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"The Party": An Experiential Role-Playing Exercise to  
Enhance Students' Multicultural Understanding

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Running head: ENHANCING MULTICULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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"Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I will remember. Involve me and I will understand." This adage aptly summarizes the power that experiential involvement has for promoting deeper, more lasting forms of learning or understanding. Indeed, research by social psychologists (e.g., Fazio & Zanna, 1981) indicates that direct, active experience may be crucial for altering attitudes and beliefs. Thus, the purpose of this particular exercise was to immerse new college students in a role-playing situation that forced them to experience first-hand the effects of stereotyping as a way of introducing students to course material examining research and theory on prejudice and ethnic identity formation.

"The Party": One Innovative Experiential Role-Playing Technique Described

"The Party" is a role-playing exercise that has been used on a number of college campuses including University of California at Berkeley and Stanford University<sup>1</sup> as part of their programs to enhance multicultural understanding among residence hall students. I adapted this exercise for use with 75 entering students enrolled in a one-unit Ethnic Studies course as part of a Summer Bridge Program for under-represented students at California State University at Fullerton.

This exercise is most effective for use with groups no larger than 35 with one group facilitator and requires from 60-90 minutes (roughly 10 minutes for instructions and role-playing and an hour for discussion). Few materials are required other than sticky labels of cultural stereotypes for participants (e.g., Asian male computer science student, White female sorority member, African-American male athlete, Lesbian student, Jewish female student, etc.) and a discussion handout with questions for individuals and small groups to address following the role-playing.

Three female upper division undergraduate teaching assistants (who had experienced the exercise at an earlier training session) facilitated the exercise in smaller "break out" groups of 25 students each. At the outset of the exercise, the group facilitator introduced and set the tone for the exercise by indicating that: (a) "The Party" was a short role-playing exercise that would be used to explore the similarities and differences among cultures in an everyday setting and to highlight related material in the lecture part of the ethnic studies course; (b) All students were urged to participate actively in the role-playing for maximal benefit; (c) Students were also cautioned to expect that they may experience some strong emotions due to the experiential nature of the exercise, but that these emotions and experiences would be processed during the discussion to follow the role-playing.

The exercise began by clearing away chairs to the periphery of the room and asking students to imagine that they are eager to meet other students at a campus "party". Next, the facilitator affixed a label representing a cultural stereotype on each participant's forehead, taking pains to select stereotypes that did not match a particular participant (e.g., affixing "White female sorority member" on a non-White male). While students could read the labels of others at the party, they did not know which label the facilitator had affixed to their own forehead. The goals of each participant were to: (a) to try and meet and talk to as many participants at the "party" as possible; (b) to respond and interact with others at the party based on their stereotyped labels--in other words, after viewing someone else's label, students were encouraged to make stereotyped conversational comments to that individual, even if they did not believe in those cultural stereotypes; (c) to make a guess as to what gender and stereotyped label they were

wearing by the end of the role-playing session based only on the comments made to them during the "party."

Following the 10-minute role-playing, students were given a handout to answer first individually, then in small groups for the processing discussion. The handout included questions such as, "What is your label's gender/culture?" "What were the most frequent comments made to you and how did these comments make you feel?" "Do you share these same stereotypes and why or why not?" "Who did you feel most comfortable with at the party?" "What did you learn from this exercise?" etc. After individuals had completed the questionnaire, the facilitator asked students to convene in small groups of 4 or 5 students to discuss their responses on the handout, and reminded them that during their discussions, they should listen closely to each other, be fair, open, and sensitive to others in the group. Groups then reported back in a general class discussion of students' reaction to the exercise and the insights gained as they related to course material on stereotyping, prejudice, and strategies to counteract stereotyping.

#### Student Response to "The Party"

Students responded very favorably to this experiential exercise. There were clear behavioral signs of excitement, curiosity, and amusement as group facilitators described the exercise to students. Student interaction during the role-playing was extremely lively, active, and very often humorous--virtually all students appeared to be enjoying the "party" as students engaged in lots of laughter, joking, and high levels of animation and involvement. Indeed, students' accuracy at guessing their own stereotypic labels was very high (averaging 82% for culture and 68% for gender). Although the role-playing sessions were generally characterized by mirth and glee, students' subsequent

discussions and reflections on the exercise were by contrast, serious, sober, and penetrating.

At the end of the ethnic studies course, participating students completed a brief questionnaire asking them to assess the value of this exercise using a scale of 1="very useless or unenjoyable" to 5="very useful or enjoyable". Students found the entire "The Party" exercise quite enjoyable or fun (mean rating=4.0, standard deviation=0.96). When asked to rate the usefulness of "The Party" role-playing part of the exercise for helping them to experience and understand stereotyping and prejudice, student response was very positive (mean rating=4.1, standard deviation=0.94). Similarly, students rated the subsequent classroom discussions as useful and enlightening for furthering their understanding of stereotyping and prejudice (mean rating=4.1, standard deviation=0.92).

