Cultural stereotypes of disabled and non-disabled men and women: Consensus for global category representations and diagnostic domains

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Despite the fact that disabled people comprise a heterogeneous social group, cross-impairment cultural stereotypes reflect a consistent set of beliefs used to characterize this population as dependent, incompetent, and asexual. Using a free-response methodology, stereotypical beliefs about disabled men (DM) and women (DW) were contrasted against the stereotypes of their non-disabled counterparts illustrating the dimensions considered most diagnostic of each group. Results revealed that both disabled and non-disabled participants expressed consensus about the contents of group stereotypes that exaggerate traditional gender role expectations of the non-disabled while minimizing perceived differences between DM and DW. Implications for the field of stereotyping and prejudice, and the individual and system justifying functions of cultural stereotypes are discussed.

The stereotyping and prejudice field has been late in recognizing disabled people as a social group struggling for civil rights and facing some of the same issues of discrimination and oppression as other minority constituencies. Research on stereotype change, prejudice reduction, and the effects of group identity on perceptions of women, people of colour and other minority groups has yet to examine how this work generalizes to the circumstances facing disabled people as a socially relevant membership category. Many remain unaware that disabled people comprise one of the largest minority groups in the USA (Fujiura & Rutkowski-Kmitta, 2001) assuming that disability has more to do people’s impairments (e.g., blindness, deafness, or spinal cord injury) than with socially constructed disadvantage, shared misperceptions, or stereotype-congruent expectations (Gill, 2001). Instead, social psychologists have almost exclusively approached disability prejudice as representing a disparate collection of impairment-specific stigmas each contributing to unique patterns of avoidance, anxiety, and ostracism (Antonak & Livneh, 2000; Jones et al., 1984).

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This is unfortunate considering that the study of disability as a social construct began in the 1940s with Beatrice Wright and her colleagues from the Kurt Lewin School of Social Psychology (Gill, 2001). Since then, few have taken up the call to move beyond stigma-specific or person-based explanations of disability to uncover the broader psychological and stereotype relevant processes involved in being categorized as a member of this group (Asch & McCarthy, 2003). One step towards bridging this gap focuses on establishing whether disabled people are stereotyped in consistent ways. Identifying the contents of consensual stereotypes is important because stereotype contents influence stereotype use, and when shared across a variety of perceivers, the consequences can be wide-ranging (Sechrist & Stangor, 2001). For example, if the cultural stereotype of DW includes traits diametrically opposed to sexuality and nurturance, this can influence opinions about the suitability of DW as prospective partners and mothers. Moreover, these representations can impact policy plans for public facilities that might include accessible bathrooms without the provision of accessible changing tables (Anderson & Kitchin, 2000).

The present investigation represents among the first attempts to quantify the cultural stereotypes of disabled men (DM) and women (DW), to identify the dimensions on which these stereotypes are consensually shared, and to propose future directions aimed at understanding the diagnostic and identity enhancement goals served by categorical distinctions that may also contribute to legitimizing status relations.

**Stereotypes and stereotyping**

A stereotype can be defined as a set of qualities that a group of people are perceived to share simply because they belong to a social category (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). Contemporary psychological theory conceptualizes the stereotype in terms of an associative network or cognitive schema that links a group label together with a particular set of traits, attributes, and images in memory (see Schneider, 2004, for a review). Although faulty and incomplete, stereotypes are not uniformly negative and serve important psychological functions helping perceivers to simplify complex social information. Stereotypes are useful because they go beyond the immediately observable, and facilitate predictions about how others will behave based on group membership.

Stereotypes are also used to define groups in ways that distinguish them from others. That is, the content of group stereotypes includes traits that are *diagnostic* of group membership (McCauley & Stitt, 1978), and these contents may derive in part, from goals aimed at maintaining positively distinctive group identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Ford and Stangor (1992) demonstrated that the traits most likely to emerge as central to newly formed stereotypes are those most objectively diagnostic in differentiating between groups. Consider the stereotype of women as nurturing, emotional, and weak. These particular characteristics may have become group defining because they best differentiated men from women according to traditional gender roles (Eagly, 1987). Thus, some stereotypes may develop to reflect (and maintain) the meaningful social circumstances or roles occupied by different groups. ‘If we want to predict which particular traits are likely to become central to the stereotype of some group, we would be advised to identify those traits that describe that group’s physical and social environment’ (Schaller & Conway, 2001, p. 166).
Cultural stereotypes and individual beliefs

While most individuals endorse a unique set of personal beliefs about social groups they consider to be true, these personal beliefs may or may not overlap with cultural stereotypes widely communicated and reinforced through socialization (Schneider, 2004). For example, one may not believe the cultural stereotype that men are more assertive but less emotional than women but still be aware that this is part of the cultural stereotype. The distinction between individual beliefs and cultural stereotypes is important because whether or not one rejects the validity of a stereotype it can nevertheless influence reactions to particular group members. Several studies have demonstrated that the simple awareness of societal stereotypes learned early and incorporated into one’s knowledge base, can lead to stereotype-congruent judgments and behaviours upon the activation of a social category (Bargh, 1999). To date, however, there have been few studies examining the consensually shared contents of disability stereotypes as distinct from individual beliefs, avoidance, and other forms of disability prejudice. In fact, some have argued that consensually held stereotypes may not even be a component of the negative and paternalistic reactions experienced by disabled people for whom broad-based inferences are considered atypical (Biernat & Dovidio, 2000).

