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Social Stereotypes as a Tool of Reality Perception

Key words: *social stereotypes, cognitive analyses, behavior, stereotyping, individual perception.*

Annotation: *Social stereotypes as a tool of reality perception are analyzed in the article. As we know the mechanisms of the human psychics functioning throughout the life cause formation of a certain willingness to perceive objects and events in any way. By themselves, the events of life are not unambiguous. Their perception by the person depends on many factors: age and gender-specific, ethnic, cultural, ideological aspects, the presence of life experience, logical thinking and others.*

Facing with someone, belonging to a certain age group, profession, ethnicity, social or political status, we a priori expect from this person certain behavior and we evaluate concrete person by how he meets this standard.

For example, a group of young people dressed in accordance with the latest trend direction, dancing at nightclub to the "funk" or "techno" is perceived quite adequately. However, people of retirement age in buggy jeans and Converse sneakers, dynamically moving to the "trans" or "hardcore", arouse a whole range of emotions - from surprise to dislike. Or another example – representatives of such professions as firemen, stuntmen or tigers tamers are always associated with courage, fearlessness and resolve, but ballerinas or figure skaters – with elegance and grace.

People used to see what is happening, to interpret its essence in a certain way and give their assessment based on their evaluative prism through which they look at the world. Even such option as the ability to abstract away and get beyond the standard thinking - could affect the view of the situation from a different angle of view. For instance, the statement that a person can walk on the ceiling without any special tools seems absurd - we are not ready to accept this information as a truth. However, if we imagine that we are in a room on the second storey, and someone near us is moving along the floor, then for those, who located on the storey below, this one is moving along the ceiling, because the surface, which we percept as a flour, is a ceiling for those, who is situated a storey below. The above-mentioned example refers to the stereotypical perception of spatial reality.

Stereotyping is mechanically bringing of difficult individual event, which is correctly or incorrectly characterizes a type of such events, to compliance with simple general formula or shape. For example, "Inhabitation in small towns is safer than in megalopolises. N*** - is a small town, so it is safe to live there".

Stereotype - is an opinion about properties of people and events, which is not based on the direct evaluation of each phenomenon, but derived from standardized judgments and expectations.

Social stereotypes – are simplified, schematized images of social facilities, shared by a sufficiently big number of social groups' members.

For the first time the term "stereotype" was used by Walter Lippmann - a classic of American journalism in 1922 in his book "Public Opinion" (1). He wrote about stereotype as the method with the help of which society tries to categorize people. Lippmann identified four aspects of stereotypes. Subsequently, many other grades were suggested, but they largely corresponded to the ideas of Lippmann.

Firstly, the stereotypes are always simpler than reality – the most complex characteristics within the stereotype as a rule are expressed in two or three sentences: "Today's youth prefers social networks instead of natural conversation and doesn't listen to classical music, but Rock and RnB".

Secondly, people often gain the stereotypes from outside and don't formulate them themselves on the base of the personal experience. As the example we can demonstrate a conception about ideal girl: she must be skinny, with perfect appearance and long legs. But it's clear that just top models correspond to this ideal.

Thirdly, all stereotypes are false in larger or smaller degree. They always prefix the concrete person the features, which he is obliged to possess only because of his membership in some group: "Children of rich people are pampered, selfish and lazy ones, because they had got everything from early childhood.

Fourthly, stereotypes are very robust. Even though people make sure that stereotype doesn't correspond to reality, they prone not to abandon it, but confirm that exception only confirms the rule. For instance, meeting with unkind fat man only convinces the adherent of the stereotype that all the rest fat men are good-tempered people.

In the following decades the notion "stereotype" is more often interpreted in scientific society as rigid, simplified and prejudicle generalization. Such determination was shared by G. Allport in his research work "Nature of the prejudice", which had become an important constituent in formation of the stereotype theory (2).

Up to 60-s of XX century researchers of stereotypes had been interested in the answer to question - in what measure they correspond to reality. Then in the next decades study of stereotype's contents leaves on the sidelines, and other problem becomes actual - identification the reasons and functions of stereotyping, as well as possible ways of the stereotype change.

