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Stereotyping the stereotypers:

How to interact and do business with the British

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Index

I. Introduction.....	3
II. The act of stereotyping.....	4
III. The British and their history with foreigners.....	7
Colonialism.....	7
Contemporary Relations	8
IV. How to talk to the British.....	10
Intercultural Interactions 101.....	10
What it is expected from the British, according to the Portuguese.....	12
British Business Etiquette 101.....	14
V. Conclusion.....	16
VI. Appendix.....	17
VII. Bibliography.....	20

Introduction

As we live in the era of globalization, Interculturalism has become a developing issue among different communities. Each culture sees the world in its own, unique way. Today's dichotomy is to find a good equilibrium between our diverging cultural traditions and our so-told standardized growth as a globalized society.

In this academic work, we will address this issue, particularly when it comes to the British culture.

Firstly, there is going to be a section about how we are attached to stereotypes and how we think we need them in order to interact with others.

Then, we will briefly overlook the British history throughout centuries, focusing on the British Empire and moving forwards to some contemporary relations such as EU (and the Brexit) and the Commonwealth.

Finally, we shall enter the section in which we will discuss what to expect when doing business with the British, presenting the results of the survey we carried out during our research.

I. The act of stereotyping

Living in a world struggling with the co-existence of thousands and thousands of different cultures, while trying to rise as globalized, it is bound to find new ways to communicate and to understand what is believed to be “different”. That is, people from different communities and cultures are bound to meet and interact. And people, since “ignorance is bliss”, are afraid of what they consider to be the Unknown, and so they try their best not to mess that up, not to “irritate the other”.

What is happening nowadays is that, in order to understand each other and our cultural differences, people are overreacting what could be a simply interaction. We tend to study who we consider “the other” and then exaggerate in our expectations: The British are very fond of their tea. Let’s bring dozens of tea-bags into a business meeting in order to make them feel welcomed. But what if they don’t actually appreciate tea?

Instead of being understandable, we are stereotyping each other. Although stereotypes can be very helpful since human beings always need some guidance into what is to them the “unknown”, they can be very detrimental and harmful. Stereotyping can be described as a simplified, commonly pejorative, attitude which people hold toward those outside of one’s life experience. This attitude is a result of distorted information which is accepted by people without question. What if saying that the British are a very polite people is actually inaccurate? Or believing that the Muslim religion has evil foundations?

We have been stereotyping since our childhood. It began with the way our parents brought us up. How they see the world usually is passed down to us. Kids raised in a catholic environment are expected to be part of that religion. Kids raised in a homophobic environment are bound to follow and pass on that stream of thought.

Then, as we grow up, we are influenced by our peers. If our friends believe that Brazilian people are “dirty”, who “never clean up after themselves”, we follow their lead in order to feel included. Being a teenager is hard. Being one in an intercultural world can be even harder because our little thoughts and opinions on the world and “the others” are inevitably bound to come up in a conversation. As teenagers, we have a hard time figuring out what our perspective on subjects can be; so, we follow our peers.

Finally, we are massively under influence of the media. What we see on the television makes its way inside our brains and stays there, breeding an opinion.

In 1922, Walter Lippman presented the word “stereotype” in his book *Public Opinion*. In the chapter “The World outside and the Pictures in our heads”, he introduces to the readers to the concept of the “stereotype”, arguing that public opinion on who “the others” is easily manipulated because of what we see and trust as an ‘authentic messenger’. In here, it can be seen as an example the U.S elections campaign of 2016 and how the republican candidate worked the population’s minds against emigrants, women and the LGBT community.

On the other hand, stereotypes are born in the human’s psychological need to categorize everything. People tend to categorize the world, whether in a social or physical way, into little groups. And there are reasons to do with so: first, it’s cognitively efficient. Since you’ve categorized the group, you don’t need information about each individual member who belongs to that group. In other others, you have a one-size-fits-all mentality: Young Portuguese people are lazy and rather stay at their parents than work. Neat stereotype. Whether it is true or not, that’s something up to discussion and study.

Secondly, we stereotype in order to understand and predict the social world. If you believe that all English people are punctual, then you won’t worry about their lateness. You expect them to be on time.

Finally, stereotypes, in some way, make people feel better about themselves, especially when we think that “our group” is better than the “other groups”. However, what people tend to forget is that inside “their group” there is a vast ethical diverse. That is, there is no such thing as homogeneity inside one culture. People can even fight and disagree on what they see as culture. Bullfights are considered important to the Portuguese culture, yet there have been dozens of petitions and arguments, whether online, on television, or in written, about them.

