

Auto-stereotypes of Portuguese and Dutch Managers

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Abstract

Previous studies have found that stereotypes held on members of the same group (auto-stereotypes) may influence managers' attitudes and behaviour. The present study develops a measure of managers' auto-stereotypes based on traits related to a fundamental managerial activity: decision-making. It also attempts to validate this instrument and to establish its cross-cultural equivalence using samples of Portuguese and Dutch managers. Results of this study may have practical applications in training courses for managers, particularly in the field of intercultural interactions.

Introduction

American journalist Walter Lippmann [1] is usually acknowledged for coining the term stereotype as a social sciences concept [e.g., 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Since Lippmann's 1922 book *Public Opinion*, the phrase "pictures in our heads" (p.1, subtitle of Chapter 1) has often been quoted and reflected in later conceptualizations of the term.

A stereotype is a group of beliefs about persons who are members of a particular group. These beliefs may be about the traits, values, behaviours, or opinions of people previously categorized as belonging to a group [7, 8, 9]. The cognitive approach to stereotypes argues that they may be viewed as cognitive schemas, reducing the need to attend to and to process individual information about the other [10, 11]. Despite the negative connotations that are usually associated with stereotypes, they may be simply viewed as a normal psychological process used by individuals to keep track of groups around them [12].

In the early history of theory and research on stereotypes, the subject was treated in conjunction with prejudice and analysed in terms of its negative implications for the evaluation of members of out-groups and even for inter-group hostility [2,7,13]. However, later research revealed that interacting social groups may hold positive stereotypes about one another [9, 14]. Furthermore, stereotypes may be defined across many dimensions, and individuals may hold positive images on some dimensions but not others [9, 13].

While most empirical research on stereotypes has been conducted with interacting social groups (especially with individuals from different nationalities or ethnic groups), stereotypes are not restricted to perceptions of out-groups. They may be applied to in-groups, that is, groups to which the perceiver belongs [9, 14, 15]. Some studies clearly use a distinction between auto-stereotypes - stereotypes on members of the own-group - and hetero-stereotypes - stereotypes on members of other groups [9, 14]. However, research on auto-stereotypes has mainly been used for assessing the accuracy of hetero-stereotypes [4]. Very few studies have been undertaken on the effects of auto-stereotypes on individuals interacting with members of the same group.

As far as stereotyping in the workplace is concerned, research has been conducted primarily on issues related to women in management [16, 17, 18]. Another important stream of research is concerned with issues related to management in international contexts [18, 19]. Several studies have been undertaken on the content and accuracy of stereotypes held by international managers as well as on the impact of stereotypes on the conduct of business in intercultural contexts [18, 20].

The present study aims to be a contribution for the study of stereotypes in the workplace. The main purpose is to extend cross-cultural research on stereotypes in the particular field of managers' auto-stereotypes.

Literature review

An examination of some of the most influential definitions of stereotypes [e.g., 2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 21, 22] shows that theorists are not at serious odds about how the concept should be defined.

The areas of agreement regarding the concept of stereotypes can be summarized as: 1) Stereotypes are cognitive structures, they serve to simplify cognition and perception, helping individuals to process information about their environment; 2) Stereotypes involve a form of categorization, since the identification of group membership is the basis for processing information on individuals belonging to that category; and 3) Stereotypes involve a form of generalization, they are a set of beliefs about the traits or attributes of a certain group, which are considered to be characteristic of all members of that group.

The effects of stereotypes in social interactions are much related to the functions stereotypes serve for the people who hold them. Five main functions have been recognized in the literature [2, 7, 11, 15, 23]:

- Stereotypes may serve a knowledge function, when they are used as cognitive shortcuts that simplify and reduce information-processing demands about individuals.
- Stereotypes may serve a value-expression function, since expressing stereotypes is an affirmation of part of a system of beliefs that one accepts as one's own.
- Stereotypes may serve an explanatory or utilitarian function, when they are used to justify or rationalize existing patterns of behavior in social interactions.
- Stereotypes may serve an ego-defensive function, when they are used to establish or strengthen the positive aspects of one's social identity, by expressing a positively valued difference.
- Stereotypes may serve an adaptational function, since they generate expectations and inferences about a target group or individual, which in turn allow for the differentiation of behavior according to these expectations and inferences, and therefore facilitate the choice of actions and behavior when interacting with others.

