



EASY COURSE FRAMEWORK

MODULE 1.

DEFINITION AND SOURCES OF STEREOTYPES



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Note:

Many specialised terms are used in the modules, so each time a term is used for the first time, the learner will find, its adopted **definition** or **synonym** in the EASY project in a colour’ box.

1. DEFINITION OF 'STEREOTYPE'

Bartminski and Panasiuk (1993), citing Walter Lippmann (1922), wrote that a **'stereotype is a schematic and one-sided' image in a person's mind of 'some phenomenon, person, thing and, at the same time**, an opinion about it acquired from the environment before learning about the object itself'.

"A 'stereotype', traditionally understood, is an **over-generalised and simplified image of a particular social group, distinguished on the basis of an easily perceived characteristic** (gender, race, nationality, social class, occupation), usually shared by a larger group of people (Wojciszke, 1991; Bordalo et al., 2016), so "the **content of a stereotype refers to the attributes** that **people believe** characterise a group of (Operairo, Fiske, 2003).

According to Cardwell (1996), we define stereotyping as an **over-generalised idea about a group** or class of people, which in psychological terms means that a stereotype is 'a preconceived or **oversimplified generalisation** about an entire group of people (i.e. **prejudice**) without regard to individual differences.' (Aronson et al., 1997; Chakkarath, 2010).

The stereotype 'is a **mental construct**, based on a schematic and simplified perception of reality, coloured in an **evaluative way**, often based on **prejudices** and uncertain knowledge (...)' (Olechnicki, Załęcki, 2002).

'mental construct'

are simply a set of thoughts about something, beliefs we hold about someone or something, regardless of the facts.

'evaluative way'

involving judgements about the quality, importance, value of someone or something

'prejudice'

feeling, favourable or unfavourable, toward a person or thing, prior to, or not based on, actual experience



To summarise:

A STEREOTYPE is an abbreviated, simplified, and evaluative image of a group of people associated with some attribute of theirs, functioning in the minds of members of other groups and capable of generating prejudice.

A **STEREOTYPE** does not derive from knowledge but from emotion (Kapuściński, 2004), becoming a **verbal expression of a belief** directed at social groups or an individual as a member of that group. It has the logical form of a judgement that, in an unverified way, with a tendency towards emotional evaluation, attributes to a certain class of people certain properties or ways of behaving or denies them certain characteristics. In **linguistic terms**, it can be described as **a sentence**. Stereotypes are strongly spread within a given cultural group (Quasthoff, 2000), usually shared by many people, and **disseminated through language, images, and symbols**, over time becoming 'silent' beliefs.

STEREOTYPES 'linguistically' reflect functioning knowledge in the public mind about different groups or social categories. This knowledge **comes from a few sources and is shaped by a variety of factors**, including culture in its broadest sense: **mass media, education and upbringing systems, religious systems, literature and art and science**, but is also shaped by the **socialisation process in the family** (Nelson, 2003; Weigl, 2000; Xantzi, 2006).

Stereotypes are a **record of defective knowledge** resulting from the limited possibilities of the **human cognitive system**. However, this knowledge helps people to adjust how to deal with uncertainty and thus reduce uncertainty. Thanks to stereotypes, we can evaluate a specific person and determine how to treat them. However, this assessment can often be inaccurate and harmful (Szacka, 2008).

'socialization process'

the process by which people (mainly children) prepare themselves to be an active member of the culture/community in which they reside, and in which they acquire standards of behaviour, attitudes and skills perceived as appropriate for that culture.

'human cognitive system'

is the set of skills of the human mind (brain) through which it can perceive its environment, learn from experience, predict the outcome of events, act to achieve goals and adapt to changing circumstances



As Lippman (1992) claimed [...] stereotypes are an expression of a peculiarly understood economy of thinking, because it is impossible to get to know and evaluate the entire sphere of social reality. Hence, stereotypes are such a **mental shortcut** that **allows us to organize our image of reality**. At the same time, Lippman pointed out that they are **emotionally coloured**. He warned that the stereotype is not free from evaluation and thus not only plays a role in ordering our thinking about reality, but also serves to defend the values we profess. Therefore, it causes a **selective reception of information that functions in the social environment and simplifies the view of the world**” (Sasińska-Klas, 2010).

Analysis of stereotypes can be considered as a certain type of analysis of the social construction of reality. Hence, stereotypes are not specific to one particular person, but to entire social groups and even societies. So, if they think with the same clichés, this is the element that integrates them. Through socialization, a person gains a certain optics of social reality and then, on the basis of a community of this optics, verifies "his own" and "strangers" (Berting, Villain- Gandossi, 1995). Individuals tend to form favourable, **positive stereotypes about members of their group** and **negative, derogatory stereotypes about members of other groups**, treating them as undifferentiated sets of individuals at a time when this does not correspond significantly to the reality of the composition of social groups (Vonk, 2002; Lampridis, 2004).

