

REFLECTING ROMANIA. BETWEEN STEREOTYPING AND REALITY

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Abstract

The features that distinguish one culture from another and that give its uniqueness are not always considered from a favourable angle. When this happens, the perspective is biased by stereotypes, which may reflect a distorted image of a given culture/community. In the last decade, Romania's image abroad has been massively constructed through stereotypes. This paper sets out to look into how Romania is presented on the Internet, both by natives, and by foreigners. The aim of this analysis is to detect whether the already 'classical' stereotypes of Romania and Romanians are preserved in the two examples under study and how they influence the perception foreigners may develop of our culture.

Keywords: *stereotyping, identity, intercultural communication, interaction, culture*

JEL Classification: Z10

1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, a consideration of the social interaction context would be utterly incomplete in the absence of intercultural communication. One can no longer deny its relevance for everyday occurrences and encounters. This is precisely due to the fact that intercultural situations have become so embedded in the weave of social interaction on the whole, that they are considered a datum of modern social communication.

Although intercultural communication is nowadays a concrete reality, the efficiency of this endeavour should not be taken for granted. In order to be successful when interacting interculturally, one should first be aware of cultural differences and then try to gap them by using a set of communicative skills that can be acquired through study and learning on the one hand and through direct, hands-on experiences, on the other.

Contact with a distinct culture can be mediated through the application of what might be called a vertical reading of that specific culture, i.e. the semiotic interpretation of the visible aspects reflecting its underlying structures and values. That is an interpretation of signs that make up the surface of that culture, from road infrastructure to the attitude of shop assistants or the condition of hotels and airports and the general atmosphere that you

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experience in the street or in pubs and restaurants. In a way, the information one extracts from and the overall impression one builds as a result of this surface contact with the receiving culture may be considered predictors for how someone is likely to behave when interacting with their culturally distinct partners of communication.

Nevertheless, there is another highly relevant factor which may dictate the success or failure of the interaction with another culture, at least in the first instances of interaction. This factor refers to stereotypes, a psychological construct that is used by almost everyone, whether we like to admit it or not. Stereotyping has been the focus of significant and consistent research, with many definitions and debates focusing on aspects such as origins, mechanisms of generation and manifestation of stereotypes or their variability and the best methods used to measure their scope and impact on social interaction.

For the purpose of this paper, I will use the definition proposed by Stangor, according to whom: “stereotypes represent the traits that we view as characteristic of social groups, or of individual members of those groups and particularly those that differentiate groups from each other. In short, they are the traits that come to mind quickly when we think about the groups” (2009: 2). A closer analysis of this definition reveals that the key terms used are “traits”, “groups” and “differentiate”. In other words, stereotyping reflects the way we perceive members of another group based on aspects such as one’s previous personal experience, the ideas and (mis)conceptions that one’s own group applies to other groups and/or the oversimplification of traits ascribed to other groups. Therefore, the conceptualisation of stereotypes has often been linked, in the specialty literature and in everyday life alike, to concepts such as disapproval, generalisation and inaccuracy.

In order to fully grasp the meaning of stereotypes, perhaps it would be useful to see the mechanisms through which they operate. According to McGarty et. al (2004, 2), researchers have designed three principles which they apply when dealing with stereotypes. One is that stereotypes facilitate explanation, another is that they are devices which save energy and the last one refers to the fact that stereotypes are beliefs shared by a group with respect to other groups/communities etc. The first of these principles suggests that stereotypes assist the perceiver in making sense of a given situation, the second conveys the idea that they help the perceiver save the effort involved by attempts to decode and interpret a given circumstance, while the last principle infers that stereotypes are actually formed in compliance with the already existing norms and beliefs circulated by the group to which the perceiver belongs.

Due to their nature which relies on generalisation and judgment based on insufficient knowledge of and experience with a new culture/community etc., it is obvious that stereotypes “sometimes lead to errors, biases, self-fulfilling prophecies and a variety of unfair and unjustified outcomes” (Jussim et al, 2009: 203). Further consequences translate into social exclusion, marginalisation and even aggression towards the victim of stereotyping. It is worth mentioning that stereotypes need to be conceptualised in a cultural and social context and that they are not always frozen in time. They tend to follow the dynamics of the social context. See, for instance, stereotypes based on the distribution of social roles according to gender, profession or age.

