

Functions of Stereotypes in Mass Culture in the Context of Critical Multiculturalism¹

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Abstract. This article offers a project-based English lesson with university students, which is aimed at studying the way that stereotypes function in mass culture. Critical multiculturalism is currently gaining more and more attention among researchers. Its rise is reflected in English language study books, which stands in stark contrast with the inexhaustible popularity of stereotypes in popular culture. Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that stereotypes are viewed not only as clichéd images of ethnic and socio-cultural groups, but they also participate in categorizing the flow of incoming information and thus act as an essential tool of cognition. During the preparation for the project-based lesson, students studied and analysed the functioning of stereotypes in various samples of popular culture, including commercials and memes, and then presented the results of their research in class. With the help of the teacher, the students identified the following functions of stereotypes in popular culture: cognitive, persuasive, integrative, reflexive, entertaining (including sarcastic), therapeutic, and the function of compression. Further research may continue this list and describe the hierarchical relations between the functions.

Keywords: critical multiculturalism, stereotype, functions of stereotypes, sexual objectification

The content of English textbooks today is increasingly informed by issues of cultural diversity and equivalence, that is, the promotion of respect for, and interest in, so-called peripheral cultures. One glaring example of this is the *Proficiency Masterclass* study guide², the first unit of which (entitled “People and Places”) contains an excerpt from the multicultural novel *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* by the Zimbabwe-born British novelist Alexander McCall Smith. The multicultural trend can also be seen in the textbooks published by National Geographic Learning, whose motto – “bring the world to your classroom and your classroom to life” – highlights

¹ English translation from the Russian text: Kamalova S.D. 2022. Functions of Stereotypes in Mass Culture in the Context of Critical Multiculturalism. *Professional Discourse & Communication*. 4(4). P. 10–21. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24833/2687-0126-2022-4-4-10-21>

² Gude K., Duckworth M., Rogers L. 2013. *Cambridge English: Proficiency (CPE) Masterclass Student’s Book Plus Online Skills & Language Practice*. Oxford.

the need to proactively include these of cultural difference and diversity in the educational process. Specifically, we are referring to Unit 7 of the textbook *Keynote Proficient*³, called “Same but Different”, which contains parts of the TED talk given by the famous Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story”, and Unit 3 of the textbook *Outcomes*⁴, which includes colour photos of a wedding in Ribnovo, Bulgaria, home to a large Muslim population.

Notably, these textbooks contain examples of the “latest” version of multiculturalism, known as “critical” or “polycentric” culturalism. The problem is that researchers distinguish various types of multiculturalism, which have significant shortcomings and have been repeatedly criticized. In an article entitled “White Terror and Oppositional Agency: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism”, the cultural researcher and leading architect of critical pedagogy Peter McLaren identifies three models of multiculturalism: conservative multiculturalism, liberal multiculturalism, and left-liberal multiculturalism (McLaren 1994). The conservative model is characterized by the gracious treatment of minorities by the dominant culture (both in the mother country and in colonies) in order to integrate the minority into the culture of the majority. Liberal multiculturalism is a utopian model of a comprehensive equality of cultures, which, unfortunately, is difficult to imagine in the real world. Left-liberal multiculturalism focuses on cultural differences, rather than on the similarities between ethnic groups, while the personal qualities of an individual are explained precisely by ethnicity, which, according to modern standards that deny national determinism, is not entirely correct. In the 1990s, McLaren and other researchers (representatives of the Chicago school of cultural studies) put forward the theory of critical multiculturalism, which posits that cultural identity is seen as a product of the social construction of meanings and signs. Critical (or polycentric) multiculturalism aims to transform the social, intercultural and intracultural institutional relationships that are responsible for the formation of meanings associated with culture and identity, as well as for how they function in society. In such a model of multiculturalism, “other” (or “marginal”) cultures are not the object of study, but rather an active participant in the dialogue. These ideas align with those encapsulated in the post-colonial theory developed by Edward Said (Said 1978) and Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 1994), as well as with Mikhail Bakhtin’s polyphony of cultures (Bakhtin 1986).

Methodology

The study of critical multiculturalism and its reflection in textbooks used in the classroom by a large number of teachers prompted to look deeper, along with our students, into what we understand as stereotypes, particularly ethnic stereotypes, as well

³ Dummett P., Stephenson H., Lansford L. 2016. *Keynote Proficient Student's Book*. Hampshire, United Kingdom: National Geographic Learning.

