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Bridging the Gap: African and African American Communication in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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This study stands as a progressive attempt to investigate the intercultural communicative dynamic between African and African American college students enrolled in historically Black colleges and universities. As these two distinct cultures share more of the same space, it becomes increasingly pertinent to evaluate and understand the ways in which perception and stereotype affect intercultural interactions. Utilizing focus group sessions, various cultural nuances and stereotypical perceptions of each culture are candidly discussed. A combination of Hans-Georg Gadamer's phenomenology and Martin Buber's dialogue act as the theoretical lenses that organize the invaluable data collected from a focus group discussion. The underlying significance of this study is that the African diaspora created two distinct cultures that currently experience dissonance that may have otherwise not existed.

Keywords: *African; African American; stereotype; intercultural communication*

There have been noticeable differences and similarities in the communicative behaviors of Africans and African American college students on the campuses of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The differences are due, in part, to the cultural and historical factors that have nurtured the two groups.

African Americans are the derivatives of enslaved Africans who arrived in the New World in 1619. The sociohistorical acculturation of a new culture in America introduced them to different languages, customs, traditions, and religion (Katz-Fishman & Scott, 2002; Franklin, 1980; Levine, 1977). This new civilization has created a change in the attitude and subsequent behaviors of African Americans toward African immigrants who, by and large, became known as Africans in the diaspora living in the United States in and around the 1960s.

With the introduction of the diversity visa lottery in the late 1990s, many immigrants mostly from Africa have immigrated in large numbers to the United States. Brenda Williams (1998) asserts that "more than 20,000 visas go to Africans" (p. 2). As a result of this significant influx of Africans into the United States each year, there is a corresponding increase in the desire for educational advancement among African students residing domestically as well as those coming directly from Africa with J1 visas for educational quests. This study focuses its attention on those Africans and African American students studying at HBCUs and having daily interactions with each other and with other Africans and African American nonstudents alike.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Few studies have been conducted on the communicative behaviors of Africans and African American students per se. More studies have tended to look rather on the similarities and dissimilarities in the communicative patterns of African Americans and Latinos (Shah & Thornton, 1994; Warren, Orbe, & Greer-Williams, 2003) and African Americans and Chinese (Garrett, 1993). Shah and Thornton's (1994) study holds that Black-Latino interaction is fraught with differences ranging from racial superiority and stereotypes. They quote a 1991 *Time* magazine in which Black Americans stated that Latinos are "whiter than us" (p. 150). This shows the superiority and inferiority complex from which both groups suffer. Warren et al. (2003) maintain that interpersonal communication between Latinos

and African Americans cannot be devoid of race and gender considerations. Other groups of people where communicative studies have been carried out is that between Chinese and African Americans. Garrett (1993) looks at "pure talk," which was a witty interaction by the Chinese, and compared it to the uses of wit by African Americans and gay men. She examined the advantages and disadvantages of using pure talk by these groups of people.

With regard to the study of Africans and African American interaction, Owolabi (1996) upholds the belief that the groups have different manner-of-speech patterns. He discusses the issue of accent as a "frame construction" used by African Americans to describe the way in which Africans enunciate, pronounce, and articulate English words. Africans, through frame construction, are seen as having light to heavy accents depending on particular circumstances. To further illustrate his contention, Owolabi offers observatory remarks on the effects of frame construction in the following: "I have seen some Africans even go to ridiculous extent of trying to emulate the way Americans speak. Sometimes, they end up not being understood even by fellow Africans" (p. 77).

This statement underscores the need for an investigative study on how the two cultural groups carry out effective communication in sharing information and building their relationships. Elaine Copeland (1994) observes that "Although African Americans and Africans share a historical past, there are differences in their racial identity attitudes. Perhaps as Africans remain in the United States, their attitudes become similar to African Americans" (p. 169).

It should be mentioned that the study above limited itself to the African American graduate students in a non-HBCU campus of a midwestern university in the United States. It is this identity issue and attitudinal change between Africans and African Americans that has motivated this study to be carried out with undergraduate students of HBCUs. To unravel these issues, the following two research questions will be examined in the study:

(1) How is communication between Africans and African American students initiated and sustained?

