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# Theoretical and methodological aspects in anthropological research of stereotypes

## Abstract

The author presents a considered theoretical and methodological background of anthropological research on stereotypes and prejudice. As an ethnologist and psychologist, he deliberates on both anthropological and psychological approach to the subject and shows the gaps in current methodological concepts. He proposes the set of questions for the questionnaire survey, which, in his opinion, seems to be adequate and describes the project that he plans to realize providing an example of the Romani people in the Czech Republic.

**Keywords:** stereotype, prejudice, identity, psychological approach

Stereotypes and prejudice<sup>1</sup> are currently much more in a centre of attention than ever before. We are facing “the otherness” more and more often and thus we need to define what does it mean “ours” and “others” more urgently, to give the meaning to something that might seem chaotic or random. The question “Where do I belong?” is much more frequent than it used to be before and it is still harder to find out the answer. But this question is causally linked to the questions “Where do I not belong?”, or “What are the ones which I do not belong with like?”. A person is ascribing a certain structure to the world in which he lives, a grid which enables him to predict so he can determine how to behave and what behavior to expect from others. He is creating a stereotype, a sort of prototypical

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<sup>1</sup> From the outset it is necessary to mention that the term “prejudice” and “stereotypes” in this article shall be treated as synonyms. I am aware of the fact that both concepts may differ in certain aspects, but the data mentioned herein are valid for both concepts. The following definitions, among which actually there is not a sharp boundary, would be beyond the scope of this text, after all.

idea of a member of a different group or his own group. Of course, this idea is not always established only by himself and it is not always based on his own experience. Many of these views are implemented by the culture, cultural knowledge, so that the culture plays a significant role in the distribution of these views. However, it is clear that the process of conceptualization and categorization of social groups (that is, what is called folk sociology) will differ in certain aspects from the categorization of the rest of the world (such as folk biology, cosmology, etc.). It is a question involving other subjectivities, subjectivities with which it is necessary to communicate and which categorize and conceptualize, just as I do. For that reason, the matter of presence is much more sensitive and therefore in society there is a commonly shared belief that “stereotypes are bad”. This postulate, which is closer to the religious or ethical view, might slip to rather *a priori* propositions than an empirical analysis that would allow us to act more efficiently with a given reality. The sensitivity of this subject arises the immense challenge for researchers in the social sciences, particularly from the methodological point of view. Therefore, it is necessary to find a suitable methodological apparatus to study this phenomenon. In this article I will try to evaluate the basic theoretical means of creating such a new method. First of all, it is necessary to briefly describe the studied object in the frame of previously conducted researches.

## The current paradigm of the study of stereotypes and prejudice

Currently, stereotypes are not considered as a pathological phenomenon, as it was in the past. This means that stereotypes are not considered as *a priori* false, out of reality and delusions. In most cases the truth-false dichotomy shows up to be irrelevant (Brown 2010). But it is important that they have their own logic, they proceed by causal-relation-based mechanisms, they are influenced by the history and intergroup relations and at the individual level by enculturation. These mechanisms are the special object of a scientific study, because thanks to generalizations of mechanisms that describe the functioning of prejudices and stereotyping, it is possible not only to make a prediction of future events in the context of intergroup contacts, but also to call for an intervention in cases of adverse development of such relationships.

Another difference which stands in contrast to the past views on prejudice is that stereotypes are not anymore seen as a sometimes-occurring negative phenomenon. The property of categorizing and generalizing the surrounding world is immanent to a human mind, so that one does not have to learn over and over again how to behave and what behavior to expect when one comes into contact with a new object. It also helps the person to orient themselves in the maze of information, which amount and complexity is beyond their cognitive abilities. In this case, humans use generalized knowledge of the group to which

