How Can We Overcome Cultural Stereotypes?

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This paper describes how the author and his Japanese university students have attempted to identify cultural stereotypes and overcome them. It is intended for foreign language and intercultural communication teachers who are concerned with issues of cultural stereotyping in their classrooms, curricula and textbooks. Stereotypes are a major area of concern within the field of intercultural communication. Often seen as part of a psychological continuum starting with generalization and ending with ethnocentrism and prejudice, stereotypes are considered a serious barrier to intercultural awareness and understanding. Because of this, a great deal of research has gone into studying ways in which to overcome stereotypes. Within the field of intercultural communication, for example, researchers have borrowed heavily from the work of social psychologists and educators concerned with cognition and cognitive processes. This paper critically examines psychologically based intercultural communication approaches and suggests that stereotypes can best be overcome when people from diverse backgrounds work together to discover how they are historically and socially constructed—and then move beyond them to create their own shared cultural experiences. To demonstrate this approach, ongoing work with Japanese college and university students is described. These students were enrolled either in content-based EFL or Japanese language cross-cultural communication courses. In class they shared stories, held group discussions and created activities which combined cultural topics of personal interest with standard categories of analysis from intercultural communication relating to stereotypes and stereotyping. These were then examined from a critical social and historical perspective. While it is impossible in a paper such as this to reproduce the actual collaborative process involved in this approach, many of the shared stories, discussions and activities appear below. It is hoped that this will allow the reader to actively join in the process of discussion and story building while reading this paper. Much of the theoretical background for this paper comes from the sociohistorical psychology of L. S. Vygotsky and A. R. Luria, and the liberation pedagogy of Paulo Freire.

Key words: stereotypes, ethnocentrism, prejudice, intercultural communication, intercultural awareness, social psychology, cognition, cognitive dissonance, socially constructed, critical social and historical analysis, content-based EFL (English as a foreign language) courses, cultural mythology, metaphor, colonialism, nationalism.

Introduction

Many introductory intercultural communication textbooks used at the college level begin by defining culture and outlining the history and purpose of the field. Following from this, the authors of such textbooks frequently attempt to introduce their readers to issues of stereotyping, ethnocentrism and prejudice. These three types of attributions are generally seen as a continuum which begins with the universal need for us to make generalizations about the world and the people around us. Because we all make generalizations, it is argued, all of us have the tendency to create stereotypes about others, view the world in an ethnocentric manner, and harbor prejudices. In order to build intercultural awareness and respect for other cultures, it is considered necessary that we acquire a variety of techniques—largely taken from social psychology—which will enable us to reduce our stereotypes, ethnocentricity and prejudices.

I have little problem with the idea that we all make generalizations to one extent or another at various times. However, how often and in what situations we do this varies widely from culture to culture. Vygotsky (1978), Luria (1979), Cole (1974) and others have clearly shown that the introduction of compulsory education and resultant methods of inductive "scientific" instruction actually serve to increase our tendency to generalize. In studies first conducted by Vygotsky and Luria
in Uzbekistan in the 1930s, and by Cole and Scriber in Liberia in the 1970s, it was found that people who have had at least several years of schooling tend to generalize more often than those who have not been formally educated. Similarly, Triandis (1987) argues that inductive reasoning has relatively low ecological validity (i.e., it is not universal).

Here, the key for me is the social rather than the psychological nature of generalization. If social conditions such as education can influence how frequently and under what conditions we make generalizations, how can we treat generalization as part of our universal psychological makeup? Likewise, how can we assume that stereotyping, ethnocentrism and prejudice are universal extensions of this, or that taken together they are part of some sort of psychological continuum? Furthermore, even if they are, this still doesn't explain how they are socially constructed. It seems to me that what we need do first (or, at least in conjunction with an examination of the psychological) is to look at the social reasons for (and by implication, the solutions to) stereotyping, ethnocentrism and prejudice. Treating these attributes as part of our universal psychological makeup, and thus divorced from their social reality will do little I am afraid to overcome the problem.

In this paper, therefore, I examine stereotyping from a critical social and historical perspective. In developing this perspective, I borrow heavily from the sociohistorical psychology of L. S. Vygotsky and A.R. Luria, as well as from the liberation pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Vygotsky lived and worked during the renaissance of Soviet academia, a brief period which began with the Bolshevik Revolution and died under the purges of Stalin (Newman & Holzman, 1993). He believed that psychology can only be understood by studying it in its social and historical (i.e., sociohistorical) contexts. By social, Vygotsky is referring to the primacy of social relations in the creation of human consciousness. Thus, rather than reducing psychology to the study of things hidden away in the mind, Vygotsky (1978) says that all mental processes begin at the level of concrete social activity.

Paulo Freire, meanwhile, was a Brazilian educator who won international acclaim for linking adult literacy among the poor in his country and around the world to issues of social consciousness. In his work with adult literacy in Brazil in the early 60s, he developed a concept which he called conscientização (often translated as "conscientization"). Brown (1974) writes that for Freire, this is a "process in which people are encouraged to analyze their reality, to become more aware of the constraints on their lives, and to take action to transform their situation. For Freire, education is either liberating or domesticating, teaching people either to be critical and free of constraints or to accept things as they are." This, then, is a process by which we first struggle to become aware of—and then struggle to overcome—the structural inequalities that are part and parcel of our society and the educational institutions that support and help reproduce that society.

In following the ideas of Vygotsky and Freire, I attempt to combine student interest in various aspects of culture with a critical social examination of what stereotyping means, where it comes from, and how we can deal with it. In embarking on this process, I should also mention that we look not only at possible student stereotypes, but many of my own as well.

