

**For Those of Us Who Must Move Forward**

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The task of defining the nature and objectives of scholarship is a monumental one, but when you add the qualifier diversity to scholarship, you have created a more dubious assignment. At worst, this effort is an intellectual exercise, which may end in philosophically obscure positions on the subject of truth. At best, we may find ourselves better prepared to discuss and ameliorate the human condition. As diversity scholars-researchers and organic intellectuals, the mission of such a venture is to clarify how and why we do what we do.

By using (Herbert) Marcusean logic, one could argue that diversity may be defined by what it is not, and it is often not traditional or modernistic. Modernism has become the antonymous flag that signifies the absence of pluralism. As a monolithic statute of traditional canon formation it has evoked the genesis of postmodern thinking where names like Foucault, Baudrillard, Lefebvre, Derrida, and Lyotard have become commonplace. Likewise, rigid structuralism and exclusionary "old boy" networks have prompted diversity efforts within public and private industry organizations, post-secondary institutions and beyond. Although many companies are joining the proverbial diversity bandwagon, I am not convinced that diversity presently means more than just good business savvy to the great majority of American workplace organizations. But, what does it mean to the academy? As instructors and scholars, we have an obligation to communicate the significance of effective cross-cultural interaction skills to our students before they graduate and enter the multicultural workforce. As scholars, we must reject the presumptive nature of philosophical certainty and narrow cultural critiques not only because they lead to the commodification of pluralism, but also because they inevitably shortchange racial and cultural progress. As researchers, we must be courageous enough to experiment with nascent cultural methodologies and theoretic paradigms, which may not be fashionable enough to enjoy wide acceptance from top-of-the-line journals. By doing this, we transcend the epistemological landscape and embark upon newfound territory marked by ontological and cosmological boundaries. Consequently, we force ourselves and others to come to terms with personal fragmentation, cultural heterogeneity and heightened "stranger anxieties." The historical and political antecedents that accompany and sometimes complicate diversity efforts should be analyzed to determine how they reify and/or denude cultural personhood. Diversity is an investment process in improving the human predicament. Every research agenda pertaining to diversity must consider this one tenet. Within this essay, I will explain how this tenet is threaded throughout my own research by discussing why I do diversity research, the development of my research agenda, and the prognosis of diversity research in the communication discipline.

### Why Diversity Research (DR) ?

Perhaps the best place to begin the discourse on cultural DR is with the struggle to respond to the scientific versus the humanistic impulse. For too long, theorists have appropriated their analyses strictly for academic consumption, and in doing so, have privileged themselves by localizing their contributions to the academy. The commitment of those conducting human scientific inquiry should be to all of humanity, not merely to sophisticated microinstitutions that empower themselves as competitive and authoritative interdisciplinary figureheads. I agree with Cornel West's (1993, p.3) observation in *Keeping Faith* that "there is a new kind of cultural worker in the making." We are at a moment of truth, a conceptual crossroad that will determine where we'll be in the next millenium. Embracing diversity is not only acknowledging difference, but also exploring ways that we may come to value one another by collaborating rather than simply cohabiting with one another. Part and parcel to this social cohesion process is the prerequisite of self-knowledge. In my opinion, it is especially difficult to invest oneself in DR when there has been no move toward culturally locating oneself in the human equation. Cultural self-knowledge cannot be peripheral to the intellectual engagement of cultural DR. If diversity scholars do not challenge their students, readers, and peers to become high cultural self-monitors, then we have only accomplished what has already been done. We will have taught people how to assimilate, accommodate, and/or acculturate. By not knowing oneself, one becomes susceptible to cultural detachment, which may not appear to be problematic in a society where we are encouraged to "be all you can be." However, it defeats the purpose of multiculturalism. After all, how can you come to value an individual for who they are culturally, when they themselves reject their cultural personhood? How do you teach diversity to a classroom, boardroom, or conference full of persons who have never asked the philosophical, cosmological and existential question, "Who am I?" The linchpin of the vocational and academic pursuit of human cohesiveness is the commitment to human evlvement and to the constitution of the self. Incessant interrogations of exclusionary or nominalistic discourse are necessary probes, but are limited by their reactionary formation. Consequently, we must balance the amount of time we appropriate to confrontative dogmatic politics with the amount of time expended on essential praxis efforts that will ultimately assist us in gaining momentum in the classroom, the discipline and beyond.

