

Do media matter?

A social construction model of stereotypes of foreigners

Elza Ibroscheva

Department of Mass Communications, Southern Illinois University, USA

Jyotika Ramaprasad

School of Journalism, Southern Illinois University, USA

Abstract

In an attempt to build on and make more complete existing models of stereotype formation, which have largely been cognitive in nature, this paper proposes a social construction model of stereotypes of foreigners, which includes a number of social factors, and in particular, the media, where media is defined as a complex variable composed of several exposure, nature of sources, content, and perceived effect.

Key words: stereotypes, foreigners, social construction of reality, mass media

Introduction

As active participants in the global information flow, media audiences are heavily exposed to messages from the mass media, accumulating, directly or indirectly, large amounts of images, sounds and news bites—so much so, that very little of what media consumers believe constitutes social reality, particularly about people, events, and issues of a global nature, is based solely on personal experience. In this context, social reality might be thought of as mostly composed of a large portion of unverified information that is shared by "in-groups," that is, "us" and by "out-groups," or those seen as "others."

This information serves as a convenient and easily accessible foundation for categorizing, generalizing and organizing the enormous amount of information we consume on a daily basis. One cognitive technique that accommodates this process is the use of stereotypes—a particular set of social beliefs and understanding of outsider groups, both culturally and socially remote from the insider groups (McGarty et al. 2002). The word "stereotype" originates from the Greek words "stereo" and "type" and means a printing-plate cast from a matrix that is molded from a raised printing surface such as type. As Lippmann (1965) stated, stereotypes are "pictures in our heads" that mark traits and help us distinguish quickly social groups from one another. In figurative speech, it is a conventional, formulaic and usually oversimplified conception, opinion and belief about a person, group, event or issue considered to typify that object (Lippmann 1965).

In their function, stereotypes can be viewed as useful devices for organizing large amounts of information, providing stability and abstraction. However, more often than not, stereotypes are used as mental shortcuts, which instead of facilitating communication hamper it because they oversimplify the complex network of political and cultural disparities and oppositions a social structure embodies (Pickering 1995). This is more likely to happen in the case of social structures that involve representation of outsider groups. The social experiences we accumulate, directly or through various channels of mediation, cultivate a sense of belonging to a certain group to which we develop individual and social attachment and by which we learn to define social reality. Those who do not share these experiences become outsider groups.

Stereotypes, then, as expression of both cognitive processes and social experiences become instrumental to building a sense of belonging and a degree of distinction between inside and outside groups. As such,

they have also become central concepts in studying inter-group and intercultural relations. As Bar-Tal (1997) contended, with the emerging cognitive revolution within the larger field of social psychology, the study of stereotyping has increasingly focused on the intrapersonal cognitive processes in general and on the specific process of categorization (e.g. Tajfel 1969; Hamilton 1981; Stephan 1985; Fiske and Neuberg 1989).

This becomes particularly important when we acknowledge that individuals are not born with specific stereotypic contents (Aboud 1988) but learn, as well as change them, through the socialization and mediation process that takes place during their life. Therefore, stereotypic content is not a given universal content, but is one learned through interactive processes with interpersonal sources and social institutions which participate in the process of socialization. One such critically important social institution is the mass media.

Presentations in the media, then, might have a lasting impression on the insider groups' perceptions of the social positions and characteristics of members of outsider groups who are in social, political or cultural opposition to the insider group, particularly in a global scenario. In the process of stereotyping, the mass media are seen as major sources of easily accessible and widely available information, possibly as powerful information channels and image factories, creating and sustaining stereotypical beliefs about foreigners (Lester et al. 1996; Lippmann 1965; Gorham 1999; Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

In this sense, the mass media are seen by many scholars as playing a vital role in shaping perceptions of the world (Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Boulding 1956; Eagly 1987; Eagly and Wood 1991; Fishman 1980). In fact, the theory of social construction of reality contends that the mass media do not reflect the world in any empirical sense, but instead help construct and maintain it by re-presenting particular meanings and understandings of "reality" (Berger & Luchmann 1967). The media are part of larger social processes that construct and encourage some meanings (generally those of dominant social groups) over others (generally social subordinate groups) and they do this via discourse (language that is infused with particular meanings and not others). Lippmann's (1965:64) definition of stereotypes as "the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights" and his discussion of stereotypes as "particular definitions of reality with concomitant evaluation, which in turn relate to the disposition of power in society" (Dyer 1979:17) illuminates this very point.

Stereotype formation have received limited attention in the communication field. As Pickering (1995:691) observed, "where work in media studies has referred to the broad psychological literature on stereotyping, it has done so either obliquely or very selectively. There are, indeed, few examples of media research engaging head-on with this literature, and generally those which exist are sharply critical." In addition, the majority of studies of media stereotypes have focused on the prevalence of various depictions without directly assessing their ideological impact. As Seiter (1996:16) pointed out, "the term [stereotypes] does not necessarily connote falseness or a perversion of social reality, as it often does in mass communications research. In its emphasis on the universality of basic cognitive processes, however, the social psychology definition can obscure the ideological nature of stereotypes." Therefore, the role of the mass media is instrumental to any discussion of the mechanisms that lead to stereotypes because not only are stereotypes transmitted via mass media channels, but they are further perpetrated and solidified by messages and portrayals in the media.

This paper attempts to address a limitation in the mass communication literature, i.e., the lack of an integrated model that takes into account both cognitive and social factors. Building upon ideas offered in Bar Tal's (1997) integrative model of stereotypic content and change, it posits a model that includes the individual characteristics of audience members as well as the mass media as mechanisms that may play an important role in the formation of stereotypes. The model suggests an innovative approach to defining and conceptualizing media influences on stereotypes by including several important aspects of media consumption. Among these are, 1) patterns of exposure, both qualitative and quantitative, such as time spent with the media and interest in international news, 2) the nature of trusted media, such as perceived ideological orientation and reported national origin of trusted media, 3) the content of media portrayals such as perceived valence of and perceived bias in media representations, and 4) opinions about the power of stereotypes to serve as tools of social oppression of outsider groups.

