WHAT’S IN A NAME?

OVERVIEW

OBJECTIVES – Following this session, participants will:

• To learn each other’s names
• To learn how our names can provide insights into our cultural backgrounds
• To establish an opportunity to learn about the impact of differences
• To create community by listening to each other’s personal stories

SETTING:

• Large group interaction with participants seated in a circle

MATERIALS:

• Markers (various colors)
• Cardstock

TIME:

• 30 minutes

PROCEDURE: [brief overview in bullets such as example below]

(Note: there are two versions of this activity in this curriculum piece for groups up to 10 and groups of 10 or more)

For a group of 10 or more:

• Facilitator asks the group, “What makes up culture?” and solicits several responses from the group
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INSTRUCTIONS

LECTURETTE:

It might sound something like this…

How would you describe culture?

What are characteristics or aspects of culture?

Note to facilitator: Allow a few examples to be shared by participants and then move into the lecturette

“Often, within a U.S. context, culture is narrowly defined as race/ethnicity and sometimes gender. By doing this, we set up a dichotomy that implies that some groups have culture, and others don’t. For purposes of this exercise, we would like all of you to see culture in its broadest sense, including race/ethnicity, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, class, disabilities, age, etc. As you do that, I also want you to begin thinking about culture as it connects to your name. Think about your name and reflect on what it means to you. Think about aspects of your name that are important to you, things about your name that bring you joy – as well as things about your name that are sometimes difficult for you. Are there stories about your name that represent things that are culturally significant to you? As you begin to think about this, I will share the cultural background of my name as an example.

- Facilitator shares the story of his/her name and ties it to any cultural significance
- After the facilitator’s story is shared, give the following instructions:

1). I am passing around cardstock that I need you to fold in half to make a name tent.

2). I am also passing around a marker for each person (or give alternative instructions if there are more people than markers available). Once you have folded your cardstock and have a marker, in silence for just a few minutes, write your first name on the front of your name tent and on the back of the name tent, write any notes or other information that you would like to share about your name that is connected to your culture. It may be a nickname, your family’s name, your confirmation name (if you are Catholic), a name of endearment that only “special” people in your life call you, etc. Once you have written that information on the back, look up so that I can provide further instructions.

3). Form groups no larger than four, as diverse as possible, with individuals that you are not familiar with or that you traveled with.
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INSTRUCTIONS

4). In your small groups, for the next 15 minutes, each person should to take a few minutes to introduce themselves to each other. Talk about your name and the cultural significance of your name.

Activity debrief: (Process as many as time allows)

- What was it like for you to think about aspects of your name that are important to you and share cultural information about yourself?
- What was it like for you to hear other’s stories?
- Were there any important or significant themes that were shared?
- What similarities and differences did you notice about the stories shared?
- How might this exercise be used to help build more equitable, inclusive and affirming environments in your work?

It can be important for us to take time to intentionally reflect on the way that culture is connected to who we are. It can be just as important to reflect on why some individuals have a clearer and closer connection to their cultural backgrounds than others and why that may be.

**Exercise option for groups of 10 or less:**

Follow the same procedures described above, except to have participants, one by one, go up to a flipchart and share their name and story with the full group. Follow the same debriefing process.

**Note to facilitator:**

- **There may be some participants who struggle with this exercise because they feel that they have no culture or they may use descriptors such as “I’m a mutt,” “I’m Heinz 57,” “I am just American.” Support them to notice why that might be? Or what feelings come up for them in relationship to this activity.**
- **Some participants (African-Americans, but not all) may find that because of different forms of oppression, they can only go so far back to the origins of their family names or that their names don’t really reflect their cultural backgrounds. It is important to stay with that discussion and/or pain when it is shared. You can also ask participants to share other groups that might also have no or limited connection to their family names. Hint: groups such as people who were adopted or in foster care.**
REFERENCES


