



Ethnic Stereotypes – Impediments or Enhancers of Social Cognition?

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Abstract. This paper presents a brief summary of the recent literature on stereotypes according to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986). It offers a comparison of related concepts such as prejudice (Gadamer 1984) and attitude (Cseresnyési 2004) and relies on stereotype definition developed by Hilton and Hippel (1996). It gives a survey of stereotype manifestation, formation, maintenance and change, focusing on social and ethnic stereotypes, their background variables, transmitting mechanisms and mediating variables. The last part of the paper discusses different linguistic means of expressing ethnicity concluding that stereotypes act as ever-extendable schemas as opposed to prototypes, defined as best examples of a category.

Keywords: linguistic and social categories, ethnic identity, schema theory, prototypes vs. stereotypes

1. Introduction

This paper is dedicated to a deeper insight into the nature of stereotypes – as forms of social cognition. First the nature of stereotypes is explored, in their generic sense, defining them from a cognitive approach, experimental psychology. In order to do that, they need to be clearly distinguished from prototypes, as defined by prototype theory (Rosch 1975, Lakoff 1987). This is the contents of sections 2 – 5, also including a short description of stereotype manifestation,

formation, maintenance and change. The next part of the paper presents stereotypes in social sciences, narrowing them to ethnic stereotypes based on social identity theory (SIT), as representations of intergroup behaviour, describing a comprehensive and integrative model of stereotype content formation and change, applied mainly to national and ethnic stereotypes, and proposing three categories of factors (background variables, transmitting mechanisms and mediating variables) which determine stereotypic contents. The last part of the paper is dedicated to a short insight into one, but rather defining linguistic aspect of ethnic stereotyping, that of ethnic humour and ethnic jokes.

2. Linguistic and social categorization: prototypes and stereotypes

Both stereotypes and prototypes are different forms of cognition, two attempts to categorize the unknown world around. However, there is a significant difference between them. While prototype theory is developed from the perspective of linguistics, stereotype theory is achieved from the standpoint of social sciences. In the following section this difference is approached.

For the proper cognition and mental representation of reality, concepts and conceptual categories are of essential value. Categorization involves a mental activity of grouping similar things together into conceptual categories or classes. Categories serve to represent objects, events and entities with maximum information and minimum cognitive effort; hence they can be regarded to satisfying the human need for cognitive economy (Roth and Bruce 1995, Lakoff 1987, Rosch 1999). Prototype theory evolves as an alternative development, reaction to the insufficiency of the Aristotelian classical theory of categorization. Promoters of prototype theory (Rosch 1975, 1999, Rosch and Mervis 1975) contest the Aristotelian view according to which every category is associated with a set of membership criteria or defining attributes, which are both necessary and sufficient. Rosch's theory (1975) claims that the properties defining the categories cannot be shared by all its members therefore all members cannot have equal status as category members; some members of the category have special status. These are called cognitive reference points or prototypes, "best examples" of the category. Asymmetries (so-called "prototype effects") can also be found. Certain members of the categories are found to be more representative of the category than others (e.g. robins are judged to be more representative of the category BIRD than are chickens or penguins). The most representative members of a category are called "prototypical" members. The prototype is conceived as having the highest degree of category membership.

According to Rosch and Mervis (1975), category membership depends not only on degree of similarity to the prototypical member, but also on degree of difference from members of other categories. They claim that "... members of

categories which are considered most prototypical are those with most attributes in common with other members of the category and least attributes in common with other categories” (ibid. 433).

All in all, Eleanor Rosch manages to shift interest in categorization from artificial, “classical” sets of equivalent members towards the study of “natural categories” (i.e. natural language categories (words) and the everyday objects that they label).

Lakoff (1987) further extends this idea arguing for a model of mental representation. According to Lakoff, some categories like TALL, MAN and RED are graded, in that they have inherent degrees of membership, central members and fuzzy boundaries; other categories like BIRD have clear boundaries, but within those boundaries there are graded prototype effects – some category members are better examples of the category than others (Lakoff 1987: 56). Lakoff identifies as major sources of these prototype effects what he calls idealized cognitive models or ICMs. He claims that we organize our knowledge by means of these structures, and that category structures and prototype effects are by-products of that organization.

Beside prototypes and stereotypes, we also introduce the concept of attitude because it is closely related to the two former ones. As defined by social psychology (cf. Augoustinos et al. (1995), Breckler & Wiggins (1992), Fazio (1986)), an attitude is a hypothetical construct that represents an individual’s degree of like or dislike for an item. Attitudes are generally positive or negative views of a person, place, thing, or event – this is often referred to as the attitude object. People can also be conflicted or ambivalent toward an object, meaning that they simultaneously possess both positive and negative attitudes toward the item in question. The category of attitude has become part of scientific thinking on social psychology following the works of Herbert Spencer (1862), himself an advocate of the theory of social Darwinism, and it has been defined as “a predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object” (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). The existence of attitudes is related to the fact that in the process of cognition it is not always possible to verify every assessment, every judgement experientially. Therefore the human mind relies on schemata, a phenomenon similar to that of stereotype creation.

