**Positive Stereotypes:
Unexpected Allies or Devil’s Bargain?**

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If asked whether stereotypes about people have the potential to help overcome injustice, I suspect that many would think there is a clear-cut answer to this question, and that answer is “no.” If indeed stereotypes are nothing but crude generalizations (Leslie 2017), essentializing falsehoods (Blum 2004), or controlling images (Collins 2000), then this answer is right. Further, many stereotypes do have harmful effects, from the blatantly dehumanizing (Livingstone Smith 2014) to the more subtly disruptive, as experienced via phenomena such as stereotype threat (Goguen 2016; Saul 2017). Reasonably then, a common attitude towards stereotypes is that they are at best shallow, superficial assumptions, and at worst degrading and hurtful vehicles of oppression.

I will argue, however, that stereotypes suffer from, well, a sort of stereotype about them.[[1]](#footnote-1) Of course, stereotypes can indeed be vehicles of oppression or grossly misleading assumptions, and often are such things. But on a broad account of stereotypes, this is not is not an inherent feature of them nor a foregone conclusion about them. Stereotypes are cognitive tools, and as such, they can be used for a variety of ends. Whether or not they contribute to injustice or help push back against it depends, in part, on how they are used. If there are in fact some stereotypes that can help push back against injustice, there’s a good chance that group will include, or consist of, positive stereotypes, because they posit positive, valued group features.[[2]](#footnote-2)

First, what does it mean to be a stereotype? Not all philosophers agree on this. Larry Blum (2004) argues that all stereotypes are, by definition, misleading generalizations that wrongly essentialize a group and are overly-resistant to counter-evidence. For Blum, any generalization that does not meet these criteria does not deserve the label of “stereotype.” Blum’s account likely resonates with many people who suspect that there are serious moral harms embedded in all stereotypes.

Erin Beeghly (2015) rejects Blum’s narrower account, however, and defends a broader one. She wants an account of stereotype that picks out the same set of objects that psychologists study, and argues that Blum’s account does not fit this bill. Beeghly also cautions that we might not want to confine the label “stereotype” to a subset of generalizations that are morally wrong and misleading. She notes that Walter Lippman, the first person to talk about psychological stereotypes (as opposed to the literal metal plates used in printing), acknowledged that stereotypes are simply cognitive shortcuts. He claimed that, “the abandonment of all stereotypes for a wholly innocent approach to experience would impoverish human life” (Lippman 1922, 88). Therefore, Beeghly argues for a “descriptive view” of stereotypes, by which they are, essentially, expectations about individuals based on group membership (Beeghly 2015, 679).

Beeghly is right that some of the generalizations and associations studied by psychologists under the label “stereotypes” will not fit Blum’s criteria. Blum’s account, however, does reveal important features about at least some stereotypes. So Blum and Beeghly’s disagreement may mostly be about terminology: on Beeghly’s account, Blum is discussing a certain subset of essentializing stereotypes. On Blum’s account, Beeghly is talking about a group of things that include stereotypes and other sorts of generalizations. For this discussion here, I will use a broader sense of stereotype, closer to Beeghly’s account and following how the word is used in everyday conversations and in social psychology research. I will not rely on Beeghly’s specific account however, because I do not think I need to for this discussion, and it may be a bit too broad.[[3]](#footnote-3)

For this discussion, stereotypes are generalizations about social groups that attempt to pick out consistent or stable features about those groups: women are empathetic; men are aggressive; gamers are lazy; jocks are stupid; Midwesterners are nice;[[4]](#footnote-4) New Yorkers are rude; autistic people are anti-social; indigenous people are wise; Asian people are good at math.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I will also focus on stereotypes that have a “positive” valence: women are empathetic; Midwesterners are nice; indigenous people are wise; Asian people are good at math. Many such positive stereotypes can still be harmful and disrespectful. They can make it easier to create or access negative stereotypes, they can create unfair expectations, they can ‘box people in’ to a certain identity, and they can reduce people’s willingness to acknowledge merit and effort when someone succeeds at something they are positively stereotyped about (Devarajan 2018). This is grist for the mill of thinking that all stereotypes, negative or positive, are epistemically and morally harmful.

