

Personal Identity and Loss Activity

We each have our own personal identity which is a composite of various aspects of our lives and cultures that are meaningful to us. Together they drive our beliefs, thoughts, decisions and actions. This exercise is meant to bring those pieces of our identity to the front of participants' minds as they consider culture and to reflect on the meaning of identity for students they serve. This activity is intended to provide experiential understanding of loss of identity and impact of intergenerational trauma.

Activity Instructions:

Part I:

1. Pass out a blank piece of paper to each participant.
2. Ask participants to
 - a. Physically divide (cut or rip) their paper into 5 separate strips.
 - b. On each strip of paper, write down an individual/personal identity they have.
 - i. You can ask "What makes you YOU?" Examples include mother, father, Christian, Buddhist, teacher, I love to dance, I take daily hikes, I play the cello, I'm a physician, I'm a physical therapist, wife, husband, grandparent, etc.
3. Give everyone time to write down the five descriptors of their identity.
4. Instruct everyone to pull two descriptors out of their five. These two descriptors will no longer pertain to themselves.
5. Every individual holds up their three remaining pieces of paper like a hand of cards with the writing facing themselves.
6. Each person turns to a neighbor who will randomly draw out one more of the strips of paper. Now each person is left with 2 descriptors of identity.
7. Reflect on and discuss what this process felt like to each person.
 - a. Did losing a part of your identity impact you?
 - b. How did it feel to have to willingly give up parts of your identity?
 - c. How did it feel to have someone take another piece away?

Part II:

1. Turn to another person sitting at your table and randomly take one piece of paper from their discard pile.
2. Repeat step 1.
3. Everyone now has 4 descriptors of who you are —two original and two new descriptors.
4. Reflect and discuss the second part of this process.
 - a. Say to the group, "What if I told you, from this point forward that your identity is now and forever made up of these four descriptors? What is gone is no longer part of you and what you have acquired is the new you."
 - i. Some will say: "I'm good with this" and others might be upset at what they've lost.
 - ii. In this activity, recognize people might change gender, religion, profession, interests. Let people talk about what they've lost and gained.

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Conclusion:

Once attendees have completed their discussion, remind the participants that this is the process that our society and systems have done throughout history and continue to do to many people on an individual and community level. To begin to understand intergenerational and historical trauma, we have to understand people's identities are important to them and that we frequently tell students when they come into a school, how they need to identify and present themselves without consideration of what we are asking them to give up.

1. Discuss what pieces of individual identity are denied by practices and procedures in your school?
2. What new pieces of identity do we ask students to take on when they become a part of the school?
Consider dress codes, religious practices, language, gender identity, and race.

How participants felt in this brief exercise can inform how they view students, families and colleagues.