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A Confrontation with Diversity: Communication and Culture in the 21st Century

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IN his absorbing work, ***In my Father's House,*** Anthony Appiah (1992) recounts the following incident:

> "In the mid-seventies, I was driving with a (white) English friend in the Ghanaian city of Takoradi. My friend was at the wheel. We stopped at a road junction behind a large timber truck, and the driver, who failed to see us in his rear view mirror, backed toward us. My English friend sounded our horn, but the driver went on backing–until he hit and broke our windscreen. It was plain enough whose fault–in the sense of the legal system–the incident was. Yet none of the witnesses was willing to support our version of the story" (p. 8).

By way of background, Appiah notes that "In other settings, one might have assumed that his was a reflection of racial solidarity" (p. 8). Instead, however, the Ghanaians refused to corroborate his and the Englishman's story because the Africans considered the issue to be between a person with money (the Englishman) and those without money (the Ghanaians). This legal and cultural system conspired against Appiah and his friend.

Appaiah's point is that to reduce the sociological, legal, and economic encounter to the simplistic issue of race is self-defeating, for it omits the complexity and elegance of human behavior. Of course, the failure to understand people from other cultures is not new. Interactions among disparate people have created misinterpretations and conflict at least since well before the 16th century, that is, before Northern Europeans came into contact with people from other continents (Martin Bernal, 1987). Rereading Appiah's story, however, we were struck by how pertinent it is to the present state of communication–especially intercultural communication. We now live in a world of "time-space compression," to use Harvey's (1989) phrase. Industrialization, democratization, urbanization, immigration, the computer chip, and Cable News Network (CNN), along with other compelling forces, have changed

the way in which we communicate, and yet, our ways and means of understanding these changes have not caught up with the actual events that have spun so powerful a revolution.

In July 1999, Harold Hodgkinson (1999), one of the premier demographers in the United States, brought the issue of diversity's complexity to light in one of his lectures at Walden University. In his lecture, Hodgkinson recited some striking statistics, which we believe introduces us to potential collisions between people from different cultural backgrounds that scholars and teachers in our discipline should be poised to examine. According to Hodgkinson:

> "There are currently 5.8 billion humans on the planet; 14% are white, declining 9% by 2010."
>
> "Half of Americans live in suburbs, 1/4 in small towns and rural areas, 1/4 in big cities. The typical commute is from a suburban home to a suburban job."
>
> "Over 85% of today's immigrants come from non-Europeans sources (for the first time)"
>
> "Nine states have half of our people, 41 states compete for the other half. ***Nothing*** is distributed equally across the U.S."
>
> "There are about 220 nations in the world. Each nation has some population living in the U.S."
>
> "All this increasing diversity is happening in only about 200 of our 3,100 counties–80% of our counties are 90-95% white. Half of all U.S. Asians live in only three metro areas–San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. Eighty percent of blacks are in the southeast; 70% of Hispanics are in the southwest."

Even a cursory examination of these statistics indicates that the numbers are a potential resource for understanding the intercultural roots of communication dynamics, from rhetoric and mass communication, to theory and practice, to processes and products, to the very nature of *meaning*. Other factors that are unrelated to our task also are apparent in the statistics, including concerns about sufficient air to breathe, ecological issues, and food production and supply.

Given the complex and changing dynamics of North American society, what are some fascinating possibilities of cultural understanding? How can humans function with "sensitivity and alertness?" (Nussbaum 1997, p. 8) How can we get along in a compressed world? (Martin Albrow, 1997; David Harvey, 1989)

Our motive in posing these questions is not to present a whirlwind tour of diversity, but simply to explore what we consider to be some important issues that are driving the human caravan in North America's shift from monoculturalism to multiculturalism. Answers to such questions should tell us a great deal about how to communicate in the next century. The essay is divided into three sections. Part one explores the framework of creolization and its implications for the communication discipline. Part two examines some social and cultural factors that possibly will shape the nature and content of persuasion in the twenty-first century. Finally, part three continues the focus on persuasion, with emphasis on the

intersection between deterritorialization and diversity. We end with a research agenda that we hope will prove useful in the field of communication.

