# Canadian University Students' Stereotypes

# of Canadians and Americans

*A. H. Diemer and M. L. Dietz*

The authors, who are American,[1] teach sociology and anthropology in a Canadian university. The location of our university on the Canadian-American border offers an excellent opportunity for cross-cultural research, as a teaching device, to facilitate the students' understanding of the dynamic interrelationships of social processes. To augment their understanding of the formation and functions of stereotypes, the students in an Introductory Sociology and an Anthropology Culture Change class were asked to describe the Canadian image of American and Canadian citizens. The responses to the assignment produced a surprisingly vivid description of the students' image of their neighbours across the river and of their national self-image. Although there is evidence to suggest that the attitudes of the students are shared by many Canadians, no claim for the universality of the results is made. No attempt was made to select a statistically representative sample of respondents.[2] Our concern was for the elucidation of specific stereotypes by the members of the two classes and the analysis of the factors that influenced their development and persistence.

Our method of analysis of these images consisted of (1) the schematization of the items that occurred most frequently in the students' reports as contrasting characteristics of each national group, (2) the construction of negative and positive images of each national character, and (3) a theoretical formulation of the historical development and function of the stereotypes.

*Profiles of the Canadian Students' Stereotypes*

The descriptive terms most often employed by the students to Americans and Canadians are listed below. We have juxtaposed contrasting traits to form sets of bi-polar qualities. Although pairs of opposed terms were not used as invidious comparisons in all the papers from which they were extracted, each term was applied only to the group indicated.

| CANADIAN | AMERICAN |
|---|---|
| underdeveloped, backward | progressive |
| followers | leaders |
| intellectuals | workers |
| thinkers | doers |
| pessimists | optimists |
| realists | idealists |
| mature | youthful |
| sedate | boisterous, wild |
| tradition-directed | other-directed |
| polite | rude |
| secretive | open |
| slow | fast |
| negative | positive |
| uncertain | confident |
| self-deprecatory | cocky, boastful |
| reserved | friendly, exuberant |
| consistent | volatile |
| dull | exciting |
| dependent | independent |
| submissive | dominant |
| self-centred | socially responsible |
| sincere | hypocritical |
| self-satisfied | discontented |
| critical | indifferent |
| cheap | generous |
| controlled | rebellious |
| peaceful | violent |
| defensive | aggressive |
| conservative[3] | risktaking |
| compassionate | relentless |
| static | dynamic |
| quiet | loud |
| routine seekers | action seekers |
| careful, cautious | impetuous |
| neutral | intense |
| procrastination | immediacy |
| inferior feeling | superior feeling |

The following profiles emerged as negative and positive images of the two national groups.

*The American*: He is aggressive, outspoken, manipulative, money-status-power hungry. He is youth-oriented, boastfully gregarious, idealistic, overbearing, patriotic, superficial, ethnocentric, generous, arrogant, and reckless. He wants to take over the whole world and cram the "American way" of government, industry, and social life down the throats of unwilling victims.

He is strong, energetic, and justifiably proud of his country, and its accomplishments. He is willing and capable of working hard to attain the very best of everything, and willing to assume the responsibility for seeing that others have the same things that he enjoys. He tends to be paternalistic, idealistic, and self-analytical (although not critical). He is outspoken, an active leader, united with his diverse countrymen by love of country and love of freedom. While he may be sometimes overbearing, sometimes hypocritical, he is a striver both for real and ideal goals, and it is this striving to have and be the best that makes him over-exuberant, apt to rush in where angels fear to tread.

*The Canadian*: He is ultra-conservative, uncertain, inhibited, and passive. He is reserved, self-conscious, intellectual, aloof, critical and dull. Although money and achievement oriented, he is cautious and not inclined to risk-taking. He is non-patriotic.[4]

He is thoughtful, courteous, and cautious; mature, well-informed, modest, quiet, compassionate, and reserved. He is a realist who recognizes the need for rules and abides by them; when he deviates, he does it quietly and with circumspection. He tends to be peaceful and sincere, to value intelligence, hard work, and success, as well as freedom and honesty. Freedom to him means the freedom to live his life within the rules with relatively little interference or aggravation. He is apt to be oversensitive and hypercritical of himself and others. He loves the vastness and privacy of his land and likes to hold himself aloof from both casual and intense personal relationships. He feels about equality as he feels

about freedom and many other things — "if they don't bother me,
I certainly won't bother them."

Most of the students reflected what they describe as an
"obsessive" concern among Canadians over the United States'
domination of Canadian industry, tastes, and habits. The ubiquity
of American radio, television, movies, and magazines poses a threat
to the development of indigenous arts and manners, and a specific-
ally Canadian national identity.[5] Often implicit was a resentment
of their own dependence and an ambivalence between blaming the
"Yanks" and self-flagellation. They expressed admiration for the
pride in country and accomplishments of the United States, al-
though they deemed it "chest beating" and defended their own con-
servatism, humility, and neutrality.

