

San Jose State University  
SJSU ScholarWorks

---

Office of the Provost Scholarship

---

1-1-2001

# Playing “Sherlock Holmes”: Enhancing students’ understanding of prejudice and stereotyping

Ellen N. Junn

*California State University - Fullerton*, [ejunn@csudh.edu](mailto:ejunn@csudh.edu)


L. Grier

*California State University - Fullerton*

D. Behrens

*California State University - Fullerton*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/provost\\_schol](http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/provost_schol)

 Part of the [Cognitive Psychology Commons](#), and the [Developmental Psychology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Junn, Ellen N.; Grier, L.; and Behrens, D., "Playing “Sherlock Holmes”: Enhancing students’ understanding of prejudice and stereotyping" (2001). *Office of the Provost Scholarship*. Paper 4.

[http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/provost\\_schol/4](http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/provost_schol/4)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Office of the Provost Scholarship by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).

Playing "Sherlock Holmes": Enhancing Students' Understanding of Prejudice and Stereotyping  
with an Innovative Experiential Exercise

Ellen N. Junn

Leslie K. Grier

Debra P. Behrens

California State University, Fullerton

### Abstract

A very simple, innovative classroom exercise designed to heighten students' understanding of stereotyping and prejudice is described. Students' evaluation of the exercise was very positive. Students reported greater awareness and understanding of their own and others' stereotypes and prejudice and of the negative effects of prejudice, with females more than males reporting enhanced awareness of others' stereotyping. Students also rated the exercise as very enjoyable. There was a trend among Non-White more than White students to report that the exercise helped show them how to reduce stereotypes and more Non-White than White students offered solutions for reducing prejudice that involved actively reaching out and interacting with others different from themselves. Additional suggestions for instructors are discussed.

## Playing "Sherlock Holmes": Enhancing Students' Understanding of Prejudice and Stereotyping with an Innovative Experiential Exercise

As the number of ethnically diverse students enrolling in higher education increases, more educational reformers are sounding the call for changes in our course material and teaching methods to reflect greater inclusion of multicultural perspectives and issues (e.g., Banks, 1993; Border & Chism, 1992; Grant & Sleeter, 1989). Indeed, the American Psychological Association (1994) and others (e.g., Phinney, 1996; Sexton-Radek et al., 1995; Youngstrom, 1992) have advocated for heightened attention to ethnic and diversity issues both in terms of research and theory in the field, as well as in the classroom. Not surprisingly, instructors at many institutions have begun to respond to this call and are seeking effective ways to introduce ethnic issues to their students. For example, Division Two (Teaching of Psychology) created a special task force and published a manual for instructors interested in diversity issues (Bronstein & Quina, 1988). Similarly, publications on how to incorporate diversity issues into the classroom continues to grow (e.g., De Four & Paludi, 1991; Ford & Grossman, 1997; Junn, 1994a, 1994b; Mosley-Howard & Harris, 1993; Richard, 1996; Santos de Barona & Reid, 1992; Tatum, 1992; Weinstein & Obeir, 1992; Whitten, 1993).

While introducing students to research and theory on ethnic issues using lecture formats can promote students' cognitive learning, changes in the area of behavior or affective understanding may not be as easy to accomplish with more traditional teaching methods, especially for topics with previous strong links to personal and emotional experiences. Instructors who use active, experiential classroom exercises can stimulate students' motivation as well as promote both retention (Cooper & Mueck, 1990) and affective understanding (e.g., Enns, 1993; Cushner, 1987; Junn, 1994a; Tatum, 1992). Similarly, research by social psychologists

(Fazio & Zanna, 1981) indicates that direct active experience may be crucial for altering beliefs and attitudes. Information or class discussions involving volatile topics such as ethnicity often elicit powerful affective responses on the part of individuals, making innovative and sensitive means of introducing material on ethnicity of particular importance and benefit.

The purposes of the present innovative, experiential exercise included the following: (a) to enhance students' cognitive and affective awareness of stereotyping and prejudice; (b) to increase students' academic knowledge of research and theory in a section of the course focusing on the social psychological determinants of prejudice; (c) to provide a safe forum for engendering constructive discussion by encouraging all students to voice their opinions and ideas regarding diversity issues.

## Method

### Subjects

The participants were fifty-five students enrolled in two sections of an upper-division undergraduate course on middle childhood at a large, ethnically diverse, comprehensive state university located in southern California. Sixteen students (3 male, 52 female) identified themselves as White or Caucasian (29%) and 39 (71%) were from the following ethnic groups: 20 Asian, 13 Mexican American/Hispanic, 1 Native American, 2 multiracial and 3 students who only identified themselves as "American" and hence were not included in the quantitative analyses.

