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# Difficult Conversations Concerning Identity and Difference: Diverse Approaches and Perspectives

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## **Abstract**

This essay is an introduction to the special issue on “Difficult Conversations Concerning Identity and Difference.” The essay begins with our argument that inquiries into difficult conversations are important as these interactions are key to addressing social inequities, creating and/or maintaining community and relational solidarity, amplifying voices of marginalized populations and/or diverse experiences, and enacting social change. Following this, we introduce the articles in the special issue highlighting the theoretical frameworks and methodological pluralism across the various relational and social contexts represented in the research (e.g., health care, higher education, community organizations, personal relationships). To complement the implications discussed by the authors in the special issue articles, we conclude the essay with additional questions that scholars and practitioners should consider as we move forward in research, teaching, and translational work on difficult conversations.

**Keywords:** difficult conversations, identity

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Our daily lives are often infused with conversations that can be characterized as difficult, contentious, uncomfortable, or anxiety-inducing. These conversations often require courageous, bold, and vulnerable communication by and with individuals, partners, families, coworkers, and community members. A “difficult” conversation ranges from managing divergent viewpoints within families to polarizing ideological positions on social issues. These difficult conversations and dialogues are often necessary to achieve social justice goals, build inclusive communities, maintain relational solidarities, enhance individual well-being, engage in truth-telling, and enact community-led social change.

A cursory exploration of popular press articles, books, podcasts, and other media demonstrates that difficult conversations are common and necessary as we address issues and concerns in our relationships, organizations, and communities. While there are exceptions, much of the discussion on difficult conversations in popular culture is atheoretical and lacks empirical support for the recommendations and advice provided to audiences. Yet, these resources are popular because they speak to the desire for humans to be able to transcend these differences, connect with others, and address social inequalities. However, as promising as difficult conversations can be, if they are not designed with care (guided by principles such as equity and inclusion), they can be futile and even dangerous (Ramasubramanian & Wolfe, 2020).

In our own work on difficult conversations on antiracism (Ramasubramanian et al., 2017; Ramasubramanian & Wolfe, 2020) and these conversations in more personal and family relationships (Colaner et al., 2022; Soliz, 2019), we find that issues of power, identity, and difference are at the heart of many of these challenging conversations and interactions. These factors shape tensions, barriers, and expectations that serve as a catalyst for the “difficulty” in these conversations. They often stem from different lived experiences, worldviews, priorities, positionalities, and perspectives on topics across various people, groups, and communities. Unstated expectations such as “civility” and “niceness” can impede meaningful conversations about difficult topics by silencing dissent, suppressing voices of historically marginalized communities, or privileging dominant perspectives.

Given these nuances and complexities, it is important for scholars and practitioners alike to build a deeper, research-based, theory-driven, contextual approach to effective difficult conversations. At this juncture, we would like to acknowledge another special issue in *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* titled “Listen then Talk: Principles and Strategies for Difficult Conversation/ in 2020 and Beyond” (Wang, 2020) that provided timely and insightful scholarship on difficult conversations in macrolevel intergroup issues such as ethnopolitical conflict and organizational concerns. Our goal is to build on such prior theorizing to create a shared vocabulary and an empirically grounded understanding of the key antecedents, processes, contexts, conditions, and outcomes relating to difficult conversations.

As such, we recognized that we would benefit from additional inquiries, theorizing, and critical examination on what contributes to effective and empowering conversations in these contexts as well as the personal, social, institutional, and cultural factors that influence engagement in and outcomes of these interactions. It is with this purpose that we invited the 10 essays in this issue that span a range of human communication contexts: relational, educational, organizational, and community. Below, we highlight the breadth and scope of cutting-edge scholarship on difficult conversations related to identity and difference across multiple subfields, contexts, and domains.

### **Overview of special issue articles**

Admittedly, selecting just a handful of articles from the 90+ submissions was a tough decision. Ultimately, as editors, we prioritized essays that were theoretically informed and significantly enhanced our insights, understanding, and recognition of the complexities of difficult conversations. We were keen on foregrounding diversity in several ways: a wide array of theoretical orientations, methodological pluralism (e.g., surveys, focus groups, interviews, and autoethnographies), regional diversity, and a variety of contextual domains.

Reflecting the nature of difficult conversations in personal relationships (e.g., romantic and family), Nuru (2023) employs relational liminality theory to explore difficult conversations and their role in

sense-making, adversity, and resilience related to liminal identities. Whitestone and Linz (2023) address the role of gender-affirming communication in end-of-life conversations between trans and gender diverse adults and family members. Shifting to our social and personal networks on social media, Zhang's (2023) inquiry in Hong Kong addresses difficult conversations by exploring the role of network heterogeneity in political expression and information filtering when there is political disagreement.

