THE MOVIES, THE ACADEMY AWARDS AND IMPLICIT BIAS

The 87th Academy Awards were aired on February 22, 2015 amidst controversy and allegations of racism and sexism in the Academy and movie industry. This year, the annual awards' show included several political speeches by award recipients that addressed these and other issues, and there was a great deal of discussion on social media and elsewhere after the show about bias in the industry. Alejandro González Iñárritu, a Latino director, won the Academy Award for best director and when he was awarded the Oscar, the presenter made a joke about him having a "green card." Prior to the show, some expressed their concern that the film *Selma* was snubbed by the Academy, who nominated the movie for best motion picture but did not select any of the cast or the director for an Oscar nomination. People further questioned that all twenty acting nominees were white. Oscars for the four categories of best actor/actress and best supporting actor/actress have historically neglected people of color.

The Academy Awards and the public discourse about them has inspired a spirited conversation about implicit bias and the role it plays in what films get made, by whom and the extent to which women and people of color get awarded for their roles in film. In this high school lesson, students will reflect on their own experiences and opinions about movies, analyze demographic information about the movie industry and explore the role of implicit bias.

See these additional ADL resources: *Current Events Classroom* lessons Microaggressions In Our Lives and Stereotypes of Girls and Women in the Media and Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories About Bias and Injustice.

Grade Level: grades 9–12

Time: 45 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

Learning Objectives:

- Students will reflect on their experiences and opinions about movies and the Academy Awards.

- Students will analyze demographic information about the movie industry and the Academy Awards.

- Students will explore the concept of implicit bias and examine its relevance to the movie industry and the Academy Awards.

- Students will put themselves in the place of an Academy Award winner and write a short acceptance speech that integrates what they have learned.

Material:

- *Our Experiences and Opinions About Movies Statements 1–7* (one copy to hang on wall around classroom)

- *Definition of Implicit Bias* (write on board/smartboard or chart paper in advance)

- The Diversity Gap in the Academy Awards: 87 Years (one copy for each student)

- *The Oscars and learning the craft of being good* video (5 min., 2015, Jay Smooth, http://fusion.net/video/53663/oscars-and-being-good/)

- "Oscars 2015: So Hollywood Is Still Racist (and Sexist), Now What?" (*The Huffington Post,* January 27, 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/a-b-wilkinson/oscars-2015-so-hollywood- b_6550568.html), one copy for each student

- *Post-it® Notes* (seven sheets for each student)

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's "Glossary of Education Terms.")

- bias
- demographics
- diversifying
- exclusionary
- impartial

- implicit bias
- legitimacy
- liberal
- overt
- racism

- screenwriter
- sexism
- snub
- social construct
- stereotypical

- systematic
- unconscious

OUR EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS ABOUT MOVIES

1. Begin the lesson by asking if anyone watched the Academy Awards that were recently on TV. Ask students to explain what they know about the Academy Awards. Explain that the Academy Awards (sometimes called "The Oscars") are an annual awards ceremony held in the United States that honors achievements in the film industry based on different categories (actress, actor, director, screenwriting, costume design, etc.). The Academy Awards, which are the oldest award ceremonies in the U.S., began in 1929.

   Explain that the ceremony is overseen by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), which is a professional organization and has over 6,000 voting members. They are the people who vote for the Academy Award winners. In 2012, the Los Angeles Times conducted a study on the demographics of the members of AMPAS and found that the group is 94% white, 2% African American and less than 2% Latino. In addition, 77% of AMPAS members were male and their average age was 62.

2. Post the seven statements written below around the classroom, using print-outs of *Our Experiences and Opinions About Movies Statements 1–7*:

   - I like going to the movies.

   - I watched the recent Academy Awards ceremony.

   - Many more movies get made about white people than people of color.

- Men get better roles in films and win more awards than women.

- Very few people of color have won Academy Awards.

- It doesn't really matter who wins awards and who doesn't—it's just a movie.

- The Academy Awards are racist.

3. Distribute at least seven sheets of *Post-it® Notes* to each student. Give students five minutes to walk around the room and place a post-it or round sticker on or near all of the statements that are true for them or if they agree. If you have a large class, you may want to call them up in smaller groups.

4. After placing their post-its on the statements, instruct students to move to the statement they are most interested in talking about with others. Give students five minutes to discuss the statements with each other. Have them talk about why they decided to stand where they are and what the statement means to them.