(2) How is African and African American communication initiated and sustained with nonstudents?

METHOD

Consistent with the attempt to generate genuine dialogue, the methodology selected for this particular study was the focus group. In an attempt to collect the richest data possible, a primary requirement for the method of choice was the capacity to handle verbal contributions of several as opposed to individual comments. Coupled with a need for the maintenance of numerous contributions, this particular research is, more specifically, concerned with intergroup interaction. The intercultural communication between the African *community* and African American *community* is the topic of interest; as a result, *individual* opinion is not the primary focus. Simply stated, group dynamic and discussion is the locus of control. With that being said, "the focus group is a collectivistic rather than individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants' attitudes, experiences, and beliefs" (Madriz, 2000, p. 836). Hence, the focus group methodology is the most appropriate tool for the purposes of this study. For this particular project, both researchers held two separate focus groups at two historically Black university campuses. The researchers subscribe to the philosophy that focus or discussion group activity yields richer results than carrying out one-on-one interviews, with special regard to the two demographics mentioned.

Esther Madriz (2000) attempted to conduct a one-on-one interview with a Maria Fernandez in the spring of 1995. Maria Fernandez, member of a socially marginalized group of women, reported her feelings in regard to one-on-one interviews in the following:

> I'd rather talk this way, with a group of women. . . . When I am alone with an interviewer, I feel intimidated, scared. And if they call me over the telephone, I never answer their questions. How can I know what they really want or who they are? (p. 835)

This type of reaction toward interviews seems to be shared by other members of marginalized groups. Madriz (2000, p. 835) goes on to suggest that participants such as Maria contribute more toward dialogue when they feel safe and in the company of people from similar socioeconomic, ethnic, and gender backgrounds. In the specific case of Africans and African Americans, both of these cultural groups can be easily classified as socially, racially, and economically marginalized groups. Because these group members share behavioral consistency with Maria Fernandez, more individualized methods were overruled as tools inappropriate for this particular study.

The research was conducted on the campuses of Bowie State University and Howard University. One researcher is African; the other is African American. In an effort to gain rapport and confidence from the participants, the African researcher conducted the focus group for African students and the African American researcher conducted the research for the African American students. At the discretion of the researchers, the participants did not meet at one setting for the focus group. This decision is supported by Krueger (1988), who suggests that the environmental atmosphere for which focus group study is carried out is primordial for unbiased responses from the participants. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, researchers anticipated communicative restraint. Therefore, the decision was made to conduct one focus group session for Africans and another session for the African Americans. The focus group reserved for the African college students was conducted on the campus of Bowie State University. Six undergraduate students participated in this focus group session, 3 men and 3 women; ages ranged from 18 years to 26 years. All participants had taken the basic speech course required of undergraduates. All participants represented various sub-Saharan African countries—these included Sierra Leone, Cameroon, and Nigeria. Two of the participants had resided in the United States for fewer than 5 years; the remaining 4 had resided in the United States between 5 and 10 years. All participants were given an informed consent form that they signed and returned to the moderator. The focus group session was audiorecorded and later transcribed by the moderator, who developed themes through line-by-line analysis.

The completed transcription was later given to participants for the purpose of insuring accurate information; a member check (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The focus group reserved for the African American college students was conducted on the campus of Howard University. Eight undergraduate students participated in this focus group session, 7 women and 1 man; ages ranged from 17 years to 20 years. All participants had taken the basic speech course required of undergraduates and were currently enrolled in an African American rhetoric course. Participants received 2 extra credit points for participating in the focus group activity. Participants hailed from various locales that spanned the country from east to west. Each participant was given an informed consent form that they signed and returned to the moderator. This focus group session was also audio recorded and later transcribed by the moderator, who developed themes using a line-by-line analysis. The completed transcription was later given to participants for the purpose of insuring accurate information; a member check (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To situate African and African American communication in its proper context for analytical purposes, the hermeneutic postulations of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) and Martin Buber (1955) have been chosen as a fitting theoretical framework to examine the two distant but similar cultural groups. This two-pronged theoretical approach is executed and justified through Gadamer's explication of prejudice in interaction and Buber's emphasis on identity construction in relation to genuine dialogue. In his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer takes an epistemological angle to human understanding. His ontology is to break barriers so as to fathom human complexities.

