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# Self Disclosure: Beneficial for Cohesion in Demographically Diverse Work Groups?

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# Self Disclosure: Beneficial for Cohesion in Demographically Diverse Work Groups?

## **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.

## **Disciplines**

Business Administration, Management, and Operations | Human Resources Management

Self Disclosure: Beneficial for Cohesion in Demographically Diverse Work Groups?

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### Abstract

Organizational scholars and practitioners have devoted a great deal of attention to understanding how to foster environments where all employees feel valued, and can work well with each other, particularly in settings that are demographically diverse (Bacharach, Bamberger & Vashdi, 2005; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Roberson, 2006). Many organizational efforts to meet these ends converge around the idea of inducing employees to bring their “whole selves” into the work place, which for employees often means revealing personal experiences, and allowing information and other aspects of their non-work lives to transcend the work/non-work boundary (Pratt & Rosa, 2003). Indeed, several theories suggest that increased disclosure of personal information will lead to higher quality interpersonal relationships in general, (Cozby, 1972; Collins & Miller, 1994) and also, more specifically in organizational work groups (Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002). However, sharing personal information may not enhance cohesion in work groups that are demographically diverse (Phillips, Northcraft & Neale, 2006). Moreover, demographically dissimilar individuals fare better when they understand how to present themselves strategically to majority group members (Flynn, Chatman & Spataro, 2001), which may entail restricting self disclosure. Given the complexities of today’s workforce, this chapter considers the implications of inducing all employees to bring their “whole selves” to work (Lewis, Rapoport & Gambles, 2003). We posit that although blurring work and personal identities has been positively linked with increased cohesion in past research, incorporating more of one’s non-work life and identities into the workplace may yield different effects for those in homogenous versus diverse groups.

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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, 2004; Hodson, 1996). Moreover, employees in more cohesive work groups have lower absenteeism and turnover rates (Iverson & Roy, 2004; Sanders & Mauta, 2004).

Ironically, the increased need for employee collaboration, and hence the increased value of social relations in the work place 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; and Williams & O'Reilly, 1998 for reviews). Organizations need not only to recruit and retain talented workers, but they must also find ways to foster a positive social climate, and manage a diverse workforce

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so that the employees' demographic differences can serve as an advantage rather than 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.

Practitioners and organizational scholars alike 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 et al., 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 work place (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 aim to help employees form closer ties to both their co-workers and the organization ([Finklestein, Protolipiac & 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

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specific intent of any one of the above-mentioned organizational policies, they all induce the worker to invoke behaviors, emotions and information in the realm of work 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, 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](#)). This issue 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 on the impact of blending work and home 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.

This chapter addresses 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

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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 (Finklestein 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 has been positively linked with increased cohesion and organizational commitment in past research, incorporating more of one’s non-work life and identities into the workplace may not yield these 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 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 explaining 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 Williams & O'Reilly, 1998 and [Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003](#) 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, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003](#); Milliken & Martins, 1996; and [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-

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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 or satisfied in the organization, and more likely to leave ([Williams & O'Reilly, 1998](#)). Similarly, other relational demography researchers found diminished social integration and higher turnover

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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 & Lasakow, 1958](#); [Jourard, 1959](#)) and intergroup ([Allport, 1954](#)) relations focuses on the exchange of personalizing information as a way to foster positive relationships and increase intergroup understanding. Specifically, research on self-disclosure 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).

Classic studies of self-disclosure reveal that the disclosure of personal information generally makes people feel closer to each other ([Jourard & Lasakow, 1958](#); [Jourard, 1959](#); [Worthy, Gary & Kahn, 1969](#)). Additionally, studies of self-disclosure indicate that positive affect or liking is also positively associated with self-disclosure ([Cozby, 1973](#); see [Collins & Miller, 1994](#) for a review and meta-analysis). 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 through the experimental manipulation of self-disclosure

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([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 ([Wortman, Adesman, & Herman, 1976](#); [Collins & Miller, 1994](#)). 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, 1995](#); [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 integrating practices in organizations are company-sponsored parties ([Nippert-Eng 1996](#)), outings to happy hours after work ([Finkelstein, Protolipac & Kulas, 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

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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 result in positive outcomes including increased organizational commitment, heightened work engagement, and cohesion among co-workers ([Perlow, 1998](#); [Pratt & Rosa, 2003](#); [Fleming & Spicer, 2004](#)). [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 home and 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, and 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-

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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](#); [Cozby, 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 it stands to reason that employees who blur the line between work and home 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

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managers should create conditions which foster closer interactions among demographically dissimilar employees, and that allow co-workers to become friends.

There is empirical evidence that increased intergroup contact, and self-disclosure among demographically dissimilar people can lead to improved relationships. In particular, one study of self-disclosure explicitly examined the impact of self-disclosure between dissimilar others and 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 consider that for those in diverse groups, or for demographic minorities in work groups, increased self-disclosure may also highlight differences which could hinder close relationships. For instance, 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. Additionally is it not clear 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. It is also not clear from this research how the mechanism of 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,

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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, the result of sharing information was that they felt more dissimilar and less attracted to the group 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,



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members of diverse groups often choose to limit the amount of personal information that they disclose to the other group members.

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 has focused on 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](#)).

Fear of rejection when 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, 2006](#)). 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 outgroup members will perceive them are addressed through several different lenses in psychological research including stereotype threat ([Steele & Aronson, 1995](#)), meta perceptions or meta

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stereotypes ([Frey & Tropp, 2006](#); [Vorauer, Main & O'Connell, 1998](#); [King, Kaplan, & Zaccaro, this volume](#)), and stigma consciousness ([Pinel, 2002](#)). These 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. A recent study suggests that minorities conceal rich personal lives by choice ([Hewlett, Luce, & West, 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

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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; Phillips, et al., 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

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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 a 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.

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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 opinions (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 it 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 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 work place, 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 images 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

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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 processed 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 ([Phillips et al., 2006](#)). 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 the 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 usually 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 their 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 running into the common knowledge effect after sharing personal information with co-workers.

## Conclusion

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. However, although several existing studies indicate that individuals in demographically diverse groups and demographic minorities in organizations fail to achieve the increased cohesion from the personal disclosure that accompanies work-non-work integration, these findings do not mean that employees in diverse groups cannot form good working relationships. Rather, perhaps the findings indicate that 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.

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](#)). We

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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 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, strategic, limited 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 coworkers 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 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



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at corporate “colonization of the self” (Casey, 1995). We believe that more research is needed regarding the nature of personal self-disclosure in work groups. In particular, 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. The findings from such studies will help organizations strike a balance between the potential costs of disclosing dissimilar information, and the potential benefits of incorporating employee differences into organizational work groups.

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 & Naughta, 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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