

# BLUE EYED

## **A Guide to Use in Organizations**

by Nora Lester

1. **Introduction: Diversity Training Today**
2. **Background: Jane Elliott and the “Blue-eyed/ Brown-eyed” Exercise**
3. **Jane Elliott’s Unique Approach to Diversity Training**
4. **A Synopsis of Blue-Eyed**
5. **Using Blue-Eyed in Organizational Settings**
6. **Using Five Common Viewer Reactions to Blue-Eyed as Discussion Starters**
7. **Applying Blue-Eyed to Your Organization: Eight Discussion Points**
8. **Bringing Closure to Your Screening: Four Paths for Personal Action**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION: DIVERSITY TRAINING TODAY**

Diversity is a hot topic in corporations, government agencies, schools and communities today. While equity, justice and opportunity have been problematic since the founding of this country, discussion of these issues was transformed in the early 1990s when demographers projected increasingly dramatic population shifts.

Immigration is increasing, with more and more people coming from Latin America and Asia than from Europe as in the past. Women are returning to the workforce in increasing numbers. People with disabilities, lesbians and gay men are demanding to be recognized and accepted, not stigmatized. The population is getting older. And U.S.-born people of color continue to press for full participation in all aspects of American society.

Many organizations have decided that addressing diversity is critical to their continued success or their very survival. One tool they use to learn to work across lines of difference is diversity training. It is offered to educate people about similarities and differences among people and provide an opportunity to discuss new and better ways of interacting.

## **2. BACKGROUND: JANE ELLIOTT AND THE "BLUE-EYED/ BROWN-EYED" EXERCISE**

Jane Elliott, a pioneer in racism awareness training, was first inspired to action by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. As a third grade teacher in an all-white, all-Christian community, she struggled for ways to help her students understand racism and discrimination. She adopted the "Blue-Eyed/brown eyed" exercise, (in which participants are treated as inferior or superior based solely on the color of their eyes) as a result of reading about the techniques the Nazis used on those they designated undesirable during what is now called the Holocaust.

The purpose of the exercise is to give white people an opportunity to find out how it feels to be something other than white. The exercise gained national attention when it was featured on the *Johnny Carson Show* in 1968 and again when it aired on the ABC News show, *Now*, in a segment called *Eye of the Storm*. After 16 years of teaching, Jane Elliott began to offer her training to scores of corporations, government agencies, colleges and community groups. Millions of people have been exposed to her powerful message through her appearances on *Today*, *The Tonight Show*, *Donahue*, *Oprah Winfrey* and PBS' *Frontline* series in a program entitled *A Class Divided*.

### **3. JANE ELLIOTT'S UNIQUE APPROACH TO DIVERSITY TRAINING**

An understanding of Jane Elliott's approach to diversity training, including ways that it differs from training more common in organizational settings, can help trainers use **Blue-Eyed** more effectively. Jane Elliott brings ethics and morality to the center of the discussion about race. This is refreshing and compelling, especially in organizations that commonly frame discussions about diversity solely in business terms. The "diversity as a business issue" approach focuses on compliance with laws in order to avoid costly grievances or poor publicity. Or, employees may be taught about the bottom-line impact of diversity-related problems (e.g., high turnover among women and people of color) or the cost of a lack of diversity (e.g., inability to reach certain markets). Diversity, when framed solely as a business issue, rationalizes diversity efforts because they are good for the organization. Jane Elliott's approach helps organizational functioning by appealing instead to people's sense of empathy and morality. Her moral outrage is apparent as she talks about her work and as she facilitates the exercise. It is likely to move and inspire the significantly large number of managers and employees who believe that organizations have a social responsibility to improve race relations.

Jane Elliott does not intellectualize highly emotionally charged or challenging topics. She creates a situation in which participants experience discrimination themselves and therefore feel its effects emotionally, not intellectually. She throws aside conventional wisdom about adult learning. Instead of respecting students' existing knowledge, affirming their sense of self, etc., she uses participants' own emotions to make them feel discomfort, guilt, shame, embarrassment and humiliation. Jane Elliott would say that protecting white people from the pain of racism only serves to perpetuate it. Her skillful use of confrontation is intended to dislodge white people from their comfortable privilege long enough for them to learn. In organizational settings where constructive confrontation is not always appropriate, watching Jane Elliott on video can achieve some of the same benefits vicariously.

