

Lesson 4

To deepen your understanding of the ideas in this lesson, read Chapters One and Two in *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*.

Those Who Don't Know: Identity, Membership, and Stereotypes

WHY teach this material?

Rationale

While in Lesson 3 students explored how individuals define their own identities, in this lesson students consider how people are also defined by others. This lesson helps students understand the meaning of prejudice and stereotyping—concepts that are central to making sense of the historical content they will cover in future lessons. The activities in this lesson ask students to reflect on their own experiences as targets and perpetrators of prejudice and in doing so encourage students to consider their responsibility to push beyond facile stereotypes when making judgments about individuals and groups.

LEARNING GOALS

The purpose of this lesson is to help students:

- Reflect on these **guiding questions**:
 - *How am I defined by others?*
 - *What is prejudice?*
 - *What are stereotypes? Where do they come from?*
 - *How can stereotypes be used and abused?*
- Practice these **interdisciplinary skills**:
 - *Reading comprehension and interpretation*
 - *Creative writing*
- Deepen understanding of these **key terms**:
 - *Stereotype*
 - *Prejudice*
 - *Others*

(See the main glossary in the unit's "Introduction" for definitions of these key terms.)

WHAT is this lesson about?

This lesson and the lessons throughout this unit highlight a tension that can come when the ways in which we define ourselves are not the same as how others define us. As we have seen throughout world and U.S. history, this tension can lead to discrimination and violence when certain groups, often those in the majority, have the power to define those in the minority, often in ways that rely on harmful stereotypes.

In this lesson, students explore the concepts of prejudice and stereotypes by reading an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros’s book *The House on Mango Street*. The word *prejudice* comes from the word *pre-judge*. We pre-judge when we have an opinion about a person because of a group to which that individual belongs. A prejudice has the following characteristics:

1. It is based on real or imagined differences between groups.
2. It attaches values to those differences in ways that benefit one group at the expense of others.
3. It is generalized to all members of a target group.

Not all prejudices are negative; some are positive. But, whether positive or negative, prejudices have a similar effect—they reduce individuals to categories or stereotypes. A *stereotype* is a judgment about an individual based on real or imagined characteristics of a group.



A Facing History student portrays the members of her community.

The story “Those Who Don’t” lays the groundwork for exploring prejudice and stereotyping—concepts that are prevalent in our everyday lives and in the history we will be studying in this unit. In this excerpt, the main character, Esperanza, shares how she feels the people in her neighborhood are mistakenly judged and defined by outsiders. While “those who don’t know any better” believe her neighbors might be dangerous, Esperanza feels safe around her neighbors. She knows them beyond the color of their skin or the place in which they live; she sees her neighbors through their relationships

(“Rosa’s Eddie V” or “Davey the Baby’s brother”) and their histories (“he’s not fat anymore”). At the same time, Esperanza recognizes this universal trait of human behavior—the instinct to pre-judge people who are different than we are—when she admits that she does the same thing. “But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color,” she shares, “and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight.”¹ Thus, this vignette represents psychologist Deborah Tannen’s description of prejudice and stereotypes. She writes:

We all know that we are unique individuals, but we tend to see others as representatives of groups. It’s a natural tendency, since we must see the world in patterns in order to make sense of it; we wouldn’t be able to deal with the daily onslaught of people and objects if we couldn’t predict a lot about them and feel that we know who and what they are. But this natural and useful ability to see patterns of similarity has unfortunate consequences. It is offensive to reduce an individual to a category, and it is also misleading.²

How can we begin to explain the prevalence of stereotypes in our society? David Schoem, a sociology professor, points out:

The effort it takes for us to know so little about one another across racial and ethnic groups is truly remarkable. That we can live so closely together, that our lives can be so intertwined socially, economically, and politically, and that we can spend so many years of study in grade school and even in higher education and yet still manage to be ignorant of one another is clear testimony to the deep-seated roots of this human and national tragedy. What we do learn along the way is to place heavy reliance on stereotypes, gossip, rumor, and fear to shape our lack of knowledge.³

Schoem describes the situation found in Esperanza's story: the people in her neighborhood are unknown to others, just as she does not know those in "a neighborhood of another color." The title of this story, "Those Who Don't," accurately characterizes how ignorance and isolation opens the door for us to rely on "stereotypes, gossip and fear" as proxies for true understanding of individuals and groups. The success of that "reliance on stereotypes, gossip, rumor and fear" can be seen and heard in classrooms. We must help students examine their thoughts, feelings and experiences and then confront not only their own potential for passivity and complicity but also their courage to act in ways that promote understanding and compassion.

Related reading in

Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior

"Stereotyping," pp. 16–20

HOW can we help students engage with this material?

Duration: one lesson

Materials

Handout 1: "Those Who Don't" from *The House on Mango Street*

Handout 2: "Those Who Don't," Original Story

Opener

In Lesson 3, students focused on various factors that shape their own identities, especially where they are from (literally and figuratively). Yet, just as we define ourselves, we are also defined by others. To prepare students to think about how "others" can define who we are, often leading to damaging stereotypes, you can ask them to think about their own experience being defined by others. One way to do this is to ask students to review their "Where I'm From" poems from the previous class. Then ask them to imagine that someone from a different place was asked to write a poem about them. How might others see "where they are from" differently than they do? How might the poem be different? What might stay the same? Students can record answers in their journals, and volunteers can share responses. Students will come back to these ideas when they write their "Those Who Don't" stories at the end of this lesson.

