

# **The Complexity of Diversity: Rethinking Gaps and Leveraging Differences**

## **SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS**

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University of Michigan, Palmer Commons

Note: The following notes were compiled by designated scribes at the conference and pulled together afterwards by editors at the NCID. Although this document endeavors to capture the essence of each expert's presentation, researchers should contact speakers and review their related publications to access these studies more fully.

### **Part 2: The Nature of Our Differences —Who We Are**

Our identities are products of place, time, and heredity. Not only do these identities have political meaning, but they also provide us with comfort and guidance to the extent that they stabilize our self-perceptions. Depending on the situations in which we find ourselves, we draw upon different identities or aspects of our identities. Identities also allow others to put us into categories.

This session takes up several questions about identity:

- In what ways do our individual differences reflect genetics, environments, and cultures?
- Why do people form social and cultural identities?
- What historical, political, and economic factors foster the formation and maintenance of such identities?
- How important are our identities to our personal well-being?
- In what ways do well-defined identities help us to benefit from diversity?
- How might identity construction and maintenance hinder our attempts to learn from and leverage our differences?

### **Identity and Action**

#### **The Empirical Analysis of "Acting White "**

Roland Fryer, Harvard University

The huge and persistent educational disparities among Blacks and Whites in this country motivate this research on "acting white." These unsettling gaps stimulate a wide range of explanations. The appropriate public policy choice to address the achievement gap may depend on the underlying source.

Cultural difference is one explanation given for Black underachievement. Famous men, such as Will Smith and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, have openly discussed how they were ridiculed for and accused of “acting white.” Similarly, Black children who achieve academically may fear being shunned by their peers for “acting white.”

“Acting white” is reflected in the racial differences between popularity and academic achievement—illustrated in data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and the National Educational Longitudinal Study.

“Acting white” is a matter of opportunity costs. If students pursue the sort of activities that will lead to academic and future job success, then they don’t have time for activities that will nurture their friendships with others of their own race.

There is a significant trade-off between being accepted by peers of one’s own race and academic achievement. Fryer’s model predicts that racial differences in the relationship between peer group acceptance and academic achievement will exist, and these differences will be greater in schools that provide more interracial contact. In fact, he finds that “acting white” is more prominent in public schools and schools in which there are fewer than 20 percent Black students. It is non-existent among Blacks in predominantly Black schools.

Rather than relying on students’ self-reports of popularity, Fryer’s study measures students’ popularity based on friendship network data. In short, students name their five best male/female friends. The responses are compiled across all students so that networks of friends can be identified. In general, the following rule holds true: the more popular your friends are—the more connected you are to popular people—the more popular you are.

A comparison of same-race popularity with grades reveals that as grades go up, popularity increases as well. For black students, this trend begins to go down once the grades go higher than 3.5. For Hispanic students, the trend goes downward when the grades are higher than 2.5. There is a bigger downturn for boys than for girls.

As grades go up, there is a loss of friends of one’s own race, but an increase in friends of other races. This trend occurs for students who participate in athletics and cheerleading, but not for students who participate in student government.

This study includes high- versus low-segregation schools. The effect is much larger in schools that are less than 20% Black, while schools that are more than 80% Black are very low in “acting white.” Also included are public and private schools. In private schools, as White students’ grades go up, their popularity goes down.

Other models have been suggested for “acting white.” One is self-sabotage among Black youth. Another is the presence of an “oppositional culture” wherein opposition to longstanding White privilege leads Blacks to refuse to participate in White activities, such as academic work. However, these theories are contradicted by the finding that “acting white” is not seen in predominantly Black schools.

To understand how “acting white” likely affects the achievement gap, one must consider that higher achieving Blacks tend not to go to racially diverse schools.

### **Situated Knowledge**

Elizabeth S. Anderson, University of Michigan

Think of people sitting in a theater. The view from each seat differs. Someone sitting in a center row will see more than someone sitting to the side, behind a pillar where her vision is blocked.

In society, people have different opportunities and different access to resources. This puts each person “in a different place.” People in these different social locations based on race, class, gender, and so forth may view the environment differently, just as people in the theater may have different views. Certain things may seem more “visible” to one person than another.

This creates “situated knowledge”— what you know or can see depends on your location. Thus, race, class, gender, and so forth create social locations that alter what knowledge one brings to an interaction. For example, class differences may “block” knowledge about why a particular financial policy would not work for someone with less money. An example would be company managers who are surprised when employees don’t choose tax-free flexible spending accounts.

Racial differences may show different assessments of what sort of environment counts as successful integration versus tokenism.

The challenge to society is to find ways to remove these blocks to shared knowledge. How do we pool situated knowledge for more effective policy?

When considering multi-ethnic, multi-racial environments, one must think about politics, philosophy, and democracy in ways that recognize that people have different views of the environment, depending on where they are situated by social category, not just physically located.

Democracy is a device for pooling situated knowledge—bringing diverse views to a problem —by fostering face-to-face interaction to develop solutions through discussion.

