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Constructing Identity in (Post-) Racial America

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Post-Racial?: Something Even More Bizarre and Inexplicable

OBAMA WINS: "A RACIAL BARRIER FALLS AS AMERICA ELECTS ITS FIRST BLACK PRESIDENT" (*Raleigh News & Observer*)

Yet, we do not live in a post-racial America. We live on a new racial frontier.

In deep-South Louisiana, I grew up when Jim Crow still lived. All of my early education through high school (1957-1969) was racially segregated from whites. Desegregation was just beginning when my younger brother reached high school (1970). So in my life time, we have gone from segregation-by-law to desegregation-by-law to having an African-American President. Yet, as dramatic as it is to say that President Obama is African American, there is more than that to the story. Mr. Obama is bi-racial. So, we have gone from race in black and white to race as multicultural.

It's a new racial frontier. That is why leading up to election-day, there was interpersonal electricity. And I felt like I had become a lightning rod for that electrical storm.

A 6'3" tall, 275lb, dark-skinned black man, white people, black people, young people, old people, acquaintances, friends and strangers, all seemed to have a need to talk to me about the election. Carrying around my own thoughts, excitement, concerns and questions, I was becoming fatigued. Part of that too was that I was teaching my course, "Interpersonal Relationships and Race." That meant that I was observing and thinking about the campaign and associated events not just from a personal standpoint but from a professional,

social-psychological, analytic, standpoint. There was no way for me to avoid the general and the interpersonal electrical storm that was the 2008 Presidential campaign.

Obama Wins

When the election results flashed and thundered across the night sky, some Americans celebrated in joy, and some Americans cringed in fear. People cried, laughed, threw up their arms, danced, collapsed, shook hands, and hugged each other, held their mouths; all in belief, shock, disbelief, joy, fear that this had happened in America. A black man had been elected President of the United States.

I was up late that night. The next morning, groggy, I made my way to the campus of North Carolina State University where I am a professor. Before getting to campus, I had tried to buy a copy of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*. I had no luck. All sold out. Then I had the idea that maybe in our campus bookstore there might be those newspapers. No; so I made my way to the Talley Student Center and again no luck. But I did run into Dr. Tom Stafford, a white man, who is Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs.

"Hey Tom, how you doing?"

"After last night, I was doing real well, but now..."

He started walking toward me.

"What's going on," I asked.

"We just found some racial graffiti in the Free Expression Tunnel. Real ugly stuff."

"I'm not really surprised," I said.

He leaned toward me, and just above a whisper he said,

"No this is real ugly; *Obama-- Shoot that nigger in the head*," he whispered.

Tom was shaken. I could see it.

"It's being painted over right now, but what if the black community hears about that?"

Really there was nothing to say. Tom went on with the business at hand. I started walking

to my office. As I walked, I began to think about what Tom said, "... what if the black community hears about that?" As I walked, I thought, so much has changed about race in America that the issue is not how will the African-American community react when the word gets out; the issue is how will the multidimensional campus community react?

My thoughts turned to what I was going to talk about in my Interpersonal Relationships and Race course that Thursday. Myself an interpersonal (social) psychologist, I created that course to give students a forum in which to explore the influence of race on contemporary interpersonal interactions. Drawing on the major social psychological theory of interpersonal relationships -Interdependence Theory- I designed the course to provide students with a general understanding of interpersonal dynamics and the analytic skill to then dissect how and why the presence of race can sometimes influence the ways in which people try to interact with each other; the interaction mistakes that arise from (white and black) people, and the ways in which (based on Interdependence theory principles) those interracial interactions can be improved.

For the Thursday two days after the presidential election, I had already decided that I would not do my planned lecture on the interpersonal dynamics of racial slurs. Instead I was going to have my class talk about the interracial-event of Senator Barack Obama being elected President and what my students were experiencing in their own interpersonal interactions given that fact.

Now I realized that I would also need to lead a discussion about the racial graffiti threatening President-elect Obama that had just been discovered on our campus. My claim for the course, you see, is that it is important for us to develop an understanding of how new 21st century social forces activate old racial tensions which then influence interracial, interpersonal interactions. To give the class of young people some historical perspective on the origins of the

old racial tensions, I have them read and write reactions to Tim Tyson's historical memoir that tells the story of a racial murder in Oxford, NC in 1970. At the same time, through lectures, I had been introducing my class of Puerto Rican, white, black, Arab, biracial, male, female, students to social psychological concepts that helped them understand the forces of racial-transition pressing on everyone's interracial encounters. With that combination, my students were beginning to understand why it is that people become anxious in interracial interactions. That understanding was based, in part, on their having a better perspective on how things were, and how much things have changed in America.

