

Didactică

Cognitive Distorsions as Collective Tools of Representation and Action in Post-totalitarian Eras

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Résumé : *Les stéréotypes sont des structures cognitives stockées dans la mémoire qui affecte la perception, les représentations et le comportement dans le groupe. Les stéréotypes, en plus du rôle fondamental qu'ils jouent dans le processus de différenciation intergroupe, ils ont une importante fonction groupe explicative et justificative. La différenciation intergroupe a comme but la formation d'une identité distincte et positive, tandis que les fonctions explicatives et justificatives indiquent que groupes utilisent les stéréotypes pour comprendre les événements sociaux et pour justifier leurs actions envers d'autres groupes. L'idée principale est que les stéréotypes ne peuvent pas être considérés simplement comme des produits privés individuels. Ils ont plutôt une nature collaborative et interactive, impliquant un processus collectif de négociation et de gestion, qui est constamment influencé par les intérêts et le positionnement des groupes par rapport à d'autres groupes, et par les modèles idéologiques de structuration des relations sociales.*

Mots clés : *stereotypes, préjugés, categorisation, comportement*

Contemporary psychologists consider that stereotypes are a natural consequence of how the human mind works, some psychologists consider that we get to stereotype because in this way we satisfy some psychological needs, or because we are pushed into this direction by our personality, while other psychologists examine stereotypes as determined by social factors.

While most psychologists say that we have too much information, being obliged to filter it out, others, especially the supporters of the theory of social identity and the theory of auto-categorization, believe, on the contrary, that we have too little information available and we have to search for it, i.e. stereotypes enrich reality, they do not simplify it; they provide information, they do not filter it.

The vision on stereotypes differs: for the cognitive tactician stereotypes are, in the first place, some means of cognitive saving, while, for the meaning-seeker, stereotypes are a very good response to its need to explain the world; in addition, they may very well represent readymade beliefs which we assimilate from the environment we live in and we use them because we see that others use them, too.

Stereotypes can be seen, very frequently, as elements of socio-political programs developed by the social elite and later spread among the masses (e.g., the stereotype of Hungarians coming from the steppes of Asia in order to steal our Transylvania or the stereotype of the Hungarians about Romanians seen as shepherds coming from a civilized Hungarian Transylvania, that they would end dominating through an excessive birth rate). (Mungiu -Pippidi, 1999).

It is clear that such stereotypes based on historical theories could not be explained without admitting the overwhelming influence of cultural and political elites.

Unfortunately, even if this solution partially saved the situation, it represents a series of problems hard to ignore. For example, it does not explain very well why, in some cases, the masses easily accept the programs of the elite, while in other cases they are much more reluctant.

Henri Tajfel's work has a key role in promoting cognitive approach in the study of intergroup perception and evaluation, primarily because he has shown that stereotypes and social attitudes may be a consequence of the process of social categorization.

In order to make the surrounding reality understandable, people must somehow organize the various information that reaches them. This means that they will divide the world into categories which provide it with sense. As a side effect, this process can lead to

cognitive errors that distort reality. The simple division of a multitude of stimuli into two distinct categories has significant effects on perception, in the case of intracategorical emphasis (the classical study of Tajfel and Wilkes, 1963). Subsequent studies have managed to demonstrate that, in such circumstances, effects of emphasizing the intracategorical similarity also occur. This discovery has been thoroughly studied by several lines of research: cognitive processes that lead to intracategorical contrast and intracategorical assimilation effects.

Applying this theory led to the investigation of out-group homogeneity effect, and also of favoring the in-group. The operation mode of social prejudices is similar to the categorical distinction effect; they cannot be explained solely in cognitive terms. The prejudices imply, in addition, two basic processes: assimilation (individuals take from their cultural environment readymade social categories) and coherence (people use these categories to confer sense to the world they live in). The explanation given to this coherence is that of the need, of the positive self-image.

Unlike the categorization of non-social objects, the categorization of human groups also involves a motivational dimension. The latter believes that stereotypes can be understood as thoughts whose direction and content are dictated by the need to satisfy some significant needs, such as keeping a positive self-esteem, system justification, social dominance or reducing the anxiety caused by the awareness of their own mortality.

According to the theory of social identity, people would be motivated to maintain a positive self-esteem and the group membership would play an important role in the same direction, whereas a positive image of the in-group may help maintaining a high self-esteem. In other words, people would be motivated to favor their own group because it makes them feel better. Recent research (Ashburn et al., 2001) showed that this phenomenon occurs at the level of the unconscious as well. On the other hand, adverse attitudes and violent, aggressive behavior towards out-groups are determined not by low self esteem but by threats to the most cherished aspects of self-image, thus associating intergroup favoring to a high level of self-esteem.

