

The Complementary Stereotypes about the Rich and the Poor: A Study in China

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the contents and characteristics of stereotypes about the rich and the poor groups of the public. One hundred and fifty two participants freely report 2813 words of stereotypes about the rich and the poor. Results show that, the contents of stereotypes about the rich and the poor consist of three dimensions which are competence, sociability and morality. Generally, the rich has been seen as high competence, low sociability and bad morality, while the poor has been seen as low competence, mid sociability and good morality. The valences between competence and morality are negatively correlated, which means the stereotypes of competence and morality are complementary. The utilitarianism and pragmatism explanations and the system justification theory are discussed.

Keywords

Stereotype, Stereotype Content Model, Complementary, The Rich and the Poor

1. Introduction

Stereotype is a cognitive structure consisting of the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs and expectation about a social group. It's a relatively fixed concept or view of the characteristics and causes of a group member [1]. As a specific schema, it plays an important role in people's social cognition and behavior. For the purpose of saving cognitive resources and promoting cognitive processing, people will tend to adopt cognitive shortcuts to directly determine their coping styles according to the social category to which the target belong.

Since the cognitive processing mechanism of stereotypes needs to be verified in different cases, many researchers began to simplify the description of stereotypes and try to distinguish social groups by only a few dimensions. The most influential model is the

stereotype content model (SCM) proposed by Fiske *et al.* [2]. The model is a two-dimensional model consisted with warmth and competence. The content of stereotype is combined of these two dimensions. Warmth and competence derive from the perception of social status. The relative position of groups in social status can predict their interrelationships on warmth and competence. Low competitive groups are considered to be warmth, while high competitive groups are not; high-status groups are considered as high competence, while low-status groups are not. Since the two dimensions are so important, the relationship between them is also a widely discussed issue. The SCM points out that, stereotypes are contradictory and mixed, consisting of a positive evaluation of one dimension and a negative evaluation of another. Many groups are seen as competent but not warmth (e.g. Asians, Jews and the rich) or warmth but incompetent (e.g. disabled, elderly and housewives); some groups are low in both dimensions (Poor and homeless); only the reference group, which is the in-group or the social prototypical group (middle-class white), is rated as “double-high” [3]. In recent years, researchers try to explore the relationship between warmth and competence. Results show that the social perception of warmth and competence often show a compensatory relationship [4]. In another word, people tend to perceive some groups are warmth and incompetent, while other groups are competent but not warmth.

Since the SCM has been proved in 17 countries and regions, it shows that the model has good cultural universality and intergroup relations predictability. However, the result in Hong Kong is quite different from those in European and American. Hong Kong participants didn't classify reference groups (within groups and social prototypical groups) into the most positive clusters (high competence, high warmth) and didn't show obvious reference group preference [5]. This may be affected by the Chinese cultural tradition of the “golden mean”, but also may be due to the different dimensions of stereotypes in Eastern culture. Some researches based on Chinese culture also show different results. Zheng & Liu found that the undergraduates' stereotype on migrant workers includes three factors, which are “hard-working and plain”, “low social status” and “strong and powerful”. “Warmth” and “competence” are not included here [6]. Studies have shown that there are cultural differences between the East and the West in terms of “moral”, “fairness”, “thinking” and so on [7]. Then is there any difference on the understanding of “warmth” and “competence”? The applicability of these two dimensions in China is a basic question. In addition, in the “hate the rich, pity the poor” phenomenon, people hold the belief that the rich doing evil things because they have bad nature, but the poor doing evil things because they are forced by the environment. These judgments are mainly based on the evaluation of moral nature of these two groups. But the SCM doesn't involve any moral-related statements, so it is insufficient to explain the conflict between the rich and the poor. Since these reasons, this study uses the method of free report to get the stereotypes about the poor and the rich in China, and trying to explain the attitudes, emotions and behavioral tendencies of the public to the advantaged and disadvantaged groups based on the stereotypes.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

One hundred and fifty two participants are involved, 69 males and 83 females, aged from 20 to 47 with average of 31.42 ± 5.73 . The participants are selected from 28 professions, such as government staff, business managers, office workers, doctors, teachers, sales staff, technical staff, students, freelancers etc.; covering 24 provinces and autonomous regions, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangxi, Heilongjiang, Jiangxi, Hunan etc.

All the participants are middle social status in China (annual household income from 80,000 to 350,000 RMB, average of 13.31 ± 4.32 million RMB). Those are ordinary people in China, not belonging to the rich or the poor. Number of the sample is based on the criteria that almost no new stereotype words are reported and the dimensions tend to be stable.

