

# Open, Closed, and Locked Images

## Cultural Stereotypes and the Symbolic Creation of Reality

*Ruth Lillhannus*<sup>1</sup>

How can you write a proper work certificate for the local workers when they cannot do their jobs properly? A Finnish business student working as a trainee in an industrial project situated in the Far East poses this question. The professional skills, even among the engineers of this country are truly insufficient, he notes in his field diary, not even basic tasks like reading are managed without problems. Common sense and everyday logic they lack all together.

This situation illustrates in a tangible way the question I want to address in this paper, namely that of *cultural stereotypes*. Prejudice and suspicion against all that is perceived of as ‘different’ are aspects that in an obvious way affect the special context, from which this example is taken, i.e. the international project industry where cultural diversity is one of the most prominent features. How can it be, we might ask, that this trainee regards all the engineers in the given country as losers in their own occupational branch? Why is it so hard to tolerate that different opinions and values prevail in other corners of the world? And why does it to the trainee go without saying that his way of looking at things represents “common sense” and the view of the local engineers the opposite?

With its starting point in these questions, this paper aims at discussing the notion of cultural stereotypes as it appears in the empirical material analysed. I want to suggest that a deeper understanding of stereotypes and their role in cultural encounters can be achieved if an analysis of their contents (what?) and functions (how?) is connected to a more comprehensive existential question of how people in general create their world-views<sup>2</sup> and interpret their reality (why?). To enhance our understanding of the form and function of cultural stereotypes, I want to propose an alternative perspective in which to

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<sup>1</sup> The writer is MA and researcher at the Department of Comparative Religion, Åbo Akademi University. E-mail: [rillhan@abo.fi](mailto:rillhan@abo.fi). She has formerly been published under the name Ruth Illman; thus, both of these names refer to texts written by the current author.

<sup>2</sup> Here, the English terminology is admittedly problematic. In Swedish we have the term *livsåskådning*, ‘life-view’ which would be more appropriate in this context, as it refers to a personal dimension within the individual.

interpret them. In this article, I view stereotypes from the humanistic and theological perspectives of *intercultural hermeneutics*<sup>3</sup> and as structuring components in the *symbolic construction of reality* (symboliska verklighetsbygget)<sup>4</sup>. This can, I believe, contribute to a more dynamic and comprehensive understanding of the stereotypes and their significance in a world where cultural encounters have become everyday experiences.

### ***Material and Method***

The thoughts of the business student expressed above constitute a sample from the empirical material I currently work with. The context of the study consists of industrial sites around the world where a Finnish multinational company carries out projects limited in time. The project activity and the industrial sites – the scene of action in projects – form an extraordinary working environment (Wikström & Gustafsson 1999). We face a both interesting and lively context that gives abstract terms like ‘multicultural’ and ‘globalisation’ a tangible, ordinary face. In many ways, the material sheds light on the role of stereotypes in intercultural encounters, as these sites are multicultural milieus in the highest degree<sup>5</sup>. On site, the Nordic members of the project-team work together not just with people from the country that hosts the project, but also with experts, workers, consultants and clients from several other countries. Contact over the cultural boundaries is unavoidable in these surroundings and, thus, a successful project demands more from the participants than just the ability to cope with confrontations with what is foreign and perhaps strange; understanding, trust and co-operation is also demanded. The question of otherness and understanding is constantly in the air. Consequently, I define cultural encounters here as encounters crossing the boundaries of our personally constructed categories (i.e. as a form of stereotypes) rather than externally formed, once and for all given, universal boundaries between cultures (Jensen 1998). Thus, the reports of the trainees from the field on their engagement, observations and reflections on life and work at the site provide a splendid material for cultural research of this kind.

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The term world-view is actually too general and unspecific, as it comprises both cosmogony and anthropogony. But it is the one word used in English. Further comments in Björkqvist & Holm (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Nynäs (1998, 2001), for English terminology Nynäs (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Holm (1997), for English terminology Holm (1995).

<sup>5</sup> Regarding the use of the terms intercultural and cross-cultural in this article, as a rule of thumb I use intercultural when human action over perceived boundaries of culture is involved and cross-cultural when referring to a milieu as such.

More specifically, the research material<sup>6</sup> used for my analysis consists of approximately 25 field diaries written by students (in economy and technology) who have participated as trainees in such international industrial projects. Out of these, I have chosen twelve diaries as key informants for a qualitative, hermeneutically directed analysis. These written accounts are personal representations on a daily basis covering periods of in average six months of life and work abroad. The diaries can be viewed as tangible elucidations of the individual experience and frame of reference in connection to cultural encounters in the given context, global economy. In my analysis, I treat the diaries solely as texts. Thus, I do not view them as more or less correct descriptions of an external reality that could be checked through other forms of information, but as descriptions in the sense *depictions of different persons' experiences of cultural encounters*. Regarding the texts themselves as the field of the study, not as a source of information on some other field, I want to place the trainees' ways of writing as well as my way own of reading the material in focus (Stanley 1999)<sup>7</sup>.

