

# Societal Relations

## Lesson #9: "HOW TO HANDLE MEXICAN LABOR": AN EXERCISE IN GENERALIZATIONS AND STEREOTYPES

Note:

- This lesson uses some very discriminatory language. Please read through the worksheet to decide if this lesson is right for your class. If you assign this lesson please emphasize that this article was written long ago, before the students' parents, or even some grandparents, were born. The class is reading it so they may become better informed about what discrimination is. It is not being studied as a reflection of today's society or even as an examination of the attitudes of all non-Mexican Americans at the time it was written.

- This lesson uses only paragraphs one through nine of the article. The entire article has been included for a more in-depth study of its contents.

### TIME

50 minutes

### MATERIALS FROM TRUNK

Worksheet #19 - "How to Handle Mexican Labor"

### TEACHER PREPARATIONS

Read through the article "How to Handle Mexican Labor" located at the end of this lesson. Make a copy of worksheet #19, paragraphs 1-9 only, for each student.

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- 1) define the words generalization and stereotype
- 2) interpret, determine the value of, recognize biases in, and select information from a primary source document
- 3) recognize the effects of stereotypes
- 4) estimate results of and solutions to stereotypes

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

**Stereotyping** - A stereotype is a preconceived and oversimplified generalization about a particular ethnic or religious group, race, or sex. The danger of stereotyping is that it no longer considers people as individuals but rather categorizes all members of a group as thinking and behaving the same way.

Most generalizations about people tend to be stereotypes because they constrain the enormous diversity of humanity. The result is dehumanizing. For example: all people with glasses are "brains," athletes (or "jocks") are stupid, and blondes are "dumb." The existence of stereotypes means that any individual who appears to fit into a category is judged accordingly, without a chance to provide his or her own evidence.

People who perceive the world according to stereotypes are prevented from assimilating new, contradictory evidence. And people who belong to stereotyped groups (probably all of us fit into one or more) find their options limited by other people's expectations.

One way of dealing with stereotypes is to point out the inherent contradictions in them. Those who consider Jews clannish will call them pushy when they seek to live in certain neighborhoods; African Americans have been condemned as uneducated, but then denied access to good schools; Catholics are accused of inordinate loyalty to the Pope, yet many dedicated public officials are or were Catholics.

**The Mexican Experience** - Discrimination against Hispanics has deep roots in the United States. As soon as European Americans and Mexicans began to compete for the same land, discrimination and violence resulted. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo signed in 1848 protected Mexicans' land and civil rights. These provisions were ignored as European Americans poured into the West, drawn by the California Gold Rush and the promise of new land. Many European Americans felt were superior to Hispanics who lived in the region, and this prejudice became a convenient excuse to rob Mexicans of their land. Some Mexican families were reduced to poverty, and they took the most grueling jobs for the lowest wages just to survive. Other Hispanics migrating to the United States in search of work also faced widespread discrimination. European Americans wanted their labor but little else.

This discrimination was manifested in many ways. Some towns passed ordinances outlawing Mexican fiestas. English became the official language of the new U.S. territory, putting the Mexicans at a greater disadvantage. Most laws were written only in English, and it was even against the law to testify in court in Spanish. Most teachers spoke only English, and many forbade schoolchildren from speaking Spanish in the classroom. Segregated restaurants, stores, and ceremonies became the norm.

World War II was a turning point for many Hispanics. As many as half a million served in the armed forces. But prejudice persisted on the home front during the war years, and many soldiers returned home to face the same types of discrimination.

The war years broadened horizons, opened up jobs, and made Hispanics more self-aware. The best-known Mexican American organization is the League of United Latin American Citizens. This group formed in the Texas Rio Grande Valley in 1929 to inform the community about social, political, and economic rights and duties of Mexican Americans. In the post-World War II years this group worked to end school segregation. Mexican American veterans formed the G.I. Forum in 1948. It urged its members to participate in politics and supported legal efforts on behalf of Hispanics fighting discrimination in jobs, housing, and education. The Community Service Organization (CSO) was formed to encourage action among Spanish-speaking voters and push for civil rights. In 1960 the Mexican American Political Association began efforts to help elect Hispanics to state and local government. The 1960s witnessed a more militant Hispanic rights movement and created a new spirit of Chicano pride that promoted "Brown power to offset Anglo power." They realized benefits from these efforts.

