The Effect of Prejudice and Stereotypes on Communication and Social Perception at The Start of The Academic Studies

Dr. Juliana Zaharia
University of Tirana, Albania

Abstract

Research on prejudice and stereotypes analyzes associations with negative feelings and attitudes, expressed in the form of verbal aggression, humiliation or exclusion, as profoundly detrimental to social perception. Based on the belief that the university is an important setting for knowledge acquisition and intellectual growth, the study is conducted with the aim of understanding and evaluating the effect of prejudice and stereotypes in communication, where in particular, in the perceptions and feelings of the students during their first encounters at the start of their university studies. The construct of independent and dependent variables, which found concepts in the literature and research dimensions of prejudice and stereotyping, is tested through primary and secondary data collected following the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The questionnaires covered 307 respondents (n = 307), randomly selected among students enrolled in the first two years of Bachelor studies at the University of Tirana "Nënë Tereza". Secondary data collected from interviews and focus groups in different academic settings completed an empirically tested assessment of the effect of bias-based stereotypes related to different forms of expression. The findings of the study underscore the demand for revision of knowledge transfer mechanisms with a focus on improving students' ability to communicate, interact and build relationships.

Keywords: university settings, prejudice, stereotypes, communication, social perception.

1.   Introduction

Addressing the lack of scientific knowledge on how prejudice and stereotypes affect communication among young people, a cause of the limited scientific insights on issues underlying youth development in Albania, is the starting point of the study.

David G. Myers (2010) explains prejudice with terminology similar to "Prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, racism, sexism" (Meyers, 2010), and views it as a complex attitude that is a distinct combination of feelings, inclinations to act, and beliefs" (Meyers,

2010). For the author prejudice it the ABCs of attitudes: *a* ffect (feelings), *b* ehavior tendency (inclination to act), and *c* ognition (beliefs)" (Meyers, 2010).

Considering that communication in the school environment is deeply conditioned by prejudice and stereotypes, often associated with negative feelings and attitudes, the analysis of Aprile D. Benner, Robert Crosnoe and Jacquelynne S. Eccles (2015) helps to understand that "Schools must be sensitive to the degree to which perceptions of prejudice pervade the educational community" (Benner et al., 2015).

The questioning of the group element in the academic setting guided the process of studying the views of the literature on intergroup dynamics.
In analyzing the integrative theoretical approach, Melanie Killen, Laura Elenbaas and Adam Rutland (2015) emphasize "understanding the development of judgments, reasoning, and behavior in intergroup contexts" (Killen et al., 2017) by considering these contexts as "especially important to investigate, as intergroup interactions are often reflective of prejudice, bias, and stereotypic expectations" (Killen et al., 2017).
Observing the distinction between "experiences related to *interpersonal* peer rejection and those related to *intergroup* peer exclusion" Melanie Killen and Adam Rutland (2022) point out that "Interpersonal peer rejection reveals individual differences related to individual personality traits, such as the inability to read social cues (e.g., bullies) and a shy, fearful, and wary profile (e.g., victims) to explain bully-victim relationships" (Killen and Rutland, 2022).
Explaining group dynamics with insights from "Intergroup Emotion Theory", Eliot R. Smith and Diane M. Mackie (2015) view "the role of emotions as a key part of people's reactions to social groups" (Smith and Mackie, 2015) pointing out that in contrast, the traditional approach to understanding prejudice and discrimination, according to the authors "relies on cognitive representations (stereotyped beliefs and prejudiced attitudes) as causal factors" (Smith and Mackie, 2015).

With particular emphasis on the scientific assessment of "Stereotype and Social Identity Threat", Joshua Aronson and Matthew S. McGlone (2009) underlines *stereotype threat* as the term that "has become something of a catch-all used to describe a variety of situations that can make people perform or behave in a manner consistent with a negative stereotype" (Aronson and McGlone,2009). For the authors, "The degree of vigilance for and the nature of one's reactions to potentially threatening cues depend importantly on individual differences" (Aronson and McGlone,2009).

