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Research Article

Stereotyping in German Geography Classes – Secondary Teachers' Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract: Stereotypes serve as a means to generalize and simplify our complex world. However, they are usually negatively connoted and can lead to discrimination. Frameworks and requirements exist at various scales to address, dismantle, and counteract stereotypes using multidimensional perspectives. However, because many stereotypes are unconsciously reproduced, blind spots may persist. This exploratory qualitative study investigates the role of stereotyping in the specific context of geography lessons. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 German secondary school geography teachers, using open-ended questions to gain insights into their perspectives and experiences. Through qualitative content analysis, we found that stereotypes appear across various geographical topics, with Africa being particularly affected. The main challenges facing teachers are time constraints, inadequate teaching materials, rigid curricula, and the need to reduce complexity. Some teachers attempt to address stereotypes, but their strategies are often vague, suggesting a lack of systematic training and reflection in university education. Therefore, our results indicate a discrepancy between the guidelines for addressing stereotyping and the reality in German geography classrooms. Although the surveyed teachers were aware of stereotyping, they are not yet adequately equipped to handle it.

Keywords: Geography Education; Geography Teachers; Postcolonialism; Stereotypes; Interview Study

Highlights:

- Stereotypes persist in geography, notably affecting Africa's portrayal.
- Complexity reduction, time constraints, and rigid curricula contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes.
- Teachers' strategies remain vague, reflecting inadequate training and professionalization in teacher education.

1. Introduction

In societies around the world, stereotypes strongly influence social dynamics and individual well-being, often by perpetuating discrimination (Devine et al., 2012; Eagly & Koenig, 2021; Sue et al., 2007). Stereotypes emerge when individuals are categorized based on attributes such as sex, age, and race; in time they become linked to generalized beliefs (usually negative) about a group's psychological traits inferred from observed behaviors, often overlooking situational factors (Eagly & Koenig, 2021; Uleman et al., 2008). Members of stereotyped groups face limited social, economic, and educational opportunities (Cox et al., 2022).

Recognizing and seeking to combat systemic inequities that keep stereotyped individuals from realizing their full potential, various educational frameworks emphasize addressing stereotyping within education and educational materials. At the international level, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) calls for the avoidance of stereotypes in educational materials to prevent stereotype-driven discrimination, ethnic tensions, and extremist attitudes (UNESCO, 2017). At the European level, the European Commission is actively committed to combating stereotypes and structural discrimination (European Commission, 2023). On a national level, the German Geographical Society (DGfG) correspondingly underscores the importance of incorporating both human and natural diversity into geography curricula, advocating for multidimensional perspectives, addressing stereotypes and prejudices, and fostering critical awareness to navigate complex global challenges (German Geography Society, 2020).

These requirements are also discussed in geography's education discourse: Geography education should foster respect toward other regions by debunking stereotypes and providing students with the insights to develop a multifaceted worldview (Milner et al., 2021) and it must now also foster collaborative ideas for a better future in response to global change (Leininger-Frézal et al., 2023). One pitfall is the unconscious perpetuation of implicit prejudices, biased representations, and negative attitudes (Lee, 2018) that may warp students' perceptions and steer them toward unfavorable educational outcomes (Luangangoon, 2020; Tobisch & Dresel, 2017). To avoid such outcomes, greater diversity should be achieved through critical reflection on prejudices against other cultures. This is necessary to ensure social justice, which should be promoted through geographical education (Kim, 2019; Lambert, 1995).

Despite the growing emphasis on mitigation of stereotyping in educational frameworks, studies reveal that stereotypes persist in geography education due to colonial structures (Awet, 2018; Bauriedl & Carstensen-Egwuom, 2023; Kersting & Schröder, 2023; Zimmermann, 2017). At the

core of these structures are colonial legacies in the form of stereotyping, which are interrogated internationally as well as within European and German contexts through various discourses, such as critical race theory (see Annamma et al., 2017; Ray et al., 2017), decolonization (Laing, 2021; Noxolo, 2017; Radcliffe, 2018, 2022), and postcolonial theories (Blunt & McEwan, 2003; Gilmartin & Berg, 2007; Schwarze, 2019).

The effectiveness of teaching interrelates with how teachers teach textbook content (Messekher, 2014). Problematically, Dörfel et al. (2024) showed that German geography textbooks show biases, homogenization, and the simplification of all continents. Because teachers play a crucial role in transmitting textbook knowledge to students (Mohammad & Kumari, 2007), while challenging the attribution of stereotypes to various world regions (Lee, 2018) it is vital to engage with geography educators and assess the presence of stereotyping in geography education. In this way, we aim to explore how German teachers—who must work to uphold high educational standards while also combating stereotypes and biased schoolbooks that supporting stereotypical worldviews—deal with stereotypes in daily geography class.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Stereotypes: A Psychological and Socio-Political Phenomenon

Stereotyping is a deeply ingrained psychological process where individuals or groups are categorized based on oversimplified, generalized traits (Lippmann, 1992). These cognitive shortcuts, learned from social environments such as family, peers, and media, simplify one's understanding of the world but often perpetuate unfair generalizations and biased portrayals (Barrera Mora & Cantor Trujillo, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2017). Although stereotypes enable quick judgments, they misrepresent individuals and contribute to societal power imbalances, constructing an “us versus them” narrative where those stereotyped are often viewed as inferior or “other” (Eberth & Lippert, 2023; van Dijk, 2006). These simplified perceptions—usually negative—can be used to justify discriminatory practices, exclusionary policies, and unequal treatment, further entrenching social divisions (Kerner, 2012; Martiny & Froehlich, 2020).

From a critical perspective, stereotypes cannot be understood merely as cognitive errors; they should be seen as tools embedded in broader societal structures that shape group identities and reinforce power dynamics (Said, 1979). Stereotypes serve as both cognitive shortcuts and socio-political tools, maintaining the status quo and preserving unequal power relations (Lippmann, 1992; van Dijk, 2006). In educational contexts, stereotypes influence teacher–student interactions and can lead to biased evaluations of students, particularly those from marginalized groups, thus reinforcing inequality (Martiny & Froehlich, 2020).