While contemplating my motivations for participating in this brand of theorizing and scholarship (DR), I found myself recalling previous experiences, both positive and negative, which function as personal snapshots with revealing subtextual narratives. These reminders plot where each of my research interests began. From them, come five principal reasons why I do DR.

The first of the five reasons is that DR is not only necessary, but cathartic. For me, it carries certain relieving properties that soothe my intuitions about myself and others. For example, my forthcoming book entitled *The Negotiation of Cultural Identity* is a thinkpiece dedicated to the systematic critique of this American obsession we call race. In particular, the book examines how marginalized persons negotiate portions of themselves in exchange for whiteness, which intentionally discards cultural descriptiveness. The monograph addresses the intuitive notion that whiteness is an inflexible constant within American interaction. Second, DR functions as a checkpoint or sounding board, verifying for me whether my observations are objects of displaced frustration or veritable commentaries on social reality. When exposed to a social climate in which you feel compelled to defend the humanity of Black people, self-definition becomes politically agitated and essentially intramural. It is then that self-monitoring throughout the research process becomes a very important activity. Third, DR promotes a scholar-activist stance. At its core, no matter how lofty it may sound, the intent of DR is to directly address and boldly confront the notion of multiculturalism in America and abroad. This necessitates a critical re-interpretation of social representation, behavioral histories, political and bureaucratic nuances, as well as curricular bias. Fourth, I do DR because scholarship is particularized, ergo it is restricted. It is almost culturally monogrammed. By purveying the methods and systems of analysis of any given researcher, it is possible to gain insight into their cultural worldviews, philosophical knowledge-forms, and ontological fascinations. So, no matter how masterful European American scholarship may be, it will inevitably overlook significant portions of my experience as an African descendant in America. When assessing the dystopic arrangement of cultural identities, multiple perspectives are needed and it is important to me that my experience is represented in that scholarly continuum. Finally, my personhood is an undetachable element of my research. And my research is directly related to my self-definition. The two become entwined not by pure happenstance. I am constantly reminded by the media, my peers, professional associates, and strangers that I (as an African American male) am not understood. This is evident in the recent Ebonics debate, OJ trial, Texaco tape scandal, Denny's controversy, and the shooting deaths of Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. (both of whom are rappers). The mere fact that I am so frequently misunderstood supplies enough research for a lifetime. But, I struggle with whether I should be the translator perpetually reacting to accusations, innuendoes, and misinformed criticisms aimed at concretizing a label of inferiority and delinquency. Instinctively, I want to reject this role, because I understand the implications and stress associated with its concomitant tasks. Certainly, I would be handsomely rewarded by the recipients of such information, but that alone may not be enough to compensate for the potential penalties of Black community ostracism and emotional drainage. On the other hand I wonder, if nothing is said to "set the records straight," where this finger-pointing will lead. Will it lead to the exacerbation of present insecurities, fears, and anxieties?

Grappling with these issues has forced me to determine why I do not do DR. *I don't do it because...*

- it is popular or fashionable, "neat" or "cute" or "just something to do."
- it can get me published or advance my career/salary.
- it is fun (actually it is quite invigorating and sometimes emotionally tedious)
- it is a deciduous intellectual moment that I fear may quickly subside.
- I want to antagonize traditional values or retaliate against white males.

## Development of My Research Agenda.

Before developing a DR agenda, several questions must be answered by the researcher: (1) what personal experiences inform my research? (2) What intellectual or political issues serve as the impetus for this investigation? (3) How would my research contribute to new knowledge in the discipline? (4) What is the pragmatic utility of this research? (5) Are there theories, concepts, methods, and/or techniques that facilitate a more accurate analysis of cultural phenomenon than those that are considered traditional?

