

# HOW TO USE STEREOTYPES TO RAISE AWARENESS OF CULTURAL INTERPRETATION AND ENCOURAGE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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## Abstract

As Ghent University is increasingly attracting international undergraduate and graduate students there is a growing need for a special attention concerning intercultural issues. Besides the presence of international students the personnel and student body has also been diversifying in the last decade. The diversity of cultures, linguistic backgrounds and religious affiliations within the same working force or among the students brings the need to tackle issues arising from intercultural encounters.

Ghent University's established a Diversity and Gender Unit, this unit has been organizing workshops 'Intercultural Communication' for its personal and doctoral schools. PhD-students as well as teaching staff and administrative and technical staff can choose to participate to these workshops. These workshops 'Intercultural Communication' have attracted participants from all sections and departments of the university. They are especially designed to tackle a wide set of problems in a limited time frame (3 hours), such as misunderstandings and issues related to multicultural settings.

To be intercultural competent doesn't mean you have to know all cultures, which is rather impossible. There are alternative ways to become an intercultural competent person. Hence, the workshops are going beyond informing people on other cultures. The workshops' goal is to enhance its participants awareness of their own cultural interpretation mechanisms. Below I will give a short overview of what is been done to achieve this goal in a relatively short stretch of time. Additionally I will elaborate on the philosophical foundations of these workshops and I will argue how and why stereotypes if handled with care can be used as a source to expand and develop knowledge on other cultures.

Keywords: diversity, ethnicity, education, communication, internationalization.

## 1 THE WORKSHOPS

First participants are motivated to discuss social themes such as migration, ethnocentrism and racism. Participants are encouraged to talk about their own experiences, expectations and culture, and to reflect upon terminology and cultural differences. The workshops emphasize that knowing your own culture is the only way to understand your own perspectives and thus understanding other cultures. Being self-consciousness of your own cultural mechanisms becomes the key to appreciate other ways of thinking and doing things.

Second cultural self consciousness is achieved through an explicit discussion on stereotypes and their meaning. To reach this goal participants have self reflective discussions on negative and positive stereotypes concerning their own cultural group. Furthermore following questions are raised: How do stereotypes work? What is wrong with stereotypes? Can we avoid stereotype thinking? Are stereotypes useful? How so? Participants are stimulated to think about where stereotypes come from, what they tell us and how they can teach us something if handled with care.

Through this experience participants are engaged in critical thinking of several stereotypes they may have of others. They are taught how to apprehend what they don't know as to learn more about others through sensitive questions concerning their own stereotypes.

## 2 KNOWING OTHER CULTURES

This paper will further focus on the theoretical background on which the workshops are based, going step by step through the different phases of the workshops. However, this paper will not mention explicitly how the actual steps were undertaken in the workshops. It will merely give an overview of

perspectives and findings expressed during the workshops by the participants and place them within the social and cultural sciences framework.

Intercultural communication used to focus on abstractions of cultural differences. These abstractions were a basis for handling problems occurring in intercultural settings [1] [2]. Unfortunately these perspectives often seem to lead to a 'The West vs. The Rest' perspective on intercultural issues. Subsequently many workshops on intercultural communication focus on knowledge about other cultures. Participants are taught about Muslim cultural habits, differences between American and German working ethics, Asian world views, African time management, etc.

All this information always consists of an abstraction of reality. But while Africans have a lot of cultural features in common, the diversity within Africa is greater than in Europe. And while Europeans share a lot of culture and history, it would be rather blunt to assume that knowing the Italian way will help you in dealing with Germans. Furthermore, this perspective doesn't take into account the differences between individuals who are part of the same culture and the similarities between those who are part of different cultures.

Therefore the UGent intercultural communication workshops rather takes as point of entry to cross-cultural conversations the things that are shared by those involved in a conversation. These things don't have to be universal, they only have to be what people in a conversation have in common [3].

Following this observation we can assume that a Chinese professor of physics has more in common with an American professor of physics than each of these professors would have in common with a carpenter from their respective cultures. Even if these professors are part of very different cultural frameworks they share a wide set of mutual fields of interest which would make communication between them easier.

Strauss & Quinn explain: *"You share some experiences with people who listen to the same music or watch the same television shows you do, other experiences with people who do the same work you do, and still others with people who have had formal schooling like yours, even if you live on opposite sides of the world."* [4]

Additionally, even if we could make abstraction of all cultures of the world, it would be impossible to learn all cultures. Although research [5] [6] has shown that exposure to various cultures is the greatest predictor of intercultural communication skills we don't have to learn about all cultures to be culturally sensitive.

