Name Calling, Racial Joking, and Prejudice Among Students

David Aveline
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Name Calling, Racial Joking, and Prejudice Among Students

by

David Aveline

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Introduction

Antidiscrimination laws and diversity awareness programs are society’s attempt to move forward from a past of racism, sexism, and other negative -isms. We have made great strides in our treatment of immigrants, Native Americans, the disabled, and lesbians and gay men. Many schools now include diversity awareness programs in their curricula to foster a greater understanding of those who are different. The intended result of such efforts is a society in which difference is understood and tolerated, rather than scorned and rejected. But are we close to such a society just yet? We may have succeeded in reducing overt discrimination (an action) by passing laws against it, but prejudice (a feeling) is more difficult to eradicate and stubbornly remains below the surface. African Americans still report being called names or mistreated, women often are denigrated by men, gay men and lesbians still must be wary of hostility or violent intentions toward them, and people with disabilities often are thought of as lesser people.

Some scholars believe that prejudice is an unwanted byproduct of people’s natural inclination to make sense
of the world. According to Gordon Allport, who wrote *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), it is human nature to classify and categorize things, ideas, and other individuals we encounter in the world. Whether our categories are "liberal ideas," "intelligent people," "bad-tasting food," or "dangerous places," we do this naturally in order to navigate our world. We do not look at each thing anew each time we encounter it; we relate to it on the basis of its similarities to things we have encountered or heard of before. We expect these things to have those similarities based on their appearance and readily define them as such until proven otherwise. If this is true, then prejudice toward groups of people is an easy step away.

Many expectations we have of other people are valid because we *do* have sufficient information to go by. We might expect an Israeli to speak Hebrew because it is the language of his or her native country. We also might expect citizens of Nigeria to have dark skin because Nigeria is a central African country. Or we might expect people coming out of a Catholic church on Sunday after mass to be Catholic. Such expectations are harmless enough. We may encounter many exceptions to them, but we are willing to acknowledge them.

Allport believes that prejudice comes about when we assign qualities to groups of people without sufficient evidence. For example, Germans might be thought of as rude because of the bad behavior of a few individuals during a vacation in Berlin. Once such inferences are made, and once they are followed by a stubborn refusal to correct them in the face of other evidence, prejudice against groups of people results. Thus prejudice begins
with inferences made on sketchy premises and persists when those premises take root.

In this fastback, I use student anecdotes collected from freshman and sophomore college classrooms in two states to look at the circumstances of name calling and racial joking and the motivations of those who do so. I discuss how, when, and why name calling and racial joking occur; how name calling and racial joking affect minorities; and sociological perspectives of name calling and racial joking. Finally, I include specific recommendations on how to reduce this behavior.
Name Calling, Racial Joking, and Bullying

Name calling and racial (or other prejudicial) joking are two likely indicators of prejudice, and bullying is a way of playing that prejudice out. Virtually everyone knows the old “sticks and stones” ditty. We would say it with hands on hips to our tormentors in grammar schools and on playgrounds, letting them know that their insults have no effect. If that didn’t work, then we said, “I am rubber, you are glue. Everything you say bounces off me and sticks to you.” However, parents and educators have come to realize that bullying behavior is more serious than simple teasing and that names do indeed hurt. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that almost 30% of school-age youth were involved in moderate to frequent bullying behavior, either as victims, perpetrators, or both (Nansel et al. 2001). Bullying begins in grammar school, becomes most frequent in middle school, and persists into high school. Boys are more likely to torment others physically, but both boys and girls are involved in verbal bullying. Victims of bullying are more likely to experience loneliness and isolation, as well as lower grades.
“Sticks and stones” hurt children physically, and these wounds will heal. Names often have an effect beyond their immediate result, lingering within one’s self-image well into adulthood. Sticks and stones was a retort aimed at tormentors in a world that did not acknowledge the effect of its own fear of newly arrived immigrants, homophobia, and racism. For minorities, the hurt of sticks and stones often paled when compared to the lasting effect of derogatory names.

While there are more generic epithets in common usage that identify no group of people in particular (“jerk,” for instance), others either directly make reference to race, nationality, or another identifier, or do so through its origin. “Poor white trash” is commonly used in the United States to denote someone of lower socioeconomic background. However, few users stop to think that if one qualifies these people as “white,” then it assumes that all non-white people are already trash. Few people also seem to know or stop to think of the origin of “cracker” (white overseers who cracked the whip on African Americans during slavery), “to gyp someone” (referring to gypsies), or to “jew someone down” (an anti-Semitic expression). Some groups of people have become powerful enough to relegate jokes at their expense or words against them as obscenities; yet others, such as gay men and lesbians, have had little choice but to endure joking and name calling for fear of exposure or repercussions. Consequently, not only are racial joking and name calling common in all segments of society, but some names are used openly while others are used only among groups of like-minded people.
Investigating the Problems

