



AIM: The exercise engages the participants in a process of defining culture and discuss the complexity of it.



Participants: 8 – 30 **Age range:** 17 - 30



Duration: 40 – 60 minutes



Required Material: A chalkboard or large sheet of paper.



Category: Dialogue exercise, opening / inter-cultural, homogeneous

THINGS TO CONSIDER

This exercise is good to use at the beginning of a workshop to set the frame.

STEPS

Preparation (2 minutes)

At the top of the chalkboard or the paper write "MULTICULTURAL". Make sure your workshop participants are positioned so that they can all see the chalkboard or paper.

Activity (30 minutes)

- Defining "Multicultural". Start by underlining the prefix "multi" and ask your participants what this prefix means. Responses will include "many", "varied or various", "different", etc. Confirm all answers, then sum them up. This portion should take only a couple minutes. Next, move on to "-cultural". What does this term mean? Encourage participants to define "cultural" both in terms of a dictionary-type definition and what it means to them individually.
- Drawing out the dimensions of "Cultural". Tell the participants you would like them to explore their understanding of "cultural" more deeply. Ask them to

suggest all dimensions of culture they can think of, encouraging them to reflect on their own culture and the dimensions of that culture with which they identify. There are several effective ways of accomplishing this task. You can either have participants call out these aspects of culture as they think of them (perhaps even using a participant volunteer to list them under "MULTICULTURAL"). You could also simply decide to go around the room, person by person, asking for suggestions.

- There are literally endless dimensions to culture, and this will be reflected in the answers. It is likely that an influx of answers will come right away, then the rate of response will slow down considerably. This often happens after some of the more surface-level cultural aspects have been suggested: music, food, etc. Ask the participants to think a little more deeply about how they define their culture. Allow for some short silences, or suggest some deeper dimensions, including faith, religion, values, language, family structure, and so on. It will be important to get as many suggestions for this list as possible. Be sure to note that this part of the activity could go on indefinitely, highlighting the complexity of "culture". Also point out how intertwined some of the dimensions are, illustrating how simplistic it is to make a judgment about somebody based on one cultural dimension of that person. This step should take 10-15 minutes.
- What's missing? Four out of 5 times this activity is used, several interesting cultural dimensions are not mentioned by participants. Ironically, these are the very dimensions that are most often associated with multicultural education: race, gender, sexual orientation, social class. Do NOT suggest these additions to the list because, if nobody suggests them, it leads to a wonderful conversation. If your class or workshop is one of the 4 (out of 5) that does not suggest one or more of these items, point this out and ask the participants why they didn't think of these dimensions. This will be an interesting introduction to the following steps, as you will see. It is often the case that when participants are suggesting items for the list from their own experience, and thus in relation to how they define themselves, identifiers such as race, gender, etc. do not come directly to their minds. But, if they are suggesting items for the list based on how OTHERS define them, or how they define OTHERS, these items immediately come to mind.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The next step is to divide the items into categories, which will make the final step of the exercise much easier. Indicate this intention to the group, and mention that you will be using Nitza Hidalgo's "three levels of culture". <p>Hidalgo's levels include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. The Concrete: this is the most visible and tangible level of culture, and includes the most surface-level dimensions such as clothes, music, food, games, etc. These aspects of culture are often those that provide the focus for multicultural "festivals" or "celebrations". B. The Behavioral: this level of culture clarifies how we define our social roles, the language(s) we speak, and our approaches to non-verbal communication. The Behavioral level REFLECTS our values. Aspects to be listed in this category include language, gender roles, family structure, political affiliation, and other items that situate us organizationally in society. C. The Symbolic: this level of culture includes our values and beliefs. It can be abstract but it is most often the key to how individuals define themselves. It includes value systems, customs, spirituality, religion, worldview, beliefs, mores, etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write short definitions for these levels on the board or on the sheet of paper you used to record the dimensions of culture. Review each of the categories for a couple of minutes. Give the participants an opportunity to consider further how they define themselves within these categories. Ask them to look over the categories and the items on the board for a few seconds. As a group, categorize all items into these categories. There may be some disagreement about where a certain item falls, so allow the same item to be listed under two categories.
<p>Evaluation (20 minutes)</p>	<p>After encouraging the participants to convince you that "the Symbolic" is the most important category, refer them back to the lists. Several questions will lead to interesting conversations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you meet somebody, which of those items (under

	<p>any of the categories) do you use to understand them culturally?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is your attempt to understand others culturally consistent with how you want to be viewed and understood? • What forces in our society could contribute to our simplification of the culture of others, even though we don't want to be defined simplistically ourselves? <p>Optional:</p> <p>If you are working with educators: After recording how many participants define themselves most closely with the three categories, and facilitating the "why" discussion described above, turn to a conversation about education. Which of these categories do you, as an educator, focus on when you are trying to teach multiculturally? (This question will provide an "aha" moment for a lot of participants. Allow a few moments for that to happen.) How has education generally tried to be "multicultural"? What are the aspects or dimensions of culture that we focus on in our classrooms when trying to be "multicultural"? Is this consistent with how we know people want to be defined?</p> <p>This is especially powerful if you know that a certain school or district is stuck in the "additive" or "heroes and holidays" stage of multicultural development. Many schools have a multicultural festival or fair, and refer to that as "multicultural education".</p>
<p>Conclusion (5 minutes)</p>	<p>Thank everyone for their participation, summarize what was learned.</p> <p>To wrap up this exercise, you can lead to a discussion on how the participants might try to make their conceptualizations more consistent. Point out that this exercise is not meant to accuse anyone but rather to highlight how forces ranging from the media to our own education can sometimes move us backward when we think we are experiencing progress in self and social development. The conversations that happen as a result of this activity can last from 10 minutes to over an hour, depending on what questions you ask and what direction you take.</p>