As it has been clarified, ‘stereotypes’ can be very harmful, whether it is in social events, or in the business environment. But let’s focus on how it can mess up an intercultural workplace. If there is an abuse of stereotyping in a work environment, then people lose since they are not seen as individuals. That is, if we make decisions about co-workers, or costumers based on our stereotyped perception, then we aren’t being unbiased, actually having little or no information about the actual person.

Cultural stereotypes can limit a management’s ability to make best use of their employee’s skills. If we see Person A as Portuguese who is a very sociable and great at making small talk, but not good at making big decisions, then we will never give them a

shot in different areas and restrict their improvement of new skills. Employees are inclined to leave an organization if there are clear signs that they are being mistreated as simply stereotypes: tolerating racism, sexism, ageism, or inappropriate jokes, opinions or images. These can lead as well to a decrease in productivity and reduced revenues.

In a long-term period, if an organization keeps operating like this, it may lead to its failure since it is not considering the important value of individuality and humanity in its workplace.

In conclusion to this section, we can ask ourselves two questions:

1. Are stereotypes essential?

Sometimes they can be a charismatic defence mechanism towards the world and it can be accepted that way, given humans' fears of messing up. It is important to see the difference between a person trying to be a part of the world and being prejudicial about it. It is important, as well, to know when to stop stereotyping others.

2. Could we live in a world without stereotypes?

At this point, it is very hard to say since this globalized world feeds on stereotypes: film-making, tourism, election campaigns, business...

Maybe the question is whether if we can be better off without them, or if we are so used to them that they have indeed become essential to us and to way we live.

II. The British and their history with foreigners

Colonialism

According to the Oxford Dictionary, *Colonialism* is the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers and exploiting it economically. It began in the 15th century, during the Age of Discovery started by Portugal and Spain.

The British Empire's first colonies began in late 16th century. It was now known as the biggest empire in history and, for a century, was the foremost global power: 23% of the world's population was under the English control and covered ca. 35, 500, 00 km² of the Earth's total land. As a result, they spread their cultural and linguistic legacy, becoming then one of the most influential languages. At its peak, the empire was often described as "the empire on which the sun never sets" since it covered so much world ground that somewhere in its territory the sun was shining.

In the 18th century, the British Empire was constituted by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, the Caribbean Island and the British colonies in North America. Later, the British conquered part of South Asia, Australia, Africa and the Americas. With the Caribbean's sugar plantation, slave trade became the basis of the empire's economy throughout many centuries, only to be abolished in 1834. At this time, the British Empire had already lost of its main colonies in America – in 1776, the Thirteen Colonies gained, through violence, their independence, being only recognized by the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. It became thus known as the United States of America.

The British Empire started collapsing one century afterwards.

During the twentieth century, the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization began pressuring nations into giving up their colonies and restoring their independence.

Following the Imperial Conference of 1926, the *Report of the Inter-Imperial Relations Committee* stated the following:

“They are autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as Members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.”¹

In 1949, by the London Declaration, the British Commonwealth of Nations was formally constituted.

Contemporary Relations

In June 2016, the British population voted to leave the European Union (EU) after thirty-eight years of membership. Brexit, as it has been commonly called, has been all over the news throughout the world and many questions are still unanswered. Relation with the rest of Europe is now unstable. It is known that the EU was the UK’s largest trade partner – around a half of their trade was – and, so far, is – with the EU. After Brexit’s conclusion, which is stipulated to be in a period of two/three years, trade costs between the UK and the EU will certainly rise, which will lead to the decreasing trade between the nation and the organization since tariffs shall be imposed once again. The UK will also benefit less from the future market integration within the EU. So far, the main economic benefit of leaving the EU is the lower net contribution to its budget.

Traveling from any EU member-nation to the UK may obtain new bureaucratic complications due to the Brexit. However, for now, the British still can travel within EU freely using a British passport and enjoy the European Health Insurance during temporary visits. For those natives who are currently living and/or working in a member-country, they can still keep their legal status as EU citizens and work in EU countries, retire pensions and receive healthcare.

Right now, the world is on the edge of their seats to find out what more consequences this referendum will bring to the United Kingdom, especially in its economic relations.

¹ Mansergh, N. (1982)

According to *The consequences of Brexit for UK trade and living standards* study², the Norway-situation is an optimistic scenario, in which the UK would enjoy a free trade agreement with the EU. There would be no tariffs or quotas between the UK and the EU-members. They would also still be a part of the European single market and would maintain the policies and the regulations designed to normalize barriers within the single market.