The authors were particularly surprised at the almost universal
assumption among the Canadian students that the United States
desires and is conspiring to annex Canada. The current separatist
movement in Quebec aggravates this fear because non-French
Canada would appear more vulnerable to annexation if the French
seceded. In our experience with American students, we have seen
no evidence of concern or debate regarding Canada — only an
extreme lack of interest and an abysmal ignorance of its history
and political situation. American students who are aware of Canada
usually display a pleasant, friendly attitude toward her. They char-
acterize Canada as a vacationland replete with forests, mountains,
wild animals (the untamed wilderness), and delightful old world
anachronisms including colorful military rituals and titled person-
ages. Contrary to the expressed fear of the Canadians, we would
suggest that most Americans do not care whether or not Canada
becomes American and that they might even view any change in that
direction as a loss.

The students pointed out similarities between Americans and
Canadians particularly in achievement orientation and materialistic
acquisitiveness. Also comparable were the concerns in both coun-
tries for freedom and humanitarianism. They described both peoples
as valuing honesty and ritualistic moral codes, while not observing
them too closely. Some students stressed that the differences they
noted in essential values and life styles were slight, more of degree
than of kind.

*Factors that Influenced the Development of Stereotypes*

The people of Canada and America share many commonalities. Settlement of the two countries occurred in the same historical epoch, the settlers came from similar backgrounds and the indigenous populations they conquered were the same. Both countries hosted immigrants of diverse nationalities and enjoyed similar natural resources including vast frontiers of open land. The political experience of the two countries differed, however, and strongly influenced the development of societal self-images. The revolt of the American Colonies against the English King and the loyalty of the Canadians to the Crown were crucial in the social development of the two nations. They fought with one another and territorial boundaries were not secure until the end of the War of 1812. The English conquest of the French in Canada, and the subsequent emergence of dual cultural groups, has no counterpart in American history.

We suggest that the pattern of pluralism (resulting from the non-assimilation of the English and French) which was set during the formative stages of the Canadian nation, affected the cultural integration of immigrants who came later from countries other than England and France. In the United States, the second or third generation of foreign born groups moved out of the foreign language enclaves established by the early immigrants and were assimilated into wider strata of American society.[6] In contrast, minimal assimilation of similar groups occurred in Canada.[7] The experience of acculturation among the ethnic groups in the United States encouraged the emergence of a sense of national identity and an ideology of "melting pot" egalitarianism. Canadians, on the other hand, retained closer identification with their particular cultural heritage and only secondarily perceived themselves as French-Canadians, English-Canadians, *et al.*

The phenomena of the "melting pot" in the United States and the "mosaic" in Canada, as ideals, had ramifications in all segments of the societies. The social stratification system was more fluid in the States, less restrained by the European class structure that was a feature of the ethnic cultures which were not repudiated by revolution in Canada. The competitiveness, for example, that has

characterized American society results from the almost unlimited opportunities for social mobility. In the nineteenth century when the influence of English class structure persisted in Canada as a consequence of her colonial status, the "self-made" man was accorded prestige in the States comparable to that enjoyed by scions of upper-class Canadians.

Since the change to Commonwealth nationhood, Canadians have become concerned with the development of a uniquely Canadian identity. Recently this was exemplified in the struggle over the design of a national flag. The predominant themes during this period of self-evaluation include problems of biculturalism and bilingualism, a negative attitude toward the former British control, and resentment of the economic power of the United States.

The economic and political development of the two countries was influenced in subtle ways by the social patterns which were rooted in their value systems. The pervasive norms in the United States supporting the separation of church and state, universal free education, "rugged individualism" and competitiveness, and mass political involvement molded the social institutions that evolved into somewhat different configurations from those in Canada. The public and separate dual educational systems in Canada, for example, supported social separateness of ethno-religious groups. The public school system in the United States, on the other hand, was the principle vehicle for assimilation of the second generation immigrants who had ethno-religious backgrounds similar to those in Canada. Educational institutions are of primary importance in the inculcation of values and the distribution of individuals into economic, social and political roles. They also tend to be conservative and resistant to change as institutions designed to teach the new generation are expected to evince support for the norms of the old.

The complex interactions of the processes within the structural components of each of the societies during their formative years reinforced one another and increased the dissimilarity of the societies over the years. The tendency toward dissimilarity has been countered to some extent, however, by the physical proximity of the two countries, the open border and consequent frequency of

personal contacts, close economic relationships, and the similar
ethnic formation of the two societies.

