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DIRECT AND INDIRECT CONTACT TO REDUCE STEREOTYPES AND  
PREJUDICES.  
THEORIES, RESEARCHES AND ALLMEET EXPERIENCE

*Abstract. Although the Allport's contact hypothesis (1954) to reduce stereotypes and prejudices has been validated by a wide number of experimental studies, often its application is not possible because it is very difficult to meet the outlined conditions. The extended contact and the imagined contact are new indirect contact strategies for promoting tolerance and more positive intergroup relations. The stimulation of positive mental interactions with an out-group member can elicit more favorable explicit and implicit attitudes, reduce stereotypes and prejudice, and enhance intentions to engage in future contact. Following this theoretic background, the paper reflects on the effects of the participation to the EACEA funded ALLMEET (Actions of Lifelong Learning addressing Multicultural Education and Tolerance in Russia) project on the group of the involved Russian and European researchers.*

*Key words: stereotypes; prejudices; contact hypothesis; extended contact; imagined contact*

### **Introduction**

Stereotypes and prejudices affect communication and relationships between people, sometimes erecting barriers that are hard to climb over. The direct or indirect contact between people from different groups is now easier to obtain thanks to speedier and more accessible communications and transports. Since with the same speed prejudices are conveyed, every occasion of meeting, mutual understanding and dialogue should be sought, desired, promoted and enhanced, to allow the establishment of new relations, even among people and worlds that could seem apparently distant.

### **Stereotypes and prejudices**

People use stereotypes and prejudices to interpret reality and try to give an order to the multiplicity of stimuli and information that absorb from everyday experience. Theories, hypotheses and explanations of stereotypes and prejudices have been numerous and expressed from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

The word prejudice, that originates from the Latin *praeiudicium* (*prae - iudicium*), is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as a “preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience; dislike, hostility, or unjust behaviour deriving from preconceived and unfounded opinions” [1]. The prejudice is an opinion given before the experience, without reliable data that can support its validity. It is a preconceived opinion, socially learned and shared with the members of the in-group, that can be favorable or hostile to a certain category of people. It often results in unfavorable attitudes and rigid beliefs, based on improper generalizations and misjudgments, attributing stereotypical traits to all the members of a certain group [2].

According to the Oxford Dictionary, *stereotype* is “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing” [3]. This word, that in the late eighteenth century was used to indicate the typographical matrix from which the identical copies of a newspaper derive, was introduced in the social sciences in 1922 by Walter Lippmann, in his book *Public opinion: as rigid as the typographical matrix*, the cognitive and social stereotype is a distorted image in a person’s mind, not based on personal experience, but culturally derived.

Pierre-Andr  Taguieff [2] describes the stereotype through three levels: first, it is a fixed idea associated to a category; second, a hard and persistent categorization of human groups, which impoverishes and over-simplifies the reality; third, a process of accentuation of the differences between the members of the in-group and the members of the out-groups, but also of the similarities between the members of the same group.

Gordon Allport [4] underlines three aspects that characterise stereotypes and the process of stereotyping: inaccuracy, negativity and overgeneralization. Stereotypes are inaccurate because, instead of reflecting the complexity and the heterogeneity of a certain social group, they represent simplified traits that we view as characteristic of that group, that come to mind quickly when we think about it. Although they can be positive, we generate many more negative stereotypes, and even expressing positive stereotypes is often not seen positively. The use of

stereotypes produces a process of overgeneralization that is more problematic than the simple holding them, because it generates unfair consequences [5; 6].

Stereotypes exist as cognitive structures, such as schemas [7; 8], prototypes [9], and exemplars [10] that are produced and elaborated during the process of social categorization, that occurs spontaneously in our everyday perception [11], driven by desires for simplicity [12; 13]. Rigid cognitive schemes and emotional responses produce distorted perceptions, in which individuals are differentiated and assigned to different categories and groups dynamics are perceived and understood as impenetrable [14].

Stereotypes and prejudices are strictly linked, they represent respectively the cognitive and affective components of the same attitude [15]: the stereotypes are the cognitive basis on which prejudices develop and rationalize [16; 17].

