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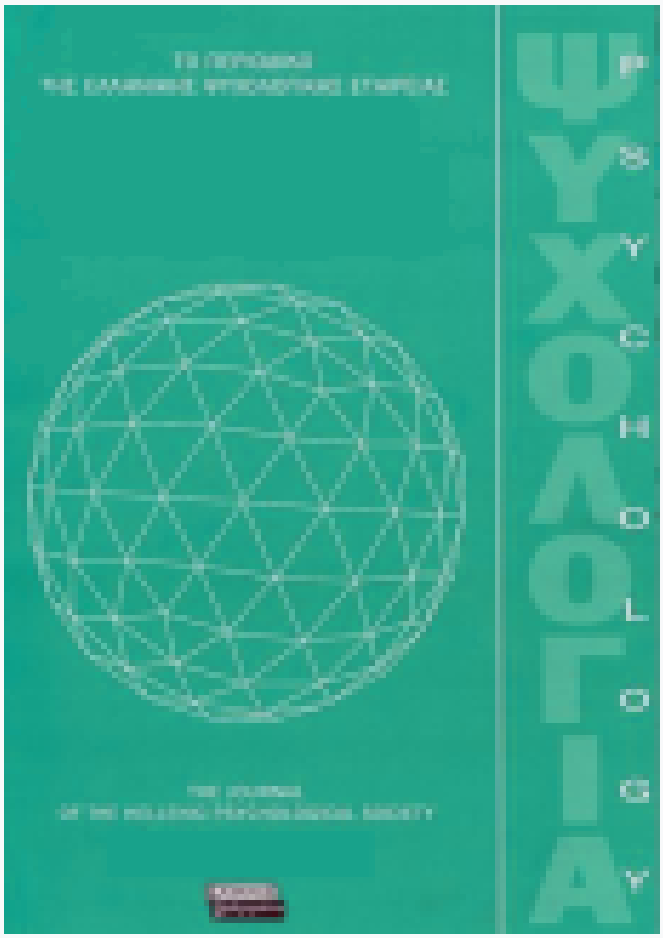

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Continuity and change in theoretical approaches to stereotypes

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ABSTRACT In the present paper, the main theoretical approaches to stereotypes in the social psychological literature will be briefly presented. The aim, however, is not only a critical review of the literature, but an attempt to discern the underlying continuity in these approaches and the critical points, or rather departures from continuity, which constitute a change in paradigm or focus. The social cognition approach and social identity theory are identified as the major shifts in paradigm and focus respectively, the former for bringing stereotype research into the psychological mainstream and the latter for bringing the social level of analysis back into focus.

Key-words: Change, stereotype, theories

The word *stereotype* is part of everyday and scientific discourse, and yet (or as a result of this) we rarely wonder about its origins. Stereotype is a compound word consisting of the Greek words *stereos* which means solid or rigid and *typos* which means trace but also mould. When the word stereotype was originally used, towards the end of the 18th century, it referred to a printing-plate cast from a mould, that is, it referred to an aspect of the printing process. Thus, it is not surprising that the first person to introduce the word stereotype in the vocabulary of the social sciences was Walter Lippmann, an American political journalist. According to Lippmann (1922), stereotypes are «pictures in our heads», or «maps of the world», which enable people to deal with complex information from the environment. Lippmann also suggested that stereotypes are used in order to justify people's attitudes and behaviour towards others and he drew attention to the role of stereotypes in intergroup conflict (cf. Miller, 1982, pp. 9-10). In most accounts of his work (cf. Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadron, 1994; Miller, 1982), it is obvious that Lippmann's conceptualization of stereotypes contains all the basic ideas around which more recent theorizing on stereotypes has evolved. In his very perceptive analysis, Lippmann anticipated cognitive and conflict theories of stereotypes as well as the analysis of the functions of stereotypes.