### ***Open, Closed and Locked Images***

As I have earlier conducted a pilot study on five field diaries belonging to this empirical data (Illman 2000) and published some articles based on the material (Illman 2001; Lillhannus 2001, 2002), I knew from before that my simple presupposition that cultural stereotypes occur in the material held true. Different scholars have defined the concept of cultural stereotypes in rather different ways. To clarify the starting-point of my own thoughts, I will start by accounting for my usage of the concept. For a researcher interested in stereotypes; the literature on the subject available is abundant. Therefore, I do not wish to make a comprehensive review of the term here but only state the most important issues connected to my usage of the term<sup>8</sup>.

Stereotypes were defined as “pictures in our heads” by Walter Lippmann ([1922] 1949) who was the first to use the concept as a description of human categorisation of

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<sup>6</sup> The material has been gathered by the *Research Institute PBI* (Project-Based Industry), based in Åbo, Finland. For more information on the institute, visit the home page [www.pbi-institute.com](http://www.pbi-institute.com)

<sup>7</sup> This of course does not imply that there is no “real” world in which these projects are carried out or that the interpretations of the trainees have nothing to do with “reality” (Alasuutari 1995: 69). This is a choice of focus, though, where the depictions, how the trainees express their experiences of cultural encounters are focused.

<sup>8</sup> The researchers I have found interesting chiefly belong to the fields intercultural communication and (social)psychology. The term stereotype is often used also by sociologists and in the humanities, such as (symbol)anthropology, linguistics, folkloristics, and many more. For a thorough review of the term, see Illman & Widell 2001 and Spears *et al* 1997.

fellow beings<sup>9</sup>. I want to stress, though, that creating stereotypes is far more complicated than simply dividing up the world into categories. It also involves connecting the created categories with values, equipping the categories with an ideational label and an emotional charge (Allport 1986; Berting & Villain-Gandossi 1995). Thus, stereotypes often contain the presupposition that one's own group represents the normal, or even universal and that one's own culture and its socially construed concepts of reality is superior and normative in relation to other cultures and world-views, as in the example given in the beginning of this article (Argyle 1991; Kylmänen 1994). A useful definition of stereotypes, which serves as my starting point, has been given by Arthur Asa Berger (1999: ?), who regards stereotypes as:

[...] an image of a category commonly shared by a certain group, a grossly simplified notion of how individuals that are members of a group are constituted.

An important point highlighted in this quotation is the social character of the stereotypes: they are not just one person's private attitude but are always shared with a larger socio-cultural group: they constitute a form of social cognition inherited through socialisation (van Dijk 1987; Geels & Wikström 1993). Berger also emphasises that stereotypes consist of suppositions of other groups as lacking in diversity and nuance; i.e. one regards all the persons as cast in the same mould (Argyle 1991). They are simplifications that prevent people from seeing individuals as they truly are (Berger 1999)<sup>10</sup>. Once such simplifications have become part of one's way of thinking, they are hard to change as they often serve as self-fulfilling prophecies (Adu-Gyan *et al* 2000; Bennett 1998; Brown 1995). Hence, the view of reality is guided by the stereotype, not the other way around. The research on stereotypes has hitherto quite heavily rested on the basic premise, presented by Berger & Luckmann ([1966] 1975), that our reality is socially constructed. With my analysis, though, I want to add another individually based dimension to this general view<sup>11</sup>. Individuals are different, and therefore, so are also our views of reality, which are affected by factors like personal experience and self-reflection. This also influences our perception of the stereotype and of 'the other'.

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<sup>9</sup> The word 'stereotype' originates from the book and newspaper printing houses where it signifies a printing form used in duplicating signs and pictures.

<sup>10</sup> According to Berger (1999), stereotypes can be positive, mixed or negative. van Dijk (1987) again regards cultural stereotypes as primarily negative and Allport (1986) states that stereotypes also can include a favourable attitude.

<sup>11</sup> Other researchers have naturally also presented adaptations of the concept, e.g. Hacking (1999).

