Cultural Immersion Project

Julie Spencer-Rodgers © 2019

**Purpose.** The Cultural Immersion Project is an experiential-based, quarter-long learning activity designed for use with students in Cross-Cultural Psychology, Multicultural Psychology, and related courses. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to confidently interact with members of a culture different from one’s own, while being aware of the culture’s social norms and expectations (Deardorff, 2006). Students select a group, and over the course of a quarter/semester, learn about and experience (to the extent possible/appropriate) the cultural practices/norms/values of their group (e.g., via interviews, cooking food, listening to music, dance instruction, arts, literature, etc.). Students document their experiences (at least 6 different types of activities, a minimum of 2 per week). The project culminates in a poster session (similar to a mini-conference), where students present a poster summarizing their experiences and research.

**Cultural groups.** Students select cultural groups from other countries (e.g. Italy, China, Ecuador), including subcultures in other countries (e.g. Kurds in Turkey).

**Activities.** Students are encouraged to “immerse” themselves, to the extent possible and appropriate, in their chosen culture. They pick at least six different activities and, over the course of the quarter/semester, complete a minimum of two activities per week (the types of activities should vary week by week). Sample activities include attending cultural events such as musical performances or theatrical events; sampling the cuisine of the culture (by preparing dishes and/or visiting restaurants); taking a relevant dance class; listening to music and watching movies; reading novels, magazines, or news media; and interviewing members of the cultural group. During week 1, students select a culture and develop a plan for the quarter. Students also complete a contract outlining the activities/events they intend to engage in. Figure 1 illustrates the types of cultural activities students engaged in. A lecture and discussion then follows on the dangers of cultural appropriation (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uJqCtZINPw), and students are instructed not to engage in activities that could be inappropriate or insensitive, such as adopting the traditional clothing of the cultural group in public, behaving in ways that could be perceived as stereotypical of the group, or attending events or ceremonies that are exclusively for members of that group.

There are some of the activities that you can engage in:

1. Sample the cuisine and eat the foods of your chosen cultural group (1-2 times per week, throughout the quarter). Taking a cooking class related to your cultural group.
2. Attend relevant cultural events, such as musical performances, theatrical events, etc. related to your cultural group. Choose events that are open to the public (see note below). (Attend 2-3 events over the quarter).
3. Listen to music and watch movies related to your cultural group (1-2 times per week, throughout the quarter).
4. Read literature, novels, and news articles related to your chosen culture (2-3 times per week, throughout the quarter).
5. Take a dance class related to your chosen cultural group (e.g., the Rec Center offers courses in belly dancing, etc.).
6. Interview member(s) of your chosen cultural group.
7. Optional: If feasible, try to get to know people from your chosen cultural group. A visit with a family, for example, can provide a unique opportunity to experience the culture first-hand. This activity is optional and you should be genuine in your desire to get to know people from your cultural group.
8. Create your own activity, not listed here. (Please discuss with the instructor).

You do not have to engage in all of these activities; but you should engage in at least 6 of the activities from the list above. Complete an average of 2 activities from your list each week (you can vary the activities week by week).

**Documentation.** Throughout the quarter, students document the activities they engage in (e.g., via a journal, logbook, photographs, movie and event ticket stubs, etc.). Submission of documentation, with due dates staggered throughout the quarter, helps to ensure that students are completing the activities outlined in their CIP.

**Reflection papers:** Students submit a weekly 2-3 page critical thinking/reflection paper regarding that week’s learning objectives (readings, etc.) and immersion activities.

**Presentation.** At the end of the quarter, students create a poster project, similar to a qualitative ethnography, synthesizing their cultural experiences and general research. The poster includes background research on the culture, methods used (e.g., unstructured interviews, secondary sources), results, discussion (e.g., “What did you learn about your own culture by doing this project?”), and references. Similar to a poster session at a conference, groups of students present their posters simultaneously during the last week of class. As an extra credit option, students are encouraged to bring a sample of food from their cultural group.

*Please note that this project must be undertaken with a great deal of sensitivity to the members of your chosen cultural group.*

1. Do not adopt the traditional clothing of your chosen cultural group in public.
2. Do not behave in ways that could be perceived as stereotypical of the cultural group.
3. Do not impersonate member(s) of the cultural group (in other words, don’t tell people that you are a real member of the cultural group).
4. Do not attend events (e.g., at the Multicultural Center) that are exclusively for members of your chosen cultural group (e.g., it would not be appropriate to attend a Multicultural Center workshop designed to help members of the cultural group cope with racism). If in doubt about whether an event is open to the public or not, contact the event organizer(s) and request permission to attend.
5. Do not attend religious ceremonies or visit places of worship related to your cultural group, unless they are open to the public or you have obtained permission to attend from a person of authority.

**Course Modifications:** Students may also chose a minority American cultural group -- one that is underrepresented in U.S. society (e.g., an ethnic minority group [e.g., Mexican-Americans], Jewish culture, etc.).
Cross-Cultural Issues in Psychology

Instructions and Grading Rubric for Poster Presentations

Your cultural immersion project is very similar to an ethnography. An ethnography is a qualitative research design aimed at exploring cultural groups or phenomena. The resulting field study reflects the knowledge and the system of meanings in the lives of a cultural group.

An ethnography is a means to represent graphically and in writing, the culture of a people.

"Ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people.' An ethnography is a written description of a particular culture - the customs, beliefs, and behavior - based on information collected through fieldwork" (Harris & Johnson, 2000).

Data collection methods:
- **Primary methods**: includes participant observation, field notes or journal entries, structured and unstructured interviews, and surveys.
- **Secondary methods**: library research, document analysis, or an examination of popular culture (e.g., movies, etc.).

Participant observation is one type of data collection method typically done in the qualitative research paradigm. Its aim is to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals (such as a national, ethnic, religious, occupational, subcultural group, or a particular community) and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their cultural environment, usually over an extended period of time.

Unstructured interviews are a method of interviews where questions can be changed or adapted to meet the respondent's intelligence, understanding, or belief. Unlike a structured interview, they do not offer a limited, pre-set range of answers for a respondent to choose, but instead advocate listening to how each individual person responds to the question.

What is a poster?
- A poster is a graphically based approach to presenting information (such as research). In presenting your research with a poster, you should aim to use the poster as a means for generating active discussion of the research.
- Limit the text to about one-fourth of the poster space, and use "visuals" (graphs, photographs, schematics, maps, etc.) to tell your "story."
- Poster title, your name, and your department should be positioned at top-center of the poster.
- Text should be readable from five feet away. Use a minimum font size of 18 points.
- Lettering for the title should be large (at least 70-point font).
- Keep the text brief. Blocks of text should not exceed three paragraphs (viewers won't bother to read more than that). Summarize text in a bullet-point list.
- Cite and reference any sources of information other than your own, just as you would do with a research paper.
Sections of the Poster

**Background**: What cultural group did you study? In order to keep your research manageable, I suggest focusing on no more than 5 elements of the cultural group. These elements could include: cuisine, customs and values, family structure and parenting practices, religion, language, demographics/geography, etc. Briefly summarize prior research conducted on your cultural group. Find about 5-7 references.

**Methods**: Briefly describe the methods that you used to conduct your research (e.g., participant observation, unstructured interviews, secondary methods).

**Results**: Your goal is to summarize the information you have acquired (through participant observation, library research, etc.). You should include photos/pictures, graphs, and other visuals.

**Discussion**: What did you find most interesting/surprising about the culture you studied? What did you learn about your own culture by doing this project (values, biases, behaviors, etc.)?

**References**: Include 5-7 references. Use APA style for citations. If there is not enough room for references on your poster, you can print them out and glue them to the back of your poster.
Cross-Cultural Psychology
Grading Rubric for Posters

Student name: _______________________________  Grade: ______
Topic/title: _________________________________________  pts. / 70 total

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Cultural Immersion Project Contract

Name ______________________________

The cultural group I have chosen is ____________________________

Activities I intend to engage in include:

1. __________________________________________________________________________
2. __________________________________________________________________________
3. __________________________________________________________________________
4. __________________________________________________________________________
5. __________________________________________________________________________

By signing my name below, I promise to complete the requirements of my contract by immersing myself in the specified group by participating in the activities of the above group.

Signature ____________________________________  Date __________________________
Sample poster

Background:
For this cultural immersion project I chose to explore the Mexican Culture. This includes the traditional Mexican culture that is seen both in Mexico and in the United States today. The elements of the Mexican culture that I chose to focus on are cuisine, customs and beliefs, music, and language.

Prior Research:

Mexican Cuisine and Holidays
- Cemita / Torta: A sandwich that is typically served at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It consists of a roll with meat, vegetables, and cheese.
- Breakfast in Mexico: The breakfast in Mexico is usually a combination of sweet and savory dishes.
- Mexican Christmas: The Christmas in Mexico is celebrated with the exchange of gifts and traditional foods.

Methods/Results: What I did over the quarter!
- Over the course of the quarter I visited many authentic Mexican restaurants where I had traditional Mexican dishes and observed those in the culture around me.
- I attended a Catholic mass in Spanish.
- Conducted an interview with a first generation Mexican American.
- Watched Marink's jeep.
- Listened to a variety of traditional Mexican music.
- Researched the Mexican culture and its influences.

Religion:
- About 20% of Mexicans identify as Catholic, the majority of people in Mexico are Catholic.
- Mexican culture is deeply rooted in religious beliefs and practices.

Mexican Music (be ninas)
- There is a very important part of the Mexican culture that is music. The Mexican cuisine is very varied and includes food from all over the country. The traditional Mexican cuisine is very popular with people of all ages.

Discussion:
- I wanted to see how the music and food influenced the culture. I was interested in seeing how the music and food are intertwined and how they are important to the Mexican culture.
- I also wanted to see how the music and food influence the way people think and feel about their culture. I was interested in seeing how the music and food are used to express emotions and to connect with others.

Conclusion:
- I was able to see how the music and food influence the culture. I was able to see how the music and food are important to the Mexican culture and how they are used to express emotions and to connect with others.
- I was also able to see how the music and food are used to express emotions and to connect with others. I was able to see how the music and food are used to express emotions and to connect with others.
- I was able to see how the music and food influence the way people think and feel about their culture. I was interested in seeing how the music and food are used to express emotions and to connect with others.
Figure 1

Cultural Immersion Activities

*Note.* Percentage of participants in the cross-cultural psychology course who engaged in each activity.