Jane Elliott focuses on white people as the targets for change. She sees white people as "owning" the problem of racism and having the power to eradicate it. For this reason, she does not look at "both sides of the problem" the way training programs about cultural difference, communication or performance often do. Facilitators should be aware that Jane Elliott's focus on white people can lead viewers to the wrong impression that people of color are passively molded by white people's behavior when, in actuality, people of color can and do respond to racism in a variety of ways.

#### **4. SYNOPSIS OF BLUE-EYED**

**Blue-Eyed**, a 90 minute video, lets viewers participate vicariously in the "Blue-Eyed/brown eyed" exercise. In the video, we see adults from Kansas City, Missouri, who were invited by a local organization, "Harmony," to take part in a workshop about appreciating diversity. We watch as the group is divided according to eye color. Since the blue-eyed people are "on the bottom" they are crowded into a small, hot room without enough chairs and watched by strict security. Jane Elliott leaves them for a long while without any information while she prepares the brown-eyed people to be "on the top." The brown-eyed people are given answers to test questions and instructed to demean the blue-eyed people. When the blue-eyed people are brought into the room, some are required to sit at the feet of the brown-eyed people as Jane Elliott treats them according to negative traits that are commonly assigned to people of color, women, lesbians and gay men, people with disabilities, and other non-dominant members of society.

Jane Elliott is unrelenting in her ridicule and humiliation of the blue-eyed people. When participants express sadness, shame, or tears, she drills in the point that participants only have to live this reality during the workshop, while people of color receive this treatment for a lifetime. Despite the fact that the group is participating voluntarily and, to some extent, knows what to expect, it seems clear that the exercise is painful. The blue-eyed participants experience humiliation and powerlessness. The participants of color watch as white people learn what they already know to be true. Later in the film, people of color talk about the stress of being denied housing, job opportunities, and dignity as parents.

Interspersed between clips of the exercise we see Jane Elliott in her home and on the streets of her community describing the origins and consequences of the exercise. We see clips of Elliott's original video *Eye of the Storm*, filmed in the late 1960s, and meet some of her third grade students who talk about the lasting impact the exercise had on their lives. We also hear Elliott as she describes, with great emotion, how her family has been harassed and ostracized as a result of her efforts to educate white people about racism.

## 5. USING BLUE-EYED IN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS

**Blue-Eyed** is a powerful tool to help groups discuss and learn about racism, white privilege, majority-minority relations and other diversity topics. Showing the video and facilitating a discussion in your organization can help you achieve the following objectives:

- Illustrate some of the overt and subtle ways that prejudice undermines people of color and the consequences of that behavior
- Provide a common framework for learning about racism and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, disability, etc.
- Open healthy dialogue about diversity-related topics that previously may have been considered “undiscussable”
- Clarify the organizational costs of a workplace culture in which some people feel devalued
- Initiate discussion about the role individuals and groups can play in creating more supportive and productive organizations

When used as part of a genuine organizational effort to examine the interpersonal and systemic aspects of racism, **Blue-Eyed** can greatly further people’s understanding of and commitment to change.

**Blue-Eyed** can be useful in organizations as part of a longer, facilitated diversity training session, as a “break” in the evening of an off-site retreat or as a way to deepen the dialogue of a work group that is committed to exploring their relationships and systems on an ongoing basis. It is not recommended, however, that participants view **Blue-Eyed** without facilitated dialogue afterwards since it is likely to stir up thoughts and emotions that need to be processed into meaningful learning.

## **6. USING FIVE COMMON VIEWER REACTIONS AS DISCUSSION STARTERS**

Like most effective diversity experiences, the power of **Blue-Eyed** is that it touches viewers emotionally, not just cognitively. They may feel defensive, guilty, horrified, validated or a mix of many emotions. Therefore, it is suggested that facilitators listen for and respond to the emotional content, as well as the substance, of viewers' reactions.

Facilitators should be prepared to utilize viewers' reactions to further, not close down, exploration. As facilitators know, there is no one right way to do this. The goal is not to convince people to think the "right" way, but rather to support people to take the risk to look at themselves honestly. They may or may not come to the same conclusions about racism as Jane Elliott. However, if they are conscious of their own beliefs and the consequences of the way they behave, then they can be held accountable in a way that is difficult when people have not explored their beliefs and behavior.

