



## EASY COURSE FRAMEWORK

### MODULE 3.

# THE MECHANISM OF ‘GIVING UP’ 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.

### 3.1. SOCIAL CATEGORISATION

Stereotypes are generalised beliefs about members of certain groups that can influence the way we perceive others and make decisions towards them. They are often based on **categorisation**.

When **people categorise**, they create a kind of template that helps us understand the world, **organise information and make quick decisions**. Categorisation can be the result of a simplistic way in which the mind organises information. When people are

**'categorisation'**  
*is a mental process in which people group objects, people, situations or phenomena based on their similarities and differences*

categorised into certain groups, general characteristics are sometimes used to evaluate or describe the group as a whole, which can lead to simplifications and erroneous conclusions about the people making up the category (Hentschel 2019).

Stereotypes are therefore simplified, sometimes exaggerated beliefs that people have about members of certain social groups. They are often created by categorising people based on the **characteristics we attribute to a certain group**. **'The big three' characteristics by which categorisation (grouping) of people** based on social information occurs are **gender, race and age**. Therefore, we most often divide society into women, men (now also e.g. non-binary) and old and young, but refrain from overtly dividing into racial groups, given the proven social harm of racism.

The neural mechanisms underlying social categorisation are not fully understood, but research suggests that stereotypes and attitudes can shape the way we perceive and process social information (Stolier, Freeman, 2016).



### 3.2. GIVING UP STEREOTYPES

We are all susceptible to stereotypical reactions towards others, but it is important to be aware of and try to overcome them. Inhibiting stereotype-related reactions is a prerequisite for a harmonious society. Still, little is known about the assumptions and effectiveness of this process. Nonetheless, it seems that refraining from stereotypical thinking and, with it, action, may be less of a challenge than is commonly recognised (Rodríguez-García 2016).

When thinking about inhibiting reactions associated with stereotypical action, it is worth remembering that although there are many reasons why stereotypes persist (Fiske, 1998), one in particular dominates contemporary psychological theory. Reacting based on stereotypes saves people the trouble of thinking deeply about others. Based on decades of research, the use of stereotypes has been shown to save (i.e. improve) fundamental aspects of people's social-cognitive functioning (Macrae 2000). When designing any kind of action to counter stereotypical thinking, action it is worth bearing this in mind.

The analysis of the literature indicates that to date, the issue of inhibiting stereotype-related reactions remains poorly explored scientifically and understood. Most of the scholarly inquiry undertaken to date seems to have focused on trying to explain how stereotypical thoughts can be suppressed (Macrae 1994; Monteith, Sherman and Devine, 1998). Less prominent in the literature is work examining the intentional suppression of stereotype-based acts (but see Bartholow, Dickter and Sestir, 2006 ) or stereotype-altering actions (Diamond, 2013; Friedman and Miyake, 2004 ).

Appearing research on how to reduce stereotype threat identifies a number of methods (Bartholow, Dickter and Sestir, 2006) - the most obvious being to change the stereotype. Ultimately, this would be a way to completely undermine the problem once and for all. Unfortunately, changing stereotypes often takes time. However, there are techniques that help to mitigate the effects of stereotypical thinking.



It therefore seems important to learn about the mechanisms that can support the avoidance of stereotypical responses. These include:

- 1) **Becoming aware of one's own biases:**  
Understanding that everyone can have/has certain biases helps to control their influence on our thinking and actions.
- 2) **Openness to experience:**  
Gaining knowledge and experiences from different sources can help break down stereotypes. Contact with people from different groups can dispel stereotypes and change one's perspective on them.
- 3) **Avoiding generalisation:**  
Realise that each person is unique and should not be judged based on stereotypes of their group.
- 4) **Working on empathy:**  
Trying to understand the perspective of others can help avoid stereotyping. Compassion and empathy can reduce the tendency to hold on to prejudices and schematic thinking.
- 5) **Critical thinking:**  
Asking yourself questions and analysing stereotypes can help you understand why such beliefs exist and why they are untrue or harmful.
- 6) **Conversation and open communication:**  
Sharing views and talking to people from different groups can help to break down stereotypes and build better understanding.

