

## **Learning about our and others' selves**

### **Multiple identities and their sources**

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#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes a three-hour workshop in which participants explore the multiple sources of their identity and those of their classmates, focusing in particular on the social categories, group memberships, and other affiliations that together both make them unique and connect them to other people. The workshop includes two related but separate components, "Sources of our identity," and "Learning about others." Although the workshop was designed for and is described in the context of a semester-long course, *Cultural Diversity in the Workplace*, it can be adapted for many other uses.

The first part of the chapter describes the workshop objectives, and includes directions for the teacher, instructions for students, a list of the reading assignments, and examples of key handouts. The second part of the chapter reflects on the exercise and contextualizes it in relation to the key issues and concepts employed, particularly with regard to the view of culture and cultural identity that it seeks to transmit to students. Finally, the third part of the chapter briefly considers some challenges and dilemmas involved in using this activity in the classroom.

#### **Part One: Workshop objectives, directions, and materials**

##### **Overview and objectives**

The workshop is titled *Sources of Our Identity: Exploring Our and Others' Selves*. It is usually the third session of a 15-week course, *Cultural Diversity in the Workplace*, required of all doctoral and master's students in the San Diego programs of Alliant International University's California School of Organizational Studies (usually in the first or second year). My orientation to the course is that it is important for all students to find something

of interest in it, and that they should learn much about diversity and inclusion not just from the content of the course, but also from how I run it.

The goal is for students to learn, in a personal way, how individuals (including themselves) typically derive much of their identity from group memberships and, at the same time, how there is a great deal of diversity within such identity groups. The focus of the workshop, as I present it to students, is: building skills for inquiring about our differences, both of ourselves and of others.

This is a relevant excerpt from the course description and learning goals included in the syllabus:

This course focuses on the complex dynamics of ethnic, racial, gender, and other diversity in organizations as seen from the vantage points of social science and organizational studies. We will adopt multiple levels of analysis to critically explore the current state of theory, research and application regarding the role and treatment of differences and the creation of inclusion in the workplace . . . A guiding assumption and focus for the course is that awareness, understanding, and skills regarding cultural diversity are cornerstones of effective and ethical professional practice in organizational psychology and related fields . . . Learning in the course is geared both to the personal and to the professional – as we consider the nature and implications of cultural diversity, the way these are intertwined and inseparable comes to the fore.

The course syllabus includes the reading assignment and questions to think about for the workshop session (see Appendix 5.1).

### **Workshop design and directions**

The workshop includes two major portions: (1) *Sources of our identity* (about one hour), and (2) *Learning about others* (about two hours). Table 5.1 presents an outline of the design and its components. In the first part, I make a brief presentation (and if possible, ask the teaching assistant to provide an illustration), then ask the students to draw a picture of their own sources of identity, share these with one other classmate, and then engage in a large group discussion. In the second part, after a short introduction, students interview each other following strict time guidelines, meet in their small project groups to process what happened, and take part in a large group discussion.

Table 5.1 Workshop design and time needed

Workshop: <i>Exploring our and others' selves</i>	Time needed (total: 2½ hrs. to 3½ hours)
Overview of session design and objectives	5 minutes
Sources of our identity	Total: 55 to 80 minutes
Brief input (including example)	15 to 30 minutes
Draw a picture of you	15 minutes
Share in pairs	10 to 15 minutes
Large group discussion	15 to 20 minutes
Learning about others	Total: 100 to 130 minutes
Set-up	15 to 25 minutes
Interviews	40 minutes
Small groups	25 minutes
Journal	5 to 10 minutes
Large group discussion	15 to 30 minutes

### *Sources of our identity*

The components of *Sources of our identity*, the workshop's first major portion, are described next.

#### BRIEF PRESENTATION/LECTURETTE

This lecturette provides an introduction to the different types of groupings among people and addresses the various dimensions of identity, including both personal or individual aspects and social identities, with the primary focus on the latter. (See Figure 5.1 for the visual.) I give a brief explanation for each dimension, usually with a personal illustration of how that has made a difference for me personally. I also hand out a summary of Loden and Rosener's (1991) notion of primary and secondary dimensions of diversity. The goal is to have students see that, although we are each at once similar to everyone else (we are all human) and like no one else (we are all unique), a key focus in learning about diversity is our similarity to and connection with groups of people. This makes us both similar to and different from others.