There are, however, some instances where positive stereotypes seem capable of pushing back against other, more degrading stereotypes. That is, they can sometimes have concrete, positive effects, at least in the moment. Could it be that some positive stereotypes can serve as unexpected allies in our struggles against epistemic injustice? Maybe not—these positive effects could prove to be illusory. Or if not illusory, they could be outweighed by harms they create. Positive stereotypes could be, not akin to an unexpected ally, but rather a devil’s bargain: a deal that look worthwhile when one is desperate, but ultimately costs much more than it is worth. Investigating this question through the lens of epistemic injustice reveals that positive stereotypes have the potential to play both roles. They do not have one set role to play, but rather are a tool (a dangerous tool no doubt) that can be used for good or ill.

**Positive Stereotypes as Unexpected Allies against Epistemic Injustice**

Do some positive stereotypes have the potential to be resources for resisting epistemic injustice? At the very least, are there some situations where positive stereotypes might grant an individual some epistemic benefit without causing serious (epistemic or moral) harm? I will focus on two ways that positive stereotypes can potentially help alleviate epistemic injustice (broadly conceived): they can help create epistemic friction, and they can help build self-trust.

**Epistemic Friction**

José Medina (2017) argues that one important tool for dealing with epistemic injustice is “hermeneutical resistance,” which names the ways that people are exerting “epistemic friction against the normative expectations of established interpretative frameworks and aiding dissonant voices in the formation of alternative meanings, interpretations, and expressive styles” (Medina 2017, 48). As background, Medina argues that “communicative contexts are always polyphonic,” which means that there are always different epistemic norms and practices being performed and advocated for. Thus, there is always the potential for epistemic friction—for presenting alternatives or challenges or questions to dominant norms, frameworks, and assumption.

Positive stereotypes can be an easy source of epistemic friction against harsher, negative stereotypes. Positive stereotypes not only deny the negative stereotype, but also supply an alternative narrative or schema to replace it. For example, a positive stereotype can deny that a certain social group has a particular vice, and instead claim that they have a particular virtue (e.g., immigrants aren’t lazy—they’re hardworking; women aren’t flighty—they’re practical and better at adulting; indigenous groups aren’t backwards and ignorant—they’re wise and retain generational knowledge.) On Medina’s account of epistemic injustice, it looks like positive stereotypes could play a role in helping to resist unfair “hermeneutical climates” (Medina 2017, 48), even if they are not perfect or ideal epistemic tools.

In some contexts, the point of creating epistemic friction may be to directly challenge an idea, claim, or ideology, because it is harmful or oppressive. But another benefit of creating epistemic friction is that it can open up epistemic space for imagining alternatives—perhaps creating the opposite of a “controlling image,” as theorized by Patricia Hill Collins. Collins (2000) argues that certain stereotypes and tropes are not just insulting or degrading, but that they also help control an oppressed population by justifying their social subordination. These images help ‘keep oppressed people in their place.’

Her examples regarding Black women are the tropes of the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel. To focus on one, the “welfare mother” as a stereotype cannot engage in responsible family planning, will have more children that she can afford, and thus will perpetually be in need of welfare (Collins 2000, 270). This image portrays Black women as people who cannot be trusted to engage responsibly with the welfare system, and thus society is justified in encroaching on their autonomy by taking away their reproductive rights, and denying the Black community (which Black women are held responsible for) a robust social safety net.

Other controlling images exist for women, too, as well as other groups. For example, one could think of the image of the bitchy boss, who is only good at her job insofar as she is terrible at being a woman (that is, nice and nurturing). Thus, it is fine if many supposedly aggressive industries do not have women in leadership roles and if women are passed up for promotion, because they are either naturally unfit to be leaders or they are a rare, unnatural ‘exception’ to their gender.

