

## 17

## SEEING OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US

*Objective:* To show how we often attach labels to people and behave toward them as though those labels were true.

**TIME REQUIRED** 20–30 minutes

**RISK LEVEL** Moderate

**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED** Any size class or discussion group of 10 to 30 students, plus one facilitator

**PROCEDURE** Please take the following steps:

1. Prepare a set of typed labels that each list a positive adjective such as *friendly*, *helpful*, *smart*, *generous*, *loving*, and so forth. A more risky alternative is to generate a list of less positive labels, such as the following:
  - Tell me I'm right.
  - Flatter me.
  - Ignore me.
  - Criticize me.
  - Treat me as a sex object.
  - Tell me I'm smart.
  - Interrupt me.
  - Tell me I'm wrong.
  - Treat me as a helpless person with nothing worthwhile to say.
2. Arbitrarily assign these labels to participants and attach a label to each person's back so that they will not know what their own label says.
3. Instruct the participants not to tell others what their labels say.

*Note.* From *Decisional Dialogues in a Cultural Context: Structured Exercises* [pp. 3–4], by P. B. Pedersen and D. Hernandez, 1997, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Copyright 1997 by Sage. Adapted with permission.

4. Divide participants into groups of six to eight participants.
5. Engage the groups in a discussion for 10 minutes, and ask all participants to treat the others in the group as though the labels were true.
6. At the end of 10 minutes, have each participant guess what his or her label says.
7. After they have guessed, have the participants peel off their labels and read them.
8. When each participant has had a chance to see his or her label, return to a large group for discussion. Encourage participants to convey to the group how they felt about how the others were acting toward them.

**DEBRIEFING**

The attachment of invisible labels might apply to situations one experiences in real life. Examples of questions to discuss include the following:

1. Did you feel helpless to change how others perceived you?
2. Did the other group members seem simplistic in their judgments?
3. Did you find it uncomfortable to treat others according to the label?
4. Were you able to accurately interpret how others acted toward you?
5. Do you think you are really wearing a label that you cannot yourself see?

**INSIGHT**

The labels others attach to us influence their behavior toward us.