Nationality Stereotypes in Europe: Content and Change

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Abstract:

Stereotypes are shared assumption about the personality, attitudes, and behaviours of people based on group membership (Hogg & Vaughan, 1995). In this thesis the content and the change of European nationality stereotypes will be discussed. The emphasis will be primarily directed at the descriptive aspects of the nationality stereotype. One exception to this is the second chapter, which deals with the evaluative aspects of nationality stereotypes.

The aim of the second chapter is to distinguish between perceived national characteristics and national stereotypes. The criterion used is that full consensus between all perceivers, including the target population, on the image about a nationality refers to characteristics of the target culture, while dissensus refers to the perceiver and therefore indicates national stereotypes. Subjects in the research were 277 students of the two highest grades of seven secondary schools giving access to university in Denmark, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany, France and Italy. Consensus/disconsensus on 22 attributions of characteristics to nationalities was determined using univariate analysis of variance with 6 nations as factor levels. It appeared that there existed consensus between the external and internal observers on about one third of the 154 characterisations of nationalities. The remaining attributions have to be considered national stereotypes. The possible determinants of evaluative national stereotypes are discussed.

The third chapter deals with the determinants of the content of descriptive European nationality stereotype. The content of the stereotypes was reflected in four dimensions namely, attributed efficiency, emotionality, empathy, and dominance. Attributed efficiency appeared to be determined by social factors, such as perceived economic development and social security, along with the geographical location of the stereotyped nation. Attributed emotionality was solely related to the north-south location of the stereotyped nation. Attributed empathy and dominance related to perceived political power and nationalism and the geographical size of the stereotyped nation. The effects of the geographical factors are interpreted in terms of cultural, economical, and historical factors associated with or relating to these geographical factors. The research and its results are placed in the framework of Von Ehrenfels' thesis of a north-south polarisation effect in nationality stereotypes and are related to self-categorization theory.

The fourth chapter addresses the stability of relative stereotype content over time by comparing the nationality stereotypes held by two cohorts (1989 and 1991) of European secondary school pupils. It was hypothesised that the ingroup as well
as outgroup stereotype content would be stable over time. Furthermore it was hypothesised that, when the first hypothesis had to be rejected, changes in the stereotype content would be caused by changes in the structural features of the stereotyped nation. Through a multiple target comparison procedure, implemented by means of an ANOVA approach which controls for the relative ingroup homogeneity and outgroup heterogeneity distribution as well as for the meta-contrast ratio, typical and atypical aspects of the content of a stereotype were analysed. The first hypothesis was in general confirmed by the results. Those instances in which the first hypothesis had to be rejected were corroborated by the second hypothesis, in that the interim growth of the German country-size - due to the re-unification - caused a change in their in- and outgroup stereotype content. The same was true for the Belgian in- and outgroup stereotype content which changed after the -interim- federalization Belgium.

The fifth chapter the contact hypothesis was tested in a study in which 416 secondary school pupils from 11 ED-countries participated. It was hypothesised that voluntary, informal, frequent and cooperative contact between members of different nationalities would reduce only those nation-to-nation stereotypes whose content was induced by an intermediate -supra national- level of categorization. Furthermore it was hypothesised that this change would be limited to the nation with which the contact was made. The contact hypothesis was tested by means of a within-subject repeated measurement between-subjects treatment design. The results, in general, showed that the intermediate-level-categorization stereotypes, of emotional, hedonistic, assertive, or aggressive, changed in a positive way. The effects were limited to the contacted nationality, and no generalization toward similar nationalities occurred.