

# SELF-DISCLOSURE: BENEFICIAL FOR COHESION IN DEMOGRAPHICALLY DIVERSE WORK GROUPS?

Tracy L. Dumas, Nancy P. Rothbard and  
Katherine W. Phillips

## ABSTRACT

*Many organizational efforts to improve co-worker relationships entail inducing employees to bring their "whole selves" into the workplace, which for employees often means disclosing personal experiences at work. Several psychological theories suggest that increased self-disclosure will lead to better relationships in organizational work groups. However, this chapter considers the factors impacting self-disclosure in demographically diverse settings. We posit that although self-disclosure has led to closer relationships in past research, it may not increase cohesion for employees in demographically diverse work groups, or those who are demographically dissimilar from the majority of their co-workers.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Classic organizational research established that work organizations represent not only systems of production, but also social systems comprising complex interpersonal processes (Mayo, 1945; Roethlisberger, 1977; Walker & Guest, 1952). The importance of the organization as a social system may be more applicable now as the nature of today's knowledge work requires greater collaboration among employees given that workers are often organized in groups or project teams (Chatman & Spataro, 2005; Hurlbert, 1991). Therefore, interpersonal relationships between workers in contemporary organizations constitute an important factor in organizational performance. Indeed the quality of co-workers' social relationships has an impact on several outcomes critical to the organization including work group performance (Harrison, Price, Gavin & Florey, 2002), worker satisfaction (Repetti, 1987; Repetti & Cosmas, 1991), identification with the organization, and employee creativity (Albrecht & Hall, 1991; Perry-Smith, 2006). Further, supportive coworker relations are considered to be an important aspect of worker dignity (Hodson & Roscigno, 2004), and are positively related to employees' pride in their work, and the sense that their work is meaningful (Hodson, 1996, 2004). Moreover, employees in more cohesive work groups have lower absenteeism and turnover rates (Iverson & Roy, 1994; Sanders & Nauta, 2004).

Ironically, the increased need for employee collaboration, and hence the increased value of social relations in the workplace coincides with the increasing demographic diversity of the workforce (Chatman & Spataro, 2005). This presents an additional challenge for managers, because as is well-documented in the diversity literature, demographic diversity can hamper cohesion and performance in work groups (see Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998 for reviews). Organizations must manage a diverse workforce so that the employees' demographic differences can serve as an advantage rather than as an obstacle to organizational performance. In sum, the collaborative nature of work in modern organizations, and the changing demographics of the workforce present organizations with a complex set of issues to address with respect to managing their employees.

In an attempt to address these issues, practitioners and organizational scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to understanding how to create an inclusive culture, where employees of all demographic categories and life circumstances can feel welcome, and can work well with each other (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Vashdi, 2005; Roberson, 2006). Interestingly, many organizational efforts to meet these ends converge around the idea of

inducing employees to bring their “whole selves” into the workplace (Pratt & Rosa, 2003). For instance, organizational initiatives including on-site child care, gym facilities and employee counseling all serve to incorporate some aspects of the employee’s non-work life into the organization. These policies aim to enhance the employee’s ability to engage fully at work by reducing the employee’s need to go elsewhere to handle personal, non-work related matters (Falkenberg, 1987; Kirchmeyer, 1995; Osterman, 1995). Other initiatives including weekend retreats, company sports teams, and social outings seek to help employees form closer ties to both their co-workers and the organization (Finkelstein, Protolipac, & Kulas, 2000; Hurlbert, 1991). Additionally, many inclusion initiatives adopt the strategy of inducing workers to incorporate their unique personal experiences and backgrounds into the workplace for the good of the organization (Roberson, 2006). These initiatives are consistent with classic psychological research, which shows that increased self-disclosure enhances interpersonal relationships (for a review see Collins & Miller, 1994), as well as research on intergroup contact, which posits that increased contact between people from different demographic categories will improve intergroup relations (Brewer & Miller, 1988; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Despite the specific intent of any one of the above-mentioned organizational policies, they all induce the employee to invoke behaviors, emotions and information in the workplace that were traditionally reserved for the personal sphere – or to blur the line between work and non-work.

