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## **CULTURAL IDENTITY IN AN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT**

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## **STEREOTYPES AND COLLECTIVE IDENTIFICATION**

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On popular postcard which can be bought at any newsstand in Brussels, each member of the European Union is represented by a caricature of a characteristic such as 'German humor', 'British cuisine', 'sober Irishman' and so on. Everybody knows that such characteristics are called cultural stereotypes. In this paper, the concept of stereotype is discussed in more detail: What are the stereotypes? Why do they exist? Are they good or bad? Should one get rid of stereotypes? and: What is their relationship to the concept of cultural identity?

### **Stereotypes and identity**

The extent to which and the way people identify with and are involved in a collective varies between individuals. The way people are involved in the collective, or the extent of their organizational/cultural commitment, is composed of different underlying motives. They may feel that they have invested so much in their collective that they do not want to leave it; they may feel that the goals of the collective are congruent with their personal goals; they may share the values of the collective; or they may stay in the collective due to their feelings of obligation, or because of pressure from others. Strong emotional commitment to the collective includes dependence and loyalty. A person wants to be a member of a collective, and is willing to acquire the collective's values and the perceptions of the collective itself and the perceptions of the significant out-groups shared by the members of the collective. The stronger the commitment, the more firmly is that person immersed in the collective's generalized and simplified perceptions of self and others. Such perceptions are called collective stereotypes.

One general characteristic of stereotyping is the difference claimed with respect to the qualities associated with the members of in-group and out-group. Usually, out-groups are seen as more homogeneous than one's own group and they are perceived as possessing less desirable traits than the in-group. Cultural stereotypes, such as comparisons between us and others, are also intertwined with the concept of ethnocentricity. In cultural stereotypes 'the other' is usually valued negatively in comparison with "us" and our culture, which we see as 'normal', 'natural', and 'correct', and the customs and the ethical values of which we feel are universally valid.

One of the objects of corporate PR and advertising is to communicate the identity of the company and its products to its audiences. The concept of corporate identity implies that the organization is to be understood like a human being with a mind and personality of its own, and the aim of identity advertising is to teach the target group a stereotypical perception of that organization. The image of a country shows the same kind of personification: the

country may be perceived as hostile, friendly, hospitable or frosty as if it were an alive human being with feelings and sensations of its own.

Stereotypes of nations are distinctive characteristics attributed to a country and its inhabitants by some group or groups of outsiders. A country, like all collectives, is perceived by observers as an entity that has personality, its own feelings and ways of reacting to different stimuli. Perceptions about a collective's identity are often called images. These include assumptions about the characteristics of the individual members of the collective, such as a company, a life-style group – or a nation. The images of a nation may be made up of certain physical facets possessed by the inhabitants, including such characteristics as skin color, facial features, color and styling of hair, and typical attire, and personality facets or personality and behavioral traits which are assumed to be shared by all members of that collective.

### **What are stereotypes and why do they exist?**

Collins' Dictionary of Sociology (Jary and Jary 1995:656) defines a stereotype as a set of inaccurate, simplistic generalizations about a group of individuals which enables others to categorize members of this group and treat them routinely according to these expectations. According to Jandt (2004:94) "Psychologists have attempted to explain stereotyping as mistakes our brains make in the perception of other people that are similar to those mistakes our brains make in the perception of visual illusions"!

In everyday use the concept stereotype is used in various contexts: we may label someone as stereotypical, meaning that (s)he lacks spontaneity and individuality, or we may comment on someone's statement by saying that it was very stereotypical. But usually the word stereotype is used to refer to members of particular collectives: firemen are courageous, females are less aggressive than men, Nordic people are tall and blond, Italians are noisy, rich people are highly civilized, the poor intellectually inferior, etc. When a person makes inferences about a new person or a social event (s)he is using her existing knowledge to reduce the uncertainty in the situation. The less (s)he knows about the new people or their culture the more (s)he uses stereotypical generalizations. These produce expectations about what people in that cultural group are like and how they will behave. Often one's perceptions of others are based solely on generalizations about the characteristics of the group to which they belong.

