Interrogating the concept of stereotypes in intercultural communication

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The *Compact Oxford Dictionary* defines stereotype as 'a preconceived and over-simplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person or thing'. A simple example might be 'Iranian businessmen put family loyalty before business'. The issue of cultural stereotypes is central to the business of intercultural understanding and also connects with a broader cultural politics within international English language education. I shall begin by setting out two basic arguments and then present my own analysis of the way forward. The first argument derives from concerns that cultural descriptions may be chauvinistic and encourage racism. The second is the more popular belief that stereotyping is normal and useful. I shall leave this until second because, against expectations, it is the more complex view and leads to the greatest part of the debate.

The cultural chauvinism argument

This argument is that cultural stereotypes are in the main over-generalisations which are based on the describer's imagination of an inferior Other rather than with objective information about what the people being described are actually like. In a browse through my own annotated bibliography almost every reference to stereotypes emphasises this suspicion. For example, Homi Bhabha (1994: 94) asserts that the stereotype is 'the major discursive strategy' in establishing fixed notions of how people are, and that this can be used to justify the cultural improvement which was a stated aim of European colonisation. Clark and Ivanič (1997: 168) associate stereotyping with the way in which writers impose 'a view of the world' on readers, and give the example of sexist or 'any language that presents powerless groups of people in a stereotyped and/or unfavourable light'. Kim M-S (2005: 105) tells us that 'empirical data have consistently shown the stereotypical model to be false' with 'massive variation' and 'overlap within and across cultures'. Even Hofstede (2001: 14, 17), who has been a major source of national cultural characterisations, warns us against the ethnocentrism of 'heterostereotypes' about others, such as 'all Dutch are tactless', and 'autostereotypes' about our own groups, such as 'we Dutch are honest'. Kumaravadivelu (2007: 65-9) maintains that cultural stereotypes which are believed to be egalitarian by their users are an influential underpinning of US notions of cultural assimilation which in turn impose ethnocentric cultural viewpoints.

The issue with cultural stereotypes has been linked with professional prejudices in English language teaching in which 'non-native speaker' teachers and students have been characterised as culturally deficient (e.g. Kubota 2002; Holliday 2008). Kumaravadivelu (2003: 715-5, 2007) locates chauvinistic stereotyping within what he considers to be an

essentially racist Western society which generates binary 'us'-'them' categories. My own work (Holliday 2005, 2007b) relates this further to the way in which **[page 134 ends here]** a modernist, technicalised 'native speaker' English language teaching methodology sets out on a missionary quest to correct the cultures of a non- Western Other through the imposition of prescribed learning behaviour. This cultural chauvinism argument is generally rooted in critical applied linguistics (e.g. Pennycook 1998; Canagarajah 1999), and Edward Said's (e.g. 1978, 1993) influential theory of Orientalism. Said argues that negative stereotypes of the non-Western Other (as dark, immoral, lascivious, despotic and so on) are constructed by Western art, literature and political institutions. Especially after September 11 we have seen a confirmation of Said's assertion in the form of Islamophobia, in which 'all Muslims' are characterised as 'terrorists'.

Stereotypical models of national and regional cultures have been used extensively in intercultural communication research and training. One such model, which was developed by Hofstede (op. cit.) in the 1960s and has sustained in popularity, distinguishes between two cultural types. On the one hand, individualist cultures, situated in North America, Western Europe and Australasia, are described as prioritising self-determination. On the other hand, collectivist cultures in the rest of the world are described as prioritising group conformity (Triandis 2004, 2006). Elsewhere (Holliday 2007a) I argue that this distinction, while pretending to be an objective measure based on empirical research, is in fact ideologically constructed along the lines described in the previous paragraph - so that individualism represents an idealised Western Self, and collectivism represents an imagined, deficient, non-Western Other. Kim (op. cit.: 108) also notes that Hofstede's model 'forced a single bipolar dimension of individualism and saw collectivism as an absence of individualism' that was derived from the need to negatively Other 'barbarians'.

