

# Exploring age-related stereotypes of emerging adults within the South African work context

**B Bell**

 [orcid.org 0000-0003-1634-0707](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1634-0707)

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Supervisor: Dr L Brink

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Student number: 23473630

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- Each chapter of this mini-dissertation has its own reference list.

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## **DECLARATION BY RESEARCHER**

I, Bronwyn Bell, hereby declare that “Exploring age-related stereotypes of emerging adults in the South African work context” is my own work and that the views and opinions expressed in this study are those of the author and relevant literature references as shown in the references.

I further declare that the content of this research will not be submitted for any other qualification at any other tertiary institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bronwyn Bell', is centered on the page.

**BRONWYN BELL**

**NOVEMBER 2017**

## DECLARATION BY LANGUAGE EDITOR

WELLINGTON

7655

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I hereby confirm that the MCom dissertation *Exploring age-related stereotypes of emerging adults within the South African context* by Ms B Bell (student no: 23473630) was edited and groomed to the best of my ability. This included recommendations to improve the language and logical structure, guide the line of argument as well as to enhance the presentation.

Rev Claude Vosloo  
Language and knowledge practitioner and consultant

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*Don't think outside the box, reinvent the box*

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## SUMMARY

**Title:** Exploring age-related stereotypes of emerging adults within the South African context.

**Keywords:** Stereotypes, age stereotypes, emerging adults, Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers, in-group, out-group, South African work environment

Currently, the workplace is populated primarily by employees from three different generations: 'Baby Boomers', 'Generation X', and 'Generation Y'. Forming part of Generation Y are the emerging adults. These individuals entail the most recent demographic group entering the workplace and are from the ages of 18 to 25. Emerging adults introduce unique and different characteristics to the workplace. These individuals also differ from other generations in their employment desires and working styles. As a result, employees from other groups (out-group) tend to formulate different stereotypes about the emerging adults (in-group). Age stereotypes of emerging adults are, therefore, a common occurrence within workplaces. Stereotypes that are formed within organisations can impact both the individual and the organisation.

The objective of the present study was to explore age-related stereotypes that emerging adults experience and the impact of these generalised ideas, specifically within the South African context. A qualitative research design was employed based on the social constructivism paradigm to reach the research objectives. A phenomenological approach was followed using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Employees from various South African organisations (N = 25) were interviewed and form part of the three mentioned generational groups, namely Generation Y, Generation X and the Baby Boomers. The selected organisations formed part of financial, mining, construction, and consulting sector. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and analysed by applying the steps of thematic analysis.

The results of the study indicated that various stereotypes exist about emerging adults within the selected South African organisations. The stereotypes were explored in terms of an out-group (older employees) and in-group (emerging adults). Emerging adults experience various positive and negative stereotypes in the workplace. The most prevalent stereotypes expressed by older employees were negative and related to the emerging adults' attitude within the organisation, the skills they had to offer, having a sense of entitlement, and being dependant on others. Emerging adult participants were also aware of being stereotyped themselves. Results indicated that the emerging adults predominantly held negative stereotypes about

individuals within their group (in-group). Results further indicated that these stereotypes influence emerging adults in a behavioural, cognitive and emotional manner. These stereotypes also influence the way emerging adults are treated by older employees within the workplace. Recommendations were made with regard to future research and practice. The present study creates awareness within organisations of age stereotypes attributed to emerging adults. By being aware, employees can manage the influences of such generalising ideas within the workplace.

## OPSOMMING

**Titel:** Die verkenning van ouderdomverwante stereotipes by opkomende volwassenes binne die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks.

**Slutelwoorde:** Stereotipes, ouderdomstereotipes, opkomende volwassenes, Generasie Y, Generasie X, 'Baby Boomers', in-groep, uit-groep, geselekteerde Suid-Afrikaanse konteks

Die werkomgewing tans bestaan hoofsaaklik uit werknemers van drie verskillende geslagte; Baby Boomers, Generation X en Generation Y. Deel van Generasie Y is die opkomende volwassenes, die mees onlangse demografiese groep wat tot die werkplek toetree het en tussen die ouderdom van 18 tot 25 jaar is. Opkomende volwassenes bring unieke en andersoortige eienskappe na die werkplek. Hierdie individue verskil ook van ander geslagte wat betref hul indiensnemingsbehoefte en werkwyses. Gevolglik is werknemers van ander groepe (uit-groep) geneig om verskillende stereotipes aan die opkomende volwassene (in groep) toe te skryf. Ouderdomstereotipes van opkomende volwassenes is dus 'n algemene verskynsel binne werkplekke. Stereotipes wat binne organisasies gevorm word, kan gevolge vir beide die individu en organisasie inhou.

Die doel van die huidige studie was om ondersoek in te stel na die ouderdomsverwante stereotipes wat opkomende volwassenes ervaar en watter invloed hierdie veralgemeende idees uitoefen, veral binne die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks. Kwalitatiewe navorsing gebaseer op die paradigma van die sosiale konstruktivisme is ingespan om die navorsingsdoelwitte te bereik. 'n Fenomenologiese benadering met 'n verbinding van doelbewuste en sneeubalproefneming is gevolg. Werknemers van verskeie Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies (N = 25) is vir die doel van hierdie studie ondervra en maak deel uit van die drie genoemde geslagte, naamlik Generasie Y, Generasie X en Baby Boomers. Hierdie organisasies vorm deel van die volgende indiensnemingsektore: finansiële, mynbou, konstruksie en konsultasie. Data is ingesamel deur semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude, en die versamelde inligting is geanaliseer deur die stappe van die tematiese analise te volg.

Die resultate van hierdie studie het aangetoon dat daar verskeie stereotipes oor opkomende volwassenes bestaan binne die geselekteerde Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies. Die stereotipes is verken volgens 'n uit-groep (ouer werknemers) teenoor in-groep (opkomende volwassenes). Opkomende volwassenes ervaar verskeie positiewe en negatiewe stereotipes in die werkplek.

Die mees algemene stereotipes wat ouer werknemers uitgelig het, was negatief en dui op die houding van die opkomende volwassenes binne die organisasie, die vaardighede wat hulle kan bied, 'n gevoel dat ander hulle “skuld”, en afhanklikheid van ander. Opkomende volwassenes was ook bewus daarvan dat hulle self gestereotipeer word. Bevindings het aangetoon dat die opkomende volwassenes oorwegend negatiewe stereotipes oor individue binne hul groep (in-groep) ervaar het. Resultate het voorts aangedui dat hierdie stereotipes die opkomende volwassenes op kognitiewe, emosionele en gedragsvlak beïnvloed. Sodanige stereotipes beïnvloed ook die manier waarop opkomende volwassenes deur ouer werknemers binne die werkplek behandel word. Aanbevelings is gemaak oor toekomstige navorsing en die praktyk. Hierdie studie help om organisasies bewus te maak van ouderdomstereotipes wat aan opkomende volwassenes toegeskryf word. Deur hiervan bewus te wees, kan werknemers die invloede daarvan binne die werkplek hanteer.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

# INTRODUCTION

The present study explored age-stereotypes that both emerging adults and older employees experience in South African organisations. The focus also was the impact of these age-based stereotypes have on emerging adults. This chapter contains the problem statement, the objective of the study and the research design.

## 1.1 Problem statement

In the present day and age, several generations are working side by side in the workplace, with the most recent demographic group entering the workforce being the emerging adults (Schulman, 2007; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). These emerging adults, therefore, are expected to populate the workplace during the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Arnett, 2000; Schreuder & Coetzee, 2011). As part of the generation Y category (individuals born from 1977 and 2000), these emerging adults (aged from 18 and 25) show several characteristics, styles and expectations that various researchers have attributed to them (Arnett, 2004; Schreuder & Coetzee, 2011).

Shaw and Fairhurst (2008) explain that the above-mentioned is a distinct group of individuals with employment desires and cultural differences, which set them apart from other generations. The generation Y (hereafter abbreviated as Gen Y) individuals enter the workplace with distinctive perspectives and different ways to approach their job (Anantatmula & Shrivastav, 2012). Lindquist (2008) points out that the personalities of younger workers entering the workplace are different from those in the years past. Limited research has been done on the characteristics and expectations of this generation (Shaw & Fairhurst 2008). Therefore, it seems important to conduct research on these emerging adults and their perceived features.

The literature indicates extensive discussions on organisational management and generational differences. However, most literature referring to Gen Y (of which emerging adults form part) is based on observation rather than empirical findings (Bullen, Morgan, & Qayyum, 2011; Jorgensen, 2003). This implies that expectations for emerging adults' careers are based on perceptions about them in organisations, rather than on an objective investigation of individuals' unique characteristics. Lower (2008) argues that even though these characteristics may describe certain individuals of a group, it cannot apply to all the members. In this regard,

Lower (2008) asserts that such sweeping statements about groups (in this case age groups) are stereotypes – a phenomenon that various researchers have defined. Bergh (2011, p.125) conceptualises stereotypes as “a form of schemas, or held beliefs that people belonging to the same group or social affiliation have certain characteristics”. In turn, Odendaal (2009, p. 121) explains stereotyping as “when we judge someone on the basis of our perception of the group to which he or she belongs”.

The phenomenon of stereotyping, in particular age-related perceptions, has received extensive attention in recent research (Blum, 2004; Brink & Nel, 2015; Blauth, McDaniel, Perrin, and Perrin, 2011; Luthans, 2010). According to Shani and Lau (2008, p. 157), “age stereotypes is the belief that differing traits and abilities make a certain age group more or less suited to different roles or display different behaviour toward work”. Bertolino, Truxillo and Fraccaroli (2012) postulate that the workforce will become more diverse in age – requiring younger and older employees to interact with each other. Therefore, it is important to focus specifically on age stereotypes within the workplace. According to Blauth et al. (2011), employees from the various age groups, generations and organisational levels, experience significant age stereotypes. Seeing that the focus of the present study is on emerging adults, the stereotypes regarding this group will be discussed in more detail.

Described by numerous researches, Gen Y (of which young emerging adults form part) is perceived as a largely self-confident group, able to adapt to various situations and adept at multi-tasking (Anantatmula & Shrivasta, 2012; Jorgensen, 2003; Schreuder & Coetzee, 2011). Furthermore, exponents of this group enjoy setting goals for themselves and pursue it; they are optimistic about life and highly confident within themselves (Jorgensen, 2003; Schreuder & Coetzee, 2011). They may also have the urge to break away from the traditional ways in which organisations work, and develop new and innovative ideas on how to change the processes (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Anantatmula and Shrivastav (2012) add that Gen Y employees may challenge the status quo or question a process or procedure if they are uncomfortable with a decision from within their organisation. Therefore, they also are referred to as the ‘why’ generation since they do not hesitate to voice their concerns and opinions (Anantatmula & Shrivastav, 2012). Schulman (2007) also points out that emerging adults are believed to prefer a working environment that delivers as many opportunities as it takes away from them. These entail opportunities where they can meet new people, work in novel ways and take calculated risks. Furthermore, Twenge and Campbell (2008) stress that Gen Y individuals welcome

authenticity – if promises made to them have not been met they may decide to leave the company.

On the other hand, Gen Y exponents are also seen as individuals who have high expectations and a dire need for appraisal, but struggle to accept criticism. This generation demands creative opportunities and ‘hops’ from one job to another (Twenge & Campbell, 2008, Anantatmula & Shrivasta, 2012). Furthermore, according to Gross and Hardin (2007), it can be assumed that these young adults are risky, moody and rebellious in nature. Arnett (2004) supports these characteristics by stating that emerging adults are believed to have a distinct set of features, as explained below.

During this life phase, the emerging adults experience the age of instability, but simultaneously express this as the age of self-focusing. Arnett describes the instability of emerging adults as constantly exploring and changing their choices in work. Even though these emerging adults are aware that they should have a long-term plan for their lives, they constantly revise the plan as they encounter new experiences. Emerging adults also tend to be self-focused as they feel no obligation or commitment to any other person or work and use this life phase to discover themselves (Arnett, 2004). However, as mentioned above, these characteristics that are attributed to emerging adults do not necessarily apply to every member of this generational group.

Castelli, Zecchini, Deamicis, and Sherman (2005) assert that age stereotypes can have significant consequences, and may affect the perceptions about younger workers (Bertolino et al., 2012). According to Bertolino et al. (2012), younger workers are viewed more negatively than older ones, and these existing stereotypes influence the work decisions that need to be made. Gross and Hardin (2007) also found that other employees hold negative views and stereotypes about the young; such views may influence the older employees’ judgement and decisions they make within the organisation. The perceptions of older and younger workers according to Bertolino et al. (2012) are also often affected by the age of the rater. Lower (2008) points out that managers or supervisors of most of these emerging adults form part of the older generation. As a result, quarrels often erupt between the generations due to the distinct qualities (patience, trust and action) which the younger generation are believed to prefer. These desires and differences have proven difficult for the older generations to accommodate, as they

themselves are influenced by the roots of their earlier career experiences (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008).

Other consequences of age stereotypes include the possibility that job seekers are chosen for a specific occupation because of the restrictive view that managers or employers have of the candidate (Lyons, Wessel, Tai, & Ryan, 2013). Age stereotypes also have the following negative outcomes: evoke competition between older and younger workers, especially regarding recognition and resources; let employees complain about other generations; cause organisations to employ only individuals from a certain generation (Blauth et al., 2011). Younger workers also come across as more disengaged and uninterested in their work because of the age stereotypes they experience in the working environment (Blauth et al., 2011). Ultimately, it is evident that these stereotypes can lead to various forms of implicit disapproval and rejection (Castelli et al., 2005). McCann and Keaton (2013), furthermore, found that individuals of different age groups avoid communication, for example, younger workers who admit that they shun communication with older ones.

After examining the different generations within organisations, it was found that the way generations perceive each other, positively or negatively impacts the general workforce's planning strategies, exhausts resources and hampers harmony between generations (Jorgensen, 2003). Additionally, Blauth et al. (2011) assert that age stereotypes restrict the contributions of individuals from all ages and levels in organisations, thus damaging collaboration, productivity and relationships within these companies. The way individuals minimise these effects are to engage in strategies that distance themselves from the negative age-related stereotypes. These strategies can entail (Lyons et al., 2013):

- denying their age or withholding information that may reveal their age;
- avoiding issues that relate to their identity; and
- diminish stereotypes.

The goal of the present research study, therefore, was to determine the age stereotypes attributed to emerging adults, and to investigate the influences of these stereotypes within the South African workplace. In this regard, it was important to focus on these stereotypes from the perspectives of both the emerging adults and their older co-employees. Stereotypes do not

only refer to the qualities and characteristics one appoints to groups other than oneself, but people tend to stereotype themselves as well. Feldman (2011) states that individuals positively or negatively evaluate members who belong to a certain group, thereby causing prejudice. When people look to enhance their self-esteem, they tend to consider their own group (in-group) as superior to the out-group (to which they do not belong) (Feldman, 2011). The members of the in-group observe the actions of another member or social out-group and attribute certain actions, qualities and characteristics to the group as a whole (Bergh, 2011). In essence it is clear that the members belonging to a certain group will favour their group above others.