More importantly, in view of the current global shift in geopolitics and the growing level of globalization and interdependency between ethnic and national groups, it is important to emphasize the role of stereotypes in fostering or obstructing the relations between nations of cultural affinity or disparity. Stereotypes, although apparent cognitive mechanisms, do find their way in political discourse and in political discourse, both levels of individual identification – ethnic and political – are interconnected. Therefore, in order to support the social and political changes taking place on both the societal and global level, media discourse should be cultivating the notion of necessity for change in the sphere of social and intercultural relationships, including perceptions about state, nation, ethnic and cultural identity, and global citizenship.

Definition of Stereotypes

In the arena of international discourse and communication, the perception of certain ethnic or national groups and of their cultural, political or religious habits and the presentation of these to media audiences have the potential to determine the success or failure of these groups. These perceptions, transmitted through virtually all means of communication, are called stereotypes.

Lippmann (1965) defined stereotypes as mental concepts, pictures in our heads, which govern perception. In the modern world, he said, life hurries and multifarious and intimate acquaintance is often impossible, and therefore, "we notice a trait which marks a type, and fill in the rest of the picture by means of stereotypes we carry about in our heads" (59). As Oakes et al. (1994) contended, stereotyping can lead to the misrepresentation of people's true characteristics. Stereotyping, therefore, "has been characterized, at best, as a process of simplification which serves to make reality manageable and at worst, a pathological vehicle for prejudice and ill-treatment" (2).

Lippmann (1965) argued similarly that stereotypes are necessary for our orientation to the world. They are a way of simplifying and economizing and without them, our perception of the world would be like a baby's "one great, blooming, buzzing confusion" (54). Still, while providing a functional way of organizing and ordering the world, stereotypes have the potential for limiting one's views of the world and possibly, legitimizing the dominance of certain groups in society based upon these economical, yet highly limited, perceptions. Thus, stereotypes may or may not be close to the social realities they represent. This, according to Lippmann (1965:59), is "because for the most part, we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. [. . .] We pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture."

Stereotypes as overgeneralizations about members of a social group, function at two levels—the individual and the group level. At the individual level, stereotypes are understood as culturally specific beliefs exhibited by an individual. As Ichheiser (1949:34) described the utility of stereotypes, "the whole process of classifying could not function as it does if we did not have prepared in our minds a whole system of well-defined images which we apply in the particular cases as they come along." Stereotypes serve the function of cognitive maps, assisting in organizing and categorizing the large volume of information that individuals receive and process in social interactions. These cognitive maps are constructed through social learning, the process of accumulating and assimilating information through observing the actions, attributes and behaviors of individual members of outside groups. Lippmann contended stereotyping at the individual level is a necessary mode of processing information, and especially so in highly differentiated societies, they become an inescapable way of creating order.

At the group level, stereotypes are seen as a system of beliefs shared by members of a certain culture, providing a sense of social belonging and cohesion, characteristic of every social formation. Thus, social psychologists and other scholars who seek to reach an understanding of the process of stereotyping are presented with an obvious paradox. On one hand, it is clear and indisputable that groups and a sense of belonging are important and indispensable parts of our social reality and social being. On the other hand, many argue that group-based perceptions are distorted perceptions of reality and could be used to discredit or promote certain social groups over others. It is then not surprising that Lippmann (1965:59) disapproved of stereotyping, commenting that if one wants to see the world as it really is, "there is no shortcut through, and no substitute for, an individualized understanding." However, Lippmann (1965:60) also admitted that stereotyping fulfills a necessary function in allowing the individual to interact with a world too complex ever to be represented in its fullest details: "The need for economizing attention is so

inevitable, that the abandonment of all stereotypes for a wholly innocent approach to experience would impoverish human life."

Approaches to Studying Stereotypes

While there is a vast array of approaches to the study of stereotypes in psychology, social psychology and political science, only recently have scholars begun to explore social factors such as ingroup interaction and other external elements of reality and their role in the process of forming and maintaining stereotypes. Many of the past studies on stereotypes focused their examination on the perceptual processes and the psychological aspects of stereotype formation, connecting the process of building a rigid perceptual understanding of the outside world to individuals' prejudice and authoritarian personality traits (Katz and Braly, 1933, 1935). However, new movements in studying stereotypes focus on the impact of other constituents of social reality, such as organized social institutions (the church, the mass media and the educational system, among others), and their implications for the formation and perpetuation of stereotypical perceptions of outsiders and members of the outgroup.

There are two fundamental approaches to the study of stereotypes—the cognitive process approach and the socio-cultural approach. The cognitive approach examines the nature of stereotypes and their role in the process of individual and group perception (Allport 1954). Within this theoretical tradition, the work of Tajfel (1978a, 1978b) and Sherif (1966, 1967) produced the social identity theory, which argues that social identities are derived from group memberships and are constructed by comparing ingroups and outgroups to evaluate individual group members in terms of these identities. The ethnocentric aspect of stereotyping, which was considered the major demonstration of individual-based perceptions of outgroups, thus, could be traced in part to a general motive to differentiate the ingroup positively from the outgroup, arising from the role of group identity in self-definition.

The cognitive tradition to studying social perceptions and identity has been criticized for failing to produce a model that incorporates all mental, social and political inclinations that affect opinion formation and decision making about group relations. Yet, the cognitive process approach is still heavily used in psychology and political science because it allows scholars to determine empirically how subjects would mentally represent a conflict situation, cognitively process its complexities and understand the stimuli (Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995).

The socio-cultural approach to the study of stereotypes originates in the idea that interaction that takes place both at the individual level as well as at the group level leads to forming identities, which in turn, are heavily influenced and determined by external factors and social institutions. This development attempted to re-center the "social" in social psychology, by arguing that intergroup behavior, rather than individual attitudes, is where social identity is located, advocating a move from intrapersonal cognition to intergroup dynamics as the focus of studying stereotypes in society.

