The Conceptual Basis of Ethnic Stereotyping

Manogarie Moodley and Rembrandt Klopper

The Nature of Stereotyping

Categorisation as Basis for Stereotyping

Kleinpenning (1993), like Tajfel (1978; 1981) considers stereotyping to be the result of a categorization process in which people from a particular social category (the ingroup) emphasize similarities between themselves, while they at the same time emphasise the differences between themselves and people from other categories (the outgroup).

Taking Kleinpenning and Tajfel as point of departure we define stereotyping as the process where members of a group positively characterise members of their own ethnic group in terms of perceived desirable similar group features, or patterns of behaviour, while at the same time negatively characterising members of another ethnic group in terms of perceived undesirable group features, or perceived patterns of behaviour, instead of characterising the persons by actual individual features or patterns of behaviour.

Categories and Stereotypes

All people simultaneously belong to multiple social categories. Devine and Baker (1991:44-50) suggest that general categories usually entail the existence of subcategories that can be default categories. A learner can for instance be a child, a female, a Zulu, a grade 6 pupil, a member of the school choir, a member of the school debating society, a netball player, a member of a lift club, one of three siblings in an upper middle class family, a member of the Roman Catholic Church, etc. Each of the before-mentioned designations constitutes a category that she belongs to along with some other persons. In

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this sense any person can be conceptually profiled in terms of any of the social categories to which s/he belongs. How they will be categorised will depend on particular contextual factors. A white boy who is a fellow choir member of our hypothetical black girl may perceive her simply as a fellow choir member when sitting talking to her about choral music on a bench outside of the school. Should an ethnically mixed group of boys walk by, he may become aware of the fact that she is a female. Should a group of white boys come walking by he may become aware of the fact that she is a black female. These awarenesses however do not constitute stereotyping. How the boy behaves towards his female, black, fellow choir member in the presence of others may constitute stereotyping.

Stereotypes evolve within communities and influence how people from the same group behave towards one another and towards people belonging to other groups. It is known that certain group differences, for example gender, skin colour, and language use, play more prominent roles in stereotyping than others. This article focuses on the role of ethnicity and gender as factors implicated in stereotyping in South African schools.

While categorisation therefore is a prerequisite for stereotyping Brewer (1996) reminds us that the use of one category will reduce the stereotypic potentials of other categories. For example, while an observer focuses on the fact that a child is a head prefect s/he will tend not to notice that the child is also a member of a particular ethnic or gender group. Therefore if the positive attributes of a person are emphasized her/his negative attributes will become less prominent. In a subsequent section we will show that stereotyping conceptually relates to the differences between generic and more specific levels of categorisation.

Values, Beliefs and Stereotyping

Wellman (1992:113f) suggests that attitudes, values and beliefs play a crucial role in the process of stereotyping. Cognition is a prerequisite for any form of communication because cognition forms the conceptual basis for aspects of communication, which in turn is part of inter-related forms of expressive behaviour such as facial expression, gesture and vocal response. Mersham and Skinner (1999:90) state that intrapersonal communication (inner reasoning) is a pre-requisite for all communication because it shapes our behaviour and attitudes. On the cognitive level people develop mental models of their environment, including of other humans that they interact with. According to

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Wellman (1992:113f) such mental models include attitudes, values and beliefs. These play a crucial role in the process of stereotyping. The following schema, adapted from Wellman (1992:115) presents a model for belief-desire reasoning. It emphasises the prominence of values and beliefs as part of human thinking, and shows the role that emotions can play in thinking. We note that emotive awareness plays an important role during stereotyping:

