



## EASY COURSE FRAMEWORK

### MODULE 4.

# THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF STEREOTYPING

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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.

#### 4.1. INTERNALISATION OF STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes facilitate the rapid processing of information about different social groups. They allow us to quickly categorise and organise huge amounts of data, which can be helpful in people's everyday functioning. These generalisations help to make sense of the world and facilitate communication through the existence of shared beliefs or expectations about certain social groups (Fiske 1998).

The **functioning of stereotypes in society** can have both **individual and societal consequences**. In this context, it is important to mention the **internalisation of negative stereotypes**.

##### *'internalisation of negative stereotypes'*

*is the process in which an individual accepts and begins to believe negative beliefs or stereotypes about his or her social group, which in effect leads to the internalisation of these beliefs as part of one's identity*

When an individual internally accepts negative stereotypes relating to the group to which he or she belongs, this can affect how he or she feels, behaves and perceives himself or herself. Internalisation can lead to the individual starting to identify with these negative traits or beliefs, which can affect their behaviour, self-esteem and developmental trajectory.

**Internalisation of negative stereotypes** often results from **social pressure**, the experience of constant exposure to **negative judgements** or **stereotypes associated with a particular social group**. **Individuals** who are constantly confronted with **negative opinions** about their group may eventually **start to believe these opinions and internalise them as part of their way of thinking about themselves**.

This process can have **negative consequences for the individual**, including **lowered self-esteem, reduced opportunities for personal growth and an impact on social interactions**. It also has **social consequences**. The internalisation of negative stereotypes can lead to **social inequalities and limit development opportunities** in different areas of life for particularly gifted individuals (internalisation of negative beliefs can be a barrier to individual and community development, limiting their opportunities and aspirations). **The internalisation of negative stereotypes can lead to discrimination, limiting the opportunities of a given social group for education, work or equal**

**participation in society.** Negative stereotypes can lead to tensions and conflicts between different social groups, which in turn affects social cohesion (Schmalor, Cheung 2021).

## 4.2. INDIVIDUAL EFFECTS OF INTERNALISING (NEGATIVE) STEREOTYPES

### 4.2.1. A self-fulfilling prophecy

Findings from a number of empirical studies suggest that the development and operation of stereotypes can begin in childhood and become entrenched in adulthood, can operate subconsciously, and usually become auto stereotypes that determine the actions of individuals (Levy, 2003).

When individuals are stereotyped, they may conform to these stereotypes, which can reinforce and perpetuate their stereotypical beliefs about themselves. For example, if an individual is constantly told that he or she is not good at something because of a functioning stereotype, he or she may start to believe this and consequently act in accordance with this belief.

As a result, an individual's internalised stereotypes may become auto stereotypes that operate subconsciously. Internalised auto stereotypes result in unnecessary restrictions, which consequently act as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Levy, 2003).

**A self-fulfilling prophecy is thus based on the mechanism of functional internalisation.**

#### **'Functional internalisation'**

*is a process whereby an individual adopts and internalises certain aspects of a stereotype in order to align his or her behaviour with social expectations or to avoid the negative consequences associated with the stereotype*

When an individual believes a negative stereotype about his or her own group, he or she may internally accept the stereotype. As a result, he or she may adjust his or her behaviour according to the idea of the stereotype (Burkley, Blanton, 2009). The activation of stereotypes (especially negative stereotypes) may prompt individuals to behave in a manner consistent with the stereotype, an effect referred to as behavioural assimilation (Levy, 2003).

**Functional internalisation of a stereotype** may result from **social pressure**, a desire to avoid stigmatisation or from awareness of expectations about a particular group. Individuals who internally accept negative stereotypes about their own group may adapt their behaviour according to these beliefs, even if they are not in line with their actual abilities or personality (Durante, 2017).

This is a process that can have negative consequences for the individual, as it can lead to reduced opportunities for development, lower self-esteem and limit self-actualisation (Burkley, Blanton, 2009).

#### **4.2.2. The stereotype threat effect**

Linked to the self-fulfilling prophecy effect is the **process of stereotype threat**. Awareness of stereotypes about one's own social group can lead to anxiety and reduced performance in situations where these stereotypes are relevant. For example, if an individual from a minority group is aware of a stereotype that his or her group is not good at a particular task, he or she may perform worse because of the fear of confirming the stereotype.

