

HOW ADOLESCENTS IN GERMANY DESCRIBE, JUSTIFY, AND CRITICALLY REFLECT ON HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ETHNIC STEREOTYPES

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Abstract

Ethnic stereotypes in Germany remain a persistent challenge, shaped by history, migration, and everyday interactions. This exploratory qualitative study examines how 15 participants aged 11–20 describe, justify, and reflect on these biases. Participants took part in two semi-structured group interviews: six identified as native German, and nine as first-generation immigrants. Thematic analysis drew on theories of implicit and explicit bias, social identity, in-group favouritism, and authoritarian personality. Within this sample, participants morally rejected ethnic stereotypes while acknowledging their persistence through media representations, intergenerational transmission, and everyday interactions. The findings should not be interpreted as representative of adolescents in Germany as a whole.

Keywords: Ethnic stereotypes; adolescence; Germany; minority groups.

ԻՆՉՊԵՍ ԵՆ ԳԵՐՄԱՆԻԱՅԻ ԴԵՌԱՀԱՄՆԵՐԸ ՆԿԱՐԱԳՐՈՒՄ, ՀԻՄՆԱՎՈՐՈՒՄ ԵՎ ՔՆՆԱԴԱՏԱՐԱՐ ՎԵՐԱԻՄԱՏՏԱՎՈՐՈՒՄ ՊԱՏՄԱԿԱՆ ԵՎ ԺԱՄԱՆԱԿԱԿԻՑ ԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ ԿԱՐԾՐԱՏԻՊԵՐԸ

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Համառոտագիր

Գերմանիայում ազգային կարծրատիպերը շարունակում են մնալ պատմության, միգրացիայի և առօրյա փոխազդեցությունների ազդեցությամբ ձևավորված կայուն մարտահրավեր: Այս հետազոտությունը, որն ունի հետախուզական բնույթ և իրականացվել է որակական մեթոդաբանությամբ, ուսումնասիրում է, թե ինչպես են 11–20 տարեկան 15 մասնակիցներ

նկարագրում, հիմնավորում և քննադատաբար անդրադառնում այդ կարծրատիպերին: Մասնակիցները մասնակցել են երկու առանձին կիսակառուցվածքային խմբային հարցազրույցների. նրանցից վեցը ինքնանույնականացվել են որպես բնիկ գերմանացիներ, իսկ ինը՝ որպես առաջին սերնդի ներգաղթյալներ: Թեմատիկ վերլուծությունն իրականացվել է բացահայտ և թաքնված կանխակալության, սոցիալական ինքնության, ներխմբային նախապատվության և ավտորիտար անհատականության տեսությունների հիման վրա: Այս ընտրանքի շրջանակում մասնակիցները բարոյական տեսանկյունից մերժում էին ազգային կարծրատիպերը՝ միաժամանակ ընդունելով դրանց շարունակական գոյությունը մեղիա ներկայացումների, միջսերնդային փոխանցման և առօրյա փոխազդեցությունների միջոցով: Ստացված արդյունքները Գերմանիայի դեռահասների ամբողջության համար ներկայացուցչական կամ վիճակագրորեն ընդհանրացվող չեն կարող համարվել:

Բանալի բառեր՝ ազգային կարծրատիպեր, դեռահասություն, Գերմանիա, փոքրամասնությունների խմբեր:

Introduction

Ethnic stereotypes remain a persistent, socially influential form of mental categorisation in Germany, deeply rooted in a socio-political history shaped by National Socialism, post-war migration, and ongoing debates over national identity. Following the 1960s Gastarbeiter (guest worker) program and post-1990 migration waves, public discourse shifted from biological racism to stereotypes that emphasise cultural differences and societal integration (Butterwegge, 2005; Zick et al., 2011). Today, while explicit racism is widely condemned in Germany, subtle, implicit biases continue to operate unconsciously and influence everyday interactions (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Understanding these dynamics is critical during adolescence—a vital developmental stage marked by advanced moral reflection, heightened salience of social identity, and vulnerability to rigid categorisation under perceived social threats (Adorno et al., 1950; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Importantly, adolescents' engagement with these biases varies by social position. While majority-group ethnically German youth often perceive stereotypes abstractly, first-generation immigrant youth frequently experience them as a concrete, emotional, lived reality.

This qualitative study uses group interviews to examine how adolescents in Germany describe, justify, and critically reflect on historical and contemporary ethnic stereotypes. It addresses four central research questions:

1. **How** do adolescents describe ethnic stereotypes and their perceived origins?
2. **How** do they justify, normalise, or reject these stereotypes?

3. **To what extent** do they critically evaluate the accuracy, fairness, and consequences of stereotypes?
4. **How** do these processes differ between ethnically German and first-generation immigrant adolescents?

