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A TOOLKIT FOR TRAINERS, MANAGERS, HR PROFESSIONALS AND TRADE UNION LEADERS

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STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICE

How does our brain handle information overload?

The human brain is the greatest 'achievement' of the evolutionary process. However, even it is incapable of analysing in detail each and every one of the millions of information pieces we are constantly exposed to. So, our brains create filters, diagrams or simplifications to help us sort through the information and draw conclusions quickly and instantly.

These processes take place unconsciously so that, despite the constant stimulus overload, we can have a 'clear head' and devote our energy only to what is really important to us. **Unfortunately, unconscious processes are beyond our control and can lead us into error.**

What is a stereotype?

A side effect of the process described above are stereotypes, i.e. **simplified opinions and beliefs about a certain social group** (e.g. women, men, representatives of a certain nationality, followers of a certain religion, etc.). It is important to know that stereotypes ascribe certain positive or negative:

- **attribute certain positive or negative characteristics to representatives of a given social group,** *e.g. a woman cannot be a good boss; men cannot cope with taking care of children; Ukrainians are very hard-working;*

- they represent reality in a **simplified and therefore untrue way**, because they **blur the differences** between individuals - *whether someone will be a good boss, how he/she will deal with children or what kind of employee he/she will be does not depend on his/her gender or nationality, but on his/her personality, skills, experience, attitude, etc.*

Where do stereotypes come from?

It is also worth remembering that stereotypes **are formed in what is known as the socialisation process**:

➢ **upbringing** – what we learn at home,

➢ **education** - what we learn at school,

➢ **cultural and social messages** i.e. patterns of perception of the world, which we get from films, books, TV series, public debate and our authorities, among other things.

Stereotypes formed in this process are unconscious and relatively persistent, making them **difficult to change or eradicate**.

Stereotypes in practice

- ✓ Let's say we've been asked to meet the board of directors of a company. We enter the room and see three middle-aged men and a young woman. **Most people will assume that the woman is a secretary** and will be very surprised to hear that she is the president of the company. The stereotypes of the male president and the female secretary have worked.

- ✓ What if a man in his fifties came to interview for a programming job? If we allowed the stereotype that older people are not good at using new technology to be triggered, we might **dismiss his application immediately and not take the whole interview seriously.**

Is it possible to hold self-stereotypes?

Self-stereotypes, which are fixed and simplistic beliefs about the group to which we belong, work in the same way as stereotypes about other groups:

- women may think of themselves as not working in the industry;

- men may be convinced that it is not appropriate for them to show weakness or to cry;

- people of other nationalities may think that if they work abroad, they should not aspire to managerial or professional positions.

It is not difficult to see how such **self-stereotypes affect self-esteem and personal or professional choices.**

What is prejudice?

Prejudice is derived from stereotypes. While stereotypes refer to what we think about a particular group, **prejudice refers to our attitudes and emotional feelings** towards members of a group. Prejudice is a negative attitude and is associated with strong emotions such as **dislike, fear, anger, distrust, contempt, disgust**, etc. Like stereotypes, prejudices are persistent and difficult to change.

Prejudice can result in a **lenient attitude by staff to a female customer in a car showroom**, based on the belief that women do not know anything about cars and there is no point in having a substantive discussion with them. Prejudice is also present when we **react with anxiety to a dark-skinned person** entering our compartment during a long train journey.

Good to know!

- ✓ **We don't like to acknowledge our mistakes;** once a stereotype or prejudice has germinated in us, it will pick up all the supporting 'evidence' from the environment and at the same time ignore most of the arguments to the contrary (or consider them the exception to the rule).

- ✓ **Social media** such as Facebook, Instagram, Twiter or Tik-Tok **are ideal conditions for the development and escalation of prejudice.** The lack of verification of the content posted by users and algorithms geared towards increasing reach mean that social media is full of fake news. It often happens that various interest groups take advantage of these conditions to manipulate public opinion and even to influence the results of elections in democratic states!

Are we condemned to stereotypes and prejudices?

As mentioned above, stereotypes and prejudices are by-products of the workings of our minds. Every person with a functioning brain has some stereotypes and prejudices. What is more, they are unconscious, persistent and difficult to change. <u>But that does not mean we are condemned to them!</u>

- ✓ Simply **knowing what stereotypes are and how they work weakens their effect**.

- ✓ Honest **introspection allows us to pull our stereotypes or prejudices out of the abyss of the unconscious and regain control over them.**

- ✓ **Deepening our knowledge** of other cultures and having regular contact with their representatives helps us to free ourselves from deceptive prejudices and to enjoy diversity freely!

FROM STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICES TO DISCRIMINATION

What is discrimination?

Discrimination is the **unequal, unfair, inferior treatment** of people because they **belong to a particular group or have a particular characteristic**. Such characteristics may include, but are not limited to, gender, age, religion, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, sexual orientation, health status or economic status.

Discrimination is any behaviour that **limits the access of people from a particular group to rights, goods and resources and/or violates their dignity and sense of belonging.**

The opposite of discrimination is favouritism or preferential treatment, i.e. treating someone better simply because they belong to a particular group.

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Discomfort for everyone

✓ Discrimination **affects the well-being of people from disadvantaged groups,** restricting their access to resources, rights and opportunities for personal and professional development.

✓ **Discrimination is unfair, unethical and unlawful;** the right to equal treatment is enshrined, inter alia, in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Polish Constitution and the Labour Code.