When an individual is aware of potentially becoming/being the target of negative stereotypes, yet fears or feels threatened by the reaffirmation of these stereotypes, they may activate an unfavourable behaviour, effectively confirming perceived stereotypes in society (stereotype threat) (Finkelstein, Voyles, 2015).

#### **4.2.3. Impact on self-esteem, aspirations and development**

**Stereotypes** have a significant impact on a person's self-esteem. They **influence a person's perception of him/herself** in terms of attributed group characteristics and **also determine a person's expectations of himself/herself**.

Being subjected to stereotypes can affect how a person perceives themselves. Continuous exposure to negative stereotypes can lead to lower self-esteem and the construction of a negative self-image. Internalising negative stereotypes can therefore lead to reduced self-esteem. Negative stereotypes can discourage people from pursuing goals or making an effort in a particular area (reduced motivation level), which can lead to a lack of commitment and lower self-esteem. Stereotypes affect the way a person sees their abilities. If a person believes in negative stereotypes about their group, they may believe that they do not have the ability to achieve certain things, which in effect limits their aspirations and development (Burkley, Blanton, 2009).

The effect is called stereotypical threats and can be experienced without decidedly stereotypical treatment from others - the concern of being discriminated against is enough to create the feeling of threat (von Hippel, Kalokerinos & Zacher, 2017). Stereotype threats are closely related to stress, anxiety and lack of commitment which reduce working memory and can lead to negative attitudes and behavioural patterns (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2010).

Whether stereotypes are positive or negative, their impact on an individual's self-esteem is important. Therefore, it is important to build awareness and the ability to recognise stereotypes and to work on developing more positive and real self-images. This can include developing self-confidence, discovering and cultivating one's own strengths and opening up to social support.

#### 4.2.4. Adopting a negative group identity

Group identity refers to the way **people identify with a particular social group** and how **this affiliation influences their self-esteem and the way they see the world**. It can be **based on a variety of factors**, such as **gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or membership of a particular community**. Group identity can affect social relationships. Members of the same group often feel a bond and solidarity, which can lead to support for each other, but also to divisions or conflicts with other groups. It shapes the way a person sees themselves. Identification with a particular group can foster a sense of belonging and pride, but can also bring negative consequences if the group is subject to stigmatisation or negative stereotypes (Jetten, 2011).

#### **'Adopting a negative group identity'**

*is a psychosocial process that can have serious consequences for the individual, both emotionally and socially*

**Adopting a negative group identity** refers to the process by which an individual identifies with negative stereotypes, beliefs or traits attributed to their social group. This may result from internalising these negative beliefs and adopting them as part of one's identity (Charlesworth, 2021).

Individuals who adopt a negative group identity may identify with the negative aspects attributed to their social group. They may believe negative stereotypes about their group and internalise them as their own beliefs. This can lead to a sense of lower personal value, a sense of social exclusion and a limitation of developmental opportunities.

This process may be **the result of experiencing stigma or social pressure**. Individuals who experience constant negative judgements from society or are exposed to negative stereotypes associated with their group may eventually accept these judgements as part of themselves (Burkley, Blanton, 2009).

#### 4.2.5. Mental and somatic disorders

Being the object of stereotypes can exert social pressure on an individual, forcing him or her to fulfil to certain expectations or to struggle with the perceptions imposed by society. The impact of negative stereotypes is undeniably detrimental to those who are targeted by them. Decades of research have shown that **endorsing negative stereotypes can lead to lowered self-esteem and, in some cases, can even result in psychosomatic illness and death**. Giving in to thinking associated with the operation of stereotypes can lead to **depression, results in poorer recovery from illness and a range of other physiological disorders**.

**Stereotypes**, which are the cognitive basis for prejudices and general beliefs about a particular group of people (including favouritism) **can also act as an external stressor for individuals**. Individuals affected by stereotypes may experience fears of being judged by others, fears of being judged by stereotypes, which generates stress and uncertainty (Burkley, Blanton, 2009). Gärtner et al. (2022) investigated the stereotyping of people with mental illness and found that negative stereotypes about their dimensions of **warmth and competence** (see Module 2, *Stereotype Content Model*) led them to develop **negative emotions** and thus show **higher levels of active or passive self-harm** than mentally healthy

people. In this context, we can see the mechanism of **self-stereotyping and self-stigmatisation**.

