

LESSON 3

SPECIESISM 101

In this lesson, students define and deconstruct the speciesist mindset, identifying logical fallacies in this harmful way of thinking as well as solutions to it.

Objectives

- **Affective:** Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the concept of *speciesism* and why it has harmful repercussions in society.
- **Cognitive:** Students will be able to write informatively to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Background

Like sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination, speciesism is an oppressive belief system in which those with power draw boundaries to justify using or excluding their fellow beings who are less powerful. This line of "reasoning" is used to justify treating other living, feeling beings like research tools, food ingredients, fabric, or toys—even though they share our capacity for pain, hunger, fear, thirst, love, joy, and loneliness and have as much interest in freedom and staying alive as we do.

Many humans grow up thinking of themselves as entirely different from and superior to other animals, which lays the foundation for exploiting them. From childhood, most humans are conditioned to view certain species as worthy of care and compassion and others as less important or unworthy—based on arbitrary human preferences. This toxic view also leads humans to draw groundless distinctions between animal species based on their perceived worth.

Because of speciesism, we learn to ignore our own conscience, which tells us that it's wrong to mistreat others. Addressing speciesism and acknowledging other animals' rights can be as

simple as respecting their needs and leaving them in peace.

Materials

- ["All Beings Bleed the Same" campaign images](#)*
- ["RZA: We're Not Different in Any Important Way" video](#)*
- ["RZA: We're Not Different in Any Important Way" video transcript](#)*
- ["Non-Human Animals: Crash Course Philosophy #42" \(PBS\) video](#)*
- ["Test Subjects" video](#)*

Key Vocabulary

speciesism: prejudice or discrimination based on species

Motivation

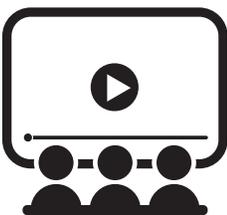
Begin the lesson by showing students the ["All Beings Bleed the Same" campaign images](#)* and asking them to explain what they think is going on in each image and what the goal of the campaign is. Ask them how they feel when they look at the images and why. Have them share their responses as a class.

Guided Practice

Have students watch the video ["We're Not Different in Any Important Way" featuring musician RZA](#).* **Provide them with the transcript*** so they can follow along, making note of any language in the text or images in the video that stand out to them. As a class, discuss the questions that follow as well as any additional thoughts or feelings that students may have.



["All Beings Bleed the Same" campaign images](#) (available online)



["We're Not Different in Any Important Way" video](#) and [transcript](#) (available online)

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Discussion Questions

1. Who is usually referred to when the speaker says “we” throughout the video?

Answer: In most instances, this refers to all sentient beings, humans and other animals alike.

2. How are humans and other animals different? How are we the same?

Answer: As the video points out, some animals have fur, feathers, or fins. Some have long noses, some have four or more legs, and some have no legs at all. Some fly, some can breathe underwater, and some live underground. All animals have thoughts and feelings. We all love, have the ability to feel pain, and want to live free from harm.

3. What do you think the speaker means when he says, “We can all understand, but we are not always understanding”?

Possible answer: All sentient beings are individuals with thoughts and feelings. Humans, however, don’t always respect this. Sometimes we judge others based on their outward appearance, and sometimes we even hurt them for being different.

4. The speaker says, “We experience ourselves as separate from the rest.” How can this way of thinking be harmful?

Possible answer: When one group of individuals thinks that it is more important than another, the former may use its superior mindset to mistreat or even harm the latter in order to maintain its dominance and privilege. For example, some humans describe animals as unintelligent or unfeeling in order to justify harming and killing them for experiments, food, clothing, or entertainment.

5. The video closes with the message “Face it: Inside every body, there is a person.” Do you think animals are people, too? Why or why not?

Answer: Will vary based on student experience. Point out that while the word “person” is almost exclusively used to describe humans, corporations have also been deemed persons in the eyes of the law. There have also been several court cases in which humans have fought for an animal’s right to legal personhood. You may also ask students to consider which noun category (person, place, or thing) they would assign animals to, arguing that they aren’t places or things.



Group Work

Put students in groups of three or four and have them watch the video [“Non-Human Animals: Crash Course Philosophy #42.”](#)* Assign one set of questions to each group. Have students discuss their responses with their group and see if they can come to a consensus. Have each group present their responses to the whole class.

