

Overview:

This activity uses a parable—a story that typically imparts a moral lesson—to get participants thinking about cultural differences and similarities. Participants will first read a parable that is provided to them and then discuss their assumptions and moral judgments of the characters based on their own cultural values.

Background and Notes:

The original version of the parable used in this activity has four characters, but there are various versions that have been created throughout the years. Several of those versions are available in the [Downloads](#) and [Links](#) section of this tool.

Pusch (see citation below) identifies the original source as developed by Sidney Simon, Professor of Education, University of Massachusetts.

If you use the Modern Parable available in [Downloads](#), please note that this adaptation was created by compiling a number of student revisions of the original parable (which they judged to be in need of updating because it was not very relevant to their lives). This adaptation requires a skilled facilitator because the narrative often stimulates learner assumptions about time, place, and various embodied cultural identities. After the suggested debriefing questions, and dependent upon what topics do/don't come up naturally in the discussion, the facilitator may want to ask students to question what assumptions they made about the characters (their race/ethnicity, class, nationality, age, etc.) and how those assumptions may have shaped their judgments. Tact and empathy may be necessary in responding to learners who are triggered emotionally by the discussion and/or who make insensitive or offensive comments that need redirection to create "learning moments." This adaptation may also not be appropriate for international groups of learners because of the implied context of the US/Mexico border.

CILMAR has also revised this activity to resonate more with STEM faculty and students (see the Lab Parable in [Downloads](#)). Because the context is professional rather than personal, the learning outcomes may shift away from empathy more towards openness, self-awareness, and worldview frameworks.

Objectives:

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

1. Become acquainted with each other.
2. Demonstrate, through the discoveries they will make themselves, how their decisions are determined by cultural values.
3. Discover specific cultural differences and similarities among other members of the group.
4. Stimulate awareness of problems in transmitting one's own ideas and listening to others.

Time:

45 minutes

Group Size:

Small group

Materials:

Board/flip chart on which to write, paper and pencils, and chairs that can be moved into small groups. Handouts (see [Downloads](#)) or PowerPoint slides to tell the parable story if you would like them as visual aids.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- 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.

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

Other Skills:

Friendship; Teamwork; Mentorship & Leadership; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Activity Instructions:

1. Provide handouts of the parable and the activity instructions/discussion questions. The facilitator can choose which version of the parable they would like to use depending on the participants' backgrounds.
2. Ask participants to read through the parable and then, individually, write down their answers to the question, "What other details do you wish you knew about this story?" Then, they should fill out the table for Task 1, where they will rank the characters in the order of whose behavior they "most approve" to those they "least approve." They should be ready to explain their decisions.
3. Next, participants should get into small groups. As a group, they should once again rank the characters from "most approve" to "least approve." They must come to a single group consensus and be ready to explain their rankings. The groups should also discuss the following questions:
 - How do you decide what is morally right and wrong?
 - Who do you blame for problems in this scenario?
 - What assumptions are you making about details left out of the story?
 - What aspects (values) of your culture are shaping your opinions?

4. Then, the entire group should come back together and come to a consensus about the ranking of the characters. The facilitator can use the board or flipchart to record the ranking of characters.
5. Finally, the facilitator should either debrief with the entire group, or ask them to complete an individual written reflection, using the following questions:
 - What did you learn about your own and other cultures from this exercise?
 - How do people determine whether a behavior is morally preferable over another?
 - What religious traditions, philosophies, and cultural value systems inform moral decision making in your own as opposed to other countries?
 - What do your evaluations of people's morality have to do with the empathy you feel for their circumstances?

Related Tools:

Similar tools:

- [Building Utopiastan](#)
- [Danger of a Single Story](#)