Blurring the work/non-work boundary by incorporating non-work identities into the workplace can result in positive outcomes for the individual and the organization including increased cohesion among co-workers, increased work satisfaction, and heightened organizational commitment (Adler & Adler, 1988; Pratt & Rosa, 2003). However, role theorists have long asserted that role compartmentalization best allows individuals to enact their multiple roles and identities with minimal difficulty (Goode, 1960; Merton, 1957; Turner, 1978). The results of recent empirical studies also indicate that blurring the work/non-work boundary is neither consistently attractive (Rau & Hyland, 2002), nor consistently beneficial for all employees in managing their careers or juggling the demands of multiple roles (Dumas, 2004; Kreiner, 2006; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). Therefore, it is clear that the value to employees of blurring the boundary between work and non-work is contingent upon the employees’ needs or preferences, as well as factors of the situation (Rau & Hyland, 2002; Rothbard et al., 2005).

The issue of managing the boundary between work and non-work has also caught the attention of practitioners and members of the popular press, as

many corporate executives reconsider whether blurring the work/non-work boundary is good for all employees (Frankel, 2007). Although some researchers have explicitly considered the relationships between individual employee characteristics and the blurring of work and home roles (Kossek, Noe, & DeMarr, 1999), there remains ample opportunity to explore questions regarding the impact of blending work and non-work for different types of employees in various situations. For example, we know little about how employees' demographic characteristics may affect the relationship between the work/non-work boundary and individual outcomes. Given the increasing demographic diversity in today's organizations, it is important to understand the effects of blurred work/non-work boundaries in diverse settings.

Therefore, we address the relationship between employees' demographic characteristics and the extent to which they blur the work/non-work boundary by incorporating aspects of their personal lives or "whole selves" into their work roles. Given the complexities in today's workforce, we consider the implications of inducing all employees to bring their "whole selves" to work through the disclosure of personal information (Lewis, Rapoport, & Gambles, 2003) and socialization with co-workers (Finkelstein et al., 2000). For instance, what does bringing your "whole self" to work mean for a working parent or for someone who is a member of a cultural minority group in an organization (Berg, 2002)? We posit that although blurring work and non-work identities is assumed to increase cohesion and organizational commitment, incorporating more of one's non-work life and identities into the workplace may not yield the same beneficial effects for employees in demographically diverse work groups, or those who are demographically dissimilar from the majority of their co-workers.

In this chapter, we focus on the impact of diversity and self-disclosure on cohesion in work groups. We focus on cohesion because of the long-term implications for environments that utilize collaborative work. We acknowledge that in the short term, managers may be more focused on task performance – but in the long term cohesion may be just as important. Moreover, many of the negative effects of diversity – including reduced cohesion – are manifest in outcomes such as turnover, conflict and absenteeism, which have both short-term and long-term effects on organizations. We begin by briefly reviewing the research on the effects of demographic diversity on cohesion and interpersonal relationships in groups. We next discuss the literature addressing the impact of self-disclosure and intergroup contact on relationships among demographically dissimilar individuals. We then consider how the dynamics of non-task related socializing and personal disclosure in demographically diverse work groups

might operate differently for majority versus minority group members. Last, we suggest two mechanisms to explain why disclosure may not be beneficial for members of diverse groups, and particularly for demographic minorities in these groups. Specifically, we posit that the potential for highlighting deeper level differences rather than similarities, and the difficulties in processing dissimilar information may inhibit the development of cohesive relationships through self-disclosure in diverse groups.

### **DEMOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

The extensive body of literature on the impact of demographic diversity in organizations reveals that it can present a significant challenge for work groups, particularly with respect to interpersonal relationships and cohesion (see Jackson et al., 2003; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998; for reviews). Based on the similarity-attraction and social categorization paradigms, diversity researchers have generally suggested that members of diverse groups are less likely to be attracted to one another (see Jackson et al., 2003; Milliken & Martins, 1996; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998 for reviews). According to the similarity attraction and social categorization paradigms, individuals assume that those who share their demographic characteristics also share their underlying opinions, values, and perspectives (Phillips, 2003; Phillips & Loyd, 2006). The basic argument is that the perception of similarity in opinions and values, as inferred on the basis of similarity in demographic attributes, leads to attraction among group members. Thus, members of work groups that are relatively homogenous in demographic attributes will experience greater cohesion than those that are more diverse (O'Reilly, Caldwell & Barnett, 1989; Smith, Olian, Sims, O'Bannon, & Scully, 1994; Wiersema & Bantel, 1992). Likewise this perceived similarity should fuel higher quality communication, and a lack of interpersonal conflict in the group.