Definitions

As Miller (1982) has pointed out, the definitions of stereotypes are «*as numerous and diverse as the scholars who have coined them*» (p. 28). For a long time stereotypes have been

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regarded as erroneous, rigid, biased and oversimplified generalizations about social groups. Recently, however, there is a tendency to adopt more general definitions of stereotypes which are stripped down of all «value-laden» issues such as stereotype (in)accuracy, rigidity or inherent bias, since these issues are still open to research and discussion. Such a general definition is proposed by Stroebe & Insko (1989), who define stereotype as «*a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people*» (p. 5).

An important distinction should be made between stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, because stereotypes are closely related to both latter concepts but should not be equated with them. Strobe & Insko (1989) draw a parallel between beliefs, which are the central component of attitudes, and stereotypes which are considered the central component of prejudice. Thus, stereotypes are, by definition, beliefs about the (positive or negative) characteristics of a group, while prejudice is the resultant (positive or negative) attitude towards that group. Discrimination is any behaviour (positive or negative) that indicates unequal treatment of individuals or groups on the basis of their natural or social group membership. Such a conceptualization of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination leads to some important conclusions. Firstly, the negative connotations associated with the concepts of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination are not theoretically justified, since it is possible for somebody to have a positive stereotype about a social group (e.g., rich foreign tourists), to be prejudiced in their favour, and to use discrimination in their favour; it has to be admitted, however, that prejudice and discrimination which are rooted in negative stereotypes (e.g., racial stereotypes) have far more important consequences for intergroup relations, and this is the reason why these concepts are predominantly used in negative terms. Secondly, since the relationship between beliefs and attitudes and thus, between stereotypes and prejudice, has been firmly established (cf. Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), most theoretical approaches to stereotypes deal with stereotypes and prejudice and sometimes only with prejudice. Thirdly, as a person's behaviour is not always consistent with one's attitudes (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), likewise prejudice is not necessarily expressed in discriminatory behaviour.

Theoretical approaches to stereotypes

The most important theoretical approaches to stereotypes and prejudice have been discussed, among others, by Leyens et al. (1994), Stroebe & Insko (1989), and Oakes, Haslam & Turner (1994). In the present paper, the order of presentation of the different approaches closely follows the one adopted by Leyens et al. (1994), which loosely reflects «historical trends» in the theorizing about stereotypes. The emphasis, however, is not on chronological order; each theory is presented as an attempt to address issues which were a point of criticism for the previous one. Thus, the emphasis is on continuity and the occasional departure from continuity which constitutes change.

The psychodynamic approach

According to the psychodynamic approach, stereotypes and prejudice are a symptom of some intrapersonal tension or conflict, which is resolved through the use of defense mechanisms such as projection and displacement.

The *scapegoat theory,* which has its origins in the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), postulates that prejudice expressed against a social group is the result of aggression, which cannot be directed towards the real source of frustration (usually a powerful figure or group), and is displaced towards a powerless (usually minority) group (i.e., the scapegoat). An example is the increase in the incedence of prejudice towards immigrants at times of economic crisis. The main critisism against the scapegoat theory is the fact that it

cannot account for the choice of scapegoats, although it has been suggested that the most likely targets of prejudice are powerless minority groups who are prominent at a given time (Stroebe & Insko, 1989).

The theory of *Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) proposes that prejudice is part of an ideology that characterizes people who cannot tolerate ambiguity, think rigidly and in concrete terms, and have a tendency for overgeneralizations. This «authoritarian syndrom» is seen as a result of strict parental (usually paternal) control and repressive upbringing. The aggression which has not been expressed towards the parents is later projected onto outgroups. However, such a personality-based explanation of prejudice cannot account for the widespread prejudice observed in certain societies (e.g., were white South Africans so uniform in terms of their personalities a few years ago?) or the sudden onset of prejudice (e.g., have a big number of Germans or French recently experienced a personality change) (cf. Leyens et al., 1994). In other words, psychoanalytic theories have neglected socio-economic and historical factors which influence intergroup relations and change perceptions of outgroups.

