Learning from Cultural Diversity:  
A Theoretical Exploration

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Abstract

As the U.S. workforce continues to diversify, particularly in the public sector, a great deal of research has explored the relationship of heterogeneous work groups to performance. Since research results have been inconsistent – diversity has been shown to lead to both enhanced and diminished functioning – a search for moderators and mediators of the relationship has begun.

Recent work suggests that a group’s “diversity perspective” acts as a key moderator. A diversity perspective is a set of beliefs about the role of cultural diversity in a work group, including the value of identity at work and expectations about the kind of impact differences can have on how work is done. One diversity perspective, the integration-and-learning perspective, takes a learning stance towards cultural diversity: Heterogeneous groups have better outcomes when they believe that cultural identities can be tapped as sources of new ideas, experiences and perspectives about work. However, simply holding the integration-and-learning perspective may not be sufficient. Research on more general team and organizational learning has shown that it requires particular skills, such as the ability to surface one’s assumptions for reflection and evaluation, as well as cognitive frames, such as “mistakes are opportunities for learning” rather than “mistakes are crimes to be punished.”

This theoretical paper integrates recent work on diversity perspectives with more long-standing and established research on organizational and team learning in order to propose a conceptual model of learning in culturally diverse groups. It suggests that both the integration-and-learning perspective and more generic learning frames and skills must be present and that each activates the other, creating specific learning frames and skills related to cultural diversity.
Learning from Cultural Diversity:
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Within the explosion of interest in organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1996; Dodgson, 1993; Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988), has been a narrower focus on team learning (Argote, Gruenfeld, & Naquin, 2001; Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001). This work has made remarkable progress in delineating what enables team learning, from structural factors to learning behaviors to particular frames or beliefs held by team members. Yet, there has been little work on the particular needs and dynamics of culturally diverse teams (exceptions include Child & Rodrigues, 2003; Dass & Parker, 1999; Taylor & Osland, 2003), despite the broad recognition that such teams face both opportunities and challenges that homogeneous groups do not (Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1998; Shaw, 1981; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). This issue is especially pertinent for public organizations given that they are generally more diverse, particularly regarding race and ethnicity, than private sector organizations.

While the team and organizational learning literature has largely been silent on culturally heterogeneous teams, the diversity literature has explored the relationship between heterogeneity and effectiveness in such team, with conflicting results. Some researchers have found that heterogeneity enhances performance because it aids creativity and new ways of thinking (Cox, Lobel, & McLeod, 1991; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelson, 1993). Others have found the opposite: that dissimilarity diminishes performance because it leads to miscommunication and greater conflict (Jehn, Northercraft, & Neale, 1999; Tsui, Egan, & Xin, 1995). A search for moderators of the diversity-
performance relationship is now underway (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998; Jehn et al., 1999). While the outcome studied has generally been effectiveness, rather than learning, one stream of research has focused on the role of learning in diverse teams. Ely and Thomas (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Thomas & Ely, 1996) argue that if teams believe that cultural identity is a resource for learning and growth, they are more likely to be high-performing. But the authors have not elaborated in great detail how learning happens in culturally diverse groups and how such learning looks different from learning in homogeneous groups.

This paper integrates insights from Ely and Thomas’s work on diversity perspectives with work on team learning, in order to explore the question: What enables learning in culturally diverse groups? This paper proposes a model to answer this question. It begins by summarizing what we already know about team learning from the learning literature. It then investigates culturally diverse groups, how they are different from homogeneous groups and, therefore, why beliefs about diversity will affect their learning capacity. It then proposes and elaborates a model of learning in culturally diverse groups.

