

how-to guide to

# deconstructing stereotypes

MAKING  
CARING  
COMMON  
PROJECT



## Overview

Stereotypes and other biases can be ingrained in all of us—often without our knowledge—and are harmful. When we accept and respond to stereotypes, we risk making assumptions about people that can harm individuals or members of that group. Stereotypes are also harmful to people outside of the affected groups. For example, if everyone believed the stereotype that women are less skilled in science than men, both men and women would miss out on a generation of female scientists.

What do stereotypes look like? This is not as simple a question as it seems. Stereotypes involve associating a group with a general characteristic, like being good at math, being poor students, drinking too much, wearing certain kinds of clothes, being violent, and so on. People do not usually state a stereotype explicitly. For example, few people will say, “I associate blondes with being less intelligent.” But we might think that someone is harboring that stereotype if he assumes that a blonde that he knows nothing about is less intelligent.

This exercise will provide your students with the intellectual tools necessary to deconstruct stereotypes—to see what is wrong with them—when they encounter them in interactions with their peers, other people in their world, or in the media. This is intended as the first lesson in a series about stereotypes. Later lessons will teach students how even positive stereotypes can be harmful and how to intervene when encountering a stereotype.



### Objectives

- Make visible stereotypes that inhibit empathy for others
- Deconstruct stereotypes
- Understand how and why stereotypes are problematic



### Time Required

- Two 45 minute sessions (Parts I and II require 45 minutes; Parts III and IV require an additional 45 minute session. These need not occur on the same day.)
- Follow up, as needed



### Materials Required

- A space conducive to discussion (e.g. a classroom where chairs can be arranged into a circle)
- Whiteboard or poster paper and markers
- Student journals or paper for writing



### Advanced Preparation

- Read through the lesson plan fully before completing as a class
- Invite a school counselor to attend the session, as needed
- Gather information on common stereotypes (see Part 3 below)



### Other Considerations

- The discussion of stereotypes can be challenging content for young people. Consider inviting a school counselor to attend your class when stereotypes are discussed. Only move on to Parts III and IV of this exercise if students responsibly and maturely handle the conversation in Parts I and II.

## PART I: DISCUSSION ON SCOPE INDICATORS

(Parts I and II are intended to take approximately 45 minutes total)

Since we want to start with a stereotype that is not so “charged” and does not apply to anyone in your class, let’s start with “*Old people are set in their ways.*”

- Write on board: “*Old people are set in their ways.*”
- Prompt the class with the following question: “*Is there anything wrong with this statement?*”
  - Note: Generally some students will think there is something wrong with it, but likely some will not and will see the statement as a legitimate expression of fact.
- Discuss what students think is wrong and not wrong with the statement.
- Explain: “*Stereotypes are a complicated business. They have a lot of different aspects. We are going to start by focusing on one of those aspects: Is this stereotype true? And we are going to figure that out by looking at these 3 different statements, each of which looks like the stereotype.*” Write on board:
  1. **All** older people are set in their ways.
  2. **Most** older people are set in their ways.
  3. **Some** older people are set in their ways.
- Have students turn and talk with a partner or small group: “*What are the differences between these three statements on the board?*” As students talk, circulate amongst them. Press students in their thinking by asking questions like: “*How is it different to say that **most** older people are set in their ways and that **some** older people are set in their ways?*”
- Bring the class back together as a whole and have selected pairs or small groups share out their thinking about the differences in meaning of the 3 statements.
- Have students turn back to their partner or small group and discuss: “*When people say or think, ‘Older people are set in their ways,’ which of the three statements 1, 2, and 3 do you think they mean?*” Again, as students discuss, circulate among them. If there is disagreement within a group, prompt students to share their reasoning with one another.
- Bring the class back together as a whole and have students share their reasoning about which of the three statements they think is meant by the general statement “*Older people are set in their ways.*” Solidify students’ understanding and appreciation of the differences among the three statements and three scope indicators.

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Some stereotypes are much more damaging or emotionally upsetting than others. It is good to start with the more “neutral” or “benign” ones and work up to the upsetting ones. If possible it is also best to start with stereotypes of groups that none of your students are in. Understandably, students are more upset about stereotypes of their own groups than of other groups.

### SCOPE

The words in bold, “all”, “most”, and “some,” indicate the scope of the stereotype—that is, how much of the group the person thinking or saying the stereotype applies it to. These words are called scope indicators, and others include “many,” “on average,” and “a few.” This exercise is helpful because speakers are often not careful about whether they mean “all,” “most,” or “some” when they generalize about groups, and this is especially true with stereotypes.

## PART II: DISCUSSION → ARE STEREOTYPES EVER TRUE?

In pairs or small groups, have students discuss each of the three statements from the previous exercise, and focus on the question: Is that statement true?

1. **All** older people are set in their ways. *Is this true?*
  2. **Most** older people are set in their ways. *Is this true?*
  3. **Some** older people are set in their ways. *Is this true?*
- Bring the group back together and have pairs or small groups share their discussions. The goal is to come to some consensus about the difference between the statement, “**All** older people are set in their ways,” which is not true, and “**Some** older people are set in their ways,” which is true. There may be disagreement about “**Most**,” where it is most important to elicit from students their justification for thinking one or the other (that most older people are set in their ways, or that most older people are not set in their ways).
    - Note: If the students do not converge on the view that 1 is false and 3 is true, you may have to prompt them. Ask for examples (or share your own!) that disprove 1.
  - Once there is agreement that the statement, “**Some** older people are set in their ways” is true, ask the group whether people of some other age might also be set in their ways. Prompt with groups such as:
    - Middle aged people
    - People in their 30s
    - Young people
    - Etc.