Though the results are mixed, diversity research shows that people generally find it easier to relate to similar others, and prefer to interact with those who share their demographic characteristics (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). For example, Hinds, Carley, Krackhardt, and Wholey (2000) found that when given the opportunity to select project team members, students chose group members of the same race. Glaman, Jones, and Rozelle (1996) found that co-workers who were demographically similar liked each other more and preferred working with each other more than they liked co-

workers who were demographically different. O'Reilly et al. (1989) examined the effects of tenure and age diversity on social integration and found that greater group level diversity was associated with lower social integration. Likewise, Smith et al. (1994) examined the effects of diversity of education, industry experience, and functional background on top management team integration and found that heterogeneity in industry experience was associated with lower social integration. Moreover, studies on racial diversity, which focused primarily on relations between African Americans and Whites, have shown that communication is often hindered in racially diverse groups (Hoffman, 1985). Consistent with these findings, Thomas (1990) found that cross-race mentor relationships tend to provide less support than same-race relationships, suggesting that there would be greater social integration among same-race mentor-mentee dyads.

In addition to the above-described research focusing on the general effects of diversity, there is also a significant body of work addressing the differential effects of demographic proportions (relational demography) on group and individual outcomes. Hoffman (1985) examined the effects of increasing black representation in the supervisory units of federal civilian installations. He found that increasing black representation (never more than 47%) was negatively associated with interpersonal communication frequency. Relational demography research also reveals the impact of majority or minority status on individuals' experiences in demographically diverse groups. Studies in organizations show that those who are demographically dissimilar from the majority of their co-workers are less likely to be committed to or satisfied with the organization, and are more likely to leave (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Similarly, other relational demography researchers found diminished social integration and higher turnover of employees who have different demographic characteristics from the majority group (e.g., Riordan & Shore, 1997; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). More recently, Sacco and Schmitt (2005) also found increased turnover among employees who were demographic misfits in their work organizations. In sum, the research consistently reveals less cohesion and lower quality interpersonal relationships among demographically dissimilar individuals.

### **DISCLOSURE AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Psychological research addressing both interpersonal (Jourard, 1959; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958) and intergroup (Allport, 1954) relations focuses

on the exchange of personal information as a way to foster positive relationships and increase intergroup understanding. Specifically, self-disclosure research shows that sharing personal information increases closeness and positive affect in interpersonal relationships (see Collins & Miller, 1994 for a review). Similarly, the fundamental mechanism of Allport's (1954) theory on intergroup contact is that interaction with members of different demographic categories provides individuating information which can serve to change people's perceptions of out-group members, and potentially improve interpersonal relationships between people from different demographic categories (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006 for a review).

In particular, classic studies of self-disclosure reveal that the disclosure of personal information generally makes people feel closer to each other (Jourard, 1959; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). Specifically, studies of self-disclosure indicate that self-disclosure is positively associated with liking (Cozby, 1973; see Collins & Miller, 1994 for a review and meta-analysis). This relationship is reciprocal; not only does liking lead to increased disclosure, but disclosure also leads us to like others more (Collins & Miller, 1994). More recently, laboratory studies have induced liking and closeness through the experimental manipulation of self-disclosure (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliott 1998). The disclosure and liking literature also shows that the nature of the information disclosed matters. The disclosure of more intimate information has a stronger effect on liking than disclosure of more generic, less intimate information (Collins & Miller, 1994; Levesque, Steciuk, & Ledley, 2002). Indeed recipients of intimate disclosures feel trusted, liked, and are more likely to evaluate the discloser positively (Collins & Miller, 1994; Wortman, Adesman, & Herman, 1976). Taken together, these studies provide some support for the idea that organizations may be able to improve co-worker relationships by offering opportunities to socialize and share personal information. Additionally, the above-cited research suggests that the disclosure of personal information that is not necessarily work-related can be an important resource for building cohesion in a work group.