Despite the fact that stereotypes are usually considered from a negative perspective, sometimes they may have a positive orientation, when they help us predict behaviour and thus prepare us to think of solutions to overcome possible roadblocks, which happen frequently in intercultural interactions. At the same time, the information that may gather about a certain group/community may be overwhelming, and in order to avoid information overload, we have developed a mechanism to structure and simplify data by organizing it into various patterns (Brozba, 2010).

Actually, this reflects the first principle mentioned above, which indicates that stereotypes facilitate explanation and assist someone in decoding a given situation or encounter based on what s/he already expects to be faced with. However, it seems that “we generate many more negative than positive stereotypes when asked to do so, and even expressing positive stereotypes is not seen positively” (Stangor, 2009: 2), since it is automatically implied that we have negative ones as well.

Although it is difficult to control stereotypes, as they represent social categorisations that are constructed in time and rely on patterns that have already been around for years, caution is advised as to the extent to which we allow them to guide and influence our interactions with the others. At the same time, we should be aware that, whether we like it or not, we are all subjects of stereotyping and prone to creating stereotypes, regardless of whether we refer to gender, age, profession, religion etc.

Awareness of the generation and use of stereotypes is actually a highly useful means to fight them. There are also other paths than can be taken in order to limit stereotyping: “through fostering perceptions of shared identities, encouraging meaningful contact that defies group boundaries, and highlighting similarities on other dimensions unrelated to group distinctions, the ingroup and outgroup can begin to see each other as more similar than different, thereby reducing negative intergroup actions and promoting positive ones” (*Ibidem*, 10).

2. Discussion

In this paper, I am addressing the issue of stereotyping by relying on a case study which involves two perspectives on the surface structure of Romanian culture. One belongs to a team of native Romanians who run the web page www.romania-insider.com, the other is extracted from a foreign web page administered by people outside Romania, www.expattarrivals.com. The two web pages have seemingly similar purposes, but target rather different groups. The Romanian web page, which is extremely well-run and well-organised, addresses many aspects of Romanian culture, from politics to news, social and cultural events. The selection of information considers the readers’ interests in the local culture and events are analysed from an objective standpoint; all in all, it is a highly valuable resource for anyone who is interested in Romania and its culture. The topics upon which my analysis focuses from the perspective of stereotyping target potential tourists visiting Romania.

On the other hand, there is the foreign web page, with contributors from around the world, which, as the name suggests, mainly targets expats (it specifies that it contains “local information for global expats”). The content is organised on continents and countries. The team presents information structured on categories such as education,

transport, healthcare, accommodation etc. The data are constantly updated and presented in a straightforward manner, the general impression being that the editorial team attempts to inform readers by maintaining a neutral position. A very useful part of the chapter dedicated to Romania is the one called “Expat experiences in Romania”, in which former and current expats share their everyday experiences in our country.

The logical question which arises is the following: when you go abroad and do your homework before leaving, would you be more prone to believing what locals say about that place or to listening to the opinion of other foreigners who visited it before you? This comparative analysis aims to identify two perspectives on the same reality, one which comes from the inside, from people who live this reality every day of their life and who may disregard aspects which are relevant for a foreigner or see them in a subjective light. The other perspective belongs to the foreigner, the Other, who presents their Romanian experience with the argument of unmediated encounter, since most of the information relies on testimonials from other foreigners who had come into contact with Romanian culture. Obviously, these too bear the mark of subjectivity, since the accounts are biased by a positive or a negative experience.

The article analysed here which was taken from romania-insider.com is called “Romania crash course – 10 things any foreigner should know”. Basically, judging by the title, the data contained in the article are aimed at the information of practically anyone interested in our country, with a stronger on potential tourists.