### Procedure

The instructor began the class by requesting that students stand and push all the desks to the perimeter of the room and remain standing as the instructions for the exercise were described. The students were told that they were to imagine themselves as “Sherlock Holmes” while the instructor read off a series of behavioral or psychological descriptions of people.

We developed a list of many interesting descriptions (see Figure 1 for the complete list of characteristics and instructor directions), but selected the following six descriptions for this exercise: (a) knows how to surf the internet and the world wide web; (b) likes to dance; (c) knows the function of a car’s pistons; (d) is a country western fan; (e) has taken a trip outside the country in the last year; and (f) has cried over a movie in the last two months

After hearing a description, students were told to look around at their classmates and select a person for whom they thought that description might apply by tapping their shoulder. They were also told they could not nominate themselves nor someone whom they already knew fit that description. Nominated students were instructed to move and stand in the center of the room. When nominations were completed, the instructor approached each nominee individually and asked the class which person nominated them and why. This was done for each student standing in the center of the circle. Then, as a group, nominees were asked to indicate if the description was true for them or not by stepping across an imaginary line--with one side signifying that the description was true for them and to the opposite side if it was false. After all the nominees were situated, the instructor asked the remaining un-nominated students to step forward if the description was true for them. This provided a visual representation of how accurate the nominations were. Students were asked to notice the composition of the nominated students as an entire group and reflect on and discuss what characteristics group members may appear to share as an indicator of factors that may have influenced their nominations.

When all six descriptions were completed, students returned to their desks and the instructor provided a mini-lecture and discussion outlining the social psychological principles pertaining to the causes and maintenance of prejudice. In this lecture, 4 major topics were discussed: (a) Basic concepts and terms (e.g., race, nationality, ethnicity, prejudice, stereotypes and social psychology) (b) social psychological causes and maintenance of prejudice, such as cognitive errors (e.g., law of small numbers, illusory correlation, confirmation biases), in-groups and out-groups, other social influencing factors (e.g., social class, education, dogmatism, economic factors, media and popular culture, the “just world” hypothesis); (c) reducing prejudice; and (d) problems and challenges with research and theory on diversity issues.

At the conclusion of the class, students were asked to complete a short, six-item questionnaire using a 6-point scale (1 = not at all, 6 = very much). The questions were as follows: (a) This experience made me aware that I hold ethnic or other stereotypes; (b) As a result of this experience, I am more aware of how prevalent stereotypes are in people’s perceptions of others; (c) I believe that any stereotypes I may hold still allow me to be objective in interpreting the activities and behaviors of others; (d) This experience helped show me how stereotypes impair relationships between individuals or groups; (e) This exercise helped show me what I can do to reduce prejudice; (f) Rate how much you enjoyed this exercise.

In addition, students were asked to provide written qualitative comments to three open-ended questions: (a) How do you think stereotypes influence relations between diverse groups? (b) Name 1 or 2 ways individuals can effectively deal with their prejudices; and (c) Any additional comments?

Four categories of graded responses to the question, “Name 1 or 2 ways individuals can effectively deal with their prejudices” were identified: (a) no response or don’t know; (b)

responses centered on an awareness of one's own prejudices--with the goal of focusing on self-awareness of prejudice or on recognizing prejudice; (c) responses that went beyond one's own prejudice with the goal of learning and "educating" oneself and working on one's own prejudice; and (d) responses focusing on the goal of reaching out and changing for the benefit of others via active and direct outreach and interaction with individuals different from oneself. Two of the 3 authors independently categorized each of the responses into 1 of the 4 categories outlined. Interrater reliability was 96% and mutual consensus was achieved after discussion for 2 entries.

### Results

Overall, as shown in Table 1, students rated this exercise very positively both in increasing their awareness of their own and others' stereotypes and in helping them experience how stereotyping impairs relationships between individuals or groups (see Table 1). In spite of being more aware of their own and others' prejudice, students were quite positive that their stereotypes still permitted them to be objective in interpreting the activities and behavior of others. As a group, students were still very favorable, but somewhat less certain that this exercise helped them show them what they could do to reduce prejudice.

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was performed on the six questions using ethnicity (i.e., White, Hispanic and Asian) as the independent measure. These results were not significant. Post hoc analysis revealed no significant group differences on any of the scaled questions. A second MANOVA was performed using a collapsed ethnic variable (i.e. Whites and Non Whites). These results were also not significant. Post hoc analyses on each question using Bonferroni  $t$  tests indicated ethnic group difference for the question asking students if this exercise helped them show them what they could do to reduce prejudice that approached statistical significance ( $t(1, 52) = 2.21, p < .03$ ). There was a trend among Non-White ( $M = 4.6$ ,



SD = 1.1) more than White (M = 3.9, SD = 1.4) students to report that the exercise helped show them how to reduce prejudice.

