

# Understanding Prejudice <sup>33</sup>

**Class Time Needed:** Two class periods

## Materials

- A copy of "[Prejudice: A Definition](#)" for each student
- A copy of "[Bogardus Social Distance Scale](#)" for each student
- A copy of "[A Continuum of Social Relationship Among Human Groups](#)" for each student

**Objective:** Students will understand the meaning of personal preference, prejudice, discrimination, and scapegoating.

## Introduction

This lesson can be implemented from several different entry points, or all of the components can be used, depending on your goals and your students' understanding of the concepts of prejudice and discrimination. When you use all three components, students will have the opportunity to move from theoretical understanding to more personal examination of their own levels of tolerance.

### Entry Point A

Role-play the following activities.

- Only students wearing (brand name) \_\_\_ blue jeans can attend the school assembly.
- Only students wearing digital watches may take the social studies exam. Everyone else fails.
- Only pupils wearing (brand name) \_\_\_ shoes may go to lunch. The others must stay in the classroom during the lunch period.

Discuss the feelings of the "ins" and the "outs." How did it feel to be denied a privilege because of an arbitrary rule? How did the privileged students behave toward those who were told they could not attend the assembly or go to lunch?

### Entry Point B

Have students read "[Prejudice: A Definition](#)" and review "[A Continuum of Social Relationship Among Human Groups](#)." Ask students to define prejudice, discrimination, and scapegoating. Help students identify behaviors that illustrate each of the terms on the continuum.

### Entry Point C

Administer the "[Bogardus Social Distance Scale](#)." Ask students to indicate on which step of the scale they would admit members of the listed ethnic and national groups. Be sure to communicate that there are no right or wrong answers. The scale is designed to help students explore their individual feelings, and their responses should be shared only on a voluntary basis. The debriefing discussion should focus on what factors influence the way we make decisions about people different from ourselves.

When students have completed the scale, ask them to look at their own papers and discuss the following:

- What do you know about these groups? What are your sources of information? How do you know what people in the groups are like?
- How did you decide where to place each group on your [distance scale](#)?
- Where do your feelings about these groups fall on the "[Continuum of Social Relationship](#)"?

**Debriefing**

Use the following questions to focus discussion on the importance of being aware of our own predilections and prejudices.

1. How does it feel when someone prejudices you based on your ethnic or national group? What do you learn about yourself? What do you learn about that person?
2. What happened when you used the [distance scale](#)? Were there some groups that you would exclude from any part of your life? What information did you use to make your decisions?
3. What did you learn from this activity?
4. What real life ideas are represented by the [distance scale](#)? Do you think that you have an unconscious scale that determines your level of tolerance for people who are different from you? How do you think you developed your own scale?
5. Suppose there is a group that you have placed at the sixth or seventh level on the "[Bogardus Social Distance Scale](#)." A person from that group is introduced into your tightly knit social circle by a good friend. What would you do? What happens when people don't interact with people from other groups?
6. What are some things you can do to learn more about individuals or groups that you don't know well?

**Extending the Ideas**

- Have students do research to learn more about the people and culture of some of the groups listed above. Discuss with the students whether having more information changes the way they rank those groups on the [social distance scale](#).
- Using the color poems for "[What is Black?](#)" in the [introduction to this section](#) as models, ask students to write culture poems based on research on several of the groups listed above or other cultures found in your community. Provide other assignments for students whose learning style is not based on the written word. Students could make collages, slide shows, or musical or multimedia presentations.

## Prejudice: A Definition

Let's look at the stages of hostile relationships--starting with "predilection."

**Predilection** simply means that someone prefers one culture, one skin color, or one language as opposed to another. If you like Mexican culture and I do not, there is no use arguing about taste. We may disagree on such matters, but, as a rule, we respect one another's choice. Predilections are natural. But they are the first step toward scapegoating if they turn into more active biases, that is to say into . . .