2.2. Stereotypes in Education: An Overview of International Discourses

Stereotypes play a significant role in education across Europe, influencing how students perceive the world and different cultures. The educational process itself is shaped by stereotypes, which affect not only the curriculum content but also teacher–student dynamics. These dynamics shape expectations, biases and, ultimately, student learning outcomes (Fuchs et al., 2014; Willinsky, 1999). In geography education, stereotypes contribute to the reinforcement of dominant Western narratives, portraying the West as superior while constructing non-Western regions as the “other” (Reuber, 2012; Said, 1979). This process serves political, cultural, and economic interests, further entrenching global power structures and perpetuating stereotypes deeply embedded in geographical knowledge (Reuber, 2012; Stöber, 2013; Stöber & Kreutzman, 2013).

Stereotypes in education are deeply connected to colonial continuities or what scholars such as Sultana (2022) describe as forms of coloniality – the enduring power structures and epistemologies rooted in colonialism. As Pieterse and Parekh (1995) highlight, the legacy of 500 years of Western expansion, including 200 years of hegemonic dominance, has contributed to the persistence of racialized and exoticized representations of non-Western cultures. Because geography as a discipline originates from colonial knowledge production—which long dominated the field (Oswin, 2020)—many unaddressed legacies of colonization persist within the discipline, suggesting that geography remains structured by colonialism (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Shaw et al., 2006; Sundberg, 2014).

Internationally and on the European level, various discourses critically interrogate deeply embedded stereotypes, though these cannot be elaborated on in detail here:

- Critical race theory—predominantly in the U.S. context—examines how racism is structurally embedded in institutions and social practices (Annamma et al., 2017; Jackson, 1985; Jackson & Smith, 1981; Ray et al., 2017).
- Decolonization has been deployed as a broader framework for interrogating how knowledge-making practices marginalize or exclude certain people and places, particularly by privileging what might be generalized as “Western” (often Euro-white) knowledge over “Southern” (often racialized) perspectives on the world (Laing, 2021; Noxolo, 2017; Shaw et al., 2006; Sundberg, 2014).
- Postcolonial theory offers a critical perspective on colonial power relations, drawing on concepts of decolonization, among other approaches (Blunt & McEwan, 2003; Gilmartin & Berg, 2007).

Postcolonial theories remain especially relevant in the European and German contexts: Postcolonial theories have emerged since the 1990s as critical responses to the persistence of colonial structures within historical and cultural geography, highlighting their ongoing influence (Blunt & McEwan, 2003; Blunt & Rose, 1994; Lester, 2001). Geography was seen as the “science of imperialism” due to its focus on exploration, mapping, and surveys—all central to the expansionist colonial project (Livingstone, 1993). A central aspect of postcolonialism is the critique of the construction of stereotypes that were developed during the colonial era and persist in many societal discourses and media today (Schwarze, 2019). Therefore, we will now consider specific examples of stereotyping from various German researchers in geography education to gain an overview of the current state.

2.3. The Persistence of Colonial Narratives and Stereotypes – An Overview of Persistent Stereotypes in Germany's Geography Education

The portrayal of Africa in geography education, particularly in Germany, has drawn close scrutiny because of the historical and ongoing consequences of colonialism: Studies of German geography education have revealed that Sub-Saharan Africa remains predominantly framed as a “problem space” marked by themes of poverty, crises, underdevelopment, famine, war, and disease while failing to cover the continent's positive developments and growth (Marmer & Sow, 2015; Schwarze, 2019). Even textbooks, which still serve as a primary source of learning for students

(Wörmann, 2021), frequently present regions such as Africa through a narrow, stereotypical lens—focusing on crises, poverty, and environmental disasters (Bendix, 2015; Hummer, 2014; Kersting, 2011; Schmitt, 1963; Schwarze, 2019; Zimmermann, 2017).

This simplistic representation not only reduces the complexity of African societies but also perpetuates colonial stereotypes that depict African nations as helpless and in need of Western intervention (Bendix, 2015); this contributes to a one-dimensional image of Africa embedding stereotypes of inferiority and dependency (Awet, 2018). These colonial narratives, which historically positioned Africa as the object of European intervention, continue to influence how the continent is represented in modern geography textbooks (Kersting, 2011; Schröder, 2013).

The persistence of such portrayals is not confined to Africa. Because geographical education often adopts a region-specific focus, similar issues arise in the representation of South America, which German geography textbooks often present through themes of economic inequality, environmental degradation, and political instability (Schrand, 1991). This narrow representation fails to capture the diversity and complexity of these regions, thereby reinforcing biased attitudes and perpetuating misconceptions (Breitbach, 2007; Budke, 2017). Likewise, the portrayal of parts of Asia often focuses on economic disparities or the region's struggles with environmental challenges, while failing to address its dynamic and rapidly changing political and social landscape (Budke, 2017). These oversimplifications risk perpetuating stereotypes that ignore these regions' complexity and agency, reinforcing a binary division (Pott, 2002). This is identified as one of the central issues and it has real-world consequences: The one-dimensional portrayals of regions, countries, or continents shape how students perceive global disparities (Reinfried, 2007). Students view the world through a Eurocentric lens that positions the "Global North" as developed, modern, and superior, while the "Global South" is depicted as backward, primitive, and in need of intervention (Reinfried, 2007). This contrast in the portrayal of regions contributes to racialized stereotypes, further entrenching societal inequalities and reinforcing power structures by shaping perceptions of the world through a binary oppositions of "self" and "other" (Reinfried, 2007).

Moreover, geography education is not immune to the influence of media portrayals, which often reduce complex global issues to simple narratives of crisis, poverty, and chaos. Photographs and images in textbooks often focus on the negative aspects of the Global South, whereas the Global North is depicted through sophisticated statistical data, graphs, and narratives that emphasize development and modernity (Reinfried, 2007). This contrast between the respective portrayals of the Global North and South entrenches racialized and hierarchical stereotypes, positioning non-Western regions as inferior and dependent. These depictions fail to engage with the lived realities of these regions, reinforcing misconceptions and perpetuating a limited understanding of global diversity (Schultz, 1999).