Many theories of the stereotype's study were offered in the three-quarter of a century. First of all, it's necessary to distinguish the theories, in which stereotyping is explained by existence of stereotypes at a rate of culture in general, and theories, in which accent on the individual particularities of personality is done. Last years differences between these two approaches disappear: supporters of cultural approach acknowledge importance of the individual perception and vice versa.

Amongst theories of the individual perception is a theory of authoritarian personality by T. Adorno and his colleagues – E. Frenkel-Brunswik, D.J. Levinson, R.N. Sanford (3). T. Adorno and his colleagues supposed that stereotyping, being a cognitive process, inherent only special

type to personality with such typical features as authoritarianism and intolerance. In addition, in accordance with their scientific ideas, stereotypes are forms, in which such authoritarian personality, driven by unconscious motives, tries to see the world.

Cognitive approaches remove stereotyping from regularities of the cognition process: accent is done on process of the perception and subsumption. H. Tajfel, D. Taylor, S.T. Fiske, T.K. Trailer, D.M. Mackie, D.L. Hamilton and others, shared the same scientific ideas.

According to cognitive approach, a person cannot consider every group as unique one, so he has to rely upon stereotypes, which already include necessary information. Subsumption is conditioned by personality's need in creation exactly these presentations, which are acceptable in its physical and social environment and which are projection of this personality's valuables. From this point of view, stereotypes can't be considered irrational, as they reflect rational selectivity of perceiver.

Possibility of stereotypes' inexactnesses is recognized too - cognitive process itself is imperfect and mistakes are possible. Different aspects of stereotyping are emphasized in different conceptions within the frame of cognitive approach: the value of the individual perception and social reproduction of stereotypes, role of valuables, knowledge, experience, expectations in perception of out-groups.

Separate mentioning deserves position of H. Tajfel, who, on one hand, was an adherent of cognitive approach and on another hand interpreted the stereotypes within the frame of intergroup relations and theories of the conflict (4). In accordance with H. Tajfel's theory, stereotypes are defined by perception of people in terms of their group belonging. As a result of subsumption accenting of group difference process between "I" and "Other" takes place, and then, on the base of this process, discrimination of out-groups occurs.

Stereotypes present themselves function of the interaction between "I" and "Other", they are movable, situational and depend on the context of intergroup relations. H. Tajfel supposes that changes of stereotypes are possible just through changes of intergroup relations.

In 1947 within the frame of "Tensions affecting international understanding" UNESCO project a study with sample in thousand people in 9 countries was organized. Researchers supposed that stereotypes if they aren't the reason of origin - than maintenance and intensification of intergroup conflicts. Therefore, it was expected that if people are better informed about stereotypes as often wrong and not always full images of their own and the other nation, that these images will be replaced by more exact knowledge about people. It will result in weakening of the international tension.

One of the leading directions of the research within the frame of project became development of as it is called "hypothesis of the contact", which is based on the suggestion that direct conversation in certain conditions promotes the improvement of social stereotypes and destroys the prejudices.

But even at observance of majority conditions, favoring to contacts (the groups have the equal status, general purposes requiring cooperation, and comply with the united code of the rules), got results allow to doubt that meeting and acquaintance with representatives of other big group inevitably lead to credit them more positive characteristics.

At present the social psychologists understand, that such influence must touch not only stereotypes, but also wider sphere of intergroup relations, including behavior, social attitudes and other.

In accordance with the opinion of British social psychologist M. Hewstone, three aspects of the contact provide the positive effect. Firstly, in situation of the contact-perceiving subjects begin to acknowledge the differences between members of the someone else's group. Secondly, "spreading" of positive attitudes favours usage of information, which doesn't confirm initial stereotype. Thirdly, the increasing of interpersonal contacts with acknowledgement that "one's own" and "one's else" have many similar characteristics and valuables, results to changes in perception of value of social categories for individuals' classification (5).

In history of stereotypes' research it should be noted scientific work of E. Said (6), in which he voiced a problem of stereotype images of "East" and "West" in organization of the modern world order, as well as research work of H. Bhabha (7), in which function of the stereotype as primary instrument of the subjectivation in colonial discourse is revealed.

In the Soviet psychology to the end of 50-s the term "stereotype" hadn't been used, though problem of the study of person's behavior pattern was raised. Yuri Sorokin defines the stereotype as some process and result of the contact (behavior) according to certain semiotic models, which list is closed because of one or other semiotics-technological principles, accepted at a certain society.