People make generalizations about various groups, gender, certain professions, life-style groups, inhabitants of a given area, ethnic groups, cultures, and nations. Such generalizations assume that the members of a group share certain values, certain personality traits and behave in a predictable way, which is in accordance with the group's expectations. All university professors are expected to be absent-minded, all women are expected to be more sociable and men more active and individual, all Finns are silent, all Italians noisy. Such group labels are unlimited in number and often held unconsciously by members of a given cultural group. They may influence the processes of inferencing and decision making on a subconscious level; very often we are unaware what role they play in our opinion formation in everyday situations. A female job applicant who behaves too assertively and a man whose behaviour is too soft, may be regarded in an work interview as socially deficient and less likeable than men and women whose behaviour is congruent with the prevailing gender stereotypes, and they will be therefore discriminated against in hiring decision. In the same way, an assertive female manager who is expected to apply, according to the stereotype, a more people-oriented style, may be evaluated more negatively than an assertive male manager. People's reactions to counter-stereotypic behaviour is termed the backlash effect. According to Rudman and Fairchild (2004) this kind of social judgment process may, in part, help to promote and maintain cultural stereotypes.

Stereotypes are termed idiosyncratic, if they are used by an individual only, and social or collective, if they are perceptions of an object widely shared by a group of people. Collective stereotypes are generalizations that are assumed to be common among the

members of a given in-group and which concern the members of a given collective, one's own or another, who are assumed to share the same attitudes, personality traits and behavioral predispositions. Like schemata in general, such stereotypes cause the perceiver to erase individual differences among the members of the group: 'All Italians love pizza', 'Every Finn goes to sauna every Saturday', 'All Germans are punctual and precise' etc. Such stereotypes are not abstract generalizations but rather particular, concrete exemplars associated with the group in question.

Another strand of theory suggests that stereotypes are a subgroup of cognitive schemata, generalized, highly abstract beliefs about groups and their members. Example of such stereotypes could be beliefs about gender differences: men are more aggressive while women are socially more sensitive etc. So-called country images often belong to this category. The overall image of the country is like a plus or minus sign before the name of the country to be added to any information on that country. Such concepts as corporate image, reputation, and corporate or product brand typically exploit this kind of stereotyping. If the company or brand has a positive image among the public the plus sign is expected to be added to all information concerning the company or its products.

### **Why stereotypes?**

The formation of stereotypes, or stereotype consensualization, is one of the current objects of interest among scholars in the field of stereotyping. It contains two complementary questions: 1 Where does the content of stereotypes come from, or how do they evolve? and 2 How is consensus among the members of the collective achieved about the content, and what factors facilitate the emergence of, consensual stereotypes? Obviously, the widespread view that stereotypes are based on common direct or indirect experiences with the out-group, cannot explain everything, because in many, if not all cases the group members do not share the same experiences and have not received the same information about the target group (Klein & al. 2003).

It is easier to identify behaviours that tend to maintain stereotypes than it is to find out where stereotypes came from. Stereotypes are maintained and transported by various means of communication: everyday talk, cultural jokes, phrases and conceits, the wording of news items in newspapers, cartoons, films, TV ads; practically all acts of communication can include transparent or embedded cultural stereotypes (see e.g. Pollick 1999) . The wider disseminated a stereotype is in a society, the more inclined the media seems to dispense information confirming that stereotype.

Negative cultural stereotypes and xenophobia may feed each other and give rise to a vicious circle: antagonism towards foreigners gives birth to negative stereotypical attributions, which, in turn, justify and boost negative feelings towards their cultural groups.

One source of stereotypical generalization is the unconscious generalization of the behaviour of one member of a group to the other members of that group. A Finn who has learned to know only one Bulgarian may assume that all Bulgarians share the characteristics of this particular person. According to this model, the subject will unconsciously continue to strengthen such a stereotype if there is no more information available and even in the absence of any evidence which would support the generalization (Hilton & Hippel 1996:245). The stereotypical image of a nation and its inhabitants can be based on one single experience or on dealings with one person only. Such an experience or acquaintance, even if long forgotten, can exert a strong influence on how later contacts with representatives of that culture will be interpreted (cf. Hilton & Hippel 1996:250).

The concept of the stereotype was originally introduced by Walter Lippmann in his classic *Public Opinion*, published in 1922. He uses the concept stereotype, loaned from the letter press technology, used in printing houses at that time, to describe "pictures in head". Lippmann borrowed the word stereotype from the old letter press printing technology where copies of a composed type were made by using papier mache as molds for new printing plates, identical with the original. Today the term is known in everyday usage to mean a

readily available image of a given social group, usually based on rough, often negative generalizations. The original meaning and the metaphoric content of the word has been forgotten by many.