Attitudes, as a result, are evaluations. They denote a person’s orientation to some object of reference that acts as a stimulus to that person’s evaluation of the object in question. “By denoting the attitude-holder’s ‘orientation’ to the referent, an attitude conveys that person’s evaluation of the referent. Thus attitudes involve judgements, are expressed in the language of ‘like/dislike’, ‘approach/avoid’, ‘good/bad’, i.e. they are evaluative” (Augoustinos et al. 2006: 113). Consequently, “an attitude intervenes between an observable stimulus and an observable response, providing the necessary link” (Fiske & Taylor 1984: 340). Additionally, attitudes

display cognitive dimensions because they imply categorization as a necessary state prior to evaluation.

In the next section it is argued that prototype theory, as established by Rosch (1975, 1999) and further developed by Lakoff (1987), as well as the view of social psychology regarding attitudes, are particularly salient for understanding the role of stereotypes in social encounters. Stereotypes cluster around prototypicality as an organising feature. There is also a so-called “prototype model” for stereotypical mental representations which will be described below. On the other hand, Lakoff (1987: 79) defines stereotypes as an additional level of prototype effects (like in the MOTHER category). He claims that the source of these effects is the stereotype of the mother as a housewife. He also adds that:

Social stereotypes are cases of metonymy – where the subcategory has a socially recognized status as standing for the category as a whole, usually for the purpose of making quick judgments about people. The housewife-mother subcategory, though unnamed, exists. It defines cultural expectations about what a mother is supposed to be. And because of this, it yields prototype effects. On the whole in our culture, housewife-mothers are taken as better examples of mothers than nonhousewife-mothers. (...) [This is the] case of metonymic model in which one subcategory, the housewife-mother, stands for the whole category in defining cultural expectations of mothers. (ibid. 80)

For all these reasons, we adopt this viewpoint, along with Lakoff, that while prototypes are forms of very complex, hierarchically organized knowledge, stereotypes present a simplification of reality, so-called “cognitive shortcuts” based on different sources. In the following sections the current definition(s) of stereotypes, their sources, routes of stereotype formation, maintenance and change are summarized. All these prepare the theoretical ground for the discussion on one special group of social stereotypes called ethnic stereotypes.

3. Stereotypes – the definition of the term

The term “stereotype” initially referred to a printing stamp used to make multiple copies from a single model or mould. However, the journalist Walter Lippman adopted the term in his celebrated 1922 book entitled *Public Opinion* as a means of describing the way society set about categorizing people – “stamping” human beings with a set of characteristics – as well. In his pioneering work, Lippman identified four aspects of stereotypes, arguing that stereotypes are:

1. simple: more simple than reality, but also often capable of being summarized in only two or three sentences;

2. acquired second hand: people acquire (and absorb) stereotypes from cultural mediators rather than from their own experience with the grounds being stereotyped.

3. erroneous: all stereotypes are false. Some are less false than others, and some are less harmful than others. They are attempts to claim that each individual human being in a certain group shares a set of common qualities. Since an individual is different from all other individuals by definition, stereotypes are a logical impossibility.

4. resistant to change: even after several decades, old stereotypes still colour our perception.

However, there is nothing inherently wrong with stereotyping, as it is a natural function of the human / cultural mind and is therefore morally neutral in itself. Every culture seeks to simplify a complex reality so that it can better determine how best to act in any given circumstance. "Despite its acquired negative connotations, stereotyping is a routine, everyday cognitive process upon which we all to some extent depend" (Jenkins 1996: 122).

Stereotypes have been defined in a variety of ways. For our purpose, the cognitive approach seems to be the most useful as a way to promote social perception.

Following Hilton & von Hippel (1996: 240), the standard viewpoint will be adopted according to which "stereotypes are beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of members of a certain group." The process of stereotyping emerges as a way of simplifying the demands of the perceiver (Bodenhausen et al. 1994), it makes information processing easier by allowing the perceiver to rely on previously stored knowledge in place of incoming information (Hilton & von Hippel 1996). Stereotypes also emerge in response to environmental factors, such as different social roles (Eagly 1995), group conflicts (Robinson et al. 1995) and differences in power (Fiske 1993). Other times stereotypes emerge as a way of justifying the status quo (Jost & Banaji 1994) or in response to a need for social identity (Hogg & Abrams 1988)¹. In other words, they emerge in various contexts to serve particular functions necessitated by those contexts.

Many researchers in experimental psychology conceptualize stereotypes as cognitive shortcuts providing mental economy to perceivers of new information. "For many of us, this temptation to stereotype others is irresistible. The ability to understand and evaluate new information (and people) in terms of old, pre-established beliefs (i.e. stereotypes) is a cognitive skill that serves us well" (Macrae et al 1997: 483). Most of the social psychologists emphasize the conditional

¹ All references are cited from Hilton & von Hippel (1996)

automaticity of these mental processes which are mostly uncontrollable, unintentional, and effortless (Allport 1954, Brewer 1988, Fiske & Neuberg 1990)².

