

# **Establishing an Effective Dialogue to Support Diversity, Inclusion, and the Learning Outcomes**

**Marie-Élène Roberge  
Roosevelt University**

**Yvonne Osomiame Alokha  
Roosevelt University**

*This paper explores the psychological processes necessary for the creation of an effective dialogue among diverse people in an inclusive environment. We propose that such dialogue contributes to achieving positive self-transformation when exposed to group diversity, leading to positive learning outcomes. Diversity can be disruptive, if not well managed, leading to stereotyping, conflicts, and misunderstanding, however in this paper, we view diversity as a factor that once exposed can enriched the self and lead to positive learning outcomes such as an inclusive self, feeling of psychological closeness to different others, acquiring diversity competencies, quality interpersonal relationships, enhancing creativity and innovation. We review some interpersonal psychological mechanisms that are part of an effective dialogue: self-categorization versus social identification, self-disclosure, mutual empathy, and learning from each other's identities. We propose that these five interpersonal mechanisms are at the core of an effective dialogue and therefore mediate the relationship between group diversity and the learning outcomes.*

*Keywords: diversity, inclusion, dialogue, mutual empathy, learning outcomes*

## **INTRODUCTION**

An interesting phenomenon related to diversity and inclusion, still relatively unexplored, is that in such environment when an effective dialogue exists, people can transform their self-concept for the best, leading them to reach some positive learning outcomes such as achieving an enriched inclusive self, feeling psychologically close to different people, developing healthy relationships with different others and in the long run, developing diversity competences leading them to become more creative, innovative, and productive. When exposed to group diversity in an inclusive environment, people become able to identify with one another which leads them to open-up to diversity and create a dialogue among the group members. By sharing relevant information about each perspective and identity, and by being open minded and empathetic of others' differences, an effective dialogue can occur. Such dialogue focuses on understanding and valuing other people's uniqueness and needs of belongingness, which explains how individuals exposed to diversity may overtime experience better quality relationships with others. For example, exposure to diversity in an increasingly inward-looking political sphere helps to keep individuals and businesses competitive. Current literature and practices are looking into the growth of diversity suggesting that

inclusively at the global level is required for people to learn to engage in an effective dialogue with diverse individuals (Mor Barak, 2022).

Recent research (van Knippenberg, Nishii, & Dwertmann, 2020) has emphasized the importance of involving diverse group members into synergic communication, where all members can freely exchange information with different others. Based on this literature, we propose to address two research questions that will provide answers and additional support to this current literature: 1) What are the interpersonal psychological mechanisms involved in an effective dialogue, when exposed to group diversity and inclusion? And 2) What are the learning outcomes predicted by an effective dialogue among diverse group members?

Providing answers to these two research questions will be the main contribution of this paper. We will review the literature and provide a conceptual model (see Figure 1) to support our theoretical framework in the hopes of guiding future research avenues and practices.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

### **Diversity and Inclusion: The Impact on Self-Transformation**

Diversity is defined as differences between individuals on any attributes that may lead to the perception that another person is different from the self (DiTomaso, 2021; Jackson, 1992; Triandis, Kurowski, & Gelfand, 1994; Roberge & Van Dick, 2010; van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). These attributes may refer to demographic characteristics, informational/functional characteristics, personality traits, personal values as well as other types of diversity such as religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or mental and physical health and abilities. This definition of diversity adopts an individual focus by referring to diversity as the perceived differences from the self. That conceptual definition addresses questions such as “Who am I, as an individual?” or “Who am I, as a group member?”.