The Socio-Cultural Approach and the Mass Media

The shift in focus from individualistic notions of group membership to group-defined self-perception led to recognizing the important role of the mass media in producing and distributing images that have the potential to become stereotypes. In their systematic examination of the development and history of the study of stereotyping within social psychology, Leyens et al. (1994) described this research direction in the study of stereotypes as the socio-cultural approach because the primary focus of this perspective is on society itself. In other words, while a significant number of stereotyping studies have been conducted following the cognitive aspects of the formation of stereotypes, the social-cultural studies of stereotypes concentrate on the evolution of stereotypes within a given cultural system and on the modes of their transmission in the symbolic environment of this cultural system.

The socio-cultural approach was a direct consequence of the work of Katz and Braly (1933). As Leyens et al. (1994:40) pointed out, "they were the first to explicitly use the concept of consensus in the definition of stereotypes." Practically, what Katz and Braly did was consider stereotypes as a phenomenon that needed to be studied at the societal and the group level, rather than the level of individual cognition. In general, this research concluded that large numbers of observers shared similar representations of given targeted groups, often a group of a different national origin, and that this image generally endured through time. Other studies discovered that stereotypes retained their relative stability

over time, but these studies also indicated that stereotypes are adaptive pictures of the relationships between different groups (Gilbert 1951; Karlins et al. 1969). Katz and Braly's studies set a methodological foundation for this type of research by introducing and solidifying stereotype examination through studying trait adjectives and the public's attributing of these traits to various groups. However, theirs was not the sole method of examination of the stereotypical perceptions of other groups (in this case, foreign nationalities) held by members of the ingroup. Other scholars explored a variety of methods, both quantitative and qualitative, to study the nature and influence of stereotypes.

Interestingly, socio-cultural examinations of stereotypes are hardly concerned with the question of why stereotypes exist in the first place (Leyens et al. 1994). Instead, they operate with the idea that stereotypes derive from the direct observations of differences between diverse groups in a given society, or are a result of exposure to media and other sources of information, most notably, via social learning and social and cultural interactions. As a result of this fundamental assumption accepted by the socio-cultural approach, a significant number of studies examining the modes of learning stereotypes as well as the modes of transmitting stereotypes through television, the news media, peer groups and interactions came to the fore of both media and social psychology studies (Rajecki 1990).

Among the important studies of the origins and theoretical foundation of stereotypes in the socio-cultural tradition are the evaluations of national stereotypes and their relationship to social learning conducted by Eagly (1987) and colleagues (Eagly and Steffen 1984; Eagly and Kite 1987; Eagly and Wood 1991). Eagly's main interest was in how stereotypes acquire specific meanings. According to the socio-cultural thesis, members of a given group form stereotypes of another group by observing the behavior performed by the stereotyped group. If observers know very little about a group, for example a foreign nation, if they have very few occasions to interact with people from this nation, the only behavior that people will observe are those which tend to be covered in the media. Similarly, Boulding (1956) voiced some apprehension at the fact that as people become more dependent on the media for their information about the world, the possibility for erroneous images of the world increases greatly. "While we have many images about the world, very few of them are actually based on personal experiences. Consequently, much of what we 'know' about the world comes from agreeing with other people that a particular act is 'true'" (Gorham 1999:231).

Eagly and associates used the example of the media coverage an act of political aggression such as hijacking a plane can have on media audience in building their stereotypes of the hijackers. Since the media concentrate almost exclusively on the aggressive behavior of the hijackers, this aggression becomes the only sample of behavior the audience has to build up a mental representation of the hijackers' nation. "For other nations, which more often attract the media, the citizens of the observed country will appear in a wider variety of roles" (Leyens et al. 1994:41). The authors gave the example of the Palestinians, who for a long time were reduced by the Western media to the role of terrorists, while hardly ever covering other aspects of the Palestinian society, for instance, about Palestine's intellectuals and cultural life. Israelis, on the other hand, appeared in a much wider variety of roles in the media, and therefore, were not viewed with the same degree of negativity as Palestinians.

Eagly stipulated that the manner in which different minorities as well as foreign nationalities are viewed is greatly influenced by the roles that these groups are seen to perform through the channels of mass communication. This means that stereotypes about a person are based on observed behaviors, directly or via the mass media. However, Eagly also warned against the danger of oversimplifying the process of stereotype formation by reducing stereotyping to observing and adopting values, when indeed, stereotyping is a complex process, which entails the presence and interaction of a number of socially defined factors. While this is true, the mass media remain a major player in defining the social reality of individuals and the groups to which they belong.

It is evident that within the field of social psychology, where most of the research examining the essence and the social role of stereotypes is found, there appears to be a growing interest in the examination of the mass media as important socializing agencies and intercultural communicators. Social scientists have recognized that the mass media play an important role in providing a cognitive map to the social environment for media audiences. As Allport (1954:195) noted, "They [stereotypes] are socially supported, continually revived and hammered in, by our media and mass communication, by novels, short stories, newspaper items, movies, stage, radio, and television." However, there continues to be

relatively little theoretical research within the mass media field that attempts to explain the role of the media in stereotype formation. In this regard, the theory of social construction of reality offers a possible link between mass communication studies and the socio-cultural approach to studying stereotypes within the field of social psychology.

Constructing Media Reality

Media scholars have a strong research interest in the way in which the mass media use techniques to represent reality. For instance, Shoemaker and Reese (1996:60) suggested that the mass media transmit much more than just information and accurate facts. The media content takes elements of culture, magnifies them, frames them and feeds them back to an audience, thus, "imposing their logic in creating a symbolic environment." In their analysis of the role of the media in the understanding of reality, the authors used Lippmann's concept of stereotypes to emphasize the important distinction between "reality" and "social reality"—that is, as Lippmann termed it "the world outside" of actual events and our mediated knowledge of those events. Shoemaker and Reese (1996:39) contended, "we depend on secondhand sources for our knowledge about that part of the world beyond our immediate perceptual grasp—which is most of it . . . Our perceptions of an object or event are at the mercy of the accuracy and completeness of those sources."

