

Cultural Identity Link-Up

What is it?

An ice breaker that helps you to examine your own cultural identity or identities, as well as to consider what kinds of cues you use when trying to ascertain the cultural identities of others (and how these match with their perceptions of themselves).

What materials do you need?

Paper clips (preferably plastic coated in a variety of colors) one per participant.

Why do you do it?

We all have many different aspects of our cultural identities. These might include some of the following: race, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, biracial/multiracial, multiethnic, dress, global nomad/third culture kid, country of origin, parents' country or countries of origin, first generation (or second or third generation), language, other. This exercise helps us to become more aware of how we identify ourselves and others, regarding our cultural identities, and how and with whom we might choose to associate with, based on these various factors. It also helps us to look at the possible differences between how we view our own identities and how others perceive us.

What is the process?

Everyone is asked to close their eyes and to look into the "inner mirror of them selves." They are asked to examine what culture means to them and what they think of as their own cultural identity. Each person should look in their mirror for the cultural identities they claim and when they are ready, open their eyes and look around the room. WITHOUT TALKING, participants should find someone whom they think shares a cultural identity with them. They should approach that person and hold out their paper clip, offering to link it with that person's clip. If the other person does not think they share a common cultural identity with the person offering, they do not need to accept the offer to link their clip. When someone offers their clip to another participant, that person should try to find a cultural commonality with the person offering their clip, and if they can find one, link their paper clip. After making a link with another participant, try to communicate nonverbally to learn more about your partner's cultural identity.

Discuss the following:

After a few minutes, once most people are linked, ask each person to talk to their partner about how they view their own cultural identity, as well as why they chose their partner to link up with and what they thought their partner had in common with them, regarding cultural identity.

How does your perception of their cultural identity compare to their own perception?
How did they view your cultural identity, compared to the way you viewed it? What kinds of cues were used to figure out someone's cultural identity?

Other questions to discuss as a large group:

General reactions...what did you see? ...think? ...feel?

How did you decide to whom you would offer your paper clip?

What happened after you offered your clip?
How did you decide whether to accept or refuse someone's paper clip?
How did it feel for your paper clip to be accepted or rejected?
How did it feel for someone to make assumptions about your cultural identity?
How did it feel to make assumptions about someone else's cultural identity?
Were your assumptions about the person's cultural identity correct?
What about their assumptions about you?
Was it easy to find someone with whom you felt you could make a cultural connection?
Why or why not?
Does this exercise remind you of any other experiences or situations?

Source: Adapted by Alice Wu from BIGLTYNY Leadership, for Toolbox for Intercultural Interactions, presented by Susan Bender, Darla Deardorff, and Alice Wu, at the 2005 NAFSA: Association for International Educators National conference, Seattle, WA, June 1, 2005, 9:15 -10:15 am.