Can we use positive stereotypes to help create epistemic friction against some of these controlling images? Some have tried this, though with limited success. Melissa Harris-Perry analyzes the image of the “strong black women,” an image that was in part created by and for Black women, to help push back against controlling images of themselves. The concept of the Strong Black women attempts to take the vices of too much aggressiveness, sexual autonomy, and independence, and flip them into a set of virtues. Strong Black women “are motivated, hardworking breadwinners who suppress their emotional needs while anticipating those of others. Their irrepressible spirit is unbroken by the legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection” (Harris-Perry 2011, 184).

However, Harris-Perry argues that the Strong Black woman trope can end up doing its own sort of damage. This image implies that Black women’s virtues are superhuman, and thus, others do not need to show them empathy, care, and concern—because they are “strong” and can handle it (Harris-Perry 2011, 185-6). One example of this fallout is that Black women’s pain is often not taken as seriously as others’, they are presumed to be able to tolerate pain better than others, and they are often under-prescribed pain medicine.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Here we witness one of the pitfalls of using positive stereotypes: they too can create a calcified image of a group of people. Even if the stereotypes accurately portray common group features or aspirational qualities, the stereotype implies that these features and qualities are completely stable and fixed. As Harris-Perry notes, “What begins as empowering self-definition can quickly become a prison” (2011, 185). The strong Black woman is always strong and never vulnerable; the independent woman is always independent and never needs help; etc. All stereotypes may have this quality of boxing a group into a certain role or trope that does not do justice to each human’s dynamic self. Thus, certainly in the long run, positive stereotypes run the risk of calcifying one’s self-image, both to others and oneself.

But what about as a more temporary measure? After all, some individuals have found positive stereotypes like the strong Black woman, or the bitch-who-gets-things-done, helpful at times. Harris-Perry herself even notes,

“The strong black woman serves as a constructive role model because black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles. She offers hope to people who often face difficult circumstances. Independence and self reliance can be crucial to building and maintaining a positive image of blackness in a society that often seeks to negate and vilify it.” (Harris-Perry 2011, 184)

Used temporarily, these positive tropes can help ‘pry loose’ our thinking from the grips of a negative stereotype or narrative. It can help us imagine different possibilities for ourselves and offer hope and motivation to make an alternative to the dominant understanding a reality. It could, even if just for a brief moment, be a freeing image. The key, perhaps, is know when to drop the stereotype before it begins to calcify your self-image.

Some might object that there are better tools for creating epistemic friction that do not come with the sorts of costs that stereotype carry. I would be happy to hear of them, and to have others explain how we can use them instead of stereotypes. I suspect, however, that positive stereotypes may be one of the easiest and most accessible tools in our arsenal, especially in the spur of the moment if someone raises the specter of a negative stereotype. This paper is not arguing that positive stereotypes are the best tool for the job, or a solution that comes without collateral damage. It is merely making the case that not all uses of stereotypes are epistemically and morally worthless.

**Self-Trust**

The second way that positive stereotypes can contribute to epistemic justice is by helping individuals build or restore epistemic self-trust. Since self-trust plays a central role in our function as general knowers (Jones 2012), an excess of self-distrust may be a byproduct of many forms of epistemic injustice. It certainly can be a sign of epistemic dysfunction in a community—which Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (2017) argues is a core feature of epistemic injustice.

I have argued elsewhere that at least some negative stereotypes can contribute to self-doubt and erode self-trust (Goguen 2016). For instance, if there is a culturally widespread stereotype that your social group is irrational, overly-emotional, primitive, impulsive, delusional, or not as logical or analytical as others groups, this could lead a stereotyped individual to doubt their own epistemic agency. They may worry that their thoughts and experiences are not reliable or trustworthy, compared to others’.