These are some ideas for how a facilitator can use participants' reactions to deepen their understanding of the film.

### **6.1 White viewers may say, "Nothing like that happens in my organization or community. People don't use the outdated term 'boy' with black men. There is no group of people who are told to sit on the floor."**

- How do you know? Is it possible that many white people underestimate the extent to which discrimination is alive because they are not the targets of racist actions? [Help viewers see that, as Jane Elliott says, "We live in different worlds - one black, one white."]
- The exercise exaggerated certain insults to make a point, like having blue-eyed people sit on the floor. This may not happen, but what does? [Get viewers to name relevant examples instead of trying to convince them that racism happens.]
- What if it did happen? What would you say or do? How would you feel? If it did happen, what would it mean about you? What would it mean about the organization? [This question cuts through the defensiveness and denial underlying the statement that "nothing like that happens here."]

### **6.2 White viewers may say "The color of one's eyes or skin is irrelevant to me. I treat everyone the same."**

- Do you think that all people want to be treated the same? Do you want to be treated like everyone else? Why do many white people think that the only way to be fair is to treat everyone the same? [This is an opportunity to validate that many white people were wrongly taught that to notice difference is offensive.]
- What happens to people with unique needs in a system that treats everyone the same? [This line of questioning is an opportunity to tap viewers' own experiences interacting with inflexible systems. This may help them to understand better the experiences of others.]

- What is a respectful way to acknowledge and respond to people's differences? [If the group is of multiracial or multicultural, and if the people of color choose to participate, this line of questioning can lead to a frank discussion of new group norms that are acceptable to everybody.]

**6.3 Viewers of color may feel the video opens a previously-closed dam of pent-up feelings and thoughts. They may express anger in ways that the white viewers are not used to or comfortable with. Alternatively, viewers of color may withdraw and become very quiet. This is likely if there are very few of them.**

- Be careful not to force people of color to frame their ideas or feelings for the benefit of white people. Ask white people to stretch, if necessary, to hear people of color, no matter what tone or phrasing they use.
- Consider having the discussion facilitated by a mixed-race team. Be sure the team members know and respect each other.
- As Jane Elliott said in the video, don't expect people of color to bleed on the floor for white people. Do not make people of color responsible for educating white people.
- Respect the choices people make about how candid to be in an organizational setting. They weigh the risks before they speak. They must live with the consequences of what they say.

**6.4 For all viewers, the video may evoke painful memories of being mistreated, sometimes severely.**

- The facilitator should prepare viewers for the emotional content of the film and create an environment in which emotional reactions, including crying, are okay.
- At the same time, since emotional reactions may compromise one's professional image in some organizational cultures, the facilitator should not necessarily try to move the group to an emotional level beyond the level the group chooses.
- The facilitator needs to be prepared to handle whatever kinds or level of emotion that get expressed. Depending on the environment, it is possible that a viewer may share that s/he was abused as a child. In small groups, women may share their experience being sexually harassed or raped.

**6.5 White people often associate racist behavior with "bad people" so that becoming aware of their own racist views or actions feels very threatening. Instead of trying to convince white people that they are "bad people," it is usually more fruitful to help them understand that simply by being socialized in a society where inequities based on race are justified, white people are influenced by racism.**

- Is it possible for someone socialized in U.S. society to not be influenced by racism?
- If white people accepted that they have internalized some feelings of superiority, how would that change the way that racism is discussed?
- Can one be a good person and still perpetuate racism? How can active anti-racism help white people as well as people of color?

## **7. APPLYING BLUE-EYED TO YOUR ORGANIZATION: EIGHT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

To turn insights into meaningful learning, viewers need to be able to apply their learning to their own life and work situations. The following discussion questions are examples of how incidents from the video can trigger discussion about organizational realities. Obviously, a facilitator should pick those lines of inquiry which are most relevant to his/her objectives for showing the video.

