

# Difference Matters: Teaching Students a Contextual Theory of Difference Can Help Them Succeed

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## Abstract

Today's increasingly diverse and divided world requires the ability to understand and navigate across social-group differences. We propose that interventions that teach students about these differences can not only improve all students' intergroup skills but also help disadvantaged students succeed in school. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, this article theorizes that teaching students a *contextual understanding of difference* can accomplish both of these important goals. Understanding difference as contextual means recognizing that social-group differences come from participating in and adapting to diverse sociocultural contexts. This article begins by reviewing research that highlights two distinct understandings of social-group differences—as contextual or essential—and demonstrates their consequences for intergroup outcomes. We then review research on multicultural and social justice education that highlights the potential benefits of educating students about social-group differences. We propose that these educational approaches are associated with intergroup and academic benefits for one key reason: They teach students a contextual theory of difference. Finally, to illustrate and provide causal evidence for our theory of how a contextual understanding of difference affords these benefits, this article provides an overview of the first social psychological intervention to teach students a contextual understanding of difference: *difference-education*.

## Keywords

culture, diversity, socioeconomic status, inequality, education, intervention

The culture of American higher education, especially at elite colleges and universities, reflects and promotes assumptions about what it means to be “smart,” “educated,” and “successful.” These assumptions are not neutral but are instead powerfully shaped by White, middle- to upper-class beliefs, norms, and values (e.g., Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack, 2013; Quaye & Harper, 2014). As a result, students of color and those from low-income or working-class backgrounds often feel excluded in these educational settings, which can lead them to question whether they fit or belong in college (e.g., Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Students from low-income or working-class backgrounds can also be unfamiliar with the “rules of the game” needed to succeed in higher education, which can undermine their sense of empowerment and efficacy (e.g., Housel & Harvey,

2010; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009). These psychological challenges work alongside disparities in resources and precollege preparation to fuel a persistent achievement gap between these students and their advantaged peers (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Goudeau & Croizet, 2017; Sirin, 2005). As such, participating in mainstream college environments can systematically disadvantage underrepresented students.

Over the past several years, college students have organized on campuses across the United States to spotlight these disparate educational experiences and the unequal outcomes they can produce (Wong, 2015; Wong

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& Green, 2016). These student activists have brought attention to the numerous ways that institutions of higher education can marginalize underrepresented students, as well as produce and maintain disparities in students' access to opportunities and academic success. In response, many college and university communities are engaging in conversations about the best strategies to address these disparities and are implementing new programs to increase inclusion on their campuses. One common proposed solution is for schools to educate students, faculty, and staff about how people's different backgrounds and social-group memberships can shape their life experiences and outcomes (e.g., via cultural competency trainings or ethnic studies courses; Libresco, 2015). These educational experiences are designed to both broaden and deepen how people understand social-group differences<sup>1</sup> (e.g., by race or ethnicity, social class, sexuality, or gender) and the ways in which they matter in people's lives.

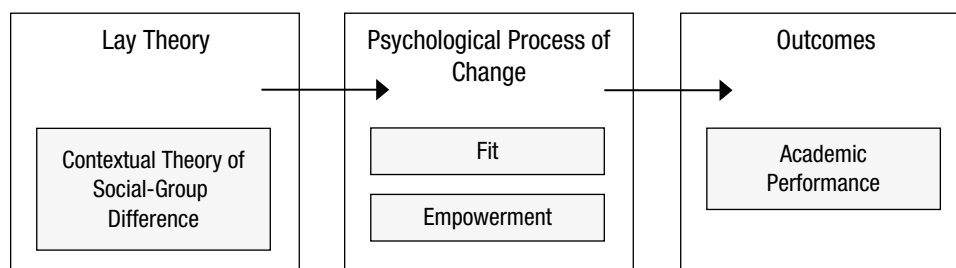
The climate on college campuses also reflects the larger public conversation about what it means to be an equal, inclusive, and just society as the U.S. population grows more racially and ethnically diverse (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2014; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). Today's multicultural and interconnected world increasingly requires that people cultivate *intergroup skills*—that is, the ability to understand and navigate across social-group differences. In fact, educators at leading schools, colleges, and universities across the country increasingly identify this capacity as critical to a 21st-century education (Binkley et al., 2012; Harper, 2008; Hurtado, 2007; Soland, Hamilton, & Stecher, 2013). Efforts to educate students about social-group differences and inequality would therefore address student activists' concerns by building crucial intergroup skills needed in today's diverse and divided world.

Is it possible to educate all students about social-group differences in a way that will not only build these critical intergroup skills but also help disadvantaged students<sup>2</sup> attain greater academic success? Drawing on research from the discipline of social psychology and

the interdisciplinary field of education, this article theorizes about how social psychological interventions can accomplish both of these important goals. Specifically, we propose that interventions that teach students about the contextual nature of difference can improve all students' intergroup skills and at the same time provide disadvantaged students with insights that can improve their academic performance.

This article builds on “wise” intervention research in social psychology that leverages the strategy of changing students' lay theories about ability and achievement to improve students' academic outcomes (e.g., Walton & Wilson, 2018; Wilson, 2011). A *lay theory* is a set of fundamental assumptions about the nature of the self and social world that shapes how people interpret and respond to their experiences (Molden & Dweck, 2006). For example, a belongingness intervention provides a lay theory that helps “students understand social adversities in nonthreatening ways” to improve their academic performance (Walton & Wilson, 2018, p. 619). Likewise, we argue that changing students' lay theories about social-group differences—in particular, teaching them about the contextual nature of difference—can improve both their academic performance and intergroup skills.

For the purposes of this article, we introduce the term *contextual theory of difference* to refer to an understanding of how people's different backgrounds and social-group memberships shape their life experiences and outcomes. In other words, it means recognizing that social-group differences come from participating in and adapting to diverse sociocultural contexts (e.g., contexts that differ by race, ethnicity, or social class).<sup>3</sup> We theorize that viewing difference in this way has the potential to change how students experience their own and others' differences in college. Specifically, learning a contextual theory of difference means understanding that difference (a) is a normal part of having different life experiences and coming from different backgrounds and (b) need not be a negative or isolating experience but can also be positive and serve as an asset. As shown in Figure 1, we further propose that this contextual



**Fig. 1.** Psychological processes by which a contextual theory of social-group difference improves academic performance.

theory of difference can improve students' academic performance through two key psychological processes—by helping them feel like they fit in college and by fostering a sense of empowerment.

