

Lesson 2: Subjects vs. Objects

PURPOSE

To enable students to accurately recognize when their own human dignity and that of others is respected or disrespected.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand that universal, intrinsic, and inherent human dignity is the foundation of a free and just society and that no human community can grant or rescind that dignity.
2. Understand that the person is always free to choose how they treat others.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Subjects vs. Objects worksheet
- [Video](#): Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl
- Viktor Frankl: Experiences from the Concentration Camp
- The Journaling Worksheet

VOCABULARY

- Treating persons as subjects: valuing persons for their intrinsic worth
- Treating persons as objects: using persons for personal pleasure or benefit

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Review the previous lesson. Remind the students that the powers to think and to choose are specifically human powers. Define human dignity and its three characteristics. Review the article, "The Need for a Thou" from the previous lesson, and have students explain the difference between an I-It and an I-Thou attitude of relationship.

Step 2: Introduce the subject-object distinction with the following table:

Objects...	Subjects...
Are to be used	Are to be valued
We manipulate	We respect
Most we can do is to like them	We can love
We don't care how they feel	We show empathy
We do with them as we please	We ask for their opinion
Can be disposed of	Should be cared for
Have price	Priceless/ worth the infinite/have dignity
We can own, buy and sell	Own themselves
Get rid of when no longer useful, productive	Protect when they can't do it themselves
Don't enter into relation with us (relation is one-sided)	Develop (two-sided) relationships
Talk at	Talk to

Hand out the [Subjects vs. Objects](#) worksheet and ask students to fill in the empty spaces. The answers can be found in the table above in grey. Explain that objects are used as means to achieve some other goals or ends. However, subjects cannot be used as mere means. Objects are used, while subjects are valued for their dignity.

Objects fall in the category of all non-living beings (things, technology, tools, etc.) and to a certain extent, plants and animals as well (although not in the same way as things). Human persons fall in the category of subjects.

Ask the students what could happen if one were to switch the left and right columns in the table above, e.g. if we would:

care for objects, and dispose of subjects
 talk at subjects, and talk to objects
 own, buy and sell subjects (has this ever happened before?)
 value objects and use subjects, etc.

Introduce the idea that because human beings have dignity, they should always be treated as subjects, and never merely as objects. Persons should never be treated merely as objects and valued simply for their usefulness or the enjoyment they bring us. Highlight that whenever any person is treated as an object, this violates their dignity. Write on the board:

Treating persons as subjects: valuing persons for their intrinsic worth

Treating persons as objects: using persons for personal pleasure or benefit

Highlight once more: What Does It Mean to Treat Someone as an Object?

When people treat other people as objects, they use them for personal pleasure, advantage, or benefit. Rather than recognizing what would be good for that person, they focus on what the person can do for them. When people use other people merely to get what they want rather than out of concern for their wellbeing, they are treating them like tools, such as cell phones or hammers. This way of treating human beings goes against their dignity.

Ask the students if they can think of any examples from their surroundings where people were treated as objects. You can help them by mentioning some examples:

Spending time with someone because they have money and I can benefit from it.

Manipulating someone because I want to achieve some goal.

Spending time with someone so they will do me a favor.

Gossiping about someone to make myself look better than them.

Appear that I'm interested in someone just because I want to befriend their friend.

Lying to someone to make them do something I want.

Step 3: Explain that today, students will learn how people are capable of choosing to treat others as subjects or as objects, even in the most dire circumstances. The class discussion will be based on the experiences of Viktor Frankl. Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist who survived a Nazi concentration camp and on the basis of his experiences there, wrote a book called *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Play the [video](#) Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl to help the students learn more about Frankl and his experiences living in a concentration camp. While watching the video, ask the students to highlight key takeaways and discuss them afterwards.

Step 4: Divide the students into groups and ask them to read the text [Experiences from the Concentration Camp by Viktor Frankl](#) and discuss the questions associated with the text. The text explains how it is possible that those in the camp were treated as either subjects or objects.

After the groups finish their discussions, ask them to share their conclusions with the rest of the class. Afterwards, lead the class discussion on the basis of the Answer Key provided with the text.

Ask the students to recognize some behaviors in the class where their classmates are treated as objects. After recognizing these behaviors, ask them to individually answer the questions on [The Journaling Worksheet](#). After everyone finishes, ask if there are volunteers who would like to share their conclusions with the rest of the class. Since the answers can be sensitive, make sure to keep a respectful atmosphere while hearing the responses from students.

Step 5: Summarize. Wrap up the lesson by reviewing how societies can treat people as objects and how they can treat people as subjects. Recall the examples from the text of how both, prisoners and guards, treated others as either subjects or objects in the concentration camp.

SUBJECTS VS. OBJECTS WORKSHEET

Fill in the blank spaces in the following table:

Objects...	Subjects...
Are to be used	Are to be valued
We manipulate	We respect
Most we can do is to like them	We can love
We don't care how they feel	We show empathy
We do with them as we please	We ask for their opinion
Can be disposed of	Should be cared for
Have price	Priceless/ worth the infinite/have dignity
We can own, buy and sell	
Get rid of when no longer useful, productive	
	Develop (two-sided) relationships
	Talk to

Viktor Frankl: Experiences from the Concentration Camp²

Beatings occurred on the slightest provocation, sometimes for no reason at all. For example, bread was rationed out at our work site and we had to line up for it. Once, the man behind me stood off a little to one side and that lack of symmetry displeased the SS guard: I did not know what was going on in the line behind me, nor in the mind of the SS guard, but suddenly I received two sharp blows on my head. Only then did I spot the guard at my side who was using his stick. At such a moment it is not the physical pain which hurts the most (and this applies to adults as much as to punished children); it is the mental agony caused by the injustice, the unreasonableness of it all. Strangely enough, a blow which does not even find its mark can, under certain circumstances, hurt more than one that finds its mark.