The social identity theory, initially proposed by Tajfel, adds these dimensions (in-groups and out-groups). Trepte (2006, p. 256) defines the social identity theory as “a social-psychological theory that attempts to explain cognitions and behaviour with the help of group-processes”. The scholar continues by explaining that this theory does not focus on the individual, but rather on the assumptions about a social group. According to Feldman (2011), the theory suggests that people tend to be ethnocentric, only viewing the world from their own perspective and dismissing others in terms of the social group to which they belong. Briefly put, it is found that people who belong to a specific social group, adopt certain viewpoints about members from another group, perceptions that influence the way these members are perceived and understood.

Regarding the present study, there is a lack of research on emerging adults who are entering the workforce, and especially how age stereotypes within the South African workplace impact them. It is particularly important to conduct the present research about emerging adults, seeing that the generation (Gen Y) of which they are part is viewed unfavourably (Anantatmula & Shrivastav, 2012). Furthermore, this study investigates how emerging adults are viewed from the perspective of both themselves and the older co-employees. Based on the literature mentioned above, age-stereotypes have evident consequences for both individuals and organisations. In turn, these perceptions and attitudes of and about emerging adults influence the way older workers and organisations manage them. The aim of the present study, therefore, is to establish the influence of age-related stereotypes on emerging adults within South African organisations.

## **1.2 Research questions**

- How are stereotypes, age stereotypes, and emerging adults conceptualised according to the literature?
- Which age stereotypes do emerging adults experience about themselves in the organisation?
- Which stereotypes do older employees have of emerging adults within the organisation?
- What are the influences of age stereotypes on emerging adults within the organisation?
- How is the behaviour of older employees influenced by the age stereotypes they hold of emerging adults?
- What recommendations can be made for future research and practice?

## **1.3 Expected contribution of the study**

### **For the organisation**

The study investigated how the stereotypes held by older employees influence their treatment of emerging adults within the workplace. The research further explores the effects of these stereotypes on the work environment. This will help provide South African organisations the opportunity to address stereotypes among their staff. The findings also aid managers to sensitise employees within the organisation to the stereotypes they hold. This will also teach employees to avoid stereotyping others, especially regarding fellow employees' age.

### **For the individual**

The present study helps create awareness among individuals of stereotypes that others have of them and of those which they hold of fellow employees. The aim was to sensitise employees to the influences these stereotypes may exert in the workplace. The study also helped make managers aware of stereotypes within their organisation and provide support to individuals affected by such stereotypes.

### **For literature**

At present, there is a scarcity of literature on emerging adults and the stereotypes they experience in South African organisations, and how it influences generational relations in the

workplace. The study adds to the literature of stereotypes, and more specifically contribute to research on age stereotypes. Stereotypes can impact the working environment, and the present study aimed to shed light on the consequences and particularly, how emerging adults experience the stereotypes that older workers have of them. Therefore, the findings of the study contribute particularly to South African literature. Additionally, the study helps industrial psychologists within South African workplaces to educate employees on the dangers of stereotyping, and how to manage different stereotypes.

## **1.4 Research objectives**

The research objectives are divided into a general objective and specific objectives flowing from it.

### **1.4.1 General objective**

The general objective of the study is to explore age-related stereotypes experienced regarding emerging adults within the South African work context, and to determine the influences of these stereotypes on individuals within the organisation.

### **1.4.2 Specific objectives**

The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

- To conceptualise stereotypes, age stereotypes, and emerging adults, according to the literature.
- Explore the age stereotypes that emerging adults experience about themselves in the organisation.
- Determine the age stereotypes that older employees have of emerging adults within the organisation.
- Ascertain the influence of these age stereotypes on emerging adults within the organisation.
- Find out how the behaviour of older employees is influenced by the age stereotypes they hold of emerging adults.
- Draw conclusions and make recommendations on possible future research and practice.

## **1.5 Research design**

The research design consists of the approach, strategy, and method for the present research.

### **1.5.1 Research approach**

For the purpose of the present research, a qualitative design was used from a phenomenological point of departure. Phenomenological research is a strategy of analysis where the researcher identifies individuals' core experiences of a specific phenomenon or construct, which they describe (Creswell, 2009). In qualitative research, the researcher attempts to understand subjectively the individual or group of individuals' behaviour within a certain situation. Furthermore, the researcher of a qualitative study gains this understanding through a naturalistic observation. This entails a subjective investigation of reality from the perspective of an insider (Fouché & Schurink, 2011). In the present study, the researcher aimed to understand the individual participants' interpretation and discernment of a certain situation (Delport, Fouché, & Schurink, 2011).

The present study was grounded within the paradigm of social constructivism. Yin (2011, p. 308) defines constructivism as "the view that social reality is a joint product, created by the nature of the external conditions but also by the person observing and reporting about these conditions". In other words, each individual constructs his/her own reality of a certain situation or phenomenon, and this reality is influenced by the world in which that person lives. A distinct characteristic of constructivism is the importance of interaction between the researcher and the object (participants) of the investigation (Ponterotto, 2005). In the present study, this interaction helped the researcher draw the needed findings from the constructs. Willis (2007) explains that constructivists focus on the meaning of the world to the individual or group under investigation. This focus is highly significant for research in the social sciences. The researcher was, therefore, interested in the phenomenon of stereotypes as experienced by both emerging adults and older employees within the South African work context.

### **1.5.2 Research strategy**

A multiple case study strategy was used to collect the relevant data necessary for this study. Yin (2014) defines a case study as an investigation of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-

world context, particularly when the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and the context. Furthermore, a multiple case study can be conceptualised as a phenomenon where the researcher explores the differences between diverse groups to find similarities or contrasting results that can be explained (Yin, 2014). For the purpose of the present study, the researcher focused on two groups, namely the emerging adults (in-group) and older workers (out-group). The strategy of a case study helped the researcher study the multifaceted phenomenon of stereotypes as experienced by emerging adults and older co-employees within their organisation (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This strategy was, therefore, used to obtain the views of both older workers and emerging adults. This was done to determine the stereotypes emerging adults experienced within the organisation as well as the influences of those stereotypes within the workplace. Several participants in multiple organisations were interviewed to understand these experiences, influences and views they dealt with in their everyday working situation.

## **1.6 Research method**

The research method consisted of the literature review, research setting, entrée and establishing researcher roles. Furthermore, the focus was on sampling, as well as methods to collect and record data. The method also described strategies employed to ensure the quality and integrity of the data, as well as the ethical considerations, data analysis, and style of reporting.

### **1.6.1 Literature review**

A complete review was done of stereotypes, age-related stereotypes, emerging adults, influences and consequences of stereotypes. Various databases were consulted to gather information, in particular sources such as EBSCOhost, Emerald, Sabinet Online, and Google Scholar. Furthermore, the researcher consulted a variety of accredited academic journals and books within the Ferdinand Postma Library of North-West University. In addition, journals and books were consulted, which deal with fields such as social sciences, industrial psychology, psychology, and organisational behaviour.

### **1.6.2 Research setting**

A variety of organisations was selected to participate in the study. Organisations were chosen that function in diverse employment sectors within South Africa. Participants were employed within the organisation where the study was conducted. Furthermore, employees from specific

age groups were targeted in terms of the objectives of the study. Employees (emerging adults) from the ages of 18 and 25 were interviewed as well as older workers from the so-called Baby Boomer generation (born from 1946 and 1964) and generation X (born from 1965 and 1976) (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2011). The setting of the research was thus diverse organisations within South Africa, and not limited to a specific industry.

### **1.6.3 Entrée and establishing researcher roles**

The researcher contacted different organisations and requested permission for their employees to participate. Further information was provided via email on the process and the purpose of the study. After the organisations granted access, the employees were informed and asked to participate voluntarily in the present study. Each participant received a letter requesting participation, the reasons provided for the research and ethical aspects outlined. After employees consented to participate in this study, the researcher communicated the time of the interviews and the venue (private offices and boardrooms), considering a time best suited for the participant.

While conducting the research and gathering the data, the researcher fulfilled significant roles. Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter (2006) postulate that the role of the researcher in the research situation and the extent of control he/she exerts will impact the study as a whole. The first role of the researcher was as planner: planning the research process. This implied ways to collect the data, sampling techniques and conducting the data analysis. During this phase, the role of the researcher was to prepare for and structure the interviews, ensuring the compiled questions were used during the interview process (Maree, 2016). Thereafter, the researcher approached the selected participants and informed them about the study. This was done to encourage participation and clarify possible ambiguities or uncertainties about the interview questions.

In a following phase, the researcher fulfilled the role of an interviewer and active listener. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) explain that during the interview process, the role of the researcher is that of a facilitator helping participants express their feelings, views and experiences. After the interviews were conducted with the specific participants, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. Thereafter, the researcher fulfilled the role of data analyst in order to provide an overview of the gathered data. Finally, the researcher took on the role of data

interpreter, where the data was presented and explained in a scientific manner, in the form of a research article.

#### **1.6.4 Research participants and sampling**

The population for the present research consists of full-time employees working in various South African employment sectors. A combination was used between non-probability purposive voluntary sample and snowball sampling ( $N = 30$ ) to reach the objectives of the present study. Purposive sampling occurs when a sample is chosen deliberately with specific characteristics and goal in mind (Yin, 2011). Through the purposive sampling, the researcher selected employees from specific age groups within South African organisations, as indicated below:

- The first group was from the ages of 18 and 25 (emerging adults).
- The second group was from the so-called Baby Boomer generation (born from 1946 and 1964), and from generation X (born from 1965 and 1976).

As mentioned above, the researcher also used snowball sampling. This occurs when initial respondents are chosen by other methods, but additional participants are obtained through information gathered from the initial participants (Struwig & Stead, 2001). This means that the researcher acquired more participants from participants with whom interviews were conducted already.

#### **1.6.5 Data collection method**

The measuring instrument used in the present research was face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with participants. This was done to understand and investigate how individuals from the selected sample experience stereotypes in the workplace. Semi-structured interviews, means the researcher poses predetermined questions to guide the interview. This method also allows both the researcher and the participant much more flexibility (Greef, 2011). The researcher chose this method for the present study as it provided the opportunity to follow up on interesting directions that may emerge during the interviews. This, in turn, gave participants the chance to elaborate on their point of view. Therefore, the researcher studied the

phenomenon of stereotypes without predetermined expectations of categories and attempted to understand how the interviewed individuals experienced these stereotypes.

The interview took place in a comfortable environment (i.e. private offices and boardrooms) that suited the individual participants the best. The researcher introduced the reason for the study, while also explaining the context of the interview and research. A pilot study was conducted with two emerging adults and two older employees before conducting the formal interviews. This was done to ascertain whether the participants understood the questions and whether the questions provided detailed and sufficient information for the research. Amendments were made to the questions if the researcher noted any confusion or ambiguity from the responses. The participants were asked standard questions, presented below.

### **In-group (emerging adults)**

- *What does the word 'stereotype' mean to you?*
- *What characteristics do you attribute to emerging adults?*
- *What stereotypes do you think older employees hold about you as an emerging adult?*
- *What are the influences of these stereotypes on your work?*
- *What are the influences of these stereotypes on you personally?*

### **Out-group (older employees from the Baby Boomer generation, and generation X)**

- *What does the word 'stereotype' mean to you?*
- *What stereotypes do you hold of emerging adults?*
- *Do these stereotypes that you hold of emerging adults influence how you treat them? If so, please explain.*

Each participant was asked to fill out a biographical questionnaire that indicated gender, age, race, qualification and years of experience. This biographical information was important especially when stereotypes relating to different categories (such as gender and race) surfaced during the interviews. The gathering of biographical information was also important to ensure the participants interviewed for the present study was the applicable ages (as stipulated above).

### **1.6.6 Recording of data**

The conducted interviews were recorded by means of an electronic voice recorder to capture the exact answers to the interview question as the participants provided it. The participants were informed about the recording method, and gave their permission to be voice-recorded. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed onto an Excel sheet. The transcriptions were kept safe and private in a secure location. Furthermore, field notes were also taken to record the non-verbal cues and behaviour of the participants during and after the interviews. This determined whether follow-up interviews were required.

### **1.6.7 Data analysis**

The researcher used thematic analysis to interpret the collected data. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. This form of analysis helped the researcher identify stereotypes about young emerging adults in the South African workplace, and the influence these stereotypes have. For this aim, the researcher used the steps set out by Braun and Clarke to conduct the data analysis. These steps are expounded below.

#### *Step 1: Familiarising yourself with your data*

During the first step, the researcher familiarised herself with the data by listening repeatedly to the recordings while searching for patterns or meanings. The data gathered from the recordings were transcribed into written form. When the data was transcribed from the verbal account, the researcher made sure that it stayed true to the original nature of the data. During this phase, the researcher searched for recurring themes. Field notes were also made that could assist with the coding of the data, even though the coding is refined throughout the process. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher gained a thorough understanding of the data.

#### *Step 2: Generate initial codes*

During the second phase, the researcher coded the data. The codes were produced by processing those data that appeared significant. According to Nieuwenhuis (2016, p. 116), this entails “the process of reading carefully through transcribed data, line by line, and dividing it

into meaningful analytical units”. During this process, full attention was given to the data items and significant aspects were identified that might form the basis of repeated patterns in the data set (i.e. themes). The data were organised into meaningful groups and it was important to ensure all the data was coded.

### *Step 3: Searching for themes*

After the different codes were categorised into various potential themes, the following phase emerged. In this phase the researcher essentially analysed the codes and established which codes can be combined to form an overarching theme. Ultimately, all the themes and sub-themes were then formed and the coded data aligned with the themes. The researcher did not discard any theme during this phase since certain themes that were extracted, might still have been altered.

### *Step 4: Review themes*

During the fourth phase, the researcher refined the themes extracted from the previous phase. The researcher noticed that these themes could be merged into a single theme. This phase comprises two levels. Firstly, the researcher revised all coded data extracts, and secondly, determined the validity of the individual themes in relation to the data set. On the first level, the researcher assessed each theme’s coded extracts, which were extracted to see whether a logical pattern was formed. If no logical patterns emerged in the coded extracts, the researcher reworked the theme either to generate a new theme, or to discard themes from the analysis. At the second level, the researcher established the validity of each theme as compared to the data set. At the end of this phase, the researcher formed an idea of the story the data were relating.

### *Step 5: Define and name the themes*

In the following phase, the researcher defined and refined the themes presented in the analysis. Essentially, by refining and defining, the researcher provided detailed understanding of what the themes described and which aspects of the data the themes captured. Each individual theme entailed a detailed analysis and the researcher also, as part of the refinement, identified and extracted the possible sub-themes (themes within themes). Thereafter, the researcher could define clearly both the themes and sub-themes.

