

Circles of Diversity

GOAL: The goal of this exercise is to look at the ways that individuals feel both included and marginalized based on various identities and to simulate the experience of inclusion and exclusion.

TIME REQUIRED: At least forty-five minutes.

MATERIALS: Paper and pen/pencil for each participant.

PHYSICAL SETTING: An open space large enough for group participants to be able to move around comfortably as well as sit, write, and share in small groups.

PROCESS: This exercise uses a brief, physically involving, group activity called a circle break that simulates and often elicits thoughts and feelings that are associated with discrimination. This physical simulation is then used as a metaphor to exemplify how people sometimes feel like they are inside the circle (majority experience) and how they sometimes feel like they are outside the circle (marginalized experience). Because this exercise involves physical contact, it works best with groups of people who will feel comfortable physically interacting with one another.

Personal identities. Ask participants to list on a sheet of paper all the various "identities" they experience within themselves. These identities may be based on race, ethnicity, nationality, age, sexual orientation, religion, profession, geographical origin, political affiliation, world-view, or any other personally-relevant variable.

Circle break. Introduce the circle break activity as a physical activity to stimulate reactions to different group dynamics. It is best not to shape participants reactions too much by revealing a lot of detail about the goal. It may be best to give participants permission not to participate in the circle break if they feel uncomfortable with physical contact.

Ask participants to stand in a circle facing in toward the middle of the circle. Identify one participant to be outside the circle. Ask the participants in the circle to hold hands and to keep the outsider from gaining entrance to the circle. Encourage the outsider to try to enter the circle. After the outsider gets inside the circle, identify another outsider and repeat the process. You may also want to identify two outsiders to work together to gain entrance into the circle.

Discussion. After a few people have had a chance to try to enter the circle, begin a discussion about the exercise. Start by focusing on participants' thoughts and feelings about this particular activity. Contrast the experience of people inside the circle (insiders) with those outside the circle (outsiders). You may also want to encourage discussion by making process statements. Common processes that occur are that the Insiders learn increasingly effective ways of keeping the outsider out of the circle. Outsiders will typically try a variety of methods of entering.

Generalization. After discussing what happened and how people felt in response to this physical activity, use the exercise as a metaphor and begin discussing how this activity may simulate discrimination and the process of keeping certain groups of people in power and excluding others who do not fit. Ask people how their feelings as outsiders or insiders may parallel the feelings of people who are discriminated against or people who are in power.

Personal application. Ask participants to use another piece of paper to draw a circle and for each of the identities that you wrote down earlier, write the identity in the inside of the circle, the outside of the circle or both, depending if that identity has resulted in feeling like an insider, an outsider, or both in different situations.

Group sharing. Give participants a chance to share which identities make them feel included and which identities make them feel marginalized. This sharing can occur in small groups or in the large group depending on group size and dynamics.

Discussion. This exercise can be used to stimulate a more general discussion on discrimination and prejudice.

SOURCE: This outline was written by Jeff E. Brooks-Harris, Ph.D., Counseling and Student Development Center, University of Hawai'i at Manoa. The circle break exercise is originally from Judith Katz. The writing and sharing exercise was presented by Karen M. Taylor, Ph.D., Counseling and Consultation Center, Ohio State University, at ACPA, Commission VII Meeting, Kansas City, MO, March, 1993.