

# THE POWER OF WORDS

### TEACHING GOAL

Students will develop an awareness of the stereotypes (assumptions) associated with various ethnicities or regional groups.

#### LEARNING ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Students will associate “ethnic-sounding” names with hypothetical occupations and then examine assumptions behind the associations.

#### TERMS/CONCEPTS ADDRESSED

**Stereotype** (from *The Color of Words*, pp. 212-213, available from [www.interculturalpress.com](http://www.interculturalpress.com)): A generalization about what people are like; an exaggerated image of their characteristics, without regard to individual attributes. Newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann coined the term, calling a stereotype a “picture in our heads” (*Public Opinion*, 1922, 95-156). Stereotypes of groups are based on salience — whatever usually stands out about that group. In the United States, so-called racial characteristics, in particular skin color, hair texture and facial features, are a common basis of stereotyping.

All people hold certain stereotypes of members of other groups, including groups based on “race,” ethnic background, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability and occupation. Many stereotypes are merely cultural expectations about our world, shorthand ways of dealing with its complex reality. But prejudiced people in particular think in terms of these images, and do so in ways that are potentially abusive. The stereotype in effect says that to know one member of the group is to know them all. Regarding ethnic stereotypes, for example, all Jews, according to the traditional prejudice, are “shrewd” and “money hungry.” All black people are “ignorant” and “welfare dependent.” All white people are “cold” and “smug.” Seeing individuals who resemble our stereotypes, however unrepresentative they may be, sustains the stereotype by a process of selective perception.

**Ethnic group** (*The Color of Words*, pp. 79-80): Any category of people within a larger society who possess distinctive social or cultural traits, shared history and sense of their commonness, regardless of the group’s size, power, race (the perception of certain common biological traits), or time of immigration. The term is popularly used for such groups in U.S. society as Jews, who identify themselves in terms usually of common history as well as religion, or groups designated by national origin, such as Polish Americans or Japanese Americans. The term has been popular since the 1960s.

#### TYPE OF LEARNING ACTIVITY

Brainstorming • Problem-solving • Debate • Attitude scales • Experiential learning

#### MATERIALS NEEDED

- This lesson plan
- Copies of the handout

#### TIME RANGE

- 5 to 10 minutes for the matching exercise
- 20+ minutes for discussion, depending on depth of discussion

#### GROUP SIZE

Small, medium or large (2 to 20+ people). Large groups may want to divide into smaller groups and compare responses.

#### LEARNING ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

1. Draw a line connecting each name on the list (see handout, page 3) with that person’s occupation (use each occupation only once; there will be some left over).
2. Share your responses. Look for patterns:
  - Did many people connect certain names with the same occupations?
  - If so, which names and occupations did your group associate with each other? Why?
3. Consider the definition of stereotype. Did any of your responses to the exercise express conscious or unconscious stereotypes you hold about various ethnic groups? If so, what were they?

#### DEBRIEF

Discuss the following questions in small groups, or as a class:

1. Respond to this phrase: “. . . to know one member of the group is to know them all.” Answer the following:
  - Is this true of the ethnic group(s) to which you belong? Why or why not?
  - It is true of other ethnic groups?

2. How would you feel (or how do you feel) to be judged based on a stereotype about your ethnic group(s)?
3. What types of traits or characteristics are emphasized in stereotypes? Why?
4. Where do we get some of the ideas that contribute to stereotypes about people of other ethnic groups? What things reinforce those ideas? What things counteract them?
5. Did this exercise give you any new ideas? If so, what are they?
6. Will you change any of your language or behaviors as a result of this exercise? If so, how?

The Power of Words curriculum is based on cultural anthropologist Philip Herbst's ground-breaking dictionaries, *The Color of Words: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States* (ISBN# 1-877864-97-8, \$29.95) and *Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation Bias in the United States* (ISBN# 1-877864-80-3, \$44.95). Both are available from:

**Intercultural Press**  
**P.O. Box 700**  
**Yarmouth ME 04096**  
**Toll free: 866-372-2665**  
**[www.interculturalpress.com](http://www.interculturalpress.com)**

Draw a line connecting each name on the list below with that person's occupation (use each occupation only once; there will be some left over).

**NAMES**

Jamal Jackson  
Eli Goldstein  
Mohammed Al-Saaidi  
Alison Running Bear  
Jiang Wu  
Consuela Garcia  
Faiza Shirazi  
Naomi Herschberger  
Steve Smith  
Twila Sue Poole  
George White Feather  
Latisha Johnson  
Jorge Enriquez  
Machiko Matsumoto  
Bubba Ray Deere  
Shannon Roberts

**OCCUPATION**

Middle manager  
Flight attendant  
Truck driver  
Massage therapist  
Corporate vice president  
High school teacher  
Computer programmer  
Farmer  
Secretary  
Professional basketball player  
Diamond broker  
Oil company executive  
Agricultural worker  
Hotel maid  
Homemaker  
Social worker  
University professor  
Lawyer  
Blackjack dealer  
Waitress