### *Step 6: Producing the report*

In the final phase, the researcher documented the thematic analysis in a way that convinces the readers that the data analysis is valid and reliable. The analysis conveyed a summarising, coherent, logical and an interesting narrative about the data the researcher gathered. The information also provided adequate evidence of the themes and sub-themes within the data, in other words, ensuring enough data extracts to support the themes. The write-up of the gathered information went beyond only describing the data but produced an argument to support the research questions.

#### **1.6.8 Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity**

In qualitative research, it is important to ensure trustworthiness of the data, and therefore, the following four criteria were considered: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria are expounded below.

##### *Credibility*

Credibility (also known as *internal validity*), ensures the context under investigation is approached in such a way that the phenomena have been identified and defined accurately (Schurink, Fouché, & De Vos, 2011). Credibility can be maintained by carrying out the study according to the ‘canons’ (the standards and rules) of research and by presenting the research findings to the participants who were studied to confirm that the researcher understood their social world correctly (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It was thus important that a participant’s description of a construct or answer to an interview question was well-understood and not assumed.

##### *Transferability*

Transferability (also called *external validity*) is the degree to which the context and data of the study can be generalised to a broader population or background (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Nieuwenhuis (2016) asserts that transferability does not involve generalised claims, but rather encourages readers of research to relate elements of the study with their own experience or research. Furthermore, Schurink et al. (2011) explain that researchers can substantiate their

statements or conclusions by referring to their theoretical framework. In the present study, the researcher effected transferability by a thorough description of the research process, the participants, the context and the setting of the research.

### *Dependability*

Dependability implies the extent to which the reader is persuaded that the research study occurred the way the researcher described and indicated (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). This is also known as the *reliability* where the researcher accounts for the changes that occur during the research, as well as for changing conditions in the phenomenon under research (Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Schurink et al., 2011). Nieuwenhuis (2016) explains that dependability is demonstrated through the research design and its implementation. This process should be documented to indicate which decisions the researcher made and how interpretations were done.

### *Confirmability*

Confirmability assesses whether the researcher was objective and acted in good faith to avoid personal values or theoretical inclinations influencing the research or the findings drawn from it (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It is important that researchers acknowledge their own predispositions when conducting research and engaging the participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).

### **1.6.9 Reporting**

The researcher used tables to present the findings of the present research systematically. These tables indicate the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. Furthermore, to substantiate the findings of the study, the researcher used direct quotes of participants to indicate the type of responses that were received, and the themes it covered that are relevant to the research question.

### **1.6.10 Ethical considerations**

Ethical matters point to the researcher's treatment of the participants during the study; these considerations were at the heart of the entire research process (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, &

Ormston, 2014). Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, and Davidson (2002) state that ethics are intrinsic to the phenomenological approach of a study. The various ethical considerations to which the researcher of the present study did adhere are expounded below.

#### *Informed consent and voluntary participation*

It is crucial that participants agree voluntarily to take part in the research. Furthermore, participants should be made aware in advance of possible risks such as discomfort or harm during the research (Struwig & Stead, 2001). The researcher focused strongly on providing accurate and complete information to the targeted individuals, eliciting a well-informed decision to take part in the research (Strydom, 2011). Written informed consent was obligatory before candidates took part in the present research.

#### *Confidentiality*

Throughout the research project, the researcher respected the participants' privacy and informed them timely of possible impediments to confidentiality (Struwig & Stead, 2001). According to Strydom (2011), the focus should be to handle information in a confidential manner. The researcher informed the participants that the gathered information would be handled with discretion, and without the participants' consent, this data would not be disclosed to others. Furthermore, the participants were informed that the voice recordings would be erased after the research is completed, therefore their identity will remain anonymous. The researcher also emphasised the fact that participants may withdraw from the study at any stage, without repercussions.

#### *Deception*

Struwig and Stead (2001) explain deception as misinforming participants about the study to gain their participation. It was thus important for the researcher to disclose all the applicable information to the participants. This helped avoid deception and ensured individuals in the present study were partaking voluntarily.

### *Avoidance of harm*

One of the most significant guidelines in ethics is: do no harm to any participant. Harm can be in the form of emotional or physical damage; in social sciences it is accepted that harm mostly will be emotional. Furthermore, avoidance reaches further than merely minimising damage or repairing after the harm has been done. Rather, participants should be informed about the potential effect of the research (Strydom, 2011). Therefore, in the present study, the researcher acted honestly, fairly and respectfully towards the participants during interaction and when providing relevant information (Struwig & Stead, 2001).

### **1.7 Chapter division**

The mini-dissertation consists of the following three chapters:

**Chapter 1:** Introduction

**Chapter 2:** Research article

**Chapter 3:** Conclusions, limitations and recommendations

### **1.8 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, the problem statement and the research objectives were discussed. Additionally, the research method was explained, followed by a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **EXPLORING AGE-RELATED STEREOTYPES OF EMERGING ADULTS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WORK CONTEXT**

**Orientation:** Currently, workplaces are populated by employees from diverse generations, of which emerging adults are the most recent demographic group entering the workplace. Emerging adults form part of Generation Y and are from the ages of 18 to 25. Emerging adults introduce unique and different characteristics into the workplace. These individuals also differ from other generations in their employment desires and working style. Age stereotypes attached to emerging adults are, therefore, a common occurrence within workplaces.

**Research purpose:** The objective of the present study was to investigate the age stereotypes emerging adults experience within the South African work context and determine the impact of these stereotypes.

**Motivation for the study:** Emerging adults form part of the new generation entering the workforce. Therefore, due to their unique characteristics and the new work style they introduce into the organisation, other generations of fellow employees may struggle to adapt. The researcher thus investigated the stereotypes in the workplace that are evident about emerging adults and how these stereotypes influence them and their fellow workers.

**Research approach, design and method:** A qualitative research design was utilised based on a phenomenological approach. A combination was employed of both non-probability purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The sample ( $N=25$ ) consisted of individuals working in selected South African organisations. These companies form part of the following employment sectors: financial, mining, construction and consulting. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data, and information was processed through thematic analysis.

**Main findings:** The results of the present study indicated that people employed within the South African context have a clear understanding of stereotypes. Emerging adults experience various positive and negative stereotypes within the workplace. The most prevalent stereotypes were those of older employees towards emerging adults (out-group stereotypes). The findings showed that these stereotypes influence emerging adults on a behavioural, cognitive and emotional level. The results indicated that these out-group stereotypes also influence the way older employees treat emerging adults within the workplace. It was found that, whereas the emerging adults are aware of the stereotypes older employees have about them, they are also conscious of stereotypes they hold about themselves and the individuals in the same age group (in-group stereotypes). Most stereotypes that were examined showed a negative inclination.

**Practical/managerial implications:** When older employees become aware of the stereotypes they hold of the emerging adults, they should actively desist these generalised ideas and alter the way they treat the emerging adults. Organisations should educate their older employees about the influence their stereotypes can have on emerging adults, and instead promote a working environment with equal opportunities.

**Contribution/value-add:** Extensive research has been done on the impact stereotypes have on older employees in an organisation, both internationally and locally. However, there is a gap in research regarding stereotypes which emerging adults experience in a South African work context. The present research thus, aimed to sensitise older employees within the South African context of the age stereotypes they attach to emerging adults. Furthermore, the older generation may become aware that their perceptions about emerging adults could be based on inaccurate information. Therefore, the study may motivate older employees to get closer acquainted with emerging adults instead of relying on (possibly inaccurate) stereotypes. This would lead them to provide new entrants an equal opportunity within the organisation

**Keywords:** Age stereotypes, Baby Boomers, emerging adults, Generation X, Generation Y, South African work context, stereotypes

## **Introduction**

With the Generation Y (individuals born from 1977 and 2000) entering the workplace, for the first time the workforce consists of four generations (Eisner, 2005; Schreuder & Coetzee, 2011). The generational groups of veterans (a small part of the workforce), the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y, are working together (Eisner, 2005, Stanimir, 2015). Individuals from these diverse groups have their own expectations and needs they believe should be adhered to and respected. If this does not occur, the individual employee will be disappointed (Angeline, 2010). In this scenario, the present study focused on Generation Y (hereafter: Gen Y), but more specifically, a section from this generation to whom Arnett (2000) refers and introduces as ‘emerging adults’ who are from 18 and 25 years of age.

Arnett (2000) points out that emerging adulthood is characterised by relative independence from social roles and normative expectations. This means that such individuals do not conform to the social norms, rules, and values, which people follow in their world. The scholar adds that these emerging adults left the dependency of childhood and adolescence but has not yet

reached the stage where they accept the responsibilities of adulthood. These individuals are still exploring the variety that life has to offer in terms of work and even love and life in general (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults are still attempting to find their feet, but simultaneously, have high expectations when they enter the workforce. This Gen Y's, of which emerging adults form part, are widely known as the individuals that "want it all" and they "want it now" (Bolton et al., 2013).

Generation Y employees can be seen as the best educated group in the current workforce (Stanimir, 2015). Gen Y grew up in a time where they have free access to modern technologies (Stanimir, 2015) and rely heavily on these resources (Bolton et al., 2013). They might be the youngest in the workplace, but are most adept at managing new technologies and social networks (Stanimir, 2015). For the Gen Y's, multitasking is part of everyday life. They view and use their work as an opportunity to achieve private objectives (Lower, 2008; Boateng, 2010). They will work faster and be more involved in a task to complete it ahead of schedule, if it provides them time to spend on personal matters (Stanimir, 2015). Lower (2008) asserts that Gen Y's are progressive thinkers and able to process information rapidly. They have a constant need for feedback to function correctly but can work in teams since they have more tolerance and openness towards other lifestyles (Stanimir, 2015). Furthermore, Stanimir (2015) states that this generation make decisions freely whether work- or life-related, and seem fearless.

Twenge and Campbell (2008) asserts that other generations may find it difficult to accept the young workers entering the workforce, seeing that Gen Y differ to any other generation employed in previous years. However, according to Na Ayudhya (2015), the characteristics of these employees (i.e. emerging adults) who belong to Gen Y cannot be generalised. Furthermore, the scholar explains that generation Y presents a complex image since they comprise such a diverse group. According to Lower (2008), the statements or beliefs regarding others may be accurate for certain members of a group, but cannot be applied to all members of a specified group (Lower, 2008). Therefore, the characteristics attributed to Gen Y, particularly emerging adults, should not be generalised to the entire group. Bergh (2011) explains that such generalisations of groups are speculative, negate the diversity within certain groups, and can be referred to as 'stereotypes'.

Generalised perceptions, specifically about emerging adults, can thus be referred to as age stereotypes. Such stereotypes are conceptualised as linking specific characteristics, or its lack, with certain life stages (Sargeant, 2011). Bergh (2011) points out that these stereotypes lead to inappropriate perceptions and actions. Bodenhausen and Macrae, (1998, cited by Lyons, Wessel, Tai, & Ryan, 2013) concur and add that when individuals have been associated with a particular stereotype, it can impact directly or indirectly on how other groups perceive and consider them (Bodenhausen & Macrae, as cited by Lyons, Wessel, Tai & Ryan, 2013). Stereotypes (false beliefs about others) limit the contribution of employees of all ages and organisational levels. Furthermore, stereotypes impede collaboration, productivity, and performance and harm relationships (Blauth, McDaniel, Perrin, & Perrin, 2011, Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault & Kang, 2011). Such generalised beliefs do not only influence the individual, but can permeate an organisation and thus prevent the company from achieving its vision and goals (Blauth et al., 2011; Inzlicht et al., 2011).

Currently, organisations present a workplace where four generational groups coexist (Lindquist, 2008, Hobart, n.d.). Employers are faced with numerous challenges when they attempt to create and manage harmonious workplaces, which integrate the generations' unique values and expectations. Seeing that employees from Gen Y are the most recent group to enter the workforce, it poses a particular challenge for organisations. Not only are employees from this group different from other generations; they are also misunderstood in several ways (Hobart, n.d.).

Posthuma and Campion (2009) states that, even though limited research has been done on younger workers, there is evidence that the latter experience both positive and negative stereotypes. They may be the youngest group entering the workplace, but the Gen Y's are fully aware of their skills and knowledge. Thus, they expect others in the workforce to treat them equally and respectfully throughout (Stanimir, 2015). On the one hand, this generation's ambition and drive towards the future may benefit organisations. However, on the other hand, Bolton et.al. (2013) points out that such individuals are demanding in matters such as work pay and benefits, career advancement, work-life balance and contributing to society. Their dependence on technology can have a positive as well as negative effect. In a negative sense, they require the new technology (ICT) for entertainment, to interact with others, and for emotion regulation. Positively, they are competent users of ICT and able to work globally, which benefits the organisation (Bolton et. al., 2013; Stanimir, 2015).

Based on the above-mentioned research, it is clear that age stereotypes do not only influence the employee but the organisation as well. When these emerging adults enter the work place, they may present an obstacle for older employees to overcome. Therefore, the present study aimed to analyse the age stereotypes which emerging adults experience and the impact of these stereotypes on their work lives. Conversely, the research aimed to ascertain the age stereotypes that older employees hold of emerging adults. A thorough investigation of literature on age-stereotypes indicated a lack of South-African studies to date on the particular age stereotypes that emerging adults experience within the workplace. This explains the motivation for the present study.

### **Research purpose and objectives**

The present study focuses on the younger workers as emerging adults (part of Gen Y) entering the workforce. The main purpose of the present study was, therefore, to determine the stereotypes that emerging adults experience and the impact of these stereotypes, specifically within the South African work context. On the other hand, the study investigated how older employees perceive emerging adults and their stereotypes.

This main research purpose can be unpacked into secondary objectives:

- To conceptualise stereotypes, age stereotypes, and emerging adults, according to the literature.
- Explore the age stereotypes that emerging adults experience about themselves in the organisation.
- Determine the age stereotypes that older employees have of emerging adults within the organisation.
- Ascertain the influence of these age stereotypes on emerging adults within the organisation.
- Find out how the behaviour of older employees is influenced by the age stereotypes they hold of emerging adults.
- Make recommendations and draw conclusions and on possible future research and practice.

To report on the above-mentioned purpose and objectives, this chapter is structured into a literature review, empirical study, discussion as well as a section explaining limitations and proposing recommendations.

## **Literature review**

### **Conceptualisation of stereotypes**

Different definitions of stereotypes can be found in the literature. Weiten (2013, p. 510) defines stereotypes as “widely held beliefs that people have certain characteristics because of their membership in a particular group”. Additionally, Blum (2004) states that stereotypes are untrue or deceptive generalisations about groups held in a manner that solidify (fixate) and make these ideas to a large extent, though not entirely, immune to counterevidence. From the definitions it is clear that individuals or groups formulate certain statements or opinions about others that cannot be generalised to each person, which can cause harm. Taking into account that stereotypes tend to be overgeneralisations, Weiten (2013) emphasised that such considerations disregard the broad diversity in a social group, which in turn fosters inaccurate perceptions of others. A key feature to stereotyping is, therefore, perceiving all the members of a social group as having similar characteristics (Hinton, 2000).

