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SPOŁECZEŃSTWO
EDUKACJA
JĘZYK

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STEREOTYPES AND MODERN SOCIETY – (IN)COMPATIBLE?

STEREOTYPY I NOWOCZESNE SPOŁECZEŃSTWO – (NIE)DOPASOWANE?

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego opracowania jest określenie, czy w świecie wysokiego rozwoju cywilizacyjnego (zarówno technologicznego jak i społecznego) mogą funkcjonować stereotypy, czyli proste wzorce poznawcze, które towarzyszyły ludzkości od wieków. Dokonano teoretycznej analizy, bazującej na przeglądzie literatury głównie z zakresu psychologii, czy stereotypy (najczęściej postrzegane jako przyczyna wielu konfliktów i starć) mogą funkcjonować we współczesnym świecie, w którym podkreśla się konieczność i potrzebę współdziałania między jednostkami, zaś równość wszystkich ludzi jest bardzo ważną wartością. Jak

Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine whether in the world of high civilization development (either technological and social) there is still room for stereotypes, i.e. simple cognitive patterns that have accompanied humanity for centuries. There was made a theoretical analysis, that based mainly on a psychological literature review, whether stereotypes (usually perceived as the cause of many conflicts and clashes) can function in the modern world, where the need for cooperation of people is emphasized as well as human equality of people is a very important value. As shown in the literature, stereotypes as cognitive

podają doniesienia naukowe, stereotypy jako schematy poznawcze ukształtowały się w okresie starożytnym (a nawet prehistorycznym), więc można poddać dyskusji ich użyteczność w nowoczesnych czasach, które swoją społeczną formą różnią się od przeszłości. Z drugiej strony można wskazać na biologiczne mechanizmy warunkujące mechanizmy stereotypów, a więc uwarunkowania, które funkcjonują niezależnie od okresu historycznego.

schemas were formed during ancient (or even prehistoric) ages, so it can be discussed if they can be still useful in modern times, which differ in its social form from the past. On the other hand, stereotypes are conditioning by biological mechanisms, which function independently of any historical period.

1. Introduction

We are living in a society that is developing at an extraordinary pace in many aspects. The multiplicity of mechanical, industrial, scientific, media and medical progress or transformations is visible in numerous aspects of everyday life. It is indicated that along with technological development (implied primarily in the context of material changes) there is also a prosper of social values related to the mutual functioning of people. Development also refers to many important social modifications. Humanity changes as a society, it is possible to observe its transformations in various aspects. Nowadays many boundaries have been broken. It seems that there is no limit in communicating and cooperating among people. Social development, in its main assumptions, indicates the world should be changing for a better life either in material and immaterial aspects.

Progress is always associated with reaching a higher stage (or better quality) of functioning. Hence, it can be expected that the developing society will be able to achieve higher levels of interpersonal coexistence. In modern societies people have got many possibilities to be whoever they want to. They can express their personality, beliefs, own views about every social concerns. Many cultures can share experiences, hierarchy of values and principles of social functioning. People seem to be more open to the others.

It seems that the modern world is different from the ancient or prehistorical ages. Unlike the past, nowadays people are much more developed in many aspects. They not only have technology, medicine, education, but also their mentality and intellectuality have reached unprecedented level.

2. Human - the social animal

Probably most (or even everyone) of social psychologists could conclude that we are social animals. Plenty of experiments, studies and researches testify that we are made to live in a group. In every period of our lives we function in some kind of community or collectivity. People`s family life, education, occupation, hobbies, ordinary activities are undeniably connected with others. In every corner of the world people form groups – formal or informal, small or huge, homogeneous or heterogeneous. The durability of each group depends on the ability to adapt to the rules prevailing in each of them.

The belief that man is a social being was already known in the antique period or even prehistoric ages. People from the very beginning had to organize their social life and gather in groups. Even when looking at the prehistoric period, forming groups or primitive squads had a huge impact on surviving in a various conditions. Being together could increase the level of defense against wild animals or enemies, could help in gathering food and improving quality of existence (Caporael, 2007, 3 – 5). Forming groups was profitable for everyone.