While a sociologist at a Midwestern college, I became interested in racial joking and name calling quite by accident when I asked my students to call out derogatory names toward minorities they had heard of so that we could look at their origins and their effect. I was surprised that they called out epithets for poor rural whites almost cheerfully, while they mentioned with trepidation those for African Americans. Perhaps some prejudices were thought to be okay, I thought, while others were taboo. I also was surprised at the great variety of derogatory names the students knew for the minority groups we discussed, and I always learned one or two new ones with each class. My purpose was to explore the historical origins and nature of these names so as to make the students aware of some of the assumptions behind prejudice. But once I had done this a few times, I decided to go further and look at how, when, and why such words were used.

I designed a class exercise as follows. First, after a brief introduction to name calling, I wrote the names of five minority groups on the board — poor rural whites, African Americans, gay men and lesbians, people with disabilities, and women. I then invited my students to call out names they knew, and I wrote them under each heading. Once lists of 10 to 12 names for each minority were generated, I asked the students to look at them as a whole to see if they could spot any common themes in name calling. “What is it that we focus on when we want to put someone down?” I asked. Students noticed many names pertaining to location or origin: “trailer
trash," "porch monkey," "spear-chucker." Others saw perceived appearance: "redneck," "monkey," "boogie lips." Some also noticed perceived behavior: "carpet muncher," "slut," "inbreeder." Usually they did not know the historical origins of the names, and we discussed them as a class.

Next I asked them to take a piece of paper and write anonymously about either a time when they used any of the names or made jokes about minorities or when any names had been used against them. The results were astounding. Most students had used names or told racial jokes at some point in their lives, and many said that they still did. Ironically, despite this frequent use, the students did not appear to define themselves as prejudiced toward any minority. They simply used the names or told jokes in various contexts that somehow precluded a self-definition of racism, homophobia, or other. Prejudiced behavior seemed to exist commonly among the students, but few who engaged in these activities defined themselves as prejudiced individuals.
Among Friends: How and Why Name Calling and Racial Joking Occur

Name calling and racial joking have long been defined as indicators of prejudice. Those who engage in such behavior likely hold such attitudes, even if they are unaware of them. However, many students who do call others names or tell jokes at the expense of minorities do not see things that way. Instead, they define their actions in such ways as to neutralize or side-step defining themselves as racists, homophobes, or otherwise. Because few people feel good about seeing themselves in such a light, neutralizing self-definitions allows them to continue prejudiced behavior.

From Public to Private Prejudice

One thing that Allport observes in *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) is that there is no prejudice where none is defined. If the vast majority of people hold negative views toward a particular minority, then the remaining few who take issue with those views are dismissed as radical or ignorant. In other words, if virtually everyone dislikes a certain group, then no one sees themselves as prejudiced. This was true of America in its recent past.
In post-Civil War America, whites who told anti-black jokes did so without expecting surprise, abhorrence, or negative judgment. Americans could behave similarly toward Polish, Jewish, Irish, and Italian immigrants in the first decades of the 20th century. Anyone in the majority during these times could talk to each other safely about the “damned niggers,” “dirty Mexicans,” or the “wops,” “micks,” and “chinks” who immigrated through Ellis Island or San Francisco.

Today things have changed. The civil rights movement has led to affirmative action efforts, laws against discrimination on the basis of race or color, and wide acknowledgement of past injustices. Gay rights struggles have led to individuals living openly as gay men and lesbians, and feminism has brought great strides toward equality of the sexes. We also recognize the value and dignity of people with disabilities and other formerly disenfranchised groups. Now, if one tells anti-black jokes, uses the word “nigger,” denigrates women, or rails against gay men, he or she is likely to draw surprise and be thought of as racist, sexist, or homophobic. Views formerly considered popular have been redefined as prejudiced and therefore are scorned.

But is mere scorn or unpopularity enough to eradicate such views? While negative reactions from peers certainly help to make some people examine their views and perhaps change them, such reactions seem to have little effect on others. Following is what some students had to say about various minorities:

“I’m not prejudiced toward blacks or Hispanics. They have a right to live like everyone else. But homo-
sexuality is another thing. I can’t stand what they do. They make me sick.”

“Sometimes Mexicans deserve what they get. They are always acting horny and leering at you.”

“Now we have equal opportunity. Still, you see blacks not bothering to finish high school. There are many exceptions of course, but a lot of them are just niggers.”

