Difference
Matters

COMMUNICATING SOCIAL IDENTITY

Second Edition

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Difference and Other Important Matters

During a summer break, I exchanged pleasant e-mails with a student I had never met named Jason[1] who wanted to enroll in a critical thinking course I would be teaching in the fall. A few weeks into the class, while we were discussing how assumptions affect critical thinking, Jason confessed that when he first saw me, he was shocked that I'm black.[2] He had assumed I would be white. 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, throughout Jason's education, none of his teachers had been black. Plus, we rarely see black women teachers or scholars on TV, in films, or in textbooks. (Have you?) So, Jason understandably was not prepared to encounter a black female college professor. His reaction to me was a good example of how we usually don't even realize we've assumed anything until something contradicts that assumption. Referring to points we had covered about critical thinking, the class and I concluded that Jason's assumption was logical.

I also assumed things about Jason. I figured he would be a young white male, based on his first name and the university's predominantly white, traditional college-aged student population. I would have been surprised if he had been a female, older, or any race except white. I hadn't even considered these subconscious expectations until Jason told me how he reacted to me.

This story implies several matters related to difference and communicating that this book addresses. First, we tend to expect certain types of people to be in certain roles. To see how this tendency works, slowly read the following list of roles, or better yet, have someone else read it to you. Notice the image that comes to your mind for each:

secretary	welfare recipient
CEO	plastic surgeon
soldier	female impersonator
hair stylist	gang member
janitor	flight attendant
minister	doctor

professional basketball player	gardener
hotel maid	special education student
manager	mail carrier
news anchor	chemist
elementary school teacher	hip-hop artist
interior decorator	nurse

For each of these, you probably pictured someone with a combination of social identities such as gender, race, social class, age, sexuality, religion, and ability status (with or without some type of disability). I think most people in the United States probably would see similar images for each role. Why do you think people might come up with comparable images?

We often expect certain individuals to play certain roles based on a 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. That context helped to shape Jason's expectations, and mine.

My story implies another point: when we interact with people, we often draw on what we expect and assume about the groups they represent to form our attitudes and to direct our behaviors. For instance, we might depend on *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."[3] Jason might have assumed I was an affirmative action employee, a token hired only because I am black and female, not because I am qualified and competent. He might have expected me not to be intelligent or capable of being a professor. He also could have anticipated that I would be nurturing or aggressive. He might have unconsciously gotten 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.[4] Likewise, I could have drawn on negative media stereotypes of white male college students to conclude that Jason would not be a serious student. I could have presumed he was interested only in partying and doing the minimum amount of work. I might even have thought he would be prejudiced against me because I am black.

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

Another reason we might suppose that certain persons occupy particular roles (as well as the fact that certain types of persons actually *do* tend to occupy particular roles) stems from a complex history in the United States of systemic, socially reproduced inequities. For instance, the history of racial and gender discrimination in the United States helps explain the disproportionately low number of black women faculty in universities. We will explore many of these inequities as well as factors in history that help to create, maintain, challenge, and change them.

In addition to highlighting issues related to roles, social identity, and expectations, my story reveals a common misunderstanding of the meaning of "-isms" such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and classism. Jason's concern about being racist illustrates a tendency to consider -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 internally located meanings."[5] This attitude neglects larger, systemic forces that contribute to discrimination and prejudice. Throughout the book, we will delve into these and related issues.

My story also illustrates the value of critical thinking skills for reflecting on difference matters. Critical thinking helps you to "distinguish between fact and opinion; ask questions; make detailed observations; uncover assumptions and define their terms; and make assertions based on sound logic and solid evidence."[6] I encourage you to improve your critical thinking skills as we explore difference matters.

A final issue raised in the story is that people rarely talk openly about topics like race or racism in mixed racial groups. Is that true for you? Why or why not? In my experience, these topics often are difficult to discuss or even acknowledge in mixed company. 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 topics can enlighten and empower us. When we explore and 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 shared his concerns with me because he felt safe in our classroom. I took his question seriously, and I responded by referring to concepts we were studying in our critical thinking class. We had a productive discussion about assumptions, expectations, identity, and communication. That classroom moment marked a turning point in my career as a scholar.

Additional teaching/learning experiences with students, colleagues, friends, and family encouraged me to focus my teaching and research on social identity and interaction. Eventually, I gained enough information and confidence to write this book. I hope to offer insight that helps people of diverse social identities to communicate positively and productively within various contexts.

In this chapter, I set the stage for the rest of the book. I clarify why difference matters, after which I explain concepts that underpin the book. Then, I provide an overview of the rest of the book. To conclude, I will tell you a bit more about myself because I want you to have a sense of me as a real person.

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*[8] refers to a characteristic of identity such as gender, race, or age. Although people frequently use the word "diversity" for such distinctions, I prefer "difference" because it aligns better with my focus. 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."[9] He elaborates: "similarity and difference are the dynamic principles of identity, the heart of social life."[10] If we think about similarity and difference as labels on a continuum:

similarity	difference
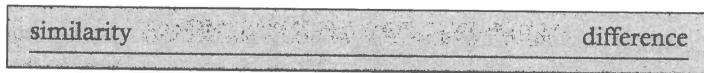
we might recognize that as we perceive differences between people, we also can see similarities. This perspective on identity also helps us avoid the tendency to separate things into *either/or* categories. I mean, is there anyone else in the world who is exactly the same as you, or who is totally different from you? So, our look at difference will consider how humans vary in gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, and age. Religion and nationality are also very important social identity categories. However, due to their broad scope and the space constraints of this text, I mention these identity categories throughout the text rather than in separate chapters.

