Stereotypes Communication

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Abstract

We live in a world, which is becoming a Global Village in which information and communication attract people's attention more than ever before. Our desire to communicate with strangers and our relationships with them depend on the degree to which we are effective in communicating with them. There are so many factors restricting or improving people's communication. This essay gives an analysis based on one factor called stereotypes. In intercultural research, the influence of stereotypes on people's behaviors in communication is a very important issue to take into account. This paper aims to illustrate stereotypes from the aspects of their social and psychological perspectives, great influence on people's communication, the problems they may cause, and some solutions.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Communication, Social, Psychological, Problems, Solution

1. Definition of Stereotypes

Stereotypes simply mean cognitive representations of another group that influence our feelings toward members of that group. Lippman (1922) refers to stereotypes as "pictures in our heads." He points out stereotypes have both a cognitive and affective component:

Stereotyping is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a shortcut. It is all these things and more. It is a guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with feelings that are attached to them. (pp. 63-64)

2. Two Aspects of Stereotypes

2.1 If we can make accurate stereotypes, then our cultural-level predictions about strangers' behavior can also be accurate.

Stereotypes, in and of themselves, do not lead to miscommunication and /or communication breakdown. To some extent, people's assumption to others leads to stereotypes. The accuracy of our predictions depends on whether the traits that we include in our stereotype of another group are similar to the ones in that group's stereotype of its own group (i.e., are our stereotypes valid?). If the traits we apply to another group agree with the traits members of that group apply to themselves, our stereotype should lead to accurate interpretations of the behavior of members of the group who are typical. When we place someone in a category, our stereotype of people in that category helps us predict his or her behavior. In other words, we are able to reduce our uncertainty because we assume that our stereotypes tell us how typical group members communicate (Krauss & Fussell, 1991). If the other person has informed us of his or her category membership, our predictions may be accurate. For example, the distinctiveness of Chinese cultural characteristics has been recognized in these ways. Chinese are often described as: emotionally more reserved, introverted, fond of tranquility, overly considerate, socially overcautious, habituated to self-restraint and so forth. (Young, 1994) If one says that he is a typical Chinese, then we can make some accurate predictions of his or her behavior if our stereotypes of people from China differentiate Chinese from Japanese. If our stereotype does not include this differentiation, then our predictions will probably not be accurate.

2.2 Inaccurate stereotypes often lead to misunderstanding.

In Hewstone and Giles' model, miscommunication is framed as the result of inaccurate negative stereotyping, usually the dissolution of group relationship. If our stereotypes are inaccurate, we cannot make correct attributions about

strangers' behavior.

As for this point, we tend to use group identities to crystallize into recognizable patterns of communicative behavior. But very often, features of other's communicative (behavior) styles are judged inappropriately. Ronen (1979) says that one's religion, mother tongue, culture, also one's education, class, sex, skin color, even one's height, age, and family situation are all potentially unifying factors. But the cues we use are not always accurate ways to categorize others (i.e., an inaccurate categorization occurs when we put someone in a category in which he or she would not place herself or himself). Individual members of a group may or may not fit a stereotype we have of that group. If we categorize strangers who so not identify strongly with their ethnic group and who do identify strongly with their culture on the basis of their ethnicity, our prediction will probably be inaccurate. That will cause inaccurate stereotypes. For example, compared with American people, English people are considered cold and not very open; Making friends with them takes a very long time; They like a certain distance when talking, etc. But things usually turn out to be much more complex (e.g. include a large number of traits in the stereotype and differentiate subgroups within the group being stereotyped).

Another source of inaccuracy in our predictions based on our stereotypes is that the boundaries between many social groups are fuzzy (Clark & Marshall, 1981). For example, what is the boundary between educated and uneducated people? Or between young and old? Even skin color may not be a good predictor of category membership. There are, for instance, light-colored African Americans who look like European Americans. These individuals may be categorized as European American solely on the basis of skin color. They may, however, identify strongly with being African American. Similarly, dark-skinned African Americans may not identify strongly with their ethnic group. When communicating with strangers, we might categorize them on the basis of one group membership (e.g., ethnicity) and assume that their social identities based on this category are influencing their behavior. The strangers, however, may be basing their behavior on a different social identity (i.e., social class, gender). For instance, Angela was born in Korea but has been living in Canada for a long time. She thinks two different cultures shaped her a lot. She has two names: Angela and Sun-Kyung. "There are times when I think that I have two personalities. Depending on where I am and whom I'm with. I would wave hello to my teachers, but bow to my parents' Korean friends when they visited our home." Obviously, predictions about their behavior based on skin color, or something else are inaccurate.