2.4. Research Aim and Research Questions (RQs)

Both internationally and in Germany, stereotyping emerges in geography classes due to colonial legacies (Bendix, 2015; Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Kersting, 2011; Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Radcliffe, 2018; Zimmermann, 2017). Colonial origins continue to shape the discipline, perpetuating Eurocentric and Western-white perspectives (Radcliffe, 2018, 2022). In Germany, much is known about Africa as a stereotype in geography education (Hummer, 2014; Schwarze, 2019; Zimmermann, 2017). However, little is known about how stereotypes in general are encountered in classroom situations, and it remains unexplored whether and how the requirement to avoid stereotyping is implemented in the classroom, specifically in geography education in Germany. As the most influential force in education (Hattie, 2009), teachers should help us understand which stereotypes are present in current geography education, why they persist, and what strategies teachers use to encounter them. We therefore aim to answer the following questions through explorative analysis:

RQs

- Does stereotyping occur in geography lessons? If so, how and why?
- What challenges exist in addressing stereotypes?
- What strategies do teachers use to deal with stereotyping in geography lessons?

3. Materials and Methods

In this section we outline the research design, including participant recruitment, analytical approach, and evaluation strategies. Figure 1 visualizes the research design.

3.1. Sampling: Participants and Recruitment

We recruited 13 participants for semi-structured online interviews (via BigBlueButton), each expected to last about 60 minutes. To ensure diversity in the interview group, we used a snowball sampling method (Supp. Material Section A), taking care to avoid biases in the representative sample by interviewing teachers from various age ranges (26–78 years, $M = 45.6$ years). Two of the 13 teachers were pre-service teachers. The sampling group represented diverse levels of experience regarding (1) school type and (2) grade level. We included teachers from both *Gymnasien* ($n = 9$) and *kooperative Gesamtschulen (KGS)* ($n = 4$). We also ensured the inclusion of teachers from different regions across Germany to avoid spatial biases, taking into account urban and rural schools as well as varying levels of migration backgrounds among students. A prerequisite for participation was that the teachers had studied geography. No patterns were identified in terms of content or statements with respect to any of the variables.

3.2. Interviews

The analysis in this study will be limited to specific parts of what were in fact more comprehensive interviews. Here we will focus on the concepts of stereotypes and stereotyping, along with the associated challenges. Interview portions covering diversity, Eurocentrism, subject content, and the potential of the subject are excluded.

To keep the interview process open, we decided not to categorize our guiding questions into different levels of stereotypes, such as content-related stereotypes, stereotypes reproduced by students, or those replicated by teachers themselves. However, we included examples from all three levels, as provided by the teachers in response to the relevant guiding questions. The interview questions and structure resulting from this process are shown in the Supp. Material Section B.

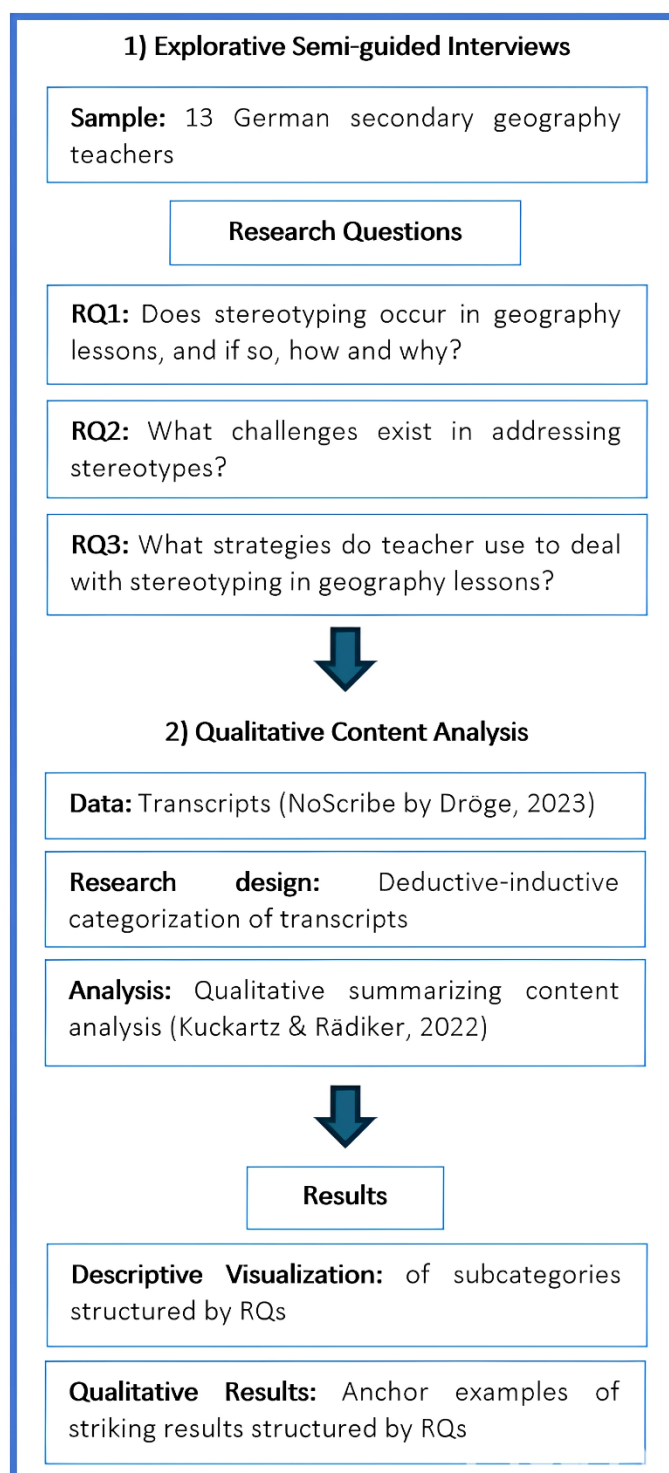


Figure 1. Research design.

3.3. Transcripts

All interviews were transcribed using NoScribe (version 0.4.1) by Dröge (2023). All transcripts were subsequently manually checked twice, and errors were corrected. We applied the transcription rules of Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022).

