind of bigot,” Jussim writes, “They accused me of being anti-Semitic. They accused me of perpetrating the worst type of propaganda about Jews” (Ibid.). He describes it as “a difficult and tense” conversation, which lasted nearly an hour.

Though he and his in-laws fought about a particular stereotype, Jussim says that the falsity hypothesis itself was in dispute. His in-laws believed that stereotypes were necessarily false. He rejected the view. “I have told this story,” he says, “because I think it may help convey why many people have a viscerally hostile reaction to scholarship that seriously considers the possibility that some stereotypes are accurate” (273). He believes that his in-laws reaction is typical. People will get upset if you claim that stereotypes can be true or accurate. They will believe that you are thereby complicit in injustice.

The quarrel is interesting. Whereas conservative justices used a version of the falsity hypothesis to uphold gender discrimination, Jussim’s in-laws used it to contest an utterance long-tied to anti-Semitic ideology.

Competing stances towards the falsity hypothesis thus come into view. One stance—advanced by Justice O’Connor and her liberal colleagues—is that the falsity hypothesis is inimical to aims of social justice. The second stance—perhaps endorsed by Lee Jussim’s in-laws—is that the falsity hypothesis is an essential tool for calling out and combatting social injustice.

Though some readers may already have an allegiance to one of these stances, others may be torn. Should we endorse the hypothesis on empirical grounds or reject it? Does the hypothesis promote social justice or does it not?

2. TWO VERSIONS OF THE FALSITY HYPOTHESIS

In order to evaluate these questions, the falsity hypothesis must be stated more precisely. Consider two versions of it:

*Universal falsity hypothesis*: stereotypes are always false or inaccurate.

*Generic falsity hypothesis*: stereotypes are (typically or usually) false or inaccurate.

The universal version of the hypothesis states a necessary condition for something to be a stereotype. It says that all stereotypes have the property of being false or inaccurate. The generic falsity hypothesis states a claim about typical or most stereotypes.

The universal falsity hypothesis is extremely widespread. Consider these definitions, advanced by psychologists over sixty years apart:

A stereotype is a fixed impression [of a social group] which conforms very little to the facts it pretends to present (Katz and Braly 1935: 181).

Stereotypes are maladaptive . . . because their content does not correspond to what is going on in the environment (Bargh and Chartrand 1999: 467).[[2]](#footnote-2)

These definitions appear to state a categorical claim: by their very nature, stereotypes fail to correspond to reality, hence they are always false or inaccurate. Notice that the first definition identifies a supplementary problem with stereotypes as well. Stereotypes are “fixed” impressions in that they do not respond to evidence. Hence two epistemically bad properties are allegedly present in all stereotypes.

A popular view of ideology encourages the claim that stereotypes are always false or inaccurate. According to this view, which Sally Haslanger dubs “cognitivism,” ideology consists in “shared (false) beliefs and shared (invalid) patterns of thought” (2017: 7).[[3]](#footnote-3) She cites Tommie Shelby as an advocate of cognitivism. Shelby argues that ideological claims—such as those expressed by stereotypes—“misrepresent significant social realities” and “make faulty claims to knowledge; they mislead and distort; they create and spread myths; they misinform and conceal” (2014: 66, 68). When scholars adopt such a view of ideology, they will be inclined to accept the universal falsity hypothesis.

The falsity hypothesis’s second version is weaker. In *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*, Michael Pickering notes,

Stereotypes are usually considered inaccurate because of the way they portray a social group or category as homogenous. Certain forms of behavior, disposition, or propensity are isolated . . . and attributed to everyone associated with a particular group or category (2001: 4).

Note the qualification “usually.” It creates space for the view that stereotypes could sometimes be true. Even so, Pickering says, stereotypes are thought to be false or inaccurate usually, typically, or most often.

The generic falsity hypothesis has philosophical advocates too. “The falseness of a stereotype,” writes Lawrence Blum, “is part of, and is a necessary condition of, what is objectionable about stereotypes in general” (2004: 256). The “in general” commits Blum to the view that most, usual, or typical stereotypes are false. Often—but not always—stereotypes have this property.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Two versions of the falsity hypothesis are now on the table. The universal falsity hypothesis says that stereotypes are always false or inaccurate, thereby making a claim about the conditions necessary for something to count as a stereotype. The generic falsity hypothesis says that stereotypes are false or inaccurate, typically or usually.

3. THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FALSITY HYPOTHESIS

Readers may have lingering questions about the falsity hypothesis. Let me pause briefly to answer three of them.

Question 1: How should we understand the falsity hypothesis? Is it a view about what stereotypes are or what is wrong with them?

The falsity hypothesis is most naturally understood as a metaphysical claim, i.e., a claim about what stereotypes—by their very nature—are. One could also understand it as a conceptual claim, i.e., a claim about how to understand or think about stereotypes.

Despite being a metaphysical or conceptual claim, the hypothesis has epistemic significance. Indeed it doubles as an epistemic criticism. The criticism is this: stereotypes are false or inaccurate. Having false or inaccurate views can sometimes be rational. Yet this does not eliminate the criticism’s bite. Suppose a person’s evidence suggests that a stereotype is true, but the stereotype is in fact false. Perhaps this person ought to believe the stereotype and cannot be blamed for what they think, given the evidence to which they have access at the time (Begby 2013; Washington and Kelly 2016). Still it would be much better—epistemically speaking—if they were able to realize the truth of the matter. From a third-person perspective, we might say: such a person should be educated; they ought to be challenged in ways that help them see their belief is not actually true; counterevidence must be brought to their attention. These interventions are desirable precisely because they aim to disrupt a false belief and replace it with a true, better-justified belief.