I point out that part of what makes us unique is the specific configuration of identities that each of us has and their impact on each other (Ferdman 1995). Thus, being a man is a somewhat different experience for me than for a man in a different cohort or who grew up elsewhere, or who is gay, or who has no children. At the same time, I share some connections with those other men that people who are not men do not, and other people view and treat us as men. I also make additional points about the varying degrees of awareness that we may have of our various sources of identity, the ways in which particular identities are more or less salient

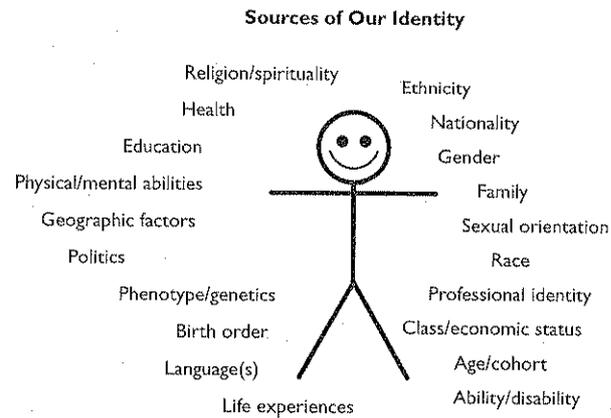


Figure 5.1 Sources of our identity.

Source: Adapted from The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc.

in different contexts, and the changes in both our awareness and the salience over our lifespan, especially as one identity interacts with another (for example, becoming a parent changed the experience of being Jewish, being a professor, and being a consultant for me). Finally, the teaching assistant briefly presents an illustration of his/her own configuration of identities, using a poster or easel pad similar to Figure 5.1, but replacing the category names with his or her own identities. (I do this myself if the teaching assistant is not available.) This is important, because it both begins to sensitize students to the multiplicity and complexity of identity and it primes them to listen to the detailed stories of others.

#### DRAW YOUR OWN PICTURE

I now ask students to draw their own picture (using Figure 5.2), and to begin to answer these questions:

- 1 Which identities are you most/least aware of?
- 2 Which identities are others most/least aware of?
- 3 Which identities are you most/least comfortable with?

(These questions can vary depending in part on the nuances I would like to bring out and the time available.)

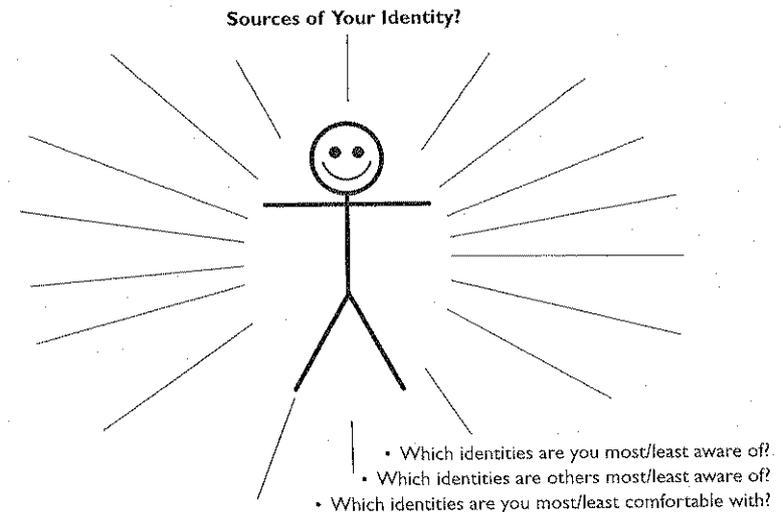


Figure 5.2 Sources of your identity.

Source: Adapted from The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc.

#### SHARE IN PAIRS

I then ask students to each find a partner who is not in their fieldwork group and who preferably appears to be very different from them (in whatever way they choose to define this), and to share their pictures in those pairs (sharing whatever they feel comfortable revealing and keeping private whatever they are not comfortable revealing).

#### LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

This is designed to bring out key insights about identities, their configuration, how they become obscured or highlighted in different contexts or at different times, and other similar issues. (As a substitute when time is short, or additionally so as to hear everyone's voice right away, I sometimes first ask for one insight from each person, going around the room: What is one insight you've had today about identity in the context of diversity? This is also useful if the workshop has to be stopped here and continued at a subsequent class session.)

### Learning about others

The following sections describe the major components of the second part of the workshop, *Learning about others*.