Stigma versus stereotypes

Most psychological research on prejudice has focused on attitudes towards disability as a stigmatizing physical or mental attribute that spoils identity (Goffman, 1963). A construct that is both negative and idiosyncratic, disability stigma typically comes in two varieties: the more visible ‘abominations of the body’ and the ‘blemishes of character’. Both attitude and stigma constructs invoke an evaluative component suggesting that disability prejudice often involves an affective or emotional response such as fear, anxiety, and pity – all of which can lead to avoidant behaviours (Kleck, 1969). As such, prejudice is typically conceptualized as a reaction to a particular stigmatizing trait like blindness or obesity, which is then used to explain discrimination, aversive reactions, and negative evaluations (see Jones et al., 1984). Take, for example, the copious yet divisive research on disability preference hierarchies where impairment types are rank ordered, each assumed to elicit its own particular brand of stigma (Westbrook, Legge, & Pennay, 1993). Biernat and Dovidio (2000) proposed that while disability is stigmatizing, there is little evidence that perceivers possess a set of consensually held beliefs about the group as a whole. This is primarily because researchers have almost exclusively conceptualized disability in terms of person-based stigma and not as a group categorization that incorporates coherent stereotypical representations in memory – some of which may even be positive. Fichten and Amsel (1986) found that physically disabled college students were described as quiet, honest, and unassuming in contrast to their able-bodied counterparts more likely to be characterized as loudmouthed, demanding, and arrogant. In addition, disabled people have been described as more conscientious, moral, and courageous compared to non-disabled controls (Weinberg, 1976).

Factors contributing to disability stereotype development

The stereotyping literature has identified several factors that typically correspond to the formation and operation of consensual stereotypes (see Schneider, 2004). Stereotypes are more likely to develop for visibly definable or ‘essentialistic’ social categories and
those perceived to be immutable such as race and gender (Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). Such seemingly ‘essential’ or ‘natural’ categories have high inductive potential because they allow for inferences about a broad range of attributes thought to derive from category membership. Stereotypes are also more likely to develop for groups found disproportionately in certain societal roles, as is the case with men and women. These convergent group memberships (e.g., women, wives, mothers) can contribute to stereotypic beliefs that confound group status with role expectations (Eagly, 1987). Furthermore, one of the most pervasive features of categorical processing relates to the accentuation of perceived differences between groups as well as the similarities within them (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Exaggerated estimates of a group’s relative homogeneity are especially prominent in perceptions of out-groups who, despite objective differences, appear to ‘all look and act alike’ (Park & Rothbart, 1982).

Although sparse, there is evidence that these fundamental stereotypic features are manifested in the categorical processing of disabled people. Throughout history, disabled people have been consigned to particular social roles (e.g., the sick patient and unemployed beggar) while being excluded from others (e.g., parent, partner, business executive) (Asch, Rousseau, & Jefferies, 2001). Marginalized economically, disabled people continue to have high rates of unemployment and poverty, and are less likely to marry or matriculate from college (Asch et al., 2001; Brault, 2008). Studies of non-disabled samples have found that disability is considered an essential element of the person, a relatively uncontrollable and immutable fate (Yuker, 1988). Related to these notions, early attribution theorists documented the phenomena of spread whereby disability serves as a primary cue from which perceivers infer information about a person (Wright, 1983). Described as a ‘master status’ classification, assumptions about disability ‘spread’ across all aspects of a person’s identity, and are used to explain personality, motives, and behaviours. Such categorical processing may also account for what Gowman (1957) describes as the ‘gestalt of disability, so that the individual shouts at the blind as if they were deaf or attempts to lift them as if they were crippled’ (p. 198). However, these experiences are not exclusive to the blind community as they are ubiquitously reported across disability groups including those experiencing physical and cognitive differences (Sutherland, 1981). This is not to say that impairment-specific stigmas and negative affect play no role in disability prejudice or that stereotypes are not used to subclassify specific disability groups. Yet, in addition to stigmatizing reactions and beliefs, theoretical and empirical research points to the possibility that more global and undifferentiated representations may operate in ways that predict category-based responding.