The next two articles address difficult conversations in the higher education domain. In their inquiry into intergroup dialog programs at a large university in the USA, James-Gallaway et al. (2023) employ critical race theorizing and discourse analysis to demonstrate the importance of understanding how cross-racial dialogs can actually marginalize people of color participating in these programs. Villamil et al. (2023) apply the theory of communicative constitution of organization to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at a Colombian university. The findings from their study challenge the Eurocentric and North Atlantic values embedded in dominant DEI discourses while also emphasizing the need to account for systemic and structural dynamics that pervade these initiatives.

Approaching difficult conversations from a health communication perspective, Hintz and Tucker (2023) use the theory of communication (dis)enfranchisement to analyze narratives of women from different countries relating to dialogs about chronic pain in patient-provider interactions. Findings from their article provide insight and implications for empowering those living with chronic illness via health care interactions that enhance physical and mental well-being.

The final four essays focus on difficult conversations in and related to organizational and community-based contexts. Guided by critical race and social identity theorizing, Williams et al. (2023) identify challenges and problems with diversity dialog programming in a human service organization for marginalized families and provide important considerations for more color-conscious programming to improve experiences and equity for parents in these organizations. In Kuehl et al.'s (2023) inquiry, findings from focus groups demonstrate how gaining insight from culturally diverse enclave groups in a community coalition is a crucial aspect of developing more inclusive public deliberation processes.

Advancing communication infrastructure theory, Kim et al. (2023) focus on residents in urban areas in Seoul to understand how difference managing and difference reducing storytelling function to address difference in neighborhoods. Finally, Grant and Wakeman (2023) center their inquiry on the Narrative Justice Project, an initiative integrating critical race theory, counter-storytelling, and public interest communication to address structural racism. Specifically, their research demonstrates how we can provide agency for marginalized communities to embrace and enact counternarratives to dominant discourses thereby adding their voice and experience to conversations on racism and other salient issues.

### **Moving forward: considerations and future directions for difficult conversations**

Each of the articles concludes with the authors' implications for understanding difficult conversations and we invite readers to review and reflect on these insights as they consider opportunities for future inquiries, development of programs relevant to difficult conversations, or other applied initiatives. As such, we conclude this introductory essay with some additional questions that we believe should be considered moving forward, along with the implications put forth in the manuscripts included in this special issue.

- How do we conceptualize a difficult “conversation?” In an age when many of our interactions with others take place via social media platforms in which interactions are constrained or amplified by the technological affordances of a given platform, what constitutes a conversation? No longer can we consider a conversation to be between two individuals or a group of individuals conversing face-to-face in close proxemics as evidenced in Zhang’s (2023) article in this issue. In today’s world, conversations can range from a couple at a coffee shop to a small group conversing through gallery formats on a videoconferencing platform to limited text-based (along with GIFs, memes, emojis) messages sent to a single conversational partner or to a public “many” (e.g., Twitter). Whereas much of the discussion related to these new spaces for interactions has

focused on how social media, for instance, amplify polarization, we also need to look at the interactional dynamics in these digital spaces to understand how issues related to identity and difference are addressed and, perhaps, reconceptualize what many consider a “conversation.”

- What are different units of analysis for understanding difficult conversations? From a research perspective, one of the challenges is considering the units of analysis for examining difficult conversations. Whereas some researchers studied them at the individual-level, others examined these conversations among dyads, small groups, and larger community spaces, as evident in the Kim et al.'s (2023) article on storytelling in this issue.
- What cultural values inform our understanding of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice as it relates difficult conversations? Many of the issues and dynamics that make conversations “difficult” are often related to social inequities, marginalization, and prejudice that necessitate these conversations. In many higher education institutions and other types of organizations, these conversations are part of formalized DEI initiatives. However, echoing other scholars (Afifi & Cornejo, 2020; Dutta & Pal, 2020; Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020), Villamil et al. (2023) point out that it is important to critically assess what values are embedded in these formalized DEI efforts and consider how these may silence or suppress the very voices they are meant to amplify. In short, we need to recognize that DEI initiatives are ideological, and that these ideologies are culturally bound. While there are certain similarities in DEI efforts globally, it is important to critically reflect and recognize cultural variation and how these are embedded in many initiatives.
- How might we better support engaged scholarship on difficult conversations? Our final question is about how we might continue academic–community partnerships to be equal collaborators in formalized programs, initiatives, workshops, etc., including about difficult conversations. From intergroup dialog programs at various universities (such as the Difficult Dialogues Project and the Intergroup Dialogue Project discussed by James-Gallaway and colleagues (2023)

in this issue) to some of the community collaborations included in this volume (e.g., Kuehl et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2023), the scholarly community has much to offer, not only initiatives for faculty and students, but also for the community at large. Moving forward, we need to think about how scholars can be contributing copartners rather than academic elites in community-engaged projects, how they can move from abstract knowledge to engaged practice, and how we can shift priorities and values within academe to better recognize and support such engaged work as “legitimate” scholarship (Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2021).

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