**7.1 Jane Elliott continually stresses that participants follow the rules or leave the exercise. Organizations also have “rules of the game,” many of which are not written or even spoken. These can include rules about who is expected to speak up or stay quiet in staff meetings or how to get invited to the after-hours events where important information is shared.**

- What are the unwritten rules in your organization? For example, are you supposed to work weekends to prove your commitment to the company? (Note: It is easiest to identify rules when they are broken.)
- Do they require greater compromises from some people than from others?
- How do people learn the unwritten rules of the game?
- Do some people have more/less access to the rules?
- What happens to the people who don't learn the rules?
- Are some people more likely to be positioned for success than others? What effect does this have on employees? On the organization as a whole?

**7.2 In the video, Jane Elliott had participants complete the Dove Counter Balance Intelligence Test, an Afrocentric test created to give white people the experience of being disadvantaged by cultural bias. She used the test to make the point that our society judges people against norms that some people cannot or choose not to conform to because they compromise who people are. A norm is a standard or “the way things are done around here.” Like unwritten laws, some people may be unaware of the criteria by which they are judged. This happens in organizations, for example, when hiring or promotion criteria are based on information or experiences to which not everyone has equal access or cultural characteristics that not all groups share. For example, consciously or unconsciously, interviewers commonly use direct eye contact to evaluate the honesty or intelligence of a job applicant. However, these criteria may unfairly screen out people from cultural groups who show respect to authority by averting their eyes.**

- What are some norms in your organization? For example, are talkative people considered “smarter” or are single people considered a better “fit” than people with families?
- How would you describe the characteristics and behavior of people who are expected to succeed versus those who are considered “stuck in place.”
- What are some of the consequences of culturally-biased norms?
- What effect might these norms have on communication and employee retention?

**7.3 Jane Elliott uses overt forms of racism to make her points, like using the offensive term “boy” and telling blue-eyed people to avert their eyes to avoid offending her. While blatant racism still persists in organizational settings (e.g., racist jokes) it is often the more subtle forms, such as discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, that are most entrenched.**

- What are the subtle forms of racism and other “isms” in your organization?
- How do people know that the organizational culture permits such racist behavior?
- What do targets of this behavior do?
- What do observers do when it happens?
- Who benefits from subtle racism?

**7.4 In the video, the blue-eyed people sit in the waiting room appearing bored, without focus, not interactive, and overall, not ambitious. There is a similar phenomenon in organizations when workers are not given the information or permission they need to do their best work. For example, certain levels or functions may be excluded from meetings where important information is conveyed.**

- What examples of this have you seen in your organization?
- Are there people who are labeled “unambitious” or “unprofessional?” Who are they and what behaviors do they exhibit?
- What is your equivalent of the hot room without enough chairs?
- What is the effect on employees’ morale?
- On employees’ creativity and productivity?
- What is the effect on teamwork?
- People who feel they have no future in an organization may not contribute their best. People who do not contribute their best often do not have a future in an organization. Which do you think comes first in your organization?

**7.5 At one point, Jane Elliott states that to reinforce oneself is the only way to win. By this, she means that when the outside world puts you down, you need to find strength within yourself or among others like you. In organizations, efforts like women’s support networks or gay employees’ support networks are often established for this purpose. Yet they are criticized for dividing people or for calling attention to the ways in which people are different instead of similar.**

- Are there support networks in your organization? Formal or informal? What is their purpose?
- How are they perceived? For example, when a group of blacks have lunch together, are they considered unfriendly?
- In what ways are support networks encouraged or undermined by the organizational culture? For example, do higher-level women avoid joining the women’s network because of fear of association with lower-level women?

**7.6 In the video, Jane Elliott says and does things that she claims “society” does to people of color every day. Unfortunately, she is not very specific about the ways that racism becomes institutionalized so that it is perpetuated, even without an identifiable perpetrator. For example, in an organization, having all-white management can be institutional racism. No one person commits an act of discrimination, yet people of color are excluded from participating in important decisions.**

- What are some examples of institutionalized racism in your organization? For example, does the company project a certain image by hiring only white men to act as company spokespeople?
- Who is responsible for dismantling institutionalized racism?
- Besides becoming a diversity trainer like Jane Elliott, what can one person do?