**Prejudice.** A prejudice is an attitude in a closed mind. ("Don't bother me with facts, I've already made up my mind.") Some Europeans may think that all Americans are loudmouthed spendthrifts. This stereotyped view is hard to change. It is a prejudice. An Oxford student is said to have remarked, "I despise all Americans, but I've never met one I didn't like." This anecdote suggests that prejudgments may stand even when available evidence is against them. Some people with prejudices may think that blacks have rhythm, that Scotsmen are thrifty, or that a woman's place is in the home.

Prejudice, if kept to oneself, causes no great harm except to the mind that possesses it. But prejudice expressed leads to . . .

**Discrimination.** That means leaving somebody out because of prejudiced thinking. Generally it is based not on an individual's intrinsic qualities but on a "label" branding the individual as a member of a group to be looked down upon. It means separating a group forcibly and unjustly from our neighborhoods, our schools, our churches, our labor unions and our professions.

**Scapegoating** is hostile behavior by word or deed. The victim usually cannot fight back, for scapegoats are usually members of vulnerable minority groups. [**Editor's note:** "Minority" does not refer only to race or ethnicity.] The essential cowardice of scapegoating is illustrated by the persecution of the Salem "witches," a small, frail handful of people who could not fight back.

**Adapted from** ABC's of Scapegoating **by Gordon Allport (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1985).**

## Bogardus Social Distance Scale

**Directions:** The steps below represent a continuum--from close family relationships to complete physical and geographical separation--on which we may place people who are different from ourselves. Write a number beside each national and ethnic group listed below to indicate at what point on the continuum you would feel comfortable with members of those groups. You may keep your responses private, but you will be asked to discuss how you made your decisions.

### Steps

1. To close kinship by marriage
2. To a social group as a personal friend
3. To my street as a neighbor
4. To employment in my place of work within my occupation
5. To citizenship in my country
6. As visitors only to my country
7. Would exclude from my country

### Groups

__ African American	__ French	__ Mexican
__ Armenian	__ German	__ Native American
__ Canadian	__ Greek	__ Polish
__ Chinese	__ Hispanic	__ Puerto Rican
__ Cuban	__ Hungarian	__ Scottish
__ Egyptian	__ Irish	__ Tanzanian
__ English	__ Japanese	__ Turkish
__ Haitian	__ Jewish	__ Vietnamese
__ Hindu	__ Korean	__ White American

# A Continuum of Social Relationships Among Human Groups

**Friendly**

Cooperation

Respect

Tolerance

Predilection

Prejudice

Discrimination

Scapegoating

**Hostile**

## What Is Black?<sup>28</sup>

It started off like any other day in my job as a language arts resource teacher. Upon arrival at my school, I greeted teachers and began working on my current project. Shortly after the bell, Miss Samuel, another teacher, came over and asked me if I'd come to her class to teach a lesson on color poems.

"No problem," I told her. I smiled to myself because this was one of my favorite lessons. The kids love it, and it really seems to bring out their creativity.

Later that day, I marched confidently into her class bearing my "tools of the trade": my colorfully lettered chart, my extra pencils, my chalk, my paper, and my already prepared examples of color poems. The lesson began by soliciting color images from the students.

"What things can you think of that are green?" I asked enthusiastically.

"A bluggoe leaf . . . an unripe mango . . . grass . . . skin-ups . . . trees . . . a lunch kit . . . a hair clip . . . an exercise. . . ." they responded. I eagerly recorded each and every one of their responses on my chart.

I then shared some examples of color poems (which came from a handout I received from the Ministry). Here are a few examples.

### What is Red?

Red is a heart filled with love.  
Red is a face when it's angry and mean.  
Red is when the door is slammed.  
Red is Moses and the burning tree.  
Red is a volcano erupting.

### What is Black?

Black is the color of hatred.  
Black is a gloomy night, ashes,  
Tar on the road, a car's tyre.  
Black is the funeral, dragging slow,  
A midnight sound, dark and low.