3.4. Qualitative Content Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using structured qualitative content analysis. More specifically, we developed a category-guided system by following the seven iterative steps of Kuckartz and Rädiker's (2022) procedure model: (1) The data were carefully read, text passages were marked, and memos were written. Subsequently, case summaries were produced for all the interviews. Due to long answers, we first paraphrased all the

interviews to categorize interviewees' statements for better clarity. (2) We then defined 182 coding units based on meaningful segments. The main categories (stereotypes and challenges) were derived deductively based on our research questions. Deductive subcategories (examples, challenges, and strategies) were derived from our interview questions. (3) The entire material was initially coded using these deductive main categories and subcategories. Each coding unit can contain multiple categories, but each category is counted only once per unit. (4) Inductive main and subcategories were exploratively formed within the material. (5) The final coding framework was used to recode the entire material (see Supp. Material Section E). Figure 2 shows a tree diagram with the structure of all deductive and inductive categories. (6) Different analysis types were then applied to analyze the material, which will be explained in the next section. (7) Finally, we wrote the results section. We used MAXQDA Analytics Pro (24.4.0) as the technical implementation of coding, evaluation, and visualization (Kuckartz, 2024).



Figure 2. Structure tree of main categories and subcategories at different levels.

3.5. Outcome Quantification

To give an in-depth analysis of the answers, we will structure the qualitative results for each RQ based on the quantitative results and provide insights for notable categories. All three levels at which stereotyping can be expected to arise (teachers, students, and subject-content level) will be addressed in the results.

We used four levels to evaluate codings:

(1) We began by counting the number of subcategories within each main category to determine their absolute occurrence.

(2) We then normalized these occurrences by calculating the relative frequency of each main category, including all the subcategories, across the interviews and visualized the results using a pie chart in Excel. Next, we visualized the absolute occurrences of all subcategories in tables, structured according to their main categories.

(3) To capture the categories' occurrences across the interviews, we calculated the number of codings per interview. Each category was counted a maximum of once per interview to avoid data distortion from repeated mentions within a single interview.

(4) Finally, we examined the proportion of subcategories within each main category to calculate their relative occurrence. This was normalized using fractions to highlight the relative importance of the subcategories within each interview. We used Excel to visualize these quantitative occurrences for each category.

4. Results

Because the results were highly individual, we can present only a selection of the most notable findings. The results were structured into subsections corresponding to the individual research questions. Each section is accompanied by pie charts providing overviews of the main categories, illustrating the absolute number of mentions by teachers.

4.1. RQ1 – Does Stereotyping Occur in Geography Lessons? If so, How and Why?

We will first represent the examples teachers mentioned and identify reasons why stereotyping plays a role in geography classes. Figure 3 shows that the established main categories are represented at roughly equal frequencies.

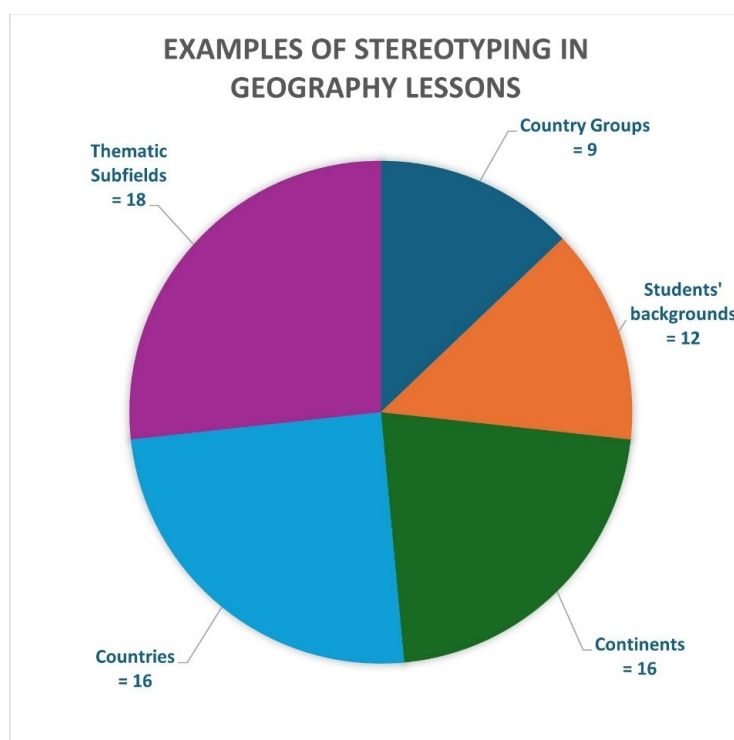


Figure 3. Examples of stereotyping in geography lessons by subordinate categories. Numbers = absolute occurrences; pie chart = percentage-based.

The category “thematic content of geography” has the highest number of mentions: $n = 18$ examples. This category includes various topics mentioned by teachers, such as the rainforest and the Inuit: “I think it plays quite a significant role in the minds of students. When we talk about the rainforest, the ideas students have about how people or young people live there are certainly stereotypes. That they don’t own a mobile phone, don’t have internet, or, I don’t know, don’t go to school, and so on. There are definitely many stereotypes. And if we transfer this to another context, like discussing how the Inuit live, it would probably be quite similar” (D1, 46–47).

The category “countries” offers various examples as well, such as in the contexts of India, China, and the United States: “The U.S. cities with ghettos and gated communities” (D11, 55), or “I’ll take an example like India, where the caste system automatically comes to mind. Or perhaps, a ‘backward’ society in quotation marks due to this very clear social hierarchy, which is especially prevalent in rural areas” (D7, 29). Furthermore, “China, which is reaching for resources and, somewhere, I don’t know, trying to extend its influence everywhere through the New Silk Road” (D11,

55). However, these remain individual examples that emerged spontaneously. The only strong consensus among the examples was in the main category “continents,” specifically in the subcategory “Africa.”

Africa is mentioned by seven out of 13 teachers (Table 1). D7 (41) explained: “When Africa is the topic, many young people and children often associate it with significant underdevelopment and poverty. It’s a common perception of the region as a third-world area.” D8 (48) added: “Sentences like ‘everyone in Africa is poor’ or something like that.” D9 agreed: “... those stereotypes fit right in there: poverty, sometimes war, hunger. That’s what happens” (41).

Table 1. Absolute n, absolute n by max. 1 per teacher, and relative occurrence within the subcategory of continents as examples of stereotyping.