2.2. Methods

The participants were asked to write 10 adjectives to describe the basic characteristics of the poor and the rich. Each participant was asked to rate both groups. The sequence is balanced, that half of them evaluate the rich first and the others evaluate the poor first.

3. Results

3.1. The Dimensions of Stereotypes

A total of 2813 adjectives were obtained, including 1382 words describing the rich and 1431 words describing the poor. Some of these words do not meet the requirements of this study: some words describe the living conditions of the poor and the rich, such as “rich”, “stimulate domestic demand”, “luxury car and beauty”, “life distress” etc.; some describe the image of the poor and the rich, such as “dressed”, “belly”, “short stature”, “short hair” etc. Removed these invalid words, 2716 words finally left, which are 1317 words for the rich and 1399 words for the poor.

The adjectives were analyzed by NVivo 8.0 qualitative data analysis software, and three-level registration was conducted according to the rooting theory. Comparing with the SCM, three core conceptual dimensions were extracted from the characteristics of the rich and the poor, which are competence, sociability and morality. Each dimension contains 5 to 9 specific characteristics, having both positive components and negative components (see [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#)).

The first dimension of the stereotypes about the poor and the rich is competence, which is consistent with the SCM. It describes intelligence, ability and mentality of the group. The rich are described as intelligent, self-confident, motivated, hard-working, active, knowledgeable, flexible and innovative; while the poor are described as not educated, conservative, pessimism, laziness, low capacity, but hard-working and strong.

The second dimension describes interpersonal communication of the groups. It is similar to the warmth dimension in the SCM, but with more implication. It is named as

sociability. The rich are described as arrogant, supercilious, hypocrisy, indifference and showing off. They have good communication skills, but developing relationships only for utilitarian purposes and calculating. The poor are described as warm, kind, tolerance and affinity. They are willing to help others, but vanity and impulse.

About 1/4 of the words cannot be classified as the competence or sociability. They are moral judgments about the life style, behavior and value of the groups, can be named as morality. Most people considered the rich as greedy, corrupt, treacherous and extravagant. They are spendthrift, but also showed some charity and integrity. The poor are considered to be good, kind-hearted, honest, but selfish, calculations and narrow-minded.

3.2. The Valences of Stereotypes

In order to measure the stereotypes about the rich and the poor more accurately, the

Table 1. Coding of stereotypical adjectives about the rich.

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Examples	F	P	DF	DP
Competence	Wise	Smart, intelligent, visionary, strategizing	155	11.77%	505	38.34%
	Knowledgeable	Highly educated, knowledgeable, learned	40	3.04%		
	Proactive	Motivated, positive, optimistic	34	2.58%		
	Diligent	Hard-working, persistent, perseverance	97	7.37%		
	Flexible	Flexible, creative, unique, innovation	30	2.28%		
	Prudent	Cautious, prudent, size up the situation	28	2.13%		
	Self-confident	Self-confidence, courage, decisiveness	109	8.28%		
	Responsible	Responsible	12	0.91%		
Sociability	Hypocritical	Love to show off, hypocrisy, vanity	94	7.14%	361	27.41%
	Arrogant	Arrogance, arrogant, head of no one	92	6.99%		
	Self-centered	Self-centered, indifferent, lofty	47	3.57%		
	Lonely	Inner emptiness, loneliness, lack of security	28	2.13%		
	Sociable	Interpersonal network, good at communication, a wide range of contacts	48	3.64%		
	Modest	Low-key, with conservation, polite, modest	26	1.97%		
	Generous	Generous, tolerant	26	1.97%		
Morality	Luxury	Spend money, greedy, stingy, luxury, waste	167	12.68%	332	25.12%
	Frugal	Thrift, frugality	14	1.06%		
	Treacherous	Selfish, heartless, corruption, treachery	102	7.74%		
	Benevolent	Charitable, caring, kind	36	2.73%		
	Integrity	Integrity, honest	13	0.99%		
Others	Others	Tasteful, elegant, influential	119	9.04%	119	9.04%
Total					1317	100%

Note: F = Frequency, P = Proportion, DF = Dimension frequency, DP = Dimension proportion.

Table 2. Coding of stereotypical adjectives about the poor.