## VOCABULARY

- **Discrimination** = The denial of opportunities and equal rights to individuals and groups because of prejudice or other arbitrary reasons.
- **Ethnic group** = A set of people defined by its national origin or distinctive cultural patterns.
- **Generalize** = To form a rule or principle for the whole from particular facts or instances.
- **Generalization** = The act or process of generalizing.
- **Minority group** = A subordinate group whose members have significantly less control or power over their own lives than that held by the members of a dominant or majority group.
- **Prejudice** = A negative attitude toward an entire category of people, such as a racial or ethnic minority group.
- **Stereotypes** = Unreliable generalizations about all members of a group that do not take into account individual differences.

## ACTIVITY

- 1) Explain that the class will do an exercise exploring the concepts of stereotypes and generalizations. The following points should be made:

- Most groups have dealt with stereotyping and discrimination at some point. Stereotypes are often based on skin color, religion, or ethnic heritage. Differences may occur in the intensity of the discriminatory treatment, the duration of it, or the point in history during which it occurs. One example is the treatment of Jews in Europe during World War II.

- It is important to become familiar with the concepts of stereotyping so that we are aware it exists, to help us more readily recognize stereotypes, and to have a better ability to counteract them.

- 2) Make a critical remark about the class such as, "You all cheated on the last test," or "This class is always late." Make sure the class understands that you are criticizing everyone in class.

Ask the students how this remark makes them feel.

**If the remark provokes anger**, ask the students why they are angry.

**If the remark does not provoke anger** ask, "Doesn't my remark annoy anyone?" Someone should object to being lumped together with other students when the critical remark did not apply to them personally.

**If there is still no response** ask each student to complete this sentence: "When you condemn all of us, I feel....."

- 3) Discuss generalizations and stereotypes in terms of the critical statement you made about the entire class. Explain that this statement was a generalization about everyone in class. Everyone was being labeled in the same negative light even though everyone did not possess the trait being criticized.

Ask the class to define the word generalize.

*To form a rule or principle for the whole from studying particular facts or instances. Generalizations are the act or process of generalizing.*

Ask the class to define the word stereotype.

*Stereotypes are unreliable generalizations about all members of a group that do not take into account individual differences.*

Generalizations of this type are not based on factual evidence and can not be substantiated. They also tend to be stereotypes.

- 4) Pass out a copy of worksheet #19, "How to Handle Mexican Labor," (paragraphs 1-9) to everyone in class. Explain that this article appeared in a 1914 edition of a magazine circulated by a railroad company and was written by James P. Craig. It was written at a time when large numbers of Mexican laborers first began to work in the United States for railroad companies.

**It is important to emphasize that this article was written long ago, before the students' parents, or even some grandparents, were born. It is not being studied as a reflection of today's society or even as an examination of the attitudes of all non-Mexican Americans either today or in 1914.**

Have the class read the article. Ask them to keep in mind the definitions of generalization and stereotype and to highlight or underline examples of these they locate. Look for both positive and negative statements.

- 5) Discuss the article in terms of stereotypes and generalizations. The following questions may be used to help direct the discussion.

**The paragraphs have been numbered to make a discussion of the article more convenient. For the teacher's convenience sections of the article that include stereotypical or discriminatory language have been underlined in the typed version of the article located at the end of this lesson. These sections have not been identified on worksheet #9, the students' copy of the article.**

Does Mr. Craig stereotype Mexicans in his article? If so, what are some of the stereotypes?

*Yes. Basically he says that while Mexicans are physically strong, they are stupid, lazy, and dishonest. See paragraphs #8 and 9 especially.*

When Mr. Craig speaks of "national traits" in paragraphs #2 what does he mean?

*He believes certain characteristics belong to all Mexicans. Note that he leaves no room for individuality in this statement.*

Does Mr. Craig make any statements that might lead the reader to question his generalizations or to suspect him of being prejudiced?