Continents	Absolute n	Absolute (max. 13)	Relative (in subcategory)
Continents (general)	2	2	12.5%
Africa	9	7	56%
Asia	3	3	19%
North America	2	2	12.5%
Total	16	14	100%

The “students’ backgrounds” category includes different forms of specific origins, such as national backgrounds like Syrian, Ukrainian, or Russian—or, more generally, parental origin. All the examples in this category were related to the students themselves. For instance, D6 commented: “I would definitely say that it concerns the social or financial background of the family. In the context of societal issues, I’ve recently noticed that certain stereotypes, especially regarding open lifestyles from the Arab world, are increasingly coming into focus (...)” (47). An example regarding national origin is: “Logically, we have some Syrian or Afghan students at our school. And when the topic of migration comes up, you do think about how to handle it. (...) You try to present it to the students and their peers in a way that avoids creating uncomfortable situations” (D4, 49).

An inductive category was formed because many teachers mentioned reasons for stereotyping when referring to examples from their geography lessons. Figure 4 gives an overview of the main categories, which we will differentiate in the next step.

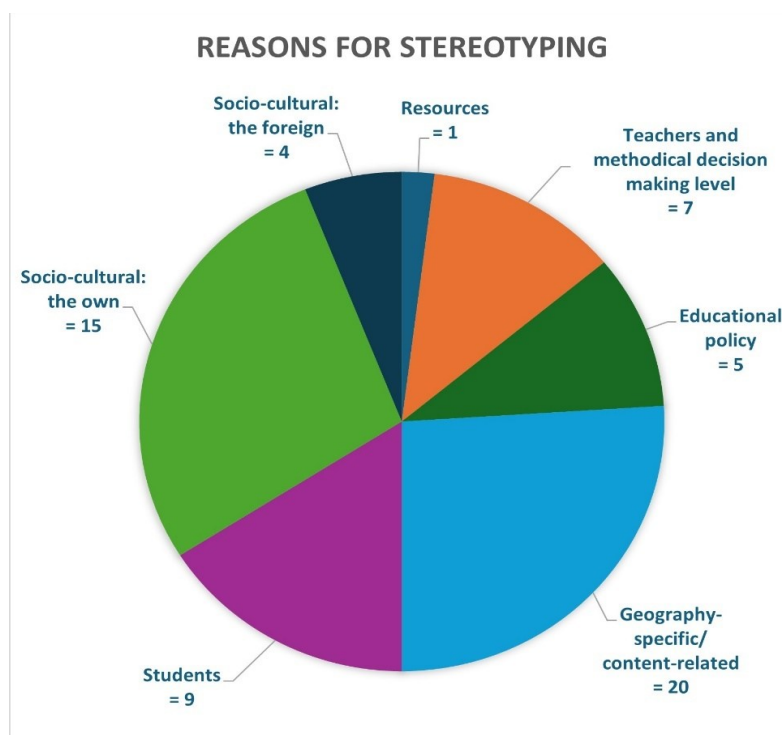


Figure 4: Reasons for stereotyping in geography lessons by subordinate categories. Numbers = absolute occurrences; pie chart = percentage-based.

The most mentioned main categories are “socio-cultural background—own cultural background and “geography-specific and content-related” reasons (table 2; for additional insights see Supp. Material Section C). With seven of 13 mentions, “complexity reduction” is the most frequently mentioned reason for stereotyping. D3 (61) explains: “Many things we discuss in our topics need to be simplified for easier learning, but reducing

the content and complexity always sacrifices naturalness or reality. Instead, as we move toward simplification, we tend to move toward stereotyping on the continuum.” This kind of balancing act is supported by D5 (62): “In particular, there’s always this slight difference, I find, or this fine line between (...) a good model that’s understood and something that somehow becomes black-and-white and biased.”

Table 2. Absolute n, absolute n by max. 1 per teacher, and relative occurrence within teachers and within the subcategory of geography-specific reasons of stereotyping in geography lessons.

Geography-specific/content-related reasons	Absolute n	Absolute (max. 13)	Relative (in subcategory)
-More stereotypes in higher grades	1	1	8%
-Stereotypes are necessary: They facilitate communication	2	1	8%
-Automatization: Stereotyping happens automatically; everyone holds stereotypes to some extent	2	2	15%
-Individuals are rarely examined in class, leading to generalizations of societies	1	1	8%
-Complexity reduction: Didactic reduction is part of the teaching process	13	7	53%
-Problem-oriented: Geography lessons often highlight problems, which may lead to a one-sided, negative perception of certain countries	1	1	8%
Total	20	13	100%

Furthermore, “own cultural identity” as a reason was mentioned by almost half of the teachers (46%): One’s own cultural identity narrows their perspective and can portray other cultures as divergent or different. “Generally, I would say, especially or often in spatial examples that are completely unfamiliar to us, where we have no or fewer preconceptions” (D12, 9).

Another reason for stereotyping at the level of the teachers themselves, specifically in methodological decision-making, may be the emotionalization of content, such as in textbooks: “One is always exposed to images that are meant to be highly emotional, like children with hunger bellies and the villages where they live. Of course, such examples exist, but often in geography classes, only these are shown and not the super high-tech developed capital of the respective country in Africa or Asia. That aspect then tends to be neglected because it doesn’t quite fit into the thematic focus” (D3, 47). At the same time, D3 highlighted the flip-side of presenting a comprehensive image: Because they do not represent a formulated educational goal, aspects were simply omitted to reduce complexity: “The foreign always ignites a certain fascination. A classic example is comparing two life stories. On the one hand, there’s the life story of, let’s say, Tina from Germany. Tina is white, marries at 26, has a maximum of two children, and earns a lot of money. And then, on the other hand, contrasting this, is the life story of a completely marginalized girl from Africa, from some village, who at 14 already has 20 children. Of course, this is a very exaggerated portrayal, but it is naturally fascinating for the students” (61). This quote demonstrates how simplifying complex narratives into contrasting extremes can create a compelling but distorted image, leaving out important nuances and reinforcing stereotypes.

4.2. RQ2 – What Challenges Exist in Addressing Stereotypes?

The challenges teachers face, and their needs that must be met to avoid stereotyping in schools, are diverse. Figure 5 gives an overview of the main categories of “challenges.”

The educational policy challenges (nearly 22%) and structural challenges (in schools) (30%) share the maximum; “lack of time” represents the most common type of structural challenge, being mentioned in some way by 69% of the teachers (Supp. Material Section C).

