

An Exercise in the Experience of Identity

Experiential Activity for Human Diversity and the Clinical Enterprise

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EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY

Abstract

The following is a proposal for an experiential activity to be used in conjunction with the curriculum of the Human Diversity and the Clinical Enterprise course. The purpose of the proposed activity is to cultivate an appreciation for the experience of one's own cultural identity, and to draw attention to the effects of not having a strong sense of cultural identity. The activity was designed in response to reading Louise Erdrich's novel, *Shadow Tag*, in which the protagonist struggles with an inability to experience her own cultural identity.

Objectives of the Experiential Activity

Increasing Awareness of the Role and Importance of Identity in Defining us as Cultural Beings

Students will gain various insights into their own strong ties to their cultural identities. This is accomplished by:

- Acknowledging the significant role of culture in defining oneself
- Examining the specific identities that comprise one's self-image
- Briefly taking the perspective of someone in minority status by adhering to authorities in power and relinquishing strong ties to cultural identity
- Experiencing the temporary loss of one's voice in self-expression as well as the loss of valued personal belongings

Experiences Related to the Loss and Lack of Identity

Students will experience a simulation of compromised identity. This is accomplished by the following:

- Instructions are given to create the experience of relinquishing personal objects that relate to one's identity.
- Clothing, a means of expressing one's identity and individuality, is masked.
- Students' communication is constricted to a written format, symbolically silencing their individual voices.
- Key descriptors are off-limits in students' written expression of their identities.

EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY

Relating the Lack of a Sense of Identity to *Shadow Tag* and to Real Life Examples

The exercise will provoke an awareness of the frequency that others, particularly minorities, experience suppression of their cultural identities or fail to acknowledge them.

- The protagonist in *Shadow Tag*, Irene America, will be offered as an example of a woman of minority status who struggles with embracing her multiple identities.
- Students will discuss their reactions to the activity, and it is predicted that these reactions will include varying amounts of defensiveness, discomfort, anxiety, and resistance.
- Students will be asked to engage in dialogue about instances in real life, personal or otherwise, where these reactions have surfaced in response to threats to one's cultural identity.

An Exercise in the Experience of Identity

Students should recognize the powerful way that cultural identity influences their lives and the lives of others. They will discover the many ways they identify themselves and understand the impact that these identities have on their self-esteem and their ways of being in the world. Students should also be made aware of the potent effects that result from a lack of cultural identity, as is regularly experienced by minorities. In Louise Erdrich's novel, *Shadow Tag*, the protagonist, Irene America, struggles with a lack of experience of identity. Though she is a Native-American, wife, mother, and intellectual, Irene fails to experience herself as embodying any of these identities. This exercise in the experience of identity replicates Irene's experience, putting students into a situation in which they will experience a loss of their own identities. Students will be asked to identify themselves in the midst of this loss, and the creators of the activity will represent the forces of dominant culture as they enforce structure and compliance.

EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY

Identity Activity

The activity and a period of discussion and debriefing will last about one hour. The steps for the activity are found below.

Preparing students for the activity- In the spirit of informed consent, students will be told that they are about to experience a gradual and brief loss of cultural identity. They will be notified that the experience may cause discomfort and will be given the option to simply observe the activity in lieu of participation.

Participating in the activity- Students will be told that there will be a series of instructions that must be followed. First, the creators of the activity will ask that the students bring all belongings to a table that has previously been set up and leave them on the table-out of vision for the remainder of the activity. The creators will then instruct students to take a seat; choosing a seat that they do not usually sit in for the remainder of the activity. Black, plastic trash bags with previously cut holes for heads and arms will be distributed to the students and they will be instructed to wear these to mask their identities as expressed by their clothing. One creator will write a list of descriptors on the whiteboard and the other will pass out paper and pencils. The list of descriptors will be explained to be “off-limits” when the students are asked to write down a description of their identities. The list is as follows: religion, family, occupation, gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Students will be instructed to write descriptions of who they are while excluding the previously mentioned categories. They will be informed that these descriptions will be read aloud to the group. They will be given the opportunity to include any comments they wish to share below their descriptions. They will be asked to keep their written work anonymous. The creators will collect the descriptions and read them aloud to the group.

EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY

Debriefing and processing the activity- After the steps of the activity, as outlined above, have been completed, the creators will ask the students if they would prefer to debrief immediately, after a fifteen minute break, or during class the following week. If students elect to debrief immediately, trash bags will be taken off and personal belongings will be restored to their owners before debriefing begins. Debriefing will include an open forum in which students may discuss the activity based on questions posed by the creators. Students will sit in a circle.

Questions that will be included in the process are:

1. What do you believe was the purpose of the activity? (After students have answered this question, creators will relate the activity to the novel *Shadow Tag* by Louise Erdrich, and explained how the protagonist's struggle with identity inspired the activity)
2. What was the experience like for you?
3. What kinds of responses did you have?
4. What descriptors did you find yourself wanting to use the most in describing your identity? If you could use any, what would you say now?
5. How were you affected by losing your belongings and having to cover your clothing?
6. What parallels in real life do you notice in this experience?

Discussion will then be opened up for student's unique ideas and responses to be expressed in relation to the activity in which they participated.

Processing the activity, and the students' affective and reflective responses to it, is of the utmost importance in an effort to reinstate feelings of individual control and identity. Because students may have an array of strong reactions to the activity, they will be given plenty of opportunities to discuss their experiences. The creators will illuminate the purpose of the

EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY

different elements of the activity so that the students fully grasp the meaning of the activity in its greater context.

Conclusion

It is the hope of the creators of the identity activity that the students will be able to come away from the task with an increased awareness of the importance of having a sense of cultural identity. The role of cultural identity in matters of self-esteem, self-worth, and individuality is often taken for granted by those who are afforded uninhibited expression of their identities. By experiencing a temporary suspension of different aspects of cultural identity, students will recognize and appreciate the powerful effects of cultural identity in their own lives and the lives of marginalized others.

Reference

Erdich, Louise. (2010). *Shadow Tag*. NYC, NY: Harper Collins.