*Yes. The following is one example.*

*In paragraph #7 he says that knowing 365 words makes one a master of the Spanish language. This indicates that Mr. Craig thinks the Spanish language, the language spoken by Mexicans, is simplistic. By contrast, in paragraph #9, he states that "Constant reiteration of rules and orders is absolutely necessary." Could it be necessary because of the supervisor's lack of knowledge of the Spanish language?*

- 6) Continue the discussion by having the class decide if Mr. Craig's generalizations and stereotypes are accurate reflections of Mexican workers based on factual evidence he presents.

What factual evidence does Mr. Craig give to substantiate his generalizations?

*This article is based on opinions he made while supervising Mexicans. He spent most of his time in this capacity in the mountains of Mexico. He does not offer evidence to substantiate or verify statements.*

What was Mr. Craig's purpose in writing this article?

*To instruct people responsible for supervising Mexican and Mexican American workers in how to "get" and "hold" a good gang (crew) of men.*

In the class's opinion was Mr. Craig qualified to write this article?

- 7) Finish the discussion of stereotypes by having the class reflect on the following:

Where do negative stereotypes lead individuals? Countries? Governments?

*Consider such historic events such the holocaust of World War II, the treatment of Native Americans by the United States government, the apartheid in South Africa, and issues in today's world.*

How can people recognize stereotypes?

*Stereotypes are generalizations that constrain the enormous diversity of a culture. Look for evidence to substantiate generalizations. For example, what is the proof that all blondes are dumb?*

What can people do to combat stereotypes?

*Don't perpetuate them by repeating them or agreeing with them. In the late 1960s several Mexican American groups protested against movie and television portrayals of Mexicans as either bandits or lazy peasants. Most of the mass media and advertisers have responded positively to these requests to avoid negative stereotyping.*

In closing, reinforce the following points with the class:

- This article is the opinion of the writer and not all European Americans or everyone living in 1914.
- Information printed in books, newspapers, magazines, etc. is not necessarily true just because it is in print. It is the responsibility of the person reading the information to determine what is true and what is false, what he or she believes or doesn't believe.

### **EXTENDED ACTIVITIES**

- 1) Research Mexican American political groups. Have the students include information on when and why these groups were developed and their accomplishments. Groups to research include LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens), G.I. Forum, CSO (Community Service Organization), and the Mexican American Political Association.
- 2) See the complementary lessons in this manual: "Do Photos Lie?," and "Bilingual Education: An Example of Discrimination?"

Words may be very damaging. This article is being used as an educational tool to show how damaging words may be. It is not a reflection of the society of today or 1914 or of any group, whether Mexican or non-Mexican.

## How to Handle Mexican Labor"

November 1914

by James P. Craig\*

General Forman, Material Yards, National City, California

\*Mr. Craig spent twelve years in charge of Mexicans, most of this time in the mountains of Mexico, far away from other Americans, and he has made a study of them.

1

In handling Mexicans the first and most important thing is to establish a reputation as being a man of your word, one who will do what he says, who will not promise anything unless he can do it, who has courage enough to apologize if at fault, and who does not lack either physical or moral courage.

2

Of these the most important is moral courage, for the reason that the average Mexican has a superabundance of physical but very little moral courage. They invariably travel in pairs, trios or groups, consisting of relatives, neighbors or *compadres*. The different members of these groups will stick together through thick and thin, right or wrong. The boss generally will find that it pays to keep track of these groups, as any trouble with one is likely to be followed by demonstrations from his friends. The other Mexicans, outside these cliques, know their national traits and are not apt to be affected very much by arguments which they realize are actuated by spite.

3

You never will be able to control your men until you first can control your self absolutely at all times. If a Mexican can see that he is succeeding in worrying or aggravating you he will in many cases do his best to make your life a burden. Many a good man has been worried off the job in just that way.