As we consider each social identity category, we will investigate implications for members of dominant and nondominant groups. **Dominant groups** tend to have more economic and cultural power than **nondominant groups,** who tend to have less economic and cultural power. This perspective on identity deviates from how people tend to conceptualize difference by focusing only on the nondominant category. For instance, when you think of difference in terms of sexual orientation, what comes to your mind first, straight (heterosexual) or gay (homosexual)? I would be surprised if you said, "straight" or "heterosexual." What about race? If I said we were going to discuss difference and race, most people would think about blacks or people of color rather than whites or Caucasians. Why does this tend to happen? 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 can preclude thinking of males/men as gendered. Please understand that, in this book, "difference" refers simply to *ways that each of us can vary from one another.* We will delve into how we humans differ, and we will explore ways that those differences matter.

How do 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 discuss the second part of the title (*Communicating Social Identity*), I need to explain why difference matters enough for me to have written this book.

Why Difference Matters

Although people in the United States are alike in many ways, we need to think about how we differ, for several related reasons. First, U.S. society is changing. 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, Hispanics, blacks, Asians, and other racial-ethnic 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 elders. 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.

As demographics change, some 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, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which legislates equal access and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. More recently, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 2007 (ENDA), seeks to protect employees from discrimination based on actual or perceived sexual orientation. Consequently, some organizations fear lawsuits or boycotts.

Changing demographics, increasing demands for equal access and opportunity, and fear of lawsuits or boycotts have made difference (usually called "diversity") a hot topic. Many types of organizations (from national and international corporations to government agencies to public and/or private universities) have responded with various strategies. To be competitive and to prevent charges of discrimination, organizations are striving to value diversity. Many of them are providing diversity training programs or workshops to help their members understand and address diversity issues to build stronger organizational communities. They also are implementing formal programs to hire, retain, mentor, and promote members of nondominant groups. 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 diverse faculty and students and to establish multicultural curricula. Many colleges and universities now require each stu-

dent to take at least one course that concentrates on some aspect of "diversity." Have you experienced any of these?

These and other initiatives 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.[11] If organizations deal effectively with difference and embrace it as a positive force rather than as something to be shunned or feared, they can optimize accomplishing their goals. For example, organizations may broaden their markets and increase profits when they seek 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 United States 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 family members, friends, students, and colleagues. If we take time and care to think and talk about difference, we might have productive and enjoyable interactions with one another across our differences. Unfortunately, however, numerous obstacles can block 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 group members, such as women, persons of color, homosexuals, and persons with disabilities, as well as persons affiliated with certain religious groups or from particular ethnic backgrounds, may feel singled out during discussions about groups with which they identity. Students of color in predominantly white classrooms often feel pressured 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 to them. They may appear to minimize concerns of nondominant groups, or accuse them of whining or being too sensitive.

At the same time, members of dominant groups, including men, white people, heterosexuals, and persons who do not have disabilities, may believe that nondominant group members are exaggerating. Because dominant group members may not have had similar experiences, they may downplay issues that matter to nondominant persons. Also, some dominant group members may resent the attention they think nondominant groups are receiving when the topic of diversity arises in the workplace.

Dominant group members 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 blatant discrimination against blacks in early U.S. history: white male students have told me

they were not guilty of those racist acts. Some people may not speak their true thoughts or feelings because they worry that others will perceive them to be sexist, racist, homophobic, or otherwise prejudiced against other groups. Dominant group members may feel threatened because they fear that including minorities means excluding majorities. For instance, some white people believe that initiatives like affirmative action give minority racial group members unfair advantages; they think that employers hire and promote minorities for their group-based identity rather than their individual qualifications, such as education and expertise. As people compete for jobs, changes 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.

Societal norms and tendencies also hinder efforts to deal with difference. Norms about political correctness[12] may block members of all groups from expressing themselves, as might fear of lawsuits or other reactions. Such obstacles can increase resentment. A strong norm in our society to appear objective and rational, rather than revealing our emotions, may further obstruct openness to engaging difference matters. Also, because society teaches us to "stick with" our own groups, some people might resist trying to understand or accept other groups due to fear that their group members might shun or criticize them. They may be concerned that someone from their in-group will accuse them of being inauthentic or not true to their roots.

Another norm in our society drives us to define ourselves in opposition to others, which may invite a chain reaction: "my sense of myself is built on 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."[13] This view of oneself and others can become self-perpetuating and hard to change. An individual may struggle with anticipated consequences of viewing "different" people in positive ways. She or he may feel a false need to surrender a positive sense of self in exchange for viewing an "other" more positively. For instance, a heterosexual man may feel that his manhood would be threatened if he responded favorably to a gay person or if he advocated gay rights.