The concepts of understanding, prejudices, effective history, and the fusion of human horizons constitute the fundamental paradigm for closely examining intercultural communications. Deetz (1978), quoting Schrag, posits the essence of Gadamer's hermeneutics:

"Hermeneutic thinking discloses the world as a dwelling in which various styles of behavior can occur. Hermeneutic thinking is a path or a way to an understanding of the world as a region of involvements" (p. 13).

Africans and African Americans historically share a common world, but due to contingent forces of slavery, both groups have been living in cultural isolation. For unity of values to be achieved, there is the need for the two groups to strive for understanding. This understanding, according to Gadamer (1989), can only come through yoking the two cultures through the sharing of effective histories before they can fully realize and understand themselves in the process of communication. Effective history, according to Bernstein (1982), is the bedrock through which human beings "can risk and share their own prejudices" (p. 831). Consequently, Africans and African Americans should confront their cultural prejudices propelled by centuries of geographic separation as a result of the historical Atlantic slave trade. For the two races to carry out meaningful dialogue for mutual intelligibility, there is need for cultural education for the two parties.

We often lure ourselves into believing that we are engaged in active dialogue. But more often than not, we do not attain this level of interaction and understanding. Gadamer (1989), like Martin Buber, endorses genuine understanding from the language standpoint. Language should constitute our shared experiences. It should take cognizance of effective history so as to fuse the horizons of both parties engaged in a dialogue.

The hermeneutic concept transcends the literary domains. It assumes, according to Gadamer, a far more multifarious significance: "The history of hermeneutics teaches us that besides literary hermeneutics, there is also a theological and legal hermeneutics and, together they make up the full concept of hermeneutics" (p. 308).

He implies that hermeneutics as a field of communicative study can be reified to cover all domains of human existence. Moral knowledge can extricate humans from the complexities of our existence. The application of moral knowledge to specific situations can bring untold positive results. This he considers the antithesis to

Aristotle's concept of self-knowledge. It is the concept of self-knowledge that can keep different cultural entities such as Africans and African Americans divided. Self-knowledge should rather be the springboard for coming close to understanding "the other." The notion of the other should not be misinterpreted to mean foreign, alien, or immigrant. The moment ethnocentricity enters the realm of interpersonal interaction, communication becomes tainted with negative bias and ill forms of prejudice.

Gadamer views prejudice as a necessary tool to foster communication between persons. Bracketing our prejudgments and prejudices but not entirely eliminating them in a dialogue would provide a clue to ontology. "Prejudices are constitutive of our being" (Bernstein, 1982, p. 827). Thus, we must bring forth our individual prejudices to confront the other. By so doing, this can create common understanding as we seek to unravel the mystery of our being. "To understand is always to understand differently" (p. 828).

By knowing our limitations as well as our strengths in "prejudiced" dialogue with each other, we come to appreciate and learn to accommodate our differences. Corroborating this view is Deetz (1978): "In an existential phenomenology, one's historical and linguistic prejudices, rather than being suspended, become resources for understanding since they are part of the very existence to be understood" (p. 59).

The historian Pier M. Larson (1999) argues that exercises in identity formation among slave populations developed in response to the trauma caused by maltreatment, division of kin, and overall brutality of enslaved populations. He offers the argument that "victims of social trauma and their descendents often engaged in purposeful and explicit remembering as a form of empowerment and identity formation" (p. 335). Similarly, the act of engaging in collective memory and identity formation are requisite mechanisms used to combat oppression, which was largely manifested through intense cultural division.