✓ Environments where discrimination and unequal treatment are tolerated **serve no one**. Even people from advantaged groups can feel uncomfortable in an environment of tension, inequality and injustice.

Discrimination mechanism

Let us look for a moment at the diagram below describing the self-perpetuating mechanism of discrimination and its relationship to stereotypes and prejudice:
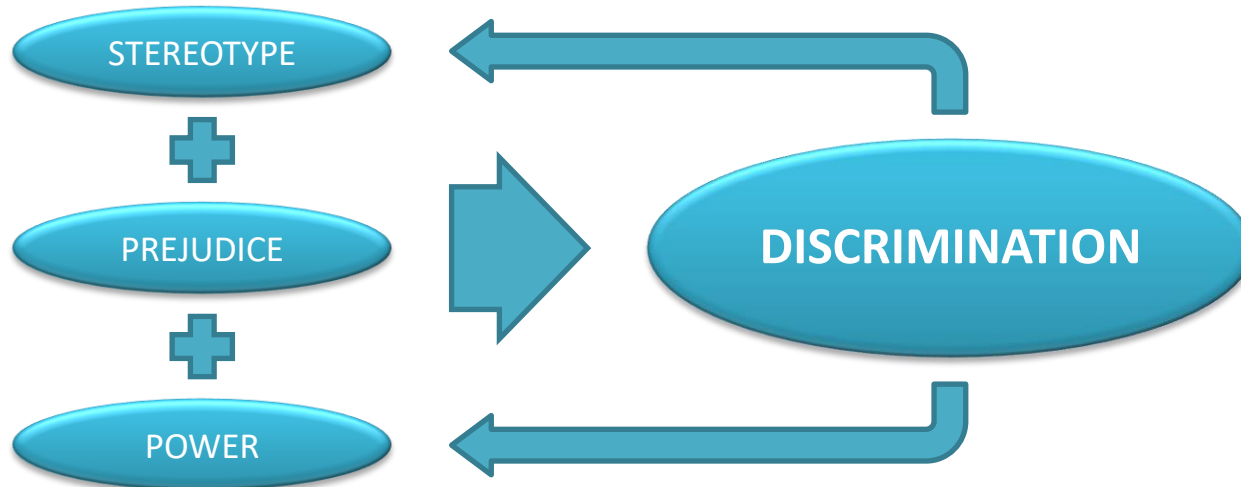
Discrimination mechanism

As we already know, **stereotypes entail prejudice**. If we add any kind of **advantage or power** (formal or informal) to this mix, we have all it takes to trigger the **discrimination mechanism**.

Unfortunately, **this is a self-perpetuating mechanism**. Unequal treatment of a group undermines the well-being of its representatives and significantly affects their behaviour. In turn, the behaviour of those who are constantly exposed to unequal treatment very often becomes 'proof of rightness' for us and contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes, prejudices and power hierarchies.

Let's see this through examples!

Management example

Imagine that a manager is convinced that **women are unsuitable for the role of boss** (stereotype), but receives a top-down order to promote one of his female employees to a managerial position. Unconvinced by the idea (prejudice), he is suspicious of all decisions made by the new female manager, makes high demands on her, quickly and harshly points out her every stumble and questions her competence in front of other employees (discrimination).

The lack of trust and support from the manager and the constant 'picking on' causes the woman to experience a lot of stress, lose her confidence and eventually start making more and more serious mistakes. This is where the manager gets his vindication and can say *'I told you a woman couldn't cope here!*

Family example

This time, let's imagine a family in which it is believed that **a woman's most important role is that of a mother and that men are not suitable for taking care of young children** (classic examples of stereotypes and prejudices). As a result, all care activities are usually carried out by the mother.

When the woman suddenly must leave and the father is finally left alone with his own child, he needs a whole set of instructions about feeding, changing, bathing or the most effective way to put the child to sleep. His many questions and insecurities (often resolved by numerous follow-up phone calls) **will reinforce his conviction that he is not up to it and will be proof to the woman that she should not prioritise other matters over her role as a mother.**

Cross-cultural example

Finally, imagine a team of co-workers in which the Poles have taken a great liking to their new colleague from Ukraine and greatly appreciate his hard-working and non-conflictual nature. They are convinced that he **surely cares a lot about his good reputation in his new foreign workplace and will do everything to show his best side.**

As a result, they often leave him to clean up the workshop at the end of the shift, assign him the hardest and least favourite tasks and sometimes even ask him to do something. The new employee, who is not yet familiar with the team's norms and hierarchy, does not protest loudly against this treatment, although in his soul he feels that it is a bit unfair. As a result, **the whole team gets another proof of commitment and non-conflictuality and the only foreigner in the team becomes an errand boy.**

SUMMARY

Worth remembering!

- ✓ The basis for successful intercultural cooperation is openness to **what is different and new.**

- ✓ The first step in building openness and friendliness in intercultural contacts is to **work through stereotypes and prejudices.**

- ✓ **Everyone has some stereotypes and prejudices** they are a side effect of the brain.

- ✓ The use of stereotypes and prejudices **leads to discrimination**.

- ✓ Discrimination is **complex, self-perpetuating and not always obvious.**

- ✓ Discrimination **harms individuals, organisations and communities.**

- ✓ Taking control of stereotypes and prejudices and **effectively tackling discrimination is possible!**

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