

One Word

March 30, 2017

Here is a quick activity in individual differences in perception.

Synopsis

The participants work silently and secretly to write a single word that describes what they see in a photograph. They compare these words and repeat the activity, trying to come up with a word that would be written by most people in the group. They conduct a debriefing discussion about their experience.

Purpose

To explore the differences in what different people see in the same photograph.

Participants

- **Minimum:** 3
- **Maximum:** Any number
- **Best:** 15 to 30

Time

5 minutes for the activity. 5 minutes for debriefing.

Supplies and Equipment

- Pieces of paper
- Pens or pencils
- Timer
- Whistle

Room Set up

Arrange seats around tables for groups of participants.

Preparation

Select picture postcards, one card for each table. These cards could all be same or different from one another.

Flow

Get ready for the activity. Organize the participants into groups of 3 to 5. Seat them around a table. Place a photograph, printed side down, in the middle of the table.

Give instructions. Use your own words to explain this procedure.

I am imposing a gag order for the duration of this activity. When I blow the whistle, turn over the photograph so you everyone can see it. Study the photograph and secretly write a single word to describe it. Write this word in big, block letters. You have 30 seconds to do this.

Write a word. Blow the whistle and repeat the instructions if necessary. Blow the whistle again at the end of about 30 seconds.

Share the words. Remind the participants to continue working silently. Ask them to show the word they wrote to each other.

Rewrite the word. Give this new set of instructions in your own words:

You are going to secretly write a single word related to the same photograph. Your challenge is to silently write a word that would be written by most others in your group. You may write the same word you wrote earlier, you may write a word written by someone else, or you may a write word that was not written earlier by anyone. Remember, your goal is to write a word that would be written by most people your group. You may not communicate with the others expect by telepathic means. You must not talk to the others or write them notes. Once again, you have 30 second to complete the task.

Signal the beginning of the task. Pause for 30 seconds and blow the whistle again.

Compare the words. Announce that you are lifting the gag order. Invite the participants to show their words and talk about them.

Debrief

Conduct a discussion using the following types of questions:

- *In the beginning, we all looked at the same photograph and followed the same set of instructions. However, we ended up with different words to describe the photograph. Why did this happen?*
- *Do you feel there will be a difference between the words used by men and the words used by women? Why do you think so?*
- *If we looked around the room and chose a single word to describe what we see, how much diversity do you expect among the words?*
- *What if we asked people to select several words to describe the photograph? Will were be more overlap among the words?*
- *During the second part of the activity, you tried to psych out what the other people are thinking that you are thinking about what they are thinking. What strategy did you use to accomplish this task?*
- *What was the result of the second round? Did you succeed in using a word that was used by most other people? How did you feel about the result?*

Learning Points

1. Different people focus on different aspects of what they see. These individual differences are probably caused by several different factors.
2. When we try to think like other people, sometimes we succeed and sometime we fail.

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