According to R. Adolphs (1999, 469 - 472) during the long process of evolution, people must have learnt how to coexist. Those who could cooperate effectively had a better chances to survive rather than those, who could not. Partnership of primitives had a huge impact on coping with difficult and unfavorable conditions. Building shelters, fighting with animals, hunting and many more were dependent on cooperation. It was worth for everyone to be in a group, so it was worth to act according to group`s expectations (because of avoiding being rejected). Living in a social world still requires adapting to its principles. Individuals must adapt their own behavior to the social environment in which they used to live. Every day people constantly make decisions about their actions, their activities, as well as they unstoppably evaluate other people and adjust own behavior towards them (Caporael, 2001, 242 - 243).

Scientist claimed that the necessity to live in a group must have had an impact on biological conditions of humanity. Humans are seen as biological organisms, who function on the basis of numerous neurological processes. There are numerous brain activities which are connected to social behavior. We are neurologically programmed to be social, because our brain rewards us for pro-social behaviors by activating neurological reward pathways, like stimulating the ventral striatum (Ochsner, 2007, 45 – 47). It can be said that we are social animal not only because we are socializing through our whole life, but also because of our biological structure.

What is more, scientists assume that there was another positive effect of cooperating. Thanks to it, people started to learn from each other and thanks to the rest of the group they started to improve their skills and abilities. Together they could do more than individually. Over time, groups started to develop into more advanced societies but not only considering technological or industrial changes. There appeared new forms of communication, cooperating, as well as new group phenomena like religion, altruism or art. Groups started to change and grow in many aspects (Van

Vugt, Schaller, 2008, 4 -5). It can be acclaimed that development of group caused the development of individual.

The group also creates the social identity of the individual. A person recognizing himself as part of a group begins to perceive himself through its prism, he begins to create his own „self" guided by the values and properties of the group which he belongs to. In this situation, it is the group that begins to create an individual - its hierarchy of values, all views and beliefs, as well as self-esteem. The quality of the social „self" depends on the quality of the group with which the individual identifies (Tajfel, Turner, 1986, 283). Creating a social identity is an automatic process that depends on a variety of external and internal factors (e.g. access to resources, group size, belief system, etc.). Social identity also creates all interpersonal relationships, and thus teaches how to build contacts with other people, both from the own and unfamiliar group (Caporael, 2001, 245).

3. Social cognition

In order to function properly in the social world, everyone has to receive and properly analyze all information coming from the social environment. Social cognition is the mental process by which people give meaning to the entire outer world and all its occurrences. Because of it, people can understand others` behavior, can interpret every signals in the process of communication or are able to make opinions of any outer phenomenon. Social cognition allows an individual to understand all kinds and levels of interactions between people, like words, behaviors, activities. Thanks to it everyone is able to find various rules and principles of functioning in a group. Social cognition helps people interpret the behavior of other individuals, receive and analyze all communication signals (verbal and non-verbal) coming from the social environment. But first of all, social cognition allows a person to become an active participant in all phenomena and events that take place around him (Quinn, Macrae, Bodenhausen, 2018, 66 - 67). Understanding the social world is essential to adapting to it. Effective functioning in any kind of group or society requires being acquainted with social rules.

The process of social cognition is associated with some factors of basic (typical) cognition. M. Lieberman (2005, 748 – 752) reviewing the achievements of various researchers, indicated the occurrence of certain specific processes that are very characteristic of social cognitive science. The scientist documented that the way people perceive the outside world bases on certain properties:

1. mental cognitive structures - people create a specific image of the external world in their minds, perceive the incoming information based on the already existing internal structures (the environment is not perceived directly, but the incoming stimulus passes through various filters). People do not perceive reality in the same way, even if they register identical stimuli. It can be concluded that people create their own reality.

2. automatism and control – acquiring every information about the world can be automatic (not requiring effort, will or intention, with simultaneous involuntary activation - deactivation), as well as controlled (as a conscious action that can be taken or interrupted in accordance with the will of the individual). Both ways can coexist, the functioning of one of them absolutely does not excludes the activity of the other one. Cognition is a process that goes on constantly, even when people are not aware of it.
3. motivation - it turns out that the way of perceiving the external world depends on the needs, desires and different interests of the individual. People very often show a tendency to protecting own self-esteem and interprets reality in a way that own self-esteem is not interrupted. Therefore, cognition is not impartial.
4. expectations - all social information is interpreted by the predictions (expectations) of the person receiving the signals. Because of the process of priming, one`s perception can be focused on specific aspects (features) of a given phenomenon (behavior, event).

