

# THE POWER OF WORDS

## LESSON 5

### WORDS THAT REINFORCE STEREOTYPES

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### TEACHING GOAL

Students will increase their awareness of the effects of using language that reinforces stereotypes.

#### LEARNING ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Students will write and discuss definitions of words that express or reinforce various stereotypes.

#### TERMS/CONCEPTS ADDRESSED

Stereotype; words and phrases that reinforce stereotypes, including: fairy, ho, jungle bunny, poor white trash, paki/Paki, wetback (for many more, see *Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation Bias in the United States* and *The Color of Words: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States*; both available from [www.interculturalpress.com](http://www.interculturalpress.com)).

**Stereotype** (*The Color of Words*, pp. 212-213): 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.

... Stereotypes are more often negative than positive. Even when they seem to be positive, however, they may convey negative or

offensive judgments about the group in question. For instance, when black people are viewed as being good dancers, the stereotype conveys an offensive image of carefree entertainers.

**Fairy** (*Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers*, pp. 89-90): A term with two different meanings since the nineteenth century, both reflecting on femininity and tending to degrade it. It was once used for women, but its common slang use today, probably American in origin, is (especially among heterosexuals) to disparage a gay man.

**Ho/hoe/'ho** (*Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers*, p. 140-141): Twentieth-century variant pronunciation and respelling of whore, “prostitute.” This usually demeaning epithet is based on black English pronunciation but is used also by white people. Ho may also refer to any woman regarded as sexually promiscuous – sometimes any woman: “You don’t have to be one to be called one” (Sharp 1993, 39). In any case ho is likely to be taken offensively.

**Jungle bunny** (*The Color of Words*, pp. 131-132): Derogatory term for a black person, originally for a slave newly arrived from Africa, alluding to primitiveness; also African bunny. Perhaps because of the diminutive-sounding bunny, this term may sometimes be used with jocular intent. Nevertheless, it is racist and figures into the white supremacist lexicon.

**Paki/Pakky/Packie** (*The Color of Words*, p. 176): Slur by abbreviation, mainly British (1960s), but also used in Canada and the United States, for a Pakistani or immigrants from Bangladesh and other South Asian nations as well.

**Poor white trash** (*The Color of Words*, pp. 184-185): Phrase used for white people of the very lowest social status – those viewed as ignorant and shiftless as well as economically backward – including, in slave days, southern white people who were ranked in social status beneath slaves. ...Poor white trash is used by both white and black people, largely as a term of contempt. The term may connote not only squalor but also moral turpitude. In the North, especially, the phrase often implies that those so labeled are racist.

**Wetback** (*The Color of Words*, pp. 228-229): A twentieth-century

slur deriving from the practice of Mexicans entering the United States by swimming or wading the Rio Grande (even though the Rio Grande is not always high enough to wet the back of a wader). Wetback was later changed to the [presumably] less offensive illegal alien.

### TYPE OF LEARNING ACTIVITY

Open-ended sentences • writing definitions

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- This lesson plan
- Pen and paper

### TIME RANGE

10 to 30 minutes, depending on the number of definitions generated and the depth of discussion.

### GROUP SIZE

Small to large (2 to 20+). Large groups may want to divide into smaller groups for discussion.

### LEARNING ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

1. Individually or in small groups, write a definition of one or more of the terms in the list above, or as assigned, about two sentences to a paragraph.
2. Share your definition with the rest of the group(s).
3. In small groups, share your impressions.

### DEBRIEF

Questions for debriefing:

- What is the “picture in your head” when you think of this term?
- Where did you learn or acquire it?
- Where else have you seen or heard it?
- What connotations (associations or implied meanings) does it have?
- Are the connotations positive, negative or neutral?
- How does this term reinforce stereotypes (i.e. what assumptions does it make about people who fall into this category? Which traits does it emphasize or disparage)?

- How does use of this term perpetuate oppression and domination?
- How does it harm people in the group to whom the term applies (the “outgroup”)?
- How does it harm people in the dominant group (the “ingroup”)?
- How does it harm you?
- Did this exercise give you any new ideas? If so, what are they?
- Will you change any of your language or behaviors as a result of doing this exercise? If so, how?

### VARIATION

Follow the **Learning Activity Instructions** above to generate or research terms that describe the same groups, but are neutral or positive and do not embody the stereotypes.

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:

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