5. Have students go back to their seats and engage them in a class discussion by asking the following questions:

- Was it easy or difficult to determine which statements you agreed with? Why?

- Where are the most post-its or stickers? How about the least? Why do you think that is the case?

- How did you decide which statement to talk about with others?

- As a class, do we like movies?

- What do you think about gender and race when it comes to the movies?

DEFINING TERMS: WHAT IS IMPLICIT BIAS?

1. Ask students to define bias, racism and sexism. Elicit definitions of the terms as follows and post on the board/smartboard, asking students to provide an example for each.

   Bias: An inclination or preference either for or against an individual or group that interferes with impartial judgment.

   Racism: Prejudice and/or discrimination against people based on the social construction of race. Differences in physical characteristics (e.g. skin color, hair texture, eye shape) are used to support a system of inequities.

   Sexism: Prejudice and/or discrimination against people based on their real or perceived sex. Sexism is based on a belief (conscious or unconscious) that there is a natural order based on sex.

2. Ask students: *Does anyone know what implicit bias is?* Share the following definition:

   Implicit bias is the unconscious attitudes, stereotypes and unintentional actions (positive or negative) towards members of a group merely because of their membership in that group. These associations develop over the course of a lifetime beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages. When people are acting out of their implicit bias, they are not even aware that their actions are biased. In fact, those biases may be in direct conflict with a person's explicit beliefs and values.

3. Ask students: *Can anyone give an example of implicit bias?* If students can't think of any examples, share a personal example such as: you are a high school teacher or college professor and a girl or young woman makes a point in class and is ignored and later a young man makes the same point and is applauded for his important comment.

4. Then share the following examples which are based on research:

    - *Example 1:* When white people and black people were sent to negotiate to buy a used car, black people were offered initial prices roughly $700 higher than white people and they received far smaller concessions. (Source: Race and Gender Discrimination in Bargaining)

    - *Example 2:* There was a study where thousands of resumes were sent to employers with job openings. Before sending them out, the researchers randomly assigned stereotypically African American names ("Jamal") on some and stereotypically white names ("Brendan) on others. The same resume was 50% more likely to get a callback for an interview if it had a "white" name. (Source: Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination)

    - *Example 3:* Researchers asked students to rate teachers of an online course (the students never saw the teachers). To some of the students, a male teacher claimed to be female and vice versa. When students took a class from someone they believed to be male, they rated the teacher more highly. The very same teacher, when believed to be female, was rated significantly lower. (Source: Online Students Give Instructors Higher Marks If They Think Instructors Are Men)

5. Ask students: *In what ways does implicit bias differ from overt forms of racism and sexism?* Explain to students that over the course of the lesson, they will discuss movies, the Academy Awards and the role of implicit bias.

TURN AND TALK: ANALYZING GRAPHS

1. Distribute a copy of the infographic "The Diversity Gap in the Academy Awards: 87 Years" to each student.

2. Have students read the infographic silently to themselves and then turn and talk with a person sitting next to them. The pairs should reflect on what they read in the infographic by responding to the following questions:

    - What surprises you the most?

    - What surprises you the least?

    - If there was one statistic you could change, what would it be and why?

3. Engage students in a whole class discussion by asking:

    - What patterns do you see in the infographic?

    - What surprises you about the numbers?

    - What does the "diversity gap" mean in terms of Academy Awards?

    - Why do you think these disparities exist?

    - Do you think this is a problem? Why or why not?

    - What do you think can or should be done about it?

    - What does this have to do with implicit bias?

    - What is the message conveyed in the infographic? Is it an effective tool to get across that idea?

VIDEO VIEWING ACTIVITY

1. Show the video 5-minute video *The Oscars and learning the craft of being good* by Jay Smooth. As students watch, have them jot down notes on what they want to remember.

2. Have students call out any words, phrases or feelings to describe what they heard in the video or felt about it. If possible, record their words on the board/smartboard.

3. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

   - What was the main message Jay Smooth tried to convey?

   - Do you agree or disagree with his point of view?

   - What is the "contradiction" Jay Smooth refers to?

   - How is injustice and prejudice perpetuated, according to Jay Smooth?

   - What example does he use from his own life?

   - What did he mean when he says "good people are naturally prone to doing bad things?"

