Exploring Your Community

*Untitled*, Cassidy Rodriguez, 2018

**Grade levels:** 9–12

**Duration:** One 45-minute classroom period
Learning Objectives

Can a photograph spotlight bias, unfairness, and injustice in society?

Message to Educators

This lesson asks: How does photography spotlight expressions in your community and other cultures? Using photography to take action for social justice, your students will turn their gazes outward to their surroundings. This lesson plan includes photography examples to spark discussion, a list of materials, and cues that will help you foster a safe space and lead confidently, as students illuminate their backgrounds and identities.

You do not need to be practiced at facilitating discussions using art to effectively lead this lesson. Getty is committed to supporting meaningful dialogue through photography, and the lesson plan was created with educators to carefully walk you through the steps.

In this conversation, you and your students will move from community awareness to highlighting community change. As you and your students explore the elements of culture and community, you may find yourself in deeper dialogue with each other around questions like: What are some of the cultures you see represented within your community or neighborhood? Do you see signs of a dominant culture? Does dominant culture reflect the majority of the people? How do photographers highlight nondominant cultures? Why is it important that we do so?

Lesson Plan Two: Exploring Your Community

In this lesson, students explore how photography can represent their communities, cultural backgrounds, bias, injustice toward groups, stereotypes, and differences and similarities in groups. To start this exploration, the group considers the idea of dominant culture, their own culture, and other cultures that photography can express, by analyzing photographs. Following a discussion of the factors that shape culture, students then begin to consider how these different cultures intersect in our public and private spaces. Next, students create their own photographs representing a culture. In the final reflection, students begin to connect culture to change, through photography as a point of view for that change.
Associated Standards

- Getty SJA LO (Getty Social Justice and Advocacy Learning Objective): Identify expressions of the dominant culture, one’s own culture, and other cultures. Consider these expressions in different contexts: one’s school, neighborhood, city, state, or one’s country.
- Getty SJA LO: Accurately and respectfully describe differences and similarities between people and between groups.
- Getty SJA LO: Ask respectfully about the history and lived experiences of others.
- Getty SJA LO: Identify stereotypes.
- Getty SJA LO: Recognize, describe and distinguish examples of bias, unfairness, and injustice in society.
- CCSS (California Curriculum State Standard).ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.5: Make strategic use of digital media (for example, textual, graphic, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence, and to add interest.

Materials

- Projector
- Photograph from Getty Unshuttered community
- Photographs from Getty Museum collection
- Point of View Image Frame or Tableau Organizer
- Getty Unshuttered 2.0 Point of View challenge video
- A digital camera or smartphone
Vocabulary

You may wish to ground the discussion of community and culture dominance with shared definitions of some key vocabulary.

Bias (see also: Unconscious Bias)
A preconceived and unreasoned inclination or preference, especially one that interferes with impartiality or fairness.

Community
A network or group of people, sometimes living in a particular place, who share interests, values, characteristics, responsibilities, or physical spaces.

Cultural Appropriation
When an individual or group claims rights to the symbols, art, language, or customs of another individual or group, often without understanding, lived experience, acknowledgment, or respect for its value in the original culture.

Culture
A social system of meaning and custom, developed by a group of people to assure the group’s identity and history. The system has unspoken rules that shape values, beliefs, habits, patterns of thinking, behaviors, symbols, and styles of communication. Consider using instead: Social identity group, social group.

Discrimination
Actions stemming from conscious or unconscious prejudice, which favor and empower one group over others based on differences of race, gender, economic class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, language, age, national identity, and other categories.

Ethnicity
A social construct, used to group people based on shared cultural heritage and characteristics such as values, behaviors, language, political and economic interests, history, geographical base, and ancestry.
Intersectionality
An approach coined and theory developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, scholar of critical race theory, which holds that characteristics such as gender, race, class, and others must be examined in relation to each other, rather than in isolation from each other.

Justice, Injustice (see also: Restorative Justice)
In different contexts, “justice” refers to both moral correctness and fairness, and also the rule of law. By contrast, “injustice” usually describes unfairness.

Marginalize
Treatment of a person, group, or concept as insignificant or powerless; placing them outside of a group, society, or community; and enforcing prejudice through societal institutions.

Privilege
Unearned social power granted by societal institutions to members of a dominant group, based on the nature of their identities. Often invisible to those who have it.

Race
A term used to identify individuals as part of a distinct group, based on physical characteristics and heritage. Although at one time the term was purportedly based in biology, race is now understood as a social construct that is not scientifically based.

