

Dr Stefania Paolini

Research Interests

Social Cognition

Traditionally social cognitive scholars have been concerned with the role of mental representations and processes that manage information about people and social events. They have provided conceptual and methodological tools to investigate the process of social categorization and its impact on group perceptions and behaviours. My research on intergroup relations and stereotyping, which I outline below, embraces this cognitive emphasis. It looks at how people encode, represent, process, and respond to social information and deals with questions like: What qualities make an individual a 'typical' or 'atypical' group member? Do people mentally represent groups in terms of their individual members or do they drop reference to specific individuals in favour of more abstract representations? What information is used when building up a social judgement? The judgement relevant information that is immediately accessible in the context of judgement? Or rather the one that is stored in memory? Methodologically, I conduct research in both controlled and naturalistic settings and I use both experimental and correlational designs. Statistically, I employ a variety of analysis techniques ranging from traditional univariate and multivariate tests to more sophisticated models of structural equations.

Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Social Discrimination

I am interested in the social psychological bases of stereotyping, prejudice, and social discrimination. What concerns me is why we stereotype people, such as homosexuals, refugees, Muslims, or the elderly. Why do we regard these groups as less valuable or 'human' than our own group? And why, if given the opportunity, do we reinforce the social dividers by allocating resources unequally? My PhD and continuing research with Prof Miles Hewstone (University of Oxford, UK) addresses these questions by looking at a specific mechanism responsible for group stereotyping: the process of **member-to-group generalization**. Member-to-group generalization refers to cases in which information about individual members of a social group affects the judgment of the group as a whole, as in the case of people concluding that Italians are 'emotional' because they know some 'emotional' Italians or they have seen some 'emotional' Italians in Al Pacino's films. My research tries to understand 'when' and 'why' this generalization process takes place. For example, research which I conducted with Prof Dora Capozza (University of Padova, Italy) tested whether a cognitive heuristic, the representativeness heuristic, and people's identification with their group shape this type of generalization.

To explain people's disliking for migrant and socially excluded people, my research collaborators, Dr Mark Rubin (University of Newcastle), Dr Richard Crisp (University of Birmingham), and I have recently advanced the hypothesis of a **displaced stimulus bias**. We believe that people react negatively towards migrants and socially excluded people partly because of a fundamental cognitive-affective bias. Specifically, we believe that people react negatively to stimuli (social and nonsocial in nature) that are perceived to have moved from one part of a category system to a part that no longer corresponds with the stimulus' characteristics and, in so doing, disrupt the functionality of simple and clear dividers between categories. This research has recently received three year sponsorship from the Australian Research Council (Rubin, Paolini, & Crisp, 2004-2007).

People, however, not only infer group qualities from the qualities of group members. Sometimes they use their self or self-concept as the basis of group inferences. This process of generalization is called **self-anchoring** and is the object of investigation of an ongoing research project, which I am carrying out with Dr Mark Rubin (University of Newcastle, Australia). This project assesses the extent to which self-anchoring processes affect people's memory for information pertaining to group members.

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Interventions to Ameliorate Intergroup Relations

I am particularly concerned with the potential implications that intergroup and stereotyping research has for social interventions designed to ameliorate intergroup relations, reduce conflict, and increase social integration. Traditional interventions of stereotype reduction have tried to convey stereotype-incongruent information in order to 'rectify' biased group perceptions. My doctoral research with Prof Miles Hewstone (University of Oxford, UK) has extensively assessed the viability of interventions based on **stereotype disconfirmation** strategies. In our studies it appears that people's willingness to revise their group perceptions is conditioned by at least three factors: prior quantity and quality of contact with the group and complexity (or dimensionality) of the experience with the incongruent group members. A comprehensive review of social cognitive studies which I am currently undertaking confirms that a variety of factors constrain the efficacy of this approach to the revision of social stereotypes.

An alternative way to reduce group stereotyping is that of making people aware of the complex system of categories which underlies our social reality. An Italian man might, in fact, discriminate less against women when he becomes aware that the women he is judging are also Italian. In a recent program of research conducted with Dr Richard Crisp (University of Birmingham, UK), we found that the beneficial effect of **criss-crossing two social categories** was more prominent among participants primed to think about groups in an inclusive manner (i.e., the participants were primed with a pronoun 'we'). In a research project carried out with Dr Theresa Vescio (Pennsylvania State University, USA), we found that, when more than two social categories spring to mind, as during the processes of **subgrouping**, a different desirable outcome occurs: People end up perceiving groups as internally more heterogeneous.

My current work focuses around the role played by **category salience** in intergroup encounters. One of the fundamental dilemmas is whether, during intergroup encounters, it is desirable that individuals are aware of their respective group memberships (high category salience) or of their idiosyncratic personal qualities (low category salience). Research conducted with Dr Jake Harwood (University of Arizona, USA) addresses this dilemma in the context of the relations between youngsters and elderly and suggests that ageism is reduced more when individuals in contact are aware of their respective group memberships. A review of the contact literature that I have recently carried out suggests that category salience might play a similar role in a variety of intergroup settings. Unfortunately, however, contact under high category salience conditions might not be a panacea for peaceful intergroup relations. Research onto the antecedents of category salience carried out with Dr Jake Harwood (University of Arizona, USA) and Dr Mark Rubin (University of Newcastle, Australia) explores the possibility that category salience is at its highest when intergroup encounters go wrong. If this were really the case, then contact under high category salience conditions would be more likely to increase than reduce prejudice, thus potentially jeopardising rather than improving intergroup relations. Under very special circumstances, high category salience and low category salience experiences coexist, as in the case of an individual becoming friend with members of a rival group. These 'hybrid' experiences might play an important role in reducing intergroup friction. In line with this hypothesis, in a collaborative project with Prof Ed Cairns (University of Ulster, UK) and Prof Alberto Voci (University of Padova, Italy), I discovered that direct and vicarious friendships among Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland were associated with reduced intergroup anxiety and more benevolent evaluations of the other religious community. In ongoing experimental and field research, I am exploring both moderators and mediators of the effects of these **cross-group friendship** experiences in a

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variety of intergroup settings to assess the full potential of these experiences for improving intergroup relations.

Metacognition and Social Judgements

Lay intuitions about the nature of our own mental processes shape many human conducts. In our everyday life, for example, we decide to pencil down a telephone number that seems too hard to memorise and we close our eyes if we suspect that the images of a horror movie will scare us too much. My interests focus on the impact that these lay intuitions or metacognitions exert on social judgements and, more specifically, on the impact that **social judgeability** considerations exert on group stereotyping. A so-called social judgeability model (Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadron, 1992) suggests that people stereotype groups because they hold stereotypical information about them, but also because they feel sufficiently justified to judge them on the basis of that information. Prof Miles Hewstone (University of Oxford, UK) and I have recently developed a theoretical extension of this model which applies the social judgeability model to the problem of stereotype reduction. My doctoral research has provided a preliminary validation of the extended social judgeability model. An ongoing program of research that I have undertaken in collaboration with [Dr Richard Crisp](#) (University of Birmingham, UK) aims to consolidate our understanding of the effects of judgeability considerations. I see the present research as the beginning of a larger program investigating the effects of metacognitive processes (e.g., social judgeability, feeling of knowing, confidence in judgements, lay theories of judgement correction) on social judgements, which will be part of Ms Kylie McIntyre 's PhD research during 2005-2007. Ultimately, my aim is to show that metacognitive processes can be successfully implemented into social programs designed to ameliorate intergroup relations.