Two-tailed Spearman rho correlational analyses revealed only two significant relations: females more than males reported that the exercise made them more aware of the prevalence of others' stereotypes ( $r = .31, p < .02$ ). Non-White more than White students reported the exercise helped show them how to reduce stereotypes ( $r = .27, p < .05$ ). There were no other significant correlations by gender, ethnicity or age.

There were no significant differences between White and Non-White students in their spontaneous written responses to the open-ended question, "How do you think stereotypes influence relations between diverse groups?" Table 2, displays an interesting trend between White and Non-White students' written comments in response to the second, question, "Name 1 or 2 ways individuals can effectively deal with their prejudices." (see Table 2). A chi-square analysis for all the response types showed no significant overall significant effect across the four response types by ethnicity. However, separate chi-square analyses on each of the four response types showed that all students, whether White or Non-White, did not differ significantly in not offering or offering solutions for prejudice that focused on recognizing one's own prejudice or for solutions aimed at trying to educate themselves about prejudice. However, significantly more Non-White (47%) than White (25%) students offered active solutions centering on changing one's prejudices and behaviors for the benefit of others by reaching out directly and interacting with others different from themselves, ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 52) = 3.47, p = .06$ ).

### Discussion

Implementing this simple exercise in class had electrifying results. Within minutes of beginning the exercise, students engaged in spirited nominations and in thoughtful reflection and

lively debate. Both the exercise and the subsequent discussions had multiple positive effects. The majority of students reported clear awareness and understanding of the negative effects of stereotyping and prejudice, especially among the female students. Some typical students' responses to the question of how stereotyping influences relations among diverse groups included the following: "They keep people more isolated and stay [sic] within their groups, limit their social network." (Chinese, female, 26 years)<sup>1</sup>; "Stereotypes cause relations between diverse people to be impaired. Stereotypes cause people to associate with others differently." (Caucasian, female, 22 years); "It has a very negative influence between diverse groups. It makes it hard for diverse [groups] to talk, and help each other out." (Mexican-American, female, 22 years); "I've experience it and knowledge [sic]." (Vietnamese, male, 54 years); "It adds friction between groups that can lead to violence." (Irish and Portuguese, female, 21 years).

Moreover, students rated the exercise as very enjoyable and helpful in making them more aware of their own and others' prejudices. Many students experienced mirth, surprise and wonder at being nominated for various characteristics; for example, one student wrote the following, "I learned how I am perceived, in general, and that is always helpful. Furthermore, I learned what I was using to perceive others." (White, female, 31 years). Other common responses included: "I really liked this a lot and it made me think hard about how I judge people. I could assess a person's characteristics and personality purely based on their physical appearance and through this I realized that half of the time I was wrong." (White, female, 22 years); "I enjoyed this as an 'anglo.' I want to be more sensitive to my future minority student's [sic] needs and to be a good example." (European ancestry, 40 years, female).

Finally, though not significant, there was a trend among the Non-White, more so than White students who reported that the exercise was helpful in showing them how to reduce

stereotypes. All students, regardless of ethnicity were equally likely to either have no response or not know what to do in response to this question. Similarly, ethnicity did not matter in terms of students focusing on the need to understand or be aware of one's own prejudices; typical comments included, "Acknowledge it. Understand how you falsely interpret the person or situation." (Chinese, female, 26 years); "Obviously the Sherlock Holmes [exercise] changed my awareness, I am a lot more aware, I would like to change it and become less stereotypical, however, I'm not sure how. I guess awareness is the 1st step." (Caucasian, female, 21 years).

However, going beyond self-awareness or recognition of prejudice and stereotyping was reflected in students' need to educate themselves about other cultures. The following quote reveals that some students felt the need to change their prejudices in order to appear "unbiased"-- for example, "I feel all races are prejudice [sic] equally. I feel it makes relations tense not b/c [sic] people are prejudice [sic] but worrying [sic] that the other person will think they are prejudice [sic]." (White, female, 23 years). Far more common than this response is the sense that many students of all ethnicities to learn more and educate themselves, such as, "By becoming more educated and more aware of ones [sic] of own prejudices." (Mexican, female, 22 years); "By realizing that they have prejudices and what type of prejudices they have." (Caucasian, female, 22 years).