Methodology

The study comprised fifteen participants living in Germany: six participants identified as native German and nine as first-generation immigrants. The sample included male and female participants aged 11–20. The age distribution was as follows: two participants were 11, two were 14, three were 15, five were 16, one was 17, and two were 20. Because this range spans important developmental differences, the study does not treat participants as developmentally homogeneous and does not make robust age-based claims. Participants took part in two separate interview groups, one consisting of the six native German participants and the other of the nine first-generation immigrant participants.

- Group 1: Ethnically German adolescents whose parents were born in Germany.
- Group 2: First-generation Germans whose parents had immigrated to Germany.

This arrangement enabled a cautious comparison of participants occupying different social positions within the study context. It should not be understood as a comparison of homogeneous majority and minority populations. After voluntary, anonymised, guardian-approved informed consent, we collected data through semi-structured group interviews. Participants aged 18–20 participated with parental awareness and approval. No institutional ethics approval was obtained. We conducted interviews separately for the two groups. Interviews were conducted in German and English, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Interview responses were translated from German to English using translation software; during the interviews, a 16-year-old participant fluent in both languages also translated questions and responses as needed. This process may have influenced nuances of meaning and is acknowledged as a limitation. Thematic prompts covered definitions of stereotypes, origins, historical and contemporary examples, media influences, lived experiences, and moral evaluations. Reflexive thematic analysis combined iterative, inductive coding with theory-informed interpretations of explicit versus implicit bias, in-group/out-group constructions, justificatory strategies, and social-position differences.

Data Analysis involved repeated readings of the interview transcripts, identification of relevant passages, and iterative development of codes covering stereotype definitions, perceived origins, justification and rejection, media influence, historical memory, lived experience, and group differences. The author conducted the coding. The author then reviewed the codes in relation to the research questions and organised them into five overarching themes. Theoretical

perspectives informed the interpretation of the coded material. No qualitative analysis software or a second coder was used. Because the sample was small and the interviews were conducted separately, the themes are treated as interpretive patterns within this dataset rather than as evidence of population-level differences.

Results

Five overarching themes were identified.

1. Stereotypes as Cognitive Responses to Fear and Uncertainty

Participants in both groups described stereotyping as a mental shortcut rooted in fear, uncertainty, and limited or no knowledge. This aligns with Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) representativeness heuristic, in which individuals make rapid social judgments by comparing people to mental prototypes rather than evaluating individual traits.

However, the underlying drivers of these cognitive shortcuts differed by group: Group 1 participants highlighted fear stemming from unfamiliarity and from linking every out-group member to a mental prototype shaped by history and/or past experiences, whereas Group 2 participants linked uncertainty to social segregation and limited intergroup contact.

2. Historical Transmission and Intergenerational Narratives

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, German society institutionalised pseudo-scientific racial hygiene theories and *Völkisch* nationalism, establishing moral hierarchies that paved the way for Nazi ideology (Mosse, 1985). This ideology peaked during the Nazi regime, embedding ethnic stereotypes into the education system (Koonz, 2003) and fostering an authoritarian personality type marked by rigid thinking, obedience, and out-group hostility (Adorno et al., 1950). Consequently, German stereotyping is deeply rooted in historical political ideologies and national identity narratives.

Reflecting this history, participants used the Holocaust and National Socialism as central reference points. They connected propaganda, economic crises, and authoritarian leadership to ethnic scapegoating (Adorno et al., 1950). However, the groups differed in application: Group 1 focused on condemning the historical events and their severe social consequences, while Group 2 linked this history directly to current migration debates.

3. Contemporary Stereotypes and Their Targets

Immigrants, refugees, Muslims from Turkey, Syria, and other Muslim countries, and individuals with Eastern European backgrounds are identified as primary targets of stereotyping in contemporary Germany.

Group 1 participants recognised these biases and forms of discrimination. However, they discussed them in abstract, detached terms. In contrast, Group 2 participants described these stereotypes as lived experiences that illustrate how implicit bias influences everyday interactions as aversive racism, producing subtle, unintentional biases that lead to miscommunication and distrust in multiethnic or

interracial interactions, resulting in negative outcomes for minorities despite intentions to be non-prejudiced (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986).

4. Media, Confirmation Bias, and Implicit Processes

Participants noted that media coverage reinforces ethnic stereotypes, particularly by linking ethnicity to crime. This reporting triggers the framing effect by shaping perceptions (Entman, 1993) and activating confirmation bias, where individuals interpret news to validate existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998). Ultimately, these narratives fuel implicit stereotyping among German youth, driving automatic, unconscious judgments.