So much has changed, so very fast. And that is why we are confused about race. Obama wins and we want to declare a "post-racial" era has begun. That just shows how anxious we are about interracial interactions. One reason is the new level of contact between racial and ethnic groups. May, 2007 is when the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the U.S. Minority population had reached 100.7 million people. In that same press release Director of the Census Bureau, Louis Kincannon, was quoted as saying:

About one in three U.S. residents is a minority... To put this in perspective, there are more minorities in this country today than there were people in the United States in 1910. In fact, the minority population in the U.S. is larger than the total population of all but 11 countries. (Bernstein)

Relevant headlines were written with drama: "Whites Now Minority in 1 in 10 US Counties; Diversity Straining Race Relations" (Alfano).

Not only have there been dramatic changes in cross-racial contact opportunities but so many other simultaneous social changes that a neo-diversity has emerged (Nacoste, "What Rough Beast," 556). Neo-diversity is not simply a matter of new contact, or changed contact

between racial and ethnic groups. Contact and interaction between members of different groups has been pushed by three major social changes. *One*, there are no longer any laws that restrict the freedom of movement of American citizens by race. *Two*, likewise there has been a dramatic increase in the everyday opportunities for each of us to have contact with persons from another country. *Three*, there have been rapid advancements in communication technologies that mean we are having intergroup encounters without knowing it. The possibility of staying to yourself, to contact only with people who look like you, is essentially gone. Intergroup social interaction opportunities are everywhere, everyday, unavoidable, activating the new social uncertainty that is neo-diversity. Cultural analyst Arjun Appadurai says that,

This species of uncertainty is intimately connected to the reality that today's ethnic groups number in the hundreds of thousands and that their movements, mixtures, and cultural styles, and media representations create profound doubts about who exactly are among the 'we' and who are among the 'they.' (5)

It is this neo-diversity that is now pressing on our interracial encounters; making those interactions less well defined and less predictable. "Should I say African American or Black?" Some black Americans say they prefer African American; some say they prefer Black; some don't care. One of my former graduate students is a member of the Lumbee Indian tribe of North Carolina. When I used the term "Native American" in a conversation with him, he objected. "I don't like that," he said. "I'm an Indian. Anybody born in America is a native-American." Ok then... because of neo-diversity, in an interracial, intergroup, interaction the interpersonal-context is less clear than in within-group encounters.

So, we do not live in a "post-racial America." But we are living in an age of interracial-

transition. Being in transition means that when we are in an interracial encounter, the model for the interaction is more unclear than in other interpersonal encounters. That's a major problem because smooth social interaction and relationship formation depend on whether two people have a good interaction experience. If the interpersonal context for their interaction is unclear, murky, foggy, the exploration will be tentative, and it will be unlikely that the two will find joint activities—even conversation topics—they both enjoy.

Whites feel uncertainty when interacting with non-whites; blacks feel uncertainty when interacting with whites and other non-blacks. There are no innocents. We are all being stalked by our uncertainty; the rough beast we hear breathing in the bushes. How should I interact; should I say something; what should I say; how should I say it; damn, what are the rules? But that anxiety does not make a person a bigot. That anxiety means that as a nation we are a people who live in a time of interracial-transition, anxiety and tension. In interracial interactions, that is why we feel jittery. That is why hours after the election of our nation's first African American President we learn of threatening racial graffiti being aimed at that person at N.C. State and elsewhere. Both the positive and negative are in the interracial mix that is our world today.

One of Those Indians

Mistakes are part of interpersonal life. Authors of Interdependence-theory, Harold Kelley and John Thibaut write that:

It must be emphasized... that when two persons are... in an interdependence relationship... their respective actions and their interaction may not be predictable from the properties of the relationship. One or both may misunderstand their interdependence and therefore make inappropriate decisions and one or both may respond with an inappropriate habit. (4)

So there are lots of different ways to make interpersonal mistakes. Finding ourselves in an interracial interaction, we use cognitive shortcuts to try to be safe. But those cognitive shortcuts are flawed reference points; they trick us.

Take, for instance, David's story.

David's Story:

People have strong reactions when I tell them I am teaching a course on "Interpersonal Relationships and Race." "...ooh..." some exclaim. "We all need that," some say. Sometimes they tell me a story from their interracial history. When a person does this, sometimes I ask them to write the story out for me. That's how I came to have David's story. David is a former Ph.D. student of mine.

