

Using *Shrek* to Teach About Stigma

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Abstract

We describe an active learning exercise to teach students about social stigma. After lecturing on the topic, the instructor distributes a worksheet and shows several clips from the movie *Shrek*, pausing after each clip to lead a discussion of the concepts. We provide information about the movie scenes, the student worksheet, and instructor discussion guide. Students who attended a lecture on stigma and participated in the *Shrek* exercise ($n = 14$) scored higher on an assessment of the concepts than students who viewed the lecture and completed a self-reflection exercise ($n = 13$) as well as students who only viewed the lecture and did not participate in an exercise ($n = 13$). Students ($N = 52$) also indicated that they enjoyed the exercise and believed it provides clarification of the topics above and beyond the lecture material. Thus, our *Shrek* active learning exercise is a useful tool for helping students learn about the sensitive issues of social stigma.

Keywords

active learning, classroom exercise, stigma, prejudice

Undergraduate students, especially those from racial majority groups, can be resistant to learning about stereotyping, prejudice, and stigma. Students may deny the existence of prejudice (McConahay, 1983) or choose not to incorporate new information on the topic into their belief systems (Munro & Ditto, 1997). Instructors often struggle to develop nonthreatening ways to present information about stigma, prejudice, and discrimination to avoid such resistance from students. Luckily, several educators have developed innovative ways to discuss these sometimes sensitive topics (Case, 2013; Christopher, Walter, Marek, & Koenig, 2004; Hackney, 2005; Junn, Grier, & Behrens, 2001; Kite & Whitley, 2012; Lawson, McDonough, & Bodle, 2010; Plous, 2000; Williams & Melchiori, 2013). We describe how using a well-known animated film may provide an additional, nonthreatening way to explore the topics of stigma, stereotypes, and prejudice with undergraduates.

Using popular films to demonstrate sensitive psychological topics can enhance receptiveness to the material and reinforce the concepts included in traditional classroom lectures. For example, Christopher, Walter, Marek, and Koenig (2004) used the classic 1980s film *The Breakfast Club*, which follows five high school students from different cliques during a day of detention, to facilitate classroom discussion on prejudice, discrimination, and the contact hypothesis. The authors found that students enjoyed the exercise and felt the exercise helped them grasp concepts related to stereotyping and prejudice.

Recent research suggests that discussing fantasy characters with fictional social stigmas can help reduce expressions of prejudice toward real stigmatized groups. Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, and Trifiletti (2014) found that children who discussed passages about stigmatized characters

in the *Harry Potter* book series with a facilitator expressed more positive attitudes toward immigrants than children who discussed passages that were unrelated to prejudice. Furthermore, this relation was moderated by identification with the main character. The use of fantasy characters and stigmas may be particularly useful in a diverse classroom because it allows the facilitator and students to discuss stigma without the problematic legitimizing ideologies that surround real-world stigmas. Both majority and minority group members should be able to take the perspective of the stigmatized fantasy characters and feel empathy toward their plight. We posit that the use of fantasy characters and stigmas in the classroom may also promote learning and retention of sensitive topics related to prejudice and discrimination.

This study uses the animated movie *Shrek* (Adamson & Jenson, 2001) to illustrate and explore stigma-related concepts. *Shrek* is an ogre who lives in a world full of fairy-tale creatures. *Shrek* leads an isolated life until the local ruler, Lord Farquaad, decides to imprison all fairy-tale creatures who flee to *Shrek*'s home. With the help of a talking Donkey, *Shrek* visits Lord Farquaad and agrees to rescue Princess Fiona in exchange for Farquaad's word that he will allow the fairy-tale creatures back into the kingdom. *Shrek* and Donkey help rescue Princess Fiona from a dragon-protected castle and begin to travel back to Lord Farquaad. Along the way, Princess Fiona reveals to Donkey that

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she is cursed and turns into an ogre at night. Only “true love’s kiss” will break her from the curse. Although Shrek and Princess Fiona have grown fond of one another, Shrek believes Fiona is disgusted by him. He delivers Princess Fiona to Lord Farquaad and returns to his lonely swamp home. With the help of Donkey, Shrek decides to tell Princess Fiona that he loves her. Shrek interrupts Lord Farquaad and Princess Fiona’s wedding. During the ensuing commotion, the sun sets and Princess Fiona turns into an ogre. Fiona and Shrek escape and kiss. Fiona now remains an ogre even in the light of day, as Shrek is her true love and she is now in “love’s true form.” The movie ends with Princess Fiona accepting herself as an ogre and marrying Shrek.