Many researchers view stereotypes as undesirable and superficial demonstrations of ignorance (Hofstede 1994; Hanvey 1976; Berting & Villain-Gandossi 1995). Nevertheless, I, like many others, choose to view stereotypes as necessary tools in the human effort to categorise: the process by which we try to sort out the flow of phenomena and experiences we encounter and structure it into manageable wholes (Adu-Gyan *et al* 2000, Allport 1986; Brislin 1981; Brown 1995). It is an indispensable way of getting along and a way to prevent chaos from breaking loose in our inner world and in our relations. In research, stereotypes can be separated from concepts such as prejudice, categorisation and generalisations (Dahl 1995). This conceptualisation, however, has been criticised for a somewhat confusing usage of the central terminology (Williamson 1987): Sometimes, stereotypes are said to be a part of, but different from, prejudice. At other times, they are seen as similar to generalisations or prejudice. In the cognitive linguistic tradition presented by Lakoff (1987), the terminology is even more complicated: a stereotype is seen as a special kind of category included as a part of the very complex system that forms our cognitive categorisation ability<sup>12</sup>.

As for myself, I consider stereotypes as a broader phenomenon than prejudice but similar to categorising and generalising when the objects are human beings and the groupings of these objects are connected to value judgements. I do not wish to present a new definition of the term stereotypes here but only hint at fundamental criteria that in my opinion should be included in our understanding of the concept. These are: their simplifying nature, their social foundations, their connection to values and emotions and their normative character in the cultural encounter. I also want to stress that stereotyping is a necessary tool for the mind in processing and interpreting reality. Without drawers to sort our experiences into, we can neither manage our everyday life nor find meaning in the world around us. It is when these images become locked and too emotionally charged that problems arise.

In this analysis, I have found it problematic to draw a line between e.g. types, stereotypes and prejudices in the actual texts. Actually, I have found it more haltering than elucidating for the analysis to try to sort out what passages in the texts could be seen as notions belonging to what categorising category. Instead, I have chosen to emphasise larger wholes in the assertions of the students to see what means they use to further their argumentation in a larger perspective. As this bigger picture has become more relevant

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<sup>12</sup> Besides stereotypes, this cognitive system includes also i.e. types, prototypes, metonymic models, polysemy

than the thin lines between different abstract terms, I thus intend to use only the concept of *image* when referring to stereotypical argumentations in the texts – but according to the way of expression in the field diaries and the context of the individual statement call them either open, closed or locked. My intention is thus to show how different kinds images interplay in the descriptions of the self and of the other in the texts of the trainees.

### ***Images of the Other in the Material***

In the field diaries discussed above, abundant description is offered on various aspects of cultural encounters, quite often with the help of generalised images that vary from rather open ones to closed and even locked ones. As Edward Said has pointed out in his analysis of orientalism as a western construct (Said [1978] 1980); by creating an image of the other we also confirm our own identity as a contrast to this. There is hence a considerable bond between our self-image and our image of other, to us foreign people, which is important to note in this context. Aided by stereotypic characterisations, these trainees namely create and depict self-images<sup>13</sup> as well as images of the other in their texts, but due to rather different personal outlooks, focuses and aims, these result in different interpretations of reality. Here, I will concentrate on the images of the other in the text (even though it can rightly be said to be hard to separate the two as a self-depiction often is implicitly contained in our descriptions of others).

The field diaries presented here are written by Swedish-speaking as well as Finnish-speaking Finns and Swedes (the translations into English are my own). The trainees are of both sexes, but as the females are very few I choose to refer to all of them as “he” as the women would be easy to recognise otherwise. Furthermore, I want to clarify that my presentation of the various attitudes related to the people and country of the different sites does not entail any value judgements.

All of the trainees use some kind of generalising images in the field diaries when depicting the persons they meet during their time on site, people they consider to be other. For some, their belonging to the Nordic team on site is taken for granted, these Finns and Swedes become a natural “we” and the rest (i.e. the local work teams) a natural “they”. For others again, being Finnish or Swedish has something of a negative ring, it represents narrow-mindedness and prejudices. These trainees view themselves

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as categorisation, centrality gradience, which all are separated from each other.

<sup>13</sup> An analysis of the different self-images portrayed in this research material has been made in Lillhannus 2002.

rather as internationalists than “typical Finns” or “typical Swedes” and thus, also the Nordic group on site becomes an image of the other. Furthermore, there are also trainees who have more varied views on otherness, not drawing the lines strictly along national criteria but rather along lines such as age, education, sex, interest and experience – being other is not dependent on one single denominator but several different ones (and national belonging might not be the decisive one). The most interesting aspect revealed in this analysis is in my opinion the great variety; open, closed and locked images are being mixed by the trainees in their depictions that changes over time.