I referred earlier to another tendency that can affect attitudes toward difference: Members of both nondominant and dominant groups may unconsciously connect "difference" with nondominant groups. They may view the social identity category as the defining and potentially constraining characteristic of members of nondominant groups. This attitude can divide groups and place undue responsibility for dealing with difference on one group more than another. For instance, 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. He assumed that only a person of color should be in that role. The white man's qualifications and interest in the position did not seem

to matter. 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." These examples illustrate the premise that difference is the domain only of nondominant groups and that members of nondominant groups should limit themselves to roles and issues related to their groups. This perspective also insinuates that members of nondominant groups are not qualified to do anything else. Furthermore, this mind-set can discourage majority group members from getting involved in difference matters because they might feel alienated and/or defensive.

Not only do attitudes about difference tend to focus on the nondominant "other," but they also tend to dichotomize and polarize social identity groups. That is, they often divide social identity groups into two, opposing categories. Reducing identities to two "opposites" simplifies complex constructions of social identity. Consequently, one is forced to identify oneself or someone else as "either/or." For instance, discourse about race often focuses on or implies 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 excluded or marginalized. A similar dynamic operates for sexuality (i.e., heterosexual or not).

Related to the tendency to categorize groups into polar opposites 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 labels, without considering the complex nature of everyone's identity. When I ask students to describe themselves only by listing three social identity groups they belong to, they feel frustrated. They know themselves to be *so* much more than three categories could ever portray. Yet, when we talk about this, they confess to perceiving other persons—especially those who seem "different"—in terms of only one or two facets of identity. Combined with the impulse and the expectation to align with one's "own" group, this tendency to see a person strictly as representing one or two social identity groups can diminish the possibility that the persons will try to get to know one another. These attitudes also can increase the likelihood of conflict between individuals from different groups.

Many people do not believe that difference deserves attention, and/or they view it as significant only in extreme cases. Some persons view difference as noteworthy only when an individual or a group commits blatant, overt acts of discrimination or hate, such as physical assault or murder, against a member of a nondominant group. Because we have made significant strides in dealing with various -isms, many people believe that U.S. society has overcome discrimination, despite evidence to the contrary. They do not understand that prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes infuse our everyday interactions, often in subtle ways.

As I have explained, a complex set of barriers may prevent progress toward valuing differences between and among social identity groups.

Throughout the book, I employ several strategies for addressing these obstacles. I provide information and data from a variety of scholarly sources to disprove myths and clarify assumptions about difference matters. I also share examples of how to value and negotiate differences, and I recommend ways to deal with difficult situations. Because I understand that difference matters can be difficult, controversial, and sensitive, I speak with you in the first person, and sometimes I share my personal experiences. I acknowledge potential challenges that anyone might face, sometimes by confessing my own struggles. So, rather than take the typical approach of a textbook author who offers only rational, objective information, at times I reveal my emotions and thoughts to help you understand what I'm saying, and to model ways that you might process your thoughts and feelings.

To try to ease any concern you might have about negating your own identity because of the tendency to define self in opposition to others, I

Tool No. 1

Mindfulness

Become more mindful difference matters. What does being "mindful" mean? When you are mindful, you actively process information, you are open to new ideas and insights, and you are sensitive to context.[14] Also, mindfulness is "a heightened state of involvement and wakefulness or being in the present."[15] In other words, being mindful requires you to observe yourself in the process of thinking.[16] Put even more simply, being mindful means thinking about what you're thinking about. Becoming more mindful can help you become more sensitive to your environment, more open to new information, more conscious of how and what you perceive, and more aware of multiple perspectives for solving problems.[17]

To be more mindful about difference matters, notice and question how you categorize and characterize others. Try to notice when you are relying on stereotypes and prejudices about social identity groups. When you meet someone different than you, be aware of which social identity cues you highlight, and remember that each person embodies a complex set of social identities. Monitor your thoughts and feelings related to other people based on their gender, race, age, and so forth, *including people who belong to the same groups as you*. Cultivate curiosity about how you and others construct and perform social identities. Also pay attention to how you perceive that others are responding to you. Look for ways that you are guilty of *TUI (Thinking Under the Influence)* of dominant belief systems or stereotypes, and try to restructure your thoughts.

To *really* develop this tool, improve your critical thinking skills. Consider taking a course or referring to books or Web sites on critical thinking. Please see my Web site [www.differencematters.info] for links to critical thinking sites.

encourage you to define yourself in more complex ways. I invite you to reflect on how matters of difference affect and have affected your life, to become curious about how you became the person you are. I encourage you to recognize how multifaceted you are, because exploring yourself can help you to acknowledge and appreciate the complex identities of others.

To conclude, difference matters for a variety of reasons, including changing demographics, increasing demands for equality, and a related heightened interest in diversity. Although numerous obstacles might delay our progress toward valuing difference, the promise of benefits should motivate us to hurdle or remove those barriers. Now that I have explained why difference matters, next I introduce other matters that inform the remainder of the book, as implied in the second part of the title.