This has happened to me personally. One instance (of the many instances I can think of) is that in college, I once asked a professor about what exactly Plato’s forms were supposed to be, after we had read the *Republic* in class, because I had trouble wrapping my head around what exactly the form of a horse was—a cognitive schema, a mind-independent essence, what. Obviously, I did not use those words at age nineteen, so I probably phrased it as, “What exactly are the forms because I don’t get them?” Somewhere in that conversation, the professor mused about whether women’s brains were not structured to naturally think in terms of logical categories as men’s brains were. The unspoken implication in that conversation was, perhaps there was something about my brain that would help explain why the forms did not make immediate sense to me. This conversation led me to lay awake for some nights, wondering what it meant to have a brain that was not naturally inclined to think in terms of logical categories, and whether I should distrust my thoughts about things if I might have such an illogical brain.[[7]](#footnote-7)

First, I want to reject one reading of this sort of self-doubt that I think is implied in lots of everyday and academic discussions of the topic. The reading is that this sort of internalized self-doubt is a form of “internalized oppression” and as such, it is thought of as either a kind of moral/emotional damage to ourselves, or an epistemic slip-up on the part of the oppressed. Either (as oppressed) we are cudgeled into feeling uncertain about our own capabilities on a brute emotional level (the mechanism here is not often spelled out), or we are somehow duped into believing a wrong conclusion about our own capabilities (whereas non-oppressed people have accurate assessments of their capabilities).

On this reading, to acknowledge that you have self-doubt from internalized oppression means that you are admitting to making a mistake (believing a badly-argued or evidenced conclusion about yourself) or you are admitting to being emotionally and psychologically susceptible to what the oppressors want you to feel and think about yourself (i.e. uncertain; not believing in yourself.) To restate, the self-doubter doubts themselves because they have either wrongly assessed their epistemic abilities, or they have given too much weight to the ‘negative feelings’ created in them by their oppressive environment. In either case, to admit to having this sort of self-doubt is then to admit to having a flaw—you are admitting to be too irrational or too gullible or not having enough confidence in yourself when you should.

Here I am going to speak for myself. This often-implicit reading of internalized self-doubt does not fit my own experience of self-doubt stemming from sexist stereotypes. I also find this reading of the situation incredibly silencing when trying to discuss this phenomenon. I find that people sometimes start pitying me or trying to correct me when I discuss my experience of self-doubt, I think because they interpret me as admitting to failures in my own logical faculties (a big no-no for someone training to be a professional philosopher). Or, people sometimes start worrying that I am saying that others who have experienced self-doubt have flawed logical and psychological faculties. In fact, I think the opposite is true.

I use here a different reading wherein excessive self-doubt in a dysfunctional epistemic system is not always a sign that the self-doubter is messing up or failing to recognize that the system is duping them. The self-doubter is sometimes self-doubting because they are a good (or even exceptional) epistemic agent, but are receiving lots of flawed evidence from the bad sources that the larger system/community has failed to identify and label as such. In these situations where someone is presented with a negative stereotype about their group being irrational, a good epistemic agent may simply not yet know about the existence of pervasive and systemic oppression, or the role stereotypes play in such oppression, or that professors who are really smart about some topics may be very ignorant about other topics—and not be self-aware enough to realize it. But if all signs in your epistemic community point towards someone being a reliable source of information and hypotheses about the world, then a good epistemic agent will take what they say seriously, even if that leads to a discomforting conclusion about themselves.

Good epistemic agents are open-minded, humble, don’t immediately discount hypotheses that don’t make them look good, seek independent assessments of their own epistemic reliability, and seek out further evidence for important claims they are unsure about. For good epistemic agents, self-trust does not form in a vacuum, independent of what the rest of the world is telling them about themselves. The smartest person in the world (should such a thing exist) still needs other people to check their math. On this reading, what the oppressed self-doubter needs is not something to improve their own cognitive processes, but simply something to challenge the dysfunction in the oppressive system that is leading these good epistemic agents to inaccurate conclusions about themselves.

Positive stereotypes are one of the things that could do this sort of challenging. One way they could do this is that, in the absence of evidence that would debunk the negative stereotype once and for all, positive stereotypes can serve as a counterweight to negative stereotypes. Many stereotypes psychologically function as suspicions or hypotheses wherein every mention or activation of the stereotype makes the corresponding hypothesis more live, or more potentially salient. Positive stereotypes will not “disprove” a negative one, but they can provide some epistemic friction by presenting an opposing hypothesis as just as live as the one suggested by the negative stereotype. This could work as a stopgap measure if one does not have access to the information (neurology, etc.) that would confirm or disprove the negative stereotype.