The sociocultural approach

The sociocultural approach, which has its origins in social learning theory, views stereotypes as the result of observing actual differences among social groups (i.e., social learning and social interaction) or as a result of socialization. The most important proponent of this approach is Eagly (1987) and her colleagues. Eagly suggests that stereotypes (e.g., gender or racial stereotypes) are formed through the observation of the behaviour manifested and the social roles performed by group members, which are shaped by the socio-economic structure. Thus, the negative stereotype about immigrants, for example, is the result of the observation of immigrants in roles which rank low in the socio-economic structure, and the confounding of the individuals' attributes with characteristics of the social roles which they occupy. In much the same way, gender stereotypes are a result of the observation of women more often occuping roles such as «homemaker», «teacher», «nurse», and men more often occuping roles such as «breadwinner», «executive», «soldier». Thus, women are considered warm and caring, while men are seen as courageous and enterprising, through a process of confounding the characteristics of the roles with those of the individuals performing them.

Stereotypes are not necessarily formed through direct observation; they may be transmitted through socialization agents such as parents, peer groups, the school and the mass media. For example, the negative stereotype of Albanian illegal immigrants may be the result of media portrayals of members of this group engaging in criminal activities. The basic criticism of the sociocultural approach lies in the fact that it cannot explain the almost universal phenomenon of outgroup derogation. If there is a «kernel of truth» in stereotypes, as this approach implies, i.e., if stereotypes reflect social reality more or less accurately, positive outgroup stereotypes should be as frequent as negative ones; it has been established, however, as we shall see in the next section, that outgroup perceptions are, more often than not, negative, or at least less positive than ingroup perceptions.

Realistic conflict theory

Conflict theories view stereotypes and prejudice as a product of intergroup conflict. According to the *realistic conflict theory* (Campbell, 1965; Sherif, 1967) intergroup competition over scarce resources brings about negative intergroup attitudes. In other words, the real (or perceived) conflict of interests between groups is at the heart of stereotypes and prejudice (cf. Brown, 1995). Sherif's famous summer camp field experiments showed that boys, who were divided into two groups,

peacefully coexisted until mutually exclusive group goals were introduced (e.g., only one group could be the winner of a competitive game) which led to negative intergroup attitudes and overt hostility. While these studies had shown that conflict of interests may be a sufficient condition for intergroup conflict, the question remained whether it was also a necessary condition.

Using the *minimal group paradigm*, Henri Tajfel and his colleagues (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971) set out to explore the minimum conditions that give rise to intergroup discrimination and showed that the mere act of categorizing subjects into two distinct groups on an arbitrary basis (e.g., supposedly on the basis on their preference for the paintings of Klee or Kandinsky but actually on a random basis) was enough to produce differential treatment of ingroup and outgroup members (e.g., allocating more points to anonymous ingroup than outgroup members). Thus, in response to a minimal social categorization, subjects displayed *«ingroup bias»*, which is the equivalent of real-life ethnocentrism, and is defined as the tendency to treat ingroup members more favourably than outgroup members, in terms of evaluations or actual behaviour.

Social identity theory

In response to questions raised by the minimal group studies, Tajfel developed *social identity theory* (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity *«consists ... of those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging»* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). One of the central assumptions of SIT is that social identity may be positive or negative depending on the evaluations of the groups that the individual belongs to. According to SIT, people strive for a positive self-concept and thus for a positive social identity, which *«is based to a large extent on favorable comparisons between the in-group and some relevant out-groups»* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). It follows that ingroup bias is a way of achieving positive distinctiveness for the ingroup, which contibutes to a positive social identity. The ingroup bias displayed by subjects in the minimal group experiments, can be explained by SIT, as follows: social categorization, however trivial, was the only meaningful feature of this minimal intergroup situation, and having identified with these minimal groups, subjects tried to achieve positive distinctiveness for the ingroup, by allocating more points to ingroup than outgroup members, since points was the only available dimension of comparison.