**Evidence for global disability stereotypes**

Of the few studies suggestive of consensually held stereotypes about disabled people, most were designed to investigate impairment-specific stereotypic beliefs. For example, in an early attempt to delineate the dimensions on which disabled persons were viewed as different, Weinberg (1976) found that those with sensory and physical disabilities were similarly characterized as less intelligent, more courageous and less aggressive than the average able-bodied person. On 27 of the 29 traits evaluated, no differences were found between ratings of blind, deaf, or wheelchair-using targets, supporting the notion

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1 Several writers have noted that stereotypes about blind people include unique characteristics associated with depression, docility, and mystical visionary powers that may serve to differentiate this group from other impairment categories (Gowman, 1957).
of a generalized stereotype. Furthermore, not all dimensions distinguished between disabled and non-disabled groups as both were considered equally emotional, sensitive, self-pitying, and creative.

More recently, Abrams, Jackson, and St Claire (1990) found that school-aged children failed to differentiate between ‘physically handicapped’ and ‘mentally handicapped’ labels on the majority of evaluations made about a hypothetical boy. In fact, children labelled in either condition were considered equally friendly, stupid, and speech impaired, and all were thought to have trouble walking. While indistinguishable from one another, those with physical and mental disabilities differed significantly from those labelled as ‘normal,’ who garnered significantly more favourable ratings in each case. Maras and Brown (1996) also found no differences in the running, hearing, and thinking abilities assigned to physically disabled, learning disabled, or hearing-impaired groups prior to students’ participation in an integrated programme. By the end of the programme, while non-disabled students developed more complex category subtypes, they continued to use disability as an umbrella category to organize group memberships. As a consequence, improved evaluations towards those with whom the non-disabled participants interacted generalized across disability categories even though interactions where limited to those with learning disabilities.

Finally, in testing whether a group’s perceived status and competition predicts stereotype content, Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002) found that blind, disabled, elderly, and ‘retarded’ groups were conceptualized similarly as both low in competence and high in warmth, and were distinguished from several other groups who differed on either one or both of these dimensions. All of these studies support the hypothesis that an overarching stereotype may be associated with disabled people as a group, especially when categorized according to some normal/abnormal binary that renders those labelled as relatively interchangeable category members.

This empirical evidence corroborates what disability studies scholars have argued for a long time: disabled people are stereotyped in pervasive and consistent ways. This phenomenon has been documented in countless personal accounts, several summarized by Sutherland (1981) who writes: ‘We are held to be visually repulsive; helpless; pathetic; dependent; too independent; plucky, brave and courageous; bitter, with chips on our shoulders; evil (the twisted mind in a twisted body); mentally retarded . . . and much else’ (p. 58).

Elaborating on these common representations of disabled people as superheroes, evil avengers, or tragic victims, are numerous studies deconstructing stereotypical representations on television, in films (Wolfson & Norden, 2000) and in the news media (Haller, 2000). Balter (1999) found that distorted portrayals remained largely unchanged in the USA eight years after passage of the landmark civil rights legislation (the Americans with Disabilities Act), designed to protect disabled people from discrimination. Some have argued that such biased portrayals are perpetuated by a reluctance to view disabled people as a minority group bound together by their common experiences with discrimination, restricted roles, and marginalized status (Linton, 1998). In fact, the history of disabled people as a distinct minority remained largely unwritten until recently (Longmore, 2001), and many scientific paradigms continue to pathologize disability as a problem with the individual as opposed to a socially constructed category, a political collective whose contributions have yet to be incorporated in the research enterprise (Oliver, 1992; Olkin, 1999).

One important contribution of the interdisciplinary field of disability studies has been to make these competing explanatory models of disability explicit. According to
the social model of disability (Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare, 2006), the persistent problems confronting people who differ from the norm are not found in their biologies but stem directly from environments, institutional policies, and practices that systematically exclude certain people from participating fully in society. As such, society disables people who may incidentally experience physical and mental conditions that are either value neutral or interact with socially constructed barriers. The social model stands in stark contrast to more individual or medical model explanations that pathologize physical, sensory, and psychological differences, and locate the problems of disability inside the minds and bodies of ‘deviant’ individuals (Oliver, 1996). This later perspective also resonates with the fundamental attribution error by attributing to the person what may be more accurately created and constrained by the social situation.

The field of psychology may have inadvertently perpetuated these individually based explanations of disability by focusing on research about impairment-specific groups, most commonly those with physical disabilities, and aggregating results across sensory, cognitive, and physical subgroups only when differences fail to emerge (Gill, 2001). For example, to date, most psychological research on disability-relevant stereotypes has been limited to checklist or trait rating methodologies that assess subcategory representations about different impairment groups, and these studies have almost exclusively employed non-disabled samples (but see Fichten, Robillard, Judd, & Amsel, 1989). In addition, few have focused on target gender as influencing stereotype contents and use, perhaps because disability has traditionally been viewed as more predictive of differential outcomes than gender (Fichten & Amsel, 1986). One noteworthy exception was a study by Hanna and Rogovskly (1993) that asked college students to list the associations that came to mind when they thought about the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘disabled woman’. What they found were clear differences between these concepts. While ‘woman’ elicited references to mother, wife, work, and sexuality, the ‘disabled woman’ was described as old, feeble, ugly, and unpleasant. Because this work focused on the unique issues facing DW, a similar comparison was not made for men, nor was it made explicit that the category of woman includes all women, not simply the generic default of the non-disabled prototype.

