The role of stereotyping in the post-colonial and post-apartheid context of an Afrikaans university

Elmarie Costandius, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

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Introduction
The motivation to research stereotyping and the differences in perceptions started with my own experience of teaching a multicultural group of students at a historically white Afrikaans South African university. The university's Visual Arts course, for which the evaluation criteria are necessarily qualitative, is open to claims of subjectivity. A curriculum is planned and executed from a particular perspective which is influenced by the institutional culture of the university, which is still, despite the post-apartheid present, predominantly Afrikaans, male and white. Course content is delivered in either English or Afrikaans, with the political baggage attendant upon those languages. Afrikaans evolved from Dutch, and is considered, sometimes polemically, as an indigenous South African language. These contextual complications often lead to conversations about and investigations into stereotyping being ignored or avoided.

This paper forms part of a bigger research project for a doctoral thesis. The current research aims to investigate specifically stereotyping between students of different cultural groups but included lecturers and curriculum design as part of the process. It intends to identify divisions and analyse the complex issues informed by racial or other misunderstandings. The ultimate aim is to use the research to adapt the Visual Arts course, including its teaching practices, to create an awareness to minimize negative stereotyping perceptions.

Literature review
"Ubiquitous categorisation"

Our perceptions are uncommonly powerful. Our daily acts of cooperation, help, competition or aggression mainly depend on our perceptions of other people (Trope and Gaunt, 2003, pp.190). We subconsciously summarise people, and then categorise them in groupings that we are familiar with. The categories into which we place other people are pre-existing. They are socially constructed, and are based on race, class, gender or language, amongst other characteristics (Trope and Gaunt, 2003, pp.191). Our actions, emotions, motivations and behaviour depend on the result of the categorisation (Trope and Gaunt, 2003). These outcomes of the categorising process differ according to whether we are aware of the action or whether self-reflection happens when we categorise (Devine, 1989). We also categorise people belonging to the outgroup differently than those belonging to the ingroup.

"Stereotyping"

We stereotype other people when the category we place them into is oversimplified, formulaic and standardised. We categorise and stereotype others subconsciously, even if we do not believe in stereotypes (Devine, 1989). Although commonly perceived as negative, there are arguments for seeing stereotyping as positive: Tajfel and Forgas (1981), for instance, argue that it is a way of simplifying the overload of information that
besets the contemporary world. Medin (1988), however, disagrees and argues that categorisation is the result of too little information, not too much. According to Allport (1954) stereotyping ‘knowledge’ could become embedded in culture and society and institutionalised in language, institutions, literature and the media.

When we categorise people who belong to the ingroup, the process is also called self-stereotyping: we assign categories to our group that distinguish us from other people. We use this often to justify our group’s behaviour. Clark’s 2001 study of the relationship between racial and gender stereotypes and self-concept found that black and white students expressed an ethnocentric bias towards their own racial group. The views of the outgroup can be adopted but does not necessarily lead to self-rejection of the in-group. It would also seem that, when dealing with race as the underlying classification, we behave selectively: we are able to express negative stereotypes of our ingroup, but we find it difficult to apply those same negative stereotypes to our individual selves.

**Historical context**

It is important to examine the colonial and apartheid past and how those histories inform our perceptions of and reactions towards other people. Writers like Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1993) opened up the dialogue that led to an alternative to postcolonial discourse, highlighting the view from the colonised subject’s perspective, thus creating space for the colonised to also have a voice. Bhabha (1994, pp.66) highlights how the discourse on colonialism stereotypes the colonised as separate, as the ‘other’. Spivak (1993), however, warns of the limits of expression in language and in culture when it comes to colonial discourse.

The strong colonial influences that came with the Dutch and British occupation of the Cape colony brought with it a western orientation. Black Africans, the ‘other’, were kept separate from and poorly integrated into this western orientation. This was exacerbated in apartheid South Africa, where cultures were deliberately kept apart and the richness of other cultures was completely overlooked, being seen as a threat to the hegemony of western culture. Black Africans were seen as second-class citizens (when they were seen as citizens at all).

During apartheid, language was used as a tool of oppression. At present indigenous African languages still have to bow to the domination of English as the dominating global language, and to Afrikaans as a remnant of the previous regime’s language policies (Maake, 1992). Afrikaans was and still is associated with domination because black African learners were previously forced to learn Afrikaans at school, a grievance that gave rise to the major uprising in Soweto in 1976.

