Stereotyping: An Open Conversation on the Establishment, Nature, and Impact of Stereotypes on Society

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Abstract

Stereotypes are generalizations about groups of people that have impacted predominantly marginalized communities. We typically use stereotypes against a generalized other and some stereotypes have become part of our perceptual sets. This activity attempts to re-humanize stereotypes by confronting students with known stereotypes and makes students reflect on the impact of stereotypes on people's lives.

Keywords: Communication Pedagogy, Stereotypes, Perceptions

Intended Course: Although developed for the basic Fundamentals of Communication course, this activity could be used in Intercultural Communication, Race/Whiteness in Communication, Interpersonal Communication, or any courses that address the impact of stereotypes on our communication.

Objectives:

• Reflect on where stereotypes are learned

• Understand and explain the relationship between stereotypes and unconscious biases

• Analyze the impact of biases and stereotypes on individuals' daily lives through overt or covert communication

Theoretical Rationale

Stereotypes, or "generalization[s] about a group or category of people that have a powerful influence on how we perceive others and their communication behavior" (Floyd, 2018, p. 65), are all around us and consciously and unconsciously influence our communication. We often don't realize or remember how we learned or where we first heard a stereotype, how it

influences our day-to-day interactions, or how it could ultimately change the way we perceive ourselves and others. The stereotypes we hear easily become perceptual sets, predispositions based on particular features of a stimulus (Allport, 1955) through which we look out for confirming messages of the stereotypes and disregard the disconfirmations of these stereotypes. This could ultimately cause us to evaluate people based on easily recognizable traits. Stereotypes reduce to a singular and untrue generalization about people's ability and identity, and they provide unfair evaluation.

Common stereotypes include "People in poverty are lazy," "Asians are submissive," "women are caring," and "Black people are criminals." These stereotypes are likely to be internalized and lead to the systematic idea among a group of people that they might not be worthy enough. Yamato (2004) calls this "internalized oppression" and explains that "members of the target group are emotionally physically, and spiritually battered to a point that they begin to actually believe that their oppression is deserved" (p. 100). Internalization of these stereotypes can have detrimental and damaging consequences for people. Bonnot and Croizet (2006) found that women who internalized the "women are bad at math" stereotype also ranked their self-evaluation in math lower, even when they controlled for prior achievement.

Though we cannot control the ways in which people internalize stereotypes, we can control the ways in which we communicate to and about people; challenging stereotypes and becoming aware about our own biases established through these stereotypes is a good first step. Lyons and Kashima (2003) explain that the communication chain of passing on one's knowledge about a group of people strongly contributes to the establishment and maintenance of stereotypes. We need to examine how we consciously or unconsciously communicate stereotypes. In a variety of situations, people are likely to evaluate behavior and performance

through these stereotypes. McGrady and Reynolds (2013) showed that white teachers evaluated their Asian students with higher scholastic aptitude than white students, while ranking the Black students with lower scholastic aptitude. Though the Asian stereotype might seem positive, it dehumanizes and could be all-defining. Additionally, McGrady and Reynolds noted that black children were ranked less attentive in class by their white teachers. This last finding has previously also been found by Downey and Pribesh (2004) who note that the behavior of black students in the classroom is evaluated less favorably by white teachers as compared to black teachers. We don't only evaluate children based on perceptions we hold on people's fundamental identities. MacNell et al. (2014) found that when students perceive their online instructor to be a male, they evaluate the instructor significantly higher as compared to perceiving them female, regardless of actual gender.

In the current political climate that prioritizes nationalistic ideals and monocultures, stereotyping seems to become more prevalent and largely contributes to a widening gap between people. It used to not be accepted for public officials to make racialized comments meant to oppress people. Statements by public officials such as "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (Scott, 2019, para. 6) have gone nearly unpunished. In fact, the generalizations and vilifications such as the previous citation have likely contributed to an increase in violence against Latinx communities in the last decade (FBI, 2019). It is important to take a step back and reflect on how these stereotypes contribute to our internalized oppression and the influence it has on our day-to-day communication.

Description

Before performing this activity in class, it is important as an instructor to reflect on the classroom climate. This activity is not recommended before week three of a semester due to the

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necessity to have a level of trust among students. If students are feeling too uncomfortable to even discuss stereotypes with their classmates, they are unlikely to discuss this topic with the depth it urges.

For this activity, materials are needed to help students keep anonymity and maximize the impact on students' understanding of stereotypes. Firstly, the instructor will need to bring enough blank notecards to class to provide each student with one card. Secondly, the classroom should be equipped with a whiteboard or chalkboard which the students can face. The instructor needs to bring enough markers to have at least two to three students write on the whiteboard at the same time. Lastly, computer access through a projector is needed to show the three-minute clip about racial profiling. Prior to beginning the activity, the instructor will divide the whiteboard into six categories (Black people, White people, Asian people, Latino/Latina people, men, and women). Categories could be adjusted to include different sexualities, races, gender identifications, or other identities.