Managing diversity in groups is not an easy task and can bring major difficulties to most organizations, such as conflicts, miscommunication, and discrimination. Therefore, to fully evaluate and solve diversity issues, it is important to understand the importance of creating an effective dialogue that will foster a positive group dynamic. Team diversity may refer to either surface level and/or deep level. Surface-level also known as high visibility diversity refers to characteristics that can be easily observed. These surface level indicators of diversity are considered particularly important due to their salience at the beginning of social interaction, which can lead to biases and stereotypes in groups. The deep level, on the other hand, also known as less readily apparent diversity, such as economic status, personality traits, values, sexual orientation, or other invisible characteristics that become salient as members become to know one another, on a more personal level. At the beginning of any interpersonal relationships, salient attributes of diversity are those observed in the first place. However, as people get to know different others, by interacting and personalizing their relationships, deep indicators of diversity become more prevalent in building an effective dialogue among diverse people.

Thus, creating a dialogue among diverse people is very important for increasing the likelihood of diversity to lead to positive learning outcomes such as a transformed and inclusive self-concept. Self-transformation refers to a changing process that occurs at the identity level. Exposure to group diversity may transform the self-concept by enriching it from interactions with different others. In an inclusive environment, exposure to diversity contributes to self-identification, self-expression, self-definition, and self-expansion. For example, Roberson (2019) reveals that “Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978) [often used to explain people’s heuristic decision-making process in diverse group settings] posits that because individuals’ definitions of self are shaped by their group memberships, they are motivated to enhance their self-concept (p. 73)”. Being open and welcoming to diversity helps to create an inclusive environment where bias and stereotypes can be overcome. Research (Madva, 2017) suggests that diversity training programs may help to initiate and support the self-transformation process in diverse group settings. This process leads to change and adoption of positive attitudes and behaviors towards others, different from the self. When diversity exists, within an inclusive context, a shared group membership become salient, leading people’s self-concept to be transformed by becoming inclusive of others’ identities. This process of self-

transformation leads individuals to develop an inclusive self, a feeling of psychological closeness to different others, increasing their competencies to work effectively with diverse people, as well as become more creative, innovative, and productive. These learning outcomes will be further discussed in a subsequent section of this paper.

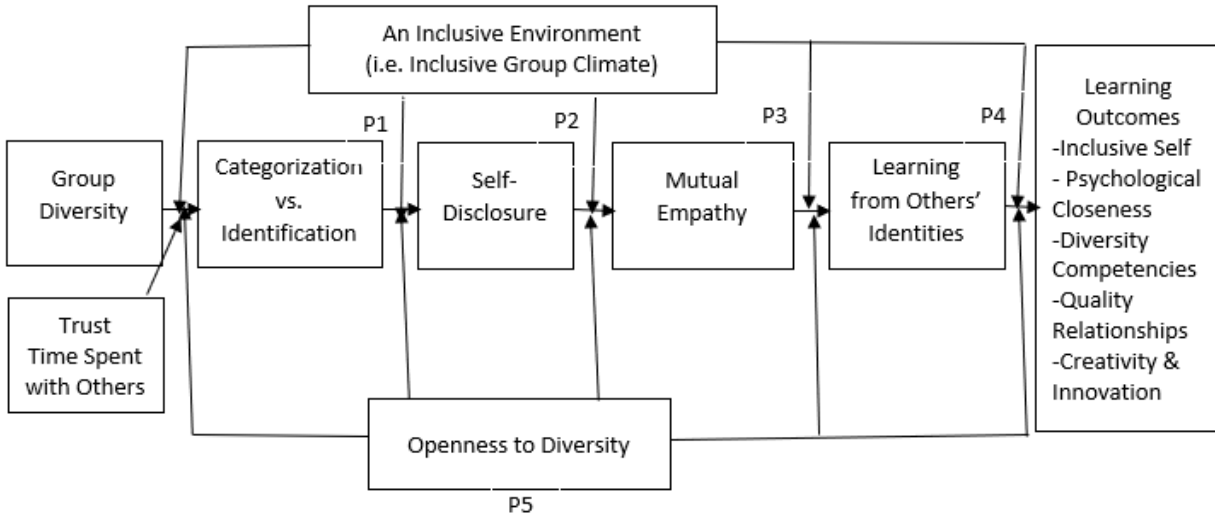
### **The Necessity of Creating an Inclusive Environment**