Intercultural communication is much more complex than just learning about other cultures and their differences. Individual personalities and differences are at least just as important. It is common sense that there are good and bad people everywhere, annoying and easy going people, irrespective of culture.

However, this doesn't mean that culture doesn't mean anything. As we learn from many cultural anthropologists it does mean something important [7] [8]. It is a reference point and a perspective. Through this references and perspectives we try to understand and rationalize our environment, i.e. we make abstractions, we put information in boxes. Although this cognitive process is human and natural we have to be aware of its intrinsic dangers and limitations. Therefore, more than studying other cultures we have to focus on the interpretation mechanisms we all use when confronted with other cultures. Focusing on these mechanisms can teach us how to sharpen our cultural awareness.

### **3 WHAT IS CULTURE?**

This is the first question that should be answered before we even try to understand how intercultural communication can be successful. In contemporary society culture and its meaning has become a very much debated issue [3] [8], certainly when related to identity and nationalism [9] [10] [11].

Bierman gives us an interesting account on the meaning of culture. He explains that only in 1871, in the first sentence of Edward B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* the word 'culture' gets its first modern meaning. While it could just mean folklore or the things people do, Tylor (1871) elaborated the meaning of culture. Culture became a system, the coherent body of laws, norms, customs and habits, manners, institutions, etc. in which societies allow the mind to develop and produce results [12].

While politicians and public opinion like to think of culture as something absolute and unchangeable, scientific research has shown that it is nothing like that, more on the contrary, culture changes over time and space [10] [13] [14].

Milton Bennett [15] defines culture as the set of habits and beliefs a group of people share. K.A. Appiah more recently refers to culture as the way people do things, without especially knowing why they do it (e.g. if asking people why they set up and decorate a pine tree for Christmas you will not necessarily receive a social, historical and anthropological account of the tradition). However, we can see that cultures emerge while others disappear. Languages and traditions change over time and contact between several cultures leads to the emergence of new cultures.

French history tells us how French identity is a multicultural construction of Celtic culture, Roman culture, Frankish culture, Occitan culture and much more [16]. American culture didn't even exist a few centuries ago but is a real thing today. Believing that Europe and its nations have always been like that and shouldn't ever change is a fallacy of historical truth. Appiah claims "Cultural purity is an oxymoron" [17]. Indeed, culture, language, identity, etc. are in constant change and evolution. That's how it is and will always be.

Additionally it is worth mentioning that cultural differences are mostly experienced on the surface. When asking participants which situations they experienced when culture may have distorted the communication most tell stories about how people *do* things. Most examples are about the way people greet each other and how it can be wrongly interpreted. French like to kiss, Germans rather shake hands, Congolese shake hands but seem to never let go of your hand, Asians avoid eye contact, etc. Cultural difference can be experienced sharply in the way people say 'yes' or 'no', or in the way they try to drag attention ('Hey! Psss!' is very common in East-Africa and not considered impolite). But these are all things that can easily be learned or unlearned. People who live for a few months abroad unconsciously start to act the same way as the people around them, similarly as they start to speak the local language or pronounce words with the local accent. When abroad it is generally appreciated that people inform you explicitly about these things so that you don't make a fool of yourself next time you try to order something in a restaurant or say hello to a stranger.

#### 4 ETHNOCENTRISM

*"It is all a matter of habit. When I have killed an enemy, it is better to eat him than to let him go to waste. Big game is rare because it does not lay eggs like turtles. The bad thing is not being eaten, but death"* A Chief of the Miranhas as reported by William G. Sumner [18]

William G. Sumner, who coined the term ethnocentrism, wasn't promoting cannibalism with his report. However, he illustrates what ethnocentrism actually is. Ethnocentrism means seeing another culture from perspectives of one's own cultural system. The ethnocentric individual can judge other groups relative to his or her own particular ethnic group. The best-known form of ethnocentrism is eurocentrism.

Since a few decades there is an emergence of afrocentrism in many humanities faculties in the US. Eurocentrism is presented as something to reject while afrocentrism would be a much needed new perspective. However, social scientists have criticized both –isms and shown that afrocentrism is not a valid alternative nor critique against eurocentrism [19].

When looking at a world map in China you notice that the Republic of China will be set in the middle of the map. In Europe and Africa you will indiscriminately see Europe and Africa in the middle. In Australia and New Zealand the continent of Oceania will be set in the middle and in the US and Latin America often the Americas will be set in the central part of the map. Are all these maps wrong? Can we make a non-ethnocentric map?