This article begins by reviewing research that highlights two distinct understandings of social-group differences—as contextual or essential—and demonstrates their consequences for intergroup outcomes.<sup>4</sup> We then review interdisciplinary research on multicultural and social justice education that suggests important benefits of educating students about social-group differences. We propose that these educational approaches are associated with intergroup and academic benefits for one key reason: They teach students a contextual theory of difference. Finally, to illustrate and provide causal evidence for our theory, this article provides an overview of the first social psychological intervention to teach students a contextual theory of difference: *difference-education* (e.g., Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2015; Townsend, Stephens, Smallets, & Hamedani, 2018).

### **Constructing the Meaning of Difference as Essential or Contextual**

Although this article proposes that a contextual theory of difference has many potential benefits, an essentialist theory of difference is actually the default way of understanding differences among social groups in the United States (Markus, 2008; Markus & Moya, 2010; M. J. Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). An *essentialist theory of difference* posits that social-group differences are biologically rooted and therefore function as relatively fixed traits of people or social groups (Gelman, 2004; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Prentice & Miller, 2007). This lay theory of difference is well represented in American history, forming the basis of arguments used to justify the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of African Americans, and a wide range of discriminatory policies that were used to exclude immigrants (e.g., Markus, 2008; Markus & Moya, 2010; Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000; Omi & Winant, 2015; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). These essentialist arguments located social-group differences in people's biological makeup rather than in their experiences in diverse sociocultural contexts. Political and social elites also used these claims to portray disadvantaged groups as inferior or deficient and, in turn, to justify their lower status and oppression in society. Throughout history, similar arguments have been used to rationalize the subordination of the poor or working class (e.g., Gottfredson, 2004), as well as women and sexual minorities (see Bem, 1993; Fausto-Sterling, 1985; Russett, 1989).

Within this troubling historical context, an essentialist theory constructs the meaning of difference as largely negative and as a source of deficiency or weakness. This understanding of difference therefore has costs for how disadvantaged groups are perceived and how groups of different status relate to one another. Across a wide range of studies, social psychologists have sought to document the pernicious consequences of using an essentialist theory to understand social-group differences. Specifically, they have shown that an essentialist compared with a contextual theory leads to increased stereotyping and race-based categorization (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Chao, Hong, & Chiu, 2013; Keller, 2005), less identification and perceived similarity across different groups (No et al., 2008), and lower levels of intergroup trust and desire for intergroup contact (Kung et al., 2018; Lee, Wilton, & Kwan, 2014; M. J. Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). An essentialist theory of difference is also associated with a greater desire to maintain the status quo. In particular, people who endorse essentialist theories show greater acceptance of racial inequalities (M. J. Williams & Eberhardt, 2008) and less support for restorative justice (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). For example, M. J. Williams and Eberhardt (2008) found that participants exposed to the idea that race is essential were less emotionally engaged and presumably less motivated to take action to address a social problem than those exposed to the idea that race is socially constructed. In sum, essentialist thinking about social-group differences is often experienced negatively and harmful for intergroup outcomes because it contributes to bias, prejudice, and discrimination.

Although the essentialist theory of difference is pervasive in the United States, another theory of difference—one that is well represented in social sciences—asserts that social-group differences are not essential but instead socially constructed (e.g., Markus, 2008; Markus & Moya, 2010; Omi & Winant, 2015; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). We refer to this understanding as a contextual theory of difference. As noted previously, a contextual theory of difference suggests that social-group differences are the product of people's ongoing participation in and adaptation to diverse sociocultural contexts (e.g., contexts that differ by race, ethnicity, or social class). Theory and research in cultural psychology provides a useful illustration of what it means to understand social-group differences as contextual (e.g., Gelfand & Kashima, 2016; Kitayama & Cohen, 2007; Markus & Conner, 2014; Markus & Hamedani, in press; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Taken as a whole, cultural psychology shows how people's ongoing participation in diverse sociocultural contexts (e.g., middle-class vs. working-class) produces different lived experiences

(e.g., widely available vs. less available resources). In turn, these experiences can foster culture-specific selves (e.g., as largely independent from or interdependent with others) that reflect and reproduce culture-specific patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world. According to this view, social-group differences reflect normal processes of responding to one's experiences. Further, because these differences emerge from experiences in social contexts, the contextual view implies that differences may be systematic but are not essential or fixed features of particular social groups; rather, they are malleable and can change with new experiences.

We propose that, in contrast to an essentialist theory, using a contextual theory to understand social-group differences can produce a divergent set of meanings and consequences. Because a contextual theory asserts that social-group differences are a normal part of adapting and responding to various sociocultural contexts, we suggest that these differences can be experienced positively and as an asset or source of strength (for related arguments, see Markus, 2008; Markus & Moya, 2010). Consistent with our theorizing, research on cultural models of the self shows that coming from a working-class background does not need to be experienced as a deficiency in professional workplace environments; instead, inhabiting working-class contexts can afford people particular assets. For example, when Master of Business Administration students were asked in an interview study how their previous contexts or backgrounds affected their current experiences, one student from a working-class background stated: "There's a lot of pride that you take in being self-made to a certain degree . . . And it teaches you a certain level of work ethic and appreciation because it wasn't just something that you fell into" (Dittmann, Stephens, & Townsend, 2018, p. 54).

Social psychology research also provides empirical support for our theory, offering evidence that using a contextual theory of difference is less harmful than an essentialist theory for intergroup outcomes. Specifically, this research shows that exposure to a contextual theory produces less discriminatory behavior, less intergroup conflict, and a reduced attachment to the status quo (e.g., Lee et al., 2014; Levy, Plaks, Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 2001; No et al., 2008; M. J. Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). A contextual theory also produces less attention to and recognition of consistent information, suggesting a potential role in changing stereotypes (Plaks, Stroessner, Dweck, & Sherman, 2001).

Although social psychology research does not directly examine the intergroup *benefits* of a contextual understanding of difference (i.e., it considers the *reduced harm* relative to an essentialist theory), these findings generally support our theorizing that a contextual theory of difference has the potential to be

experienced positively and foster psychological tendencies associated with intergroup skills.

## **Supporting Evidence From Multicultural and Social Justice Education**

The previous section provides an overview of contextual and essentialist understandings of social-group differences. This research suggests that the consequences of acknowledging social-group differences for intergroup outcomes hinge on the meanings ascribed to those differences. When the meanings of difference are constructed as contextual, research finds that acknowledging social-group differences is less harmful for intergroup outcomes. This work provides preliminary evidence to support our theorizing that a contextual understanding of difference is likely to improve intergroup skills.