Literature and practice have recently emphasized the importance of creating an inclusive environment to embrace diversity and increase its likelihood of leading to positive performance outcomes (MorBarak, 2015; 2022). Roberge, Xu, Aydin & Huang, (2021) define an inclusive organizational climate as the “employees’ shared perception of the formal and informal organizational policies, practices, procedures, and routines that optimally satisfy both needs, their belonging need and distinctive need, within the organization (p. 106)”. The belonging need can be satisfied by valuing group membership and communalities among group members, while distinctive need can be satisfied by valuing each individual for their respective differences and accepting them for who they are (Brewer, 2011). Recent empirical research (Roberge, Huang, & Xu, 2021), has proposed that an inclusive climate can be composed of individuals’ perceptions of three sub-dimensions: 1) justice, 2) support, and 3) psychological safety. Justice referred to the perception that the organization treats all its members fairly and provides them with equity, equal employment, and advancement opportunities. Support can come from two sources: The support received can come from the organization by providing accommodations, for instance, but it can also come from the group members, often call the social support, by colleagues showing solidarity for diversity and inclusion. Then, perception of psychological safety is defined as the perception of being able to freely express your identity without the fear of being rejected for being different (Edmonston, 1999; 2018). Inclusivity in any environment must exist for developing an effective dialogue. Indeed, establishing functional communication and interpersonal bonding that contribute to helping different people to thrive and enhance their productivity is a necessity to successful diversity management. In our model, we propose that fostering an inclusive climate is required for the positive psychological mechanisms, part of an effective dialogue, to be activated. We suggest that individuals tend to feel more trust and will reach positive learning outcomes in environments where they feel welcome and valued. Inclusivity should exist in all different contexts, from the educational institutions to corporate organizations and the political arenas.

### **Establishing an Effective Dialogue**

A dialogue involves two or more individuals that communicate with each other and engage in a discourse or conversation by sharing information with one another. It refers to a discussion, or a debate between people. Establishing an effective dialogue among people who are different is very important to exchange different viewpoints, and learn from different perspectives (Ely, & Thomas, 2020). As pointed out by Ryan (2007), an effective dialogue can foster a broader and more inclusive sense of oneself and one’s relation to others. It is through an effective dialogue that diverse people can achieve collaborative efforts that lead to creative solutions and quality decision-making, by respectfully discussing each other’s perspective (Ryan, 2007). Establishing a culture of dialogue is very important. It must be cultivated where individuals respectfully share ideas while keeping in mind the feeling of people involved, and by giving up their stereotypes and prejudice. It also means keeping an open mind to accept and value differences of opinions, perspectives, and identities throughout the dialogue. Finally, by keeping an active dialogue, it helps to eliminate the feeling of ambiguity and promotes transparency and authenticity among diverse members.

**FIGURE 1**  
**A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE INTERPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS INVOLVED IN THE CREATION OF AN EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE AMONGST DIFFERENT PEOPLE**



*Categorization Process Versus Social Identification Process*

At first, when exposed to group diversity, people tend to categorize themselves and others into group identities which may be shared (ingroups) or not shared (outgroups) (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). However, in an inclusive environment, its counterpart becomes activated, people become more easily able to identify with diverse people rather than categorizing one another. Social identity is reflected in the extent to which a group membership is incorporated into an individual’s self-concept (e.g., Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Waddell & Cairns, 1986). Thus, when people share a group membership, they are more likely to socially identify with each other and, as a result, they become able to open up and to engage in an effective dialogue with different others, leading them to feel closer psychologically to diverse people, which reveal the transformed self-concept becoming more inclusive (Reimer, Schmid, Hewstone, & Ramiah, 2020).