It is known that the UK was one of the founding countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), leaving in 1978 to join the EU. Right now, EFTA has four members: Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. Can the UK be once again part of it? Only the future will tell. Summarizing, it is a free trade area among those four countries.

Another option to expand their economic influence might be the Commonwealth, which right now has 52 members, including countries in almost all continents. Most of them used to be colonies of the British Empire. Statistics from 2008 show that trade among Commonwealth members round US\$4 trillion worth of goods.

When it comes to the relation with the U.S.A, the British foreign policy highlights a proximate coordination with the American country. Relations between the two nations were strengthened during the two world wars, the Korean conflict, the Persian Gulf War, in Operation Iraqi Freedom and in Afghanistan. Their relationship is so close that their governments usually consult each other on foreign policy issues and on global problems. Moreover, they share major foreign and security policy objectives.

With the Brexit and Donald Trump winning the presidential elections, economic and political links between the UK and the USA might change. Since the Brexit vote has essentially changed British foreign policy and the western international structure, it indirectly influences American foreign policy as well.

Additionally, Brexit won't change – or, at least, speculations believe so – the importance of American partnership with its European allies, yet, gathering a consensus for certain actions had already been a challenge with the EU at 28, let alone with Europe at 28 minus one important puzzle piece.

² Dhingra, S. et alii (2016 : 3)

III. How to talk to the British

Intercultural Interactions 101

The fear of the unknown has been replaced with the pride of being too prepared for intercultural interactions.

In 1994, Richard W. Brislin and Tomoko Yoshida published a book entitled *Improving Intercultural Interactions: Modules for Cross-Cultural Training*, where they explicitly stated that if new hires are unfriendly or abrasive in their demeanour, and cannot pass on their knowledge in face-to-face situations, then they will be unable to contribute effectively to the organization. Having interpersonal skills is very important nowadays, especially due to high and high numbers of international assignments and travelling in organizations that are increasing in the past decades.

In their book, Brislin and Yoshida (1994) ask the following question:

What are the qualities of people who are successful on international assignments?

They come up with answers through other famous books. For instance, they quote Hawes and Kealey in their book *An empirical study of Canadian technical assistance: Adaptation and effectiveness on overseas assignment* (1981), in which they set a list of seven indicators of good intercultural interaction. First, they start on advising to interact with the host national both socially and on the job. It is followed by an advice on getting interested on the local language, even if only in modes of greetings or salutations. The visitor's efforts will be appreciated since they reveal empathy and respect.

Intercultural misunderstandings are a complex phenomenon that can happen for many reasons such as inadequate perception – that is, the hearer did not listen and/or hear properly -, or inappropriate comprehension to be located at various linguistic levels³. Therefore, it is important to know and understand the nonverbal modes of communication

³ Juliane House. (2002: 146)

in an intercultural environment. It has been stated by many psychologists that more information is given through nonverbal signals than through words or phrases. Businesspeople that tend to complain about “inscrutable” individuals from other countries – in Hawes and Kealy’s study the Asians are the chosen example – actually mean that they do not understand the nonverbal messages from the other culture.

The following factor is about having some knowledge about the local culture. When doing business with a different country, you have to understand the “hard” aspects of it, including accounting practices or tax structure, as well as the “soft” ones such as leadership styles and negotiating tactics. It is important to adjust your business to the country you’re getting involved with.

The author DJ Kealey, in a series of studies called *A study of cross-cultural effectiveness: Theoretical issues, practical applications*, explains in detail the factor of expressing concern with and training nationals. He asked several host nationals about the technical assistance advisers who had had the best reputations over a long period of time. That is, he wanted to know which advisers would be more fondly remembered by host-country nationals. The answers were clear: advisers who had provided training to hosts – the ones who had skills to offer and made sure that hosts developed them as well – were considered the best. It is important to integrate employees in the workplace, especially when there is an intercultural environment: people from different cultures tend to have different process of working. It is important to find common ground in order to improve workers’ productivity.

As it was explained in the section “The Act of Stereotyping”, people tend to believe that their group/culture may be better than everyone else’s. Whether that is true or not, it still can be a very sensitive topic to people. Therefore, in an intercultural interaction, people have to have in mind that it is important to have a tolerant and open attitude toward local culture and conditions, local mentality and customs. If a person makes no effort in understanding the cultural differences and respect local customs, he or she may find it very complicated to accomplish their business goals.