According to Lippmann, people resort to stereotypes because the world that we have to deal with is out of reach, out of sight and out of mind. Thinking about group-relevant social issues often requires reliance on stereotypes because the actions and characteristics of the relevant social groups are too numerous and diffuse to be grasped directly by the senses. (Lippmann 1922:18; Gill 2003:323-324)

Stereotypical thinking is understood to be a fundamental property in the human inferential system. Stereotypical generalizations are often inaccurate, misleading, deceptive, and often irrational but we apply stereotypes nonetheless. McRae & al. (1994) refer to the explanation originally presented by Lippmann (1922) according to which we draw on stereotypes because reality is too complex for any person to represent accurately. According to McRae & al. (1994:45), stereotypical thinking is a result of evolution in the human inferential system. Stereotypes help perceivers to simplify social information and preserve valuable processing resources. By applying stereotypes, perceivers are able to derive viable, although potentially erroneous, impressions about the social environment at very little cognitive cost. In this way they can reduce the complexity of the social environment to be perceived and thus preserve the limited capacity of the cognitive system for the processing of other information.

One of the problems concerning the concept stereotype concerns when that word should be used. Some scholars define a stereotype as a cognitive structure, or a meaning in the head of the individual perceiver, others understand by stereotype a consensus regarding certain beliefs among a group of observers. Accordingly, one line of research sees a stereotype as an individual's beliefs about a given target group while another refers to characteristics attributed to some target group by all members of a collective. If we adopt the latter alternative, the question remains whether a stereotype should be defined as a perception about a given target group, only if it is shared by the majority of members of the observing group.

Stereotypes are social to the extent that they are shared by members of a group, but the concept implies the assumption of some level of consensus: stereotypes are shared perceptions among group members but it is not clear, however, what minimum degree of consensus is required to call a stereotype social (see Krueger 1996); should the same perception be shared by all members of the in-group, or is, for instance 10% enough to justify the word stereotype? This ambiguity in the everyday use of the concept of the collective or cultural stereotype has its parallel in what different writers understand by the word image. For some of them the image of a particular collective is like a mirror image, something that is a part or a projection of the object itself, while others understand images of the object to be pictures in the head of each observer (Sani & Thompson 2001). The former implies that the perceptions of most, if not all, observers are identical; the latter may use the term image even if the contents of the pictures in the minds of different observers may not have much in common.

According to the standard definition, stereotypes are beliefs about the characteristics of members of a certain group. They can either refer to mental representations or real differences between the groups of "us" and "them". Sometimes, indeed, stereotypes may be rather accurate representations of reality, but more usually the concept is used to refer to perceptions which are not understood to be true. Although stereotypes can be positive as well as negative, in everyday usage they are most often understood as irrationally based negative attitudes to certain social groups and their members.

### **Descriptive and evaluative stereotypes**

An individual's perception of self includes different dimensions: S/he has a perception of what he is and what he is like: tall, short, dark-haired, blond, robust or slim and so on. But he

has also perceptions of characteristics which compare him to some other individual: he is taller than another, slower or faster, or duller or wittier than someone else. Like individual self-concept collective self-concept also may in the same way be descriptive or evaluative (cf. Marsh and Hattie 1996). Descriptive self concept comprises stereotypical perceptions of the general characteristics of members of the collective, such as “we are honest”, “we drink too much”, “we are hard-working”, “we are envious”, etc. Although such perceptions may implicitly value the in-group when compared to others, they are more than that: they are also evaluations against some absolute ideal or relative standard based on a more general understanding of the qualities of groups and individuals in general.

Perception of self, and one’s own collective can also be evaluative in character. Evaluative components of the collective self-concept are descriptions which compare some quality of one’s reference group with the respective qualities of some significant group of others. The point of comparison in the case of the national or cultural self may be the neighboring country, some belittled or admired country or cultural group, or ‘the international standard’ in general. Typical evaluative constituents of self are perceptions such as ‘members of my collective are educated/ quiet/poor’ etc. which imply a comparison to some significant other. Most often a characterization will include both aspects: descriptive and evaluative. When, for instance, members of a collective are described as honest, this refers to a general virtue but may at the same time be based on the conscious or subconscious comparison of the collective to an outgroup which is known to be less honest in their behavior.