### *Self-Disclosure in Work Settings*

Scholars studying boundary theory have addressed the disclosure of personal, non-work-related information in the workplace (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Specifically, boundary theory considers whether

employees blend their personal and professional lives (i.e., integrate) or keep their personal lives separate from their work lives (i.e., segment) (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., 1999; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Rau & Hyland, 2002; Rothbard et al., 2005). For instance, an employee who integrates and incorporates her “whole self” into the workplace is more likely to discuss personal matters with co-workers and bring family members to company outings. Other examples of integration in organizations include attending company-sponsored parties (Nippert-Eng, 1996), outings to happy hours after work (Finkelstein et al., 2000), informal socializing at work, and personal conversations about non-work-related issues (Kram & Isabella, 1985), also defined by Nippert-Eng (1996) as “cross-realm talk.” This is akin to what Daft and Lengel (1986) describe as richness of interactions. In essence, employees who integrate their personal lives into work are bringing more of themselves to work by incorporating their non-work identities and experiences into the work role and presumably forming closer interpersonal bonds with co-workers.

Today’s organizations increasingly adopt practices which blur the boundary between employees’ work and personal lives, believing that these practices will result in positive outcomes including increased organizational commitment, heightened work engagement, and cohesion among co-workers (Fleming & Spicer, 2004; Perlow, 1998; Pratt & Rosa, 2003). Fleming and Spicer (2004) examined the practices of an organization operating under this philosophy. In describing the organization, they state, “Utilizing the private lives of workers is thus a crucial training strategy that aims to have them invest more of themselves in their work and evoke spatial norms commonly reserved for outside of work activities” (p. 84). Casey (1995) described this phenomenon as corporate “colonization of self” and explained that these practices are becoming more prevalent in modern organizations.

As outlined above, boundary theorists describe a variety of behaviors as falling under the rubric of integrating work and non-work. Among the many types of integrating behaviors described by boundary theorists, the most useful for bonding employees to the organization and enhancing cohesive working relationships are those that incorporate more of the employees’ personal identities into the workplace, invoke personal emotions in the workplace, and involve personal disclosure. Asch (1946) explained that an important aspect of forming relationships is acquiring information about relationship partners. Certainly, frequent social interaction can provide the type of personal information that leads to the formation of close relationships. Additionally, the more people socialize and spend time with



each other informally, the more likely they are to self-disclose and share additional information. Similarly, involvement in leisure activities is positively related to feelings of liking and friendship (Segal, 1979). As noted earlier in this chapter, classic studies on self-disclosure reveal that in general, sharing personal information with others enhances relationships and increases liking (Cozby, 1972, 1973). Though these earlier psychological theories on interpersonal relationships do not explicitly address relationships in the workplace, clearly the mechanism of self-disclosure is applicable to social relations among co-workers. Therefore, employees who blur the line between work and non-work by incorporating more of their personal lives into the workplace may experience more cohesive relationships with their co-workers. Moreover, this logic has been extended to address coworker relationships in demographically diverse groups.

#### *Effects of Disclosure on Cohesion in Diverse Groups*

In addressing demographic changes in the modern workforce, researchers have explicitly considered how to apply the tenets of self-disclosure and the contact hypothesis to demographically diverse work groups. Pettigrew and Martin (1987) considered how the organizational context might be altered to enhance working relationships among demographically dissimilar others. Citing the contact hypothesis, they propose that organizations should structure work tasks so that demographically dissimilar people are interdependent or work together on teams. Polzer, Milton, and Swann (2002) suggest that positive outcomes accrue in demographically diverse work groups when the members share more about themselves with each other. In other words, Polzer and colleagues suggest that improved relationships result from increased personal revelation that enables others to see the target person as the target sees himself or herself. More recently, Ensari and Miller (2006) suggested that managers should create conditions that foster closer interactions among demographically dissimilar employees, allowing co-workers to become friends.

There is limited empirical evidence that increased self-disclosure among demographically dissimilar people can lead to improved relationships. Much of the research on self-disclosure and liking focused on college students who were demographically similar. However, one recent study of self-disclosure did explicitly examine the impact of self-disclosure between dissimilar others (Ensari & Miller, 2002). This study found that when an out-group member discloses personal information, bias toward newly

encountered members of the out-group is reduced (Ensari & Miller, 2002). However this research does not examine ongoing work group relationships. Thus, it does not consider that, for those in diverse groups or for demographic minorities in ongoing work groups, increased self-disclosure may highlight differences which could hinder close relationships. Ensari and Miller (2002) constrained the content of the personal information that was disclosed between out-group members; therefore, it is not possible to conclude that all types of personal information shared between out-group members would lead to improved social relations. It is also unclear how the effects of self-disclosure in a demographically diverse group might differ for those who are in the minority compared with those who are in the majority. Thus, this research does not address how self-disclosure operates in the context of a demographically diverse work group.