False or inaccurate beliefs can also be ethically bad. Ignorance of the truth often constitutes a kind of moral failure (Murdoch 1970; Code 1987; Mills 1997; Sullivan and Tuana 2007). To have false beliefs about others is, very often, the result of paying attention to the wrong kind of things, caring about the wrong things, and choosing to wallow in prejudice rather than critically evaluating one’s own biases. Telling someone that they have a false view about a social group is thus to enter into a potentially ethical conversation.

While the ethical issues here are complex, I am making a simple point. We can—and should—distinguish the philosophical dimensions of the falsity hypothesis. While the hypothesis states a metaphysical or conceptual claim, it is epistemically and morally charged.

Question 2: Are stereotypes supposed to be cultural or psychological? And, what about stereotyping? Does the falsity hypothesis apply to stereotyping too?

The falsity hypothesis has the potential to apply both to cultural stereotypes and stereotypes ‘inside the heads’ of individuals. The falsity hypothesis—applied to cultural stereotypes—states that group stereotypes, i.e., culturally pervasive images and ideas related to social groups, are false or inaccurate. The falsity hypothesis—applied to stereotypes in individual psychology—says that the images and ideas of social groups in our minds are false or inaccurate. For my purposes, it is not important to specify which kind of stereotype is at issue, so I will usually keep my statement of the hypothesis ambiguous for the time being. My analysis will apply to stereotypes in both senses.

Variants of the falsity hypothesis also apply to acts of stereotyping. Stereotyping is a complex phenomenon. You can stereotype individuals, but you can also stereotype groups as a whole. In this essay, I focus on stereotypes. That’s because stereotyping is a multifaceted phenomenon that requires its own analysis (Beeghly ms). Nonetheless, readers will be able to see the connections. For instance, if group stereotypes are sometimes true or accurate, stereotyping individuals would not always involve judging persons by false or inaccurate views of the social groups to which they belong.

Question 3: Why do you focus on falsity and not other epistemic defects? Wouldn’t it be better to investigate more complex versions of the falsity hypothesis?

This question gets something right. The falsity hypothesis could be further embellished. Blum, for instance, asserts that stereotypes are not only false or misleading but also “held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, immune to counter-evidence.” Similarly, Katz and Braly define a stereotype as a “fixed” impression that fails to conform to reality. Accordingly, these theorists endorse what is more accurately considered a ‘falsity-plus’ view of stereotypes. Falsity-plus views build epistemically dubious properties beyond falsity into the very idea of a stereotype.

While these more nuanced views are important, I will focus on the hypothesis in its basic form. Here is why. Falsity is at the core of many definitions of what a stereotype is, and we should ask whether it ought to be. If falsity or inaccuracy is justifiably included in the definition of a stereotype (either as a necessary condition or a generic claim), theorists are free to experiment with embellishing their definitions, just as advocates of falsity-plus views already do. However, if falsity or inaccuracy should not be included in the idea of a stereotype, we should be suspicious of any view that builds them into the definition of a stereotype, whether basic or embellished.

4. THE UNIVERSAL FALSITY HYPOTHESIS

With the falsity hypothesis clarified, we can now evaluate its empirical merits. I’ll start with its universal version. According to it, stereotypes necessarily have the property of being false or inaccurate.

Examples of false stereotypes are easy to find. “So pervasive was the tendency,” writes bell hooks,

for whites to regard allblack women as sexually loose and unworthy of respect that their achievements were ignored . . . All black women, irrespective of their circumstances, were lumped into the category of available sex objects (2014: 58).

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Alex Haley reports Malcolm X as saying, “All Negroes, among themselves, admit the white man’s criminal record” (2015: 289). In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, one of the characters tells the novel’s narrator “all colored people sing” (1995: 312). When stereotypes state universal generalizations such as these, they will always—or nearly always—be false or inaccurate. Only one counterexample is necessary to undermine their validity.

Not all stereotypes express universal generalizations, however. Often stereotypes expressed in speech communicate what linguists call ‘generics’ (Haslanger 2012; Begby 2013; Beeghly 2015). Generics lack quantifiers like ‘some,’ ‘most,’ or ‘all,’ and they do not make claims about specific individuals. Instead they express generalized claims like ‘women are empathetic’ and ‘Asians are good at math.’ Examples of stereotype generics abound. In his autobiography, Malcolm X refers to African Americans in the U.S. as materialistic and “status-sick” (320). He clearly means this as a generic claim. In his view, members of the Nation of Islam did not have these defects, even if most or typical black people in the U.S. did. Likewise, hooks cites a nineteenth-century French visitor to the U.S, who writes:

American men accorded their women more deference, lavished more money on them, regarded them with more respect than was accorded the women of any country. But they did not particularly like them. They did not enjoy their company; they did not find them interesting in themselves. They valued them as wives and mothers, they sentimentalized over them; they congratulated themselves on their enlightened attitude towards them. But they did not (and do not) like them (2014: 32).

This visitor does not say all men—in particular, all white men—in the U.S. had these attitudes. The observation concerns typical, common, or dominant attitudes.

Philosophers of language and linguistics offer competing accounts of the truth conditions for generics. Sarah-Jane Leslie, for example, divides generics into main three types: majority generics, characteristic generics, and striking-property generics (Leslie 2007; Leslie 2017). Each kind of generic is thought to have distinctive types of truth conditions. She also argues that generics can express normative claims (Wodak, Leslie, and Rhodes 2015; Leslie 2015). Other theorists define the truth of generics in statistical terms. Ariel Cohen, for example, argues that generics are of two types: absolute and relative (Cohen 1999). Absolute generics are true if and only if fifty percent or more of group members have the property in question. Relative generics are true if and only if group members possess the relevant trait at a rate higher than average non-group members. Yet other theorists argue that there is only one set of truth conditions that apply to all generics. A common suggestion, for example, is that generics are true if and only if “normal” group members in “normal circumstances” possess the ascribed property (Pelletier and Asher 1997; Thompson 2014).