Social identification process is about creating psychological bonds between individuals based on sharing a group membership to ensure that different people relate to each other. This process is very important as it sheds light on the positive attitudes and behaviors that individuals experience toward one another while interacting and coexisting with diversity. Moreover, it influences the establishment of an effective dialogue that predicts individuals’ learning and performance outcomes. Sharing similarities may enhance the social identification process. Although it is more difficult to activate this process in between different people, when the environment is perceived as being inclusive, social identification is likely to occur in between different people by humanizing each other and relating to each other’s goals and existence. By being in a diverse and inclusive social environment, identifying with different others leads to greater feeling of psychological closeness to others. Social identification also contributes to enhance self-disclosure and exchange of ideas as well as, in return, the display of empathetic attitudes, and collaborative behaviors between parties.

**Proposition 1:** *When the climate is inclusive, the activation of the social identification process, instead of the categorization process, increase the likelihood for individuals to disclose their identities with different others.*

### *Self-Disclosure: Sharing Valuable Information*

Information elaboration theory (Homan, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef & De Dreu, 2006) has often been referred to explain how diverse groups are capable of positive performance outcomes such as creativity, improving innovation, and decision quality. It has been well discussed that sharing information and disclosing each other's perspective is crucial for diverse group members to reach to positive learning and performance outcomes (Phillips, Duguid, Thomas-Hunt, & Uparna, 2013; Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009). Self-disclosure is more likely to occur when trust is established among diverse members. Therefore, the time spent with the group members and the quality of this relationship are predictive variables of self-disclosure. Being able to open-up to others and reveal each other's unique opinion or uniqueness is crucial for diverse groups to lead to positive learning outcomes. Self-disclosure helps to build authenticity which nurtures trust and boosts productivity. Building an environment where all members of the group feel comfortable sharing personal information can help improve day-to-day interactions as well as create a feeling of belongingness. By being able to disclose their identity, people continue to self-transform and become more acquainted with one another, leading them to listen better and respond more empathetically towards one another.

Self-disclosing identity may sometime mean breaking the silence and opening-up to others by sharing a part of the self that was often neglected by fear of stigma. For example, revealing mental health issues or sexual orientation. Knowing when to disclose personal information is also very vital, using one's personal judgement comes into play. Slowly easing into sharing such information will help other individuals to smoothly get acquainted with such environment without feeling pressurized or coerced. It is important to begin with superficial stories and ease into personal ones to give everyone a chance to analyze the environment and build trusted relationships. When people can express their identities free from stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, such as in an inclusive climate, it becomes possible for oneself to transform and be able to speak up openly about differences. Studies on disabilities (Roberge, Haq Abbasy, Huang, & Lavoie, 2020) suggest that self-disclosure that shows authenticity has the power to enhance productivity by offering appropriate accommodations, for instance. People who choose to express themselves wholeheartedly will do so when they know that there is no fear of judgements or bias. Therefore, it is particularly important to reinforce inclusiveness for self-disclosure to occur among diverse group members.

***Proposition 2:*** *Self-disclosure from diverse individuals will lead to mutual empathetic concerns when the climate is perceived as being inclusive.*

### *Empathic Attitudes and Behaviors to Deeply Understand the Different Others*

Being empathetic refers to understanding or feeling the emotional state of someone else (Roberge, 2013). Empathy requires being capable to place oneself in another's position such as reflected by the popular expression "putting yourself into someone else's shoes". Empathy can take place cognitively and/or affectively. Cognitive empathy occurs when someone understands the different other, whereas affective empathy occurs when someone feels for someone else and can recognize the feeling experienced by the other person. Thus, empathy is a genuine connection with the other person, a sense of compassion for others, and humanization of interpersonal relationships.

Diversity sensitivity and empathy are intimately interconnected. Diversity sensitivity focuses on becoming inclusive of others, of their values, lifestyles, as well as learning from other's identity, which helps to build a sense of self, thus, helping individuals to become more relevant and competent at managing diversity successfully in organizations and communities. Diversity sensitivity and showing support to diversity are key elements in building empathetic concerns in diverse settings. For an effective dialogue to occur, compassion and empathy towards others' differences must be nurtured. When all people emotionally understand each other and their situations, mutual empathy is experienced at the collective level. Empathy breaks cultural barriers when people can comfortably coexist with others allowing them to foster a dialogue based on respect and authenticity. Implementing inclusive practices is critical to enhance the likelihood for mutual empathetic concerns among diverse group members to develop.