All these functions apply to both hetero-stereotypes and auto-stereotypes. Previous research has shown that the auto-stereotypes of managers of a particular nationality may be antecedent conditions of their subsequent perceptions, behaviors and attitudes. For example, the auto-stereotypes of Marketing managers were found to be the variable with the highest predictive power for ethical decision-making in this group [24], and the auto-stereotypes of Navy Officers were found to be strongly correlated with job satisfaction as well as with stress levels [25].

However, previous questionnaires on stereotypes tend to use items related to social situations. The present study attempts to develop a measure of managers' auto-stereotypes with items clearly related to management activities. For this, items will be sampled based on a literature review on decision-making. The view of decision-making as the central focus of management has long been recognized by many management scholars [e.g., 26, 27, 28, 29].

Various disciplines have acknowledged the importance of decision-making and provided significant contributions to its study, resulting in multiple theoretical perspectives and different foci of analysis.

A recent study [30] argues that three conceptually distinct aspects of decision-making can be identified in the existing vast body of literature: Cognitive aspects, for which the “rational” label is generally employed; social interaction aspects, usually labelled as “political”; and environmental adaptation aspects, for which different labels have been used, the “entrepreneurial” label being the broader in meaning. More specifically, the rational domain relates to thorough and systematic information processing and the development of alternative courses of action. The political domain includes aspects such as the influence of power and political actions on decision processes, the scope for negotiations, and the extent of openness to others reflected in the search for agreement. The entrepreneurial domain covers aspects such as creativity and novelty in finding alternatives, acceptance of risk and change, and proactiveness in the identification of problems and opportunities.

The sampling of items to build a measure of managers’ auto-stereotypes was guided by these three domains of decision-making.

Developing the auto-stereotypes instrument

The design of the auto-stereotypes measure followed the much used method of positive and negative trait adjectives [e.g., 31]. Sixteen items were developed in connection with each of the three decision-making domains (Table I). Each item had a positive and a negative pole, separated by a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 was to be chosen if respondents thought that the left word represented their general image clearly better than the right word, and 6 was to be chosen if the reverse happened. To avoid having the positive pole always on the same side of the scale, half of the items were reversed, and a random order was then attributed to the 48 items. When data were introduced in SPSS, answers were re-coded so that scores ranged from negative to positive. Items were originally written in English and subsequently translated into Dutch and Portuguese using a translation-back translation process.

The research method followed in this paper is essentially exploratory, since we were unable to find previous studies analyzing managers’ stereotypes with a questionnaire related to decision-making dimensions. Hence, no hypotheses will be formulated.

Data collection and sample

The instrument was sent to a sample of Portuguese managers and a sample of Dutch managers. The Portuguese sample was obtained by contacting Human Resource managers included in a list gathered by a Portuguese association of post-graduate students in HR. Managers in the list were contacted and sent information on the study. Those who agreed to participate were sent the instruments to distribute in their organization, together with pre-paid return envelopes. Of the 250 questionnaires sent, 102 were returned, for a response rate of 41%.

To obtain the Dutch sample, lists of managers from Dutch Chambers of Commerce were used. Executives whose e-mail was provided on the list of the Chamber of Commerce were sent information on the study. Those who agreed to participate were asked to distribute the questionnaire to individuals in various departments of their organizations. Instruments were mailed-out with pre-paid return envelopes. Of the 300 questionnaires sent, only 67 were returned, for a response rate of 22%.

