Circles of My Multicultural Self

Materials:
Distribute copies of the Circles Handout

Time:
20 -- 30 minutes

Objective:
The Circles activity engages participants in a process of identifying what they consider to be the most important dimensions of their own identity. Stereotypes are examined as participants share stories about when they were proud to be part of a particular group and when it was especially hurtful to be associated with a particular group.

Instructions:
Ask participants to pair up with somebody they do not know very well. Invite them to introduce each other, and then follow these steps:

1. Ask participants to write their names in the center circle. They should then fill in each satellite circle with a dimension of their identity they consider to be among the most important in defining themselves. Give them several examples of dimensions that might fit into the satellite circles: female, athlete, Jewish, brother, educator, Asian American, middle class, etc.

2. In their pairs, have participants share two stories with each other. First, they should share stories about when they felt especially proud to be associated with one of the identities they selected. Next, they should share a story about a time it was particularly painful to be associated with one of the identity dimensions they chose.

3. The third step will be for participants to share a stereotype they have heard about one dimension of their identity that fails to describe them accurately. Ask them to complete the sentence at the bottom of the handout by filling in the blanks: "I am (a/an) ____________ but I am NOT (a/an) ______________." Provide your own example, such as "I am a Christian, but I am NOT a radical right Republican." Instructions for steps 1, 2, and 3 should be given at once. Allow 8-10 minutes for participants to complete all three steps, but remind them with 2 minutes remaining that they must fill in the stereotype sentence.
4. Probe the group for reactions to each other's stories. Ask whether anyone heard a story she or he would like to share with the group. (Make sure the person who originally told the story has granted permission to share it with the entire group.)

5. Advise participants that the next step will involve individuals standing up and reading their stereotype statement. You can either simply go around the room in some order or have people randomly stand up and read their statements. Make sure that participants are respectful and listening actively for this step, as individuals are making themselves vulnerable by participating. Start by reading your own statement. This part of the activity can be extremely powerful if you introduce it energetically. It may take a few moments to start the flow of sharing; so allow for silent moments.

6. Several questions can be used to process this activity:
   1. How do the dimensions of your identity that you chose as important differ from the dimensions other people use to make judgments about you?
   2. Did anybody hear somebody challenge a stereotype that you once bought into? If so, what?
   3. How did it feel to be able to stand up and challenge your stereotype?
   4. (There is usually some laughter when somebody shares common stereotype such as "I may be Arab, but I am not a terrorist" or "I may be a teacher, but I do have a social life.") I heard several moments of laughter. What was that about?
   5. Where do stereotypes come from?
   6. How can we eliminate them?

Debriefing:

The key to this activity is the process of examining one's own identity and the stereotypes associated with that identity, then having one's own stereotypes challenged through others' stories and stereotype challenges. Encourage participants to think about the stereotypes they apply to people and to make a conscious effort to think more deeply about them, eventually eliminating them.

As with most activities, it can be especially effective if you participate while you facilitate. If you are willing to share your own experiences, participants are more likely to feel open to share their own.

It is crucial, especially for the final part of the activity when participants are sharing their stereotypes, to allow for silences. People will be hesitant to share initially, but once the ball starts rolling, the activity carries a lot of energy. Allow time at the end for participants to talk more about whatever stereotype they shared.

After everyone has shared their stereotype challenge, announce that anyone who would like to share another one can do so. Model by sharing another one about yourself.

Note: This activity was adapted from Awareness Activities, part of the Multicultural Pavilion Internet Project. Special thanks is extended to Bob Covert and the Multicultural Education team at the University of Virginia.