### **Classifying cultural stereotypes**

In each country there are some regions the inhabitants of which are assumed to share some special characteristics. In Finland, for instance, people of the Häme region in the middle of southern Finland are presumed to be extremely silent and reticent, people in the East more talkative and sociable, and the inhabitants of Ostrobothnia towards the Finnish west coast, serious and aggressive. People may have such generalizations even about inhabitants of the neighbouring village. In many countries people also tell jokes about their stupid neighbours and in this way transfer the stereotypes to new generations (Lehtonen 2002).

In an intercultural setting, one of the goals of the participant is getting to know the attitudes and personality of the other party. In this process s/he applies both evidence and his/her existing beliefs about the members of that cultural group. These beliefs are cultural stereotypes. Stereotypes can equally concern one’s own group or the other – these are called respectively auto- and hetero-stereotypes – but members of a given group may also hold common conceptions about the other party’s stereotypical assumptions about themselves – or about the respective other party. Because the person in this case is projecting his/her 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 now 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 and honest but at the same time may think that the Swedes consider the Finns to be drunks, backward and simple, and that the Swedes consider themselves to be more educated ‘better people’ while for the Finn they are boastful and cold. (see Lehtonen 1994a)

The projected auto-stereotype as a concept is a synonym for the concept ‘construed external image’, which Dutton et al. (here according to Soenen & Moingeon 2002:21) defines

as what a member of a collective believes outsiders think about the collective. It also seems to equal, in actual practice, the concept of attributed identity, which, according to Soenen and Moingeon (2002:20), is made up of attributes that are ascribed to the organization by its various audiences. The same perception has also been called 'perceived external prestige' which represents how an employee thinks outsiders view his or her organization and thus him or herself as a member thereof. Gudykunst and Bond (1980: 132) argue that stereotypes about the characteristics of out-group members may not be as effective as inter-group emotions in predicting attitudes towards the out-group: stereotypes about the characteristics of the other in part determine our emotional reactions to members of some other group which then more directly influence our attitude towards that group.

Stereotypes of other countries or cultures are typically exaggerations of actual differences between cultures. Negative stereotyping means that all members of the target culture are assumed to share the same kind of personality and attitude structures. In the case of negative projected stereotyping members of a given nationality assume that all members of the target culture have negative stereotypical prejudices concerning them: 'We think that your thoughts about us are negative.' Such projected prejudices often assume 'the worst', they are typically more negative than the others' real hetero-stereotypes about the country or culture in question (Lehtonen 1994b).

## **Perceptual biases**

In situations where we observe the behaviour of an out-group member we try to draw conclusions about the person's characteristics and to find explanations for the question why he behaves as he does. According to Greenberg and Baron (1997:54-) we tend to make inferences about a person's disposition, traits and characteristics on the basis of what we have observed of their actions.

Cultural/national stereotypes are both descriptive and prescriptive in nature: they are perceivers' shared beliefs about the characteristics of the target group but 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 expectations about the other party and as a reference in the judging of the other party's behaviour. Attribution theory has often been used to explain what happens in contact situations between representatives of different cultures. According to the classical theory of attribution, people tend to assign causes to important instances, especially where these concern success and failure in the social world. In initial interactions with strangers, the way we perceive the other person's motives and intentions and how we adapt our own behaviour to these perceptions determines whether the contact results in failure or success. In this process, or even more than that, in the process of making a decision whether to contact the other party or not, stereotypes play a role: they determine the assumed characteristics of the stranger's personality and his expected attitude and serve as a kind of null-hypothesis for our attributions.

Greenberg and Baron (1997:76ff) list five perceptual biases which together with the human tendency of stereotyping may distort the image of the target collective or its members. These are: 1. the fundamental attribution error, 2. the Halo effect, 3. the similar-to-me effect, 4. the first impression error, and 5. the phenomenon of selective perception.