Emerging research, however, also points to opposite situations in which **negative stereotypes can be useful for those targeted**. In certain contexts, negative stereotypes can clarify current social arrangements, promote in-group social comparisons, satisfy assimilation and differentiation needs, and protect self-esteem from stereotypical failures. **It is clear that a variety of motives underlie the endorsement of negative stereotypes and therefore this can result in both negative and positive consequences for the individual** (Burkley, Blanton 2009).

Stereotypes can have widespread social effects, both at the individual level and at the group and society-wide level.





### 4.3. GROUP AND SOCIETAL EFFECTS OF STEREOTYPES

At the social level, stereotypes often lead to prejudice, i.e. negative or harmful beliefs or attitudes towards a particular group. This can lead to unfair treatment, and the **marginalisation of individuals based on their perceived group membership**, rather than their individual characteristics and abilities (Charlesworth, 2021).

Stereotypes tend to underpin the perpetuation of **social inequalities, as they influence the way groups are perceived and treated** in different areas of life, such as employment, education or healthcare.

In relation to the operation of stereotypes, **self-exclusion is observed for individuals who are subject to negative stereotypes**. These individuals may internalise negative beliefs and avoid certain situations or opportunities, convinced that they are not entitled to them or will not succeed because of stereotypes (Rodríguez-García, 2016). There is then a **reinforcement of stereotypical judgements about the group to which they belong**.

**Stereotypes limit the abilities of individuals**, which can lead to a reduction in aspirations, career choices or activities that could contribute to personal development, but, importantly, could **also contribute to the development of the group and society as a whole**.

Stereotypes can affect how groups perceive themselves and how they identify themselves. Sometimes **groups try to defy stereotypes, which can lead to a stronger sense of community, but also to reinforce separation between different social groups**.

Stereotypes can affect the way people perceive information about others, leading to distorted perceptions and judging people based on their membership of certain groups (Rodríguez-García, 2016). Assigning people to social categories that are linked to stereotypes is carried out through the process of stigmatization i.e. social demarcation of a group or **stigmatized** people or **so called labelling**. Stigmatization underlines an exaggerated trait of a given person based solely on its affiliation to a given social group excluding other groups. Being stigmatized, a person develops expectations to observe behavioural norms consistent with an assigned stigma (Kilian, 2018). A kind of 'game' is played in communication and relationships between people, which is well illustrated by the pattern of **experienced threat** presented by Santos et al. (2023).