Ndom, Elegbeleye, and Williams (2008) states that people may target another person to predict that individual's behaviour or characteristic. Such predictions are based on physical characteristics and the social group to which these individuals belong, in other words, by stereotyping them (Ndom et. al., 2008). Kurylo (2013) concurs that these stereotypes are not always true and saves people energy by simplifying their social world (Weiten, 2013). People develop stereotypes when they do not have access to or are reluctant to discover sufficient information to make fair judgments about others (Hinton, 2000; Ndom et.al., 2008).

Furthermore, the generalisations that people make often sprout from the media images such as publications, television or movies, or from statements by family and friends (Hinton, 2000; Blum, 2004; Ndom et.al., 2008). It is evident that people primarily form stereotypes based on their experiences and expectations, despite it possibly being a distorted image of the group or individual concerned. Ndom et.al. (2008) supports this statement by pointing out that in the absence of the full picture, people tend to fill in the gaps by stereotyping.

The way people perceive and process information about and act towards group members is affected by different stereotypes (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick & Esses, 2010). According to Blum (2004), stereotypes typically has a negative valence. On the other hand, Kreitner and Kinicki (2010) explains that not all stereotypes are negatively inclined. Stereotypes can also be positive and be accurate for a certain group or individual. Whitley and Kite (2006) concurs and add that stereotypes can be positive, negative, and even neutral. People are stereotyped based on numerous qualities, features, and traits. The most common stereotypes in society are based on gender, age, and membership of ethnic or occupational groups (Weiten, 2014).

For the purpose of the present study, the researcher primarily focused on age-based stereotypes. The research focused specifically on emerging adults' experience of age stereotypes, its impacts, and how older employees describe and stereotype the younger workers according to their age. The researcher utilised the social identity theory to substantiate the argument on how people perceive their own group (in-group) and how others perceive individuals that does not form part of their group (out-group).

### **Social identity theory**

The researcher applied the social identity theory to understand the act of stereotyping. This understanding helped guide the line of argument and attain the objectives of the study. Henri Tajfel first proposed the concept of social identity in 1978/1979. The literature presents numerous definitions on theory, which has developed over time. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), the social identity theory predicts that individuals will attempt to enhance their self-esteem through group associations that differentiates positively between their in-group and a relevant out-group. Hogg (2006) additionally views the social identity theory as “a social psychological analysis of the role of self-conception in group memberships, group processes and intergroup relations” (p. 111). The basic idea of this theory according to Hogg, Terry and White (1995), is that a social category to which individuals perceive they belong, defines who they are in terms of the typical characteristics of that category.

Social identity specifically refers to the pride that individuals gain from being members of a specific group (Weiten, 2014). When individuals' social identity is threatened, or fixated in a group, they categorise the social world into 'us' versus 'them' (Weiten, 2014) – in other words, in-group against the out-group. The in-group represents the tendency to favour individuals

from the same group and attribute more positive qualities to the 'us'. In contrast, the out-group reflects the tendency to attribute more negative qualities to the individuals who do not belong to their own group, referring to 'them' (Passer & Smith, 2009).

From the discussion above, it is evident that individuals do not only stereotype themselves but also, and more importantly, they hold these generalised ideas of others. Furthermore, individuals tend to stereotype their own group (in-group) in a more positive light and other groups (the out-groups) more negatively.

During the research report, the emerging adults are referred to as the in-group and the older employees as the out-group. For the purpose of this study, the stereotypes that these individuals hold mutually, are considered to be based primarily on their age.

### **Age stereotypes**

As was indicated, the diversity of the workplace is growing due to the different generations entering the workforce. As a result, age stereotypes become a major challenge with which management must deal. Age stereotypes as conceptualised by Sargeant (2011) means to associate certain characteristics, or its lack, with certain ages. Characteristics are, therefore, assigned to all the individuals from a specific age group, rather than a specific characteristic linked to an individual belonging to that group. Thus, age stereotypes homogenises the particular age group without recognising its inner diversity (Robinson, Gustafson, & Popovich, 2008).

Age stereotypes regularly occur within organisations (Chen, Pethtel, & Ma, 2010), is not exclusive to older people, but apply to ages and age groups of diverse life stages (Sargeant, 2011). Age stereotypes typically develop early in life during an individual's younger years and sprout from expectations, experiences, family and the social media (Kornadt, Voss & Rothermund, 2015; Blum, 2004). Kornadt and Rothermund (2015) explain that age stereotypes do not originate from specific life stages only but also from the social context in which a person is observed, and the role information that is provided on that individual.

Posthuma and Campion (2009) point out that unlike stereotypes about race and sex, those focusing on age can function on a subtler or subconscious level. In the literature, younger and

older employees are described, characterised, and stereotyped in various ways. Older employees are depicted with numerous undesirable characteristics such as poor health, an inflexible attitude, resistance to change, and difficult to train (Chiu, Chan, Snape & Redman, 2001). They are also characterised as less ready to accept new technology and less adaptable to change. Furthermore, if colleagues and employers hold such beliefs about older workers it may influence employment decisions and result in age discrimination in the workplace. On the other hand, older workers are also perceived as more loyal, reliable, flexible and motivated individuals (Chiu et. al., 2001).

Certain characteristics and stereotypes are also attributed to younger workers. These workers are viewed as ‘tech savvy’, multi-taskers, perfectionists and confident (Boateng, 2010; Van der Merwe, Van Zyl, Nel, & Joubert 2014). However, on the other hand they are perceived as lax, having an ‘attitude’, prefer different learning styles, and expect assistance during struggles they face (Boateng, 2010; Van der Merwe et. al., 2014; Solnet, Kralj & Kandampully, 2012; Boateng, 2010;). Twenge (2006) explains that young adults who form part of Gen Y has been raised to express their thought and feelings, since they view it as important. This means that young adults do not only have a high self-esteem, but also take pride in being independent individuals who express their needs and wants (Twenge, 2006).

Overall, younger and older workers are stereotyped differently, with older workers often associated with negative images, while younger workers are perceived more positively (Mccan & Keaton, 2013).

#### **Stereotypes about emerging adults**

Considering the objective of the present study, it is important to examine how emerging adults who form part of Gen Y is being described, characterised, and stereotyped. Lindquist (2008) emphasises that it is important to understand this generation and appreciate them for their divergence from previous generations. It is believed that individuals from Gen Y were raised to place themselves first. They perceive themselves to be ‘special’ and do not forthwith show respect for authority. They experience themselves as free to make suggestions if they believe they can improve a situation (Lindquist, 2008). Individuals from Gen Y demand that respect must be earned and not just assumed by position (Lindquist, 2008).

Lindquist (2008) explains that the perception of feeling special is accompanied by other distinctive characteristics, which seemingly is the largest challenge that this generation poses. The mentioned perception leads to a feeling of entitlement, arriving at the workplace with a sense of privilege, and believing that they are deserving. This leads to high expectations regarding salary, job flexibility and responsibility (Lindquist, 2008; Twenge, 2006). Younger workers are often direct in their interpersonal relationships. In this regard, managers may find them blunt, constantly demanding feedback that is straightforward and uncomplicated (Lindquist, 2008). The younger workers also tend to return criticism and share information that have been considered private or sensitive (Lindquist, 2008).

Despite the depiction above, younger workers and the Gen Y's are also viewed in a positive light. According to Twenge (2006), individuals from this generational group does not only present a high self-esteem. They also pride themselves in being independent actors that express their needs and wants. Lindquist (2008) adds that these individuals are more confident than any other generation. They also tend to be multi-taskers, perfectionists and are the best educated group in the current labour market (Boateng, 2010, Stanimir, 2015). As a result, they are achievers with a high work rate and set goals for themselves as they are aware that this may lead them to fulfil their dreams (Lindquist, 2008). Furthermore, employees from this generation are more pragmatic and conventional about several work-related issues. They are also one of the only generations that has comprehensive plans for the future, which include their finances, remuneration and even retirement (Lindquist, 2008).

It is evident from the discussion above, that this is a diverse and unique group of individuals who differ significantly from other generational groups. Nevertheless, these characteristics, also viewed as stereotypes, can impact the individual, the group, and the working environment.

### **Consequences of stereotypes**

The attributing of incorrect characteristics to an individual or group can have dire effects. On the one hand, stereotyping condenses the amount of information necessary to know about an individual (Mullins, 2010). On the other hand, stereotyping others often leads to bias and the failure to understand them truly. Furthermore, stereotypes can distort perceptions of an individual, and lead to potential situations such as prejudice or discrimination (Mullins, 2010). When individuals hold such a perception, make statements, or build stereotypes about others,

the latter also tend to behave accordingly (Luthans, 2010). In turn these negative stereotypes and behaviours towards employees can elicit destructive responses. These reactions can be observed in their behaviour toward other employees or individuals, their performance in certain tasks, and work motivation (Singletary, Ruggs, Hebl, & Davies, 2009).

Where stereotypes have numerous influences on individuals, age stereotypes specifically also have consequences in the working environment. Rauschenbach, Göritz and Hertel (2012) explain that age-related attitudes and beliefs have become more prominent and important in the organisational life. The reason is that these perceptions may determine management's recruiting and staffing decisions as well as employees' interactions. Furthermore, if these attitudes are negatively biased it may lead to age discrimination. It may happen that stereotypes become prominent in an individual's perception of members of the out-group. In such a case, it may hinder that employee to view the other members objectively: as co-workers, managers, subordinates, or job applicants (Al Waqfi & Jain, 2007).

In addition, Blauth et al. (2011) point out that stereotypes limit the contribution of employees from all life stages and organisational levels. The false beliefs and negative perceptions influence matters such as collaboration, productivity, relationships and individual self-perception. The stereotypes that employees experience in the organisation exert negative influence on their reactions, performance on tasks, motivation, and self-esteem (Singletary, et al., 2009). The age of the individual who holds the stereotype may also, in response, affect the perception of the younger or older worker (Bertolino, Truxillo & Fraccaroli, 2013).

These findings from the literature review support the social identity theory discussed above – according to which individuals tend to favour their in-group more than the identified out-group. Negative stereotypes can become self-fulfilling and may function as deterrents making employees' unwilling to exert themselves in the workplace. As a result, those subjected to negative perceptions also experience reduced career opportunities (Al Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2010). Inzlicht et al. (2011) adds that threatening environments force employees to cope with negative stereotypes. This may also reduce their will, making them less able or willing to engage in the various tasks requiring effort and self-control.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design consists of the research approach, research strategy and research method, which are all expounded below.

### **Research approach**

A qualitative research design based on a phenomenological approach was followed in the present study. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is used to explore and attempt to understand the meanings that individuals ascribe to a social or human problem. Such research produces descriptive data (Taylor, Bodgan & DeVault, 2016). This entails understanding of the participants' experiences by using their own written or spoken words and observed behaviours (Gupta & Awasthy, 2015; Taylor et al., 2016). The present research study examined the age stereotypes which emerging adults encounter within South African organisations and how they experience these stereotypes on both a personal and work-related level.

Furthermore, by applying the phenomenological approach, the analysis starts off with an individual's experience of a particular phenomenon and attempts to describe the meaning of a group of individuals who share this experiences (Kawulich & Holland, 2012). The phenomenological approach, therefore, aims to produce the subjective experiences of the research participants and give an account of commonalities as they share their experience about a specific phenomenon (Kawulich & Holland, 2012; Willig, 2013). In case of the present research, the phenomenon was stereotypes, more specifically age stereotypes, which emerging adults experience in the workplace.

The social constructivism paradigm was applied to extend the phenomenological approach of the research. Social constructivism investigates the subjective views about individuals' experiences of a specific notion or phenomenon. Furthermore, participants may attribute various meanings to the same phenomenon. Thus, the researcher focuses on the complexity of the views rather than narrowing it down to a single idea (Creswell, 2013). It should be understood that people make their own sense of the social realities, which they experience through interactions with each other and within the broader social system (Tubey, Rotich, &

Bengat, 2015). In this regard, there are multiple meanings of reality for individuals who experience the same phenomenon. For the purpose of the present study, the researcher was interested in analysing the various experiences and ideas that participants had about the phenomenon of age stereotypes.

### **Research strategy**

The study was conducted through the strategy of a multiple case study. Wellman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005) view a case study as a limited number of units of analysis that is studied intensively. These units of analysis may entail individuals, groups and institutions. In the present study, the researcher focused on two groups, namely the emerging adults (in-group) and the older workers (out-group). Multiple case studies was, therefore, used to obtain the view of how emerging adults experience stereotypes and how it impacted them and others from the out-group. Additionally, the researcher obtained the views of older employees towards emerging adults. In a case-study design the aim is to understand the uniqueness and the idiosyncrasy of particular cases. Participants (i.e. older workers and emerging adults) in multiple organisations were interviewed to understand their experiences of age stereotypes and how it influences their every-day work situation.

### **Research method**

The research method consists of the research setting, entrée and establishing researcher roles as well as sampling. Furthermore, the focus is on methods to collect and record data as well as strategies to ensure the data's quality and integrity. This is followed by assessing ethical considerations, discussing the data analysis, and explaining the reporting style.

### **Research setting**

The researcher conducted interviews in organisations consisting of diverse employment sectors (financial, mining, construction and consulting) within different areas in the Gauteng Province. The researcher approached corporate organisations where employees may experience age stereotypes within the working environment. Considering the objectives of the study, the researcher targeted participants from a specific age category. Emerging adults from the ages of 18 and 25 were interviewed as well as older workers from the so-called 'Baby Boomer'

generation (born from 1946 and 1964) and Generation X (born from 1965 and 1976) (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2011). Interviews were conducted in comfortable and confidential environments such as boardrooms and offices, after permission had been obtained from the organisations and the respective participants.

### **Entrée and establishing researcher roles**

#### *Access to South African organisations and participants*

The researcher identified several organisations, which then were contacted, via email and phone calls, and asked to take part in the study. After receiving a response from the organisation, the researcher arranged a meeting with the respected contact person in charge (CEO, Human resources manager, Line manager, etc.) to explain the purpose of the study and how the employees would get involved during the research process. The applicable information about the present study was provided and discussed with the above-mentioned representatives, after which questions and concerns were addressed. The relationship between the researcher and the organisation was crucial, given that the researcher relied on the organisation to provide employees with the time to attend and to feel comfortable when entering the interview session. Each representative of the respective organisations informed the participants about the study. The researcher gained consent from the representatives and acquired the contact emails of the participants who agreed to take part in the study. The email address of each participant was sent to the researcher via an email from the representative that attended the information session mentioned above. These participants were contacted through email in order to ensure them that the participation was voluntary, obtain informed consent, and arrange a specific date and time that would suit their schedule for the interview together with a short summary of the study.

#### *Roles of the researcher*

The researcher portrayed different roles during the research study. The first role was that of *planner*, developing a plan that covers the relevant aspects of the study (i.e. arranging meetings with the representatives of the organisations, establishing interview times and locations). The plan also indicated how the study was going to be conducted. The researcher had to ensure the various aspects outlined in the methodology section were planned and organised.