The present investigation extends this work by ascertaining the content of disabled and non-disabled male and female cultural stereotypes as reported by both disabled and non-disabled participants. Using a free-response methodology, this study seeks to capture the spontaneous characterizations hypothesized to constitute broad category representations of disability and gender. We predicted that regardless of participants’ disability status, a consistent set of characteristics would be generated reflecting the cultural stereotypes of both gender and disability groups. The cultural stereotypes of all four target groups were expected to include both positive and negative characteristics, although not every dimension should be relevant to differentiating between disability and gender classifications. Based on the empirical work of Hanna and Rogovskly (1993), only non-disabled women (NW) were expected to be stereotyped along traditional gender lines as nurturing and attractive; DW, by contrast, should elicit associations related to their perceived asexuality and unattractiveness. Therefore, a replication of male and female gender stereotypes was only anticipated for non-disabled targets while the stereotypes of male and female disabled groups were expected to be more similar to each other and less ‘gendered’ overall. This prediction is consistent with feminist disability studies scholarship which has critiqued discourses that position DW as asexual, unfeminine, and degendered (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Gill, 1996; Milligan & Neufeldt, 2001; Morris, 1991).
Methods

Participants and design
Both disabled (26 females; 24 males) and non-disabled participants (26 females; 21 males) were recruited from flyers posted in the undergraduate psychology and disability service departments at Reed College, and from various disability organizations including the Society for Disability Studies, and local independent living centres in the greater Portland, OR area. Flyers indicated that the study focused on understanding disability stereotypes and sought to represent members of the disability community by including those living with various impairments whose voices are often excluded from basic research.\(^2\) Disability status was determined via participant self-report in response to a two-choice question about the social category that best described them: disabled or non-disabled. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 66 ($M = 31.4$ years), most (84%) had at least some college experience; 25% graduated with a 4-year degree or more, and 17% identified as US ethnic minorities. There were no age differences between the ethnic minority ($M = 33$) and majority ($M = 31$) samples. However, as in the general population, disabled participants were older ($M = 42$) than non-disabled participants ($M = 20$), $t(93) = 12.64$, $p < .001$, and their educational experiences were more diverse as well; both participant groups were equivalently balanced in terms of gender and ethnicity.

This study employed a within subjects design such that all participants completed responses for all four target groups: DM, DW, non-disabled men (NM), and NW, counterbalanced to control for order effects.\(^3\)

Materials and procedure
As part of a broader project, stereotype assessment was accomplished using multiple methodologies including free-responses, subjective trait ratings, base-rate probability estimates, and objective responses. The present article focuses on the most elaborated, free-response data, which were presented first to capture the spontaneously activated traits that surface when one is simply asked to think about the characteristics of a group. Participants were told that the study concerned the content of cultural stereotypes imposed on different groups of people. It was emphasized that the research was aimed only at their awareness of the characteristics assumed to represent these groups, and not on whether they believed these were true. Alternative formats of the questionnaire were prepared, including large print and electronic versions, along with options for either in-person or phone-based interviews, and participants were compensated with a $10 honorarium for their time. Most completed the study in groups of 2–10. The first page of the packet requested that participants list the first thoughts that came to mind about the ‘traits, dispositions or other descriptive features considered by society to be

\(^2\)Few empirical studies have employed both disabled and non-disabled participants within the same experimental design. However, among those with ongoing programmes of research measuring attitudes and interactions between disabled and non-disabled groups, recruitment methods typically include convenience samples where volunteers are solicited through local organizations serving people who experience disability, campus offices that coordinate disability services and through personal contacts (see Fichten et al., 1989; Makas, 1988).

\(^3\)To test whether the content stereotypic themes attributed to target groups varied as a function of the four orders presented, separate Kruskal–Wallis tests were run on the mean rankings of the top 10 themes assigned to each group. No significant order effects were found in any of these analyses; therefore the order of target presentation does not appear to have differentially influenced the consistent pattern of open-ended responses found when participants freely reported on the characteristics considered stereotypical of each target group.
Data organization and analysis plan

Open-ended descriptions from 97 participants were produced for the four target groups with up to five possible responses per group, yielding a total of 1,679 free responses. Data organization began using a diverse research team that included both learning and physically disabled students who developed a set of theme categories to capture the universe of all responses without reference to target sex or disability status. Student assistants were instructed to generate, as many themes as necessary to represent the data making sure their theme categories were as mutually exclusive as possible. After extensive review and discussion, the team agreed on a final set of 49 themes plus a miscellaneous category (which accounted for less than 2% of the total responses).