Open images are those views on cultural belonging that are tentatively held; if experience shows that they are not accurate as explanations to the reality experienced on site they can be changed without any greater problems. The awareness that these images are precisely images and not eternal facts can be seen in a comment made by one of the trainees in connection to his first experience of what he considers to be the chaotic traffic in the country where he is staying. To me, the drivers seem either mad or drunk, he writes, but probably the reason to their driving is simply that they have just grown up with this kind of unruly traffic. Another trainee gives an example of open images as he in his field diary notes that both a Finnish colleague and a local colleague are characterised by their conscientious attitude towards work. Here, it is not the nationality but the individual and the situation that defines a “conscientious” work.

This openness in the images of the other also allows for some ambivalence in the depictions, an ambivalence that can be seen as a natural part of a world that is not seen only in black and white. The following quotation was written down by a trainee in India:

When N had left, I mostly kept myself occupied with feeling sorry for myself at the same time both admiring and loathing the ant-like Indian way of building.

In other parts of the field diaries again, one finds images of the other that are much more closed; at these times, the trainees use generalisations concerning the preferences and opinions of the other as well as her character and mental disposition when they try to describe and interpret the happenings around them in their diaries. Thus, the closed images are central in the texts as they serve as explanatory models for the trainees. These closed images of the other can be both positive and negative. The following quotation, where a trainee working on a site in South America expresses his view of the character

of the perceived other and also states that this is an image he likes, can function as an example of such a closed, but positive image:

In these countries, people are just like us - only more. I mean, when one is joyful, angry, happy, in love etc, one is even more of that here than a standard Finn. I like the people here very much. They are humane and sensitive.

The “standard Finn” in this quotation seems not to be a positive image to the writer, but among the trainees under study in this article one can also find positive closed images of the Nordic group and the people belonging to it. A Swedish trainee in Asia writes:

For me, it is always easier to deal with people that don't talk so much bullshit but really do something instead. That's why I like all the Finns and Swedes here. There is no one who feels uncomfortable when it is all quiet for a long time, rather the opposite.

These closed images can also be negative to their character, thus revealing characters and traits that the trainees regard as a general, but negative part of the image of the perceived other. Culture forms the personality of the individual, one of the trainees seems to imply in the following quotation concerning the inhabitants of the Asian country where he is staying:

[People of this nationality] (not all of them of course) are greedy to their nature and try to fool money off foreigners as soon as they get the chance. If you give in the first time, they crave more the next.

As we see in the quotation, by putting in an extenuating circumstance in brackets, the trainee is still letting the reader know that he knows that this image is not always true. But still it seems to be such a general characteristic that he finds it worth writing down in his diary as an explanation of how people are constituted in this part of the world. Nevertheless, we can also find locked and very harsh images of the perceived other in the diaries, images that qualify as prejudices if not even racism. Concerning his experience of leading a local work team on an Asian site, one of the trainees writes:

They [the local workers] are like chess pawns; you have to move every single one yourself because nobody moves automatically or can take an initiative. [...] The game is lost if you get angry, they do even less then. You can't coordinate their work if you get angry at their apathy. Actually, you should lead them like a sheep dog tends the sheep. You have to explain all the time and signal if something goes wrong just like the sheep



dog bites the sheep if they don't obey. When they do take an initiative themselves, it often goes wrong, so that is not desirable.

These locked images of the other and her character can also be conveyed back in history as explanations of how the unequal situation regarding economy and political power in the world has arisen, or into the future giving the trainees rather hopeless images of the future possibilities for dialogue and understanding:

Already the traffic behaviour in this country shows that they can't think far into the future. And when they can't prepare and plan for the future, it all results in chaos. Nobody is interested in following any rules or in thinking that what benefits the larger society might perhaps one day also benefit oneself. As these people have grown up as illiterate and uneducated, as adults they cannot learn and take in anything new either.

The main point I want to illustrate with this empirical discussion is the complexity of the images in the material. The images vary from open and closed to locked and furthermore, the types of images is not connected to persons in such a way that one trainee *always* uses open images as another *always* closed images in their explanations: the full scale of different sorts of images can be seen in all the separate field diaries.

### ***The Individual as an Active Interpreter***

As established above, the analysis of the research material brings about several different ways of understanding and making use of the concept of stereotypes in these field diaries. One cannot say that stereotypes function in one certain way or another but in several different ways; they have different importance in different situations; they differ on a scale from open to locked images. Hence, we can ask why the perceptions of the trainees vary so greatly – between the different trainees as well as in the writings of every single person. I suggest that the explanation to these differences might lie in what was hinted at in the propositions I presented earlier in this chapter: not just social constructionist notions and collective value judgements should be taken into our accounts of the stereotypes as parts of cultural encounters – the individual as an experiencing subject needs to be analysed too.