Because stereotypes often take the form of generics, they can—and sometimes will—be true. The visitor quoted by hooks, for example, could have been making a fitting observation about how white American men in the Victorian era generally related to white American women. They tended to put them on pedestals but did not particularly like them. The same goes for gender stereotypes like ‘women are empathetic.’ In a society where empathy is disproportionately cultivated in women, women could very well be more likely than men to display empathetic feelings and behavior.

The same observation holds with regards to accuracy. Unlike falsity, accuracy is scalar: it comes in degrees. Jussim defines the concept as follows: “accuracy is a correspondence between perceivers’ beliefs (expectations, judgments) about one or more target people and what those target people are actually like, independent of perceivers influence on them” (172).[[5]](#footnote-5) Since stereotypes can correspond to the world more or less well, stereotypes can be more or less accurate. They can also count as accurate or inaccurate *simpliciter*. ‘Women are empathetic,’ for example, would be an accurate stereotype if women—as a statistical matter of fact—were measurably more empathetic than people who aren’t women.

Faced with the fact that the literal, semantic content of stereotypes may not always be false or inaccurate, one may try to press the universal falsity hypothesis in a different way. Consider a pragmatic strategy. In *Resisting Reality*, Sally Haslanger argues that stereotypes uttered in speech—even if literally true—convey false, unjustified claims about the causes of group traits. ‘Women are submissive’ is an alleged example. She asserts:

under conditions of dominance, women are, in fact, more submissive than men [because they tend to defer to men in family and professional life]. This is a true generalization and those who live under male dominance are justified in believing it (2012: 449).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Nonetheless, she argues, a speaker asserting the stereotype conveys something false, as well as unwarranted. ‘Women are submissive’ implies that women are submissive by their very nature. However, she notes, “[t]he facts in question obtain by virtue of a broad system of social relations within which subjects are situated, they are not grounded in intrinsic or dispositional features of the subjects themselves” (466).

Haslanger’s argument is restricted to stereotypes uttered in speech. The machinery of pragmatics only works when stereotypes are publicly communicated. If an individual does not communicate her thoughts, she is not guilty of introducing a false, unwarranted explanation of group traits into conversational common ground. Therefore, Haslanger’s argument does not—and could not—vindicate the claim that stereotypes are always false or inaccurate. In particular, it does not apply to beliefs about or associations with social groups that remain unsaid at a given time.

A non-pragmatic version of the objection might do the trick, however. The idea would be this. We have been talking so far about stereotypes thinly described.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thinly described, stereotypes make claims like ‘women are empathetic.’ Perhaps such claims count as literally true or accurate. Yet, thickly described, the content of people’s stereotypes includes their explanations of why group members have the traits they do.

Theorists of oppression at least sometimes think of stereotypes as including explanations of group traits. In *The Emotional Politics of Racism*, for example, sociologist Paula Ioanide writes,

Racial and gender stereotypes are difficult to disrupt because people can confirm what they believe to be true in observable realities. For example, some of the claims that New Orleans homeowners and city council members made about public housing and Section 8 residents were evident across the city and confirmed by empirical studies (2015: 147).

Despite being empirically verified, Ioanide does not believe that New Orleans homeowners’ stereotypes of Section 8 residents were true. Why not? She explains:

dominant stereotypes about public housing and Section 8 residents maintained that these oppressions were caused by the inherent behavioral, cultural, or familial deficiencies of poor people, particularly African American women and men (147).

Clearly, she is thinking of stereotypes in a thick way, i.e., as expressing both generic claims about groups and an explanation of why group members have the properties they allegedly do. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young takes a similar view. She argues that stereotypes cause marginalized groups to be “stamped with an essence” and confined “to a nature which is often attached in some way to their bodies” (1990: 59).

Does the connection between stereotypes and essentialism save the universal falsity hypothesis? There are reasons to think not. Let us first note: not all stereotypes are endorsed on the basis of essentialist explanations. A person might endorse a stereotype based on statistical observations and be noncommittal about the deeper causes of group traits. But there is something else, too. It seems to be a working assumption of Haslanger and others that essentialist explanations rest on false, unwarranted claims about group difference. That assumption may be incorrect.

When psychologists study essentialist thought and reasoning, they distinguish several ways to be an essentialist. If someone is a biological essentialist, they believe that innate, biological causes explain group membership and typical properties. On this view, a kind’s nature is biologically determined. But psychologists have found that people can also be social essentialists, meaning that they cite “social background or status, upbringing, peer contact, and socialization” to explain why certain people are group members and why group members exhibit typical properties (Rangel and Keller 2011: 1058).

Essentialists of all kinds are thought to endorse a core set of beliefs and have characteristic dispositions. Here is one popular view of them:

1. Stability: Essentialists believe that group members have a shared, stable disposition to possess/display/manifest certain traits.
2. Homogeneity: They tend to see social groups as homogenous and unified.
3. Discreteness: They tend to see certain social categories as distinct and non-overlapping. For example, “man” and “woman” will be seen as unique categories, and group members will be thought of as belonging to either one category only.
4. Immutability: Essentialists tend to believe that group membership is fixed and unchangeable.
5. Inductive Potential: Essentialists see group membership as having a rich inductive potential; that is, if you know that x is a member of group y, you will believe that you can make a number of reliable inferences about x (Rangel and Keller 2011: 1059-1060).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Biological and social essentialists fit the description of (a) - (e). However, they exhibit significant diversity when it comes to details. For example, when asked about a particular group, some may argue that group membership is impossible to change; others will see it merely as difficult and unlikely to change.

