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## **Teaching About Diversities: The Shadow/Role-Play Exercise**

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*This article describes the shadow/role-play exercise, an instructional tool that, when used in the context of appropriate preparation, can teach students about a broad range of diversities within groups. Qualitative analysis of the content of students' shadow/role-play papers illustrated the learning that resulted from*

this exercise. The shadow/role-play exercise can be modified to teach about any combination of diversities in a variety of psychology courses.

In a review of diversity literature in *Teaching of Psychology*, Ocampo et al. (2003) noted the need to progress beyond “call-to-the-profession” pieces. Among many recommendations, they advocated (a) examining techniques for teaching diversity, (b) highlighting diversity within groups, and (c) attending to a broad range of diversities. This article describes an instructional tool that, in the context of appropriate preparation, addresses these recommendations. In a psychology of women course, this exercise facilitated students’ understanding of the intersection of gender with other identities that shape diversity among women. The exercise can be modified, however, to teach about any combination of diversities in a variety of psychology courses.

### The Course: The Context for the Shadow/Role-Play Exercise

A question at the core of this psychology of women course is “what women are we talking about?” This question highlights that “women” is not a homogenous group and is shaped by the intersection of gender with other identities. I adopt an infusion model and use a wide range of teaching strategies to prepare students for the shadow/role-play exercise. Readings, lectures, discussions, and presentations across topics address issues of diversity. Students learn scholarship by and about women of color with particular attention to Black feminist and womanist analysis of intersections of diversities (e.g., Bowman et al., 2001; Garth, 1994). To facilitate critical thinking about the shadow/role-play, students learn about and discuss stereotypes and potential attribution biases. Grounded on this continuous attention to diversity of women’s experiences, the shadow/role-play exercise serves as a capstone project to facilitate experiential understanding of the scholarly knowledge students accumulate throughout the course.

### The Shadow/Role-Play Exercise

Students shadow or role-play for a day a woman who is different from them in terms of age, ability status, religion, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, pregnancy, or motherhood. Students who conduct a shadow spend a full day with the woman they select. Students who conduct a role-play transform themselves into the woman they select (e.g., wear a pregnancy suit or padded clothing to role-play a pregnant woman). The dimensions of diversity for the shadow/role-play exercise in this course reflect the broad scope of issues of diversity examined in the psychology of women literature (Yoder & Kahn, 1993) and parallel topics covered in the course. Men are limited to conducting shadows, given the course’s focus on women and the danger of physical harm for a man dressed as a woman. Instructors can modify the list of dimensions as they see fit.

During the fifth week of class students submit a detailed description of how they plan to carry out their shadow/role-play. Students who shadow also submit an informed consent form that describes the project and is signed

by the person being shadowed. These steps assure that students are not procrastinating and allow the instructor to provide feedback about how to improve plans. Consultation occurs on an individual basis so that students feel safe to explore potential stereotypes and biases in their plans. For example, a student who plans to shadow someone whom she or he assumes to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) would benefit from a discussion about the accuracy of stereotypes about LGB individuals along with exploration of appropriate ways to identify an LGB person to shadow (e.g., attend an LGB organization meeting to describe the project and ask for volunteers). Students submit revised plans for further feedback and approval. About 12 weeks into the semester students submit a photograph taken of them during their role-play or a form, signed by the person they shadowed, indicating that they completed the shadow.

Next, students write a paper that incorporates McIntosh’s (2001) discussion of unearned privilege and other course material (as appropriate) to address (a) what it was like to live as the person they selected and (b) what privileges of their own became visible to them. Students give 5-min presentations of their experiences in class. Subsequent class or group discussions can highlight how presentations reflected *similarities* and *differences* both *between* and *within* groups of women and challenge stereotypes about particular groups of women or women in general.

### Themes in Students’ Shadow/Role-Play Papers

Learning expected from this exercise reflects what Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) described as analysis (i.e., attending to experiences during shadow/role-play), evaluation (i.e., how intersection of gender with selected dimension shapes experiences), and synthesis (i.e., translating observations into privileges). Qualitative analysis of students’ papers assessed this learning. To extract themes, I grouped together papers based on the intersection selected. Following Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) procedures, I coded students’ observations and collapsed similar observations into core categories or themes (e.g., I coded the observation “placed pride magnet instead of a pride sticker on car for easy removal to avoid conflict when visiting family” as “a concealment strategy to cope with family strain” and collapsed this code into the larger theme “concealment to cope with rejection”).

Given that male students and some dimensions of diversity (e.g., age) were limited to shadowing, more students conducted shadows (27) than role-plays (7). Table 1 outlines the wide range of experiences and privileges that emerged from students’ papers. In addition to these themes, many students highlighted self-realizations that resulted from the exercise. Indeed, 62% (21 out of 34) of students noted in their papers that the exercise helped them translate their learning into personal experience and many described the exercise as an “eye-opening experience.” For example, one student noted that in preparing for the exercise, she realized that she had never been aware of knowing a lesbian woman. Another student who role-played a lesbian couple with her friend noticed that she avoided locations where she might be recognized.