The Culture of Food

Intercultural communication doesn't as a general rule treat food as a subject of study. My students do. What is more, it is their most common topic and the biggest area of popular interest in culture. For that reason, and also because in each course students work together with me to design their own syllabus, the culture of food is often the theme of one of the first lessons. Below are some fairly typical examples of questions I get about food and food culture:

1. Why do Japanese eat fish and rice but Westerners eat meat and bread?
2. Why is Thai food hot?
3. Why do Indians eat curry?
4. Why do Koreans eat kim chee?
5. Why do Chinese eat dog?
6. Why do Hawaiians eat pineapple and macadamia nuts?
7. Why do Italians eat spaghetti?
8. Why do Americans eat turkey?
9. Why don't Moslems eat pork?
10. Why don't Hindus eat beef?

Oftentimes, we write the questions on the board and then I tell the following story:

Imagine that you are a foreigner visiting Japan for the first time. You are only going to be here for a few days so first impressions are probably going to have a
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lot of influence on you. You leave your hotel on the first day and decide you want to try some Japanese food for lunch. You pass a ramen shop, a McDonald’s, a restaurant called “The Italian Tomato,” another ramen shop, a Mos-Burger, and two soba shops. You go into the second soba shop and have buckwheat noodles in a kind of soup. When you get back home, friends ask what they eat in Japan. You answer, “Hamburgers and noodles.”

Discussion:
1. Do you think this is an accurate descriptions of what Japanese eat?
2. Look at the list of ten frequently asked questions. How accurate do you think the descriptions are?
3. Where do people learn about these things?
4. How can you find out what people in different countries really eat?

What Is a Stereotype?

The term stereotype was first coined by Walter Lippman in 1922. According to Jandt (1998), it was originally used to describe judgments made by others on the basis of their ethnic group membership, however today it can be used to describe any group, including those based on gender, ethnicity, age, education, wealth, etc. (Smith and Bond, 1993).

Stereotypes are generally described as overgeneralized, oversimplified, second-hand beliefs which are widely held about the characteristics of a group of people (Barna, 1993; Guo-Ming Chen and Starosta, 1998; Martin and Nakayama, 2000; Triandis, 1994). They help guide our behavior toward a particular group of people (Samovar, Porter and Stefani, 1998), but give insufficient attention to individual differences among members of that group (Brislin, 1993). Stereotypes may be both positive and negative (Brislin, 1993; Jandt, 1998; Seelye, 1993), shared by others or individually held (Gudykunst, 1991; Smith and Bond, 1993), and they may reflect beliefs about one’s own group as well as beliefs about outside groups (Triandis, 1994). In addition, stereotypes may vary according to complexity, clarity, specificity, validity and value (Triandis, 1994). Finally, stereotypes are seen as pervasive (Samovar, Porter and Stefani, 1998), meaning that we all have them.

The most frequent reason given for the pervasive-ness of stereotypes is that humans have a psychological need to categorize, classify, organize and make sense out of the overwhelming amount of information about the world around us (Brislin, 1993; Dodd, 1998; Martin and Nakayama, 2000; Samovar, Porter and Stefani, 1998). In this sense, stereotyping is seen as part of the normal thought process with intercultural communication research on the subject borrowing heavily from studies by psychologists and educators who investigate cognition and cognitive processes (Brislin, 1993).

As a result of this psychological perspective, approaches to overcoming stereotyping are also heavily influenced by social psychology. Three common remedies include: (1) the practice of empathy (i.e., trying to put yourself in the other person’s shoes); (2) the acceptance of ambiguity which will encourage one to suspend judgment in cross-cultural situations until more complete information can be gathered, and (3) the seeking out of common activities or tasks which will allow for a more complete picture of individual characteristics of members from groups outside of one’s own (Dodd, 1998).

A great deal of research has also gone into the study of what is termed cognitive dissonance as a technique for reducing stereotypes, ethnocentrism and prejudice. This approach is based on the theory that people find it uncomfortable to live with too many contradictions in their lives. If enough factual evidence can be found to contradict people’s stereotypes, then according to this theory, such stereotypes should eventually dissipate. However, research by Hamilton, Sherman and Ruvolo (1990), suggests that people tend to remember information that supports a stereotype but may forget information that contradicts it (in Martin and Nakayama, 2000). Here, one problem may be the mass of contradictory data necessary to effectively overcome the stereotype. Then too, separate research from cross-cultural psychology suggests that not all cultures are equally adverse to cognitive dissonance. Japan has been cited as one culture where people are taught to accept and live with the contradictions in their lives.

Relatively little is said in mainstream intercultural communication literature on stereotyping as to social causality. When the issue is addressed, “blame” is most often placed on the individual, parents, relatives, friends or the group itself. Occasionally reference is made to the media, and particularly movies and televi-
sion (Martin and Nakayama, 2000; Samovar, Porter and Stefani, 1998). Labeling stereotypes as products of lazy and misguided perceptions, Samovar, Porter and Stefani (1998) note three ways in which stereotypes are acquired: (1) parents, relatives and friends, (2) limited personal contact, and (3) the mass media.

Smith and Bond (1993) suggest that stereotypes may arise out of distrust of foreigners, particularly if one’s own group has a long history of dealings with an out-group within one’s own borders. Such stereotypes are then reinforced at home, by the media and in educational curricula. Nothing is said, however, about the economic and social conditions which produce this distrust to begin with. It may be that we are to assume that antagonisms among disparate groups living in close proximity are simply to be considered a given. Likewise, nothing is said about class stratification or power structures including government, the news media or business and trade interests which support ruling elites. Nothing is said either about economic systems or modes and relations of production. Are we to assume that these socially and historically constructed material conditions have nothing to do with the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes?