#### SET-UP (INTRODUCTION)

In this introduction, I once again explain the purpose and the overall design. Students are told that they will be working in their fieldwork project teams (formed the previous week), and that they will have the opportunity to interview one of their fellow group members as well as to be interviewed and to observe one or more interviews. I go on to lead a brief discussion (or simply give a lecturette, depending on time) about inquiry and interviews. Topics covered include setting up the interview, confidentiality, body language, empathy, comfort level, timing, types of questions, checking assumptions, tone, and the importance of sharing of oneself. The goal here is for students to begin to think about the many components involved in interviewing others, including the human relationship aspects. They will get to know their fellow team members as individuals and in the context of a task that is quite relevant to what they will have to do for their project.

I conclude the introduction/set-up by letting students know that their task in conducting an interview will be as follows (presented on an easel pad):

To learn about significant experiences and milestones in the interviewee's journey to becoming who she/he is today. [One can also add, focusing in particular on her or his experiences of privilege, or, focusing in particular on his/her cultural identity.]

After presenting this on an easel pad (or on an overhead), I give students about 5 to 10 minutes to develop, individually, a strategy and a list of questions for an 8-minute interview that will accomplish the interview task.

#### INTERVIEWS

In this part the students actually conduct the interviews. In my experience this portion of the session works best when it is very strictly timed. Students will always want more time, but this is not necessary to get the benefit of the activity. First, students are asked to meet in their fieldwork groups, and then each group is asked to select a Person A, B, C, etc. At this point, the role assignments for each time period are distributed, as shown in Table 5.2. Each time period (using strict timing) consists of an 8-minute interview and one or two minutes for making individual notes regarding observations,

Table 5.2 Role assignments for interviews

For groups of four:				
Time period	Person A	Person B	Person C	Person D
1	Interviewee	Interviewer	Observer	Observer
2	Observer	Observer	Interviewee	Interviewer
3	Observer	Interviewee	Interviewer	Observer
4	Interviewer	Observer	Observer	Interviewee
For groups of three:				
Time period	Person A	Person B	Person C	
1	Interviewee	Interviewer	Observer	
2	Interviewer	Observer	Interviewee	
3	Observer	Interviewee	Interviewer	
4	Talk about process of interviewing, insights for group project			

feelings, and thoughts (to be ready for processing in the small group discussion later). Then, groups are given about 45 seconds to one minute to get ready to switch roles, before getting a signal to begin the next round. (If necessary, the interviews can be as short as six minutes.) Usually, I call out a warning one minute before the interview period is up.

#### SMALL GROUPS

After all the interview rounds are completed, students continue to meet in their groups, but now talk about their experience. The assignment, posted on an easel pad, is as follows:

Discuss in group:

- What was it like being interviewed?
- What was it like being an interviewer?
- What could you see as an observer?
- What led to more genuine dialogue/sharing?

*To share with large group later:* Learning about effective interviewing.

#### JOURNAL

At the conclusion of the small group discussion, students are given five minutes to journal (i.e., note for their own use) their answers to the following questions (posted on an easel pad):

- What would you like to work on to develop/enhance your interviewing skills?

- What are your initial thoughts about how you will do this?
- Into what aspects of yourself would you like to delve more deeply?

#### LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Finally, the workshop concludes with a large group discussion reflecting on the complete experience. This conversation typically brings out important insights about, e.g., timing, empathy, assumptions. Depending on time, I might kick off the discussion by asking students to brainstorm regarding key insights they had about interviewing and learning about others, and listing these on the board. During this discussion, students often realize that some questions “work” better than others. They typically mention how amazed they were to learn so many new things about people that they have been around for some time. Finally, conversation often hinges around how challenging it can be to go beyond their own assumptions as to what particular labels, experiences, and the like mean, and to elicit the interviewee to provide his/her own meanings and interpretations. For example, they often describe their reluctance in the interviewee role to open up if they were not asked the “right” questions, in the “right” way.

At the end of the discussion, I typically hand out resource packets that include the following:

- Interview protocols used in my research (for individual and group interviews).
- Sample interview questions for (a) “non-dominant-culture employees,” (b) “dominant-culture employees,” (c) leaders and policy-makers (from Gardenswartz and Rowe 1994).
- Five ways to ask questions (from Gardenswartz and Rowe 1994).
- Additional examples of interview questions, surveys, etc.
- Additional articles about interviewing and formulations of questions.