The concept fundamental attribution error refers to people's tendency to explain another's actions in terms of his or her traits instead of finding the explanation in the situation and environment. Usually people find the causes of the unusual behaviour of an in-group member in the environment but for the out-group member in the person: they assume something about his or her personality and his or her motives and often these assumptions are based on generalizations concerning the national or cultural group to which he or she belongs (see Samovar & Porter 1997:346). The Halo effect means a tendency for our overall negative or positive impressions of some people or objects to be applied to their specific traits or qualities, and even to things about which we have no knowledge. This phenomenon

is often applied to brand and corporate advertising. If the advertiser succeeds in creating a positive overall image of the brand or the company, customers are expected to relate in the same positive way to all new products introduced under the same brand name. Applied to country images the halo-effect would mean that once a country has acquired a negative or positive overall image in the eyes of the observers they tend to add this negativity or positivity to all products, for instance, which come from that country. The similar-to-me effect, in turn, refers to people's tendency to assume that the other party has the same beliefs, values, and habits and interpret phenomena in the same way as the observer him or herself. This is unlikely to be true in any interpersonal contact, but believing that the other party sees things in the same way as we do, may be one of the greatest obstacles to successful intercultural interactions. The problem is that "I use my meanings to make sense out of your reality" (Adler 1986:61).

The fourth obstacle listed by Greenberg and Baron, the first impression error, refers to the tendency to base our judgments of others on our earlier impressions of them. This error, equally, may be fatal for international perceptions. We form our impression of another nation or people on the basis of the first person from that country we learned to know and assume that all people in that country are alike. The last but not least in the list by Greenberg and Baron is selective perception. This concept refers to the tendency of individuals to focus on certain aspects of their environment while ignoring others.

Stereotypes typically act as knowledge structures which make people see certain characteristics in the target culture and ignore others. Expectations drive our attention as observers. The stereotypes steer our attention in the same way as some object that we are looking for. When we walk down the street, for instance, just to get to a certain address, we may not be able to tell how many barber shops we passed. But if we walk along the same street to find one, our attention is tuned to see the signs of barber shops hanging above us.

Cultural stereotypes work in the same way: they focus our attention on certain features, amplify them in our observation, and offer interpretation to our observation. In this way, we see what we are taught to see, and our observations at the same time also confirm the stereotype. Having stereotypes leads one sometimes even to see things that are not really there, or to give meaning to some behaviour of the other which he or she did not mean to communicate. Concepts activated by stereotypes can influence not only a collective's members' interpretations of others' behaviour but also of their own behaviour, and make them act according to the stereotype.

It is easy to imagine how, initiated by the stereotype, the five biases together may result in a truly vicious circle. An observer may have learned about Finns that they are silent. If this is the only piece of information s/he has about these people he or she makes a kind of null hypothesis: all Finns are silent. When seated opposite a Finn at a dinner table his attention will be attuned to look for silent sequences in his communicative behavior. When these are discovered he attributes meaning to them according to the similar-to-me principle: I keep quiet when I hesitate or don't know what to say. The corresponding inference will be 'the Finn behaves like that because and does not know what to say'. As a foreigner he probably is slow-witted. In this way the silent behavior was attributed to the person and the generalized characteristics of the individual members of the culture, not to some external causes such as a cultural rule, for instance, that in that country talking at the dinner table may be less usual or even perceived as misconduct.

Stereotypes about the characteristic 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 behave towards you in a hostile way because I assume you to have hostile attitudes towards my culture. What may make such a setting calamitous is the projected similarity phenomenon: we assume that the other party feels and thinks in the same way as we do, which he does not!

We are generally unaware of just how much our interpretations are biased, not only by stereotypical prejudices towards the other party but also by the values, norms, and conventions of our own culture. At the same time, however, we assume that the other party

assumes, imagines and perceives in the same way as we do. However, such attributions are not usually isomorphic, and it is only isomorphic attributions that enable correct inference of the other's communication and behaviour and enable us to see the issue from the perspective of the other.

### **Changing harmful stereotypes**

How fatal are stereotypes for the interactions between individuals or between various groups of people, such as nations? To what extent are the actions of a person who meets a representative of a given target collective towards which he has negative stereotypical assumptions steered by those stereotypes? Earlier, stereotypes were understood to be detrimental to intercultural communication and the elimination of stereotypes was believed to be a prerequisite to successful intercultural exchange. Both the theory and research assumed that the use of stereotypes was a result of prejudice and hostility toward the stereotyped group (Wyers and Adaval 2003). The elimination of stereotypes was widely understood to be a prerequisite for inter-group harmony (Gudykunst and Bond 1997:129-130). According to the web-text ([www.free-definition](http://www.free-definition)), negative stereotyping is a key feature in prejudice, such as racism, sexism etc. The same idea could be read, among others, in the preface of the book "Stereotyping and prejudice" by Bar-Tal and others (1989:1): "...the study of stereotyping and prejudice reflects an interest in inter-group relationships. While we recognize that a discussion of inter-group relationship may focus on behaviours describing actions such as confrontations, violence, wars, cooperation, alliance, negotiation, or coordination, we also believe that each of these inter-group behaviours is mediated by perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes." Yum (1998) has collected some definitions which emphasize the detrimental nature of stereotypes:

- Stereotypes are a set of attributes agreed on as typical of the group but conforming very little to actual behaviours or facts (Campbell 1933)
- stereotypes are inferior judgmental processes that can distort the real picture of out-group behaviour and exaggerate inter-group differences (Campbell 1971)
- stereotypes are relatively simple, generally rigid cognitions of social groups that function to "blind" the individual to neutral and informed judgment (ibidem).

Are stereotypes bad or good? As such, stereotypes are not bad or good, but they can influence intercultural interactions in different ways: an observer tends to favour information which is consistent with existing expectancies, and tends to ignore, or reject information which is inconsistent with those 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 also resistant to change. Experiences at variance with the stereotype usually do not change the stereotype but are interpreted as exceptions.

Stereotypes may sometimes be harmful both for the perceiver and for the targets of stereotyping. However, eliminating stereotypes is not possible, or, if it were done it would be detrimental to human cognition. Stereotypes as such are just cognitive schemata, typical of the human cognitive system, which assume a set of characteristic to all members of a given social group, and serve 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 making sense of them.

The findings of Gill (2003) seem to suggest that the role of group stereotypes as a predictor of how the individual is perceived may have been exaggerated in many practical course books on communication. According to Gill, stereotypes have a stronger effect on group-directed judgments than on individual-directed judgments. When people make judgments about individual group members in real-life contacts, they tend to set their stereotypes aside but nevertheless continue to use them when making judgments about the group. One explanation for this tendency, which Gill calls individual-group dissociation, may be the fact that an individual activates in the perceiver not only broad social categories such



as collective stereotypes but also more specific categories like personality or some particular traits, etc. (Gill 2003: 341).

One general finding in social psychological experiments is the fact that people tend to maintain their stereotypes even if they are exposed to stereotype-mismatching information. The fact that stereotypes are hard to change is to be expected if we keep in mind that they are cognitive structures which facilitate our making sense of the complex stimuli in our social environment. Stereotypes are part of a person's world view, values and knowledge structure. If these were to change with each disconfirming piece of information the consequences for the mental structure of the individual would be disastrous. The finding of Johnston and Macrae (1994) that stereotype reduction in a group is greater when incongruent information is dispersed across many mildly disconfirming group members than when it is concentrated in a few highly disconfirming members, is in accordance with this reasoning. It seems that if stereotypes are to be changed, the salami method, as it is known in persuasion theory, is more effective than the door-in-the-face technique because people ignore or reject solitary stereotype-inconsistent experiences but shift their opinions if submitted to continual stereotype-disconfirming experiences.

### **Organizational identity and image as organizational stereotypes**

Among the five facets of corporate identity described by Balmer (2002), i.e. actual, ideal, desired, communicated and conceived, the last two are of interest in the context of stereotypes and images. By conceived identity Balmer and his colleagues understand the perceptions that the relevant stakeholder groups have of the corporation: corporate image, reputation, and brand associations. Communicated identity in Balmer's model is made up of all those messages which the corporation sends to its audiences through the different channels of corporate communication: advertising, sponsorship, public relations, etc.

The meanings of concepts such as corporate image, identity, reputation and corporate brand are intertwined with each other. Images determine people's attitudes and behavior; they are experiences which take place in people's minds, and which are experienced by the various publics of an organization (Ind 1997:2-; Vos 1996:23-). The same ambiguity as was found in the use of the concept stereotype is still more stridently found in the use of the word image in the business literature. Some writers imply that image and reputation are qualities of the organization while others understand both to be the observer's perceptions of some qualities of the corporation. Also, the concept identity has been given meanings that differ from the standard definition. Some scholars or organization science define organizational culture as meaningful interpretations of values and beliefs, identity as a deliberately worded set of core values, profile as the deliberately communicated business idea, and image as interpretations of the distinctiveness and business idea of the company. Others start with definitions which are close to the standard definitions of the concepts: personality means what the company is, identity what the company says it is, and image what the stakeholders think it is.