If essentialists are a diverse group, one should not assume that all essentialist explanations of group traits are false or inaccurate.[[9]](#footnote-9) Consider the stereotype ‘women are empathetic.’ Women are a highly essentialized group, so we might guess that a biological explanation underwrites the stereotype (Prentice and Miller 2006).[[10]](#footnote-10) However, there is more than one way to be an essentialist. If I am social essentialist when it comes to women, I will explain women’s shared nature and typical group traits, including empathy, by citing social causes. So long as gender norms and social structures are stable, I may argue, women’s empathic advantage will be stable. Maybe I also know that gender tends to function in a rigidly binary way in a society like mine due, in part, to the punishment of non-conformists. I may count an essentialist by psychological metrics. But my beliefs aren’t false. In a society where gender is heavily policed along binary lines, people—including those who identify as women—will very often have gender stereotypical traits.[[11]](#footnote-11)

An analogous point applies to cultural stereotypes. Collective explanations for group stereotypes change over time, and widespread disagreement is currently the norm. Psychologist Susan Gelman reports in her influential book, *The Essential Child*:

Ullian (1976) interviewed six- to eighteen-year-olds about the causes of male-female differences and found that causal beliefs shifted with age from biological orientation (focus on innate physical differences) to a socialization orientation (focus on social roles and obligations), and finally, to a psychological orientation (focus on requirements of individual and interpersonal functioning). J. Smith and Russell (1984) reported a similar shift from a biological to a sociological orientation in their interviews with seven- to fifteen-year-olds. For example, seven-year-olds most typically reported biological differences (e.g., “Boys have different things in their innards to girls”) or normative differences (“Because God made them that way”). By the time a child reached age fifteen, socialization explanations were more common (e.g., “We do different things because it is the way we have been brought up.”) Adults samples of parents (Antill, 1987) and college students (Martin and Packer, 1995) mentioned both biology and sociology in their explanations of gender difference. When asked which factor they viewed as more important, both groups favored socialization (although a third of the parent sample viewed both as equally important) (Gelman 2003: 95-96).

Gelman’s own research with children points in a similar direction. In one study conducted with Marianne Taylor, she found that for “biological properties, children nearly always (>.95% of the time) endorsed the mechanism of birth” (cited in Gelman 2003: 97). This result, she writes, shows that children are essentialists about biological and physical traits. But she found that children explained psychological traits differently. “Even kindergarteners distinguished the two kinds of characteristics,” she writes, “they consistently treated physical characteristics as innately determined but their views of psychological traits were mixed” (99). These studies are suggestive. As children mature into adults, one would expect that they get an increasingly better sense of how environmental features, including socialization and culture, influence group traits, especially behavioral and psychological traits. This should result in more complex views of group difference and a greater recognition of the role played by nurture. In studies of teenagers and adults, the prediction is confirmed. As Gelman herself notes, “the mental models adults use are intriguingly complex” (98).

If nothing else, these studies illustrate the existence of widespread disagreement about gender differences. In a context where deep disagreements are the rule, people should not assume that someone who asserts a gender stereotype or uses an unspoken stereotype in reasoning holds any specific position on the cause of the group difference. Nor can we assume that a unique, explanation always attaches to cultural stereotypes.[[12]](#footnote-12)

With additional information we could perhaps be justified in attributing false essentialist beliefs to agents who use stereotypes, either in speech or cognition. One’s history of interactions with another person could justify inferences about her explanations of group difference. So could stereotypes. If I know that someone is a social conservative, I might justifiably infer that she is a biological essentialist about gender difference. The content of the utterance may help too. Some stereotypes might be so repugnant that almost anyone who would use them in conversation would very likely have false essentialist beliefs.

The fact remains that not all stereotypes will be false or inaccurate, even when thickly described. It follows that we should reject the universal falsity hypothesis. Its empirical credentials are dubious. Too many counterexamples stand in its way.

5. THE GENERIC FALSITY HYPOTHESIS

The generic falsity hypothesis is now on the table. The hypothesis is this: stereotypes are (typically or usually) false or inaccurate. This claim is an example of what Leslie calls a “majority generic” or as what Cohen calls an “absolute generic.” On Leslie’s view, majority generics are perceived to be true when sixty percent or more of group members have the property in question. On Cohen’s view, absolute generics are true when more than fifty percent of group members have the property in question.

The evaluative situation is now more complex. Whereas one counterexample sufficed to undermine the universal falsity hypothesis, a single counterexample could never challenge the falsity hypothesis in a generic form. Even a whole slew of counterexamples would leave the hypothesis intact. It is therefore not surprising that the hypothesis is controversial. Some researchers argue that the generic falsity hypothesis should be rejected. Others vehemently disagree.

Consider Lee Jussim. He rejects even the weaker, generic version of the falsity hypothesis. If he is right, “scientific evidence provides more evidence of accuracy than of inaccuracy in social stereotypes” (392). “The most appropriate generalization based on the evidence,” he argues,

is that people’s beliefs about groups are frequently moderately to highly accurate . . . This pattern of empirical support for moderate to high stereotype accuracy is not unique to any particular target group or perceiver group. It has been found with racial/ethnic groups, gender, sororities, occupations, and college majors. There does, however, appear to be one exception to this pattern—political stereotypes seem to be less accurate than many other stereotypes (Ibid.).

Much of what Jussim wants to say can be reframed in terms of truth. If people’s stereotypes are generally accurate according to his definition, then they will also be generally true. For example, if I believe that women are empathetic and my belief corresponds to what women are actually like because a large majority of women are empathetic, then my belief is true.