To answer the question of whether a contextual theory of difference also has the potential to improve academic performance, we now turn to the education and psychology literature relevant to this question. We theorize that it is possible to leverage a contextual theory of difference to improve not only all students' intergroup skills but also disadvantaged students' academic performance. To provide initial evidence to support our theorizing, we review several relevant interdisciplinary studies in multicultural and social justice education. In the section that follows, we provide an overview of what these educational approaches look like, suggest how they help students learn about the contextual nature of difference, and outline some of their academic and intergroup benefits.

### ***Overview of multicultural and social justice approaches to education***

A multicultural or social justice approach to education recognizes how mainstream schools and classrooms often reflect the perspectives of dominant groups in society (e.g., White Americans) while excluding the perspectives of those with less power or status (e.g., African Americans). These processes of exclusion—sometimes relatively implicit and sometimes quite explicit—can powerfully undermine disadvantaged students' opportunities to succeed and fuel disparities in academic outcomes (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Carter, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Nasir & Hand, 2006; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). To address these educational disparities, multicultural and social justice education approaches teach students about multiple content areas and use various strategies—often simultaneously—to make schools and classrooms more inclusive and empowering for underrepresented students. These strategies include (a) educating all students about social-group

differences, power, and inequality; (b) incorporating disadvantaged students' backgrounds and perspectives into teaching and learning; (c) conveying that students' social-group differences can serve as assets; and (d) providing experiential learning opportunities for students to use this knowledge for personal and community empowerment (e.g., Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006; Hackman, 2005; Hamedani, Zheng, Darling-Hammond, Andree, & Quinn, 2015).

Helping both disadvantaged and advantaged students to learn about social-group differences is an important part of the pedagogy and practice of multicultural and social justice education. Interdisciplinary research examines the knowledge, skills, and teaching and learning strategies that can help students learn about social-group differences. One area of research characterizes the content knowledge and skills that students need to be literate about the nature and consequences of social-group differences (e.g., perspective taking, systemic thinking; Adams et al., 2007; Au, 2009; Banks, 2007; Freire, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noddings, 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). A second area identifies pedagogical strategies that successfully help students learn about social-group differences (e.g., building greater self-awareness, critiquing stereotypes, celebrating aspects of one's culture; e.g., Bertaux, Smythe, & Crable, 2012; Butin, 2007; Cammarota, 2011; Christens & Kirshner, 2011; Ginwright & James, 2002; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). A third area examines institutional strategies that can help make schools and classrooms more inclusive and empowering spaces for students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., changes to teacher training or institutional design; Ball, 2000; Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008; Paris & Alim, 2017; Sleeter, 1996, 2011).

Across multicultural and social-justice education approaches to education, the theory underlying them is grounded in the understanding that social-group differences are socially constructed (e.g., Sleeter, 2011). Building on this work, we propose that one common strategy unites these approaches: They help students learn a contextual theory of difference. Consistent with this suggestion, scholarship suggests that multicultural and social justice education increases students' understanding of how social-group differences operate in the important social contexts (e.g., home, school, community) of people's lives.

Although research points to the potential of multicultural and social justice education to reduce educational disparities between social groups, most of the work in this area is qualitative or theoretical in nature.

This research therefore focuses on developing theory to explain how these educational experiences, including various pedagogical strategies, might produce benefits for students. As a result, this work does not directly establish a relationship between multicultural and social-justice education and its academic and intergroup benefits. There are two notable exceptions, however: the literature on the effects of taking ethnic studies and diversity courses and the literature on participating in intergroup dialogues. We review this literature and focus on the effects that these educational experiences have on students' academic and intergroup outcomes.

***Ethnic studies and diversity courses.*** Ethnic studies and diversity courses are an example of multicultural and social-justice education. Scholars have studied the effects of these courses on students' educational outcomes in college as well as elementary and high school settings. We suggest that these courses help students learn a contextual theory of difference by teaching them to use different analytical frameworks and by reviewing various academic content areas. Sleeter (2011) summarizes some of these academic content areas as follows:

- (1) explicit identification of the point of view from which knowledge emanates, and the relationship between social location and perspective;
- (2) examination of U.S. colonialism historically, as well as how relations of colonialism continue to play out;
- (3) examination of the historical construction of race and institutional racism, how people navigate racism, and struggles for liberation;
- (4) probing meanings of collective or communal identities that people hold; and
- (5) studying one's community's creative and intellectual products, both historic and contemporary (p. 3).

These courses encourage students to view social groups, including their own, as socially and historically situated and to connect what they learn in school to their experiences at home and in their communities. By doing so, these classes highlight how contextual factors—such as history, institutions, policies, and practices—can shape students' experiences and life outcomes (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014). These courses also help students understand how their culture-specific knowledge and perspectives can serve as assets. Sleeter (2011) explains how “giving considerable sustained curricular space” (p. 13) to the heritage of underrepresented communities can help communicate strengths associated with different social groups.

Research examining the effects of ethnic studies and diversity courses provides empirical support for the idea that these learning experiences are correlated with

a variety of academic and intergroup benefits (see Sleeter, 2011 for a review; see also Bowman, 2010, 2011; Cabrera et al., 2014; Cole, Case, Rios, & Curtin, 2011; Dee & Penner, 2016; Denson, 2009; Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013; Nelson Laird, 2005). Education scholars theorize that these courses benefit both disadvantaged and advantaged students, albeit through different processes (Sleeter, 2011). For both groups, taking these courses correlates with psychological tendencies that can improve intergroup outcomes, such as greater understanding of and appreciation for social-group differences and less intergroup bias (e.g., Bowman, 2011; Denson, 2009; Engberg, 2004; Gurin et al., 2013). These courses also tend to be associated with improved academic performance (e.g., grades, retention, engagement) and an increased sense of agency, especially among disadvantaged students (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2014; Cammarota & Romero, 2014; Sleeter, 2011). For example, one study of San Francisco high schools suggested that taking an ethnic studies course in ninth grade was associated with an increase in ninth-grade attendance, grade point average, and credits earned (Dee & Penner, 2016; see also Cabrera et al., 2014). Although taking ethnic studies was more helpful academically for Latinx students than for Asian students, overall this correlation was observed for students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Despite the observed benefits of these courses, the research on ethnic studies and diversity courses has not yet identified—or tested—the key role of a contextual theory of difference in improving students' academic outcomes. Instead, these courses tend to teach students about topics related to ethnic studies and diversity (e.g., colonialism, historical constructions of race) through a wide range of pedagogical strategies. Moreover, most research on the effects of these courses consists of naturalistic studies or pre-post correlational survey studies that are not designed to establish causality.