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Examples	F	P	DF	DP
Competence	Hard-working	Hard-working, strong, perseverance	192	13.72%	693	49.54%
	Optimistic	Optimistic, motivated, struggling, proactive	75	5.36%		
	Cowardly	Low self-esteem, timid, indecisive, hesitant	77	5.50%		
	Unambitious	Easy to meet, content with the status quo	82	5.86%		
	Stubborn	Backward thinking, superstition, stubborn	66	4.72%		
	Passive	Helpless, pessimistic, negative	49	3.50%		
	Lazy	Easy to give up, lazy, no perseverance	25	1.79%		
	Ignorance	Ignorance, dull, short-sighted	83	5.93%		
	Uncultured	Low education, not educated, uncultured	44	3.15%		
Sociability	Warm	Warm, sincere, personal loyalty, amiable	68	4.86%	268	19.16%
	Friendly	Tolerant, friendly, gentle	42	3.00%		
	Helpful	Helpful, caring	32	2.29%		
	Vanity	Vanity, pretend to be generous	29	2.07%		
	Unsociable	Rude, do not understand interpersonal rules	15	1.07%		
	Impulsive	Impulsive, out of control, irritable	18	1.29%		
	Low-key	Patience, low-key, endure	35	2.50%		
	Sorrowful	Miserable, pathetic, tragic	29	2.07%		
Morality	Kind-hearted	Kind, caring, compassionate	101	7.22%	323	23.09%
	Dutiful	Honest, simple, well-behaved	81	5.79%		
	Narrow-minded	Complain, hatred of the rich, preoccupied, narrow-minded	50	3.57%		
	Thrifty	Thrift, conservation, live frugally	41	2.93%		
	Greedy	Greed, stingy	29	2.07%		
	Selfish	Selfish, calculating, utilitarian	21	1.50%		
Others	Others	Freedom, cherished, struggle	115	8.22%	155	8.22%
Total					1399	100%

positive and negative level of each word was rated by two researchers on a 7 points score, which is -3 (extremely negative) to 3 (extremely positive). The interrater reliability $r = 0.93$. The average score of two raters is used as the valence of each word. The valences are added respectively on the competence, sociability and morality dimensions. The overall valence is total of all three dimensions. The descriptive statistics of each dimension and overall are shown in **Table 3**.

It can be seen that, there are difference between the valences of stereotypes about the poor and the rich. However, the overall valences of both groups are close to 0, which is neutral, neither positive nor negative. A paired sample t-test shows that, the difference of overall valence between the poor and the rich is not significant, $t = -1.126$, $df = 151$ and $p = 0.235$.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the stereotypes valences (N = 152).

Dimension	Competence		Sociability		Morality		Overall	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
The rich	1.58	0.75	-0.67	1.43	-1.37	0.92	-0.02	0.89
The poor	-0.88	0.94	0.14	1.27	1.34	0.96	0.10	0.91

Table 4. Correlation between the stereotypes valences (N = 152).

	The rich			The poor		
	Com	Soc	Mor	Com	Soc	Mor
Com	1			Com	1	
Soc	-0.181**	1		Soc	-0.391***	1
Mor	-0.213**	0.104	1	Mor	-0.091	0.266**

Note: Com = competence, Soc = Sociability, Mor = Morality; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

3.3. The Complementary Characteristics of Stereotypes

The correlations between different dimensions of the stereotypes about the poor and the rich are calculated. The results are shown in **Table 4**.

For the rich, the evaluation of competence is negatively correlated with the evaluation of sociability and morality. That is, the overall evaluation tends to be balance and compensation: the more positive evaluation on competence, the more negative evaluation on sociability and morality. For the poor, the negative correlation between competence and sociability is significant, while between competence and morality is not. The overall evaluation on the poor is also compensated: the more negative evaluation of competence, the more positive evaluation of sociability. This is a phenomenon of compensatory stereotype.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Theoretical Basis of Morality Dimension

Through the free report and the qualitative analysis of the words, we can understand the stereotypical impression on the poor and the rich. The content of stereotypes can be divided into three dimensions: competence, sociability and morality. The first two dimensions are similar to the SCM, while the moral dimension is not. But some researchers have mentioned this dimension in various forms. Poppe and Linssen studied 6 national stereotypes held by adolescents in Central and Eastern Europe, shown that the national stereotype has two dimensions of competence and morality [8]. College students of Spanish and Dutch are considered the other group not honest or credible as in-group [9]. Some cross-cultural studies have found similar results: the participants associate moral factors with groups most rapidly in various factors, and then determine the other dimensions based on the judge of moral [10]. Chinese researches on personality and stereotype have also found that morality is likely to play an important role in stereotype. Wang and Cui conducted a longitudinal study on the Chinese personality

and proposed a seven-factor model. The dimensions of good-heartedness and honesty are related to morality [11]. Through factor analysis, Sun found that the stereotypes about Chinese and other 10 countries held by Chinese adolescents consist of 10 dimensions. Morality dimension has the highest factor loading [12]. From the results of the present study and studies above, it can be seen that the SCM cannot fully meet the cross-cultural situation. In many cultures, moral judgment of the group is also an important part of the stereotypes.

