

The logo for SORAPS, featuring the word 'SORAPS' in a bold, sans-serif font. The letters 'S', 'O', 'R', and 'A' are orange, while 'P', 'S', and 'S' are white. The text is set against a dark blue rectangular background.

Study of religions
against prejudices
and stereotypes

Appendix 2

A Relational Approach to Stereotypes

| Version No. | Author, institution | Date/Last Update |
|-------------|---|------------------|
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Introduction

Stereotypes may be approached from many different disciplines ranging for instance from psychology, cultural studies, discourse analysis, linguistic, sociology and also cognitivist approaches, which recently have contributed, inter alia with notions about 'prototypes' (Boyer 2001; Guthrie 1996; Stangor 2000). In this paper, I suggest a linguistically informed sociological approach, which hopefully may lead to a better understanding of how and why stereotypes are constructed and how they are used in social life especially with regards to social groups. Stereotypes will in the following be approached as basic human linguistic (and cognitive) categorization used by individuals and groups in ordinary social life. With regards to the latter, the paper draws specific attention to the use of stereotypes as a potent vehicle of boundary-drawing linked to identity politics of collective groups. In doing so, the paper draws on Fredrik Barth's classic introduction to the anthology *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth 1969) and recent research that has extended Norbert Elias' notion of the survival unit to other groups than the state (Elias 1978; Reeh 2013).

The conclusion, similar to the idea about ways of thinking, cognising and classifying with the use of prototypes, is that stereotypes cannot be avoided altogether but that they can and ought to be controlled by an education, e.g. religion education, that seeks to give pupils and future citizens knowledge and analytical skills enabling a reflexive and self-critical approach to their own proto- and stereotypes.

On stereotypes and their use in social life

A stereotype is a cultural construction through which a group of people is characterized (Bobo 1999). As such I will here suggest that a stereotype is simply a linguistic construction like any other linguistic construction. A basic approach to linguistic construction in an overwhelming amount of literature. Here, I will draw on an approach by Terence Turner where he uses Roman Jakobson's approach to language in which any kind of linguistic construction can be described as the projection of equivalence from the semantic axis of selection into the axis of combination (Jakobson 1990; Turner 1991). In a more mundane formulation one could say that semantic (as well as any linguistic) construction is a result of selection and combination. As an example one could say that the two words black and cars are selected and combined, which results in the construction black cars. Another example of this linguistic construction obviously is the category black people. Through this construction one may further say that reification occurs and the consequence is that the category black people is apprehended as a fixed category.

Our languages are constructed in such a way that we can often only express constant movement or constant change in ways which imply that it has the character of an isolated

object at rest, and then, almost as an afterthought, adding a verb which expresses the fact that the thing with this character is now changing. For example, standing by a river we see the perpetual flowing of the water. But to grasp it conceptually, and to communicate it to others, we do not think and say, "Look at the perpetual flowing of the water"; we say, "Look how fast the river is flowing." We say, "The wind is blowing," as if the wind were actually a thing at rest which, at a given point in time, begins to move and blow. We speak as if a wind could exist which did not blow. This reduction of processes to static conditions, which we shall call "process-reduction" for short, appears self-explanatory to people who have grown up with such languages. (Elias 1978, pp. 111–12)

According to the quote from the German sociologist Norbert Elias, one problem with regard to linguistic categories used in the description of the fluid, dynamic and highly changeable processes of man's social life are that they are reduced to static conditions. Another way of putting this would be to say that man's social life is described with "thing concepts" as if they are objective things (also known as 'reification') or as Lakoff & Johnson would say through container concepts (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

The social problems arising out of man's presumably unavoidable tendency towards such reduction into static thing concepts ('reifications') are often further aggravated because such constructions become permanent constructions. This may be realized if one considers the linguist and anthropologist Terence Turner's notion of "entrenchment" (Turner 1991). Without going into the details of Turner's argument here, it suffices to say that Turner's argument dispenses with the usual distinction between denotation and connotation within linguistic and cultural construction of meaning and argues that any linguistic and cultural construct over time may become what he calls entrenched in the language. For example the metaphoric construction "Market Equilibrium" may to ordinary people imply connotations to balancing scales on a weight. However, these connotations may disappear to people if they hear and use the two terms often, which Turner argues is the case among economists to whom the construction "Market Equilibrium" will not imply the connotations of scales but simply that the term market equilibrium denotes that demand equals supply on a market (Turner 1991). The same linguistic construction may to some people imply connotative meaning while it implies denotative meaning to others.

The importance of this example, an example that may at first occur a bit remote from a discussion on stereotypes, is the acknowledgement that stereotypes as well as any other kind of linguistic construction may have not only connotative significance but become so entrenched in language that they appear as fixed topoi. If the latter is the case one may say that a stereotype becomes perceived as not just connotative but - through frequent use - as a *denotation*. Such denotative as well as negative connotations are of course to be criticized and problematized (see below).

Norbert Elias' notion of the survival unit as a key to understanding the problems with regards to the use of stereotypes in collective boundary drawing

In real social life there are of course an infinite number of different actors with different interests that may contribute to the establishment of such entrenched stereotypes. In the following, I will however limit ourselves to one of the most important social mechanisms, namely the boundary drawing that occurs when a social group, on the one hand, establishes itself as a group, and simultaneously, on the other hand, draws a distinction between itself and what I will call its *significant* other (groups). In order to do so, I will draw on the relational sociology of the German sociologist Norbert Elias because I agree with recent research that Elias figurative approach can solve many pressing problems with regards to essentialism and substantialism in social analysis (Kaspersen 2008).