Maps are culturally biased [9]. However, it is impossible to make a geographically and culturally unbiased map. It would cease to be a 2-dimensional map. Of course trying to put the round earth on a two dimensional piece of paper always means making an abstraction of reality. In this reality it can even mean that Western-Europe looks much bigger than Congo while both areas are approximately the same size.

This contradicts our belief that geography is an exact science and that maps are trustworthy sources of information. They are, but as it is man made it also reflects something human, i.e. culture. Maps use a certain language, a certain script and a certain perspective. There is nothing wrong with doing so. Making a map (or for that matter a globe) taking in account all diversity in the world would be impossible. Even if we would make a three dimensional globe using for each name of each area the official national languages and scripts we would fail to take into account the minorities living in those nations.

The goal of a map is rather to make a gigantic and complex amount of information easily accessible. Taking all diversity present in the world into account would make your map hardly intelligible and just as gigantic as the earth itself.

Similarly, we all have a certain perspective on things, we all wear culturally biased 'glasses', we are all ethnocentric. The dangers of this ethnocentrism is that we may have contempt for other cultures and that we would make value judgments about other cultures. However, this cultural bias helps us to make the world around us intelligible although it always means an abstraction of reality.

We have to be aware of these abstractions and dangers when confronted with other cultures. Rather than trusting all (ethnocentric) available knowledge, we should be ready to always be curious, to always doubt our own judgment, to know more. As a geographer I can't just rely on a map, I go into the field and fill in the gaps if needed.

All participants to the workshops intuitively state that ethnocentrism is a bad thing that should be avoided. They mean that moral judgment of other cultures is wrong, or at least blunt and dangerous. Though we have to be cautious we also have no other way to see things. You can't delete your preconceptions, you can only take them into account when dealing with facts.

## 5 CULTURAL AND MORAL RELATIVISM

Cultural and moral relativism have been widely discussed in the social and cultural sciences [20] [21] [22] [23] [24] [25]. Social and cultural scientists do not always agree with its dangers and benefits. But what does it mean? Where does it come from? And what should we do when confronted with cultural habits we do not understand?

Cultural relativism is a way of understanding another culture from the perspective of the other culture and thus without judging the other culture. Although American anthropologist Franz Boas didn't coin the term, it is he who urged his fellow ethnographers and anthropologist to try to look at other cultures through the perspective of the other culture [26].

This is an interesting methodological tool and intellectual exercise. Boas formulated this unorthodox perspective during the hey days of imperialism. While the scientific and political establishment were convinced of the superiority of Western and Christian values and thus imposed Western culture on other so-called uncivilized cultures, Franz Boas urged the anthropologist to understand other cultural habits from the point of view of the participants of that culture, i.e. to not take a Eurocentric perspective for granted. But today it seems a scientific fact that talk of objective moral truths is just a conceptual error [24].

However, Boas's well-meant and valuable perspective has some perverted consequences. While it is an interesting methodological tool for ethnographers it is not very useful in intercultural contexts where interlocutors are trying to work together. Stating that a certain habit in the other's culture is understandable because of the cultural context of the other blocks all further communication. We may explain the origins of our and their cultural habits but the discussion stops right there. There is no need for reflection or seeking a common ground. When we discover the peculiarities of other cultures and discover we can't morally accept them we walk away, we choose not to communicate with the other culture.

*"For if relativism about ethics and morality were true, then, at the end of many discussions, we would each have to end up saying, "From where I stand, I am right. From where you stand, you are right." And there would be nothing further to say. From our different perspectives, we would be living effectively in different worlds. And without a shared world, what is there to discuss? People often recommend relativism because they think it will lead to tolerance. But if we cannot learn from one another what it is right to think and feel and do, then conversation between us will be pointless. Relativism of that sort isn't a way to encourage conversation: it's just a reason to fall silent."* [27]

Out of respect for other cultures we are actually nurturing the believe that cultures do not change, and that contact between cultures shouldn't influence the participating cultures. Some analysts go even further and argue that:

*"Cultural relativism, which had buttressed the attack against racialism, [can] be perceived as a sort of neo-racialism justifying the backward techno-economic status of once colonized peoples".* [21]

Because of the popularization of cultural relativism we take our distance, do not judge other cultures, we feel shame for feeling disrespected by the habits of others, but instead of trying to analyze

intercultural issues we stop further thinking. It doesn't seem to be desirable to try to understand different cultures. We thus abstain to interfere, reflect or be critical even towards our own cultural habits. This way cultural relativism outside of its ethnographical purpose leads to a disinterest in other cultures and a disbelief in learning from each other.