4. Stereotype manifestation, formation, maintenance and change³

4.1. Stereotype manifestation

Affective and motivational factors influence the time and mode of stereotype manifestation through their impact on cognition. It is usually cognitive processes that serve as a mechanism for the motivational effects, determining how motivational processes influence perception, judgment, and behaviour. For example, people typically require more evidence to convince them that a disliked person is intelligent rather than unintelligent (Ditto & Lopez 1993). On the other hand, affect can facilitate stereotype formation by increasing perceptions of group homogeneity (Stroessner & Mackie 1992), the likelihood that deviant group members will be assimilated to the group stereotype (Wilder 1993), and reliance on stereotypes as a cognitive shortcut (Bodenhausen et al 1994).

As mentioned above, stereotypes are beliefs about certain groups. Hilton and von Hippel (ibid.) identify two main sources of these beliefs.

- The first are mental representations of real differences between groups, i.e. they are sometimes accurate representations of reality (Judd & Park 1993, Swim 1994). In this context, stereotypes operate much like object schemas, allowing easier and more efficient processing of information about others. Like schemas in general, these stereotypes may cause perceivers to gloss over or to fail to notice individual differences (von Hippel et al 1993),⁴ (e.g. cultural stereotypes about food preferences);

- The second route to stereotyping occurs when stereotypes are formed about various groups independent of real group differences. In this case, they are based on relatively enduring characteristics of the person (such as race, religion, gender) and have enormous potential for error.

This second belief is also echoed by Jenkins (1996: 122-125), when he introduces the concept of “attribution” as another important dimension of classification, beside stereotyping. He claims that

² References cited in Macrae et al. (1997)

³ This section is based on Hilton & von Hippel (1996), all references are cited there.

⁴ This may be a cause that stereotyping is considered to be a harmful process and therefore the word “stereotype” has attracted negative connotations. Compare the arguments of many researchers who consider that stereotypes are inherently wrong because they are illogical in origin and resistant to change and that it is “a conventional (frequently malicious) idea (which may be wildly inaccurate) of what an X looks like or acts like or is” (Putnam 1975: 169).

[a]tribution, [is] the attempt to understand others (...) by inference from the limited information provided by their verbal and non-verbal behaviour. [This] is also at work when stereotyping. Attribution is another attempt to understand the social world and render it more predictable. (ibid. 123)

Research (Hilton & von Hippel 1996) has outlined different models for these mental representations: the prototype model, the exemplar model, associative networks, schemas and base rates. Out of these – for practical reasons – we are going to refer only to the first and most cited one, i.e. the prototype model.

In this model, stereotypes are not defined as a set of defining features, nor as much information about individual group members, but as abstracted representations of a group's typical features. Individual group members are judged by perceivers on the basis of similar comparisons between the individual and the prototype (Hunyadi 1984: 325-390). In other words, the prototype representation is an "averaged" representation of the category across many attributes, with no set of group attributes seen as defining. To put it differently, the shared norms and beliefs of the group are represented by the prototype of the group. Prototypical group members embody the in-group characteristics and, therefore, represent the identity of the group (Eisenbeiss 2004: 21).

An implication of the prototype model is that knowledge about the stereotype is organized hierarchically (Johnston & Hewstone 1992, cited in Hilton & von Hippel 1996), thus it is possible to talk about "base level" categories and "subtypes", which means that stereotype change is accomplished through the creation of subtypes. Another implication of this model is that it predicts that perceivers will often fail to apply stereotypes to individual group members. Because reactions to individual group members are based on comparison between the prototype and the individual, any features, which reduce the similarity between the individual and the prototype, should decrease reliance on the stereotype. The creation of such subtypes can be traced in literary texts, too, in the sense that the author may find new character traits for the given ethnic stereotype, which will become a "subtype" of the base level prototype, therefore extending the limits of the commonly accepted image of the described ethnic group. However, this striking dissimilarity between the individual and the prototype does not decrease reliance on the stereotype, but on the contrary, it extends its circle.

4.2. Routes of stereotype formation

One of the best-known routes of stereotype formation includes – among others – the creation of group differences through self-fulfilling prophecies. They emerge when people hold expectancies that lead them to alter their behaviour, which in turn causes the expected behaviours to be exhibited by people who are

targets of the expectancies (e.g. teachers who expect some of their students to excel elicit superior performance from those students (Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968).

Another route to stereotype formation is through the generalization from the behaviours of one group member to the evaluation of others (which is not necessarily a conscious process). Therefore self-perpetuation of bias may play an important role in the formation of social stereotypes. In the absence of supporting evidence, earlier learned non-conscious beliefs will strengthen the stereotype (Hilton & von Hippel 1996: 245).

A great deal of research has demonstrated that people can come to perceive minority groups in a more negative light than majority groups, even when the groups behave identically. One explanation of this effect is the distinctiveness perspective (Hamilton & Sherman 1989, Mullen & Johnson 1990). According to this, people spend more time encoding distinctive (minority) information than other information. Therefore so-called “illusory correlations” are formed. “Illusory correlations” (Mackie et al 1993: 50) is another mechanism of stereotype formation, which implies that perceivers tend to establish relationships between sets of variables that are not actually related and that provide no reason for association (e.g. correlating teenagers with rebellious behaviour).