In his attempt to establish a point of departure for his relational sociology, Norbert Elias coined the term *survival unit* as his primary social unit (Elias 2008). The concept of the survival unit is Elias' reformulation of the concept of the state as relational concept. In the following, Elias notion survival unit will be generalised into a category that can be used also with regards to social groups on all levels (Reeh 2013). Before we get to this, I would however like to stress that the crucial point here is that Elias with the analytical notion of the survival unit established a truly relational and non-essentialist social analysis (Kaspersen 2013; Kaspersen 2008). According to Elias the notion of the survival unit, in contrast to the concept state, implies that the survival unit is situated in an environment (of other states) in which it is bound to try to survive. The notion of the sovereign survival unit thus opens up the possibility of an analysis of the state as embedded in a specific and dynamic historical figuration, externally as well as internally. Here, I will argue that such a survival unit is defined and conditioned through its relations to other sovereign survival units. The other survival units will in the following be called the significant other(s). According to Elias, then, a state is not a fixed "thing" but on the contrary defined and determined by its relations to its significant other(s). Before we continue, one should perhaps note that in the following I will use the generalised version of Elias' concept of the survival unit so it can be used to study religions as well as other social groups in their relation to their environment consisting of other constructed units who are competing, struggling or relating to one another within the same social field or society (Reeh 2013).

The social "We"

Before I continue I would like to stress that I do not argue that all social groups are a kin to the modern state for instance with regards to permanency, institutionalization etc. What I do suggest is, however, that all social groups share a crucial feature with Elias' survival unit, namely that social groups are established through the construction of what Elias calls the "extended 'I-and-We' consciousness, which hitherto has always seemed indispensable in binding together not only small tribes but large social units like nation-states encompassing many millions of people" (Elias 1978: 137).

This collective 'We' is thus the anchor of Elias' relational social theory. Here, it should perhaps be noted that Elias' extended I-and-We consciousness is being supported by new research by scholars such as John Searle, Matti Gallotti, Bernard Schmid, Christian von Scheve and Niels Reeh (Gallotti 2011; Schmid 2014; Searle 1995; von Scheve and Ismer 2013). Both Elias and these scholars stress the importance of the personal pronouns I, we, us and them (Elias 1978; Searle 1995). In our view, social groups should be understood as embedded in a dynamic relations between collective "we's" that I propose to call survival units and regard as collective subjects, as in relational grammar or collective figurations (Elias 2008). These collective subjects may be seen as constituted through speech-acts (i.e. the construction of a social we vis-à-vis a they or a them). But while these social "we's" are constructed, they undoubtedly at the same time have a historical and social reality. The interrelatedness of social groups should therefore be taken much more seriously.

Following this brief explication of the relational character of inter-group dynamics, I suggest that the most dangerous aspect of the use of stereotypes is when they are used in such inter- or intra-group processes in which the group constitutes itself in a dialectic process of mutual othering with other social groups. From this point of view it does thus not matter much whether the group (i.e. the social) we constitutes itself vis-à-vis another established social group or whether it establishes itself through distinctions against internal members of the group who then through a process of scapegoating may become painfully crucial in the establishment of the identity of the group (Girard 1986).

Prejudice

There is still one problem with regard to stereotypes and prejudice that needs to be addressed. As already mentioned in the introduction, I regard a stereotype as the result of basic human language production, which basically may be conceived of as the production of a set of distinctions or linguistic discriminations. Stereotypes are thus an unavoidable aspect of human life and as such they are a crucial aspect of what one might call intergroup prejudice. On the basis of the outline of the above linguistically informed description of stereotypes, I now approach the discussion of the most fruitful strategy with regards to limiting the negative effects of stereotypes.

In addition to calling attention to what I regard as fact, namely that a stereotype is a result of basic human language production and therefore will be impossible to weed out from a language, I will also call attention to the work of the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer who in *Wahrheit und methode* correctly argued that prejudice as such can never be avoided. The reason is that prejudice is an unavoidable part of the basic process of understanding or the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer 1975). Instead, he claimed that what one could and should do was to qualify one's prejudice through the hermeneutic process he described in his phenomenological analysis in the book. His basic argument was that any understanding begins with a question, which is part and parcel of some a priori understanding (prejudice). Prejudice is thus unavoidable in his account, which today still is widely accepted in philosophy. According to this account one therefore cannot avoid prejudice, since it is an unavoidable part of man's cognition.

Concluding remarks

What one could hope for on the basis of Gadamer is thus not to avoid neither stereotypes, prejudice nor prototypes but to engage pupils and students in learning processes through which they acquire a knowledge of their own (as well as others) prejudice, prototypes and stereotypes. The important thing is thus to recognize that such stereotypes, prejudice as well as prototypical thinking are natural but that they may be qualified if the subject becomes aware of it. It is, in this perspective, natural for a lot of people to consider a blackbird more typical of the category 'birds' than a penguin, and to think of 'religion' in general in terms of Christianity being the typical (or 'prototypical') kind of religion. The job for the educator, e.g. in religion education, is thus to deconstruct or qualify this construction by way of historicization and comparison of religion, religions, and Christianity, so that the 'prototype' becomes an analytical term or notion rather than a 'natural' one. This is perhaps even more important when one considers the potential use of stereotypes, prototypes and prejudice in inter-groups processes, such as boundary drawing and exclusion through which groups, which may position themselves vis-à-vis each other. As a final remark, it should be noted that this use and misuse of stereotypes is a crucial thing to counter in today's globalized world where such stereotypes easily can be spread through Internet, Social Media etc.

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