### What is Pink?

Pink is the sky at sunset.  
Pink is a kitten's tiny nose.  
Pink is the inside of a rabbit's ear.  
Pink is how I feel inside on my birthday.  
Pink is the joy of being alive.

I then encouraged the children to write a descriptive color poem as a class, with all students offering ideas and suggestions. Hands went up like rockets and children bobbed up and down in their seats, begging to be called on. We composed quite a nice color poem, "What is Blue?" Finally, I put the students into small groups to write their own color poems. They worked well together, cooperating and sharing.

When the lesson was over, I quickly conferred with Miss Samuel to see how she felt about the lesson. We both agreed that the students had made a good effort and have some excellent poems to prove it. I left the class feeling satisfied and went about my duties, without thinking again of the lesson.

The next morning, Miss Samuel came over to have a "piece-a-chat" with me. She told me that something about the lesson I taught had bothered her, but she couldn't put her finger on it at the time. Throughout the evening she thought about it and finally realized it was my example color poem, "What is Black?" She found that my poem used negative images to describe black and decided to try her hand at presenting black in a poem with positive images. This is what she came up with.

### What is Black?

Black is the shine of ebony  
And the color of some people's hair.  
Black is the feather of the Corbeau King  
And the skin of my ancestors.  
Black is the seed of the sweet Sapodilla.  
Black is the forerunner of the fair dawn.

Black is Truth.  
Black is Justice.  
Black is Beautiful.  
Black is the writing of Martin Luther King  
And the words of Malcolm X.  
Black is the philosophy of Marcus Garvey  
And the teaching of Bustamante.  
Black is the roll of the Tumba drums  
And the dancing of the Shango women.  
Black is the taste of molasses sweet  
And the culture of my people.  
Black is the son of King Shaka  
And the daughter of Queen Nazinga.  
Black is the ring of the Short-Knees' gullo.  
Black is Free.  
Black is We.  
Black is being Me.

As I finished reading her poem, every hair on my body stood on end and tears welled in my eyes. I stammered out some words of praise for her powerful poem and she went on to see about her class.

Unknowingly, Miss Samuel had opened my eyes to my own hidden prejudice. This was upsetting to me because I consider myself extremely open to and accepting of other races and cultures. I've lived and taught in a rural village in Kenya and now in the West Indies. I appreciate, even celebrate, the richness and beauty in other cultures. I am an avid listener of African music like Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Miriam Makeba, and Hugh Masekela. I enjoy reading the works of African writers like Bessie Head, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Chinua Achebe. I choose to see movies like **Cry Freedom** and **A Dry White Season**. I have participated in anti-Apartheid rallies and believe in the ideas of Stephen Biko and Nelson Mandela. Currently, I'm involved in the most significant relationship of my life, a cross-cultural one with a Grenadian. To me, all these things show my belief in the unity of all people, regardless of race or color, and my profound respect for African culture. I consider myself free of racial prejudice. And yet, I found myself in a black culture, clearly and unconsciously contributing to negative images associated with black that have been around for many years. I'm ashamed to admit this and disappointed in myself for this lack of cultural sensitivity.

It started me thinking: Why is it that bad guys always wear black and good guys wear white? Why do we wear black for grieving our dead and white to celebrate the joy of the union of marriage? Why is black associated with death, evil, and hatred while white is associated with angels, purity, and godness? What kind of message is this sending?

What I know is, I taught the same lesson to nearly every class in my school. Each time, I was unconsciously perpetuating the "negative images" of black and showing my own "true colors" (excuse the pun). If it wasn't for Miss Samuel, I would have continued my subtle prejudice without even realizing it. So, I owe a lot to her for reminding me, gently, that although we consciously believe in racial equality and unity, sometimes our actions don't show it.

For now, my former example of the color poem "What is Black?" lies at the bottom of my trash bin. I'll be using her powerful images of black from now on. Thank you, Miss Samuel.

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