



Discussion Guide: “Don’t Label Me: How to Do Diversity Without Inflaming the Culture Wars” By Irshad Manji

Heterodox Academy invites students, professors, and other heterodox enthusiasts to adopt or adapt these discussion questions as warranted by their interests and circumstances. Our one request: within an environment of open-mindedness, curiosity, and intellectual humility, please encourage disagreement and ensure everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

Thank you to the Heterodox Academy members who participated in our Virtual Book Club about “Don’t Label Me.” Questions and ideas from that conversation served as the basis for this discussion guide.

Citation:

Manji, Irshad. (2019). *Don’t Label Me: How to Do Diversity Without Inflaming the Culture Wars*. St. Martin’s Press.

About the Book

From the publisher: “Diversity, inclusion, antiracism – the hottest topics in America – have become exercises in labeling rather than engaging. Worse, the way they’re practiced too often amplifies conflict.

“Don’t Label Me’ provides needed guidance that’s fresh, relatable, and concrete. Educators, employers, and everyday citizens will learn to create cultures in which diversity of viewpoint is part and parcel of diversity itself, so that public listening becomes as important a skill as public speaking.

“Manji reveals the strategic value of not taking offense at every turn and unlocks the mystery of how to be heard by those who passionately disagree with us. Along the way, she combines cutting-edge scholarship with the time-tested power of story to present an action plan for moral courage—one that equips us all to uncover common ground even as we stand our ground.”

Discussion Questions

- 1 Early on, Irshad Manji states that “diversity itself doesn’t divide; it’s what we do with diversity that splits societies apart or stitches them together” (p. 5). She explains that while some people are indeed bigots, others are “skeptical of diversity because of how we, its champions, practice it” (p. 6) — namely, to build more walls. Do you recognize this way of misusing diversity? If so, how does it make you feel?
- 2 Manji points out that the word “respect” comes from “re-spectate,” to turn around and look again. According to Manji, do labels prevent respect or can they facilitate respect?



- 3 Throughout the book, Manji warns against “factory-style diversity” that puts individuals into “pre-fabricated molds” or group categories (p. 30). Her solution is “honest diversity.” What does she mean by that?
- 4 Bruce Lee, the martial arts master, is among Manji’s go-to philosophers. He taught his students to “be like water.” How does this principle apply to practicing, and sustaining, honest diversity? Is there a relationship in your life that would benefit if you became like water?
- 5 Manji poses a powerful question to those who insist upon “purity” within social justice movements: “If you won’t make peace with different points of view, what’s inclusive about your diversity?” (p. 113). But Manji’s blunt question raises other, more nuanced questions: What are the limits of viewpoint diversity? How should we think about calls for the subjugation or marginalization of certain individuals or groups? And when we subjugate or marginalize people whom we regard as bigots, do we become bigots in turn?
- 6 Manji reframes social media as “sociopathic media.” She makes a compelling case that it dehumanizes, manipulates, and needlessly escalates differences. Do you agree? If not, what is she missing? And if you do agree with her, then is “sociopathic” media beyond repair or can it yet become social?
- 7 When discussing free speech dilemmas, Manji brings up methods and motives. For example, she explains that when “white supremacists arrive at their protests with assault rifles in tow, their method hints – actually, it hails – that they’re not here to fight with words alone” (p. 157). She applies the same argument to internet trolls “who don’t intend to participate in dialogue; they show up just to blow up the space” (p. 156) and drive community members away. Do you believe, as Manji does, that internet trolls who repeatedly flout community guidelines should be removed from online forums? Is it contradictory for Manji to take this stance while asserting her commitment to free expression?
- 8 The book introduces us to people who have transcended their tribes — religious, racial, ideological —to understand the “Other.” In so doing, they have often helped their Other to abandon such toxic beliefs as white supremacy. Manji even speaks with ex-jihadists who say they “left militant extremism only after they felt heard” (p. 172). Are there any people whom we should refuse to engage, despite the longer-term potential of changing their hearts and minds?
- 9 One of the main lessons of the book is how not to be easily offended – a challenge that requires emotional discipline. Pausing to breathe is the first step in overriding our impulse to react harshly. What further steps will help us to respond rather than react? How does Manji suggest we use these teachings to reimagine safe spaces?
- 10 Manji differentiates between power “in here” and “out there.” How does she reconcile that the same individual can be both powerless and powerful, depending on the situation? How does her emphasis on context change the way we think about power as a concept?



11 After analyzing parts of Benjamin Franklin’s and Thomas Jefferson’s careers, Manji poses the question: “Would you rather have high expectations of your country and risk being let down or have lower expectations and risk-taking part in the meritocracy of mediocrity?” (p. 230). Do you read this question as rhetorical or practical? How would you answer the question, and what does it say about the way you view the country?

12 Genesis and Louis, the two young people from Mississippi, both risked “being dishonored by their tribes for talking to each other” (p. 251). Yet they had transformational experiences. Manji cites their story as an example of moral courage — doing the right thing in the face of your fears. Why was speaking with each other the right thing? What if Louis continued to fly his Confederate flag; would Genesis still have done the right thing by initiating dialogue with him?

13 Manji believes that building relationships is key to fighting racism not only among individuals, but also throughout institutions and systems. She says that by relating to people as individuals, even when they belong to identity groups, we create and execute policies with real human needs in mind, rather than treating people as grand abstractions. Consider, she says, the policy of de-segregating public schools; because Black people were treated as abstractions, Black schools were shuttered and Black children were bussed to white schools. This resulted in half of America’s Black teachers losing their jobs while the vast majority of white teachers kept theirs.

Do you agree that if policymakers saw Black teachers as individuals with professional credentials and personal needs, instead of as an amorphous group, they would have found a fairer way to implement de-segregation? More generally, are relationships incidental or instrumental to achieving justice?

14 Instead of publishing her footnotes in the book, Manji posts them on the internet and invites people to engage—constructively—if they want her to rethink a particular issue. Are you incentivized or intimidated by this invitation?

15 The book is written as a conversation between Manji and Lily, her blind, old, yet feisty dog. Why did Manji choose such a quirky approach? Did you find it an effective way to convey the book’s messages?