***Intergroup dialogues.*** Social psychologists and education scholars have also studied the effects of participating in intergroup dialogue courses. These courses build on and integrate theories about multicultural and social justice education with social psychology research on intergroup relations. Intergroup dialogues can be thought of as a specific kind of diversity course designed to teach students about social-group differences through a series of structured discussions and peer interactions that are facilitated by a trained moderator.

In these weekly discussion sessions, students from diverse cultural backgrounds come together in groups and talk about their commonalities and differences (Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Gurin et al., 2013). The dialogues encourage students to think critically with other

students about the source, nature, and impact of social-group differences. Discussions of difference and inequality are always discussed as experiences that come from participating in sociocultural contexts (e.g., those that differ by race or ethnicity). Therefore, these discussions make visible how these important sociocultural contexts systematically shape people's life experiences and outcomes. Indeed, Gurin et al. (2013) theorize that the dialogues “allow a larger, social truth to emerge between and among individuals in which everyone recognizes themselves as social selves rather than autonomous beings” (p. 78).

Although studies examining the effects of intergroup dialogues do not examine students' academic outcomes, they document a wide range of psychological tendencies associated with better intergroup outcomes (e.g., Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Gurin et al., 2013; Gurin, Peng, Lopez, & Nagda, 1999; Hurtado, 2005; Muller & Miles, 2017; Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2012). In one experiment conducted at nine separate universities (Gurin et al., 2013), students who applied to participate in intergroup dialogues were randomly assigned to either a race- and ethnicity-focused dialogue, a gender-focused dialogue, or a waitlist control condition. In the control condition, students were offered the chance to take an intergroup dialogue course in the future. Participants were surveyed before and after taking the courses and again 1 year later. Consistent with our claim that intergroup dialogues teach students a contextual theory of difference, the researchers found that participating in the intergroup dialogues (compared with a control condition) increased students' contextual understanding of difference and inequality (e.g., that racial disparities result from discrimination as opposed to a lack of individual initiative). Participating in these dialogues also fostered psychological tendencies associated with intergroup skills, such as intergroup empathy, perspective taking, positive attitudes toward diversity, positive emotions in interactions across difference, and intergroup collaboration (see Gurin et al., 2013; Zúñiga et al., 2012). Both disadvantaged and advantaged students showed these intergroup benefits.

Work on intergroup dialogues stands out from ethnic studies and diversity courses because it employs an experimental design that makes it possible to establish causation. However, similar to research on ethnic studies and diversity courses, these dialogues have not yet identified—or tested—the specific role that a contextual theory of difference plays in improving intergroup outcomes. Instead, they teach students about multiple topics (e.g., students' commonalities) and also use various teaching strategies (e.g., critical reflection, alliance building) simultaneously.

### ***Extending theory and providing evidence***

Despite the wide range of strategies and content areas included in this scholarship, this work suggests that teaching students about social-group differences has the potential to improve all students' intergroup outcomes and disadvantaged students' academic performance. As noted earlier, we propose that these educational approaches are associated with intergroup and academic benefits for one key reason: They teach students a contextual theory of difference.

In addition to this critical theoretical insight, this article makes two additional contributions. First, we provide further evidence of how a contextual theory of social-group differences can improve both academic performance and intergroup skills. As noted earlier, the interdisciplinary theorizing and research reviewed here have not yet identified the key role that a contextual theory of difference plays in improving students' outcomes. Nor have they directly examined the important causal question of whether the theory produces academic and intergroup benefits. To provide further evidence of how a contextual theory of difference can afford intergroup and academic benefits, we developed and tested the approach of difference-education, the first social psychological intervention to teach students a contextual theory of difference.

Second, this article draws on difference-education to develop theorizing about the psychological processes through which a contextual theory of difference can benefit students. In the next section, we specify two psychological processes through which a contextual theory may improve disadvantaged students' academic performance: increasing a sense of fit and fostering a sense of empowerment.

### **Difference-Education: Providing a Contextual Theory of Difference Improves Both Academic Performance and Intergroup Skills**

As multicultural and social justice education approaches illustrate, teaching students a contextual theory of difference can take place through a number of different formats (e.g., an ethnic studies course). In the first difference-education intervention, we opted to teach students a contextual theory using a student panel format that featured student speakers from diverse backgrounds. In social psychological studies of students' educational experiences, the term *intervention* typically refers to an effort to change students' experiences, behavior, and/or outcomes using a randomized

controlled experimental design that tracks students over time (Paluck & Shafir, 2017; Walton, 2014; Walton & Wilson, 2018; Wilson, 2011; Yeager & Walton, 2011).<sup>5</sup>

The defining feature of a difference-education intervention is its use of contrasting real-life stories of students from diverse backgrounds to convey a contextual theory of difference. Hearing how students' current experiences in college vary as a function of their different backgrounds helps intervention participants learn that their particular college experiences are contextual—that is, a product of students' diverse life experiences and backgrounds. In other words, hearing these contrasting personal narratives helps participants learn about how students' diverse backgrounds can matter in college in both positive and negative ways. We designed this initial difference-education intervention to examine whether it was possible to use a contextual theory of difference to improve academic performance among disadvantaged students—in this case, first-generation college students (Stephens et al., 2014). We also explored whether a contextual theory would produce additional psychological tendencies that would improve intergroup skills for all students.

Our initial intervention studies focused on improving the academic performance of first-generation college students (i.e., students from working-class backgrounds) for two key reasons. First, because much of our prior work has focused on social class and experiences of first-generation college students in higher education (e.g., Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012), we were well equipped to design an intervention to address these students' particular challenges. Second, we theorized that first-generation students' views of their social class backgrounds would be less defined compared with other social-group differences (e.g., race or gender) and, therefore, relatively open to change.

Given that U.S. society is often unwilling to acknowledge the powerful ways in which social class shapes people's life outcomes (Kingston, 2000; Mantsios, 2006; J. C. Williams, 2017), we expected that first-generation students' views about social class would likely be less explicit or defined. Further, given that social class is often viewed as a relatively malleable identity that can change over time as a result of new experiences (e.g., gaining a college degree; Destin, Rheinschmidt-Same, & Richeson, 2017), we also expected these views to be open to change. Accordingly, we theorized that a contextual theory of difference would be especially powerful in altering how first-generation college students make sense of their college experiences.