**TEAM LEARNING**

Scholars of team learning vary on the emphasis they put on individual and team characteristics, but there is broad agreement that both are involved in one way or another. The work of Argyris, Schon, and colleagues (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Argyris et al., 1974, 1996) has investigated in great detail the individual-level beliefs and behaviors that accompany learning. As Argyris and Schon point out, “We take individual
practitioners as centrally important to organizational learning, because it is their thinking and acting that influence the acquisition of capability for productive learning at the organizational level” (1996, xxii). Others, principally Edmondson and colleagues (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 1996, 2002; Edmondson et al., 2001; Edmondson & Woolley, 2003), have focused more on group-level characteristics. However, all of these scholars, regardless of unit of analysis, have identified ways of behaving and thinking which facilitate learning.

In their exploration at the individual level, Argyris and Schon distinguish between Model I behaviors and Model II behaviors (Argyris et al., 1974, 1996). Model I behaviors which are counterproductive for learning, include making untested attributions about others’ motivations and positions, not inquiring into others’ views, and offering no opportunities to test one’s advocacies. Model II behaviors, which enhance learning, include suggesting ways to test one’s advocacies and attributions and inquiring into why others view things the way they do. Implicit in this work is the individual’s capacity to surface and reflect on his or her implicit assumptions or mental models (Ayas & Zeniuk, 2001; Rudolph, Taylor, & Foldy, 2001).

Work from this approach also suggests that particular beliefs or frames, in addition to skills or behaviors, are also essential to learning. These learning frames include “errors are puzzles to be engaged,” rather than “errors are crimes to be covered up” and “role of learner as agent” as opposed to “role of learner as recipient” (Argyris et al., 1985, 280).
Edmondson’s work on team learning, influenced by this previous work, has also focused on beliefs and behaviors. To begin with, teams must have a sense of “psychological safety” or “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” (Edmondson, 1999, 354). This overarching consensus includes such ideas as “It is safe to take a risk on this team” and “Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues” as opposed to, for example, “If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you” (382). Team learning behaviors include seeking feedback, sharing information and asking for help (Edmondson, 1999). Argyris and Schon have also applied Model I and Model II behaviors to the group level, asking such questions as: Do group members treat assumptions as testable? Do they test for congruence of their espoused theory and their theory-in-use? (Schon, 1983, 125-6).

**CULTURALLY DIVERSE TEAMS**

As the foregoing discussion indicates, previous work has established that particular frames and behaviors facilitate learning in work teams. However, little work has investigated whether these frames and behaviors are sufficient for learning in culturally diverse teams. This section explores how such teams are different from homogeneous teams and why, therefore, generic learning beliefs and skills may not be enough to enable learning.

By cultural diversity, I am referring to identities such as race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender and other dimensions of difference which derive from membership in groups that are socioculturally distinct, that is they “collectively share certain norms, values or traditions that are different from those of other groups” (Cox,
Members of the same cultural identity group often, though not always, have similarities of background and experience which shape their way of seeing the world.

Cultural identity groups also tend to be associated with power differentials, in that some groups have higher status and access to more resources than other groups (Nkomo, 1992; Omi & Winant, 1994; Ragins, 1997; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). While this is a broad generalization, in Western countries, men as a group tend to have more power than women, whites generally have more resources than people of color, native-born Americans have higher standing than immigrants, and so on. When power differentials are roughly contiguous with identity group memberships, this can reinforce the boundaries among the groups, making their group identities more salient (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). Group identity is now no longer based solely on cultural similarity, but on a shared status or shared interests.

Numerous studies have established that culturally diverse teams have different dynamics than homogeneous teams (For an excellent summary, see Williams et al., 1998). These groups are broadly seen as having both increased challenges and opportunities: diverse groups often experience miscommunication and disabling conflict (Shaw, 1981; Tsui et al., 1995); yet, under the right circumstances, they can be synergistic and creative (Cox et al., 1991; McGrath, 1984).

The factors underlying these different dynamics are numerous and complex. First, as suggested by the definition of cultural diversity, group members will come with different life experiences which have shaped their values, approaches and perspectives. Members of culturally diverse groups may be more likely than those of homogeneous groups to differ in how they define a problem, structure a discussion, view potential
solutions, or come to a decision. These differences of opinion can represent a mother lode of creativity or a quagmire of conflict, depending on how the group handles conflict and differences (Chatman et al., 2001; Chatman et al., 1998; Jehn et al., 1999).

