

## Stereotyping Media – Bridging Theory and Practice

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**Abstract** This article compares a variety of theoretical approaches concerning the prevention of discriminatory behaviour, which are located on the individual, interpersonal, inter-group, or societal level, and also looks at relevant practical programmes, seminars and trainings. In order to determine which theory-driven practical programmes exist, analysis of documents and literature was conducted within the scope of a larger research project on media and stereotypes. Recommendations for the production of news and information programmes, for instance, have been created under the name "Diversity Toolkit" for European public television broadcasters. Here, diversity is considered a credential of public value. The range of available literature on diversity trainings and diversity management is also growing, since public authorities and companies support diversity for legal, but also for economic and image reasons.

**Keywords:** Stereotyping media, discriminatory behaviour, diversity, European Television Broadcasters.

## Tektipleştirilmiş Medya- Kuram ve Uygulamayı Bağdaştırmak

**Özet** Bu makale bireysel, kişilerarası, gruplararası ve toplumsal düzeyde ayrımcı davranışların önlenmesiyle ilgili kuramsal yaklaşımları karşılaştırmakta ve ilgili uygulama programları, seminerler ve eğitimleri gözden geçirmektedir. Hangi kuramsal temelli uygulama programlarının var olduğunun belirlenmesi için, belgelerin ve alan-yazının çözümlenmesi medya ve tektipleştirme hakkındaki daha büyük bir araştırma projesinin kapsamında yürütülmüştür. Haber ve bilgilendirici programların yapımına dair tavsiyeler Avrupa Kâmusal Televizyon Yayıncıları için hazırlanan "Çeşitlilik Uygulama" kitapçığında yer almaktadır. Burada çeşitlilik kamu değeri için bir kimlik olarak kabul edilmektedir. Çeşitlilik eğitimi ve çeşitlilik yönetimi hakkındaki bulunabilen alan-yazının genişliği artmaktadır, çünkü kamu yetkilileri ve şirketler çeşitliliği sadece hukuki açıdan değil, ekonomik ve kurumsal imaj açısından da desteklemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tektipleştirilmiş medya, ayrımcı davranış, çeşitlilik, Avrupalı televizyon yayıncıları

## 1. INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH ON STEREOTYPES: THE CONTRIBUTION OF COMMUNICATION SCIENCE AND MEDIA STUDIES

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various scientific disciplines have dealt with the emergence and possible functions of stereotypes, concepts of an enemy, prejudices, and clichés. Psychology and social psychology, in particular, but also linguistics, political and social science, as well as history, have given new impetus. Media studies and communication science have partly taken up, but also partly overlooked, these new developments. Still, the aforementioned neighbouring disciplines have not adequately considered *media* as constructors and conveyors of stereotypes.

Therefore, prejudices, stereotypes, and concepts of an enemy conveyed by the media constitute a research topic in communication science. This area of research has been expanded considerably since the 1970s. Research has been conducted on geographic, ethnic, gender-specific, as well as occupational, generational and religious stereotypes. Intersectional approaches have been followed since the 1990s, with an aim to take appropriately into account overlaps of stereotypes based on a range of categorisations. All in all, there have been a great deal of theoretically and methodically ambitious studies on the representation, or indeed the marginalisation, of various social groups in the media, often accompanied by suggestions for what needs to change.

Taking into account legal aspects (statutory provisions) and ethical considerations, I would like to provide an overview of scientific approaches and practical programmes regarding the reduction of prejudices and stereotypes. Thereby, I aim to illustrate the critical potential of stereotype research in communication science to change our society, in order to go beyond confirming established practice or providing justifications for a kind of Diversity Management, which for the most part focuses on image improvement and economic benefit.

## 2. DEFINITIONS: STEREOTYPES, PREJUDICES AND DISCRIMINATION

Terms like *stereotype*, *prejudice*, and *discrimination* have been defined with various emphases and valuation over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One important question concerns whether stereotypes and prejudices, but also discrimination, are only meant negatively. The amount of truth contained in stereotypes ("kernel-of-truth debate") has been, and continues to be, debated, so how accurate are they? In addition: How resistant are they ("rigidity") and which positive or negative functions do they fulfil for individuals and society?