Table I – Items in the stereotypes questionnaire

Rational Dimension		Political Dimension		Entrepreneurial Dimension	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Thorough *	Superficial	Communicative *	Non communicative	Preventive *	Non preventive
Selective *	Undiscerning	Reserved	Chatterers	Endowed with a spirit of initiative *	Devoid of a spirit of initiative
Methodical	Disorganized	Non secretive	Secretive	Optimistic	Pessimistic
Quick	Slow	Discreet	Indiscreet	Sceptical	Gullible
Thoughtful *	Hasty	Frank	Devious	Endowed with a sense of vision *	Devoid of a sense of vision
Decisive	Indecisive	Diplomatic *	Tactless	Autonomous	Dependent
Objective	Subjective	Ethical *	Unscrupulous	Long term oriented	Short term oriented
Intuitive *	Without intuition	Wordly-wise	Naïve	Active *	Contemplative
Broad-minded *	Narrow-minded	Team spirited *	Not team-spirited	Creative *	Non creative
Practical	Theoretical	Competitive *	Non competitive	Down to Earth *	Utopian
Versatile *	Limited	Respectful	Insubordinate	Progressive	Conservative
Specialists	Generalists	Non subservient	Subservient	Orthodox *	Anarchical
Open-minded *	Dogmatic	Consensus oriented	Obstinate	Challengers	Conformists
Consistent	Unsteady	Firm *	Yielding	Dutiful	Slackers
Flexible	Rigid	Democratic *	Autocratic	Adventurous	Wary
Perservering *	Wavering	Self-confident *	Lacking self confidence	Prudent *	Rash

* Reversed item

Within the Portuguese sample, about half of the respondents are male (49%) and half female (51%). The distribution of gender in the Dutch sample is not so homogeneous. The large majority of Dutch participants are male (78%) and only 15 participants (22%) are female. The Dutch sample has a slightly higher age average (40,9 years) than the Portuguese sample (38,3 years). This is also reflected in managers' working experience, where the average working experience for the Dutch is 18 years, while for the Portuguese it is 15,5 years. As far as the level of education is concerned, the large majority of participants in the Portuguese sample have a University degree (90%). This high level of education is also found in the Dutch sample, where 33% of participants have a University degree and 48% of participants have followed a Hogere Beroeps Opleiding degree (HBO, i.e., a tertiary level education in a professional field).

Positions in the organization's hierarchy were classified as top management (including CEOs and Directors), middle management (including middle managers, product managers, project managers, and geographical managers) and technical staff (participants that did not have a management position). There is a similar percentage of participants in top management positions in the Portuguese sample (30%) and in the Dutch sample (27%). However, more than half of Dutch participants (61%) are in middle management positions, whereas only 27% of Portuguese participants are in this category. This also entails a difference between the two samples in the category technical staff, which represents 42% of the Portuguese sample and only 10% of the Dutch sample.

The Dutch sample is almost entirely composed of participants working in private sector organizations (96%). However, in the Portuguese sample, almost ¼ of participants (24%) work in state-owned (public) organizations. The distribution of participants by organizational size was similar in the two samples, with the majority of participants working

in medium to large size organizations. Only 14% of Portuguese participants and 16% of Dutch participants worked in small size organizations (<100 employees).

Results

Analysis of country bias

Before analysing cross-cultural results, an analysis of cultural bias was undertaken in order to assess the likelihood of the equivalence of the scale in the national samples included in the study. Two types of bias were analysed: 1) Construct bias, which occurs when the construct as measured is not identical across cultural groups; and 2) Item bias, referring to differential functioning across cultures in individual items in the questionnaire [32].

In this study, construct bias is analysed by estimating agreement in factor loadings of items across samples using Tucker's ϕ . Item bias is analysed for each item separately, through conditional analysis of variance [32].

A preliminary factor analysis of the 48 items in the stereotypes questionnaire was undertaken, using principal axis factoring as the extraction method and direct oblimin as the rotation method. Results showed that a single factor explained 25% of variance. A scree-plot also suggested the extraction of one factor, which can be interpreted as the items providing a global image managers hold on colleagues from their own country.

