

Handouts for What Is Your Single Story? Categorisation, Stereotype, Prejudice, Discrimination and Their Functions

Categorisation

Categorisations are psychological processes that help us to understand and cope with the world that surrounds us.

Example: In a film, two people speak French, and in the background, you can see the Eiffel Tower. It is therefore a film set in Paris.

Without such a categorisation process, we would not be able to understand and interpret the complexity of our world in which we live. BUT categorisations are not always correct. For instance, people with breasts are not always women.

Stereotype (an idea/thought)

Stereotype is a simplified, generalising attribution about a group of people. It disregards individual differences and makes a judgement call. It can be negative (e.g. all punks are lazy, loud and alcoholics) or positive (e.g. Asians are good at maths). Many stereotypes about minorities (e.g. Muslims, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals) are historically handed down and are reproduced in media, textbooks and in everyday language. Stereotypes leave the descriptive, supposedly neutral level. They are not harmless, even if they contain the function of orientation and adaptation.

Word origin: 'Stereotype' (Greek: stereós 'solid, hard, durable, spatial' and týpos 'like')

- Definition of Stereotypes

'A stereotype is a simplified, undifferentiated attribution that includes: a judgement of behaviour, habits, abilities or expectations towards others. These attributions are applied to all members of a group, regardless of their individuality and without regard to the attributions and social contexts from which they originated. The attributions are based on rigid ideas about what something or someone is like. The dominant group projects self-denied attributions (often negative, sometimes positive) onto another group. Sometimes stereotypes are selectively related to reality whose historical context is hidden. Members of the group they are directed at experience the attributions as very hurtful. The same attributions may be positively perceived if they are used for members of the dominant group themselves.'

- Functions of Stereotypes:

'Stereotypes represent a rationalisation of oppression and disparagement. They are intended to embarrass the sufferers and make them feel that this attribution has given them what they deserve. Stereotypes dehumanise the sufferers in the eyes of the discriminating group, making it easier to discriminate because the injury is rationalised and denied. Specific stereotypes have emerged from complex social and historical situations. They are the result of adaptation and power-based survival strategies of the dominant and oppressive practicing groups, the dominant culture. Therefore, the constant, renewed production of stereotypes is based on two prerequisites: It denies the historical context in which human culture and behaviour are always embedded; it repeatedly appeals to generalise and to draw conclusions about individuals from generalisations.'

Source: Czollek, L. C., Perko, G., & Weinbach, H. (2012). *Praxishandbuch Social Justice und Diversity: Theorien, Training, Methoden, Übungen. Pädagogisches Training*. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa, p. 77-78.



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Prejudice (an attitude)

Prejudices contain an assessment, which must be made in advance in relation to a person or group of persons.

Example: A punk works at my firm. Each time when I see him doing nothing, I think this is because of his/her laziness and not because he/she is actually well organised.

In that case, the action/behaviour of a person is interpreted within the filter of the stereotype 'All punks are lazy'.

Discrimination (an action)

Discrimination can be the result of prejudice. It is about treating people, or groups of people, based on their affiliation to a group or category differently or unfairly.

Example: I will hire no punks for my firm, because I think they are lazy and alcoholic. Levels of Discrimination:

1. Individual level:
Personal attitudes, actions that reflect prejudices against people or groups of people.
2. Institutional level:
Policies, laws, rules, norms, customs enforced and implemented by organisations and social institutions (governments and administrative systems, school systems, judiciary, church, health system, etc.) that disadvantage some social groups and favour others.
3. Cultural level:
Social roles, norms, music, art, literature, rituals, language, discourses in which one social group stands above another.

Structural discrimination = institutional level + cultural level.

These three levels always work together:

– Example: A person migrates from Turkey to Germany. In Germany, the person is searching for work.

1. Individual level:
This person is stealing 'us' the work; he/she does not fit into 'our' team/will have communication difficulties/only brings problems, etc.
2. Institutional level:
Limited entry and limited stay possibilities (visa, residence permit), very restrictive immigration possibilities (e.g. studies, family reunification), work permit, subordinated labour market access (examination by foreigners' authority and labour office), unequal recognition of school and professional qualifications, etc.
3. Cultural level:
Integration debate (how do the media and the public space talk/write about migrants, who is supposed to integrate into what, deficit orientation, word creation such as a parallel society, migration background, etc.).

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Functions of Stereotypes and Prejudices

1. Reduction of uncertainty
 - Stereotypes and prejudice help people to orientate themselves in a complex world.
 - They reduce uncertainty and offer behavioural safety.
 - They hide existing contradictions.
2. Creation of clear affiliations
 - Stereotypes and prejudices create a clear generalised image of the 'other'.
 - They define the self in demarcation to the 'other'.
 - Prejudices serve as social 'admission tickets' in certain groups.
3. Preservation of a positive self-image
 - By the devaluation of the 'other', stereotypes and prejudice are used to upgrade one's own group.
 - They shift aggressive feelings to foreign groups.
 - They increase the solidarity within the own group and give you a sense of strength.
4. Legitimization of power
 - Stereotypes and prejudices are used to legitimise power and establish dominance.
 - They strengthen and maintain the unequal distribution of power between the majority and minorities.
 - They enable participation in power at the cost of minority groups.

