DIFFERENCE MATTERS

Communicating Social Identity

Brenda J. Allen

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Brenda J. Allen
University of Colorado at Denver

To my mother
Thelma L. Allen

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Preface

Today, members of contemporary society confront matters related to social identity categories that include gender, race, social class, sexuality, ability, and age. When looking at these categories through a social constructionist lens, they appear artificial and fluid, rather than natural and fixed. Systems of power and privilege have shaped our perceptions of social identity, while, throughout history, members of society have resisted and transformed those systems. *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* describes and analyzes categories of identity to explore the idea that differences within and between those categories matter. Throughout the text, I stress the constitutive role of communication and probe relationships between social identity and discourse. To illustrate the impacts of social identity issues, I focus on a wide variety of organizations, because organizations are prime sites of social identity construction. Furthermore, the field of organizational communication is continually evolving. It now includes an interest in everyday interactions among all organizational actors and in-depth examinations of the complexities of social collectivities.

Due to its focus on how humans enact difference within organizations, *Difference Matters* is especially appropriate for organizational communication courses at undergraduate and graduate levels. It is also appropriate for communication courses or training programs that focus on one or more of the social identity categories explored in the text, and for any curricula that delve into topics such as diversity, multiculturalism, and intercultural communication. Other disciplines that might adopt this volume include business administration, human resources management, organizational behavior, education, sociology, ethnic studies, gender studies, disability studies, industrial psychology, and social psychology.

In writing this text, I have been cognizant of the fact that students often struggle with material related to theory; they want to cut to the chase to learn skills that they can use. Students positively respond to texts that are comprehensive, but easy to understand—texts that are interactive, that clearly identify objectives, and that make connections to the real world. It is my hope that the content and approach of this book meet the needs of students and instructors alike.

To assist instructors, I have developed a Web site that contains ideas and resources for teaching difference matters. The address is: www.cudenver.edu/clas/communication/differencematters

Acknowledgements

This project has been underway for several years, well before I realized that I should write a book on difference matters. During that time, many people have offered invaluable inspiration, guidance, and support. Although I could never adequately express my gratitude, I wish to acknowledge their contributions.

Countless students (who also were/are my teachers) were fundamental to the development of this book. Among those, four merit special recognition: Heidi Burgett, Margarita Olivas, Karen Ashcraft, and Jennifer Simpson exhibited passion and commitment to learning, teaching, and studying difference matters. They also gave me invaluable feedback as the book project unfolded. In addition, research assistant Aaron Dimock located a wealth of literature that extended my scope of knowledge about social identity groups.

Phil Tompkins, Patrice Buzzanell, Bob Craig, Karen Tracy, Stan Deetz, and Dennis Mumby are peerless mentors who not only offered guidance about research and writing, but also modeled how to be a scholar.

Many of my colleague-friends read and responded to portions of the manuscript and/or directed me to important information sources. Their input helped to deepen and strengthen the book. A million thanks to Patrice Buzzanell, Karen Tracy, George Cheney, Mark Orbe, Terry Rowden, Jim Barker, Jim Cohn, Dawn Braithwaite, Diane Grimes, Sally Thee, Omar Swartz, Phil Tompkins, Patrick Johnson, Deborah Burgess, Ralph Smith, Brett Anderson, Kurt Nordstrom, and Anna Spradlin.

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Chapter

1 Difference and Other Important Matters

A few summers ago, I exchanged pleasant e-mails with a student I had never met named Jason Harcourt.[1] He wanted to enroll in a course I would be teaching in the fall. After being in the class for a few weeks, he confessed that when he first saw me, he was shocked to see that I'm black.[2] And, he questioned his reaction: "Does that mean I'm racist?" I assured him his response did not necessarily mean he was racist. After all, few minority professors were employed at the university. And, none of Jason's teachers had been black. Plus, we rarely see black women scholars on TV, in films, or in textbooks. Therefore, Jason was unprepared to encounter a black woman in the role of college professor. He assumed I would be white.

Similar to Jason, I also made some assumptions prior to our face-to-face meeting. Subconsciously, I figured that he would be male, white, and young, based upon his first name and the university's predominantly white, traditional college-aged student population. I would have been surprised if he had been female, older, and not white. Because Jason met my

profile, I didn't even think about my unconscious expectations until he expressed his reaction.

This story implies several issues related to difference and communication that this book addresses. First, we tend to hold expectations about which types of people "belong" in various societal roles. To see how this tendency operates, slowly read the following list of role labels, or better yet, have someone else read them to you. Notice the image that comes to your mind for each:

secretary
CEO
soldier
hair stylist
janitor
basketball player
hotel maid
manager
elementary school teacher
interior decorator
nurse
welfare recipient
plastic surgeon
female impersonator
gang member
truck driver
gardener
special education student
chemist
rap artist
beauty queen

For each of these labels, you probably pictured someone with a combination of social identities such as gender, race, social class, age, sexuality, and ability status (i.e., nondisabled or disabled). Due to social conditioning, most people in the United States probably would conjure similar images for each role, and their images may or may not correspond to reality.