### ***How difference-education conveys a contextual theory***

To investigate whether a difference-education intervention can improve the academic performance of disadvantaged students while also improving intergroup skills for all students, we invited first-year students at an elite university to participate in an intervention at the beginning of the academic year. In the intervention we randomly assigned half of the participants to attend a difference-education intervention and the other half to attend a control intervention. In both conditions, incoming students attended a panel in which senior students told personal stories about how they adjusted to and found success in college. Incoming students and panelists included both first-generation and continuing-generation students (i.e., students who have at least one parent with a 4-year degree) so that this experience would be relevant to everyone and avoid stigmatizing disadvantaged students.

In the difference-education intervention, panelists' stories conveyed a contextual theory of difference by linking their social class backgrounds to the contrasting experiences they had in college. In particular, their stories revealed how students' different backgrounds (a) negatively shaped the challenges they confronted and (b) positively shaped the strengths and strategies that they leveraged to be successful. Because part of learning a contextual theory is understanding that social-group differences can be positive, it was critical to convey that students' diverse backgrounds presented not only challenges but also strengths.

For instance, to highlight how different social class backgrounds can negatively shape the college experience, panelists were asked, "Can you provide an example of an obstacle that you faced when you came to [university name] and how you resolved it?" One first-generation panelist responded, "Because my parents didn't go to college, they weren't always able to provide me the advice I needed, so it was sometimes hard to figure out which classes to take and what I wanted to do in the future." This first-generation student's story conveys a contextual understanding of difference by linking his previous social class context (i.e., not having college-educated parents) to an obstacle he faced in college (i.e., not knowing which classes to take). In contrast, after previously mentioning her parents' graduate-level degrees, one continuing-generation panelist responded, "I went to a small private school, and it was great college prep. We got lots of one-on-one attention, so it was a big adjustment going into classes with 300 people." As in the first-generation student's story, the continuing-generation student's story links her social class background (i.e., having highly educated

parents) to a college obstacle (i.e., having less attention and support in college than in high school).

The intervention also exposed students to examples of how their diverse social class backgrounds can positively shape the strategies and strengths they use to succeed in college. First-generation and continuing-generation student panelists discussed how they worked to overcome their particular challenges. For instance, after the first-generation student in the previous example described his inability to get specific advice about college and careers from his parents, he stated, "There are other people who can provide that advice, and I learned that I needed to rely on my adviser more than other students." In contrast, the continuing-generation student who faced the challenge of being overwhelmed in large classes explained, "I felt less overwhelmed when I took the time to get to know other students in the class."

To further convey how one's background can positively shape the college experience, panelists described how their backgrounds afforded them particular strengths. For instance, panelists were asked, "What experiences that you had prior to [university name] prepared you to excel in ways that you wouldn't have anticipated at the time?" After describing her social class background, one first-generation panelist responded,

I've been through a lot in my life. . . . It gave me perspective that made [university name] a lot easier to tackle. Midterms and papers seem hard, and they are, but at the same time they just seem like another drop in the bucket, and I love that perspective.

This first-generation story links the student's social class background (i.e., overcoming adversity as a result of coming from a family without college education) to a strength (i.e., having a broad perspective), emphasizing the contextual nature of her positive college experiences. Likewise, after describing her parents as having college degrees, one continuing-generation panelist responded as follows:

My choice to attend [university name] really was supported by everyone in my family. There was no sort of imposition by my parents [saying], "You need to go to the University of Texas," or anything like that. It was like, "Wherever you want to go we'll fully support you in any way that we really can," and so they were very open with it.

As in the first-generation story, the continuing-generation story links the student's social class background (i.e., having college-educated parents) to a background-specific strength (i.e., having parents who are open and supportive).



In contrast, students in the control intervention were exposed to similar stories, but these stories did not communicate a contextual theory of difference. That is, the panelists' stories did not include background-specific information about how their social class backgrounds shaped their college experiences. The control condition used the same format and panelists, who also told personal stories about their experiences in college—in particular, the obstacles they faced and the strengths and strategies that they leveraged to be successful. For example, panelists were asked, “What do you do to be successful in your classes?” One panelist told her story about an obstacle she faced in college (e.g., the coursework was difficult) and then suggested a strategy for success: “Go to class, and pay attention. If you don't understand something or have a hard time with the material, meet with your teaching assistant or professor during office hours.” As in the difference-education condition, participants in the control condition learned about panelists' different experiences in college, including challenges they faced (e.g., a student found coursework to be difficult), and the strategies they learned to be successful (e.g., a student found it helpful to meet with a professor). Note that participants across both conditions learned the same types of strategies for success, such as seeking help from peers and professors. The key difference was that students in the control condition did not learn a contextual theory of difference (i.e., how their backgrounds shaped their obstacles, strengths, or strategies for success). Stephens et al. (2014) provide additional details about the methods and content of difference-education, including more complete excerpts of the student stories.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Outcomes of difference-education***

To obtain initial evidence for our theory of how a contextual theory of difference can benefit students, we reviewed the outcomes of two evaluations of difference-education interventions. In the initial study described in the previous section, participants listened to students' stories told in an in-person student panel with a group of other students. We then followed intervention participants throughout their first 2 years of college, conducting a series of surveys and an in-person laboratory study (Stephens et al., 2014; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2015). In a replication study, participants learned the same intervention content online as they read about successful students' stories individually. This study followed intervention participants throughout their first 2 years, conducting a series of surveys (Townsend et al., 2018).

Given that the education scholarship we reviewed suggests that disadvantaged students are most likely to

benefit academically from learning a contextual theory of difference, we expected that difference-education would improve the academic performance of the first-generation students in our study. Consistent with our hypotheses, the initial in-person study revealed that first-generation students in the difference-education condition earned higher first-year grades than their counterparts in the control condition (Stephens et al., 2014), thereby reducing the social class achievement gap. This improvement in grades was explained by an increased tendency among first-generation students to take advantage of the campus resources they needed to succeed (e.g., seeking help from professors; Stephens et al., 2014). In the online replication study, we found the same grades benefits for first-generation students at the end of their second year (Townsend et al., 2018). In this case, the improvement in grades was explained by a greater sense of learner empowerment and perceived preparation, a complementary but somewhat different process (Townsend et al., 2018). Taken together, and drawing from the social psychology and education literature reviewed earlier (e.g., Gurin et al., 2013), we theorize that the intervention increased students' sense of empowerment—the psychological experience of being empowered (e.g., feeling efficacious), coupled with the willingness to take the actions (e.g., seeking resources) necessary to succeed. These findings provide the first causal evidence supporting our hypothesis that a contextual theory of difference can improve disadvantaged students' academic performance.