Once I was standing on a railway track in a snowstorm. In spite of the weather our party had to keep on working. I worked quite hard at mending the track with gravel, since that was the only way to keep warm. For only one moment I paused to get my breath and to lean on my shovel. Unfortunately the guard turned around just then and thought I was loafing. The pain he caused me was not from any insults or any blows. That guard did not think it worth his while to say anything, not even a swear word, to the ragged, emaciated figure standing before him, which probably reminded him only vaguely of a human form. Instead, he playfully picked up a stone and threw it at me. That, to me, seemed the way to attract the attention of a beast, to call a domestic animal back to its job, a creature with which you have so little in common that you do not even punish it.

Do the prisoners' reactions to the singular world of the concentration camp prove that man cannot escape the influences of his surroundings? Does man have no choice of action in the face of such circumstances? We can answer these questions from experience as well as on principle. The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

2 Victor E. Frankl: Man's Search for Meaning, 1946.

And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.(...) In the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually.

I remember an incident when there was occasion for psychotherapeutic work on the inmates of a whole hut, due to an intensification of their receptiveness because of a certain external situation. It had been a bad day. On parade, an announcement had been made about the many actions that would, from then on, be regarded as sabotage and therefore punishable by immediate death by hanging. Among these were crimes such as cutting small strips from our old blankets (in order to improvise ankle supports) and very minor “thefts.” A few days previously a semi-starved prisoner had broken into the potato store to steal a few pounds of potatoes. The theft had been discovered and some prisoners had recognized the “burglar”. When the camp authorities heard about it they ordered that the guilty man be given up to them or the whole camp would starve for a day. Naturally the 2,500 men preferred to fast.

It must be stated that even among the guards there were some who took pity on us. I shall only mention the commander of the camp from which I was liberated. It was found after the liberation – only the camp doctor, a prisoner himself, had known of it previously – that this man had paid no small sum of money from his own pocket in order to purchase medicines for his prisoners from the nearest market town. But the senior camp warden, a prisoner himself was harder than any of the SS guards. He beat the other prisoners at every slightest opportunity, while the camp commander, to my knowledge, never once lifted his hand against any of us.

Certainly, it was a considerable achievement for a guard or foreman to be kind to the prisoners in spite of all the camp’s influences, and, on the other hand, the baseness of a prisoner who treated his own companions badly was exceptionally contemptible. I remember how one day a foreman secretly gave me a piece of bread which I knew he must have saved from his breakfast ration. It was far more than the small piece of bread which moved me to tears at that time. It was the human “something” which this man also gave to me—the word and look which accompanied the gift.

From all this we may learn that there are two races of men in this world, but only these two – the “race” of the decent man and the “race” of the indecent man. Both are found everywhere; they penetrate into all groups of society. No group consists entirely of decent or indecent people. In this sense, no group is of “pure race” and therefore one occasionally found a decent fellow among the camp guards.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

How were prisoners treated as objects in the concentration camp? Give some examples.

Were there examples of prisoners and guards treating others as subjects? Explain.

Can a person ever be fully influenced or conditioned by their environment – to the extent to which they can be forced to treat others as objects against their better judgement?

Which kind of guard or prisoner in a concentration camp would you be? Would you treat others as subjects or as objects?

Answer Key for the teacher

1. How were prisoners treated as objects in the concentration camp? Give some examples. Frankl shares some experiences of how the prisoners were treated as objects in the concentration camp:

“Beatings occurred on the slightest provocation, sometimes for no reason at all. For example, bread was rationed out at our work site and we had to line up for it. Once, the man behind me stood off a little to one side and that lack of symmetry displeased the SS guard: I did not know what was going on in the line behind me, nor in the mind of the SS guard, but suddenly I received two sharp blows on my head. Only then did I spot the guard at my side who was using his stick. At such a moment it is not the physical pain which hurts the most (and this applies to adults as much as to punished children); it is the mental agony caused by the injustice, the unreasonableness of it all. Strangely enough, a blow which does not even find its mark can, under certain circumstances, hurt more than one that finds its mark.

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2. Were there examples of prisoners and guards treating others as subjects? Explain. There were definitely examples of times when people were treated as subjects. Frankl mentions a few of them:

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

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3. Can a person ever be fully influenced or conditioned by their environment – to the extent to which they can be forced to treat others as objects against their better judgement? Frankl explains that people are never fully conditioned by their surroundings, and that each person always has the spiritual freedom and power to choose their attitude towards their particular circumstances:

"Do the prisoners' reactions to the singular world of the concentration camp prove that man cannot escape the influences of his surroundings? Does man have no choice of action in the face of such circumstances?" We can answer these questions from experience as well as on principle.

The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

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And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate... in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually.”

4. Which kind of guard or prisoner in a concentration camp would you be? Would you treat others as subjects or as objects? Students will likely provide different answers to this question, but make sure to highlight that one must not be quick to judge that they would always be among the “good guys”. Taking responsibility for one’s actions to treat others as subjects and not as objects, even when circumstances are hard, requires developing habits of excellence and respecting the human dignity of ourselves and of others in daily life.

JOURNALING WORKSHEET

Reflect upon a time when you had to make a difficult decision, in which you refused to go along with the crowd in treating someone as an object. How did you feel? Why did you do it? Would you do it again?

Can you think of a similar situation in which someone else refused to go along with the crowd in order to prevent you being treated as an object. How did this make you feel? Did you thank this person?