#### Part Two: Reflections and theoretical notes

This seemingly simple and straightforward activity is actually quite multi-layered. Among other themes, it addresses the multiplicity and complexity of identity and its many sources, the diversity and uniqueness of experience even within the same identity groups, the role of the individual in constructing and interpreting cultural identity, and the key role of dialogue in the process of knowing about our own self-identities and those of others. As a way to learn about culture and cultural identity, it challenges unitary approaches to those constructs that do not recognize the wide variety that exists within any one group, while at the same time requiring participants to confront the reality of group-based differences.

Most importantly, it asks every student to be a participant in and contributor to diversity. At the end of the workshop, most students realize that every individual is internally diverse and adds to the diversity of the group as a whole.

The issue of multiplicity and complexity is quite critical to address in any treatment of cultural diversity. Traditional and certainly colloquial approaches to diversity often revert to over-simplified categorization systems that obscure more than they reveal. While certainly there is some social meaning to the broad racial categories that have been in use in the United States, for students to truly learn about cultural diversity, they must go beyond such classification systems to learn how these and other categories actually apply to the experiences of individuals. Increasingly, these categories are less and less meaningful (Ferdman 2001) and are being replaced with a greater number of labels that are self-assigned by people. Not only do people prefer to name their own categories, but also individuals belong to many categories at once. By seeing these juxtaposed in relation to themselves and others, this notion becomes more grounded in reality for participants.

Another idea that underlies the activity is that membership in the same identity group can be experienced in a variety of ways (even by the same individual over time and across settings). In this activity, participants both construct themselves alone (in the first part) and construct themselves in direct interaction with another (as they are interviewed in the second part). This allows them to experience both the possibilities and the limitations to self-definition. They learn how they simultaneously must be and need not be bounded by shared categories. Two Latinos in the class, three women, or five 20-year-olds will find that they are similar in some ways, and very different in other ways. In the conversations in which they share their pictures identifying sources of identity, participants often discover similarities with those who on the surface seemed very different, and also discover great differences with those who appeared on the basis of initial assumptions to be very similar. Related to this is the issue of how one group membership interacts with another (Ferdman 1999; Ferdman and Gallegos 2001). For example, being a woman will be experienced differently by a 55-year-old African-American heterosexual grandmother than by a 22-year-old White single lesbian.

The third issue, regarding individuals' roles in constructing themselves, is based in large part on my previous work (Ferdman 1990, 1995, 2000; Ferdman and Horenczyk 2000) in which I have written extensively about the concept of cultural identity, which I see, at the individual level, as the reflection of culture as it is constructed by each of us. Specifically, cultural identity for me is one's individual image of the behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms – in short, the cultural features – that are thought to characterize one's group(s), together with one's feelings about those features and

one's understanding of how they are (or are not) reflected in oneself (Ferdman 1990). Essentially, this is a psychological account of how individuals personalize their group that reflects the realities of multicultural societies in that it does not assume within-group homogeneity. As such, it can enhance our understanding of cultural transitions, such as those that go along with immigration (Ferdman and Horenczyk 2000). According to this view, culture is not static or fixed, but rather is continuously transformed. As we come into contact with each other – both within and between groups – we constantly change culture and its elements. As Nagel points out:

Culture is not a shopping cart that comes to us already loaded with a set of historical, cultural goods. Rather we construct culture by picking and choosing items from the shelves of the past and the present ... In other words, cultures change: They are borrowed, blended, rediscovered, and reinterpreted.

(Nagel 1994: 162)

According to Nagel, ethnic cultures (as well as ethnic boundaries and identities) are negotiated, defined, and produced through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities. I would suggest that this is the case for most, if not all, social identities.

These last points also speak to the role of dialogue (e.g., Isaacs 1999) in both the construction and the learning process. It is difficult, I believe, for us to know ourselves, without engaging in conversation and without reflecting on our interactions with others. The process of identifying key aspects of the self, then talking about them with each other, requires participants to become conscious of the degree to which this may be true for them. Moreover, it requires students to go beyond facile generalizations about groups, and engage with those who are present in the room with them. They must engage with each other; and for this engagement to be productive, it must be culturally aware and sensitive, and it must be dynamic and interactive. Scripts, or general rules for interaction, simply will not suffice.

Ultimately, the collective construction that I hope results for the class is recognition that diversity is truly about every individual. Participants must deal with the tension that exists in accepting the reality of both group-level differences and individual differences – neither is sufficient alone when trying to understand diversity.

### Part Three: Challenges and dilemmas

There are a number of challenges and dilemmas that arise in using this activity. I discuss three of these here.