Themes included dispositional traits (e.g., nurturing, ambitious, passive), states (e.g., independent, incompetent, active), appearance cues (e.g., unattractive, sexual, impairments), and societal roles (hero, homeless, married). Separate theme categories were generated to capture both positive and negative domains. That is, independence and dependence, competence and incompetence, and weakness and strength were each included as separate theme categories. Each of the 1,679 free responses, alphabetized without reference to target group, was then assigned to one of the 50 theme categories by two independent coders after extensive training to familiarize them with the empirically derived trait descriptions defining each theme. For example, individual responses that related to motherhood, caregiving, and parenting skills were all to be coded as instances of nurturing while responses related to bravery, inspiration, and overcoming hardships were to be coded as instances of the heroic survivor theme. Computed on the basis of all 1,679 responses, inter-rater reliability (76%) was acceptable, and discrepancies were resolved following a team-wide discussion. Analyses first examined the frequency distributions of all theme categories by target group and then as a function of both target group and participant disability status. This latter analysis enabled a comparison of the top ranking themes that emerged independently for disabled and non-disabled participants facilitating an examination of consensus about the extent to which stereotypes were shared across participant groups.

Results

Descriptive frequencies

The top half of Table 1 shows the most frequently used themes considered stereotypical of DM and DW, both of whom were stereotyped as dependent, incompetent, and asexual. These were the top three most frequently mentioned themes used to represent these groups. Similarly, DM and DW were both characterized as unattractive and weak, passive and heroic. In fact, the stereotypes about DM and DW shared 7 out of 10 of the most frequently used themes for these groups, revealing substantial within-category similarities across the two disabled target sexes. There were also a few between-category differences. DM were more likely to be stereotyped as angry, inferior, and lazy while DW were more frequently characterized as vulnerable, socially excluded, and poor.
Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of the top 10 themes used for each target group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target group and theme</th>
<th>Total uses</th>
<th>Uses per group</th>
<th>Percentage of theme attributed to group</th>
<th>Target group and theme</th>
<th>Total uses</th>
<th>Uses per group</th>
<th>Percentage of theme attributed to group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DM</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>DW</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>38.10</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>53.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incompetentₐ</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34.41</td>
<td>Incompetentₐ</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asexual₉</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49.18</td>
<td>Asexual₉</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>47.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>69.05</td>
<td>Unattractive₇</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>58.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroic survivor₉</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52.27</td>
<td>Weak₇</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak₇</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31.15</td>
<td>Passive₇</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>61.29</td>
<td>Societally excluded</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>55.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive₇</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32.14</td>
<td>Heroic survivor₉</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unattractive₇</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37.50</td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>77.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>56.67</td>
<td>Poor homeless</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>52.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NM</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>NW</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>55.17</td>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>84.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>88.00</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>56.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domineering</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>53.97</td>
<td>Attractive</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>82.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>76.74</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>61.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent₈</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>54.24</td>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>65.31</td>
<td>Independent₈</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macho</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>96.55</td>
<td>Incompetent₈</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insensitive</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>68.29</td>
<td>Weak₇</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>61.36</td>
<td>Domineering</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>86.67</td>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Frequency attributions sharing a common subscript are not significantly different at the $p < .05$ level.
The bottom half of Table 1 highlights the top 10 themes considered stereotypical of NM and NW who were both frequently considered ambitious, domineering, and independent. In this case, only three of the top 10 themes overlapped between the two non-disabled targets. NM were more likely to be described as physically strong, employed, macho, and aggressive while NW were more frequently characterized as nurturing, attractive, and feminine in line with gender role expectations.

Comparing the two female target groups, there was even less overlap in terms of shared themes. Both disabled and NW were stereotyped as being weak and incompetent, consistent with the female stereotype (Deaux & Kite, 1993). However, as a group, DW were never labelled feminine, were rarely considered nurturing, and instead were nearly the universal recipients of the ‘unfit parent’ designation. Finally, no overlap was observed among the top 10 themes used to stereotype the two male groups. Only once were DM described as macho, otherwise, this theme was exclusively used to define the cultural stereotype of NM.

**Nonparametric frequency analyses**

To test the statistical reliability of both disability and gender classifications as an indication of the relative availability of stereotypical traits in memory, a comparison of theme frequencies was made using the Cochran test which assesses when group frequencies depart from equivalence on any given trait. This nonparametric test uses a chi-square statistic to examine whether each theme occurs equally often across four repeating groups for each of the top 10 themes generated. Because the raw frequency data were already presented in Table 1, results focus on those themes that best distinguished disability and gender groups from one another as diagnostic of group membership. One of the fundamental features of social stereotypes is that they help make clear how groups are defined in ways that differentiate them from others (Ford & Stangor, 1992). Figure 1 illustrates the stereotypical dimensions that most clearly distinguished each of the four target groups from the other three. Although both DM and DW were most frequently stereotyped as dependent, incompetent, and asexual, anger was much more likely to be attributed to the stereotype of the DM than to any other group, \( \chi^2(3, N = 42) = 48.48, p < .001 \). Not only was anger among the top five most frequently occurring themes for DM, it was rarely used to characterize any of the other three targets. Nearly, 70% of the anger-related responses in these data emerged to describe DM. DW, by contrast, were best distinguished from the others as vulnerable victims; 78% of this theme’s total uses were ascribed to the DW stereotype, which differed reliably from the other three groups, \( \chi^2(3, N = 18) = 27.33, p < .001 \).

