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Specific manifestations of stereotypes in the process of interpersonal communication

Abstract: The article focuses on the process of categorization and stereotyping and their effects on interpersonal communication with specific emphasis on the communication in school context.

Key words: Interpersonal communication, categorization, stereotypes

The topic of interpersonal communication is very popular and very up to date in the psychological research and practice. Despite this huge popularity there is no commonly accepted model for the understanding and analysis of such a complex social and psychological phenomenon as communication. This is due not only to the diversity of its forms and content, but also to the various methodological positions of the individual researchers in the field of human communication. For example, the psychoanalytical approach is governed by the idea that human behavior is mainly determined by unconscious and suppressed drives. This approach also puts strong emphasis on the influence of the family relationships on formation of the personality, as well as on the opportunities for "transferring" them to other situations. Such transfer is possible because of the models of behavior and communication that get established in very early age within the family context, but then they predetermine future interpersonal relations and interactions.

According to behaviorists communicational experience and expectations are formed on the basis of the reinforcements and punishments that the person receives. Therefore the main force behind human behavior can be found in the urge to receive more pleasure and to avoid difficulties and unpleasant experiences [1].

According to cognitively oriented psychologists human sensory perceptions have a strong influence on individual behavior, on the comprehension and remembering of certain images and ideas and this influences personal activity and the quality of cognitive functioning.

For the full realization of the interpersonal communication a huge role plays also the dialogical communication (according to the humanistic approach in psychology) in the context of the spontaneous human experiences and emotions and the positive regard to their own self and their partner in the interaction.

Communication is a word of Latin origin and means "transmission, message, connection, notice". In the broadest sense, under the term 'communication' we can understand the basic fact that all living beings are in an active and permanent connection with the world. In the narrow sense it is considered, hat living creatures maintain connections among themselves to achieve a better understanding and more accurate expression of their internal conditions, while also managing to exchange diverse information and to cause relevant reactions [2].

The main purpose of each act of interpersonal communication is usually associated with the desire of the submitter of information to make a connection to the recipient and to send a message, using a suitable communication channel. Perception and understanding of the communication is carried out through adequate reflection, decoding and interpretation of the information obtained. It is important to note that during the communication act the information may be transmitted openly (refers to external observed behavior) or in a hidden manner (refers to what the sender of the message is thinking and implying to the recipient, and to what the latter has understood and decoded). In reality very often many errors or misunderstandings appear between what was initially thought and coded by the sender of the message and what is decoded eventually by the recipient. In order to avoid such errors in coding and decoding it is important to encourage the sender to verbalize his/her thoughts, motifs and considerations more clearly, as this will considerably improve the recipients proper understanding [3].

If communication could be more narrowly defined as a number of information processes, communication could be broadly seen as a fundamental category with extremely rich content. By the study of the psychological features of communication the complexity of human relations can be revealed. Communication is a separate form of subjective activity, through which the relations with the social world change, and important communication functions (informational, regulatory and affective) are activated. Communication is also a mandatory prerequisite for the achievement of better knowledge of reality, for the formation of an adequate emotional relation to it and of appropriate communication competencies. The

latter are based on full and proper understanding of communication and interpersonal relationships from a cognitive, affective and behavioral point of view and suggest the drawing of adequate feedback form the results achieved [4]. Another important point is that communication is one of the main adaptive and defence mechanisms against stress in terms of human adaptation to the environment. Since humans are social creatures, it is vital fro them to maintain active contacts with other members of their own species and communities, otherwise, they may fall victims to the destructive influence of stress, anxiety, despair, helplessness and other negative effects of social isolation.

Effective communication and coping with life's challenges in a world rich of various stimuli requires intense cognitive functioning and particularly, adequate process of categorization. To make sense of what we encounter, we categorize objects on the basis of their similar features. That way we can reduce the amount of information which our minds should process all the time. The famed American psychologist Gordon Allport notes that the human mind must think with the aid of categories and that once formed categories are the foundation of the process of forming expectations and predictions about the world [5].

Each human perception in the process of communication is a "act of categorization". Categorisation is a simplification of incoming information from the outside world through its reduction it to a limited number of cognitive categories. This means that each participant in the process of communication tends to categorize the other in accordance with his/her pre-existing cognitive frames of reference and schemas. The tendency for categorisation is usually strongly emphasized at the initial perception of the other, but at the later stages of the communication the cognitive frames and categories in which people put one another tend to get less rigid and to even disappear. If lacking enough information about the other, the first impressions of a new person are supplemented with qualities that are attributed to him/her on the basis of a small amount of external, mostly sensory data. Yet, relying too much on the results of the categorisation may easily blur or distort the individual characteristics of the participants in the process of categorization. Perceiving a person as a member of a certain category may lead to the erroneous belief that he or she necessarily possesses certain features, attributed to this category of people.

