African American Communication

Ethnic Identity and Cultural Interpretation

MICHAEL L. HECHT
MARY JANE COLLIER
SIDNEY A. RIBEAU

African American Communication

Ethnic Identity and Cultural Interpretation

MICHAEL L. HECHT
MARY JANE COLLIER
SIDNEY A. RIBEAU

LANGUAGE
AND
LANGUAGE
BEHAVIORS
volume 2

Acknowledgments

Mary Jane Collier

I wish first to acknowledge my two co-authors. The three of us have been collaborating on various projects since 1982 when we coded our first qualitative data about communication competence across ethnic and interethnic conversations. Our dialogue about African American communication and identity continues to be engaging, collegial, and stimulating. I also wish to thank the many, many students, colleagues, and friends who participated in our research studies, read drafts of the manuscript, supported our efforts, and were so willing to engage in dialogue about their identity and communication processes.

Sidney A. Ribeau

Thanks to those who made my contribution to this project possible—my family, who support me unconditionally; Michael L. Hecht, my patient colleague and friend; Pat, my partner; Janis Woolpert, my transcriber; and God, my constant guide.

Preface

Many academic research projects begin as creative enterprises that culminate in a finished product, in this case a book. Informal conversations among the authors regarding the lack of information that explains African American communication led to our first empirical study of this group. These conversations, which included discussions of African American popular culture, sports figures, and rhetoricians all seemed to conclude with an awareness that something unique characterizes the African American experience in the United States and that this should be exhibited in communication and other expressive forms. Conversations such as these were reinforced by classroom teaching experiences and examples in the media of communication breakdowns/problems that suggested differing communication systems that lead to alternative interpretive frameworks.

There seemed to be a great deal of attention given to interethnic communication problems, but little data to help us better understand this phenomenon. We initially conceptualized a number of studies to help better understand the complexity of African American/European American communication, a practical task that was ambitious and premature. What was needed, we decided, was a data-based explanation of African American communication that could be used first to explicate the communicative behavior of this important American co-population. A series of studies has evolved into this text, an attempt to describe and interpret African American communication.

The work is important for a number of reasons, a few of which will be mentioned here. The book is a serious attempt to provide

a cultural analysis of African American communication from the perspective of the group. Emphasis is given to the identity, rules, and strategies that characterize communication for group members. It is a look from within. Group-specific cultural data are used along with culturally sensitive social psychological theory to provide an analytical framework for group behaviors. Analytical constructs were selected because of their congruence with African American life and culture. Finally, we provide an extensive review of the literature and recommendations designed to assist one in understanding African American communication in a context that extends beyond the Eurocentric paradigm.

The text presented here is a beginning. It suggests an approach and provides information necessary to begin an important dialogue in the communication discipline, ethnic studies, and other fields concerned with the centrality of culture and communication as it relates to human behavior.

The three authors came to this book from diverse yet intersecting paths. Below we attempt to situate the book in the experiences of the authors.

Michael L. Hecht

I was born and raised in New York City. My family home was in a section of the borough of Queens where diversity was represented more by religious and nation-of-origin differences than by racial distinctions. During these early years my exposure to ethnic diversity was mainly through my interest in basketball. But my cultural background as an Eastern European Jew raised in the post-World War II era taught me about prejudice and stereotyping. As a child I met holocaust victims and was warned about the dangers of discrimination and racism. Through these experiences I gained an awareness of membership in an oppressed culture. Although Judaism may be an "invisible" culture, one easily hidden, it nevertheless comes with a history that rivals any group for its tragic treatment at the hands of the dominant class.

My focus on intercultural communication, and particularly interethnic communication, was shaped through undergraduate and master's classes at Queens College under Stan Jones. Jones, one of the early communication ethnographers, observed the proxemic

and touch behaviors of African American and European American children and examined cultural walking styles. While at odds with my early positivist bent, these cultural experiences sparked an interest that survived the intellectual training of my doctoral program.

