The Power Shuffle Exercise

This diversity exercise helps group members examine their understandings of diversity, their feelings about belonging to one group versus another and their assumptions about one another. It also highlights the power differentials between dominant and non-dominant groups in our society and the sense of “stigma” that may be assigned or attached to non-dominant groups.

Preparation and Words of Caution

In this exercise, participants are invited to self-identify as belonging to various social groups by performing an action that sets them apart from others. Because the exercise usually evokes very profound emotions, facilitators need to take care to create a safe atmosphere for group members both at the start and the conclusion of the exercise. To prepare for the exercise, the facilitator should discuss with participants reasons why this group is being invited to join in the exercise. The facilitator may also want to suggest some ground rules, or ask participants to create group agreements, related to respecting individual members’ experience and preserving confidentiality. (Preserving confidentiality means not disclosing personal histories or information about group members outside the group.) Facilitators should also take care to point out at the start of the exercise that participation is voluntary. Group members should be informed that they do not have to identify themselves as belonging to any particular group or category if they don’t wish to reveal that information about themselves. Instead, they should simply notice any feelings that arise whether or not they choose to reveal personal information about themselves.

At the end of the exercise, the facilitator should give participants time to collect and compose themselves gradually before engaging in a full group discussion of the exercise. This can be done by instructing participants to move about the room silently for a few minutes, acknowledging one another’s presence through eye contact alone. After a period of silent mingling, participants can be invited to pair up with a partner to describe how they felt during the exercise.

As a final word of caution, this exercise should only be used by experienced facilitators who are comfortable with helping people process strong reactions in a group setting. If this exercise does not feel safe for your group, it’s best to omit it.
Instructions:

For this exercise, the facilitator asks group members to stand side by side along one wall of the room, facing the opposite wall. (Furniture should be cleared from the center of the room before starting the exercise.) The facilitator next tells participants they will be given a set of instructions which they should follow **silently**. During the exercise, the facilitator calls out instructions from the “Facilitator’s Script” below. With each set of instructions, the facilitator asks group members who fit certain descriptive categories or criteria to cross to the opposite side of the room, away from the full group, then stop, and turn to face the group they left behind. The two groups are given a few seconds to observe one another silently and to notice their feelings. The facilitator then instructs those who have crossed the room to return to their original place with the larger group, to await the next “shuffle.” If participants are uncertain about whether they belong to a specific group or not, they should decide for themselves where they belong.

Facilitators may add new categories or delete ones included here, depending on the composition of the group, the amount of time available and specific issues being addressed in the group. Questions that can be used for a group discussion at the conclusion of the exercise are included at the end of the Facilitator’s Script below.

Facilitator’s Script

“Please cross to the other side of the room if... “ (insert category from list below)
“Notice who’s with you . . . notice who’s not.”
“Notice how it feels to be separated this way.”
“Now cross back to your original place.”

List of Categories to Use with The Power Shuffle Exercise

- You are a woman.
- You are Asian, Southeast Asian, East Indian or Pacific Islander.
- You are Latina, Chicano or Mestiza.
- You are of Arabian descent.
- You are Native American or one of your parents is full-blooded Native American.
- You are African-American, Black or of African descent.
- You are of Jewish heritage.
- You are of multi-ethnic heritage or one of your parents is a person of color.
- You have any bi-racial children.
- You don’t know exactly what your European American heritage is, what your great-grandparents names are or what regions or cities your ancestors came from.
• You were ever told you didn’t act Black/Latino/Asian/Arab/Indian . . . enough.
• You are 25 or under.
• You are 55 or over.
• You were ever discouraged or prevented from pursuing academic or work goals or were tracked into a lower vocational level because of your racial or ethnic identity or class standing.
• You were raised poor.
• You were raised by a single parent.
• Neither of your parents, or the people who raised you, attended college or received a college degree.
• You have a visible or hidden disability or impairment.
• You are adopted.
• You are a birth parent.
• You are an adoptive parent.
• Your native language is other than English.
• You grew up in a household where you heard derogatory racial terms or jokes.
• You did not meet a person of color socially before you were in your teens.
• You ever felt racial tension in a situation and were afraid to say anything about it.
• You are a recovering alcoholic/addict.
• You come from a family where drugs or alcohol are a problem.
• You or a member of your family has ever been labeled mentally ill or crazy.
• You are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender or have family members who are.
• You have ever not been affectionate with someone of the same sex because you were afraid people would think you are a lesbian, gay or bisexual person.
• You have ever been sexually attracted to someone of the same sex.
• Your partner makes more money than you do and thinks that entitles him/her to make more of the decisions.
• You ever felt conspicuous, uncomfortable or alone in a group because you were the only representative of your ethnic group.
• You ever earned less than a man for doing equal work.
• You were ever yelled at, commented upon, whistled at, touched or harassed by a man in a public place.
• You have ever been afraid of a man’s anger.
• You have ever changed your diet or exercised to change your body size, body shape or weight.
• You ever limited your activity or changed plans to go somewhere out of fear for your physical safety.
• You have ever been called a bitch, cunt, whore or slut.
• You have ever said “Yes” to a partner because you were afraid to say “No.”
• You have ever been hit by an intimate partner.
• You have ever experienced sexual violence.
Discussion Questions

At the end of the series of shuffles, the facilitator can ask for feedback and guide a follow-up discussion using the following set of questions:

1. What feelings came up for you during the exercise?
2. How did it feel to be part of a minority group?
3. How did it feel to be part of a majority group?
4. Did this exercise change your understanding or definition of diversity? If so, how?
5. How might the issues we’re exploring in this exercise come up in our work as a team?
6. How might the issues we’re exploring here come up in our work with the larger community?