Let us consider Vygotsky’s sociohistorical model of learning and development for a moment. Vygotsky asserts that all higher psychological functions begin as actual relations between human individuals. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory and to the formation of concepts (Vygotsky, 1978). If this is true, then this has two very significant implications. The first is that stereotypes also begin as actual relations between people. They both develop and are learned in the context of social relations. Therefore, in order to understand and overcome stereotypes, they must be examined in that same context of social relations. The second—and in some ways even more crucial implication—is pedagogical. It suggests that a pedagogy which takes into account these social relations (i.e., the complete embodiment of our social selves including the relations between myself and my students) is crucial for all learning and development.

In the examination of stereotypes which follows, I attempt to take both of these factors into consideration. I attempt this through an integration of stories and discussions that my students and I have shared with each other. We begin by trying to identify possible stereotypes from the students’ list of culture questions about food. We then consider different ways in which we can collect accurate information about how people from different cultures really live and what they eat. In the process, we create new stories about ourselves which free us from the constraints of the stereotypes we have inherited.

Student Question Number One: Why Do Japanese eat Fish and Rice but Westerners Eat Meat and Bread?

This has been the most frequently asked student question about culture for the past four years. It’s a very interesting question although I’m not sure how true it is. It may in fact be an overgeneralization without too much basis in fact—that is, a kind of stereotype or cultural myth. And from that perspective alone, it’s certainly worthwhile taking a look at. Maybe we can make some new stories. Let me begin with a story from my childhood.

As a child growing up in New York, I remember eating a lot of potatoes. I remember that because I didn’t like potatoes very much when I was young. I always wanted to eat spaghetti. I can still remember my mother telling me “Eat your potatoes. You won’t get big and strong unless you eat your meat and potatoes.”

So I guess I was a little surprised when I first came to Japan and found out that Westerners eat meat and bread instead of meat and potatoes. I began to wonder if maybe I was mistaken. So I started asking American friends what we eat and they said “meat and potatoes,” or “meat, potatoes and vegetables.” But then, maybe all of us were mistaken. One way to check is to observe what people actually do, not what they think they do or say they do. So I started observing.

Observation Number One

I’m in a restaurant in the Shinbashi district of Tokyo. An American tourist is sitting across from me ordering his meal…

American: I’ll have the steak.
Waitress: Rice or bread?
American: Potatoes.
Waitress: Potatoes? No, rice or bread.
American: Potatoes. Steak and potatoes. Don’t you have potatoes?
Waitress: No, rice or bread.
American: Rice.
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A few minutes later the steak comes. There’s a side dish of rice. But on the same plate with the steak are some carrots and—guess what—three rather soggy looking slices of fried potato.

American: Oh, so you do have potatoes. Good. I don’t need the rice. But could I have some more potatoes?
Waitress: Rice?
American: No rice. More potatoes.
Waitress: No rice?
American: (almost shouting) No rice. Potatoes!
Waitress: (Looking rather frightened, she silently rushes away with the rice and returns with bread)

Discussion
1. How many observations are needed before you can make a generalization about something?
2. What kind of statement, if any, can you make about this particular situation?
3. In addition to direct observation, what other methods might we use to find out what people really eat?
4. Is it meaningful, or even worthwhile, to try to make generalizations about people? How is this different from stereotyping—particularly based on the psychological model used in mainstream intercultural communication?
5. Assume that you are a server at a similar type of restaurant in Japan and the same thing happens to you. What would you do?

What my Students Would Do

The following, in order of frequency, are the most common student responses for what they would do as servers if asked to substitute potatoes for either rice or bread: (1) ask the manager, (2) suggest that the customer order potatoes as a side dish, (3) refuse the customer’s request without giving a reason, (4) refuse because potatoes are not on the menu, (5) tell the customer that this is Japan so he should choose rice or bread, or (6) refuse because in Japan potatoes are considered a vegetable and served only as a garnish.

Observation Number Two

I take a Japanese English teacher to a seafood restaurant in Boston. Boston, by the way, is famous for seafood. My friend orders steak. The waitress doesn’t ask if he wants rice or bread with his meal. She asks if he wants rice, pasta, baked, fried or boiled potatoes. He asks for rice. I order halibut with boiled potatoes.

During the meal, my friend comments on his large portion of meat. He says, “Americans always eat bread and meat. That’s why they’re so big!” I look around. Nobody is eating bread. And except for my friend, nobody is eating meat. All the other customers are eating seafood with potatoes, rice or pasta.

Discussion
1. Do you think the Japanese teacher noticed what the other customers in the restaurant were eating?
2. Why do you think he said, “Americans always eat bread and meat?”
3. What might some other possible reasons be?”

Observation Number Three

Following a conference in North America, I spend a week visiting relatives and friends in New York, Mississippi and California. For dinner that week we eat:

Sunday: Ham with sweet potatoes and broccoli.
Monday: Shrimp with rice and beans, spinach.
Tuesday: Spaghetti.
Wednesday: Fried catfish with butter rice, carrots and cole slaw.
Thursday: Chicken with mashed potatoes, corn and cornbread.
Friday: Broiled salmon with egg noodles, asparagus.
Saturday: Lamb chops with baked potatoes and green peas.