⁴ Dellar H., Walkley A. 2020. *Outcomes Advanced Student's Book*. National Geographic Learning.

as stereotyping in general and what function stereotypes serve, especially in popular culture. Exactly one hundred years have passed since the publication of Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion* (Lippmann 1922), which is usually referred to when talking about the concept of social stereotypes. Since then, the stereotype has become the subject of study of various scientific fields, even producing the entirely new scientific discipline of imagology, which explores images of other nationalities and, in particular, ethnic stereotypes (or ethnotypes).

We often use the term “stereotype” to describe an unkind, distorted, one-sided perception of a social, cultural or ethnic group, while cognitive science considers stereotypes within the framework of the concept of categorization, which plays a crucial role in the process of cognition. According to the predictive brain theory put forward by Andy Clark (Clark 2013), the human brain is a device, a prediction machine – that is, in the course of processing huge flows of information, our brain performs the processes of cognition, perception and mental alertness, while minimizing the need to predict errors is the driving force behind processes of recognition, learning and inference. It thus follows that the greater the number of stereotypes (in the cognitive sense of the word), the easier it is for us to structure and cognize the complex external world. As Henri Tajfel, one of the most prominent names in the field of research into stereotypes and prejudices, notes, the huge amount of sensory information that a person deals with cannot be processed if it is not divided into categories, and the categorization process itself inevitably involves a certain amount of distortion of information, because people invariably exaggerate both the similarities between members of the same group and the differences between members of different groups (Billig 2002). Hence the connection between stereotypes as exaggerated images and stereotypes as a means of cognition.

The connection between the two concepts can be traced to the study of the functioning of stereotypes in popular culture. We asked undergraduate and master's students of the School of International Journalism at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in their English classes to select examples of the use of stereotypes in various areas of popular culture (TV serials, commercials, memes, comedy shows, etc.). We then asked them to analyse the material and determine what function these stereotypes served before presenting their observations and conclusions in class. This project was timed to coincide with the teaching of this topic in Unit 7 of the *Keynote Proficient* textbook mentioned above⁵, where students are invited to discuss such issues as the dialogue of cultures, multiculturalism, and stereotypes of other cultures. The students were also encouraged to read Walter Lippmann's description of social stereotypes. When working on the project, the students had little trouble finding all kinds of examples of the use of stereotypes, including ethnic stereotypes, gender stereotypes,

⁵ Dummett P., Stephenson H., Lansford L. 2016. *Keynote Proficient Student's Book*. Hampshire, United Kingdom: National Geographic Learning.

religious stereotypes, and intergenerational stereotypes (in particular gerontological stereotypes, or stereotypes about older people). Determining what function these stereotypes served proved to be far more difficult in most cases.

Discussion and findings

After familiarizing themselves with some of the theoretical studies on stereotypes, students were immediately able to identify the cognitive and persuasive functions of stereotypes that now lie on the surface of our perception. The theoretical base also makes it possible to single out an integrative function when stereotypes are used to separate people into “us” and “them” and consolidate stereotypes about “strangers”, that is, about a “heterostereotype”, which in turn allows us to rally “our people”, because, as we well know, rallying typically occurs against someone else.

In popular culture, advertising, both in print and on TV, is typically replete with all kinds of stereotypes. Giving the students a solid theoretical base on this subject encouraged them to discover the compression function of stereotypes, which describes the need to fit a large amount of information or a rather complex idea into the limited space of a piece of text, a short video, or a soundbite. For example, in an advertisement for Aptamil baby formula⁶, the healthy and harmonious development of a child was reduced to scenes depicting a girl becoming a ballerina and boy becoming an engineer, for which it was roundly criticized.

Another clear illustration of the function of compression and its costs are the numerous examples of advertisements in which women are depicted as mere objects, which today is called the sexual objectification of women. In other words, “sexual objectification comes down to objectifying a woman, seeing her as a picture, an abstract image, artificially endowed with characteristics that are in line with the interests of men” (Grigoryan, Grigoryan 2021: 6). For example, advertisements for all kinds of consumer products, especially beverages, focus on a woman’s exposed body parts (Szymanski et al. 2011). Towards the end of the twentieth century, researchers developed a theory of objectification, which states that the female body is seen not only as a biological organism, but also, and primarily, in terms of the sociocultural aspect (Fredrickson, Roberts 1997). And while there is no denying that men are also objectified, as the creators of the aforementioned theory point out, the problems associated with the objectification of women are of a much larger scale. As for the objectification of women in advertising, a great deal of research has already been devoted to this topic. One study, for example, notes that in the 1960s, women were hypersexualized in 11% of the images appearing in the American *Rolling Stone* magazine, compared to 61% in the 2000s⁷.