the new object belongs. It is a cognitive economic heuristic. This is actually the basic principle of stereotyping (e.g. Brubaker *et al.* 2004; Brown 2010; Kanovský 2004).<sup>2</sup> The mere fact that it is economic heuristic does not necessarily mean that the result of this reasoning is correct. Heuristics are shortcuts that lead us quickly to a necessary conclusion in a relatively simple way. Thus obtained judgment in most cases does work correctly but it does not mean it will work each time (Tversky, Kahneman 1974; Kahneman 2011). A number of systematic errors occur which are called *cognitive biases*. In our case, we can think of several cognitive biases. Often, there is not a sharp distinction between them. They are complementary to each other. Perhaps one of the most important biases that maintain stereotypes is a *confirmatory bias* (sometimes also called *drawer effect*), which is a selection of information so that only individual's own beliefs and attitudes could be confirmed. Similarly, if we ask a person about the most typical situation that comes to their mind, it is the one that confirms his own version. *Illusory correlations* are similar phenomena, but these confirm the specific relationship between the two variables, but they also use selected information. If one is confronted with a situation or a person who disapproves his stereotypes, there may occur *typification*. It is a phenomenon whose function is to prevent cognitive dissonance and thus the disintegration of the stereotype. In that case, the individual creates a special subgroup within the stereotyped group, for which the stereotype does not apply. For example, if I say that people A are mean and I meet a man from group A which is definitely not mean, I can rationalize it so that I start to claim that it is A who has worked for some time with B, and those As who worked with B, are "the exception that proves the rule" (the phrase is very typical for typification), but as are, generally speaking, still mean, so the system that I created does not disintegrate.

A special type of cognitive biases relevant to us are group biases. *Inter-group bias* is perhaps the best known phenomenon. It was experimentally demonstrated by Henri Tajfel (1970). The probands in his experiments strongly favored people in their own group, even though they were divided into groups randomly (coin toss) and they were aware of this fact. It is assumed that this is the elementary principle under which something like group emergence can be possible. Minorities differ in the perception of the ingroup from a majority. Minorities tend to see members of the ingroup as very similar in a certain sense in comparison to outgroup members (*ingroup homogeneity bias*), while members of other kinds of groups rather see members of outgroup as similar to each other (*outgroup homogeneity bias*). In general, one tends to emphasize the similarity of group members

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to the categorization function, stereotypes have yet another function. Groups tend to be maintained by offering an assistance to an individual at a time when he needs it, and pointing at the benefits of the membership of the group. It is an assumed solidarity between members of the group. Thus, the individual is more willing to help ingroup members than outgroup members. He will also expect an aid on the basis of belonging to a group in times of need. It can be said that by the adoption of the group proclaimed prejudice against a certain group (either ingroup, or outgroup), an individual demonstrates solidarity with his own group.

to each other and differences between members of various groups as well (*accentuation effect*, see e.g. Brubaker *et al.* 2004).

It would be incorrect to believe that stereotypes are purely cognitive phenomenon. In addition to cognitive component, we can also observe affective and behavioral components. Not always does a person feel or behave according to what they think or proclaim. This three-component model has showed up to be a valid mean of grasping attitudes, including prejudices and stereotypes (Breckler 1984). From a methodological point of view this model will allow us to approach the issue with more deliberation, as if we took into account only one of the mentioned factors, but it will require more sophisticated inquiry methods.

## Anthropological approach to stereotypes

Social psychology is the dominant discipline in the research of stereotyping. Despite considerable explanatory advantages over other disciplines in this area, our understanding of stereotypes and prejudices can be enriched from other sources, including sociocultural anthropology. Its advantage lies in the detection of cultural specifics, intensity and distribution of phenomena.

Culture is crucial for the development of the stereotype. Of course there is an innate potentiality of a man to stereotype people of a certain trait,<sup>3</sup> but it takes a concrete form under a social impact. It is the only way to explain the similarity of some groups – ideas about other groups. It is necessary to point out that in this case, social models may differ from mental models. Publicly shared opinions may be different from the opinion of individuals. For example, in a certain culture it may be proclaimed an opinion that any prejudice is wrong and so every individual will claim that he does not have any hard feelings against outgroups, but in the moment of his confrontation with an outgroup member he could act hostile.<sup>4</sup> Such contradictions between mental and cultural models can be pointed out only by an anthropologist with a sufficient cognitivist-psychological training.