After the planning phase was completed the researcher took on the role as *interviewer*, where the pre-established questions were used to interview the research participants. Thereafter, the researcher, together with co-coders in the field of Industrial Psychology, fulfilled the dual role of *transcriber* and *analyser*, where data from the interviews were transcribed and processed. During the analysis, the researcher and co-coders extracted themes and sub-themes from the gathered data. Finally, the researcher fulfilled the role of *reporter*. This entailed writing a report that presents the research findings and by using literature to substantiate and evaluate the findings of the research. While portraying the various mentioned roles, the researcher ensured objectivity was maintained, and that the presentation remained free from bias.

### **Research participants and sampling**

The population selected for the present study consisted of full-time employees operating within different employment sectors (financial, mining, construction and consulting) within South African organisations ( $N=25$ ). In this study the techniques employed was a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The researcher used purposive sampling to identify participants who were regarded as representative of the relevant population (Wellman et al., 2005).

For the purpose of the study, two groups were interviewed according to different criteria: 1) younger individuals referred to as ‘emerging adults’ aged between 18-25; and 2) older individuals referred to as ‘Generation X’ aged between 40-51 (1965-1976) and ‘Baby Boomers’ aged between 52-70 (1946-1964). Snowball sampling means identifying participants who fit the criteria of the study and then requesting them to suggest a colleague or friend who can partake in the study (Tracy, 2013). This sampling method was utilised to identify other candidates who comply with the indicated criteria, were pointed out or contacted by those already interviewed. The identified candidates were contacted and invited to take part voluntarily in the study.

The sample of the study consisted of 25 employees from selected, diverse employment sectors ( $N = 25$ ). Participants who adhered to the criteria stated above was included in the study. The characteristics of these participants are indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Characteristics of participants (N=25)*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency (f)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Age</b>	18-25	9	36.0
	40-51	7	28.0
	52-70	9	36.0
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Black	4	16.0
	White	19	76.0
	Indian	1	4.0
	Asian	1	4.0
<b>Gender</b>	Female	7	28.0
	Male	18	72.0
<b>Language</b>	Afrikaans	5	20.0
	English	13	52.0
	Setswana	1	4.0
	IsiXhosa	2	8.0
	*English/Afrikaans	3	12.0
	*English/Ndebele/Sepedi	1	4.0
<b>Highest level of qualification (NQF level)</b>	Higher education and training (NQF level 5)	23	92.0
	Further education and training (NQF level 4)	1	4.0
	General education and training (NQF level 3)	1	4.0

\*These individuals are exposed to a multi-linguistic home setting

Of the participants, 36% were found to be aged between 18-25; as many as 28% between 40 and 51; and 36% between 52 and 70. The majority of the participants were male (72%); while more than half were White (76%); only 16% were Black (16%). Furthermore, 52% of the participants were English speaking; and 20% Afrikaans speaking. The languages Setswana and isiXhosa made up a representation of 12%. The majority of the participants (92%) have obtained higher education and training.

#### **Data collection methods**

During the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the required data. Predetermined questions were outlined and posed during the interview, however, the sessions were flexible and provided the researcher the opportunity to probe (Tracy, 2013). Before

commencing the interviews, the researcher settled with the participants from the different organisations on the best suitable date and time for the interviews. This ensured the interviews fitted within the schedule of individual participants and their organisations. Before the interviews commenced, the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form and a biographical questionnaire that requested their age, race, language and gender. The questionnaire's purpose was to ensure the sample population could be described accurately in the research report and that the participants adhered to the proposed criteria.

The researcher made sure beforehand that the participants understood each question thoroughly. Before the interviews, the researcher conducted a pilot study with four participants. These participants were selected from the education and construction sector. This was done to ensure the participants interpreted the posed questions correctly and understood it fully. During the pilot study the researcher found that the participants did not understand certain questions. Therefore, she altered these questions before conducting the interviews. The gathering continued up to a point where the data was saturated. This implies that the researchers brought the collection of data to an end as enough data was gathered to reach the objectives of the study.

All participants were asked the following interview questions:

#### **In-group (emerging adults)**

- *What does the word 'stereotype' mean to you?*
- *What characteristics do you in general attribute to emerging adults (18-25)?*
- *What stereotypes do you experience as an emerging adult within the organisation?*
- *What are the influences of these stereotypes on your work?*
- *What are the influences of these stereotypes on you personally?*

#### **Out-group (older employees from the 'Baby Boomers' and Generation X)**

- *What does the word 'stereotype' mean to you?*
- *What stereotypes do you hold of emerging adults? (What characteristics will you attribute to these emerging adults)?*

- *Do these stereotypes/characteristics that you hold of emerging adults influence how you treat them? If so, please explain.*

### **Recording of data**

Prior to each interview, consent was obtained from the participant to use electronic voice recorders. This helped capture the participant's exact words. After the interviews were conducted, the data were transcribed electronically in an Excel spreadsheet. The researcher took care that the data were kept safe at all times by using a password system. The only people who had access to the password and voice recordings were the researcher and her supervisor.

### **Data analyses**

Thematic analysis was utilised to process the data gathered for the present study. Thematic analysis can be defined as “a general approach to analysing qualitative data that involves identifying themes and patterns in the data” (Kawulich & Holland, 2012, p. 231). The process of thematic analysis is explained in more detail by discussing the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). These steps were utilised throughout the data analysing process.

#### *Step 1: Familiarise yourself with the data*

All the interviews conducted by the researcher were transcribed verbatim on an Excel sheet, as the written information helped the researcher perform the thematic analysis. The researcher familiarised herself with the data before completing the analysis. This was done by reading through the data repeatedly and searching for meanings and similarities. During this familiarising, the researcher decided to make additional notes on possible themes and sub-themes that would represent the data accurately. As a result, the information that were gathered from the participants and analysed expressed the original nature of the phenomenon.

#### *Step 2: Generating initial codes*

After the researcher familiarised herself with the data and made notes about possible ideas for themes and sub-themes, phase 2 commenced. Three categories (initial codes) were generated from the transcribed data. These categories were in line with the specific questions and

objectives of the study. Categories which the researcher identified was labelled as follows: Stereotypes experienced by emerging adults; Influence of stereotypes on emerging adults; In-group Stereotypes; Out-group Stereotypes; and Behavioural consequence of stereotypes expressed by older workers. The gathered data were analysed according to the questions posed to the participants. While generating these initial codes, the researcher focused on the raw data that were gathered and did not disregarding any data.

### *Step 3: Searching for themes*

Phase 3 began after the researcher had a broad idea of the categories into which the data could be classified. The search was for themes that would support these categories and represent the findings accurately. The themes were documented in a separate document with accommodating responses. When and where the research allowed, the researcher generated sub-themes to elucidate the theme and over-arching category. A separate document was also drafted with themes that did not fit within the overarching themes, but were not disregarded at that stage.

### *Step 4: Reviewing themes*

During the following phase, the researcher revised the themes that were extracted (as explained during the previous phase). The researcher identified the following themes: those that should be disregarded, may fit in with other themes and categories, or which must be broken down to link better with certain themes and categories. Furthermore, the researcher made sure that the responses assigned to each theme reflect the theme correctly. After re-reading the data set and generated themes, the researcher made the necessary changes.

### *Step5: Defining and naming themes*

After generating the themes in the previous stage, they were refined further by focusing on the data that represent each theme. The researcher also sought to discover how the themes relate to the study and capture the data accurately. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that each extract allocated to a theme was accurate and relevant. After refining the themes and sub-themes, the researcher was able to discuss and describe each theme in a few sentences.

### *Step 6: Producing the report*

The final step of the analysis was to write a report that explain the findings logically and accurately. The researcher, together with the co-coders from Industrial Psychology, analysed the data before producing the report. The themes that emerged during the analysis were explained clearly and presented together with different responses from the participants to support and explain the categories and themes. It was important to ensure the reader is convinced of the reliability of the report. Therefore, the findings were explained thoroughly and clearly.

#### **Strategies employed to ensure quality data**

The researcher adhered to specific criteria to ensure the findings were trustworthy. Trustworthiness means adhering to the following criteria: dependability, credibility, transferability, and conformability.

#### *Dependability*

According to Shenton (2004), dependability means that if the work needed to be repeated, in the same context, with similar methods and participants, a similar result will be attained. Firstly, the researcher ensured dependability by describing the research methodology in a clear and dense (detailed) manner. Furthermore, the researcher kept track of possible changes occurring during the study. The only changes that eventually were documented during the research process were altered interview questions. As explained above, the reason is that participants misunderstood certain questions. The researcher became aware of this confusion during the pilot studies and, therefore, altered the questions somewhat to help the participants understand it clearer.

#### *Credibility*

Credibility, which also refers to internal validity, means ensuring the study does measure what it actually intended to measure (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, it was important that the researcher not only gather the information from the desired participants. The researcher also took care to report the findings in the study correctly from the perspective of the participant. To ensure

credibility, the researcher continuously asked participants whether she understood them correctly, or requesting them to explain the answers they provide to the questions. The involving of co-coders, enhanced credibility by reporting the experiences of the participants truthfully.

### *Transferability*

The transferability of a study can be explained as the degree to which judgements on similarity can be made (Kawulich & Holland, 2012). This often implies demonstrating that the results of the study can be generalised to the wider population (Shenton, 2004). In the present study, transferability was ensured by describing the background and context of the study in detail. The sampling procedure and characteristics of the participants were also discussed comprehensively to provide an overall picture of the individual and the setting.

As mentioned previously, the strategy of multiple case studies was utilised. Furthermore, participants were selected from diverse employment sectors. As a result, the influences of age stereotypes could be described from multiple views and possibly were transferable to the overall work context of South African employees.

### *Conformability*

Confirmability is based on the researcher's concern to stay objective (Kawulich & Holland, 2012). In the present study, the researcher ensured the discussed findings reflected the experiences of the participants and not the opinion of the researcher. The researcher took care that her subjective opinions and values did not influence the research process; this was ensured by staying objective and neutral throughout the research project.

### **Reporting**

After analysing the gathered data, the findings were reported in table format. These findings were supported by direct quotations from the participants, providing the assurance that the results were reported truthfully. Afrikaans quotes were translated into English by an accredited language practitioner in order to accommodate diverse language groups.

## **Ethical considerations**

When conducting research, certain ethical aspects must be kept in mind. According to Wiles (2013), research ethics involves moral behaviour in different research contexts. During the research process, the researcher adhered to the ethical considerations as expounded below (Wellman et. al., 2005):

*Informed consent:* The researcher took care that the participants and the respective organisations were thoroughly and truthfully informed about the research process, procedure and the purpose of the interviews. The participants were asked to confirm their consent in written form that they wish to take part in the research process willingly and understand they may withdraw from the process at any given time.

*Right of privacy:* Participants, who consented to take part in the research process, were assured that their identity would remain confidential. The participants were also assured that information they provide during the process will not be discussed or disclosed to an outside party. Therefore, the identity of the organisations and participants were not disclosed during the writing of the report or at any other period during the research.

*Protection from harm:* The researcher assured the organisations that none of the employees partaking in the research process will be harmed in any way. Furthermore, the researcher respected the rights and dignity of the participants throughout. This meant not harming them in any emotional or physical way during the research process. The participants were, therefore, treated fairly and as individual human beings.

*Involvement of the researcher:* Throughout the research process, the researcher remained objective during each interview and did not manipulate any participant. In this regard, the researcher remained neutral and did not allow her own opinions or ideas to influence the research.

## **FINDINGS**

The study's research findings are presented as a combination of categories, themes, sub-themes and quotations to support the results. The findings are outlined in table format.

## Category 1: Stereotypes experienced by emerging adults

The participants (emerging adults) were asked to describe the stereotypes they experience as an emerging adult within a South African organisation, or what stereotypes they perceive older individuals to hold about emerging adults. Respondents indicated that stereotypes linked to their age are mostly negative. The responses are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

### *Stereotypes experienced by emerging adults*

Theme	Sub-theme	Response/quote
<b>Negative stereotypes</b>	Entitled	<i>“Definitely coming in as a graduate ... 2014 there’s that ... grads o just want high position without working for them; they just, we want more money without experience. We want, so I think coming to the organisation people think ...”</i>
	Incompetent	<i>“They don’t think you are really competent to handle some, some, some of the work.”</i>
	Inexperienced	<i>“... you have no experience ...”</i>
	Immature	<i>“... maturity as well they think that you are, tend to be immature.”</i>
	Not hardworking	<i>“I would say a stereotype is that ... they think everything comes easy. Ja, and you’re not willing to work hard or ...”</i>
	Ungroomed	<i>“I would say they think we are scruffy ... Yeah scruffy looking, you know the fringe and stuff.”</i>
	Coddle	<i>“... stereotypes that: ‘Ag these grads are spoon-fed ...’”</i>
<b>Positive stereotype</b>	Ambitious	<i>“I think that’s the stereotype when you’re young and you’re eager.”</i>

*Negative stereotypes:* The negative characteristics that the emerging adults perceive older employees to express, are mostly that the younger generation is inexperienced and incompetent to perform the tasks at hand. Participants felt they get snubbed for not being dressed professionally, however they feel entitled to have higher-paying salaries linked to continuous development. Furthermore, the emerging adults felt the older workers think they need to mature more and wander through life without exerting them for what they wish to achieve. The

emerging adults were of the opinion that these stereotypes also indicate that older employees believe the younger generation are spoon-fed.

*Positive stereotypes:* Respondents identified certain positive characteristics that older workers ascribe to them, for example, that they are ambitious.

