Voice & Inequity: Ground Rules Help Diverse Teams Work

Bill Provaznik,
College of Business
Central Washington University,
400 East University Way,
Ellensburg, WA. 98926.
provaznb@cwu.edu

Wendy Cook
College of Business,
Central Washington University:
Edmonds Campus,
20000 68th Ave.,
Lynnwood, WA. 98036.
Wendy.cook@cwu.edu

Terry Wilson
College of Business,
Central Washington University,
400 East University Way,
Ellensburg, WA. 98926.
Terry.Wilson@cwu.edu

ABSTRACT

Popular interest in educational equity for students across the spectrum of privilege has revealed latent forces impeding an individual's performance beyond that typically ascribed to one's agency and capabilities. One of these educational performance contexts is teamwork. The impact of operational ground rules on individual attitudes along two facets of teamwork (Voice in Teams, Equity in Teams) were examined in a controlled experiment involving participants of two parallel courses involving multiple team projects (N = 74). Results suggest ground rules facilitate development of a sense of voice in students from families with less exposure to higher education. Positive relationships between Team Voice and Team Equity were observed. No significant ground rule effects on Equity of Teamwork were observed. Implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative based learning models have been increasingly recognized as a fundamental driver of student success across multiple dimensions of academic success. Student retention, academic growth, social development, and the development of critical professional skills needed to thrive in the post-graduate world are consequences of students working in groups and teams within the learning environment. Interactions between members of student groups are the foundation for building growth across all these imperatives.

Similarly, equity and diversity are of growing prominence in higher education. This attention has focused the role of higher education toward increasing the human capital and social mobility of individuals from underrepresented communities as well as propagate cognitive, social mindsets and personal ties across members of various communities promoting social progress towards equity and justice in society at large (Gurin, 1999). Recently, closer investigations of the impact of interactions between individuals of different backgrounds has revealed that benefits have been inconsistent and not always positive towards the intended goals of the efforts behind them.

Left on its own, individuals from diverse backgrounds bring social and cognitively influenced norms into the interpersonal behaviors within classroom school work. Within team and group work in educational contexts, this leads to disparities in status, influence, and voice across student members that correlate to the students' membership in particular communities outside the school context. Group and team class projects have an extensive history as an educational tool advancing learning. Bringing a diverse collection of students into a group or team seems a logical step in preparing them for their professional world. Surprisingly, the literature lacks an empirical inquiry on the effect of ground rules in providing voice to members of groups not typically represented in higher education.

Groups and Teams

Group and team collaborative frameworks have been of interest as effective tools for increasing student learning. While the growing body of research supports the potential of group work for learning both outside and inside the classroom (Johnson et al. 2014), the benefits are not experienced evenly by all students. Students of diverse groups risk marginalization from membership in many dimensions including racial, gender, cultural, economic, age, or as a numeric minority of an otherwise homogenous group.

A strong focus of pedagogical literature has been on the facets of team and group work (e.g., Michaelson et al., 2004; Michaelson et al., 2014) that largely address student differences brought in from outside the classroom as something to be managed by the instructor or facilitator. Reward systems and accountability plans are suggested as instruments to encourage students towards effective group member behavior. The assumption in higher education is that students from diverse groups are "of reasonably equal status within campuses, even when status differentials exist between groups in the broader society" (Bowman, 2012, p. 5), however, with

the increase in diversity and equity initiatives across university campuses, the assumption of reasonably equal status cannot be made.

Recent research has made clear that while the goal of fostering a diverse experience in higher education is to enrich student experience (Bowman, 2017) and further develop students' intellectual capacity (Bowman 2010; Roksa et al., 2017), negative encounters between individuals across diverse populations lead to judgements about the other population as well as themselves. These perceptions persist beyond students' college experience (Roksa et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2010).

There is a gap in the understanding and prescriptions for managing the interpersonal behavior between students during group exercises. This gap is of increasing importance given the emerging understanding of how negative interactions between diverse members leads to enduring consequences for students later in both their personal learning in college, and also their sense of self and diverse others that persist far beyond graduation (Smith et al. 2010). An abundance of evidence has made clear the benefits of diversity experiences in college education, however diversity interactions left without structure or influence are likely to lead towards negative outcomes has also been shown (Ashikali, et al., 2020).