**7.7 Jane Elliott tells a woman participant in the video to “get over cute and get competent.” She says that names like “Betty” infantilize women.**

- How do women behave in your organization? For example, do they “take care” of men by waiting on them?
- In what ways are women complicit in perpetuating negative or lowered or stereotyped expectations for women? For example, do women undermine each other by being judgmental of women who leave/don’t leave on time?
- What are the costs and benefits to women of conforming to these expectations?
- What are the costs to the organization of boxing women into certain behaviors and roles?
- Was Jane Elliott’s way of telling the woman participant to “get over cute” effective?
- What role should women/men play in changing sexism in organizations? For example, if a man consistently cuts off a woman who is speaking, who should point it out and how?

**7.8 Although Jane Elliott most frequently cites examples of discrimination against people of color, she also talks about sexism, ableism, and heterosexism. [Since the video does not deal with these subjects in any depth, it is important for the facilitator to bring in his/her own knowledge and experience.]**

- What are some examples of sexism in your organization? How do they affect women? Men?
- What are some examples of ableism in your organization?
- What are some examples of heterosexism in your organization?
- Is it helpful to compare the severity of injuries suffered by different target groups?

## **8. BRINGING CLOSURE TO YOUR SCREENING: FOUR PATHS FOR PERSONAL ACTION**

Closure is critical. Viewers need to be personally and emotionally intact in order to take away any learning. The group needs to be intact in order to function effectively back at work. Furthermore, viewers need to have clear, specific ideas about what to do differently in order to feel empowered by the video and discussion. Facilitators should leave enough time to address at least some of the following topics with the goal of bringing closure.

### **8.1 Differing Realities.**

One of Jane Elliott's major points is that we live in different worlds. A white person may never have his/her credentials questioned, while a person of color may be asked about his/her credentials several times in the same conversation. A man may go several days without being concerned with his physical safety, while a woman may organize all her activities with safety in mind.

A dominant culture can and does ignore other people's realities. Members of the dominant culture discourage the alternative perspectives of others by simply ignoring them or denying the relevance of their experience. A black woman in the video talked about this dynamic when she said that white people respond to her complaints about racism by saying, "Things like that don't happen in 1995." If we can learn to function from the assumption that we do indeed live in different worlds and that others' experiences may be fundamentally different from our own, perhaps we can trigger dialogue instead of shutting it down. Through dialogue we can become more aware of others and ourselves and the possibilities for working together toward common goals.

Ask viewers: "What specifically do we need to do to create a workplace in which differing realities are solicited, respected and utilized to benefit employees and the organization? For example, how should we run staff meetings? Develop new products? Recruit new employees?"

### **8.2 Clarity of Purpose**

Jane Elliott paints a vivid picture of what is wrong with race relations. However, it is not enough for white people to stop abusing people of color. All U.S. people need a personal vision for ending racism and other oppressive ideologies within themselves. As workers, we also need an organizational vision for how we want to work together effectively and respectfully across lines of difference.

Ask viewers: "Very specifically, what would our organization feel like and be like if we stopped abusing people and created systems and relationships based on dignity and respect?"

### 8.3 Taking Responsibility.

In the video, Jane Elliott asks a large group of mostly white people if any would choose to be black. No one raises a hand. Jane Elliott concludes that white people know how people of color are treated in this society and would not choose it for themselves. Yet, she says, white people fail to take effective action to end racism. By demeaning the blue-eyed people in the exercise, she demonstrates how easy it is to get people to be complicit in oppression. We need to be clear about our responsibility for ending racism and other forms of oppression. We need to be clear about the obstacles we face as we embark on an effort to eradicate racism so that we can find ways to overcome these obstacles.

Ask viewers: "Who is responsible for ending racism in our organization? What role should white people play? What role should people of color play? How can we overcome the tendency toward complicity with the status quo? What role do managers have? What roles do employees have?"

### 8.4 Courage and Commitment

Jane Elliott says she was only confronted once by her colleagues. Instead, opponents tried to undermine her by attacking her parents and children. Despite this harassment and ostracization, Jane Elliott continued her efforts to end racism. To persevere against the status quo and even active opposition, it is important to have courage and maintain a sincere commitment.

Ask viewers: "How courageous are we willing to be to improve our relationships, workplace and society? How committed are we?"

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**About the author:** Nora Lester is a diversity trainer located in the Boston area. She works with a multicultural team of consultants to help corporations, government agencies and nonprofit organizations work better across lines of difference including, race, culture, sexual orientation, class and gender.

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