The last category of response to dealing with prejudice centered on one's willingness to change one's attitudes and behavior for the benefit of others in a way that actively reaches out to others different from oneself. Responses of this nature included: "Be open and willing to learn more about different cultures by talking to people and experiencing their culture." (Filipino, female, 22 years); "Try to understand others' situation. Try to be friendly. Try to know more about others." (Korean, female, 24 years).

Instructors who wish to implement this exercise should consider a number of factors and caveats. First, it is undeniable that this study involved a small sample size of students at a comprehensive institution within a highly diverse student body in an urban setting. Nonetheless, this exercise is generic enough to be both very effective and evocative with audiences of all types, regardless of background. Second, the instructor ideally should be both relatively comfortable and familiar with the research and theory on ethnic diversity issues. Third, we deliberately chose a list of characteristics that were relatively neutral, or at worst, represented slight personal quirks, rather than full-blown, negative ethnic stereotypes with the intention of not alarming or inflaming students to racial or ethnic issues from the outset. Though we have never had any serious incident of student discomfort with the exercise, as the instructor, you should pay attention for signs of nonverbal or verbal discomfort and raise and discuss these issues in a frank and appropriate manner.

Some additional suggestions for instructors include the following: (a) assume an open, respectful and attentive posture and demeanor at all times and maintain good eye contact and an atmosphere of goodwill and humor during the exercise and discussion; (b) participate fully in the exercise by including yourself as a potential nominee as well. Research (e.g., Scollon, 1981) indicates that instructors who engage in moderate, appropriate levels of personal self-disclosure are more effective with students when addressing ethnic issues; (c) an unanticipated benefit of this exercise is that it also serves as an excellent ice breaker for building a sense of community among students in a class and therefore, may be more effective to implement earlier in the course, before students become more familiar with each other; (d) additional assignments for students might include asking students both before and after the exercise, to respond anonymously to the question of how prejudiced they think they are for comparison purposes. As

a follow-up, require students to complete a short reaction paper integrating their personal reactions with the research and theory on stereotyping and prejudice and discuss how this learning might influence their future actions; and (e) given the results from this study, it may be wise to consider additional exercises or activities that would provide students of different ethnic backgrounds with different activities that would support students in generating specific strategies on how to reduce stereotypes.

In sum, students found the exercise helpful in terms of increasing their awareness and understanding of the dynamics involved in stereotyping and prejudice. In general, the comments of White students emphasized their enhanced awareness of stereotyping and the need for more education, while ethnic minority students emphasized more specific actions and behaviors that involved direct contact and interaction with those different from themselves as a means of circumventing stereotyping and prejudice. The responses and written comments of students to this exercise suggest that awareness and understanding of prejudice and behavior was a meaningful experience for all.

## References

- Banks, J. A. (1993). The canon debate, knowledge construction, and multicultural education. Educational Researcher, *22*(5), 4-14.
- Border, L. L. B., & Chism, N. V. N. (Eds.). (1992). New directions for teaching and learning: Teaching for diversity (No. 49). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bronstein, P., & Quina, K. (Eds.). (1988). Teaching a psychology of people: Resources for gender and sociocultural awareness. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Cooper, J. & Mueck, R. (1990). Student involvement in learning: Cooperative learning and college instruction. Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, *1*, 68-77.
- Cushner, K. H. (1987). Teaching cross-cultural psychology: Providing the missing link. Teaching of Psychology, *14*, 220-224.
- DeFour, D. C., & Paludi, M. A. (1991). Integrating scholarship on ethnicity into the psychology of women course. Teaching of Psychology, *18*, 85-90.
- Enns, C. Z. (1993). Integrating separate and connected knowing: The experiential learning model. Teaching of Psychology, *20*, 7-12.
- Fazio, R. H., and M. P. Zanna (1981). Direct experience and attitude-behavior consistency. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.) Advances in experimental social psychology: Vol. 14, (pp. 123-140). New York: Academic Press.
- Ford, T. E., Grossman, R. W., & Jordan, E. A. (1997). Teaching about unintentional racism in introductory psychology. Teaching of Psychology, *24*, 186-188.
- Grant, C. A., & Sleeter, C. E. (1989). Turning on learning: Five approaches for multicultural teaching plans for race, class, gender, and disability. Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Junn, E. (1994a). Experiential Approaches to Enhancing Cultural Awareness. In D. Halpern and Associates (Eds.). Changing college classrooms: New teaching and learning strategies for an increasingly complex world (pp. 128-164). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Junn, E. (1994b). "The Party": Role Playing to Enhance Multicultural Understanding. College Teaching, 42(30), 109-110.