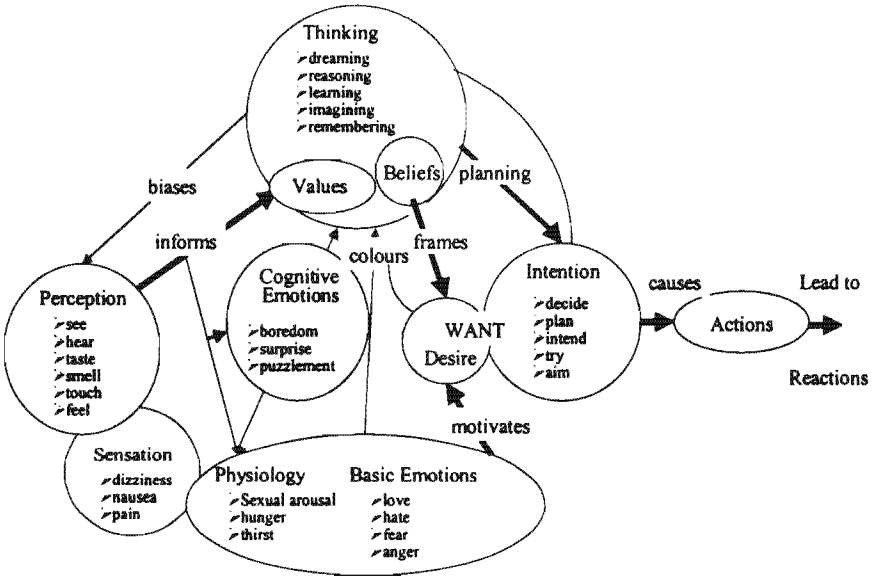

Figure 1: Model for belief-desire reasoning adapted from Wellman (1992:109)

According to Wellman (1992:120) figure 1 represents three year olds' belief–desire reasoning, as well as a simplified version of adults' belief–desire reasoning. At this stage of cognitive development the child should be in command of the following belief-desire reasoning skills:

(1) Children should be able to predict an actors' actions, given the relevant information as to actors' beliefs and desires.
(2) Children should be able to explain actors' observed actions by spontaneous appeal to their beliefs and desires.

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(3) Children should be able to predict someone's emotional reactions from information about beliefs, desires and outcomes.
(4) Children should be able to infer beliefs from information about the actors' perceptions and desires from information about the actors' physiological states.

Unsurprisingly, in Wellman's model the major product of mind is thinking – to interpret perceptual information, to remember and to infer. Perception informs thinking and emotions and thinking bias perception. Values and beliefs are part of the formative thinking processes, which includes dreaming (imagining), reasoning, learning, remembering, and knowing. These cognitive activities result in the formation of a knowledge base, an understanding of concepts in the world and about the self in that world. They also result in thinking stereotypically and thinking about stereotypes.

According to Wellman's model intention emerges from the core concept *desire*. What we *want* is determined by our desires and intentions. Wants are internal physiological and psychological needs that are motivated by physiological emotive states and basic emotions. One can physiologically want water because you are thirsty, or you can psychologically want recognition for an achievement to bolster your self-image. Desires motivate intentions. Desires include hopes and wishes, and intentions are the plans and aims to carry out the desires. Intentions are the beliefs and desires of a person. To act from these beliefs and desires is to act intentionally. According to the Wellman schema emotive states colour thinking, while *beliefs*, as forms of thinking, frame (promote or inhibit) *desires* while thinking in general influences intentions via planning. One sees what one wants to believe or see. Tracing links like *colouring* and *biasing* in commonsense psychology emphasize the influence from emotions to desires to thinking to perception leading to action and reaction. Everyday perceptual encounters cause emotions. Emotions are founded in physiological states like arousal and deprivation and are formed by basic feelings like fear, hate and anger.

According to Wellman traits form a layer over the core schema of thinking, cognitive emotions, beliefs, desires and partially over intentions. Traits influence specific desires, beliefs and emotions and therefore influence actions. Wellman (1992:116) claims that thinking, reasoning and intending are active processes while sensing and desiring are seen as passive processes expressing two different sorts of mental states or attitudes. We are swept away by our basic desires and emotions, which then influence our thinking, colour

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our thoughts or distort our judgements. Thinking as an active process allows us to have thoughts, form plans or make decisions. Perceptions can be active or passive as we actively do things or passively experience the perceptual world. An active mind can ignore or misinterpret perceptions or lead to false beliefs. A person's beliefs and desires lead to intentions and intentions lead to actions.

We have discussed Wellman's models of belief-desire reasoning in detail to illustrate the vital role that beliefs and desires play in the formation of stereotypes.

A study of stereotyping could be focused on the cognitive or the expressive level. On the cognitive level stereotyping relates to how people think about one another (processes of attribution). On the expressive level stereotyping relates to the jokes that people from one ethnic group tell to members of their group about other ethnic groups, or to the epithets that an individual of one group uses while addressing a member from another ethnic group.

Stereotyping always has an emotional component. It can be a volatile process, making it difficult to discern the intentions of people using the stereotype. This easily lets the researcher fall into the trap of a superficially anecdotal analysis. It was therefore considered better to limit this study to the cognitive level of stereotyping by analysing the attributes that people use to stereotype one another.

Belief is shorthand for values, beliefs and norms. Values have a psychodynamic thrust. Values are internally motivated rules of behaviour. What is at issue in this article is to what extent the learners have internalised the norms that are externally mandated and to what extent are they not complying with the rules and stereotyping each other, or have they internalised those rules to become part of the value system. Because values operate at the subconscious level people tend to embed those values in a narrative that supplies a rationale of how they should behave or not behave.