Communicating Social Identity

Communicating

Our study of difference (and similarity!) centers on communication. I use the verb form, *communicating*, to refer to the dynamic nature of processes that humans use to produce, interpret, and share meaning. These processes are complex, continuous, and contextual. And, they constitute our social reality.[18] To understand how communicating helps to create reality, we will explore factors related to how we communicate social identity. We will consider how various sources provide implicit and explicit messages about communication styles and norms of social identity groups and dominant beliefs (including stereotypes) related to social identity groups. We will focus on *discourse,* "systems of texts and talk that range from public to private and from naturally occurring to mediated forms."[19] We will investigate how discourse helped to construct social identity throughout the history of the United States. We also will review changing meanings of discourse related to social identity groups, and their impacts. For instance, varying meanings of femininity and masculinity have affected policy in medicine, law, and education. Throughout the book, we will explore ways that discourse "produces, maintains, and/or resists systems of power and inequality,"[20] especially as related to social identity. We will consider matters related to communicating social identity within and across a variety of contexts in the United States, where structural circumstances have varied widely across history.

We will study interactions between and among members of social identity groups in a variety of interpersonal, group, and institutional/organizational settings. I highlight organizations because we spend so much time within them, and because they play pivotal roles in difference matters. Although most persons might think about organizations as large, for-profit businesses such as corporations, I take a broader perspective that spans a wide range, including large corporations, government agencies and institutions, small businesses, nonprofit groups, sports franchises, hospitals, advocate/

activist groups, educational institutions, religious institutions, restaurants, social groups (sororities, fraternities), and so forth.

We spend most of our days dealing with organizations as customers, clients, constituents, consumers, congregants, coworkers, employees, patients, students, and representatives, to name several roles. Also, we learn much of what we know about social identities (ours and others') in organizational settings, such as school, church, health care facilities, and at work. Conflict and controversy related to social identity groups usually center on organizations: demands for and disputes about equal employment opportunity and access, education, health care, benefits, and media depictions all implicate various types of organizations. Matters of difference increasingly are apparent and important in organizations, because members of different social identity groups are likely to interact more frequently. Due to population projections, we are more likely now than ever to encounter differences in those settings. Furthermore, as nondominant members of social identity groups continue to gain access to roles they traditionally have not held, we are likely to encounter them/us in unexpected roles, as when Jason and I met.

We often identify ourselves based on organizational relationships and roles. For instance, I am a professor (at a university) and a volunteer (at an elementary school). As members of organizations perform their roles, they also make friends and enemies, gossip, indulge in romances, advance themselves professionally and personally, and endure a variety of conflicts. A final reason for highlighting organizations regards power dynamics, which I discuss in chapter 2. Power dynamics drive the communication processes that constitute organizations and societies, as different groups strive to serve their own interests and to control various resources.

In addition to organizations, I discuss media and their pivotal roles in communicating social identity. In each social identity chapter, I highlight a specific form of media and how it matters to that category.

Social Identity

Identity refers to an individual and/or a collective aspect of being. Sociologists Judith Howard and Ramira Alamilla observe that identity is based not only on responses to the question "Who am I?" but also on responses to the question "Who am I in relation to others?"[21] We will focus on *social identity*, aspects of a person's self-image derived from group-based categories. Most human beings divide their social worlds into groups, and categorize themselves into some of those groups. In addition, we become aware of other social groups to which we do not belong, and we compare ourselves to them. We often define ourselves in opposition to others: "I know who I am because I am not you."[22] Thus, *social identity* refers to "the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities."[23]

Social identity differs from personal identity, one's sense of self in terms of variables such as personality traits. For instance, a person may be charac-

terized as "shy" or "outgoing." However, "a person's self actually consists of a personal identity and multiple social identities, each of which is linked to different social groups."[24] An individual can "belong" to numerous social identity groups. Some of my social identities are: professor, black, woman, wife, homeowner, U.S. citizen, heterosexual, baby boomer, middle-class, Steelers fan, executive coach, and volunteer. Although infinite possibilities exist for categories of social identity groups, I focus in this book on six that are especially significant in contemporary society: gender, race, social class, ability, sexuality, and age.

As we consider difference matters and social identity, two important ideas to remember are: (1) identity is relational and (2) human beings develop their social identities primarily through communicating.[25] This perspective represents the *social constructionist* school of thought, which contends that "self is socially constructed through various relational and linguistic processes."[26] In other words, "our identity arises out of interactions with other people and is based on language."[27] Let's look at how communicating helps to construct social identities.

From the time we are born (and even prior to birth, due to tests that determine a baby's sex or congenital defects), socially constructed categories of identity influence how others interact with us (and vice versa) and how we perceive ourselves. When a child is born, what do people usually want to know? Generally, they ask if "it" is a boy or a girl. Why is the sex of the child so important? Sex matters because it cues people on how to treat the baby. If the newborn is a girl, relatives and friends may buy her pink, frilly clothes and toys designated for girls. Her parent(s) or guardian(s) may decorate her room (if she's fortunate enough to have her own room) or sleep area in "feminine" colors and artifacts. These actions and others will help to "create a gendered world which the infant gradually encounters and takes for granted as her social consciousness dawns, and which structures the responses to her of others."[28]

And that's just the beginning. As she grows up, she will receive messages from multiple sources, including family members, teachers, peers, and the media about what girls are allowed and supposed to do (as contrasted with boys). This process is known as *socialization,*

> the total set of experiences in which children become clear about norms and expectations and learn how to function as respected and accepted members of a culture . . . children are socialized at both conscious and unconscious levels to internalize the dominant values and norms of their culture, and in so doing, develop a sense of self.[29]

The same scenario applies for a male. He, too, will receive numerous messages, blatant and subtle, that will mold his self-perception. Simultaneously, both female and male children will learn about additional identity categories like race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, sexuality, and religion. What they learn may vary depending on their identity composites. For instance, a

Jewish boy in a working-class family probably will be socialized differently than a Latino Catholic in a middle-class family, even as they each may receive similar messages about being male. Meanwhile, an able-bodied Asian American boy probably will receive different messages than a white boy labeled as "developmentally challenged," even as all of these males receive comparable lessons about masculinity in general. These individuals also will learn communication styles particular to their groups, such as vocabulary, gestures, eye contact, and use of personal space.