CREOLIZATION OF CULTURE AND THE "GLOBAL ECUMENE"

In our movement toward diversity, what will be the resultant society with such a rapid transformation from a largely Anglo-Saxon culture in the United States, for example, to a *creolized* culture? A *creole* is someone of a mixed racial and/or ethnic origin. The important characteristic feature of a creole is the merging of a diverse cultural heritage in a person or a language. In Haiti, for example, the lingua franca is creole, which is a mix of French and African languages. Many countries in West Africa speak *pidgin*, which is a creolized version of English and several African languages. In Louisiana, there is a group of people referred to as creole who are of mixed Spanish, French, and African descent. Because of diversity we are extending creolization to include all ethnic groups and the language they bring to the culture.

Creolized cultures can be the resultant diverse culture of a country such as the United States given the emerging numbers of Asians, Hispanics, and other immigrants from non-Western cultures who are "merging" their indigenous cultures with that of their new host culture in the United States (Calloway-Thomas, Cooper and Blake, 1999). In such a resultant culture, each of the major ethnic, racial, religious, and co-cultural groups will contribute significantly to the creolization process. The new culture will have to manifest several elements of each of the major co-cultural blocks in society, incorporating, for example, values and belief systems and attitudes (Hannerz, 1992). However, the merging cultural systems may clash. For instance, rituals in some Asian and African cultures involving controversial practices such as female circumcision and the use of herbal medicines brought in from Asian and African countries can create serious areas of dispute and confrontation as the creolization process evolves (Fadiman, 1997; Gonzalez, 1997; Samavor & Porter, 2000).

In addition to such potential clashes, cultural changes and adjustments do not occur in revolutionary ways. Cultural changes *evolve*. Geertz (1973) observes that moving from imagining change to actually living under conditions that have changed are radically different things. So even though we can imagine creolization as an option, living in a creolized culture will be an entirely different matter. The evolutionary process may prove to be difficult to a point of provoking violent resistance by certain groups in the host country. As a result of such dynamics, we are in need of explanatory hypotheses and theories that will explicate changes in human diversity. Real changes require new research and ways of viewing communication phenomena and events.

In terms of the evolution of a creolized culture, some critical issues that our discipline might consider for analysis and discussion would seem to include the following questions.

First, What will form the foundations of values in a creolized culture? Zarefsky (1995) notes, for example, that "The core concept or fundamental subject matter of the discipline is *meaning* which resides in the relationship between messages and people" (p.111). If we answer the foundational question in the traditional way in which Westeners have answered it, by reference to the things that mean most to people, that is, in terms of history, customs, religion, and ancestry, then a dialogue is required to bring people from different backgrounds together so that they can have a common base from which to interact. In a diverse world, whose history will we have a dialogue about to generate a common base of knowledge and meaning? Will the diversity of 2010, for example, accept European modes as ***content*** for the common base? By the year 2010, according to Hodgkinson (1999), white membership on the planet will be around 9%. In light of these observations, where will meaning reside in diverse relationships? Of course, we are not suggesting here an essentialist view of communication, but rather, a basis for cross-cultural understanding.

Second, one of the foundational principles that undergirds the very notion of persuasion is trust. What effect will increased creolization have on establishing trust among humans? As early as fifth century B.C. Aristotle, the distinguished student of Plato, theorized that the believability of the speaker has a bearing on persuasion. Aristotle declared, "the orator must not only try to make the argument of his speech demonstrative and worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to decide, in the right frame of mind" (Aristotle, book II, p. 90). Moreover, Aristotle claims that "When people are feeling friendly and placable, they think one sort of thing; when they are feeling angry or hostile, they think something totally different or the same thing with a different intensity" (Book two, p. 91).