Power disparities arising from race, economic status, social status, and other sources influence the internal dynamics of groups and teams within the college experience (Greer et al., 2017). Despite the long history of theory devoted to this fact, surprising little attention has been given to managing these inequities in the classroom or in a way that persists beyond the classroom or the college experience. The emerging recognition is that the development and implementation of policy within a group or team is a necessary first step in team development (eg. Kolb, 2013; Valenti et al., 2005; Cox & Bobrowski, 2000; Whatley, 2009). An empirical investigation of how rules can influence group members' sense of voice or equity within the group is still needed. The present paper is a contribution towards bridging this important gap.

Our proposition is that significant differences exist between students, and the differences can lead to inequities in group/teamwork. We also propose that these inequities manifest themselves in an individual's perception of voice, where those of lower status/power experience less influence in group projects. Finally, we propose that the deployment of ground rules in teams leads to norms that level the status in group members allowing for a greater sense of equity for the members of the group.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Student Inequality

While inequality has been recognized as barrier for equal college access, it also leads to secondary effects involving a misalignment of norms for interaction between students in and out of college classrooms. Armstrong & Hamilton (2013) observed a cohort of 53 college women at a dormitory on a state university campus over a five year period. Similarities between the

students' behaviors and experiences tended to fall into three distinct student categories that had a strong correlation to student social class: Socialites, strivers, and achievers.

Socialites were predominantly focused on making connections in college. Strivers' goals were to proceed into a professional school. Achievers tended to be focused on advancing into a professional career. Socialites and the successful achievers were students from predominantly upper/upper middle class families. Strivers and unsuccessful achievers were from lower middle class to working class level backgrounds. The primary difference between achievers and under achievers' successful navigation through academic life was access to quality academic advice from parents. Under achievers' families lacked the educational backgrounds which provide significant advantage (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Similarly, interactions between students were facilitated by class and family education status. Strivers tended to lack social networks, unlike achievers and socialites (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Their backgrounds also led to a lack of social skills that would advance successful relationship development in college culture. Inequality in relationship development tended to be primarily driven by social/economic status rather than culture or other factors.

White and Lowenthal (2011) point out the disparity in familiarity with the norms, logic, and languages of higher education between students from families and communities with fewer members possessing advanced education. Among these differences are "essential components" including verbal assertiveness, the idea of voluntary participation, specialized jargon, and what is accepted as critical elements of display, all of which are based on white linguistic norms (White & Lowenthal, 2011,). Among the solutions they offer for bridging this gap is for instructors to directly address is "the tacit rules of academic discourse" (e.g., not to question peers and professors appropriately, p. 304).

In a conventional classroom, educational norms are explicated and modelled by the instructor and students familiar with the conventional norms. Behaviors in a classroom can be visibly encouraged or shaped by the instructor as they are being emitted by the students, leading to a vicarious learning effect where students are able to learn from the consequences experienced by others in the same context (Bandura, 1976). In group and team projects, student collaboration takes place outside the classroom. As group norms evolve without the curation of an instructor's monitoring, they may default to conventions and biases brought in from the external world. Groups which have an opportunity to form inclusive norms and a sense of ownership of those norms are likely to have members who internalize them and enforce them in others.

Voice

Voice is defined as the opportunity to present information prior to a decision (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Walker, LaTour, Lind, & Thibault, 1974) and the experience of voice leads to feelings of fairness with regard to a procedural decision. Instrumental models of procedural justice suggest that the experience of voice provides the sense that one can influence the state of affairs in a social context (Hirschman, 1970; Grant 2013). Relational models argue that the experience of voice provides feelings of respect and group commitment (e.g., Tyler & Blader, 2000, Tyler & Degoey, 1995; Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996)

A person's willingness to express voice is affected by two general factors: the sense safety of expressing their voice, and the sense that it will lead to impact. As voice is expressed within groups, the dynamics of the group serve to influence the two factors. Groups typically import the norms and structures of hierarchy themselves conferring a status structure within the groups. These serve to assign members with a predetermined role of who is more liked, and who is the center of communication (Raven, 1959).

Recent work has built on these early findings. For example, Liu et al. (2015) performed a field study involving 142 university students in team projects. Students perceiving themselves as lower status compared to the targets of their voice behavior were more hesitant to express their voice, as well as more attentive to the mood of the target.