As these children become indoctrinated into social identity groups, they will receive information about other groups, including contrasts between groups, and "rules" for interacting (or not) with members of other groups. They will learn stereotypes about groups, and they may accept these stereotypes as facts. They also will learn about hierarchies of identity. They may learn that being young is more desirable than being elderly, or that being heterosexual is preferable to being gay. These and other "lessons" about distinctions between and within groups will recur throughout their lives—and the lessons may contradict one another.

Due to socialization, children will accept social identity categories as real and natural. Yet, they are not. Persons in power across history have constructed categories and developed hierarchies based on group characteristics. In 1795, a German scientist named Johann Blumenbach[30] constructed a system of racial classification that arranged people according to geographical location and physical features. He also ranked the groups in hierarchical order, placing Caucasians in the most superior position.

Although scientists have since concluded that race is not related to capability, many societies in the world still adhere to various racial classification systems because the idea of race has become essentialized. *Essentialism* refers to assumptions that social differences stem from intrinsic, innate, human variations unrelated to social forces. For example, so-called racial groups are viewed as if they have an "ultimate essence that transcends historical and cultural boundaries."[31]

Thus, while we accept social identity groups as real and natural, we also perceive them as fixed (essentialized) and unchanging. However, these categories are not only artificial, but they also are subject to change. In different times and different places, categories we take for granted either did/do not exist or they were/are quite unlike the ones that we reference in the United States in the twenty-first century. Currently, the same person identified as black in the United States may be considered white in the Dominican Republic; in the nineteenth century choices for racial designations in the United States included gradations of enslaved blacks: mulattos were one-half black, quadroons were one-quarter black, and octoroons were one-eighth black.[32]

To develop these types of categories, human beings often refer to physical or physiological distinctions. It's logical to compartmentalize humans according to physical characteristics. If we did not have labels to distinguish groups of items that are similar, we would have to create and remember a

separate "name" for everything and everyone. What a challenge that would be! Therefore, it makes sense that we use cues like skin color, facial features, body parts, and so forth to distinguish and group people.

However, problems can arise when people assign meaning to neutral descriptors. They may use categories not only to distinguish but also to discriminate and dominate. Categorizing can lead to in-group/out-group distinctions that may negatively affect intergroup interactions. For instance, *social identity theory* (SIT) describes humans' tendency to label self and others based on individual and group identity.[33] SIT contends that members of social identity groups constantly compare their group with others, and they try to show that their group is positively distinct. When an individual perceives someone else to be a member of an out-group, that person will tend to react more to perceived *group* characteristics than to the other person *as an individual*. Stereotypes and prejudice occur more frequently in this scenario. In contrast, stereotypes and prejudice are less likely when a communicator views another person as an individual, especially when both persons belong to the same social identity group(s).

As I noted earlier, individuals often use identity markers like skin color to develop hierarchies. Moreover, many people accept and reinforce such hierarchies as natural and normal. Organizational communication scholars Charles Conrad and Marshall Scott Poole explain: "As people *internalize* the values and assumptions of their societies they also internalize its class, race, gender, and ethnicity-based hierarchical relationships."[34] These perceptions facilitate the social construction of inequality, which results in favoritism and privilege for some groups and disadvantage for others. Thus, for instance, regardless of level of education and even with similar qualifications, men of all races in the United States generally earn higher salaries than women of all races, and whites earn more than members of other racial/ethnic groups.

One way to understand differences in status based on social identity is the concept of *privilege.* Sociologist Peggy McIntosh coined this term to refer to men's advantages in society, based on her experiences teaching women's studies.[35] McIntosh noticed that while men in her classes were willing to concede women's disadvantages, they were unaware of advantages they enjoyed simply because they were men. She later extended her analysis to encompass race, and she developed the concept of white privilege, which I discuss in chapter 4.