According to Maslow (1954) human behaviour is motivated by five fundamental needs with the primary needs (hunger and thirst, shelter) at the base. In the hierarchy of needs, these primary needs must be satisfied before social needs can be satisfied[1].

[1] These fundamental needs are partially reflected in Wellman's model as the physiological states, sexual arousal, hunger and thirst.

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Boon (1998) builds on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. According to Boon if survival is threathened, then ethnicity is high in the different social groups.

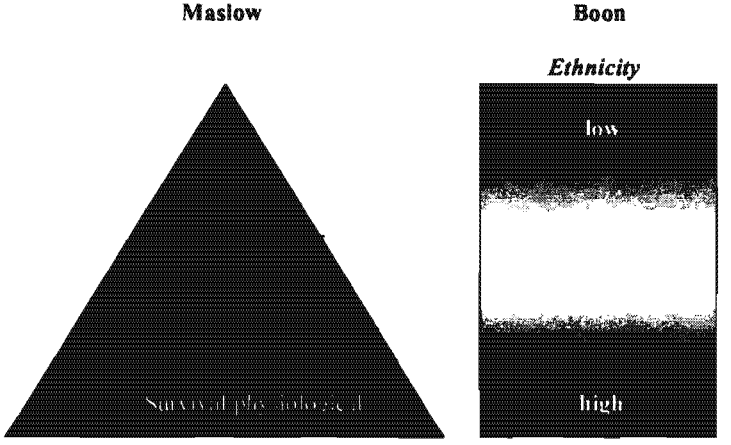

Figure 2: Model for hierarchy of needs adapted from Mersham and Skinner (1999:69).

The higher one goes on Maslow's hierarchy of needs towards self-actualisation the lower the ethnicity needs. Boon adds a social dimension to Maslow's taxonomy and presents a rationale for high levels of ethnicity and stereotyping in South African schools in the absence of proper integration strategies.

According to Boon, the physiological and safety needs are similar to Maslow's survival needs. The higher the physiological and safety needs are, the higher the need for ethnic self-identification will be and group values will remain strong. Once the basic survival needs are satisfied and there is no danger and self-actualisation has been reached, ethnic identification is low. Miscommunication takes place when the communication needs of the communicators are not satisfied, or are different. Attitudes, opinions, beliefs, conventions and stereotypes of people are emotional needs. Other categories of general communication needs include information needs, entertainment

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needs, motivational needs, aesthetic needs and ideological needs. In the following section, we will document the extent to which White, Black, Indian and Coloured respondents positively stereotype their own group while negatively stereotyping respondents from other groups. We consider this to be an indication according to Boon's reinterpretation of Maslow that levels of ethnicity are still relatively high among our respondents because their material living conditions are still such that they are competing with one another for the fulfilment of their security and social needs.

Ethnic Stereotyping among Durban Black, White, Indian and Coloured Learners

Moodley (2001) documented clear cases of ethnic stereotyping, which can be summarised as follows:

- While ethnic groups clearly do stereotype themselves positively and do stereotype outgroups negatively, they in fact do not do so in equal degrees. With the exception of the statements *Blacks are loudmouthed* and *Blacks are racist* White respondents consistently take a neutral position with regard to both their own group (the ingroup[2]) as well as toward outgroups.

- Black respondents clearly favour their ingroup by strongly disagreeing that Blacks are loudmouthed, unfriendly, untidy and racist, and by fully agreeing that Blacks are friendly, honest, generous and hardworking. The general trend for them was to negatively stereotype outgroups.

- Indians positively stereotyped their ingroup by agreeing that Indians are friendly, honest, hardworking and generous. They negatively stereotyped Whites, Blacks and Coloureds.

- Coloureds clearly favour their ingroup by agreeing that they are friendly, honest, hardworking and generous. They were however equally divided with regard to the positive traits associated with Indians. They negatively stereotyped Indians with regard to being loudmouthed and racist, but disagreed that Indians were unfriendly and were neutral about Indians being

[2] Literature on stereotyping generally uses the term 'ingroup' and 'outgroup' rather than 'in-group' and 'out-group'.

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untidy. Coloureds show the same general pattern of variable stereotyping with regard to Blacks.

