

Overview:

This lesson plan will challenge participants to consider the “dark side” of empathy and how empathy can sometimes foster tribalism. In this activity, they will listen to a podcast and discuss the concepts of empathy and tribalism, as well as how attitudes toward empathy have changed over time.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Define empathy.
2. Consider how perspectives toward empathy have changed.
3. Examine the difference between empathy and tribalism.
4. Learn what the “dark side of empathy” means.

Background Information:

This activity was created by Annette Benson and Brittany Biesiada, CILMAR, based on an episode of *NPR's Morning Edition* podcast (see citation below). The podcast episode also discusses Fritz Breithaupt's *The Dark Sides of Empathy* (see citation below).

Time:

30 minutes

Group Size:

Entire group

Materials:

The podcast or copies of the transcript (in [Links](#)), discussion questions (in [Downloads](#)).

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Empathy

- To interpret intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview.
- To demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group

Other Skills:

Friendship, Teamwork

Activity Instructions:

1. Participants should listen to the podcast episode. Facilitators can choose to have the participants listen together or before they meet.
2. Facilitators should use the following questions to foster discussion about the podcast:
 - How do you define empathy? How does it differ from sympathy?
Note: The facilitator can ask participants to define these terms before or after listening to the podcast.
 - Ask Rosin's question about how students have stopped believing in empathy: "Why should they put themselves in the shoes of someone who was not them, much less someone they thought was harmful?"
 - Do you agree with Rosin's argument that empathy is now for people you believe in or relate to (i.e. on your "side")?
 - How does empathizing with people on your "side" create polarization? How can empathy create conflict?
Note: The facilitator may need to define polarization on the [Intercultural Development Continuum](#).
 - How can empathy resemble tribalism?
Note: The facilitator may need to first define tribalism. They may also consider creating a chart on a whiteboard or chalkboard to compare the two.

Related Tools:

Tools to use in conjunction with this lesson:

- [Ethno-Cultural Empathy Scale](#)

Similar tools:

- [Disagree Better: Empathy Gym](#)
- [Empathy and Fiction](#)
- [Empathy and Tourism: Limits and Possibilities](#)
- [Empathy Bingo Exercise](#)
- [Empathy not Sympathy](#)
- [Limits of Empathy, The](#)
- [Migration: An Empathy Exercise](#)
- [Tribalism and Empathy](#)