The link between stereotypes and SIT was made explicit by Tajfel (1981) in his discussion of the functions of stereotypes, among which is social differentiation, which aims at establishing or maintaining a positive distinction in favour of the ingroup, *«when such a differentiation is perceived as becoming insecure and eroded; or when it is not positive, and social conditions exist which are perceived as providing a possibility for a change in the situation»* (p. 161). Tajfel (1981), however, thought that considering social differentiation as part of ethnocentrism would be an oversimplification and stated that *«it is a dynamic process which can only be understood against the background of relations between social groups»* (p. 162). This implies that stereotypes are not simply the inevitable effect of social categorization, but emerge in order to restore an unstable, threatened or negative social identity, and are thus dependent on the social context of intergroup relations.

The cognitive approach

The initiation of the cognitive approach to stereotypes is rightly attributed to Henri Tajfel (cf. Spears, Oakes, Ellemers, & Haslam, 1997), whose article «Cognitive Aspects of Prejudice» (Tajfel, 1969) set the scene for the conceptualization of stereotypes as products of adaptive cognitive functioning.

Tajfel's analysis of stereotypes was inspired by his earlier work on the effects of categorization on the judgement of non social stimuli. Tajfel &

Wilkes (1963) asked subjects to estimate the length of a series of eight lines. The shortest line was 16.2 cm, the longest was 22.8 cm, while the lines differed from each other by approximately 1 cm. In the experimental condition, the four shorter lines were labelled 'A' and the four longer lines 'B', while in one of the two control conditions the labels were absent and in the other the four 'A' and the four 'B' labels were randomly assigned to the eight lines.

The results showed that in comparison with subjects in either of the two control conditions, subjects in the experimental condition accentuated the difference between the four shorter and the four longer lines, mainly by overestimating the difference between the fourth (e.g., the last of the shorter) and the fifth (the first of the longer) lines. There was also a (non significant) tendency for experimental subjects to minimize the differences among the four shorter and among the four longer lines. In other words, the classification created by the labels in the experimental condition led to the accentuation of interclass and the reduction of intraclass differences.

On the basis of this evidence, Tajfel (1969) proposed that: «*when a classification is correlated with a continuous dimension, there will be a tendency to exaggerate the differences on that dimension between items which fall into distinct classes, and to minimize these differences within each of these classes*» (p. 83). Tajfel argued that social group membership (e.g., one's gender, race or profession) can function as a basis for classification and personal characteristics (e.g., emotional, intelligent, lazy) can be treated as continuous dimensions, which may become associated with certain social groups through personal or cultural experience, and this process leads to an accentuation of perceived intergroup differences (e.g., women are emotional in contrast to men who are cool-headed) and intragroup similarities (e.g., all women are emotional and all men are cool-headed). Thus, Tajfel (1969) suggested that «*stereotypes arise from a process of categorization. They introduce simplicity and order where there is complexity and nearly random variation*» (p. 82). In other words, stereotypes are a consequence of the perceiver's tendency «*to simplify in order to cope*» (p. 83) and are thus viewed as the product of normal cognitive processes. It should be noted, however, that Tajfel (1969) also emphasized that the specific content of stereotypes is culturally transmitted through a process of «assimilation».

An interesting question is whether the perceived relationship between two variables such as group membership and personal characteristics or behaviours corresponds to reality or is the product of an erroneous judgement. David Hamilton and his colleagues explored this issue in relation to stereotype formation and developed the theory of *illusory correlation.* On the basis of findings by Chapman (1967) showing that subjects overestimated the frequency of co-occurence of distinctive stimuli, Hamilton & Gifford (1976) reasoned that the conjunction of a distinctive (e.g., minority) group with distinctive (e.g., undesirable) kinds of behaviour would lead the observer to perceive an illusory correlation between the two, which would influence his or her impressions of the group.