In discussing these other groups, the class should see that the statement “**Some** \_\_\_\_\_ are set in their ways” could apply to almost any group.

**Discussion Take-a-ways:** The conversation will be more powerful if you can connect these understandings to things that students have said themselves in the discussion.

- You can always make a stereotypic statement true by making the scope indicator, whether spoken or not, “some.” However, in that case, the statement will no longer be a stereotype. The statement “Some older people are set in their ways” is a true generalization, but it also applies equally to every age-defined group.
- A stereotype has to be *distinctive* of a particular group, or close to being distinctive. If every group has people in it who are set in their ways, then it becomes misleading to make the statement: “Older people are set in their ways.”
- It makes a large difference, when making generalizations about a group, whether you mean “all,” or “most,” or “some” members of the group. When people use stereotypes or make stereotypical statements, they do not usually make their scope indicators explicit. Someone stating a stereotype does not usually say “All Mexicans are lazy.” They usually just say, “Mexicans are lazy.” But people sometimes get away with stereotyping precisely because they do not make the stereotype’s scope indicator clear.
- One way to confront stereotyping is by asking someone else to clarify what they mean—what their scope indicator is.

**Goal:** When students hear (or are tempted to say) a stereotype like “Older people are set in their ways,” you are trying to get them to be inclined to ask—either in their own mind or to someone else saying it—“Do you mean all older people, most older people, or some older people?”

Follow up: Give students silent time to reflect (e.g. in a journal) by thinking about other stereotypes that are not so “safe” as this one—for example ones that apply to groups they are in, or that people that they know are in—and how what they learned in this exercise applies to these other stereotypes.

Homework: Students have a week (or whatever period of time you feel is appropriate) to record two stereotypes that they encounter in their lives, including social or traditional media. Students will write down each stereotype and analyze it using what they have learned in this scope indicator exercise. Invite students to share any additional thoughts about the use of that stereotype.

Note: If you feel that the last two parts of this exercise got into unsafe territory (students were rude, offensive, or expressed discomfort), this will be the final element of the stereotype activity for now. If students appear to be handling this conversation well, move on to parts III and IV.

## **PARTS III AND IV**

(Parts III and IV are intended to take approximately 45 minutes total)

For parts III and IV of this lesson, you will essentially be going through the same steps you went through with the statement, “*Older people are set in their ways,*” but using first a racial or ethnic stereotype that does not apply to people in the class, and then a racial or ethnic stereotype that does apply to people in the class.

## **PART III: SHIFTING TO RACIAL AND ETHNIC STEREOTYPES**

You will now use the discussion of the “older people” stereotype in Parts I and II to build up to discussing ethnic and racial stereotypes. This is challenging territory, and you should work up to it by starting with a stereotype of an ethnic group that none of the students in the class are in. You can find ethnic stereotypes of different groups on the internet and you should pick ones that you think will work for your particular class.

Follow the steps outlined above using a racial or ethnic stereotype of a group that doesn’t include people in the class. For example,

1. Present the stereotype in its generalized form without a scope indicator (i.e. “*Koreans are Christian.*”) (Assuming that none of your students is Korean—otherwise choose another ethnic stereotype.)
2. In pairs or small groups, have students discuss whether this statement is problematic with respect to its scope indicators, or in other ways not related to scope indicators. Share out reflections in general discussion.
3. Rewrite the stereotype three different ways using the scope indicators “all,” “most,” and “some” (i.e. “**All** Koreans are Christian.” “**Most** Koreans are Christian.” “**Some** Koreans are Christian.”)
4. In pairs or small groups, have students discuss whether each of these statements is true and why, focusing on how the scope indicators do or do not change the interpretation of the statement. Share out reflections in general discussion.
5. Discuss which of the three scope indicators people think is generally meant by people when they use the generalized form of the stereotype.

In the discussion, emphasize that your students now have the tools to question and “deconstruct” stereotypes that other people say, that they hear and see in the media, and that they themselves sometimes say or are tempted to say.

## PART IV: STEREOTYPES FROM WITHIN THE CLASS

If you feel the class is ready to take the next step and discuss ethnic and racial stereotypes that apply to the students in the class, have students provide the stereotypes that you will deconstruct. Consider:

- Pulling from the earlier silent written exercise that the students generated in Part II.
- Asking students to write down stereotypes that they think other people hold of their own group (letting them choose which group and stereotypes they want to talk about).
- Asking students to write down stereotypes they think other people hold of students in groups other than their own group.

Once you have a list of candidate stereotypes, choose 1-2 stereotypes for the class to discuss and deconstruct together—without identifying which student suggested each stereotype. Pick stereotypes that would not identify which student in the class suggested that stereotype.

Start this discussion with a “positive” stereotype. Examples might be “*Blacks are good at basketball,*” and “*Asian American students are good at math.*” These stereotypes put something positive on the groups in question (in contrast to stereotypes like “*blacks are aggressive*” and “*Asian Americans are nerdy*”).

- Follow the steps outlined above, using a racial or ethnic stereotype of a group that *does* include people in the class.
- Ongoing follow up: Ask students to bring in stereotypes they hear or see in the world. In later classes, subject these to a similar analysis to help keep up the students’ skills at “stereotype deconstruction.” This reinforcing of the exercise should result both in students being more aware of stereotypes, and feeling more capable of taking them apart.

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