The first question alerts you to your own bias up front. The answer to the question can be treated as a threat to reliability and built into the study, so that you can observe its effect. Or, you can attempt to eliminate this bias being fully cognizant of the possible danger it may have on your results. The second question can be less personal, but still a viable part of the agenda. It can assist with brainstorming topics to be further analyzed in a full-length study or analysis. This segment of the pre-agenda process reminds me of Muzafer Sherif & Associates and

their social judgment theory. One of the primary constructs considered in Sherif et al's paradigm is ego-involvement, one's personal investment in a given issue or subject. The third question pertains to the expansion of knowledge. Because the discipline of communication is still relatively young, heuristic research is more valuable to us than it might be for a much more well established discipline. Communication scholars should be national and international leaders in the conversation on cultural diversity simply because the issue is so directly tied to human interaction and social construction of meaning. The fourth question addresses the humanistic impulse alluded to earlier. How do we transform knowledge from the highbrow intellectual community to the general populace? We, the academic intelligentsia have often been accused of talking to ourselves rather than drawing practical conclusions. When asked if they thought intellectuals could ever play a major role in saving or liberating the masses, my students gave a vote of no confidence. Their reasoning for this was due to the selfish hoarding of academically produced solutions to social ills. So, at some point, it is imperative that you decide as a DR to whom you are talking. Perhaps, you will have excluded the very people you are investigating. This is why my pedagogical strategy is to encourage my freshman students to "break down" the technical jargon and philosophical argot as though they were talking to a five year-old or to someone "out on the streets" who wanted to know "what that stuff is you're studying." The final question is crucial, since it suggests that the standards and criteria you use to evaluate human phenomenon reflects your commitment to both scientific and human progress. Conventional models have often been recycled to explicate all human phenomenon with little to no regard for cultural specificity. Therefore, nascent concepts and paradigms, which are designed to critically assess the fusion of cultural interaction and human activity, should be adopted and celebrated within DR.

### Moving to an Agenda

My motivation for DR is propelled by my students, family, and other scholars. Being at a predominantly white institution has facilitated a very negative outlook on cultural issues for some of my students. They frequently inquire about the necessity or usefulness of being sensitive and aware of cultural differences. Then, of course, there is the age-old argument about which is more important, race or economics. The Marxist thinkers in the class usually combat any mention of race as a separate entity from economics. While I would agree that they do inform one another, I am perpetually disappointed with the blatant disregard of what money really is - a means of exchange. If it were peanuts, we would still have people complaining about not earning enough peanuts, and of course squirrels would be extinct. I say that in jest, but also to illustrate how simple conversations with students can inspire DR studies to be added to the research agenda. My family, friends and other inquisitive persons often ask what it is that I do, and what my current writing is concerning. I find myself giving rudimentary replies, not because I think they wouldn't understand, but that I wonder if they are really interested or if they just want the "watered down" version. Typically, I say, "I am an identity scholar, so I am concerned about how people define themselves in relationship to others." That usually piques their curiosity or encourages them to quickly conjure another subject. I've learned to know the difference. For those whose curiosities are piqued, the reason seldom is influenced by political partisanship. It is often associated with some life-altering encounter with someone who forced the individual to come to terms with who they really are. It introduced social binary characterizations, such as ethical/immoral, true/false, normal/abnormal, each of which are value-laden couplets. The experience could have been positive or negative, yet it shattered the person's innocent perspective on human character, kindness, and goodwill. I have observed that those who have never had such an experience are unlikely to feel compelled to define themselves culturally.

Sometimes, I wonder why my parents chose not to inform me of racial tensions, and why they raised me in mixed-race and mostly white neighborhoods. As I got older, I wondered what their friendships with whites meant to them. It seemed that they really weren't as solid as the ones with other Blacks. I speculated about whether they were hoping that I'd never experience racism so that I wouldn't have to carry their burdens regarding race. No matter what the reason, I have found that intrapersonal reflection on questions such as these have always been the initial catalyst for all of my research. An obvious source for devising a DR agenda is other scholars. There is so much that is currently being done in composite areas of communication study (i.e. gender, intercultural, and rhetorical communication) like Black feminist and masculinist thought, "negotiation of cultural identity" (my term), afrocentric methods, and religio-spiritual philosophy. Out of every sub-discipline, there are at least three distinctly different and new directions we are headed toward at any given time. By reading other scholars' works within and without the discipline of communication, I am motivated to create new concepts, theories, methods, and studies to address the voids and inconsistencies I've discovered.

