

**Title:** Diversity Is Not Enough: Why Collective Intelligence Requires Both Diversity and Disagreement

**Podcast:** Heterodox Out Loud

**Episode:** 35

## **Transcript**

### **Ravi Kudesia**

Time and time again, I think we are culturally almost programmed to think that somehow differences are bad, and we should value people who are similar to us. But I see no evidence for that whatsoever. The evidence that I always see is that as I'm teaching that it starts to get enacted in the classroom. It's like, oh, you saw this very differently than I did. What's that about? And then that works so well.

### **Zach Rausch**

Ravi Kudesia on Heterodox Out Loud. In this episode, we explore a concept revered by many and challenged by few in higher education: the value of diversity. We look beyond the surface of this belief and consider how different kinds of diversity impact team building, decision-making, and collective intelligence. I'm Zach Rausch. Let's dive in. Our guest today is Ravi Kudesia, assistant professor at the Fox School of Business at Temple University. He teaches courses on power, influence, and negotiation. He's won numerous teaching awards and has appeared in the Financial Times, New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, CNN, and other media. In our interview, we discussed the often-overlooked importance of both deep-level diversity and constructive disagreement. Before we chat, let's listen to Ravi's blog post that he wrote in the summer of 2021 on our website.

**The full blog post can be found on our website here:**

[Diversity Is Not Enough: Why Collective Intelligence Requires Both Diversity and Disagreement](#)

### **Zach Rausch**

Now, my interview with Ravi. So, Ravi, welcome to Heterodox Out Loud.

### **Ravi Kudesia**

Thanks for having me.

**Zach Rausch**

Can you tell us a bit about your academic story, and how you became interested in the work of Heterodox Academy?

**Ravi Kudesia**

If I was to think back to it, probably one of the most important moments for me was, I imagine this would be 8th grade, but I haven't really gone back and dug up the transcripts, but I remember taking a class, and in the class there was a debate portion where you had to take some sort of social issue and debate one side or the other as part of a classroom assignment. And I remember really wanting to debate one side of it. And then the teacher sort of very wisely said, "Oh, is this something that you feel strongly about?" And I was like, "Oh, yeah, I really want to take the side. I think I can win with this side, and I believe in it." And he says, "Well, great, I'm going to make you debate the other side." And so he made me debate the exact opposite of what I believed in. And I found myself not only kind of being challenged by that, but enjoying it in some sort of way. It really did kind of change my perspective on the issue itself. And so I remember that being a really formative experience, just one about the power of education in general to kind of help us challenge, preconceptions, expand our ways of thinking about issues, and then also set the stage where there can be a little discomfort, but then there's growth that happens from that.

**Zach Rausch**

How did you get from this formative experience in 8th grade and to starting to do research on this topic?

**Ravi Kudesia**

This is a case where this study idea came about when I was working in Singapore at an institution called the Future Resilient Systems Lab. And it's basically an academic think tank that was created and funded by the Singaporean government. And their thought process was that problems that we're going to be dealing with, especially in advanced societies with technology that are densely populated, that the sorts of issues that they'll be facing are going to be interdisciplinary. And so they got together people who were physicists, urban planners, behavioral scientists, and we're all kind of in one space trying to tackle these complex interdisciplinary problems. And in a really meta sense,

the project came about because I had these interests, but I was talking to people who were high level coders and data science backgrounds, and we're working with models from physics. And they said, "Well, how do we apply this stuff to behavioral science?" And so that's part of what really motivated this study was being surrounded by different people with different backgrounds, what we would call deep level diversity, and then saying, "Well, what can we produce with these different skill sets? Can we bring them together?"

So this project is actually pretty personally meaningful because it was a PhD student with these skills and said, "Hey, I want to study human systems. How do I understand this stuff?" And then it was that bringing together very different viewpoints and backgrounds that then generated this project.

### **Zach Rausch**

For anyone who may have had a little bit of a difficult time, maybe following the study, can you give us a brief elevator pitch of what you found and what you did?

### **Ravi Kudesia**

We typically think of teams as being very important for solving complex problems. So that's why we have juries and teams. That's why science is done increasingly in teams. You can look at things like the creation of knowledge, right? Patents are more often created by teams and teams of larger sizes. So generally, teams are really important for solving complex problems. But then the question is sort of you can put people in teams, but then how do you get that collective intelligence? So why are more minds better than fewer minds? And overwhelmingly kind of what we know is that people need to think differently. And so if you're coming to a team with different backgrounds and viewpoints and experiences, so if you have an engineer and a lawyer and somebody in marketing and somebody in operations, well gosh, they're going to be way better at planning a rollout of a product than people who are all just marketers. And so there is this sense that you kind of need diversity, deep level diversity in terms of people's backgrounds and experiences and such. But even then, you put people who are different together, and there's no guarantee that they're actually going to solve these problems.