An anthropologist can chose several research designs from the standard methodological apparatus. Perhaps the most effective method in this case would be a semi-structured interview with several informants. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, and therefore much more probable distortion of the results

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<sup>3</sup> There is a number of researches aimed at the determining at what age prejudice appears in a human's mind, which would actually imply the answer to the question of innate or obtained character of this phenomenon. For example, Brown (2010) argues that prejudice occurs in humans as soon as he is able to create categories (i.e. from about three or four years of age). This ability, because it is based on an evolutionary advantage, is innate at least to a certain extent (Hirschfeld 1996). But it is a potency of prejudice that is innate, not prejudice itself. The content it will be filled with depends on the social environment that fills these free slots in the stereotypes scheme.

<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is called *implicit attitudes*. When an individual proclaims a negative attitude toward prejudices, in fact, he does not have to lie. He does not have to be aware of such a conflict.

than in studies of other phenomena, using indirect questions would be a more appropriate way. The Immediate interview and properly reputed issues (not to mention the need for correct interpretation) could in fact detect many causal relations, which could remain hidden while using a questionnaire survey. Questionnaire, however, seems to be an appropriate subsequent supplement of such research in order to discover at least an approximate distribution of the observed phenomena. Probably there is no need to mention that participating observation, one of the most praised methods in our discipline, seems to be unsuitable in this case. Not only internalizing certain cultural models in their contextual environments would be required. It would also involve an adoption of a comprehensive model of an all-encompassing identity. It is a kind of metamodel which is filtering a number of other models, including the relations with other groups (i.e. stereotypes as well). It is one of the characteristics of this model that the public dimension is perhaps just as essential as the mental one. It is not only that one identifies himself with a certain group, it is also important to be identified with this group by the other members of this group and he must take historical explanations of inter-ethnic relations as well. These demands from the researcher are of course way too unrealistic. Moreover, even if he gained/received the identity of the studied group, or if he was a member of this group since the very beginning, introspective investigation, emic analysis respectively could distort the data to an undesirable extent (Davies, Spencer 2010, there is a whole section on this topic in this volume). Stereotypes have, in fact, also an emotional dimension, as it was already mentioned. Thus, it is better if the researcher is not a holder of such models.

Anthropological approach can contribute a lot to the traditional questions about stereotypes not only with a new look, but it may also provide a new insight into some specific aspects of the problem. For example, the problem of segmentary forms of organization (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Gluckman 1956), hence the contextual use of the concrete level of the local identity, raises the question whether the stereotyping is similarly instrumental as a social identity. If so, how does it work in terms of processual dimension, and if not, why is it so?

## Basic methodological aspects

From the point of view pointed out in the previous paragraphs we can come to the conclusion that stereotyping, due to the considerable social sensitivity, is a phenomenon that requires a special methodological approach. As mentioned earlier, respondents may feel the need to publicly affirm rather acceptable opinion, but when confronted with members of the outgroup their behavior can be different. It is a question of the ethical attitude and there is a strong temptation to answer in a polarized way, so to say the most desirable way from their point of view. In the research methodology, such a systematic error is called *social desirability bias*. Also, the fact that such a sensitive issue is discussed with the outsider

might largely distort the data<sup>5</sup>. Pitfalls of the situation when the researcher comes from the same group as the respondent have already been mentioned.