Although the animated film is lighthearted, there are several themes related to stigma, stereotypes, and prejudice in *Shrek*. For instance, the three main characters (Shrek, Donkey, and Princess Fiona) all differ on several dimensions of stigma (Jones et al., 1984): Shrek’s stigma is nonconcealable but Donkey’s and Fiona’s stigmas are concealable. Fiona and Shrek’s stigma is a violation of aesthetics but Donkey’s stigma is not. Applying course material to the nonthreatening characters in the film can help students see the basic concepts of stereotyping, prejudice, and stigma at work without activating guilt or denial that often surrounds these issues, especially for students from socially advantaged groups. Furthermore, the nonthreatening characters may offer students from socially disadvantaged groups a way to talk about stigma without the pressure to be a spokesperson for their group.

We provide a student worksheet (Appendix A) and instructor discussion guide (Appendix B) to facilitate discussion about stereotyping, prejudice, and stigma present in *Shrek*. We have used the active learning exercise several times in undergraduate psychology courses related to prejudice. We also report the results of a survey about students’ opinion of the exercise and a test of the effectiveness of this exercise for improving retention of the material. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical test of the effectiveness of one classroom exercise compared to a similar classroom exercise.

Method

Participants

We used the *Shrek* exercise in three semesters of an undergraduate course on the psychology of prejudice at a private Midwestern university. Fifty-two undergraduates (65% female and 85% White) with varied academic majors (51.9% psychology) participated in the exercise.

We compared student performance on an assessment of the material using the students from a psychology of prejudice course who participated in the *Shrek* exercise ($n = 14$; 57.14% female, 64.29% White, 78.57% psychology majors, and 43% in their first or second year), a control group of students from a separate course who heard a lecture on prejudice and stigma and participated in a follow-up self-reflection exercise ($n = 13$; 76.92% female, 46.15% White, 61.54% psychology majors, and 33% in their first or second year), and a

second control group of students who only heard a lecture on prejudice and stigma did not participate in an exercise afterward ($n = 13$; 69.23% female, 69.23% White, 76.92% psychology majors, and 52% in their first or second year).

Procedure

We evaluated this exercise in two ways. First, we collected data about student enjoyment and perceived effectiveness of the exercise over the course of three semesters. Second, we compared the performance of a single psychology of prejudice class who completed the *Shrek* exercise with two control groups of students on an assessment that covered the lecture material.

The students who were enrolled in the psychology of prejudice course listened to the lecture and completed the *Shrek* exercise during class. The comparison groups of students were enrolled in social psychology courses and listened to the same lecture but did not complete the *Shrek* exercise. One control group was asked to consider the lecture material and apply the concepts to their own life following the lecture. A second control group only listened to the lecture and did not participate in an exercise afterward. Both control group participants received extra credit for listening to the lecture and completing the assessment. We ensured that all participants heard the exact same lecture material by recording the PowerPoint slides and lecture presentation using Panopto (2014) software (Version 4.8).

Lecture only group. Students in the lecture only group were enrolled in a social psychology course and participated in exchange for extra credit. Students listened to a 1-hr Panopto (2014) PowerPoint lecture on stigma, prejudice, and stereotypes. Students then completed a learning assessment 3–5 days after listening to the lecture.

Lecture and self-reflection exercise group. Students in the lecture and self-reflection exercise group were enrolled in a social psychology course and participated in exchange for extra credit. After listening to the same Panopto (2014) PowerPoint lecture on stigma, prejudice, and stereotypes as the lecture only group, students completed a self-reflection exercise via computer immediately following the lecture. Participants were given three prompts that mirrored the concepts covered in the *Shrek* exercise. The prompts instructed students to apply the lecture material to their own lives (e.g., “Thinking about your self-esteem, would you say that your public and private self-esteem match? Why or why not?”). Participants spent approximately 10 min on the self-reflection exercise, which is comparable to the time the *Shrek* group spent applying lecture material to the film clips. Students then completed a learning assessment 3–5 days after listening to the lecture.

