

Interracial ***Communication***

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

MARK P. ORBE **TINA M. HARRIS**

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First and foremost, we dedicate this book to Our Creator who is the guiding force in all that we do, and the primary source of inspiration for this book—MPO and TMH

To all those who've committed their lives to human understanding and harmony, both those who came before me and those who step up to carry the torch after me; To those young people whose lives bless me in countless ways: Victoria Humphrey Orbe, Gabrielle Love Orbe, Isaiah Philippe Orbe, Jordan Lawrence Jackson, and Rachael Olivia Orbe . . . and many others who inspire me to press forward—MPO

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Preface

The closer we got to completing this book, the more important it became. The saliency of race in our personal and professional lives—either at or below surface level—is undeniable. One single day did not go by where race was not featured in one or more media outlets *and* discussed with family, friends, or colleagues. “Race still defining factor in United States society” read one newspaper headline in October, 1999. Around the same time, national polls indicated that as U.S. Americans anticipated the challenges of the 21st century, race relations were seen as the number one issue that needed to be addressed. President Clinton’s “Initiative on Race” increased attention to the importance of (and difficulties in) promoting open, honest dialogue among diverse racial/ethnic group members.

The 1970s witnessed a surge of books on the topic of communication and race: *Transracial Communication* by Arthur Smith (1973), *Interracial Communication* by Andrea Rich (1974), and *Crossing Difference . . . Interracial Communication* (1976) by Jon Blubaugh and Dorthy Pennington. We draw our inspiration from these authors who worked to set a valuable foundation for current work in interracial communication. *Interracial Communication: Theory Into Practice* uses this scholarship, as well as that of countless other scholars and practitioners to provide you with a textbook that focuses on Communication and the Dynamics of Race.

The primary objective of this book is to provide a current, extensive textbook on interracial communication that promotes moving from the theoretical to the practical. We provide a resource to professors teaching an undergraduate course on interracial communication, by focusing our efforts on the ways that existing literature can be applied to everyday interactions. For those teaching a related course (i.e., intercultural communication, race relations, communication and racism, etc.), we provide a substantial component dedicated to the interactions of diverse racial/ethnic groups. We also hope that persons outside of academia will find the

book a valuable resource for facilitating interracial dialogue in their respective communities. As clearly demonstrated through current and projected demographic trends, the ability to communicate across racial and ethnic groups will be crucial to personal, social, and professional success in the 21st century.

OVERVIEW

Interracial Communication: Theory Into Practice emphasizes the valuable contribution that communication theory and research can make to improve the existing state of race relations in the United States. The first section of the book provides a foundation for studying interracial communication. Chapter 1 offers an introduction to the subject area and the book. Chapter 2 presents a history of race, an important beginning to understand current race relations. Chapter 3 focuses on the critical role that language plays in interracial communication. In this chapter we highlight the role that power dynamics play in why and how one gets labeled. Chapter 4 features information on how racial/ethnic identity is developed and maintained and how we perceive ourselves and others. In Chapter 5, we discuss how other elements of culture (such as gender, age, socio-economic, and spirituality) also play an important role during interracial interactions. The final chapter in Part One is Chapter 6. This chapter introduces nine different theories that can help you understand interracial communication from a variety of different perspectives. As you will see, each chapter draws heavily from existing scholarship in and outside the field of communication. To complement this information, personal reflections from the authors, case studies, and other opportunities for extended learning are provided in each chapter.