His theories raise serious issues about what happens in a society when there are possibly insufficiently shared values out of which to build trust. Francis Fukuyama (1999), in his book, *Trust*, argues that "it is possible to have too much diversity and arrive at a situation in which people in a society have nothing in common besides the legal system. . . ." (p. 308). Our aim here is not to be iconoclastic, nor to endorse Fukuyma's argument, but rather to raise a host of issues about diversity and communication. Despite the unpleasant connotations of Fukuyama's position, which raises hackles, it seems appropriate for scholars in the discipline to examine some of the unresolved issues about credibility that diversity has raised. Of course, issues of trust extend well beyond diversity into the realm of politics and other forms of sociability, such as family and civic and social organizations.

The most straightforward extension of our concern as communication scholars, however, will be to quantify further (or at least collect more ethnographic data), and thus to establish convincingly the role of trust or credibility in a diverse society. For example, the following obvious question has probably occurred to readers already: how do citizens negotiate trust out of competing moral visions? (Hunter, 1991) And most critically, how does persuasion function in an era of decreasing trustworthiness? What is its content? Its nature?

Third, what will be the public language of this creolized culture? In his provocative book, *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language*, Steven Pinker (1999) observes that "Language comes so naturally to us that it is easy to forget what a strange and miraculous gift it is. All over the world members of our species fashion their breath into hisses and hums and squeals and pops and listen to others do the same. . .We humans are fitted with a means of sharing our ideas, in all their unfathomable vastness" (p.1). Pinker is strikingly onomatopoeic! But language is indeed a dazzling concern during this period of great diversity, especially in the domain of common allusions.

Common public allusions are potentially the glue that will hold diverse groups together, and yet, we do not at this time, know what they are. Newt Gingrich discovered this in the 1990s when he relied so heavily upon a segment of the Internet audience for his guiding light in his efforts to craft public policy for the Republican party. In the end, he failed to realize that there is a diverse audience "out there"–some folks are wedded to Conservative Web sites, such as Rush Limbaugh's while other individuals are attached to BET, PBS, TNN, C-SPAN, CNN, HGTV, A&E, ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, ESPN, AMC, WGN, and other television channels too numerous to mention. How do individuals persuade publicly in light of such diversity? How do individuals construct arguments around such diversity, especially given acrimonious disagreements over ethnicity? We will not outline the wrenching public conversations about multiculturalism, including debates over the Western canon, issues of gay liberation, and hate crimes because such tensions are well-known.

As we already mentioned, if humans beings are to cohere, they are required at least, to have some common threads out of which to craft such coherence. Public allusions are core concepts for formulating arguments that are designed to move and influence human beings

in the public square. Is it possible, then, given the difficult issues surrounding diversity and multiculturalism, for disparate groups to resolve the cultural and social tensions that exist between them? And will they find common ground?

We think that communication studies should be moving in the direction of factors that would seem essential to framing a new dialogue between competing voices. Underlying arguments about resolving quarrels between opposing groups is the idea that however different our ethical paths are through the wilderness, we must find a way to function well and harmoniously within the civic culture. We must know what is essential to interacting with others across the great divide. We must know collectively what our society is and is not. These suggestions are motivated by our belief that humans are naturally inclined to seek the good, and that there are enough things that we share in common as humans to guide our collective paths (Berlin, 1991; Morris, 1994; Selznick, 1992; Wilson, 1993; Wright, 1994).

The first way that we might begin to foster a more harmonious public culture is to *change the environment of public discourse.* Hunter (1991) argues sensibly that media technologies are primarily responsible for passing along the *content* of debates that flow between opposing groups. Because the contending parties to a quarrel rely heavily on bits and pieces of information that flow back and forth via television, for instance, the parties rarely confront each other face-to-face. Giving groups along the great divide an opportunity to confront one another face-to-face should resurrect old-fashioned modes of discursive discourse, which would encourage a serious and rational public conversation. In our search for explanations of human communication, however, we also should include new approaches to knowledge that are central to our persuasive mission.