Walter Lippmann's classic work *Public Opinion* (1922) marked the beginning of social-scientific research on stereotypes. From printer control language he imported the term "stereotype" into a social-scientific context, and referred to stereotypes as "pictures in our head". Social-psychologist Gordon W. Allport specifically studied prejudices. In his book *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) he defined prejudices as „an antipathy based on

faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt oder expressed. It may be directed toward a group or toward an individual because he is a member of that group.“ (Allport 1954, 10) Following a further attempt at definition, prejudices touch on various dimensions: cognitive, affective, and conative. The cognitive dimension plays a greater role for stereotypes, which are frequently regarded as a precursor of prejudices. The conative dimension is also concerned when prejudices, which are always strongly affectively loaded, actually lead to discriminatory behaviour.

In general, discrimination ultimately means “statements and behaviours which are directed towards members of a certain group with the intention to disparage or place them at a disadvantage” (Hormel & Scherr 2010, 7). Yet discrimination occurs in many different forms and contexts. One can distinguish between “... structural, organisational, institutional, direct, indirect, statistical ...” forms of discrimination (Hormel & Scherr 2010, 9).

### 3. LAWS AND ETHICAL CODES

Over the years, combating discrimination has become recognised as a socio-political challenge at the international and European level, as well as at the national and local level. Laws aim to guarantee non-discrimination. *The United States Declaration of Independence* of 1776 and the *French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789 contained an implicit prohibition of discrimination. This was then formulated explicitly in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* – partly as a reaction to the wars, persecutions, and mass murders in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Article 2, it states: “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” (UN, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, online)

Unlike in the USA, for example, this principle of anti-discrimination, although part of the fundamental rights in the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, was not a significant point of reference for political contentions or juridical discourse until a few years ago. Nevertheless, as a result of its establishment in the relevant EU directives, for instance in the directive regarding the application of anti-discrimination principles, national laws have been amended and expanded.

Hence, in 2006, the *Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz* (General Anti-Discrimination Law) – informally known as the anti-discrimination law – was passed in Germany in order to allow sanctioning of discrimination for reasons pertaining to ethnicity, sex, religion or ideology, disability, age, or sexual identity. This law was highly controversial, with private companies and landlords in particular fearing a flood of lawsuits.

Therefore, the *Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft* (INSM – roughly: Initiative for a New Social Market Economy) commissioned a study on *Gesetzesfolgekosten des Allgemeinen Gleichbehandlungsgesetzes* (AGG) (consequential costs of the General Anti-Discrimination Law), which came to the conclusion that the law had resulted in €1.73 billion in costs accrued for German companies. The *Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes* (ADS) (Federal Anti-Discrimination Office) convened a committee to review this study: The committee members concluded that there were no additional costs, nor was there a flood of lawsuits. In the long term the social benefits of the law would outweigh.

Besides legislation, discrimination can be prevented by means of voluntary self-regulation and ethical understandings. Hence, Item 12 of the German Press Council’s (*Deutscher Presserat*) press codex states: “Nobody must be subjected to discrimination because of their sex, a disability, or their affiliation to a ethnic, religious, social, or national group.” (Press Codex, Item 12, online) The practical relevance of ethical standards and laws is debatable. In this connection, one can refer to the studies by Daniel Müller (2009a; 2009b), which look at the conditions under which journalists accept discrimination bans and how – if at all – these affect their daily work.

Despite varying levels of acceptance: There is willingness, or a requirement (due to existing laws and frequent (daily) transgressions), to combat prejudices and stereotypes. From research on prejudices, politicians, pedagogues, social workers, as well as journalists and public relations professionals hope to obtain practical advice on the best way to prevent discrimination and violence. But what answers does scientific research offer?

### 4. LEVELS OF ANALYSIS, APPROACHES, INTERVENTIONS

As always, many different ones! There is not just *one* theory on prejudices or stereotypes, or *one* ultimate formula to prevent discrimination. Instead, various relatively separate approaches exist. They differ from one another in terms of their subject-specific origin, their questions, preferred levels of analysis, and methods. Differentiation according to levels of analysis offers explanations at the:

1. individual, or micro level
2. interpersonal/inter-group level, or meso level
3. societal level, the macro level

Ad 1. Explanations on the individual or micro level assume that the causes of prejudices and stereotypes can be found within the person doing the stereotyping, and result, for instance, from lack of knowledge, or from certain personal characteristics (for example, trust in authority). Thus, interventions on the individual level aim at changing these individual characteristics and attitudes.

