

**Human Connection Through Difference: Dialogue and Belonging**

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## Abstract

This paper judgmentally reflects on the relationship between human connection and dimensions of difference through my personal experiences in dialogue and campus life. Drawing on course readings including Murthy (2020), Way et al. (2018), Harro (2000), Adichie (2009), and Yankelovich (1999), the paper discusses that difference does not weaken connection but can support it when tackled through intentional dialogue and identity security. Even though my experiences while I was in intersession, structured dialogue sessions, and conversations about racial and religious belonging, I examines how connection is shaped by occurrence, weakness, and institutional structures. I explored how inequity and power influence access to belonging, complicating the idea that connection is simply a matter of individual effort. By reflecting on my shift from debate oriented thinking to dialogue centered engagement, I identified a key insight that human connection strengthens when individuals engage difference with curiosity and awareness of structural power. Ultimately, this paper concludes that meaningful connection requires both interpersonal honesty and critical reflection on how identity and belonging operate within social systems.

*Keywords: human connection, dimensions of difference, dialogue, belonging, identity, inequity*

In a society that frequently portrays difference as disruptive, my experiences this semester in class have led me to a different conclusion: difference does not weaken human connection it strengthens it. Through structured dialogue and personal experiences at Cornell, I have come to understanding that connection deepens when the individuals feel confident in their identities and engage across differences with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Human connection and dimensions of difference are not conflicting strengths rather, they are tangled. Our identities shape how we connect, and connection becomes more meaningful when it acknowledges the realities of power, belonging, and perspective. However, I have also come to recognize that while difference can deepen connection, inequity and institutional structures shape who has access to belonging in the first place.

One of the strongest moments of connection I experienced this semester occurred during intersession, when athletes return to campus early around January 4<sup>th</sup> before the semester begins. With no academic distractions and a singular focus on training, I unexpectedly had to confront solitude. I realized I did not know how to unbores myself without constant stimulation. That realization pushed me toward small but intentional activities building Legos, spending more time with teammates, and connecting with athletes from other teams. What began as loneliness transformed into intentional connection. This experience aligns with Murthy's (2020) argument that connection is not accidental but requires thoughtful presence and effort. By slowing down and being undistracted, I created space for deeper relationships. Connection became stronger precisely because it was planned rather than automatic.

Similarly, in my dialogue section, being away from our phones for three to four hours each week created an environment where weakness felt possible. Over time, I learned personal

stories from classmates that I never would have known otherwise. One peer shared experience growing up in California and navigating racism. Another explained his Korean and Jamaican heritage and the historical migration patterns that shaped his family's story. These conversations demonstrated what Way et al. (2018) describe as the "crisis of connection" the idea that modern life often limits deep relational bonds. In our section, slowing down, listening carefully, and speaking through "I" statements countered that crisis. The LARA framework (Listen, Affirm, Respond, Add) shifted my instinct from reacting to understanding. Rather than preparing rebuttals, I practiced affirming others lived experiences before offering my own perspective. This structure made conversations more intentional and less reactive.

A particularly impactful moment occurred during a conversation about identity with a Jewish peer. We were discussing our experiences at Cornell when he shared that he could connect instantly with almost any Jewish alum on LinkedIn just based on shared identity. He described Shabbat dinners and Morrison as spaces where he never had to sit alone in the dining hall because someone Jewish would always invite him to join. I realized I felt something similar when interacting with Black alumni and current Cornell students. There is an immediate sense of shared understanding rooted in race and lived experience. Though we come from very different backgrounds some from the desert of Alaska or another one from the snow resort of Arizona overall we both described nearly identical feelings of identity-based belonging. Our conversation revealed that dimensions of difference do not always separate people they can create powerful bridges within communities.

This experience reflects Harro's (2000) "Cycle of Socialization," which explains how identities are reinforced through organizations long before individuals knowingly choose them.