Lecture and *Shrek* exercise group. Students in the lecture and *Shrek* exercise group were enrolled in a psychology of prejudice course. Following a live lecture on stigma, prejudice, and stereotypes, which was recorded via Panopto (2014) for use in the control groups, students completed an exercise to enhance

their understanding of theory and research about stereotypes (e.g., Stangor & Schaller, 1996), stigma (e.g., Jones et al., 1984), and self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989) featuring the film *Shrek* (Adamson & Jenson, 2001). Students used a worksheet to record their observations and link course-related concepts to the movie scenes (see Appendix A for the student worksheet). The worksheet posed questions about the dimensions of stigma (e.g., concealability), the effect of stigma on self-esteem (e.g., public vs. private self-esteem, contingencies of self-worth), and strategies for coping with stigma (e.g., self- vs. situation-focused). The students completed the worksheet as the clips were presented and during discussion after the clips (see Appendix B for the instructor discussion guide). After watching all of the clips, the instructor went through the worksheet, asking the students to comment on points of integration or patterns that they saw in their complete worksheets. The clip presentation lasted approximately 15 min and discussion lasted approximately 10–15 min for each class, bringing the total time spent on the activity to under half an hour.

Students evaluated the exercise by rating their agreement with 6 items on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The items were “I found the movie clips to be enjoyable”; “This activity helped me to understand the principles of stigma, stereotypes, and coping”; “This activity made the concepts clearer for me than the research articles”; “This activity was a good supplement to the lecture”; “I believe that this activity effectively facilitated discussion”; and “I think this activity would be suitable for use in future classes.” Approximately 2 weeks later, students completed an exam as part of their course that included the same learning assessment items as the control groups.

Assessment of lecture material. The *Shrek* group and both control groups completed the assessment several days after the lecture/exercise.¹ Five multiple-choice items tapped the concepts of stereotypes, stigma, and self-esteem. For example, two of the multiple-choice items were, “According to Goffman’s early conceptualizations of stigma, which of the following designations would be applied to the stigma of alcoholism?” (correct answer: blemishes of individual character) and “Which of the following is true of contingencies of self-worth?” (correct answer: certain ones can be avoided to protect the self from negative social stereotypes). We also included a single open-ended item, “Given existing social stereotypes, please name one risky contingency of self-worth for individuals who are heavy. Next, please name one risky contingency of self-worth for individuals who are not heterosexual. Be sure to explain why each domain is risky for that particular group.” We also asked students if they had ever seen the movie *Shrek*.

Results

Shrek Exercise Ratings

There were no significant differences across semester or between psychology and nonpsychology majors. These results

include data from all three semesters. Students rated the activity as enjoyable ($M = 6.28$, $SD = 0.88$), helpful for understanding the concepts ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.09$), clearer than the articles ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.44$), a useful lecture supplement ($M = 6.31$, $SD = 0.90$), and a good springboard for discussion ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.33$). The students also recommended the activity for future classes ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 0.84$).

Assessment of Lecture Material

All the students had previously seen the movie *Shrek*. We conducted one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to compare the percentage of correct multiple-choice items and the points awarded to the open-ended item. The one-way ANOVA for the multiple-choice items was significant, $F(2, 37) = 8.04$, $p = .001$. Follow-up t tests revealed that the psychology of prejudice students who viewed the lecture and participated in the *Shrek* exercise ($M = 85.57$, $SD = 10.83$) had a higher percentage of correct answers than the lecture and self-reflection exercise group ($M = 63.08$, $SD = 19.91$), $t(25) = 4.17$, $p < .001$, as well as the lecture only group ($M = 70.77$, $SD = 16.68$), $t(25) = 3.31$, $p = .003$. The self-reflection exercise group and lecture only group did not differ on the multiple-choice items, $t(25) = 1.07$, $p = .30$.