According to Weedon (1987), education is geared towards the requirements of a specific educational institution informed by the values, modes and preferences of the dominant group. He remarks that ‘at the heart of the mechanism of power/knowledge lies the education system’. Stellenbosch University was historically and still is dominated by Afrikaans-speaking students, an environment not necessarily accommodating of other cultures. Black African students studying here are faced with several difficulties in adjusting to a historically Afrikaans university environment, one of which is Afrikaans as a medium of instruction.

Research by Vandeyar and Killen (2006) found that institutionalized racism is still pervasive in the South African educational institutions that they studied. Their findings include negative stereotyping of black students, selective empathy, devolution of authority
to students on a racial basis, and aversion to African languages.

**Self-concept**
During the colonial and apartheid eras other cultures were relegated to a position secondary to that of western culture. Students from a non-western background might still retain vestiges of that relegated concept of their culture. A lack of confidence in and undervaluing of their own culture could be consequences of the devastating historical denial of the value of African culture. (The current popular struggle aims to regain the rightful place of African culture and indigenous knowledge in order to reclaim an African sense of identity and thus bolster confidence.)

**Methodology**

**Framework**
I use critical and feminist theory as the theoretical framework for this study. The aim of critical theory in education is transformative: to transform individuals to a democratic society. Feminist theory has an agenda to empower, to give voice to, to emancipate and to promote equality and representation for oppressed groups that include women (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, pp.35). Feminist theory reveals and rediscovers power relations within categories such as class, race and knowledge. It also insists on changes in power relations in society.

Using these theories as a framework implies self-reflection applied with vigilance: Lather (1991) argues that research is inherently a political endeavour with a political agenda, and that researchers have to be aware of the political consequences their research could have on participants. My position as a white, previously advantaged middle-class person researching students from a disadvantaged past could jeopardise the subjectivity of the study.

**Method**
I use the phenomenological tradition, as described by Marton and Fai (1999), as the methodological framework for this research. Marton (1999) describes different ways in which people experience, understand, conceptualize and make sense of various kinds of phenomena in the world around them. To experience something, a person has to discern certain aspects of the phenomenon (Marton, 1999, pp.2). The discernment is made possible because there is a variation in phenomena. The experience of the phenomenon is multi-faceted. The figure ground concept is used to emphasise that one aspect of the experience is in the foreground, even though it is experienced simultaneously with the other aspects. This verifies that different perceptions or expectations could exist (with one that comes to the fore more than the others) when experiencing the same phenomenon.

**Data collection**
Quantitative data from conversations were recorded with a group of students who chose a critical friend from a different cultural group to discuss their differences in perceptions and stereotypes of each other. They had to imagine how it would be living the life of the critical friend.

**Analysis**
I identified concepts that appeared regularly during the interviews and grouped it into themes. To analyse the data I follow an approach of describing rather than explaining. The relationship between individuals in the context of their given material and historical
conditions is also considered (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, pp.25). The variations in perceptions are described, but not for the purpose of making a judgement. To compensate for the limitation of being a white person doing cross-cultural research, I asked a brown colleague to act as an independent check on the data and on my analysis of it for the purpose of triangulation.

Results and discussion

The results show that the individuals from different cultural groups involved in this study use categorisation to order their understanding of another culture. A study by McCool, Du Toit, Petty and McCauley (2006) looks at prejudice in student leaders from different higher institutions and finds that it still exists to a great extent. The students in the current study also admitted that it is only when the cultures mix on a regular basis that the strong categories disappear and people start to see similarities as well as differences. Devine (1989) stresses that we do categorise people, but the action we take as a result of the categorisation is the most important. Categorisation could determine actions, emotions, motivations or behaviour (Trope and Gaunt, 2003, pp.191). We could stereotype without knowing, because it is experienced as normal, or we could recognise the stereotyping and correct the thought before acting or behaving in a certain way.

The first aspect that emerged from the data is financial difference and stereotyping. In South Africa there is a big divide between rich and poor. Cultural stereotypical thinking still connects white with rich and black with poor. One student remarked that ‘I do not want to start talking to a white person because I think they are all rich’. Most comments coming from black students about how they imagine the life of a white student was related to having more materialistic advantages. The one student said that ‘he has a computer and TV probably a PlayStation’, and another said ‘[he] goes downstairs and opens a fridge filled with eatables that haven’t been opened’. Another student said that she thinks that her critical friend probably gets up from the supper table while ‘¾ of the food is still on his plate’. Another student also imagines that ‘in front of you is … a computer busy with your work writing some stuff with your right hand, with the left hand you are holding a burger’. Food, related to abundance, is a topic that came up regularly. One student said that she imagines that ‘with such a variety [of food] you’d think he’d pack a lunch box, but he takes an apple instead’. In a reflection session afterwards a student also remarked that perceptions of rich people, related to white people in this country, are influenced by what is seen on television.