Considering that the study focuses on university settings, the aim is to provide empirical scientific recognition of the challenges of communication and social perception during the transition to adulthood of this particular group of young people. Analyzing the suggestions from the literature, the reference to Galen V. Bodenhausen, Andrew R. Todd and Jennifer A. Richeson (2009), who highlight the analysis of Brandon J. Schmeichel and Roy F. Baumeister (2004) who emphasize the self-regulating strength model implying that "Self-control strength refers to the ability each person has to inhibit, alter, or otherwise regulate

their own behavior" (Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2004) have contributed research to underline the demand for mechanisms within the university that could facilitate communication and reduce prejudice and stereotypes.

2.   Methodology

The paper presents part of the results of the study conducted in Albania during the first semester of the academic year 2021 - 2022, in the period: September 2021 - February 2022. The objective of the research is to assess the effect of stereotypes based on prejudices on communication, in particular on the perceptions and feelings of students during their first encounters in the university environment.

The study design structure consisted of developing the research methodology, research tool design, sampling procedure and statistical measurement.
The sequence of research phases is guided by following the paradigm of constructivism with its major bias:

- Understanding, and
- Multiple participant meanings (Creswell, 2014).

The research concerned two main groups of respondents: one composed of students at the start of the first semester of the first year of Bachelor studies (1), and the other group composed of students at the start of the first semester of the second year (2). This selection ensured a broader basis for evaluating data from two different contexts.
Quantitative methods combined with qualitative methods are integrated into the research design strategy with the aim of collecting data from a sample of 307 respondents (n = 307), randomly selected among the students of the first two years of Bachelor study programs at the University of Tirana "Nënë Tereza".

Primary data is collected through questionnaires designed to form seven open/closed sections aimed at describing, explaining and exploring the data (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Due to the complexity of the questionnaire design and topics, each questionnaire is applied to each respondent individually.

Secondary data is collected from 62 structured interviews with students and 5 focus groups, in which the members are 45 academic staff (2) from the University of Tirana engaged as professors and lecturers in Bachelor level study programs. Secondary data is analyzed and processed following the transcription and organization of information procedures for qualitative methods.

3.   Findings

The correlative analysis of the data of the independent variable "The year of frequency of Bachelor studies" and of the dependent variable "The effect of stereotypes based on prejudices" shows that students more frequently experience prejudices and stereotypes at the beginning of their university studies.

Data analysis presented in Table 1 shows that 78% of first-year students report that their encounters with their peers are conditioned by stereotypes of various kinds.
Using the Pearson correlation coefficient, the interdependence between the year of frequency of Bachelor studies and the level of prejudice effect at first meetings is reflected with chi-square value of $\chi2 = 8.196$ and Pearson's R value r= 0.004 for the value of significance p ≤ 0.05.

Data analysis in Table 2 also shows that 37.1% of students at the start of the first semester of the second year of Bachelor studies report a lower level of prejudice in peer relations, and in general in the university environment, compared to students of the first year (22%).

Table 1. Measuring the effect of prejudice in communication and social perception in correlation to the year of Bachelor studies

The year of frequency of Bachelor studies * The effect of stereotypes based on prejudice					
			The effect of stereotypes based on prejudice		
			Yes	No	Total
The year of frequency of Bachelor studies	1st year of frequency of Bachelor studies	Count	149	42	191
		% within the year of frequency of Bachelor studies	78.0%	22.0%	100.0%
	2nd year of frequency of Bachelor studies	Count	73	43	116
		% within the year of frequency of Bachelor studies	62.9%	37.1%	100.0%
Total		Count	222	85	307
		% within the year of frequency of Bachelor studies	72.3%	27.7%	100.0%

Source: Dataset Analysis

The construct of independent and dependent variables followed the dimensions of the literature, which emphasizes the perception of biases related to feelings, attitudes and experiences.
This dimension guided _interviewing process_ with 62 students, with the aim of completing the data collected through the questionnaires.

Following the analysis of *structured interviews* with second-year students, to the question: "What has changed compared to the first year of the course?", in addition to 'Less pressure to

obtain results', 'Better relations with peers', 'Better adaptation to the university environment', most of the interviewees declare having experienced fewer situations of misunderstanding linked to stereotypes based on prejudice.

By comparing the analysis of the data with the "Gender" variable, it emerges that at the start of Bachelor studies, girls are more frequently subject to prejudice and stereotypes comparing the boys.