   - What is implicit bias and what does it have to do with what Jay Smooth talks about?

   - How does Jay Smooth suggest we fight implicit bias within ourselves?

READING ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL)

1. Distribute a copy of the article "Oscars 2015: So Hollywood Is Still Racist (and Sexist), Now What?" to each student to read (or give it to them to read the day before for homework).

2. Engage students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:

   - What did you learn by reading the article?

   - What is the perspective of the article?

   - What are some of the stereotypes about certain groups that movies perpetuate?

   - How do statistics cited in the article prove or disprove the writer's main point?

   - If people feel strongly about the bias in the film industry, what are some things they can do to have their voices heard?

   - Is the problem of implicit bias represented in other parts of our lives and society or only in Hollywood and the movies?

WRITING ACTIVITY

1. Explain to students that based on everything they have learned about the movie industry, the Academy Awards and implicit bias, they are to pretend they have won an Academy Award and prepare a short acceptance speech which they will deliver to their classmates.

2. Have students consider their opinion about the Academy Awards and the latest controversy about implicit bias. Explain to them that as they reflect on the issues discussed in the lesson and their thoughts and feelings, they are to write a speech based on their particular point of view. Their speeches should include the following:

- State whether they feel implicit bias (racism, sexism, homophobia, other) plays a role in the film industry and who gets nominated and wins Academy Awards.

- Say something inspirational about what should be done (or not done) about it.

- Share an anecdote or story from your own life or movies you've seen that illustrates your point.

3. As a closing activity for the lesson, have some or all of the students deliver their speeches.

ADDITIONAL READING

- "'Birdman' and political speeches soar at 87th Academy Awards" (MSNBC, February 23, 2015)

- "Oscars 2015 Infographic: How White Are The 87th Academy Awards?" (*International Business Times,* February 22, 2015)

- Project Implicit

- "Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions" (*The New York Times,* January 3, 2015)

- "Straight Talk for White Men" (*The New York Times,* February 21, 2015)

- Test Your Implicit Bias With Science (PBS, February 20, 2015)

- "The Oscars Proved That Even When Latinos Win Film's Highest Honors, Someone Will Ask For Your Papers" (Remezcla, February 23, 2015)

- "Unconscious Bias and Hollywood's Arrested Development" (Alliance of Women Film Journalists, January 27, 2015)

- "Unmasking the Academy: Oscar Voters Overwhelmingly White, Male" (*Los Angeles Times,* February 19, 2012)

- "Where's the Diversity, Hollywood? 85 Years of the Academy Awards" (Lee & Low Books, February 20, 2014)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Standard 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
Standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

OUR EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS ABOUT MOVIES

STATEMENT 1

I like going to the

movies.

OUR EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS ABOUT MOVIES

STATEMENT 2

I watched the recent Academy Awards ceremony.

OUR EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS ABOUT MOVIES

STATEMENT 3

Many more movies get made about white people than people of color.

OUR EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS ABOUT MOVIES

STATEMENT 4

Men get better roles in films and win more awards than women.

OUR EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS ABOUT MOVIES

STATEMENT 5

Very few people of color have won Academy Awards.

OUR EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS ABOUT MOVIES

It doesn't really matter who wins awards and who doesn't—it's just a movie.

OUR EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS ABOUT MOVIES
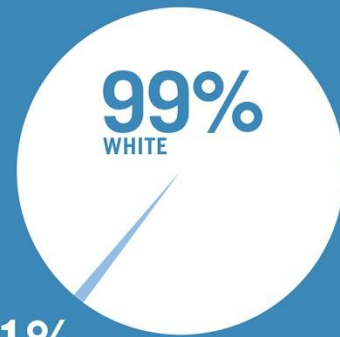
STATEMENT 7

The Academy Awards

are racist.