## **The Agenda**

Every agenda should have an attached list of objectives and goals. For instance, if you are interested in getting tenure in five years, you should have a commensurate number of publications in mind. You should also specify what journals are advantageous outlets for your research. If you want to be known as an interdisciplinary DR, then you have to publish in major journals whose focus is aligned with your own. Perhaps, your plan is to become a major scholar in communication first before branching out; in that case, you should identify journals, potential mentors, collaborators, and other resources that will assist in the accomplishment of your goals. The most important item on your agenda is a timeline. Without specific deadline dates, you may find yourself talking a lot about what you plan to do when you get the time. Somehow, you may not find the time, thus your goals are sacrificed.

## **The Agenda to Publication**

Once you are clear about your goals, objectives, and strategies to be used in obtaining each, getting your works published is next. Most scholars have figured out the obvious link between conference papers and publications. If you write a quality conference paper, with some revision, you can submit it for publication. Because I am still a neophyte in the discipline, I haven't a tremendous wealth of knowledge in this regard. But, I have learned in the last couple of years that the journal prestige factor, rejection rate, and inside resources are three significant external facets pertaining to your success in getting published. I label them "external" because they are variables which do not directly relate to your work, but should be considered thoroughly. Every discipline, and every school has some implicit subjective policy on the appropriateness of your research. Most research institutions and their academic departments want a "dream team" of nationally and internationally recognized scholars. This will attract students, enhance the school's reputation, and bring credibility among peers at other institutions. I school which will remain anonymous here, listed all the journals that were appropriate publication outlets for a new tenure-track professor. Any ones that were not on the list were considered potential threats to obtaining tenure. Certainly, one would be allowed to publish in other journals, but they simply wouldn't count. Sometimes, departments encourage new faculty to publish in prestigious interdisciplinary journals rather than in lower-rated communication journals. So, it is important to ascertain the degree of "rigor" expected of you. Many of the larger research schools require publication in journals with 85% or higher rejection rates. Anything lower is not acceptable for tenure. So clearly, networking is critical. No one will admit that they are beneficiaries of professional networks which have facilitated the publication of much, if not all of their work. Even still, the old adage "it's not what you know, it's who you know" is mostly true. This is why establishing mentor and advisement relationships is vital to the success of all scholars.

In shaping my own work for publication, I extensively and intensively examine similar articles and/or books and determine how well they are being received and by whom. Those who seem to be most receptive are natural outlets for publication. Communication journals, I think, are becoming much more open to diversity research. I also consult with my mentors and advisors about major works and suggested publication organs.

## **The Prognosis**

Within African American communication studies, one of the primary struggles that confront us is the acceptance and legitimization of African American theory in the discipline. Politically, "culture" has become an intellectual commodity across disciplines. Many social scientists have taken license to explore culture as a fertile seed on the intellectual landscape. In the forthcoming twenty-first century, however, this ulterior fascination must subside and scholars must prepare to lend theoretic space for credible non-traditional scholarship in cultural communicology. The reconstruction of the philosophic plane in communication may be paralleled to the exigencies experienced in other disciplines. Philosophy, religion, psychology, and sociology are just a few that have undergone intellectual protest and have conceived liberation scholarship movements. As communication scholars, we are imbued with the dubious task of epistemological reform. Thomas Kuhn & Karl Popper have taught us that knowledge must evolve.

In Communication, science will occupy many modes, concretize an intellectual renaissance, and will call into question the very notion of what the German rationalist Christian Wolff calls "ontologia". These inquiries will consider the dialectic between rhetoric and spirituality, group affiliation and indigenous identities, and science and culture. These pronouncements will represent the totality of complexes that engage culture-intensive theories such as afrocentricity, negotiation of identity, oppositional rhetorics, postmodernism, ethogeny, phenomenology, feminism and Marxism. The challenge, in its most parsimonious essence, is to relieve hegemonic discourse from its

nomothetically necessitated post, and to offer a viable replacement of nascent paradigms which produce revealing discourse about the efficacy of communicated identities. If this is not achieved, the discipline will stagnate its growth. For those of us who must move forward, defining DR and setting agendas are incomplete efforts. These activities must be accompanied by a consistent and persistent commitment to cultural progress and human understanding.