A recommendation to show empathy is to develop active listening. Here are some steps to show empathy through active listening:

1. Maintain eye contact
2. Be attentive
3. Keep an open mind
4. Listen to understand and not to reply
5. Do not interrupt or impose solutions
6. Ask questions to clarify & ensure understanding
7. Avoid being judgmental
8. Ask if he/she is done speaking before responding

**Proposition 3:** *Mutual empathy will be expressed by each party when the climate is inclusive, leading individuals to learn from each other's identities.*

#### *Learning From One Another's Identities and Incorporating Differences Into Oneself*

As proposed by Ely and Thomas (2020), adopting a learning orientation with diversity is crucial to maximize the likelihood of reaching out to positive performance and learning outcomes. In this paper we focus our attention on learning from each other's identity which is considered a mutual process that occurs between different people. As pointed out by the personalization model proposed in the literature about diversity management (Ensari & Miller, 2006), when the context allows employees to interact and communicate with one another, they can learn about each other's personal lives, experiences, perspectives, lifestyle, and identities which in turn leads to reduced categorization process and stereotyping. When learning occurs, people become able to integrate information in a nonbiased way, and therefore to collaborate more easily, which increases performance.

Ways to value learning from one another's identity is by celebrating and incorporating other people's differences into oneself concept. Such process is closely related to cultural appropriation (Nguyen & Strohl, 2019, p. 981) which is defined as when "members of a group engage in shared practices that contribute to a sense of common identity, such as wearing certain hair or clothing styles or performing a certain style of music". It is indeed when people develop new attitudes, routines, and rituals into their daily activities by having been exposed to diversity that it is possible to consider that the learning process has been effective by changing their self-concept and making these individuals more inclusive of others and their differences. For example, daily routines (practicing daily prayers), or behavioral patterns (eating different ethnic foods, or listening to international music and watching global movies) can be incorporated into one's own lifestyle to show support and solidarity to diversity. It can also be learning someone else's language and wearing other people's ethnic clothing style. Sometimes, solidarity can be shown by paying attention to non-verbal cues. People from different ethnic backgrounds use body language differently to react to various situations, paying attention to these cues and learning how to correctly interpret them will help build an inclusive environment and effective dialogue.

**Proposition 4:** *When individuals learn from each other's identities, several learning outcomes may be reached such as an enriched self-concept, feeling of psychological closeness to different others, diversity competences, quality relationships, and creativity and innovation.*

#### **Learning Outcomes of an Effective Dialogue**

The proposed model identifies several positive learning outcomes, consequences of an effective dialogue with diverse people within an inclusive environment. Those learning outcomes include: transcending oneself by becoming inclusive of others, developing a feeling of psychological closeness to diverse people, acquiring diversity competencies, cultivating quality relationships with others, and producing creative and innovative ideas, as well as increasing productivity.

The self-transformation process that occurs when one is exposed to group diversity in an inclusive environment, leads to the development of a greater self and an expansion of one's self-concept by including

other people and their differences within the self. This can be observed via changes into people's rituals, lifestyles, and routines that incorporate other people's identity and perspectives. Thus, the self becomes richer in content and social learning experiences, while developing deeper connections with different others by valuing and celebrating people's uniqueness. Being more connected with other people's purpose and identities makes individuals from diverse groups more competent at interacting with each other and able to address diverse issues more effectively.

Once the self-concept is transformed and becomes more inclusive of others' differences, the feeling of being psychologically close from these different people increases and may take prevalence. Based on this positive feeling associated with different others, psychological closeness leads to collaborative efforts, positive attitudes, and behaviors toward different others. This important feeling may be a factor that contributes to shaping individuals' competencies at interacting with and managing diversity.