## Functions of the Stereotypes

The psychological and sociological literature[6] suggests that
stereotypes function to organize into a kind of short-hand (by
sorting out the salient features) the mass of data from the real
world that confronts the individual. The literature also points out
the self-enhancement function and suggests the self-actualizing
propensity of stereotypes. Since stereotypes tend to "define" reality
for us, the behaviour that is based on them affects the real situa-
tion and inclines it to conformity with our definitions. An under-
standing of the self-other definitions of various groups is, there-
fore, a prerequisite for the successful prediction and management
of future interaction between them.

Evidence of the influence of national images may be adduced
from the history of twentieth century Canadian-American relations
where the predominant stereotypes have been ambivalent. Being
neither wholly positive nor negative, a kind of "live and let live"
policy has obtained between the neighbours. For example, the
American tendency to spread the "American way" to all the world
(which was a prominent theme in almost all the students' reports)
may have fostered the Canadian fear of annexation. At the same
time, the perception of America as a semi-admired, idealistic, over-
exuberant, do-gooder may have mitigated the genuine hostility and
aggressive behavior that fear of subordination would arouse in a
threatened group who traditionally stereotyped the "other" in
wholly negative terms.

Aproximately four per cent of the students attending our
Canadian university are American. All of the Canadian students
participating in our study had had the opportunity to know in-
dividual Americans at least casually. Many of them expressed
awareness that the image they described did not fit the particular

Americans they knew personally. The strength of the stereotype
of the American among Canadians is evident in the persistence of
it in the face of rather extensive interaction with the stereotyped
group that does not lend support to it. Investigations in the field
of intergroup relations have suggested the same phenomenon —
that interaction between groups does not automatically produce a
change in the perceptions of behaviors of the groups toward one
another.[9] It may even intensify negative attitudes if they are
psychologically satisfying.

In the light of the historical development of Canada, it can
be surmised from the students' reports and class discussions that
the stereotypes have functioned in the predicted pattern, and there-
fore, have persisted and influenced the relationships of Canadians
and Americans over the last century. They have provided a short-
hand view of reality and have been psychologically gratifying in
alleviating feelings of inferiority among the Canadians. The dif-
ference in size of the two populations (the United States is ten
times as large), the affluence of American visitors to Canada, the
ubiquity of the American mass media, and her industrial power, all
contribute to the Canadian sense of "second place" status. The
reaction to the psychological effects of this competitive disadvan-
tage is apparent in the Canadian self-image which stresses matur-
ity, conservatism, and moral and intellectual depth and integrity
rather than the efficiency, opportunism and achievement orienta-
tion of the American.

The American stereotype and the Canadian self-image inter-
mesh and tend to relieve the anxieties latent in a "Number Two"
position. A certain stability is thus achieved in the relationships
between the two countries that is satisfactory to both parties.
When differences are not so rationalized and there are large dis-
crepancies in power between the two groups, hostile attitudes tend
to develop and intensify. The rare historical experience of amicable
relationships between two countries, which share extensive borders
and which were born as a result of an armed clash of political
values, was influenced beneficently by the self-images and stereo-
types of the other that emerged in the formative years of the two
societies.

## Notes and References

1. In this paper we use the term "American" to apply only to residents of the United States because we have found this usage not only accepted, but desired, by Canadians. Contrary to our earlier assumption that it was an example of "American" ethno-centricity — are not Canadians and Mexicans also American? — we discovered its use by Canadians to be deliberate and meaningful. The term includes derogatory connotations stemming from its application to the rebellious anti-British colonists in the eighteenth century. Canadians, today, do not designate themselves "American" and when the term is applied to them it is viewed as evidence of imperialistic attitudes and a disparagement of their national identity and independent status.

2. The sample consisted of fifty-two students in Sociology 12 and Anthropology 31. With few exceptions the students were native-born Canadians in their second or third year at the University. We are grateful to them for their help and interest in developing the material for this analysis.

3. This term was used more often than any other to characterize the "Canadian."

4. Some students also suggested that non-Canadians tended to define the Canadian image in terms of the Lumberjack and/or the Hockey Player.

5. The students mentioned the confusion over the flag and the national anthem as evidence of the search for an unambiguous identity.

6. Cf. Peter I. Rose, *They and We: Racial and Ethnic Relations in the United States*, New York: Random House, 1964. Also, Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation and American Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

7. John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965.

8. John Harding, Harold Proschansky, Bernard Kutner, and Isador Chein, "Prejudice and Ethnic Relations," in G. Lindzey and E. Aronson (eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Addison-Wesley, 1969.

9. For example, Eugene L. Horowitz, "Development of Attitudes Toward Negroes," in T. M. Newcomb and E. L. Hartley (eds.), *Readings in Social Psychology*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947.