## Category 2: Influence of stereotypes on emerging adults

Emerging adults were asked how they are impacted by these stereotypes they believe the older generation attach to them. The participants described the influence on a personal and work-related level. The young adults were offended mostly by the nature of stereotypes, or they held no regard for them and did not pay attention, which helps minimise exposure and influence. These responses are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

### *Influence of stereotypes on emerging adults*

Theme	Sub-theme	Response/quote
<b>Behavioural influence</b>	Improving self	<i>"... just try and better myself as much as I can ..."</i>
	Prove wrong stereotype	<i>"...for my work personally, it motivated me to break out of that..."</i> <i>"...I wanna make sure my work is right so that I don't tend to prove them right."</i>
	Uncooperative teamwork	<i>"...also nobody wants to work together as a team ..."</i>
	Working harder to prove oneself	<i>"You have to just show - to prove yourself."</i> <i>"... leave an impression that I should prove myself, yes in terms of my work, so I tend to put in more effort in what I do."</i>
<b>Cognitive influence</b>	Inferior	<i>"... but sometimes they make you feel this big." [expressed by pressing thumb and index finger together]</i> <i>"Uhm I wouldn't say looked down on but seen as less than the older generations."</i>

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	Thinking about experienced stereotype	<p><i>“Sometimes it influences, then you go home you wonder about it you think about it ...”</i></p> <p><i>“... am I really like that or did I really do something like that. So sometimes it really actually makes you think.”</i></p>
	Dislike	<i>“The old people don’t like us, the young ones.”</i>
<b>Emotional Influence</b>	Demotivated	<i>“... it obviously influences the motivation behind what people have to do...”</i>
	Frustrated	<i>“... it frustrates me as I don’t necessarily know how to deal with it because I actually want to freak-out and tell everyone to sort their own crap out as everyone is old enough now, you are in the corporate world...”</i>
	Uncomfortable	<i>“...and everybody can realise, everybody can realise that there is an ambiance...”</i>
<b>Inconsequential</b>	Focus on task at hand	<p><i>“No I don’t think any of that affect me. I just try and get my work done.”</i></p> <p><i>“...I just have to make sure that they stay on their side and that I stay busy with my own stuff ...”</i></p>
	Indifferent	<p><i>“Honestly, they don’t have an influence on me. I have my own way of doing things, so they don’t have an influence on me.”</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t know if it really affects me personally, But ... ja, I just tend to brush it off, I guess outside of the work environment, cause it doesn’t really affect me that much.”</i></p>

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*Behavioural influence:* Results from the present study showed that participants are also influenced by stereotypes on a behavioural level. The behavioural influence refers to the way in which the individual or candidate reacts to or displays a certain behaviour towards a certain person, situation, or object (Martin & Fellenz, 2010). The participants indicated that they will mostly attempt to prove themselves to the older workers; work harder to prove them wrong. Participants also indicated that they want to prove the stereotypes wrong and show the older employees of what they are capable and confirm that the older workers have a wrong perception of them. Furthermore, the participants also felt that the stereotypes exert a negative behavioural influence, seeing that the co-workers struggle to work as a team.

*Cognitive influence:* The emerging adults felt that these stereotypes influenced them negatively on a cognitive level. *The cognitive influence as described by Martin and Fellenz (2010,) refers*

to the beliefs, views and cognitions an individual or candidate has about a person, situation or object. Participants felt inferior; they would consider the stereotypes and ask themselves whether these are true for them.

*Emotional influence:* Buelens, Sinding, Waldstrøm, Kreitner, and Kinicki (2011) view emotional influence as the moods, emotions and feelings an individual or candidate has towards a person, object or situation. Emotionally, participants found that the stereotypes they experience demotivates them to perform the tasks expected of them. Participants also indicated that it frustrates them since they are unsure how to handle these stereotypes within certain situations, and it hampers the ambiance within the team.

*Inconsequential:* The minority of the participants indicated that these stereotypes were not important or significant to them. Participants emphasised that it is important for them rather to focus on the task at hand instead of on the stereotypes the older workers hold of them. Furthermore, the participants indicated that these stereotypes do not influence them at all. Thus, they tend to reject these characteristics.

### Category 3: In-group stereotypes

The participants (emerging adults) were asked how they would describe their own group, in other words, discussing which characteristics they would attribute to their own group (i.e. emerging adults). The respondents seemingly struggled to describe their own group or stereotypes within their group. The emerging adults mostly described themselves favourably. Their responses are provided in Table 4 below.

Table 4

#### *In-group stereotypes*

Theme	Sub-theme	Response/quote
<b>Negative stereotypes</b>	Arrogant	<i>"... the younger people are just arrogant ..."</i>
	Entitled	<i>"... some ways ... you think everyone must you know help you or everyone must spoon-feed you; you think you know you are entitled to things."</i>
	Inexperienced	<i>"They're inexperienced but they're like... they're willing to learn."</i>

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	Ill-mannered	<i>"... know they've got their own way and they have no respect for anyone."</i>
	Know it all	<i>"They think they know everything."</i>
	Poorly dressed	<i>"... as they get younger you notice that they still dress a bit trashier."</i>
	Sociable	<i>"I don't know we enjoy 'jolling', going out, spending time with each other."</i>
<b>Positive Stereotypes</b>	Ambitious	<i>"They have drive and ambition and ... They very eager to get going, that's what I see in this organisation." "I find that young people are at the same time very driven ...."</i>
	Confident	<i>"... confident ..."</i>
	Energetic	<i>"I would say fun; outgoing; loud; pretty much our generation." "... energetic ..."</i>
	Hardworking	<i>"They are willing to get stuck in."</i>
	Independent	<i>"Well, we are still not tied down yet so we are still free spirits." "We can think for ourselves."</i>
	Passionate	<i>"We are more about the passion we are more about ok do I like this."</i>
	Sociable	<i>"... outgoing ..." "... willing to have fun, I guess."</i>
	Well-mannered	<i>"We got better, I don't know – more respect ... we have grown up some bit ..."</i>
	Well-rounded	<i>"We are pretty well-rounded; not too bad."</i>
	Growing potential	<i>"They are obviously still busy to grow, grow within their personality. I think it is also the time where their personality changes the most and also their interests in what they originally wanted to do and what they strive towards eventually.")</i>

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*Negative stereotypes:* The negative characteristics the emerging adults expressed indicated that they come across as arrogant, feeling entitled to getting help within the organisation, and growing vertically in the hierarchy. Participants also felt that they are somewhat inexperienced when they enter the organisation but are eager to learn the required skills and knowledge. Despite this deficiency, participants indicated that they enjoy going out and having no responsibilities. They seem convinced that they have sufficient knowledge to perform their task within the organisation. In addition, participants described themselves as being ill-mannered and poorly dressed.

*Positive stereotypes:* The participants mostly identified positive characteristics within their own group as emerging adults. Participants felt that the following possible positive characteristics could be ascribed to their own group: they are ambitious, hard-working, come across as confident, and are passionate about their work and their future. Furthermore, the participants indicated that they are energetic, outgoing and sociable. The emerging adults also emphasised that they are independent without major responsibilities to accept. Participants also signified that they are well-rounded and well-mannered as they become more mature than when they were younger. The participants felt that they are determined to get ahead in life and to explore the world, showing growth potential.

#### **Category 4: Out-group stereotypes**

The older participants were asked what stereotypes they hold of emerging adults or what characteristics they would attribute to the emerging adults within the organisations. The respondents primarily described the emerging adults in a negative tone. Their responses are provided in Table 5 below.

Table 5

##### *Out-group stereotypes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Response/quote</b>
<b>Negative stereotypes</b>	Arrogant	“... they are arrogant ...” “The Afrikaans word is ‘windgat’.”
	Asking too little work-related questions	“I think they don’t ask enough questions because you don’t just get necessarily the right kind of information from searching for something on the Internet.” “... may appear not to be interested but actually he doesn't want to ask certain questions. ...”
	Belief that career progression is slow	“It’s not fast enough for them in terms of promotions and recognition.”
	Daring	“They are adventurous, you know they are inclined to take more chances...”
	Demanding	“... quite demanding ....”

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Dependant	<i>"... in many ways less independent ..."</i>
Disloyal	<i>"Loyalty and things like that don't exist in their lives." "... not loyal ..."</i>
Disobedient	<i>"He will not listen to any advice, because he has his own way of thinking." "I'll give him advice and sometimes he'll ask. But nine times out of ten he will go ahead with his decision anyway."</i>
Entitled	<i>"... are other ones that expect the element of entitlement ... 'I got my degree, now so you owe me, I've worked hard enough.'"</i>
Unconcerned	<i>"... guys that are just going with the motions ..."</i>
Gullible	<i>"... in many ways more gullible to the way of their thinking ..."</i>
Immature	<i>"... in many ways less mature ..." "They are not mature enough."</i>
Impulsive	<i>"... don't think about consequences of their actions." "... to take chances without really being worried about the outcomes of their decisions..."</i>
Inattentive to detail	<i>"Maybe the way they are brought up it is just quick – rush – go and you know they need to step back and say: 'Ooh wait a minute, let me just check this again.'"</i>
Inefficient	<i>"They like to do it quickly but sort of skim over stuff and sometimes forget to do it thoroughly."</i>
Inexperience	<i>"Remember, they come fresh out of school, would it be varsity or whatever, so they don't know what the work life is all about." "They don't have experience in the line of mining; they want to do the job, but they don't have the experience."</i>
Irresponsible	<i>"There are a level of maturity that I feel has not been reached with regards to taking responsibilities for specific deliverables."</i>
Know-it-all	<i>"... don't think they need to be nurtured in the companies ..." "... think they know all ..."</i>
Lack life skills	<i>"... lack of experience practicalities and realities and in life ..."</i>
Lack of self-confidence	<i>"... other people have, a, I would think confidence issue."</i>

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Lack practical knowledge	<i>"... have a lot more theory and might not always know how to apply it."</i> <i>"They know it all their text books taught them that kind of thing."</i>	
Lack skills	<i>"... lack of basic skill to fulfil even a minimal job ..."</i>	
Lacks depth in problem solving	<i>"... there is no delving further into problems."</i>	
Lacks work ethic	<i>"I don't see the work ethic that I remember at that age."</i>	
Low competency level	<i>"Correct, because it's quite time-consuming to get them to a certain level where they actually bring something to the organisation as supposed to just taking from the organisation."</i>	
Not knowledgeable	<i>"In an organisation this big, getting around is based on how many people you know and how much you know about how the organization works. If a grader should come in, you assume the grader knows nothing."</i>	
Opinionated	<i>"... being quite opinionated ..."</i>	
Pleasure seeking	<i>"... pleasure seeking ..."</i>	
Self-absorbed	<i>"... understanding other people's agendas but they like to please themselves at this stage."</i>	
Trouble adjusting to workplace	<i>"The others take a while to adjust because they haven't worked before."</i>	
Uninterested	<i>"... may appear not to be interested ..."</i>	
Untrustworthy	<i>"... are kind of not trusted ..."</i>	
<b>Positive Stereotypes</b>	Technologically advanced	<i>"... educated in computer skills ..."</i> <i>"They sort of help us as we help them with the computer side."</i> <i>"... IT driven or IT experienced ..."</i> <i>"...they tend to probably research information themselves a lot more directly because of Internet ..."</i>
	Need for training and development	<i>"... get lot more training, lot more development: personal development and that kind of stuff..."</i>
	Theoretical knowledge	<i>"They have theoretical knowledge."</i> <i>"... but he is still according to the book ..."</i>

*Negative stereotypes:* The older employees attributed mostly negative stereotypes to the emerging adults. These negative images the older employees expressed about the emerging

adults, indicated that the latter come across as arrogant, demanding, dependant, disloyal, disobedient, entitled, gullible, immature, and impulsive. The older employees also felt that the emerging adults were inexperienced, had trouble adjusting to the work environment, and did not pose enough work-related questions to understand the work. Furthermore, participants described the emerging adults as lacking skills, lacks depth in problem solving, and appear to be self-absorbed and unconcerned.

*Positive Stereotypes:* Participants felt that positive characteristics that could be ascribed to emerging adults is that they are technologically more advanced than the older employees, has extensive theoretical knowledge, and are hungry for training and development.

### **Category 5: Behavioural consequence of stereotypes expressed by older workers**

The participants (older workers) were asked whether the stereotypes they hold of the emerging adults or the way they describe them, influences their treatment this group in the organisation. The respondents mostly struggled to provide answers to the question as they were not aware of their behaviour and whether it influences their attitude toward this group. Their responses on this matter are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6

*Behavioural consequence of stereotypes expressed by older workers*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Response/quote</b>
<b>Objective</b>	Treating everyone equal and with respect	<i>"... but I treat everyone equal and with respect."</i>
	Treat individuals according to their unique characteristics	<i>"Very quickly you will see who's growing more in one area or other and you're trying to play them to that strength exactly." "No not at all. ... I see them as individuals."</i>
	Do not judge according to stereotypes	<i>"I don't think that I do judge people based on these stereotypes."</i>
	Acceptance of all within the organisation	<i>"No I do not believe so. I think there is a place for everyone in such an organisation."</i>

	Treat individuals according to their attitudes		<i>"Well obviously, it depends on what level they're coming in. If they're not grads, there's a different aspect, you know."</i>
	Value emerging adults		<i>"I'm generally inclined to be open for the younger generation because I know they can also offer more to a company." "I think they are needed in a company; there has to be young blood in an organisation."</i>
<b>Inferior treatment</b>	Cobble		<i>"I am generally a very motherly person. So, when the younger generation come I always like take them under my wing and like sort of groom them and teach them the things." "...babying them just from the on-start ..."</i>
	Not seeking guidance and advice		<i>"... so, you tend not to look for advice or direction from that person even though they might bring in valuable insight."</i>
	Allocating menial tasks		<i>"You also probably treat them a little bit as cheap labour ... and get them to menial stuff which is not bad. I mean, it gets him as part of the team."</i>
	Does not provide opportunity for assistance if unenthusiastic		<i>"... guys that wasn't displaying that much enthusiasm I would probably rather just say no I don't really need help."</i>
	Less attention		<i>"Then there are some guys that are just going with the motions and this and that and then they don't really get that much attention."</i>
	Less attention if uninterested		<i>"... but it comes across as not being interested and he kind of gets left to the side."</i>
	Poor relationships		<i>"It is sometimes difficult for older people to get along with the young bunch."</i>
	Lack of growth opportunities		<i>"Yes, there's no growth there." "So, people of some departments you find that they're very reluctant to even teach you."</i>
	Unsolicited advice		<i>"Well they think they can advise us you know in the right direction but nine times out of ten we don't like need advice the whole time."</i>
<b>Positive treatment</b>	Provide opportunities inexperienced	learning when	<i>"They are just out of school and have a lot more to learn to get on our level. It is an advantage because they can do further learning."</i>

Provide opportunity to help with work if enthusiastic	<i>"I will welcome them in assisting with something."</i>
Providing independence if independent	<i>"If someone shows a great level of independence ability to work on his own, you are going to give them more independence."</i>
Providing opportunity	<i>"... like always teaching her and grooming her and things like that and making her aware of reality."  "Sometimes they just need a bit of guidance on how to approach something and as soon as their confidence levels are in place then they kind of fly."</i>
Teaching practical skills	<i>"We'll show them things ..."</i>
Tolerant management style	<i>"Obviously, it depends on what level they're coming in. If they're not grads, there's a different aspect, you know."</i>
Providing growth opportunities	<i>"Personally for me, ... it was a lot of, you know, the growth, personal growth as well besides the career growth, personal growth as well...."</i>

*Objective:* Certain older participants indicated that they remain objective when working with emerging adults. They approach them according to their unique characteristics, and treating everyone equal and with respect. Older employees also indicated that they accept all within the organisation and value what emerging adults have to offer and contribute. The older participants also stated that they treat emerging adults according to their attitudes when they enter the organisation. Furthermore, the participants pointed out that they do not judge others based on any stereotypes.

*Inferior treatment:* Older employees felt that their 'motherly' nature gets the better of them and they tend to baby emerging adults who enter into the organisation. They also stated that they would rarely seek advice from an emerging adult, even though it may be insightful ideas and information. Furthermore, the participants remarked that they will only give this group of employees menial tasks when they enter into the organisation. They would, however, not give them opportunities to assist with projects if they seem unenthusiastic. The participants will also pay the emerging adults less attention if they only 'go through the motion' or do not show interest in learning new skills or being part of a project. Furthermore, older employees find it a struggle to build relationships with the emerging adults.