In Part Two, the conceptual foundation provided in Part One is used to understand how interracial communication is played out in a number of contexts. In other words, each chapter presents a specific context where the ideas from Part One can be applied. Chapter 7 focuses on the challenges and rewards of friendships that transcend race. Chapter 8 looks specifically at interracial romantic relationships and offers insight to facilitate a productive discussion on this sometimes “touchy” subject. In the next two chapters, we turn to the situational contexts that are somewhat more formal. In Chapter 9, we discuss the interracial communication that occurs in various organizations. Chapter 10 continues this direction by focusing particularly on public speaking and small group communication. Chapter 11 provides insight to the important role that the mass media play in terms of perceptions of interracial communication. In addition to *Personal Reflections*, *Case Studies* and *Opportunities for Extended Learning* (which feature integrated InfoTrac College Edition exercises), each of these chapters also contains *TIP*

(*Theory Into Practice*) boxes to guide you toward more effective interracial communication. Chapter 12 highlights the primary objective of the book: to make the connection between theory and practice for you explicitly clear and concrete. It also features insight to the importance of facilitating dialogue among diverse racial/ethnic group members.

NOTE TO OUR READERS

This book truly represents a labor of love for us. We have attempted to author a book that simultaneously reflects our professional and personal interests in interracial communication. As you read the book, we hope that you come to see our sense of passion for this subject area. Both of us have spent considerable time thinking about race/ethnicity issues, and “doing race” during our daily interactions. We also have spent our academic careers engaging in scholarship that promotes greater understanding of the inextricable relationships between race, culture, and communication. Yet, we hesitate when others identify us as “experts” in this area. While our achievements signify some level of competency, there is so much more to learn that such a label seems hardly appropriate. So, as we begin the 21st century, we invite you to join us in a life journey that promises to be full of challenges AND rewards.

Authoring a book on a topic such as interracial communication is not an easy task. Trying to reach a consensus between all concerned parties (colleagues, editors, authors, reviewers, students, practitioners) was fruitless. Some agreed on *what* topics should be covered, but disagreements arose in terms of *how* they should be treated and *where* they should appear. As you read through the text, you may find yourself agreeing and/or disagreeing with different approaches that we have taken. In fact, we don’t believe that there will be any one person who will agree with everything that is included. What we do believe, however, is that the book provides a comprehensive foundation from which dialogue on interracial communication can emerge. In other words, we don’t claim to provide “the” answers to effective interracial communication. Instead, we have designed a resource that provides a framework for multiple answers. As the reader, then, you are very much an active participant in this process!

It was our intention to create a book that is “user-friendly” to educators who bring a diverse set of experiences to teaching interracial communication. We have completed this task with specific attention to student feedback from past interracial and intercultural communication classes, most of which indicated a greater need for opportunities for extended learning. Students wished to become more actively engaged in the topics of discussion. In light of this recommendation, and others collected from professors, students, and diversity consultants, we have written a

book that is both theoretical and practical. Before you begin reading, there are a couple of things that we would like to draw your attention to:

- Existing research and discussions of interracial communication has given a hypervisibility to European American/African American relations (see Frankenberg, 1993). We have attempted to extend our discussion beyond this particular type of interracial interaction to include insights on Latino/as, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. However, this was not easy because existing research has largely ignored these groups. As scholars broaden their research agendas, we hope that a more balanced coverage of all racial/ethnic groups can be achieved with each edition.
- Different racial/ethnic group members will come to discussions about race and communication with different levels of awareness. They will also come with different levels of power and privilege (see Chapter 3). Regardless of these differences, however, we believe that ALL individuals must be included in discussions on race (see Chapter 1 for guidelines). Throughout the book, we have attempted to strike a tone that is direct and candid, but not “preachy.” Our goal is to provide a resource that prepares individuals for a dialogue about race openly and honestly (see Chapter 12). This is not an easy task, but we hope that we were able to negotiate these tensions effectively.
- We have worked hard to address issues that were raised by scholars who reviewed the manuscript in various stages of development. In this regard, we attempted to include some discussion on a large number of topics and focused our attention to those that seemed to be most important. However, we see this first edition of *Interracial Communication: Theory Into Practice* as an ongoing process of discovery. We invite you to contact us with your suggestions, criticisms, and insights.

Mark P. Orbe

Tina M. Harris

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—Professors Mark P. Orbe and Tina M. Harris

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