The practicality argument

The cultural chauvinism argument thus suggests that stereotypes cannot be objective measures of what people are really like and are always going to be culturally chauvinistic. In contrast, the practicality argument suggests that cultural stereotypes are natural and useful mechanisms for aiding understanding of cultural difference, and that, although we know that they are over-generalisations, they are good as starting places. This view is the one that has been more established and supported by psychometric research such as that of Hofstede, and also fits better with popular belief. Waters (2007a, 2007b) sees stereotypes as almost always inevitable and ordinary starting points for perception, and feels that recognising and accepting this will provide a firmer footing than attempting to outlaw them - thus working towards replacing negative stereotypes with more accurately positive ones. He describes such a process as follows:

> Step 1: 1 am working in a culture which is unfamiliar to me. I feel it might help if I got some basic information about it, in order to begin to get to know it better.
>
> Step 2: In the light of this knowledge, what can I do (i) to limit culturally inappropriate behaviour on my part, and (ii) improve my ability to understand/ accept behaviour on the part of locals?

Step 3: In the longer-term, how can I use this information to give me a basis for building up a better general picture of how expatriates and locals can live and work together as well as possible, and to help me perceive the individual person behind the cultural 'mask'? (2007a: 284) **[page 135 ends here]**

He sees this as 'acquiring knowledge that will be used not as a static end in itself, but dynamically, as a means to gradually increasing understanding and contributing to the development of productive inter-cultural relations' (ibid.).

An extension of the practicality argument, which Waters (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) presents in some detail is that the cultural chauvinism argument amounts to an imposition of 'political correctness'. Citing the work of social theorist Browne (2006), he defines political correctness as a hegemonic force which has become dominant in English-speaking Western society and creates the impression that everyone is either an 'oppressor' or a 'victim' (Waters 2007b: 354). His response to the cultural chauvinism argument in English language teaching is that this imagined oppressor-victim relationship is portrayed indiscriminately as native speakers versus non-native speakers, teachers versus learners and '"global" versus local methodologies' (ibid.: 355).

Waters (2007a) cites a number of early theorists, such as Lippman (1922) and Allport (1954), to support the point that while there is an early acknowledgement that stereotypes are 'defensive, partial and rigid representations of the world, which obscure variety and particularity, and which the individual should resist', to deny the usefulness of stereotypes in 'economising attention' would be to 'impoverish human life', and to deny the categorical nature of all human perceptions, and the possibility of working with their complexity and diversity to arrive at more valid truths. He therefore makes the following claim:

Suspension or suppression of stereotypes is an impossibility, a vain attempt at 'thought control', and all perception can be seen, to a greater or lesser extent, as inevitably stereotyped, for both better or worse. Thus, rather than stereotyping all stereotyping as innately unhealthy or aberrant, because some forms of stereotyping from some points of view are seen to have negative consequences, the starting point needs to be one based on accepting the immanency of stereotyping, instead of attempting to deny its rationality and central role in the development of perceptions. Such a stance recognises that some stereotypes will offend, but why this is so and what might be done about it can then be approached from a very different perspective. (ibid.: 228)

Intercultural communication methodologies

Waters' warning against a knee-jerk demonising of all stereotyping needs to be taken seriously. However, while it claims more realism than the cultural chauvinism position, his argument may also be naive in its lack of belief about how easily the best intentioned people can be taken in, not by the hegemony of political correctness, but by the discoursal power of, in his words, the apparently innocent 'economised' explanations that stereotypes provide. Much can be learnt here from another branch of Applied Linguistics, that of Critical Discourse Analysis, which shows us how prejudices can easily be hidden in apparently

neutral everyday talk, and in institutional, professional and political thinking (e.g. Fairclough 1995). Kumaravadivelu (2007: 52) puts this very well:

> Even people with an egalitarian, non-prejudiced self-image can act prejudicially when interpretive norms guiding a situation are weak. In such a scenario, people easily justify their racially prejudiced acts and beliefs on the basis of some determinant other than race. **[page 136 ends here]**

Kumaravadivelu's view of society, as an inherently racist system, is very different to that of Waters. Waters suggests that an initial, stereotyped understanding may subsequently be modified or abandoned in the light of experience. If we accept Kumaravadivelu's view, however, it is difficult to accept Waters' opinion. Once the easy repertoires of stereotypes are in place they provide basic structures of understanding that are very difficult to remove. In Western cultural history destructive narratives of an imagined uncultured East repeat themselves again and again. The cultural chauvinism and the practicality arguments each produce a methodology for intercultural communication which falls on either side of this tension.