Several studies suggest that contact and disclosure may have different effects on group members depending on the demographic composition of the group and depending on whether the focal group member is in the majority or minority. For example, in a recent meta-analysis, Tropp and Pettigrew (2005) found that intergroup contact reduced intergroup prejudice among members of majority status groups, but that the effect was weaker for members of minority status groups. Phillips, Northcraft, and Neale (2006) attempted to increase group cohesion in a laboratory study by instructing participants to share information about themselves. Ironically, these researchers found that disclosure, which was intended to induce cohesion and a feeling of similarity, only had the intended effect on members of homogeneous groups. When members of diverse groups were given the same instructions (i.e., to disclose personal information), the result of sharing such information was that they felt more dissimilar and less attracted to the other group members after the similarity induction exercise.

In a study designed explicitly to consider the impact of disclosure and co-worker socializing on cohesion in demographically diverse work groups, Dumas, Phillips, and Rothbard (2007) collected data from part-time and full-time first-year MBA students in their first semester of classes regarding their current or most recent work-experiences. The respondents provided information on the extent to which they disclosed information about their non-work lives at work, the demographic characteristics of their work group members, and the cohesiveness of their work groups. Dumas et al. (2007) found that those who disclosed more personal information at work, and socialized more with their co-workers reported more cohesive relationships in their work groups. However, this effect was qualified by an interaction such that greater disclosure was associated with more cohesive

working relationships only for individuals who were in homogenous work groups, and for those who were demographically similar to others in their work group. Interestingly, individuals in diverse work groups, or those who were dissimilar from their co-workers did not experience the same enhanced work-group cohesion when they disclosed more about their non-work selves in the work group. Relatedly, Flynn, Chatman, and Spataro (2001) found that group members generally formed negative impressions of demographically dissimilar individuals. However, this effect was moderated by the dissimilar individual's self-monitoring ability. In other words, demographically dissimilar individuals fared better when they understood how to present themselves strategically to majority group members and presumably limited the personal information that they disclosed to others. In fact, members of diverse groups often limit the amount of personal information that they disclose to the other group members (Hewlett, Luce, & West, 2005).

Phillips, Rothbard, and Dumas (2004) found that even among employees who reported a preference for integrating their work and non-work lives, those who were in demographically diverse work groups were less likely to share personal information with their co-workers. Perhaps this is because people fear that rejection will ensue if they disclose personal information to dissimilar individuals. Indeed people are often reluctant to disclose personal information to dissimilar others. Even when two dissimilar individuals attempt to connect interpersonally, anxieties and expectations regarding out-group members' perceptions may inhibit the development of close relationships (Curtis & Miller, 1986; Frey & Tropp, 2006). Thus, though this chapter primarily addresses the differential effects of disclosure for individuals in diverse groups versus those in homogenous groups, we must acknowledge that often people are reluctant to disclose personal information at all to out-group members (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002; Omarzu, 2000).

#### *Choosing Whether to Disclose in Diverse Settings*

Several factors may have an impact on individuals' choices to disclose personal information in demographically diverse groups. As suggested by the Flynn et al. (2001) chapter referenced above, an individual's self-monitoring abilities are likely to be closely associated with their choices to self-disclose. High self-monitors might be more strategic about what they disclose, whereas low-self-monitors may be less able to disclose personal

information in a manner that will help them improve their relationships with dissimilar others (Flynn et al., 2001). Another factor which may affect disclosure is the individual's sense of identification with his or her demographic category relative to their work group or organizational identification. People have a need to express important aspects of their identities, and people also desire validation and acknowledgement of their central identities (Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Moreover, tension and stress can result when people do not freely express and acknowledge important aspects of their identities (Barreto, Ellemers, & Banal, 2006). Therefore, a group member may be more likely to self-disclose and share personal information in the workplace to the extent that they identify highly with their demographic category or other non-work-related identity.