When analysing the reliability of the 48-item scale, 7 items were found to have low correlations with the total scale (Selective, Reserved, Preventive, Sceptical, Active, Orthodox, and Prudent). After deleting these items, for the remaining 41-item scale, $\alpha=.93$ and the one-factor solution explains 27% of variance.

To analyse differential functioning of the individual items, two score levels were distinguished: low (below or equal to median) and high (above median). Conditional analysis of variance was then carried out, with the aim of verifying whether a main effect of country was present (evidence of uniform bias), and whether an effect of the interaction of country and score level was present (evidence of nonuniform bias) [32]. For 5 items (Methodical, Intuitive, Non-secretive, Non-subservient, and Down to Earth) there was evidence of uniform bias ($\eta^2>.08$).

After deleting these items, for the remaining 36-item scale $\alpha=.93$ in the Portuguese sample, and $\alpha=.90$ in the Dutch sample. The one-factor solution explains 30% of variance in the Portuguese sample and 24% in the Dutch sample. When analysing the structural equivalence of the factor obtained for Portuguese sample and the factor obtained for the Dutch sample, we found $\phi=.93$, and therefore the factors can be considered as equivalent.

Cross-cultural comparison of scores in the stereotypes scale

Having established the likelihood of equivalence in the two samples and the acceptable levels of reliability of the stereotypes scale, we computed the score of each participant in the scale by averaging the 36-items included. Subsequently, we compared the results in the two samples. There was a significant difference between the two samples, with eta squared (η^2) showing that the effect of group differences is considerable. Analysis of means shows that Portuguese managers hold a considerably more negative image on their colleagues than do Dutch managers (Table II).

When conducting analysis of variance for this scale, significant effects were found for age and sector, with older managers and managers from private sector organizations holding more negative views on their colleagues. When introducing these two variables as covariates, the difference between the country groups continued to be significant. The estimated

marginal means are 3.25 for the Portuguese group and 3.75 for the Dutch group, with Portuguese managers holding a more negative image on their colleagues.

Table II – Analysis of differences in the stereotypes scale

	Descriptives		ANOVA		
	Mean	Std	F	Sig	η^2
Portuguese managers	3,24	0,60	36,701	0,000	0,180
Dutch managers	3,77	0,49			

A more detailed analysis revealed that 71% of Portuguese managers on average scored below the mid-point of the scale (rating their co-nationals towards the negative side), while only 24% of Dutch managers did so. By contrast, 76% of Dutch managers on average scored above the mid-point of the scale (rating their co-nationals towards the positive side), while this was the case for only 29% of Portuguese managers. An analysis of separate items also revealed a striking difference between the Portuguese and the Dutch samples. Of the 36 items considered, only 9 averaged above the mid-point of the scale (towards the positive adjective) in the Portuguese sample. By contrast, in the Dutch sample only 6 items averaged below the mid-point of the scale (towards the negative adjective).

Conclusions

This study presents the development and assessment of a measure of managers' auto-stereotypes. Based on a literature review on decision-making, 48-items were developed. Following the analyses of reliability and of cross-cultural equivalence with samples, a one-factor measure with 36 items was identified. This measure may be used in future research assessing the impact of auto-stereotypes on managers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors – a field that currently has few but very promising results.

The study also contributed to the general research on stereotypes by revealing that auto-stereotypes are not always positive, and therefore do not always serve the purpose of maintaining a positive sense of self-esteem derived from group membership.

However, the small sample sizes do not allow for generalizations and the results of this study should be interpreted with caution.

For future research, we would consider it relevant to undertake a similar research with broader sample sizes and including a wider number of nationalities. Research on antecedent factors and consequences of managers' auto-stereotypes could also provide interesting topics to be used in training courses aimed at improving intercultural interactions.

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Acknowledgement

I gratefully acknowledge financial support from FCT- Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (Portugal), national funding through research grant (PEst-OE/EGE/UI4027/2014).