Of course being cautious of cultural relativism does not mean that we should judge other cultures, that we should impose our moral views. The purpose is not to impose my cultural and moral expectation to other cultures, but the confrontation is instrumental in the search of knowledge, common ground and understanding.

This confrontation can be conversation or conflict. Ido Abram [28] explains that depending on the setting or situation, parties involved can have more to gain from conversation than from conflict. Abram talks about the class room setting as an ideal place to stimulate positive intercultural communication. Equally, the same could be said for any intercultural professional setting where all parties involved would rather see the confrontation change into conversation rather than conflict.

Therefore cultural relativism, the unconditional respect we should have for other cultures, doesn't work outside of the ethnographer's field, doesn't work if we want to have a successful intercultural communication within a pedagogical or professional setting.

The advantage of the class room or the work place is that all participants to communication have to gain from dialogue rather than conflict. It is in such a setting that we are more prepared to learn from each other's differences. Eventually to understand how values work, we have to see that values are not guiding us as individuals for our own, but they are guiding people who are trying to share lives [24]. This could be sharing the work place, sharing schooling, sharing entertainment, etc.

We may think that cross-cultural conversations about values are bound to inflame conflict rather than creating understanding. But we can agree about *what* to do even when we don't agree *why*. We exaggerate the role of reasoned argument in reaching or failing to reach agreements about values. Often practices are what enable us to live together in peace, not principles. Conversations don't have to lead to consensus about values, as long as it helps people to get used to one another [24].

I like to illustrate this part of the workshops with my own experiences with multicultural societies in Africa. However, K.A. Appiah makes a similar point about Ghana:

*"If we had been living in America, I suspect that at some point it would have seemed necessary to explain to us Christian cousins the significance of Ramadan. But we were in Ghana, a country where Christians, Muslims, and the followers of traditional religions live side by side, accepting each other's different ways without expressing much curiosity about them. Auntie Grace went to church on Sundays during Ramadan, as usual. Our cousins came to us at Christmas. I feasted in Ramadan throughout my childhood, but I learned what it meant only when I read about it for myself as an adult."* [29]

## 6 INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

It helps to have knowledge and experience of different cultures to be interculturally competent. However, it is not a guarantee nor a prerequisite. As outlined above, some anthropologists' cultural relativistic point of view may demonstrate a curiosity about strangers but also an urge not to intervene in the lives of other societies [30] and thus not to improve communication between cultures.

Additionally, people who lived in different cultures during their lives may be more inclined to intercultural communication skills [5], they don't automatically developed the skills to improve communication in intercultural settings. Nor are people who never lived in other cultures excluded of developing the needed skills to handle intercultural misunderstandings.

Although culture is an important factor it is not the only factor. When individuals interact they have their cultural background, but they are also personalities with their own characters. Some are sensitive, others are cool tempered, some are aggressive, others are assertive, some are loud, others are timid, etc. Although growing up in a certain culture means that certain personality features are better nurtured than others, your personality is more important than your culture. Some people from Nordic countries find they can better cultivate their personality in a Latin country, where they feel they can be more their selves. Africans who grew up in rural Africa may find they can fully emancipate when living in the urban West. On the other hand, there may be an urban European who discovers rural Africa is where he belongs. Thus intercultural communication is a lot like interpersonal

communication and often says more about the person's individuality than his or her culture [31]. Features such as assertiveness, intelligence, flexibility, creativity, etc. are all independent of a person's culture.

Not only personality plays a major role. As mentioned above the professional and intellectual background of your interlocutor plays at least a similarly important part in the understanding of the other [24].

Additionally institutions, even in one and the same culture, have their own institutional cultural frameworks. Employees might get in conflict with employees of another institution, department or company because of internal cultural features that clash with those of others. One company may have a vertical hierarchical structure leading to employees having to inform their chief for any decision they make. This may sound absurd in another company with a more horizontal hierarchy leading to misunderstanding and frustration when dealing with common decision making.

The principles of intercultural communication are thus relevant in any interpersonal communication, inter-institutional communication or inter-professional communication. Unfortunately we can't know in advance how every person, culture or institution works. We may be well informed if we prepare ourselves but often there is no time to be prepared.

Therefore the focus is not on the other but on yourself. What are your expectations? What do you consider important? What are your core values? How do you like things to be done? What do you consider respectful/disrespectful? Why so?

