

## FISH BOWL ON CLASS BACKGROUNDS AND EXPERIENCES OF CLASSISM

### PREPARATION

The facilitator asks participants to self-identify their class backgrounds and provides indicators based on the classism definitions in 3A above. In order to make the groups relatively the same size, the facilitator may want to group owning class/rich/upper middle class (incomes over a certain amount) together, and also lower middle class/working poor together. It is important that not everyone identifies as “middle class.” (Reading selection #26 can also be helpful in sorting out the class distinctions.)

The room is set up with chairs in the center of the circle—enough to accommodate the group members. The chairs in the center are surrounded by a larger circle of chairs for the participants who are listeners. (If the group is large, or if not everyone wants to participate, a smaller number of chairs can be set up in the center, with one chair left open for a participant to join while the conversation is in process. In that case, every time a new member joins, someone from the center will leave.)

### PROCEDURES

The facilitator emphasizes the purpose of this activity, which enables participants to talk with each other about their shared class backgrounds and experiences while being overhead from participants from different class backgrounds. In each case, a relatively homogeneous group of participants—wealthy/upper middle class, middle class, poor/lower middle class—will have a chance to talk together in the center of the room, while the other two groups have the opportunity to listen.

The questions discussed by the group in the center can be selected from this list, and participants should select which questions they want to discuss, or substitute other questions of their own. (It’s useful to have copies of a list of questions for all participants.)

- How would you describe your class background as you experienced it, growing up?
- When did you first become aware of class? What made you aware of class?
- What were you especially aware of in your class background: As a child? As an adolescent? As a young adult?
- What were the advantages and strengths you gained from your class background?
- What were the disadvantages and challenges you experienced in your class background?
- Describe some of the critical incidents that shaped your awareness of your class background?
- What stereotypes have you heard about your class? What do you want other people to understand about your class?
- In what ways have you experienced the privileges or the disadvantages of classism?
- What were the messages you gained from your family, your schooling, your neighborhood, the media about classism?

The role of the outer ring is clearly laid out as well. The listeners are instructed to listen carefully. When the center group is finished (15–20 minutes), but before they leave the center, participants on the outside are asked to acknowledge and appreciate specific things that they heard. (They need to say exactly what they heard and why they appreciate having heard that.) Only when the appreciations are complete may they ask clarifying questions. It is important that these questions be for clarification only, and not as comments or disagreements with what the speakers in the center have said. This process may take 10–15 minutes.

When the first group of speakers has finished and the outer group of listeners has made appreciative

comments and asked clarifying questions, the first group leaves the center. The second group moves into the center and the process is repeated.

When the second group of speakers has finished and the outer group of listeners has made their comments and asked their questions, the second group leaves the center. The third group moves into the center and the process is repeated.

## **CLOSURE**

When all three groups have had the opportunity to be in the center of the bowl, the facilitator may want to process the entire activity. This can be opened by asking participants how they felt—talking with each other about their class background and experiences, and listening to others talk about different class backgrounds and experiences. The facilitator might ask what class-based stereotypes were challenged by what they heard, what surprised them about things they found themselves saying, what new insights they had (about their own class experiences, about the class experiences of others).