

Your Stereotypical Life Story

Large Group – 101 – Low Trust – 10 mins – szp.guide/lifestory

Materials

- Timer (cell phone timers work great!)

Setup

- N/A

Goals & objectives

- Help participants understand the ways they live or do not live the stereotypes of their genders
- Clarify participants' understanding of what gendered stereotypes they've internalized, as well as what stereotypes others' have internalized about gender
- Highlight the limiting (and often problematic) depictions of themselves and others that stereotypes encourage
- Provide a concrete counter-narrative participants can access when challenging stereotypes (internally, when they see themselves doing so; and externally, when discussing identities with others)

Process Steps

1. Have everyone find one partner, and determine a "Partner A" and "Partner B" (there will inevitably be some triads; this is okay, just have two people play Partner B's role)
2. Explain the instructions (see below for in-depth).
3. Part 1: for 1 minute each, starting with Partner A, have partners tell each other things about themselves that are ALSO stereotypes of their gender (i.e., stereotypes about their gender that also describe them)
4. Mini-process what the just did (questions below)
5. Part 2: for 1 minute each, starting with Partner B, have partners tell each other things about themselves that are stereotypes of A DIFFERENT gender (i.e., ways they break gender stereotypes)
6. Process the exercise

In-depth Instructions (you may read verbatim, but it's okay to ad lib)

Introduction & Part 1

For the next minute, you're going to tell your partner your life story. There are only three rules: 1, only one person talks at a time -- Partner A will go first, Partner B, your job is to nod or say "Tell me more"; 2, you must talk for the entire minute; and 3, you may only tell the other person things about yourself

that are true and ALSO stereotypes of people of your gender. For example, if you identify as a woman and you would also describe yourself as someone who is sensitive, you can say "I'm sensitive." What questions or clarifications do you have about the instructions?

Notes on instructions:

- Make sure people are clear (get nods, or verbal yes's from the group) before you start the timer for Part 1. The instructions are hard to verbalize, but easy to follow if communicated correctly.
- Sometimes it's helpful to provide more examples (e.g., "If you identify as a man and you would describe yourself as 'a strong leader' you may say 'I'm a strong leader.'" or "If you identify as trans* or genderqueer and you would describe yourself as 'courageous' you may say 'I'm courageous.'"). But be wary of giving too many different examples, because some of the much of this activity comes from the participants exploring what stereotypes they are bringing into the conversation and already know.
- As you are timing, you can walk around the room, or, if in a bigger group, just stay up front and give them time updates ("30 seconds left! Keep talking, Partner A!") or just encouragement ("Tell me more!").

Part 2

Now, we're going to change things up. Partner B is going to talk first, and you're going to tell Partner A about your life, but only describing yourself by saying things that are true about you, but NOT stereotypical of your gender. Or, another way of thinking about it, describing yourself using stereotypes of another gender. For example, if you identify as a woman, and you would describe yourself as someone who is "courageous" (a common stereotype of trans* or genderqueer people), you may say "I'm courageous."

Debrief & Discussion Questions

Think about the goals of the activity, and do your best during both processing discussions to ask guiding questions toward that goal. This activity varies widely from group to group, so it's best to be prepared to be flexible, but following are some good starting points.

For the mini-processing (that happens between Part 1 and Part 2) -- take 1 or 2 minutes to check in with the group before moving on.

What was that like?

- Let them just yell out answers popcorn style. They'll say "Hard!" or "Fun!" (often both). Echo both and any others. If you want to process this out more ask folks to expand on their one word responses.
- If someone wants to give a longer response, let them.

Why was it hard?

- People often say... “I don’t know that many stereotypes”
- “I don’t often describe myself in that way”
- Or “It’s hard to think on the spot.”
- These are all helpful responses to call back on in the final processing discussion

Why was it fun?

- You’ll hear variations on the responses from “why hard?” and get a sense of how people react to challenge. The folks who answer here were likely experiencing the same things as folks who thought it was fun, they just react differently.

For the Final Discussion

What did you think of that activity? Why?

By a show of hands (or claps), who thought the first half was easier? Who thought the second half was easier?

- Ask for a few people to testify why for both. “What made the first part easier for you?”
- “Why was the second part easier?”

What was challenging about describing yourself in this way?

- People don’t think of themselves as stereotypes, or “Stereotypes are for other people, I’m a snowflake.”
- We don’t realize how many stereotypes we know, or how hard it can be to think of them on the spot, but they pop into our minds a lot without us noticing
- We are more than our gendered stereotypes (often much more, or better described using stereotypes of a gender we don’t identify with)
- What’s stereotypical (and gender in general) changes over time, and within our life cycles (e.g., what’s a “little girl” stereotype is different from a “mom” stereotype)

Why do you think I asked you to do this activity?

- Refer to goals

What lessons did you learn that you might be able to apply in the future?

- We often think of others as stereotypes, but do not generally do so of ourselves; but we’re also innately aware (and sometimes uncomfortable) of how well we do or do not fit into the boxes of our genders (and other identities).
- Naming these experiences may help us to discuss and dismantle them

- Having the opportunity to tell our stereotypical life story allows us to recognize how incomplete it, and other stereotypes, are in describing us

Make Your Own

A longer, more difficult version of this activity is to do it in 4 parts, digging a bit deeper into folks stereotypes and understandings of self, as described below:

- Part 1: Positive Stereotype of YOUR GENDER that ALSO describes YOU (partner A leads)
- Part 2: Negative Stereotype of YOUR GENDER that ALSO describes YOU (partner B leads)
- Part 3: Positive Stereotype of A DIFFERENT GENDER that ALSO describes YOU (partner B leads)
- Part 3: Negative Stereotype of A DIFFERENT GENDER that ALSO describes YOU (partner A leads)

You may modify the time folks are allowed to talk (2 minutes is really difficult and leads to awkward silences and discomfort; 30 seconds doesn't get as uncomfortable [which you can decide to be good or bad]) to better meet your intended outcomes.

You can also discuss this activity in a variety of ways based on what you hope to accomplish and how much time you have (e.g., have the pairs discuss it amongst themselves before bringing it to the greater group). This activity can be as short as a few minutes, or as long as 30 - 45, and still be a powerful learned experience.

Finally, the activity structure can easily be applied to different identity stereotypes (e.g., "describe yourself in ways that describe you AND also are stereotypes of your race" - be aware that changing up this activity to different identities may make it more challenging (or less) depending on the group you are working with and how much they have processed their different identities) and have a similar impact for discussing/understanding stereotypes. I use gender because it's relatively familiar (we have so normalized and systemized gender stereotypes...) but leads to big learning outcomes (...that we don't often realize how problematic the stereotypes are).

Notes

This activity is incredibly flexible. At groups of all levels of experience or knowledge with identity and social justice, as well as a variety of ages (from early teens through 60s), and all sizes of groups (20 - 30 people through upwards of 600), I've had great experiences facilitating this activity. But...

Heads up! The tone you set at the introduction of this activity (or with any activities/lecture that come before it) will carry on throughout. I advocate for a lighthearted, encouraging, and even "this can be fun/ny" tone, for two reasons: (1) the activity is innately challenging, you don't need to add to the challenge, but instead be supportive; and (2) if you set it up with too harsh or serious of a tone, folks will be less likely to discuss their stereotypes openly [if they know "stereotypes are bad"] and may actually bypass the learning part of the activity by playing the role of the benevolent "I don't stereotype" partner.

Knowing your facilitation style and the personality you bring to discussions like these will go miles in making this a more beneficial activity for your participants.