Low appreciation for the subject of geography and the limited hours are cited as limiting focus on stereotyping. This relates directly to the challenge cited by five educators: the curriculum acts as a “straitjacket” and makes it difficult to meet thematic requirements. This is exacerbated by the time shortage reported by nine of 13 educators, which represents a structural issue: “So, for the subject of geography, we would need to increase both the number of hours and the importance of the subject. This would allow us to incorporate more competencies and content that are highly relevant but have so far been overlooked” (D5, 106). D11 (107) added that time is a big factor, which is the main structural challenge in schools (Supp. Material Section D: “With our six hours in middle school, we just can’t cover much. So, you have to, well, time is a major factor.” D11 continued: “The problem is also that if you want to critically question something, you need the time for students to recognize it themselves” (117).

Geography-specific challenges, by contrast, are much less common: Teachers mentioned only two aspects. Materials and resources (17 codings) evoked various issues: Teachers found the material almost equally challenging, with 62% considering the material deficient: “Yeah, I have to say, that’s often where the problem lies; we work with textbooks a lot. I believe we simply need more time in many aspects to engage more deeply with individual spatial examples. (...) They need to look more closely and have different people examine various circumstances within an area. (...) Moreover, we need textbooks and materials that don’t promote stereotypes and perhaps preemptively address these issues. As a teacher, I find it very challenging to manage this, especially with a full-time position and time constraints, and to independently gather materials that deviate from the curriculum or the available resources” (D12, 26). D3 added: “The publishers just look at the curriculum guidelines, then start researching, creating their materials, and designing the book based on those guidelines. I think the very last ones to feel any need to be quick or super-progressive are the publishers. They are just machines that implement what the curriculum guidelines dictate” (101).

Concerning the education of teachers, six of 13 referred to the limited university education on strategies to combat stereotypes: “I don’t know if the topic is even being addressed by students in practical teaching areas at the moment. If it isn’t, it would be beneficial if universities started implementing the topic through practical preparation or other similar events” (D1, 103).

4.3. RQ3 – What Strategies Do Teachers Use to Deal With Stereotyping in Geography Lessons, and Why?

Figure 6 gives an overview of the strategies the teachers reported using to deal with stereotypes. Most can be assigned to the “dialogue and reflection” category (almost 30% overall). Except for “discuss stereotypes in plenary,” all the other strategies are individual ones (table 3).

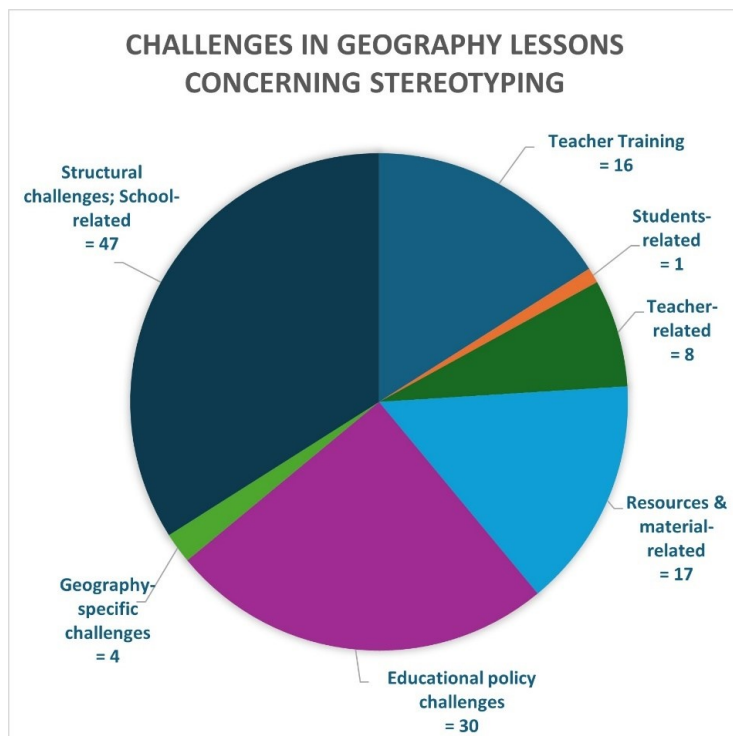


Figure 5. Challenges in geography lessons concerning stereotyping by subordinate categories. Numbers = absolute occurrences; pie chart = percentage-based.

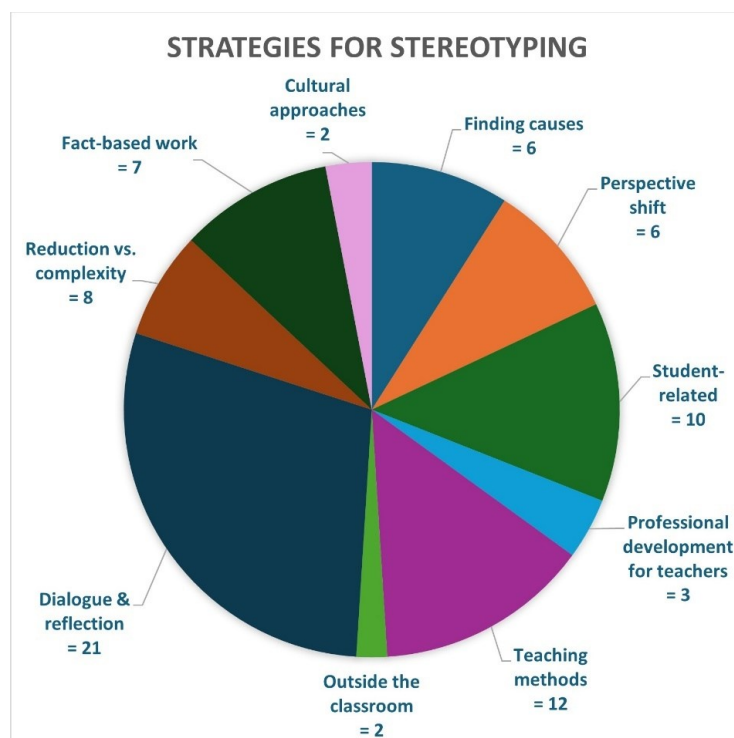


Figure 6. Strategies to deal with stereotypes in geography lessons by subordinate categories. Numbers = absolute occurrences; pie chart = percentage-based.