The minority-majority difference has lead research to draw several conclusions about in- and out-group differences⁵ as well. In this respect, out-group members are not only perceived as possessing less desirable traits than in-group members, but they are seen as more homogenous as well. A consequence of the so-called “out-group homogeneity effect” is that people believe that most out-group members share the attributes of the specific out-group members whom they encounter and that group-level stereotypes are likely to describe individual group members (Park et al 1991). Linville and her colleagues (Linville et al 1989, Linville & Fischer 1993) have proposed an explanation to this phenomenon. In their view, perceptions of out-group homogeneity are caused by the fact that obviously people know more in-group members than out-group members and thereby retrieve more instances when making in-group variability judgments, than out-group ones. This greater retrieval of in-group instances leads to greater

⁵ Within social identity theory (SIT), a large influence on people’s behaviour is attributed to the value in having an identity and having a sense of being in a group which is distinct from other groups (positive group distinctiveness). The theory suggests that distinguishing between ingroups and outgroups allows people to discover the value of their own group. This allows group members to gain positive value from membership of their group. An *ingroup* is a social group towards which an individual feels loyalty and respect, usually due to membership in the group. This loyalty often manifests itself as an ingroup bias. Commonly encountered ingroups include family members, people of the same race, culture, gender or religion, and so on. An *outgroup* is a social group towards which an individual feels contempt, opposition, or a desire to compete. Members of outgroups may be subject to outgroup homogeneity biases, and generally people tend to privilege ingroup members over outgroup members in many situations (cf. Tajfel, H. (ed.) 1978).

perceptions of in-group heterogeneity. On the other hand, Park et al (1990) have proposed an abstraction/exemplar model, where group variability information is stored as part of an abstract group stereotype (i.e. a group prototype). For example, minority groups are seen as more homogeneous than majority groups, an effect that holds even in impressions of a minority member's own group (Bartsch & Judd 1993). A side-result of these processes is that perceptions of out-group homogeneity may be critically associated with stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination (cf. Diehl & Jonas 1991, Quattrone 1986).

4.3. Stereotype maintenance: priming, assimilation and attribution

Stereotype maintenance is carried out through a variety of ways, regardless of how they are formed. According to Hilton & von Hippel, there are four major routes to maintain stereotypes: priming, assimilation effects, attributional processes and memory processes.

Priming is an information-processing strategy based on the fact that the way we process (even unambiguous) information, is heavily influenced by information that we have previously encountered. Bruner (1957, cited in Hilton and von Hippel 1996) argued that prior experience operates on current perception by making certain categories more "accessible" during the interpretation of incoming information. In other words, the impact of prior experience on ongoing perception and cognition is pervasive. In the realm of stereotyping, priming plays a dramatic role in the perception and evaluation of out-group members. This mental process can take place both consciously and unconsciously. Here we can refer to those experiments where, after exposure to television commercials in which women are portrayed as sexual objects, males are more likely to encode the next female they encounter in a sexual fashion, paying more attention to her appearance and style of dress than to what she says (Rudman & Borgida 1995). Despite the fact that social behaviours can often be interpreted in a variety of ways, and all individuals are members of many social categories, priming may lock perceivers into a stereotypic frame of reference (Skowronski et al 1993).

Another important route to stereotype maintenance is through assimilation. Individuals are often perceived as more similar to their stereotype than they really are. For example, a student athlete is more likely to be judged guilty of cheating than a non-athlete (Bodenhausen 1990). This is an example of an individual being assimilated to his/her group stereotype. The tendency to assimilate is moderated by a perceiver's expectations of consistency from members of the stereotyped group.

By virtue of their seeming homogeneity (discussed earlier), out-groups will be associated with higher levels of perceived internal consistency than in-groups. Thus, there is a greater tendency to assimilate incongruent behaviours to the group stereotype when the behaviours are associated with smaller rather than larger

groups and when they are associated with out-groups rather than in-groups (Hilton & von Hippel 1996: 251).

Attributional processes are likely to be initiated by behaviours that are incongruent with perceivers' prior expectancies (Kanazawa 1992). When making memory-based judgments, people tend to remember and rely on their abstractions in place of the original behaviours that led to these abstractions (Srull & Wyer 1989). On the other hand, abstractly encoded information tends to be more resistant to disconfirmation and more stable over time than information that is encoded at a concrete level (Semin & Fiedler 1988). To sum up the above, perceivers tend to remember, believe, rely on, and communicate stereotype-congruent information than stereotype-incongruent information.

Attributional processing can also be inhibited by stereotype-congruent information. People typically engage in attributional processing only until they have found a sufficient cause for the behaviours they are witnessing. Once such sufficiency has been achieved, attributional processing usually ceases. Because the stereotype itself provides a sufficient explanation for many stereotype-congruent events, stereotypes can block people's ability to notice and interpret co-variation between stereotype-irrelevant factors and the stereotype-congruent event (Sanbonmatsu et al 1994).

In addition to the information-processing strategies mentioned earlier, memory processes also play an important role in stereotype maintenance. Evidence suggests that people often have better memory for information that is incongruent with their stereotypes and expectancies. This finding suggests that memory processes actually serve to undermine stereotyping. However, it has been demonstrated (Stangor & McMillan 1992) that this is true only when the perceiver believes that the target is relatively homogeneous. For groups from which little internal consistency is expected (such as large groups like African-Americans and women) perceivers should remember stereotype-congruent rather than stereotype-incongruent information.