In a nonacademic sense, the term *dialogue* is easily viewed as a communicative exchange between two or more persons. These communicative exchanges are usually not defined by rules of time, space, openness, or honesty. Dialogue is created if communication

has occurred. Through a philosophical and theoretical framework, Martin Buber (1955) viewed the process of dialogue a bit differently. Buber, a believer in life and humanity existing only through a process of genuine meetings, stated that

> [In dialogue] man learns not merely that he is limited by man, cast upon his own finitude, partialness, need of completion, but his own relation to truth is heightened by the other's different relation to the same truth—different in accordance with his individuation, and destined to take seed and grow differently. (p. 59)

As Buber suggests in this quote, humans possess an innate need to assume perspective on their worlds through the incorporation of perspectives different from their own. In the most elementary terms, definition cannot exist with antonym. Buber's sentiment on dialogue is that it acts as the communicative venue (space) where antonymic perspectives converge to create definition and reality. Consequently, dialogue is a necessary element not only in discovering truth about one's environment, but more important, dialogue is a compulsory element in the acquisition of truth about one's self.

John Poulakos (1974) defines dialogue as "a mode of existence manifested in the intersubjective activity between two [groups], who, in their quest for meaning in life, stand before each other prepared to meet the uniqueness of their situation and follow it wherever it may lead" (p. 199). Through subsequent discussions on the Self, the Other, and the Between, Poulakos is able to reiterate the necessity of possessing and maintaining pure intersubjectivity as a means of obtaining this "meaning in life." Martin Buber (1955) describes the innate tendency by stating that "men need, and it is granted to them, to confirm one another in their individual being by means of genuine meetings" (p. 59). Buber argues further that people essentially need *genuine* interaction to understand themselves on an unadulterated level. In an argument against seeming, or perpetrating, Buber argues that "only in partnership can my being be perceived as an existing whole" (p. 65). It is most certain that Buber would argue that this 'wholeness' remains the collective objective of mankind. In regard to an oppressed population of people, the desire for achieving wholeness would seem to take on redefined priority.

Hence, Buber's (1955) phenomenological dialogue articulates the exigencies of such a communicative study between Africans and African Americans. These two cultures, though distinct, possess cultural commonalties that are witnessed through treatment by European hegemony and opinions of international community. As Larson (1999) suggests, "perpetrators and their descendants seek to obliterate and question the validity of [cultural] memories and thereby undermine the empowerment and identities they generate" (p. 335). Whether this obliteration of cultural memory is executed through European institutionalized venues or European-influenced mass media, its negative effects have been consumed and perpetuated by the international community. Illustrating the negative influence of European international domination, Suzuko Morikawa (2001) reports that the Japanese are tainted with distorted perceptions of African and African Americans based on both the Japanese monolithic society and a long history of European hegemony. Morikawa offers the observations of a Japanese samurai:

> I see a Negro. His face looks like it is painted by ink. He looks just like a monkey. Although I have seen people with dark skin all over Japan, I have never seen any like him. *According to the words of Americans*, this Negro is the ape incarnate. (p. 426, italics added)

Understanding dialogue and how it may be used to supply cohesion for two groups of people who share the aforementioned cultural oppression provides an understandable amount of exigency for engaging in research pertaining to the intercultural communication dynamic between Africans and African Americans. Documented accounts of the British, Portuguese, and Spanish slave trades offer information on an objective historical truth. However, this evidence in global social studies does not offer truth on the phenomenological level that Buber (1955) so eloquently argues humans yearn to capture. Because the tools of historians and archaeologists prove inefficient in acquiring truth on a phenomenological level, communicalogists must intervene and assume the position of "truth finders."

ANALYSIS

To answer the two research questions, the researchers came up with focus group questions that addressed both research questions. For instance, some of the questions addressed issues such as how participants relate with each other in and outside the classroom environment, and on Research Question 2, about their communicative interactions with nonstudents.