The first student admitted dislike of gay men based on a personal aversion, the second made a generalization about an entire group from her own personal experience, and the third seemed unaware that discrimination toward African Americans continues to block access to education and better-paying jobs. These students were unlikely to admit their views publicly, but they were willing to do so privately. However, such views were exceptions. The majority of students appeared to define themselves as not prejudiced and said that ordinarily they would not try to offend members of other groups. Many even expressed abhorrence to such views, as the next students indicate:

“Epithets toward minorities offend me. I’ve heard them all my life in the neighborhood I grew up in, but I quickly learned never to use them. Now, when I hear someone say ‘nigger,’ I stare at them.”

“I’m prejudiced against prejudiced people. I very much dislike it when someone puts someone down just because of the group they belong to. It’s hard enough living in this world without people who look at you because of what you are and not who you are.”
Greater awareness of diversity certainly has had an effect on these students’ thinking. However, these views were far outnumbered by a disturbing trend of private prejudiced behavior. Here is what other students had to say:

“I think a lot of these words can be used among friends [who will] not take offense at them. I joke about blacks and gays with my friends all the time. There’s no harm in it really.”

“You can use these words jokingly with your friends and [they] know how to take it.”

“To be honest, my friends and I will tell racist jokes or religious jokes. Also, my best friends and I will call each other slut and whore or names like that. Most of the time I do not get offended at all by these words because they are out of fun. Although I never call a specific person a negative thing.”

“There are so many people taking people to court for these words. Most of them I don’t mind, but I wouldn’t use them unless I’m with my friends.”

One student even went so far as to say that she frequently used the word “nigger” among her friends but would never think of using it openly toward an African-American person. This, she added, would be rude and offensive. This is curious behavior. If people would not use derogatory names or tell racist or other derogatory jokes in public, why would they do so in private? This would appear hypocritical, reserving one set of behaviors for the general public and another away from public view. Two possible answers arise. First, those
who use derogatory terms or tell racist jokes are indeed prejudiced but recognize the unpopularity of their views. Their private spheres therefore become outlets for their real selves. The other possibility is that they honestly do not see themselves as prejudiced but still act in prejudiced ways. They might instead see themselves as lampooning prejudiced behavior or perhaps laughing at jokes only for their humor and not their actual meaning. Quite a few students appeared to see themselves in this way, as the next quote exemplifies:

"I've got nothing against any group of people. They are as good as anyone else and I don't like prejudice. But these jokes are funny. My friends and I tell them to each other all the time."

In either case, they have chosen "safe zones" for their behavior. Some understand their own prejudices and so espouse their views only among those who might share them. Others do not see their words as prejudiced per se but believe the words might be interpreted as prejudiced and so use them only among those who would not label them as bigots. The first case is well known and still dangerous. Secret prejudice may find its way into decisions that affect who is hired for jobs, who gets awards for professional merit, or even who gets better grades in school. Bigotry in the closet is as dangerous as bigotry in the open. The second case is equally alarming. Students may not define themselves as bigots, nor may the friends who hear their words. But this is still a dissemination of views that have long affected the lives of minorities everywhere and may still do so in terms
of solidifying attitudes through the perpetuation of prejudiced behavior.

It is not my purpose to label anyone a bigot. However, name calling and racial joking, even for the sake of humor, can be an indicator of underlying attitudes of which students may be unaware. It also is possible that repetition of prejudiced language may lead to attitudes or behaviors that adversely affect minority persons.

Fighting Words

I posed the following question to my students: “You drive to a shopping mall one afternoon and are about to take a parking spot when an African-American driver zooms in quickly and beats you to the parking spot—even though he obviously knows your intentions. You loudly call him a ‘damned nigger.’ Are you a racist?” There was silence for a few seconds, and then voices began to chime in.

“Not really,” said one student. “He made you mad and you’re just taking a cheap shot at him. That’s all.”

“But that’s the first thing you thought of,” another student said. “Why would his race immediately pop into your head if you weren’t prejudiced?”

“Because you know it will really get to him,” a third said. “You want to make him feel low for what he did, and that is a good way to do it.”

The discussion went on for a while, both sides offering various insights. Finally, they agreed to disagree. However, they did agree on one thing: If such a situation were to happen, even if the intention would be to
make someone angry, that person’s race, ethnicity, disability, or perhaps even sexual orientation would be the first thing that came to mind. People in such a situation might have chosen “jerk,” “idiot,” or another more general insult if they felt so inclined; but they immediately zeroed in on race, ethnicity, or otherwise. Would the students be more frank in their anonymous writings? They still were divided on whether this situation indicates actual prejudice:

“I never use those words. I don’t hold any bad feelings to any people. But when a guy pisses me off, I’m going to try to get him mad, and that is a good way to do it.”

“Hey, if there’s a word available that can get right under someone’s skin and that’s what you want to do, I say go for it.”