Group membership is also associated with differing representation within the group. Members of groups in the minority, whatever that means in a particular context, will be more aware of their identity and of being different from the norm (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kanter, 1977/1993). Depending on the dynamics of the group, they may feel less comfortable or less welcome. Members of majority groups, who share ways of thinking and acting, may unwittingly create environments that make it difficult for others to feel included.

Diverse groups may also have different dynamics because of the power differences that are associated with cultural differences. Members of the more powerful groups may consciously or unconsciously act in ways that reinforce their dominance, in their conversational styles, decision-making processes, social interaction, and so on (Elsass, 1997; Ridgeway, 1997; Smith-Lovin & Brody, 1989). Members of non-dominant groups may also contribute to dysfunctional dynamics, by withdrawing or by communicating largely with other members of their sub-group (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000).

All these dynamics suggest that generic learning frames and behaviors may be harder to establish in culturally diverse groups. On an individual level, learning means making oneself vulnerable; it means admitting that one is dependent on others to grow and develop (Brown & Starkey, 2000). Therefore learning requires trust (Child et al., 2003). As others have amply demonstrated, this is difficult enough in homogeneous
groups and, I suggest, even more difficult in heterogeneous groups. For example, making mistakes may carry greater weight in heterogeneous groups which means admitting them will be all the more difficult. This will be particularly true for members of non-dominant groups who often feel their capabilities are questioned and therefore feel under greater pressure to perform (Steele, 1997). Carrying the frame that mistakes are opportunities to learn, rather than crimes to be punished, will be more difficult under these circumstances. Maintaining a stance of inquiry can also be more difficult for individuals in diverse groups. The concept of “threat-rigidity” (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981) suggests that we become less open and flexible when we feel in some way threatened or unprotected. Working with others who are different from us can feel unsafe or unfamiliar, as opposed to a sense of comfort and fit that comes from homogeneity. For that reason, group members may be more likely to rigidly advocate for their own position rather than inquire about others’.

Individual feelings of discomfort or threat will create difficult team-level dynamics. Heterogeneous teams are less likely to achieve a broad sense of psychological safety. In some cases, the difficult dynamics associated with cultural diversity may lead to most members of a team feeling generally unsafe, whether they are members of majority or minority, dominant or non-dominant groups. If dynamics are characterized by a lot of conflict, mistrust, and paralysis, then it is less likely anyone will feel safe. In other cases, majority or dominant members may feel safe, while those in the minority will not, because they feel uncomfortable or unwelcome (Earley et al., 2000; Elsass, 1997).

If it is true that a learning stance is more difficult in diverse groups, then what could make the difference? What enables learning amid cultural diversity?
DIVERSITY PERSPECTIVES

Recent research suggests that a group’s diversity perspective is central to learning in culturally diverse groups. Ely and Thomas (2001; Thomas and Ely, 1996) proposed the idea of “diversity perspectives” as the key moderator of the relationship between diversity and performance. Diversity perspectives are a workgroup-level phenomenon; different workgroups within the same organization can hold different perspectives. A diversity perspective is the way that group members think about the cultural differences among them, whether they are important, and how they might be harnessed to further the group’s work.

A diversity perspective includes: “The rationale that guides people’s efforts to create and respond to cultural diversity in a work group; normative beliefs about the value of cultural identity at work; expectations about the kind of impact, if any, cultural differences can and should have on the group and its work; and beliefs about what constitutes progress toward the ideal multicultural work group” (Ely & Thomas, 2001, 234.) Such a perspective might be written in mission statements or diversity policies, but more often such explicit statements refer to the group’s espoused theory, rather than the theory-in-use actually held by group members (Argyris et al., 1996, 13). A group’s diversity perspective is the approach, usually implicit, that underlies how it defines its tasks and goals and how group members interact.

