

## STEREOTYPES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** *In human behavior stereotyping traces back in old times. People in all cultures, and in all times, have this tendency of categorizing and placing the others, i.e. their peers, into separate classes according to their behavior, or certain character traits. We should admit that our way of thinking may be altered by the existing assumptions about representatives of a certain group, nation, ethnicity, cultural background, without filtering the information we get about those people, or trying to see if certain characteristics also apply to them. It is in human nature to stereotype, to "label" our peers by applying generalizations to individuals. Stereotypes, be them racial, based on people's look, on gender, or religion, they still persist in any society, since it is easier for people to deal with a certain situation if they generalize a group of people. Not rarely may we hear people characterizing an overweight person as lazy, a Muslim as a terrorist, a Russian as a vodka drinker, a German as a Nazi, a Scottish as stingy, and so on. Sometimes we may refuse to think otherwise, considering that these characteristics have been verified by others. We hurry to pre-judge and include people in known and pre-set categories, not understanding and not considering cultural differences, of which we should be aware in communication. This paper aims to present information on different types of stereotypes, related concepts, i.e. prejudice, or discrimination, and the way they affect people, with an application to seafarers, and maritime cadets. Through exposure to seafarers of different nationalities, in multinational, multicultural crews, seagoing people must learn to cope with stereotypes in order to avoid misunderstandings, or potential conflict.*

**Keywords:** *stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, cultural differences, multinational crew, multi-cultural crew.*

### Introduction

Early in our childhood preconceptions and prejudices are usually formed. If we allow and favour them in our education, and further in our social system we will certainly allow what later will develop into discrimination, inequality, racism or any other form of negative attitude towards the otherness. Respect for diversity and fundamental rights of others, in small groups and later outside them, in work places, or other forms of interaction, should be cultivated so as not to grow in isolation and accept that not everything that is different is necessarily bad or negative.

All these pre-judgments, i.e. stereotypes, are usually negative opinions about people who are different from those living closely around us. Coming across representatives of other cultures, we are not so sure that we can be willing to handle diversity and difference reflected in behavior, attitudes, language and ways of communication. Stereotypes can cause us to believe that a widely recognized assumption may be true, when it may not be. We tend to apply the same label to all members of a group without checking personally if this is true or not. Regardless of any difference all members of a group or culture is stereotyped as such. When by using negative stereotypes in interpreting someone's the behavior within a group, we do

nothing else but impede intercultural communication!

Not rarely, are stereotypes too simple or general, and also exaggerated, and reduced to, sometimes, naive statements like "Blonds are...", "Blacks are...", "Women should not...", etc. Appreciations with reference to certain nationalities are also met with, especially in small groups, such as ship crews, in which people would separate from and avoid certain cultures representatives, simply because they just can't stand people who have a certain reputation as a nation, just for the reason of having met one of the kind before. To be make things clear we should say that we are thinking of those worn-out phrases referring to Muslims, Germans, Scots, i.e. terrorists, Nazi, stingy, etc. We hurry to pre-judge and include people in pre-set categories, not understanding and not considering cultural differences, of which we should be aware in communication.

### What are stereotypes?

To offer a clearer understanding of what stereotypes are it is not aimless to mention a few aspects about what culture is, and what it refers to. Culture reflects the values, attitudes and beliefs of groups of people that make them behave in a certain way. Roughly, cultures differ in terms of language, religion, ethnicity, and, as mentioned, values, attitudes and beliefs.

A stereotype is a simplified concept or image and / or standard that is common to people on another group. Stereotypes can be positive or negative and usually occur when we have minimal knowledge about a group of people. These simplistic views, opinions or images, are based on what they have in common within members of another group.

There are as many definitions of stereotypes as the authors who dealt with this subject. Altogether a stereotype may be defined as a fixed and preconceived idea that people hold about what something or someone is. If used, they generate superficial images about the people we interrelate with. Stereotypical beliefs can be involved in conflicting events, especially referring to race discrimination, which are likely to appear among the members of multinational ship crews. Stereotypes are distorted ideas, disguised myths and superficial thoughts. They obstruct our minds, thus determining us to gather the opinions formulated by others, and not letting us judge with our own minds. We see life according to pre-defined standards, and also in the light of the experience lived by others.

Stereotypes tend to numb our senses and thinking. We internalize them into our way of thinking, in which we no longer distinguish who we really are. We have to admit that in order to come to understand others we have to know ourselves first, so as to have a term of reference. We give the measure of the “other”.

Often, stereotypes are used to justify and support the beliefs and values of the majority. 'Common' is perceived as 'normal' and things done by distinct social groups or minorities are devaluated when they do not conform to these 'norms'.

#### **Culture and stereotypes**

Stereotypes are often considered to be among the oldest social phenomenon that has persisted along historical epochs. Conceptions burdened by

stereotypes and prejudices concerning everything that is related to others have always been a constant. Whenever it comes to work or personal interactions it is easy and handy to call on a collective memory where we find ready-made information about the others, without checking or filtering it. From generation to generation prejudices and clichés become stronger irrespective of the development of the society. By clinging to cultural stereotypes we focus our attention on certain features, amplify them, and offer interpretations of our observations.

The fact that all human beings are born free and equal in their dignity and rights, and are endowed with reason and conscience should lead them to act in a spirit of brotherhood and friendship, which is not always the case.

Despite this noble ideal, prejudice and discrimination continue to affect humanity. This cruel reality is a reflection not only of the times in which we live, but also of the imperfect nature of man. Most often we define first and then see, we do not follow the logical, or common- sense order of see first and then defining. From the confusion of the outside world, we choose what culture already defined in our name, and we tend to perceive what we receive as a stereotype of our culture, or of other cultures.

To this end, it would be wise to recognize that anyone can have prejudices or resort to stereotypes. The question is whether we can get rid of them, and fight against them, so as not to affect us and the ones we come into contact with, in different instances.

Education was described as the "most powerful weapon" in the fight against prejudice. A proper education can reveal the true causes of prejudice, can help us to examine our way of thinking, and also react wisely when we ourselves are the target of prejudice.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

As long as there are different races and cultures, stereotypes will never disappear. People have always fear what they have not understood, considering that by categorizing them, the task would be easier to accomplish. The first impressions that we form about representatives of entire groups of people, many time based on, occasional interactions are very strong, difficult to get rid of.