Developing competencies, specific to diversity management, is another positive learning outcome identified by our conceptual model. By being exposed to diversity, in an inclusive environment, establishing an effective dialogue can help people to enhance their diversity competencies such as displaying empathetic skills, listening skills, leadership skills, and conflict management skills. All of which are necessary to possess for successfully leading diversity (Homan, Gundemir, Buengeler, & van Kleef, 2020) and managing diversity issues, such as resolving interpersonal conflicts and other issues such as misunderstandings that different individuals may encounter.

Another learning outcome is developing strong interpersonal relationships that are based on mutual respect and understanding of each other's similarities and differences. Such learning outcome is likely to be the norm when the dialogue is effective. Developing a strong social network that fosters continuous learning from one another may bring broader types of opportunities and career advancements. It means making connections outside the normal pool of individuals and practicing networking with members from the communities that would not have been reached otherwise if diversity would not have been experienced as a priority in the first place.

Finally, by being exposed to diverse opinions, expertise, identities, and perspectives, it becomes easier to be creative and solve problems in an innovative way. Creativity and innovation are signs of integration of knowledge that comes from diverse groups. This happens when the self-transformation processes have been successfully activated and fully utilized in its maximum potential to yield the predicted positive learning outcomes.

### **Openness to Diversity**

In this model, openness to diversity is an individual difference mostly determined by personality trait such as openness to experience. Openness to diversity is a type of trait that facilitates the development of competences that must be used and reinforced when managing diverse groups (Homan, Hollenbeck, Humphrey, van Knippenberg, Ilgen., & van Kleef, 2008). Such traits may contribute to enhancing the relationship between the psychological mechanisms and the learning outcomes. Being able to accept and embrace differences, developing curiosity and interest for other people's differences and uniqueness, paying attention to their identities and how important it is to them, celebrating other people's identity, contribution and success, and becoming a good listener when engaging in dialogue with different people are all domains of competences that group members must develop to become efficient at dialoguing with diverse group members, and the process of a positive self-transformation when exposed to diversity within an inclusive environment.

Moreover, people who score high on openness to diversity may have a natural interest in bringing awareness to issues related to diversity and inclusion such as learning to deactivate prejudices and discriminatory behaviors and to speed up the process of self-transformation into themselves and others. Being committed to diversity may enhance the likelihood for individuals to self-transform by incorporating pluralism of ideas and differences of perspectives into their self-concept.

In our model, openness to diversity acts as a moderator of the linear relationship between the interpersonal processes of an effective dialogue and the learning outcomes. This suggests that when people

score high on openness to diversity, the psychological processes necessary for an effective dialogue are more easily activated, and the effects of self-transformation on the learning outcomes become stronger.

**Proposition 5:** *Openness to diversity moderates the relationships between exposure to diversity, the psychological mechanisms of an effective dialogue, and the learning outcomes.*

## CONCLUSION

This conceptual model about establishing an effective dialogue may be useful to Higher Education for students, faculty members, and the community to be involved in a positive exchange of perspectives that enhance learning outcomes. However, this conceptual model can be useful to other sectors as well such as in corporate organizations or in the political arenas. Our model proposes that establishing an effective dialogue involves five psychological mechanisms (categorization versus social identification, self-disclosure, mutual empathy, and social learning) which are crucial to enhance the likelihood to mediate the relationship between group diversity and the positive learning outcomes such as an inclusive self, psychological closeness to different others, diversity competencies, quality relationships, creativity and innovation.

Those learning outcomes can be achieved by establishing an effective dialogue among diverse people. Developing an effective dialogue that acknowledges awareness about issues related to diversity and inclusion is a first attempt to manage a successful self-transformation adapted to diverse organizations and learning outcomes. Many other types of practical interventions may be required to learn how to establish an effective dialogue among diverse people. Those practices may be for examples, implementing brainstorming exercises in the classroom, encouraging traveling experiences or studying abroad, conducting networking events locally and globally, and teambuilding activities in the communities, as well as delivering diversity training programs in corporations, to just name a few.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank Professor Hae Sang Park for the feedback she provided to us on a prior version of this manuscript.

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