For example, if I told a friend of mine about what my professor said about women’s brains, and she thought that was bullshit, but did not have a whole argument or body of evidence at her fingertips, she could at least for the time being present me with a countervailing positive stereotype: “I don’t think women’s brains are naturally disinclined to logic because I’ve seen lots of women manage complex logistics in situations where the men were way crappier at organizing. So there might even be some situations where women’s brains are better organized and quicker than men’s.” This would play into the positive stereotype that women are better at adulting and daily organization then men are.

One might object here that it’s better to discuss counter-stereotypical examples, instead of countervailing stereotypes. For instance, the friend could mention all the brilliant women she knows in philosophy and science. The problem is that, after a little bit of research, she and I would realize that women only make up 10-30% of those fields, which raises the specter of the negative stereotype again. So, I would say that, when it works, definitely turn to counter-stereotypical facts and examples. But I suspect that in some cases, a few counter-stereotypical exemplars will not be enough to make a negative stereotype less live of a hypothesis, because a few exceptions do not disprove a general rule.

A second use for positive stereotypes is that they could help scaffold embodied practices and embodied knowledge, which could then help build self-trust.[[8]](#footnote-8) For example, I experience lots of self-doubt about writing philosophy. Whenever I try to write a philosophy paper (including this one!) I am inundated with self-doubt, and it is hard to write when the writing process is associated with lots of negative emotions and I have essentially created a habit of dredging up lots of worries and negative thoughts about myself while writing.

A friend once suggested to me that I should find some positive mantra and cling to that, even if it’s something like, “I have a Ph.D.; I have smart things to say; I can do this.” At first I balked at this idea, because it sounded like I would be clinging to a positive stereotype about people with Ph.D.s, and stereotypes are bad. But as I heard her out, I realized that I was a bit desperate and willing to try things I didn’t even have much faith in. So I tried it, and whenever I would start worrying that I would never have anything smart or original to say, I would stop myself and think, “I have a freakin’ Ph.D.; I can write a minimally competent paper.”

What I realized is that the positive stereotype served as a stepping stone, to inject some positive associations into the writing process. Then, with this jumpstart in motivation and bolstered resistance to quitting, I could more easily spend more time writing, and thus gain more knowledge of writing—more knowledge about how a paragraph that seems stupid one day can look rather insightful the next, or how, when I feel the most hopeless, I’m usually on the edge of a breakthrough. Some of this was embodied knowledge—the feeling of typing furiously at the keyboard when I had a moment of insight; the feeling of dread in my stomach that I learned I had to push through; the feeling of confusion that meant I probably hit on a deeper question than I had realized. We do not normally think of writing as a physical activity, but as I’ve become more practiced with it, and more confident in my writing abilities, the more I’ve noticed the embodied aspects of it. There are ways that I am guided not by deliberate knowledge but rather by the feelings and associations and hunches that stem from certain actions. When you drive, you learn how it feels when you take too sharp of a corner; when you paint, you learn how it feels to make properly-proportioned leaves with your fan brush; and when I write, I’ve learned how it feels to spit out two pages of writing in a flurry of energy that is on to something, but that will probably need to be edited down to 10% of its current length.

Even if one does not grant me the claim that writing incorporated embodied knowledge, the larger point is that once one achieves a certain level of competence or mastery with an embodied skill, going through the motions of that skill can instill feelings of self-confidence that spur on further activity, creating a positive feedback loop. Eventually, the hope goes, I can just sit down at my computer and enjoy positive associations with the writing process, because I have built up embodied self-trust. But to get to that point where one is practiced enough to have competence with a skill, some people will benefit from the strategy of “fake it till you make it.” Positive stereotypes may help up fake (or really, jumpstart) confidence and motivation until embodied habits can take over that role. Though again, this warrants only a temporary role for positive stereotypes, and if there is something else that can do the job equally well, it might be all the better to use those alternative means.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Positive Stereotypes as Devil’s Bargains & Master’s Tools**