In a diverse group of students, group hierarchies will reflect the hierarchical social conventions of society outside the group. Students from higher levels will have a higher sense of voice, whereas those from low levels will perceive that they have less.

Hypothesis Ia: There is a negative relationship between SES and sense of voice after working in teams with no formal ground rules.

Perceptions of Fairness

Perceptions of equity derive from procedural and distributive justice. Distributive justice specifies that one's "profits" are compared to one's investments such as qualifications, effort, risk in particular situations (Homans, 1961). Procedural justice (Thibault & Walker, 1975) refers to fairness in the procedure itself. In the student group, allocations of work, patterns of decision making, and degrees of participation are used in making judgements about the equity of a situation. Decisions around work allocation, how decisions will be made by the group, and the amount of participation from each member can be influenced by the perceived status of individual group members.

While many factors can signal peer status in college student social settings, a student's behavior patterns and self-identity that they bring from outside college contribute to their social status in school. For students from under-represented communities, where education and economic degrees of freedom are limited, this has been implicated as a factor compromising their status with conventional student populations. Factors such as attire, demeanor, and deference to others have been recognized as cues for status assignment in interpersonal relationships (Conway et al., 1996).

In Higher education, "Codes of Power" have been implicated in the assignment of status among college students. Linguistic styles, familiarity of college protocols, college expectations, verbal assertiveness, formality, and explicitness are all norms specific to higher education contexts which may be less emphasized in communities less represented by conventional college student attendance (White & Loewenthal, 2010).

As the student from the lower status background interacts with traditional students, the traditional students' initial judgements lead to a process where the traditional students adjust

their own behaviors towards status and role assignments within the group (Snodgrass 1982, 1992).

In a teamwork setting, while the grades may be equally distributed across all members of the team, the work involved may not be. Moreover, the sense of contributions, as well as the evaluation of effort from each of the other members adds to perceptions of equity within the group.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a negative relationship between SES and a sense of team equity after working in teams with no formal ground rules.

Ground Rules

The transition of team dynamics through time has been extensively researched. A widely discussed model proposes that teams go through a five stage evolution: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman 1965, Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Later work demonstrated the importance of timing for establishing and changing norms and goals. Gersick (1988) found that the transitional changes of groups occurs in a "punctuated equilibrium" trajectory, where the beginning and middle points of a group's task timeline are the most critical inflection points for engaging change. Feldman (1984) suggested that group norms develop through explicit statements by leaders or co-workers, critical incidents in the group's history, primacy, and carryover from prior situations.

In observations of group discussions in classrooms, Lee & McCabe (2021) identified a continuance of what they referred to as "Chilly Climate" where students from demographic groups known for aggressive communication patterns took up between 1.3 to 3 times as much sonic space in discussions than the other groups. They also observed that discussion guidance or management styles from the instructor had significant impact on reducing or increasing these ratios.

This is consistent with Sherf et al.'s, (2018) study of centralization of voice in teams where voice often converges into that of a few dominant members. They argue the risk of the skew of voices in teams to a few jeopardizes both the decision making as well as impoverishes the team from the ideas of the non-dominant members. They conclude that managing teams should not only focus on the amount of discussion, but also on "how voice is distributed within the team" (p. 824).

As mentioned earlier, team members arrive to the team with preconceptions of acceptable behaviors along with judgements of how higher and lower status/power individuals are identified and their own place in the structures. These implicit knowledge structures help members orient themselves in their social environments, including the consequences of their speaking up. While the individuals may be aware of their theories, they are often difficult to articulate with words (Knol et al., 2021).

Given the trajectory of group evolution into teams, providing rules for equitable access to sonic space in the beginning of a group's evolution could acclimate the group towards affording opportunities for individual voice, as well as routinize individuals' behaviors towards regular

contributions to the group deliberations and decision making. It would also decentralize the voice from a few members towards more evenly distributed across the members.

Hypothesis 2: There is an interaction effect between SES and sense of voice after working with teams such that when ground rules are present, students of lower SES levels experience a higher sense of voice after working in teams with ground rules.