[“Non-Human Animals: Crash Course Philosophy #42” video](#)
(available online)

Discussion Questions

1. “The response to [Cecil] the lion’s death was so strong that the guy who shot Cecil basically went into hiding until he issued an apology. But isn’t that a little bit strange? We react with horror when we hear about a majestic lion being shot or sacks of kittens being tossed into rivers or owners training their dogs to fight each other for sport. But what is the difference between killing Cecil and killing a deer, or a duck, or a cow, or a chicken?” Respond to this question posed in the video. How did you determine your beliefs? Are they consistent with your behavior? How can you use your knowledge of cognitive dissonance to understand your reaction to the video and the questions it raises?
2. “How do we reconcile the strong feelings many of us have about certain animals, mainly the cute ones like kittens and puppies, with the way we actually use animals in our own lives?” Respond to this question posed in the video. The video points out that animals face harm because humans use them for their meat, milk, and skin. How can you make your actions more consistent with your feelings?

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3. "Contemporary Austrian philosopher Peter Singer uses the word *speciesism* to describe giving preference to our own species over another in the absence of morally relevant differences." Why does Singer believe that humans giving preference to humans over other animals is based on "morally irrelevant difference[s]"? (Hint: He reminds us that there was a time when enslaving humans was thought to be totally normal and right based on the morally irrelevant difference of skin color.) Is species a morally relevant difference? How do you think future generations will look back on us?
4. Philosopher Carl Cohen argues that "every species is struggling to claw its way to the top and that's how it should be" and that "every species ought to be concerned with protecting itself." He says that "humans ... can pretty much do whatever we want to other beings." Reflecting on previous class discussions, do you believe that "might makes right"? Does tradition justify everything? Is it necessary for humans to use and eat animals?
5. The philosopher Jeremy Bentham said, "The question is not 'Can they reason?' nor 'Can they talk?' but 'Can they suffer?'" What does this statement mean to you?

Independent Work

Have students choose one way society uses animals and describe in writing what an equal consideration of interests would look like. Students may find PETA's motto helpful in identifying the four main areas in which the largest number of animals suffer the most intensely for the longest periods of time at the hands of humans: "Animals are not ours to experiment on, eat, wear, use for entertainment, or abuse in any other way."

Ask students to break down Singer's principle of equal consideration by addressing the following questions in their description. Walk them through an example: As the video points out, society uses rabbits (along with mice, rats, monkeys, cats, dogs, and other animals) in laboratory experiments.

- What interests do humans and the animals in your chosen scenario share?
Example: Both humans and rabbits have an interest in avoiding pain and suffering. This includes having all their needs met (food, water, shelter, freedom of movement, safety, etc.).
- Are these shared interests equally considered in the way society uses the animals in your scenario?
Example: These shared interests are not equally considered in the way society uses rabbits. As the video points out, "a common method for testing cosmetics ... involves restraining rabbits and putting the product into their eyes, leaving it for a set amount of time, and then washing it out and checking for ill effects." The video goes on to note that "this can be extremely painful and often blinds the rabbits, [who] are then euthanized."
- If not, how can the scenario be changed to consider the interests of all individuals involved equally?
Example: Opting for animal-free testing and research methods would provide both humans and rabbits with an equal consideration of interests.

Real-World Connection

Read the following short story to the class to prepare students to watch the "Test Subjects" video:

Thanks to a rat named Ratsky, Dr. Neal Barnard, founder of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, changed the way medical schools in the U.S. and Canada use animals.

While in college, Barnard, interested in how the human mind works, enrolled in a psychology course that included placing rats in boxes and depriving them of food and water so that they would press levers or do whatever else the experimenters wanted them to do.



"Test Subjects" video
(available online)

One day Barnard was conducting a test in which he had to drill holes into a rat's head and insert electrodes inside the brain. To steady the skull, the rats had to be placed in a device that held them in place by way of bars in their ears. Barnard's professor walked by and told him that his device was too loose. When Barnard tightened it, he could feel it pierce the rat's eardrums. He reported this to his professor, who shot back, "Well, I guess he won't be able to listen to his stereo in the morning."