A second theme that was significantly more likely to be attributed to DW, \( \chi^2(3, N = 12) = 28.67, p < .001 \) explicitly excluded DW from occupying the parental role (although not in the top 10, ‘unfit parent’ was the 12th most frequently occurring theme used to describe DW as a group).

Among the top 10 themes most frequently used to stereotype NM, physical strength, machismo, aggression, and employment status all had frequencies that differed reliably across the four targets (all \( p \) values < .001). That is, these themes

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4 Pairwise comparisons between DM and each of the three other groups were run on the theme dependence using the Cochran statistic, and were all significant (\( p \) values < .01).

5 Pairwise tests using the Cochran statistic revealed that DW were significantly more likely to be characterized as vulnerable victims than any of the other three groups (\( p \) values < .01).
were most uniquely and exclusively used to describe NM. As shown in Figure 1, 33 out of the 43 references to employment were made to characterize NM. Finally, NW were significantly more likely to be stereotyped as nurturing, attractive, and feminine than any other target group (all p-values < .001). Consistent with the traditional gender role of maternal caregiver, nurturance was not only the most frequently used theme to characterize this group, but was also among the most defining traits distinguishing NW from the other targets.

Other themes revealed between-group differences that highlighted either gender or disability status distinctions. For example, dependency distinguished groups on the basis of both gender and disability; all four groups differed in terms of how often this theme was used to stereotype them, \( \chi^2(3, N = 147) = 107.83, p < .001 \). Pairwise tests revealed that DW were more likely to be characterized as dependent than DM, \( \chi^2(1, N = 147) = 3.61, p < .05 \), followed by NW who were considered dependent more often than NM, \( \chi^2(1, N = 147) = 9.31, p < .01 \). By contrast, the theme independence exemplifies a trait that only discriminated between disabled and non-disabled groups, irrespective of gender, \( \chi^2(3, N = 59) = 46.83, p < .001 \). Specifically, NW received an equivalent number of independence attributions as NM while DM and DW were equally unlikely to be characterized as independent. A similar pattern emerged for attributions of intellectual competence where DM and DW were assigned equally few competency descriptions while NW were more likely to be considered competent, but not as often as NM, \( \chi^2(1, N = 59) = 4.90, p < .03 \).

This failure to differentiate between the stereotypes applied to DM and DW was further evidenced on themes related to asexuality, unattractiveness, and heroism.

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\[ \chi^2(3, N = 59) = 46.83, p < .001 \]

\[ \chi^2(1, N = 59) = 4.90, p < .03 \]

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\[ ^6 \text{While overall differences between the four target groups on the theme independence were significant, pairwise tests between gender groups within disability status were not. Unlike the ANOVA approach that can test for main effects and interactions between disability and gender status variables, this nonparametric test for K-related samples does not allow one to partial out these effects across repeated measures of categorical frequency data.} \]
That is, disabled people of both sexes were equally likely to be represented as asexual, unattractive, and inspirational/heroic as contrasted from their non-disabled counterparts who were rarely ascribed these characteristics. This lack of gender differentiation was not observed among comparisons made between the two non-disabled sexes. Consistent with traditional gender stereotypes, compared to NW, NM were more frequently ascribed themes related to their ambitiousness, dominance, competence, and insensitivity (all p values < .03); again, however, the stereotypes of DM and DW were indistinguishable from one another in lacking these descriptors.

Finally, on some dimensions there were no differences observed between DM and either of the two female groups. In fact, all three target groups (DM, DW, and NW) were equally likely to be stereotyped as incompetent and weak as compared to the NM who had significantly fewer of these traits (all p values < .001). Consistent with the writings of Asch et al. (2001), a redundant intersection may exist between disability and femininity, both of which imply childlike dependency and weakness rendering these categories interchangeable and in opposition to the normatively valued (non-disabled) male (see also Garland-Thomson, 1997; Morris, 1991).