Mosley-Howard, G. S., & Harris, Y. R. (1993). Teaching a course in African-American Psychology. Teaching of Psychology, 20, 170-172.

Phinney, J. S. (1996). When we talk about American ethnic groups, what do we mean? American Psychologist, 51, 918-927.

Richard, H. W. (1996). Filmed in black and white: Teaching the concept of racial identity at a predominantly White university. Teaching of Psychology, 23, 159-161.

Santos de Barona, M., & Reid, P. T. (1992). Ethnic issues in teaching the psychology of women. Teaching of Psychology, 19, 96-99.

Sexton-Radek, K., Lundquist, A., Richard, H., Simoni, J., Yescavage, K., & Behling, C. (1995, August). Embraced by the light of diversity. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York.

Tatum, B. D. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. Harvard Educational Review, 62, 1-24.

Weinstein, G., & Obear, K. (1992). Bias issues in the classroom: Encounters with the teaching self. In M. Adams (Ed.), Promoting diversity in college classrooms: Innovative responses for the curriculum, faculty, and instructors (pp. 39-50). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Whitten, L. A. (1993). Infusing Black psychology into the introductory psychology course. Teaching of Psychology, 20, 13-21.

Youngstrom, N. (1992, February). Adapt to diversity or risk irrelevance, field warned.

APA Monitor, p. 44.



### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Students self-identified and labeled their own ethnicity, gender and age. Their self-identification is recorded here as they reported it.

Table 1

Student Ratings on Questionnaire Items

Question Item	White (n = 16)	Non- White (n = 36)	Mean (N=52)	Std Dev
This experience made me aware that I hold ethnic or other stereotypes.	4.8	4.4	4.5	1.3
As a results of this experience, I am more aware of how prevalent stereotypes are in people's perceptions of others.	4.9	5.1	5.1	1.0
I believe that any stereotypes I may hold still 1.3 allow me to be objective in interpreting the activities and behaviors of others.		3.9	4.3	4.2
This experience helped should me how stereotypes impair relationships between individuals or groups.	4.8	4.9	4.9	1.1
This exercise helped show me what I could do to reduce prejudice.	3.9	4.6*	4.4	1.2
Rate how much you enjoyed this exercise.	5.2	5.4	5.3	0.9

Note. Values were 1 = not at all , 6 = very much

\*  $p < .03$ .

Table 2

Number and Percentage of White and Non-White Students' Responding to "How to Effectively Deal with Prejudice?"

Response Type	White (%) (n = 16)	Non-White(%) (n = 36)	Mean Percent (N=52)
No response or don't know	5 (31%)	10 (28%)	29%
Awareness and recognition of one's own prejudices	3 (19%)	3 (8%)	12%
Learning and "educating" oneself about own prejudice	4 (25%)	4 (11%)	19%
Changing one's prejudices and behaviors for the benefit of others via direct outreach and interaction with individuals different from oneself	4 (25%)	19 (53%)*	40%

\* $p < .06$ .

Figure 1

Instructor Sheet with Instructions and List of CharacteristicsRules

- After hearing the description, look around the room and pick someone you think fits the description and go up and tap them on the shoulder.
- You cannot nominate someone you already know fits the description; you cannot nominate yourself. One person may be nominated by multiple students.
- Nominated persons must come forward and stand in the center of the circle.
- After all nominees have been selected, I will ask who nominated each student in the center and why the nominator selected them.
- When all the nominees have been identified, I will ask that they step to the right side of an imaginary line if the description is true for them, and to the left side if false.
- Next, all in the audience will be asked to raise their hands or step forward if the description is true of them.

Descriptions

- has taken a trip outside the country in the last year
- secretly watches soap operas on a regular basis
- knows the function of a car's pistons
- knows how to operate a sewing machine
- knows a second language other than English (at least semi-fluent)
- know the difference between a linebacker, tight end and safety
- writes poetry
- could name the last 12 U.S. presidents
- has cried over a movie in the last 6 months
- enjoys hunting animals or game
- knows the difference between a Chardonnay, Riesling and Merlot
- prefers hotdogs over gourmet food
- probably is a vegetarian
- is a feminist
- would someday like to have a family of 5 or more children
- is a Country Western music lover
- likes to dance
- drives a foreign-made car
- knows how to play a musical instrument
- hates to shop
- is too fearful of spiders/bugs to catch them when found in one's home
- balances their checkbook perfectly each month
- doesn't mind a little dirt in the bathroom or kitchen
- knows how to surf the internet and the WWW
- has sung while in the shower
- has had the experience of falling in love