A line-by-line analysis of transcriptions from each focus group produced three pervasive themes. These themes illustrate the predominant ideological systems that were woven into the narratives present throughout both focus group discussions. James W. Potter (1996) suggests participants' opinions, observations, and concerns throughout "these conversations are the embodiment of an ideological language through their social positions" (p. 141). As a result, the emergent themes present throughout the two focus group discussions in this study are the derivatives of a certain dialogic analytical exercise. Emanating from the dialogue of both discussions were certain recurring motifs that were interestingly insightful in relation to intercultural communication between Africans and African Americans.

The three emergent themes that surfaced from both discussion groups include (a) intragroup stereotypical perspectives of the "other," (b) cross-cultural communicative tension, and (c) a yearning for the presence, maintenance, and perpetuation of improved intercultural dialogue. Each of these themes will be analyzed and discussed in reference to how they were conversationally displayed throughout the focus group sessions. These themes were recognized and labeled through either repetition in discussion and/or intensity of dialogue in relation to their mention. Having an understanding of said analysis construction, the aforementioned themes will be discussed in respective order.

INTRAGROUP STEREOTYPICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE OTHER

Joseph A. Devito (2003) defines perception as "the process by which you become aware of objects, events, and especially, *people*"

(p. 56). This definition of perception possesses an inherent priority in the discussion of intercultural communication between Africans and African Americans. Similar to most communication between heterogeneous demographics, perceived notions are the initial stages of any and all forms of communicative interaction. When the phenomenon of perspective is coupled with the notion of stereotype, complication or convenience is further established. Stereotype, defined as a sociological or psychological fixed impression of a group of people (p. 65), is what essentially emerged as the initial derivative theme.

In the focus group of African students, this idea of intragroup stereotypical perspectives was discussed in an open and direct manner. This is illustrated through Respondent F stating, "I don't understand African Americans . . . they are not serious. Most of them are ignorant about Africa." Respondent A expresses the opinion that "most of the information they know about Africa is through the media." These two statements were offered in response to a question addressing the nature of relationships with African Americans outside of their college campus. Immediately, Respondents A and F make mention of the ignorance African Americans display in regard to African culture. Note that Respondent F, who offers the primary response to said question, prefaces her comment with the statement "I don't understand African Americans." Hence, it becomes clear that not only are African American students possibly not showing interest in African history, culture, and value system, but African students may not illustrate reciprocity in this matter, either. Consequently, intragroup stereotypes tend to be maintained and perpetuated. In an act of reversing this practice of intragroup stereotyping, Respondent E combines preconceived notions and actual experience with the other. Respondent E offers the following:

> Most of them [African Americans] are very hostile towards Africans; they are very ethnocentric. They believe that they are the best and we don't know anything . . . we are foolish. I mean, like, I have had very bad experiences with African Americans.

This statement illustrates a particular point where stereotype and experience coincide. In the beginning, the participant speaks of African Americans with the similar "distant" pronouns that prior participants used to illustrate the stereotypes of African Americans. But in a moment of intense revelation, this participant qualifies the testimony by stating that experiential evidence could possibly be the basis for this contribution. On the topic of sharing experience with the other, an interesting example of intercultural interaction was given by a student in the African American focus group.

On the topic of interpersonal interaction with African students, the participants immediately offered narratives and personal encounters within the context of the classroom. In an attempt to describe interpersonal interaction, Respondent 3 offers a high school classroom experience; the following is stated:

> Well, yeah, but the work ethic is stronger in a lot of foreign people I've met. When we were in high school they [Africans] would be turning in assignments, doing work on the weekends, handing me stuff that was not even assigned. I was like, damn. They was turning in stuff that the teacher lectured on . . . they was turning it in like it was homework.

In this instance, a comment is offered that resembles the structure of African Respondent E. Because the topic of work ethic had frequented the discussion, Respondent 3 attempts to link experiential knowledge with the frequently visited stereotype to offer a perspective laced with what she feels is objectivity.