The sociability dimension, which is similar with warmth in SCM, does not play a significant role in prejudice. The biases toward the rich and the poor mainly come from differences in moral judgment. The highlight of morality may be affected by long-standing view on the rich and poor in China. As early as two thousand years ago, there is a statement that “The rich are not benevolent; the benevolent are not rich” in the Chinese culture classics “Mencius”. This idea is rooted in the moral value of Confucianism, which are “cherish the ethics, contempt the interests”, “keep the laws of universe, eradicate the desire of human”, and “advocate the public and restrain the private”. This moral standard reflects 3 contradictions between ethics and interests, laws and desire, public and private. In this value system, many folks and proverbs with extreme bias are widely recognized and handed down, such as “People will not be rich without windfall”, “there is no official without corruption, no businessman without treachery” etc. Thus there are deep ideological roots and cultural foundation of the antagonism between rich and benevolence in China. Because of the influence of ancient Chinese thought, many rich peoples were described as “speculation” during Chinese economic reform. The pay and return of them are considered as not equal, which called “not righteousness”. When the rich get rich, some have failed to meet requirements of “in success, try to let others be benefited”. Some rich people are exposed as greedy, corruption, extravagance, which called “not benevolence”. In summary, “rich” and “not benevolence” are related in Chinese traditional culture, which led to a difference between stereotypes about the poor and the rich.

4.2. Implications for Compensatory Stereotypes

The public evaluate the rich as low morality and sociability but high competence, and the poor as high morality but low competence, *i.e.* complementary stereotypes. This phenomenon can be explained from two perspectives.

One explanation derives from utilitarianism and pragmatism. This theory argues that stereotypes stems from the fact prevalent in all human beings: for their own interests and survival, people will unconsciously confirm whether other groups are friends or enemies, and whether they can pose a threat to themselves [2]. When interacting with an individual or group, one tries to ask himself two questions, “Does the other person want to hurt me?” “Is the other person capable of hurting me?” The SCM points out that this corresponds to two basic dimensions of perceiving the other group or individual: warmth and competence. However, in modern society, the direct damage caused by cold is easy to prevent, but the harm caused by immorality is hidden and

should be pay more attention. From this perspective, three-dimensional model of competence, sociability and morality is reasonable. The competence of the group can be inferred from the social status. The competence of advantage group is high; the competence of disadvantage group is low. When the group or individual has low competence, indifferent or immoral will not pose a threat. So for the optimistic expectations, people will evaluate the group or individual as high sociability and good morality. However, when the group or individual has high competence, due to caution, some preparation will help dealing with the coming threat. Therefore, the group or individual will be evaluated as low sociability and bad morality.

A more persuasive explanation is the system justification theory. According to the theory, there is a general psychological need to justify and rationalize the status quo, to view the social status quo as good, fair, legal and satisfactory [13]. One of the means to idealize the status quo is complementary stereotypes, which gives the advantage and disadvantage group compensatory trait, so that each group has their own unique pros and cons. Through this way, people can maintain a balanced view of the social groups. In literature, movies and pop culture, the poor are seen as more honest and happy than the rich [14]. These complementary stereotypes can help individual create a comfortable “equality illusion”. This theory holds the same view with China traditional theories. The Taoist advocate the balance of Yin and Yang, and Confucianism emphasizes the “golden mean”. In Chinese culture, people tend to thinking dialectically. They would find the positive traits of negative group and negative traits of positive groups. They see the whole society as balanced, and you win some and lose some. Based on this view, the negative stereotype about the rich may have the significance of maintaining social fairness, stabilizing the social law and order. Although there is no direct evidence to prove that, but the related research, such as Weng’s research showed that people with low sense of fairness prone to despise the rich and pity the poor. If the sense of unfairness from deprivation enhances, the hatred of the rich will occur [15]. Li based on the “Chinese general social survey” data, found that there is a high correlation between sense of fairness and perception of social conflict. The higher the sense of unfairness, the greater the perception of social conflict is [16]. This dynamic process can be interpreted as: individuals with high sense of unfairness take some defense mechanism, such as hatred of the rich and enhance perception of group conflict, to maintain the “believe in a just world” belief.

In general, the complementary stereotypes about advantages of disadvantaged groups have a psychological adaptive function, and it cannot be eliminated. The negative impact of group conflict can reduced to some extent by de-categorization, re-categorization and sub-categorization, but cannot be completely eradicated. To promote equal access, communication and mutual understanding among different groups and embrace the multicultural values are the keys to solve these problems.

5. Conclusions

- 1) The contents of stereotypes about the rich and the poor consist of three dimensions,

namely, competence, sociality and morality.

- 2) The rich has been seen as high competence, low sociability and bad morality, while the poor has been seen as low competence, mid sociability and good morality.
- 3) The stereotypes of competence and morality are complementary.

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