

The Alien Invasion Exercise: Creating an Experience of Diversity

PAM REMER
RORY REMER

ABSTRACT. The authors developed the Alien Invasion Exercise in which they use action methods to help people experience the role messages and the stereotyping to which diverse groups are subjected. The authors describe the exercise and offer instructions and suggestions for its use.

Key Words: action methods technique, diverse groups, diversity issues, gender studies, stereotyping

WE PRESENT AN ACTION METHOD TECHNIQUE, called Alien Invasion Exercise, for allowing people to experience the role messages and the stereotyping to which diverse groups are subjected. Like other sociodramatically oriented interventions, the exercise is designed to explore group differences and diversity issues. In particular, we have found the exercise effective in raising awareness of and changing attitudes and behaviors toward stereotyped individuals. It combines aspects of diversity training (e.g., Singelis, 1998), values clarification exercises (e.g., Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1978), and psychodramatic warm-ups (e.g., Hollander, 1986).

The Alien Invasion Exercise (AIE), created and developed by the first author to explore gender role messages, can be used as a warm-up to socio-dramatic explorations of any group rules, themes, or myths. It can also be used alone as a type of sociodrama.

In form, the AIE resembles many other in-group/out-group exercises. The point is to allow each group to experience being in the other's position. An additional dimension of the AIE is that it also functions as a kind of mirroring, "fish bowl" activity, in which vicarious learning occurs through observation.

Feminist Therapy Connections

The Alien Invasion Exercise incorporates an integration of Empowerment Feminist Therapy (EFT) (Worell & Remer, 1992) and psychodrama theory. Thus, an understanding of the basic underpinnings of EFT is essential for anyone who uses the AIE. EFT is based on the principle that the "Personal Is Political." According to this principle, individuals' personal issues are usually rooted in or caused by dysfunctional political or social contexts (e.g., sexism, racism, ethnocentrism), especially in social systems that prescribe one set of roles for women and another set for men. The gender-based conserves result from gender-role socialization and institutionalized sexism and restrict the potential development and spontaneity of women, men, and society. Gender-role socialization and institutionalized sexism are seen as on-going social processes that occur across the entire lifespan. The Alien Invasion Exercise was developed as a psychodramatic concretization of these dysfunctional cultural conserves so that those often invisible realities could be identified, explored, and challenged.

Executing the AIE

To be implemented effectively, the exercise requires a sufficient number of participants of both genders. Although the exercise can be staged with as few as three or four persons of each gender in the group, a minimum of five of each gender provides the most effective interaction, both within and across genders. The ensuing steps are intended to be guidelines, but following the general structure is recommended. Spontaneity can be promoted by the therapist's adapting the specific instructions, to the openings and opportunities provided by the in-the-moment group interaction. We suggest budgeting time so that no one is cut off and that sufficient time in particular is allotted to the sharing and processing. If need be, allot time to each step to ensure that all are included and stick to the time limits.

Step 1

The therapist briefly describes the exercise and its purpose to the participants as follows:

The object of this exercise is to allow you to experience what being a person of the other gender (or group) is like. We are to imagine that we are all aliens from another planet trying to learn about life on Earth so that you can pose as an earthling. To optimize the ability to observe and understand the nuances of being an earthling, you are going to take part in training designed to prepare you to pass as an earthling as unobtrusively as possible. Your success as an earthling is dependent on your learning the rules for living as a man or woman on earth.

The therapist then makes every effort to move into action immediately. Questions, either about the exercise itself or about what is to be expected, need to be deferred until the sharing and processing after the interaction.

Step 2

To initiate the action aspect of the AIE, the therapist directs the participating individuals to form two distinct groups by gender (or any other stereotypic group dichotomy being explored). One group becomes the inner circle (the alien trainees); the other group becomes the outer circle (the trainers). The circle configuration is important so that those in the inner circle get the sense of being bombarded from all sides by the instructions and messages being sent.

The choice of which group should be inner and which group should be outer first is usually fairly arbitrary. A good way to determine an arrangement is to have those who have experienced the AIE before act as trainers first. The therapist may select any option that encourages group spontaneity (e.g., using people who are more comfortable with action methods to reduce the anxiety of others), and the exercise, which was designed to promote spontaneity, usually stimulates that reaction.