The essence of such research should not be to identify the “real form” of stereotypes and prejudice. Nothing like that exists. It’s a question of a relationship between the two groups and their perception of this relationship. Metaphorically speaking, I would say that this is like describing the relationship between two people. If we focus on a particular common history of these people, surely we will find a number of interesting aspects. Similarly, by observing their behavior, we will be able to tell more about their relationship. However, the essence of this relationship, its conflicts and joys can be understood profoundly only when asking the people who have that relationship. What feelings in what situations are caused by the other person, how they perceive their common history, what are the participants’ expectations from this relationship and the way these relations could be improved. An anthropologist thus gets into the position of a relationship counselor who must consider the perspective of both sides as a social fact, borrowing this term from Durkheim. Therefore as relevant are treated both, affective component (the view they have of each other), and the interpretation of the historical development of inter-group relations and mutual expectations as well. This way we can describe two of the three before mentioning components of attitudes, namely, emotional and cognitive. The investigation of a third component – behavioral, brings several obstacles.

The difficulty of the behavioral component lies in the fact that the observation of inter-group behavior is prone to get biased, in the sense of representativeness (typical so to say). If we observe the contact point of two groups, the observed period may not be representative in relation to the overall condition. The conflict of exceptional dimensions between those groups may escalate, or the opposite – there might not occur any conflict in this period even though these groups confront each other relatively often. The observer can thus gain a wrong view of the nature of these inter-social relations. One of the solutions for this situation might be the so called “time-lag” research design (research with a time delay), which is based on the randomization of the time sample. It means that we randomly choose an interval after which the observation will be repeated (e.g. the situation is observed for 2 hours every 5 days – a random option), so we get a representative sample of time. However, another kind of bias might occur. It happens when observed participants are aware that they are observed, so their behavior is not authentic, which is called the *Hawthorne effect*. The human product analysis method, in this case the media, is also not appropriate, because a medial view may be distorted. Also the proportion of conflict situations (in comparison to non-conflict situations) and their intensity in media may not reflect the actual observable situation.

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<sup>5</sup> The problem is not the very fact that the data are somehow distorted, but that it is not possible to reliably estimate the extent to which the belonging of the researcher to the group distorted the data. If we knew the degree of distortion, we could “deduct” them from the final findings and so we could come to at least relatively correct conclusion.

Another significant risk is that the researcher can go to the field with a biased view (perhaps unconsciously) and he will select the information so that it confirms his point of view. In anthropology this phenomenon (Rashomon effect, observer-expectancy effect or experimenter effect) was demonstrated at the well-known dispute between Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman (Heider 1988). As this example shows, sometimes the anticipation can be so strong that the results of two different authors writing about the same society appear to describe completely different cultures. The issue of the subjectivity of researchers is still open. At least it is necessary for each researcher to realize the risk and subject his research to a critical analysis since the fieldwork.

It might be difficult to approach an inter-group relationship, where one of the groups is a majority at a given territory and the other is the minority. Such a relationship is usually particularly sensitive and therefore the possibility of a distortion of research data is bigger. One of the risks is a distorted view that have minorities. *Attribution to the prejudice* is a belief of a member of a minority that the prejudice against his own group is a cause of more conflicts than it really is<sup>6</sup> (Zelová 2008). This reflects the increased sensitivity to their own identity.

## Towards an inquiry apparatus

The research should not take place only in one group, but parallelly in all interested groups, participating on this inter-group relationship. The comparison of the two groups respondents' answers to the same questions could validate this research to some extent.

I find it useful (at least from a methodological point of view) to divide the research into two parts, namely the content and the process analysis. Content analysis is that part of the research on stereotypes and prejudices, which covers specific characteristics of intergroup relations in their static form. These are the names that are used for members of the outgroup, specific emotions towards "the others" and alike. Processual analysis captures the intensity of the intersocial contact in its diachronic form. Of course, the two dimensions of the research are linked together, joint into the one integrated system, and indeed can not exist without each other. From a methodological perspective, the two dimensions differ at least at techniques by which they should be examined.

"What names do you have for the outgroup members?"<sup>7</sup>, "What names do the members of the outgroup give you?". These are questions which capture the content of stereotypes. This type of questions is also suitable for a questionnaire

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<sup>6</sup> It has already been mentioned that the question of the verity is often hardly assessed, if not irrelevant. This phenomenon describes a situation where a member of the minority considers any perceived negative step towards him as an attack on the integrity of the group, even in a situation where from the other side there was no such intention involved.