On my return flight from San Francisco to Tokyo, the economy class menu lists the following choices for dinner:

Western Selection: Honey-baked chicken breast with apple honey sauce.
Mashed sweet potatoes with onions and peas.
Sliced Parma ham with cantaloupe and lime.
Garden fresh salad with dressing of the day.
Triple chocolate brownie bash.
Regional Selection: Teriyaki beef.
Steamed rice and sugar snap peas. Sliced Oriental chicken roll with vegetables. Soba noodle salad. Fresh seasonal fruit.

**Discussion**

1. Do you remember what you ate yesterday? Make a list.
2. Do you think it is a stereotype that Westerners eat meat and bread? Why?
3. Do you think it is a stereotype that Westerners eat meat and potatoes? Why?
4. Do you think it is a stereotype that Japanese eat fish and rice? Why?
5. Where do you think stereotypes come from?

**Some Student Observations**

**Naoko:** I had a homestay in Australia. For breakfast, we had cereal, fruit and juice. For lunch, we often had rice with a stew or some kind of cream dish and fruit. For supper, we ate meat, fish, broccoli or carrots, and mashed potatoes or rice, and soup. For snacks, we often had caramel tart ice cream or salmon paste on crackers. I thought caramel tart ice cream was especially delicious.

**Keisuke:** When I was in England, we had tea or coffee and cereal or toast with jam and butter for breakfast. On Sundays, though, we sometimes had tea or coffee with toast or corn flake, a fried or poached egg, bacon or sausages and baked beans. Our everyday lunch was a packed sandwich, an apple, a drink, a chocolate bar and crisps. For supper we usually had meat with vegetables and gravy. On Fridays we often had fish and chips. Chips is what we call French fries here. The fish is cod.

**Rie:** In France, people have pastry and milk or coffee for breakfast. At school in the cafeteria students have soup and bread, boiled or fried potatoes, meat and salad. For dinner, most families have potatoes and another dish. Sometimes they have spaghetti, or rice with meat or fish in a sauce. French people don’t like potatoes so much because they have them almost every day. They think, “Oh, not again!” They like bread though. They also like Japanese dishes.

**Hiroyuki:** Before I went to America, I imagined Americans ate meat and bread, too. So, I was surprised to see them eat mashed potatoes. I think that Americans have mistaken images of Japanese, too. They may think that Japanese eat only fish and rice. Cultural differences like these are interesting.

**A Student Survey**

Let me give you our report. Our group decided to do a research survey of both foreigners living in Japan and Japanese college students and ask them if they think it is true that Japanese eat fish and rice and that Westerners eat meat and potatoes, or whether they both are stereotypes. We also asked people to explain why they thought the way they did. I would like to divide this report into two parts. First, I will give you the responses from the foreigners we surveyed. Then Satoko will tell you how the Japanese students responded. First, my report. We interviewed three French people, one Australian and one English person. Their responses were as follows:

French respondent number one: “They are stereotypes for people who have never traveled abroad. That is what we see on TV. Once you have lived in a foreign country, you realize it is only partly true.”

Australian: “Completely myths. What is an American or a Westerner? The name encompasses too many different kinds of people from many cultural backgrounds. It is true that Japanese eat vast quantities of rice and fish but of course it is not only what their diet consists of.”

French respondent number two: “I think it’s true. This difference is historical fact. Rice and potatoes are regarded as basic meal in Japan and in Western countries. So it is not a myth but it produces myths and habits.”

English respondent: “The majority of English people probably do eat more meat and potatoes than Japanese people, but this doesn’t mean English people eat only meat and potatoes. Especially among the younger generation, people nowadays eat more international foods—for example, pasta, spaghetti, Chinese and other Asian foods. Particularly popular with students is Indian curry. In the same way, I guess Japanese people don’t live on rice and fish.”

French respondent number three: “Of course Westerners also eat fish and rice and Japanese people began to eat more meat and potatoes thanks to MacDonald’s. So these are cultural myths now even if maybe they were true a century ago.”

Thank you. Now, Satoko will report on the results of
our findings with Japanese Students.

Thank you. First we found that Japanese university
students don’t think that Japanese eat fish and rice be-
cause they can eat anything. Regarding Westerners,
they don’t think that they eat meat and potatoes. They
have an image that they eat bread. We also polled
eleven students to find out what they ate for a week.
The total comes to rice 48 times, fish 18 times, meat 39
times, bread 11 times and noodles 22 times. Note that
potatoes are not even listed. They can’t imagine pota-
toes are a staple. Also note that meat was much more
popular than fish. Thank you. Are there any questions?

Observing Different Cultural Behaviors

Remember even if you observe very carefully, you
might make mistakes. For example, you might be in a
foreign country and see people eating bananas or pota-
toes. Do you think of these foods as fruits and vegeta-
tables? Both bananas and potatoes contain starch and in
some places they are eaten as staples. What might you
do to find out how these foods are eaten? Here are some
projects other students have conducted to study what
people eat: (1) Conduct a survey (2) Look at movies (3)
Collect menus (4) Look at foreign newspaper and mag-
azine pictures, advertisements and articles (5) Ask
friends who have lived or studied abroad.

Fig. 1. A Sunday meal in Micronesia: fish chowder,
sashimi, breadfruit, rice and bananas.