Within the individual approaches, one can distinguish between psychodynamic and cognitive approaches. These are based on various psychological images of humanity and different definitions of prejudices. Whereas psychodynamic theories on prejudices emphasise the emotional dimension of prejudices, and understand prejudices as distortions of reality, cognitive approaches see these distortions as a result of the limited human capacity for information processing: Following this approach, every person constructs categories within a highly complex reality, in order to subjectively separate important from unimportant information, moderate the flood of information, and remain capable of acting. These categorisations repose on hierarchisations, and consequently are not “neutral”; rather, they already contain implicit valuations, which are projected onto the categorised persons and objects.

Belonging to the psychodynamic approaches, which place the cause of prejudices within the individuals’ personality structure and inner psychological conflicts, are theories based on psychoanalysis, such as the “authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al. 1950), or the frustration-aggression hypothesis and scapegoat theory. Prejudices, which have a relieving function for the prejudiced person, are considered the result of inadequately processed inner and outer conflicts (repression). Indeed, the prejudiced person projects their inner conflicts and aggressions onto others, thus searching for a scapegoat. Here, having prejudices appears to be the exception, something pathological. Alphons Silbermann and Alexander & Margarethe Mitscherlich therefore referred to “prejudice disease”. Cognitive approaches, by contrast, understand prejudice as something that affects everyone.

Individual-centric intervention approaches aim, for instance, to increase awareness for how error-prone and fragmentary human information processing is (ANCOVA Reasoning Programme 1996). They include programmes for moral development (for example, by revealing a discrepancy between one’s own values and norms and prejudice-based attitudes or behaviours = Value Confrontation Technique, Rokeach 1971), for improving the capacity for empathy, that is the capacity to put oneself in someone else’s shoes (= perspective take-over, conveyed by the relevant books or films), or they aim to increase specific knowledge about the group being stigmatised. Imparting knowledge about other ethnic groups by means of a learning programme, for example, has proven to be an effective method of reducing ethnic prejudice (“Culture Assimilator” Learning Programme, Cushner & Landis 1996).

Ad 2. Explanatory approaches on the interpersonal or inter-group level (meso level) describe prejudices as the result of comparing one’s own person or groups, the in-group, with members of the out-group. Among the interpersonal or inter-group approaches, a distinction can be made between conflict-theoretical approaches, which trace prejudices back to competitive situations or conflict between social groups, and learning-/socialisation-theoretical approaches, which focus on the adoption of prejudices during the process of socialisation.

Conflict-theoretical approaches consider prejudices to be caused by conflicts of interest and competitive situations which are “real” (or perceived as real). A classic example for this is the experimental research conducted in the 1950s by American social psychologist Muzafer Sherif involving adolescents at a holiday camp. The participants were divided into two groups and subjected to competitive and conflict situations. The competitive pressure increased identification with the in-group and derogation of the out-group.

With “social identity theory”, the conflict-theoretical approach was expanded. The studies by British social psychologist Henri Tajfel and his employees confirmed that the (arbitrary) division of people into groups is sufficient to produce differences between groups and favouritism towards the in-group in relation to the out-group. A conflict of interest regarding resources such as money, work, or territory is therefore not a necessary condition for the derogation of out-groups, but rather it suffices to separate “us” from “them” (see anti-Semitism without Jews or xenophobia without direct contact to “foreigners”). The results are explained with processes of identity formation: every person – following the basic assumption – aspires to a positive self-perception, which is determined in part by group affiliations and their valuation. The positive perception of the in-group results from the comparison between the in-group and the out-group. A person can achieve a positive social identity by derogating the out-group to increase in-group value.

As opposed to conflict theories, prejudices and stereotypes in learning-/socialisation-theoretical approaches are not constructed directly through personal experience with members of other groups, but adopted from the existing store of attitudes and norms handed down in every society. Therefore, the fundamental assumption of learning-/socialisation-theoretical approaches is that stereotypes and prejudices – but also non-discriminatory attitudes! – are passed down through instances of socialisation such as parents, relatives, colleagues, schools, occupations, but also media. “Here, learning processes function by virtue of imitation, observation, identification with role models, indirect instruction, and laws, prohibitions, and punishments.” (Bergmann 2001, 8)

Programmes at the interpersonal or inter-group level (meso level) aim to change the perception of groups being stereotyped, for example by means of de-categorisation (= consideration of the individual instead of their group affiliation) or re-categorisation (= the emphasis of an overriding collective identity, i.e. “we are all Europeans/mothers/people”), or by creating the possibility for personal contact. The contact hypothesis is based on the hope that contact with representatives of the group subjected to stereotyping leads to a reduction of prejudices (cf. Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006). However, the opposite can also occur. Therefore, various requirements – outlined, for example, by Gordon W. Allport – must be fulfilled in order to ensure the positive effect of contacts: hence, a truly personal encounter between people focussing on interaction. The individuals should have more similarities than

differences, tend to be of equal status, and share a common goal. In addition, support from a higher-level authority has been shown to be advantageous.