4.4. Stereotype change

In general, the assumption has been that it is easier to maintain a stereotype than to change it (see above Lippman's view on stereotypes being resistant to change). However, contemporary research has brought about several models of change (see Hilton & von Hippel 1996: 258-261 for a review). Here we will highlight the "subtyping model", which derives from the prototype-based model, according to which knowledge about stereotypes is organized in a hierarchical way (Johnston & Hewstone 1992). This allows for the identification of base level categories and subtypes. The emergence of these subtypes leads to stereotype change. According to an analysis (Brewer 1988), as our perceptions of groups

become sufficiently differentiated, subtypes replace superordinate categorizations and become base level categories themselves. This is so because our experience with some groups (e.g. men and women, young and old) is sufficiently rich to render the superordinate categorizations relatively uninformative. As a consequence, people are likely to rely on subtypes of such groups rather than on the group in general when making stereotype-relevant judgments.

5. Stereotypes in social life. Ethnic stereotypes

We will now turn to the description of ethnic stereotypes, which are considered to be a subgroup of social stereotypes in general. Social stereotypes are defined in social psychology as cognitive or mental representations of a social group and its members. They are not socially neutral, but have a symbolic and ideological nature, their values being relative to the ideological tendencies of a given society. Social stereotypes are “ideological representations which are used to justify and legitimize existing social and power relations within a society” (Augoustinos & Walker 1995: 302). In other words, they are used to rationalize, legitimize individual beliefs and actions, and they have group-serving and system-serving functions.

Ethnic identification and ethnic stereotypes have always been in the scope of interest of social scientists. As stated above, stored beliefs about characteristics associated with social category membership are typically referred to as stereotypes. People have a rich variety of beliefs about typical members of groups including beliefs about traits, behaviours, and beliefs about values of a typical group member. If an individual activates representations of a group to which he/she belongs, there is an instance of autostereotype. Heterostereotype refers to a representation of the group by non-members (Liebkind 1992). Besides, according to Brown & Turner (1981), people have representations of their own person – the egostereotype.

We will approach this issue, starting from social identity theory (SIT) founded by Tajfel & Turner (1986), which has become one of the most influential theories on intergroup behaviour. It is based on the notion that our social environment is divided into groups and social categories that convey meaning and orientation to their members. Social identity has been defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of the social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1978: 63). According to this theory, the concept of social identity is a tri-dimensional construct: it has a cognitive component (i.e. the knowledge of group membership), an evaluative component (values attached to that membership) and an affective component (the emotional ties linked to it). Research reports the terms “social identification” (“the strength of association with

a particular social category”) and “social identity” (“the nature or content of a particular identity”) (Ellemers et al 2002).

On the other hand, personal identity denotes the definition of the self in terms of unique characteristics and interindividual differences. SIT emphasizes the distinction between the personal and social identity and, correspondingly, between situations that are determined by interpersonal versus intergroup processes (Eisenbeiss 2004).

What is of special interest in Social Identity Theory for the discussion on ethnic stereotypes is today’s dominant cognitive view which states that an ethnic group (or nation) is a category which the individual considers himself to belong to and which therefore gets a special role by relating the viewpoints of information processing and self-evaluation. Tajfel (1978) considers that our relation to the different categories is inherently asymmetrical. Categorizing people according to their ethnic or national affiliation affects the judgment of their features: within the category we mostly consider the identity of those belonging to it, our own group is experienced to be “ingroup biased”, continuously being overestimated as opposed to the outgroup. This asymmetrical relation leads to the emergence of national or ethnic stereotypes: the common characteristic of people belonging to one category, which – at the same time – is the description of features differentiating them from other categories.

Social stereotypes can be learned either from direct contact with individual target group members or from communication about the target group received from others. These two forms of stereotype acquisition have consequences for the nature and content of the stereotype that is formed. In this line of thought, research (Thompson, Judd & Park 2000) distinguishes between “abstraction-based” stereotypes, learned from significant socializing agents, acquired intact from them, and “instance-based” stereotypes formed on the basis of direct contact and experience with individual category members. Their findings have shown that perceivers’ impressions of abstraction-based target groups are more extreme or stereotypic than are impressions that are instance-based. Moreover, abstraction-based stereotypes contain less variability information, i.e. they are less dispersed than instance-based stereotypes. So the “classic” definition of stereotypes (i.e. beliefs about the typical attributes of groups) has been extended by these new findings. They argue that stereotypes contain information not only about these attributes, but also about the degree to which these attributes are widely shared in the target group. In the process of social communication, group impressions are stereotypically exaggerated, groups are seen as less variable, stereotypic attributes are seen as more prevalent and group stereotypes become consensually shared (ibid. 595). It is the process of social communication that is in large part responsible for the inaccuracies that are typically associated with stereotypes.