Some Preliminary Insights

Thus far we have spent a great deal of time trying
to find ways of collecting accurate data which will help
us identify and hopefully overcome or reduce stereo-
types. In this collaborative process my students and I
have frequently asked whether there is a way to collect
such information without making the same overgener-
alizations that perpetuate the very stereotypes we’re
trying to overcome. Barntlund (1989) singles this out as
being one of the greatest challenges to intercultural
communication. He states that popular explanations
are all too often unreliable, making it impossible to dis-
tinguish cultural mythology from truth:

...some are clichés, repeated so often they are fi-
nally believed; some constitute the abstract ideals of
a given society but are claimed more than they are
realized in daily life; and others may offer penetrat-
ing glimpses of the cultural ethos. But in the absence
of accurate data, it is difficult to know whether one
is dealing with cultural myth, idealization, or valid
insight. (p. xv)

At this level then, it would appear that there is no
easy solution. Those in mainstream intercultural com-
munication may after all be correct when they say that
since we all make generalizations, stereotypes are also
inevitable. What is more, since they do help to guide
our behavior in novel situations, they may at times
even be helpful. As one student put it following a series
of classes on the subject, “Even if stereotypes are not
always true, they are still convenient. They teach us
how to think about the world.”

This is an excellent point, and one which suggests
that we might look more closely at the social rather
than the psychological side of stereotypes. Not all
stereotypes are convenient, beneficial or even benign.
Gudykunst (1991), for example, notes that stereotypes
can create self-fulfilling prophecies. That is, they can
change behavior. They can make the untrue, true. Con-
sider, for example, the choice between bread and rice
in Japanese restaurants. You can’t say, “No, I want pota-
toes!” It won’t work, as we saw with the American
tourist. Here, the stereotype becomes reality—the
choice in Japan is between bread and rice.

This is very frightening because it shows the power
of stereotypes to control people—to limit their actions
and make them behave in prescribed ways. Think
about it for a second. Have you ever been in a situation
where people had mistaken beliefs about you? And you
couldn’t explain to them that these beliefs were wrong?
No matter what you did, they would treat you the
same? So eventually, you had no choice but to act the
way they expected you to? There is an expression for
this I remember from my childhood. It goes something
like, “If you call someone a black sheep long enough,
that’s what they eventually become.” For example, if
you tell a child that he or she is stupid, or a bad student, then that is what the child probably will become.

**Discussion**

1. Have you ever been in a situation where people thought you were different from the way you really are? What did you do?
2. If you went to an imaginary country where people said, “In our country people eat bananas but in your country they eat noodles,” and every time you went to a restaurant, they asked, “Do you want bananas or noodles?” How would you feel?
3. Imagine that in this same country you ask for rice and the waiter says, “Why do you want rice so much? Why don’t you just have some noodles? Again, how would you feel?

**Where Do Stereotypes Come From?**

Here, it might be worthwhile to look critically at where stereotypes come from—that is, at their social side. We have already noted that mainstream intercultural communication, for the most part, attributes the learning of stereotypes to parents, relatives, friends, limited personal contact, the mass media (especially television), and educational curricula. In working with students, however, a somewhat different picture emerges. They attribute stereotypes to the media (especially television and newspapers), movies, teachers and textbooks, politicians, and business and industry.

While there is some overlap, mainstream intercultural communication attributes stereotypes more to individual pathology than social causality. The students, on the other hand, see stereotypes as coming more from power hierarchies that maintain social order and control within society. As a possible result, suggested techniques for overcoming stereotypes also differ. Students use critical social analysis while mainstream intercultural communication employs techniques from social psychology designed to engender tolerance and respect for other cultures. It is probably because of this emphasis on critical social analysis that students see

attaining accurate information about culture as being of primary importance. They list such information-gathering techniques as visits, homestays, communication with foreigners and people who have been abroad, surveys, critical analysis of TV programs, newspapers, movies, etc., and clipping foreign newspapers, magazines, advertisements, articles, photos, etc. They also list the internet as a possible source of useful information. Techniques recommended by those from mainstream intercultural communication, on the other hand, place more emphasis on such psychological skills as the use of empathy, acceptance of ambiguity and holistic approaches to interpersonal relations.²

Based on the belief that stereotypes support social hierarchies, students in some classes have developed check-lists which encourage critical analysis of stereotypical expressions. The following are some of the their most frequent questions:

1. Where have you heard this expression?
2. What kinds of people have used this expression?
3. In what situation or context was it used?
4. What is the purpose of this expression?
5. Whose interests do you think this expression serves?
6. Where do you think this expression comes from?
7. What might history teach us about this expression?

These questions are meant to reveal the underlying (and often hidden) social relations that these potential stereotypes may serve to maintain. They can be used to examine any potential stereotype including the student questions about food and food culture listed earlier. Below, I use a similar set of questions to critically dialogue with a student about the underlying meaning of the expression, “We Japanese eat rice and fish but Westerners eat bread and meat.”

Me: Where have you heard this expression?

Hiroaki: I heard a representative of Keidanren³ using it in a speech recently.

Me: What was the speech about? Was it about differences between what people eat?

Hiroaki: No. It was about differences in Japanese and Western ways of doing business.

Dave: What was the purpose of this expression?

Hiroaki: To support the Japanese way. To support Japanese business.

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² A comparative study between Japanese and German university students revealed a similar difference between knowledge-based and interpersonal techniques for developing intercultural awareness. (See Yoneoka, 2000).
³ The Japan Federation of Economic Organizations
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Stereotypes as Metaphors and Cultural Myths

We have suggested that critical questions such as the ones listed above can be used to reveal the power relations and social control mechanisms that underlie many stereotypes. Such stereotypes are more than innocent overgeneralizations based on limited personal contact and observation. They fall into a separate class of social control mechanisms known as cultural myths. Jandt (1998) describes cultural myths as representing “society’s collectivity of persistent values handed down from generation to generation that help make the world understandable, support the social order, and educate the young.”

