

ETHNOCENTRISM -- A CULTURAL ENCOUNTER SIMULATION¹⁶

The object of this activity is to demonstrate in a visceral way that humans tend to look at the world from the perspective of their own culture. Through this simulation, students learn how this ethnocentric perspective can lead to misunderstandings and prejudice.

Divide the class into two. One group goes into another room and each group gets a description of their culture (see below). One group is very gregarious and touchy and inquisitive and the other is the exact opposite. Neither group knows what the other group is like.

Each group should discuss what it means to be an "Agitanian" (or a "Solidarian") and should practice acting according to their cultural values and norms.

Then each group sends an observer (or two) to the other group, to take notes on this other culture. They set a time for the ambassador(s) to visit their culture and they report back on their findings to their group.

Each group sends ambassadors to the other group with instructions to be kind, appropriate and culturally sensitive but to get a certain amount and kind of information about the people in the other group. You can do this a number of times with different ambassadors (two or three ambassadors at a time).

When everyone who wants to be an ambassador has had a chance to take notes and interact with the other culture, get back together as a whole group again and ask the people in each group to describe the other group. Sometimes it helps to put all the adjectives and comments up on the board. You will likely find that the students first use all kinds of negative adjectives to members of the other group. You can have a discussion about how cultural values color how you see others and how that can cause problems. You can follow this with discussions about ethnocentrism (define it, think of examples from the simulation, etc.). Other possible discussions include topics such as the American government's designation of immigrants as "aliens", the practice of many Native American cultures to call themselves "the People", and a discussion about where ethnic strife is currently an issue. Another interesting and related topic is different cultural attitudes toward time (the American notion that "time is money" vs. the Algonquin people whose language doesn't have tenses). Another possibility would be to follow some of these discussions with an exploration of cultural relativism and to talk about when it may be appropriate for one culture to intervene or interfere with another

¹⁶ This exercise is adapted from Susan Ruyle's workshop given at the National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar at Saddleback College during the summer of 1997. See www.saddleback.edu/AP/1a/neh/simgame.htm.

culture's laws or customs. Pairing the activity with readings from other cultures and with journaling or other writing opportunities can be really powerful too.

AGITANIANS

You like people and you like as much physical contact as possible. When you meet someone, you give a long, two-handed handshake. You look people in the eye for a long time and you touch people as much as possible. You like to sit and stand very close to people.

You like to talk about yourself a lot and you tend not to listen to other people because they aren't as important as you are. You like to be the center of attention. On the other hand, you really want to have information about other people because that makes you feel powerful. You like to argue and you often disagree with people.

Time is very important to you and you like to be punctual. You find it disrespectful when other people are late. You are task oriented – you want to get things done – and you set very particular schedules (down to the minute) for completing activities.

Your task is to find out certain information from the people in the other group: 1) their parents' names 2) how much money they earn (or get from their parents) each month.

SOLIDARIANS

You are shy. You are interested in other people, so you ask them questions, but you don't like to make too much eye contact – in fact, you are highly uncomfortable with other people looking at you, so you don't look at other people either. You do not like to touch other people. You are very concerned with having adequate personal space – you don't like to sit or stand very close to people and you don't like it when they sit or stand close to you. You do not shake hands when you greet people, but you bow to them.

You don't like to talk about yourself and will go to great lengths not to give out personal information. You like to hear other people talk about themselves, though, and you listen very carefully, without interrupting. You also want to help other people as much as possible.

You never argue if you can help it. You will go to great lengths to avoid conflict and even if you disagree with someone, you very rarely voice a dissenting opinion.

Time is not important to you. You never set time limits because you feel more strongly about accomplishing your goal and enjoying what you do than getting it done in a specific amount of time.

Your task is to find out as much as possible about the people in the other group (especially what they think of you) without giving away information about yourself.

SOLIDARIAN DIRECTIONS

Once you are in your group, learn about your culture (see below).

Discuss what it means to belong to your culture and practice acting according to your cultural values and norms.

Decide who wants to be an ambassador. You will have time to send a maximum of 6 ambassadors, two at a time.

I'll let you know when the borders are open. At that time, you may send one to two ambassadors to the other group for five minutes (remember you don't care about time so much as about doing the job correctly). Your ambassadors should take notes and should try to get the information indicated at the bottom of the page.

Ambassadors should be kind, appropriate and culturally sensitive. They want to get as much information as possible.

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