Stereotyping is, as we have seen, a natural ordering function of the human and social mind. Stereotypes make reality easier to deal with because they simplify the complexities that make people unique, and this simplification reflects important beliefs and values as well. These two characteristics combined mean that a society has two powerful motives to encourage people to “live up to their stereotypes”: to encourage them to act like the images a culture already has of them and to thereby fulfil their proper social roles. In other words, stereotypes encourage people to internalize a cultural image, as their goal. This task may be convenient for the culture (especially for the power structure status quo) but it may prove to be both impossible and damaging to the individuals being asked to mould themselves in such a narrow manner (Nachbar & Lause 1992).⁶

As stated above, being stored beliefs about characteristics of a group of people, stereotypes shed light on intergroup processes. They serve, at the same time, as an antecedent and an outcome to analyze the nature of intergroup relations. Bar-Tal (1997) proposed a comprehensive and integrative model of stereotypic content formation and change applied mainly to national and ethnic stereotypes in order to extend our understanding of interethnic relations which are determined, at least partially, by the stereotypic contents that the two parties in relationship hold. The model proposes three categories of factors (i.e. background variables, transmitting mechanisms and mediating variables) which determine stereotypic contents. In what follows we are going to revise these factors.

According to this model, the first category of factors contains macro-societal variables, which serve as a background and basis for the formation and change of stereotypic contents. They involve socio-political and economic conditions, on the one hand, and the present nature and the past (history) of intergroup relations, together with the characteristics of the out-group and behaviour of other groups, on the other. These are indirect determinants, which can either foster or inhibit the formation and change of particular stereotypic contents (see for details Bar-Tal 1997: 497-504).

Transmitting mechanisms are of special importance. Through them individuals receive information which serve as a basis for formation and change of stereotypic contents. This consists of societal (political, social, cultural and educational) channels, the family channel, as a socializing agent and finally, direct contact, through which individuals collect information about out-group members via an impression-formation process.

All the incoming information about an encountered group (out-group) is not represented in its new form, but rather absorbed, interpreted, evaluated, elaborated, organized and stored via a cognitive process which is influenced by a series of

⁶ This idea corresponds to the “myth of the American melting pot”.

personal mediating variables (e.g. past knowledge, values, attitudes, personality, cognitive skills and motivations).

Finally, the model suggests that the formed stereotypic contents, in turn, exert their influence. It becomes part of the individual's repertoire (stored knowledge) and serves as a mediating personal variable for the processing of newly acquired information. In addition, on a societal level, the stereotypes formed by the group members have an effect on the nature of intergroup relations and societal channels. They provide important information for the in-group members about the out-group and supply the contents for various channels of communication.

Out of the background variables I will highlight two models, which may lead to negative intergroup relations. The first is the ethnocentric model suggested by Bar-Tal (1990) about the ethnocentric tendency to perceive the other group by virtue of its mere otherness. This tendency is especially manifest when the out-group obviously differs and arouses despise and/or fear (e.g. the relations between Whites and Blacks in the Southern United States). Satisfactory political, economic, social and cultural cooperation, the experience of friendship, security, mutual support and trust are – on the other hand – all translated into positive stereotypic contents.

The other phenomenon, which is related to negative stereotyping, is explained by the “scapegoat theory”. These are cases where group members direct their resentment towards out-groups, which are not responsible for the existing injustices or social inequalities. The scapegoat theory is based on Freud's theory of defence mechanisms and the frustration-aggression hypothesis (idem. 1997: 502) and it suggests that hostility including prejudice and negative stereotyping are a result of frustration. Specifically, when group members experience frustration and its source is either too powerful or unidentified, then their hostility will be arbitrarily displaced towards members of minority groups. The act of displacement, including the attribution of negative labels to the minority, is justified by blaming the out-group for the frustration.

Within this integrative model described earlier, ethnicity is mentioned among the demographic characteristics of the out-group, together with race, nationality, religion and size. Power, education, values and norms, as well as cultural roots are enlisted among the societal characteristics of the out-group, while the group's economic resources, standard of living, dominant occupations, or wealth are mentioned as economic features. The information about these characteristics is transmitted through various channels of communication and serves as a basis for stereotype formation by in-group members.

In discussing the societal communication channels it is necessary to direct attention to the function of language in the formation and change of cultural stereotypes. Language used by political, social, cultural and educational sources cues the activation of stereotypes, expresses them, influences the communicative

distance established between the groups, and affects the emotional reactions of in-group members towards the out-group (van Dijk 1984, Wetherell & Potter 1992).

Information about out-groups coming from group sources is always influenced by the group's values, ideology, beliefs and goals. This suggests that the references to out-groups through institutionalised channels of communication should not be seen as merely expressing the stereotypic contents. In fact, these reflect the group's ethos by guiding the provided information and are inseparable from the macro-societal factors described previously (cf. Bar-Tal 1997: 506) (e.g. the dramatic change in the image of African-Americans – earlier called Black people – in the United States; their roles also changed almost completely from low class jobs to middle class, even upper class positions).

In my opinion, personal mediating variables have the most significant role in stereotype formation. Whatever background sources there may be, whatever transmitting mechanism there may exist, the information-processing ego has the greatest role in stereotype formation. Personal variables have influence on how information about out-groups is identified and interpreted, leading to individual differences: at the end of cognitive processing individuals show a different understanding of the same information. These variables are: personal knowledge, cognitive skills, language, values, attitudes, motivations and personality. All these influence the absorbed information and thus the formed stereotypic content, and mediate the information processing. Due to the individual's cognitive bias (connected to the illusory correlation phenomenon mentioned earlier), individuals either overestimate or underestimate an actual association between certain characteristics and certain groups. They selectively process information and subjectively interrupt it on the way to forming stereotypic content (Hamilton & Sherman 1989).