We have in mind here an environment that would discourage rhetorical excess. All of us know very well that television invites sound bites and bombastic generalities. Changing the environment in which debates over gender, ethnicity and race occur should help debaters to draw upon complex, rich sources of language, such as rebuttal, cross-examination, and presentation of evidence, in addition to predisposing individuals to civility. Would, for instance, a discussion between Leonard Jefferies and Diane Ravitch about the relative merits of "ice" cultures versus "warm" cultures degenerate in a face-to-face rhetorical environment free of television? Perhaps. However, the rules governing what can and cannot be said, when and where, should mitigate against the development of hostile rhetoric. Our point is that a change from a media environment to an environment more conducive to discursive talk should promote civility, community, and goodwill.

A second factor that would seem essential to framing a new dialogue between competing voices is *finding appropriate language with which to argue differing perspectives.* For example, to what extent can an ethnic white American be critical of black studies and Jewish studies, and other aspects of black and Jewish life, while at the same time avoiding charges of racism or anti-Semitism? We are searching for an increased understanding. It is the kind of understanding that we invoke when we say things like, *"I understand what makes him or her tick,"* or *"Now we understand each other."* What should the grammar and style of such language look like? What should it *be* and *do?*

If we are to expect anything bordering on congeniality, then we must find some way of checking our polarizing impulses or tendencies. Of course, we are not suggesting the elimination of vigorous discussion and debate. Rather, we are concerned with ways of managing talk so that versions of our better selves will triumph in discussions and debates. As we grapple with these overarching issues, however, we must not fail to address the historical antecedents in the rhetorical environment, such as slavery, distrust, racism, and cultural differences. Indeed, one could argue that America's pre-Civil War history of slavery and racism is a primary culprit in disputes over multiculturalism, not only because history depends upon memory, experience, and powerful cultural, political, and economic lega-

cies, but also because the very nature of arguments over ethnicity is presumed to grow out of–at least in some measure–the question of nationality or "identity," a major crucible in multicultural debates.

BASIC HUMAN ISSUES, DIVERSITY, AND PERSUASION

The new century will challenge communication scholars in other ways, and at the most basic level of human existence: who are we at this moment of great diversity? To anchor and frame our discussion, we must make a detour and return to some of the Greek and Roman Hellenistic philosophers: Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics–who conceived of philosophy as a way of addressing the most painful problems of human life. While we believe that the ancient Greeks are instructive, our dear readers should not construe for an instance that our detour is the end-point. Nussbaum (1994), in her book, *The Therapy of Desire* notes that "it seems possible that philosophy itself, while remaining itself, can perform social and political functions, making a difference in the world by using its own distinctive methods and skills" (p. 3). We are not about to recommend that we in the National Communication Association should turn our methods, skills, and procedures back to the world of the Stoics, Skeptics, and Epicureans! Rather, what such philosophers did and how they performed their deeds during the Hellenistic era, tell us a great deal about the nature of communication and the nature of souls and their remedy.

For example, as Nussbaum (1994) argues, the Stoics and Epicureans "focused their attention. . .on issues of daily and urgent human significance–the fear of death, love and sexuality, anger and aggression—issues that are sometimes avoided as embarrassingly messy and personal by the more detached vanities of philosophy" (pp.3-4). What *is* crucial for our purposes is that the Hellenistic philosophical schools sought a newly complex understanding of human psychology that led them to adopt complex strategies–"interactive, rhetorical, literary,"–designed to help them grapple effectively with their world. Our challenge today is equally as compelling.

There is, of course, one crucial difference between the philosophers of the Hellenistic era and those of us who must contend with the complexities and challenges of a postmodern world of uncertain things. Epicureans, for example, "prided themselves on the responsiveness of their ethical arguments to particular cases and situations" (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 125). They, believed, for instance, that "the philosophical teacher, like a good doctor, must be a keen diagnostician of particulars, devising a specific course of treatment for each pupil" (p.125).