This idea of intragroup stereotypical perspectives continued to show in an explicit conversation regarding stereotypes within the African American focus group. Similar to the focus group of African students, the idea of mass media's influence on stereotype and perspective surfaced. Respondent 8 gave the following opinion:

> Well, I think both groups are relying on stereotypes that are often put out there by whatever sources that tend to affect random conversation. Like, I don't know . . . it's like don't they think we're all lazy . . . you don't want them to talk to you like you're lazy. But you

might talk to them like you've been influenced by the media's portrayal of them, too.

In this particular excerpt, the influence of the media is given direct attention. The stereotypical views conjured by mass media are addressed not only unilaterally but bilaterally as well. Respondent 8 establishes that it is possible for Africans to view African Americans as being docile and lacking work ethic. However, she also makes mention of the strong possibility that African Americans are subject to being misled by stereotypical images that the media utilizes to depict the "typical" African as well. The group as a whole seemed to have a keen awareness of the power of the media's repetitive imagery in relation to identity construction and perception of the other.

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE TENSION

Oftentimes, intercultural communication specialists will define communication competence along the lines of human relations, social skills, and self-presentation perspectives. At a glance, it would seem that mastery over these three areas would not only bring improved intercultural communication competence but overall communication competence relevant for various venues, persons, and contexts. John Wiemann (1977) offers a strategy for conceptualizing the essential aim of improved intercultural communication competence by suggesting it is

> the ability of the interactant to choose among available communicative behaviors in order that he may successfully accomplish his own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his fellow interactants with the constraints of the situation. (p. 198)

In essence, Wiemann implies that intercultural communicative success is other oriented, and effectiveness of communication is equally shared by the other.

With the preceding definition as a standard of measure, it was evident that a second theme inherent in focus group discussions

was one of cross-cultural communicative tension. There were instances in which the success or effectiveness of cross-cultural communication was indirectly manifested. Respondent C speaks of indirect encroaches on successful communication with African American students by saying, "I have a Nigerian background and they make little comments and stuff like that; and I have to be like it's not funny, you know." In this statement, Respondent C illustrates knowledge of indirect criticism of culture that can be deduced as derogatory. There is no confusion in the feeling of embarrassment and dismay that one feels when objectified by snide comments and the like. Respondent A offers more of an account of cross-cultural communicative decay in the following:

> A lot of time they don't like Africans so they start making jokes about African people. I just try to understand their English language because a lot of us have accents. During some parts of the conversation my accent might make me pronounce certain words in a different way and they might laugh.

The frustration illustrated in the statement above is the result of direct verbal insensitivity and abuse by African American students. This participant makes it quite clear, in linking accent to ridicule, that Wiemann's (1977) intercultural has been violated by the other. In this case, the other is African American interlocutors. Interpersonal communication being a communicative phenomenon based on reciprocity is at a major stifling point in this situation. Following the rules of reciprocity, insensitivity can only be met with more insensitivity.

The research shows evidence that this detrimental type of insensitivity is not limited to African Americans. The intercultural communicative situation becomes far more complex when genealogy and national identity do not present themselves in the traditional codetermined fashion. To further illustrate this scenario, Respondent 2 offers the following:

> One day I was buying something from the food stand . . . and this African lady asked me where I was from. I told her Florida. She said, "Oh, you're American, right?" Both my parents are from

> Africa, but I'm from Florida. I felt like she was calling me a sellout, man.

In this instance, it appears that it was of utmost importance for the African woman to inform Respondent 2 that the correct behavioral response was to claim African heritage and African heritage only. Though having African parents, which is most likely evident in phenotype, Respondent 2 was born and raised in the United States. Throughout the discussion, this respondent also reported several attempts to clarify and explain her "complex" genealogical and nationalistic identity to the woman, alas, to no avail. Respondent 2 reported a consistent tone of sarcasm throughout the entire interaction.

Throughout the discussion, it seemed as though ethnocentrism was a factor that might inhibit the attainment of Wiemann's (1977) intercultural competence. Respondent 7 offers a personal narrative of her own in the following: "To me it seems like they are closed-minded about the whole idea of talking across culture. My stepfather is very much closed to intercultural communication with Americans. Just very, very closed to communication with anyone besides Africans."