Awareness through cultural descriptions

The practicality argument encourages the established, dominant approach where people are introduced to a description of the new culture they are about to be introduced to - very much following Waters' steps. Taking the example of Iranian society, with which I am familiar, this methodology would very probably introduce the prospective visitor to aspects of Iran as a collectivist and a Muslim society. These two macro characterisations may deal with such detail as 'Iranian businessmen put family loyalty before business' (the example from the beginning of this chapter) or 'it is not appropriate to deal directly with women'. On arriving in Iran the visitor would hopefully begin to discover that there are many 'exceptions' to such rules; and, indeed, much current intercultural communication theory does warn against the danger of over-generalisation (e.g. Gudykunst 2005; Samovar and Porter 2006).

Awareness through interrogating issues of Self and Other

The cultural chauvinism argument is very cautious of the cultural description route. As argued above, macro characterisations such as collectivism are perceived to be ideologically motivated; and, especially in an era of Islamophobia, any form of characterisation of Islam has to be treated extremely cautiously The methodology emerging from the cultural chauvinism argument would therefore avoid imposing cultural descriptions. The focus would instead be on the structure of prejudice arising from the stereotyping process, and the development of disciplines for avoiding them. The prospective visitor to Iran would therefore be asked to interrogate her or his prejudices about Iran and to address inhibitions to understanding arising from them. Behaviour considered 'exceptions' to the stereotype in the cultural description methodology would be considered normal until found otherwise. The model of society would therefore be one of complexity rather than cultural unity, with an emphasis on looking for commonality rather

than foreignness, given that many stereotypes are founded on a chauvinistic expectation of difference. Statements such as 'Iranian businessmen put family loyalty before business' or 'it is not appropriate to deal directly with women' would not therefore be taken as descriptions of how things are, but as 'easy answers' which need to be deconstructed in terms of a superior Western Self imagining a deficient non-Western Other. In other words, stereotypes are perceived as problems rather than solutions. **[page 137 ends here]**

This sort of methodology can be found in Holliday et al. (2004: 48-49), and might involve disciplines for seeing such as: (a) excavate and put aside preconceptions and ready-made systems for understanding, (b) appreciate complexity, (c) avoid over-generalising from individual instances, (d) submit to the unexpected and what emerges from experience, (e) seek a deeper understanding of how negative stereotypes are formed, and (f) accept that even innocent looking beliefs can have political and patronising undertones. These disciplines have much in common with those of qualitative research, where the emphasis is on rinding out the nature of culture without being influenced by preconceptions. Similarities may also be found in the work of Byram and colleagues (e.g. Byram and Feng 2006), who encourage foreign language students to carry out their own personal ethnographic research projects while visiting other people's countries - to find out for themselves the nature of other cultures. They are encouraged to begin by making sense of what is going on in its own terms, employing a 'willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship' (Byram 1997: 57).

Loose ends

In conclusion it needs to be emphasised that I have presented an over-tidy picture of the issues surrounding stereotypes - learning something from Waters in appreciating how easy it is to stereotype arguments about stereotypes. The question of stereotypes needs to be looked at within the context of complexity. Either because the world is changing, within a process of globalisation, or because we are more tuned to appreciate it, the nature of culture is far from straightforward. Culture is something that flows and shifts between us. It both binds us and separates us, but in different ways at different times and in different circumstances. There are many aspects of our behaviour which are culturally different. We must, however, be wary not to use these differences to feed chauvinistic imaginations of what certain national or ethnic groups can or cannot do - as exotic, 'simple', 'traditional' Others to our 'complex', 'modern' selves. The foreign is not always distant, but often participant within our own societies; and the boundaries between us are blurred. Culture is therefore cosmopolitan, and as such resists close description.

What is clear, however, is the moral imperative which underpins issues in intercultural communication and problematises stereotypes - to counter what Kumaravadivelu (2007) projects as a major activity of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one half of the world chauvinistically defining the other as culturally deficient. **[page 138 ends here]**

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