When used as cultural myths, stereotypes often take on a metaphorical or symbolic meaning. Understanding this metaphorical use of cultural myth can be a problem. In some cases observing what people actually do may help. But if the cultural myth is being used as a metaphor, then what people actually do is probably not important. The expression, “We Japanese eat rice and fish but Westerners eat bread and meat,” for example, is probably more about nationalistic (some might say xenophobic) values than food. In fact, I can’t recall ever having heard it being used in a context where the topic of conversation was really about differences in dietary customs.

Rather, it is one of numerous metaphors commonly employed by journalists, media moguls, politicians, educators, trade and industry representatives, etc., to propagate the cultural myth that “we Japanese are different from you foreigners.” Such myths are by no means limited to Japan. They are a worldwide phenomena, closely tied to the history of late 19th century nationalism and nation building. They have been used to replace working class consciousness with national consciousness, thus allowing industrialists, financiers and politicians to respond to problems of overproduction, global competition and trade friction by pitting workers from different countries against each other (to the point, in some cases, of even going off to war). Osterkamp (1999) offers the following political analysis of such nationalistic stereotypes:

...people are prevented from turning their economic fears into criticism of the government by being offered ‘foreigners’ as a substitute object of their anger and excused for their aggressions against them through supposing a natural ‘xenophobia’, which, however, some—society’s elite—have more under control than others, and so on. If, however, the ‘projected’ aggressions exceed the level of ‘tolerance’, that is, begin to threaten the image of the community as such, people will be given masses of information and education about the ‘harmlessness’ of ‘foreigners’ and, thus, of the ‘unfoundedness’ and ‘irrationality’ of their aggressions against them. Such ‘enlightened’ measures fit perfectly well into the manifold mechanisms of stabilizing the given order and will enjoy corresponding official support as long as they remain pedagogical or psychological, that is, restricted to preaching tolerance without questioning the conditions which make some people or groups dependent on the ‘tolerance’ of others and which, at the same time, prevent the tolerance being called for (Cohen, 1991; Holzkamp, 1994/1997b). (p. 388)

Here, I think history can be helpful. In fact, I believe that an understanding of history can be helpful in overcoming innocent stereotypes as well as cultural myths. Take, for example, the Japanese student who visits Hawai‘i and notices Hawaiian pineapples and macadamia nut chocolate for sale everywhere he goes. He might quite naturally make the assumption that pineapples and macadamia nuts are indigenous foods traditionally eaten by the Hawaiian people rather than being commercial agricultural products which were introduced to the islands by European and American plantation owners for their own profit. Understanding this history might not only help in overcoming the student’s stereotype, it might also help to raise his consciousness about the plight of Hawaiian people today.

Stereotypes and History

The potato wasn’t always the staple food for so many of the world’s people that it is today. In fact, the potato wasn’t even known in Africa, Europe or Asia before the 16th century. It was native to the Americas and a staple food of the American Indians who developed every major kind of potato known in the world today. Prior to the introduction of the potato, the major staples in the old world were generally limited to such

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4 It may in fact be that standard techniques from social psychology and mainstream intercultural communication can be used to at least partially help to reduce stereotypes based on innocent overgeneralizations.

5 Pineapple is indigenous to the Americas; macadamia nuts to Australia.
grains as rice, wheat, oats, barley and a small number of roots and tubers.

Let's take a brief look at history, starting with the late 16th and early 17th centuries. This was a time of revolutionary technological and economic change worldwide—a period which included active participation on the part of many Japanese individuals and groups from a variety of class backgrounds.

By the mid 15th century, Japanese craftsmen had learned from Chinese to construct long distance ocean-going junks. Paid for by wealthy merchants, these junks set out from Nagasaki to points in Southeast Asia (Huard and Durand, undated), where they set up trading communities. In 1610 Tanaka Katusuke and other Kyoto merchants traveled via the Philippines across the Pacific to Mexico where they purchased American Indian gold and silver from the Spanish. Three years later, Japanese visited Europe and trade started between Japan and England.

One of Japan's biggest overseas communities at that time was in Hoi An, Vietnam. There Japanese traders bought Vietnamese silks, porcelain, foods and spices. They also married Vietnamese, learned the language and culture of Vietnam, and traded with Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch merchants. In addition, they built a covered bridge which still stands today. The tombs of some of these Japanese traders are now historical Vietnamese landmarks.

Japanese merchants of this period did not use the metaphor “Japanese eat rice but Westerners eat bread.” Instead, they encouraged international trade and contact based on a universalist view of humanity. One such individual, Fujiwara Seika (1561–1619), wrote the following sometime in the late 16th century:

“...Men differ only in secondary details, such as clothing and speech. Countries may be a thousand or even ten thousand miles apart and differences may be found in clothing and speech, but there is one thing in all countries which is not far apart, not a bit different: that is good faith.” (Yamazaki, 1994)

This period marked the dawn of capitalism worldwide and was greatly influenced by Europe's conquest of the Americas. Many of the foods we now eat daily came from America during this time. Red peppers, corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, yams, peanuts, pineapple, mango and tomatoes—just to name a few—all originally came from the Americas. They were unknown in Europe or Asia. Also okra, which originated in Africa, was introduced to Japan in the 16th century by the Portuguese.

Gold and silver, stolen by Europeans from the American Indians, also helped the growth of capitalism. Unlike copper, which had little value, gold and silver could be used in world trade. By the late 16th century, Japan was importing both gold and silver directly from Mexico. However, the increase of gold and silver throughout Europe and Asia also caused inflation. The result was a worldwide financial crisis and a period of great conflict. The merchant classes in both Japan and Europe fought with their own feudal rulers for power and control.