Barnard was taken aback. The professor had always struck him as a kind man, but, Barnard says, "this callous remark, this disregard for the suffering of animals, was something very different." Troubled by this attitude, he took one of the rats home. He began to see, even in that tiny body, a sentient being who loathed pain, bonded with others, and had a wide range of complicated emotions. He named her Ratsky.

Ratsky lived for some months in a cage in his bedroom. And in her cage, she behaved the way Barnard assumed rats behave. But when he started leaving the cage door open so that she could scurry around, he began to see actions he hadn't anticipated. After several days of cautious sniffing at the cage door, Ratsky began to investigate the world beyond it. "As she explored my apartment (under my watchful eye), she became more and more friendly. If I was lying on my back reading, she would come and stand on my chest," Barnard says. "She would wait to be petted, and if I didn't pay her enough attention, she would lightly nip my nose and run away. I knew her sharp teeth could have gone right through my skin, but she was always playfully careful."

Shortly afterward, when Barnard was attending the George Washington University School of Medicine, an instructor announced that an upcoming laboratory exercise would involve giving numerous human heart drugs to a dog and recording any reactions. All the dogs would be killed at the end of the exercise. Barnard refused to participate—obvious cruelty was involved, and he felt that medical students could sufficiently grasp the concepts of pharmacology without a graphic (and fatal) demonstration using a dog. Instead, he and one other student turned in reports of the expected psychological effects of these drugs. Both passed the course.

Dr. Barnard is one of many scientists who have chosen to recognize that animals used in experiments are living, feeling beings whose bodies and lives are their own—not ours—and that abundant evidence shows that animal experimentation produces almost nothing to promote better human health, despite what we've been taught to believe. Challenging the status quo, especially in the world of science and academia, isn't easy, which makes these rebel scientists all the more inspiring.

Share with students the 16-minute documentary "[Test Subjects](#),"* which explores the pervasive and sometimes subtle pressure on graduate students to experiment on animals—even when doing so is contrary to good science. The film profiles three scientists whose lives were altered when they were coached by their doctoral advisers to accept that experimenting on animals was the best way to earn their diplomas, even though it was unnecessary for their research. They had all entered their graduate studies as young scientists hoping to improve human health, but they soon realized that they were being taught to perpetuate an archaic system that was *impeding* good research—and they've since dedicated their careers to ending animal tests. **Have students discuss what it means to "challenge the status quo." Ask them to recall a time when they had to take a stand against something that was popular but that they felt was wrong. As a group, discuss the importance of standing up for what you believe in.**



Wrap-Up Activity

Have students discuss the following common acts of speciesism and suggest ways each situation could be changed to give equal consideration to all individuals involved:

- Animal shelters hold fundraisers to help certain species (like dogs, cats, and rabbits) have a better

life, while serving the dead bodies of other species (like pigs, chickens, and cows). Although this is done with good intentions, it can confuse the people attending and can prevent farmed animals from getting the help that they need.

- The thought of drinking cat's or dog's milk is seen as more disgusting than drinking cow's milk—even though all these animals produce milk for just one reason: to nourish their own young.
- Wearing the skin of a dog or cat would freak most people out, yet many wear shoes made of cow skin (aka "leather") without thinking twice.

Assessment

Evaluate students' written responses and group discussions for clear and accurate descriptions of complex ideas.

Common Misperception/Reality

Common Misperception 	Reality 
<p>People don't need to justify their use of animals. If they want to eat meat, wear fur, go to an animal circus, or otherwise exploit animals, they should be allowed to do so without scrutiny.</p>	<p>It's important for people to be consistent in their beliefs and to be able to justify their actions—otherwise, everyone would be acting only in their own self-interest and disregarding the safety and well-being of others, which wouldn't make for a society anyone would want to live in.</p>



Extension

Like other harmful forms of discrimination, speciesism relies on the differences between groups of individuals—in this case, humans and animals. But the more we learn about animals, the more we can see *ourselves* in these living, feeling beings—after all, humans are animals. Visit TeachKind.org/WritingPrompts for images and videos to cultivate students' empathy for animals.

Common Core Standards Addressed

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1**
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2**
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1**
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2**
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

*Indicates components necessary to implement the lesson are available online only. Please visit TeachKind.org/SocialJustice to access these materials.