One reason we expect certain individuals to play certain roles is the relationship between context and expectations. Jason and I met one another in the late twentieth century at a predominantly white university in Colorado, where I was one of only three black women professors. I also was the first person of color on the faculty in the department where the course was offered. Moreover, the university was experiencing pressure to diversify its student body, faculty, and curriculum. That context helped to shape Jason's expectations, and mine.

Another reason we might expect certain persons to occupy particular roles (as well as the fact that certain types of persons tend to occupy particular roles) stems from a complex history in the United States of "systemic, socially-reproduced inequities."[3] We will explore many of these inequities as well as sociohistorical factors that help to generate and perpetuate them.

Jason's concern about being racist reveals a common misunderstanding of the meaning of "-isms," including racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and classism. His question embeds a tendency to connote -isms simply as characteristics of a "bad person." As organizational communication scholar Jennifer Simpson observes, "this thinking, however, tends to keep the focus on -isms as individual behaviors that result from

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internally located meanings."[4] This attitude neglects larger, systemic forces that contribute to discrimination and prejudice. I will delve more deeply into these and related issues.

My story implies another point: when we interact with people, we often rely upon expectations and assumptions about those individuals to form our attitudes and to direct our behaviors. For instance, if the person seems different from us, we might depend upon ***stereotypes***, oversimplified preconceptions and generalizations about members of social groups "that provide meaning and organize perceptions, inferences, and judgments about persons identified as belonging to a particular social category."[5] Jason might have assumed I was an affirmative action employee, a token who was hired only because I am black and female, not because I am qualified and competent.[6] He might have expected me not to be intelligent or otherwise capable of being a professor. He could have anticipated that I would be nurturing or, on the other hand, aggressive. He might have derived these notions from a variety of sources (including the media, his family, peers, and teachers) that depict black women in stereotypical ways, for instance, as a Mammy/caretaker or as loud-mouthed and sassy. Likewise, I could have summoned negative stereotypes of young white males to conclude that Jason would not be a serious student because he was interested only in partying and doing the minimum amount of work. I might even have assumed that he would be prejudiced against me because I am black.

In addition to depending on depictions from other sources, each of us might have relied on our own personal experiences with (similar) different persons. I could have reminded Jason of a black female coworker, or he may have resembled any number of earnest white male students I have known. We will explore these and related issues about expectations, including how and why we routinely rely upon assumptions and stereotypes when we interact with others.

A final issue raised in the story is that people rarely talk openly about topics like race or racism in mixed groups. Why is that? Well, these subjects often are difficult to discuss or even acknowledge. They may arouse uncomfortable responses, such as anxiety, fear, shame, guilt, anger, frustration, hostility, or confusion. However, under the right circumstances, thinking and talking about these issues can be enlightening and empowering. When we express our thoughts, feelings, and experiences, we might understand ourselves, as well as others, better. We also might be more likely to enjoy effective, open communication with one another. Jason expressed his concerns with me because he felt safe in our classroom. Because I took his question seriously, and took time to respond to him, we engaged in a productive discussion about expectations, identity, and communication. That classroom moment marked a turning point in my career as a scholar.

Subsequent teaching/learning experiences with students, colleagues, and friends encouraged me to focus my research and teaching on social

identity and interaction. Eventually, I gained enough information and confidence to write this book. I hope to offer insight that helps people engage in productive and positive interactions in the various roles and contexts where we interact with one another. I encourage you to reflect upon and discuss topics that people often avoid or discuss only when among people like themselves.

The purpose of this chapter is to set the stage for the rest of the book. I clarify why difference matters, after which I delineate several concepts that form the foundation of the book, including communicating, social identity, and organizations. Then, I provide an overview of the remainder of the book. To conclude the chapter, I will tell you a bit more about myself because I want you to have a sense of me as a person, not simply as a disembodied voice. First, though, let me explain the title of the book, beginning with the phrase, "Difference Matters."

DIFFERENCE MATTERS

I got the idea for the book's title from a critically acclaimed book entitled *Race Matters*.[7] However, in addition to race, I discuss other categories of social identity. For our purposes, *difference* refers to a characteristic of identity such as gender, race, or age. Although scholars and practitioners frequently use the word "diversity" for such distinctions, I prefer "difference" because it aligns better with the focus of this book. Difference signifies how we tend to view identity (ours and others'). As sociologist Richard Jenkins explains: "the notion of identity simultaneously establishes two possible relations of comparison between persons or things: *similarity*, on the one hand, and *difference*, on the other."[8] He elaborates: "similarity and difference are the dynamic principles of identity, the heart of social life."[9] If we think about difference and similarity as labels on a continuum:

difference________________________________similarity

we might recognize that as we perceive differences between people, we also can discern similarities. This perspective on identity also allows us to recognize that no two persons are either totally different or totally similar.