“Why would you even think of saying such a thing. If someone does something wrong, it already reflects on him that he is a bad person. You stoop to his level just by saying those kinds of things.”

The first two students saw name calling as an effective weapon and felt justified in using it. There was no indication that they saw themselves as racists. However, another was more introspective:

“Once I went to a grocery store to buy something and got into an argument with an Indian guy who worked there. We started yelling, and things got heated up a lot. I called him a towel head. I don’t know why I did that. It came to mind. I was sorry afterward.”
This student spoke in anger, but he later looked at his actions and regretted them. Perhaps he saw that referring to someone’s ethnicity in anger indicated an underlying sentiment that he did not like in himself. If this is true, then a valuable lesson came from an unpleasant incident.

An even more accurate indication that name calling in anger indicates underlying prejudice comes from those students who mutter names under their breath. The following exemplify:

“If someone cuts me off on the highway, I’ll say ‘nigger’ or ‘stupid fag.’ I only say those things because I’m angry. I don’t mean anything by it.”

“I’ve called someone a ‘nigger’ or ‘trailer trash’ under my breath. But I would never say it to someone’s face. That would be stooping to their level.”

“Once a guy was rude to me in a restaurant. I said ‘faggot’ in a low voice. He turned around and looked. I was scared and hoped he didn’t hear me.”

This is a different twist. Students admitted saying these things in anger. But they did so in ways so that others would not hear. Their intentions were not to make the other person angry, only to release their own anger. They did so by referring to the other person’s race or perceived sexual orientation. It is surprising that they made the distinction between private muttering and public insults, suggesting that the latter is racist while the former is not. On the contrary, with the defense of making someone angry out of the picture, what is left
is a contempt for people because of the groups to which they belong, rather than for the individuals’ actions.

Even if one’s intentions are to make someone angry, immediately defaulting to racial or other epithets indicates that such contempt is not far below the surface. If an individual does do something unjust or callous, then many of us might speak up. Angry words may be exchanged. But when epithets arise, they indicate underlying feelings not merely about an individual, but about the group to which they belong.

In-Group and Out-Group Usage

Why is it, white students ask, that they hear African Americans referring to each other as “niggers” in spite of the stigma of the word. If one black person refers to another affectionately as “ma nigga,” this is not perceived as racist. If a white person does the same, however, it causes a stir. Several students said they went with the flow in such situations, and some were admonished for doing so:

“I was with my black friend and another black girl came and said, ‘hey, nigga.’ She said, ‘hey back, nigga.’ It was nigga this and nigga that; and I just said, ‘so what’s up, niggas?’ They looked at me like I was a total racist. I didn’t understand.”

“I was sitting in the cafeteria and heard these black people call each other niggers. Why did they do this? I know if I said it, I’d get punched.”

This is not easy to answer. Consider the popular gay pride chant: “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it,”
the academic sub-discipline of "queer theory," or the activist gay group Queer Nation. In both situations, whether black or gay, we have minority-group members referring to themselves with the same language that others use to degrade them. Indeed, "whassup, nigga" has become a form of greeting among many younger African Americans; and "queer" has become a way of describing oneself for many gay men. Both uses are seen as insults when they issue from the lips of non-African Americans or heterosexuals.

In sociological terms, this is called "in-group/out-group" usage. When members of the in-group use the name, it is understood by other members as not degrading, while it might be if used by members of the out-group. Whites, the out-group in the case of "nigger," have always used "nigger" as a putdown and are seen by the in-group as unable to use it in any other way. Whites have not participated in the black experience and thus can never use the term as a reference among equals. Similarly, heterosexuals are outside the gay experience and so cannot use the word "queer," in the view of the gay in-group, in any way other than as an insult.

Still, why would African Americans or gay men greet each other with the names that have been used against them? Haven't they learned that "nigger" and "queer" are insulting and degrading? The answer lies in the evolving meaning of words. Black rap artists, for example, do not intend to insult other African Americans in their lyrics. Rather, they use the word "nigga" defiantly. Queer Nation adopted its name as an activist
group in part to raise awareness and to defy its opponents. In both cases, there is an effort to recapture words used against them and to redefine them. As one gay student explained to me, “If someone says, ‘Hey, queer!’ I turn around and say, ‘Damned right and proud of it!’” The result, he added, is that it confuses the person who intended to insult him by apparently doing the opposite. In effect, he has reclaimed the word “queer” and turned it to his advantage.

