The dual role of stereotypes in the society

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Introduction

As technology develops, the number of situations of communicating with people from different countries has been increasing. In many fields, learning a non-native language is one of the requirements to be successful. It's commonly acknowledged that language is an important tool of communication. However, mastering a non-native language is not enough to become a skillful communicator; we need to learn and improve other intercultural communication skills.

In the era of globalization when national and ethnic border tend to be defaced the issue of successful communication in multicultural room increases its turn. The phenomenon of stereotyping becomes therefore very topical nowadays. In order to have successful intercultural communication, it is essential that communicators avoid incorrect categorizing or stereotyping. Incorrect stereotyping tends to appear in the communication between at least two or more people who are physically different, for example "interracial communication." Unfortunately, the difference in physical appearance often provokes unfavorable and inaccurate presuppositions of other people. This could hinder further potential communication.

Nature of stereotypes and stereotyping

Having studied a number of scientific and literature works I've found out six categories of stereotypes which can be defied in the following way:

1. A simplified and fixed image of all members of a culture or group (based on race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, national origins).
2. Generalizations about people that are based on limited, sometimes inaccurate, information (from such sources as television, cartoons or comic books, minimal contact with one or more members of the group, second-hand information).
3. Initial predictions about strangers based on incomplete information about their culture, race, religion, or ethnicity.
4. A single statement or attitude about a group of people, that does not recognize the complex, multidimensional nature of human beings.
5. Broad categories about people that fail to differentiate among individuals, peoples, and societies.
6. Identification of easily observable characteristics of groups of people.
7. Stereotyping is however a natural function of the human mind and is therefore morally neutral in and of itself. A culture, however, endorses moral or immoral actions based upon the beliefs and assumptions implicit in the simplifying stereotype, and every culture seeks to simplify a complex reality so that it can better determine how best to act in any given circumstance.

The role of stereotypes in communication

Stereotypes versus countertypes

For the process of cross-cultural communication of the most importance are the following functions of stereotypes:

1) transmitting of more or less valuable and objective information;

2) creating "countertypes." A "countertype" is a positive stereotype (one which arouses "good" emotions and associates a group of people with socially approved characteristics) which evolves as an attempt to replace or "counter" a negative stereotype which has been applied previously to a specific group of people. Negative stereotypes of African Americans were attacked by countertypes in the 1960s and 1970s in movies such as *Guess Who's Coming*

to Dinner and *Shaft*, both of which featured strong, dynamic, intelligent black males. The process continues today with the positive portrayal of "Bumpies" (Black Upwardly Mobile Professionals) on television programs such as *The Cosby Show* and *L.A. Law*. Countertypes are important reflections (and shapers) of popular beliefs and values. They are still stereotypes, and this means that they are still oversimplified views of the group being stereotyped. Many African Americans came to resent the "Sidney Poitier" stereotype of the black male which was an ubiquitous countertype in movies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, for example, because it seemed to imply that blacks were now simply slaves to another image promoted by white middle-class society--a different stereotype to be sure, but a stereotype nonetheless. The Poitier-countertype was often interpreted to be nothing more than a racist command for black males to clean up their acts, cut their hair, learn to speak English clearly and "properly," and pursue professional goals. Black males labeled the Poitier-countertype with their own definition of the stereotype--an Oreo (Black on the outside, white at heart)--and argued that it meant only that blacks who were "better" than whites at the white man's game were "acceptable." A countertype, in other words, cannot be accepted at face value any more than the negative stereotype it is seeking to replace or meliorate. Countertypes are often merely surface correctives--scratch an intended countertype and you will often discover an old stereotype lurking underneath. The Poitier-black male is one example of this characteristic as well;

3) influence on reality implies clear bordering of one ethnic groups from another, and helps evaluate and keep traditions from interference.

The basis for stereotyping, represent thus a natural part of the learning process, when they are directed at human beings, they can be sometimes dangerous and harmful. When we stereotype people, we prejudge them; we assume that all people in a group have the same traits. This form of blind categorization leads to false assumptions about people and causes misunderstandings, hostility, abusive behaviors, conflicts, discrimination, and prejudice.

Conclusion

Civil societies can only thrive when damaging stereotypes are broken down. The difficulty is that stereotypes are sometimes hard to recognize because they are fixed beliefs. Learning to identify stereotypes is one of the first steps we must take to build a civil society. After identifying stereotypes, we can work toward eliminating them from society. When stereotypes are eliminated, it will be easier to acknowledge and appreciate individual differences. When we live in a society that is open to cultural diversity and that values the contributions of all society members--regardless of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, race, life styles, and belief--we will be one step closer to living in a civil society.

Understanding the nature of prejudice, scapegoating, stereotypes, and discrimination is extremely important in developing cross-cultural awareness and understanding

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