The group leaders participate as members of their respective groups. Not only does that device decrease psychological distance and reduce the chance that the leaders are perceived as evaluating the participants, but it also allows the leaders to model what is being asked of the participants. A coleadership arrangement, with one leader from each gender/group, is optimal. If that arrangement is not available, the therapist's use of the sociometric leader of the group opposite of the leader's designation may encourage group participation.

Step 3

Once organized appropriately, each group receives their instructions, which are complementary. Each group hears the instructions given the other. Eventually the roles are to be reversed, so one group's hearing the instructions given to the other group speeds up the later phases and the completion of the exercise.

Trainer Instructions

The outer group trainers are charged first. Told that they are the experts, having already been trained and having more or less effectively experienced living with earthlings, they are to direct the trainees in how to pass as an earthling of the gender (group membership) of the trainer (e.g., female outer circle trainers teach male inner circle aliens how to be female). "Think about all the messages you received in your family and in your ethnic community about

how to be a woman or a man and direct those messages to the alien trainees.” Because the trainers are of the designated gender, the gender role messages should be part of their experiences, although all the trainers may not be aware of or have been subjected to all the messages equally. Thus, the group “brainstorming” promotes a fuller exposure at various levels of individual consciousness to such imprecations. The exposure to the messages experienced by others of the same group can promote more active awareness within the group.

The trainers accomplish this task by exposing the trainees to the gender role messages prevalent on Earth and by helping them learn the actual behaviors by seeing that they adhere to the rules announced by the trainers. For example, when told how to sit acceptably, the trainees need to adopt the indicated posture immediately and sit as directed through the remainder of the phase.

The physical implementation of the role is essential for the participants to feel the full impact of the role. Any role aspect that trainees can adopt—tone of voice, looks, words and slang—should be encouraged as much as possible. If conflicting messages occur, then the trainees try to implement them simultaneously. In doing so, the trainees experience the frustration and confusion that such “double binding” produces (e.g., those being trained as women need to attempt to be alluring and virginal simultaneously). Trainers provide the experience of coping with conflicting messages by sending mixed messages, nonverbal communication belying the verbal instructions, or one trainer gives instructions contradicting those of another while both trainers demand adherence to instructions issued.

After the trainers receive their directions, they pause only briefly for the minimal instructions being delivered to the trainees. By starting their roles almost immediately, they preserve the momentum for action. Further clarification for both groups can be accomplished most effectively through modeling and using actual messages.

Trainee Instructions

Instructions to the trainees—inner group—are simple and brief: Listen to the trainers’ directions and implement them as we go along. The therapist reminds the trainees that their adherence to the messages is crucial to their passing successfully as earthlings. They are also told that they can freely ask for clarifications, if they feel the need to do so.

Step 4

The therapist allows the interaction between the groups to continue as long as it seems productive and feels free, as the leader, to interject his or her own messages when a member of the outer group or react spontaneously when a

member of the inner group. The therapist watches the participants for signs of frustration and other reactions that are considered later in Step 7. The leader avoids having too much processing occur before both groups have been in both positions. The therapist directs the participants to hold their comments and to remember their reactions for the last phase, assuring them of time to speak and *to be heard*. If participants tend to step out of role, the therapist encourages them to continue in role by responding to them as if they still were in role.

Sample Enactments

The following examples help illustrate a typical AIE training enactment. In Sample 1, the dialogue represents an AIE enactment in which the male trainers are teaching the female aliens how to be male earthlings.

Trainer 1: You should always be the boss in relationships with women. You should initiate and pay for dates.

Trainer 2: You must be good at sports and be able to talk about sports with other men.

Trainer 3: You must never be afraid or sad.

Alien 1 to Trainer 3: But what do I do if I feel afraid or sad?

Trainer 3: If you feel afraid or sad, take a deep breath, numb out your feelings, act angry, or distract yourself by getting busy with some activity.

Alien 1 to Trainer 3: But that sounds so hard.

Trainer 3: It is at first, but if you practice what I have said, eventually you won't ever feel sad or afraid.

In the Sample 2 scenario, the female trainers are teaching the male aliens how to be women on earth.

Trainer 1: Always be polite and never get angry.

Trainer 2: Always let the male earthling take the lead. You should never appear smarter or more competent than he is.

Trainer 3: When you sit, you must keep your knees together and fold your hands in your lap.

Trainer 3 to Alien 1: You have your legs apart. Put them together so that your knees are touching and so that you are taking up as little space as possible. (Alien 1 complies) Yes, that's better.