In case you're not familiar with this concept, one way to think about privilege is handedness. Are you right-handed or left-handed? Did you know that people used to consider being left-handed as deviant, sinister, and dangerous? I'm left-handed, and one of my elementary teachers tried to change me to being right-handed. Of course, Ma didn't allow that. In our society, being right-handed is the dominant expectation. Although neither of these is better than the other, we have structured society in favor of right-handed people (primarily because of numbers). And, right-handed people rarely are aware of the benefits they receive as they move around in a right-hand world. They enjoy

the privilege of not knowing, until someone points it out. As a lefty, I often have awkward moments with tools, utensils, scissors, desks, and other things designed for right-handed people. And, people have told me, "Your handwriting looks good, for a lefty." We use our right hand to pledge allegiance to the flag, to shake hands when we meet someone, and to take oaths. Right-handed people can't avoid the benefits of being right-handed. We all inherited a system handedness that benefits some and disadvantages others.[36]

So, privilege tends to "make life easier; it is easier to get around, to get what one wants, and to be treated in an acceptable manner."[37] On the Public Broadcasting System's video *People Like Us*, which explores social class in the United States, a white male plumber describes how sales clerks tend to treat men in suits better than they respond to him when he wears his work clothes. Similarly, a working-class college student reported that he would change out of his work clothes before going to campus because he felt that faculty and staff treated him less favorably when he wore them.[38]

Privilege allows people to be oblivious to how their lives differ from others'. Members of privileged social identity groups often don't recognize their advantages. In fact, they may assume that others enjoy similar experiences to theirs. For instance, I never thought about my heterosexual privilege until a coworker friend told me she was a lesbian and began to describe the many challenges she has faced because of her sexual orientation. I just didn't know how privileged I was. Before I got married, I could easily discuss my [heterosexual] dates or romantic relationships during small talk at work. Now that I am married, I often discuss how my husband and I spent the weekend, our plans for vacations, and so forth. If I wanted to, I could put our wedding photo on my desk without thinking twice, especially since we're the same race and about the same age. Yet, persons who are not heterosexual may hesitate to engage in such activities because they fear verbal abuse, ostracism, being fired, or even physical assault. Even if none of these ever happened, some homosexuals live with the persistent perception that *these reactions might happen.*

This potential difference in perceiving the world related to social identity can inhibit interactions between privileged and nonprivileged persons. A person who is not privileged (or who does not feel privileged) may seem hypersensitive to an individual who is privileged. In contrast, the person who is privileged (or whom the other person perceives to be privileged) may seem hyper*insensitive*. Privileged individuals sometimes diminish, dismiss, or discount experiences of others who are not advantaged. If a privileged person witnesses or hears about an incident where someone demeans or humiliates a less privileged person, she or he may interpret the incident as an exception rather than the rule. That person also may accuse the less-privileged person of overreacting or misinterpreting the situation. When I assign my friend Anna Spradlin's article[39] on the challenges she faced as a lesbian passing as heterosexual at work, some students respond with comments such as, "She's making a big deal out of nothing," or "She shouldn't care what others [her students and colleagues] think." Of course, that's easy for them to say. Discussions

about privilege among nondominant and dominant groups can be productive when each "side" tries to understand the other's perspectives and experiences.

To elaborate on the idea of privilege, most of us simultaneously occupy privileged and nonprivileged social identity groups. Although I may experience or anticipate discrimination based on my race, gender, and age, I also can reap benefits associated with being heterosexual, able-bodied, educated, and middle-class. I also enjoy the privilege of speaking English as my native language, and being able to read and write. We will consider the concept of privilege and its complexities as we study gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, and age. For now, I hope that you have a basic understanding of the concept of privilege (if it's new to you) and that you can see how privilege helps to construct and maintain inequalities.

Another consequence of internalizing dominant values and assumptions about social identity groups is that members of nondominant groups often help to perpetuate hierarchies because they believe that their group is inferior and that the dominant group is superior. Accepting these ideas and believing negative stereotypes about one's group is known as *internalized oppression*.[40] When I was a little girl, my friends and I used to sing: "When you're white, you're right; when you're brown, stick around; but when you're black, oooh baby, get back, get back, get back." We had internalized a hierarchy of skin color, or *colorism*.[41] Sadly, this attitude persists: a dark-skinned black employee alleged that his light-skinned Black supervisor called him a "tar baby," "black monkey," and "jig-a-boo," and told him he needed to bleach his skin.[42]

To summarize, social identities emerge mainly from social interactions. We learn from a variety of sources about who we are and who we might become, mainly through interacting with others. We also learn about other groups. We learn communication styles and rules based on our membership in certain groups, and we communicate with other people based on how we have been socialized about ourselves and about them. As we interact, we are subject to biases and expectations about social identities that can affect what, how, when, why, and whether or not we communicate. And, most interactions occur within established normative contexts where members of groups tend to be more or less privileged than others.

About Me

Before I outline the remainder of the book, I want to tell you more about myself, to show how some of the points I've raised operate in my life, and to give you a better sense of who I am. As you read this abbreviated autobiography, notice how it exemplifies many of the issues I've mentioned, including the social construction of social identity, intersections of social identities, privilege, the role of context, and communication processes.

In the 1950s and 1960s, I grew up in Ohio in a small apartment in the Youngstown Metropolitan Housing Authority ("the projects") with my mother, my brother, and my sister. I was a toddler when my family moved into the projects after my father died. Residents of the projects comprised a well-known social identity group in Youngstown, and many of us are proud of having grown up in what we fondly call "Brick City." Since the projects were restricted to low-income families (most of whom were black), I was aware at an early age of being a member of a specific social economic class. Thanks to the Red Feather Agency (which the state government administered) and the city-funded community center, my friends and I enjoyed a variety of organized, year-round recreational activities (including arts and crafts, camp, drill team, variety shows, and sports). Although I was athletically inclined, I received subtle messages that discouraged me from pursuing my talents. Only a few sports activities in school were reserved for girls. And, because I was labeled as "smart," I learned that I shouldn't also aspire to be an athlete. In those days, people classified you as either one or the other. It seemed that you couldn't be both. I was tracked according to IQ, and placed in advanced classes in junior high and high school. I usually was the only black girl in those classes, along with one black boy and our white classmates. Because I was on the Honor Roll, I believed that I could go to college even though no one in my family had ever done so. However, I knew that my mother couldn't afford to send me. So, to prepare for life after high school graduation, I completed both college preparatory and secretarial skills courses. Those secretarial skills have come in handy throughout my life!