When specifically considering the impact of racial dissimilarity on individual's choices to disclose, fear of rejection upon disclosing personal information is a central feature in studies of interracial relationships. Indeed several studies reveal that people experience apprehension and express concerns over how members of other racial groups will perceive them (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Pinel, 1999; Shelton & Richeson, 2005). Racial minorities are often concerned that their characteristics or behaviors may confirm negative stereotypes (Pinel, 2002; Steele & Aronson, 1995), and they often fear social rejection based on their race (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Shelton & Richeson, 2005). Individuals' concerns regarding how out-group members will perceive them are addressed through several different lenses in psychological research including stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), meta perceptions or meta stereotypes (Frey & Tropp, 2006; King, Kaplan & Zaccaro, this volume; Vorauer, Main & O'Connell, 1998), and stigma consciousness (Pinel, 2002).

The above-described concerns about out-group members' perceptions often play out in the workplace, when racial minorities strategically omit parts of their identities in attempts to fit in with the group. A recent study suggests that minorities conceal rich personal lives by choice (Hewlett et al., 2005). Indeed a large proportion of minority women professionals (56%) report that they believe their outside lives are invisible to the organization because they choose not to share personal information in the workplace (Hewlett et al., 2005). Though most existing studies focus on minorities' concerns over how people in the majority will view them, other researchers have also considered majority members' concerns over how they are perceived by dissimilar others (Frey & Tropp, 2006). For example, in a study of White Canadians and their meta-stereotypes regarding Aboriginal

Canadians, Vorauer et al. (1998) found that White Canadians (i.e., the majority group) worried that Aboriginal Canadians perceived them as prejudiced. White Canadians were also concerned about being stereotyped, and believed that Aboriginal Canadians viewed them as arrogant, non-spiritual, and selfish (Vorauer et al., 1998).

Both majority and minority group members' concerns about how others perceive them are often related to issues of status differences in the group. Accordingly, Phillips, Rothbard, and Dumas (2007) theorized that members of demographically diverse work groups may strategically disclose personal information at work in order to manage the perceived differences in status associated with demographic categories. They focus on members' concerns over increasing the perception of status distance, and theorize that both low status (i.e., women or racial minorities) and high status (i.e., men or whites) group members selectively disclose personal information in work settings to minimize status differences and increase cohesion. A central aspect of Phillips et al.'s (2007) argument is that group members' disclosure is based on their expectations of how the disclosed information will affect their standing in the eyes of the other group members. Therefore, majority and high status group members may also have concerns about relating to dissimilar others. Taken together, the literature on minority members' fear of rejection and the literature on majority members' concerns about how they are perceived both raise doubt about whether blurring the line between professional and personal relationships through self-disclosure will increase cohesion for employees in diverse settings.

### **DISCLOSURE AND COHESION IN DIVERSE SETTINGS: MECHANISMS**

The above-described studies illustrate the complexities involved in attempting to increase cohesion in demographically diverse settings through self-disclosure and intergroup contact. Below, we discuss two mechanisms which may explain why disclosure does not necessarily lead to greater cohesion in demographically diverse settings. First, the information disclosed between demographically dissimilar employees may actually increase the sense of dissimilarity and social distance in demographically diverse settings (Phillips et al., 2006, 2007) because increased disclosure may in fact reveal deep-level diversity that coincides with the surface-level diversity characteristics (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Harrison et al., 2002). Second, disclosure

by dissimilar group members may fail to increase cohesion because the other group members may not attend to or process the information (Gigone & Hastie, 1993). We elaborate further on each of these mechanisms below.

### *Highlighting Differences through Self-Disclosure*

Much of the research encouraging intergroup contact and self-disclosure proposes that increased contact and information exchange will uncover fundamental similarities that override the effects of demographic dissimilarities. Harrison et al. (1998, 2002) found that demographic or surface-level diversity in work groups had less of an impact over time, but that deep-level diversity, or diversity in attitudes, values and beliefs had more powerful effects on group cohesion the longer group members worked together. Harrison and colleagues (1998, 2002) explained that the more time group members spend together, the more they learn about each other, and discover each others' deep-level attributes. Similarly, employees' choices to integrate work and non-work by disclosing personal information indeed may allow co-workers to acquire more detailed, nuanced knowledge of one another. However, due to the complex social dynamics in demographically diverse groups, we propose that encouraging self-disclosure and social relationships among demographically dissimilar work group members may not lead to a greater sense of similarity, interpersonal closeness or understanding as implied by the contact hypothesis. Rather, such disclosure could reveal information which highlights differences instead of similarities. Thus, disclosure may further widen the social distance between group members (Phillips et al., 2006).