Consider democracy as government by discussion among equals. This idea of

democracy is significantly different from the "majority rules" democracy. In "majority" democracy, issues are decided upon by those in power. But citizens need to determine what the "issues" are going to be. The pooling of resources can make it possible for changes that are relevant to respective groups, and decisions on "issues" can be determined by "equal" citizens.

Individuals have plural identities. As a member of a democracy, an individual has an identity as part of the "we." "We" are a "we" for a specified context. A "we" can split up into another "we" as necessary. Even in this "we" state, we are acting as individuals, but a common goal provides a basis for pooling our information.

How do we bring together multiple-identity persons to form a "we"? A cosmopolitan model, where individuals are members across groups, provides some answers. In this conception, individuals have multiple, intersecting identities, each of which allows situated knowledge. The more salient the information, the more a particular identity will be drawn from it. Forming a "we" also requires promotion of discussion across group lines, or integration, as an instrument for pooling information. This requires more than tokenistic in-group discussion, which merely reinforces stereotypes and doesn't recognize the intersections of our individual knowledge.

There are three other political models that do not enable the pooling of knowledge:

Assimilation forces people to give up their identities (or parts of them) as well as valuable prior knowledge. In an assimilation model, multi-ethnic identities are detrimental to the society.

Segregation divides.

The interactive model would have each group make up different pillars of the same building, all under the same roof. However, the roof holding everything together is actually the elites who speak for their own needs and not for the interest of their representative groups. There is a lower degree of successful integration for immigrants, and there is not a lot of interaction between groups. Intersection of identities never occurs.

The challenge for the future is promoting integration. It is a prerequisite for plural identification, democratic dialogue, and the pooling of information for more effective policymaking. It requires more than tokenism to overcome group stereotypes, make individuating information salient, and empower marginalized voices.

## **African-American Racial Identity**

Robert Sellers, University of Michigan

Racial identity matters. African-Americans vary in their racial identities, based on the significance they place on race and how they define what it means to be Black. For some, race is #1. For others, it is not as important. This presentation looks at “significance versus meaning” within individuals’ attitudes about racial identity—and suggests that efforts to increase diversity may have unintended as well as the intended consequences.

The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI), developed by Sellers to explore the role of racial identity in the well-being of Blacks, represents one conceptualization of the variability in racial identity attitudes. There are two key dimensions of the MMRI:

- Racial Centrality refers to the extent to which a person defines her/himself with respect to race. It is a measure of relative importance of race to the self-concept.
- Racial Regard refers to a person's affective and evaluative judgments of his/her race.
  - Public regard is the extent to which the individual feels that others view African-Americans positively or negatively.
  - Private regard is the extent to which the individual feels positively or negatively towards African-Americans and his/her membership in that group.

Sellers’ study asked adolescents to report how frequently over the past year they experienced “racist hassles.” The hassles included being treated rudely or disrespectfully, being accused of something or treated suspiciously, being presumed to do inferior work, and fifteen other items.

Adolescents’ responses illuminated a relationship between “public regard” and perceived racial hassles. Specifically, those who perceived more hassles had lower public regard beliefs; they thought the public viewed African-Americans negatively. For those with low public regard beliefs, ambiguous experiences were reported as being discriminatory.

Individuals with increased perceptions of discrimination also had an increase in depressive symptoms. Where there was an increase in how highly they regarded African-Americans (private regard), there was a decrease in depressive symptoms.

Girls reported higher levels of stress and discrimination. Racial hassles were not directly related to well-being, but the increase in private regard was. High public regard both raised risks and offered some protection. It was a risk factor for

perceiving stress and reduced well-being from experiencing discrimination, yet it was a buffer against perceived discrimination.

Pertinent is research done with college students, who were asked about their perceptions of the racial climate at their colleges. The measures included the following: the extent to which intergroup association was viewed as “the norm” at their school, the equal status of groups, and interdependence of groups—whether they needed each other. In the college data, identity was not related to perception of interdependence or equal status.

In the end, the people with whom African-Americans choose to interact proves important. The level of contact with whites is a predictor of depressive symptoms. The higher the private regard scores, the lower depressive symptoms.

These studies leave us with several issues to consider:

What are some of the potential unintended consequences of promoting more diverse settings for some African-Americans?

Which African-Americans are most likely to be negatively affected?

What can be done to minimize the potential adverse impact for these individuals?

Does diversity mean the same for those in the minority as it does for those in the majority?

## **The Nature of Our Differences—How Do Our Differences Come to Be?**

### **Genes and Environments**

David Moore, Yeshiva University

According to traditional genetic determinism, human traits emerge as a result of the unfolding of a “developmental program” controlled by the genes. These “evolved” traits—be they “biological” or “psychological”—are uninfluenced by experience. They are innate and immutable. Supposedly, scientists can explain how much of our identity is determined by our “nature” and how much by “nurture.”

In fact, biology long ago rejected this dichotomy though it remains in the popular press. Our genes can’t determine any of our characteristics independently of developmental environments. The scientific data underlying our (mis)perception that some traits are more “in the genes” than others are those that come from heritability studies. Heritability tells us about what causes variation in a trait. It tells us nothing about what causes traits, and it tells us nothing about how much

(or how easily) a trait can be influenced by environmental factors.