To summarise:

"STEREOTYPE is a form of consciousness (Błuszkowski, 2003; Berting, Villain-Gandossi, 1995):

- 1/ fully or partially factually correct,**
- 2/ expressing cognitive content from sources which are completely or to some extent independent of experience,**
- 3/ containing emotional judgments and value judgments (negative or positive),**
- 4/ associated with the word as an impulse to update preconceived beliefs,**
- 5/ these are relatively durable and inelastic”**



2. SOURCES OF STEREOTYPES

The phenomenon of stereotypes is complex. There are at least four sources of stereotyping (Chlewiński, 1992):

- 1) stereotyping is the **result of social learning**,
- 2) stereotyping is the **result of social conflicts**,
- 3) it is the **result of personality factors** (and prejudices), and
- 4) it is the **result of cognitive determinants** of stereotyping.

'social learning'

is a theory developed by the psychologist Albert Bandura and means that we learn by observing other people's behaviour and by the consequence of our own actions.

Based on the influence of the environment, the surroundings and observing how it reacts, we begin to form our own world view. And by being aware of the results of behaviour (those observed as well as our own), we gain more flexibility and the ability to change it.

'social conflict'

Social conflict theory views society as a system characterised by power dynamics and the inevitable presence of conflict due to social inequalities, competition for resources and struggles between social groups in shaping the social order.

Stereotypes are created and, more importantly, **reproduced in all the usual socio-cultural ways**; through the **socialization** that takes place **in the family and school**, through the repeated exposure of the individual to them through the **media**, and through **everyday communication** and interaction within the micro-social system in which each individual moves in the various periods of his or her life. Stereotypes are not usually caused by the behaviour of a member or members of the group to which they refer. They are, rather, the intention of others, members of other social groups to create certain images so that they can thereby define and manipulate social reality for their own benefit (Lepore & Brown, 1997).



Stereotypes reflect inequalities and conflicts in society, providing a diagnostic map of intergroup relations. The basic dimensions of this stereotype map represent the warmth of each group (friendly, sincere) and competence (capable, skilled). Some societies cluster groups with high levels of both (positive 'us') and low levels of both (negative 'them') (Durante, Fiske, Gelfand et al, 2017).

Park et al. (1991) and Johnson & Mullen (1994) highlight the element of out-group homogeneity as a key criterion for stereotyping. According to this perspective, individuals who belong to a particular social group and tend to identify themselves as members of that group, enjoying all the - in their subjective judgement - merits of that membership, do not differentiate members of other groups according to certain characteristics that also make them different and distinct. They **prefer to resort to quick and simplistic generalisations** in order to group them together and, ultimately, to emphasise the diversity of the group to which they belong. **They feel more secure in this situation.**

The process of stereotyping is a fundamental and probably universal process of perceiving members of particular social groups in a superficial way, which tends to assign specific characterisations and create corresponding behavioural expectations without having been tested in its entirety and before it has been subjected **to integrated cognitive processing and crystallised as a position** (Kawakami, Spears & Dovidio, 2002).

Slightly different sources of stereotyping are discussed by McGarty et al. (2002). According to authors stereotypes are driven by three principles: The first is the **explanation of the world**. They are designed to help people make sense of a situation. Stereotypes are designed to help people understand the meaning of a situation. The stereotypes are an example of the categorization process. The impressions we get about a group are formed by comparing it to another group. The formation of stereotypes involves the perception or encoding new information, but also previous knowledge. In an environment containing too much information, individuals perceive the world by trying **to reduce this information overload by filtering or ignoring much of it**. The second principle derives from the first and suggests that **stereotypes are a kind of energy-saving device**. These are formed to **reduce the time** and effort that people need to explain the world. Seeing people as members of a group saves energy because it allows all the different and detailed information associated with those individuals to be ignored. But this leads people to adopt biased and incorrect perceptions of the world, which projects the negativity of stereotypes. Finally, according to the third principle, **stereotypes are common beliefs**. These are formed according to the accepted views or **norms of the social groups** to which individuals belong. They attract more attention when many people have the same or similar stereotypes. If every person had a very different stereotype about some group, then these stereotypes would not be of interest. But



common stereotypes are useful for predicting and understanding the behaviour of group members and offer a few qualitative explanations for the condition in question.

In simple terms

Stereotypes arise from the need to organise and reduce excess information about people and the world, the need to fill in the 'blanks' in the knowledge we have, making behavioural patterns more certain and affecting the sense of security of individuals as members of social groups.

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