The attitude-based dimension of stereotypes as a common, socially formed dimension of experience building on shared symbolic universes and social constructions (Berger & Luckmann 1975) is important indeed. But the perception of the individual is

diminished if only this collective dimension of the stereotypes is acknowledged. We can either conceive of the individual as a fairly simple product of her context, of her social and cultural milieu. In this case it follows, that if we know the categories within which she belongs, we also know how she thinks, feels and lives. Or; we can prefer to conceive of humans as many-sided compositions of external as well as internal factors and qualifications, as subjects constantly reflecting upon their identity. Thus, she is always *becoming*, always on her way (Lindgren & Wåhlin 2001). Indeed, the view that human beings are constantly both formed by their lives and also form their existence and their circumstances is what I find to be close to reality the way I see things (Lillhannus 2002). Many characteristics we do share with others: nationality, education, socioeconomic background - even family and important values, attitudes and interests might be shared. But in addition to many common cultural elements, we are endowed with internal qualities and processes which are person-specific – feelings and memories, experiences and interpretations – that make us into unique and complex individuals (Holm 1995; 1997).

As the individual is seen as formed both by her external, social milieu and by her inner world, we need to include another dimension in our analysis of stereotypes to get a more comprehensive picture of the ongoing process of experiencing and interpreting life and events. This dimension concerns emotional aspect of the encounter. It is psychologically oriented and touches the individual as an experiencing subject. In this perspective, the individual is not just a product of her context; she actively forms her views and meanings in negotiations related to her life experience and her self-conscious sense of reality. She experiences, interprets and expresses her views of this context in a unique way, a process depicted e.g. in the concept *reflexive identity construction* (Lindgren & Wåhlin 2001).

### ***Intercultural Hermeneutics***

The active and dynamic view of man presented above can be linked to a perspective on intercultural issues that Peter Nynäs (2001) has called *Intercultural hermeneutics*. With humanities, theology and especially hermeneutic theory as their point of departure, scholars in this emerging perspective want to develop a more dynamic and humane way of understanding cultural encounters, as an alternative to the deterministic views on culture and man that characterise many contemporary discussions on interculturality. The tendency to treat rational aspects of the encounter as the whole solution has lately met

critique in this field. Besides knowledge and intellectual perspectives, how we interpret, understand and express encounters is also of great importance, emphasises Nynäs (2001). Encountering always includes establishing an interpersonal relationship – it comes down to an attitude of openness and interest towards the other. In this perspective, differences on the outside are not definitive and measurable – actually, these say rather little about how different we are as such and to each other (Lillhannus 2001). Thus, an encounter is always an interpretation: people experience them in different ways and value them differently. Confidence and reciprocity, respect, empathy and the willingness to understand hence become keys in the actual encounter (Dahl 2001).

This humanistic perspective, which I too use in my analysis, places the individual in the focal point. Interest is directed towards the experience of estrangement and the quality of meeting, towards questions concerning understanding and interpretation of reality. Such aspects are more interesting than assumptions based on predetermined cultural differences. Abstract boundaries between people, like ethnicity or colour, are not as exiting as the views on how they are interpreted and experienced by different persons. Thus, personal attitudes based on experienced estrangement and understanding, or self-image and image of those we consider other – coloured by the experience of encounter - replace the systems. Nynäs (2001) suggests five points of departure for intercultural hermeneutics:

- Understanding: Reciprocity and mutual understanding are neither given nor impossible in the cultural encounter, as understanding is not a simple question of knowledge.
- Interpretation: The individual is not a passive receiver – she actively works through her experiences.
- Context: All individuals are part of a social community; they start from a cultural background against which they interpret cultural encounters.
- Language: How a person in words expresses the boundaries she experiences creates limits and possibilities for communication and understanding.
- Estrangement: Similarity and difference are not concepts given in advance but are open to subjective negotiation in the encounter.

Peter Winch can also be quoted in support for this hermeneutical position: we do not only absorb a culture, he states; we also react on it (Winch 1958). Culture and religion

shape human behaviour in society - and values and meanings are being shaped by the individual *in* society.

Reijo E. Heinonen (1997), another scholar in this field, proposes the term *arvomuisti*, *value memory*, as the foundation of our attitude to experienced others. Heinonen, too, underlines the importance of regarding the cultural encounter as involving elements of knowledge, attitude and commitment (Heinonen 1997). Self-knowledge, he underlines, should also be taken into account: a consciousness of the value judgements and conceptions that form the foundation of one's personal motivation. Therefore, an encounter is characterised by much more than just certain knowledge and predictable (and controllable) components – our prejudgements and world-view are entities that to a far greater extent form our encounters (Lillhannus 2001).

