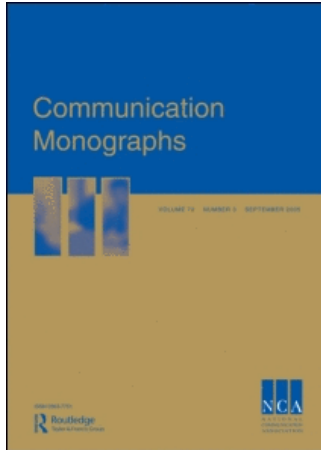


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Theorizing Communication and Race

Brenda J. Allen

Keywords: Race; Social Construction; Organizational Communication; Eurocentricism

The invitation to write this essay posed the following question: “When viewed from the standpoint of a particular culture, does mainstream communication theory seem to be culturally biased in important ways?” My response was immediate and emphatic: “Of *course* it does; of *course* it *IS*.” Mainstream communication theory is culturally biased because it neglects to delve into race in critical, substantive ways. I submit this claim from my standpoint(s) as a middle-aged black woman socialized all of my life to view race as a fundamental, consequential aspect of identity, and as a critical scholar ordained to illuminate inequities in society in order to “transform oppressive structures, institutions and relationships” (Collier, 2005, p. 254).

From these vantage points, I have discerned and decried deficiencies in mainstream communication scholarship about race, particularly in organizational communication studies (see, e.g., Allen, 1995, 2000, 2004, 2005; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Orbe & Allen, 2006). Across the discipline, others have offered similar or related critiques (e.g., Collier, 2005; Flores & Moon, 2002; Hendrix, 2005; Hopson & Orbe, 2007; Jackson, 2000; McPhail, 1997; Shome, 1996; Shome & Hegde, 2002). Most of these critiques assert the bias of Eurocentrism, a propensity to interpret reality based on western (especially European or Anglo-American) values and experiences. Due to this tendency, the discipline draws from and disseminates white universalistic paradigms without problematizing or even acknowledging their Eurocentric limits, thereby perpetuating “a pattern of Eurocentric intellectual domination” (Shome, 1996, p. 49). This bias impedes our discipline from effecting social change related to race.

Race merits theoretical and practical attention because it is an enduring, contested phenomenon with important implications for communication studies, and for transforming society. After all, race is “one of the most powerful ideological and institutional factors for deciding how identities are categorized and power, material privileges, and resources distributed” (Giroux, 2003, p. 200). Recurring news

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accounts of racial discrimination in macro areas of society (e.g., mortgage lending, hiring practices, and arrests) imply that “micro areas carry similar racial codes” (Johnson, 2002, p. 220). These reports, along with chronic statistics about race-related socioeconomic disparities, reveal that race persists as a source of social inequality. However, many white persons in the United States seem to believe that racial discrimination is basically a thing of the past. Along with some persons of color, they sometimes invoke the language of color-blindness, implying that race “has no valence as a marker of identity or power when factored into the social vocabulary of everyday life and the capacity for exercising individual and social agency” (Giroux, 2003, p. 198).

However, race usually “is a central cue for perceptions about others: temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences, and so on are presumed to be fixed and discernible from the palpable mark of race” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 60). Yet, members of racial groups tend to differ in their attitudes toward the significance of race in everyday life. As noted above, I have been socialized to view race as a fundamental, consequential aspect of my identity. I have received messages that my race is both a source of cultural pride and a basis for discrimination. I also have been indoctrinated about white supremacist ideology, which makes me vulnerable to internalized oppression, and which conditions me to perceive racism as systemic and pervasive. I believe that other African Americans and members of other racial minority groups in the United States tend to be similarly socialized.

In contrast, white people often seem to deem their racial identity as a nonissue, due greatly to invisible privileges of whiteness. During everyday interactions, they usually are not conscious of their race, and they are likely to claim not to notice others’ race. They frequently conceive of racism as isolated, atrocious acts committed by dysfunctional individuals. These differences in perspectives derive from how all of us learn about race through dominant discourses, across various contexts and relationships. These differences can elicit tensions between and within racial groups, and foster apprehension to talk about race in interracial situations. And, these differences help to account for the virtual absence of race and race-related issues in mainstream communication theory.

“Mainstream communication theory” connotes widely distributed publications, such as prominent journals and textbooks, which represent the discipline’s canon of knowledge. Because most of the persons in charge of these publications are white, it stands to reason that they tend to reflect Eurocentric, white supremacist biases, however unwittingly. For instance, mainstream communication scholarship tends to treat race as an ahistorical, essential, and depoliticized aspect of identity (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Orbe & Allen, 2006). Thus, this scholarship rarely refers to the racial paradox, which characterizes the “both/and” nature of race as an artificial, dynamic, political construction based on white supremacy, with material consequences such as privilege and discrimination (Flores & Moon, 2002). In addition, mainstream communication theorizing usually does not delve into power dynamics of race. Furthermore, it infrequently mentions racism in explicit ways that analyze macro-level issues.