Suppose Jussim is right that stereotypes are largely accurate. Advocates of the hypothesis can still push back. Jussim acknowledges that his research “does not show that people correctly explain why group differences exist” (391). If so, stereotypes—thickly described—might usually be false or inaccurate because people explain the causes of group traits incorrectly.

To address this possibility, Jussim says two things. The first is that we don’t know the extent to which lay explanations track the correct explanation of a trait. Experts often disagree about the correct explanation of group traits. Second, he notes that regular people are not so naïve as to explain group traits by appealing to innate, biological causes. Citing research similar to that described in Section 4, he notes studies indicating that people attribute stereotypic sex and race differences largely to “differences in socialization and opportunities” (Ibid.). As a result, it is possible that laypeople’s explanations of group traits are largely correct, even if they count as essentialist by some metrics. Therefore, perhaps even the generic falsity hypothesis is false.

I don’t pretend to know whether the generic falsity hypothesis is true or not. It is an open empirical question. Jussim welcomes theorists to evaluate his claims—and to disprove them—on empirical grounds.

To improve its chances of being vindicated, one could weaken the generic falsity hypothesis. Perhaps ‘stereotypes are false or inaccurate’ doesn’t state a claim about most or usual generics. Maybe it asserts a striking property generic. Striking property generics, according to Leslie, appeal to dangerous or alarming properties of groups. Falsity is in fact a dangerous property in stereotypes. Striking property generics may be true even if only a small percentage of group members have the property in question. Or, perhaps the claim ‘stereotypes are false or inaccurate’ is only meant to pick out an image that pops into our head when we hear the word ‘stereotype.’

Exploring the options, a troubling fact emerges. Unless it is reduced to a claim about a common image in people’s heads, the falsity hypothesis will be difficult—if not impossible—to verify.

6. TWO DISPUTES REVISITED

Most of this essay has been focused on the question of whether or not the falsity hypothesis can be defended on empirical grounds. I’ve argued that the university falsity hypothesis is empirically indefensible, and the generic hypothesis is questionable as well. But I also asked a second question. Does the hypothesis promote social justice or does it not?

Consider the evidence. *Nguyen* demonstrates one way in which the universal falsity hypothesis may contribute to injustice. The United States Supreme Court decided by a slim majority that a law mandating discriminatory treatment of American fathers was, in fact, legal. The Court justified the decision, in part, by appealing to the claim stereotypes are false, irrational views of groups.

The legal ramifications of Court’s opinion are ongoing. In 2018, *Nguyen* was cited as a precedent that could justify employment discrimination against transgender individuals (Reply Brief for the Petitioners, *R.G. and G.R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC* 2018: 5).[[13]](#footnote-13) According to Title VII, employers must cite a legitimate, non-discriminatory reason for taking an adverse employment action against an employee (e.g., firing them) if brought to court on charges of discrimination. Stereotypes do not qualify as legitimate, non-discriminatory reasons. However, if the *Nguyen* precedent is taken seriously, employers are free to cite true claims about gender difference in their own defense. ‘Why did you fire that person?’ the question goes. ‘Because males have a masculine gender identity,’ an employer may answer. This is not a stereotype, according to the decision in *Nguyen*, because it states a true, justified generalization about males in a society like ours and, also, accurately represents gender norms. Biased employers thus find a potential cover for injustice. If the *Nguyen* precedent stands, they have just articulated a non-discriminatory reason.

Here is what I think follows. In legal contexts, one should take special care not to conflate stereotypes and false stereotypes. The conflation is both empirically dubious and politically dangerous. In collapsing the two ideas, one writes into court record (and potentially case law) a universal generalization about stereotypes that is both empirically incorrect and can be used to vindicate unjust, discriminatory treatment and policies.

If the falsity hypothesis is rejected, courts still face the question of how, and in what contexts, stereotypes—and the statistical evidence that underlies them—are legally permissible to use. Thorny legal and philosophical questions immediately arise (Colyvan, Regan, and Ferson 2001; Schauer 2003; Enoch, Spectre, and Fisher 2013; Smith 2018). Yet one thing is clear. Theorists and jurists must argue for the impermissibility of stereotypes on ethical or political grounds, rather than on purely epistemic grounds such as falsity or irrationality. From an ameliorative perspective, this is positive. Increased normative clarity is a step in the right direction.

Turning to Jussim’s family dispute, one finds presumptive reasons in favor of the hypothesis’s ameliorative value. If someone utters or otherwise deploys an offensive stereotype, you can simply note, “that’s a stereotype.” If the falsity hypothesis were correct, you thereby convey that a fallacious—and likely ethically suspect—view of a group has been used. It’s an elegant linguistic device, with critical punch. Why give it up?

Consider this reason. A discredited universal generalization about stereotypes is not an effective tool for calling out unjust stereotypes. The generic version of the falsity hypothesis is more plausible, empirically speaking. It may even be useful for fighting injustice in some contexts. For instance, it would have supported O’Connor’s dissent in *Nguyen*. She wants to say that legally impermissible stereotypes could be true or false, rational or irrational. However, fighting problematic stereotypes with the claim with a generic claim about stereotypes—namely, that they are typically or usually false—will often be counterproductive. Proving the claim is a minefield, as with any generic. Moreover, if you object to a generic claim about a social group by asserting a generic claim about stereotypes, you open yourself up to a biting criticism: you’re hypocrite.