Heinonen suggests the concept *value memory* (*arvomuisti*), as the perspective in which we always regard people from other cultures and religions. In the holy scriptures of the religions, in their traditions, rituals and myths, fundamental values are being expressed - thoughts that have grown over centuries. These constitute what Heinonen calls a culture's value memory. Also for persons who do not actively practise religion, these fundamental values embedded in culture are central to the apprehension of reality. In new situations that urge us to take a stand and to find new ways of orientating ourselves - in the contact with representatives of other cultures and religions - we usually without reflecting that much take refuge to these basic values and the general outlines they offer. The term bears many similarities with the symbolic universe proposed by Berger & Luckmann (1975), but in this context, I feel that the value memory as a term offers advantages in our strivings for a deeper understanding of stereotypes in cultural encounters. The value memory, namely, should not only be seen as a frame forming us from the outside. It is also strongly connected to the personal emotional life, which gives this interpretative frame priority in the encounter (Heinonen 1997). This requires us to take in yet another perspective to supplement the theoretical framework being built in this article.

### ***The Symbolic Character of Reality***

In Heinonen's view, it obviously makes a difference what kind of values we have stored in our memory-bank and what the mental representations are which underline and motivates our actions and reactions. This notion corresponds to Nils G. Holm's (1997) psychological analysis of human interpretation of reality. In presenting some terms from

this academic field, my aim is to form a more substantial theoretical perspective in which to understand the attempts of the trainees to create meaning in situations full of not just differing working methods but also altering values and opinions. This terminology could perhaps be of use also in a broader intercultural research effort.

Holm underlines the important role emotional aspects and symbols play in the individual processes of interpretation, *the symbolic creation of reality*, especially in complex situations such as the experience of an encounter. A *symbol*, as this many-sided concept is used by Holm, refers to a way of thinking and perceiving that comes in touch with such aspects of reality that cannot be expressed in any other way. A symbol can simply be defined as *something that points to a reality beyond the immediately given* (from the Greek word *symbolon*, unite) (Holm 1997: 18). In order to understand the symbols fostered by our own culture and to create a personal use of these, we need to be able to think in terms that surpass the immediately given. This requires abstract thinking that allows for concepts and items to obtain a deeper significance than the ordinary and immediate. The symbols are of great importance in our lives; through our ability to use them we build up our reality and without them our thinking would be impoverished, suggests Holm. The term *symbolic universe*<sup>14</sup> coined by the social theorists Berger & Luckmann is an essential component in this theory.

In psychology, symbols are often seen as unconscious, mental constructs that surpass cultural differences. For linguists, a symbol might be a linguistic form embedded in the speech act and for anthropologists again a material object with a collectively created meaning structure held alive by a cultural group (Leppäkari & Lillhannus 2001). In the perspective chosen for this analysis, with its roots in comparative religion, the symbol is seen as including all of these different qualities, united in one single form with both a function and a content. The external form of the symbol might be e.g. a geographical location (Leppäkari 1999); a special situation (an encounter, a ritual), a person or the role this person is seen to fill: the priest or the mother, but also e.g. the role of the stranger, or the other, can be interpreted in symbolical terms (Illman 2000; 2001), which is of interest in this particular article.

These symbolic components of our reality creation have two sides: an external and an internal – a commonly shared and a personal (Holm 1997). On one hand, we create our image of reality with the help of external, culturally shared material embraced

directly through learning or indirectly through the society we live in. In the religious traditions and culture as such, for instance, the structured experiences of generations have formed patterns including norms and habits, linguistic and behavioural forms. This reality made tangible by material symbols, such as texts, pictures, behavioural structures, Holm (1995) calls the *external existence space* (yttre existensrum). But our interpretations are also influenced by inner, personal factors and treatment of this material from the outside world: the experience has an inside characterised by traits of the unique experiencing individual. This important inner world is the *inner existence space* (inre existensrum). Here, the symbols from the outside are worked through.

In the process of bringing together the inner and the outer worlds symbols play a crucial role. Through this treatment, the new impressions are joined to previous remodelled memories, emotions and experiences. Thus, the external culturally shared norms and attitudes get personal interpretations characterised by the complicated composition of the innermost being of every individual. With this view, Holm connects the dynamic inner world with the frames and contents provided by an external socio-cultural context and describes the importance of contents and functions of symbols in the vital interaction between the two.