Research has shown that, despite a widespread opinion that negative stereotypes are learned from a very early age, children show positivity towards the in-group rather than negativity towards the out-group.

The research of Tobena et. al. (1999) analyzes and interprets cognitive errors and those of the stereotypes and prejudices in terms of their adaptive value. According to these authors, cognitive errors, either at the perceptual, memorizing, or social level, etc., are determined by the functioning of specialized neural modules that operate automatically. Social errors would depend on the properties of the neurocognitive modules mediating the perception and categorization of relevant social stimuli, such as face, look, voice, emotions, etc., being almost inevitable.

These research results have shown that stereotyping and social categorization also appear at a very early age, when cultural influences are excluded. For example, at the age of 2-3 months already, the children are looking for a longer time at attractive faces rather than at unattractive ones, and they are easily categorizing at the age of 2-3 years, according to race, gender or age.

More important, numerous studies have shown that the specific neural modules help processing the social information. For example, it has been demonstrated that recognition of emotional expressions of fear and anger is primarily made in tonsillitis. The functioning of these neural modules is determined by the laws of evolution and their errors are seen as mere side-effects of adaptation.

The similar conclusions of most research on social cognition show that the limited processing sources of the human brain make the heuristic processing strategies with a high

error potential a necessary compromise for its efficient functioning. And there are many evolutionary advantages implied by different errors: taking fast, automatic decisions allows a more effective detection and concentration on targets.

Activation dynamics of stereotypes is not simple, the people's needs being able to reactivate stereotypes that would normally be dissipated during a social interaction. It is unclear yet whether stereotype dissipation occurs simply because time passes or if this depends on the information that individuals obtain through interaction, whether the people's attitudes and goals affect this process.

Stereotyping can affect not only the subsequent impressions of social actors but also their behavior. This problem has been studied in two lines of research, one focusing on how human performance can be affected by stereotypes about their own group, while the second focuses on a direct link between perception and behavior.

Claude Steele (1997) argued that people strongly identified with an area for which there is a negative stereotype about their group may be preoccupied with the thought that others judge them in terms of that stereotype, an experience that is threatening to itself and may cause reduced performances in the stereotyped area. Many authors consider that the reduction of the performance due to the stereotype threat occurs because the threat reduces the capacity of the humans' working memory. The phenomenon can also occur because the threat generates anxiety and the nerve activation related to it constrains the humans' cognitive resources or because people try to inhibit these emotions and thus cognitive resources that should be used to solve the task are elsewhere assigned (Croizet et al, 2004, Quinn and Spencer, 2001, O'Brien and Crandall, 2003, Schmader and Johns, 2003).

On the other hand, Seibt and Forster (2004) have advanced a broader explanation, according to which the activation of in-group stereotypes affects our behavior because it changes the styles of processing the information by inducing some specific regulatory guidelines. More specifically, negative stereotypes lead to a cautious, exact style of processing, manifested through a higher speed and creativity, but through a low analytical thinking. This idea suggests that the nature of the effects caused by activation of in-group stereotypes depends not only on their positive or negative valence, but also on the type of the task performed.

Since the stereotypical threat may have negative social effects, many researchers have wondered: how can we protect ourselves against these consequences? A first answer is derived from the definition of the stereotype threat: because the phenomenon occurs in the case of those who are strongly identified with the stereotyped area, it turns out that reducing the level of identification can ameliorate the effects of the stereotype threat. The same applies also for identification with the stereotyped group. A recent solution is also derived from the above definition. Given the fact that the stereotype threat generates the concern of being judged in terms of in-group stereotypes, the most practical way to fight the negative effects of the stereotype threat would be to eliminate this concern, for example, by introducing a positive social combination which would lead to similar effects and there is found, indeed, that the information about an in-group member who is successful in the stereotyped area reduced the participants' concern of being judged in terms of the in-group stereotype, thus improving their performance in the respective field.

Another response is derived from the explanatory mechanism of the stereotype threat: if the threat creates anxiety and reduces people's cognitive resources, thus affecting their performance, then the factors that reduce anxiety should also mitigate the effects of the stereotype threat. In line with this vision, it was shown that people with a high sense of humor are less affected by stereotype threats, whereas the sense of humor reduces anxiety generated in these contexts. On the other hand, the concepts concerning the skills needed to solve tasks also have an important role. While people with an entitativist vision of

intelligence feel the effects of the stereotype threat in a stronger way in a task that requires intelligence, people with an incrementalist vision are protected against the negative effects. This is because those having an entitativist theory believe that human intelligence is a fixed, unmalleable trait, and always tend to show to themselves that they are smart, which makes them anxious in front of difficult tasks, while those with an incrementalist theory that intelligence is flexible, dynamic and they seek to improve their skills and performance, feeling less anxiety in front of difficult tasks.

