CHAPTER TEN

2. Cognitive Consequences of Stereotypes

In addition to considering how stereotypes arise, cognitive models also consider the functions stereotypes serve. Most cognitive theorists adopt a functional approach, arguing that stereotypes allow people to process information rapidly and efficiently (S. T. Fiske, 1998; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). From this perspective, stereotypes function as schemas. They influence what we notice, how we interpret what we see, what we remember, and how we explain what we see (Allport, 1954).

**Stereotypes Influence Interpretation.** In February 1999, New York City police officers shot and killed a West African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, when they mistakenly assumed a wallet he was holding in his hand was a gun. Although numerous factors contributed to this tragic incident, stereotypes may have played a role. A common cultural stereotype holds that African Americans are more aggressive and violent than European Americans. Like other stereotypes, this belief influences the way people process ambiguous information. To illustrate, in one early investigation, Duncan (1976) had European American participants watch a staged interaction between a European American actor and an African American actor. During the interaction, one of the actors appeared to shove the other. Thirteen percent of the participants characterized the shove as a violent act when the European American actor exhibited the behavior, whereas 73 percent of the participants made this judgment when the African American actor exhibited the behavior. Since many European Americans believe that African Americans are violent, these findings show that stereotypes guide the way we interpret various behaviors. In a replication of this research with sixth-grade children, Sagar and Schofield (1980) found that both European Americans and African Americans displayed this tendency, suggesting that the stereotype develops at an early age and is held by African Americans as well as by European Americans.

Could this stereotype explain why New York City police officers mistakenly shot Amadou Diallo? To answer this question, Correll, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink (2002) had European American participants play a video game that required them to quickly identify whether a person was holding a weapon or some other object (e.g., an aluminum can, a cell phone). If the object was a weapon, the participants were to shoot the man by pressing a button labeled “shoot.” If the object was not a weapon, the participants...