Here is the story he told me that I asked him to write up.

It was a mild autumn Saturday morning in September. I was at the golf driving range in Raleigh, N. C. working on a few shots. After an hour, I noticed a typical young couple in their late 20's or early 30's and their daughter set-up to my left. Why is it that that folks who cannot play golf or hit the ball for that matter always set-up beside me?

After they had exhausted themselves they sat down for a breather. Then the lady said, "Sir, do you mind if I ask you some thing?" I replied, "No, yes?" "Where do you place the ball in your set-up?" she asked. So I proceeded in explaining what I know about the proper set-up and then demonstrated with a few shots.

Then the husband approaches me and asks if I have a regular group I play with. I explained that I am a college professor at University of North Carolina in Pembroke and received my doctorate here at NCSU and I still come up on weekends to get away. He asked, "What is your degree in?" I replied, "Psychology." At this point his eyes light up, "I subscribe to

Psychology Today," he says.

I am in trouble... I just want to hit my golf balls. But my new friend proceeds to tell me some of the articles he likes and why. A little while later, we chat more about golf. My new friend notices I have Callaway golf clubs (driver and fairway woods). He comments,

"Those clubs are very expensive aren't they?" he comments.

"Yes," I say.

"There was a Black guy here last week with Callaway's," he states.

David's Story Interlude:

"Let's pause in our story," David writes. "Up to this point there has been a social interaction between four people (although the daughter and I did not speak, there was still an interaction) with me, being the stranger. In any given social situation there are many assumptions we humans make. I stated a typical couple in their 20's or 30's and their daughter interacted with me. I mentioned I was in Raleigh, N. C.; the South. Since my new friend mentioned 'the Black guy' the previous week, this family was White."

Back to David's story:

David continues:

After some more small talk I notice they are ready to leave. My new friend extends his hand says, "I'm Rusty Jones (not his real name)." I say, "David Oxendine."

Now at this moment his eyes widened, not light up, but widen. And, he slowly begins to pull away saying,

"Oh, you're one of those Indians aren't you?"

"Yes I am," I affirm.

With that deer in the headlights look he says, "Well, I think that is great!" As they left, he says to his family and to me,

"Maybe we will see Dr. Oxendine here again."

Maybe it was me, but I sense a little condescension in his last salutation to me.

David's assessment:

"What assumptions had "Rusty" made about me?" David writes. "He established his notion that I am not Black by his comment: "There was a Black guy here last week with Callaway's." I am confident in my deduction that they think I am White. I am tanned and I am playing a sport that currently is still predominantly White. Their assumption may be I have darker skin because I play a lot of golf in the sun.

My Assessment:

I think that David is right. At first, "Rusty" had no intergroup concerns. He assumed, as David says, that David was white. So Rusty's work to develop an interpersonal expectancy, and give the interaction positive flow, had to do with connecting to David-the-golfer, and David-the-psychologist. All that went pretty well, despite David's reluctance to interact at all. Where the interaction between David and Rusty took on a new dynamic was when David gave his full name.

In NC, as elsewhere, certain names are associated with certain racial, ethnic groups. As names, Oxendine and Locklear, for example, are associated with the Lumbee American Indians of NC. When Rusty heard the name Oxendine, he realized his mistaken racial assumption that David was white. The name, Oxendine, now attached to David, pushed Rusty to reassess the situation. David writes that Rusty's "... eyes widened, not light up, but widen..." Rusty was rethinking the whole interaction-sequence.

"Who have I been interacting with over the last hour?"

Things were happening fast in this interaction. From research on how people build interpersonal-expectancies to predict how an interaction will go (Holmes), it is clear that "Rusty" had built an erroneous expectancy of the "who," in the "where, when, who, why and

what," that people always work through in a first-time encounter. For "Rusty" had been interacting with what he thought was a "we," white, racial in-group person who turned out to be a "they," Indian, racial outgroup member. All that time, without knowing it, Rusty had been in an intergroup interaction. When he realized that he had made an identity mistake Rusty's self-concern went on alert. Suddenly he was trying to gain control of the interaction guided by his own identity concerns.