Finally, when students were asked to respond in writing to what they learned about the topic of prejudice and about themselves or others, the following comments were typical: "I loved it! [the exercise] I learned that stereotypes and prejudice are everywhere and it can be hard for anyone to get over it." [sic] "The best part was that I experienced a view within people that I never was able to understand before. It was very emotional for me." "It made me realize how prejudiced I am sometimes--I learned that many times we stereotype without knowing it." "It was fun [student emphasis] and that's a good way to study and learn!" "It gave me an understanding of racism." and "People are all the same--we shouldn't stereotype each other--we have the power to eradicate prejudice, but it'll take lots of effort and education from every individual."

#### Concluding thoughts on "The Party"

Judging from students' positive and enthusiastic response to this innovative experiential classroom exercise, "The Party" appears to be an effective, simple, and

evocative vehicle for sensitizing students to issues related to cultural or ethnic diversity. In fact, this exercise can be modified easily to focus on other forms of diversity understanding aside from ethnic or cultural stereotypes such as differences due to age, ableness, social class, etc. Some additional suggestions for instructors include: (1) foster a responsive, safe classroom environment by maintaining an open, warm, and positive attitude throughout discussions; (2) avoid singling out non-majority students as spokespersons for their particular ethnic group; (3) be prepared to utilize flexible and sensitive communication and negotiation skills should potentially derisive racial issues arise; (4) permit some measure of honest, appropriate self-disclosure about your own ethnic or cultural experiences as research indicates that instructors who do so are more effective when dealing with multicultural students and issues (e.g., Scollon, 1981); and (5) familiarize yourself with the increasing number of resources addressing the topic of university teaching regarding issues of diversity (e.g., Banks, 1993; Junn, in press; Wurzel & Holt, 1991).

Whether students or faculty are consciously aware of it or not, each of us brings into the classroom a wealth of unique and personal cultural knowledge. By tapping this rich personal resource, students not only deepen their understanding and appreciation of the influence of social, historical, and political forces for cultural diversity, they are afforded the potential to view themselves and the world from more complex, interrelated, multiple perspectives. It is this enriched, heightened sense of self in relation to larger global and historical contexts that sets the stage for powerful possibilities as these students leave our institutions of higher learning to navigate their personal and professional worlds. Viewed from this perspective, taking up the challenge of educating for diversity represents a rich and important opportunity for all.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> A facilitator manual with instructions for "The Party" exercise as well as other exercises can be obtained for \$25 by writing to Ms. Edith Ng, University of California at Berkeley, Staff Affirmative Action Office, Project DARE, 2199 Addison Street, Suite 641, Berkeley, CA 94720. Telephone: 510-643-7464



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### After "The Party": Who Am I?

Based on the comments and conversations you had during "The Party" simulation, take a guess as to who you were! Be sure to take a guess on the following:

What is your "label's" gender?    male    or    female

What is your "label's" ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

What were the most frequent comments made to you? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How did the comments make you feel? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Who did you feel **most** comfortable with and why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Who did you feel **least** comfortable with and why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Anti-Stereotyping Strategies Inventory

You are more powerful than you think; you have information and life experiences that can be effective tools in combating stereotyping and prejudice. Try and identify strategies that might work to combat stereotyping. Don't be disheartened, remember that this is a life-long process, but you can make a promising start now--and don't forget to enlist others in the crusade too!

Brainstorm and write down a list of practical strategies you and others could use to deal with stereotypes. Below are some thought questions that may help you think of ideas or actions to dispel stereotypes.

Based on what you've learned and shared in this meeting, how has this experience changed your ideas, perceptions, or behavior?

- What do you do when you see stereotyping happen? What types of action should you, or can you take? Give some real-life examples.
- Is it important to acknowledge differences? Why or why not?
- How can you show appreciation for cultural diversity when you may be unfamiliar with certain groups? What do you say?
- What do we need to dispel stereotypes? Point out where or how we can get more accurate information?
- How would you approach people who you don't know, differently, after going through this exercise?
- When you hear offensive remarks made about other groups, how might we show our support for the targeted groups?
- What have you learned from this discussion that you can take away and use?

## Summary and Closure

### **Purpose:**

1. To experience first-hand, what it feels like to be stereotyped;
2. To learn that everyone is "prejudiced" and that we all have similar "tapes" running in our heads whether we verbalize them consciously or not that work to unjustly stereotype others;
3. To understand the negative effect of stereotypes and how it limits our daily interaction and future possibilities;
4. To learn from ourselves and others that there are a number of simple, practical things that each of us can do to work against stereotyping;
5. To learn that this is a life-long growing and learning process.