It was during these doctoral years that I met Sidney A. Ribeau and we became friends. Later, while working at separate universities in Los Angeles, we decided to combine my work in communication competence with his work on African American culture, and thus began our line of interethnic research. This line and my understanding of ethnicity were enriched through a second friendship with Michael Sedano, with whom we co-authored a paper. And into this world came a doctoral student, Mary Jane Collier, eager to develop new understandings of ethnicity and culture through a unique combination of rules and systems theories. The three co-authors first worked together on studies related to Collier's dissertation work. My work on interethnic communication was encouraged by my move to Arizona State University's Department of Communication, which was building a doctoral program around intercultural communication as one of its prime foci.

The specific idea for this book developed at a conference at Bristol, England, when a colleague, Bill Gudykunst, introduced Ribeau and Hecht to Howard Giles, who was editing this series on language and social behavior. Contact with Giles, Bourhis, and Sachdev stimulated our thinking and encouraged us to continue establishing linkages between our work and ethnolinguistic identity theory. With the encouragement of Giles, this book project was begun.

Mary Jane Collier

I am a White woman who grew up in a White middle-class neighborhood. During my last year of college I was a student teacher at an inner-city school in Denver where busing for integration was put into effect for the first time. Later I taught on a Navaho Reservation. I have taught at universities rich in ethnic diversity in the heart of Los Angeles, and I have taught at universities where ethnic students represent a small percentage of the population.

Over the years, I have learned that racism and discrimination are, on the one hand, complex phenomena caused by economic, social, political, historical, psychological, and spiritual factors. On the other hand, I see that racism and discrimination are very simple responses to fear and threat.

The more I teach about and learn from African Americans in the United States, the more I see that it's all about identity. We all want to feel good about ourselves, we all want to exert a certain amount of influence over our environment and other people, and we all want to have some hope for the future. The beating of Rodney King, an African American, by White police officers in Los Angeles, was captured on videotape for the world to see. The subsequent trial, acquittal of the police involved, and violence that followed in Los Angeles and throughout the United States show the results of such differences in identity avowal and ascription, ultimate hopelessness, and inevitable rage.

I continue to learn from my students and my friends about what it means to be African American, and I continue to learn about myself from their views of me. I believe that there is hope for understanding one another, for appreciating one another, for empowering one another. This book is one step in that direction. The path is long and difficult, but it is an essential journey for all of us.

Sidney A. Ribeau

Throughout my academic career I have attempted to explore areas of intellectual interest that posed challenging questions regarding human relationships. In graduate school I was initially interested in interpersonal communication but quickly came to realize that African Americans were not included in the literature that defined the field. Further research confirmed my experience in the interpersonal area—research studies on African American communication were almost nonexistent in the entire discipline.

At the same time, relationships between Black and White America had deteriorated to an all-time low. Throughout the country nonviolent social protests were rapidly becoming demands for Black power. In many cities frustration fermented and eventually exploded into urban rebellions. It seemed clear to me that something must be done to reopen the channels of dialogue and reduce

the violence. Thus I became interested in what was then known as interracial communication. Time passed, and my interests were solidified in graduate study that included speech communication, anthropology, and sociology.

I completed graduate school armed with many ideas concerning the role of communication in race relations, yet aware that there was still limited information available that helped explicate ethnic communication. On one occasion, I was discussing these ideas with a friend who was also a communication professor. He seemed quite interested in the academic problems that I described and in the need for academics to study communication as it is lived in ethnic communities. An interethnic team was formed during those discussions that has authored a number of papers and published several articles. Our early work has evolved into this book. Along the way much has changed in our personal lives, America, and the world. All of these events reaffirm for me the need for human dialogue. I believe that our work provides insight into an important communication phenomenon and ethnic culture that helps us better understand our humanity.