As we can't know all cultures, nor all personalities, we can at least know our own culture and our selves. Contact with other cultures stimulates that self-reflection, at least if you are aware of your own preconceptions and limitations.

## 7 PERCEPTION

Things do not always seem to be the things they are. Psychological games are a good illustration. Take a quick look at the following illustration, then look away and say out loud what you just read.



Most participants to this exercise say they read 'I love Paris in the springtime'. However, at a second glance they realize they skipped one 'the' (watch again if you still don't see it). This is a normal unconscious cognitive process where you select the information needed and may skip things considered superfluous. When reading we don't read each letter to understand the words, we don't read each word to interpret sentences.

This psychological trick demonstrates how our brain functions and it works much the same way when confronted with other cultural expressions, mostly when we already have an opinion before actually knowing or experiencing them.

A first example is the rhythmic dancing and singing in African cultures. Because dancing and singing in the Western world are mostly related to happy events it seems from a Western point of view that Africans are always happy and celebrating. This is actually not true. Africans are just as often sad or happy as Americans, they just have different ways to express it.

Rhythmic dance and song are in many African cultures the most important way to express feelings, bad and good. While Westerners may prefer to write down or read out loud their sadness, many

Africans will choose to dance and sing it, accompanied by loud beats. Rhythmic dancing and singing in Africa doesn't always mean the same celebration. It is up to you to recognize the different rhythms, songs and dances in African cultures to understand if it is a sad or happy event the people are playing, singing and dancing for.

A second example relates to a much debated issue in Western European media: the Muslim veil or head scarf. While for many Westerners it is a symbol of female oppression many Muslim women in Europe choose to wear the head scarf for exactly the opposite reason. Some see in it an expression of their identity, others see it as a symbol of female emancipation. The latter wear their head scarf because they don't want to be objectified as a lust object, they don't want physical appearance to come into play when people judge them. For them, the head scarf symbolizes humility and stands in contrast to the abuse of the female body in Western media and culture.

Perception is important and it means we can never really trust what we see and how we interpret it. Being intercultural competent means accepting that you are ignorant, that you want to learn. It means accepting that your preconceptions may be wrong or incomplete and that you want to test their validity every time you get the opportunity to do so.

## 8 STEREOTYPES

*"The problem with stereotypes is not necessarily that they are not true, it's merely that they are incomplete" [33]*

The word stereotypes was first used in 1922 by Lippman. He used it to describe *"judgments made about others on the basis of their ethnic group membership" [34]*.

What to do with stereotypes and prejudice? It seems we should avoid these terrible consequences of perception and colored knowledge. But at the same time it seems to be impossible to be completely impartial.

Stereotypes are not invented out of thin air though. They come from somewhere and tell us something. They can tell us something about the culture that generated the stereotype of the other, they can even tell us something about the stereotyped culture. However stereotypes don't give us thorough knowledge, they just show and accentuate a certain part of the truth.

Therefore, stereotypes rather than being ignored should be used as tools. Being aware that stereotypes are not trustworthy is a first step in understanding stereotypes. Participants to the workshops are asked to express some negative and positive stereotypes of their own culture and to do the same for other cultures. When expressing them in the group, all participants are asked to reflect upon them. Where does that idea come from? Why do other people think this? It is important that during the workshops the coach stresses that stereotypes are not expressions of personal opinion but expressions of general attitudes.

While trying to answer these questions, participants discover the truth that lays behind stereotypes. This can be a truth about the stereotyped culture, as well as a truth about the stereotyping culture. In any case we learn something interesting about the others and more important about ourselves.

## 9 CONCLUSION

A manual for intercultural communication cannot exist. Companies or institutions may want to order intercultural communication workshops on demand, as to prepare their employees to work in a particular culture. But our world today is characterized by a growing number of contacts resulting in communication between people with different languages and cultural background. Even when you stay in your home country there is a great chance you will be in contact with persons from other cultures. This may sometimes be frustrating and lead to misunderstanding.

Good intentions and a friendly approach don't seem to be sufficient. Respect for other cultures may leave you frustrated when having to respect habits you'd rather reject.

However, the focus shouldn't be on culture as such. Culture and stereotypes can be used to break the ice and learn something from yourself and the other. The setting in which this learning can take place is crucial. Professional and educational settings are ideal in creating the right context in which culture can be thematised and discussed. But as Milton Bennett demonstrates, interculturalist should strive *"to bring culture into individual consciousness and in so doing bring consciousness to bear on the*

*creation of intercultural relationships.*" [15]. Eventually all intercultural communication is first and foremost communication between several personalities.

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