⁶ Baby Milk Advert Shows Girls becoming Ballerinas and Boys Scientists. 2017. 14.12.2017. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLfH70nm9VM> (accessed 18.11.2022).

⁷ Sementina V. Pochemu seksizm v reklame ne rabotaet – infografika [Why Sexism in Commercials is Not Effective]. 2020. *Mastera [Masters]*. 30.01.2020. URL: <https://mastera.academy/sex-does-not-sell/> (accessed 18.11.2022).

An example of the objectification of women can be found in the advertisement below (see Fig. 1):

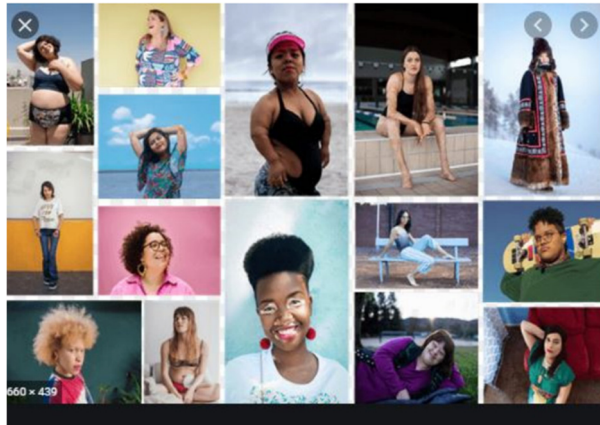
Fig. 1. Advertisement for a Lexus GS 2013⁸



Figure 1 shows one of the images used as part of the advertising campaign for a new sports sedan from Lexus. The track on which the car appears was designed to match the contours of the body of the famous American supermodel Tori Praver.

During their work on the project, the students also found numerous examples of critical attitudes towards stereotypes in popular culture. In these examples, gender and beauty stereotypes that reflect the phenomenon of *lookism*, or discrimination based on external data, become the subject of serious rethinking and deep reflection. In this regard, the concept of the reflexive function of stereotypes, when stereotypical images are used as a way to discredit or the stereotypes themselves and demonstrate how they do not work, comes through. In popular culture, this function is implemented in numerous advertising campaigns. One example would be the #ShowUs campaign launched by the brand Dove. The campaign involves creating a collection of photographs on the Dove website that are not edited in any way and have not been processed in Photoshop or any other program. The photos show all kinds of different women, with the aim being to create a more realistic approach to the female appearance, and a more inclusive attitude to beauty as a whole (see Fig. 2).

⁸ Lexus Newsroom. 2013. Lexus GS – 2012 Tori 500 Campaign 002. 14.02.2012. URL: <https://pressroom.lexus.com/image/2013-lexus-gs-2012-tori-500-campaign-002/> (accessed 18.11.2022).

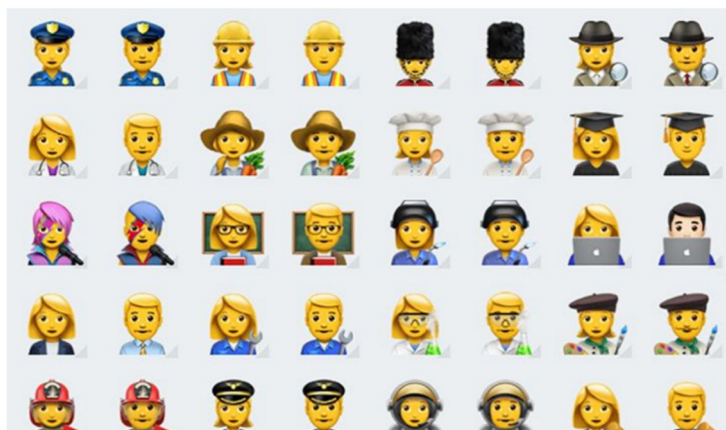
Fig. 2. Dove #ShowUs Ad Campaign⁹

Another example of the reflexive function of stereotypes in mass culture can be found in a commercial for NIKE Women Russia, which features a fresh take on the lyrics of Yakov Khaletsky's famous children's song "Out of what, out of what, out of what". In the original version, girls are made "out of flowers, out of bells, out of notepads and glances", whereas in the updated version, they are made "out of iron, out of aspirations, out of selflessness, out of struggle", as well as "out of bruises and slaps" and "a grace that makes the entire nation proud"¹⁰. The commercial features famous Russian athletes, and the message is to look beyond the stereotypical image of girls.