Open-ended answers that were handwritten were transcribed, and two trained coders naive to the study hypotheses and condition graded the 5-point open-ended item. The coders’ grades for each item were significantly correlated ($r = .92$, $p < .001$). We averaged the two grades for all following analyses.² The one-way ANOVA for the open-ended item was significant, $F(2, 34) = 9.32$, $p = .001$. Follow-up t tests revealed that the psychology of prejudice students who viewed the lecture and participated in the *Shrek* exercise ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.95$) scored higher on the open-ended item than the lecture and self-reflection exercise group ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.67$), $t(23) = 3.55$, $p = .002$, as well as the lecture only group ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.78$), $t(23) = 4.34$, $p < .001$. The self-reflection exercise group and lecture only group did not differ on the open-ended item, $t(22) = 0.77$, $p = .45$.

Discussion

Students from classes predominately composed of racial majority group members found this active learning exercise to be enjoyable and thought that it effectively reinforced class concepts and facilitated discussion. Half of the students were not psychology majors. Therefore this exercise served to reinforce material that they may have struggled with when reading original psychological research articles. The enthusiastic reception of the *Shrek* exercise indicates that it may be a unique, nonthreatening way to stimulate discussion about sensitive psychological research. In fact, students often began, unprompted, to discuss how the concepts of stigma emerge in real social groups following the exercise. Furthermore, when compared to a sample of students who heard the

lecture and completed a similar self-reflection exercise and a sample of students who had only heard the lecture, students who completed the *Shrek* exercise scored higher on an assessment consisting of both multiple-choice items and an open-ended item. Our data suggest that the *Shrek* exercise facilitates understanding and application of concepts related to stigma.

Our greatest limitation is that we did not randomly assign students to our treatment and control groups. There are several ways that our treatment and control groups may be qualitatively different. First, it is possible that, compared to the control group, students enrolled in the prejudice class had a greater motivation to learn about these concepts to receive a favorable course grade. The prejudice students' assessment of the learning objectives was part of a course exam instead of merely an extra credit opportunity as was the case in the control groups. Second, the student groups were somewhat equivalent in the percentage of Psychology majors, gender breakdown, ethnic diversity, and proportion of first- and second-year students, but it is possible that the students enrolled in a psychology of prejudice course were qualitatively different from the students enrolled in a social psychology course. Finally, it is possible that the students in our prejudice class had a more enriching classroom experience than the control groups because they participated in a live lecture and discussion as opposed to viewing a prerecorded lecture. However, we are bolstered by the large effect size for our assessment of learning retention (Cohen's *d* for the multiple-choice items and open-ended item are 1.32 and 1.48, respectively). The predicted effect emerged despite the fact that students in the control groups were assessed soon after consuming the lecture material, whereas the psychology of prejudice students had a longer gap between the lecture and the assessment. Nonetheless, we strongly suggest that future work on classroom exercises should randomly assign students to condition when possible in order to avoid common quasi-experimental confounds. Additionally, future work should

strive for equivalent lecture and testing conditions between the classrooms.

We believe that our work adds to the literature in three important ways. First, the last published research on a film-based classroom exercise on prejudice featured a nearly 30-year-old film. *Shrek* is a more modern film, therefore it is likely that students are familiar with the basic plot, and 100% of our participants had seen the film before. Familiarity with the film used in class exercises should facilitate greater discussion. Second, this is the first evidence that the use of nonthreatening animated characters with fictional stigmas to illustrate the sensitive concepts covered in the lecture is beneficial for retention. There is great value in avoiding student discomfort when talking about these issues, especially for students from stigmatized groups who may feel targeted or "in the spotlight" when discussing these concepts in class. The use of nonthreatening characters in class examples may reduce anxiety around the discussion of stigma, thereby increasing focus and processing of the material. Third, the inclusion of our self-reflection control group supports that our exercise has a greater positive impact on student learning than merely providing additional discussion on the topics.

Although we provide the discussion guide and worksheet that we have used in our classes, we believe that there are even more scenes and themes from *Shrek* that could be used to teach the psychology of prejudice. For instance, several other characters besides Shrek, Donkey, and Princess Fiona are stereotyped and carry stigmas (e.g., Lord Farquaad, the Dragon). Also, many critics view the characterization of Donkey, voiced by actor Eddie Murphy, as racist (see Pimentel & Velázquez, 2009). Instructors can also encourage students to further integrate the concepts discussed within the exercise with real-world social stigmas via a personal reflection assignment. We hope that instructors will be able to use and grow this exercise in their classrooms that deal with issues of social stigma.