As distributive and procedural justice have been advanced as influences on one's sense of equity, voice is one channel a person has to correct imbalances in what they find an inequitable situation. Possessing voice in a situation gives the member the perception that they have influence over a situation and some control over the outcomes. While it is logical that having voice in a decision process would contribute to one's sense of equity, voice has been shown to have an effect even when the participants know they don't have influence over a decision, and even if their opportunity for voice is after the decision (Lind et al., 1990). Providing a structure that will maintain each person's sense of voice will lead to a lower sense of inequity within the group.

Hypothesis 3: There is a negative relationship between voice and sense of inequity such that as students perceive a greater sense of voice, they will perceive less inequity in teamwork.

New teams lack the trust and sophisticated roles between the individuals that have evolved into existence over time in many long term teams. Behaviors such as "extra-behaviors" (Valentine, 2018), transactive memory (Wegner et al., 1991), and complex coordination (Weick & Roberts, 1993) take months of continuous interactions between the members to emerge. While some role structures can be trained into a population of personnel allowing for coordination between complete strangers (e.g., first responders, Bigley & Roberts, 2001), the short time constraints of a typical college class make student team projects more of a group than a team (Valenti et al., 2005).

According to Gersick (1989), change in the status and behavior patterns commenced at the beginning of a work group's lifespan is unlikely. The asymmetry in status and allocations of work and voice among members of a work group will persist mostly unchanged throughout the group's lifecycle. The members of the group and the group as a whole quickly assimilate the dominance of a few voices in the group, and the silence of others as normal and the process of unconscious allocation of those behavior patterns as expected roles of influence or lack of influence begins (Wegner, 1989; Van Den Bois et al., 1996). While the group's norms grow to accept the asymmetric allocation of sonic space, disparities in voice among the group members accumulate.

The tendency of students from higher social backgrounds to behave in ways that advantage voice, and the challenges experienced by students from lower social status backgrounds to do the same, leaves a status gap where high SES students are influencing, if not making, most of the decisions for the group. Those left out are unable to change the trajectory of the project and even prevent their loss of influence within the group. The presence of rules to counter this trajectory could help avoid the crystallization of a sense of inequity by the students.

Additional involvement within the group's sonic space by members traditionally left out also brings more information about the members and their work and personal situations. The salience of higher status students adds their control over the narratives within the group. Members lacking voice are more vulnerable to misconceptions about their situations, skills, and interests due to lack of accurate or current information for the other members.

For all students, a sense of voice will lead to a stronger sense of control over their situations, leading to less of a sense of inequity within the group. Their engagement with the group deliberations and decision making will also provide the larger group a better understanding of each member leading to fewer mis-attributions towards any member.

Hypothesis 3: There is a relationship including sense of voice and the interaction effect between SES and sense of team equity after working with teams such that when ground rules are present, students' from lower SES backgrounds who are experience voice will report a higher sense of team equity after working in teams with ground rules.

METHOD

Participants included 75 university students from a pacific-northwest public university enrolled in a general education introductory writing and communication course. Participants were randomly assigned across two sections of the same course. Of the 75, a total of 65 completed both beginning and ending surveys. Both sections contain identical content and are held at the same time of day. The course was team taught so that topics, assignments, and projects are introduced to both sections at the same time while project management and teamwork assignments are engaged in the subsections. Over the course of the term, students worked in six temporary teams in competition against other teams in their section or against ones from outside sections. Team selection was conducted by random assignment. All students provided their consent to participate and were provided course credit for their participation in the data collection. Mean age was 20.73 (SD = 4.055), and the majority (n = 40) were male.

Members of intervention class were also randomly assigned temporary teams at the start of each of the six team projects. Two handouts were provided, one a blank sheet with lines for group members' names with one for their chosen group leader at top. Another with two ground rules. To ensure allocation of "sonic space" for students more equally, two questions from Mercer et al. (1999) were adapted to enforce an opportunity for each student to speak in a group conversation. Four more lines afterwards for their own group rules. On the first group project, a discussion of what constitutes ground rules and why they are helpful, along with a talk about successful group management and decision techniques. The control group was provided the group member sheet at the beginning of each group project, and received the lecture of successful group management and decision techniques.

Instruments were introduced second day and last day of class for extra credit.

Measures

Scales were administered on the same day for both sections at the beginning and conclusion of the term.