On the other hand, Parenti (1993) contended that the mass media not only suppress information, but also often deliberately create disinformation. The mass media, he argued, seldom give us a range of information and views which might allow us to approach a story from a different angle, frequently, in sharp contrast to the generally accepted view on a certain issue of interest. Fishman (1980) contended that media consumers are led to see the world outside firsthand experience through the eyes of the media in such a way that alternative ways of knowing the world are simply not made available.

Lester et al., (1996) defended a similar position while examining the verbal and pictorial stereotypes employed in media representations of ethnic and cultural minorities as well as other marginal groups. The author, however, assigned many of the existing stereotypes to problems inherent not only in the potential of the mass media to misrepresent reality, but also in the journalistic profession itself—in their attempt to represent reality as close as possible, journalists are often forced into typifying facts, and illustrate only the major findings of their reports.

Media reports are the product of the work of journalists, who are often influenced by their own system of beliefs and by the network of ideological and corporate pressures that have been documented to wield influence on the journalistic process (Wolfe 1983; Chomsky 1985). In fact, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) offered a detailed examination of the complex process of media content creation and dissemination. They argued, "mass media content—both news and entertainment—is shaped, pounded, constrained, encouraged by a multiple of forces" (ix).

Therefore, mass media have the potential to mediate reality. For people with extensive personal contacts in a myriad of social contexts, the mass media are just one source of knowledge about political affairs and different ethnic, national or cultural groups. The information and impressions that people receive from the mass media are far less influential when they have firsthand experience with these issues and groups, upon which perceptions are built (Silverstein and Flamenbaum 1989). On the other hand, for issues and subjects concerning which most personal experience is limited, for example foreigners, television and other media forms may virtually be the only vivid sources of information (Silverstein 1989). Therefore, Silverstein and Flamenbaum (1989) concluded, the public receives information about a nation's actions primarily from reports in the mass media.

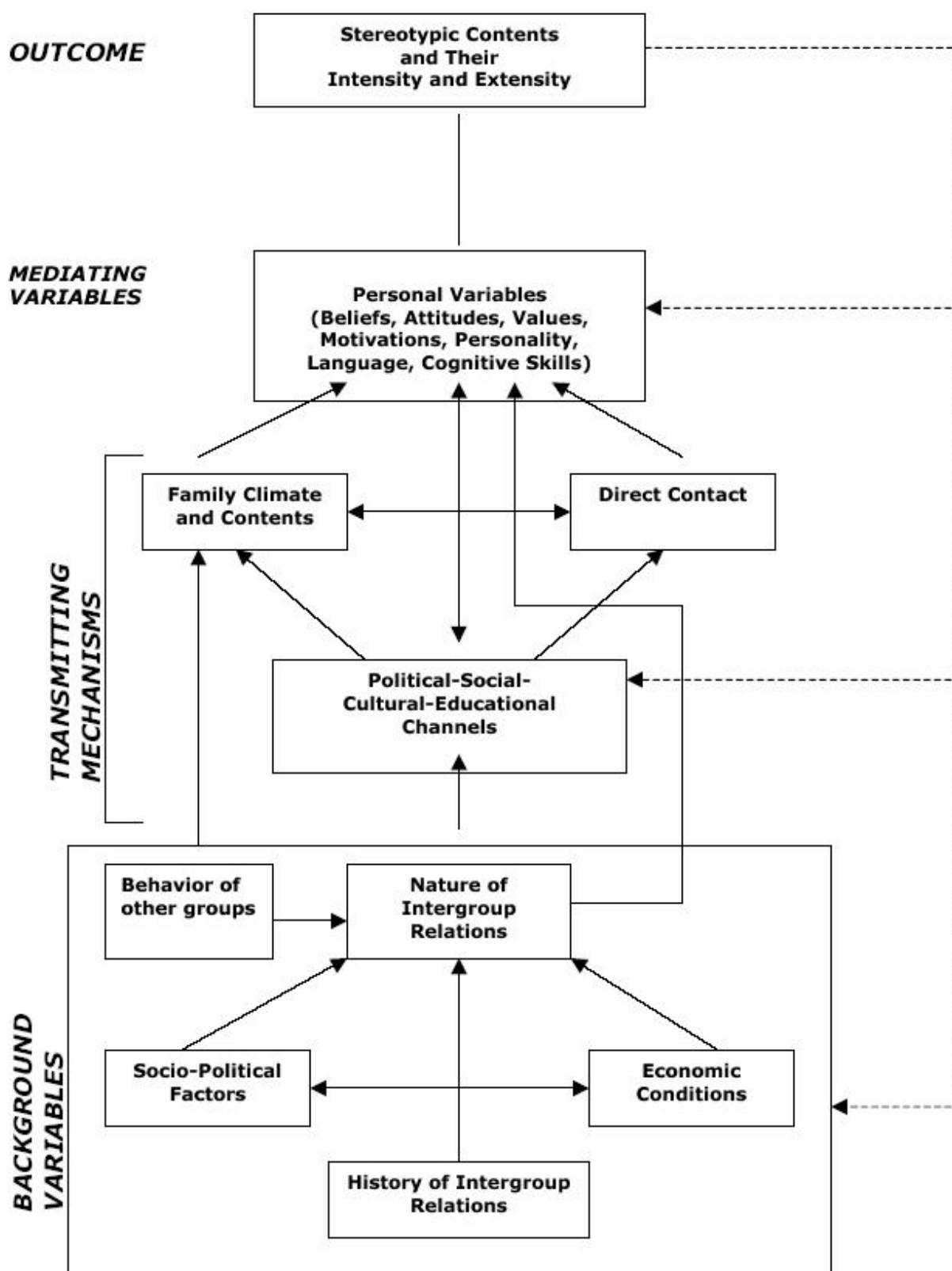
Ultimately, Silverstein and Flamenbaum argued, there exists a relationship between the individual cognitive process and what might be conceived of as a societal or group cognitive process that leads to an item appearing in the news and presenting certain social and cultural stereotypes. In this process, we allow new information in our perceptions, but more frequently, accept, reject, or reshape the new information in such a way as to preserve existing perceptions, "perceptions, that could be called world views or stereotypes" (Lester et al. 1996:17).