The social psychology and education research reviewed earlier suggests that teaching students about social-group differences is associated with psychological tendencies that can improve intergroup skills (e.g., perspective taking) for both disadvantaged and advantaged students. By providing a contextual theory of difference, we therefore expected that difference-education would afford similar types of intergroup skills for both first-generation and continuing-generation students. To explore this hypothesis, we tested whether students across both intervention studies had learned the contextual theory of difference. We asked participants to write about what they had learned from the student stories they had listened to or read. Our coding of themes that emerged in participants' open-ended responses provided evidence consistent with the idea that participants learned a contextual theory of difference. Specifically, both first-generation and continuing-generation students in the difference-education condition were far more likely than students in the control condition to report that they learned how students' different backgrounds—or experiences in different contexts—can matter in college (Stephens et al., 2014; Townsend et al., 2018). For example, one intervention participant said, “People from different

backgrounds have different expectations of college.” Another intervention participant said, “Everyone comes from such a different background and has different motives for doing well.” These findings are consistent with research on the effects of intergroup dialogues, showing that these courses foster a more structural understanding of difference and inequality for both advantaged and disadvantaged students (Gurin et al., 2013).

Second, at the end-of-first-year follow-up to the in-person intervention, we examined additional psychological tendencies that we theorize should improve intergroup skills. Drawing on a measure of diversity endorsement from Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, and Sanchez-Burks (2011), we created a measure of *appreciation of difference*—that is, the extent to which participants understand the significance and value of diversity as part of their college experience. A sample item was as follows: “It is important to have multiple perspectives on campus (e.g., cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sexualities).” Consistent with the intergroup benefits observed in intergroup dialogue evaluation studies (Gurin et al., 2013), we found that both first-generation and continuing-generation students in the difference-education compared with the control condition reported a greater appreciation of difference (Stephens et al., 2014). Likewise, using the standard measure of perspective taking (the interpersonal reactivity index; Davis, 1983), we found that both first-generation and continuing-generation students in the difference-education condition compared with the control condition reported higher levels of perspective taking at the end of the first year of college (Stephens et al., 2014).

Third, at the end-of-second-year follow-up to the in-person intervention, we also examined participants’ comfort with social-group differences in actual interactions (see Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2015, for detailed methods). Again, for all students—regardless of their social class backgrounds—we found that difference-education produced psychological tendencies that we theorize should foster intergroup skills. In an interaction with another college student (i.e., a research assistant), difference-education participants showed a greater willingness to talk about the impact of their different background contexts (e.g., family and friends from home) and were more comfortable doing so, as indicated by their physiological responses (Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2015). We theorize that this greater comfort with one’s own social-group differences is a first step toward better interactions with others from different social groups or backgrounds. These findings are consistent with work on multicultural and social justice education, which provides correlational evidence suggesting that teaching students about social-group

differences has the potential to improve all students’ intergroup skills.

Finally, some of the social psychological literature on “wise” interventions demonstrates that interventions giving students a new lay theory can improve students’ subjective psychological experiences as they transition to college (Walton & Wilson, 2018; Wilson, 2011; Yeager & Walton, 2011). Therefore, we explored whether this would be the case with difference-education. On the basis of the end-of-year follow-up to the initial in-person intervention study (Stephens et al., 2014), we found that the difference-education intervention helped both first-generation and continuing-generation students experience a higher-quality college transition compared with the control condition. Specifically, we found that both first-generation and continuing-generation students showed higher levels of academic identification, psychological well-being, and social fit (see Stephens et al., 2014 for specific items).<sup>7</sup>

Together, these results provide the first causal evidence supporting our theory that providing a contextual theory of social-group differences can not only improve disadvantaged students’ academic performance but also foster all students’ intergroup skills.

### ***A contextual theory can increase fit and empowerment***

Drawing on insights from research on multicultural and social justice education, we theorize that providing a contextual theory has the potential to improve disadvantaged students’ academic performance through two key psychological processes—by helping them feel like they fit and fostering a sense of empowerment. This article uses the term *fit* to refer to the feeling of being accepted, recognized, welcomed, and included within a setting such as the college community (e.g., Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015).<sup>8</sup> The term *empowerment* is used to capture (a) the psychological experience of efficacy, ownership, and control and (b) the resulting willingness to enact strategies needed to make the most of one’s experience. Using the example of a difference-education intervention, we provide initial evidence for the role of these psychological processes.

Specifically, we theorize that a difference-education intervention should increase disadvantaged students’ fit by revealing that difference comes from the context and is therefore a normal, expected part of the college experience. Understanding this can decrease the stigma and negative meanings attached to one’s experiences of difference (e.g., questioning whether one belongs) and should foster students’ sense of fit with the college setting. For example, when students face challenges (e.g., difficulty choosing a major), a contextual theory conveys that these challenges may be informed by their

backgrounds and prior experiences (e.g., not having college-educated parents) rather than because they are incapable or deficient. As described above, longitudinal surveys evaluating the effects of difference-education have demonstrated that it can increase first-generation students' sense of social fit with the college environment (Stephens et al., 2014; Townsend et al., 2018). For example, after participating in our difference-education intervention, a first-generation student described her newfound sense of fit:

I am a first-generation college student so it's nice to know that not everyone comes from a highly educated, upper middle-class family. I feel like I'm an outsider here, but the panel made it clear that's not exactly how it is and you can be successful no matter what background you come from.

Using difference-education as an example again, we theorize that providing a contextual theory should increase disadvantaged students' empowerment by helping them better understand the contextual sources of the challenges they confront in college (e.g., Gurin et al., 2013). Learning that one's challenges result from experiences in different contexts (e.g., not having college-educated parents) rather than some individual deficiency means that one's experiences in the future can be changed. This understanding should help students feel more efficacious and in control of their experiences and outcomes and at the same time foster their willingness to take appropriate action. As described above, longitudinal surveys evaluating the effects of difference-education have demonstrated that the intervention can improve first-generation students' academic performance by increasing students' psychological empowerment (e.g., sense of efficacy; Townsend et al., 2018), as well as their willingness to take advantage of campus resources (Stephens et al., 2014). For example, after participating in difference-education, one first-generation student described gaining a sense of empowerment:

I found that the panelists who came from backgrounds similar to mine and . . . who had parents that didn't attend a university ran into many of the similar obstacles in their lives. And I found this information that I received very helpful because I realized that there are students here that have faced and overcome similar obstacles to me and it just gives me a sense of encouragement that I can also overcome those obstacles.

In sum, the example of difference-education provides initial evidence to support our theory that providing a contextual theory of social-group differences can

improve both disadvantaged students' academic performance and all students' intergroup skills. This example provides the first causal evidence that a contextual theory can improve disadvantaged students' academic performance and begins to specify some of the psychological processes—fit and empowerment—through which a contextual theory can produce these academic benefits.