So what we did in this study is we did something called an agent-based model, which is a form of computer simulation where we simulated how different types or different levels of diversity so how different we all are in terms of the knowledge that we're bringing to the table can interact or combine with different ways of sharing information. So do I share information that just agrees with

you? Do I share information that disagrees with you? Do I share information randomly, or do I just share information that's going to support the decision that I want? And we run tens of thousands of iterations across all sorts of different spaces of how much diversity there is within a team, which information sharing strategy they're using, then we can kind of see to what extent are people arriving at decisions that we know are optimal versus not.

### **Zach Rausch**

And the core finding?

### **Ravi Kudesia**

Yeah, the core findings, I guess, would be fourfold. One is that diversity matters. So across all the different strategies of sharing information, the worst strategy across the board is just sharing information that agrees with other people. And it's basically that when everyone thinks the same way, no one's really thinking at all. Interestingly enough, kind of, if all you care about is accuracy, one of the best ways you can go is random information sharing. So we all have different bits of information and you share a random bit of information. Why would that be helpful? Well, because you're really elaborating the space, the information space as fully as possible. But what's the problem? Well, the problem is basically this is one of the things that we're concerned about is information overload is in today's day and age, there's so much information available about any sort of problem that the more information it gets, random information sharing just becomes unfeasible. You might get the accurate information, but it takes a lot of time to get there. So the final, fourth and final sort of key finding basically is that disagreement is the optimal strategy if you're trying to balance off speed and accuracy, and that is the way that people tended to arrive at accurate decisions, but in a way that wasn't dramatically impacted by information overload.

So those would be the four key findings.

### **Zach Rausch**

Is disagreement, though by itself useful? Does that need to be packaged in some sort of larger environment and culture of an organization or team?

### **Ravi Kudesia**

One way that you could think about it in terms of where it's been studied a lot in my field of organizational behavior and organization theory is in terms of types of conflict. Right. So we might be in a team and we might disagree about stuff. Right. There are at least two major different types of disagreement. We could have relationship-oriented conflict where there's something about just interpersonally we're not getting along. Or there could be conflict around tasks, which is that we disagree about how to get things done. But if you look at performance, are we making good decisions. So relationship conflict, that's very negative. When we dislike each other, we don't make good decisions. But when we're disagreeing about tasks, the effects are kind of neutral and become quite positive. When you can disagree about tasks without getting into the relationship conflict. And so to the extent that you can master the art of disagreeing about tasks without getting into the relationship type conflict, that's really important and really valuable.

### **Zach Rausch**

This is just so fascinating because I feel like when we start thinking about other areas within higher education, more social science, you start to get into areas of identity, of issues of politics, issues of race, where I feel like the line between trying to address maybe task-level issues permeates really quickly into relationship level disagreements. When we talk about or when you talk about deep level diversity, what you've been talking about is mostly around differences in educational background of what you study, what experiences you've had. Is that the most important forms of deep level diversity or what about things like political diversity or religious diversity? Where does that play into creating successful teams?

### **Ravi Kudesia**

So when I'm talking about deep versus surface-level diversity, I'm talking about basically surface level meaning things that are only skin deep. So what is maybe your demographics or your nationality or something like that versus deep level diversity, it's all the stuff that goes sort of beyond just skin deep, which would be your attitudes, your viewpoints, your experiences. So what is your training in? Because clearly an engineer would approach a problem very different than a lawyer would. Deep level diversity are things around your cognitive styles, intuitive versus deliberative decision making, these sorts of things. So deep level diversity kind of gets at that more underlying aspect. I think that's a useful way to talk about the differences and the different ways of conceptualizing diversity is, are we talking about things that are at the skin level or things that are deeper than that? And so then the question would be basically is you talked about religious diversity, is it just a category that you're a member of, and it's really only at the surface level, or does it really

inform how you view the world? Same thing, too, are you just a member of a political group, a political party, because that's just where everyone in your zip code is, and you haven't really considered that, or is it something that you've actually internalized these beliefs and it actually shapes how you view the world?

So I think that would be the right distinction. It's, I think, a little limiting to think about demographics or identity groups or political labels as necessarily determining something about the nature of mind.

### **Zach Rausch**

So, when you have a lot of diversity, if you have deep level political, religious diversity, other forms of diversity, how do you foster a team that you make it work? Like, do you have any tips in the classroom or in business how do you make this happen?

### **Ravi Kudesia**

Yeah, that's the million dollar question. So one of the things about our study was that, well, we ran a computer simulation, right? And so the question is always, hey, well, does this apply in the real world, right? If we look at the task that we set up in our simulation is based on something known as a hidden profile set up. These model systems that people can study and they indicate something about how the world functions. And so there's a lot of psychological research that actually takes people in organizations or takes undergraduate students, puts them in labs, and has them engage in these sorts of problems. The key factor here is how much of information is individual and idiosyncratic. So only I have it, versus does the collective have it? And do we share it all? That's the key distinguishing feature here, because if it's information that one person has that other people don't have, then that's when you need you have this sort of diversity of background, and that's where information sharing becomes more helpful. So the meta analysis, which is a systematic analysis of studies, have basically found that if you set teams up such that people have unique information that other members of the teams don't have, they become eight times more likely to fail.