The duality of the concept 'image' becomes evident in the literature on country images. One strand of research and public discussion understands by country image the qualities associated with the country and its inhabitants, another - at least implicitly - understands by country image the picture that can be construed by analyzing the news and discussion on the country in question that appear in the media, including the intentional propaganda or 'public information' put out by the country itself (cf. Kunczik 1997).

From the point of view of stakeholder thinking, both perspectives are inadequate. An object, be it a country or a company, does not have a uniform image but many images composed of the impressions, reminders, and factual information relevant to each stakeholder party. It is far less probable that any collective, whether a life-style group within the society, a business organization, or a country, will have a coherent and uniform image among its different stakeholders. The image of a tourist, an exporter, or a representative of an international organization like UNESCO or Red Cross, associated with some country will

certainly be different from each other. However, the impressions common to 'average' people have been the object of many studies. In most cases, what has been listed under the title 'country image' have been simple auto- and hetero-stereotypes about countries and their inhabitants (see, e.g. Hill 1992: 26). In the political sciences the concept of image, especially that of enemy image, has been treated, in practice, as a synonym for stereotype, meaning a simplistic picture of the other group's motivations in both substantive and normative terms (Alexander & al. 1999:79). The image describes the enemy as monolithic to protect the self-image of the in-group member from moral constraints.

Many writers see stereotypes as rigid generalities that members of a society impose on others with whom they are unfamiliar or do not understand. The less we know about the other the more we hang onto stereotypes. If the stereotype is well-grounded and justifiable it may help us to orient ourselves in the situation, but if it is unjust and loaded with negative emotions it will inevitably harm the interaction. 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. In addition, the salience of the constituents of cultural stereotype may change with time and context. Some particular features may be enacted at different intensities in different contexts but in another context these features may have no relevance at all. In general, stereotypes are not useful in intercultural interaction because they do not accurately predict either party's behaviour.

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. A generalization made by a scholar that people in one culture are more collectivistic than in another is naturally also a stereotypical statement. Osland and Bird (1998) call the 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 to help to reduce the complexity of a culture but it is still a stereotype which may constrain understanding of the behaviour of the others as much as it may facilitate real cultural understanding.

### **Self-esteem and self handicapping stereotypes**

The same kind of differences exist between national selves as between individuals: some may have a more positive image of their own culture than others, some nations may be more aware of their cultural characteristics than others and some more sensitive, or more reactive to the nation's social environment than others (Laine-Sveiby 1987). A normal strategy for enhancing the social identity of one's own country would be to compare it with foreign cultures on dimensions that allow for a positive outcome. It is typical of minority cultures with high degree of collective self-esteem to apply a strategy which denies or shuts out external criticism. But if the culture is characterized by a low collective self-esteem, its members tend to set the bar unrealistically high and seek countries or cultures to be compared to, or dimensions of comparison, which result in negative evaluations. For members of such cultures the 'international standard' typically means something above what they have in their own culture. One could hypothesize that members of a nation which is culturally more sensitive, or more reactive to negative signals from the social environment of their country, would be more prone to apply stereotype formations which are meant to protect the culture, or the cultural self-esteem of the member of the culture. Low collective self-esteem may, however, turn this picture upside down.

When confronting others, people observe their communication partners and try to conclude something about their personality, mood and attitudes. What traits will be inferred depends, according to the study by Vigboldus & al.(2004), much on the stereotypes the observer holds about the object, and on the level of the cognitive load of the observer.

Under high cognitive load, when processing capacity is low, stereotypes were found to be especially likely to guide the observer's social perception. This means that stereotypes are likely to be activated in situations where cognitive resources are depleted (Vigboldus & al. 2004:295-296; cf. Sherman & al. 2004).

Self-esteem refers to how people evaluate themselves. The term collective self-esteem refers to how individual members of a collective feel about their membership of the collective (Luhtanen 1992). There is lot of evidence which suggests that activation of stereotypes has to do with the self-esteem of the perceiver. According to these theories a subject who experiences his self-esteem as threatened uses stereotypes as a means of making him or herself feel better through downward social comparison (Hilton&Hippel 1996:239).