In England, the merchants won and the monarchy was temporarily overthrown. Even Shakespeare, a royalist who had supported the feudal monarchy, was forced to stop writing in 1612 and was under virtual house arrest until his death in 1616. In 1640, his works were banned. Colonial expansion and capitalist conquest continued.

Likewise in Japan, aristocrats saw their hold on power jeopardized. The threat of peasant rebellion was always present. In addition, fear of Europeans was justifiable. Not only did Europeans have clear designs on Asia, they had a certain degree of military superiority. Finally, if Japan were to compete with European powers for markets and resources, it clearly needed colonies of its own. However, a Japanese colonial invasion of Korea and China ended in failure. All of this convinced the Japanese aristocracy that their hold on power could only be assured if they closed the country. In 1640—the same year that the monarchy was toppled in England—they closed Japan to the outside world. They blamed this action on the threat from foreigners, not internal instability. Bread-eating, butter-smelling foreigners became two of many metaphors for the foreign menace.

For the next 200 years, Japan remained closed to the outside. Although many domestic technological and economic changes did occur, Europe changed even more rapidly. The two biggest changes were colonial-
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ism and the industrial revolution—brought about in large part by the conquest of the Americas.

A good deal also was due to the potato. Instead of bread, cereals, gruel and rice—the staples Japanese had associated with the West—Europeans began eating potatoes from America. Unlike European and Asian grains, the potato was very easy to grow. There was now more food. The population of Europe increased. However, instead of being a blessing for the many, the introduction of the potato was used to benefit the rich. Since fewer people were required to grow potatoes, peasants could now be forced off their lands and into the cities. With a ready supply of cheap labor, wealthy landowners invested in factories. The industrial revolution was now underway.

Not all of those thrown off the land went to work in the factories. Many excess laborers—the ones who didn’t die of starvation or disease in the streets—were sent to the colonies. This lessened the threat of revolution at home and helped Europeans colonize more than 60% of the world’s land surface at the same time. Meanwhile, the original inhabitants of these newly colonized territories lost their land, their culture, often their language and even their lives. From North and South America to Africa and the Pacific, indigenous peoples suffered exploitation, slavery and even genocide. Unfortunately, most of those who survived still suffer today.

As European colonialism encircled the globe through the 19th century, Japan again found itself threatened. Forced into unequal trading agreements with the United States and European powers, the Meiji government pushed to industrialize. Again, the process was similar. New fertilizers increased food production. The population grew. Peasants were forced into the cities to work as laborers. Poverty increased and threatened the stability of the wealthy. Colonial expansion followed which required a new kind of nationalism similar to that of the other world powers. Again, the myth of “We Japanese eat rice but foreigners eat bread” was useful to prevent revolution and maintain control. It’s still used today for the same reason.

Discussion
1. What are some cultural myths that you think foreigners have about Japanese? Make a list.
2. How can you confirm these stereotypes exist?
3. Where do you think they come from?
4. Whose interests do you think they serve?
5. What might history teach you about these stereotypes?

Stereotypes about Japanese

The following is an approximate translation of an end-of-semester group project prepared by students in a comparative culture course at SIT. As with other such projects, it is a collaborative effort which includes a sharing of ideas among all members of the group as well as with the teacher.

Our group chose to do our report on stereotypes. We began by discussing what we thought were common stereotypes about Japan and the Japanese. We decided that the most common stereotype that foreigners who have not been to Japan have is that Japanese all wear kimonos, children have “okappa” haircuts (made by placing a bowl upside down over a child’s head and cutting the hair around it), men are all “chambara” (sword-swinging samurai), and women are all geisha.

We asked three teachers and five exchange students at our university about this. They all said that the image was incorrect. They couldn’t imagine any foreigners having such old-fashioned stereotypes about Japan. Several people said that this is what the Japanese mass media tries to portray as stereotypes and misinformation that foreigners have about Japanese. This means it is a Japanese stereotype of a stereotype.

We then asked what stereotypes they thought were commonly held about Japanese. Most of the respondents had no strong impression about stereotypes. One teacher, however, said that many Japanese who have homestays in foreign countries are given orientations before they go on how to explain Japan and Japanese customs to foreigners. Students are encouraged to teach their hosts about origami, Japanese tea ceremony and flower arranging. They are also encouraged to take yukata with them and to teach bon odori dances. These things could possibly produce stereotypes. This teacher suggested we look at books that are written for Japanese students who are going to study abroad. We found one book entitled American Homestay Do’s and Don’ts. It had the following advice about taking gifts:

The gift doesn’t have to be expensive, but it is preferable that it has some cultural or local significance. For example, paper to make origami, something connected with one of the traditional Japanese arts such as flower arrangement or tea ceremony, or
some traditional clothing worn by Japanese, like yukata, make interesting gifts and provide an interesting topic for you and your host family to discuss. You can explain what your present is made of, where it is from and how it is used. (p. 34)

Finally, we decided to look at an American movie about Japanese. The name of the movie is Gang Ho. It is about a Japanese auto manufacturer opening a factory in the United States. The movie stars Michael J. Fox and was made during the period of the Japanese bubble economy. Although the movie was quite popular in the United States, it was criticized in Japan as being full of stereotypes. We got a copy of the video and watched it. These are our impressions:

The company president is portrayed as poker-faced and cunning. This is a very negative stereotype which suggests that you cannot trust Japanese. Also, the Japanese middle-level managers are portrayed as very nervous “yes” men who do whatever they are told and have no opinions of their own. Finally, the Japanese workers are shown doing calisthenics and all acting the same, supporting the stereotype of Japanese as group oriented collectivists.