My mother instilled a strong work ethic in my siblings and me. She always worked hard for the money to take care of us, initially as a maid and eventually as a clerk for the U.S. Post Office. I believed without thinking about it that I would have to work all of my life. When I was a little girl, I wanted to be either a teacher or a nurse when I grew up. Based on messages from teachers and community members, those seemed the only options for a smart colored girl like me. From an early age, I worked at various jobs, on my own initiative. I earned money by babysitting, going to the store for elderly neighbors, or taking out their trash.

During high school, I worked for the federal government's Comprehensive Education and Training Agency, which assigned jobs and paid minimum wage to teenagers from low-income families. Fortunately, one of my jobs was to assist the guidance counselors at my school. Although I was a star pupil, neither the guidance counselors nor any of my teachers encouraged me or informed me about applying to colleges. Why do you think that happened? Fortunately, I paid attention to my white classmates as they discussed the SAT and the ACT, and I persuaded Ma to pay for me to take those tests. While filing materials in the guidance office, I came across information about scholarships and I applied for one of them. In a city-wide competition, I won a full scholarship (yessss!). I applied to and was accepted at Case Western Reserve University, the predominantly white university that Lillian Jones, "the" smart black girl who graduated two years before me, had attended. Even though my scholarship funds would have paid for me to go to any college in the world that admitted me, I didn't even think about applying to other schools. Why do you think I didn't consider others?

My background had prepared me to do well academically and socially in college. I interacted easily with white teachers and my white dorm mates, and I participated in many social activities, sometimes with the few other black students on campus. I changed my major three times, from linguistics, to Romance languages, to speech pathology. Notice that I stuck with some type of communication. Also notice that I never pursued a major related to mathematics, even though I had been classified in junior high as math-gifted.

After graduating from college, in a 15-year period during which I worked full-time and attended school, I earned a master's degree and a Ph.D. in organizational communication at Howard University, a historically black college in Washington, D.C. In 1989, I conducted a doctoral dissertation research project on computer-mediated communication (CMC) at the Public Broadcasting System's corporate headquarters. How I got involved in computers is another story, but it's related to my math skills.

Also in 1989, I was recruited to teach and conduct research on CMC at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Although I was qualified for the position, being a black woman was an important factor in my recruitment and hiring, because the university was actively trying to increase its numbers of minority faculty and women. In 1995, due to a variety of experiences (including the moment with Jason I told you about earlier), I changed my research emphasis to social identity and communication. That same year, I earned tenure (yessss!) and was promoted to Associate Professor. In the Fall of 2001, I accepted a position in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado–Denver. In the fall of 2003, I became chair of the department. I was promoted to Professor in 2004, and in 2007, I became an Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Throughout the book, I share more information and stories about myself. I am not trying to brag or to gain pity. I just want you to have a sense of me so that reading the book feels more like interacting with a person than simply viewing printed words. I also provide personal examples to illustrate some of the issues I cover; my examples might model ways for you to explore your experiences. I wish that I could know about you, too. I love getting messages from readers. Feel free to send me e-mail about yourself or your responses to the book. My e-mail address is: brenda.j.allen@ucdenver.edu.

Overview of the Book

In chapter 2, I continue to establish the foundation for the book by defining and describing *power dynamics* and their relationship to difference matters. Chapters 3–8 each concentrate on one of six significant aspects of social identity in U.S. society: gender, race, social class, ability, sexuality, and age. Although each chapter foregrounds one aspect of identity, please remember that social identities are complex and multifaceted. I highlight one category per chapter to illuminate issues and information that are especially relevant to that social identity. However, I urge you *always* to consider that intersec-

tions of social identity also matter. To emphasize that idea, I discuss differing consequences and issues for overlapping social identities.

In each social identity chapter I trace the sociohistorical construction of the highlighted category. Although discussing history may seem unusual in a book about communication, I cover history to help you understand social construction and to demonstrate how context matters in communicating constructs of social identities. I want to provide evidence that the social identity categories we assume to be natural and fixed are actually artificial and possible to change.

I also share history to punctuate the point that "past is prologue." People sometimes say about topics like race and gender that we should put the past behind us. However, we need to examine the past to understand its impact on the present and to guide us into the future. By the end of the book, you should recognize commonalities of consequences of social constructions, including privilege for some persons and disadvantage for others, as well as recurring and persistent efforts to change society by members of dominant and nondominant groups.

Insight and information related to history might help you to reflect on your attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about difference. When you realize that social identity categories can change, you may reconsider some of your attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions, about yourself as well as others. Also, the stories of individuals and groups who imagined and worked to attain social justice might inspire you. I sure hope so.