During the Hellenistic period and well into the twentieth century, it was possible for rhetoricians to tie their messages and their remedies, more to a particular audience with specific demographic and dispositional qualities. In this way, rhetoricians plied their listeners with common allusions that grew out of the particular life experiences that framed the historical and geographical context in which audience members lived. Of course the Epicureans also confronted the fact that their audience was "diverse and at a distance," but nothing approaching the level that we are encountering at the end of the twentieth century (Nussbausm, p. 487).

DETERRITORIALIZATION, DIVERSITY, AND PERSUASION

Today, the idea of messages being imbedded in a particular milieu is changing. As Martin Albrow (1997) observes, the computer chip is the "Prime accelerator of the disembedding of social relations in the Modern Age and continues to promote deterritorialzation in the Global Age" (p.115). Let us focus for a moment on the theme of deterritorialization because it illustrates some communication dynamics that we must con-

front if we are to maintain semblances of meaningful human relations with individuals different from ourselves. Deterritorialization suggests that it is increasingly difficult for communication scholars, social scientists, and others to "impute the coherence and integration of social activities to the local area where they take place. Locality loses an unequivocal significance in a social sense; rather it becomes a site for multiple coexisting worlds" (Albrow 1997, p. 156). And multiple coexisting environments have an impact on how people view the world. For example, individuals who are exposed to multiple media, including television, radio, and computers encounter simultaneously multiple coexisting worlds. As a result of these channel confrontations, locality loses some of its importance in terms of group loyalties and identities. The risk of miscommunication increases based on the diversity of information that is received. Although risk is involved in single channel communication exchanges, it is reasonable to assume that more channels potentially increase the chances for messages to be misperceived.

Albrow (1997) indicates that we are prone to think that this disembedding process is related primarily to retail outlets of national firms, economic linkages, and the like, but they relate equally to kin, friendship and special relationships" (p. 156). The image of families processing muscadine wine in the hinterlands of Tennessee, sharing connections through marriage, and passing on a common experience from parents to children is becoming "as much a part of the mythology of modernity as the village community" (p. 156). Such global changes suggest to some scholars (Albrow, 1997) that "the social activities which transpire between and among individuals is being done without great reference to a local center" (p. 156).

Increasingly, our social engagements are based on special interest, including segmented occupational, professional, and civic lives. Quoting Robert Putnam, Fukuyama (1995), for example, reports "a striking decline in sociability in the United States" (p. 309). According to Fukuyama, "participation in parent-teacher associations has plummeted from 22 million in 1964 to 7 million today; fraternal organizations like the Lions, Elks, Masons, and Jaycees have lost from an eighth to nearly half of their memberships in the past twenty years. Similar declines are reported in organizations from the Boy Scouts to the American Red Cross" (p. 309).

We call attention to these dramatic declines in sociabilities because of their implications for diversity and communication. Our discipline should take into account the key values at stake in the definition and meaning of community; for example, our notion of public argument as fashioned from "strands of history and culture" (Selznick, 1992, p. 361; Leff, 1989; Cummings, Taylor & Niles, 1992; Logue & Garner, 1988; Andrews & Zarefsky, 1989; Foner & Branham, 1998; Condit & Lucaites, 1993; Calloway-Thomas & Lucaites, 1993; Lasch, 1995).

Furthermore, how we talk about ideas and how we connect them to our audience, rely heavily upon the particularities of custom, language, and institutional life; a heritage of significant events and crises; and such historically determined attributes as allusions, whether we are talking about Lincoln's "First Inaugural," with its references to the Bible: "A house divided against itself cannot stand," or whether we are talking about the erudite black reconstruction speaker, Robert Browne Elliot, who in 1871, ended his Civil Rights speech on behalf of the passage of the first civil rights bill in our nation's history, with the words, "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people. . . ." that is, with the story of Ruth and Naomi (Foner & Branham, 1998, p. 536). Indeed, as Selznick (1992) notes, a sense of history "is needed for sound collective judgment as to means and ends" (p. 361).