The effects of the stereotype threat can also be reduced by creating safe environments in which social identities are not devalued.

As a result of their research, Wheelur and Petty (2001) concluded that there are two processes through which the activation of stereotypes can affect behavior: a cognitive and a motivational one. The two processes may act either independently or together.

In other research, they suggest that stereotypes do not activate a certain behavior, but the category itself. For example, it was demonstrated that priming the elderly category has a significant influence on behavior and stereotypes, but we can also highlight the fact that the activation of stereotypes does not mediate the effect of priming the category on behavior. This suggests that both stereotypes and behaviors are directly associated with the social groups in the humans' memory. These issues are consistent with the contemporary views on the attitudes being perceived as consisting of cognition, affects and behaviors, which are components that can act independently and in unequal proportions from each other.

Such research is important because it gives empirical weight to the research based on the idea that stereotypes can function as prophecies that self-fulfill. If you interact with a member of an "aggressive" out-group, the stereotype associated to the group will activate in your mind and will unconsciously affect your behavior, which will become more aggressive. But your behavior will generate, in turn, more aggressive reactions from the one you interact with and, ironically, you will get to perceive that person as being aggressive because of your own automatic behavior.

All studies are based on the idea that stereotypes' activation occurs after the categorization of social targets has already occurred. Before saying about a gypsy that he/she is so and so, we must first classify him/her as a gypsy and then we must apply the group stereotype. However, stereotypes can be also activated in the absence of categorization, based only on the presence of features specific to the stereotyped category. This means that we can classify a person as being Romanian and yet automatically assign him/her features specific to the gypsies. This happens when that person has physical traits that make her/him close to this social category (e.g. dark skin), because, in time, we not only come to associate the stereotypes to the social class, but also to its specific physical attributes.

People are aware that they can stereotype on the basis of social categories, but apparently they are not aware that they activate stereotypes also on the basis of physical features of the social targets. In addition, the two types of activation of stereotypes differ in terms of their controllability, meaning that people can control the activation of stereotypes when it occurs in the basis of the process of categorization, but they seem unable to do the same when activation is based on physical traits. It is also quite difficult, even impossible for us to determine the social class of a person on the basis of physical traits. For example, it is easy to decide upon this when it comes to race, gender or age, but things get complicated if you need to identify a communist, a pedophile or a Nazi.

Castelli et al. (2004) showed that it is sufficient for us to know at some point about a person that he/she belongs to a social group that we hate, even if we do not remember

who he/she is and what group he/she belongs to; however, her/his presence triggers in us a tendency to avoid and it also activates a negative attitude associated with the group.

Cognitively speaking, we tend to see connections between groups and traits even when they do not exist in reality (illusory correlation), or they are not as we imagine them (pseudo-contingencies), and secondly, the simple act of categorization makes us exaggerate intergroup differences and mitigate intragroup differences (categorical accentuation and assimilation). Such processes are more evident in the case of individuals with a high degree of authoritarianism or those with an increased need for cognitive clarity.

Once formed, the stereotypes are activated and applied to individuals belonging to social groups, often in an automatic way (the time necessary for the stereotypes to activate is very short, a few hundredths of a second). They affect both our impressions and behaviors (through the stereotypical threat mechanism or through the mechanisms of the direct perception-behavior link). In order for these processes not to be automatic, we should have sufficient cognitive resources available; we should be sufficiently motivated or have more weak stereotypes, conditions which are not easily to meet in everyday life. The use of stereotypes can be benign, but it often has negative social consequences. For example, stereotypes can function as prophecies that self-fulfill.

Our psychological processes deal with the stereotypical and counter-stereotypical information in such a way that it very often contributes to the maintenance of the stereotypes, rather than change them.

For example, if we adhere to an entitativist theory on the human person, we will pay more attention to the information that confirms our stereotypes, this type of information being also better stored, especially in the social memory of people. Also, in order to protect our stereotypes, we isolate individuals that contradict these beliefs within some subcultures, psychologically separated from the group stereotype.

Stereotypes are also maintained because we attribute the counter-stereotypical information to some unstable internal or external causes (external awards enable individuals to be seen as an exception to the rule, whether they are typical or atypical for their group, and the group stereotype will remain unchanged).

In order for the stereotypes to change, many basic conditions must be fulfilled. For example, the contact between two groups can lead to changes of the stereotypes in a positive way, only if the groups have an equal status, common goals and cooperate in a regulatory tolerant environment.

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