Hamilton and Gifford (1976) presented subjects with 39 sentences, each describing a person as simply beloning to group 'A' or 'B' and his behaviour as either desirable or undesirable. Group 'A' consisted of 26 persons, 18 performing desirable and 8 undesirable acts, while Group 'B' consisted of 13 persons, 9 performing desirable and 4 undesirable acts. In other words, Group 'B' was half the size of group 'A' (i.e., it was a minority), and undesirable behaviours were less frequent (1/3) than desirable behaviours (2/3), although, within each group the ratio of desirable to undesirable behaviours was the same. Thus, group membership and behaviour desirability were not correlated. Subjects were given a list with the 39 behaviours and were asked to indicate the group membership of the person who performed each behaviour. The results supported the initial predictions: it was shown that while subjects correctly attributed 1/3 of all the desirable behaviours to Group 'B', they wrongly attributed to this group 52% of all the undesirable

behaviours instead of the correct 1/3. Moreover, subjects' impressions of Group 'B' were less favourable than those of Group 'A'. It was concluded that «*a cognitive bias in the way we process information can lead to the unwarranted differential perception of two social groups*» (Hamilton & Sherman, 1989, p. 62). The theory of illusory correlation can account for the formation of many real-world stereotypes. For example, the basis for the negative stereotype of Albanian illegal immigrants, may be an illusory correlation between an unfamiliar minority group and the infrequency of criminal behaviour.

According to Hamilton & Sherman (1994), categorization and illusory correlation can lead to an initial differential perception of social groups, which is the basis for stereotype formation, but stereotypes become established when the perceiver's acquired knowledge, beliefs and expectations about these social groups are stored in memory as a cognitive structure (or representation or schema) which guides subsequent information processing about (as well as behaviour towards) the stereotyped groups and their members.

The epitomy of the cognitive approach to stereotypes is the «cognitive miser» model of social cognition (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Fiske & Taylor, 1984), according to which stereotypes are the by-product of perceivers' limited information processing capacity, which leads them to categorize individuals into groups in order to simplify and cope with infromation from the complex social environment. Thus, stereotypes act as capacity conservation devices, since using categorical rather than individuating information, when making inferences about individuals, is less effortful and less time-consuming, although it involves information loss and does do justice to the individual targets of perception.

The most influential critic of the cognitive approach was, ironically, its main proponent, Henri Tajfel, who later expressed his concern about the exclusively cognitive focus of research on stereotypes (Tajfel, 1981). While not denying the importance of the cognitive processes involved in stereotype formation, Tajfel emphasized the social dimension in the analysis of stereotypes. More specifically, he argued that stereotypes serve not only individual cognitive and motivational functions (e.g., the tendency for categorization in order to simplify and cope, and the need to protect and preserve personal and social values), but most importantly, social functions: stereotypes are used in order to explain social events by identifying and holding responsible certain social groups *(social causation function),* they are used for the justification of behaviours towards certain groups *(social justification),* and finally, they are used for the creation and maintenance of positive ingroup distinctiveness, which contributes to the enhancement of a threatened social identity *(social differentiation).* Moreover, he suggested that a proper analysis of stereotypes should start with the social functions in order to reach the individual ones: it is cultural traditions, group interests and social upheavals that determine the criteria for intergroup differentiation and the characteristics attributed to ingroups and outgroups.

Self-categorization theory

Tajfel considered his 1981 paper no more than «*a hazy blueprint for future research*» (p. 167). He died a year later and never carried out that research himself, but his legacy is acknowledged and developed by his students and co-workers (cf. Oakes et al., 1994; Robinson, 1996), as well as those who were influenced by his ideas of a social level analysis of stereotypes (Leyens et al., 1994; Spears et al., 1997).

Within this tradition, John Turner and his colleagues (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) developed *self-categorization theory* (SCT) as «*a general analysis of the functioning of categorization processes in social perception and interaction*» (Oakes et al., 1994, p. 94). According to SCT, the self-concept reflects self-categorizations, which exist at three different levels of abstraction: the interpersonal (subordinate) level (personal identity, i.e., the self

as different from others), the intergroup (intemediate) level (social identity, i.e., the self as a group member) and the interspecies (superodinate) level (the self as a human being). The appropriate level of self-categorization varies with context. Self-categorization theory postulates that *«categories form so as to ensure that the differences between them are larger than the differences within them»* (Oakes et al., 1994, p. 96), which means that categorization is a context-dependent process of judgement of relative differences. Moreover, SCT theorists suggest that categorization does not *«function primarily to 'reduce the total amount of information', but to represent the stimulus situation in the most informative, meaningful manner»* (Oakes & Turner, 1990, p. 127).