The data presented in Table 2 shows the processing of responses to the question "Do you believe that expressions of prejudice have a gender basis?"

According to the respondents, 84.9% of girls and 66.7% of boys enrolled in the first year of the Bachelor studies answered the question in the affirmative (Table 2).

*Table 2. Measuring effect of prejudice at the first meetings in auditoriums in correlation with gender variable*

Gender * The effect of stereotypes based on prejudice * The year of frequency of Bachelor studies						
The year of frequency of Bachelor studies				**The effect of stereotypes based on prejudice**		
				Yes	No	Total
1st year of frequency of Bachelor studies	**Gender**	Female	Count	101	18	119
			% within Gender	84.9%	15.1%	100.0%
		Male	Count	48	24	72
			% within Gender	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
	Total		Count	149	42	191
			% within Gender	78.0%	22.0%	100.0%

Source: Dataset Analysis

Comparing these data with information collected during the structured interviews, most of interviewees mentioned forms and ways of facing prejudices and gender stereotypes in 'More than one episode' within a time period defined as 'Within the last month'.

Descriptive statistics of "The cognitive perception on prejudice and stereotypes" (the second dependent variable) presented in Figure 1 show that respondents view bias-based stereotypes as attitudes and behaviors that start from a base of antipathy continuing with 'Humiliation' (39.8%), 'Verbal Attack' (33.2%), 'Exclusion' (27%) (Figure 1).

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*Figure 1. Measuring cognitive perception on prejudice and stereotypes*
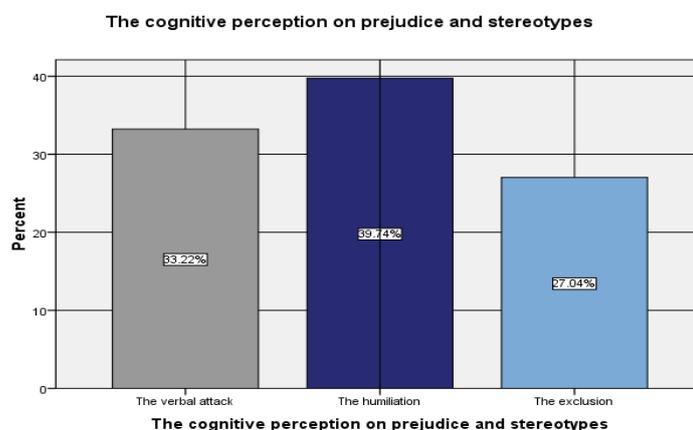
$\bar{X} = 1.94$; $SEM = 0.044$; $\sigma^2 = 0.601$; $\sigma = 0.775 = 0.601$
Source: Dataset Analysis

Furthermore, the data analysis presented in Figure 2 shows that respondents perceive stereotypical attitudes as behaviors that are: 'Cynical'' (27.4%), 'Disrespectful' (25.7%), 'Malicious' (25.1%), 'Intolerant' (21.8%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Prejudice-based stereotypes attitudes and behaviours
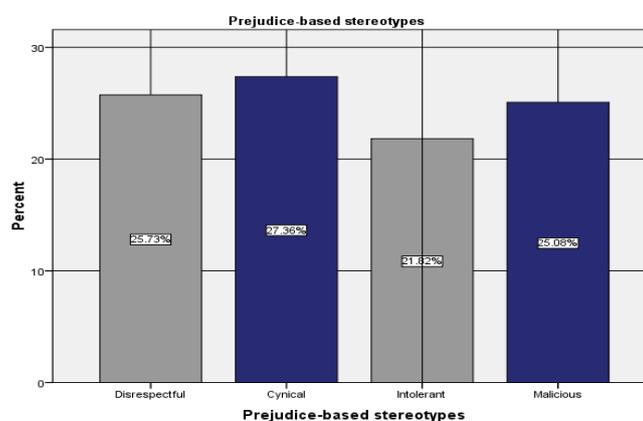
$\bar{X} = 2.46$; $SEM = 0.064$; $\sigma^2 = 1.269$; $\sigma = 1.127$
Source: Dataset Analysis

As indicated by the information collected from the questionnaires (and also from the structured interviews), first-year students react less to the expression of attitudes related to intolerant behaviors, while second-year students react less to behaviors marked by cynicism and disrespect.