Exchange programmes, of course, exemplify a practical implementation of the contact hypothesis, as do “cooperative learning” programmes at schools, and corporate Diversity Trainings. People of different backgrounds, or with different aptitudes, get together in learning or working groups and apply their various talents, since the common goal can only be achieved in this way.

Ad 3. Explanatory approaches at the societal or macro level inquire after the causes of social inequality. Besides the classical approaches following Marx, social class models of different origins can be cited here (Max Weber, Theodor Geiger, Helmut Schelsky, Ralf Dahrendorf). Since the 1970s, a further distinction can be recognised. Approaches regarding social position, lifestyle, and milieu have been developed, as well as deconstructing approaches such as Ulrich Beck’s theory of individualisation, according to which we are situated “beyond social classes” (cf. Beck 1983).

What unifies theories on social inequality in relation to stereotypes and prejudices is that they consider these to be deeply rooted culturally, focussing in terms of societal change and concrete attitude adjustments on the meshing of various mechanisms. This can be achieved by means of laws and administrative orders, but also with moral understandings (political correctness, anti-antisemitism) and voluntary self-regulation. Or with awareness-raising and information campaigns, initiated by the state, or by groups of “the affected”. Or also with media coverage that does not fall back on invariable (stereotypical) topics, images, or formulations.

It is advantageous when interventions take effect simultaneously at several levels. In this way, for instance, a change in legislation (macro level) with reference to comprehensive schooling of children not only contributes to a shift in social norms, but also enables personal contact between these children (meso level), and thus can increase knowledge about one another among participants and nurture their social competencies (micro level). Existing prejudices could also be broken down by flanking media coverage that offers a sufficient arena for discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this type of schooling. Therefore, a multi-level approach is necessary.

## 5. PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION: DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT, DIVERSITY TOOLKIT

But who uses the knowledge acquired from scientific research in practice? Who offers (scientifically sound) seminars and trainings? And what contribution can, and should, media- and communication-scientifically oriented training institutions make? It should firstly be noted that the scope of further education and trainings being offered – owing to societal change, but also to legal standards such as the General Anti-Discrimination Law – has been growing steadily over the past few decades. Anti-discrimination

programmes are offered for students, pedagogues, police officers, civil servants, and by now, in fact, for nearly every age and occupational group. Besides non-profit organisations, these programmes are offered by private entrepreneurs, who provide their services – informative materials, seminars, trainings – to public institutions such as schools, public authorities, and private companies. I would like in the following to have a look at these programmes, firstly at in-company further training, which under the label *Diversity Management* is also being offered increasingly in media companies.

What does *Diversity Management* mean? The idea of understanding “otherness” less as a problem than as an advantage and challenge originates from the American Civil Rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s. In the following decades, Diversity Management developed more and more into a concept of corporate management. Companies operating internationally require, on the one hand, knowledge about how to deal with diversity within the staff, and on the other hand, about which cultural differences should be considered when expanding into new markets.

The *Austrian Society for Diversity* defines Diversity Management as a “... multidimensional approach to the targeted perception, use and development of diversity in social systems, in for-profit and non-profit organisations, public organisations, as well as groups and teams.” The aim of Diversity Management is thereby to “optimise the use of personal competencies and resources in organisations by promoting equal opportunity and having a competent approach to diversity.” (*Austrian Society for Diversity*, online)

Although in-company homogenisation had initially been favoured, a strategy of recognising and harnessing diversity appears by now to have gained acceptance. At issue in the practical seminars are individual discriminatory behaviours, as well as external business practices that could have an image-damaging effect. The counter-measures are directed towards

1. the introduction of clear corporate norms and rules that describe what constitutes prejudiced behaviour and what does not, since, by means of such guidelines, the illegitimacy of discriminatory behaviour can permanently be brought home to those who harbour prejudices.
2. the requirement to formulate unambiguous criteria in job advertisements and to adhere to these when the position in question is filled
3. – and this concerns the external perception of the company – discriminatory business practices must be recognised as such and brought to an end.

Media companies are also concerned with external perception, as they must fulfil a public duty, and offer their services to the public as defined according to target groups. Using Diversity Management, an attempt can be made to confront the danger of certain

social groups being excluded. Society's diversity should be reflected in media coverage as well as in the staff structure: that is the ambitious goal.

