

# Bad Drivers? No, Just Bad Stereotypes

December 10, 2014



Ugly stereotypes about “bad drivers” creep into pop culture, jokes, and slurs on a regular basis. The pernicious stereotype of “bad Asian drivers” has made its way into popular TV shows like *Family Guy* and websites like *Urban Dictionary*. In August of 2014, an Australian politician publicly apologized for stating that Asian drivers had “no comprehension” of the road rules, according to *The Guardian*.

However, research on traffic accidents actually shows that many of the groups who are often stereotyped as “bad drivers” — women, Asians, and the elderly — are actually less likely to get into accidents or break traffic laws than are people from other demographic groups. For example, a recent Australian traffic study found that Asian-born drivers had about half the risk of an accident as their Australian-born peers.

Data show that negative stereotypes about “bad drivers” are simply untrue. So, where did these stereotypes come from, and why are they still going strong?

A recent study published in [Psychological Science](#) may help explain how these kinds of stereotypes get started and spread. A team of psychological scientists led by Doug Martin, of the Person Perception Laboratory at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, examined what happens as social information is passed down a chain comprising multiple “generations” of individuals.

As people share information, the researchers hypothesized, they tend to break it down into categories that are simpler and thus easier to understand. Cultural stereotypes may then arise as the unintended but inevitable consequence of these shortcuts for sharing social information.

“It seems that people possess numerous cognitive limitations and biases that are likely to lead them to store social information in a simplified, categorically structured, stereotype-like manner,” says Martin. “As information is passed down a chain of individuals, it begins to change in predictable ways: It becomes simpler, more structured, and more easily learnable—and, as a consequence, more easily

transmittable.”

For the study, the researchers created different types of space alien creatures that combined unique sets of features and personality traits. For example, blue aliens with a square shape that bounced might tend to be curious, arrogant, and excitable, while a creature with a triangular shape might tend to be private, tidy, and serious.

Groups of students tried to learn 13 of the 27 possible alien creatures and their attributes. The students were then asked to identify the traits of all 27 creatures, including the 14 they'd never seen before. The attributes these participants selected were then used as the training materials for the next participant in the chain through seven “generations.”

Like a game of “Telephone,” the information that people remembered about the alien characters changed as it travelled down the chain.

Participants overestimated the likelihood that aliens who shared features also shared the same personality attributes. Over multiple generations, certain features became so strongly associated with specific attributes that they could be used to accurately infer information about previously unseen aliens. By the end of one chain, blue aliens were seen as “sensible” and “successful,” whereas green aliens were seen as being “vulgar.”

The findings suggest that, as information continues to be simplified and organized categorically, it can become a stereotype.

“In this way, cumulative cultural evolution can provide a mechanism to explain not only those aspects of stereotypes based on underlying realities but also those that are seemingly arbitrary or of no obvious origin,” writes Martin and colleagues.

## **Reference**

Martin D., Hutchison J., Slessor G., Urquhart J., Cunningham S.J., & Smith K. (2014). The spontaneous formation of stereotypes via cumulative cultural evolution. *Psychological Science*, 25(9), 1777 – 1786. doi: 10.1177/0956797614541129