The first challenge is the constant pressure of time. Students are often frustrated that they do not have more time to generate aspects of their own identity, to talk about these with classmates, or to interview each other. I also grapple with this, because there is certainly a benefit to the specific learning that they do about each other. Ultimately, the challenge is to allow for this while also both drawing out the conceptual learning and facilitating the generation of student insights into the implications for themselves and others. For this to happen, enough time must be given to processing the content.

A second challenge has to do with the need that some participants will have to transcend group memberships, and the resulting debates that can ensue when other students seek to disabuse them of the idea that group memberships are irrelevant. More generally, the challenge is to support the group in avoiding either/or thinking or becoming polarized around particular positions. The dilemma I often grapple with has to do with the degree to which I am or should be directive or bring out my points explicitly. If I take students through the process and support them in reaching their own insights, the learning can be deeper. Yet, at times, this can also encourage unhealthy debate among participants. Ultimately, I have dealt with this by making sure in the prior session to establish clear ground rules for engagement and safety in the classroom and by presenting material on dialogue (e.g., Isaacs 1999) and on difficult conversations (Patton 1999).

The third challenge arises after the interviewing activity. One key insight students often have as part of the interviewing portion of the experience is that they realize how difficult it is to ask good questions that really bring out the interviewee. They learn that there is much more learning to be done. My way of handling this in part is via the packet of sample questions I offer. My dilemma regards the question of how to get the students to the next level so that they develop their own expertise, rather than just taking the packet I offer and choosing a few questions for their fieldwork. I continue to struggle with and have not quite resolved this dilemma; I partly address it through my comments and suggestions in response to the students' fieldwork plans, which encourages them to adapt the questions to the particular objectives of their project.

### Conclusion

Over the years that I have used it, I have found the workshop provides a solid, memorable, and rewarding base for students to begin to learn about some of the complexities of diversity and culture. I hope that it will do the same for those readers who use it.

## Appendix 5.1 Reading assignment

## Readings

## SOURCES OF OUR IDENTITY: EXPLORING OUR AND OTHERS' DIFFERENCES (INTERVIEWING WORKSHOP)

Taylor Cox, Jr. (1993). Group identities in the self-concept. *Cultural Diversity in Organizations: Theory, Research and Practice* (Chapter 4, pp. 43-63). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Taylor Cox, Jr. and Ruby L. Beale (1997). *Developing Competency to Manage Diversity: Readings, Cases and Activities* (Chapter 4, pp. 51-77). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Donald C. Klein (1994). Collective dis-identity. In Elsie Y. Cross, Judith H. Katz, Frederick A. Miller, and Edith W. Seashore (eds), *The Promise of Diversity: Over 40 Voices Discuss Strategies for Eliminating Discrimination in Organizations* (pp. 272-9). Burr Ridge, IL: Irwin.

Bernardo M. Ferdman (1995). Cultural identity and diversity in organizations: bridging the gap between group differences and individual uniqueness. In M. Chemers, S. Oskamp and M. A. Costanzo (eds), *Diversity in Organizations: New Perspectives for a Changing Workplace* (pp. 37-61). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey (1994). Interviewing: the art of science. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 361-76). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## Optional:

Elisha Y. Babad, Max Birnbaum and Kenneth D. Benne (1983). *The Social Self: Group Influences on Personal Identity*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. [Part I. Initial considerations. (Especially the following sections: "Self-definition and group memberships," "A method of inquiry into the social self," "Skills for self inquiry," and "Exploring life history.")]

Jeanne Marecek, Michelle Fine and Louise Kidder (1997). Working between worlds: qualitative methods and social psychology. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53, 631-44.

Lyn Mikel Brown (1997). Performing femininities: listening to White working-class girls in rural Maine. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53, 703-23.

## Suggested questions to think about

Sources of Our Identity: Exploring Our and Others' Differences (Interviewing workshop)

Focus: building skills for inquiring about our differences, both of ourselves and others.

Objectives: a) to learn about processes of inquiry as initial preparation for conducting interviews as part of the fieldwork assignment; b) to delve experientially into the nature and range of the diversity in each of our selves and in our group.

- 1 Who are you? What makes you who you are?
- 2 What are some of the social components of your identity? Have these developed/changed over time? How? Why?
- 3 If someone wanted to find out more about who you are, what types of questions would they have to ask? How would they have to ask them?

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# Crossing Cultures

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Insights from Master Teachers

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