Heritability, taken alone, cannot tell us how likely it is that parental traits will be inherited by their offspring. In fact, all traits are caused 100% by genes and 100% by environments.

As studies of biological mechanisms reveal, “biological” does not equal “immutable.” For example, PKU (phenylketonuria) is widely considered by physicians to be a “genetic” disease, but its development is profoundly influenced by diet.

Time and again, behaviors we have initially thought were “innate” have proven to have interesting developmental courses. If the development of a trait seems uninfluenced by environmental or experiential factors, you probably haven’t yet looked hard enough.

Knowing what genes actually do can help us understand what genes could not possibly do. DNA contributes to the production of protein. It does this only with help from non-genetic components in the cell (many of which are not dependent on nuclear DNA for their construction). By itself, DNA is inert.

To more accurately understand human differences, one must draw upon “systems thinking.” In reality, all of the factors in the system—environmental, genetic, and non-genetic-biological —work together to construct our characteristics.

A relatively simple example is hair color. Hair color is determined by the presence of melanin, which is formed during the breakdown of the amino acid tyrosine. Environmental factors that influence the breakdown of tyrosine affect coloration. Melanin accumulation depends, in part, on copper concentrations in hair-producing cells. Non-genetic factors like diet can also affect hair color; hair comes in lighter, for instance, when you’re malnourished.

The system does work from the bottom up, as Watson and Crick figured: DNA is used to create proteins; proteins do contribute to the shapes of organs; organs do contribute to the functioning of bodies; and the structure and chemistry of the brain do contribute to our psychological characteristics.

But the direction of causation can also go the other way. Proteins--that is, hormones—can turn genes on and off. Stress can activate genes used in an earlier stage of development. Furthermore, evolution doesn’t require that genes determine our characteristics, independent of our experiences. Adaptive traits require non-genetic input for their development, and then that non-genetic input must be “inherited” by offspring.

Other evidence for the lack of genetic determinism comes from cloning. Cloned

calves—who have identical DNA— will develop different markings and distinct personalities, too.

The boundary between “nature” and “nurture” is porous, if it exists at all. Human characteristics, be they biological or psychological, can be best understood via analysis of their development. Development is a unitary process that utilizes both genetic and non-genetic resources.

What it all means for diverse people is that individuals—regardless of their racial, ethnic, or national backgrounds—develop their traits because of how their genes interact with their environment. Certainly, that environment includes culture.

### **Culture, Personality, and Well-Being: Some Unresolved Questions**

Shinobu Kitayama, University of Michigan

How do people arrive at a sense of well-being, including an appropriate sense of self and high-quality social ties? Some say culture leads to this outcome, while others suggest it is personality. Are both culture and personality important, or is one more important than the other? Most research has been done in Western societies and particularly the United States, but this study contrasts North American and Japanese cultures.

Culture provides the “blueprints” for what it is that people are expected to do, in what ways they are expected to do it, and how well or poorly they actually do it. North American cultures are organized around the model of self as independent. The central cultural mandate is personal control and mastery. In contrast, Japanese culture is organized around the model of interdependence, and the central cultural mandate is relational harmony.

Personality traits systematically related to well-being include agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. From national surveys of mid-life in the U.S. and Japan, Kitayama’s research group looked at measures of independence, interdependence and well-being.

For the effect of personality on well-being, Kitayama’s team found that extraversion was strongly positive, especially in Japan. Neuroticism was negative in both cultures. Agreeableness was weakly negative in the U.S. and weakly positive in Japan. Conscientiousness was weakly positive only in the U.S. Openness to experience was inconsistent.

The research group also looked at the relationship of culturally sanctioned emotions to happiness. Socially disengaging emotions highlight the individual—such as pride, self-confidence, and feelings of superiority. Socially engaging emotions are friendly feelings, feelings of closeness, and feelings of respect.

Looking at the effect of cultural mandates on well-being, the researchers found that culturally-sanctioned positive emotions and episodes associated with them — social engagement for Asians and disengagement for Americans— are among the most significant correlates of happiness and subjective well-being.

Kitayama's theory is that independence arises in cultures established by persons voluntarily moving away to seek better economic circumstances. He tested this idea by looking at the Japanese who live in Japan's northern island of Hokkaido, which was settled, mostly during the first half of the 20th century, by peasants and jobless ex-samurais from the rest of Japan.

Kitayama found that socially engaging emotions were the main factor in happiness among residents of the main island of Japan. For non-native Hokkaido residents, socially engaging emotions were more important than disengaging emotions. However, for Hokkaido-born residents, both contributed to happiness about equally. For Americans, happiness was predicted more by socially disengaging emotions.

Culture plays a crucial role in well-being. Personality dispositions are also important, but no more so than culture. Kitayama cautions that theory grounded in only one culture is incomplete at best and, in all likelihood, misleading.

New questions for scholars of cultural diversity include:

How malleable is it?

What are the consequences of globalization and the biculturalism, cultural change, Westernization of other cultures that come with it?

Scholars also need to consider regional and subgroup differences and similarities, in particular based on social class and gender.