Even if one is not being a hypocrite, using falsity as a go-to criticism of stereotypes is problematic. Think about Jussim’s family squabble. Jussim insists that a stereotype is accurate and his wife’s parents fight back. In doing so, they engage the argumentative terrain on his terms. His mode of operation is to zero in on the semantic content of stereotypes. Myopic in focus, he brackets everything else: the pragmatics of generic claims, their normative dimensions, the wider social narratives in which stereotypes function, and their pernicious role in upholding historical and ongoing oppression. All these things matter, epistemically and ethically. Yet his interlocutors take the bait. They seem to let him steer the conversation back to literal content, time and again. We should resist this rerouting. One path of resistance is to reject the falsity hypothesis and to use falsity-focused critiques judiciously.[[14]](#footnote-14) They have the potential to backfire.

To those still tempted by the falsity hypothesis, I would also say this. It is essential to realize that even the most ideological, repulsive stereotypes could be true or accurate. As Simone de Beauvoir notes in *The Second Sex*:

when an individual (or group of individuals) is kept in a position of inferiority, the fact is that he is inferior . . . Yes, women today are on the whole inferior to men; that this, their situation affords them fewer opportunities (Beauvoir 1953: xxiv).

The observation is perceptive. Our world is set up to make some people ‘lesser than’ others and to keep these ‘inferiors’ firmly in their place. The falsity hypothesis obscures this fact. True stereotypes can be dangerous. They cement social hierarchies and may be as difficult, if not more difficult, to challenge and change.

The hypothesis also encourages distorted view of what’s epistemically wrong with stereotypes. In his popular *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman notes a range of cognitive biases associated with stereotypes, including confirmation bias and base-rate neglect (Kahneman 2011). In “The Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias,” Tamar Gendler identifies cognitive depletion, stereotype threat, and difficulty distinguishing between out-group members as epistemic costs of stereotypes (Gendler 2011). José Medina associates stereotypes with epistemic vices, including close-mindedness and lack of imagination (Medina 2013). The list of epistemic problems could go on (Begby 2013; Munton 2017; Siegel 2017; Bolinger, 2018). My point is this. From the perspective of knowledge, stereotypes—whether true or false, accurate or inaccurate—are problematic in large part due to their distorting effects on cognition, perception, imagination, memory, and attention. Yet the hypothesis directs our attention to falsity as if the content of a stereotype were the key thing—always or usually—wrong with it.

The same point holds with respect to ethical wrongs. In *Analyzing Oppression*, Ann Cudd writes:

Much injustice can be done to the individual who is grouped by a stereotype and whose choices or opportunities are limited by that grouping, especially when the stereotype does not hold in that particular case (69).

She might have added: the injustice is even worse when the stereotype is both false and does not apply to you. But falsity is not necessary for her critique. You should be judged as an individual, the thought goes, and not merely by your group membership (Lippert-Rasmussen 2011; Eidelson 2016; Beeghly 2018; Moreau 2018; Basu 2019). Similar points apply to almost any ethical objection. Stereotypes can harm people, limit their opportunities, worsen group social inequalities, and express disrespect to individuals, whether true or false.

If we care about social justice and want to fight bad stereotypes, what should we do? Jettison the falsity hypothesis. Its universal version—which says that stereotypes are always false or inaccurate—is at best amelioratively useless and at worst positively harmful. Its generic version is better from the point of view of justice. At least it is consistent with recognizing that problematic stereotypes can be true or false. Still, it encourages a limited understanding of what’s epistemically and ethically wrong with stereotypes and is of questionable value in calling out problematic stereotypes. Thus, the ameliorative stance we should take to the falsity hypothesis is clear. We should reject it.

7. GIVING UP THE FALSITY HYPOTHESIS: NEW HORIZONS

Here is one beautiful thing about giving up the falsity hypothesis: it frees you to adopt a more interesting and illuminating theory of what stereotypes are. In closing, I want to sketch one such theory. Though I will not be able to offer full arguments in its favor, I will be able to indicate why it is plausible and why readers ought to be tempted by it.

The positive account with which I am most sympathetic is a two-part theory. Its first part advances a view of what a cultural stereotype is, drawing on the work of Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000). The view’s second part articulates a psychological view of stereotypes psychology, based on my earlier work in “What is a Stereotype? What is Stereotyping?” (2015).

The view’s first part deploys a sociological frame to understand what stereotypes are. Following Patricia Hill Collins, the view says this: cultural stereotypes are “controlling” images or ideas (2000: 5). Stereotypes are controlling, in part, because they are used to maintain social hierarchies and, often, to promote domination. This may be accomplished through violence. ‘Black women are sexually loose,’ for example, is a cultural stereotype that was used to justify sexual violence against and exploitation of black women (Collins 2000; Harris- Perry 2011; hooks 2014. ‘Native Americans are savages’ was used to justify governmental policies of annihilation (Berkhofer 1979). Keeping people in their place occurs through subtler, everyday means as well. A father may tell his weeping son ‘boys don’t cry’ and thereby influence his son’s future emotional responses. If people can be made to discipline themselves, violence is not required to keep them in their place (Foucault 1995).

The role of cultural stereotypes in the social imaginary reveals their power to control. Consider George Yancy’s elevator example (2017: 20). A white woman rides an elevator alone when a well-dressed black man—Yancy—enters. The woman’s heart rate rises. She starts to sweat. Her body tenses up, and she clutches her purse. “My dark body,” Yancy says, “occludes the presumption of innocence” (Ibid.). “The point here,” writes Yancy, “is that deep-seated racist emotive [and cognitive] responses may form part of the white *bodily* repertoire” (21).[[15]](#footnote-15) The importance of his point cannot be understated. Cultural stereotypes not only insinuate themselves into people’s beliefs and cognitive habits. They also affect people’s immediate emotional and bodily responses.