Oakes et al. (1994) present a large amount of recent empirical evidence based on SCT, which supports a definition of stereotypes as perceptions of people in terms of their group membership, representing categorizations at the level of social identity, in the context of intra- and inter-group relations (p. 211). Thus, in contrast to the social cognition notion of stereotypes as fixed cognitive structures stored in memory and waiting to be activated, Oakes et al. argue that stereotypes are context dependent and vary with the changing realities of intergroup relations, as well as with the expectations, needs, values and purposes of the perceiver (pp. 211-212). Moreover, their view of the categorization process renders the «cognitive miser» metaphor rather redundant. Oakes et al. provide a vivid example of how SCT views categorization and stereotypes: within the science faculty, «hard core» scientists such as physicists may perceive biologists as very different from them, i.e., not as «real scientists», but in a different context, for example a general meeting of university staff discussing research grants for the science and social science faculties, physicists may perceive biologists as real scientists as opposed to social scientists who are scientists «only in name».

Continuity and change

The first theories about stereotypes had their roots in the psychodynamic tradition. Stereotypes were viewed as «symptoms» of intrapersonal tension or as a result of a specific personality «syndrom». The psychodynamic approach, being strictly individualistic, neglected socio-economic factors, an issue which was central in the socio-cultural approach. According to this approach, stereotypes reflect the unequal distribution of status and social roles among different social groups in a given culture. This, by implication, leads to the conclusion that stereotypes are «symptoms» of social injustice and reflect social reality. Thus, the cognitive approach represents a departure from continuity and constitutes change in the sense that stereotypes, instead of «symptoms», they came to be viewed as products of adaptive normal cognitive functioning. In other words, the cognitive approach *«introduced an important paradigm shift that moved stereotyping out of the realm of psycho-dynamic or socio-cultural pathology into the psychological mainstream»* (Spears et al., 1997, p. 4).

The cognitive approach in social psychology, which has come to be known as social cognition, has produced such an impressive amount of research, that some authors talk about «the tidal wave» of social cognition that «flooded over» social psychology (Leyens et al., 1994), especially in the U.S.A., where it has been the dominant perspective for the last 20 years. The social cognition perspective on stereotypes is based on the conviction that the same rules apply to the categorization and perception of both physical (apples vs. oranges) and social (Greeks vs. Turks) objects. The relationship between the perceiver and the target of social perception in the specific social context has been largely neglected. There have been some recent attempts to put social cognition in its social context by considering the role of affect (cf. Mackie & Hamilton, 1993) and motivation in social categorization and stereotyping. For example, Susan Fiske explicitly states that *«social cognition reseach needs to get social»* (Fiske & Depret,

1996, p. 31) and that «*taking social motives into account should extend the social validity of social cognition research*» (p. 32). Thus, the image of the social perceiver as «cognitive miser» may have been replaced by that of «motivated tactitian» (cf. Fiske & Taylor, 1991), but affect and motivation are usually treated as moderator variables and not as an integral part of a social psychological theory of stereotypes.

Social cognition may have moved the study of stereotypes into the psychological mainstream, but, as a result of this, it has blurred, if not obliterated, the disctinction between the «psychological» (i.e., individual level of analysis) and the «social psychological» (i.e., group and intergroup level of analysis). The emergence of social identity theory and its elaboration into self-categorization theory constitutes another major change, in the sense that it has cleared the picture by bringing the group and the social context into focus. This distinctly «European» perspective, has integrated cognitive processes (i.e., categorization), motivational factors (i.e., needs, values), and the social context (i.e., the social realities of intergroup relations) into a unified social psychological theory of stereotypes, and other intra- and intergroup phenomena.

One cannot fail to notice that both the major «changes» identified here, that is, the SIT and the social cognition approach to stereotypes, have their origins in Henri Tajfel's work, but took different paths and (literally) reached different destinations (Europe and the U.S.A. respectively).

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