Our most important interactions have identity content. About this one interdependence theorist says,

We have goals for the kinds of persons we are, the attitudes we have toward our partners, and the values we express in interaction with them. It is because of this fact that the partner's negative attribution [or interpretation] of our behavior, if communicated and credible, can effectively constitute a sanction, making us feel ashamed, and a challenge to live up to our standards. (Kelley 109)

But for any relationship, it takes an interaction history for the two people to be ready for an identity-level interaction. To really know a person requires that the two people have interactions with each other that are of frequent impact, strong impact, diverse impact, over a period of time, not just within the span of one or two interactions (Berscheid, Snyder and Omoto). Without such an interpersonal history, the rules for an interaction are undefined at the start. Those rules must be negotiated. For that reason each person is wondering how they are supposed to behave in the presence of this new person. Putting it plainly, the worry is that we might do something that pisses off the other person. As a consequence, we are motivated to engage in a safe pattern of behavior. Problem is that in an intergroup encounter, the attempt to be safe must rely on group-stereotypes.

Given the unexpected intrusion of an

intergroup fact, "Rusty" and David, two strangers are suddenly having an identity-interaction for which the dyad is not ready. These two people have no history of mutual self-disclosures from which to know what is or is not a racial, possibly hot, identity topic: "There was a Black guy here last week with Callaway's." Each person in the interaction is struggling to know "...in my interaction with this person, who am I" and "...who does this person think I am?"

Recent social psychological studies and models of contemporary intergroup interactions indicate that whether you are black or white, straight or gay, male or female, Muslim or Christian, Jew or Gentile, intergroup situations can activate intergroup anxiety in you. What social psychologists have learned is that "...different factors may be associated with intergroup anxiety levels in different minority groups, depending on the historical and contemporary relations between the minority and majority groups" (Stephan & Stephan 216).

When we worry and feel uncertain about how to interact with someone not in our racial, ethnic or gender ingroup, intergroup anxiety has been activated in the interaction. My students say exactly that when I ask, "...why are first-time interracial encounters so difficult to manage?" They say because

You don't know what to say without being racist

You are trying to find a way to relate to each other

You don't know social interaction rules across groups

You have preconceived notions - what's going to happen - feeling of strangeness about the situation.

Here is the way it can go. In an interaction with a stranger who is not a member of our group, we are not confident about what to expect. So we feel a little nervous. In that moment we can become distracted by our

concerns about how we are coming across. In that moment of distraction, something "slips out." We say or do something in an exaggerated way.

Now the moment is awkward. But awkwardness is not just awkwardness. Since all social encounters and relationships are based on how the encounter proceeds, awkwardness can have big interaction and relationship consequences. Through interaction, you see, two people try to assess whether there are mostly good, mostly bad, mostly ok, experiences available in this potential relationship. How is this person thinking of me? How does this person see me? Of course, these questions indicate that our self-focus is on alert. And so each person is looking for signs of how the other person thinks about, feels about, values or devalues this interaction "with me."

Remember the awkward end of David's story:

"Oh, you're one of those Indians aren't you?"

"Yes I am," I affirm.

With that deer in the headlights look he says, "Well, I think that is great!"

What else could David have said, except,

"Yes, I am one of those Indians."

Oh dear...

This Has Already Happened

In the prologue of one of his satirical novels Douglas Adams tried to point out to us just how big and complex is our social universe. He wrote:

There is a theory which states that if ever anybody discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable.

There is another theory which states

that this has already happened. (*The Restaurant i*)

Indeed, nowadays, everyday activities, interpersonal encounters and interactions can sometimes make us feel as if we are living in a hard to understand universe. A universe that, just as soon as we think we get what is going on there, changes into something even more bizarre and inexplicable. Senator Barack Hussein Obama is elected President and the very next morning at North Carolina State University a racial epithet and threat toward the President-elect is found; *Obama - shoot that nigger in the head.*

Students were stunned (Harmon 5). One said, "I actually didn't feel that so much discrimination was prevalent on campus... It made me think about my surroundings." Another said: "I've almost been embarrassed or just disgusted in how N.C. State has reacted [to Obama's election]. I would just hope that educated students would be more open minded than to stoop to a level of degrading one another." And yet another said: "I didn't expect for people to react that way because I just thought we have come a little bit farther than that. That really surprised me... You couldn't help but notice his race, but I didn't expect for us to have a problem on a college campus."

Much ado was made about the racial-graffiti and threat in our Free-Expression Tunnel. That tunnel came into existence in the 1960's to give students one place to paint in any opinions they wanted. With no content rules, this tunnel has been the way the campus administration has controlled the spread of graffiti by providing a place for graffiti to appear. And all manner of hateful - racial, gendered, slanderous - words have appeared in that tunnel. In this case, since the words were a physical threat to the President-elect, the Secret Service was called, came and tracked down the culprits, but found no viable threat and hence no crime. Yes, the words that were painted in the tunnel were stupid, insensitive and bigoted, but not criminal.