Contents

Introduction

This is a book about African American identity and communication. Our goal is to articulate how African Americans define themselves and membership in their group and how they perceive intra- and interethnic communication. We work to portray the voices of African Americans as we have heard and experienced them in our research and read about them in the work of others. However, no claims are made to speak for members of the group or the group as a whole. We pursue our goal by interpreting this rich cultural system in order to understand the major patterns of thought and conduct and explicate the problematic elements of competent communication. We describe what is distinct about African American communication and then explain the emerging pattern of norms across situations. In doing so we emphasize ethnic identity and perceptions of communication, explaining which identities emerge, what they mean, and how they are enacted.

Communication is seen as a problematic part of cultural affiliation and not as caused or predicted by that affiliation. Communication and culture are not truly separable. Communication is meaningful because of the culture that frames it and culture must be expressed to exist. Thus the term *cultural communication* is a useful redundancy because all communication exists in a cultural context and all culture is communicated.

Communication is problematic because there are few "givens" or "taken-for-granteds." In writing these sentences the authors cannot assume that the reader interprets meanings as we would. In meeting a stranger one cannot assume a shared understanding of the nature of the encounter (e.g., is this friendship or romance,

business or pleasure?). Within a relationship one cannot assume that a conflict will be resolved as previous ones have.

Cultural affiliations are also problematic. There is no single and correct way to be "African American." These identities are negotiated in context and situationally emergent. As identities emerge they present problems for the interactants, problems managing individual identities and jointly negotiating conversations.

These problems are part of communication and cultural affiliation. In other words, the affiliation process and the expression of affiliation are problematic. Problems may be a cause or consequent of affiliation but are always a characteristic of affiliation and communication. As a result, our research seeks to understand the problematic elements of communication and cultural affiliation rather than predicting from one to the other.

Ethnicity plays a major role in everyday life in a culturally diverse nation such as the United States. As R. Rosaldo (1989) reports:

> Cities throughout the world today increasingly include minorities defined by race, ethnicity, language, class, religion, and sexual orientation. Encounters with "difference" now pervade modern everyday life in urban settings. (p. 28)

Ethnic groups are difficult to define since there are no essential characteristics that are common to all groups so distinguished (De Vos, 1982). We define *ethnicity* as shared heritage. An ethnic group is a self-perceived community of people who hold a common set of traditions not shared by those with whom they are in contact (De Vos, 1982). Despite the importance of ethnicity, there is little research about the diversity within and between ethnic cultures and what makes interethnic contact effective or ineffective. Most studies of interethnic communication are binary, invoking comparisons between European Americans and one other group with the European American group as the assumed norm or point of comparison (Nakayama & Peñaloza, in press). Even less is known about how members of nonmainstream or disempowered ethnic groups perceive these interactions. We review this research in Chapter 4. Most of the research is Eurocentric, particularly Anglocentric, in theory, method, and focus (Asante, 1980, 1987; Delgado, 1984; Olivas, 1989; van Dijk, 1987). Eurocentric studies are derived from European

American theories, conducted by European Americans about European Americans, and the results are assumed to be culture general rather than culture-specific findings (Martin, in press).

This book attempts to give voice to an alternative view and experience of communication, that of African Americans. These voices expand the range of experiences that inform the communication discipline and provide a diversity on the levels of theory and practice. Perhaps this alternative worldview will broaden us and facilitate new and richer theories and explanations. Pragmatically, to feel included in a body of knowledge a group must feel heard. One implication of work on diverse groups is their inclusion in the social science literature.

A study of African Americans brings into focus the ethnocultural aspects of communication and provides a counterpoint to Eurocentric perspectives. Historically, politically, and socially, African Americans occupy a unique position within U.S. society. Their history includes slavery and segregation, the migration north, and the civil rights and Black Power movements. Their political past involves voter disenfranchisement and separation from formal channels of power (Lemann, 1991), and their economic life can be characterized as disadvantaged compared to European Americans of comparable skills and training (Dewart, 1989; Mincy, 1989). African American culture is also socially distinctive, including language/dialect, nonverbal and verbal style, and patterns of interaction (Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Kochman, 1972, 1981; Labov, 1970, 1972). Structural, cultural, ethnic, and social distinctions define the African American experience and lead us to argue that African Americans constitute an ethnic culture.

