Kaleidoscope: exploring social identity complexity as a method for facilitating intragroup dialogue

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Abstract

The complexity of group life in diverse organizations can pose both cognitive and emotional challenges for group members as they strive to work cooperatively and productively. This workshop employs a structured dialogue format that invites individuals to consider their own group memberships and those of others in the group. Participants discuss their social identity structures intersected with notions of advantage. The workshop format complicates boundaries in a way that reduces the tendency of the group to focus on a single difference – such as race or gender – as the source of potential or realized dissension and conflict.

Keywords: diversity, group dynamics, conflict, experiential learning
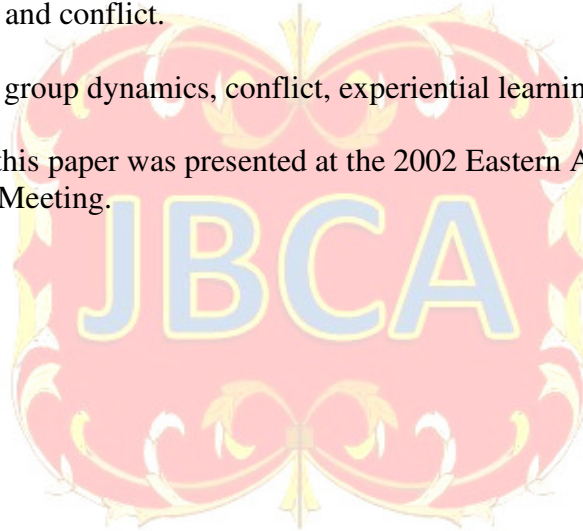
INTRODUCTION

Organizations seeking to create inclusive environments are facing a daunting challenge. Attempts at addressing inequities based on race and gender have broadened in scope to encompass a host of demographic differences such as age, sexuality, socioeconomic class, ability, culture and the like. In addition, organizational differences such as those based on function, position and hierarchy continue to be important. Technological expertise, for example, can be a source of difference among employees, and those in technological areas are increasingly asked to work in cross functional teams (Smart and Barnum, 2000) and to bridge cultural differences (Neff, 1995) that, if left unattended, can hamper their ability to remain at the cutting edge of technology.

People in organizations may experience diversity as an unwieldy, perplexing burden if they cannot cognitively or emotionally handle the myriad of differences that may be generating tension and conflict in a group.   Some organizational researchers are attempting to determine which "differences make a difference" (Jehn et al, 1999; p. 741) in order to assist managers in their efforts to effectively manage diverse groups of employees. More than ever, organizations are interested in ways to establish a balance between honoring individual differences and fostering a cohesive work environment for all employees.   There is continuing need for techniques that enable people to interact with one another in ways that create awareness and provide a basis for constructive, productive working relationships.

SOCIAL IDENTITY COMPLEXITY AND FAULTLINES

Individuals are internally complex, by virtue of the multiple group memberships that comprise their individuality. Some group memberships are based on organization groups, such as those associated with levels of hierarchy, functional background and position. Others are based on membership in identity groups such as race, gender and age (Alderfer and Smith, 1982). Psychologist Beverly Tatum (1997) also notes that identity is multidimensional and shaped by a host of historical, social, cultural, and political factors. Roccas and Brewer (2002) posit *social identity complexity* as "…an individual's subjective representation of the interrelationships among his or her multiple group identities" (p. 88). These "multiple cross-cutting group memberships" (Brewer & Pierce, 2005) or "crossed categorizations" (Crisp, Hewstone and Rubin, 2001) can have implications for how individuals interact in group settings (Crisp et al, 2010).

Group memberships are generally associated with systematic advantages or disadvantages (Tatum, 1997). In the United States, dimensions of diversity that receive attention typically include race, culture, gender identity, age, socioeconomic class, ability and education. Each of these dimensions has associated group memberships, for example, black, white, Latino/Hispanic, Native, and Asian for race, and American, European or African for culture, and the like. The group memberships are viewed as sources of advantage or disadvantage, which refers to the extent to which individuals perceive that they have access to opportunities, resources, influence and control over their own working lives and those of others, or, as Curtin et al (2016) suggest, "…individuals belonging to groups with relative high or low status or power, respectively, in a particular social context" (p. 265). Because white males have long dominated the working

environment in the U.S., they would likely be seen as advantaged. However, LGBTQ white men are also disadvantaged with respect to sexuality. White women can be viewed as advantaged with respect to race and disadvantaged with respect to gender. Black women might be seen as disadvantaged with respect to both race and gender. Taken together, social identity complexity and advantage provide a complicated picture of the individuals and, thus, the group. These two aspects of an individual's identity may also serve as a foundation for conflict or, as this workshop suggests, for increased awareness and cooperation.