Public communication's quest for an audience is rooted in principles latent in a community's culture and history. And such principles become **resources for internal and**

external dialogue. They become authoritative standpoints from which to criticize and influence beliefs, norms and practice, that shape the ethos of a people.

Deterritorialization, then, challenges the very foundation of talk as we know it, and talk as it moves out and around the neighborhood, giving our lives coherence and meaning. Deterritorialzation intersects with how we conduct communication business because it shapes what we say, when, how and with what effect.

First, and centrally, we must grapple with understanding public communication's role in the movement toward decontextualization. We must be prompted by real human perplexities, and communication must address these, perhaps with the unspecificity of the Hellenistic period. We must, however, fine-tune our attention to individuals' concrete needs and existence. If this echoes the medical, then our implicit message within this proposed line of inquiry is astray. The medical, however, need not be, in the strictest sense medical, as in the case of a medical doctor, who has special remedies for particular categories of need. However, we must in great earnestness realize the grave potential for how people in communities will be arranged in this century, and communication's role in such an arrangement.

Albrow (1997) argues, for example, that localized bases for community in the global community will serve "predominantly a special category of people, the retired, and elderly, those with learning difficulties, a selective recruitment at odds with the inclusiveness of the old communities" (p. 156). Buffoni (1997) holds out even less hope for those who are impoverished by globalized conditions. She writes that "lack of material and cultural resources restrict one's ability to socialize and . . .reduce options in very day life" (p. 110). Think of the implications! Two crucial questions that emerge out of such concerns are: What are the implications for community as people move around? What are the implications for the relationship between meanings, messages, and people?

If we think of public communication as an enterprise that is tied to a specific context, in a particular time, then we must give some thought to the consequences of deterritorialization. If Globalism is a main aspect of the meaning of human life, how are we to pass meanings around? How will the nature of audiences be configured? What will constitute the nature of invention? What will style, memory, and delivery be composed of? In the past, speakers from George Washington to Sojourner Truth to Martin Luther King, Jr. utilized the notion of topoi or lines of argument with which to influence their audiences' values and beliefs. With the movement between space and place occurring with greater frequency, we should reexamine what it means to speak publicly in a world that is globally constructed. Indeed, what happens when the United States becomes truly diverse, as indicated by Hodgkinson?

Above all, communicating in a diverse world requires inventiveness and a search for explanations and new methods that go to the heart of the current human condition. In the process of "seeking" answers to a host of issues that we have raised, all of us should pause to consider whether we have "enough" data–qualitative and empirical–with which to answer some of our unresolved research questions. We propose, as a start, a research agenda for the future that will include nationwide, indeed, even worldwide collections of data on ways of life that tell us what humans are confronting at this moment of great diversity. For example, an important question concerns what do we really know, in a coherent way, about who we are and the impact of that knowing on how to get along in a compressed world? And what about how ***new ways of knowing*** might shape our ability to communicate effectively with others in the future? And from a variety of sources, including newly arriving immigrants, women, men, gays and lesbians, and ethnic, racial, and religious minorities?

Naturally, in proceeding, it is important to recognize that all avenues of knowledge should be open. Molefi Asante (1998) has suggested that "If communicationists have any public role then it must be to bring harmony, order, reciprocity and justice through criticism to the public practice of communication." Moreover, he argues that we should do this "by

asking the kinds of questions asked by the ancient African civilizations along the Nile River" (p. 7). The questions include: "How do you make the inexplicable explainable? How do you make the ungraspable graspable? And how do you make the unheard heard?" (p. 7). Whatever "social or cultural calculus "we employ, it should equip us for understanding and interacting well in the complex and various world that we will confront in the twenty-first century.

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