5. Collective Memory, Moral Evaluation, and Resistance

Collective memory strongly shapes these implicit schemas. Families pass down intergenerational narratives of war, guilt, and victimhood, shaping younger generations' moral boundaries and social empathy (Assmann, 2012). One participant from the native German group stated:

“But you cannot say it out loud, even if there is hatred towards others; no, don’t say it out loud, it’s not okay.”

This statement suggests that the participant distinguished between the possibility of hostile feelings and the social and moral prohibition against expressing them openly. It also indicates awareness that public norms may discourage explicit prejudice, even when negative attitudes persist. Participants from the first-generation immigrant group described stereotyping and exclusion as more direct, personal, and emotionally significant. One participant explained:

“I can feel the way they look at us. No matter how good my German is, no matter that I was born here, I am still regarded as the child of an immigrant, and it is frustrating because you don’t know which world you belong to.”

This account connects ethnic stereotyping with questions of belonging, language, and national identity. The participant’s statement also suggests that being born in Germany and speaking German fluently did not necessarily protect them from being perceived as an outsider.

At the same time, participants did not necessarily view cultural identity and German belonging as mutually exclusive. One participant explained:

“See, but I want to hold on to my roots, what’s wrong with that but I also want to be German, I can do both.”

Together, these accounts show that participants connected ethnic stereotypes with moral responsibility, political anxiety, and the negotiation of multiple identities. However, these patterns should be understood as interpretations of the accounts provided by participants in this study and not as characteristics of either group as a whole.

Discussion

The coexistence of historical guilt and modern prejudice shapes a unique psychological landscape in Germany, demonstrating that stereotyping is a deeply ingrained cultural phenomenon rather than a mere individual cognitive bias. This study highlights a clear gap between adolescents' explicit rejection of stereotypes and their persistent implicit bias. This discrepancy suggests that although social norms successfully encourage explicit egalitarianism among German youth, subconscious biases continue to operate and subtly influence peer interactions and decision-making, despite conscious intentions to act without prejudice (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

Experimental reactions differed significantly by group. Majority-group adolescents displayed composure and abstraction, whereas minority-group adolescents expressed raw emotion and frustration, describing stereotypes as a painful lived reality that induces self-doubt and defensiveness. Social Identity Theory explains these dynamics, noting that individuals derive self-esteem from group affiliations, thereby splitting social behaviour into personal traits and group-influenced interactions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Historical consciousness remains a central interpretive framework. Participants frequently invoked Germany's Nazi past and the Holocaust as moral reference points, linking historical exclusion to contemporary migration debates. This framing (Ad: what's wrong with that? But I also want to be German) strongly shapes current social understanding. However, modern digital landscapes complicate this legacy; participants in both groups confirmed that social media platforms rapidly amplify and reinforce ethnic biases. Online media serves as a structural anchor for implicit bias through the framing effect (Entman, 1993), shaping how youth perceive social problems and solutions.

Ultimately, these adolescents demonstrated significant moral agency and critical thinking. Education, historical consciousness, and media literacy emerged as vital protective factors, positioning youth as potential agents of democratic resilience when equipped with the proper tools.

Limitations

This study primarily focuses on two context-specific categories: participants who identified as native German and those who identified as first-generation immigrants. While this division enabled separate group interviews and a cautious comparison, it oversimplifies Germany's contemporary diversity. The categories do not capture key intersections, such as religious background, socioeconomic status, regional setting, language, mixed or hybrid identities, and migration histories. The age range of 11–20 also spans important developmental differences; the sample was too small to support robust age-based comparisons. Furthermore, the small qualitative sample limits statistical generalizability. The findings therefore concern the participating individuals and should not be generalised to adolescents in Germany.

as a whole. Software-assisted translation and in-interview translation by a bilingual participant may have affected the wording or nuance of the translated material. The author conducted the coding alone, and no institutional ethics approval was obtained; readers should consider these factors when evaluating the study.

Conclusion

Within this qualitative sample, participants linked stereotyping to historical memory, evolving identities, media representations, and contemporary multicultural challenges. The findings offer exploratory insight into how these fifteen participants discussed and evaluated ethnic stereotypes; they should not be interpreted as representative of adolescents in Germany as a whole. Participants demonstrated a capacity for critical reflection on bias, though the extent and form of this reflection varied across accounts and social positions.

Importantly, participants drew on historical knowledge and moral reasoning when discussing bias, belonging, and resistance. The interview data suggest that education, historical consciousness, and media literacy may merit further investigation, but the present study does not establish the effectiveness of interventions. Future research with larger, more age-diverse, and more intersectionally diverse samples could examine these possibilities more systematically.

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