The above properties of cognitive processes suggest that the perception of the world is not universal. Each individual can interpret and perceive the surrounding reality in their own way, which may be influenced by a huge number of factors, such as affect (emotions), own experiences or knowledge. The world that people percept may be different for every individual. However it is important to notice that the process of perceiving reality is specified by characteristic attributes that concerns everyone.

4. Stereotyping

Stereotypical perception is a well-known and often commented phenomenon that evokes many different opinions not only among researchers but also among common people. In colloquial speech, the terms regarding stereotypes in a pejorative context are very often used, emphasizing the potential negative effects that may be associated with this type of social perception (Blum, 2004, 251 - 252). Stereotypes have got many definitions and they are described with the emphasis on various characteristics. Defining the essence of stereotypical cognition is quite problematic, because of the amount of definitions that can be found in the literature. Summarizing interpretations of this phenomenon it can be admitted that stereotypes are representations of traits which are viewed as typical for some social groups or even individual members of groups (Stangor, 2009, 2). Scientists J. Hilton and W. von Hippel (1996, 240 – 242) state that stereotypes are mental representations of real and true differences between members of particular groups. They are beliefs about groups, societies or individuals. Correctness of stereotypes is another issue, that has been analyzing many times and there is still a lot to discuss and examine. What is the most important – stereotypes are mental structures containing beliefs about others, according to which every member of a group has similar characteristics and usually behave in identical way.

First of all, before the stereotypical perception appears, one of the natural (as well as non-voluntary) human`s feature has to appear. That characteristic of one`s cognition is categorization (Schneider, 2005, 64 - 65). Categorization is a necessary factor for the stereotypical perception of reality. Dividing people into groups by using different clues is automatic process, that cannot be completely controlled. Categorization may base on any criterion, either for external and internal features. It can be race, nationality, age, gender, occupation – probably any selected characteristic. However, it should be remembered that the process of creating categorizations based on external properties is much more common because it is built on easily perceived and easily noticeable features. In this case, creating groups does not require getting acquainted with the representatives of a community or whole society (Rosch, Lloyd, 1979, 561 – 562). Opinion is formed on noticeable attributes, what saves time and mental energy of person who perceives others.

The main problem of stereotyping is not the fact they are improper and cause incorrect opinions about people, but the fact that because of stereotypical perception all members of any groups are seen as the same. For example, according to some stereotypes women are not suitable for group leadership, men should not work in kindergartens, the elderly are not enjoying life because of many illnesses. Stereotypical perception is often identified as something negative, that can cause many problems. According to the scientist (Stangor, 2009; Hilton, von Hippel, 1999; Schneider, 2005), in social perception, the pejorative nature of stereotypes is emphasized, and their negative impact on various aspects of the functioning of groups and individuals is pointed out. Stereotypes are very often perceived as the cause of numerous misunderstandings, conflicts and disputes on the grounds of nationality, race, gender or other traits. Stereotypes can affect mood, self-esteem of individuals or even they may form intergroup relations. Being viewed in a stereotypical way can have multiple effects.

However, stereotypical thinking can also trigger a positive perception of some objects. Apart from negative stereotypes, there are many positive ones. It can be observed that some groups are believed to have valuable traits, for example Asians can be seen as intelligent, Poles as hospitable, women as empathetic and men as strong or firm. Perfunctory interpretation may suggest that positive stereotypes cause only positive effects but in fact, they also creates some costs (Czopp, Kay, Cheryan, 2015, 453 - 455). According to researchers positive stereotypes can improve negative impressions, may function as a compensatory to weaken the process of stigmatization or can establish distinctive identities. On the other hand, positive stereotypes can cause unjust and unfair favorability, may interfere with the cognitive skills and abilities of group`s members by making (positive) pressure or steer individuals away from opportunities (as an effect of being convinced of excellence).

Researchers usually indicate two views of genesis of stereotypes - social and biological. They are not mutually exclusive, they can complement each other. Biology researchers focused their efforts on finding neurological structures whose activity could be linked to automatism in the assessment process. The parts of the brain that caught their attention was the amygdala (a structure located in the area of the temporal lobes),

orbital frontal cortex, insula (region in cerebral cortex), striatum (component of the basal ganglia) and medial prefrontal cortex (Amodio, 2014, 670 – 675; Mitchell et al., 2014, 598 - 560). All of these structures show activity during stereotypical perception of reality. So it can be assumed that stereotypes are result of neurological functioning.