<sup>7</sup> Of course this is only a model of a question. Specific questions should be formulated for a specific field and should be ordered according to the research intention.

survey despite its risks (such as an impersonal approach, or the inability to continually follow-up the answers). The more respondents we will have, the more kinds of answers it will bring. Therefore, it is more likely that such a design will saturate all possible relevant answers. Also, the frequency of individual responses will allow us to estimate better the relevancy of specific outputs. The self-censorship of respondents can be expected from these answers. It is not easy to answer personal questions to someone you really do not know (because this is a principle of an anonymous questionnaire design research). Therefore, it is desirable to ask these questions in a controlled interview as well, what will enable to follow the respondent's non-verbal expressions while responding. The differences between the data obtained from the questionnaire (i.e. what is publicly more desirable) and the data revealed privately during the interview would be considered as another quality of information.<sup>8</sup> But privacy cannot be obtained easily. It is based on trust in the researcher, that he will use the information only for the purposes that the respondent agrees on. He must feel safe. The researcher has to approach the data with great responsibility. He must resist the temptation to use some of the potentially useful information, in case there is any doubt that the respondent would not agree with its publication. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, it is not enough to start the research project with asking whether the respondent agrees with a publishing of the data for scientific purposes (with the exception of data identifying the respondent), but also it would be suitable to confront the respondent with a transcript of the interview, offering him the opportunity to decide to remove some of the responses in case he changes his mind or even to give him a chance to refuse the participation on the research.<sup>9</sup>

“Why are members of the outgroup the way they are?”, or “Why are members of the ingroup the way they are?” These questions are focused not only on contents but also on the processes of the legitimation of such a model, or the intensity of intergroup relations.<sup>10</sup>

“Recall any contact situation with an outgroup member that you consider as typical. Describe it – how did you behave, how did the counterpart behave?” Since this question contains the word “typical” it can be assumed that the respondent may not recall the real situation, but he might at least partially re-model this situation. This re-modeling is not necessarily invalid for the research purposes. The

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<sup>8</sup> The important thing is that not every interview is carried out in a sufficient privacy, and so it is important at this point to obtain a private atmosphere. Only when such an atmosphere is obtained, the data collection shall start.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, this opportunity he would also have without the confrontation with the transcript, but the psychological ease of the respondent is primary here. He might hesitate whether to withdraw from the research because he would not know how to do it or he might be afraid to face the researcher's frustration because of research mortality. This psychological comfort should be an initiative of the researcher, who is the one that comes with the opportunity for the respondent to withdraw from the research, respectively deletion of some data so that the respondent would feel less pressure.

<sup>10</sup> The intensity could be considered rather as a content feature, but due to the greater tendency to transform the intensity over time more than the very content, I define it as a process feature of the studied object.



typical situation, real or imagined, uses themes that are dominant in mental models about the outgroup. But the question should be formulated with an emphasis on a memory rather than on creativity, because the behavioral type of questions and projective type of questions require different kinds of answers. This behavioral model is rather inviting more to a reality resembling reply because the respondent will be expected to possess a certain degree of empathy to the situation rather than to have a “detachment apart”.<sup>11</sup>

“Try to evaluate the intensity of the relation with the outgroup members on a scale 1–6, where 1 is the least intense relationship, 6 is a very intense relationship.” This question is not directly focused on the issues of prejudice and stereotypes, but also reflects the wider context. Its particular advantage lies in a quantifiable character. Of course, we can assume that in contrast with the reality a distortion might occur, which is called *central tendency*. By that I mean that the respondent might prefer to choose more neutral answers which are less explanatory valuable. Therefore, it is better to use a range with an even number of options, so the overall median is not possible and an undecided respondent has to choose between the options that could be called “rather less intense relationship” and “rather more intense relationship.” In this case it is important not to ask for a positive or negative relation, because the desirability bias mentioned before can occur. Also, if this question precedes the question of the evaluation of the intensity, the reply to this second question could be anchored by the previous answer claiming affirmative, a respectively negative relationship.