This particular testimony carries a certain strength based on the experiential relationship that Respondent 7 shares with her stepfather. The behavior of a family member, because of the frequency of contact, is usually behavior that is observed with a great deal of accuracy and consistency. Understanding both the opinion of Respondent 7's stepfather and Wiemann's (1977) strategy for improving intercultural communicative competence, it becomes clear that the relationship between the two is characteristic of relationship between oil and water. They do not mix. Although Wiemann stresses saving face and remaining sensitive to the other, the stepfather, in this case, chooses not to associate or interact with the other altogether. Consequently, the initial step toward intercultural competence (intercultural *communication*) is never made. Fortunately, this scenario is not indicative of the norm. Emerging from hours of discussion, a desire for improved intercultural dialogue came to fruition.

DESIRE FOR IMPROVED INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

Drawing from researchers (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Lukens, 1978), there is an antonymic relationship between ethnocentrism and intercultural communication. As degrees of ethnocentrism decrease, the ways in which people view the other as occupying statuses of equality increases. Devito (2003) adds denotative contribution to this relationship by offering the term *communication distance* to describe various levels of openness, cooperation, and genuineness with the other. At one end of the ethnocentrism continuum is a communication distance characterized by disparagement; the person is likely to view their own culture as superior to other cultures (p. 46). Pertinent to the current discussion is the other end of the spectrum, characterized by equality and a yearning to improve intercultural dialogue (p. 46).

This equality was demonstrated in the African focus group when Respondent A offered his strategy for ridding African Americans of African cultural ignorance. Respondent A suggests that the proper "approach is to educate them so that they can educate someone else. They are trapped in ignorance." Consequently, his antidote to ignorance that may be displayed by his African American counterparts is through education and not anger. His intention of intercultural communication is couched in remaining genuine in his effort to educate those who are ignorant about certain aspects of his culture. This respondent is essentially addressing the need for perpetual education of African culture as a way to combat cultural insensitivity and spark intercultural communicative competence. Respondent F supports this strategy by saying "The best thing to do is bring them to the culture, for them to see it themselves." In this comment, there lies a strong desire for community building. In line with the old adage "Kill them with kindness," Respondent F offers inclusion as an antidote for ignorance and ethnocentrism. These comments illustrate a yearning for improved intercultural dialogue.

Not to suggest that all discussion regarding intercultural dialogue was of the rehabilitative nature, it must also be noted that participants also spoke of positive intercultural interaction and experiences.

These positive intercultural interactions were typically described through comments such as "I have not really had any bad or strained relationship with them [African Americans]. I think our class relationships are cordial" (Respondent E). So, it should be understood that not all intercultural communication is of the damaged, ethnocentric, and insensitive nature. Some interaction is maintained and regulated through operating with levels of genuineness. As illustrated in the following contribution, this genuineness was also present in the African American focus group. This student offered this comment in response to who should assume responsibility for initiating conversation, Africans or African Americans. She says,

> I don't need nobody come to talk to me. But, I have extended myself. At Howard function, I just walked up on two Africans and begin talking, and—and they were talking about Africa. And we started vibing. So, maybe, we need to like . . . uhh . . . start taking risks and just communicating regardless . . . of what we think . . . or how our fears might play a part, you know? It's about conquering fears . . . that's my opinion.

In this instance, there is a sincere desire to operate within a realm of genuineness. This student displays a desire to conquer intercultural communication apprehension by taking the "risk" and placing herself in a situation that demands communicative effort on both sides. Through this practice of risk taking, she has reached a point of "vibing." This vibe solidifies the risk she has taken as being one of good measure.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATION

This exploratory research aimed at examining those themes found in the data from the two focus groups in the light of the two research questions. In an attempt at getting respondents to speak openly about their communicative behaviors, the first research question was adequately answered in this research through the general themes of intragroup stereotypical perspectives of the other. African Americans, it was ascertained, categorized Africans in

general from a biased standpoint stemming from an unobjective portrayal of sub-Saharan Africa in American media. Hostility and ethnocentrism manifested by African Americans toward African students, as echoed by respondent E of the African students' group, ("they believe they are the best and we don't know anything") is clear testimony to the fact that initiating and sustaining communication between Africans and African Americans could be orchestrated by bias and deeply ingrained stereotypes of one another.