The amount of planning that went into ensuring that we would not be recognized troubled me . . . . Granted, I am not a

lesbian ... but the mere fact that it was so undesirable for me to be associated in such a way was very thought provoking. Is this the same way that lesbians feel when they are considering “coming out of the closet?” ... the mere planning of this activity gave me an insight into the fear that comes from being involved in a lesbian relationship.

Similarly, one Christian Arab American student realized the contrast between feeling “visible” when she wore the hijab and her everyday privilege of being able to “pass” as “White.”

I felt an overwhelming sense that my presence was known, that I could not pass through the room unnoticed. It was hard to forget about all the recent anti-Muslim sentiment and interpret the stares that I received as harmless glances, as I usually would. ... As an Arab who doesn't look the part, I find it comforting that I can pick who I choose to share my ethnic

identity with, because sadly we live in a society where I may be perceived and treated differently for that. But as a veiled woman I had no choice.

Finally, some students stated that the exercise resulted in new or renewed connections with the person they shadowed, and some expressed a personal commitment to changing their own attitudes and behaviors.

## Conclusions

Although described in the context of a psychology of women course, the shadow/role-play exercise can also be used in other courses that provide sufficient background in topics related to stereotyping. For example, in social psychology courses, this exercise can facilitate understanding of research

**Table 1. Themes Across Students' Shadow/Role-Play Papers**

Intersection	Observed Experiences During Shadow/Role Play	Own Privileges Identified
Men shadowing woman × race/ethnicity (3) or age (2) (presented together due to shared focus on gender as a dimension of difference)	3/5: Pressure to fulfill care taking roles 2/5: Overt sexism (e.g., sexist comments) 2/5: Subtle sexism (e.g., given gender stereotypic tasks) 2/5: Subtle racism (e.g., intentional disrespect) 2/5: Others' attention to appearance 2/5: Attention placed on own appearance 2/5: Importance of spirituality/affiliation with women 1/5: Overt racism (others stating racist attitudes)	2/5: Feeling respected by others 2/5: Freedom to speak up and be heard 1/5: Freedom to be out late at night 1/5: Freedom from fear of rape
Woman × pregnancy (8) or mothering (5) (themes for pregnancy subsumed those for mothering)	8/13: Stares, strange looks 5/13: Loss of spontaneity/need for structure 4/13: Delaying/foregoing educational goals 4/13: Responsibility for welfare of child 2/13: Others' expectations that mothers/expectant mothers should be at home	7/13: Freedom to make daily and life decisions without feeling judged
Woman × pregnancy (8) (themes unique to pregnancy)	4/8: Others asked personal questions (e.g., marital status) 4/8: Space difficulties (e.g., sitting on bus) 4/8: Others being helpful 2/8: Others touching stomach without asking	4/8: Ability to assume freedom from space constrictions in daily activities
Woman × age (5)	4/5: Health difficulties 3/5: Variety of abilities and responsibilities (e.g., leadership in community) 3/5: Others being helpful 2/5: Employment discrimination 2/5: Loss of friendships 2/5: Anxiety about daily activities 1/5: Dependence on others 1/5: Treated as “senile”	3/5: Having a broad range of educational and career options 3/5: Freedom to make daily choices independently
Woman × sexual orientation (5)	4/5: Students' noting own fears and prejudices 4/5: Fear of rejection/discrimination 4/5: Concealment of sexual orientation to cope with fear of rejection 3/5: Overt discrimination (e.g., comments) 2/5: Subtle discrimination (e.g. ignoring) 1/5: Institutional discrimination (e.g., rejection by religious community) 2/5: Feelings of stress, anger, anxiety	4/5: Freedom from fear of stigmatization 2/5: Ease of meeting other heterosexual persons 1/5: Freedom to disclose one's identity 1/5: Institutional privileges (e.g., ability to marry)
Woman × religion/Islam (2)	2/2: Fear of being stigmatized 2/2: Perceived fear and prejudice from others 2/2: Questioning motives of others (e.g., is it prejudice or not?)	2/2: Freedom from negative treatment 2/2: Freedom from self-doubt 1/2: Others understand one's religion 1/2: Ability to “pass” as “White”
Woman × ability status (2)	2/2: Subtle discrimination (e.g., being ignored) 2/2: Visibility of disability linked to prejudice 1/2: Stress associated with negative treatment 1/2: Employment difficulties	2/2: Being attended to and acknowledged

*Note.* × indicates “intersecting with.” Parenthetical values reflect number of papers in each category. Fractions reflect proportion of papers in each group that reflected the theme. One student shadowed Woman × ability status × sexual orientation. This student is included in the count for ability status and sexual orientation.

on stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and group identity. Across all courses, appropriate preparation and debriefing that includes consistent attention to diversity and stereotyping are essential to the effectiveness of the shadow/role-play exercise. Instructors should encourage students to be critical and self-reflective about their shadow/role-play experience. Particularly, students should be mindful of the potential for confirmation bias in their observation (e.g., uncritically attributing events to discrimination or nondiscrimination factors without considering alternative explanations, attending to information that reinforces rather than challenges their stereotypes). Furthermore, students should be reminded that the 1-day exercise is a small sample that may or may not represent the shadow/role-play person's larger life experiences.

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## Notes

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