Groups, as a collective, may not be aware of the totality of this complexity when they interact. Instead, certain group memberships may become more salient for individuals such that an awareness of the interlocking ties that exist is lost. Lau and Murnighan (1998) note, for example, that demographic diversity in groups can result in the formation of "faultlines," or fractures that may cause a group to split into subgroups. These faultlines form along group membership lines -- blacks vs. whites, males vs. females, and the like. These group fractures may lead to interpersonal, task, or other types of intragroup conflict. Faultlines may develop among a group of diverse employees if they begin to identify with one subgroup. For example, gender distinctions may emerge. The subgroup viewed as disadvantaged, as holding less power, is then pitted against its advantaged, or more powerful, counterpart. Membership in the subgroups may then stabilize—having "chosen sides," men and women establish their allegiances. This dynamic typically engenders conflict and tension between subgroups. For example, a woman may begin to distort her view of self such that the aspects associated with her female subgroup receive exaggerated attention while other aspects of self, such as those relating to age and country of origin, are relegated to the background. She likewise may develop a distorted view of the other, male subgroup. Soon a contentious exchange, overtly or covertly, can erupt between the men and the women.

Focusing on a single dimension of difference oversimplifies the interaction in a group. Drawing boundaries along gender lines may give the impression that individuals identify only as men or women--and that their views are shaped by gender alone. Often, when these dynamics develop, subgroups are holding on to beliefs or assumptions about the presumed advantages or disadvantages accorded the other subgroup. Airing these thoughts may seem too risky or undiscussable (Argyris, 1986); however, avoiding an articulation and consideration of these assumptions and beliefs ensures that tensions will remain latent sources of conflict. Individuals in groups rarely ask "burning questions" (Proudford, 2002), preferring to discuss them in private, side conversations with others whom they trust.

A faultline is strongest when a few homogeneous subgroups form, calling attention to the marked differences in the group. Faultlines lose some of their disruptive potential, however, when multiple subgroups form. One method for diffusing potential stresses and strains within a group is to generate opportunities for multiple subgroups to form so that rigid demarcations do not emerge along dividing lines (Agazarian, 1999). Engaging the differences, rather than avoiding them, may be a way to foster cooperation. In constructing this workshop, the assertion is that the ability to see oneself as complex— as having both advantaged and disadvantaged parts rather than only advantaged or only disadvantaged parts—decreases the tendency to confront others and to adhere to a single subgroup. Though a person may be disadvantaged, for example, with respect to class, he

or she may be advantaged with respect to country of origin. While in the midst of outlining the problems and concerns associated with being disadvantaged, and often confronting those who are of another class, the suggestion here is that the person may remember his or her advantaged parts (country of origin), and that others may likewise hold him or her accountable for the advantages associated with country of origin.

An acknowledgement of our complexity as individuals can also result in shifting alliances—individuals are no longer strongly bound to only one subgroup. Though a person may be pitted against a particular individual when socioeconomic class is salient, he or she may share the same subgroup with that individual when country of origin is raised. Thus, an awareness of simultaneous memberships may ameliorate the potentially destructive power of faultlines by allowing individuals to think more critically about the assumptions made about the individuals framed as "the other." Tatum (1997) described the process this way:

> For those…who are targeted by racism and are angered by the obliviousness of Whites…, it may be useful to attend to your experience of dominance where you may find it -- as a heterosexual, as an able-bodied person, as a Christian, as a man -- and consider what systems of privilege you may be overlooking. *The task of resisting our own oppression does not relieve us of the responsibility of acknowledging our complicity in the oppression of others*." (emphasis added, p. 27)

That responsibility, when made apparent, may give individuals pause both in terms of understanding the perspectives of others and in terms of their willingness to resolve rather than escalate conflict and tension. Complicating the boundaries, in contrast to choosing one boundary in a group, can help ameliorate tensions.