Of course, these questions imply broader answers, additional situation specific sub-questions, which could explain many of the observed phenomena. However, the primary set of questions should have rather a modest design, at least before the pilot study. This serves to calibrate the inquiry apparatus, which should precede the full-scale project. The primary design is supposed to be modest for both: not to exhaust the respondents and to show idiosyncrasies of a specific field so that the following project could be tailored precisely.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to briefly outline the basic theoretical and methodological basis for the study of stereotypes and prejudice. Stereotypes are actually a cognitively economical way of categorization of the social world, but they can lead to conflicts in the inter-group communication. It is a phenomenon that begins to be negative if it is less flexible. Establishment and maintenance of stereotypes are allowed by several psychological phenomena called heuristics, or cognitive biases.

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<sup>11</sup> A projective type of questions can also bring relevant information about how the respondent thinks about his models of intergroup conflicts, but this “detachment” is an expression of a purely cognitive nature. Behavioral questions are more suitable for the three-componential mode mentioned above, so all three components are more balanced than at the projective questions.

Among the research designs the most ideal for this kind of research seems to be a semi-structured interview supplemented by a questionnaire survey. Of course, even if it is the best available method, it also has its limits and gained data, due to the high sensitivity of this topic, might be more distorted than in other socio-cultural phenomena researches.

In the last part of this paper I proposed a set of questions, and their wording. However, they will need to be tested in a pilot study. This apparatus is not too large in range and should be used to anchor the basic theme of the conversation, but of course each of the questions can be extended, based on the respondent's answers. Explanatory power of this system appears to be promising, but it is hard to say but it is hard to say how valid the data obtained this way will be. Nevertheless, it is a risk which every stereotypes researcher must take. Some information is better than none, which is particularly true about such a socially important topic. The success of this kind of research will largely depend on the researcher's preparation, his experience and verbal and nonverbal social skills.

Studies focusing on explaining identity (ethnic, national, religious, political, professional etc.) have a long tradition in the anthropological research. There are many studies describing the emergence of an identity, its maintenance, distribution, characteristics and transformation. Identities have been studied via historical, language and cognitive approaches, however, only a few empirical studies in stereotyping, this crucial phenomenon in forming any kind of identity, have been produced in our field. But why is it so? Stereotypes have been studied for a long period of time especially in the field of social psychology. It is a part of the psychological agenda since the 1950s, and many empirical as well as metaanalytical studies have been published since then. The main difference between anthropological and psychological approach is their methodology. Psychology, using confidently both qualitative and quantitative methodology, has more precise tools to investigate phenomena that remain covered, the phenomena that are more likely to be biased by hermeneutical interpretation of a researcher. It is not that anthropology does not use quantitative methods at all, but "statisticians" as are the researchers using these tools sometimes derogatorily called, often meet with a resistance from most of their "numerophobic" colleagues. They are often accused of an unhuman attitude to a human being, superficial (and not causal) insight, etc. Nevertheless, using the right combination of both approaches might bring interesting scientific achievements in a number of topics, so far only slightly explored by anthropology. One of them seems to be the study of stereotypes. In the future I and my colleagues plan to conduct a study concerning stereotypes at Roma people in the Czech Republic, which should join a previous study of stereotypes at non-Roma people in the Czech Republic towards Romas. However, this project is facing theoretical and methodological challenges, which might be brought into a wider academic discussion. Therefore, my article will focus on this aspect of the planned research project. However, in this paper I do not intent to theoretically discuss if the quantitative analysis is (or should be) a part of the anthropological toolkit or if

it is not. I will merely look for the heuristically most appropriate and pragmatic ways with the highest achievable explanation strength which could explain the phenomena like stereotyping from the anthropological perspective.

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