So if I have information that you don't have relevant to the problem, we're more likely to fail because we don't tend to discuss around our diverse backgrounds, we tend to talk about what we have in common, not what's different about us. Right. But the interesting features. They actually broke this down and said, well, what happens if sometimes just based on the way that the information is allocated, they all happen to agree about the same conclusion? So hey, we have to

decide between A, B, and C, and we all want A, right? So just based on the way the information is allocated, if we all agree at the start, we're 17 times more likely to fail versus if we disagree at the start, just based on the way the information is allocated, we're only about like 2.5 times more likely to fail. So the actual behavioral observations of this suggests that if you just set things up so that people are going to disagree, if there is some disagreement there, then that will prompt information sharing, that will prompt discussion, that will lead to better outcomes.

### **Zach Rausch**

What advice would you give to students, to teachers, from the insights that you've gained from all of this research.

### **Ravi Kudesia**

One of the contexts that I study quite frequently are something called high reliability organizations, and those would be things like air traffic control, naval aircraft carriers, nuclear power operations. These are contexts where a major error or failure would be catastrophic. The technologies and operations that they're working with are extremely complex, and you would expect there to be a lot of failures, but somehow there aren't. It's relatively rare that you hear about something like accidents on naval aircraft carriers. Right. So why is this what is it that they're doing that can be helpful for us? Right. And a lot of it starts with modeling. So there was an example. There was like a nuclear carrier, Carl Vincent, and somebody was working on the deck reported losing a tool. The problem is that if you leave a tool on the deck, it can just get sucked in to the engines of a plane that's taking off or landing. So it was a major issue because all the aircraft were redirected to land bases, and they had to sit there and search for the small little tool. But what would a normal organization do? A normal organization would reprimand the person and blame them and say, well, you messed up.

But instead, the next day, that person was recognized at a formal ceremony. Right. So that's like counterintuitive. Or there was an instance where there was a test of Redstone ballistic missile and the missile went out of control. And so there was an engineer who said, actually, wait, I might have been responsible for the short circuit during this prelaunch testing. And he brought it up publicly. And then they did some analysis. And in fact, yeah, it was this engineer who caused the accident. And instead of getting in trouble, the leader of that organization sent him a bottle of champagne. Why? Because what we're doing is we're showing that speaking up is encouraged and is valuable. And so if you are talking about things and sharing things that might be uncomfortable, that might be

dangerous, well, you kind of have to be encouraged. That has to happen within a set of norms and practices that make the value of those sorts of contributions justified. So for me, I draw a lot of inspiration from cases where, like these high reliability organizations, where it just matters so much that we do things right, that we just have to honor disagreement.

We have to honor diversity of information and viewpoints and perspectives, because if we don't, we're in trouble. So I try to, as much as possible, model it, talk about it just like those leaders did. When I see someone step out and say something that's risky, I encourage it, I value it, I engage with it. And so one of the things that I will incessantly bring up is the fact that differences lead to value, not similarities. So time and time again, I think we are culturally almost programmed to think that somehow differences are bad and we should value people who are similar to us. But I see no evidence for that whatsoever. The evidence that I always see is that as I'm teaching that it starts to get enacted in the classroom. It's like, "Oh, you saw this very differently than I did. What's that about?" And then that works so well. Once people get it, it's magic. It's great in the classroom.

### **Zach Rausch**

What would you like to leave our listeners with make sure that your core argument you'd like them to take?

### **Ravi Kudesia**

Yeah, I would just say that again recognizing that value of differences is central and then to realize that you can bring those differences to bear on tasks without it having to spill over into relationship conflict. And that again, people who do this well, whether it's top management teams, whether it's people in high reliability organizations, they do this, it's possible. And the way to do this is to change the nature of our attributions such that this agreement isn't a personal thing. It's just how we interact here because we care about getting things right.

### **Zach Rausch**

Ravi Kudesia on Heterodox Out Loud. If you enjoyed this episode, subscribe and listen to more thought-provoking takes from our blog authors. To engage deeper in these conversations, join us at our 2022 Heterodox Academy conference in Denver this June. We'll be joined by hundreds of members and friends and you'll get to hear from outstanding speakers including Jonathan Haidt, Batya Ungar-Sargon, Matt Yglesias, Glenn Loury, John McWhorter and many more. Get details at

[HeterodoxAcademy.org](https://www.HeterodoxAcademy.org). Thanks to Davies' Content for producing this podcast and to Kara Boyer on our communications team. I'm Zach Rausch, until next time.