The Integrative Model to Stereotype Formation

One of the most comprehensive models of stereotype formation which takes a somewhat socio-cultural perspective comes from Bar-Tal (1997), whose integrative model to studying stereotypes categorizes a number of social factors he believes could be used to explain and predict the content and what he called the stereotypes' "intensity and extensiveness." These two aspects of stereotypes, Bar-Tal explains, refer to the degree of confidence a person has in a stereotype, and to the extent of consensus in which group members hold a specific stereotypic content, respectively.

In Bar-Tal's model, presented in Figure 1, the first category of social factors are *background* variables, which involve social-political and economic conditions on one hand, and the nature and history of intergroup relations together with the characteristics of the outgroups and the behavior of the outgroups towards the other. Next, Bar-Tal specifies the *transmitting* mechanisms through which individuals receive information and, which therefore, serve as the basis for the formation and change of stereotypical content. Among these are societal channels (leaders' speeches, broadcasting news and written commentaries), cultural channels (books, films, art) and educational channels (school books, educational TV programs, etc), family climate and content and direct contact. Finally, the third category of social factors in Bar-Tal's model includes *mediating* variables, such as personality, language, cognitive skills, etc. All of these factors, Bar-Tal (1997) hypothesizes, affect the outcome of stereotypic content by influencing its intensity and extensity. "The facts of our experience is that they are social in so far as they depend for their meaning on a larger societal context which includes all previously analyzed variables" (515).

Figure 1. Model of Stereotypic Content Formation and Change (Bar-Tal, 1997)



Factors/Predictors Influencing Stereotypes

In their explanation of the theory of social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1967) referred only tangentially to the mass media in analyzing social processes and structures determining individual interpretations of reality. Mass media, the authors argue, operate in accord with other social agencies in defining and organizing reality. Similarly, stereotypes as the product of individual cognitive processes and group interactions are not influenced solely by the mass media; they are influenced by a variety of social forces. So much so that the process of forming stereotypes can no longer be viewed as an

individual act of cognition, guided by internal factors, but should be critically examined as a process determined by multiple social agents, i.e., external factors. Therefore, it is important to discuss other factors, which the literature on stereotypes has recognized as contributing to the cognitive processes of constructing an idea of social life, of which forming stereotypes is one clear manifestation. Specifically, this study suggest the examination of two large groups of predictors of stereotypical content of foreigners —internal, namely, demographics, knowledge-based, and personality factors; and external factors, namely, information-mediating and mass media factors.

Internal Factors

Background Variables: Demographics

Education has been a factor frequently examined as a possible predictor of stereotypes of foreign nationals. Reigrotski and Anderson (1957) discovered that favorable opinions of people increase directly with education, postulating that education, among other factors, plays a significant role in the manner in which individuals perceive and approach foreign nationals. Wandycz (1995) also contended that along with contact, travel and other media related factors, school and university education are very important venues through which stereotypes are not only built and distributed, but also reinforced. Moreover, although age and gender have not been examined as important predictors of stereotypes in the literature, this paper's model expects that age and gender will be important factors influencing stereotypes.

Personality Variables: Ethnocentrism and Personal Ideology

Le Vine and Campell (1972) were among the scholars who studied in great detail the dynamics of ingroups' ethnic and national stereotypes to decipher what factors influence the manner in which groups perceive themselves in relations to others. The authors offered an extensive library of ethnographic case studies discussing ingroup bias and hostility towards the outgroups, which they called "ethnocentrism." Ethnocentrism, which indicated unfavorable attitudes towards the outgroup accompanied by a favorable attitude towards the ingroup, accounted to a great degree for the negative sentiments ingroup members displayed in their interactions and contacts with members of the outgroup. In the ethnocentrism scale which Le Vine and Campell constructed, geographical proximity is viewed as a major factor influencing unfavorable perceptions of foreign groups. The consequence of this bias, the authors contended, ranges from maintenance and formation of stereotypes to the belief in the genetic superiority of the ingroup over the outgroup.

Several studies of stereotype formation conducted within a cognitive psychological perspective have emphasized that personality traits other than ethnocentrism are also related to stereotyping (Stephan and Rosenfield 1978, 1979; Altemeyer 1988; Stephan et al. 1994). Among the personality variables, these studies found such traits as self-esteem, authoritarianism, and empathy to be useful predictors of emotional reaction to outgroups.

Although none of the reviewed stereotyping studies made a direct reference to personal ideology as a possible social predictor of stereotypes, this paper stipulates that personal ideology as a measure of one's psychological disposition will be useful in predicting one's tendency to stereotype social groups and individuals, particularly foreigners who come from nations with clearly conflicting ideological views. In this sense, personal ideology is defined in the context of politics (but it may be defined in other ways depending on the context of each study of stereotypes). Thus, personal ideology is defined as "the measure of an individual's liberal or conservative beliefs and attitudes about politics without reliance on specific issues" (Mehrabian 1996:473). Mehrabian (1996) studied relations between political attitudes, personality and psychopathology by applying a measure of political ideology, assessed through a liberalism-conservatism scale. As a measure of one's attitudes towards politics, personal ideology can be viewed as a possible indicator of the level of openness and acceptance of a worldview that welcomes either internationalism or isolationism in foreign policy decisions, and possibly has the potential to determine one's attitudes towards foreign nationals.