In this context, it is possible to assume that persons with high cognitive complexity foster a more differentiated view of the out-group, storing various contents, which might even be of contradictory nature. In contrast, persons with low cognitive complexity perceive the out-group simplistically, forming few contents and tending to generalise to either overall favourable or unfavourable contents (Bar-Tal 1997, Hunyadi 1997).⁷

6. Ethnic stereotypes in language: ethnic humour, ethnic jokes

Within the discussion of ethnic stereotypes it is also necessary to mention the existence of ethnic humour and ethnic jokes, which signify the presence of stereotyping in everyday language. Ethnic jokes, sometimes referred to as

⁷ For a detailed description of this integrative model see Bar-Tal 1997: 491-523.

race/racist jokes, are jokes that exploit ethnic stereotypes. They are often considered to be offensive, though they still remain popular.

Ethnicity in humorous utterances/texts can be discussed from two perspectives, which can be formulated in the form of two questions:

- a) Is the target of humour an individual with strong ethnic ties or an ethnic group? If so, which ethnicity is the target of humour, or of ethnic jokes?

In this case, for instance, we can speak of “Scottish jokes”, “Irish jokes” in the case of the British culture, but similarly of “Szekely jokes” in Hungarian, respectively “Moți jokes” in Romanian culture, etc. This is usually achieved by explicitly stating the name of the specific ethnic group or individual and placing them in ridiculing situations.

- b) What is the ethnic attitude of the creator of humour, of the joker?

In this sense, we can speak of English/German/Hungarian/Romanian, etc. humour. Additionally, certain ethnic groups/nations are claimed to have an inherent sense of humour (e.g. the English), or a sense of humour apart from other national/ethnic humour.⁸

- a) Ethnic jokes come and go with social change, particularly with waves of immigration from one country to another; for example, Polish jokes, which were once very common in the US during widespread Polish immigration, are now little used, as Polish and other Eastern European immigrants have long been absorbed into the large American community. Similarly, Irish jokes have become far less common in the United Kingdom as the social status of Irish people has risen with increased wealth in Ireland. As public awareness of racism has increased, racial and ethnic jokes have become increasingly socially unacceptable in recent years, and have become socially taboo to tell in public in many regions.

It is claimed by many researchers (Priestley 1929, Lendvai 1996, Davies 1990, Chiaro 1992, Alexander 1997) that ethnic jokes have a basis, “a grain of truth”. They may reflect real national values, which may emerge from historical events (for example, many historians have argued that the spirit of American individualism has its origins in the experiences of the pioneers in the Old West). Social scientists (like Richard Robins) have proposed several other possible explanations for stereotypes. They argue that some ethnic stereotypes may have been accurate at one point in history and then persisted while the culture changed; or they may have grown out of historical conflicts between cultural groups.

⁸ Naturally, this may also be called an ethnic stereotype, or even a prejudice. Consequently, it is frequently expected that every English person should have this typical English sense of humour, and it may be the case that this person lacks this character trait. Or, this may be true the other way round, as well: we would not expect to find English humour, full of understatements and irony from the representative of another ethnic group and we may be pleasantly surprised to find its presence. A good example of this latter case is the English humorist George Mikes with Hungarian roots.

Ethnic jokes are often aimed at minorities within certain regions, or peoples from neighbouring areas. A common ethnic joke format is the “stupid person” joke, where the stock character, who is the butt of the joke, belongs to an ethnic group singled out for abuse. Such jokes are often interchangeable, with the stigmatized group varying from region to region. For instance, the English tell jokes about the Irish, Canadians about the Newfies, Romanians about ‘Olteni’ or ‘Moți’, Hungarians about Szekelys, Jews, and sometimes Poles as well, are also a common target of ethnic jokes within Europe and North America. “Whether these jokes are to be seen as an act of aggression against the communities in question or whether, being jokes, they are not to be taken seriously, is an open-ended debate” (Palmer 1987, 1988, Rappoport 2005). It is usually the so-called “superiority theory of humour”⁹ which is at work when considering ethnic humour or ethnic jokes, and where ethnic stereotypes are present predominantly. A good example of a typical ethnic joke in English is the following:

The Englishman, Irishman and the Scotsman went to a party together. The Englishman took six bottles of beer. The Irishman took six bottles of Guinness and the Scotsman took six of his friends.

There are many jokes of the “Englishman, Irishman and Scotsman”-variety, in which the two latter groups get a negative, foolish connotation, they come off worst, which demonstrates the validity of the superiority theory. Disparagement of minorities gives rise to ethnic jokes (in Britain, including Irish jokes or jokes against immigrants to Britain from the Indian sub-continent; Davies analyzes the origins and scope of these ethnic jokes in great depth (cf. Davies 1990, 1998).

b) English culture is claimed to be humour-permeated, therefore it is common to speak of English humour and English sense of humour. Anthropological research has proved that many English people believe that they have some sort of global monopoly on certain “brands” of humour – the high-class ones such as wit and especially irony. There is indeed something distinctive about it: its real “defining characteristic” is “the *value* [they] put on humour, the central importance of humour in English culture and social interactions” (Fox 2005: 61, italics in the original). It is claimed that most English conversations involve at least some degree of banter, teasing, irony, understatement¹⁰, humorous self-deprecation, mockery or just silliness. The English have achieved a great mastery of “ironic detachment, a

⁹ According to this theory, “an individual (or a group of people) is amused when he or she feels triumphant over another group or when that group is made to look bad in comparison with himself” (Alexander 1997: 121).