This is not to say that every African American or gay or lesbian person agrees with such behavior. Many blacks, including some students who wrote down their thoughts anonymously, would be equally insulted whether “nigger” came from a white person or black person. The same may be said for many gay men and lesbians about the word “queer.” Both words have become so hateful that some individuals object to this trend. As a result, there is vigorous debate over recapturing certain language and its uses.
Effects of Name Calling and Racial Joking

To say that name calling and racial joking often hurt others seems unnecessary. African Americans, gay men and lesbians, Jews, overweight people, and the disabled have told stories for decades of the way they felt when they encountered bullying and ignorance, whether in school or beyond. The effect of the names and jokes at their expense slowly ate away at their self-images and left scars well beyond the immediate anger, hurt, or sadness that they felt. Nevertheless, these stories must still be told. Although some students said they were lucky enough never to have encountered name calling or insults because of their minority status, other students told stories of sad encounters that they never forgot. Following are just a few examples.

Hurt

"When I was in high school, people used to make fun of me because they thought I was gay. I'm not gay, but I know how many of them must have felt. I felt the same kind of hurt that they must have felt."
“I am a large woman, and I am satisfied with the way I look. But it took me years to come to this self-image. When I was in school, kids called me ‘tubbo,’ ‘lard ass,’ and ‘fat cow.’ It affected me so much that I never went out on weekends. I remember the pain I felt as a girl because of the way I was treated.”

“Once somebody my friend knew called me a stupid nigger. I stared in disbelief. I couldn’t believe that she would call me this. It bothered me for days. I felt so low and dirty.”

“The first time someone called me a nigger was when I was a young girl in the South. I went into a store to buy something for my mother; and one of the customers said, ‘Well, a little nigger came in.’ He was a grown man and I was only a child. I was scared and ran out. Later, when I learned what he meant by that word, I was hurt.”

“I am gay and that’s my business. I don’t tell everyone. Only those who I think will be okay with it. When I was in school I was called ‘queer’ and ‘faggot.’ Maybe I’d be more open about it now if I didn’t have those experiences.”

“I am a person with a learning disability. All my life people have called me stupid or a retard. It took me a long time to realize that I am just as good as anyone else, sometimes even better. Now I am in college and my grades are high. But I still remember those times in school.”

“When you call someone names, it hurts them. It hurts me. I am a human being, and I don’t deserve to be called names.”
Anger

“I am an African-American woman who has been called a nigger a few times in my life. The first time it happened, I was hurt. The second time, I just stared at the guy. The third time, I started yelling. How dare someone characterize me that way just because of the color of my skin!”

“I get so mad when guys call other girls sluts. They can do what they like, and no one puts them down for it. Just because I am a woman who does the same thing, I get labeled ‘slut,’ ‘tramp,’ or ‘whore.’”

“When I was in school, people knew I was gay. I lived with it and minded my own business. One day this guy started shoving me and calling me a faggot. I punched him so hard he fell to the ground. I told him to tell his friends a queer beat him up.”

“I don’t know the circumstances, but I was in a store a long while ago. I overheard two women laughing and saying, ‘now that’s a nigger for you.’ I walked away and took the bus home. For days I couldn’t get it out of my mind. How could someone be that cruel? I was angry at them and angry at myself for not standing up to them.”

“I once walked up on some white girls who were using the word ‘nigger.’ I said, ‘who’s a nigger?’ They looked at me and said, ‘oh, we didn’t mean you.’ I told them they did mean me and never to use that word again. They just didn’t get it.”

Defense

“I’ve often heard those words in my neighborhood. Sometimes I even hear the word ‘nigger.’ But I almost
laugh when I hear them say it. If they are using those words, then it reflects on them, not me. I am a proud woman of African heritage; and they degrade themselves, not me.”

“I am a fat woman. I can be mean as I want to be, and nobody messes with me now. If people don’t want to be around me because I’m fat, then I don’t care a damn. They are small-minded people who only want the superficial. I am real, and I am worth the effort.”

These students give perspectives that non-minorities can only imagine. Few whites can imagine what it is like to face either open hostility or negative assumptions about them because of the color of their skin. Heterosexuals cannot imagine what it must be to be 15 years old, gay, and living in fear of exposure or hostility in high school. Many people also do not know what it must feel like to be rejected or socially ignored because they are overweight, in a wheel chair, or from the poor side of town. Members of the majority in the United States, Canada, and much of Europe — whether white, heterosexual, or Christian — are not immune to insults. However, when names are hurled at them, the words often refer to minorities. High school students often say, “That’s so gay” or “Don’t be gay.” Other people have said such things as “Only a nigger would do that” or “That’s just too nigger for me.” Still others have called their friends “retards” or “special eds” when they perceive them to be stupid. These phrases are the perpetuation of a feeling that some people have more worth than others. As the stories above illustrate, such behavior, whether overt or subtle, hurts, angers, and saddens.
Sociological Perspectives

The technical term for names used against racial or ethnic groups is **ethnophaulisms**. They have been used by American whites against African Americans, by the British against the Irish, by the Québécois against English Quebecers, New Zealand whites against Maories, and presumably by most groups who are different from those nearby. Ethnophaulisms arise when physical or cultural differences become most apparent. Although there is nothing wrong with ethnic, national, or cultural pride, this pride may easily cross the line to feelings of superiority. When this happens, ethnophaulisms arise and serve to affirm such feelings. Ethnophaulisms, not surprisingly, are most likely to arise during times of strife between groups. Thus the Vietnam War popularized the word "gook" for an Asian person; "wop" came into use when large numbers of Italians immigrated to the United States; and "caffer" was a term used for South African blacks during apartheid.