Table 3. Absolute n, absolute n by max. 1 per teacher, and relative occurrence within teachers and within the subcategory of “dialogue and reflection” as strategies to deal with stereotyping in geography lessons.

Dialogue & Reflection	Absolute n	Absolute (max. 13)	Relative (in subcategory)
- Misconceptions: Clarify misconceptions from surveys	1	1	5%
- Create neutrality to resolve stereotypical views	2	2	10%
- Author intentions: Consider author intentions (e.g., caricatures): What is the author exaggeratedly drawing attention to? Avoid misinterpretations	1	1	5%
- Discussing: Discuss stereotypes in plenary	11	10	50%
- Reflecting: Reflect to uncover and eliminate stereotypes	1	1	5%
- Conscious vs. unconscious handling of stereotypes	1	1	5%
- Follow-up questions: When stereotypes appear, follow up and address	1	1	5%
- Differentiating: When stereotypes appear, address and differentiate	1	1	5%
- Resolving: When stereotypes appear, recognize and resolve	1	1	5%
- Talking about stereotypes can help	1	1	5%
Total	21	20	100%

Others use visual approaches as a teaching method: “Therefore, I need to check prejudices at the beginning. For example, if I want to treat Africa as a continent and go through various countries exemplarily, exploring what culturally characterizes them and so on, I will start the lesson by saying, ‘You have 15 minutes to draw everything that comes to mind about Africa. ‘ This provokes the extreme release of all prejudices. From there, we can work on addressing them” (D8, 40).

To work on stereotypes, teachers must have strong self-awareness—part of “teachers’ professionalization.” D12 remarks, “Yes, I think we should generally try to counteract stereotyping more. That is, to curb it, even though it is incredibly difficult in everyday teaching. However, it shouldn’t be the case that we as geography teachers promote or advance these stereotypes. That shouldn’t be the goal. Instead, I think teachers should be aware of this, be conscious of it, and then, of course, counteract it accordingly” (22).

Finally, one teacher encouraged his students to discuss development projects, intending to create cognitive dissonance: “When white German students think about a development project in Africa and genuinely believe they could do it better, that approach to the project is already somewhat paternalistic” (D2, 46). He further justifies his goal: “I have always loved to place students into such cognitive dissonance, meaning, telling them at the end what the actual situation is that they have fallen into, because it triggers an ‘aha effect’ and a sense of concern” (D2, 50).

5. Discussion

5.1. RQ 1 – Does Stereotyping Occur in Geography Lessons? If so, How and Why?

Stereotypes are present in geography lessons in Germany, as evidenced by the 64 examples of stereotyping provided by 13 teachers. However, these given examples varied greatly, except for Africa-related stereotypes. This aligns with previous studies highlighting the persistence of colonial-era narratives, which frame Africa as underdeveloped, deficient, or exotically romanticized (Linneborn, 2017). While such representations reinforce a hierarchical contrast between the “modern” West and a “backward” Africa (Reichart-Burikukiye, 2001), they do not necessarily reflect teachers’ own views but rather those presented in the materials they use. Many teachers in our study criticized “teaching materials,” particularly textbooks, for reinforcing stereotypes. Furthermore, time constraints and stereotypical materials reinforce each other: When time is limited, teachers tend to rely more on textbooks, which increases the risk of perpetuating stereotypes and biases. Africa’s representation was seen as particularly problematic in two key aspects: First, Africa was discussed in predominantly negative contexts (e.g., social and economic issues); second, the entire continent is strongly generalized. This critique aligns with the findings of Dörfel et al. (2024), who identified biased representations in Hessian geography textbooks. Both the teachers’ reports and Dörfel et al.’s (2024) analysis identified biased representations of Africa, supporting the argument that geography education remains shaped by colonial structures (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Shaw et al., 2006; Sundberg, 2014).

Given the study’s exploratory nature, teachers provided diverse examples. Although “Africa”-related stereotypes warrant particular attention, blind spots may exist: Stereotypes regarding minorities, such as the Inuit, or representations of countries like China or India, may be unconsciously reproduced because they receive little attention and are not recognized as such (Lee, 2018).

Lastly, many examples provided by the teachers fall under the “thematic content of geography,” including topics such as economic issues, poverty, and migration. This raises the question of whether the curriculum itself contributes to stereotyping—a dynamic that future research should explore.

Nearly all teachers identified the need to reduce complexity, which often entails generalizations, as a key contributor to stereotypes. The fine line between simplification and stereotyping has also been noted in previous studies and aligns with our finding: Baig (2008) highlights this issue, emphasizing that educational simplifications often result in stereotypical representations because nuanced perspectives are overlooked. Although “complexity reduction” was the most cited driver for stereotyping, teachers identified “lack of time” as the biggest challenge—an issue that warrants closer examination.

5.2. RQ 2 – What Challenges Exist in Addressing Stereotypes?

“Lack of time” has also been reported as a major challenge in other studies: Van Middelkoop et al. (2017) showed that teachers struggle to incorporate diverse perspectives due to time constraints. Teachers in our study also described the curriculum as a “straitjacket.” Given the high complexity of geography and the large number of prescribed topics, reducing complexity becomes necessary. However, time constraints, insufficient preparation, and a lack of professional training make stereotyping more likely. This connection needs further investigation.

Stereotyping in teaching is also linked to cognitive processes. Like all individuals, teachers are susceptible to automatic categorization and generalization. Due to limited cognitive resources, they may unconsciously rely on stereotypes (Herppich et al., 2018), leading to rapid, biased judgments that negatively affect students’ expectations and outcomes (Gawronski et al., 2003; Hattie, 2009; Herppich et al., 2018; Lorenz, 2021; Martiny & Froehlich, 2020; Reyna, 2008). Research suggests that teachers often struggle to accurately assess students’ needs (Rubie-Davies, 2015), further complicating the issue.

This dilemma must be addressed both academically and in professional development. For training measures to be effective, teachers must be motivated to reflect on and change their own perspectives (Seaton, 2018) and to raise awareness of stereotypes and biases (Liccardo et al., 2025; Schmidt & Wächter, 2023). Crucially, university education should promote openness and equip students with skills to engage with ethnic and cultural diversity (Grießig et al., 2022). Conceptually, no clear geography education approach has yet been established to counter stereotyping.