Turning to other areas of popular culture, we can see a clear example of the acknowledgement of the existence of stereotypes in the appearance of emojis on social media and smartphones depicting not only people of different skin colours, but also representatives of different professions, including women engaged in traditionally male occupations (for example, the female firefighter emoji), as well emojis featuring women taking part in various sports.

⁹ Dove. Project #ShowUs. URL: <https://www.dove.com/us/en/stories/campaigns/showus.html> (accessed 18.11.2022).

¹⁰ NikeWomen: What are Girls Made Of? 2017. 16.02.2017. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xifSHMbGSKI> (accessed 18.11.2022).

Fig. 3. Emojis Depicting Professions¹¹

Of course, stereotypes are also used in popular culture for *entertainment*, *humorous* and *sarcastic* purposes. This typically serves an integrative function – that is, it is used to make fun of “outsiders” and thus bring those in “our” group together. Examples of this are the numerous racist jokes based on ethnic egocentrism and the clash of ethnic stereotypes (Romanov 2013). Today, in the golden age of social media and instant messengers, the humorous function of stereotypes, including those relating to race and ethnicity, is used with incredibly frequency in the form of internet memes, which are seen as a “mechanism for the transmission and storage of cultural information” (Shchurina 2014: 86). An integral characteristic of the internet meme is its ability to accurately reflect “cultural stereotypes and phenomena of modern reality that are relevant and interesting for internet users” (Ibid.: 86) (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. An Internet Meme that Plays On the Humorous Function of Stereotypes¹²

¹¹ Peyser E. 2016. Tired of Sexist Emojis? Here's How Everything Might Change. 13.05. 2016. *Cosmopolitan*. URL: <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/lifestyle/news/a58365/professional-women-emojis/> (accessed 18.11.2022).

¹² Imgflip. Scared Spongebob and Boomer Spongebob. URL: <https://imgflip.com/i/406rub> (accessed 18.11.2022).

In the course of researching and writing their presentations, the students discovered that stereotypes can also serve a therapeutic function, when two perceptions of the term “stereotype” (one as a cognitive tool and the other as an overly simplified and hackneyed representation of members of a certain social group) converge as closely as possible. Modern psychoanalysts such as Julie Reshe (Yulia Reshetnikova) see stereotypes as a necessary means of survival which allow us to reduce the inevitable trauma of having to adapt to the conditions of life around us¹³.

A good of this function in action in popular culture is stand-up routines, which play on

difficult situations that the comedian and much of their audience have had to face in real life: they joke about depression, toxic relationships, stress at work, conflicts at home, etc. The audience can relate to the comedian's unique take on something that has happened to them. They listen to the stereotypical situations described by comedians and recognize themselves or their friends in them, which causes them to identify themselves as a member of a large group, a representative of the “in” group that consists of people who have exactly the same problems as us, and this sense of belonging to a group creates a sense of security and stability. For example, the famous British comedian Michael McIntyre's has a routine about how difficult it is to raise children, evoking a stereotype of young parents who do cannot keep up, or cope with their children and sometimes behave inappropriately¹⁴. This stereotypical image effectively serves as a kind of therapy for the target audience – young parents who are going through a similar situation.

Conclusions

Stereotypes play a crucial role in processing the surrounding reality. We use them to filter incoming information into different categories, which in turn leads to its inevitable distortion, and often to a stereotyped perception of the world around us. In this regard, we should not underestimate the merits of the most successful model of multiculturalism to date, namely critical, or polycentric, multiculturalism and its implementation in educational materials on the English language, which imparts a conscious attitude towards stereotypes to students. Students should be given the opportunity to see exactly how stereotypes are exploited in the media, in propagandistic materials and, more broadly, in popular culture.

The student project to identify the functions of stereotypes can be built with varying degrees of complexity: you can trust students to identify the functions themselves, or you can give them a ready-made list of functions and ask them to find examples of

¹³ Reshe J. *Terapevticheskaya funktsiya stereotipov ili iskusstvo kak anti-terapiya* [Therapeutic Function of Stereotypes, or Arts as Anti-Therapy]. 2018. Street Art Museum. 24.10.2018. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G46jvYazjWI> (accessed 18.11.2022).

¹⁴ McIntyre M. 2019. *People Without Children Have No Idea What It's Like!* 29.05.2019. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eC6eHraeMes> (accessed 18.11.2022).

stereotypes in popular culture that perform these functions. In this study, we identified the following functions of stereotypes that exist in popular culture: cognitive, persuasive, integrative, compression, reflexive, entertaining (humorous and sarcastic) and, finally, therapeutic. It is important to note that this list of functions is open and can be expanded. There is also room to study the hyper-hyponymic relationships between the functions we have identified here.

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