The remainder of this chapter describes the context for the book. First we describe the African American experience in the United States. This section is not intended as a complete description of the social, political, historical, cultural, and economic conditions. Rather, we attempt to capture the essence of that experience by highlighting findings in each of these areas. Second, we attempt to articulate the basic assumptions that guide our work. These assumptions provide a starting point and help the reader understand the choices we have made. Finally, we provide an overview of the remaining chapters, which describe African American ethnic identity, communication style, and communication competencies.

The African American Experience

In this section we provide an overview of the African American experience in the United States. African American communication must be understood against this cultural backdrop in order to understand its grounding. No communication system exists in isolation. So here we paint the historical, political, economic, and social milieu in the United States as a way of describing the context within which African Americans grow and develop a communication system. First we will briefly describe some of the main historical events that shape the culture, explaining the Afrocentric approach. Next we will examine the African American experience in contemporary U.S. culture. Finally, we examine social structures and institutions that influence African American life.

Afrocentricity and the Historical and Social Roots of the African American Experience

The African American experience is the term often used to characterize the African diaspora that created African America. Forcibly removed from their native land, the Africans created a culture and way of life in America that blended the indigenous cultures of the past with the cruel reality of life in racially segregated America. Slavery and the life of African Americans in the United States for the past 300 years are a matter of historical record. While actual accounts differ in detail and point of view depending on the writer's perspective, the works of W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, and John Hope Franklin are particularly useful in understanding African American life and culture (DuBois, 1964; Franklin, 1988; Woodson, 1966).

These scholars employ what is currently labeled an Afrocentric approach (Asante, 1980, 1987) in their work, which emphasizes the holistic experience of the people in the explication of their social reality. The Afrocentric account is written from an African American frame of reference and includes early experiences on the African continent as the structural foundation for African American culture. Covin (1990) identifies five constructs that support the Afrocentric perspective:

(1) People of African descent share a common experience, struggle, and origin.

(2) Present in African culture is a nonmaterial element of resistance to the assault upon traditional values caused by the intrusion of European legal procedures, medicines, political processes, and religions into African culture.

(3) African culture takes the view that an Afrocentric modernization process would be based upon three traditional values: harmony with nature, humaneness, and rhythm.

(4) Afrocentricity involves the development of a theory of an African way of knowing and interpreting the world.

(5) Some form of communalism or socialism is an important component of the way wealth is produced, owned, and distributed.

These constructs provide the philosophical starting point for an analysis of African American culture. Not all African Americans today embrace these assumptions in their day-to-day life and others do not embrace them fully. However, the historical effect of these assumptions is unquestionable and, as such, they guide our discussion of African American communication.

A complex relationship exists between a theoretical consideration of the African American experience and the realities of daily existence. The glory of periods in early Africa (Diop, 1991; J. Williams, 1964) seem far removed from the world of the "truly disadvantaged" described by W. Wilson (1987). Few deny that African Americans can rightfully take pride in the achievements of their ancestors, yet the harsh reality of life for many African Americans often overshadows the study of history (R. Hill, 1989; Jacob, 1989). A brief discussion of life in modern African America provides a useful background for our discussion of African American communication and ethnic identity.

African American life, social structure, and identity have always reflected the complexity of a people caught in a cultural chasm. Before being brought to America, life in Africa was characterized by tribal affiliations that employed separate languages, rituals, and beliefs. Group similarities were at the deep structural level that accounted for a general orientation and worldview rather than culturally shared behaviors. Precolonial Africa consisted of tribal nations, not a homogenous group. The African