**Stereotype consensus**

Stereotype consensus was first examined by computing a uniformity index to assess the extent to which participants agreed on the dimensions most frequently used to characterize each target group. Uniformity is indicated by the smallest number of traits needed to account for 50% of the trait attributions made in a given target condition (Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999). In this study, only six to seven themes out of the original 50 were needed to account for over half of the responses generated for each target group, which when aggregated totalled 1,679. As an additional test of stereotype consensus, participants were divided on the basis of their own disability status to examine whether cultural stereotypes differed as a function of group membership. If each group had completely different ideas about the way DM were represented, these top 10 lists would include 20 different theme categories. Instead, participant groups shared 7 out of the top 10 themes used to define the DM stereotype, reflecting a substantial degree of consensus. Consensus was even greater (85%) when examining the top 20 themes used to characterize DM, with 17 out of 20 themes shared between participant groups. The biggest difference was in the order in which themes were ranked by frequency of occurrence. A similar pattern was found with the themes attributed to DW as both disabled and non-disabled participants agreed on 6 of the top 10 themes (and 17 of the top 20) considered stereotypical of this group. Five of the top 10, and 17 of the top 20 themes used to describe NW were also shared between participant groups. However, the greatest degree of consensus observed between the two samples concerned the stereotype of NM; that is, disabled and non-disabled participants agreed on 90% of the top 10 themes attributed to NM.  

7 Although the two participant groups overlapped considerably, non-disabled participants were more likely to ascribe passivity and sensitivity to DM whereas disabled participants were more likely to mention laziness, inferiority, and low socio-economic status, which may reflect more of an insider's perspective about how society positions the DM group. Similarly, non-disabled participants were more likely to mention cultural views of DW as sensitive but plucky while disabled participants focused more on DW as vulnerable, impoverished, and as not occupying the role of mother. Perhaps, the societal rejection of women with disabilities as fulfilling the role of caregiver has increased saliency among those who have experienced negative reactions in response to their actual parenting of children (Asch et al., 2001; Kirshbaum & Olkin, 2002).
Discussion

The results of this study present a current portrait of the defining characteristics spontaneously associated with the cultural stereotypes of disabled and non-disabled men and women. Consistent with previous theorizing, quantitative research and personal anecdote, support for a global stereotype that similarly characterizes DM and DW as dependent, incompetent, and asexual beings was found to be a part of the consensual knowledge base recognized by non-disabled and disabled participants alike. These representations may unintentionally influence perceptions, expectations, and judgments of those identified as belonging to this social group even among perceivers who discredit the veracity of such beliefs (Wood & Nario-Redmond, 2009). For example, if most people do not expect DW to be mothers, they may react with surprise upon encountering such a seemingly unusual event, perhaps even failing to recognize that a disabled woman could be the mother of a child in her company, or judging such a relationship unacceptable (Kirshbaum & Olkin, 2002).

By examining stereotypes in an intergroup context, the present investigation extends previous work elucidating the specific dimensions on which disabled and non-disabled men and women are expected to differ. Findings revealed that not all characteristics were negative nor were all equally relevant to distinguishing between disability and gender categorizations. Furthermore, some stereotypic dimensions were more diagnostic of target group membership than others, one of the hallmark functions served by stereotypical definitions. Specifically, the stereotypes of disabled and non-disabled groups seemed most clearly distinguishable on traits that portrayed the non-disabled as independent and autonomous. In fact, independence is what marked them as most distinct from disabled people who were rarely defined in these terms, irrespective of gender. By contrast, themes related to dependence differed on the basis of both gender and disability status. Consistent with the gender stereotype, women were considered more dependent than men, and this difference was exacerbated by disability status. Interestingly, both female and disabled male groups were thought of as similarly incompetent and weak indicating some redundancy between these classifications on dimensions that may be more useful in distinguishing them from NM (Asch et al., 2001). Finally, whereas the stereotypes of NM and NW generally fell along traditional gender stereotypic lines, those characterizing DM and DW corresponded to share a number of features, indicating little differentiation between them. This was particularly true for attributions of incompetence, asexuality, heroism, weakness, passivity, and unattractiveness, where DM and DW were stereotyped equivalently.

Consistent with many early scientific discourses that cast savage societies, Africans and homosexuals as primitive, inferior and undifferentiated by gender, the stereotypic sex roles replicated here only among the non-disabled, may continue to serve as signifiers of a more ‘civilized’ status implicitly associated with the normative class (Somerville, 1994; White, 2001). Similarly Shields (1982) traced the history of evolutionary thinking that discursively explained male–female role differences as indicators of progress, and positioned sexual inequality as a hallmark of civilization where women are relegated to the ‘special’ sphere of nurturant labour. In the present study, the absence of gender differentiation is concordant with the historical portrayal of disabled and other marginalized groups as ‘animalistic throwbacks’ (Somerville, 1994), and provides yet another instantiation of the widespread assumptions that disabled people are somehow less than human (Gill, 2001), de-gendered and asexual perversions of the human form (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Milligan & Neufeldt, 2001; Morris, 1991).
Another novel contribution of this study relates to the characteristics that emerged as most diagnostic of each group examined. Among the characteristics most frequently used to stereotype DM, anger was the most uniquely defining. DW on the other hand, were best differentiated in terms of their perceived vulnerability and restricted parenting options. The traits that emerged as most stereotypically distinctive of the non-disabled male related to physical strength, machismo, aggression, and employment status whereas NW were most frequently, and most definitively, characterized as nurturing, attractive, and feminine. Consistent with data from over 15 years ago (Hanna & Rogovsky, 1993), we found very little overlap between the cultural stereotypes defining NW and DW; the latter were rarely conceptualized as mothers or partners and, in fact, elicited spontaneous associations prescribing against these roles. Extending this finding to the stereotypes of men, the present study found few similarities across the two male groups as few masculine role ascriptions were considered descriptive of DM.