Notably, some areas of the discipline have addressed these issues, including mass media studies of racial representations, critical rhetoric studies, and the burgeoning area of cultural studies. In addition, a rich body of scholarship, developed primarily by African American scholars, exists on African American communication and culture. However, mainstream communication rarely mentions this work, or the communication theory of Afrocentricity (Asante, 1980; Jackson, 2000). Intercultural communication studies have recently moved beyond emphasizing nationality as the primary focus of identity to also investigate interracial interactions between individuals (Cooks, 2001). Also, some communication scholars are investigating whiteness as a socially constructed, political aspect of identity (see, e.g., Nakayama & Martin, 1999). Furthermore, scholars have published race-related articles in special issues of mainstream journals and in newer journals designed to delve into critical issues. While these developments are promising, they are sporadic and scattered. Thus, a need persists for systematic, sustained efforts to develop theories of communication and race.

Theorizing race can help to effect social change by informing disciplinary practices, including how we conceptualize, conduct, report, and disseminate research. In turn, our theories can inform practice within academia and in other contexts. For instance, our theories might facilitate productive race relations and antiracism, as well as provide direction for developing, implementing, and evaluating policies related to race. Theories also can guide pedagogy. We should include theories about communication and race in our textbooks because whether and how textbooks treat race has practical and political ramifications. Information in textbooks will provide knowledge and insights, while also indicating to students (and professors) that race matters to our discipline. Consequently, we might encourage budding and veteran scholars to study race, which could lead to a more substantive body of scholarship on communication and race.

Basically, it's time to move beyond calls and critiques to action. To begin, we might refer to race-related theories or theoretical frameworks from other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, ethnic studies, and legal studies. For instance, communication scholars Hasian and Delgado (1998) endorse critical race theory, an intellectual movement which contends that the legal system sustains white supremacy and social inequities through legal discourse. Within our discipline, we could consult Jackson's cultural contracts theory (2002), McPhail's (1997) complicity theory, and Orbe's (1998) co-cultural theory, to name a few examples. We also could incorporate postcolonial approaches to theorizing race that "place performance of [racial] identity into a larger and socially/culturally contested frame" (Cooks, 2001, p. 247).

Among potential avenues for theorizing race and communication, I am especially excited about the potential of social construction, a school of thought which contends that humans create reality through interaction (Allen, 2005). Social constructionists maintain that meaning arises from social systems, and that we derive knowledge from dominant discourses, which usually are based on dominant value systems. For instance, processes of constructing social identity "depend heavily on social, political,

and historical factors, as humans rely on current ideologies to create social identity categories and their meanings” (p. 35). Thus, social constructionists acknowledge relationships between contexts and constructions, and they refute essentialist claims about identity as natural, inevitable, and universal. This perspective encourages us to question taken-for-granted knowledge about the world, and therefore about ourselves.

Social construction is a viable approach to theorizing race and communication because its tenets authorize us to attend to some of the critiques I noted above. For instance, its antiessentialist stance empowers us to imagine and to create alternative constructions of race and race relations, rather than accept the status quo. This paradigm also guides us to delve into the idea that everyone is assigned to an artificial racial category and taught how to enact it, as well as how to perceive members of other racial groups. Therefore, we might theorize discursive processes by which humans learn about and perform race. In addition, social construction provides a means for studying whiteness in its own right, not as the assumed standard against which to compare other racial identities (see Grimes, 2002). Consequently, we can invite all scholars to study race, rather than continue to operate from the assumption that race is the purview of scholars of color.

I especially urge organizational communication scholars to take a social constructionist approach to theorizing race, for several reasons. Organizations of varying types (e.g., corporations, government agencies, K-12 schools, universities, healthcare providers, nonprofit groups, and so forth) are prime sites of identity construction where people increasingly are interacting with racially different others, in a variety of capacities (including persons of color in roles of authority that whites traditionally have occupied). Within these settings, formal and informal policies usually dictate that members enact dominant norms, linguistic codes, and communication styles during everyday interactions, which can lead to discrimination and conflict. In addition, organizations are often locales of documented cases and anecdotal narratives of racial strife. On a more positive note, many organizations are actively seeking to value diversity, usually with race as a high priority, due to population projections about increasing numbers of racial minorities. Thus, organizations are sites where members can develop and implement policies, programs, training, and so forth, to value racial differences, to counteract racism, and to facilitate antiracism. Despite these compelling conditions, organizational communication scholars rarely and barely investigate race (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003).

Organizational communication scholars can use social construction to generate theories about how organizations and their members construct race and meanings about race. They could take an interpretive approach to develop theories describing processes and outcomes related to communication and race, such as routine social practices and interactions. Or, they can take a critical stance to theorize power dynamics, such as recursive relationships between larger discourses about race and organizational micropractices. For example, they might study how members of organizations reinforce or resist white supremacist ideology during everyday interactions (for a list of recommendations, see Ashcraft & Allen, 2003). Employing

either perspective can help us to learn more about communication and race, and therefore inform our efforts to effect social change.

In closing, I must offer one caveat: Although I advocate theorizing communication and race, I do not mean we should focus *only* on race. Rather, we should foreground race as inextricably connected to other salient facets of social identity, such as gender, social class, age, ability, religion, and sexuality. Social construction facilitates this approach because it requires us to contextualize our descriptions and critiques.

The United States has made significant strides toward racial equality and harmony due to alliances of dominant and nondominant racial groups. If communication scholars forge similar coalitions, we can build upon that progress by undertaking the daunting task of theorizing communication and race. I am optimistic about the possibility of our discipline to promote positive change related to racial issues within the United States and around the world. I hope that my insights and ideas will facilitate such efforts.

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