The educational 'answer' to the mechanisms mentioned above is to work on making learners aware **that everyone has some prejudices, stereotypes are part of the culture and environment**, but they can and should be worked on (Bian 2017). The process of change cannot only concern children and young people. Observing the age structure of the European population (approximately 60 % are people of working age 15-64), we can assume that **'getting up' of stereotypes in thinking and acting must be an activity of this very age group**, which is and will be at the same time the basis, free of stereotypes, of socialisation of subsequent generations.

***How can this be done?***



- **Education through experience**  
Organising workshops, excursions or meetings with different social groups can help to break down stereotypes through direct contact and learning.
- **Developing empathy**  
Working on developing empathy skills is key. Exercises that help to understand the perspective of others can be very effective. Simulation games or scenarios can be used to help young people, adults to see certain situations from different perspectives.
- **Developing critical thinking**  
Teaching how to analyse the information we encounter. For example, in the course of reading articles or watching the news, it is useful to ask questions and consider different points of view.
- **Conversations and discussions**  
Creating a space for open discussion about stereotypes and prejudices can be very valuable. It allows people to share their experiences and help each other understand diversity.
- **Promoting diversity**  
Highlighting the value of diversity and promoting an attitude of openness to differences can be key. It is useful to organise, support cultural, educational events where different groups can present their culture and traditions.
- **Encouraging action**  
Encouraging social activities or volunteering where you can meet/work with different social groups, this can be a great opportunity to break stereotypes through action and cooperation.
- **Creative learning projects**  
Implement tasks or projects that focus on diversity and breaking stereotypes, e.g. interviews with people from different social groups.
- **Examples of positive change**  
Discussing success stories where people have broken stereotypes and shown how this has contributed to their development and understanding of others.

It is worth remembering that **training to break down stereotypes requires patience and constant work**. The key is to create an environment, an environment of social participation that promotes openness, understanding and respect for diversity. Creating an environment that promotes openness takes commitment and time, but can bring enormous benefits, such as greater understanding, cooperation and respect between people with different backgrounds and from different social groups (Durante 2017).



Key factors supporting the creation of an environment that promotes openness, understanding and respect for diversity are (Hentschel 2019):

**Information and education, developing public awareness:** Disseminating information on cultural, social and ethnic differences. Explaining the importance of respect for diversity and the consequences of prejudice, stereotypical thinking.

**Creating a safe space:** Creating a space in the school, workplace, neighbourhood community where people feel safe, willing to express their views and experiences.

**Respecting diversity:** Promoting diversity among staff, students or the community. Valuing diversity in teams and organisations, thereby contributing to a richer exchange of experiences.

**Open communication:** Encouraging open and sincere communication. Organising meetings, discussions, workshops where people can share their experiences and thoughts on diversity.

**Promoting collaboration:** Creating opportunities for collaboration between different community groups. Joint projects or events can foster bonding and understanding.

**Promoting respect and tolerance:** Emphasising the importance of respect and tolerance towards everyone, regardless of beliefs or group affiliation.

**Values-based leadership:** Leaders, whether at school, in the workplace or in the community, should set an example of openness and respect for diversity. This can motivate others to have similar attitudes.

**Soft skills education:** Education in soft skills such as empathy, openness to other perspectives or conflict resolution. These skills are crucial in building an open social environment.

**Monitoring and response:** Regular monitoring of the atmosphere and people's reactions towards diversity. Strong reactions AND corrective actions in case of any incidents of intolerance, stereotypical thinking (Charlesworth, 2021).





## Summary

**Categorisation and stereotyping are closely related mechanisms for grouping, describing and judging people, which can influence the emergence of prejudices and discrimination that break the social order.**

**Although we do not yet know the neuro-mechanisms for inhibiting the reactions associated with stereotyping, we do know that it is possible to change these reactions, especially through the use of educational techniques developed and tested by researchers and practitioners.**

**Working to break down stereotypes is a process that requires time, commitment and ongoing support. A combination of different methods can be the key to effective teaching and promoting openness and respect for diversity.**

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