Alien 1 to Trainer 3: But that position is uncomfortable.

Trainer 3: Ladies have to sacrifice comfort to be feminine. You will get used to it.

Steps 5 and 6

The participants reverse roles with the outer group moving in to become the trainees, the inner group moving out to become the trainers. The therapist

reminds everyone that the instructions given in step 3 are now reversed and briefly repeats the instructions. The interaction proceeds again to completion.

Step 7

The processing is of two varieties: (a) sharing personal reactions to having participated in the exercise, and (b) sharing personal history/life experiences triggered by the exercise. Participants' questions about the structure of the exercise are not to be a part of the processing and sharing phase. Those questions, which can be a defense against the personal sharing aspect, are answered only after the exercise has been completed.

The therapist starts the processing by asking all the participants a general, open-ended question, such as "What part of the exercise affected you the most?" or "Where did you have your strongest personal reaction?" or "What messages or rules did you find surprising? Familiar?" or "How did you experience being a female alien or a male alien?" More pointed or closed questions—"Did you like having to sit in that position for 10 minutes?"—come when the group needs some prodding or when a certain perspective has not been mentioned. One always hopes that directed explorations come out in the natural flow of the group as trust and openness build. The therapist can suggest that participants, especially those whose strong reactions the therapist had noted earlier, share their reactions. As the members of the group respond, add, and question, the leader maintains a rule of respecting others by encouraging those who share to own their reactions and perhaps share with the group the experiences on which they are based. The positive and negative impact of the roles need to be included in the processing. The leader also answers questions about why and how the instructions were given, relating the intent of the structuring to the outcomes generated by the group interaction.

Step 9

When the processing and sharing are finished, the leader encourages everyone, and particularly those who have had strong responses, to "de-role," encouraging even reticent participants to say something about their experiences of and reactions to the exercise. The leader reminds the participants that they are exploring together the negative and positive aspects of the roles and thanks them for their trust, openness, and willingness to take risks. Then the leader asks if anyone has anything more with which to deal in the group setting. As a final reminder, the therapist notes that the participants may experience latent reactions because of the intense nature of the topic addressed and that, if they do have something troublesome occur, they need to seek someone with whom to work it through.

Final Comments

The AIE can be modified to include other dimensions of diversity. African American participants can contribute messages about gender roles that are influenced by or unique to their culture. Participants from foreign cultures can contribute messages about gender-roles that are consistent with their cultural indoctrinations. As an assignment, a specific trainee can be designated to live in a culture that differs from that of the main group, and a trainer from that culture can modify the training program to make it more applicable to that trainee's placement. The cultural differences in expectations and rules for men and women can then be processed at Step 8. Such a cultural focus results in participants' awareness of how sexism, racism, and ethnocentrism interact.

The main benefit of the AIE is that it includes everyone in the group at once, while not requiring that any participant go beyond the minimal level of experiencing the training. Personal comfort and participation boundaries are respected. As a result, participants tend to warm up to the interaction more quickly and thoroughly. They often surprise themselves in both their reactions and their willingness to contribute to the group learning process. For the most part, that outcome is both productive and acceptable to all involved. As with any action techniques designed to lower the personal defenses of participants, the leader establishes and maintains a safe environment. What seems to be a "fun game" is far more than participants realize, either at the beginning or while involved in the process. Hence the need for step 9.

The AIE has proved effective with a variety of participants (e.g., Remer et al., 1999; R. Remer & P. Remer, 1999a, 1999b). We have used the AIE in classes, in workshops with psychologists and psychodramatists, and at professional meetings. Each time it has been a spontaneous experience—effective and novel, even for us. Not only have the participants gained awareness, knowledge, and the experience of other groups but they have also enjoyed doing so. An additional benefit is that the participants have been introduced to action methods in a way that has been comfortable for them. We continue to employ the AIE and encourage other therapists to try this successful exercise.

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PAM REMER is an associate professor of counseling psychology at the University of Kentucky, where she teaches graduate courses in feminist therapy, psychodrama, group counseling, and counseling trauma survivors. Her e-mail address is PRemer@pop.uky.edu and her mailing address is 251C Dickey Hall, EDP, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506-0017. RORY REMER is a professor of counseling psychology and a licensed psychologist. His primary interests are in family therapy, couples therapy, gerontology, and dynamical human systems (chaos) theory.