Considering the current manifestations of stereotypes and prejudices in our society, Charles Stangor [18, p. 4] refers and supports the old idea of Pettigrew [19] to consider them mainly as social norms.

It is my feeling, taking it all together, that we need to focus more on prejudice and stereotypes as social rather than individual constructions. Stereotypes represent our relationships with our groups and our cultures - with those we know and care about. This was the initial argument of the original stereotype researchers - D. Katz and Braly and Allport, for instance. In short, we are prejudiced because we feel that others that we care about are, too - that it is okay to be so. Similarly, we are tolerant when we feel that being so is socially acceptable. Conceptualizing stereotypes and prejudice within their social and cultural context is essential, and we frequently do not.

### **Stereotypes about Russia and Russian people**

In people's representations, Germans are often blond, the Spanish funny, the Japanese heavy workers, and so on. The attribution of *national characters* is one of the most common manifestations of the stereotyping processes. The basic idea is that the various national groups are characterized by sufficient homogeneity in terms of sensitivity, attitudes, behaviors, so as to define a specific character that is typical of a certain nation, which would result not only from a common cultural matrix, but also

from the broad distribution of certain psychological traits [20]. The use of national characters produces highly stereotyped descriptions, although not always negative, of the members of certain national groups, and these descriptions are so effective that guide expectations and attitudes towards them.

Each individual must be recognized in his specific characteristics, but there is a high probability of finding in him at least some of the typical peculiarities of his national character: in the absence of other information, the stereotype may guide the mutual interaction. National stereotypes are subject to the concept of probability: there is a higher probability that an individual belonging to a group has features that are typical of his group, but it is not correct automatically transferring those features to all the group members. The expectations, which can be useful in the absence of other information, should not be maintained when we have such other information, when we have known more deeply the individual and his personal characteristics.

When a national group appears distant and less known, it is more likely to be described through stereotypical national characters. In 2015 I made a small exploratory qualitative survey, asking thirty people, aged between twenty-five and forty-five, all workers and possessing a university degree, to write a few sentences by answering the question: “What do you think, when you hear the words *Russia* and *Russians*?” [21].

The sample size is not high enough to allow generalizations, however, it is already possible to draw interesting insights from the collected material. All respondents admitted to have vague, indirect and imprecise knowledge on Russia, mostly drawn from the mass media and friends. In their descriptions, positive and negative elements are mixed.

Some respondents do not like the Russians, considering them homophobic, intolerant, cold and heavy drinkers of vodka. They distinguish between a minority of arrogant, consumerist, ruthless and corrupt rich people, and a poor and depressed mass, which does not speak English and is subservient to the dictator Putin. The girls are defined “glacial beautiful women ready to warm hearts to achieve a goal”, adept at seducing and marrying wealthy Europeans. Other respondents, however, have very

positive opinions toward the Russian people and President Putin, appreciating especially their patriotism, the attachment to their own culture and the coherence in the lifestyles.

Between the extreme positions of hate and love, the majority of the respondents fluctuates between fascination and a kind of fear of the extreme diversity and the distance they perceive. Russia is imagined as a cold, snowy and boundless land, of which they know only two cities: Moscow and St. Petersburg. Vodka, corruption, the bucolic atmosphere in the villages, consumerism, the renegade communist ideal, are contradictory and recurrent elements. The glacial and jovial light blue eyes, the pale skin, the squared faces, the physical strength, the ability to withstand the cold, the beauty of women, are features that seem to belong to all Russians, perceived as a single, homogeneous Slavic group, whereas in the reality there is a cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious pluralism that is rarely reported by the European media.

Today as in the past, the representations of Russia spread throughout Italy inspire fear. The elements that arouse fear are the diversity of this great federation and its people, the leadership and the aggressive policy of president Putin, the echo of its history: the empire of the Tsars, the Bolshevik Revolution, the two world wars, the Cold war, Lenin and Stalin, until the recent crisis in Chechnya and Ukraine. All this scares, but at the same time fascinates, carries the seduction of the forbidden, of the unmatchable, of the unknown, as stated by one of the respondents:

RUSSIA is a word that fascinates and frightens because we have grown up with the “fear” for Russia (opposed to the American myth), so it would be wrong to give descriptions that do not consider political and/or historical issues.