The first impression of an unknown person is usually drawn up on the basis of his/ her physical attractiveness/ unattractiveness. Sometimes separate, but specific features in his/ her outer appearance serve as a basis for the attribution of certain psychological characteristics. It

has often been noted in the psychological research literature that people who are perceived as more attractive are also believed to possess more socially desirable traits (like higher intelligence, better moral judgement, kindness and openness). Also, due to insufficient information in the first meeting, people tend to form an overall impression of the other person on the basis of fragmental or incomplete data of any kind. Only when it becomes clear what the partner in the communicative process is, then it becomes possible to better understand his/her qualities and behaviour.

In many cases the beliefs about the outer appearance and the psychological characteristics of the partner can manifest in the form of various stereotypes. The emergence and maintenance of stereotypes is also strongly influenced by the social and professional roles, in relation to which people perceive and evaluate each other.

In the process of social perception the schemas and stereotypes may aid the simplification and the better comprehension of the incoming information and this enables its better organization. The categorization of people according to their group membership activates the group stereotype [6]. In these cases the stereotyping is rooted in the individual's urge to assign objects and situations to certain classes and categories that are associated with well-known beliefs, ideas and expectations. According to Susan Fisk [7] stereotyping is rooted in the human tendency to put objects and situations into classes and categories for which there are already established beliefs and expectations. People categorize and label not only the other people, but also themselves. When people label themselves as "intelligent", for example, they tend to think about themselves in a certain manner and to perceive themselves as members of an homogenous group of similar individuals with whom they share common features [8].

The term *stereotype* was introduced by the American journalist Walter Lipmann in his book "Public Opinion" (first published in 1922) [9]. According to him the real environment around us is too complex to understand it fully, so we perceive the world in a simplified way by the schemata and stereotypes that we hold. This stereotype can be described as an overly generalized concept, formed on the basis of incomplete and ambiguous information. According to other definitions a stereotype is a summarized belief about a group of people and the stereotype-holder accepts that all members of the stereotyped group share common traits and behaviors. Stereotypes can influence communication very strongly because of their

effects on social perception like emphasizing group differences, selective perception, and underestimation of in-group differences.

In addition, as a stereotypical can be seen each specific or outer feature and this can oversimplify the most important aspect of human communication – the adequate perception of the other person. This means that as a result of the stereotyping the personality of the partner may fall in a unsuitable category and to „absorb" all of its distinctive features, which the other person may not possess at all. Stereotypes not only illustrate operation of the principle of economy of efforts in the cognitive organization of everyday life, but can also significantly facilitate the emotional experience of important events. In this sense stereotypes have strong emotional charge (they usually are accompanied with certain emotions - sympathy, antipathy, warmth or other similar experiences) and represent summarized personal observations, preconceptions or preliminary attitudes concerning the personality, behavior and coping mechanisms of other people, seen as members of a category. The reason why stereotypes are rooted so deeply in the process of social perception lies in the fact that the mental reflection of reality is always elaborated with a personal interpretation which serves the human urge to search for the inner reasons for human behavior and occurring events (<http://sites.google.com/site/sexologypsychology/covesko-obsuvane>) [10].

It is a shared view among researchers that stereotypes are cognitive structures, consisting of a category (or label) and its features attributable costs. These features are linked in a coherent structure in the long-term memory, which can be activated at any time. People use stereotypes as heuristic approaches, such as "shortcuts" to fill the information that is not available, to reach a conclusion or judgment — in short, to avoid the overload of cognitive functions. As social psychologist Susan Fiske notes, people tend to act as 'cognitive misers', or trying to spare time and effort in the process of perception and understanding the environments. When one stereotypical trait gets activated, then the other traits, associated with the stereotype, get activated because of the complex "associative net" they are in [11]. The process of stereotyping starts with the identification of a person(s) as belonging to a certain category (on the basis of appearance, for example, or their gender/ethnicity). As a second stage in the process could be defined the attribution of a scope of traits/ features to this category as a whole, and as a third one – the attribution of these traits and features to a particular member. Stereotypes are social in their origin and have their own "social life"

beyond the individuals, who share them; in fact every member of a certain culture or community knows its stereotypes and can name them [12].

In the process of interpersonal communication stereotypes give people the opportunity to process information quickly and make quick judgments, especially if the information processing is too difficult or demanding (fro example, when encountering new people and know too little about them). Thus time and efforts are spared in the search and processing of new information, as well as in the process of forming an impression or making a judgment as the information deficits are "filled in" with the help of the stereotypical contents. The use of stereotypes, however, according to recent studies, goes beyond the drive towards frugality of the "cognitive miser" [13] and beyond the urge to simplify the complexity of the environment: they are something far beyond the control of the individual and may turn into automatic responses that are resistant to change and independent of the intentions of the stereotype-holder.