Yet the local NAACP came to campus calling the words a hate-crime. I read of the NAACP's demand that the four white students be expelled for writing the racial-graffiti and threat in the Free-Expression Tunnel (Allred 1). One African-American student said, "I want to know if I'm walking down the street next to these people or sitting next to them in class. These students should be made an example of" (Layman 1).

I was particularly disturbed by that statement. Where in America, I wondered, does this place exist where we can or will be guaranteed at some point that no one we work with or live near will have negative racial attitudes? Disturbed by that implication, I decided this was my time to speak into the moment.

Having first begun to do diversity work in the Navy (1972-1976), having become a scholar of intergroup tension, having made my academic career conducting research on the social psychology of affirmative action, having been a consultant on diversity to the Department of Defense, and having been NCSU's first vice provost for Diversity and African-American affairs (Nacoste, *Making Gumbo*), I thought it important to raise my voice since the discussion was going so off track. I felt an obligation to not let stuck-in-the-past, knee-jerk stereotypes of the university, carry the discussion (Nacoste, "University Response"). Yet, one need not be an expert to stand against stereotypes.

Turns out that at the interpersonal level, we all have what it takes to speak into a moment of intergroup conflict. Since the laws of the land are now clear, the change in the racial environment that is before us is interpersonal. That is where the real work remains. Not in blaming people; not in calling people racist; not in trying to make sure we know who they are. And, not in claiming, based on one event, that we now live in a post-racial America. That may feel bizarre and inexplicable because it requires that we give up old patterns of blame, and self-righteous strategies. Giving those up requires that we redefine our interpersonal responsibilities and identity. But doing so will open up a lens on the

real work to be done. That work is in our interactions where each of us can speak into an interpersonal interaction to object to the casual use of group-stereotypes.

New research by social psychologists indicates that too often we do not object to a new acquaintance using stereotyped language and claims (Ruscher, Cralley & O'Farrell). We show tolerance for intolerance. That is why change at the interpersonal level is still our great challenge. We have an obligation, you see, to speak up when someone casually talks in racial-offensive, gender-offensive, or any group-stereotyped language. You see, people are at risk of dying because we tolerate stereotypes in everyday interpersonal interaction. Two studies have shown that among patients with heart disease, African-Americans and women are much less likely than white men to be implanted with life-saving technology (Curtis, et al; Hernandez, et al). These implantable devices shock "...a malfunctioning heart back into a normal rhythm," saving the person's life.

Why would African-Americans and women with the same level of physical need as white males receive the implants with less frequency? According to one newspaper report, "Experts say that the roots of this and many other medical disparities often lie within the relationship between patient and doctor..." where the doctors are mostly white males. On this point, the same newspaper account quotes an epidemiologist who said, "They [doctors] have stereotypes about minorities and about women and about old people and young people. We all do" (Collins). What kind of stereotypes? The newspaper account points out that the epidemiologist indicated that,

...doctors are often forced to make snap judgments because they have so little time with patients. That may lead some to assume, for example, that a black patient might not make the necessary lifestyle changes such as exercise or diet that are critical to a treatment's success.

We let stereotypes live by not speaking up. In our interpersonal interactions, we show tolerance for intolerance. And so people are dying.

Turns out, then, speaking up is about more than not having to hear slurs and stereotypes. Research shows there is power in speaking up to say, "I really would prefer you not use that kind of racial (gender, ethnic) language around me." One set of researchers (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark) found that a person who was confronted in this polite way about using a racial stereotype experienced a mix of, "anger at myself," "annoyed at myself," "regretful," "disgusted with myself." Those negative self-evaluations were activated because of being confronted, politely. Not only that, but those negative self-evaluations predicted that the confronted person was unlikely to use a stereotype again in the immediate situation. And those negative feelings about self also predicted that the person was less likely to respond with approval

to use of a racial stereotype in a different context. The logic of the findings leads me to this speculation: *the more people have the experience of another person standing against their use of a stereotype, the more people will experience tension when in their formal actions they are about to rely on a stereotype.*

By our own behavior, each of us has the interpersonal power to influence another person's experience of the moment of interaction with us. Such interpersonal power can be used to create a quiet revolution against the stereotypes that we all still carry around. Electing Barack Hussein Obama president does not put us in a post-racial era. We are still in racial transition. Stereotypes still live on to do real damage in this age of neo-diversity. Using our interpersonal power against those stereotypes is the only means through which we can ever become post-racial.

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