Documenting the ubiquity of these cultural stereotypes, the present study makes clear that the availability of these stereotypes is not limited to one particular segment of the population. The same stereotypic dimensions were encoded into the memories of disabled and non-disabled participants alike. Regardless of participants’ own disability status, a substantial amount of agreement was found for the characteristics most frequently associated with these cultural representations.

Though personal beliefs may differ, most people have incorporated the culture’s predominant characterizations as part of their general knowledge, which previous research has shown is capable of influencing impressions despite one’s best intentions (Bargh, 1999). According to the stereotype threat literature, an awareness of societal stereotypes can even undermine the performance of those who belong to the group but discount the validity of these beliefs (Steele, 1998). The potential for stereotype threat among disabled people is but one direction for future researchers to pursue. For example, students identified with learning disabilities may underperform academically in part, due to concerns over professors’ stereotypic expectations about their group’s incompetence, independent of professor bias which also contributes to stereotype congruent perceptions (Molloy & Nario-Redmond, 2007).

Much research confirms that perceivers are more likely to rely on stereotypes when they are uncertain about what is expected of them and category salience is high (Schneider, 2004). This is often the case upon initial encounters between disabled and non-disabled people, especially when one’s disability is more visible. Future research might examine the hypothesis that disability stereotypes are more likely to be activated and used under these circumstances, especially when perceivers are not particularly motivated to seek out individuating information (Pendry & Macrae, 1996). Similarly, this work may be useful to those interested in which stereotypic dimensions are more likely to affect judgments in particular contexts. An interview setting may elicit greater stereotyping for groups about whom an assessment of competence is relevant while they should be less influential in contexts where evaluations focus on nonstereotypical domains (e.g., tolerance, humour).

Another fruitful direction would be to examine the extent to which disability stereotypes are accurate reflections of the social circumstances disabled people face. Consistent with the stereotypes found in this study, disabled people are more likely to be poor and unemployed (Brault, 2008). However, perceivers may fail to recognize the sociopolitical determinants of these differences, blaming the person or his/her specific impairment instead of recognizing the situational and culturally created barriers that
disqualify and disable certain people, a perspective integral to disability studies scholarship and the social model of disability (Gill, 2001; Olkin, 1999).

In fact, one reason stereotypes may be so resistant to change is that they remain predictive of the social positions these groups occupy or are expected to occupy; thus, stereotypes are also responsible for perpetuating group differences and legitimizing the status quo (Jost & Major, 2001). By continuing to conceptualize disabled people as incapable and incompetent, it may be easier to rationalize their need for protection and special schooling, as well as their high rates of unemployment. According to the social identity perspective, a stereotype’s defining characteristics reflect important group identity concerns aimed at maintaining a sense of positive distinctiveness about the groups one belongs to relative to those one does not. As such, consensus goals motivated by needs for belongingness, validation, and a shared reality, may contribute to stereotype contents that allow some individuals to establish their value by espousing group definitions that clearly distinguish them from other groups—groups defined by traits they do not want (Haslam et al., 1999; Schaller & Conway, 2001). In line with Sampson’s (1993) idea of the serviceable other, in order for a group to self-define as independent, another group must be defined as dependent to establish the comparison. In this way, the stereotypes of DM and DW help shore up the boundaries of what it means to be a non-disabled man or woman (Linton, 1998). Thus, another arena for future research will be to identify the various reasons why some traits become more central to consensual stereotypes than others.

Finally, additional research is needed to explore questions that focus on group identity, self-stereotyping and the factors that predict stereotype activation and change. Preliminary evidence suggests that disabled people endorse different self-stereotypes about the disability community that challenge pathologizing cultural accounts, and focus on minority group resistance, creativity, and resilience as a function of group identification (Nario-Redmond & Fern, 2005). Several have initiated the process of stereotype change by pursuing strategies for increasing the participation of disabled people in public life, disrupting the distorted and limiting misrepresentations that disability stereotypes embody (Hevey, 1993). This author anticipates that the field of stereotyping and prejudice will turn its attention more earnestly to address the impact of global disability stereotypes on social judgments, behavioural reactions, and the conditions that contribute to their use and modification. Disabled people are increasingly identifying as a social group striving for power to address their common fate and promote a positive identity as members of a culturally valued minority group. The field of psychology has much to gain by understanding the social, cognitive, and motivational mechanisms involved in this pursuit.

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