### **The contact hypothesis**

Although stereotypes and prejudices are stubbornly resistant to change [22; 23; 24; 25], many researches indicate that they can be successfully reduced and social perceptions can be more accurate when people are motivated to do so [26; 27; 28]. Gordon Allport [4, p. 281] hypothesized that:

Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups.

The *contact hypothesis* has been validated by many further researches. In a review of 203 studies from 25 countries, involving 90.000 participants, Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp [29] found that 94% of studies supported the contact hypothesis.

An exemplifying demonstration of the effectiveness of the contact hypothesis, applied in an unconscious way, may be traced to the experience lived by the participants in the project ALLMEET (Actions of Lifelong Learning addressing Multicultural Education and Tolerance in Russia).

Started on December 2013, the project is going to end on November 2016 and it has been financed by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Commission. The aim of the project is to contribute to support the modernization of Higher Education in Russia, enabling Higher Education Institutions to play the role of key-actors in promoting actions of Lifelong Learning on the topics of migration and intercultural education. Six Intercultural Education Platforms have been implemented in six Russian cities and they are offering to the local population activities and events aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue in term of an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. The project consortium is composed by seven partners from Russia, and European partners from Italy, Portugal, Scotland and the Netherlands.

Among the Europeans engaged in the project, no one had ever previously worked with Russians and only a few had already visited Moscow and St.

Petersburg, but not other cities. Many of them had read Russian novels, studied the main events of Russian history, knew the most famous artists, were used to read on European media news on the current events and had consolidated their ideas on the political situation. However, they have never had Russian friends, so they had not been able to experience the contact with members of that national group. European researchers were working together with Russian colleagues in a project aimed to promote education initiatives to reduce stereotypes and prejudices, but they themselves, some more and some less, had prejudice against Russians and Russia, determined by superficial knowledge of Russia and lack of relational experiences and friendships with Russian people.

During the first months of work, mutual stereotypes and prejudices influenced the communication between partners, creating problems and misunderstanding that only later were attributed to those dimensions. Then, with the succession of possibilities for contact and thus mutual understanding, European and Russian researchers became able to change their mutual convictions, and consequently certain representations that were thought immutable became less rigid. Through the contact, sometimes characterized by conflict or disagreement on certain topics, but always by mutual respect and esteem, European researchers have decreased their stereotypes and prejudices towards Russians and Russia, and vice versa.

Through the discussions on Skype and by email, but especially during the project meetings, the Russians and European researchers have worked together daily, solving common problems and gaining gradual successes: inevitably, over the months, the professional relations have evolved in relationships of real, in some cases deep, friendship, whose boundaries have gone beyond the working partnership. In the last months, the email exchanges between participants, and the conversations during the joyous joint dinners at the end of every meeting, concerned not only matters relating to the project, but also confidences, jokes, friendship claims. The frequent trips to Russia, in cities like Yoshkar Ola, Naberezhnye Chelny, Kazan, Krasnoyarsk and Arkhangelsk have enabled the

Europeans to make contact with the places where their Russian colleagues were living and working, and therefore with the food, the language, the expressions of the local culture, and to experience warm welcomes, that are relevant elements for breaking down barriers and previous convictions.

The ALLMEET project participants have experienced in a positive way the effects of the contact, reducing the mutual stereotypes and prejudices. Their interactions have fulfilled the conditions that Allport identified as necessary for the success of the contact. Although they live in different places, have different salaries, familiar conditions and lifestyles, in the ALLMEET social and relational framework they have all the equal status of researchers involved in the common goal to achieve the aims of the project, under the umbrella of the European Commission institutional support, sharing a common interest on intercultural education and a common humanity, sensitive to the values of tolerance and peace among the different cultural, ethnic and religious groups.