The idea that stereotypes become activated when self-esteem is felt to be threatened, seems to be in tune with the mortality salience hypotheses developed by Kinga Williams (2004) in her recent conference paper. According to this hypothesis, developed in the framework of the psychopathology associated with migration, the more we feel that our life is in danger, the less we tolerate other cultures, and the less we tolerate or feel tolerated by other cultures, the more we feel that our life is in danger.

Traditionally, research on self-concept has focused on personal identity, but yet ignoring the role of membership of social groups as a part of one's self-concept or identity. The collective self includes aspects of self-concept that relate, for example, to race, ethnic background, religion, feelings of belonging in one's community, and the like. Collective identity may be positive or negative according to the evaluations of the collective rather than the individuals' personal attributions or achievements. Accordingly, collective self-esteem denotes the positive or negative values allocated one's own social group but not the individual's esteem of his or her personal characteristics and achievements (Luhtanen 1992:302-). According to the better-than-average effect people tend to view themselves as above average on positive characteristics but below average on negative characteristics. Unrealistically positive self-views are often reflected in biases favouring positive rather than negative self-relevant information. In order to protect their positive self-esteem people tend to view positive personality traits as more descriptive of themselves than others and negative personality traits as more descriptive of others than themselves (Silvera and Seger 2004). The same also holds true with respect to positive self as a member of a collective. If, however, our collective self-esteem is negative we may tend to attribute the eventual success of our collective to external causes but failures, as we interpret them, to internal causes. Under these circumstances we also attempt to protect our self-esteem and our public image by calling attention to external circumstances that seem to reasonably explain the maladjusted behaviour of members of our collective.

When we suffer of low self-esteem and feel that our image is threatened in the eyes of an outsider we provide ourselves with an out: we apply the self-handicapping strategy. According to Sanna and Mark (1995:84) self-handicaps are pre-emptively acquired or claimed impediments to successful performance that are designed to manipulate the attributional ambiguity of an evaluation. Self-handicapping strategies are designed to reduce the responsibility for a potential failure and to enhance the responsibility for a potential success (Shepperd and Arkin 1989). In the context of cultural comparison information offered to the other about one's own collective may serve the self-handicapping function. Before the outsider has taken note of some circumstance which the member of the collective suspects is disadvantageous for the collective's reputation, the member of the collective will alert the outsider to the issue and provide him with an explanation for it. A Finn, for instance, who worries that the outsider regards his Nordic country with suspicion, may hurry to tell the foreigner how dark, cold and stormy it may be in the winter, or how silent and taciturn the people in that country are. Here the Finn applies the self-handicapping strategy to protect the image of his culture % it is better that I tell him this before he finds it out himself; in this way no worse damage than this will be done. In fact, by the self-handicapping strategy he sabotages the image of his country and culture by focusing attention on negative phenomena and offering the observer a negative explanation for his observations (Lehtonen 1994a). Negative projected national auto-stereotype, or one's negative assumption about the

attitudes of the outsider towards one's country and culture, combined with low collective self-confidence, makes the representative of the culture to offer a self-handicapping explanation to the observer. In this way the individual also seeks to protect his or her own collective self.

For an individual or nation which suffers from weak self-confidence, the assumption that outsiders have negative images serves as a kind of collective ego protection. The threat to the social self resulting from the incongruity between what one is and what one wishes to be, is brought under control by creating exaggeratedly negative assumptions about oneself as seen by others: 'Things cannot be worse than this, so whatever I hear about myself after having handicapped myself will not hurt me any more'.

\* \* \*

Cultural stereotypes, generalized perceptions about certain traits and qualities of the members of a cultural group, do not come from a vacuum. There is always some kernel of truth in them. Stereotyping may be a relative minor part of national or cultural identity, or in the way how a national group defines itself by reference to those outside the group (cf. Armstrong 1996). What may make stereotyping and the use of stereotypes sometimes detrimental, is the fact that stereotypical inferencing most often takes place on a subconscious level.

In fact, the concept of a stereotype, as it is used in everyday communication, is a stereotypical one. In reality, the concept of the cultural stereotype is a more complex phenomenon than just a perception of some other group of people shared by the members of a collective. Stereotypes of the self and others are essential constituents of collective identity, what we are and what we are not. Expectations about others', and one's own in-group members' personalities, their intentions and their motives have their expression in cultural stereotypes, which also define the identity of the in-group itself.

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