Figure 1. Stereotypes, source vs. target of threat

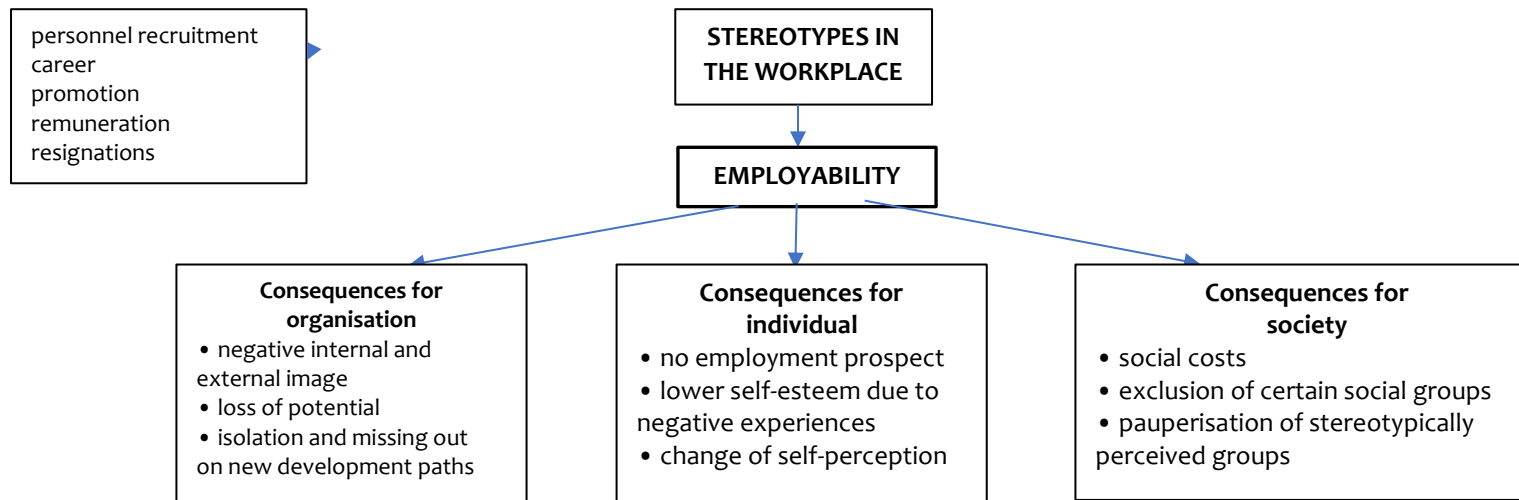
Source of the threat	Target of the threat	
	SELF	GROUP
<b>Self</b>	<p><b>Self-Concept Threat</b></p> <p>Fear that my behavior will confirm, in my own mind, that the negative stereotypes held of my group are true of me.</p>	<p><b>Group-Concept Threat</b></p> <p>Fear that my behavior will confirm, in my own mind, that the negative stereotypes held of my group are true of my group.</p>
<b>Outgroup Members</b>	<p><b>Own-Reputation Threat (outgroup)</b></p> <p>Fear that my behavior will confirm, in the minds of outgroup members, that the negative stereotypes held of my group are true of me, and I will therefore be judged or treated badly by outgroup members.</p>	<p><b>Own-Reputation Threat (outgroup)</b></p> <p>Fear that my behavior will confirm, in the minds of outgroup members, that the negative stereotypes held of my group are true of my group and my group will therefore be judged or treated badly by outgroup members.</p>
<b>Ingroup Members</b>	<p><b>Own-Reputation Threat (ingroup)</b></p> <p>Fear that my behavior will confirm, in the minds of ingroup members, that the negative stereotypes held of my group are true of me and I will therefore be judged or treated badly by ingroup members.</p>	<p><b>Own-Reputation Threat (ingroup)</b></p> <p>Fear that my behavior will confirm, in the minds of ingroup members, that the negative stereotypes held of my group are true of my group and my group will therefore be judged or treated badly by ingroup members.</p>

Source: Santos et.al. (2023: 1640), after Shapiro i Neuberg (2007)

Stereotype threat is characterised as a form of threat to social identity and is triggered by a situation in which a negative stereotype is created by a social group that is devalued by or in relation to another group (Pennington et al., 2016). The situation of identity conflict evident in the schema by Santos et.al. (2023) is a trigger for fear/anxiety and increases the vulnerability of the individual (as themselves and as a group member) to negative stereotypes.

Stereotypes (and discrimination based on them) have important **consequences in the labour market**, interfering with the employability status of individuals in organisations. This is clearly shown in a diagram developed by Bednarska-Wnuk and Syper-Jędrzejak (2016), listing the **consequences of stereotypes for organisations, individuals and society**.

Figure 2. The consequences of stereotypes in the workplace for employability



Source: Bednarska-Wnuk, Syper-Jedrzejak, 2016, p. 96

The authors of the diagram point out that **personnel recruitment and selection**, as well as **promotion and career policies**, are processes that **are very sensitive to the influence of stereotypes**. The supervisor or HR professional conducting them evaluates not only the qualifications and achievements of the candidate for employment or promotion, but also his or her other qualities and characteristics, such as personality, behaviour, skills, potential for success or broadly understood suitability for the organisation. **If stereotypes or prejudices are present in the beliefs of those running these processes, a person or group of people may be favoured or rejected** in recruitment or promotion. We can expect that, in the wake of the actions of single, stereotypically thinking individuals responsible for hiring and promotion policies, the whole organisation runs the risk of ‘losses’, moreover contributing to negative social phenomena (e.g. **exclusion** and **pauperisation** of certain social group).

**‘Pauperisation’**

*social process of lowering the standard of living of individuals or communities; in other words, becoming poorer*



## Summary

**Stereotypes and stereotyping have profound consequences at individual, group, and societal levels. They cause discrimination, stigmatisation, and self-stigmatisation, disrupt communication between social groups and reduce the quality of interpersonal relationships. They contribute to the perpetuation of prejudice against specific groups, which affects culture and social norms. The experience of discrimination and stigmatisation associated with stereotypes can lead to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression or low self-esteem.**

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