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**The Role of Perception in Fostering  
or Impeding the Unity through Diversity**

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## **Introduction**

When I was invited to participate and submit a paper in this conference, I was wondering about what to write and from where to start. Unity and diversity is a broad subject that involves many crucial topics, as much as the diversity in cultures and backgrounds. However, I have chosen to start my contribution from describing my own experience which gives a real example on how different people with different cultures, languages and habits can live, work and communicate with each other effectively and successfully.

As a Palestinian and a New Zealander, who is proud of both cultures, I still remember when the mayor of our city in New Zealand said that we should not forget our cultures; in contrast, we need to keep them and convey them to the others, so we can all benefit from the diversity and accomplish a true unity. I think the change that has taken place to me was in my perception toward others rather than just a short-term modification. In fact, this was the first step in which my perception became more positive toward others' cultures. Indeed, this has enriched my knowledge, and the knowledge of others from different cultures. For example, as I have become familiar with the Japanese SUSHI, the Indian Curry, and the New Zealand Pavlova, my friends have become familiar with Hummus and Tabbouleh,

**Perception and Unity in Diversity:**

People are different in nature and distinctive; part of this difference lies in their perspectives about social issues such as the unity and diversity process. This includes the extent of tolerance and the boundaries of acceptance of unity that people are willing to have, as well as, the ceiling of diversity they are ready to live with. Diversity is defined as "otherness," or "those human qualities that are different from our own and outside the groups in which we belong" (University of Maryland Diversity Database, 2009, p. 2).

Perception, among other issues, plays a major role in explaining the way that people behave and act; it is a part of individuals' cognition of objects and how they deal with them (Bordeux, Boulic and Thalmann, 1999). Although perception is an essential part of human awareness and behavior, it is more evident in some fields, such as the acceptance of others and the way of dealing with different cultures. According to Adams (1995), the human's behavior is guided by his/her anticipation which is led by the perception, thus, if we anticipate destruction we take avoiding action. Therefore, living with others and respecting their cultures and diversity, as well as, working and cooperating with them and finding out a sort of unity are subject to our positive perspectives about the unity and diversity, as perception strongly has a key function in this regard. Creating awareness among people regarding the benefits, necessity, and the constructive role of unity through diversity, in other words, building a culture of unity in diversity among people, is very crucial for a successful process of unity through diversity. Indeed, "personal initiative is needed to make real change" (Ruys, 1994, p.3)

### **Perception' modifications for Effective Unity in Diversity**

The individuality of perception's components, such as feelings and attitudes (Samson & Daft, 2005), enlarges the importance of paying more attention to individuals as a base of reconcile unity through diversity. Consequently, recognizing how people perceive the diversity, whether as a sort of fragmentation or a source of support and balancing, is essential in accomplishing the phrase Unity in Diversity. Working for unity through diversity is very important, but at the same time it is not a simple business that is just based on particular technical steps. It is more than this and more complex than it seems. Effective implementation of this phrase requires preparing individuals to be ready for accepting the culture of unity in diversity. This needs, in the first place, to focus on individuals within the society to reinforce their perceptions and create awareness inside them, thus to make them more willing and ready from inside for this change. This involves studying individuals' perspectives about unity and diversity and then stimulating their perceptions. In this regard, Sekuler and Blake (2002, p.11) note that "studying perception enables one to design devices that ensure optimal perceptual performance". Studying and analyzing how the people perceive diversity helps in exploring their viewpoints about the multiplicity of cultures and the profit of unity. This paper aims to discuss and illustrate the key role of perception in accomplishing the unity in diversity principle through addressing benefits of unity through diversity.

### **Principles of Establishing Effective Unity through Diversity**

To establish a well recognition about unity among people from different cultures, the acceptance from individuals should be existed (Lalonds, 1997). In this regard, Siddiqi (2001, p.2), points to the following principles as the base of right accomplishment of unity in diversity; these are: "the dignity of the human beings, the basic equality of all human beings, universal human rights, and fundamental freedom of thought, conscience and belief". The challenge that confronts us is how to consider and fulfill these principles as a means for convincing people to support diversity. Obviously, if people do not have the right to choose, do not feel that they are respected, and the equity could not be achieved through unity in diversity, they will, whether consciously or spontaneously, resist it. Ruys (1994, p.1), in this regard, found that "traditionally unequal relationship are destructive to everyone -- both those on top, and those on the bottom". In our perception, as humans, if any change or process will not contribute to us, it will be seen as a useless one. Therefore, considering the above principles is a curial step for an effective unity through diversity process.

### **Benefits and Advantage of Unity in Diversity**

The second matter for gaining a positive response of people toward unity in diversity is to communicate the benefits of diversity and how unity in diversity could develop our societies and improve the quality of our life. Ruys (1994, p.1) states that "change is difficult, especially for those who don't see any reason for it". Ruys adds that "we think about why we value diversity in order to motivate ourselves to take steps that can seem difficult". Many researchers (1996) and Ruys (1994), point to numerous benefits of unity in diversity. For example, Berthelot (1996) states that unity through diversity is vital in teaching people how to think and feel beyond "the individualistic Me to the interdependent We". Berthelot (1996) notes that unity in diversity is a means that learns people how to live and work together productively for mutual benefit and to find common ground in conflict. In addition, unity in diversity, as Berthelot (1996, p. 1) conceives it, incorporates the following: " protecting equal human rights for all, improving human relations, celebrating pluralism, forging healthy relationships across all kinds of diversity, learning to actually capitalize on diversity, striving for common ground and mutual benefit, and collaborating for the common good".

The importance of these benefits does not lie in just defining them, the most important issue here is to communicate these benefits to people to inspire and modifying their perceptions toward unity and diversity. Otherwise, without recognizing these benefits by targeted people (in societies), they will not work.

**Conclusion:**

any effort for an effective implementation of unity and diversity process should consider the perception of people. Perception, among other issues, plays a major role in driving behavior of people in accepting others, and thus, fostering unity within diversity. Creating a culture of unity in diversity among people is critical in generating a real recognition of unity and diversity, and thus in inspiring people not just to promote diversity, but to celebrate it. One way to do this is through communicating benefits and advantages of implementing unity in diversity. Studying, analyzing and exploring how people perceive unity in diversity, as well as, finding ways for modifying the perception toward more commitment and belief toward unity through diversity are needed as the first step in successfully putting the phrase "Unity in Diversity" into practice.

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