

The “Drawbridge” Exercise – Facilitator Notes

The “Drawbridge Exercise” is taken from Judith H. Katz’s *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training* (1978, pp. 70 – 72). It begins with the instructor, or the class taking turns, reading the story out loud.

First, ask everyone individually to rank-order the degree of responsibility for the baroness’s death of each of the characters. Small groups of five to six students then meet to try to agree about a ranking order and identify a spokesperson to report out. After approximately 30 minutes, the whole class discusses the results of the smaller group debates, the various rankings, and the different perspectives about society and social change the rankings implied.

Facilitate the students in identifying contrasting views and the assumptions each view makes about the possibilities and legitimacy of action against oppressive conditions. In particular, ask them to consider differences in the ranking of each character, when they are viewed as individuals acting apart from any societal context or as operating within the confines of imposed social relationships.

Debrief Questions:

- What factors influenced your ranking decision?
- What feelings were provoked during this activity and your decision making process? Why?
- In attempting to reach a group consensus, were you convinced of a different ranking order? Why or why not?
- How does this exercise relate to societal values and norms?
- What change work would need to be done to effect the outcome of the story?

Finally, using the symbolism described by Katz (1978), suggest to the class that the characters in the story can be equated with social forces in contemporary society: The baron becomes the symbol for White society; the baroness, for people of color; the gateman, the police force and military; the boatman, White institutions; the neighbor, liberals; and the childhood friend, enticements such as the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and other American ideals of freedom (p. 70). Then ask students to reconsider ranking the characters in light of the new symbolization and in light of present-day conditions. This part of the discussion deepens the consideration of the responsibility for maintaining or changing oppressive conditions and the power or powerlessness of the victim in self-determination and in effecting social change.

Barron - White society (if appropriate you can also draw out, male, Christian, straight, typically abled, US born, etc. - it sets values, rules)

Baroness - People of Color (have little to say about values, expected to adhere to them)

Gateman - Police force/military, etc. (no say in rules but expected to enforce them)

Boatman - Institutions (service for a cost, if you have resources you have opportunity)

Neighbor - Liberals (good intentions, within my values framework, I'll accept you as long as you follow the rules)

Friend - Enticements (things we fall in love with, but in reality or practice they don't do much good, constitution, bill of rights, etc.)

As students argue for their particular view, they become clearer about their own perception of the relationship between the individual and society. For most, this activity is fun and nonthreatening because it centers on a fictitious historical situation. Nevertheless, when contemporary social relationships are discussed during the last part of the activity, some students do experience discomfort. They are faced with the recognition that, from the perspective of the victim, current societal rules and relationships cannot be accepted if change is to occur for them.

(Adapted by Darlene Flynn from, Teaching / Learning Anti-Racism: A Developmental Approach, by Louise Derman-Sparks, Carol Brunson Phillips)