Religion
A system of beliefs, usually spiritual in nature. Often advanced in the context of a formal institution.

Restorative Justice (see also: Justice, Injustice)
A theory of justice that focuses on repairing or mitigating the harm caused by a crime. As a cooperative, in-person process with all willing stakeholders, its goals for offenders include taking responsibility, understanding the harm caused, redemption, and discouraging further harm.

Stereotype
Attitudes, beliefs, or assumptions about a person or group that are oversimplified and unsupported, but may also be widespread and socially sanctioned. Stereotypes can be positive or negative.
Unconscious Bias, Implicit Bias, Hidden Bias (see also: Bias)
Negative stereotypes regarding a person or group of people, which influence individuals’ thoughts, attitudes, and actions without their conscious knowledge.

Instructional Plan

Introduction

As we look beyond ourselves to our communities, we start to explore questions about culture, dominant culture, dominant groups, coexisting community groups, cultural identification, biases, and other markers of people and groups. The questions for inquiry at the center of the lesson include: How does dominant culture present itself in your community? Does the dominant culture in your community reflect the dominant culture in your country? How, if at all, do the two differ? How do photographers use photography to illuminate, explain, or highlight representations of community?
Set the Stage

Project the photograph shown below. Discussion can begin by simply asking students what they notice.

Because We Live in the Suburbs We Don’t Eat Too Much Chinese Food, 1971. Bill Owens, gelatin silver print. The J. Paul Getty Museum, purchased in part with funds provided by the Photographs Council. © Bill Owens


Questions for discussion:

- What do you notice first about this image?
- Describe the subjects of the photo and their location.
- What compositional and photographic elements do you notice, and why? Include:
  - Framing (The image is horizontally oriented, with a strong point of perspective centered in the image.)
o The position of the subjects (The subjects all turn toward the camera, in a way that suggests it is unexpected, not posed; the subjects are all seated while the photographer’s higher angle suggests he is standing.)
o Where this might have been taken (This is the dining and kitchen area of a home; the subjects’ body language displays a level of comfort and ease that suggests it is their home; the title gives even more information about the location.)
o Foreground and background (The family at the dining table is in the foreground, and the kitchen is in the background.)
o Lighting (There seems to be a light source coming from the left side of the scene, where it is most illuminated, with shadows falling into the darker kitchen space.)

- What do you think the photographer is trying to show or explain?
- What do you think the photographer might be communicating about this culture or community? Do you think there are unintended messages in this photograph?
- The photograph is titled Because We Live in the Suburbs We Don't Eat Too Much Chinese Food. Does anything change when you know how the photographer titled it? And what do the hot dogs on their plates suggest?
- Does anything change when you know a bit more about the photographer?
- What assumptions do you draw, or what expectations do you have, about the photographer’s background and identity?

---

**Bill Owens**

Introduced to photography as a Peace Corps volunteer, Bill Owens (born 1938) became a staff photographer for a local newspaper in an East Bay suburb of San Francisco. In 1973 he published *Suburbia*, a book of photographs notable for its keen observation of middle-class America and the movement of families from urban apartments to affordable new homes in city outskirts. Social critics mocked the suburbs for their apparent conformity, but Owens respected the liberation many suburbanites felt, and their determination to build better lives.

Discuss: Community and Cultural Dominance

Project the photograph shown below.


Let’s look at another example from Getty’s collection. Here we will ask, how do photographers use their work to explain their communities, or highlight stereotypes and bias, or frame conversations about the dominant culture? It’s time to open the discussion to the larger question of dominant culture. Project the photo and caption above, and with the whole group, discuss cultural dominance and community, with questions such as these:

**Questions for discussion:**

- What do you notice first about this image? (It’s a portrait of a woman with laundry equipment around her.)
- What do you think the photographer is interested in communicating about the subject? Do you see any stereotypes or bias at work here? (The subject appears to be a young, working-class Latina, with the props referring to laundry, a stereotypical line of work.)
- Do you think the photographer is simply documenting someone with her tools of the trade, or aiming to impart something more complex about the subject? (Consider that the subject and the items are posed and arranged purposefully against a studio backdrop, in other words, not outside, where you’d typically find a laundry line.)
- Do you expect that the subject is meant to represent the dominant culture? Why or why not? Do you think the photographer is in some way commenting on the dominant culture? How?
- How do stereotypes play into cultural dominance? And, returning to the photograph again, what do you think was the photographer’s intent?
- After learning more about the photographer’s practice and her photo series, does it deepen your understanding of the work?