Cultural stereotypes have this ability to shape social interaction, whether or not you personally endorse them. In *The Imperative of Integration*, Elizabeth Anderson describes pulling into a gas station in Detroit to check her car’s oil and being approached by a black man. “Don’t worry, I’m not here to rob you,” he tells her, holding his hands in the air (2010: 53). He then offers to check her car’s oil. She accepts. “This encounter,” writes Anderson, “illustrates the public standing of racial stereotypes as default images that influence the interactions of black and white strangers in unstructured settings, even when both parties are prepared to disavow them” (Ibid.). Both she—a white woman—and a black stranger rejected stigmatizing racial stereotypes. Yet they still had to enact “a little ritual” in order to demonstrate to one another that this was the case, a fact that underscored the stereotype and kept Anderson and the man on terms of inequality (Ibid.).

Conceptualizing cultural stereotypes as controlling images or ideas is incredibly helpful. Rather than drawing attention to questions of truth and falsity, the account puts front and center the functional role of stereotypes. Stereotypes are about power, and they exert power. This fact is shoved into the background if you adopt a falsity-focused view of stereotypes. Cultural stereotypes don’t simply describe the world in ways that can be deemed true or false; their function is to shape the world—and individuals—in particular ways. For this reason, one could dub the two-part theory under discussion ‘the regulative view of stereotypes.’ This name underscores that the social function of stereotypes is to regulate—hence control—how groups and the individuals in them are seen and treated.[[16]](#footnote-16) A further benefit of the regulative view it can be either moralized or non-moralized. Though Collins reserves the label “controlling” for images that subordinate and hence are central in facilitating injustice, there is a broader sense of the word as well. ‘Grandparents are wise’ is a cultural stereotype, but it is one that seeks to lift up rather than oppress older people by cultivating respect for them. Nonetheless, it aims to direct how people are seen and treated in society, hence to control or regulate the nature of social relations. A third benefit is that the view underscores just how difficult changing cultural stereotypes will be. To change a cultural stereotype, social hierarchies and group interests must be disrupted. You can’t simply call out stereotypes as false and expect them to go away. Linguist Jane Hill puts it like this:

Referentialist ideology permits stereotypes to be attacked as racist because they are not true, so they reflect false beliefs and moral dubiousness…While referentialist ideology makes stereotypes visible as “wrong,” it leads us to the misleading conclusion that if we merely “educate,” revealing the racist errors of stereotypes, they will be discredited . . . Mere education does not seem to interrupt the circulation of racist ideas (2008: 39-40; see also Jones 2017: 394).

Moving on to the theory’s second part, one finds an account of stereotypes in individual psychology. As readers will know, psychological views of stereotypes are diverse. Some theorists argue that stereotypes are “qualities perceived to be associated with particular groups or categories of people” (Schneider 2004: 24; see also Madva 2016). A second view is that a stereotype is “a socially shared set of beliefs about traits that are characteristic of members of a social category” (Greenwald and Banaji 1995: 14; see also Jussim 2013: 302). According to a third view, a stereotype is “a particular kind of role schema that organizes people’s expectations about other people who fall into certain social categories” (Fiske and Taylor 1991: 116). Alternative definitions exist as well. Some psychologists argue that stereotypes are concepts of social groups (Vinacke 1956; Brewer, Dull, and Lui 1984). Others identify stereotypes with cognitive—affective—behavioral clusters related to social groups (Gendler 2008; Madva and Brownstein 2015). In “What is a Stereotype? What is Stereotyping?” I synthesized this host of views in a way that remained neutral on the cognitive architecture of stereotypes (2015). My suggestion was this: a stereotype is a concept, or it is an informational structure—for example, a schema—associated with the formation and use of concepts.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Stereotypes in individual psychology serve as controlling images and ideas. Whether they are concepts of social groups or schemas, stereotypes structure our first-person lived experience. They affect how we categorize individuals, as well as the predictions we make; they impact what we pay attention to and ignore, remember and forget, as well as how we perceive others and ourselves (Fryberg et al. 2008: 210-211; Kahneman 2011). Moreover, their influence cannot be turned off. Second, stereotypes exert control over us in that they may set expectations about what is permissible, normal, or appropriate in a given context, for particular kinds of people (Hosein 2018; Haslanger 2019). Stereotypical expectations are therefore emotionally loaded and may involve taking up evaluative stances towards individuals. Third, and relatedly, in so far as stereotypes can motivate individuals to say and do certain things, they have behavioral impacts and shape social interactions in ways that often reify the status quo (Young 2005; Fanon 2008; Ngo 2012; Greene 2020).

Though Collins and I each deploy a single conception of stereotypes, combining our views into a joint, hybrid theory offers the best of both worlds. The sociological frame deployed by Collins is necessary for explaining why stereotypes and other biases in individual psychology can be widespread and how they relate to group dynamics, including the maintenance of group hierarchies. The psychological frame that I deploy is required to fully analyze the impacts of stereotypes on individual experience and social interactions. We need both frames to fully understand how stereotypes function and, in particular, how they facilitate oppression.

A major consideration in favor of this two-part view is that it keeps both the structural and the psychological elements of stereotypes in play. It also gestures towards incredibly productive questions about the ways in which these elements interact (Manne 2017; Munton 2017; Zheng 2018; Payne, Vuletich, and Lundberg 2018; Beeghly and Ayala-López 2020; Davidson and Kelly 2020; Peters 2020). With it, we have the potential to fully see how cultural stereotypes are assimilated (or resisted) at the level of the individual. The view also clears the way for a maximally complex analysis of what’s wrong with stereotypes and stereotyping, epistemically and ethically. Now is not the time to fill in all the details. My immediate task is more modest. I want to reassure readers who may be worried about giving up the falsity hypothesis. Relinquishing the falsity hypothesis, one doesn’t face a void. There are better options out there, which have the potential to more fully illuminate what stereotypes are, why it is wrong to use them (when it is), and how to fight them.