Self confidence and self-stereotyping (Wright and Taylor, 2003) is also a product of circumstances prevalent in the historical and current South Africa. A student remarked that ‘I always thought I will go to the technical college until I met people that applied for university and realised that it would be possible for me too’. People in a poor township situation are not always exposed to different possibilities, and what is known or done in the white section of the community seems impossible to achieve.

Colonisation and apartheid also added to separation of cultural groups and self-stereotyping. It is often used as an excuse for excluding or judging the other. The second aspect that came to the fore is the perception of the nature of cultures. White students’ perception of black culture is that people are friendly and spend more time talking to each other. One student said ‘people talk more to each other in the township’ and ‘you talk to people on the taxi and they are joyful’. The black students’ reaction was that it is true that people are more friendly and warm. A black student remarked that ‘on the taxi I talk with other people that I do not know. My parents told us to also greet strangers’. But another student said that ‘even though people are friendly on the street they are not necessary
open to emotional conversations if a person is in need. In our culture we would not always talk about our problems at home or with friends'. A white student remarked that it is similar in many white families. Young people would not necessarily talk to their parents about their problems.

A white student also said that she has the idea that people are not depressed in the township. A black student answered that ‘you also get people that is depressed in the township, maybe even more than in the white rich community. The ‘therapy’ is going to the shebeen and drink, not seeing a psychologist’. Another student added that ‘depression is common in the township, sometimes people would hang themselves if they cannot find a job, especially men’. Another comment was that ‘HIV/Aids also makes people depressed. They will then either make many other people sick … or kill themselves’.

A black student remarked towards a white student that he imagined that her ‘time to relax is very limited’ and she probably ‘returns very late because she is a workaholic. Working for so many hours is not easy so I think its very hectic’. A black student said that he is working hard, but he thinks maybe not that hard. Another student warned that ‘I can also say that you put your life in danger, because working for day and night can bring about some sickness in your body, which probably leads to some costs of need for medical aids’. A black student also said to a white critical friend that he imagines that ‘her parents are very strict and have a standard to maintain’. White students agreed that the perception of black students that money is connected with a hectic lifestyle is valid, but agree that it could cause stress and health problems.

Another aspect that came to light was stereotyping in relation to poverty. White students often assume that the basic facilities are available in black students’ homes. A black student remarked that ‘the difference is I don’t have a shower or bathroom. The toilet is outside’. Another student said that ‘in winter we go to bed early because it is cold in the shacks’. Townships are far from the town centre and transportation is often a problem, and students have to get up early to get to class. One student said that ‘my family gets up at different times in the morning, starting at 4am. I’m the third one getting up’. The other black student commented that ‘I get up at four to get the train. I do not eat breakfast, I only eat lunch’. White students found it difficult to think of difficulties that they have in relation to basic facilities in the house or transport.

School facilities in townships are often not safe and do not offer a protective environment. A student said of another black student that ‘he went to school where there is lots of violence’ and also mentioned that ‘he was quick to stab if you provoked him’. Peer pressure is often strong because a father or mother is not living together because of work circumstances. In South Africa many black families are split up when parents cannot find jobs in the same city. A black student said that ‘I was raised by a single parent’ and another said ‘I have never met my father and I grew up with my stepsister’s mother’. A black student remarked ‘much of the violence that takes place in townships is because many young boys are without a father figure’. White students were aware of this problem and a realistic perception of this social issue is evident from their responses.

Gender stereotyping also featured in the conversations. The stereotype of a mother who is responsible for homework and cooking is evident in both black and white students. A white student remarked that ‘after she [her mother] arrives she does the homework and starts to make supper’. A black student said that ‘it is my sister’s task to cook for us, I do not cook’. They were both saying it without realising that it could be a stereotyped idea of
a woman.

Conclusion

Stereotyping exists in subtle ways and often occurs unconsciously. The purpose of the research was to identify stereotyping that exists in a postapartheid Afrikaans university in South Africa. The lack of interaction between cultural groups in South Africa is still visible in the reactions of the students. The colonial and apartheid past in South Africa has influenced students’ perceptions and caused cultural stereotyping which is still visible. The complexity of stereotyping also became noticeable in the conversations between students. Students differ, and their perceptions are influenced by what they have been exposed to.

The ways in which stereotyping influences or infiltrates learning and teaching is an area to be researched further, because these often subtle actions and behaviour among cultural groups in a learning environment could have an effect on academic performance.

References


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