4

It is poor policy to make a practice of bullying these laborers, who are in no position to defend themselves. If this is done the company will have to pay more money to hold a gang or will get only inefficient workers. Men cannot work to the best advantage if continually afraid that their superior will "fly off the handle" because of some little misunderstanding. They are quick to resent and to "work out" a spite on a grouchy boss. This penchant is by no means confined exclusively to Mexicans. If the boss is in the habit of getting piqued he does himself more harm than anyone else and eventually will ruin his disposition and be compelled to resort to the use of dyspepsia tablets. Keep your temper and remember that verbal chastisement will only slide off the Mexicans like water off a duck's back. This may explain their appellation of "greaser." If you are grouchy all the time the Mexicans soon become accustomed to it, and it ceases to have any effect on them other than to make them dislike you.

5

While it is impossible to have the good will of all your men all the time, a foreman should be able to have the good will of the majority of his men most of the time. The average worker will sometimes get out of sorts but will not stay angry very long unless he is convinced that you are decidedly unjust. Good will is the basis of all good work; without it there will be no great success in any line.

6

To get along with your subordinates you must have at least a liking for the men under you. If you hate Mexicans, or despise them, you will not be able to hide the fact from them for a single day. Nothing will cause dislike as quickly as dislike. Men certainly will not work well for a man they dislike - especially the average Mexican will not.

7

A knowledge of the Spanish language, or at least enough of it to be able to explain work, carry on a common conversation and tell what the men are talking about, is absolutely essential in your efforts to avoid friction. If you don't understand Spanish they pass their time ridiculing you to your face. This has a tendency to destroy their respect for you, if you are unable to detect and stop it. You never will get the best results through a head man or any interpreter. You are always at his mercy. Should he become angry at you or any of the men you and the company lose. Some of the best men to handle Mexicans I have ever known could speak very little Spanish. But how much better they could have done had they been able to speak Spanish well. One word a day for one year and you are master of the language. You won't use three hundred and sixty-five different words in a week's conversation. I have never known a Mexican straw boss or foreman who would not work out his personal spites on the men. Mexicans as a rule would rather work under an American than for their own countrymen. This is one distinct advantage that the American foreman has over his Mexican competitor.

8

The average Mexican is slow of comprehension and it requires a great deal of explanation for him to grasp an idea. After he gets it he holds it fairly well. He would rather listen to the boss explain than to work. If you are not on the alert he will take advantage of you by pretending he does not understand. If you will let him, he will lead you into an argument simply to take your attention from the work in hand. Never allow them to argue with you. A great many men make the mistake of thinking them stupid. In some ways they are. In dodging work, however, they are past masters and will tax the ability of anyone who tries to keep them at their tasks. On the other hand, when they become convinced that you are up to all their tricks, they will work very well, provided you treat them justly.

9

Constant reiteration of rules and orders is absolutely necessary in handling Mexicans. Like children, they soon forget. It is useless to become vexed about this failing. Just get the habit of reminding them. A peon's mind is very much like that of a nine or ten year old child, with the difference that the child's mind matures and the Mexican's never does. Take him all in all he is not a bad fellow. You must be able to see things as he sees them and divine which way he is going to

jump. The man who doesn't study him will never make a success of handling him. When properly

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handled they are willing to do a great deal for a man, often working for ridiculously low wages or giving the very best of service for common wages.

10

To get the best results be an absolutely impartial judge. Reward by kind words and good treatment all men who try to do what is asked of them. Be patient and never reproach a man until it is a certainty that he is at fault. Never reproach a Mexican severely in the presence of others. The Mexicans are sensitive people and cannot stand being humiliated continually in the presence of their fellow workmen. If you make a practice of doing this you will never have a loyal crew of men. Some day when you are in trouble they will throw you down.

11

Most Mexicans cannot read or write. Consequently they pass a great deal of their time, when in bunk cars, talking about the different places at which they have worked. Any section or extra gang boss who is either very good or very hard on his men is known all over the system through this "clearing house." Often men cannot choose their employer, but in the end the capable overseer gets the good men and the unjust foreman gets nothing but the chaff.

