

Chapter 2

How Do We Understand Difference?

A good place to start thinking about diversity is to consider how we understand difference. As defined in *The Random House College Dictionary* (1982), to be different means “1. differing in character or quality; not alike; dissimilar. 2. not identical, separate, or distinct. 3. various, several. 4. unusual, not ordinary.” All these definitions point to an underlying theme-- difference means more than one. To not be identical, you must have at least two different entities. Understanding difference means you are able to grasp this reality. While this notion seems simple, the opposite is actually the case. People struggle with difference. They gravitate to people who are like them. Was everyone in your high school just like you? Who do you spend time with now? Are your friends like you? Is your partner like you? In what ways?

Chapter 2 is designed to help you examine the notion of the two, three, four, or more unique entities that make up difference. The purpose of the following activities is twofold: 1) to help you understand the complexity associated with difference; and 2) to promote an understanding of difference across a multitude of dimensions.

DIVERSITY TRAINING ACTIVITY 2.1

FIRST IMPRESSION VS. AUTHENTIC IMPRESSION

RATIONALE

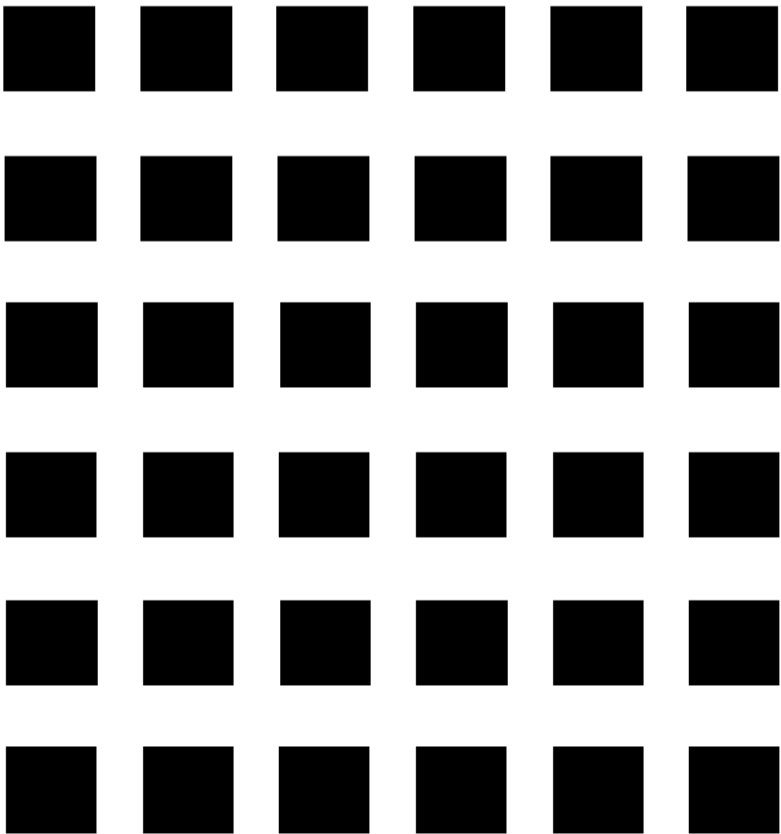
One way to break out of the “everyone is the same” mold is to explore how we instinctively develop first impressions based on perceptions. These perceptions may not actually be true, and yet the perceiver may act on them as though they are grounded in reality. The task of this *Diversity Training Activity* is to initiate a dialogue about the concept of difference, its meaning,

influence, and how it plays out in life. The Herman Grid exercise highlights the fact that first impressions are not always the right impressions.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

- 1. Examine the Herman Grid in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 The Herman Grid



Source: <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/diverse2.html>
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2. Divide into groups of 5 to 6 students and share your perceptions:
 - a) Do you see gray dots at the white intersections on the grid?
 - b) Do you believe the gray dots exist?