Although some authors have found contradictory results in establishing a connection between ideology and psychological or temperament measures (Mehrabian 1996), ideology has been associated by social psychologists with a number of personality traits, such as authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and other personality variables (Adorno et al. 1950), some of which, in turn, have also been linked to stereotypes.

Therefore, it is entirely reasonable to expect that personal ideology, as a psycho-social variable, which has been analyzed as having both cognitive (of individual importance) elements and social (as willingness to identify oneself as belonging to a specific group) elements to it, can be extrapolated as an important factor that determines one's stereotypes, including stereotypes of foreign nationals.

Knowledge-Based Variables: Political Knowledge

Silverstein and Flamenbaum (1989) have discussed the possibility of knowledge as a moderator of enemy images and stereotypes. Within the context of stereotypes about nations and foreign nationals, political knowledge appears to be the relevant variable. Political knowledge has been defined as the measure of what people know about politics. Scholars have studied the role of knowledge of domestic and international political affairs in understanding how people form beliefs and attitudes about social, ethnic, or national groups.

Silverstein and Flamenbaum's (1989) study recognized as "entirely reasonable" the assumption that people who are more positive towards a nation will be more open to information about that nation and will actively seek ways to enlarge their knowledge about this nation. Specifically, the study of political knowledge has been linked with mass media because such knowledge is mostly garnered from the media. In political communication, media use and attention to the media have been found to be fundamental sources of information for members of society, and the phenomenon of acquiring political knowledge has been mainly studied in election periods through the theoretical perspective of agenda-setting (Chaffee and Kanihan 1997).

In the field of international news, research focused on studying the link between political knowledge and exposure to international news among American citizens, but produced rather mixed results (Hollander 1997). For instance, high levels of television news were weakly correlated to levels of international political knowledge (Sahin et al. 1982; Graber 1988). Foreign news, however, has been found to play a vital role in the development of opinions about other nations, with television news significantly outperforming newspaper coverage (Semetko et al. 1992). Thus, the studies on the effect of the mass media on political knowledge contributes yet another social variable that can factor in the process of stereotypes formation.

External Factors

Information-Mediating Variables: Interpersonal Contacts

A major factor that has been studied in connection to stereotypes and been developed in the literature on stereotypes is interpersonal contacts. This variable is a mediating mechanism through which information, leading to forming stereotypes and opinions, reaches the general public.

Reigrotski and Anderson (1957) examined the stereotypes which the nations of Germany and France held of each other to establish not only what kind of perceptual images dominated a nations' public opinion, but also to explore what role other factors such as foreign contacts, attitudes and education, played in the process of forming stereotypical perceptions of foreign nationalities. The authors concluded that increasing foreign contacts in the case of the French and the Germans led to an increase in favorable opinion of the other group and a more critical examination of the corresponding ingroup.

In a recent replication of the 1933 Katz and Braly classic study of stereotypes and prejudice, Madon et al. (2001) discovered that ethnic and national stereotypes have increased in favorableness, but they also discovered that ethnic stereotypes tended to become more consensual among group members. The increased favorable stereotypes were attributed to the increased level of contact between members of different social groups, but the authors cautioned that other phenomena might also predict the increased favorable stereotypes towards ethnic and national groups, making the increase in favorable stereotypes possibly both the cause and the consequence of improved relations between ethnic and national groups. Wandysz (1995:5) also analyzed stereotypical portrayals of Central and Eastern Europeans and suggested that personal contact, travel, visual presentations, literature, film, press, all contributed their share in building stereotypes "which are rooted and reinforced by less easily traceable traditional beliefs derived from religion, history or a given culture."

Yet it is important to point out that while some authors have found that interpersonal contact can contribute to increasing favorable views of the outsider groups, other studies have found that changes in stereotypes as a result of contact are not always positive. Some studies (O'Driscoll et al. 1983; Ray 1983) demonstrated that informal contacts alone do not produce positive stereotypes. And some studies even suggested that geographical proximity and increased contact may encourage and solidify negative stereotypes (Le Vine and Campell 1972).

Information-Mediating Variables: Mass Media

Bar-Tal et al. (1991) argued that the formal channels of information such as news channels are viewed as "epistemic authorities"—that is, knowledge coming from these sources is unquestionably received as valid, informative and thoughtful. Therefore, these societal sources of information serve as models, providing legitimization for formed stereotypes and reflect institutionalized views about them (Bar-Tal 1997). This becomes a particularly important factor to emphasize in studying the specific role of the media in stereotype formation.

In the proposed social construction model of stereotypes, the media is conceptualized as a composite variable, which combines four distinct aspects of media consumption: *exposure* (time/attention spent on news and interest in news, in the case of this paper, both refer to international news), *nature of trusted media* (perceived ideological orientation and reported origin of media sources used, in the case of this paper of American or foreign origin), *content* of media portrayals (perceived valence of and bias in coverage, in this case of foreigners), and *media effect* (opinions about media stereotypes as mechanism for social oppression, in this case of foreigners).

Media exposure provides the traditional measure of media consumption, which offers the quantitative aspect of information reception from media sources. To make this measure comprehensive, both time spent with international news and interest in international news are included.

Nature of trusted media is conceptualized as having two components, *ideological orientation* and *origin* of media sources. Although time spent on and interest in international news can present a general idea about the frequency of audience's interaction with international news, these measures do not necessarily give a detailed view of what type of media content audience members trust the most. Therefore, this paper suggests adding the qualitative aspects of media consumption, namely the ideological nature and national origin of the mass media sources audience members trust as their main source of information about foreign nationals and distant cultures.