We think these are accurate examples of the kinds of stereotypes that Hollywood, the American mass media and politicians and educators try to create about Japanese. In many ways, they are worse than the stereotypes which we thought that foreigners had about Japanese. That is because these are all very negative images. Instead of portraying some outdated tradition, these stereotypes make Japanese appear to be dangerous and even threatening.

Whose interests do these stereotypes serve? We think these stereotypes serve the interests of Pax Americana. They make foreigners (in this case, Japanese), look like the enemies of America. Especially, they make the Japanese look like the enemies of the American workers. It this way, they create the cultural myth. It is similar to the myth about Japanese eating fish and rice and foreigners eating meat and bread, which is a metaphor for “we” (Japanese) versus “they” (foreigners). Both myths are really intended to create distrust and make enemies. They serve the economic interests of the few who which to control the many.

These myths also have their history. In class we have studied some history about Japanese cultural myths and stereotypes. Here we would like to explain something about the history of the myths that Japanese managers are poker-faced, cunning and that their underlings are malleable “yes” men who work like robots and have no opinions of their own. These myths are not new. They started with European colonialism. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they were used to keep Asians from immigrating to the United States, Canada and Australia. During World War II, these myths were used as propaganda against the Japanese. This propaganda has continued until this day.

Finally, we would like to say that we have worked and cooperated as a group in preparing this report. We have exchanged many different opinions with each other and the teacher. In the end, our report is not the opinion of one member. Nor is it the opinion of the teacher. It is a summary of our group learning and thinking.

**Making New Histories**

This paper has attempted to examine stereotypes by using a collaborative approach to learning, where students and teachers are encouraged to share stories and create activities which reveal many of the marginalizing and stigmatizing constraints in our lives. Often, these constraints are embodied in stereotypes and cultural myths that privilege the socioeconomic interests of the few.

As already noted, much of the theoretical grounding for this approach comes from the sociohistorical psychology of L.S. Vygotsky and A.R. Luria, and the liberation pedagogy of Paulo Freire. This approach differs from standard methods for identifying and overcoming stereotypes proposed by mainstream intercultural communication in several significant respects.

First, it sees stereotypes as primarily social rather than psychological constructions. Second, it sees all

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7 Teachers Note: During World War II, the US War Department commissioned American anthropologists to write psychological profiles and national character studies of enemy leaders and nations as part of its propaganda effort. Ruth Benedict's The Chrysanthemum and the Sword was one such work. Following the war, national character studies and psychological profiling were used by the US Foreign Service Institute and later, the CIA. Many of the individuals involved in this work, along with their research methods and results, were instrumental in the establishment of intercultural communication as a new social science discipline. In fact, intercultural communication grew out of this work.
learning as social. Moving from this, it suggests that stereotypes can best be overcome when people from diverse backgrounds collaborate to critically examine where stereotypes come from, whose sociopolitical and economic interests they serve, and how these interests are reflected in history. From this, students and teachers can then set about on the task of collectively creating new stories which reflect their own historical interests. That is, they can begin the liberating process of creating new histories. The following are some group comments regarding this process:

**Group One:** We seem to exaggerate the difference between foreigners and Japanese by using cultural myths, for example, “Japanese eat rice and fish while foreigners eat bread and meat.” We think we had better get rid of old cultural myths and replace them with new ones. We also want to know origin of what we eat now. For example, we thought that okra was Japanese but now we find it originally came from Africa. Also, we wonder whether the following are cultural myths or not: (1) Is it true that the English have a lot of tea times during the day? Are there class differences regarding tea time? (2) We heard that French drink wine instead of water because the water in France is not potable. We used to think this was true but now we wonder.

**Group Two:** We think the metaphor is made by strong country. The food metaphor is such an example. Many foods were transferred by Portuguese or Spanish in the 15th and 16th centuries. At that time, Spain and Portugal were strong countries. To prevent a Portuguese invasion of Japan, Japan closed their doors to foreigners and created the metaphor. What I want to say is that to make new histories, we have to be even stronger.

**Group Three:** We learned that “We Japanese eat rice and fish, and Westerners eat meat and bread” is used for keeping Japanese from the influence of Westerners. It implies that “We Japanese are quite different from Westerners.” This metaphor has been used for about 130 years and is used to control people's way of thinking and behavior. Because of the concept that “We are different from you,” Japanese have many stereotypes of foreigners. And it can be a kind of racism (sometimes of themselves). But now we know that such myths are quite different from reality. So we have to start to change our view about foreigners. We humans are all the same even though we may have different backgrounds and cultures. What we have to do is not to find differences between Westerners and us, but to try to understand our “little bit different friends’ cultures.”

**Group Four:** This topic was a great shock to us because up until now we never doubted what we were taught in school. Now, however, we understand real history and cultural myths. And we want to make new history. However, we don’t have the power to change educational policy and we can’t control the mass media. So we want to change just in this classroom. For example, we decide a key word like “pizza.” We start by sharing whatever the fixed ideas we might have about it. We also talk to foreigners and find out what their ideas are. For example, we might ask American, British, Italian or Korean exchange students what they think about it. We might, for example, think that Italians eat pizza everyday. But maybe that’s just a stereotype and isn’t true. So we ask and find out the truth. In this class, for example, I discovered that tomatoes did not originally come from Italy, but were brought to Europe and Asia from the Americas. I also found out that spaghetti may have come from China.

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