In an era when gender issues are at last receiving the attention that they deserve, a study of stereotyping will be incomplete without an enquiry into the relationship between gender and ethnic stereotyping. Therefore, in Figure 3 we present a bar graph that reflects differences in ethnic stereotyping among the male and female respondents in the survey:

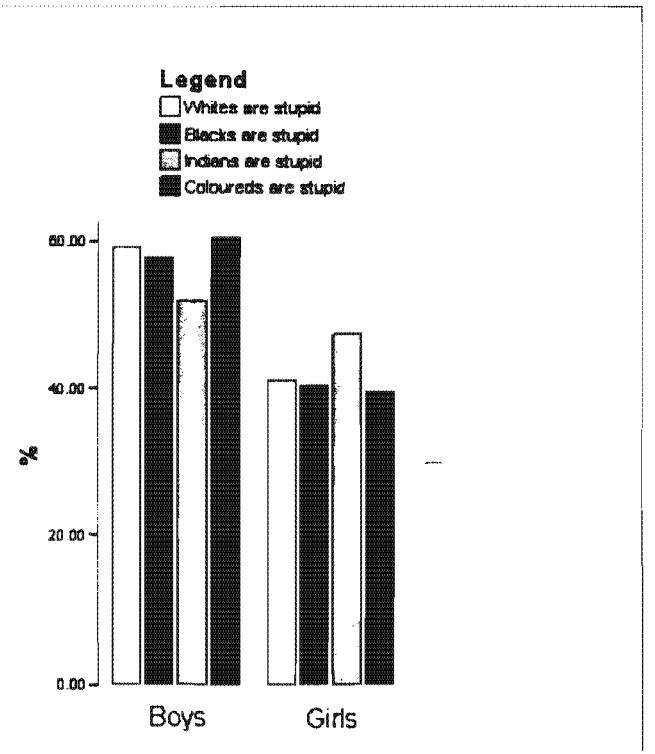

Figure 3: Ethnic stereotyping by gender among Durban learners

The following general conclusions can be drawn from the graph in Figure 3 about gender-based stereotyping:

Given the fact that males constituted just over 48% of the respondents, and females just over 51%, it is clear at a glance from the graph that male respondents (designated as 'boys' on the graph) are more inclined

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towards ethnic stereotyping than females (designated as 'girls' on the graph). It furthermore is clear that males tend to stereotype Coloureds more as being stupid, followed closely by Whites and Blacks being stupid. By contrast, females tend to stereotype Indians more as being stupid followed by Whites, Blacks and Coloureds being stupid.

The Idealised Cognitive Models that Respondents have of Themselves and Members of Other Ethnic Groups

According to Klopper (1999:248-272), humans understand their environment by constructing mental models of the entities that they encounter and the events that they observe, or of which they form part. According to Klopper, each individual constructs such mental models of entities by associating an extensive array of attributes with that entity.

When people stereotype their own groups, or other groups, they selectively use a small number of generic group-attributes instead of the full array of individual-specific attributes at their disposal.

The challenge for a study on stereotyping, such as this one, is to identify the really significant generic attributes that are used during stereotyping, and to measure the extent to which such generic attributes are used when respondents conceptualise their own and other ethnic groups.

In the examples that we give below we will demonstrate how four individual respondents stereotype their own and other groups by means of such generic attributes. These four examples, randomly extracted from Moodley's doctoral research database, demonstrate that generic attributes form part of the various idealised cognitive models that individuals have of members of other groups. The four respondents were selected randomly from among 1322 respondents in the database:

- Respondent 5 in the database is an Indian female, 14 years of age and in grade 8. We will show how she stereotypically models Whites. She is not in class with Whites and does not have White friends outside of school. Her mental model of Whites contains the following generic perceptions: Whites are hardworking, Whites loudmouthed, Whites are untidy, and Whites are not honest. She has no strong views about Whites being friendly or unfriendly.
- Respondent number 103 in the database is a White male, 14 years of age and in grade 8. We will show how he stereotypically models Blacks. He is

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not in class with Blacks and does not have Black friends outside of school. His mental model of Blacks contains the following generic perceptions: Blacks are loudmouthed, Blacks are honest, and Blacks are not untidy. He has no strong views about Blacks being friendly, unfriendly or hardworking.

- Respondent number 1163 in the database is a Black male, 15 years of age and in grade 8. We will show how he stereotypically models Indians. He is not in class with Indians and does not have Indian friends outside of school. His mental model of Indians contains the following generic perceptions: Indians are friendly and hardworking, but not honest. Indians are not loudmouthed, not untidy and not unfriendly.
- Respondent number 1015 in the database is a Coloured female, 13 years of age and in grade 8. She is in class with Blacks, but does not have Black friends outside of school. Her mental model of Blacks contains the following generic perceptions: Blacks are not friendly, Blacks are not honest, but Blacks are hardworking. Blacks are loudmouthed and untidy.