Additionally, perceptions about media content—*content of media portrayals*—are deemed essential to understanding the social interaction between the media outlets and the audience members in the process of constructing reality. Two such measures—*perceived valence* and *bias* of media portrayals—are proposed in this paper as additional qualitative aspects of the audience members' knowledge and understanding of media that could affect stereotypes. As Pickering (1995) contends, by and large, media research and media education have tended to operate with a classic view of stereotypes as rigid, simplistic, overgeneralized and erroneous, and have produced a large volume of content analysis of media stereotypes recording their existence, yet offering very little, if any, explanation as to how they became ingrained in media content and more important, what effect these depictions might have on public opinion. Understanding the audiences' perceptions of the valence and bias of media portrayals can provide an important insight in the process of internalization of stereotypes per se as ubiquitous cognitive structures, deeply ingrained in the fabric of social interactions. To some extent, this is a media literacy issue. If audiences are aware of the valence of media portrayals and more particularly of the possibility that media portrayals may be biased, would that influence their absorption of media proffered stereotypes?

Another similar question relates to the power of stereotypes themselves. The need to acknowledge the potential of stereotypes in defining social power has been recognized by media and social psychology scholars alike, but very few studies include this examination in their proposed models of stereotypes formation. Seiter (1986), for instance, explained that through the narrow definition and research direction mass media scholars have used to examine stereotypes, media critics, as well as many social psychologists who have explored stereotypes, have failed to notice the tremendous ideological potential of the concept of social stereotypes. Stereotypes have been among the most widely discussed social

constructs which magnified by the mass media become tools for legitimizing and institutionalizing social relations between dominant and marginal groups in society. Media scholars have consistently called attention to the dire need to investigate the relationship between stereotypes and their legitimizing power as well as to the need to educate the general viewing, listening, and reading audiences to the power potential of stereotypes. For this specific reason, this 'paper's model included opinions about stereotypes as tools for social oppression, which is concretized as a way to record and analyze people's awareness of the power potential of stereotypes and their highly ideological function within the social structure.

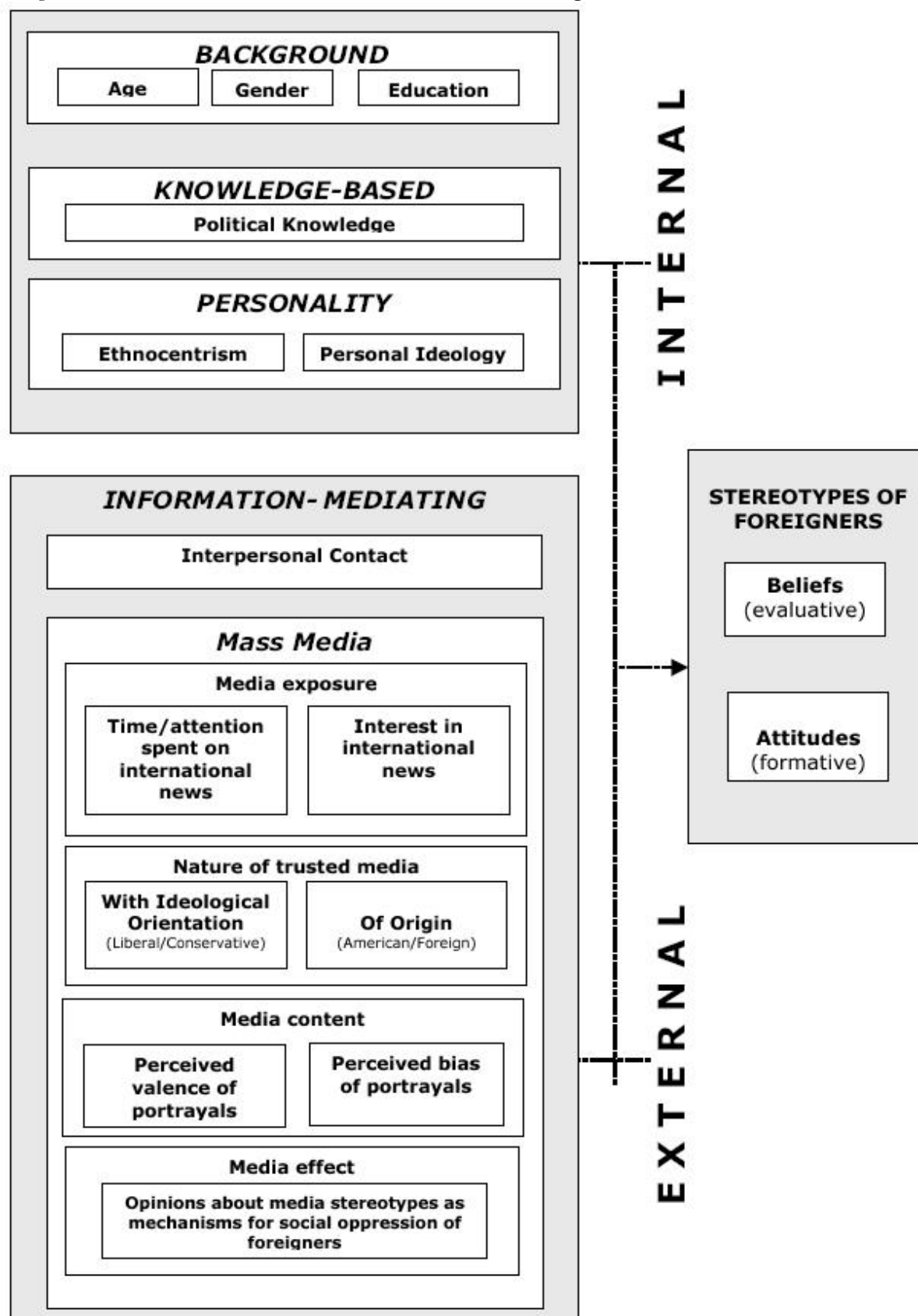
Finally, while most stereotype studies conceptualize stereotypes mostly as beliefs, very few studies adopt a multi-dimensional view of stereotypes. This model proposes using Seiter's (1986) conceptualization of stereotypes as composed of two distinct components—a descriptive and an evaluative component. The descriptive part of stereotypes refers to beliefs and the evaluative part is attitudinal in nature. Bar-Tal (1997) argued that the evaluative connotation of stereotypes provides the most important implication of stereotypes for inter-group relations because it reflects the attitude towards the outgroup and is one of the determinants of behavior. On the other hand, studies have also demonstrated that individuals tend to behave consistently with their beliefs and, therefore, the contents of stereotypes they hold determine their behavior on the interpersonal and inter-group level. Beliefs, then, become an equally important component of stereotypes that can provide insight in the complex structure of these perceptual mechanisms.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, while adopting the model structure of Bar-Tal's integrative model, the postulated social construction model of stereotypes describes the relationship on the one hand, between (a) stereotypes (both attitudes and beliefs), and by internal factors expressed by (b) demographic measures, such as age, gender and education as *background* variables, (c) personal ideology and ethnocentrism as *personality* variables (d) political knowledge as a *knowledge-based* variable, and external factors such as (e) *contact* and *mass media* conceptualized and measured as *information-mediating* variables. The media related factors include *media exposure* as time spent on international news and interest in news of a foreign nation/public, *nature of media source* as ideological orientation and perceived national origin of news source, *media content* as opinions about the valence and bias in media portrayals of a foreign nation/public and *media effect* as opinions about stereotypes as tools for social oppression.