The instructor prefaces that we have all heard of stereotypes, that some of us can relate to some stereotypes, while others are far from what we hold true. The class will be told that the following activity might be perceived as awkward, but stereotypes are not supposed to be considered comfortable. In pre-phasing the activity, the instructor will address the definition of stereotyping as well as perceptual sets. Both terms were addressed in the reading assigned for that class period (Floyd, 2018). Instructors could use other course materials addressing both stereotypes and perceptual sets. It is important for the instructor to highlight some research about the impact of stereotypes (e.g. Downey & Pribesh, 2004; MacNell et al., 2014) to emphasize the importance of the topic.

Each student is given a notecard. Students are asked to anonymously write one stereotype they have heard about each of the six groups on the whiteboard. Once the class is done writing, students will fold their notes, and put them in a bag. Each student pulls out a notecard with stereotypes another person wrote and chooses one stereotype to write on the whiteboard. Once each student has had a chance to write something down, the instructor remains quiet for a couple of minutes to let these stereotypes sink in. From there, a discussion ensues about the stereotypes with the following questions as prompts:

- How did you learn about these stereotypes?

- Do you identify with any in the category you consider yourself to be in?

- How are some stereotypes originated?

- How could these stereotypes be harmful?

- How could these stereotypes play into our perceptual sets?

Once the students have had a chance to reflect on the stereotypes, the instructor will play a three-minute clip of the film "Zwart als Roet" by Sunny Bergman (2014). The clip reveals the difference in response of witnesses when three men, a white man, a black man, and a man from Middle Eastern background steal a female's bike in a busy park. The video shows that people were more likely to presume innocence from the white man while stereotyping the black and Middle Eastern men as criminal and dangerous. This video is used to exemplify how (unconscious) biases impact bystanders (and our own) actions to make students aware about the tangible impact stereotyping can have.

The last part of the activity allows students to reflect on stereotypes and their impact. Potential question prompts include:

- Did you realize you might be unconsciously influenced by these stereotypes?

- Do you realize ways in which these stereotypes have influenced ideas about people?

- How do these stereotypes influence the context in which we communicate with others?

Debrief

The effectiveness of the lesson is measured through the way students respond to the lesson. Many students experience discomfort, which is good. Stereotypes are uncomfortable. In the discussion, students' reflection on and grappling with serves as an evaluation of the effectiveness of the activity. Students should be able to understand that stereotypes contribute to shaping our biases, which in turn impact our communication with individuals in these groups. It is important, however, that students feel supported enough in their class to openly reflect on these stereotypes. The reflection questions assist in creating a non-judgmental environment by not asking people for their beliefs, but rather, by helping students reflect on the origins and impacts stereotypes have.

Typically, students show much more empathy in the way in which they answer the questions about stereotypes after seeing them written on the whiteboard as compared to before. This show that students are starting to understand that stereotypes are real and have an impact on people's lives.

Appraisal

Students indicated both a degree of irritation and appreciation towards this activity. The university in which this activity was performed was in a medium-sized predominantly white university in the Midwest. Some students noted that they knew what stereotypes are and therefore didn't need to learn about them. These comments indicate that students might not realize the extent to which stereotypes influence people's lives and how stereotypes have been

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internalized by both people stereotyped and stereotyping. This activity is for many students a first exposure to stereotypes beyond a dictionary term. Though this activity might not take away everyone's stereotypes, it does allow for reflections most students do not do. In a discussion about the activity, one student mentioned, "You usually hear stereotypes around, but writing them down on a piece of paper is confronting. Seeing all stereotypes on the whiteboard made me realize we are talking about people."

Though this activity has many benefits, there are some limitations. If students are already feeling strongly that stereotypes aren't impacting their communication, they might become disengaged, and the activity might have a countereffect. It is therefore important to be very sensitive as an educator of the approach to the activity, and to decide when in the semester the class is ready for such an activity. In addition, it is important to walk between groups and sit with groups to listen and ask follow-up questions to encourage student to reflect on the material.

If a class has little diversity, minority students might feel uncomfortable in the discussion of stereotypes due to the more prevalent exposure to stereotypes. The way in which this activity attempts to limit this is through asking about stereotypes about not only people in minority status, but also people from dominant cultures. Despite this, tokenization can still happen, which is why the instructor needs to be proactive in engagement with student groups. This activity and the discussion questions can be adjusted depending on the goals of the instructor and discussion questions. For example, one student noted that it would be interesting to have men and women write stereotypes separately to see how gender influences the type of stereotypes we write down. Additionally, instructors can choose different marginalized identities to reflect stereotypes more prevalent in their region or more relevant to the course material.

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