**Christina Fernandez**

Los Angeles–based photographer Christina Fernandez’s Mexican heritage often influences her work, along with themes of migration, immigration, labor, gender, and her relationship to her home city. In the series “Maria’s Great Expedition,” Fernandez photographed herself posing as her great-grandmother María González, the first member of her family to migrate to the United States from Mexico. In these staged images, she evokes the challenges immigrants to the Southwest have had to overcome.

Exercise: Communicate Point of View

Using the group’s list of aspects of cultural dominance, let’s take some time to explore our own community and cultural dominance. Begin by showing the Getty Unshuttered 2.0 Composition: Framing video and discuss around Point of View. [See Resources section.]

Share the Point of View Image Frame or Tableau Organizer. [See Resources section.] Pass out the organizer, and have students choose to work individually or in a group. You may wish to assign the class groups or allow students to self-select. You may wish to let students know that their frame or tableau is going to be shared, so that they can determine what they want to frame or not about their community. In this exercise, students are invited to create images, or for a more active experience, create a real-life tableau. Use your knowledge of the group when assigning work on the organizer.

With the Point of View Image Frame or Tableau Organizer complete, students then put together the artistic idea of photography or image with their present understanding of cultural dominance or community.

Have students come back together as a class to share Frames or Tableaux and discuss what was or wasn’t shared in each image that was created.

Practice: Use Point of View to show Cultural Dominance and Community

In this practice, students use framing and perspective in a photograph of something in their community, to communicate a point of view about cultural dominance or community.

If time allows, this can be a good point to call out additional photo and narrative skills for the students. In the earlier exploration of cultural dominance, we discussed elements such as framing, foreground, background, scale, proportion, lighting, and position relationships. The related photography skill videos listed under Other Resources can also serve as quick skill refreshers. Ask how they will apply these skills and understandings in their own practice.

Encourage students to continue their practice at their homes and in their neighborhoods. Assigning the cultural dominance and community point of view...
exercise as homework, if possible, affords students time to work on the assignment, and the opportunity to use contexts from their daily lives.

Reflect

Reflection can take place in the group setting or individually. Ideally, have students share one to three photographs with their peers. They can each choose to speak about their intention with the photo(s) or not. Having the viewers provide positive feedback is key to the exercise. However, sharing can be a vulnerable moment for students. Use your best judgment about whether a group reflection is appropriate, and enlist the support of your students to create a safe space.

Questions for discussion:

- What is the first thing you notice about the photograph?
- What is the photograph expressing about a particular culture or community?
- What did you discover about yourself, your community, and others, in the course of the project?
- What was challenging, and why?
- What part are you most proud of, and why?
- What would you do differently next time?

Alternatively, individual reflection can be useful, using the same framework of questions.

Assessment

- Observe the group discussion of the lesson. Assess contributions to the discussion. Did students pose thoughtful questions? Did they respond to questions with reasons and evidence? Did they listen to different points of view? Did they clarify and challenge ideas and conclusions when appropriate? Did they synthesize evidence and ideas?
- Photograph students’ frames and tableaux in class to check for understanding and completeness, and to assess students’ understanding of how artists use framing and point of view to prompt dialogue about community and cultural dominance.
- In the Reflection section, assess student feedback for clarity and thoughtfulness.
- Encourage students to share their photographic work from this lesson on the Getty Unshuttered app.
Thank You…

…for your commitment to using art to inspire youth creating social change in their communities. Please adapt and improve upon this lesson plan to meet the needs and age range of your group. Now is the time! We are grateful for educators like you who listen, learn alongside their students, and inspire action.

Resources

Point of View Image Frame or Tableau Organizer [See page 14]

Related photography skill videos:

High Level Perspective: https://youtu.be/D9hJZy8NyVM

Canted Perspective: https://youtu.be/tYbskr4K7Co

Bird's-eye Perspective: https://youtu.be/XHOloblivEw
**Unshuttered: Point of View**  
**What to Show/What Not to Show**

Using the idea of Point of View as a way to frame an image, think about what you want others to know about your community and its relationship to the dominant culture. Use the questions below to help frame the image you will create.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point of View Prompts</th>
<th>Point of View Decisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who/what is in the image?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who/what is not in the image?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance of subject from the artist?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreground/background: What is in each space, and how does it shape our understanding of the photograph?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship of elements in frame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame Perspective: horizontal, vertical, canted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close up vs. bird's-eye vs. high level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candid vs. Portrait</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the photographer saying by what is in/out of the photo and the presentation from their point of view?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other thoughts? Ideas?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>