Social genesis of stereotyping claims that people use stereotypes because they get the knowledge of groups from media, parents, friends and other members of society. People from the beginning learn about social categories and are getting used to divide others into them. Observing outer world gives a lot of information about people that probably would be never met by individual (Stangor, 2009, 8 – 10). People learn a kind of cognitive laziness, where it is demonstrated to them that knowing others is not necessary to know about others. This sort of cognition may seem to be comfortable, because it requires no mental effort and no time, to be convinced to have knowledge about other people – their abilities, characteristics and typical behaviors.

In the conclusion about stereotypes it should be noticed that they simplify the reality. They can facilitate the whole process of exploring the world, knowing others and adapting to society. According to evolutionary researchers (Adolphs, 1999; Caporael, 2007; Ochsner, 2007), stereotypes, despite the negative effects, could have had an enormous impact on one`s adaptation to environment. Quick and fast evaluating, estimating or judging could help in dealing with threats and dangers. This could be invaluable for the survival of human species.

5. Modern societies and stereotypes

According to the scientists' approach, stereotyping should be seen as a process that has been present in the history of mankind for centuries. Stereotypical perceiving was formed through many years of human evolution. Stereotypes could be adaptive in many aspects – individual and social. Without them, mankind probably would not exist, because would not be aware enough of different kinds of danger (Schaller et al., 2010, 83 – 90).

Ancient (and prehistoric) ages seem to be completely different from modern times. Years ago societies based on strength and physical skills. Nowadays the strength of society is specified by its knowledge. In the age of information, knowledge has got a vast function in everyday life. People have realized that this is a factor influencing the quality of life (Stehr, 2018, 311). Education, technology development, gaining information is what describes contemporary world. People are told to cooperate, collaborate and contribute. Physical (or even military) strength is not as important as ages ago, nowadays technology took its place.

The process that defines the state of the modern world is globalization. The flow of information, services, values and especially people is on an enormous level that has never been seen before. The world is beginning to be seen as an increasingly integrated place where people coexist together (Awdel, Odel, Saadi, 2020). It seems that with this

size of social interactions, flowing of many different cultures should unite people. According to social view - stereotypes should be minimizing because of the social connections that helps to know each other. It is claimed that making connections is one of the greatest way to break stereotypes – by gathering more information about groups or individuals, inner (non-stereotypical) picture of their representation is expanded (Walton et al., 2012, 514 - 520). People are getting use to variety of societies and its members. Diversity of people pretends to be no more unusual but tries to become an ordinary element of everyday life.

One can ask a question, if this means that stereotypes are totally absent in modern societies. Definitely not, because nowadays people can still observe stereotypical perception – both as recipients and initiators. According to modern research (Eagly et. al. 2019) stereotypes tend to minimalize, but they have not vanished and probably will not. Evolutionary psychologists, researchers claim that there is one enormous difference between technological development and humanity evolution – the pace of changes. It can be observed that nowadays technology develop very rapidly. Over the course of several years many things have changed – contemporary world looks much different than several dozen years ago – in terms of medical, industrial, technical facilities. Although the world changes quickly, human`s evolution is very slow or even sluggish. It took millions and thousands years to form modern man. People still have got many psychological characteristics (like natural tendency to judge others) that were created during past eras.

According to literature (Schneider, 2005; Stangor, 2009; Amodio, 2014) stereotypes have both social and biological genesis. However, the social factor is constantly changing, the biological aspect mostly remains the same. People are naturally programmed for stereotyping and it seems impossible to be changed in the near future. But it would be mistake to claim that the modern world does not affect stereotypical perceiving. Social development has a great influence on making people aware of diversity of the others. Showing stereotyped individuals in non-stereotypical situation may cause the change of their perception. Taking by people different social roles (not only stereotypically appropriate) may change the view about the others. Because of this humanity may be shown, that one characteristic does not define whole person, so that the stereotyped attribute may be seen as not the only trait of someone.

Discussion

Stereotypical perception is natural and typical for humanity. It may be changed during years but probably it will not be absent in any future period. Development of civilization seems to be a reason of some changes of stereotypical perception, but the whole process of judging others is firmly embedded in biological processes, that cannot be affected by the change of society. Stereotypes should not be evaluated as beneficial or unfavorable, they simply exist and it seems that they will exist.

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