When asked about ways to find answers against acts of prejudice and stereotyping, 64.5% of respondents denied knowing about these types of answers (Table 5). [The chi-square value of $\chi2 = 8.446$, and the Pearson R value r = 0.004, for the significance value p≤ 0.05, show the

correlation between the year of frequency of Bachelor studies and the level of knowledge in bias-based serotypes defense strategies.]

Table 5. Correlation of responses to prejudice with year of studies

The year of frequency of Bachelor studies * Strategies for dealing with prejudice and stereotypes					
			Strategies for dealing with prejudice and stereotypes		
			Yes	No	Total
Year of Bachelor studies	1st year of frequency of Bachelor studies	Count	56	135	191
		% within the year of frequency of Bachelor studies	29.3%	70.7%	100.0%
	2nd year of frequency of Bachelor studies	Count	53	63	116
		% within the year of frequency of Bachelor studies	45.7%	54.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	109	198	307
		% within the year of frequency of Bachelor studies	35.5%	64.5%	100.0%

Source: Dataset Analysis

To the question: "Do you think that prejudice and stereotyped attitudes (or behaviors) have harmful short- or long-term consequences?" 72.3% of respondents choose the second alternative (Figure 3).

*Figure 3. Consequences of prejudice-based attitudes*

Consequences of prejudice-based attitudes

27.69% | 72.31%
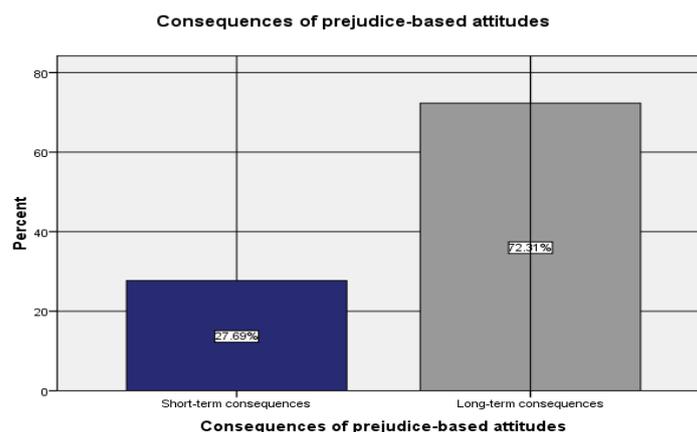
$\bar{X} = 1.72;\ SEM = 0.026;\ \sigma^2 = 0.201;\ \sigma = 0.448$
Source: Dataset Analysis

Further analysis presented in Figure 4 shows that according to respondents' opinions the strongest effect of prejudice and stereotypes is on: 'Social connection' (34%), 'Cooperation during group assignments' (25%), 'Self-expression' (23%) and 'Self-identity' (18%).

Figure 4. The strongest effect of prejudice and stereotypes
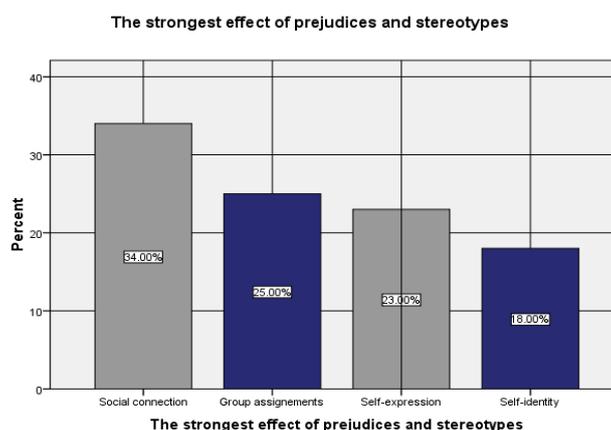
$\bar{X} = 2.25$; $SEM = 0.079$; $\sigma^2 = 1.234$ $\sigma = 1.111$
Source: Dataset Analysis

This last group of primary data collected from the questionnaires in the section entitled "The forms of reaction to feelings, attitudes and experiences, caused by prejudices and stereotypes" is integrated with secondary data collected through *focus groups* with professors and lectures from the University of Tirana "Nënë Tereza, which was based in:

- Analyze of the need for positive communication among students, and,
- Interpretation of ideas about how positive communication mechanisms work.