Positive stereotypes are not without risks and harms. But it is far from obvious that all positive stereotypes carry the same risks and the same harms. Here is where we can return to Beeghly and Blum’s disagreement, with additional context from Collins. It may be that certain basic psychological processes are the same for all stereotypes, broadly conceived as group generalizations. For example, research on stereotype threat suggests that marginalized and dominant groups can both experience certain negative effects from negative stereotypes about their group being emphasized or made salient (Inzlicht and Schmader 2011). This is in line with Beeghly’s account of stereotypes. But Collins points out that certain stereotypes have a specific use or function in certain social contexts. In the U.S., certain stereotypes about Black women serve as controlling images that justify their oppression and create additional epistemic labor for Black women to push against them. These are essentializing stereotypes as Blum describes them.

What this means is that some positive stereotypes may be riskier to use than others. It might be less risky or less damaging to use a stereotype about Midwesterners to boost your confidence than using a stereotype about your gender or race. Similarly, it might be riskier to use a stereotype about a privileged identity than a more socially neutral identity. For instance, one faces stereotype threat or self-doubt regarding being a woman in a masculinized field, it is risky to appeal to one’s prestigious college training or family of academics as a psychological band-aid here. So too with my writing—relying on my Ph.D. for confidence probably came with some costs.

What makes some of these potential costs especially worrying is that the people benefitting from employing these stereotypes may not be the people paying the price for doing so. For example, if a white man semi-regularly employs the stereotype that members of his social group are intelligent and rational, the costs to him might be minimal—because although he may be making himself more susceptible to negative stereotypes about white men, there are currently no oppressive stereotypes about this social group. But the costs to those that he is implicitly denigrating—women and people of color, are significantly more severe. So too with the positive stereotype about Ph.D.s I used and stereotypes about different classes in U.S. society.

An interesting question is whether this sort of cost also appears in positive stereotypes about a stigmatized group. For instance, the positive stereotype that women are nurturing has been used to argue that women are not cut out for certain non-nurturing roles, such as being in the military or cut-throat politics. Thus, a similar calculus could apply to a middle-class white woman who is a stay-at-home-mom, if she employs the stereotype of women as nurturing to her own benefit, but that may carry costs to the less privileged women in her life who are trying to hack it in politics.

If this analysis is right, then Audre Lorde’s (1983) well-known warning about the master’s tools is an apt description of the dangers of using positive stereotypes in this way. Lorde argues,

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support. (Lorde 1983)

Lorde makes this initial observation about white feminists who reproduce hierarchies of marginalization (and white ignorance, if I am reading her correctly) against women of color and queer women. Their institutional practices use many of the same ‘moves’ that more privileged groups use, and thus, although they might be able to move themselves up a bit in the relevant social hierarchies, they are not doing enough to undermine the hierarchy as a whole.

Similarly, using certain positive stereotypes might allow one to temporarily maneuver oneself within a social hierarchy, but does nothing to help those further down the relevant set of hierarchies. Furthermore, if one makes it a habit of boosting one’s sense of self-worth with positive stereotypes, one might tie one’s self-esteem to a system of social hierarchy, to the point where one might become psychologically defensive of those systems. In this way, one might become those who “still define the master’s house,” i.e. the social hierarchy, as their primary source of self-worth. Pushing back against epistemic injustice is then not just about mitigating the effects of stereotypes on their direct targets, since the true costs of using a stereotype might not be felt by the person employing it on themselves. Instead, overcoming unjust stereotypes is about dismantling unjust hierarchies from our institutions and our thinking.

This has implications for research on stereotype threat, a phenomenon where the mere mention of a negative stereotype can cause targeted individuals to lose focus, motivation, and confidence—which is often measured through performance. Some suggest that individuals can use positive stereotypes to overcome the performance effects of stereotype threat—and this seems like an accurate prediction. However, individual performance is not everything, and positive stereotypes might have larger and longer-term consequences than one realizes.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Conclusion**

Where does this leave us? Positive stereotypes can have positive effects in certain circumstances. There are instances where they may be an individual’s best shot at mitigating the negative effects of negative stereotypes, or the most available tool for resisting epistemic injustice. The take-away is that stereotypes are versatile (if crude) cognitive tools, which can be used for many purposes. Because of this, a blanket moral condemnation of all things stereotype-like in all situations is too broad a principle.