*Positive treatment:* The participants emphasised that the emerging adults will be offered learning opportunities when they enter the organisation as young and inexperienced. Additionally, the older employees indicated willingness to offer these new entries the opportunity to assist with projects if they display enthusiastic behaviour. They will also provide room if the young adults portray themselves as independent. The participants also confirmed they will teach the younger employees practical skills. The older employees explained that their treatment of the emerging adults depends on what level the latter enter the organisation. They emphasised that they would be more tolerant if the younger employee was not a graduate.

## DISCUSSION

### Outline of the findings

The *first objective* of the present study was to conceptualise stereotypes, age stereotypes, and emerging adults based on the literature. According to Passer and Smith (2009) a stereotype is a generalised belief about a group or a category of people. People tend to categorise others based on how they perceive a group rather than on individual characteristics, seeing that this simplifies the process (Passer & Smith, 2009; Mullins, 2010). Mullins (2010) also understands stereotypes as people within a particular perceived category that share the same traits or characteristics.

Shani and Lau (2008) point out that age stereotypes are the belief that individuals belonging to a specific age group have a set of traits or characteristics that make them suitable for a role or to portray a particular behaviour in an organisation. Such a stereotype about an individual's age is then assigned to every person in that age group rather than only the individual (Robinson et. al., 2008). People of all ages are stereotyped. Thus, this tendency is not limited to older workers within an organisation. Nevertheless, the present study focused only on emerging adults, who can be regarded as the new entries who enter the workforce 'by storm'. Arnett (2000) explains that emerging adults are those aged from 18 and 25 and are still in the process of taking on life's responsibilities, exploring the variety that life has to offer.

The *second objective* of the present study was to explore the age stereotypes that emerging adults experience about themselves in the organisation, in other words, how they perceive the

attitude that older employees display towards them. The findings showed that emerging adults experience both negative and positive stereotypes that originates from older employees. This is in line with Chen et al. (2010) who found that older employees are not immune to using age stereotypes; in reality they are more susceptible to stereotypes than younger employees. Additionally, Kreitner and Kinicki (2010) and Devlin (2006) point out that stereotypes do not necessarily have to be negative. Various stereotypes attribute positive qualities to the entire group. However, in the present study, emerging adults experienced only one positive stereotype, which the older employees attributed them, namely being ambitious.

The emerging adults in this sample believed that older employees attach mostly negative stereotypes to them. Within the organisation they felt that older employees view them as being entitled, incompetent, inexperienced, immature, ungroomed and not hardworking. If individuals are aware of these stereotypes, any action consistent with the stereotype lends credibility to this image as self-characterisation. Conforming to the negative stereotypes, introduces extra-task concerns, which influences the individual's performance and tends to confirm this depiction (Inzlicht et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is evident that the emerging adults are aware of the stereotypes that others hold of them. In this regard, Stanimir (2015) states that Gen Y's merely wish to be treated equally and respectfully.

The findings also showed that emerging adults may attach stereotypes within their own group (in-group stereotypes). This societal group attribute both negative and positive stereotypes to themselves. Additionally, it is also known that Gen Y's work-related characteristics and attitudes differ fundamentally from those of the previous generation (McGuire, Todnem By & Hutchings, 2007). Various literature supports the positive stereotypes that emerging adults use to describe themselves. This group (forming part of Gen Y) are viewed as confident, ambitious, adaptable, adept at multitasking, and reliable with technology (Boateng, 2010; Lower, 2008; Bolton et al., 2013).

On the other hand, studies also support the notion of negative stereotypes, by indicating that emerging adults are perceived as lazy, have a sense of entitlement, and enter the workplace with extremely high expectations (Laird, Harvey & Lancaster, 2015; Boateng, 2010 Lindquist, 2008). Within the present study the above-mentioned perceptions were confirmed by the older employees (out-group stereotypes) as well as the emerging adults (in-group stereotypes). Emerging adults who participated in the study labelled themselves as being independent, well-

mannered, ambitious, energetic and hardworking. Additionally, they also view themselves as arrogant, inexperienced and entitled. Stanimir (2015) and Solnet, Kralj and Kandampully (2012) explain that Gen Y is the most educated group and is beginning to enter the workforce. This may be why participants (young adults) described themselves as progressing in life and upward mobile in the organisation. During the biographical analysis of the participants, the researcher also found that the emerging adults declared themselves as more educated than the older workers.

The *third objective* of the study was to determine the age stereotypes which older employees hold about emerging adults within the organisation (i.e. out-group stereotypes). The older employees primarily described the emerging adults by assigning negative stereotypes to this group. For example, older employees affirmed that they would characterise emerging adults (which forms part of Gen Y) as being arrogant, daring, demanding, dependent, entitled, impulsive; lacking practical knowledge, and opinionated.

Lindquist (2008) also describes Gen Y as feeling special, which leads to feelings of entitlement and the desire to achieve a balance between what they do and aim to do. This, therefore, indicates that emerging adults strive for a perfect work-life balance. This view is in line with the finding by Meier and Crocker (2010) that Gen Y gives the impression they seek work-life balance with flexibility that will provide them the opportunity to define themselves in their job.

Considering characteristics which the participants (older workers) attributed to Gen Y, and the research mentioned above, it can be argued that older workers may experience resistance to the emerging adults' attitude towards work-life balance (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Wey Smola & Sutton, 2002). This attitude of resistance may be the reason the older employees attributed several negative characteristics and stereotypes to the young adults. However, Martin (2005) contradicts certain of the characteristics which older employees identified by pointing out that Gen Y's are typically self-reliant and independent. This generational group seek clear directions and support from their managers, but simultaneously want to enjoy the freedom and flexibility to complete a task in their own way and at their own pace (Martin, 2005).

The older employees did, however, attribute a number of positive characteristics to the emerging adults. According to these attributes, young adults are technologically advanced, hunger for training and development, and has extensive theoretical knowledge. These

statements are in line with Martin (2005), Meier and Crocker (2010), Stanimir (2015) and Hobart (n.d.) who typify Gen Y's as techno savvy and the most-educated group entering the workplace.

The *fourth objective* of the study was to determine the influence these age stereotypes exert on emerging adults within the organisation. The results indicated that the stereotypes which emerging adults are experiencing have a behavioural, cognitive, and emotional influence. This finding is supported by wide-spread research (Dion, 2002; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

Numerous participants indicated that they react on a *behavioural* level when confronted with stereotypes. Participants confirmed that they will work harder or improve themselves to prove the stereotypes wrong. This is in line with the view of Latrofa, Vaes, and Cadinu (2012) that when individuals perceive their social identity to be threatened, they can react in two ways: Firstly, they would strengthen the similarity between the self and the stereotypes ascribed to the in-group (self-stereotyping); secondly they will reduce the similarity between the self and the in-group (self-maintenance). From a different angle, Block, Koch, Liberman, Merriweather, and Roberson (2011) point out that these individuals will work vigorously to prove that the stereotype does not apply to them. By trying to prove themselves they will hide certain aspects of themselves, engage in counter-stereotypic behaviour, and distance themselves from their group.

Participants also indicated that they react on a *cognitive* level. They professed that the stereotypes make them feel inferior and let them reflect on the truth behind the stereotype when leaving the organisation at the end of a working day. According to Burkley and Blanton (2009), not only do these stereotypes influence individuals in the organisation. The individual employees also tend to internalise these stereotypes, which can lead to lower self-esteem.

On an *emotional* level, participants indicated that the stereotypes tend to make them feel frustrated, demotivated, and uncomfortable in certain situations. Stereotypes can have a detrimental effect on employees' behaviour and feelings, which in turn makes it harder for them to perform to their true potential (Roberson & Kulik, 2007). When individuals are aware of the stereotypes held about them, they may feel apprehensive and anxious, and thus attempt to suppress or deny the emotions (Johns, Inzlicht, & Schmader, 2008; Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

This may be done through inhibiting the emotions that arise, or preventing the expression of these feelings (Johns et al., 2008).

In contrast to the above-mentioned reactions, certain participants indicated that these stereotypes have an inconsequential influence. These emerging adults felt that they are not influenced by the stereotypes that older employees entertain about them. The important factor for these emerging adults was to focus on the task at hand and learn to reject the characteristics. This attitude towards negative stereotypes may be due to the Gen Y's unique characteristics. According to Martins (2005), Gen Y's require increasing responsibility to prove themselves, gain the trust of other employees and enjoy flexibility. The reason is that this generation is prepared to adapt to new people, places and circumstances. In addition, as Hobart (n.d.) points out, Gen Y's are diverse and act accepting towards those who differ from them. They are keen to interact and work with people outside their own norm group. As a result, the emerging adults are not influenced by or exposed to the age stereotypes because of the open-mindedness within their surroundings and workplace.

The *fifth objective* of the present study was to determine how the behaviour of older employees is influenced by the age stereotypes they hold of emerging adults. The results indicated that the older employees may cobbler the emerging adults who enter the organisation. However, the older employees may not provide the opportunity for assistance if the emerging adults are unenthusiastic. They pay this generation less attention if the latter do not show interest in their work. Certain participants even attested to having an extremely poor relationship with the emerging adults. Additionally, older employees were of the opinion that they offer emerging adults limited growth opportunities within the organisation and dispense unsolicited advice to the emerging adult.

However, other participants experienced no behavioural consequences and tended to be more objective when working with the emerging adults. They attested to treating everyone equal and with respect as well as according to their unique characteristics. Additionally, the older employees affirmed that they accept all the emerging adults into the organisation and value their contribution. Inzlicht et al. (2011) maintain that certain individuals may be motivated to reduce prejudice since they value diversity and equality. In this regard, the older employees also displayed positive behaviour towards the emerging adults. For example, the older employees provide the emerging adults with opportunities for learning and growth when

inexperienced, and to assist with work if enthusiastic. They also teach the younger individuals practical skills and show a tolerant management style towards them.

As was mentioned previously, limited research was done to investigate emerging adults and how they are influenced by stereotypes in the workplace (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Solnet & Hood, 2008). Nevertheless, some researchers did examine behavioural influences of stereotypes on emerging adults. Findings by Loretto, Duncan, White (2000) indicate that younger individuals are perceived as untrustworthy and are given less responsibility in the workplace. O'Higgins (2001) points out that young adults are denied promotions because they lack the necessary experience and skill. The difference in behaviour where the older employees encounter emerging adults, may be due to the considerable differences between the work-related expectations, values, attitudes and behaviours of GenY and the previous generations (Solnet & Hood, 2008).

In addition, Meier and Crocker (2010) explain that due to Gen Y's different education levels and experiences from the older generation, the companies' level of expectation regarding the younger entrants are also rising. The findings show that the different qualities and characteristics which emerging adults introduce into the working environment does not only influence the behaviour of other employees but also can impact the culture and climate of the organisation.

### **Practical implications**

By participating in the present study, the older employees became more aware of their perceptions about emerging adults and the impact of these perceptions. The study also sensitised emerging adults on how these age stereotypes influences them on a personal level as well as a work-related level. This study could help employees from both generational groups realise that their perceptions about others are not always correct and justified. This will motivate them to get closer acquainted with fellow employees in the organisation before attributing age stereotypes.

Furthermore, this study did not only make the older workers and the emerging adults aware of age stereotypes. Management also become conscious of the influence such stereotypes may

exert on relationships and teams within the organisation. Should employees be informed about the nature of age stereotypes, which ones they hold of fellow employees, and what the impacts are, they can begin to mitigate these age stereotypes within the workplace. The present study could provide guidelines for organisations to educate their employees on age stereotypes and the impact of these constructs on the individuals and the organisation.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

Despite the new information and contributions, certain limitations of the study must be factored in. Firstly, the study only comprised a sample size of 25 participants (N=25), therefore, the results cannot be generalised to whole South African population, however, the objective of qualitative research is not to generalise. The second limitation concerns the different languages. During the interview process the researcher found that certain participants would indicate their home language as Afrikaans, but that they opted to do the interview in English. This was despite the option of Afrikaans given to each participant. This choice may have influenced the way certain participants expressed and articulated themselves. It may also have increased their stress levels having to ensure they translate properly. Furthermore, other participants did not have the opportunity to do the interview in their home language, seeing that the researcher was only able to speak Afrikaans or English. Finally, certain older employees also gave the researcher the impression that they were unable to share their thoughts openly regarding stereotypes of emerging adults, seeing that an emerging adult was interviewing them. Such an attitude may also have influenced the participants' experience of the interview and impacted the data gathering by the researcher. However, the researcher did remain neutral and objective throughout the entire research and tried her best to make all participants feel at ease.

For future research, it is recommended that a larger sample group should be used. This would enable researchers to generalise the findings to a larger population group and elicit more information about employees' experiences of stereotypes with regard to emerging adults. Furthermore, it is recommended that future research use quantitative analysis to verify the findings gathered through the qualitative analysis. It is also advisable to involve fieldworkers as translators. This method would help overcome the language barriers by providing participants the opportunity to articulate their experience in their home language. Furthermore, the researcher can employ fieldworkers from the three different generational groups to help

interview their corresponding age groups. These measures will make it easier for the participants to share their thoughts around stereotypes more openly and accurately.

Organisations can also use the research discussed above to ensure their management provide the appropriate support to these emerging adults. This will ease this younger generational group into the organisation and help them gain the skills that is required. To accomplish this, organisations can implement mentorship programmes providing emerging adults who enter the workplace with a mentor to guide them through the first period in this environment. Mentorships also allows senior employees to reach out to Gen Y employees and offer them advice and coaching within a new environment. Such a relationship will also help the older employees understand the true nature of the emerging adults, and not rely on their stereotypes to guide them.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings showed that emerging adults experience various stereotypes within an organisation. Emerging adults are not only stereotyped by themselves but also by individuals from Gen X and the 'Baby Boomers'. These stereotypes were found to be mostly negative even though certain positive characteristics were ascribed to the group. On the one hand, certain participants indicated that these stereotypes by no means influence them; on the other hand, participants were influenced on a behavioural, emotional and cognitive level. Additionally, it was found that the stereotypes older employees hold do influence their behaviour and may impact their treatment of emerging adults in the organisation.

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

## CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The final chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the present the study and is provided according to the research's specific objectives. Furthermore, this chapter outlines the limitations of this study, followed by recommendations for future research, practice and the profession.