### ***Hermeneutical Ontology & Stereotypes as Symbols***

After this presentation of an alternative theoretical frame for the interpretation of cultural encounters, and specifically the stereotypical images included in the descriptions of these encounters, it is now time to analyse what advantages these lines of thoughts can offer in this particular study. Turning back to the research material and the question of the richly varying forms and functions of the stereotypes found in the diaries; we find that there might not be just *one* correct answer to the question asked in the beginning of the article: *why* do we need these stereotypes, *why* do we need structures and categories in our minds? Regarding the subjects under study, i.e. the trainees, as active and reflecting actors in a hermeneutical process of meaning creation, we can observe that much of the literature within the field of intercultural communication is of little use in trying to understand the complex processes involved. Many interculturalists draw up fairly simple pictures of cultural encounters, suggesting as the solution to the problem different kinds

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<sup>14</sup> In this context it is defined as a cognitive and behavioural structure formed and distributed by society or a social group (Holm 1997, 23).

of communication models for intercultural situations<sup>15</sup>, diagrams of national characteristics<sup>16</sup>, step-by-step models for the development of cultural encounters and handbooks (or so called “how to” books) on specific cultures (Bennett 1998; Dahlén 2001). According to this view, success in the intercultural arena depends solely on intellectual knowledge; differences are predetermined so that your own cultural belonging defines how far from another given culture you stand. The cultural encounter is thus compared to a game: She who knows the rules is an unerring winner.

But as we has been mentioned before in this article; the tendency to treat encounters as rational and predictable events has lately met critique from researchers positioned in the field of hermeneutics (Nynäs 2001). Encountering always includes establishing an interpersonal relationship; it involves complex human beings with complex views on reality. Thus, encountering comes down to an attitude of openness and interest towards the other – human beings are not just objects prearranged in categories and groups – they have the ability to surprise. By the help of these hermeneutical notions of interculturality, thus, I believe that a more thorough understanding of the images of the other portrayed in the research material can be obtained. The images are dynamic – they change from time to time in the particular field diaries and they vary greatly from one person to another. Therefore, a dynamic theory of man, of culture and knowledge that gives room for human interpretation and understanding is needed.

The fact that stereotypes might have something to do with cognitive structures in the human mind, and hence are indispensable, has been suggested before<sup>17</sup>, but the implications of this turn to a more profound way of regarding the function, prerequisites and content of the stereotypes that my proposition implicates must now be taken seriously. If we deepen our conception of the stereotypes and their central features and regard them as fundamental structures with important functions in the construction of reality, hence, we must also strive to deepen our understanding of the significance they have for us. In this situation, I find it elucidating to connect the stereotypes in the material to Nils G. Holms theory on symbolic reality creation, regarding the different images in the material as symbols in Holm’s sense of the word. Holm’s introduction of the symbolic dimension into the process of meaning creation (Holm 1995; 1997) takes the interplay of personal and cultural perspectives into account - a vitally important

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<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Hall (1969), Gudykunst (1988).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Hofstede (1994).

<sup>17</sup> Especially by Singer (1998).

correspondence for the individual<sup>18</sup>. This symbolical perspective is both elucidating and thought provoking in connection to the categorical images found in the research material as it is a fusion of a psychological and a phenomenological<sup>19</sup> view on the character and function of the symbol.

According to this symbol theory, presented in general earlier, we learn in an early stage of life to separate between good and evil as basic dimensions of our social reality. Consequently, we learn to name our experiences and arrange them into these two fundamental categories (Holm 1995). The link to attribution theory<sup>20</sup> is clear; our lives are seen as accompanied by constant searches for meaning.

Our memory does not work as a camera but has both cognitive and emotional sides. Hence, we actively mould events and emotions in our mind – we forget, reinterpret, repress and enlarge. We also fuse our experiences into categories and sort them into “memory-drawers”<sup>21</sup>. This is done by means of symbols. Hence, in our inner existence space we create a personal image of e.g. the evil or the good, the heroic, on the basis of social material. As already stated, this symbol has not just knowledge and experience but also emotions and values connected to it (Holm 1997). Forming an opinion on how the individual treats the external symbols in her inner existence space is a delicate task depending on intra-psycho components, and hence, this cannot be the striving of this article. It is possible to implicate, though, that this process is what we encounter in the field diaries; the personal use of stereotypes can be seen as inner treatments of external symbols of the stranger, the other – sometimes as a positive feature (the adventure) but sometimes also as a negative one (the evil, the strange). When external and internal symbols interplay we experience a symbolic reality with strong legitimating power – thus the strong validity that these stereotypical explanations hold to some of the trainees in some situations.