Ely and Thomas have identified three diversity perspectives. The discrimination-and-fairness perspective is concerned with recruitment and retention of employees from protected groups. While its commitment to redressing past inequities is
both essential and laudable, the perspective presumes that cultural dimensions of
diversity, like race, nationality or gender, don’t have important consequences for work
practices, that nothing is to be gained by surfacing and engaging differences. The access-
and-legitimacy perspective challenges these notions to some extent. Organizations with
this perspective celebrate cultural differences, but only in somewhat simplistic and
narrow ways. They are likely to bring on employees from non-traditional backgrounds to
reach new clients and constituencies, like hiring Hispanic employees to work in Spanish-
speaking communities. There is little further investigation into the potential of diverse
backgrounds and ideas.

Finally, the integration-and-learning perspective (ILP) seeks to build, more
depthly and comprehensively, off the varied skills, experiences and ways of thinking of a
diverse workforce. It suggests that organizations should “incorporate employees’
perspectives into the main work of the organization and to enhance work by rethinking
primary tasks and redefining markets, products, strategies, missions, business practices
and even cultures” (Thomas & Ely, 1996, 85). Differences can be a source of growth,
learning and insight, but only if they are acknowledged and constructively explored.

To understand learning in culturally diverse groups requires integrating previous
research on team learning with the literature on diversity perspectives.
Figure One suggests a model for what enables learning in culturally diverse groups. In order to learn, groups must have the integration-and-learning perspective, whether it is held implicitly or explicitly. They also must have generic reflective learning frames and behaviors, as illustrated in the work of Argyris and colleagues, Edmondson, and others (Argyris et al., 1985; Argyris et al., 1996; Edmondson, 1999; Fisher & Torbert, 1995). The model suggests that the group’s diversity perspective and learning frames and behaviors will influence each other, resulting in a set of learning frames and actions specifically related to cultural diversity. These frames and behaviors then enable learning in culturally diverse groups.
I now explore each of these relationships in turn: how do diversity perspectives and learning frames and behaviors influence each other to create specific learning frames and behaviors and how do those specific frames lead to learning in multi-cultural groups.

**Diversity Perspectives and Learning Frames and Behaviors**

The model suggests that a group’s diversity perspective and its learning frames and actions influence each other, creating an overall environment which then has an effect on learning. If a group has both the ILP and reflective learning frames and behaviors, then each will “activate” the other; that is, each adds an ingredient that makes the other come alive in a given group setting. The ILP enlarges and contextualizes a group’s learning beliefs and behaviors; it allows them to address the particular challenges of learning in culturally diverse groups. Just as importantly, the group’s learning beliefs and actions enable the group to enact their perspective on diversity: they provide the tools by which a group can mutually investigate their differences. I elaborate each of these claims in turn.

**The ILP activates generic learning frames and behaviors.** Why does the ILP activate learning in a culturally diverse group? Most importantly, and most simply, the integration-and-learning perspective is the only perspective which suggests that cultural diversity is a source for learning, as indicated by its name. This approach is in contradiction to how diversity is conceptualized in the other two perspectives.

Both the discrimination-and-fairness and the access-and-legitimacy perspectives share a basic color-blind stance, though they manifest it a little differently (Ely & Thomas, 2001). The discrimination-and-fairness perspective argues that though people
may look physiologically different, in fact, people are just people and we are all the same in what really matters: how we think and what we do. While emphasizing our common humanity is very important, especially when dealing with explicit racism and ethnocentrism, refusing to acknowledge cultural differences glosses over the very different histories of cultural groups in this country. It diminishes the legacy of slavery for African Americans or the impact of immigration and assimilation on white ethnic groups such as Eastern Europeans or Italians. It ignores the ongoing differences in experiences among cultural groups: for example, the fact that people of color are much more likely to experience discrimination, or that being bi-lingual allows deeper participation in multiple cultures.