How a given culture/group sees itself can also be subjected to self-stereotyping. This is precisely the case with the article from [Romania-insider](http://romania-insider.com), which is signed by an insider, a Romanian, and is targeted at foreigners. It is a very relevant example of how self-stereotyping works. In case of self-stereotyping, the concept of social identity comes into play. Social identity is distinct from personal identity, which is formed through personal relationships and idiosyncratic features. Hogg and Abrams claim that “because social identities define, prescribe and evaluate who one is and how one should think, feel and act, people have a strong desire to establish or maintain the evaluative superiority of their own group over relevant other groups – there is an inter-group struggle for evaluative positive group distinctiveness” (2003:421). According to research on self-stereotyping, which is also reinforced by the above-mentioned scientists, when self-stereotyping, the general tendency is to emphasise the positive traits assigned to the group to which the perceiver belongs.

However, as we will see in what follows, the author of the cited article chooses to highlight mostly negative traits which are normally associated with Romanians and Romanian culture. It is incomprehensible why the author opted to take such a negative approach in an informative text which is meant to depict one’s culture in a manner that should motivate people to visit his country and not discourage them before even arriving at their destination.

The introduction is not very motivating, although the intention of the author is manifestly expressed: to ease foreigners’ adjustment to Romania, which, in the author’s opinion, means being prepared for an utterly negative experience. In other words, he offers to mediate the impact of any potential culture shock: “First time in Romania? Or planning to arrive for business or pleasure? Here are 10 hints that will bring a smoother

adjustment to the country. In most cases, we're focusing on the worst case scenario, especially for things that we know happen quite often in Romania. Be ready for them and enjoy the exceptions – plenty of which DO exist in Romania!". In other words, the alternatives to any negative scenarios that might happen are only exceptions, and not the norm in Romanian society. The author fails to be convincing in his attempt to persuade potential visitors of the opposite, even though he uses capital letters in his effort to do so.

The ten topics which are discussed in the article represent areas of interest for anyone who wishes to initiate contact with another culture: language, time, agreements, parties, family, infrastructure, small talk topics & interests, status symbols, relationships and safety. Unfortunately, all these topics are covered from a negative perspective. For instance, foreigners are informed that they will hardly find any official signage in English. Presumably, the reason for this warning is to "save them from having too high expectations". In terms of agreements, potential business people are warned to "brace themselves for swimming in uncertain waters".

Not very encouraging if one intends to initiate a business contact with Romanian companies.

The negative description of Romania reaches its climax in the approach to infrastructure. One of the most frequently met stereotypes foreigners apply to Romania is that road infrastructure needs improvement. The author of the cited article strengthens this stereotype in very vehement words: "You might have heard about Romania's bad road infrastructure. But nobody will prepare you for the full extent of it until you drive on a road full of potholes: it will ruin your mood for holidaying. Prepare mentally for that possibility every time you go around driving in Romania and remember that in most cases, amazing places will await for you at the end of the roads. Try not to be frustrated [...]".

Another stereotype that is addressed in the article refers to status symbols. Although they do not differ from what most cultures regard as signs of status, the Romanian author chooses to emphasise the negative aspects associated with status symbols. Surprisingly, he specifically expresses that the presentation of these symbols relies on generalisations and advises caution when dealing with them. In other words, he is aware that such generalisations could be detrimental to the image of his culture; nevertheless, he consciously does what he advises others not to: "Below we list some of the most important status symbols for many Romanians [...] (these are generalisations, they do apply to many people, but not to all – so it is always safe to check, rather than presume, what values a person holds dear)". Presented as they are in this article, the symbols that define status for "many Romanians" suggest a shallow culture, whose values reflect a concern for superficiality and the ephemeral.

If we were to draw the conclusion of this presumably motivating article, that would be that foreigners are strongly discouraged to visit Romania unless they are well-prepared for disappointment. They should come to Romania with a low level of expectations and should be prepared that, in a nutshell, in this culture positive things are not the rule, but the exception.