The ALLMEET framework is successful but it can't be easily reproduced in other contexts, where it is impossible to assure all the conditions for a positive contact. The problem with using contact to reduce prejudice is not that the contact hypothesis is wrong, but that it is so difficult to meet the conditions that Allport outlined. In many real-world environments the fires of prejudice are fueled by conflict and competition between groups that are unequal in status, such as Israelis and Palestinians, Whites and Blacks, or long-time citizens and recent immigrants [30; 31]. Under conditions of competition and unequal status, contact can even increase prejudice rather than decrease it.

### **The extended contact and the imagined contact**

Indirect forms of contact, such as the extended contact [32] and the imagined contact [33], can be applied in contexts where the conditions for the direct contact can not be fulfilled.

According to the hypothesis of the *extended contact*, the simple fact of knowing that one or more friends of the in-group have friends in the out-group is enough to reduce prejudice. The extended contact does not require direct knowledge



between the in-group and the out-group members, it is sufficient that some members of a group have friends in an out-group to spread the positive effects of the contact of these individuals to the other members of the in-group.

In a few years many evidences supporting the efficacy of the extended contact have been accumulated [34]. For example, Liebkind and McAlister [35] have operationalised the extended contact by reading stories of friendships between in-group and out-group characters to Finnish students of high schools. The stories, carefully prepared to highlight the importance of friendship between Finns and immigrants, were read in class and discussed collectively, resulting in the improvement of the attitudes towards immigrants.

Referring to the ALLMEET project's participants, it is obvious that their experience of friendship with the Russian people and travels in Russia have indirectly changed the ideas and stereotypes of their friends and relatives. Indeed, after every trip, friends and relatives used to ask them with increasing curiosity to tell how were the places and the people. The oral narratives, but also the posts on social networks, the written articles and other dissemination activities transformed ALLMEET researchers into true ambassadors for the knowledge and the building of critically positive attitudes towards the Russians and Russian culture. During the meetings in Europe or short visits by some Russian researchers, it happened that friends and relatives of European researchers could meet firsthand these people, socializing with them, exchanging views, thoughts and stories, transforming indirect contact into direct contact.

However, even the extended contact has an important limitation because it requires that in the social network there is at least one person who has friends in the out-group. This is unlikely in situations characterized by high segregation and conflict, in which even those who have friends in the out-group may be afraid to declare it because of possible social sanctions and the risk of being excluded from the in-group. Turner, Crisp and Lambert [36] have developed a even more indirect typology of indirect contact: the *imagined contact*. They found that simply imagining a positive encounter with an out-group member has positive effects and reduces

stereotypes and prejudices. In the imagined contact it is not expected that members of different groups know each other, but people are only asked to imagine a certain situation. In a few years its effectiveness has been demonstrated by numerous findings. For example, Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini and Stathi [37] asked Italian primary school children to imagine a friendly encounter with an immigrant child. Each week the participants had to imagine a contact situation in a different context: at school, close to home, at the park. Each meeting was followed by a group discussion, led by researcher. It was found that, after a week since the last session, the children in the imagined contact condition were more eager to befriend immigrant children and revealed a lower degree of prejudice.

### **Conclusion**

Where applicable, the direct contact is preferable to the indirect contact because it leads to the formation of more stable intergroup attitudes [38]. Some authors [33; 39] believe that the various strategies are not alternative to each other, but complementary. In particular, the (extended or imagined) indirect contact should facilitate the desire to have friends in the out-group among those who have few experiences of real contact.

Russia is a still unknown country for most of the people in Italy and Europe, and negative stereotypes and prejudices have been persisting since decades, in some cases feeding a real Russophobia, especially in correspondence with some political facts.

It is important to distinguish the narrative that we do of Russia from the reality of how it really is, and to do this it is necessary to educate to question stereotypes and prejudices, to bring people to new positions of openness and desire to know and understand. Every opportunity to make direct or indirect contact is therefore particularly important, especially when it is guided by the shared values of tolerance and desire to interpret the current world according the intercultural paradigm, moving beyond old and outdated barriers. Through direct or indirect contact, ordinary citizens of Russia and Europe will be able to establish friendly relations, prepending respect

and trust in people to the often conflicting demands that characterize the geopolitical arenas.

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