## **Discussion: Theoretical Implications and Future Directions**

Social-group differences by class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability, among others, powerfully shape students' experiences and outcomes in higher education. Given the increased attention to social-group differences on college campuses and in American society today, this is a timely opportunity to improve people's understanding of their own and others' differences.

Understanding how social-group differences matter is a vital intergroup skill needed to navigate today's increasingly diverse and divided world. It is also a crucial first step to making institutions such as college campuses more inclusive and equitable—spaces in which people of all backgrounds can thrive. We began this article by asking whether it was possible to take advantage of the current spotlight on social-group differences to educate college students about how their differences matter, while at the same time improving performance of students who are disadvantaged by mainstream educational environments. By bringing together insights from a wide range of interdisciplinary literature in education and psychology, this article presents evidence supporting our theory that teaching students a contextual theory of difference can work to accomplish both of these important goals.

In this article, we theorized about how interventions that help students understand the contextual nature of social-group differences can effectively reduce educational disparities. Yet a number of important questions remain open to further investigation.

### ***Processes of change***

As is the case with other popular and successful social psychological interventions, future research on interventions that communicate a contextual theory of difference should further specify the necessary and sufficient components that drive the intervention's benefits. One important question is whether role models with similar backgrounds or identities are necessary for students to gain a contextual understanding of difference (e.g., Oyserman & Destin, 2010). For example, would intervention participants need to listen to stories

of successful seniors who are either first-generation or continuing-generation students, or could they simply read a research article about the contextual sources of social inequality? On the one hand, research suggests that students are most likely to learn from and personalize the intervention message when they listen to stories of successful older students (e.g., Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009; Marx & Roman, 2002). On the other hand, research on multicultural and social justice education suggests that these educational approaches yield similar benefits as difference-education and that they do so without using peer role models to deliver the message (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2016).

Another important question for future research is whether an intervention that teaches a contextual theory of difference would need to teach students concrete strategies they need to overcome the obstacles they face (e.g., seeking help from professors). We theorize that gaining a sense of empowerment requires learning not only about the types of challenges students are likely to face (e.g., not knowing how to choose a major) but also about concrete strategies (e.g., seeking help from professors) to overcome them.

Future research should also investigate the specific ways in which interventions that provide a contextual theory can catalyze psychological and behavioral changes in a recursive cycle over time (see Miller, Dannals, & Zlatev, 2017). Previous work on multicultural and social justice education, as well as the difference-education studies presented here, suggests that fit and empowerment are two key processes that begin to explain how a contextual theory can change behavior (e.g., seeking resources) and improve academic performance (see Fig. 1). However, further work is needed to unpack precisely how these psychological changes work in tandem to sustain long-term behavioral changes (and vice versa). For example, in one direction, how might the psychological experiences of fit and empowerment work together to initiate key behavioral changes such as seeking campus resources or developing a relationship with a mentor? And, in the other direction, how do these behavioral changes affect and sustain students' psychological changes over time as they encounter new experiences?

Beyond fit and empowerment, research should consider other possible complementary processes through which learning a contextual theory of difference could catalyze psychological or behavioral change. For example, future work could examine how learning a contextual theory might benefit disadvantaged students by increasing their self-reflection and metacognition about their own learning processes (e.g., Chen, Chavez, Ong, & Gunderson, 2017). Future work might also consider

whether students who learn a contextual theory of difference become more culturally intelligent—that is, better able to function and operate in diverse settings (e.g., Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Earley & Ang, 2003; K. Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014). Likewise, research could examine whether students develop metacognitive skills about how cultures work and how people's thoughts, feelings, and actions can be shaped by their cultures (e.g., A. K. Y. Leung, Lee, & Chiu, 2013; Mor, Morris, & Joh, 2013).

### ***Across multiple groups and settings***

The research reviewed in this article suggests that providing a contextual theory of difference has the potential to benefit both disadvantaged and advantaged students. Indeed, work on multicultural and social justice education theorizes and provides evidence to suggest that teaching students about social-group differences can help all students improve their intergroup skills (e.g., perspective taking). This prior work also suggests that learning about social-group differences can help all students gain a sense of empowerment to effect positive social change (see Sleeter, 2011). Similarly, the initial in-person difference-education study described here benefited both first-generation and continuing-generation students in ways that are likely to improve intergroup skills (i.e., increased perspective taking, appreciation of difference, and willingness to talk about social-group differences in an interaction; Stephens et al., 2014; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2015). The in-person difference-education study also improved both first-generation and continuing-generation students' subjective psychological experience in the transition to college (Stephens et al., 2014).

Despite some evidence suggesting potential intergroup and social benefits for all students, more work is needed to better understand when and how disadvantaged versus advantaged students may benefit. Future studies might consider how the psychological and behavioral changes initiated by an intervention unfold similarly or differently for advantaged versus disadvantaged students. For example, does learning a contextual theory of difference empower students from diverse backgrounds in different ways, and does that sense of empowerment translate into different behavioral responses (e.g., resource seeking among disadvantaged students vs. being willing to act as allies among advantaged students)? Furthermore, are there situations in which disadvantaged versus advantaged students are likely to show resistance to the message and respond in a threatened manner?

In addition to better understanding how a contextual theory of difference can benefit individual students,

future research should consider how such a theory might be used to drive cultural change at an institutional level. As in other classic social psychological interventions (Wilson, 2011; Yeager & Walton, 2011), difference-education focuses on changing individuals' construal (i.e., providing a contextual theory) to alter their psychological experiences (e.g., increase their fit and empowerment) and improve their academic performance. We believe that these individual-level changes are not a panacea and may fail to support long-term change if they are not built into and reinforced by the larger college culture. To support these individual-level changes over time, we must also change institutional-level policies, practices, and resources (e.g., Hamedani et al., 2015; Markus & Conner, 2014; Markus & Hamedani, in press; Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012; Walton & Wilson, 2018). For example, universities could communicate a contextual theory of difference in diversity courses or via shared cultural products such as university websites or student guidebooks. At the same time, however, because people can shape their cultures (Markus & Hamedani, in press), providing a contextual theory at the individual level also has the potential to change institutions. Increasing individual-level awareness and understanding of social-group differences can create a more inclusive and accepting environment in which students are empowered to effect change.