We acknowledge that surface-level diversity does not always correlate positively with deep-level diversity, and that individuals who are demographically different may share similar attitudes and beliefs, particularly on task-related issues (Phillips & Loyd, 2006). However, when considering personal non-task-related information, it is quite likely that disclosure between demographically different employees will also uncover deep-level dissimilarities. We suggest that for employees who are in homogenous groups, richer interaction and heightened interpersonal knowledge will be associated with increased cohesion, but this effect may not hold for employees in diverse groups. This idea is consistent with the Phillips et al. (2006) finding that disclosure increased cohesion only in homogeneous groups.

Disclosure of deep-level attributes such as values, and opinions may increase cohesion among similar individuals because people feel more close

to others when they learn that they share similar experiences or subjective assessments (Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, & Pyszczynski, 2006). However, when individuals differ in their experiences, values, or subjective assessments of events, self-disclosure may not reveal deep-level similarity, but rather may reveal deep-level differences. In fact, Omarzu (2000) theorized that disclosure among dissimilar others can cause discomfort for both the discloser and the recipient of the disclosure. Thus, group members may better preserve co-worker relationships by choosing not to disclose information about their experiences or values that differ from those of their colleagues (Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Hewlin, 2003; Phillips et al., 2007). In sum, individuals in diverse groups may fail to attain an increase in cohesion when integrating or sharing more of themselves in the work group. Rather, segmentation, or deliberately keeping one's personal life out of the workplace, may serve as a form of strategic presentation described by Flynn et al. (2001) and may actually preserve relationships. Accordingly, a critical component of boundary management entails individuals' concerns for their professional image and their relationships with co-workers, particularly when in demographically diverse settings (Hewlin, 2003; Roberts, 2005).

#### *Processing Dissimilar Disclosures*

When considering studies reporting differential effects of self-disclosure for diverse versus homogenous groups, and majority versus minority group members, it is important to understand how group members process the information that has been disclosed. An interesting aspect of the Dumas et al. (2007) study was that employees in diverse groups and those who were in the minority experienced neither an increase nor a decrease in the cohesion of their groups, when participating in organizational social activities, or sharing personal information with their co-workers. We propose that the common knowledge effect (Gigone & Hastie, 1993) may explain this intriguing finding. Research on group discussion and group decision making suggests that the introduction of unique or unshared information in a group setting often falls flat (Stasser & Titus, 1985, 1987). In other words, perhaps the disclosure of dissimilar information may not have any effect on cohesion (positive or negative) because the disclosure by a dissimilar individual is simply not seriously considered or attended to by the other group members.

When demographically dissimilar co-workers freely disclose personal information, it is likely that they are revealing aspects of their personal lives

and experiences that differ from those of their colleagues. Not only is unique information less likely to be mentioned in a group setting, it is also less likely to be repeated by other group members or integrated into the discussion, and is more likely to be forgotten (Gigone & Hastie, 1993; Stasser & Titus, 1985, 1987). If we consider how the common knowledge effect might play out for a minority group member who shares personal information that is different from his or her colleagues, it is easy to see why self-disclosure may fail to increase their sense of cohesion with their group members. As noted earlier, Hewlett et al. (2005) found that minorities in organizations often choose to conceal information about their personal lives at work. The rationale for concealing this information stems from a desire both to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes which we described earlier, but also to avoid the frustration and disappointment that are often experienced when disclosing personal experiences that are not understood by others. A participant in the Hewlett et al. (2005) study commented, "When I do try to open up personally, people just don't get it...so you stop trying" (p. 78). This participant's comment may in fact reflect frustration over encountering the common knowledge effect after sharing personal information with co-workers that is subsequently ignored.

## DISCUSSION

We have addressed the question of how demographic diversity influences the effects of self-disclosure on cohesion in organizational work groups. At first blush, the findings from the studies we have described are sobering, and reveal the difficulties faced by those trying to improve relationships in demographically diverse groups, as well as the challenges faced by demographic minorities when trying to fit in to their work environments. Although we posit that individuals in demographically diverse groups and dissimilar individuals in organizations may not benefit as much from the personal disclosure that accompanies work-non-work integration, this does not mean that employees in diverse groups cannot form good working relationships. Rather, perhaps organizations do not yet fully understand how to create a climate where all employees will benefit from sharing their disparate identities in the workplace. Clearly, the existing studies and our discussion highlight several questions to address in future research, yet a consideration of the existing literature also yields some critical take-aways for organizations, managers, and team members.



