

## Exploring Language: Definitions Activity

For this exercise, participants are asked to find definitions for prejudice, discrimination, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Definitions for each word should come from two sources: the person's existing understanding and a scholarly source.

### Objectives:

1. To help participants understand the five words and to explore the intricacies and implications of different definitions for each word.
2. To help participants learn to appreciate the importance of language in discussing multicultural and social justice issues, and how the *process* of discussing the definitions adds to the understanding of the terms.

### Activity Description:

The facilitators should divide the participants into groups of 6-10 to ensure that everyone will have ample chance to participate. Each group's facilitator will begin her or his session by having each participant share her or his definition for "prejudice". The group will proceed with the rest of the definitions attempting, if possible, to reach a consensus on one definition for each word. (Rarely will the group agree on one definition.) All definitions should be discussed. When small groups are finished, bring everyone back together for a final discussion.

### Facilitator Notes:

#### (1) Definitions

- Prejudice--an attitude about another person or group of people based on stereotypes
- Discrimination--an action or behavior based on prejudice
- Racism--the systemic conditions that provide some people more consistent and easier access to opportunities based on (perceived) race or ethnicity
- Sexism--the systemic conditions that provide some people more consistent and easier access to opportunities based on (perceived) sex, gender, or gender expression
- Heterosexism--the systemic conditions that provide some people more consistent and easier access to opportunities based on (perceived) sexual orientation

(2) An issue that arises regularly is that prejudice and discrimination can be positive. (I am prejudice towards my children; I am a discriminating eater.) It is important to note that when these issues are discussed in the context of social justice, a prejudice toward somebody is matched by an equal prejudice against somebody else.

(3) According to the definitions above, anyone can be racist or sexist. It is vital to bring the issue of **power** into the discussion. For example, a definition of racism might be "prejudice or discrimination based on race, plus the power to enforce it." In that case, in the U.S., only men can be sexist and only white people can be racist. This perspective has a major impact on people and some respond by insisting that the "other" group can be just as racist as her or his group. This response provides an important opportunity to differentiate between an individual-focused basis of "racism" (which privileges the current power structure by ignoring systemic conditions) and an institutional-focused basis.

(4) Some people might not be familiar with the term "heterosexism." Ask students to consider the "phobia" framing of the more common term, "homophobia." This can lead to other strands of discussion, such as who has power over language, the evolution of language, and so on.

(5) Spend a lot of time on power. Many participants will have a hard time understanding it. Talk about individual acts of racism, which may be done by anyone, as opposed to institutional acts of racism, which involves economic, class, and social factors which all add up to power. Some groups in the U.S. do not have the political, economic, or social power to be racist on an institutional level. It is important to acknowledge that we all have personal power and how we exercise it is very important. Do we stand up for the right things? Who gets to make the rules and who do those rules benefit (this is a question of institutional power)?

(6) The major point of this activity is to get people talking about these terms and realizing that different people mean different things even though they are using the same words. How does the way we are socialized to relate to these terms inform the ways we imagine they might be solved?

(7) Mention how, when we don't know the meaning of a word, we go to the dictionary and accept its definition as truth. Challenge people to look up definitions for "black" and "white" and notice the connotations.