Each social identity chapter presents examples of relationships between the highlighted identity and communication processes. From the wealth of information that exists, I offer just enough to enlighten you and to stimulate you to learn more. I discuss numerous types of contexts and I refer to a variety of disciplines, including communication, history, sociology, psychology, economics, women's studies, ethnic studies, business, organizational behavior, and anthropology.

I also spotlight research about mass media because they permeate U.S. society. They depict interpretations of social reality, and they socialize us about social identity groups. Media portrayals of social identity groups can influence how we orient to our own as well as other social identity groups. We often receive preliminary information about social identity groups other than our own through mass media rather than through meaningful interpersonal interaction. The media also help to disseminate, shape, and reinforce dominant belief systems, stereotypes, and cultural ideals. On the plus side, media also portray and report resistance to inequalities. They also offer realistic portrayals of nondominant groups.

I tend to concentrate on nondominant groups in each social identity category, primarily to shed light on issues that rarely receive attention. However, I also consider issues and implications for dominant group members. I try neither to bash members of dominant groups nor to idealize nondominant groups. I want members *of all groups* to see themselves as participants in social

systems and networks that privilege some people and penalize others. While you did not construct those networks, you inherited them. You can challenge them, and you can even try to change them. I hope that this book helps you to realize that you can choose how you view and do difference. I also hope it provides a blueprint for how to do so.

I share a few "tools" to help you improve how you communicate social identity. These tools can aid intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational communication about difference matters. Like all tools, they are optional. You can choose to use them or not, depending on the task at hand. To help you process what you read, I include in each chapter an "ID Check" to allow you to engage in intrapersonal communication. That's right, I want you to talk to yourself! After all, intrapersonal communication matters, too. I also include "Reflection Matters" in each chapter to encourage you to delve into issues that the chapter covers. In the final chapter, I conclude the book and recommend next steps.

Now that I've told you what to expect from the book, I invite you to take a moment to reflect on what you might gain by reading and reflecting on the topics we will cover. I also urge you to open your mind and heart to becoming more aware of how you communicate social identity. Best wishes.

ID Check

1. How do you identify in each of the six social identity categories (gender, race, social class, age, ability, sexuality)? Other categories to list are religion, nationality, and native language.

2. From #1, how many of these place you in dominant categories? How many in nondominant? For religion, nationality, and native language, please consider which tend to dominate in your current context. For instance, English as a native language dominates in the United States.

3. Have you ever been aware of privilege because of any of your dominant social identity categories? Explain.

4. Have you ever felt disadvantaged because of any of your nondominant social identity categories? Explain.

5. Have you ever felt discriminated against because of any of your nondominant or dominant social identity categories?

REFLECTION MATTERS

1. What issues raised in this chapter, if any, do you find intriguing? Why?

2. Do you agree that the six categories we're covering are especially important in the United States? Why or why not?

3. Of the six categories that we will cover, which, if any, are most important to you personally? Why?

4. Has "difference" according to the social identity groups with which you identify ever mattered in your life? If yes, in what ways did difference(s) matter?

5. If you had to describe yourself using the labels of only three social identity groups, which would you choose, and why? How do you feel about limiting your description of yourself to three categories?

6. How does the sociohistorical context in which I grew up seem to have affected how my life unfolded? For instance, does the time period of the 1950s and 1960s, or the geographical location of a housing project in Ohio, seem to matter?

7. My brief autobiography demonstrates potential influences of organizations and people in organizational roles on social identity development. For instance, when educators assigned me to an academic track, they reinforced my sense of being a smart black girl. As teachers, peers, and community members affirmed that sense of my self, I became confident and competent in interactions with diverse types of people, particularly black and white peers and white teachers. To explore how organizations or people within organizations have affected your identity development, divide your life into segments, beginning with your birth. For each segment, identify at least one or two organizations (or member[s] of an organization) that affected your social identity development, and explain the effect(s). If you are 35 years old or younger, divide your life into 7-year segments; if you are over 35, divide your life into 10-year segments.

8. In addition to anyone you described in question #7, what other persons in your life have influenced your self-concept? Do you think that your gender, race, age, ability, social class, sexuality, nationality, religion, or intersections of any of these affected how these persons interacted with you, and how you interacted with them? Explain.

9. What do you think of the statement that "-isms," such as sexism, racism, ageism, "are merely behaviors of a 'bad' person"?

10. Have you talked about social identity categories in mixed groups (e.g. talking about race in a multiracial group)? If so, explain the circumstances, and describe your feelings and responses.

11. Have you talked about "others" in homogeneous groups (for instance, in a group of women talking about men, or straight people talking about gay people)? If so, explain the circumstances and describe your feelings and responses.

12. Have you ever experienced any of the obstacles to valuing difference that I cited? Explain.

13. To illustrate how much organizations matter, keep track for one weekday all of the organizations that directly or indirectly influence your life. From the time that you wake up until you go to bed, keep a list of those organizations (or types of organizations). Also keep track of your communication interactions during the day.

    a. Write the list of organizations.

    b. List the communication interactions that you engaged in that took place either within an organization, or with someone representing an organization.

    c. If any of those interactions were cross-cultural, describe them.