And, lastly, the seventh important factor is the attitudes of collaboration and cooperation that one must have. It is important to understand that humbleness is a very vital and respected quality for someone to have. Quoting Yoshida and Brislin, “There is no dominant nation that can dictate the direction of the world’s economy. There are many

‘players’ on the economic world stage, and businesspeople must convey attitude of collaboration and cooperation.”⁴

It is essential to be aware that it is always important, whether it is an intercultural situation or not, that we must be prepared to interact with other individuals, whose mind and perspective on life can diverge from ours. Surely, intercultural interactions can sometimes be trickier than what we are expecting, yet, there is no need for “a storm in a teacup” as we need to remember ourselves that, although that we belong into a certain community, we still are individual, dealing with other human beings aware of the same situation as we are in.

What it is expected from the British, according to the Portuguese

On a small survey carried out by us (which can be seen in the Appendix), we asked some Portuguese what their thoughts on the British community were. Most of them were female (52.8%), young (ages rounding 21-30) and students (45,91%).

Our goal was to know how the Portuguese view the British in a scandalous time for them (with the Brexit) and in a digital era.

Interestingly enough, even with such an easy access to the Internet and information, many people could not answer basic, general questions such as which countries belong to the United Kingdom. There were some who answered New Zealand (8,1%), and others who went for Canada, the United States and Australia (2.7% in each).

Although most of the questioned has never visited the United Kingdom (73%), they were able to select what they thought were the three most “British” characteristics. 48,6% of the participants see the British people as very competitive, followed by 40% believing that they were snob and determined. 34,3% answered friendly and intelligent. Among the twelve options, the least ones chosen were lazy, nostalgic and straightforward (each with 8,6%), followed by trustworthy and cheerful (each with 14,3%).

While giving these answers, the questioned might have not been aware that they were stereotyping another culture, even if it was in a harmless way. As it was discussed in a previous section (“The act of stereotyping”), we can see here that human beings have a need to categorize everything that surrounds them. Cultures are not different.

⁴ Richard W. Brislin & Tomoko Yoshida. (1994: 25).

We found it odd that, given recent events, our participants did not stereotype them more as nostalgic since Brexit's results were a lot influenced by how the British felt towards their glorious past, also discussed in a previous section.

In the survey, we also asked if Portuguese people would ever consider living in the United Kingdom. The most popular answer, with 56,8%, was 'Maybe'. Then, we gave out seven reasons to justify the previous questions. Our participants went for culture (62,2%), career opportunities (64,9%) and better life standards (48,6%). The unpopular answers were food and weather with 21,6% and security with 13,5%.

Next, our participants had to identify the most common immigrant communities in the UK. Among several options that we provided, they chose India (51,5%), Portugal (48,5%) and Poland (45,5%). They were actually not far away from the truth, but they would not consider immigrants from Somalia (0%), or Malta (3%).

Since the UK had had such a vast empire, many people from all over the world choose this nation as their home. Therefore, one should be careful when approaching British people since we tend to call them 'English' when they are not. Besides immigrants, there is a difference among UK's jurisdictions: Scottish, Welsh and Irish can find it offending if called English. Moreover, do not ask someone about their origins since it might be a sensitive topic. It may lead to misunderstandings, like trying to place people on a certain social or class scale.

When it comes to Brexit, people answered that there would be repercussions in the European community, with 64,9% answering with a 'Yes'. 35,1% answered 'Maybe' and no one chose 'No'. Yet, when asked to give a more detailed opinion on the British someone said that they have respect for other cultures and their own ("They like culture and know how to appreciate it. They are proud of themselves and face the future with optimism.", "It's a very independent population that values their culture.").

Funnily enough, some people decided not to write an opinion, or give blunt observations such as "They are arrogant", or "They are a little bit cold". Most would say they were friendly, according to their experience of dealing with them. Some people said that they were stressed, busy people that didn't care about what surrounds them – "Like any other great nation, they are a bit ignorant about the rest of the world.".

Some of them also mentioned their lack of humour, saying they are dry or even humourless.

So, our final question is: Can the Portuguese be prepared for doing business with the British without prejudice or ignorance? From our research and survey, we can say that

maybe some of us would be able to carry on a good intercultural interaction. However, we are easily manipulated by the media and the British current situation, with the Brexit, is bound to change some opinions on them. Also, people must be careful with unreliable information that is constantly in the social media.

British Business Etiquette 101

Our social behaviour is very much influenced by our cultural attitudes and values. Therefore, while doing business, we must be aware of the difference since understanding those behaviours are essential for a successful communication. Even though we must face an intercultural business environment as normal – because nowadays it is -, we also need to be prepared in advance. Although stereotyping can be prejudicial, it may come from some real grounds, and there is a difference between it and understanding that we are dealing with people that do not have the same cultural background as we do.