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1. Jussim defines stereotypes as follows: “a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a social group” (302). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a similar definition in case law, see (*R. v. Kapp*2008: 18). In this case, Canada’s Supreme Court said that a stereotype is a judgment that “does not correspond to a claimant’s or group’s actual circumstances and characteristics.” For an example from sociology, see (Higginbotham and Anderson, 2006: 82). They write: “Stereotypes categorize people based on false generalizations along a narrow range of presumed characteristics, such as the belief that all Jewish people are greedy or all blondes are dumb.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note that Haslanger rejects this view of ideology. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Readers familiar with Blum’s work may want to delve further into his view on stereotypes here. “Stereotypes,” he argues, “are false or misleading generalizations about groups held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, immune to counterevidence” (2004: 251). This definition attributes properties other than falsity to stereotypes, including the property of being immune to counter-evidence and the property of being “misleading” when used in speech or thought. Blum implies that stereotypes can have these problematic attributes even if they are true. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. What is the appropriate statistical threshold for measuring accuracy, one might wonder? And what of Jussim’s stipulation that our actions and perceptions cannot influence group traits? For exploration of these questions with additional references, see (Jussim, Stevens, and Honeycutt 2018). A growing philosophical literature on accuracy and its rational significance (Schoenfield 2015; Oddie 2019) has the potential to generate alternative conceptions of accuracy, as well as critical insights regarding Jussim’s view. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also (Haslanger 2014). Here Haslanger says that speakers who use group stereotypes may also introduce dubious normative claims about how group members ought to be into conversational common ground. One finds variants of the objection in legal theory too (Choudhry 2000: 157). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Usually, theorists talk about actions being “thinly” and “thickly” description. An action is thinly described if its description includes only the action, e.g., “John ran away.” An action is thickly described if its description includes an agent’s motivations for performing the action, e.g., “John ran away because he was scared and believed that bullies were chasing him.” I am using this distinction, but applying it to beliefs. This is somewhat unconventional, but I see no other way to save the falsity hypothesis, and it is worth exploring whether this fix works. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For further discussion, see (Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernest 2000: 116). Haslam et al. write: “The structure of essentialist beliefs about social categories is not yet known. Although the use of a single term implies a singular set of beliefs, essentialist beliefs may have several distinct dimensions . . . Social psychologists working of the subject have employed subtly different, although overlapping, understandings of essentialism, and it remains to be seen how it ought best to be characterized.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Feminist metaphysicians ought to be sympathetic to this point. See (Antony 2012: 229). Antony writes, “Let me digress for a moment to make clear what I mean here. I am not using ‘intrinsic’ as a synonym for ‘innate,’ ‘biological,’ or ‘natural,’ and I do not take the term to imply ‘necessary’ or ‘essential.’ I use the term ‘intrinsic’ in the sense current in contemporary analytical metaphysics, according to which a property is intrinsic if and only if it supervenes entirely on the state of the individual to whom the property is being ascribed. The causal etiology of the property does not matter, according to my usage, and so it does not matter whether the individual possesses the property ‘by nature’ or because of interactions with the physical or social environment.” According to her view, some of a person’s intrinsic properties could have biological causes; others could have social causes. It would follow that essentialist beliefs as defined by psychologists—in so far as they involve claims about the intrinsic properties of groups—need not be false. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Prentice and Miller write: “the strongest evidence for psychological essentialism comes from research on gender” (130). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For experimental work confirming this suggestion see (Ickes 2003; Klein and Hodges 2001). Socialization, these studies suggest, provides women with special motivation and incentives to be empathic. When men are given similar incentives to display empathy, they get better at it. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In “Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground,” Haslanger says that we are “normally” justified in assuming that speakers who utter stereotypes in conversation introduce false, unjustified claims into conversational common ground. The same claim is advanced in (Anderson, Langton, and Haslanger 2012). If I am right, we are justified in assuming something weaker, namely, that people who utter stereotypes *might* or *could* be introducing false, unjustified essentialist explanations into conversational common ground. Even this possibility, in my view, is sufficiently worrisome to warrant a conversational intervention. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The defendant’s appeal to *Nguyen* was ultimately not successful. The Supreme Court decided that discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation qualifies as sex discrimination (see *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia; Altitude Express v. Zarda; R.G. and G.R. Funeral Homes v. EEOC* 2020). The issue of whether stereotypes were true or false never came up in the majority decision because it was decided that firing workers on the basis of sex is illegal, full stop. Nonetheless, the *Nguyen* precedent remains troubling. For further discussion of the conditions under which sex stereotyping is currently permissible in discrimination law, see (Hellman ms.). Hellman notes that *Nguyen* may not be “good law” forever. Even if the precedent were struck down, it would remain a cautionary tale for the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For examples of how to use falsity-focused critiques judiciously, see (Feagin 2009; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Bracey and Moore 2017). Rather than advancing falsity-focused criticisms of racist beliefs, these theorists investigate the social practices and narratives that perpetuate racial inequality and oppression in the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 21. His emphasis. For additional examples, see (Ngo 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This view of stereotype fits nicely within a broader “regulative theory of mind” argued for by (McGeer 2015; Haslanger 2019; see also Zawidski 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In developing and defending this view of stereotypes, I noted that psychological, non-moralized conceptions of stereotypes already have traction within social and political philosophy (Cudd 2006: 69; Fricker 2007: 30; Anderson 2011: 44–45). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)