The biased presentation of Romania and Romanians undermines the positive image of our culture and society by displaying values, perceptions and beliefs which do not apply to all of its members. At the same time, it creates negative expectations with

potential visitors, who may thus come to Romania prepared for the worse. Undoubtedly, it is unlikely that the Romanian experience could really be defined by entirely negative happenings. Surprisingly, the author of the article, who is a local, takes on and preserves some of the most frequently met stereotypes about Romania. The mere fact that he approaches them without even attempting to demolish them is, in a way, a form of endorsement; he admits to the stereotypes being accurate and legitimate. Who better to know the weak spots of a community/group if not one of its members?

On the other hand, there is the information on Romania available on the web page expatarrivals.com. While the Romanian article seems to address potential visitors rather than business people or persons who might wish to come and work in Romania permanently or temporarily, this latter category seems to be the target readership of the contributors from expatarrivals.com. The introductory paragraph, however, briefly mentions the stereotypes most often associated with Romania: “Expats moving to Romania will find it both challenging and rewarding. For many, Romania conjures images of gypsies, Dracula and Transylvania, but it has far more to offer. The country is growing as an international tourism destination and a gateway to business in Eastern Europe”. In a single paragraph, it does more service to the image of Romania as a country worth visiting/moving to than the entire Romanian article.

The content is presented in a well-structured and objective manner and highly professional in terms of updated information and the selection of topics that would be of utmost interest to expats. They can find details on areas such as education, accommodation, healthcare and even a very useful insight related to the culture shock foreigners may experience upon their arrival to Romania. I particularly focused on the article on culture shock, since it is the one most likely to address stereotypes. Indeed, the introduction to this category of information warns foreigners to be prepared for some setbacks, but without the vehemence of the Romanian article: “Foreigners can expect to find much that will initially seem strange and inspire a fair degree of culture shock in Romania. That said, the country has opened up to the world at large, meaning that the challenges expats face when adjusting to life in Romania are diminishing as it becomes increasingly Westernised”. This Westernisation is not exactly fortunate for the preservation of national identity, but, in this particular context, it is useful for the adjustment of foreigners to Romanian realities.

The web page also displays the category of Frequently Asked Questions, and one which is called Expat Experiences. These are extremely useful, since expats already living and working in Romania or who did this at some point share their Romanian experience. The issues touched upon are extremely varied, from cost of living to social life and work culture. The testimonials of the expats living in Romania are mostly positive; the most common complaints refer to road infrastructure, public administration and the language. Overall, after reading the information on this web page, the general impression is that www.expatarrivals.com is a useful resource for people interested in Romania, precisely due to the largely unbiased and balanced depiction of both positive and negative aspects pertaining of Romanian culture and society.

3. Conclusion

Difference and otherness are not only prevalent coordinates of social and cultural life which cannot be ignored, but they are also concepts which should be preserved and enhanced due to their potential for strengthening individuality and for the multitude of valid perspectives on reality. However, under various types of social pressure and as a consequence of inherited preconceived ideas, they are prone to generating stereotypes. Negative stereotyping in particular may be difficult to struggle against, since it is in the human nature to resort to categorisation and labelling as mechanisms to simplify an overload of information and since it mostly occurs out of awareness.

The comparative analysis of the information on Romania presented on the above-mentioned web pages reveals that stereotyping can be used and approached from different perspectives, with distinct consequences. On the one hand, there was the article signed by a local, a native Romanian, who chose to emphasise a series of mostly negative stereotypes about his own country. Although in the article humour pervades the rather gloomy perspective on stereotypes, it hardly manages to counterbalance the dominantly negative final impression readers may be left with after reading the information. Most likely, the author fails to achieve the intended effect of the article (that of assisting foreigners in coping with Romanian realities), which pushes potential visitors off rather than motivates them to embark on a Romanian adventure.

On the other hand, the style, organisation and presentation of information on expatarrivals.com accurately reflect the general aim of the contributors (which is actually similar to the one intended by the Romanian article): to inform and help expats going to Romania to adjust to a completely new culture, by approaching both positive and negative aspects. Consequently, the information on this web page can be significantly more useful to foreigners than the criticism the Romanian author makes of his own country under the guise of a “crash course” intended for foreigners’ use.

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