Appendix A

Student Worksheet

What are their <i>stigmas and stereotypes</i> ? What are the dimensions of their stigmas—concealability, course, disruptiveness, aesthetics, origin, peril?	Do the characters' <i>private and public self-esteem</i> match? Why or why not? Does your answer change with the situation?	What are their " <i>safe</i> " contingencies of <i>self-worth</i> (competition, appearance, approval from others, religion, family academics, virtue/morality)? Why?	How did the characters alter their behavior to <i>cope</i> with the stress of social stigma? Were those self-focused or situation-focused?
Shrek			
Donkey			
Princess Fiona			

Appendix B

Instructor Discussion Guide

	Time (hh: mm: ss)	Clip Description	Discussion Questions
Intro	00:00:45–00:01:32	Storybook introduction to the plot and characters.	
Scene 1	00:03:25–00:04:45	The townspeople converge on Shrek's home. Shrek scares them and they run away.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the stereotypes of Ogres? (loud, mean, and dangerous) • How does Shrek respond to the townspeople's discrimination? (conforming to the stereotype, being mean and scary)
Scene 2	00:04:45–00:06:42	People are rounding up fairy-tale creatures. Shrek finds a "Wanted: Fairy-tale Creatures" flyer. Donkey reveals his stigma (talking).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Donkey's stigma? (fairy-tale creature/animal that can talk) • Is it concealable? (yes)
Scene 3	00:06:42–00:09:45	Donkey finds Shrek's house and tries to befriend him. Shrek is used to being rejected and keeps up façade until he learns that Donkey is not going to reject him.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Shrek's default response to everyone? (be mean and scary) • Why is that adaptive for him? (because people are trying to kill him) • Does he change his response when he sees that Donkey isn't acting as he expected? (yes)
Scene 4	00:26:18–00:27:45	Donkey does a recap of the story to date. Shrek tells Donkey that "ogres are like onions," not like cakes, as a response to Donkey stereotyping him.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does it seem like Shrek's public and private self-esteem match? (no, because he seems to like being an ogre even though he recognizes others do not like his group)
Scene 5	00:40:55–00:42:35	Shrek has just "rescued" Fiona from the tower. She asks him to remove his helmet (and reveal his stigma) to receive his "reward." Note the presentation of the traditional myth of a prince rescuing a princess—they make fun of it. More later.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the princess react when Shrek reveals his stigma? (looks disgusted, upset, says he's not what she expected) • How does Shrek cope with her reaction? (looks sad, upset, smiles, then gets stubborn, and asks defensively what she expected).
Scene 6	00:46:00–00:48:15	Shrek talks to Donkey about what it's like to deal with his stigma and why he reacts defensively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does Shrek cope with his stigma? (keeps everyone out) • Does he engage in self-focused or situation-focused coping? Why? (situation focused, avoidance)
Scene 7	01:00:00–01:03:00	Fiona's stigma is revealed to Donkey. Donkey reacts to the revelation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What stigma does Princess Fiona possess? (she's an ogre) • How does donkey react to Princess Fiona's stigma? (shock and surprise, fear, tells her she's only ugly at night) • How does she react to his learning about her stigma? (she's embarrassed, explains the curse) • Does her private and public self-esteem match? (yes, both are negative) • Do you see any evidence of hostile or benevolent sexism in this tale? (yes, a bit of both. Hostile—adversarial view of gender relations, women seeking to control men. Benevolent—Fiona can only be "fixed" by finding a man.)

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Notes

1. The psychology of prejudice students completed these items as part of a larger course exam administered approximately 2 weeks after they completed the *Shrek* exercise. The comparison groups

completed only the items reported in this paper as a quiz that was administered 3–5 days after they watched the lecture.

2. One student from each of the three groups did not give an answer to the open-ended item and had a score of 0. All analyses were the same with these students included versus excluded. The reported analyses do not include the 0 grade for the three students who skipped the open-ended item.

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