It also makes it impossible to consider how cultural background might influence our ideas and our contributions. It makes it difficult, for example, for an African American individual to consider that how she approaches working with customers might in some way trace back to experiences she had feeling unwelcome in some stores. It means that explicitly asking about group members’ religious backgrounds as part of revamping HR practices would be considered unseemly or irrelevant, even though religious practice could be affected by such policies as the holidays on which the organization chooses to close.

While the access-and-legitimacy perspective does suggest that cultural background matters, it limits it to very narrow spheres. It suggests that such backgrounds matter only when members of a group are dealing with other members of their group: that the heritage of employees of Latino descent, for example, only really comes into play when they have Hispanic customers. Members of non-dominant groups have a special
contribution only when dealing with other members of the same marginalized group. Therefore it only makes sense to be color-aware within group; color-blindness is still the correct stance across groups.

The alternative, the integration-and-learning perspective, conjectures that our cultural heritage might bring a valuable set of experiences with broad applicability to how the organization does its work. The ILP is quite explicitly not color-blind: it acknowledges that our group identity says a great deal about our and our ancestors’ life experiences and may well inform who we are. Regarding the impact on work, it argues that race, ethnicity, nationality and other differences are extremely valuable resources since they often, though certainly not always, imply a different set of perspectives and cultural teachings. The ILP differs from much of the cultural sensitivity literature (e.g., Adler, 1991) in that it doesn’t presume to know, given a person’s cultural identity, what those experiences or teachings might be. It simply assumes that different life experiences are likely to bring different ways of thinking about work and that leveraging those different ways of thinking is likely to enhance effectiveness.

**Learning Frames and Behaviors Activate the ILP.** While the ILP is necessary to activate learning frames and behaviors, the reverse is also true. Without learning beliefs and actions, the ILP is simply an espoused perspective that will not be manifested in the group’s work together. It is the learning beliefs and behaviors that allow groups to undertake the difficult work of expressing and working with culturally-based beliefs. Groups with the espoused ILP, but without a learning stance, might believe that cultural groups must be acknowledged and celebrated; that all groups have wisdom that can be tapped; and that creating a multi-cultural, rather than an assimilationist, environment is
essential. However, they lack the learning tools that are necessary to create such an environment: capacities like being able to surface and reflect on one’s embedded assumptions or to hold genuine curiosity on someone else’s point of view. In fact, an espoused ILP could become a rhetorical device, a rigidly held belief used to promote a particular point of view and way of behaving, rather than a supple and flexible tool which allows new ways of working to come into being. In fact, any perspective – on diversity or any other topic-- held in the absence of a learning stance has the potential to become an iron cage, rather than an open door.

In summary, both the ILP and generic learning frames and behaviors must be present in order for learning to happen in culturally diverse groups. Each element activates the other; in other words, there is an interaction effect between the two elements.

**Specific Learning Frames and Behaviors Related to Cultural Diversity.** The interaction between the ILP and generic learning frames and behaviors enables the development of specific learning frames and behaviors related to cultural identity, which are then crucial to the capacity for learning in culturally diverse groups. I suggest a number of these specific learning frames and behaviors below. (I am not arguing that these specific frames and behaviors must be present; I am suggesting them only as examples.) In order to clarify their contribution to learning and to learning from diversity, I provide two different comparisons. First, I compare low-learning frames and behaviors with high-learning frames and behaviors. Second, I compare generic high-learning frames and behaviors with high-learning frames and behaviors specifically
related to cultural diversity. I have used race as an example, but other dimensions of identity could be substituted, though the specific content of the frames might differ.