DISCUSSION POINTS

The Herman Grid is an example of how we see, perceive, believe, and act on things that may not actually exist. When you stare at the black squares on the Herman Grid you will see gray dots at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal white lines. While the gray dots are not really there, seeing them makes the grid look different. Consider the discussion questions below as your group talks about perception, reality, and difference:

1. Have you ever had a mistaken first impression of someone?
2. Has anyone ever had a mistaken first impression of you?
3. What does the Herman Grid suggest about first impressions?
4. What does the Herman Grid suggest about perceptions?
5. What does the Herman Grid suggest about authenticity?
6. What are the implications about the meaning of difference?

DIVERSITY TRAINING ACTIVITY 2.2

MICROCULTURAL IDENTITIES

RATIONALE

Diversity Training Activity 2.2 further explores the numerous variables associated with difference. Subcultures exist in the United States within the context of a larger, overarching macroculture. Gollnick and Chinn (2002) refer to these subcultures as microcultures that they define as “cultural groups...that have distinctive cultural patterns but share some cultural patterns with all members of the U.S macroculture” (p. 18). Those who belong to the same microculture “share traits and values that bind them together as a group” (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002, p. 18).

Being from a shared microculture, however, does not automatically imply sameness. Two women can share the same gender, for instance, and be very different in terms of how they view their role as women. Two individuals can be immigrants and yet have very different experiences. One

person has family ties and fluency in the new language while the other immigrated without family connections or fluency.

The individual's identification with microcultural groups is determined by social and historical influences as well as membership in other microcultures. In the previous example, the intersection of language and immigrant experience play out very differently for each individual. The implication is that the individual with family support and knowledge of the new language will have more resources than the person who lacks these supports.

This suggests that microcultural identities occur on a continuum of sameness and difference. Identity is influenced by both life experience and membership in other subcultures. Not only must we look at the continuum of sameness and difference for each microculture, we must also consider how each microcultural continuum interacts with other microcultures (i.e., in this example immigration and language) and in the dominant culture (i.e., how each individual's microcultural experience interacts with the larger society).

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

1. Your instructor will have each student share a microcultural identity (i.e., race, gender, ethnicity). After sharing the identity, each student is to mention aspects of sameness and difference for the microculture. For instance, aspects of difference for gender can include (but are not limited to) masculine, feminine, and androgynous orientations.
2. Your instructor will list each microcultural identity on the board along with related similarities and differences. You can record them on the figure presented in Table 2.2.

DISCUSSION POINTS

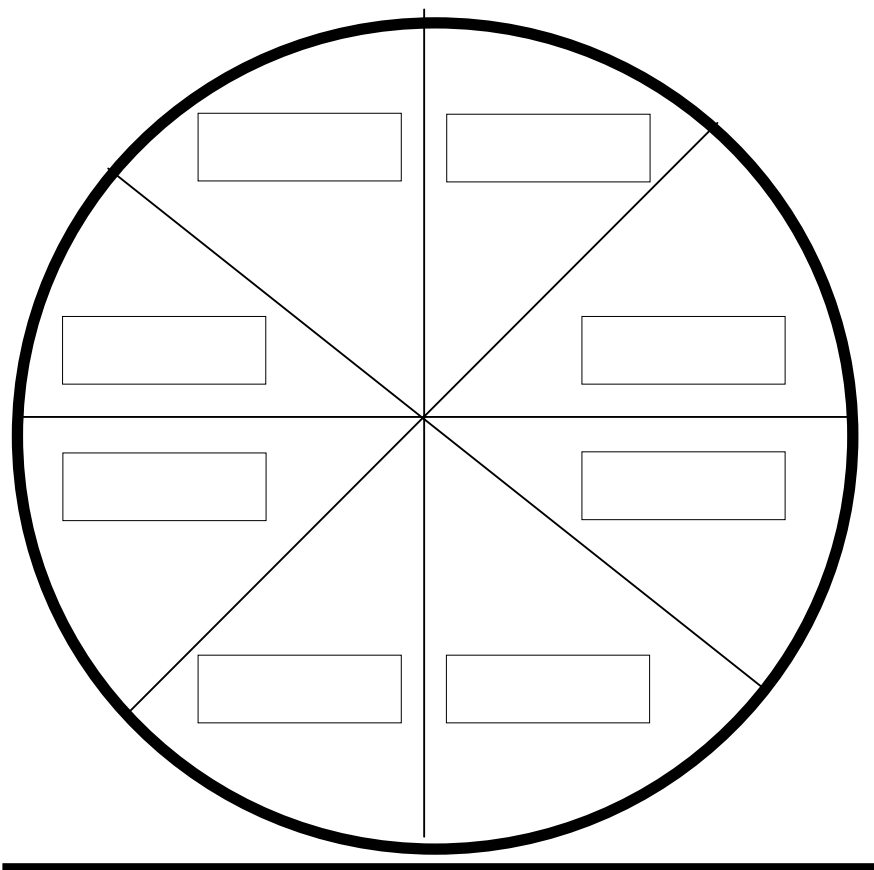
Examine the dimensions of microcultural difference after everyone has made a contribution. A key point for discussion concerns the interaction and overlap of being a member of more than one microculture. Another area for discussion involves whether dimensions of microcultures were omitted and what this means for the class. Specific questions are:

1. What do you make of the vast number of microcultures identified by the class?
2. How does the continuum of sameness and difference within each microculture influence how it is experienced? Were any microcultures

- not mentioned that you can think of now? What does it mean that they were left out?
3. What are the connections and interrelationships among the microcultures? Do you associate some microcultures with others more readily? What influences your association?

Table 2.2 Microcultural Identities

Document the microcultural identity along with aspects of sameness and difference in the graph below. Add more segments as each class participant reports a relevant identity.



DIVERSITY TRAINING ACTIVITY 2.3

EXPERIENCES OF DIFFERENCE

RATIONALE

The purpose of *Diversity Training Activity 2.3* is to help you delve deeper into the emotional aspect of difference. Perhaps you believe that you do not have an experience of difference and feel this topic does not apply to you. This exercise explores a time when you did feel different, how you felt about it, and how this awareness can help you empathize with differences that others experience. Key themes associated with difference will become apparent as participants share their stories.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

1. Your instructor will go around the room and have each student recall a time he felt different. You might remember being the only student in class who wore glasses or had a short haircut. The magnitude of the difference is not important--how you felt about the difference you experienced is what matters in this exercise.
2. When you talk about your experience, share the feelings that came up for you during this time.
3. As you listen to the experiences presented, identify the common themes associated with difference. The questions below will guide you in your efforts.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. What did you notice about yours and other people's reactions to experiences of difference? What feelings emerged for people as they talked about a time they felt different? What common themes came out of your discussion?
2. What do these feelings suggest about how difference is generally viewed?
3. How can we begin to unlearn some of the negative assumptions we have about difference?

NOTEBOOK SECTION FOR CHAPTER 2

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND DIFFERENCE?

I. CONCEPTS/THEORIES

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II. CLASSROOM OBJECTIVES

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III. BEST PRACTICES (HOW TO IMPLEMENT THOSE OBJECTIVES IN THE CLASSROOM)

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

WEB RESOURCES

- The YouthNOISE Website includes information on tolerance and understanding difference. Topics include “What Did You Do With the Hate?” and “Islams, Muslims, Arabs, and Intolerance.” The link is: <http://www.youthnoise.com/home/>
- The Center for Instructional Development and Research at the University of Washington has a Web page devoted to the perspectives, strategies, and resources of inclusive teaching. Key topics for understanding difference are equitable class participation, perspectives on what excludes students, support for student success, and planning for diversity in teaching. The link is: <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/inclusive/>

REFERENCES

- Diversity activities and ice-breakers.* (n.d.). Retrieved October 2, 2004, from <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/diverse2.html>
- Gollnick, D.M., & Chinn, P.C. (2002). *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society* (6th Edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Stein, J. (1982). *The Random House college dictionary: Revised edition*. New York, NY: Random House.