Because the principles are the same, the meaning of ethnophaulisms can be extended beyond racial or ethnic denigration to mean any derogatory name against any minority — gay men and lesbians, people with disabili-
ties, overweight people, or those with mental disabilities. If names directed toward racial and ethnic minorities focus on visible physical and cultural differences, then those directed toward gay men and lesbians similarly focus on perceived mannerisms or behaviors ("fairy," "pansy," "butch," "butt pirate"). Terms directed at people with mental or physical disabilities also focus on what is most visible or apparent ("gimp," "retard," "special ed," "wheelchair jockey"). Words thrown at poor rural whites focus on perceived behaviors or locations ("trailer park trash," "inbreeder"), and those against overweight people focus on size ("tubbo," "lard ass," "fatso"). There are even ethnophaulisms that focus on two or more group memberships at the same time ("chocolate pudding," "queer girl").

This extension of the meaning of ethnophaulisms serves to remind us that prejudice is rarely narrowly focused toward one group. Those who look down on people because of a particular group membership are far more likely to look down on other people for other group memberships. If people dislike African Americans, they also may look down on Hispanic Americans, Jews, or Arabs. The reason for this is that they base their attitudes on stereotypes — unreliable generalizations about a group of people based on the characteristics of only a few members of the group. If this is the case, then they are more likely to believe other stereotypes about other groups. Once this belief takes root, perceptions becomes selective: They either ignore individuals who possess none of the stereotypical characteristics or re-interpret their behavior in such a way as to say that they
do. Years ago, a man I met said that he felt most Jews were cheap. When I pointed out to him that Jewish people have given much to charity in the past, he replied, “Of course, they do that because of the tax shelters.” His stubborn refusal to see behavior that refuted his long-held belief illustrated his acceptance of stereotypes.

What about positive stereotypes? Are they okay? African Americans have been thought of as good at sports or accomplished dancers, gay men have been called fashion conscious or accomplished gardeners, Asian Americans often are thought to be highly intelligent, and poor rural whites often are thought to know how to fix cars. All of these things are enviable characteristics. Are they offensive? While they may sound harmless enough, they still typecast. They also are unreliable generalizations about groups of people based on the qualities of a few group members. If a person is likely to believe positive stereotypes, then he or she also is likely to believe negative ones. It is therefore not a compliment to assume that a black person has rhythm or that an Asian person must be good at mathematics. It slots people into particular behaviors not because of their individuality, but because of their group.

**Prejudice and Socialization**

One thing some of the students’ comments show is that many engage in prejudiced behavior but do not see themselves as prejudiced. They may not realize it, but their attitudes are indicative of prejudice that may be so deeply ingrained that they do not notice. A person’s out-
look on life becomes ingrained through the mechanisms of socialization — something sociologists Macionis, Jansson, and Benoit define as “the lifelong social experience by which individuals develop their human potential and learn culture” (in press, p. 75). Although much socialization takes place in the early years within the family, among peers, or at school, it is a process that continues to shape people’s thoughts and actions throughout their lives. We learn values, mores, and appropriate actions first from our parents, later from our friends, and throughout our lives at school, work, church, and elsewhere. American values are transmitted by virtue of living within the United States, specific ethnic values are learned from being among ethnic groups, and even more specific values are learned among the smaller networks to which we belong. The sum of what we think, know, and do comes to us through socialization.

If this is the case, then it is easy to see how prejudices can form. Several students wrote that they used to use the word “nigger” all the time when they were younger because it was commonly heard in their households. Others said that they had grown up in neighborhoods where derogatory names or racial joking were common. If one grows up in a family or a neighborhood where prejudiced behavior is the norm, then one will likely internalize those attitudes automatically. One becomes socialized at an impressionable age toward a particular outlook that sees one or more minorities as distrustful, lazy, immoral, or some other negative. Once this happens, it may be difficult to throw such outlooks off, even if one wants to do so. One student explained:
“I know that it is wrong to be prejudiced. I know that blacks have suffered a lot. But even though I know this, it’s still hard for me to ignore these views. This was the way that I was. When I see a black (person) on welfare or breaking the law, my mind goes back to what I was taught. It’s hard to ignore how you were raised.”