Information collected specifically on the "Spaces needed to discuss students' experiences and concerns related to biases and stereotypes, associated with inappropriate or aggressive behavior" showed that views on this issue focus on 'Open and informal discussions' as tools to help students improve self-control, strength and identity through a positive communication.

On the questioning of the concrete mechanisms for creating responses and interventions aimed at facilitating communication and improving social perception in the university environment, far from prejudices and stereotypes, the information collected by the focus groups showed that the opinions expressed by professors and lecturers are linked to the need to introduce 'Informal conversations' and 'Case study illustrations' formally and institutionally regulated by the university.

4. Discussion

Concepts from the literature were tested and data analysis showed that prejudice and stereotypes are part of the students' harrowing views towards each other, especially at the

start of university studies, during the first encounters in the auditoriums and other academic settings.

By analyzing pathways to finding answers and mechanisms to counter prejudices and stereotypes, the concepts of Bodenhausen, Todd and Richeson (2009), who explain the 'executive function' related "to the constellation of higher order cognitive processes involved in the planning, execution, and regulation of behaviour" (Bodenhausen et al., 2009) and 'self-regulation' with self-regulatory strength model by Baumeister and other researchers, who define it as a model that "focuses on impairments resulting from the consecutive expenditure of regulatory resources " (Baumeister, et al., 2000; Schmeichel and Baumeister, 2004 cited in Bodenhausen et al., 2009), guided data elaboration and analyses processes.

Most of the data collected through the questionnaires shows that the majority of respondents report humiliation as the most frequent form of expression of prejudice.

The information collected during the structured interviews with the students confirmed the data processed by the questionnaires, and the more in-depth analysis of the information showed that first-year students mainly experience prejudice and stereotypes in the form of humiliation, cynicism and of disrespect.

Given Monica Biernat's (2009) conclusion that "Stereotyping effects are complex, and perhaps downright confusing from the perspective of the recipient of these effects" (Biernat, 2009), the elaboration of data from questionnaires and interviews shows that students are well aware of submitting stereotypes based on prejudice. Students at the start of their first year of university studies are more frequently affected by prejudice than students at the start of their second year of studies. According to the analysis, girls are more frequently victims of prejudice than boys, which shows that prejudice has a gender basis.

Data analysis also shows that most respondents are unaware of defense strategies against prejudice and stereotyping, and often have to look for some kind of reaction that they have not experienced before, to which they were not advised at university. Following the opinions of the respondents, the data shows that prejudice has serious and long-term consequences, especially in the restoration of social relations and cooperation between students.

Considering that an issue to be addressed, adequate responses and interventions related to the concept of 'strength', 'self-control' and 'self-identity' must target attitudes and behaviors related to prejudice, negativity and resistance to communication and social relations. The data and information collected by the professors and lecturers participating in the focus groups demonstrated that mechanisms to combat prejudice in the university environment are necessary and that their success begins with formalization on an institutional basis.

Conclusion

Access to knowledge, such as achieving a successful graduation, is the top priority in university settings. But, in between, there are a number of attitudes that have a direct impact on students. Distance, exclusion, as well as insults and offenses according to data analysis are

forms of expression of rejection and antipathy in auditoriums, outside in courtyards and in other university environments.

In particular, in the first semester of the first year of the Bachelor study programs of the University of Tirana "Nënë Tereza", being cynical, disrespectful or intolerant and malicious manifests itself as stereotyped attitudes of many. And those who submit, according to data analysis, due to the absence of copying strategies, go through transition phases without defensive responses.

Assessing the effect of biases in students started from the perception that, while profoundly influencing the establishment of communication, interaction and relationships, the study of the effects of bias-based stereotypes on young people living in Albania is underestimated.

To respond and find answers to the expression of prejudices and stereotypes in university settings, built to transfer knowledge, but also to promote human and intellectual development, data analysis interpreted the concern for greater awareness of the negative effect of stereotypes on students' ability to communicate, interact and bond at the start of university studies.

Reviewing the mechanisms of knowledge transfer following discussions and open sessions as mechanisms aimed at facilitating communication and the well-being of students requires an important role of the university, which must intervene decisively to combat prejudices and the stereotypes.

Acknowledgment

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