Teamwork index: In work prior to this study, interviews were conducted asking students their primary concerns with working on team projects in schools. The comments topics converged into two general themes: voice and inequity in teamwork. These themes were used to develop a six-item survey.

Social Status: Education status has been used as a crucial component of socioeconomic status in health (Hauser, 1994, Svedberg et al., 2016). Some theorists suggest that it is a sufficient indicator of SES alone as a simplified measure (Cirino et al., 2002, Zill, 1996). Zill, in a summary of indicators to children's health outcomes, illustrated the value of parental education as a proxy for racial and economic advantage of their families. A five level categorical measure was used for respondents to select highest level of parental education spanning from high school or less, to doctoral level.

Results

In Table 1, we provide the results of our correlations. No correlation between parental education and post Team Voice was observed, failing to support H1a. There was a relationship between Parental Education and Team Inequity such that individuals whose ratings of Parental Education were lower, evaluated their sense of Team Inequity higher at the end of the course ($p = .022$), consistent with H1b.

Table 1:
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for All Variables

				Correlation			
	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	Ground Rules (2 = Yes)	1.459	.502					
2	Parental Education	3.11	1.165	.008				
3	Pre "Team Voice"	2.93	.427	-.117	.178			
4	Post "Team Voice"	3.07	.534	.092	.122	.503**		
5	Pre "Team Inequity"	1.510	.502	-.081	-.054	-.045	-.212	
6	Post "Team Inequity"	1.361	.593	-.029	-.267*	-.138	-.412**	.498**

Note: All tests are two tailed. N = 74
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

A regression was first performed on the Team Voice Model (Table 2) without the interaction variable to observe any main effects. While the initial model yielded a significant R value, the only main effect was the Pre Team Voice variable. Parental Education and Ground Rules yielded no significant main effects.

To test Hypothesis 2, a term representing the interaction between Ground Rules and Parental Education was introduced into the regression. The addition led to an R square change in the model of .058 significant at the $p < .05$ level. The resulting model revealed main effects in both the Ground Rules intervention as well as levels of Parental Education of the students. Ground rules were positively correlated with Team Voice yielding a standardized beta of .695 significant at the $p < .05$ level ($p = .013$). Parental Education was also positively associated with Team Voice with a standardized beta of .726, significant at the $p < .05$ level ($p = .026$), partially supporting H1a. The interaction term resulted in a beta of -.937 significant at the $p < .05$ level ($p = .024$). The valence of the interaction term indicates that with a lower level of parental education, ground rules lead to a higher level of Team Voice from experience working on teams, supporting H2. The absence of main effects in the first model suggest that ground rules have an effect lowering Team Voice in participants with higher levels of Parental Education.

Table 2

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.985	.443		2.222	.030
	Ground Rules	.120	.114	.113	1.053	.297
	Parental Education	.012	.048	.026	.240	.811
	Pre Team-Voice	.650	.135	.525	4.798	.000
2	(Constant)	-.198	.665		-.298	.767
	Ground Rules	.737	.287	.695	2.563	.013
	Parental Education	.322	.141	.726	2.275	.026
	Pre Team-Voice	.721	.134	.582	5.364	.000
	Ground Rules X Parental Education	-.198	.085	-.937	-2.323	.024

a. Dependent Variable: Post Team-Voice

While the interaction effect was significant, the effects on the students from the higher parental education compared to the lower were unclear. An ad hoc independent samples T-Test was performed, comparing the mean changes between pre and post student voice was performed. Students whose parents included college education and above were compared with students of some college or less as highest level of education. While there was no significant change observed in the control group, the intervention revealed significance. at the $p < .05$ level ($p = .030$).

In the control group with no Ground Rules, no general significant change was detected in the students with parents of incomplete college or less as highest level of education, while students from families of college or higher educations showed a significant positive change. Conversely, in the Ground Rules condition, students from families with incomplete college education or less experienced a higher sense of voice, while students from college and higher parental educations experienced no increase in voice.