Main Activities

Explain to students that they will be reading a story told by a girl their age, Esperanza, about how she thinks others view where she is from. Then distribute handout 1, "Those Who Don't," and ask a volunteer to read the excerpt aloud. You can give students a few minutes to record their reactions to this text in their journals. What does this story mean

to them? What message does it express? How do they connect with Esperanza's experience?

Another way students can process the ideas in this short reading is through a literacy strategy called "Three Levels of Questions." This strategy helps students comprehend and interpret material by requiring them to answer three types of questions about the text: factual, inferential, and universal.

- *Factual questions* (level one) can be answered explicitly by facts contained in the text or by information accessible in other resources;
- *Inferential questions* (level two) can be answered through analysis and interpretation of specific parts of the text; and,
- *Universal questions* (level three) are open-ended questions that go beyond the text. They are intended to provoke a discussion of an abstract idea or issue.

This is a useful literacy strategy to use throughout the unit, especially as students confront more challenging historical texts. This scaffolded approach provides an opportunity for students to master the basic ideas of a text so that they can apply this understanding and "evidence" to conversations about deeper abstract concepts or complex historical events. You can model "Three Levels of Questions" in this lesson by asking students to respond to the following questions individually in their journals or in small groups. The universal questions are effective prompts for a large class discussion.

Three levels of questions for "Those Who Don't"

Factual: According to Esperanza (the narrator of the piece), how do "Those who don't know any better" define the identities of the people in her neighborhood? How is this different than Esperanza's ideas about the people in her neighborhood?

Inferential: Who are "those who don't know any better"? What does the line "That's how it goes and goes" mean?

Universal: What are stereotypes? Why do people form stereotypes of "others"? When are stereotypes harmful? What prevents people from forming damaging stereotypes of others?

"Those Who Don't" introduces concepts that are important to understanding the historical case study, concepts such as stereotype, prejudice, and "other." To close the class discussion, you can ask students to suggest words that they think should be added to the word wall and/or the vocabulary sections of their notebooks. Then you can construct working definitions of these terms.

Follow-Through (in class or at home)

As a way to reflect on their own experiences being stereotyped and defined by others, students can write their own "Those who don't know" stories. These stories do not need to focus on neighborhoods or ethnic groups. Students can brainstorm the various groups to which they belong. They might list gender, religion, hobby, or school. Any of these groups could become the basis of a "Those who don't know" story. Students can write their stories in their journals or on Handout 2.

Students can also write a journal entry where they reflect on their experiences both as the target and the perpetrator of stereotypes. Students can respond to a prompt like this one in class or for homework: Identify a moment when you were the target of stereotyping. How were others defining you? How did this make you feel? In what ways, if any, did these stereotypes inflict harm? Then, identify a moment when you were the perpetrator of stereotyping. How were you defining others? In what ways, if any, might this stereotyping have inflicted harm? What might be done to prevent the spreading of harmful stereotypes?

Assessment(s)

Students will have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of stereotypes through their participation in the class discussion and through their journal writing. Students' original "Those who don't" story will reveal if they are able to recognize that how others define us and the groups to which we belong may be different than how we define ourselves. Students' work in this lesson should reveal an awareness of the fact that labeling others is a universal trait of human behavior, but that often these labels are based on false information. A sophisticated middle school understanding of stereotyping at this point in the unit would reveal that the labels ascribed to an entire group can never accurately represent all of the unique individuals who belong to that group.

Extensions

"The Bear That Wasn't" (pages 2–9 in the resource book) uses words and pictures to express how even as we struggle to define our unique identity, others attach labels to us that may be different than the ones we choose for ourselves. After reading this story, students can draw an identity chart for the Bear. Questions that might be used as prompts for journal writing or discussion include:

- What happened when the Bear was placed in a new culture? What happened to his identity? What is the relationship between culture and identity? How do the cultures we come from shape our identity? How do the cultures we come from shape how we view others—those within our culture and those outside our culture?
- How have others shaped your identity? How do you deal with it? Were you able to maintain your independence? How difficult was it to do so?
- What does the title "The Bear That Wasn't" mean? Why didn't the factory officials recognize the Bear for what he was? Why did it become harder and harder for him to maintain his identity as he moved through the bureaucracy of the factory? What is the author, Frank Tashlin, suggesting about the way a person's identity is defined by others?

Lesson 4: Handout 1

Those Who Don't

From *The House on Mango Street* (page 28) by Sandra Cisneros

Please visit this page to view Cisneros' reading: <http://www.filebox.vt.edu/users/sgerrol/main/My%20Name%20Imitation.pdf>

Notes

¹ Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 28.

² Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 16.

³ David Schoem, *Inside Separate Worlds: Life Stories of Young Blacks, Jews, and Latinos* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 3.

⁴ Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, 28.