

Introduction:

Intercultural learning experts agree that developing empathy for those who are different from us is a key component of intercultural competence. However, are there ever cases where extending empathy would be inappropriate or detrimental? This activity asks participants to consider two sides of one coin: 1. Times when they have extended empathy and connected with people who were different from them; and 2. Moments when they have chosen to not extend empathy.

Facilitator Notes:

The facilitator may choose to ask participants to listen to the podcast episode (in [Links](#)) ahead of time, or they may listen to it as a group. The episode is approximately 45 minutes.

Objectives:

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

1. Reflect on moments where they have extended empathy and connected with people who were different from them.
2. Reflect on moments where they chose to not extend empathy.
3. Identify their limits to empathy.

Time:

1 hour 30 minutes.

Group Size:

Entire Group.

Materials:

Internet access, equipment to listen to podcast (computer/tablet/smartphone and speakers), paper, pens/pencils, Participant Instructions (in [Downloads](#)).

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

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; Emotional Resilience.

Activity Instructions:

1. Listen to the episode of Alan Alda's podcast *Clear + Vivid* entitled "[Sarah Silverman and the Joy of Enjoying People You Don't Agree With](#)." You may choose to ask participants to listen to the podcast ahead of time, or they may listen to it as a group. Either way, participants should be advised to take notes on how empathy is addressed throughout the episode.
2. Participants should also read the *CNN* article, "[Sarah Silverman says she was fired from a movie for an old blackface sketch](#)."
3. Lead participants in a short discussion using the following questions:
 - How do Alan Alda and Sarah Silverman define empathy throughout their conversation?
 - How does Sarah Silverman practice empathy in her daily life and through her professional work?
 - At one point, Sarah Silverman questions the egotistical aspect of empathy. She asks, "Do you have to be able to see yourself in someone else to have empathy for them?" What do you think?
 - At another point, Alan Alda asks if there are ever points where "you have to put down your empathy and fight." What do you think he means by this?
 - As cited in the *CNN* article, Sarah Silverman acknowledged that she made an upsetting, hurtful mistake by wearing blackface on her show—a mistake that got her fired from a movie. How do you think that experience shaped her views on empathy?
4. Make sure each participant has paper and a pen/pencil. Ask them to free write using the following prompts:
 - Sarah Silverman says that her favorite part about talking with people who are different from her is when they are able to put their "porcupine needles down" and truly connect with one another. Write about a time when you were having a conversation with someone who was different from you and you both were able to lower your porcupine needles (i.e., lower your defenses) and find common ground. What made you decide to extend your empathy in that moment?
 - On the other hand, can you think of any moments where you chose to put down your empathy and fight? Or, is there anyone who you cannot empathize with? Why? How did you come to this decision?
5. Once participants have finished writing, ask them to first pair up and share. Then, ask for several volunteers to share with the entire group.
6. End the activity by debriefing with the following questions:
 - As you heard from other participants, what did you notice were some of the limits to their empathy?
 - What are some strategies for deciding when you should or shouldn't extend your empathy?



- Does your empathy extend to Sarah Silverman, or does that incident cross the boundaries of your limit? Why or why not?