Table 3

Group Statistics

Ground Rules		Parental Education	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
No Ground Rules	Change in Voice	College Grad and Above	14	.2637	.63457	.16960
		Incomplete College or Less	26	-.0539	.46609	.09141
Ground Rules	Change in Voice	College Grad and Above	12	.0589	.29008	.08374
		Incomplete College or Less	22	.3615	.40631	.08663

To evaluate Hypothesis 3, a final regression was performed with Post Team-Inequity as the dependent variable. In the first model, Parental Education showed a standardized beta of -.228 significant at the p <.05 level (p = .04), indicating that individuals whose parental education levels are lower experience teams as involving a higher level of Team inequity. Post Team-Voice was added as a variable. The addition led to an R Square change of .074, p = .011. In this second model, Post Team-Voice resulted in a standardized beta of -.281 significant at the p < .05 level (p = .011). This supports H3, where as Team Voice increases, sense of Team Inequity decreases. In the second model, Parental Education yielded a standardized beta of -.196, significant at the p < .10 level (p = .065).

Table 4

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.810	.353		2.293	.025
	Ground Rules	.046	.128	.040	.362	.719
	Parental Education	-.111	.053	-.228	-2.097	.040
	Pre Team-Inequity	.537	.128	.460	4.203	.000
2	(Constant)	1.781	.499		3.566	.001
	Ground Rules	.066	.123	.056	.537	.593

	Parental Education	-.096	.051	-.196	-1.877	.065
	Pre Team-Inequity	.476	.124	.408	3.835	.000
	Post Team-Voice	-.310	.118	-.281	-2.638	.011
3	(Constant)	2.100	.656		3.199	.002
	Ground Rules	-.151	.313	-.129	-.481	.632
	Parental Education	-.207	.156	-.423	-1.323	.191
	Pre Team-Inequity	.475	.125	.408	3.816	.000
	Post Team-Voice	-.300	.119	-.271	-2.524	.014
	Ground Rules X Parental Education	.069	.092	.298	.752	.455

a. Dependent Variable: Post Team-Inequity

Discussion

College students from families with lower levels of education reported lower levels of voice when participating in group projects. When the groups incorporated ground rules involving communication, the sense of voice in students from families with lower levels of education improved when participating in the group projects. While the deployment of ground rules did not appear to effect students' sense of equity about teamwork, there was a positive relationship between students' sense of voice and their sense of equity in teamwork.

The implication is that unstructured group and teamwork erodes low status students' sense of empowerment. Similar to Snodgrass (1985), the assumption and assignment of subordinate status to members of the team results in the adoption of conventions for whose opinions take priority. Interestingly, in the non-rule teams, students from higher parental education backgrounds increase in their sense of voice. However, with the presence of ground rules, they experienced no increase in sense of voice.

Group work involves creating a social space in which discourse is held, decisions made, and members are intentionally or tacitly assigned roles by both the others as well as the individual member to themselves. Role Theory holds that individuals are members of social positions and hold expectations of their own behaviors as well as others (Biddle, 1986). Divergent role expectations of individuals in identical situations and positions have been recognized across gender (Schneider, 2019) and race (Mui, 1992). In our social environments, the members as well as ourselves hold varying expectations about roles according to characteristics that do not directly relate to our efficacy towards a task at hand. Our findings suggest that introducing ground rules to structure simple communication patterns can disrupt the evolution of role structures within group interactions that perpetuate existing inequities in society at large. In the control population, the low status students lost their sense of voice as time went on while the

high status students experienced growth. In the ground rules population, the low status students experience growth, and the high status students experienced no significant change. In the aggregate, a more even distribution of voice does come at the expense of a loss of voice for others.

Conclusion

These finding are critical in that while the impacts of diversity are still being widely discussed, the idea that bringing individuals with divergent experiences together to precipitate student growth in higher education is approaching a century in age. Social Development Psychologist Erik Erikson postulated that humans have a formative stage in their development where their sense of self identity is profoundly shaped and the opportunity to change their existing trajectory by avoiding commitments made in their past. This stage provides the opportunities for individuals to experiment with new roles and adjust towards those that may best fit their talents and sense of authenticity (Erikson, 1956).

As we have discussed in our investigation, not all encounters with diversity are positive for the members involved. Higher education is a brief window of opportunity to change life trajectories of students for the better. Providing simple structure for equitable discourse is a valuable foundation from which to build a more dynamic model of one's role across situations, as well as the dynamic potential of others that we deal with day to day.

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