Figure 2 displays the postulated relationships between these social factors:

Figure 2. A Social Construction Model of the Relationship between Social Predictors and Stereotypes



In view of the social-cultural approach to stereotypes and the theory of social construction of reality, it becomes important to recognize that institutionalized channels of information exchange, such as the mass media, can have a significant impact not only on the content of stereotypes, but also on the process of learning stereotypes through social interaction. Social psychologists have alluded to the hypothesis that information, provided through the media, either directly or indirectly can exert influence on the formation and change of group members' stereotypic content, as well as on their content and intensity (Eagly 1987; Eagly and Steffen 1984; Eagly and Wood 1991) and should be studied further. In this connection, a number of measures of general exposure, such as time spent with the media and interest in media content

has been studied as influencing general knowledge about the world, foreign policy issues included (Graber 1988, Semetko 1992). Therefore, this model proposes examining the concrete demonstration of media consumption measured in time spent with the media and interest in news as two major components of the mass media variable. In addition, several new media variables are seen as components of the mass media consumption variable based on social constructivist theoretical stipulations and suggestions by major stereotype studies. These variables included ideological leaning and national origin of media sources, bias and valence of media portrayals, as well as a media literacy component, which examines common perceptions of the power of stereotypes to legitimize the marginalization of outside groups in society.

The social construction model proposed by this study offers another important contribution beyond the stage of conceptualizing a more complex way of understanding mass media variables. It also offers an empirical model for testing relationships between internal and external predictors that can determine and explain the evaluative and formative dimension of stereotypes, namely, beliefs and attitudes. The model offers another contribution which helps in understanding the complex ways in which media effects often work—it not only measures the quantitative aspects of media consumption, such as exposure, interest and attention, but also offers an empirical method to measure and study the qualitative aspects of media consumption patterns by audience members, namely, by examining the ideological bias and national origin of media sources they trusts, as well as their opinions and evaluation of the media's potential effects on stereotypes in society. In addition, the social construction model of stereotype formation of foreigners can easily be adapted to multiple regression tests, including hierarchical regressions, if the order of the internal and external factors influencing stereotypes can be supported by additional arguments in the literature from the fields of social psychology and mass media studies.

Stereotypes are relatively stable, fairly simplistic and significantly rigid in their cognitive structure, while at the same time, extremely useful in offering a system of categorization, which help individuals make sense of the multitude of information and available sensory data, making their complexity even more challenging to decipher. In taking on the task of lifting the curtain on an intricate concept such as stereotypes, this paper presents a comprehensive view of stereotypes predominantly as social constructs, to which the mass media make a major contribution. Thus, this paper provides a media perspective to studying the concept of stereotypes, which in the field of academic investigation have been treated largely as a product of cognitive processes, and a lot less as products of media influences.

Building upon an extensive examination of the socio-cognitive tradition to studying stereotypes and adapting a number of methodological suggestions from the immense literature on the subject, this model is based upon the concept of social construction of stereotypes, which stipulates that the mass media, in accord with several socially defined and personality-mediated variables, can explain the presence and content of stereotypes. Such a model will allow for a more comprehensive, socially-oriented analysis of the media in which the presence of stereotypical images and portrayals can cause failure of intercultural understanding and possibly, international conflict. As White (1984: 121) noted: "An exaggerated, literally diabolical image of another country—a country that is actually composed of human beings not so very different from the citizens of one's own country—is in my judgment the very taproot of war in the present-day world."

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About the Authors

Elza Ibroscheva is an assistant professor at the Department of Mass Communications at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism and English from the American University in Bulgaria and a master's and doctorate degree from the School of Journalism at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Her research interests include international communication, Eastern European media, political communications and women in the media in global context. She has authored a book chapter and several articles on media developments in Bulgaria and Bulgarian women in politics. She is also recipient of several study grants, including awards from the University of Oslo Norway and Central European University.

Jyotika Ramaprasad is an associate professor at the School of Journalism in the College of Mass Communications and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC). She has a bachelor's and master's degree in English literature from India and a doctorate in journalism from SIUC. She has received several USIA/State Department grants for training journalists and journalism education in Southeast Asia and Africa. Her research and teaching interests are in international news, media, communication for social change, and integrated marketing communication. She has published in *Gazette*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Mass Communication and Society*, *Journal of Advertising*, and other publications.

Authors' addresses

Elza Ibroscheva, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor

Department of Mass Communications
Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville, IL 62026-1775
tel: (618) 650-5628
fax: (618) 650-3716
e-mail: eibrosc@siue.edu

Jyotika Ramaprasad, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
School of Journalism
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, IL 62901
tel: (618) 453-3277
fax: (618) 453-5200
e-mail: jyotika@siu.edu

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