By using correlational statistical procedures in SPSS 9, the 1322 individual responses contained in Moodley's survey were averaged for each of the ethnic groups, after which tests of significance were applied to determine whether generic attributes could be discerned for each ethnic group. In the following section, we discuss the extent to which we could discern generic ethnic-specific mental models.

Generic Mental Models of Ethnic Stereotyping

Because it is not possible to give an exhaustive account of results in a journal article such as this one we will limit our discussion of generic models of ethnic stereotyping to how Whites and Blacks stereotyped themselves and one another.

How Whites Modelled Themselves

Most of the Whites showed no strong opinions about Whites being friendly, honest, hardworking and generous. The second largest group of Whites fully agreed that Whites are friendly, honest, hardworking and generous showing that they favoured their own group. A small number of Whites completely disagreed that Whites are friendly, honest, hardworking and generous.

Most of the Whites showed no strong opinions about their negative attributes—loudmouthed, unfriendly, untidy and racist. The second largest

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group of Whites completely disagreed that Whites are loudmouthed, unfriendly, untidy and racist, showing ingroup favouritism. A small percentage of the Whites fully agreed that Whites are loudmouthed, unfriendly, untidy and racist. Whites showed only a moderate tendency towards ingroup favouritism when it comes to their perception of the negative traits exhibited by their group.

This indicates that Whites do not have a singular idealised cognitive model about themselves. The predominant model is one of reserve by Whites about the positive and the negative attributes associable with their own group. Whites as a group do not show a strong tendency towards ingroup favouritism.

How Whites Modelled Blacks

Most of the Whites had no strong opinions about Blacks being friendly, honest, generous and hardworking. Very few of the Whites fully agreed that Blacks are friendly, honest, generous and hardworking. A greater percentage of Whites completely disagreed about Blacks being honest, generous and hardworking indicating stereotypical value judgements about Blacks.

Most of the Whites fully agreed that Blacks are loudmouthed and racist, but are neutral about Blacks being unfriendly and untidy. Very few Whites completely disagreed that Blacks are loudmouthed, unfriendly, untidy and racist revealing a moderate negative stereotypical view of Blacks by Whites.

How Blacks Modelled Themselves

Most of the Blacks fully agreed that Blacks are friendly, honest, generous and hardworking, showing strong ingroup favouritism, but there was a large percentage of Blacks that completely disagreed that Blacks are hardworking.

There was strong disagreement by Blacks about Blacks being loudmouthed, unfriendly, untidy and racist, indicating strong ingroup favouritism. Few Blacks fully agreed that Blacks are loudmouthed, untidy and racist and a percentage of Blacks fully agreed that Blacks are unfriendly. Most Blacks showed strong ingroup favouritism with regard to positive and negative attributes about themselves.

How Blacks Modelled Whites

Most of the Blacks completely disagreed that Whites are friendly, honest and hardworking, but fully agreed that Whites are generous. A small number of Blacks fully agreed that Whites are friendly, honest and hardworking, but

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completely disagreed that Whites are generous. Few Blacks have neutral opinions about the positive attributes of Whites.

Most of the Blacks fully agreed that Whites are loudmouthed, unfriendly and untidy, indicating negative stereotyping of Whites by Blacks.

The predominant model is a strong negative stereotypical view of Whites by Blacks with regard to positive and negative attributes of Whites.

Conclusion

Taking Moodley 2001 as point of departure, we documented instances of ethnic stereotyping among grade 8 learners in the Durban region. We showed that at the conceptual level ethnic stereotyping is closely related to how individuals categorise one another in terms of group attributes.

We also showed that in terms of Wellman's (1992) model of commonsense belief-desire psychology the categorisation that underpins stereotyping involves values and beliefs as particular cognitive subcategories. We argued that stereotyping is related to Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, beginning with physical needs for safety and sustenance, and ending with the psychological need for self-actualisation. We drew this conclusion in the light of Boon's (1998) insight that ethnicity is high when people feel threatened, or when their physiological and safety needs have not been met, and low when people can proceed to actualising their inherent potentials.

We showed that learners from all ethnic groups tended to positively stereotype their own groups, while at the same time negatively stereotyping other groups with regard to particular attributes.

Finally, we related stereotyping to the mental models that people construct of their environments. We briefly outlined how the particular mental models of four respondents reflected instances of stereotyping, after which we by way of example discussed the generic mental models of White and Black respondents in terms of how they modelled their own group and one another's group.

KZN Examination & Assessment Services
University of Natal

Communication Science
University of Zululand

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