**Table One: Low-Learning Frames**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic Frames Related to Learning</th>
<th>Specific Frames Related to Learning in Culturally Diverse Groups</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mistakes are crimes to be prosecuted.</td>
<td>1. If I say something about race, I may say something wrong or culturally insensitive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My role as a participant is to be a recipient.</td>
<td>2. As a white person, I don’t have anything to add in discussions about race.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I don’t have anything to learn from others in this group.</td>
<td>3. As a person of color, I don’t have anything to learn from white people about race.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. If I don’t have a solution, I shouldn’t raise the problem.</td>
<td>4. Racial issues are insoluble and I will make things worse if I say anything.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. If I feel uncomfortable in this discussion, something must be wrong.</td>
<td>5. Talking about race makes me uncomfortable, so I don’t think we should do it.</td>
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<td>6. If I speak up, I will be criticized.</td>
<td>6. People will think I’m too militant if I speak up.</td>
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<td>7. I don’t have any power or authority in this group, so I will be quiet.</td>
<td>7. There are no blacks in positions of power in this organization, so it’s clear nobody cares what we think and we have no authority — so I won’t say anything.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generic Frames Related to Learning</td>
<td>Specific Frames Related to Learning in Culturally Diverse Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Mistakes are puzzles to be engaged.</td>
<td>1. I should say something, even if it might come off as prejudiced or racist, because it is an opportunity to learn.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I should be an engaged participant.</td>
<td>2. Even though I’m white, I have something to contribute to discussions about race.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I don’t know everything.</td>
<td>3. As a person of color, I could have something to learn from a white person about race.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. It is helpful to raise problems, even if I don’t have a solution.</td>
<td>4. Even though this is a racial issue -- with a lot of history and complexity and no obvious solution -- it still might be helpful to raise it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Feeling uncomfortable in a discussion can be a sign that this is exactly where I should be.</td>
<td>5. Talking about race makes me really uncomfortable -- which means that is exactly what I should do.</td>
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<td>6. I think I have something to contribute to the conversation, even though what I say may be criticized.</td>
<td>6. I think this could be a helpful contribution, even though I may be considered too militant for saying it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I can make a contribution here even though I don’t have any formal power or authority.</td>
<td>7. Even though there are no blacks in positions of power in this organization and I’m not convinced that anyone cares what we think, I will take the risk of speaking my mind.</td>
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Table 3: Low-Learning Behaviors

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<tr>
<th>Generic Behaviors Related to Learning</th>
<th>Specific Behaviors Related to Learning in Culturally Diverse Groups</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Make attributions about others without testing them.</td>
<td>1. “X is just saying that because she knows nothing about the Latino community.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Advocate positions without illustrating them or suggesting a way to test them.</td>
<td>2. “This issue has everything to do with race.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Advocate positions that are difficult or impossible to test.</td>
<td>3. “I don’t see race.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Invoke abstract concepts that are impossible to disagree with.</td>
<td>4. “People are people. Everyone is the same under the skin.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Construct a situation as a dilemma or double bind; feel trapped.</td>
<td>5. “If I don’t raise this, I don’t think we can make any progress. But if I do raise this, people will think I’m too militant. I’m stuck.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Do not inquire into why you think, feel, or act the way you do.</td>
<td>6. “Even though X thinks I can’t deal with racial issues, this is just the way I feel and that’s that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Do not inquire into why others think, feel or act the way they do.</td>
<td>7. “Jeez, Y always gets that cringing expression when we talk about race. What’s his problem?”</td>
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## Table 4: High-Learning Behaviors

