

UNPACK YOUR CULTURAL BAGGAGE or CULTURE PIE

Purpose: This activity is best conducted as a pre-orientation exercise prior to visiting another country or different cultural context as part of a service-learning course or program. The primary purpose of the activity is to assist students to become more aware of their worldview, the different aspects of the culture they identify with and how culture affects their beliefs, values, behaviors and sense of self. The exercise should assist students in describing (in a comfortable and safe environment) the meanings they attribute to different aspects of culture that they identify with. The activity should help students better understand dominant norms, values and beliefs in their own culture as well as other cultures – particularly the cultures in the country they are visiting. The activity should provide students with a better understanding of what it feels like to be a minority member of a culture.

The exercise is should assist students in understanding and critically examining the validity of the assumptions they hold about their cultural identity as well as the aspects of other cultures. The exercise should uncover visible and invisible aspects of culture, the complex and contested nature of cultural identity and the marginalization and harm some people experience as members of a minority group. The exercise should also highlight how culture defines who we are, how we understand ourselves (as minority or part of dominant culture) and others and the misperceptions we might have about our own or others' cultural identity and assumptions.

Instructions for students:

1. On the suitcase worksheet, write down 5-10 aspects of your individual culture and identity.
2. Provide examples of visible and invisible aspects of culture and identity for inspiration.
3. Think about how much room each item takes up in the suitcase. To continue with the suitcase metaphor, is the item like:
 - a. a pair of shoes that have very little give
 - b. a bulky sweater that can be squished to accommodate other items
 - c. a bottle of shampoo that can spill get all over everything else in your suitcase
 - d. a pair of underwear--an essential that takes up very little room
 - e. a pair of tweezers that you could easily do without or lose in your bag

*Note if you use the Culture Pie as a symbol, students should draw a circle and identify different slices of the pie as different aspects of their identity and culture. Larger slices represent how much that trait or attribute defines one's identity.

4. Be prepared to share your suitcase with a partner and/or the group

Instructions for facilitator:

- Once the group has had some time to think about their cultural baggage/pie and write a few items in the suitcase, ask for a volunteer to share an item that they wrote down. (Note: To facilitate discussion in reticent groups, you may wish to give the students time to share their suitcases with a partner before the group discussion or model how you define yourself culturally.)
- For each item, ask for clarification about the meaning of the item to the individual and the role it plays in the individual's life. (Example: What does it mean to be a Christian, a Southerner, a woman, an African-American, a mother, a patriot, a liberal, etc.)
- Another interesting topic for discussion is to identify and consider dominant cultural values, assumptions and norms – visible and invisible – as it relates to the ways in which participants describe their culture and identity. (Example: If an individual identifies themselves as a Southerner, ask what it means to be a Northerner. Or, how does it feel to identify as African American in the US or other countries?) This activity typically gives rise to lively discussion of the values, beliefs and assumptions that underlie aspect of culture. The discussion might also lead to a discussion of power relations among individuals and groups. The instructor/facilitator will need to be particularly sensitive to the group's comfort level, individual's defensiveness and or frustration.
- Conclude the activity by brainstorming how one might respond when confronted with values and assumptions that differ from one's own.

*This activity created by Andrea Kiely (Former Associate Director, International Education, University of Georgia and Richard Kiely, Director, TA Program, Center for Teaching Excellence, Cornell University.