The symbolic dimension discussed here is connected not just to religion and culture but has a vital function in our everyday lives, in contemporary, secularised world-views. The use of symbols provides us with meaning on a profound, existential level.

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<sup>18</sup> Siv Illman (1992) previously presented a similar integrated theoretical approach to give theoretical description to more specific life situations.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to distinguish between the philosophical tradition called phenomenology, with e.g. Husserl and Heidegger as prominent figures, and the tradition deriving from comparative religion with the same name that was formed by e.g. Otto and Schleiermacher. This context refers to the latter.

<sup>20</sup> Especially, I want to connect to interpretations of this theory where implications for questions relating to world-view, religion and the view of reality as culturally conditioned have been furthered; see Geels & Wikström 1993; Proudfoot & Shaver 1997; Spilka & McIntosh 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Cp. with the discussion on stereotypes and categorisation presented earlier in this paper.



Due to this wide range, this specific symbol theory is of interest when studying the world-views of the trainees and the position held by cultural stereotypes in this construct. Our ability to pick up symbols and comprehend their meaning gives us the possibility to bring forth a chain of associations embracing centuries and generations by using only one single word<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, the symbol is a convenient tool in our inner world and in communication: *"Through the symbolic function, a major psychic memory can be preserved and instantly actuated for the individual"* (Holm 1995, 136). These categorising, mediating and meaning-rendering functions of symbols could, in my opinion, be connected to the cultural stereotypes and their occurrences in the research material. Consequently, my argument is that cultural stereotypes, to some extent, can be understood as expressions of a symbolic way of approaching reality, a way that is perceived as meaningful by the trainees in the specific situation. The stereotype images presented by the informants about people from other cultures might become a little bit more comprehensible when interpreted in the terminology of symbols.

According to the theory, we create an object of projection representing e.g. everything evil or everything beautiful with the help of a symbolising function connected to intra-psychic structures as well as to reactions to and influences from surrounding society. A specific character may in this way become the symbol of all the thoughts, emotions, experiences and teachings we choose to attribute to it. My suggestion is that such objects of projection is involved in some of the cultural encounters presented in the field diaries. The symbolical stranger is brought to the fore in encounters with people they feel they do not know and feel incapable of understanding, people who live and dress in strange ways, whose world-views they neither share nor accept. On the other hand, the symbolical ideal - the hero, the idol - is awaked in encounters with people that the trainees perceive as attractive and engaging, in contexts that have a flavour or exotism, adventure – an idealised otherness.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

When the views of intercultural hermeneutics are connected with the concepts of external and inner existence space, I believe we have a framework that facilitates an

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<sup>22</sup> By drawing the symbol of a heart on a post card the receiver of my card will know much more than if I had filled the card with ever so many words. This is because the symbol expresses emotions, historical connotations, and personal features, too. The hart is a symbol of love in our society and by using it properly I prove that I have understood what it stands for. Nevertheless, the symbol might have a personal significance for me personally, connected to my personal history and specific cognitive constitution.

interpretation of the stereotypes found in the material, at least partially. My aim in this paper was to show that (1) the images of the other portrayed in the research material cannot be explained by any simple templates or schemes: the trainees whose field diaries have been analysed here must be regarded as conscious actors, actively reflecting their experiences and encounters. Thus, the need for a hermeneutically based theory on interculturality. I also aimed at showing that (2), stereotypes can be viewed as symbolical notions, constructed through an external as well as an internal process of reality creation performed by the individual, thus explaining the emotional evaluations of the images in the texts. The cultural stereotypes could, consequently, be apprehended as explanations of reality connected to emotional factors and cognitive structures in our inmost world of experience. These suggestions were made along the lines of Nils G. Holm's theory of the symbolical creation of reality I also want to suggest, that in our cultural tradition, perhaps in every individual, there exists a symbolic creation of "the other". It can therefore be a fruitful approach to regard the stereotyped judgements of the trainees as reactions to the association chains connected to symbolic structures of e.g. "the stranger" or "the outsider" actualised by the unfamiliar situation.

Finally, I want to turn back to the example given in the beginning of this article. If we can understand more of the symbolic dimension in the encounter between our business student and the local work force, many of the attached fears, negative thoughts and commonly shared xenophobic stories that go with it can be noticed as well. We may then better understand what it is all about – and it is possible to give the phenomenon a theoretical description to a larger extent. This could be a way of comprehending and gaining a deeper understanding for the harsh reaction of the trainee and the difficulty he finds in carrying out the task of writing recommending work certificates when reality, in his eyes, appears so diametrically different.

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