Religious and racial communities at Cornell create structured spaces of belonging that feel natural and automatic. These identity-based networks strengthen connection. However, they also reveal that belonging is not equally distributed. Not every student arrives on campus with an established identity community that ensures they will never sit alone. Dimensions of difference shape not only how we connect but whether connection is readily accessible.

In this sense, the crisis of connection described by Way et al. (2018) is not only about technology or distraction. It is also shaped by inequity. Some identities come with built-in networks of recognition and affirmation, while others must have to work harder to establish community. Loneliness and belonging are influenced by how institutions validate or marginalize certain identities. As Young (1990) talked about in her framework of the Five Faces of Oppression, marginalization and cultural colonization shape whose identities are normalized and whose are viewed invisible, which in turn affects who experiences belonging as automatic vs conditional. For example, marginalized students lack built-in social networks and must struggle to gain access to belonging. Cultural imperialism occurs when dominant identities define what's normal on campus based on their own perspective, making other identities feel out of place or misunderstood. Individuals also feel disempowered when individuals feel they lack the institutional legitimacy to speak across status differences, even in dialogue spaces. These forms of oppression do not be dramatic, but they shape who gets experiences connection as automatic and who experiences it as uncertain.

Recognizing this challenged my earlier assumption that connection is simply a matter of effort. It is also a matter of access. Inequity can shape who feels invited into conversation and whose voice is considered valuable.

The conversation with my peer also reminded me of Adichie's (2009) concept of the "single story." Without dialogue, I might have understood Jewish identity through simplified narratives, just as others might flatten Black identity into stereotypes. Hearing his personal experience disrupted those assumptions. Dialogue moved identity from concept to lived involvedness. Rather than debating generalizations, we exchanged stories. That shift transformed difference from something categorical into something relational.

My background in policy debate further shaped how I understand connection. Debate trained me to argue multiple perspectives and expect counterarguments. While this skill made me comfortable with disagreement, it also framed conversations as competitions. Dialogue, in contrast, reframed difference as an opportunity for understanding rather than victory. As Yankelovich (1999) explains, debate seeks to win, while dialogue seeks to understand. Through dialogue I learned to ground my contributions in personal narrative rather than general claims. Difference became generative rather than threatening. Even in my friendships, where we spend much of our time debating topics, those disagreements strengthen our bond because they are rooted in mutual respect and curiosity rather than dominance.

At the same time, I began questioning why I personally feel comfortable engaging across difference. My confidence may stem from debate training, but it may also reflect a sense of identity security. As a Black student with access to identity-based belonging on campus, I do not often question whether I have a community. Not everyone experiences that same self-confidence. For students whose identities are more frequently marginalized, speaking across difference may carry higher stakes. This realization complicated my earlier belief that connection does not require examining power. While I may feel free to initiate conversation regardless of status,

power dynamics still influence whose voices are heard and valued. These dynamics reflect structural power, which operates beyond individual intention and influences whose perspectives are taken seriously within institutions. While I may benefit from certain forms of privilege that make cross difference engagement feel relatively safe, others navigating oppression may experience dialogue as carrying greater personal risk. A janitor may not feel equally empowered to challenge a CEO, even if both are technically present in the same conversation. Connection cannot be fully separated from legitimacy.

Ultimately, I have come to see that human connection and dimensions of difference strengthen one another when approached through dialogue and self-awareness. Difference introduces new perspectives, histories, and experiences that improve relationships. However, connection becomes meaningful only when it acknowledges how power and belonging operate. When individuals feel secure in their identities and are willing to enter one another's frames of reference, difference becomes a bridge rather than a barrier. At the same time, building more equitable structures of belonging is essential if connection is to be accessible to all.

Through intersession solitude, dialogue conversations, and reflections on identity-based belonging, I have learned that connection is not the absence of difference it is the intentional engagement of difference. Rather than avoiding identity, I now see value in exploring it. Rather than fearing disagreement, I view it as an opportunity for growth. Moving forward, I hope to approach conversations not as contests to win, but as spaces to understand and expand my perspective. In doing so, I believe my human connection becomes not weaker, but stronger.

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