Beyond changing culture at an institutional level, future research should examine how to extend interventions that provide a contextual theory of difference to new settings (e.g., the workplace, community colleges) and social groups (e.g., women or racial and ethnic minorities). Across various settings and groups, the general methodological strategy of the approach would be the same: The intervention would seek to change people's experiences, behaviors, and outcomes by providing a contextual theory of difference. However, as is the case in any intervention, it is important to take local context and the particular social group into account. In practice, researchers must work to understand the existing views and challenges that a particular disadvantaged group faces and tailor intervention methods and content to them.

Specifically, an intervention designed to address race or gender (vs. social class) would need to take into account how people's existing views about race and gender may differ from those about social class. As described earlier, because existing views about race or gender (vs. social class) are likely better defined and more difficult to change, an intervention that seeks to provide a contextual theory about racial or gender

differences would need to be tailored to counteract people's existing narratives about race or gender (e.g., as biological or fixed features of people). Moreover, discussions about race and gender (vs. social class) may also be more fraught and may therefore require additional steps to render them inclusive and empowering rather than threatening. For example, race-focused and gender-focused intergroup dialogues rely on highly trained instructors to facilitate discussions and engage students for an extended period of time (e.g., over the course of an entire semester).

In the case of different settings, we suggest that interventions that provide a contextual theory of difference also have the potential to improve employees' outcomes in the workplace. Indeed, organizational research examining the effects of multicultural ideologies—that is, messages that attend to and celebrate employees' diversity—suggests that such an intervention could be effective (e.g., Apfelbaum, Stephens, & Reagans, 2016; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlemann, & Crosby, 2008). On the surface, a contextual theory of difference may seem similar to the ideas contained in multiculturalism. Although there is some overlap, they are distinct constructs. Whereas multiculturalism is an ideology that focuses on attending to and celebrating social-group differences (e.g., having different perspectives), a contextual theory of difference provides a deeper understanding of what difference is, where it comes from, and how it functions. Moreover, whereas multiculturalism focuses exclusively on the positive aspects of difference, a contextual theory explains how difference shapes one's experience in both positive and negative ways.

Similarly, organizational research on the effects of diversity training programs suggests that such efforts have the potential to accomplish their goal of reducing bias and increasing diversity (Dobbin & Kalev, 2013, 2016; Moss-Racusin et al., 2014, 2016). These programs often focus on teaching people about implicit bias and how to avoid making discriminatory decisions influenced by these biases (e.g., in hiring, promotions). However, they vary dramatically in the messages they convey (e.g., implicitly assigning blame to advantaged groups rather than conveying that diversity is a shared concern) and how they convey those messages (e.g., active vs. passive learning; see Moss-Racusin et al., 2014). Note that unlike the educational approaches reviewed in this article, these diversity programs do not provide people with a contextual theory of difference. Although diversity training can be effective when conducted in the right way, research also suggests that such efforts can be ineffective or even backfire when they are not implemented properly.

## Conclusion

The reality of an increasingly diverse yet divided America has spurred a powerful ongoing national conversation about the impact of social-group differences on economic opportunity, racial equity, and educational attainment. The current spotlight on these issues has raised the voices of those who seek to reduce disparities between social groups while also increasing societal awareness of the significance of social-group differences. Popular social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street's consciousness-raising around economic inequality, Lean In's push for increased gender equity in the workplace, and Black Lives Matter's call to end racial injustice in policing and the legal system, reflect this desire to understand these differences. Likewise, colleges and universities across the nation are grappling with the critical need to educate faculty, students, and staff about how social-group differences matter.

In this article, we proposed that it was critical to continue talking about social-group differences and inequality—in this case, helping students to better understand the contextual nature of these differences. On the one hand, the academic work reviewed herein generally supports the idea that educating students about social-group differences is associated with academic, social, and intergroup benefits—if done in the right way (e.g., Sleeter, 2011). On the other hand, it is also critical to acknowledge that the benefits of attending to difference hinge on how difference is represented and what it means to the students who learn about it. Indeed, if difference is represented as essential or linked with negative stereotypes or deficiencies, it can of course have a number of negative repercussions. Despite these potential downsides, we argue that we should not avoid discussing social-group differences but rather continue to work to better understand how to best educate students about this topic in an informed and identity-safe way. Doing so will help ensure that 21st-century students will be equipped with the intergroup skills they need to navigate today's increasingly unequal, diverse, and multicultural world.

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The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

## Notes

1. We use the term *social-group differences* to refer to variations in the experiences, opportunities, or outcomes of diverse social groups.

2. The term *disadvantaged* refers to students who are typically disadvantaged by the mainstream system of higher education—for example, students who are first-generation, low-income, or underrepresented racial or ethnic minorities. This term is meant to highlight how these students' institutional environments can negatively affect their learning experiences and chances for success, not that these students' backgrounds themselves are deficits. In contrast, the term *advantaged* refers to students who are typically advantaged by mainstream higher education environments—for example, students who are continuing-generation, middle-income or high-income, or White.

3. The term *sociocultural context* refers to a socially and historically constructed environment that contains a set of culture-specific ideas, practices, and institutions (Markus & Hamedani, in press; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012).

4. We use the term *intergroup outcomes* to refer to a broad range of outcomes pertaining to intergroup relations (e.g., attitudes or behavior toward different social groups). The term *intergroup skills* is an example of one specific intergroup outcome.

5. We invited, rather than required, participants to attend the intervention because prior research suggests that giving participants the choice to attend helps ensure that they are motivated to fully engage with the intervention content (e.g., Brannon & Walton, 2013; Dobbin & Kalev, 2013, 2016; Dobbin, Kim, & Kalev, 2011; Langer & Rodin, 1976).

6. Across conditions, the stories were as similar as possible. For example, both sets of stories included the same strategies for success (e.g., seeking help). Yet the stories could not be identical. If the stories were identical across both conditions (e.g., if the control condition contained the story of a student being embarrassed about relying on financial aid), then participants in the control condition would have been able to infer the panelists' social class backgrounds, gaining the same message about how students' social class backgrounds matter.

7. Note that only in the in-person intervention did Stephens et al. (2014) find these benefits for both first-generation and continuing-generation students. Townsend et al. (2018) observed these types of benefits only for first-generation students.

8. We use the term *social fit*, rather than belonging, to emphasize the relationship between a person's psychological experience and its congruence with a particular environment. This term is derived from decades of research on cultural fit and person-environment, person-culture, or person-organization fit (e.g., Chatman, 1989, 1991; Dawis, 1992; Edwards, 1991; Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006; Fulmer et al., 2010; Holland, 1997; Kristof, 1996; Rivera, 2012, 2015; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; Schneider, Smith, & Goldstein, 2000; Van Vianen, 2000).

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