To sum up, even if others are typical members of the group in which we categorize them, the inferences we make about them on the basis of their group membership may not be accurate. There are two reasons for it: One is that our stereotypes may not be valid (i.e., our stereotypes of their group are different from their stereotypes of the group); the other reason is that the group membership we are using to categorize them may not be affecting their behavior in the current situation. Furthermore, if we rigidly hold our stereotypes and are not willing to question them, we can never reach the point where we know strangers as individuals (i.e., we can never make psychocultural predictions about their behavior), and our attributions about an individual strangers' behavior will continue to be incorrect.

3. Problems of Stereotypes and Solutions

3.1 Stereotypes may lead ineffective communication when we communicate with strangers.

Our stereotypes tend to be activated automatically when we categorize strangers and when we are not communicating mindfully (see von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vargas, 1995). We, therefore, unconsciously try to confirm our expectations when we communicate with strangers. Our stereotypes constrain strangers' patterns of communication and engender stereotype-confirming communication. In other words, stereotypes create self-fulfilling prophecies. We tend to see behavior that confirms our expectations even when it is absent. We ignore disconfirming evidence when communicating on automatic pilot. When we communicate on automatic pilot, we do not cognitively process all the information about others that is available to us (Johnston & Macrae, 1994). Generally, the greater our cultural and linguistic knowledge, and the more our beliefs overlap with those of the strangers with whom we communicate, the less the likelihood there will be misunderstandings.To increase our accuracy in making prediction, we must try to understand which social identity is guiding strangers' behavior in a particular situation. And to be effective in communication with strangers, we must keep our minds open and be mindful.

3.2 Since stereotypes are a natural product of the communication process, they influence the way we process information.

Stereotyping is the result of our tendency to overestimate the degree of association between group membership and psychological attributes. While there may be some association between group membership and psychological characteristics of members, it is much smaller than we assume when we communicate on automatic pilot. When we communicate on automatic pilot, we interpret incoming messages on the basis of the symbolic systems we learned as children. Besides, our processing of information is biased in the direction of maintaining the preexisting belief systems. We remember more favorable information about our ingroups and more unfavorable information about outgroups (Hewstone & Giles, 1986). So we tend to process information that is consistent with our stereotypes and our stereotypes

do not change.

To have objective cognition on the information of strangers, we can process all the information available to us if we are mindful of our communication. We need for predictability, to avoid diffuse anxiety, to sustain our self-conceptions, and above all, knowledge. When we process all the information available to us, our stereotypes of strangers change.

Our tendency to stereotypes automatically is enhanced when we are highly anxious. Wilder (1994) points out that "when anxiety distracts persons from careful attention to the environment, they rely more on cognitive structures such as social stereotypes in making judgments of others."(pp. 87-88) Anxiety stems from feeling uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen. Anxiety is an important motivating factor in intergroup encounters. If anxiety is too high, we avoid communicating with members of other groups in order to lower our anxiety. To be motivated to communicate with strangers, we have to manage our anxiety if it is too high or if it is too low.

The skills necessary to communicate effectively and appropriately with strangers are those that are directly related to reducing our uncertainty and anxiety. Reducing or managing our anxiety requires at least three skills: ability to be mindful, ability to tolerate ambiguity, and ability to calm ourselves.

4. Conclusion

Stereotypes are the content of the categories when we are categorizing people. The stereotypes we hold have a direct influence on our communication with strangers. Our initial predictions about strangers' behavior must, out of necessity, be based on the stereotypes we have about the strangers' culture, race, or ethnic group. To the degree that our stereotypes are accurate, we can make accurate cultural-level predictions about strangers' behavior. If our stereotypes are inaccurate, we cannot make correct attributions about strangers' behavior. Further, if we rigidly hold our stereotypes and are not willing to question them, we can never reach the point where we know strangers as individuals (i.e., we can never make psychocultural predictions about their behavior), and our attributions about an individual strangers' behavior will continue to be incorrect. To avoid inaccurate stereotypes, we should be conscious that the problem of misinterpreting others' behavior is compounded because we tend to interpret strangers' behavior on the basis of our own frame of reference. In addition, with stereotypes, people are likely to estimate the information they get from communication impertinently. Finally, controlling our anxiety, and making it promoting is an effective way enhancing our communication with strangers. In order to increase our effectiveness in communicating with strangers, we need to increase the complexity of our stereotypes (e.g., include a large number of traits in the stereotype and differentiate subgroups within the group being stereotyped) and question our unconscious assumption that most, if not all, members of a group fit a single stereotype (Stephan & Rosenfield, 1982). Anyway, the successful intercultural understanding is based on recognizing the ways in which two cultures resemble one another as well as the ways in which they differ.

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