PURPOSE OF THIS WORKSHOP

Merriam-Webster (10th ed) defines a kaleidoscope as "a variegated changing pattern or scene." Groups can be thought of as kaleidoscopes of group memberships. Making the myriad of group memberships visible allows us to grasp the complexity inherent in the individuals and the group. Each group membership offers a portion of what comprises the individual both in terms of their identity structure and in terms of their structure of advantage. It complicates the boundaries in the group in a way that allows individuals to acknowledge and wrestle with the complexity in order to lessen the tendency to get stuck in rigid dividing lines that create dissension and conflict.

This workshop presents a structured dialogue format that enables individuals in a group to become aware of the import of their own group memberships and of the group memberships of others. Structuring the conversation allows individuals to give voice to their thoughts while minimizing the tendency to "talk at" each other. As individuals reflect on their own advantaged and disadvantaged parts and on those of others, they have a growing appreciation for the connections that can form the basis for constructive working relationships.

WORKSHOP DESIGN

The size of the workshop should be limited to approximately 25 people so that there will be adequate time for discussion during each phase of the workshop.

Phase I: Discussion of the Dimensions of Diversity (15 minutes)

During this phase, the facilitator discusses the purpose of the workshop, emphasizes a commitment to establishing connections among participants, and asks participants to commit to that goal. Next the facilitator reviews the two axes that are the foci of the workshop: the first addresses the dimensions of diversity such as gender, age, technological expertise, and seniority (See Appendix A for a list of possible dimensions of diversity).   The second axis captures the structural (power) dimension, characterized as advantaged or disadvantaged. The facilitator asks the participants to consider their location at the intersection of a dimension of difference and a power dimension (e.g. with respect to age, are you advantaged or disadvantaged?). A worksheet is provided for participants to complete (See Appendix B). The group chooses three dimensions of diversity to address during the workshop.

Phase II: Exploration of dimensions (40 minutes)

During this phase, participants have an opportunity to reflect on their various subgroup memberships. The facilitator asks those who have identified as advantaged or disadvantaged with respect to the first dimension of diversity (e.g. age) to move to the appropriate subgroup. Participants are instructed to self-select the advantaged or disadvantaged subgroup, regardless of whether their choice fits prevailing notions about the relative power and influence of that subgroup. Members of the advantaged and disadvantaged subgroups are then invited to share their experiences with others in their subgroup.   They complete the following statement: "I view myself as being (dis)advantaged with respect to (dimension) because…." Some participants may be surprised at who is in their subgroup. For example, an advantaged group based on age may include both young and old women. It is likely that the composition of the subgroups will be complex in unexpected ways; the facilitators should allow this complexity to emerge.

This process is particularly powerful in unlocking preconceived notions about various subgroups and in encouraging a discussion about individual/subgroup position on the disadvantaged – advantaged continuum. An individual or group may feel both sides of the continuum simultaneously. For example, a professional woman in her mid forties may feel advantaged in that she has established herself in her career but disadvantaged in that she may not have the flexibility she wants or may fear her age will become a liability when she reaches fifty. Similarly, men may be considered advantaged in terms of the level they have reached in organizations but may feel disadvantaged with respect to their ability to balance family and work lives. Participants should be encouraged to choose an advantaged or disadvantaged position, though they will likely speak to the ambivalence they felt in choosing one or the other. It is particularly important for people who are

advantaged to acknowledge it. It can be enlightening for them and for those who are disadvantaged, since acknowledging one's disadvantages is more common.

This process is repeated for the remaining dimensions of diversity. Participants will shift from the advantaged to disadvantaged subgroups based on the dimension of diversity being addressed. Each should have an opportunity to (a) reflect on what it feels like to be advantaged (b) what it feels like to be disadvantaged, (c) their reactions to others who are advantaged and (d) their reactions to others who are disadvantaged.

Phase III: Burning Questions (40 minutes)

While the emphasis in Phase II is on sharing information in the advantaged and disadvantaged subgroups, this phase allows participants to ask questions that they have always wanted to ask of the other (advantaged or disadvantaged) group or that have occurred to them during the previous discussion. Because these burning questions may seem too risky to ask in an open session, participants will be invited to record their questions on note cards. Each note card will include the dimension of diversity being addressed, whether the questioner saw himself or herself as advantaged or disadvantaged, and the question. Participants should be instructed to submit their questions anonymously. The facilitator collects the questions and reads each one before the whole group. In this way, participants gain valuable information about some of the key concerns, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that individuals have as they consider the group's diversity. After the questions are read, the facilitator can ask the group to choose several questions to discuss in more depth, though the purpose of the workshop is to provide an opportunity for observation and reflection rather than debate and resolution.