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<tr>
<th>Generic Behaviors Related to Learning</th>
<th>Specific Behaviors Related to Learning in Culturally Diverse Groups</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Make private attributions about others public; test them.</td>
<td>1. “I realize I’m sitting here thinking you are saying this because you are unfamiliar with the Latino community, but perhaps I am being unfair to you.”</td>
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<td>2. Illustrate and suggest ways to test one’s advocacies.</td>
<td>2. “I think this issue is about race because it relates to our two departments, one of which is mostly black and the other is mostly white. Perhaps we should talk to several members of each department…”</td>
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<td>3. When invoking abstract concepts, try to make them concrete and testable.</td>
<td>3. “I think people are people, so I worry about dividing our constituency base into different ethnic markets. So perhaps we should do some research…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Make dilemmas public and discussable.</td>
<td>4. “I realize I feel caught in a bind. I want to raise an issue, but I’m afraid people will see me as too militant. But I think we’re stuck and this might help us get unstuck. So I want to take this risk…”</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Publicly reflect on why you are thinking, feeling or acting as you are.</td>
<td>5. “I wonder why I feel so strongly about this? Perhaps because I grew up in an all-white neighborhood and I don’t have much experience…”</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Inquire into why others are thinking, feeling or acting the way they are.</td>
<td>6. “Y, you have a worried look on your face. Are you feeling concerned?</td>
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<td>7. Invite joint investigations or experiments into a question or issue or conflict.</td>
<td>7. “I am having a hard time with what you are saying, because it contradicts what I learned about race growing up. But I do want to learn more and I think maybe we could learn from each other. Would you be willing to spend some time talking with me?”</td>
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How Specific High-Learning Frames and Behaviors Facilitate Learning in Culturally Diverse Groups

Ample research has demonstrated that particular frames and behaviors are more likely to enhance learning (Argyris et al., 1996; Edmondson et al., 2001; Rudolph et al., 2001). Frames such as “mistakes are opportunities for learning” and behaviors such as inquiry into others’ perspectives and feelings create an atmosphere of curiosity, engagement and safety. This atmosphere then allows individuals to loosen their attachment to particular approaches and try on new ways of thinking and acting.

I suggest that high-learning frames and behaviors related to cultural diversity play that same role in culturally diverse groups. These frames and behaviors make three important contributions above and beyond generic high-learning frames and behaviors. First, these frames and behaviors manifest the idea that, as suggested by the ILP, cultural differences are an important resource for thinking about how work is done. Encouraging people to draw off their cultural experiences will enrich, deepen and broaden a team’s approach to its work. Second, these frames and behaviors suggest that cultural differences are not only significant, they must be discussable. Given the charged nature of race, religion and other identities in American society (Nkomo & Cox, 1996; Omi et al., 1994), this is, in itself, a big change in most group norms. But it is impossible to draw upon cultural differences if they are kept veiled. Finally, these frames and behaviors also hold everyone in a group responsible for addressing difference. Everyone has something to bring to the table, given their background. Everyone is also expected to be open to what others bring and consider how it can be incorporated into work practices. A generic learning stance also argues that differences must be discussable and that
individuals are responsible for their own learning. These specific frames and behaviors explicitly make charged cultural differences part of the equation.

These frames and behaviors enable learning in two ways. First, they enable learning from difference, that is, they encourage explicit discussion of cultural differences and how those differences affect how we think about the team’s work. This broadens the pool of available options for structuring work, designing strategy and carrying out other key organizational tasks. Second, they also enable learning across difference, meaning that they facilitate learning about a whole host of different things that may be unrelated to cultural differences per se. This is because general learning in culturally diverse teams can be hampered by the more difficult dynamics often faced by such teams, as outlined earlier in this paper. Given the heterogeneity of perspectives, the sense of discomfort and lack of fit felt by employees when working with people unlike themselves, and the issues of sub-group dominance and marginalization, diverse groups tend to have more dysfunctional conflict then homogeneous groups. These specific learning frames and behaviors help establish a sense of safety in a diverse group, allowing everyone to feel more open to new ways of thinking and acting.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a theoretical model of learning in culturally diverse groups. The model, building off work on team learning and on diversity perspectives, suggests that two elements must be present: the integration-and-learning perspective on diversity and generic high-learning frames and behaviors. These two elements each activate the other, turning them on, so to speak. The interaction between the elements then results in
specific high-learning frames and behaviors related to cultural diversity. Those frames and behaviors then catalyze learning in culturally heterogeneous groups. In addition to providing this framework, integrating the broader literature on team learning with the construct of diversity perspectives enriches our understanding of both concepts.