It's possible to expect that stereotyping (as result) is acknowledged by individual in the form of such aspectual notions as standard and rate. Moreover standard is a realization of certain semiotic and/or technological model on social and social-psychological levels, but rate is a realization of such model on language and psychological levels.

Such understanding of notions allows delimiting language and non-language behavior, and on this base, it is possible to draw a conclusion that standard is non-language, social-psychological reality, existing on language level, expressed by rate. And stereotype is a general notion, including itself both rate, and standard (8).

Last decade of XX century in social psychology approaches, which are aimed at goal-directed suppression of negative stereotype, have got the development. Mentioned approaches as well as are aimed to change the behavior, founded on coordinated social stereotypes, on actions, in the base of which personal convictions present. Their supporters found on conception of researcher from the USA - P.G. Devine. According to this conception, stereotypes are inevitably actuated in situation of the perception of the representative of the other group, in spite of any attempts to ignore them.

In models of the negative stereotype reduction it is emphasized that free from prejudices "answers" to stereotypes require from person, perceiving representatives of "one else" groups, knowledge about his close-mindedeness and longings to change his own convictions coming from valuables of equality, fairness, feeling of the blame, pangs of remorse and etc (9).

As the analysis of scientific approaches shows, social stereotypes are an integral element of the ordinary consciousness. Nobody is able by himself to respond creatively all situations meeting him in everyday life. Stereotype, accumulating some standardized collective experience and

inspired to individual in process of the education and contacts with others, helps him to orientate in life and by certain way directs his behavior.

For separate person, adopted stereotypes of his own group, they execute the important function of the simplification and reduction of the perception process of the other person or phenomena. Stereotype can be considered as instrument of "rough adjustment", allowing individual "to spare" psychological resources.

On the base of the stereotype's shaping is information about differences and peculiarities of the representatives of different sex, age, appearance, nationality, profession and other signs. Person gets this information from his own experience, from the other people, mass media. However, it is necessary to emphasize that person himself and the other sources of information, which he uses, are subjected to influence of different kind of distorting phenomenon, reducing the accuracy of social perception. Some of mentioned phenomenon has direct attitude to stereotypes' shaping.

For example, phenomenon of stereotypes' excessive generality results in that real existing small differences are very much exaggerated. Valuing people, individual is attracted to exaggerate the resemblance inside group and differences between groups. Therefore, usually representatives of male are prefixed confidence, power, bravery and dominance, and representatives of female - a tenderness, weakness, indecision and aptitude to compassion. However, as among men we often can meet characterless and unman like persons, so among women – there are enough volitional and purposeful ones.

Phenomenon of single bright information influences more to shaping of stereotypes, than more extensive and exact information, but herewith not so emotional. Therefore, description of the cruel crime, made by person of nationality "n", will promote shaping of corresponding stereotype in greater degree, than statistical table, from which it's clear that most percent of the crimes are made by persons of nationality "m".

Phenomenon of stereotypes' stability is provided that information corresponding to stereotype, promotes its strengthening, and discordant information - is ignored. Moreover, in the same information it is possible to find the acknowledgement to opposite stereotypes.

At present days in accordance to essence of stereotype as before there are many free-answer questions, however psychologists reconverge in opinion that social stereotype executes the objective necessary function, allowing quickly and enough safely to categorize, simplify the social encirclement of the individual, and consideration of social stereotype just at positive or only at negative side is, at least once, not objective.

On base of conducted analysis stated below conclusions can be formulated.

Stereotype - is comparatively firm, generalising image or number of characteristics (often false), which, in accordance of majority people opinion are peculiar to representatives of their own cultural and language space, or representatives of other nations. It is the cultural-deterministic presentation, existing both in the form of mental image and verbal enclosure.

On the other hand, stereotype – is a process and result of the communication (behaviour) according to determined semiotic models, stable reiterative chains (templates, patterns) of the thoughts, feeling and actions.

Stereotype can be true and false. It can cause both positive and negative emotions. Its essence is in expression of relationship, attitude of concrete social group to certain event.

Stereotypes - are initial ways for us to perceive and respond to situations. In some sense, it is our way to think, look and respond to the world.

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