However, many positive stereotypes may be conceptually and psychologically joined to a contrasting negative, degrading stereotype. In many cases, we might only be able to lift our own self-image at the cost of lowering the image of others, knowingly or not. Because of this danger, we should focus on investigating the different effects that different stereotypes have. I suggest that we could divide effects into different levels: the individual, the stereotyped group, and the institutional/cultural. In some cases, stereotypes may have an impact on an individual or local community, but no significant impact at the societal level (e.g. “The Lopez family are hard workers;” “People from Leominster are snobs”). In other cases, using a certain stereotype may benefit you the individual, but not the stereotyped group as a whole.

Stereotypes are cognitive shortcuts and hypotheses about patterns of human behavior. They are indeed vehicles for epistemic injustice in many instances, but they can also sometimes be used to push back in reverse and provide momentum for resisting injustice. They are a tool with many uses, so we always want to be asking, what is this tool being used for, and what is its actual effects? Is this stereotype a coping strategy for an individual to mitigate the effects of injustice on themselves? Is it a counter-hegemonic stopgap that applies friction against a dominant narrative? Is it one of the many epistemic weapons we use to keep marginalized groups in their place? Stereotypes are all that, and more. They are both unexpected allies and a devil’s bargain at times.

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2. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a full analysis of positive and negative stereotypes. Such a project could include the following: the positive effects of negative stereotypes for privileged groups (thanks to Maureen Erber for this suggestion), the negative effects of positive stereotypes for marginalized groups (see: Devarajan 2018), the negative effects of positive stereotypes for privileged group members who are counter-stereotypical, and using negative stereotypes to ‘punch-up’ against privileged groups (thanks to Ben Sherman for this suggestion). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Beeghly claims that, “When we ask, “What’s wrong with stereotyping?” we are asking primarily, “What’s wrong with forming expectations of individuals based on group membership and structuring our interactions accordingly?” (Beeghly 2015, 679). The primary feature of stereotypes (and the primary facet of their wrongdoing), however, may not be forming expectations of individuals based on group membership (i.e. the correlation of group membership to expected behavior). Stereotypes may also imply that a particular group membership is especially salient for understanding and *explaining* that individual’s behavior (i.e. a causal link between group membership and behavior). As Blum puts it, stereotypes “essentialize.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Midwesterners are nice” is a generalization that Blum specifically rejects as (usually) being a stereotype (Blum 2004, 264). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Leslie (2017) for a further discussion about stereotypes and “striking property generics”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There is currently not much large-scale research about pain biases against Black women in particular, but there are documented biases against both Black patients and women more broadly in this regard, so Black women are subject to at least two separate biases, and I suspect that the intersection of those biases may even amplify one another. See Hoffman and Tarzian 2001; Jamison 2014; and Fassler 2015 for discussions of biases against women’s pain, and Tamayo-Sarver et al. 2003; Hoffman et al. 2016; and Singhal et al. 2016 for discussions of biases against Black patients’ pain. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I also obsessed over the question of how one could investigate this sort of claim, and determine whether one’s own brain was as logically inclined as other people’s brains; and whether having heard this suspicion, I should consider it a live possibility until such time as I had found compelling evidence that it was not true of my brain—though I struggled to imagine what such evidence would look like. With hindsight, I appreciate the irony of me having a rather (perhaps overly) rational response to the suggestion that I was not fully rational. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Shotwell (2017) for a discussion of embodied knowledge and epistemic injustice. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For instance, one might be able to use knowledge about their Ph.D. in a non-stereotypical way, telling themselves that “Lots of people without Ph.D.s can write awesome philosophy papers, so with one, the chances of me writing a good philosophy paper are probably high.” The problem might be that such a pep talk fails to inspire the confidence it was aiming for. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Goguen 2016 for further discussion about stereotype threat, performance, and epistemic injustice. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)