The assignment of a person to a certain category is not always a result of the actual possession of the associated features, but more the result of the perception of this person as member of the category or social group. There are two explanatory models of how people assign membership in a certain group/category: the model of the prototypes and the model of the example. According to the first, we put people into categories according to the extent to which they remind us of some already known "typical" representative of this category - or a *prototype*. The prototypes can even not be a real person, but an imaginary individual who embodies the key group characteristics. Very often as a prototype could serve a fictional character from a book, a movie, a TV shows. In this sense the media in the modern world are a strong channel for the creation and maintenance of stereotypes through the ways they present different groups of people. And if these are groups, with which the individual has no or little direct contact, then he/she is more likely to use the information from the media as orientation or prototype. In the 21st century, when the media influence is extremely strong and starts form very early age, the risks of forming and sustaining various stereotypes is very high and this requires extreme caution in the process of upbringing and education of the younger generation.

The model of the example posits that we have in mind many examples for a given social category and if we meet a new person who reminds us of most such examples; we assign him/her to the same category [14].

Neither of the two models can explain fully the process of categorisation; probably various processes occur in different situations. But both models emphasize that people have mental representations of social categories on the basis of which they create their social taxonomies. These representations have the effect that people are viewed as more similar to one another, if they are presented as members of the same group (in-group assimilation) and having less similar if they are presented as members of different groups (between groups contrast). When we perceive the members of other groups as having many common features, as homogeneous the individuality and differences get blurred. This phenomenon has received the name effect of out-group homogeneity [15]. If these phenomena are applied to the communication in the school environment, where teachers and students communicate on daily basis, then it would show that under the influence of the age stereotypes the younger people (students) usually perceive the older ones as alike, particularly on key dimensions such as political beliefs or contemporary thinking. In a psychological experiment students were asked to describe the typical elderly person, in their view. The descriptions were found to be too simplified and extreme in comparison to the descriptions given for the typical person of their own age [16]. Under the influence of age stereotypes teachers, on their turn, can perceive all teenagers they teach as equally bad-mannered, undisciplined and foolish. This shows that in the process of interpersonal communication stereotypes can turn into a very serious barrier to the mutual knowledge and understanding of people. For example, if school teachers have negative stereotypes for certain groups of students (on gender, ethnic or other such basis), then this leads to negative expectations towards them and to neglectful attitude towards them. Or if the stereotype the teacher holds is that girls do not perform good at mathematics, then such a teacher would expect girl in the class to fail in math or have lower grades. In such cases the teacher usually would not pay much attention to the students from the stereotyped group because of the belief that they would not reach high results anyway, so there is no need to "waste" efforts on them. Such expectations of teachers are always conveyed to the students, even if not verbally expressed in an explicit manner, through, for example, derogatory comments if they are mistaken, putting much stress on their failures and ignoring their successes, or through nonverbal and paralinguistic forms of communication (sarcastic tone of voice, rolling of the eyes, etc.). If the students have negative stereotypes about their teacher, they will not accept them as authorities and as people whose demands they have to follow; so

they may not comply to the teachers' requirements for order, discipline, rules and even the school norms for appropriate behavior may be ignored and disregarded by such youngsters.

If the students have negative stereotypes for groups, to which they assign some of their teachers or classmates, then this may have very negative effects on interpersonal communication. For example, if the pupil has negative stereotypes about representatives of ethnic minorities, then there is the risk that he/she will behave towards them in neglectful, discriminatory and derogatory way, which in turn may lead to tension and conflicts. In research, carried out among Bulgarian teenagers and young people for establishing the content of their stereotypes for different ethnic and social groups, four dimensions were established – competence, warmth, status and competitiveness [17]. It was found out that on all four dimensions the Roma minority received very low ratings – or they are perceived by the young Bulgarians as neither competent, nor warm, nor having high status, not competitive. At the same time the demographic situation in Bulgaria is such, that the number of Roma children increases and higher percentage of school-age children are form this ethnic group. The negative stereotypes towards Roma people creates the risk of their automatic perception as having lower abilities, less responsive, less supportive in communication, unwanted partners in games and activities, for sharing or studying, which can lead to their rejection from in school, discrimination or the selective emphasis of specific characteristics or behaviors that are congruent with the stereotype. Therefore, the statutory and role characteristics of the participants in a given communicative act are very important and are usually determined not only by ethnicity, but also by their age, gender, profession, education, social position. The desire to participate in a communicative act is mediated by various communicative attitudes, personal intentions, readiness to act in certain manners and levels of adequacy of communication abilities.

Communication abilities and social competence are formed either gradually and unconsciously in the course of individual development, or are the results of special trainings (mostly, sensitive training), where there is heightened individual susceptibility to new information, as well as higher levels of psychic readiness to assimilate social stimuli. During interactive trainings the participants acquire deeper self-knowledge, improve their life skills, and form abilities for successful coping with personal problems and life's challenges. With the improvement of social skills comes the betterment of mutual understand in communication, the heightened levels of tolerance and goodwill, as well as the prevention or

reduction of the risk of conflicts and of negative emotional states, provoked by unsuccessful communication. This means that psychological work at school with students, teachers and parents, as well as such work in the community as a whole is the most appropriate preventive measure against tension and conflict in interpersonal communication, and for the overcoming of barriers to understanding among people.

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