¹⁰ Understatements, as a special case of irony, “is amusing, but only in an understated way. It is humour, but it is a restrained, refined, subtle form of humour” (Fox 2005: 67).

squeamish distaste for sentimentality, a stubborn refusal to be duped or taken in by fine rhetoric' (ibid. 72). As Jeremy Paxman (1998: 157) remarks, "[t]he virtues of the English character – tolerance, individuality, humour – are the true repositories of Englishness."

Culture and within it, literature is usually the mirror of the real national temper. When we think of humour in British culture, we may think of "the Britain of William Shakespeare, of George Bernard Shaw, of Lewis Carroll, of Barbara Windsor, of Des Lawson, of Sue Townsend or of John Cleese" (Alexander 1997: 116). In English literature, beside the above-mentioned authors, we may also mention Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (a mock-heroic epic about a feud between two families over a lock of hair), the celebrated satire, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), or his *Modest Proposal*, the most ferocious satire on England's conduct in Ireland ever written, all these in the Restoration period. We may continue by enlisting some of the most outstanding humorous or satirical writings of the 19th century. The Victorian era bred some of the greatest of English comic writers: Charles Dickens, with an entire gallery of affable fools and hilarious rogues, (Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* or Mrs Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit*); or two great nonsense writers: the already mentioned Lewis Carroll (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*) and Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* (1846). Beside G. B. Shaw's plays, in which the presence of ethnic stereotypes is foregrounded in his character presentation and the characters' ethnic bias, manifest in their language use and behavior, Oscar Wilde is the other playwright, also of Irish origin, famous for his "witticisms", as well as ironic presentation of society life and the English upper classes. The list may be continued with the novels of Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) and *Three Men on the Bummel* (1900), presenting the light-hearted accounts of the misadventures and philosophyzing of three middle-class young Victorians, with P.G. Wodehouse's stories about the aristocratic cretin Bertie Wooster and his resourceful manservant, Jeeves; with Evelyn Waugh, the greatest comic novelist in the interwar years (e.g. *Decline and Fall*, 1928), Angus Wilson in the postwar era, Kingsley Amis (*Lucky Jim*, 1954), one of the greatest political satirist, George Orwell (*Animal Farm*, 1945).

As we have seen in this section, ethnic jokes and humour are representatives of ethnic stereotyping. Their frequent and widespread use (in spite of their being recently unacceptable) demonstrates the existence of stereotypes in several speech communities. This kind of ethnic humour pervades not only the everyday language use of a community but it is also strongly present in the literature of any language.

7. Conclusions

In this paper we have presented the most important features of stereotypes from a cognitive perspective and a description of their manifestation, formation, maintenance and change. We have highlighted the prototype model as a form of stereotype manifestation, stressing the fact that this model is not to be confused with the prototype itself, as defined by Rosch, Taylor and others. The nature of the basic difference between the prototype and the stereotype is clarified by linguistic categorization theory.

According to prototype theory, (Rosch 1975, Jackendoff 1983, Langacker 1987, Taylor 1989), the prototype is the typical, best member of a category; a member of the category which best represents it. This best member also implies that there are less good members as well. Therefore the category assimilates other elements according to their perceived similarity to the prototype, thus creating degrees of membership within the category.

As opposed to the prototype, the stereotype functions like a schema¹¹, which is perfectly compatible with all the elements of a category. It is an integrated structure, which contains all the common features of its elements. In this way the schema functions as a frame which can be / is filled with new information all the time during cognition, i.e. it does not allow for perfect and total insight. The stereotype is a typical schema, therefore it can lead to false statements, too.

To sum up, while the prototype is a way to categorize reality, the best member of a category, it is based on well-known data, the stereotype is a schema which assumes incomplete factual knowledge about a certain category and which – during perception – can be filled with elements congruent or even incongruent with the prototype.

¹¹ Schema theory equally deals with simplified mental cognitive structures, stored in memory and activated whenever comprehension of an input requires retrieval of those representations. In contrast with prototype theory, which is hyponymy-based (i.e. based on class-inclusion) and envisages single categories or simple hierarchies of categories, schema theory considers *clusters of concepts* organized in complex spatio-temporal structures (Sorea 2006). As defined by Eysenck and Keane (1990), “[a] schema is a structured cluster of concepts; usually, it involves generic knowledge and may be used to represent events, sequences of events, precepts, situations, relations and even objects.” The term schema, on the other hand, must be distinguished from the terms “frame” and “script”, often employed by researchers to refer to organised mental structures. The concept of *frame* was introduced by Marvin Minsky (1975) and later it was employed in linguistics (see Tannen & Wallat 1999) designating stereotypical knowledge about settings and situations. The term *script* was introduced by Schank and Abelson (1977) to define *sequences* of actions used in the comprehension of complex events (e.g. knowledge about going to a restaurant, i.e. the “restaurant script”).

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