**What do we learn about learning when we look at culturally diverse groups?**

Considering the particular challenges of culturally diverse groups forces researchers to consider the social context within which learning takes place. While the impact of organizational structure and culture on learning has been well-researched (e.g., Levitt et al., 1988; Nevis, DiBella, & Gould, 1995; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998), the role of the larger social environment remains largely invisible. But as embedded intergroup theory (Alderfer, Alderfer, Tucker, & Tucker, 1980; Alderfer & Smith, 1982) reminds us, groups in organizations are embedded in multiple contexts, not just departmental and organizational, but societal. Therefore group interactions, and inter-group relations, cannot be immune from larger societal dynamics. But most researchers on team learning conceptualize teams as acting in a social vacuum.

Teasing out the particular dynamics of multi-cultural teams requires placing those teams in a larger context and considering the impact of demography, history, privilege and marginalization on their capacity for learning. The concept of diversity perspectives argues that diverse groups do have a way of thinking about that broader context, even if their models are usually implicit and unacknowledged. Groups with a discrimination-and-fairness perspective believe that, while societal inequities must be addressed through equal opportunity and affirmative action, cultural differences are not significant and should be muted. Groups with an access-and-legitimacy perspective believe that cultural
background is important only when working with particular, usually non-dominant, populations. Only groups with an integration-and-learning perspective believe that cultural experience is a resource for learning; that our experiences as members of social identity groups should explicitly be brought into the workplace as material to enrich our work. Therefore, the concept of diversity perspectives embeds learning in its social context and suggests that different approaches to that context will affect a group’s capacity to learn from and across cultural difference.

When we look at the experiences of culturally heterogeneous groups, we also learn more about the importance of power as it affects learning. Of course, all groups have to deal with power dynamics (Ridgeway, 1997; Ridgeway et al., 1986) and there is growing recognition that power dynamics must be addressed for learning to happen. Edmondson, for example, has argued that whether groups are able to learn depends most fundamentally on whether power differences are exaggerated or minimized (2002). In a study of 12 teams, she found a subsection of teams that were quite skilled at group reflection, but unable to take action when that might have threatened the authority of the group’s leader. This and other work (Contu & Willmott, 2003; Lee, 1997) highlight the role of power dynamics associated with organizational level or position power (Finkelstein, 1992). Consequences of learning that threaten the status of the superordinate may be suppressed in some way, which damages the integrity and reputation of the learning process.

However, little work has explored the question of power inequities associated with different cultural identity groups and their impact on learning. Multi-cultural teams will certainly have power dynamics related to organizational level as do homogeneous
teams, but they also have culturally-associated power dynamics. Certain sub-groups may be represented in greater numbers. Also, regardless of representation, certain sub-groups may be dominant in some way, while others are marginalized. Again the notion of diversity perspectives provides a foundation for thinking about these kinds of power issues in teams. The integration-and-learning perspective argues that cultural background is connected to work. But to truly mine that resource, a group must address obstacles to fully integrating the ideas and approaches of all its members. This means that a group must somehow deal with power inequities within the group.

Therefore, addressing the particularities of multi-cultural teams places learning in a broad social context that considers the consequences of cultural background and the particular power dynamics associated with cultural differences. This begins the process of grounding the concept of learning in a particular social and historical reality, rather than defining it as disconnected from its source.

What do we learn about diversity perspectives when we bring in team learning? The concept of diversity perspectives marks an important advance in understanding why some diverse groups are more effective than others. Research suggests that diversity perspective is a key moderator of the relationship between heterogeneity and performance. However, as the construct’s authors themselves point out, “More theoretical and empirical development is needed to understand fully the integration-and-learning perspective’s potential for connecting organizations’ cultural diversity to their core work and work processes” (Ely & Thomas, 2001, 270). The literature on team learning has already documented some of the necessary frames and behaviors which facilitate learning more generally. Grounding the concept of diversity
perspectives in the established learning literature elaborates and enriches its connection to what we know at this point about learning.

The increasing diversity in our workplaces, particularly in public organizations, presents an opportunity: Can we reap the richness of diversity? This paper suggests one way to meet that challenge.
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