

Ground rules

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When working with groups of participants in workshops, it can be a good idea for those involved to agree 'ground rules' for the discussions. This simple exercise suggests a way in which groups can come up with a set of ground rules at the start of a workshop.

Safety and confidentiality

Ground rules can help participants to feel safe expressing themselves and can reassure them that what they say will be treated as confidential and not repeated outside of the group exercise. By agreeing a set of ground rules at the onset, the group has effectively formed a 'contract' that can also be referred to throughout the rest of the workshop when necessary.

However, it is impossible to completely guarantee confidentiality in a group, so people can, if they prefer, discuss ways of sharing experiences that do not put them at risk – for example, by referring to experiences that happen to 'people like us' rather than personally. This is especially important when groups are discussing issues such as sexuality and gender when openness about relationship problems could, for example, lead to violence at home. Particularly, participants should take care about sharing private things that could be harmful to himself or herself or to anyone else if they were told to others.

There are other more complicated versions of this exercise, which look further at degrees of confidentiality, how to create a safe space, and how to recognise whether the rules agreed to are reinforcing the status quo of existing power dynamics (e.g. see www.mhhe.com/socscience/education/multi/activities/groundrules.html) but this exercise gives you some idea of the basic guidelines.

Brainstorming ground rules

Begin the exercise by asking participants to brainstorm a set of key 'rules'. Encourage people to make positive ground rules (dos) rather than focusing on prohibitions (don'ts). This can be done either in a group, and listed on paper; by individuals writing their thoughts on slips of paper; or by individuals or groups drawing images which represent different rules (especially useful as drawing does not require that participants are literate). The drawings do not have to be works of art, as you can see from our example!

Depending on the time you have available, and depending on how experienced participants are in setting ground rules, this exercise will probably take about 30 minutes. For groups of more than 10 people, it might be better to split them into smaller groups to begin with, and then bring the groups back together after 10 minutes of brainstorming.

Agreeing the ground rules

The whole group can then collate the different 'rules' that they have come up with, and have a focused discussion to agree which rules they want to use for the rest of the workshop.

Some examples of possible ground rules include:

- Let people speak without interruption.
- Don't pass judgement on others.
- Respect other people's thoughts and opinions, but challenge each other to think more deeply.
- 'Pocket your status': no one has a higher or lower status than anyone else – everyone is equal.
- It is fine to say you would rather not participate at any stage.
- Keep it confidential – no one will discuss what people share in the room outside of it.
- Avoid generalisations – say 'I think that...' or 'people like us think...' instead of 'some people think...' although if you are unsure about sharing private information, use generalisations to be on the safe side.
- Be aware of how much you are talking and leave room for others to contribute.

It is important for the facilitator to help people to think critically about the ground rules they generate together and to challenge conservative ones. Establishing rules such as 'challenging each other to

Drawing the ground rules – it's no Picasso!



Illustration: Holly Ashley Photo: Chi-Chi Tang

think more deeply' at the same time as 'don't pass judgement on others' can also be important. Simply asking that no one judge one another can lead to situations where every answer is correct and the acceptance of harmful attitudes etc. It might also be useful to see where rules are **not** working, which in turn might challenge the participants to think critically about **why** rules might not be as effective as anticipated.

This exercise is a learning activity in itself and if the ground rules are placed where everyone can see them and remind each other about them, it can help people to practice new ways of interacting.

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