5.3. RQ 3 – What Strategies Do Teachers Use to Deal with Stereotyping in Geography Lessons?

Teachers address stereotyping through diverse and highly individual strategies, with no universal approach identified. A few teachers reported encouraging perspective-taking to challenge stereotypes. Other studies emphasize this as a key method, particularly in addressing “white Western perspectives” (Daigle & Sundberg, 2017; Howitt, 2020; Shaw et al., 2006). One teacher in our study explicitly mentioned the issue of dominant whiteness and the perception of Europeans as “white rescuers”—a core problem (Radcliffe, 2022; Shaw, 2006). White-dominant colonial logic has severe consequences for Black, brown, and other marginalized people in economic, cultural, and structural decision-making (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; Jacobson et al., 2022). Beyond perspective-taking, diversifying the teaching workforce in Germany is crucial. Currently, far fewer teachers have a migration background (13%) compared to students (40%) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023).

Strikingly, only one teacher mentioned addressing colonial legacies as a strategy to counter stereotypes. Without confronting these structures, stereotypes will persist. Research on teachers’ engagement with colonial structures remains scarce, and the lack of awareness is problematic. Critical geography, which advocates anti-racist and decolonial approaches to counter Eurocentrism and racism (Radcliffe, 2018, 2022), is not yet established in German geography education. Thus, geography education seminars should emphasize the subject’s historical origins and promote deep engagement with these issues. A particular focus must be placed on reducing complexity in a way that centers on core geographical and geo-scientific knowledge while explicitly avoiding stereotyping (German Geography Society, 2020).

Cruz Neri et al. (2024) summarized two key strategies for addressing (gender) stereotypes in geography education: direct reflection with students (Sunderland, 2000) and critically questioning (Cocorada, 2018). Although teachers in our study referenced these approaches, they often described them vaguely, using terms like “resolving stereotypes through discussion,” “asking follow-up questions,” or “challenging statements.” This suggests that explicit training and professionalization are still lacking, even if teachers act on their intuitive awareness. Some even expressed a need for greater professional development in university education. England (2015) suggested strategies such as using diverse everyday images to highlight commonalities, actively reflecting on existing perceptions, designing activities to uncover misconceptions, and incorporating balanced teaching materials that emphasize diversity within and between countries. Some of these aspects were hinted at by individual teachers.

Overall, teachers see stereotyping primarily in students, not themselves. Although some acknowledge that no one is free from stereotypes, there appears to be a lack of critical self-reflection, which risks reinforcing colonial structures.

5.4. What do the results mean on different scales?

Geography education in Germany reflects broader challenges: Various stereotypes persist, reinforced by time constraints that hinder diverse perspectives and effective complexity reduction. A lack of teacher training reinforces these challenges. These findings have significant implications for both European and international contexts. Stereotypes, especially about Africa, reflect global curriculum issues. Many European (e.g., Dutch and Irish) and international (such as Ethiopian and U.S.) geography textbooks still depict non-Western regions through problem-centered narratives (e.g., poverty, conflict, environmental challenges), reinforcing colonial-era perspectives (Kaplan, 1994; Myers, 2001; Takele Ayane & Mekonnen Mihiretie, 2024; Usher, 2023; Weiner, 2016). A literature review by Tarisayi (2023) on decolonizing geography education supports this conclusion, emphasizing the need to reform curricula and amplify marginalized voices. Some countries, such as New Zealand and South Africa, have introduced reforms, albeit inconsistently (Tarisayi, 2023).

There are clear parallels at the European and international levels, particularly in the representation of minorities like the Inuit (Affolter & Sperisen, 2023), and countries such as China (Hong, 2009; Li, 2021) or India (Kořir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). In Germany, these patterns appear to be systemic rather than isolated, highlighting the need for further research in subject didactics across different countries.

Another aspect for future research is the challenge of reducing complexity, which is necessary but problematic. Subject education in other countries should explore whether there is a direct link and develop strategies accordingly; insights from these findings could inform geography education at all levels, offering a foundation for European and international reforms. Additionally, similar gaps between stereotyping and professionalization may exist elsewhere and warrant closer examination.

5.5. Limitations

This study has several limitations. The first is the small sample size and lack of systematic selection regarding ethnicity and national background, which may introduce biases and limit generalizability. The perspectives of teachers from diverse backgrounds might not be fully captured. However, given that only 13% of teachers in Germany have a migration background (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023), this disparity reflects the broader teaching workforce. Future research should address this limitation by employing targeted sampling strategies to ensure a more representative distribution of participants from diverse backgrounds (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023).

Another limitation is the sensitive nature of the topic, which may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose information. Additionally, voluntary participation likely attracted more engaged teachers, potentially skewing results. Future studies could use anonymous surveys or qualitative interviews to encourage candid responses and consider longitudinal designs to track changes over time. Future studies could also mitigate this limitation by employing alternative data collection methods that encourage more candid responses.

Finally, further research should account for diversity within the teaching workforce and examine how teachers' (and the authors') identities shape their perceptions and assessments of the issues discussed.

6. Conclusion

Various frameworks—international, European, and German—emphasize the importance of addressing stereotyping by combating stereotypes and structural discrimination while fostering critical awareness to tackle stereotypes and prejudice (DGfG, 2020; European Commission, 2023; UNESCO, 2017). However, our exploratory analysis of German secondary school teachers reveals that stereotypes remain pervasive in geography lessons. This affects mainly the portrayal of Africa but also influences depictions of minorities (Inuit) and countries (China and India).

The teachers interviewed were aware of the issue and critically reflected on it, yet they lack effective strategies to address it. Their responses highlight significant barriers: Time constraints, an overloaded curriculum, and insufficient professional training in university education. Although some strategies align with previous research (e.g., Cruz Neri et al., 2024; England, 2015), they remain vague, suggesting a broader gap in teacher education programs—an issue teachers themselves acknowledge.

Crucially, our sample consisted of engaged and critically aware teachers; stereotyping may be even more prevalent among educators without such awareness. Ultimately, insights from classroom practice indicate that existing guidelines for addressing stereotypes are not being adequately implemented. This points to a broader discrepancy between educational requirements and actual teaching practice, highlighting an urgent need for further research to explore how these challenges can be effectively addressed—across all scales.

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