How would you define "matter"? As a verb, it means to be important, to be of consequence, to count, as in "Your opinion *matters* to me." As a noun, it means something of concern: "What's the *matter*?" Applying those two definitions of "matter," we will: (1) explore the idea that difference counts (it matters), and (2) examine a variety of important concerns or issues (matters) related to difference. As the title indicates, we will focus on relationships between social identity differences and communicating. Before I explain the second part of the title, I need to elaborate on why difference matters enough for me to have written this book.

Why Difference Matters

Although those of us who live in the United States are alike in many ways, we need to think about ways we differ, for several related reasons. First, we can consider the composition of U.S. society, which is undergoing change. We are experiencing an increase in numbers of persons of color, elderly citizens, and people with disabilities. Perhaps you have heard some of the projections: by the year 2030, Asians, blacks, Hispanics and other minorities will account for one-third of the population. In addition, age will become more of a factor as baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) like me become senior citizens. For the first time in history, four different age generations comprise the workforce. This change can affect communication processes because members of each age cohort or group tend to have differing experiences, values, and interests.

A second notable development is that members of certain social identity groups and their allies have become more vocal about rights and recognition in the workforce and other sectors of society. For instance, in 1990, due in large part to social activists, who were themselves persons with disabilities or who worked on their behalf, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which legislates equal access and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Third, changing demographics, increasing demands from a variety of identity group members for equal access and opportunity, and fear of lawsuits or boycotts have made difference a hot topic. Many types of organizations (from national and international corporations to government agencies to public and/or private universities) have created various strategies for dealing with these developments. Recognizing that they need to cater to diverse groups to be competitive, many organizations are implementing formal programs to hire, retain, and promote ethnic minorities and women. Many organizations conduct diversity training programs or workshops to help their members understand and address diversity issues with the goal of building a stronger organizational community. Some organizations customize marketing and advertising to appeal to various groups, for example, by advertising products and services in Spanish as well as English. Institutions of higher education fund initiatives and programs to recruit and retain minority faculty and students and to establish multicultural curricula. Many colleges and universities now require each student to take at least one course that concentrates on "diversity."

These and other responses can yield important benefits. Potential rewards of valuing difference include increased creativity, productivity, and profitability; enhanced public relations; improved product and service quality; and higher job satisfaction.[10] Dealing effectively with difference and embracing it as a positive force rather than as something to be shunned or feared, can help organizations to accomplish their goals. For example, organizations may broaden their markets and increase profits when they elicit and incorporate input from members of diverse groups.

Equally as important (if not more so), when we value differences, we can help to fulfill the American credo of liberty and justice for all. And, we can enhance our lives. My life certainly is enriched because I enjoy relationships with many different types of friends, students, and colleagues. Thinking and talking about difference can facilitate productive and enjoyable interactions with one another across our differences.

Unfortunately, however, "diversity issues seem to have intensified prejudice rather than manifesting themselves in an era of tolerance or even the embracing of difference."[11] The number of hate groups has grown, and individuals often commit hate crimes against members of various social identity groups. Members of some social collectivities resist initiatives to tolerate or appreciate diversity. In other words, numerous obstacles hinder attempts to understand and value difference. These obstacles further reinforce the point that difference matters.

Obstacles to Valuing Difference

As I noted earlier, difference is a difficult, challenging topic. Efforts to address difference can arouse negative feelings from members of nondominant and dominant groups. ***Nondominant groups*** include those who traditionally have been less privileged (economically and socially) than others, while ***dominant groups*** comprise persons who usually enjoy more economic and social advantages in our society. Nondominant group members, such as women, persons of color, homosexuals, and persons with disabilities, may feel singled out during discussions about groups with which they identity. Students of color in predominantly white classrooms report feeling pressure to represent "their" group when the class discusses race. Nondominant group members also may feel frustrated during diversity training sessions because members of dominant groups seem apathetic or hostile. They may seem to minimize the concerns of nondominant groups, or accuse them of whining or being hypersensitive.

Members of dominant groups, including men, white people, heterosexuals, and nondisabled persons, believe that nondominant group members are exaggerating their concerns. Because they may not have had similar experiences, they may downplay issues that are important to nondominant persons. Also, in contexts where the topic of diversity often arises, some dominant group members may resent the attention given to nondominant groups.