12

No man ever will be able to secure very good results with a crew of men whose personnel is continually changing. If you cannot hold a good percentage of your men, you had better find the cause, because it takes several months to train a man to learn what he can do well. This is decidedly bothersome and expensive. If your men are changing all the time there is something wrong with your methods or those of your commissary clerk or with camp conditions. Possibly you have some valiant or would be bad man who is running them off. Whatever the trouble may be, you will not get good results with a crew of green men.

13

Mexicans often will leave a job for fear of some other Mexicans, and pride keeps them from confessing the true reason. They will always give a false instead of a true reason for everything. Secretiveness is a national trait and they are very clever about hiding their motives. They more often quit because of some wrong, real or imaginary, than on account of the wages they are receiving. Even though they often say they are leaving on account of poor wages, Mexicans are not affected half as much by wages as by treatment.

14

Many Mexicans, after working several months in one place, become restless and want to move. Instead of quitting outright, they ask for more money and commence to "lay down" on the job and get impudent. In these cases there is only one thing to do and that is quietly to let them out. They may come back penitently in a week or so and become good workers. Do not hesitate to take a man back if you are convinced that he is penitent and that he intends to reform. It does not pay to hold spite against Mexicans; neither does it pay to remember faults or failings. All men have their shortcomings, but some do not interfere with their working ability. Always overlook such faults.

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15

You cannot always get a full gang of remarkable good men, but you can gradually eliminate the poor ones. The best laborers are generally those who are most anxious to get money. For that very reason the best men are often heavy drinkers and gamblers. Those who spend their money on clothes, phonographs and other innocent luxuries are of course preferable. A good worker is usually a good spender, but a good spender is not always a good saver. Mexicans can live on very little and many would prefer to work half time and live on short rations rather than eat and dress well and work steady to do so. These are the kind of hands to let work for the other fellow.

16

Mondays and Saturdays are never as good workdays as the other week days; also the day following a holiday is poor. Any dance, holiday or feast leaves idleness in its wake. Payday is a blow to labor from which it requires from three to five days to recover. Men who work every day always work better than those who make a practice of laying off. When men want to stop work temporarily let them off if you can. When they get into the habit of laying off too much, ask them what is the matter. If they haven't a good reason, quietly attach that well-known piece of tinware to them.

17

Mexican are strong in their likes and dislikes. If they like a new man they will help him and tell him about his work. But if they are not well impressed with the newcomer they let him strictly alone. They will not warn him if they see him in danger, nor will they aid him if he performs his work incorrectly or works under a strain when there is no necessity for it. The Mexican peon is the originator of the now famous phrase, "I should worry;" at least one would think he was. He will stand by and see money needlessly wasted for lack of a little effort. So long as it isn't his money "he should manifest concern," as they say in Boston.

18

Certain diseases are very common among Mexican laborers. They contract them and then do nothing to rid themselves of the strength-draining "leeches." After waiting a long time before going to a physician, they finally patronize a quack. Of course maximum laboring efficiency is impossible under such circumstances. I venture to say that over 50 percent of the company's Mexicans have been permanently injured by contracting these diseases and then neglecting to get medical aid. It would pay employers to make some arrangement whereby all such cases would immediately be taken care of for a small fee.

19

The Mexicans are born and raised under the padrone system. They must have someone in whom they have confidence to go to for advice. It will pay any man to act as a padrone to his Mexicans. Therefore, always try to avoid the appearance of bossing.

20

In working a gang of Mexicans personally allow them to talk and jest as long as it doesn't interfere with their work. Never stand very close to them unless one of them is "soldiering." In that case stand alongside the guilty one rather than call him down. If they work diligently stand farther away from them. It is hard for a man to work with the boss "looking down his collar." At all times endeavor to keep your voice low and pleasant. Speak sharply only on rare occasions; then, when

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you do, your words will have the desired effect. Another thing: Set a good example. If the boss relaxes, sits down or leans up against something to rest, the men ease up in their work.

21

Your men's inventory of you never is closed. They eventually will know you and you will have to be a man in the full sense of the word to meet their acid test. If you are broadminded, energetic and capable, you will have little trouble in getting and holding a good gang of men. Your workers are usually a reflection of yourself. When you have convinced them that they will have to work hard and when they do so they will be well treated, then most of your troubles are over.