

**PSYC 8204: Intergroup Relations**  
**“Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination”**  
**Program Transcript**

NARRATOR: He was tall, handsome, young, and rich. At the turn of the 20th century, Bert Williams sold out theaters from coast to coast and headlined hit musicals on Broadway. He counted Britain's, King Edward the seventh, educator, Booker T. Washington, and stage diva, Sarah Bernhardt, among his biggest fans. Yet, when this highly regarded actor appeared on stage he looked like this. His face hidden behind the degrading mask of burnt cork. It was a bizarre tradition handed down by minstrelsy, the most popular form of entertainment in the United States during most of the 19th century.

Blackface minstrels began touring the country in the 1830s, as white men blackened their faces to portray exaggerated and derogatory caricatures of African Americans on stage. The minstrels spread the stereotype of blacks as shiftless, lazy, comical, and childlike. Onstage minstrels traded jokes about eating watermelon and stealing chickens, then sang songs about their love for their masters and the old plantation. This stereotype nourished the idea, then held by many whites, that blacks were simple-minded and somewhat less than human. Minstrelsy painted a portrait of blacks that was reassuring and non-threatening for a largely white audience.

When African Americans began taking to the stage, in larger numbers after the Civil War, the minstrel show provided a major gateway. And keeping with tradition, many black performers, appeared in black face. Born in the Bahamas, in 1874, Egbert Austin Williams, grew up in Riverside, California. As a teenager in the early 1890s, he joined a minstrel show. But he despised the thick, sticky makeup and swore never to wear it again. After quitting the show, Williams teamed up with George Walker, another ambitious and talented young man, to form a song and dance duo that performed on the streets and in the saloons of San Francisco.

In time, Williams and Walker decided to work their way across the country with the goal of reaching New York and performing on Broadway. But it was a bumpy road East, after being fired from a show in Chicago, they found work in a Detroit theater and that's where Williams broke his vow. He smeared on burnt cork and sang a ragtime song he'd just written. The reaction was overwhelming. Greeted by raucous laughter and applause, the team scored its biggest success to date. For the rest of his career, Williams rarely appeared on stage without blackface.

Over time he developed the character of a Jonah Man, a poor soul who attracted hard luck and trouble like a magnet. It was a characterization that struck both a sad and humorous cord with black and white audiences alike. After arriving in New York, Williams and Walker scored a big hit in vaudeville and within a few years they formed their own theatrical troupe. In 1903, they took their show In

Dahomey to Broadway. The first Broadway show written, directed, and entirely performed by blacks. Williams and Walker then took In Dahomey to London, where they played a royal command performance at Buckingham Palace, before the king and queen of England.

After ill health forced George Walker to retire in 1909, impresario Florenz Ziegfeld, hired Williams to star in his infamous Ziegfeld Follies, the only black performer in an all white cast. In addition, Williams became the first black recording star, releasing more than 70 records, including his theme song, "Nobody," which he co-wrote. In 1916, he became the first black actor to direct and star in his own film, A Natural Born Gambler, where he performed one of his most revered bits of stage business, the poker game pantomime. In the film, Williams has been arrested for gambling, but in his cell he dreams of another big game.

Though he received rave reviews, achieved wider fame, and was paid handsomely for all of his pioneering efforts, Williams grew restless and depressed. He faced relentless racial discrimination offstage, often unable to stay at the same hotels or eat in the same restaurants with the rest of the Ziegfeld Follies cast, and he felt trapped by the professional limitations of playing a stereotype.

"I want to be an interpreter of the negro on stage, Williams said. "The negro has a place, and a big one, in the history of this country and he has to be shown in the drama just as he exists in real life."

But Williams could not find a way to break through the stereotypes that have become so deeply embedded in American culture. He retreated to his doting wife, in the sanctuary of their well appointed home, in New York's Harlem neighborhood, frequently locking himself away in his vast library to study books on philosophy and African history. And as depression consumed him, he consumed large amounts of alcohol. Legendary comedian WC Fields, who co-starred with Williams in the Ziegfeld Follies, called him the funniest man I ever saw, the saddest man I ever knew.

In late January of 1921, Bert Williams was in Chicago performing in a new play he was hoping to take to Broadway. He caught a bad cold, against the advise of his doctors, he refuse to take time off to rest. The cold developed into pneumonia. At the show's next stop in Detroit, he collapsed in the wings of the stage after is opening scene. As usual, he was in black face. A week later, on February 4, 1922, Bert Williams died at the age of 47. His life forever linked with the heavy cost paid to racial stereotypes and discrimination in America.

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