THE DIVERSITY GAP IN THE ACADEMY AWARDS

87 YEARS ★ 1927-2015

ACADEMY BRANCHES

PRODUCERS 98% WHITE

WRITERS 98% WHITE

ACTORS 88% WHITE
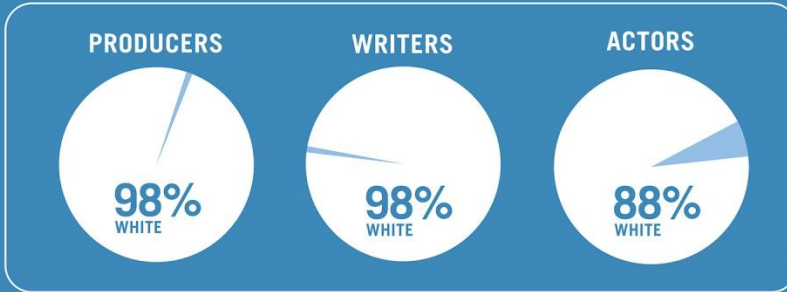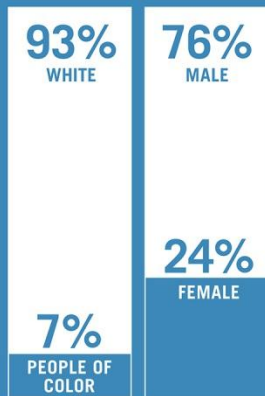
BEST ACTRESS WINNERS

99% WHITE

1% PERSON OF COLOR
Halle Berry 2002

IN 87 YEARS OF ACADEMY AWARDS **LESS THAN 5%** OF ACTING OSCARS® HAVE BEEN AWARDED TO BLACK ACTORS

DID YOU KNOW?
PRODUCERS AND WRITERS MAKE ALL THE CALLS RELATED TO WHAT CONTENT IS DEVELOPED AND WHO IS CAST IN LEADING ROLES. IS IT SURPRISING THAT EVERY SINGLE CATEGORY IN THIS STUDY IS OVERWHELMINGLY WHITE?
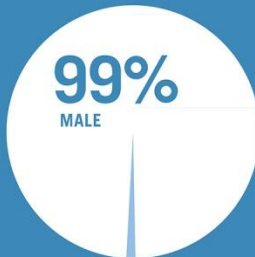
IN THE LAST 10 YEARS **NO WINNERS** OF ACTING OSCARS® HAVE BEEN OF LATINO, ASIAN, OR NATIVE AMERICAN DESCENT
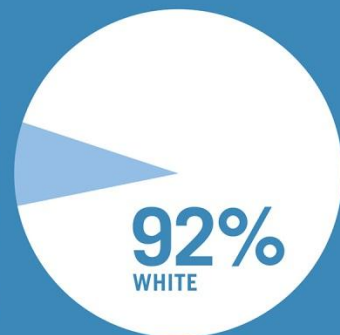
ACADEMY VOTERS
93% WHITE   76% MALE

24% FEMALE

7% PEOPLE OF COLOR

BEST DIRECTOR WINNERS
99% MALE

1% FEMALE
Kathryn Bigelow 2010

BEST ACTOR WINNERS

8% PEOPLE OF COLOR
José Ferrer 1950
Sidney Poitier 1963
Ben Kingsley 1982
F. Murray Abraham 1984
Denzel Washington 2001
Jamie Foxx 2004
Forest Whitaker 2006

92% WHITE

63 AVERAGE AGE OF ACADEMY VOTERS

ABOUT EVERYONE • FOR EVERYONE
LEE & LOW BOOKS

for more conversations on diversity, visit
blog.leeandlow.com

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"Academy Award for Best Actress," Wikipedia, last modified May 14, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academy_Award_for_Best_Actress.
"Biography for Yul Brynner," IMDB, last modified May 14, 2013, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000989/bio
Horn, John, Nicole Sperling, and Doug Smith, "Oscar Voters Overwhelmingly White, Male," Los Angeles Times, Entertainment section, February 19, 2012.
Robinson, Russell K., Su Li, Angela Makabali, and Kaitlyn Murphy, "Not Quite a Breakthrough: The Oscars and Actors of Color, 2002–2012." Sponsored by Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy, UC Berkeley School of Law, and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Latino Policy & Issues Brief, no. 27 (March 2012).
Siddiqi, Saira. "Watch Asia Make its Mark at the Oscars, Past and Present," Asia Blog (Asia Society), February 25th, 2013, http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/watch-asia-make-its-mark-oscars-past-and-present.

Disclaimer: Statistics for this study were compiled by the LEE & LOW staff. While we are bright, caring people, we are not statisticians. We have dutifully listed our sources for this study and have done so with the full knowledge that sites such as Wikipedia may not be entirely accurate.
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