This student gives testament to the power of socialization. He or she admits knowing that such views are false. Still, this student must fight against the power of earlier influences. Other students were more successful in their fight. Several mentioned their racist grandfathers who frequently refer to blacks as “niggers” or “coons.” Yet despite their families’ views, they still feel comfortable having black friends.

One positive thing is that socialization does continue throughout life. Perhaps as one gets older, as in the case of the students’ grandfathers, it becomes more difficult to change one’s outlook. However, school provides an excellent opportunity to socialize students in ways that will foster understanding and respect. This must be done not simply through the curriculum, but through example and consistency.

**Privileged Lives**

If one looks at society in terms of different groups of people, one sees dominant and minority groups. Generally, the majority holds power and privilege over the minority. As it happens, whites hold the majority over people of color, heterosexuals over gay men and lesbians, Christians over Muslims and Jews, and the
middle and upper classes over the poor. People within dominant groups may take their lives for granted, not thinking that someone outside of that group may have different experiences. In terms of race, this is known as white privilege.

Historically, the United States has been dominated by whites and, as a result, typical American life has been defined in terms of whiteness. Blacks were segregated by Jim Crow laws and were badly mistreated, and until recently they were rarely seen on television commercials or in positions of importance in movies. We still rarely see Arab Americans or Native Americans in general roles. The result of such segregation and omission is that white Americans take their lives for granted and typically do not appreciate their privileged positions or even see them as such. However, they are privileged. White people are more likely to get taxis to stop for them in large cities, more likely to get good service in many parts of the country, and less likely to be followed by store detectives in department stores. Because many people hold prejudices and act on them in the form of discrimination, whites are more likely to be treated with courtesy and respect in a variety of everyday situations. Although many whites may be outraged at the way some people of color are treated, they rarely stop to think that this might be them were they not white. Instead, one gets used to privilege, sees it as normal, and ignores it as given.

The heterosexual assumption is a similar concept, also referred to as heterosexism. Because the majority of people are heterosexual, everyone is assumed to be that way
by default. Heterosexuality also is portrayed constantly on television and in movies, in advertisements and newspapers, and virtually everywhere one looks. There is nothing wrong with portraying and celebrating dating, opposite-sex relationships, engagements, and marriages. However, if it is done with the assumption that there are no alternatives, it is a form of stereotyping and prejudice. In fact, there are millions of gay men and lesbians wishing for and living in same-sex relationships, and their lives are rarely portrayed. When note is taken of homosexuality, it often is discussed in a negative way.

This assumption also affects many gay and lesbian adolescents in school. Their teachers may make exclusive reference to heterosexual life in their lectures; and if they mention homosexuality, they may do so in a negative way. Ann Heron, editor of One Teenager in 10, and Clifford Chase, editor of Queer 13, do excellent jobs in bringing forth the voices of many teenagers who have felt the toll of such invisibility. Teens often say that they have felt scared of exposure, have been shoved aside by the world, and all too often have been the victims of bullying, name calling, and joking at their expense. Even casual comments may lead to discomfort. To ask a teenage boy if he has a girlfriend may be innocent enough, but the looks he may get or the comments that may follow (“well, you’ll get one soon enough”) after he says “no” may lead to discomfort. When enough people ask him such a question, he may feel more and more conspicuous. This is not to say we should never make such inquiries or that we should never presume hetero-
sexuality in anyone. It is to say that the heterosexual assumption permeates social life to such an extent that those who cannot conform are made to feel like the strange, odd, or “queer” exceptions that they have been called. In this sense, heterosexuality, just like whiteness, is a privileged status in society.

A third position of privilege in society is economic—to be a member of the middle class. More than 31 million Americans, or one in eight, fall below the poverty line. Just above this line are even more people who struggle long hours at low-wage jobs to make a living. Despite such large numbers, such lives are rarely portrayed on television, and magazines and advertisements assume that luxuries such as computers and fashionable clothing are affordable by all. Even standardized tests in schools occasionally make such assumptions. One teacher at a school in a poor county pointed out an example to me. A question to fifth-graders read, “Does a grapefruit taste bitter or sour?” As she told me, few of her pupils could answer this question because their parents could not afford grapefruits.