While reading this academic paper, one should consider that we are always basing ourselves in stereotypes and what people are expecting from others; in this case, from the British.

First of all, the British are considered punctual people and like to follow a rigorous schedule. Appearing uninvited, unlike in the Portuguese community, can be seen as offending to them.

Unlike the Portuguese, who don't mind when receiving a gift when you come and visit them (even in a business context), the British might not see that way. If you want to give them a gift (or, better saying, a small *souvenir*), make sure that it is not expensive, or else, it will be seen as a bribe.

When it comes to the dress code, they have a classical conservative style, both for men and women. The colours are also the most basic ones such as black, grey or dark blue.

Moreover, when holding a business meeting, aware that you will receive British guests, it is said to be better to have sure that meeting appointments are scheduled in advance.

One of the many British stereotypes, as referred previously, is that they are very fond of punctuality. While doing business with them, or with anyone else, it is important to respect the time agreed and not be “fashionably late”. It is a business meeting, not a

wedding. Of course, accidents happen, so do not hold too strongly to the stereotype, just keep in mind that it is okay to warn the ones that are expecting you. It is common sense.

Discrimination against sex, age, race and other characteristics is, in many countries including the United Kingdom, unlawful. However, anyone might have to deal with someone more old-fashioned. Although that attitude might be considered wrong, we need to keep a correct posture and have an open-mind. Of course, this isn't an advice directly related to the British.

Any negotiation process can be tough. Some cultures see emotions as a weakness and others as a strength. The British have a tendency to look for objective facts and solid evidence, believing that emotional persuasion is often a waste of time. The popular Portuguese “cunhas”⁵ are hopeless in this situation since personal bonds have some little relevance in the UK business.

Finally, despite dragging your opponent seems always like a good strategy, some cultures, such as the British, do not see it as productive. It is better to focus on your own professional method than using derogatory remarks about the competition.

⁵ “Cunha” is known as the act to help someone close – relative or a friend - to climb the stairway to success.

Conclusion

With this academic paper, our conclusions go further than the British community and stereotypes. It is easy to give in to traditional, manufactured conventions and treat people as obstacles that must be overthrown in order to succeed.

Stereotypes can be a useful when not used in a harmful way by people. It gives us ground to walk through what can be considered the unknown.

To study British stereotypes and how they can intervene in a business situation, it is also necessary to understand their past and find a link to the present, especially after the Brexit' results in June, 2016.

Intercultural interactions are bound to happen in a world risen as globalized. There are concerns yet to fix and understand, especially when it comes to these kind of “filters” that people may have that can roughen comprehension and proximity with the “other”.

Also, the Portuguese mentality towards the British came, sometimes, as too “dreamy” for the real situation that we are facing. Ignorance can be bliss, but, living in a globalized world, we need to start learning about each other and find productive ways to reach common goals, always having in mind that who we can see and maybe study as “the other” is as human as we are.

The last section of our paper, the British Business Etiquette 101, is not intended to be read as a manual. Through our eyes, those were some advices that people can embrace.

So, to sum up, after our research and study, what we can say in a very short way is that: there is no need for “a storm in a teacup” when dealing with intercultural interactions.

Appendix

The following survey will be written in Portuguese since our main focus was the Portuguese people and their knowledge on the British culture.

Survey

Idade: _____

Género

Feminino

Masculino

Profissão: _____

Reino Unido

Sabe identificar os países pertencentes ao Reino Unido?

Inglaterra

Austrália

Nova Zelândia

Estados Unidos da América

Escócia

Irlanda do Norte

País de Gales

Canadá

Já alguma vez visitou o Reino Unido?

Sim

Não

Se não, gostaria?

Sim

Não

Porquê?

Que características atribuiria ao povo britânico?

Amigável	Intelectual
Liberal	Ambicioso
Snob	Confiável
Preguiçoso	Íntegro
Competitivo	Determinado
Bem-disposto	Nostálgico

Considera o Reino Unido uma boa escolha para viver?

Sim
Não
Talvez

Escolha três razões para sustentar a resposta anterior:

Cultura
Gastronomia
Tempo
Oportunidade de Carreira
Bom Salário
Segurança
Qualidade de Vida

Sabe identificar as comunidades imigrantes mais populares no Reino Unido?

Portugal
Polónia
Itália
Malta
Chipre
África do Sul
Paquistão

Somália
Filipinas
Índia

Considera que o Brexit terá repercussões profundas para a comunidade europeia?

Sim
Não
Talvez

Qual a sua opinião sobre o povo Britânico?

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