Phase IV: Debriefing (20 minutes)

During this phase, the facilitator asks the group to reflect on the experience of seeing themselves and others in complex ways. The facilitator begins by offering the metaphor of a kaleidoscope -- noting that:
- There is a complicated pattern of group memberships in the group.
- Individuals are connected via their common group memberships.
- Individuals are connected via their experiences of advantage and disadvantage.
- The pattern is dynamic and fluid, making it likely that every individual in the group has, in some way, discovered a connection with every other individual.

After discussing the kaleidoscope metaphor, the facilitator leads a discussion of the following questions:
- What were you thinking/feeling as an advantaged (or disadvantaged) person?
- As an advantaged person, what were you thinking about the disadvantaged subgroup?
- What was it like to move from being advantaged to disadvantaged? from disadvantaged to advantaged?
- What were you thinking/feeling as participants in the advantaged (or disadvantaged) described your subgroup?
- How closely did your experience as an advantaged subgroup member matched that of your fellow advantaged subgroup members (within and across dimensions of diversity)?

- What surprised you about the burning questions that were aired?
- What implications does this experience have for your willingness to build constructive relationships with others?

Phase IV: Feedback (10 minutes)

During the final phase, the facilitator solicit feedback from the participants. This will aid the facilitator in refining the workshop for future audiences. Questions to be asked include:

- How was this experience helpful?
- In what ways, if any, do you leave feeling settled?
- In what ways, if any, do you leave feeling unsettled?

Because this workshop is structured, it is important for participants to have an opportunity to air the ways in which the experience was constraining and/or liberating.

SUMMARY

The aim of this workshop is to develop an individual's capacity to engage in the introspection necessary to foster thoughtful interactions with one another. It is best used as an intervention in groups that have developed deep divisions along a faultline and/or as an opening exercise before a diverse group engages in further task-oriented work. The approach of the workshop is counterintuitive. While many approaches might advocate focusing on a single dimension of diversity in order to build connections (with a view, for example, that a discussion of race would encourage or enable intragroup cooperation), this workshop suggests that complicating boundaries by simultaneously engaging with group memberships and perceived differences in power may yield new insights. Discussions in which participants adopt an oppositional stance often end in unproductive debates. This workshop, by contrast, offers a technique that situates people using connection <u>and</u> opposition. Both forces exist in groups, and the intent here is to permeate the intractable barriers that limit the opportunities and outcomes for segments of an organizational population. As individuals acknowledge their own complexity, they may be more likely to acknowledge the complexity of others, reducing the tendency to form divisive cliques and factions that stymie progress for all.

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APPENDIX A

KALEIDOSCOPE WORKSHOP

Phase One: Dimensions of Diversity

The following is a list of some dimensions of diversity that may be impacting your group interaction. Your group will choose 3 dimensions of diversity to discuss during this workshop.

- RACE/ETHNICITY
- GENDER
- GENDER IDENTITY
- AGE
- SEXUAL ORIENTATION
- EDUCATION
- SOCIOECONOMIC CLASS
- ABILITY/DISABILITY
- FAMILY STRUCTURE
- FUNCTIONAL BACKGROUND
- LEVEL IN HIERARCHY
- CENTRALITY IN HIERARCHY (e.g. CORPORATE, SUBSIDIARY)
- TECHNOLOGICAL EXPERTISE
- SENIORITY
- OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)_____

APPENDIX B: KALEIDOSCOPE WORKSHOP

Phase Two: Exploration of Dimensions of Diversity

PARTICIPANT SHEET

Instructions: Record the dimension of diversity being discussed in the first column; determine whether you view yourself as being advantaged or disadvantaged with respect to each dimension of diversity. Circle the appropriate letter. In the third column, record your thoughts about being (dis)advantaged.

DIMENSION OF DIVERSITY	ADVANTAGE=A DISADVANTAGED=D (CIRCLE ONE)	I view myself as being (dis)advantaged with respect to (dimension) because….
	A D	
	A D	
	A D	