The assumption of middle class thus permeates society, as does the assumption of whiteness and heterosexuality. As a result, people of color, poor rural whites, and gay and lesbian teenagers become socially disenfranchised. This is not to mention the assumptions of “normal weight” that make overweight teenagers feel rejected, those of full ability that make the disabled feel left out, and even the assumptions of gender superiority that have long restricted the lives of women (in spite of the fact that women actually outnumber men).
Popular and Unpopular Prejudices

One trend among the students with whom I conducted the name-calling exercise was that they had little difficulty giving me derogatory names for poor rural whites. "Redneck" and "poor white trash" came out almost jovially. When it came to African Americans, however, the names came out hesitantly. Were it not for some African-American students who called out several to begin with, the list might have been short even though there are many in common usage. Derogatory names for gay men and lesbians came out jovially once again, and those for disabled people came out with hesitation. This ebb and flow of names depending on group is interesting in that it indicates a belief that some prejudices are "okay" while others are not. Or perhaps some are not as bad as others. Certainly the word "nigger" has been raised to the level of an obscenity in recent times (some students could not say it, calling out, "the N-word," instead). Being prejudiced against African Americans has become highly unpopular. Yet discussions of "poor white trash" or "flamers" (effeminate men perceived as gay) and "butches" (masculine women perceived as lesbians) seem almost acceptable.

This differential acceptance of name calling or joking may indicate that many people assume that distaste for certain groups of people is still acceptable. It is okay to look down on someone for being poor or living in the country because there must be something wrong with such people to have "chosen" such lives. It also is okay to express distaste for lesbians and gay men because
they are sick and twisted individuals. However, it is not okay to dislike someone because of race or religion. To be racist or anti-Semitic is wrong; to be classist or homophobic is not. It is assumed that the latter two prejudices are typical, and thus justified.

On the contrary, sociologists and others have learned that prejudice is rarely target specific. Whites who dislike African Americans because of stereotypical beliefs about them are more likely to have similar dislikes for Asians and Arabs and more likely to be anti-Semitic and homophobic. To dislike a group of people based on stereotypical beliefs is to believe in stereotypes; to believe in stereotypes leads to greater likelihood of accepting other stereotypes for other groups. Martin Neimoller, a Westphalian pastor who experienced both world wars, put it best with his now famous words:

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.

Prejudice is rarely restricted to one target. It often is a feeling that branches out everywhere. It therefore follows that fighting to reduce only one form is to fight a battle but not a war. If someone thinks it is okay to look down on some groups of people, that person tacitly states that it is okay to look down on people in general. If this is the case, then prejudice will prevail.
Conclusion

Daily life unfolds in such a way as to miss many opportunities. Because teachers are concerned with lesson planning, grading, and curricula, they often miss what have come to be known as “teachable moments” for combating prejudice. Good teachers tend to do well in catching teachable moments when they pertain to the subjects they teach, whether social studies, history, or biology. But we often miss those pertaining to everyday life.

In the classroom a student chuckles at another’s reference to lesbians, another remarks on how dirty a homeless man appeared to her over the weekend, or several students remark that a popular idea in history is “retarded.” Because such comments are not pertinent to the topic under discussion, we move on. We overhear students talking in the hallways or at lunch time. A student tells his friends about another student who is “nothing but country trash”; another student imitates a new student’s perceived effeminacy by dangling a limp wrist; still another student stretches her eyelids with her fingers to imitate an Asian face. These are the more difficult teachable moments that we often miss. Teachers
may not even stop to think that such behavior is an indication of prejudice and dismiss it as teenagers just being teenagers.

We all miss moments such as these out of preoccupation with other matters, hurriedness, or not realizing their importance. But they are important indications of prejudice. A gay student might have witnessed the boy dangling his limp wrist in fun; an Asian girl may have witnessed the girl drawing back her eyelids; and someone in the class where students call an idea “retarded” may have had a mentally challenged sister. Those individuals may have shrugged off the incidents as ignorance, but they also may have been hurt by them.

Many of the students whose anecdotes are included in this fastback do not define their behaviors as bad. Students have used the word “nigger” among their friends or told “fag jokes” to each other for their humor. They “do not mean anything bad” about African Americans. They are just “using the word.” They do not have anything against gay men and lesbians, but “the joke is funny.” Even when they get into arguments with minority members and call them names, they “are just letting off steam.” They may even call non-minority members names such as “faggot” or say that they are acting “like a nigger.”

One incident is easy to dismiss. Something was said out of anger or a tasteless joke was told. But any moment such as this is a snapshot of the continuity of prejudice. Those students have learned their attitudes. Many students — indeed, likely many teachers — have used such words or told similar jokes. In doing the same, they
keep them alive in the moment, and they pass them on to others. Those others, in turn, are likely to do the same. If this is the case, prejudice can be imagined as a ping pong ball. It hits another ball, which may hit several others, all of which in turn may hit still others. The results of a such a multiplication of actions are people who experience rejection and hostility, and even violence within hate crimes. When teachers are aware of this, then it behooves all of us to reach out and catch the ping pong ball — with a word or an action that, if uttered or performed consistently, can alter perception and diminish prejudice.
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