Dominant group members also may feel uncomfortable during diversity training or teaching sessions. Males sometimes feel like they are being attacked when the topic of "male domination" arises. White males may resent feeling blamed for the "sins of the father," such as for discrimination against blacks that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s: white male students have told me they were not guilty of racist acts recorded in history. Furthermore, "sometimes individuals will resist behaving in a more sup-

portive manner toward those different from themselves because such a change implies, in their minds, that they were somehow at fault or 'guilty' in the past."[12]

Some people may not express their true thoughts or feelings because they worry that others will perceive them to be sexist, or racist, or homophobic. Dominant group members who also constitute the majority of a social identity group may feel threatened because they fear that including minorities means excluding majorities. For instance, some white people believe that initiatives such as affirmative action give minority racial group members unfair advantages; they think that minorities are hired and promoted for group-based criteria rather than merit-based qualifications, such as education and expertise.[13] As people compete for jobs, workplace developments such as downsizing, mergers, and layoffs help to compound these attitudes. As you will see, times of economic distress tend to heighten conflict between dominant and nondominant groups, with members of the dominant group often feeling more entitled.[14]

Societal norms and tendencies also affect efforts to deal with difference. Norms regarding political correctness may constrain members of all groups from expressing themselves, as might fear of litigation. These constraints can cause resentment to build up. A prevailing norm in our society to be objective and rational in most organizational settings, as opposed to revealing emotions, may further hinder openness and willingness to address matters of difference. Also, the expectation in U.S. society for people to "stick with" their own groups might inhibit them from exploring or accepting other groups due to fear that in-group members might ostracize or criticize them. They may fear being accused of being inauthentic or not true to their roots.[15]

Another norm drives us to define ourselves in opposition to others. Such self-definitions may invite a chain reaction: "my sense of myself is built upon my ability to distinguish myself from you; therefore I value the ways in which I am different from you; therefore I begin to devalue the traits that make you distinct from me."[16] This habitual way of viewing self and others can become self-perpetuating and difficult to change. As a result, an individual may struggle with the ramifications of viewing "different" people in positive ways. That person may feel a false need to relinquish a positive sense of self in exchange for viewing an "other" in a more positive light. For instance, a heterosexual man may feel that his manhood would be threatened if he responded favorably to a gay person.

Another tendency may affect attitudes toward difference: When people think, write, or talk about difference, they tend to focus on the presumed "other." For instance, when you think of difference in terms of sexual orientation, what comes to your mind first, heterosexual (straight) or homosexual (gay)? Probably homosexual or gay. What about race? Most people would think about blacks or people of color rather than whites or Caucasians. Usually, "different" refers to how an individual or a

group varies from, or compares to, the unspoken norm of the dominant group. For example, gender often is defined by equating gender with femaleness/women, which precludes viewing men/male as gendered.[17]

Members of both nondominant and dominant groups may unconsciously accept this attitude toward difference. A black male human resources director objected to allowing a white man to chair an employee diversity committee, based on the "principle" of assigning the position to someone who does not represent a minority group instead of considering the man's qualifications and interest in the position. When I presented a seminar on difference and communication as an invited guest of a communication department, only women attended; a white male professor was overheard saying to a white male colleague, "That's women's work." In cases like these, difference becomes the defining and potentially constraining characteristic of members of nondominant groups. This attitude can divide groups and place undue responsibility for addressing issues related to difference on one group more than another.

The logic underlying the premise that difference is the domain of the disenfranchised is dangerous because it implies that members of nondominant groups should limit themselves to roles and issues related to their groups. This perspective also insinuates that they are not qualified to do anything else. Furthermore, this mindset can prohibit majority group members from getting involved in difference matters because they feel alienated, unaffected, and/or defensive.

Not only do attitudes about difference tend to focus on the presumed "other," but they also tend to dichotomize social identity groups. This simplifies complex constructions of social identity and reduces them to two discrete categories. We tend to "oversimplify our observations by limiting them to binary oppositions as opposed to more complex and multiple perceptions."[18] Consequently, one is forced to identify oneself or another person as "either/or." For instance, discourse about race more often than not focuses on blacks and whites. Denoting these racial groups as polar opposites may compel members of other categories to identify as either white or non-white, and to feel marginalized. A similar dynamic operates for sexuality (i.e., heterosexual or not).

Related to the tendency of dichotomizing groups is the tendency to identify others and ourselves in limited, simplistic ways. We often fail to acknowledge that social identities are complex and multifaceted. We reduce a person to one or two identity facets, without considering the complex nature of everyone's identity. When I ask students to describe themselves by any four social identity groups they would like to cite, they feel frustrated. They know themselves to be so much more than four categories could ever capture. Yet, they confess to perceiving other persons—especially those who are "different"—in terms of only one or two facets. Combined with the impulse and the expectation to align with one's "own"

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