Cultural stereotypes

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The concept of the 'stereotype' was borrowed from old raised printing technology, where copies of a composed type were made by using papier mache as molds for new printing plates, identical to the original. The term stereotype, as allegedly used for the first time by Walter Lippman in 1922, is used today to mean a readily available image of a given social group, usually based on rough, often negative generalizations. Although stereotypes can be positive as well as negative, they are, in everyday usage, most often understood as irrationally based negative attitudes about certain social groups and their members. Stereotypes are called idiosyncratic, if only an individual uses them, or they are social, or collective if they are widely shared by a group of people.

In everyday use, the concept of the stereotype is used in various contexts: usually the word stereotype is used to refer to members of some kind of collective: firemen are courageous, blondes are less intelligent, Italians are noisy, and so forth. When a person makes inferences about a new person or about some social event, they use their existing knowledge to reduce the uncertainty in the situation. The less one knows about the object, the more one uses stereotypical generalizations.

In an intercultural setting, one of the goals of the participant is getting to know the attitudes and personality of the communication partner. In this process, we apply both evidence and our existing beliefs about the members of that cultural group. These are cultural stereotypes. Stereotypes can concern one's own group or that of the other. These are called respectively auto- and hetero-stereotypes. Nonetheless, members of a given group may also share common conceptions about the other party's stereotypical assumptions about themselves, or about the respective 'other' party. Due to the fact that the person, in this case, is projecting their own prejudices onto the group of others, this type of stereotyping could be called a projected stereotype.

The different national or cultural stereotypical assumptions can be described as follows: Simple auto-stereotype: In our opinion we [my nationality] are . . . Projected auto-stereotype: We think that they [inhabitants of the foreign country] consider us to be . . . Projected hetero-stereotype: We feel that they [the inhabitant of the foreign country] think that they are . . . Simple hetero-stereotype: We think that they are . . .

For instance, a Finn may feel that 'the Finns' are hard-working/diligent and honest, but at the same time they think that 'the Swedes' consider 'the Finns' to be drunks, backward and simple, and that 'the Swedes' consider themselves to be more educated and 'better people', whereas for 'the Finn', they are boastful and cold!

Often, stereotypes are understood to be detrimental to intercultural communication and the elimination of stereotypes was believed to be a prerequisite for any successful intercultural exchange. This idea could be read, in amongst other places, in the preface to the book, Stereotyping and prejudice, by Bar-Tal et al. (1989: 1), where they state;

The study of stereotyping and prejudice reflects an interest in intergroup relationship(check the quote, as, grammatically, this should read relationships). While we recognize that a discussion of intergroup relationship may focus on behaviours describing actions such as confrontations, violence, wars, cooperation, alliance, negotiation, or coordination, we also believe that each of these intergroup behaviours is mediated by perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes. (I have made this change as the quotation ran over more than two lines and, therefore, required separating from the main body of the text).

However, eliminating stereotypes is not possible, or, if it were done, it would be detrimental to human cognition. Stereotypes, as such, are cognitive schemata, typical of the human cognitive system, which assigns a set of characteristics to all members of a given social group, and serves as a reference when assigning significance to observations and experiences in social interactions. They are mental structures, which simplify the complex stimuli from one's environment and facilitate their comprehension.

When we walk on the street, for instance, just to get to a certain address, we may not be able to tell how many barber shops we passed during our journey. However, if we walk on the same street to find one, our attention is tuned to see the barbershops' signs hanging above the pedestrians. Cultural stereotypes work in the same way: they focus our attention on certain features, amplify them in our observation, and offer interpretations of our observations.

In this way, we see what we are taught to see, and at the same time our observations also confirm the stereotype. Expectations drive our attention as observers. Having stereotypes may even lead one to see things that are not really there.

Many writers see stereotypes as rigid generalities that members of society impose on others with whom they are unfamiliar or do not understand. The less we know about the other, the more we hang on stereotypes. If the stereotype is well-grounded and justifiable it may help to orient oneself in a certain situation, but if it is unjust and loaded with negative emotions, it will harm the interaction without question. A number of phenomena make the interpretation of cultural/national stereotypes enigmatic: cultural stereotypes are at the same time enduring and changing, strong and insignificant. Some of the constituents of a stereotype may be very old and remain the same for centuries, while some of the labels given to a country or cultural group may change within a short period of time. Also, the salience of the constituents of cultural stereotype may change in time and context. Some particular features may be enacted with different intensities in different contexts, yet in another context these features may have no relevance at all. In general, stereotypes are not very useful in intercultural interaction because they do not accurately predict either party's behaviour.

As such, stereotypes are not bad or good, but they can influence intercultural interactions in different ways. An observer tends to favour information that is consistent with existing expectancies, and tends to ignore, or reject information that is inconsistent with the stereotypes. According to some studies, people tend to favour hypotheses based on stereotypes even when they have a reason to suspect the validity of the stereotype (Johnston & Macrae 1994). Stereotypes are often resistant to change. Experiences at variance with the stereotype usually do not change the stereotype but are interpreted as exceptions.

Cultural/national stereotypes are both descriptive and prescriptive in nature: they are perceivers' shared beliefs about the characteristics of the target group and at the same time they also function as social expectations. In initial interactions and in solitary intercultural contacts people's national or cultural stereotypes may be used as a source of expectation about the other party, and as a reference applied to the judgement of the other party's behaviour.

Stereotypical notions about the character of the members of the other party determine a person's emotional reactions to the other group: a strong, negative projected stereotype ('I believe that you conceive of us as dishonest') may result in displaced hostility. i.e. 'I behave towards you in a hostile way because I assume you to have hostile attitudes about my culture'.

The treatment of stereotypes in intercultural education is problematic. Scholars of intercultural communication have developed a great number of variables that enable the comparison of different cultures. Among these are concepts such as collectivism/individualism, high context/ low context, femininity/masculinity and so on. The generalization made by a scholar that people in one culture are more collectivistic than in another, and so on, is, naturally, a stereotypical statement too. Osland and Bird (1998) call stereotyping done by scholars 'sophisticated stereotyping'. It is 'sophisticated' because it is based on the empirical work of language and communication scholars, and because it is supposed to be based upon theoretical concepts. It has been developed in order to help in reducing the complexity of a culture, yet it is still a stereotype which may constrain an understanding of the behaviour of the others as much as it may facilitate real cultural understanding.

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