Therefore, the *European Broadcasting Union's Intercultural and Diversity Group* (IDG) initiated the creation of a *Diversity Toolkit*. This toolkit, a ninety-page publication complete with DVD, draws attention to one-sided media coverage in public broadcasting and suggests a change of perspective. The Diversity Toolkit is aimed at media professionals, as well as the management level of media companies, and students of journalism. Concrete examples, namely news reports, which are collected on the DVD, raise pertinent questions: e.g. What is balanced representation, what is objectivity? According to which criteria is the news selected? How far should research go? Who is featured in news reports, and who is not? In which situations? Which language is appropriate and non-discriminatory? What are stereotypical patterns and how can they be broken?

At the end of the first part of the publication, there is a "Diversity Checklist", which is meant to encourage the reconsideration of journalistic routines and the reduction of clichéd reporting. In the second part, there are descriptions of positively evaluated projects, and tips on how diversity can be achieved not only in terms of content, but also by the selection of personnel. In addition, there is specific advice for job interviews with "new talent", that is to say people who previously have not been adequately considered in personnel selection. Mentoring programmes are also recommended.

This Diversity Toolkit has been implemented in various European public broadcasting corporations within the scope of in-house training seminars. Despite the positive reaction seen on the homepage, we still know little about its "success": A scientific evaluation has yet to be conducted. But perhaps we as an audience can recognise success in changing media coverage less beset with stereotypes.

## 6. PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

In conclusion, I would like to at least mention what sometimes stands in the way of the conveyance and practical implementation of these tips and recommendations, and the problems that can come up in seminars, for the reason that it illustrates the theory-practice dilemma so well:

Certainly, one fundamental problem lies in the way involvement with stereotypes, at the outset, draws attention to and therefore reproduces them, and only in the second step scrutinizes and deconstructs them. The same goes for categories and dualisms that are directly connected with stereotypes: these are named and thus in a certain way confirmed. Meanwhile, deconstructivist approaches, precisely, do not aim to contrast two poles, but focus on the processes of distinction that produce two clearly distinguishable poles in the first place (cf. Smykalla 2011, 232). Thus, seminar facilitators in gender trainings will, for instance, ask themselves specifically how much

theoretical knowledge participants can be expected to put up with, which theoretical positions could be "counterproductive", and when "strategic essentialism" might be more sensible.

Furthermore, it must be decided which categories and stereotypes will be looked at, when it makes sense, for example, to focus only on gender stereotypes, and when additional overlapping "politics of difference" and multiple discriminations can be discussed.

Finally, be it university seminar groups or in-company trainings, one important condition for a successful exchange within groups – namely as few status differences (cf. contact hypothesis) as possible – is not always given. Hence, taking differences as a productive starting point becomes a further challenge to the participants' cooperativeness and to the seminar facilitator's professionalism.

## 7. CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE?

We therefore have awareness for the problem, as well as sufficient scientific knowledge, particularly in communication science, regarding the emergence, passing on, as well as individual and societal functions of stereotypes and prejudices.

To my mind, this theoretical knowledge could be implemented more pointedly and put to better practical use as follows:

- Scientists in the field of communications should collaborate in publications, such as the Diversity Toolkit, and in creating guidelines for the prevention of discriminatory media coverage and corresponding information campaigns.
- Theoretical knowledge should have a greater influence on non-university as well as on university instruction. In my opinion, there is room for development in the latter. Although it is not out of the question that, whereas courses on journalism, media law and media ethics, intercultural and interpersonal communication, gender studies, as well as media psychology and media sociology, in particular, are partly concerned with discrimination due to stereotyping in media coverage, they naturally deal with other issues, too. The content and focus of the courses are determined by numerous factors: by the orientation of the study path, for instance, whether the major is in journalism, communication science, or media studies, and also whether it is a Bachelor's or Master's degree course. Ultimately, it also depends on the size of the educational institution overall, on how many students, and on how many lecturers and focal points there are.
- It should be acknowledged that the field of Diversity Trainings also offers an emerging occupational field of particular interest for graduates of communications and media studies programmes.
- The toolkits and seminars conceived in this area should be evaluated in terms of their scientific foundation, their practical relevance, and their feasibility.

The occupational field of *Diversity Management*, the practical side, should be left neither to economic nor to political actors. In my opinion, it appears quite urgent to offer scientifically sound, and above all critical, opposition to certain Diversity Management approaches – which means making power a subject of discussion.

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