*Implications*

First, this discussion of the dynamics of self-disclosure in demographically diverse settings should prompt managers and researchers to reconsider what we interpret as withdrawal behaviors or lack of attraction to the group on the part of demographic minorities. A group member who remains silent during a discussion of personal opinions or non-work experiences may withhold his or her opinions because they differ greatly from those of the majority. Similarly, this group member may have prior experiences with feeling misunderstood or dismissed when attempting to disclose personal information. Additionally, this group member may want to avoid causing discomfort for the other group members (Omarzu, 2000). Thus, we suggest that demographically dissimilar employees may desire to fit in to the organization but may find that their attempts to integrate are not successful. Rather than interpreting a lack of self-disclosure and social integration as lack of attraction or commitment to the group, managers should discern whether any factors in the structure of the group or task communicate that different opinions, perspectives or experiences will be met with rejection and ostracism.

Second, when the demands of the task dictate that increased cohesion is necessary for the group, limited strategic self-disclosure may be optimal for preserving cohesion in demographically diverse groups (Phillips et al., 2007). In a study of employee socialization, Beyer and Hannah (2002) found that many employees chose to avoid personal interaction with their co-workers in order to avoid tension, preserve working relationships, and better fit in to the organization. Particularly when group members differ on deep-level attributes, less disclosure may be more effective for improving relationships. Instead of relying on disclosure of personal information, managers may be able to increase cohesion more effectively through an emphasis on work-related and task-related successes, because a sense of group efficacy can also increase group cohesion (Mullen & Copper, 1994).

Last, whether in diverse settings or not, it is important to recognize that most employees have preferences for either integrating or segmenting their personal and professional lives (Rothbard et al., 2005). Thus, organizations should reconsider the value of inducing all employees to incorporate their personal lives into the workplace. When organizations go too far in fostering integration, despite good intentions, they run the risk of alienating or rebuffing those employees who prefer to draw a more rigid boundary between the work and non-work domains. Particularly when considering integration of employees' work and non-work lives through personal

disclosure and social interaction, organizations may benefit from reducing the attempts at corporate “colonization of the self” (Casey, 1995).

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

More research is needed regarding the nature of personal self-disclosure in work groups. As stated earlier, numerous factors including role identification, self-monitoring, and stigma consciousness may impact the relationship between disclosure and cohesion in diverse groups. Laboratory studies designed to examine group members’ choices to disclose, the nature of information they disclose, and the way personal disclosure is processed by dissimilar individuals will be critical. In particular, laboratory studies which manipulate group composition and the nature of information disclosed can provide insight into the mechanisms driving the effects of disclosure in diverse settings. For instance, the question remains as to how group members process the personal information shared by dissimilar others. Does personal disclosure to dissimilar others in a group setting highlight dissimilarities thus increasing social distance – or is the disclosed information ignored? Moreover, are there discernible patterns in the personal information that people choose to conceal or disclose in demographically diverse settings? The findings from laboratory studies designed to address these questions will help organizations strike a balance between the potential costs of inducing employees to incorporate their personal identities into the workplace, and the potential benefits of incorporating employee differences into organizational work groups.

### **CONCLUSION**

Organizations are indeed social systems, and cohesion in work groups affects many organizational outcomes including turnover, absenteeism, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Iverson & Roy, 1994; Kidwell, Mossholder, & Bennett, 1997; Sanders & Nauta, 2004). However, we propose that accepted methods of fostering cohesion among employees – company sponsored off-job socialization, or encouragement to share more of one’s personal identity at work (Brewer & Miller, 1988; Pratt & Rosa, 2003) – may be less effective for employees in demographically diverse groups, and for employees who are dissimilar from others in their work group. Managers should strive to promote a culture where employees have a

choice to disclose or conceal personal information. Moreover, managers can create a team environment such that when differences are disclosed, they are acknowledged and accepted. Last, managers should explore alternatives to personal disclosure for increasing cohesion in work groups, such as promoting and celebrating task-related successes. Understanding the complex dynamics underlying the relationship between disclosure and cohesion in demographically diverse groups may be a critical first step that managers and organizations need to take when attempting to improve cohesion in demographically diverse work groups.

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