This view was equally shared by the entire African students' group as they reacted in a similar way when they mentioned aspects of their communications with African Americans being judged as "people who speak with accents or those they can create jokes about." The African American students tend to distance themselves from African students. The African students ascribe this tendency to a superiority complex from the African Americans. The African students view themselves as hardworking, whereas their views of African Americans are couched in stereotypical lethargy. This creates a void in communication. Respondent 8 of the African American focus group confirms this: "Like, I don't know . . . it's like don't they think we're lazy . . . you don't want them to talk to you like you are lazy." This practice of stereotypical perspective-taking seems to be quite pervasive when groups engage in referencing each other. For such a barrier to be broken so that the two groups can feel comfortable in dialogue with each other, there is bound to be sensitization on what Buber (1955) discusses in his postulations of "I" and "thou" philosophy.

Initiating and sustaining communication between Africans and African Americans from this study is hampered by ignorance and the lack of "effective history" (Gadamer, 1989). This is made evident when African American students engage in the practice of monetary compensation for service rendered by African students, which they understand as genuine charity and community. As a result, cultural value differences lead to different interpretations of a similar event. To the African, getting a reward from a service he considers charitable can be a display of ignorance. To the African American, not giving reward after a service has been rendered can be a display of ingratitude. The poor interpretation of one's

intention from the two groups shows the wide margin of cultural differences that exist between Africans and African Americans. This clearly affects both groups' intercultural communicative competence. When the two groups fuse their cultural prejudices through a systematic understanding of the traditions and cultures of Africa and America, and reach understanding of how these factors have affected the communicative trends of the people, there will be no apparent obstacle that can hinder the attainment of an intersubjective dialogue. Until both groups operate under the guise of communicative hermeneutics, effective communication cannot take place.

On the subject of Research Question 2, initiating and sustaining communication between Africans and African American college students and other nonstudents, themes of cross-cultural communicative tension were manifested. But although it was of great concern for African students, it was rather the issue of inferiority and superiority complexes that the African American students had problems with. When Respondent 2 of the African American focus group echoed the example of an African lady ashamed of her African culture, as shown in the analytic section, it was shared by all the members of the group. An African lady would prefer the participant to say she is from Florida *although* her parents are from Africa. This is demeaning of one's cherished cultural heritage. Because the African continent is commonly associated with malnourished orphans and AIDS patients, persons who have been fully acculturated and assimilated might find difficulty in establishing identification with it. This point was equally shared by a respondent in the African focus group who testified that in the classroom, some African students, when called to introduce themselves, use the American accent and speak about their American citizenship without acknowledging their roots.

It is important to understand these results holistically. Africans and African Americans, though of similar race, possess cultural and communicative differences that lead to challenges in the realm of cross-cultural communication. Through the findings in this study, it is understood that both groups are prone to the execution and victimization of stereotypical perspective-taking and cross-cultural

miscommunication. More important, and certainly more beneficial, is the fact that both groups also display a sincere desire to attain true intercultural dialogue. It is through this unbiased spirit that the communicative gap between Africans and African Americans may be made null and void.

This study was limited by the fact that it was an exploratory research meant to motivate and trigger further research. Future research should be able to organize a focus group with Africans and African Americans simultaneously so as to have rich and all-encompassing data. Future research could also be carried out using a longitudinal ethnographic methodology. Through longitudinal ethnographic research, more elaborate communicative patterns and behavior between the two groups can be ascertained. Important limitations of the study include a disproportionate representation of gender in the African American focus groups; future research should strive to have equal gender representation so as to have an unbiased data.

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