### 3.1 Conclusion

#### **Conceptualising stereotypes, age stereotypes and emerging adults according to literature**

Throughout the study it became clear that individuals can describe stereotypes in terms of their own view of the world, based on various aspects and occurrences. These world views influence the way people interact and work together, and the relationships they forge. People often have the tendency to perceive others as belonging to a distinct class or category (Luthans, 2010). Robbins and Judge (2014) point out that by judging someone based on an individual's own perceptions, the one who judges use a shortcut. Stereotypes are a powerful schema since people have generalised beliefs about a group or category of individuals (Passer & Smith, 2009). Individuals tend to use stereotypes to simplify their world without considering the impact and problems these stereotypes may cause, especially in a workplace (Robbins & Judge, 2014). People tend accept stereotypes as accurate, which are not always the case. Clearly not all stereotypes are inaccurate; however, in general people have no basis to deem stereotypes as accurate (Kurylo, 2013).

In a nutshell, Block, Koch, Liberman, Merriweather and Roberson (2011) view a stereotype as a simple term for a cognitive process that comprises a specific social group (in-group and out-group); particular attributes; and an assessment of how such attributes will be distributed among the different individuals in a social group. When individuals categorise each other, this leads to a perception of in-group (i.e. members of any group to which an individual belongs) against out-groups (i.e. members of a group to which an individual does not belong). Individuals categorise themselves (in-group) more positively or even neutrally and may assign more negative characteristics to other groups (out-group) to which they do not belong (Holt, et al., 2012; Passer & Smith, 2009).

Age has been one of the primary considerations in organisations for stereotyping employees (Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly & Konopaske, 2012). Sargeant (2011) states that age stereotypes mean associating specific characteristics to certain age groups. In effect it classifies the specific age group homogeneously, failing to differentiate between the individuals in that group (Robinson, Gustafson, & Popovich, 2008). From a young age already, individuals begin believing certain negative and positive stereotypes about other individuals from different age groups. Consequently, age stereotypes are accepted without being questioned (Nelson, 2002). Stereotyping does not only concern older people; it can apply to various ages and diverse life stages (Sargeant, 2011).

The present study focused primarily on the age stereotyping that emerging adults are experiencing in the workplace. The life stage of 'emerging adults' entails the period from late teens through the twenties, focusing on ages from 18 to 25 years (Arnett, 2000). The group of emerging adults form part of the so-called Generation Y (hereafter: Gen Y) group, born between 1977 and 2000 (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2011). The present study focused on the age stereotypes affecting these emerging adults.

#### **Exploring the age stereotypes that emerging adults experience about themselves in the organisation**

In view of emerging adults experiencing stereotypes in the working environment, the researcher explored the most prevalent of these generalised ideas within selected South African organisations. The findings showed that most stereotypes were negatively inclined. It was also found that the negative stereotypes that emerging adults experience, were not only about their work-related competencies, but also concerned their physical appearance, for example, appearing ungroomed.

When assessing the most prevalent stereotypes, it was found that the majority focused on the emerging adults' working competence, which includes the following characteristics: entitled; incompetent; inexperienced; immature, and not hardworking. Regarding the stereotypes which emerging adults experience in the workplace attributed to them by older fellow employees, Hobart (n.d.) points out that Gen Y's reputation is not always positive and can be largely associated with myths. Although Gen Y's is viewed as hardworking, it is important for them that their work should be meaningful and interesting. Hobart (n.d.) explains that managers observe this trend and assume that the young adults seek easy work, is not as hardworking, and

only want their work to be fun. Additionally, Erickson (2008) emphasises that from an early age, Gen Y's received extensive praise and continued reinforcement. As this experience translated into adulthood, some may view it as optimism, whereas others largely view it as a sense of entitlement. Therefore, the reason why emerging adults may primarily experience negative stereotypes in organisations is that managers and older employees tend to interpret their displayed behaviour differently.

The researcher also examined how the emerging adults describe their own group (in-group). The results indicated that individuals do not only stereotype others (out-group), but also experience stereotypes about themselves (in-group). From the findings, it was evident that the emerging adults perceive themselves primarily in a positive vein. Literature supports this perception, declaring that stereotypes about in-group members tend to be more positive than those about out-group members (Bergh, 2011).

#### **Determining the age stereotypes older employees hold about emerging adults within the organisation**

When exploring the stereotypes that emerging adults experience within the organisation, the researcher focused on generalised ideas that older employees hold about this younger generation. The findings showed that older employees perceive emerging adults primary in a negative fashion. However, it was also established that stereotypes can be both positive and negative (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Older employees expressed certain positive stereotypes about emerging adults, but these positive images were in the minority. The older employees found emerging adults to be technologically advanced; showing a high need for training and development, and possessing extensive theoretical knowledge. Meier and Crocker (2010) and Martin (2005) reinforce these findings by typifying Gen Y as more technology 'savvy', not only using the new technology but creating with it as well. Furthermore, these emerging adults show a constant need for learning opportunities and advancement.

The most prevalent stereotypes expressed by older employees were found to be negative. These stereotypes centred on the emerging adults' attitude at work and their work-related skills. Older employees attested to seeing the emerging adults as arrogant, demanding, disloyal, and entitled. Furthermore, they appear immature, impulsive, know-it-all, lacking work ethic, with a low competency level, not knowledgeable, and self-absorbed. They also seem to have trouble adjusting to the workplace and appear uninterested. Lyons (2016) found in a similar study that

individuals from the so-called 'Baby Boomers' generation and the 'Generation X' ascribed similar characteristics to the younger generation. The group of individuals stated that they view Gen Y as being selfish, entitled, lazy, self-involved; incapable of commitment and living in a state of perpetual adolescence. Additionally, Hobart (n.d.) found in his myths about Gen Y that managers in the organisation also view the younger workers as being disloyal, selfish, with a constant need to have everything immediately, and unwilling to pay their dues in the workplace.

The present research also found association's between the emerging adults' experience in the workplace and the older employees' description of this younger generation. Both groups of participants mentioned characteristics such as being arrogant, entitled, and know-it-all. Block et al. (2011) explain that if individuals are aware that they may be judged based on negative stereotypes, it may impede their performance. Furthermore, Snape and Redman (2003) point out that personal experience of discrimination may lead to feelings of being under-rewarded or under-valued by fellow employees of the organisation.

Thus, the findings above clearly showed that if the emerging adults are aware of the stereotypes within the organisation attributed to them, it may undermine their performance at work and may create a feeling of being unwelcome into the workplace.

#### **Determining the influence of these age stereotypes on emerging adults within the organisation**

After the researcher established the stereotypes within the organisation, the question remained: How does these generalised ideas influence emerging adults in the workplace? While engaging with this generational group, it became evident to the researcher that this group experiences stereotypes on a cognitive, emotional and behavioural level. Pre-dominantly, participants reported that they react in a behavioural manner when confronted by stereotypes about them or their in-group. In other words, they tend to display certain behaviour patterns to particular circumstances (Martin & Fellez, 2010). Block et.al. (2011) asserts that individuals from this generational group work vigorously to disprove the stereotypes that fellow employees attribute to them. The emerging adults also emphasised that they want to work harder to prove themselves. Such an attitude may result in higher levels of productivity, but with a correspondingly high psychic cost. Moreover, while the individuals are attempting to disprove

stereotypes attributed to them, they also engage in counter-stereotypic behaviour, thereby distancing themselves from the members of their in-group (Block et. al., 2011).

Certain participants indicated that the stereotypes attributed to them in the organisation has no influence on them, or they did not experience any stereotypes at all. A possible explanation for this behaviour could be stereotype suppression. According to Purdon (2004), this occurs when an individual deliberately or consciously negates the stereotype. Individuals display this behaviour because they are aware of the negative effects accompanying stereotypes.

#### **Determining how the behaviour of older employees is influenced by the age stereotypes they hold of emerging adults**

The final objective of the present research was to determine how the older employees' behaviour is influenced by the stereotypes they hold of emerging adults. It became clear that the older employees' behaviour is influenced by the mentioned stereotypes. The findings showed that these older employees will treat the emerging adults differently since they are newcomers and young entrants to the organisation, at a lower rank or status. Older employees will coddle the emerging employees, taking them under their wings and introduce them into the workings of the organisation. Furthermore, they will allocate menial tasks to the younger workers, and would pay them less attention if they appear uninterested and do not seem to offer opportunities for growth.

Additionally, certain older employees admitted that they find it difficult to build a relationship with an emerging adult. Duncan, Loretto, and White (2000) found similar results which confirm that younger workers are viewed as untrustworthy and thus given less responsibilities. In this regard, Angeline (2011) points out that the dissimilarities between the different generations hampers the developing of cordial relationships between employees. Solnot and Hood (2008) found considerable differences between the generations in terms of their values, attitudes, and behaviours. While Gen Y continue to enter the workforce, there is widespread speculation and concern about how these differences will influence the other employees (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

Nevertheless, certain older employees also affirmed positive treatment of emerging adults. They emphasised that will offer learning opportunities to the emerging adults if they are

inexperienced; provide them several opportunities; teach them practical skills; and will have a more tolerant management style to these emerging adults when they enter the workforce. This finding about the behaviour of older employees is in line with Martin (2005) that Gen Y's prefer opportunities for ongoing education, socialising and being creative. As a manager of the younger employee, it is important rather to play the role of a coach than to micro-manage individuals from Gen Y.

### **3.2 Limitations**

Various limitations were identified for the present study. Firstly, the disclosing of information related to stereotypes. Stereotypes are a sensitive and contentious topic of discussion (Edward, 2003). This may be the reason that participants felt uncomfortable and self-conscious to share their views about stereotypes. Furthermore, certain older participants seemingly felt uncomfortable to share their views about emerging adults as the interviewer were from that age group.

Secondly, a limitation adding to the sharing of stereotypes is voice recorders. Even though the researcher assured the participants that their information is confidential, the use of voice recorders may still have created an uncomfortable environment. Consequently, the participants may have toned-down the information they shared with the researcher. Or they could have been unwilling to report stereotyping, but rather present themselves in a socially desirable light.

Thirdly, the researcher used the phenomenological approach to interpret the collected data. The disadvantage of using this approach for research is that it cannot be generalised to the larger group of South Africans. The reason is that normally, this approach does not study large numbers of participants (Denscombe, 2014). During the present research study the sample size was only 25 participants, which limited the researcher to generalising the findings to the larger population.

A fourth limitation concerns the number of emerging adults currently within organisations. Emerging adults formed a crucial part of the recent study, however; there were only a limited number of individuals with work experience whom the researcher could interview to gain data for the study. This may have hindered a comprehensive view or understanding of emerging

adults' experiences of stereotypes within the organisation. Future studies could focus on specifically Gen Y, seeing that this generation is larger with more work experience.

A sixth limitation is the small number of organisations within certain of the selected sectors during the data gathering of the study. The various sectors that formed part of the study were: financial, mining, construction and consulting. Value could have been added to the study if data could have been gathering in other sectors of South African organisations.

The final limitation concerns the language used to conduct the interviews. Certain participants may have answered the interview questions in a language other than their home language. This may have made them feel challenged to express themselves, and the researcher thus may have understood the responses incorrectly. However, the researcher did ask beforehand whether participants would be satisfied if the interviews were conducted in either Afrikaans or English. In addition, the researcher asked the participants to clarify their answer if she did not understand.

### **3.3 Recommendations**

Recommendations can be made for practice and future research.

#### **3.3.1 Recommendations for the organisation**

People judge others based on their perception since it helps individuals make decisions quickly and simplify their complex world environment (Robbins & Judge, 2014). It is important, however, that employees should be aware of these stereotypes and its impact on individuals, groups and the organisation (Bergh, 2011).

Training and awareness interventions must be implemented within the organisation to help sensitise employees to the stereotypes they may hold of their own group (in-group), as well as others (out-group). Houghton (2010) explains that to avoid potential negative stereotypes and its detrimental effects, individuals must understand the process through which stereotypes are formed. If employees and employers are aware of their own stereotypes, it will encourage a transparent and fair working environment and avoid the tendency to rely on these stereotypes when decisions are made.

Since emerging adults is part of the new generation entering the workforce, it is important for organisations to ensure they retain these individuals. Employers, managers and organisations should take care that their stereotypes about the group does not influence their way of working. Bergh (2011) maintains that stereotypes should be avoided when meeting someone for the first time. By avoiding the stereotypes, the manager of an emerging adult gets the chance to build a relationship with the new employee. Gen Y's has clear expectations of their managers (Martin, 2005). Employers should establish a coaching relationship with the emerging adults. It is important for the Generation Y's to experience that the older employees want to help them grow and improve (Martin, 2005).

Managers and organisations should provide regular productive feedback to the group of emerging adults. Instead of waiting for performance reviews, they should provide the young employee with daily feedback, which focus not only on the negative aspects, but accentuates the positive side as well (Martin, 2005). By implementing these strategies within the organisation, managers could retain emerging adults and build a sound relationship with these young employees. Once organisations are able to see beyond the negative stereotypes that older employees hold of Gen Y, they would be able to tap into the talents this group has to offer in the workplace and in future (Hobart, n.d.). It is clear from the present study that the stereotypes which employees attribute to others influence their behaviour toward those they stereotype.

Employees will continue to experience stereotypes at work since these are widely held beliefs about individuals, and perceptions which people are unwilling to change (Block et. al, 2011). A more diversified and inclusive working environment can be fostered if the organisation understands how employees experience and cope with stereotypes (Block et. al., 2011). Professionals and managers should be made aware that employees can react to stereotypes in different ways. This will help the organisation render better support to the employees as they struggle with the experience of conforming to these stereotypes in the organisation (Block et. al., 2011).

### **3.3.2 Recommendations for future research**

Several recommendations can be made for future research. Before beginning to gather data, it would be advisable to have fieldworkers who are able to conduct interviews in different languages, or to train fieldworkers in diverse South African languages. This will help create a

comfortable environment in which participants could share their thoughts about age stereotypes. Participants will also respond more clearly to the interview questions in their home language. In addition, these fieldworkers can be recruited from the above-mentioned different generational groups to interview participants from their corresponding generations. If the fieldworkers are from a similar age group, older employees will feel less uncomfortable to share their thoughts and stereotypes about emerging adults.

Further qualitative studies should also be conducted. When collecting data for the present study, the researcher found it difficult to attract emerging adults to take part in the study. A larger sample group from Gen Y should be involved in the study to investigate the specific age groups within organisations. Since Gen Y is the most recent generation to enter the workforce (Solnet & Hood, 2008), it is important to understand the influence of stereotypes on their working environment. Furthermore, the researcher could use a larger sample group for a broader image of the stereotypes that older employees hold of emerging adults and how these stereotypes influence the latter.

More research should be done in other sectors of South Africa. For the present study, the researcher collected data only within the financial, mining, construction and consulting sectors. Additional data can be gathered from the manufacturing, agriculture, tourism and the wholesale and retail trade sector. Such an extended focus will enable the researcher to generalise the information to a broader population within South Africa.

It is recommended further that quantitative methods should be employed as well. A measuring instrument can be designed to ascertain participants' experiences of stereotypes. Participants may feel more comfortable to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences if they can convey this information in written format. In addition, current or newly designed measuring instruments can be used to investigate the influence of these stereotypes on the organisation's culture and climate and on emerging adults' work output. This form of information will also help managers understand the influences that stereotypes exert within the organisation.

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