Colorblind Ideology and Othering in Our Time: A Mindfulness Pathway

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Abstract: This article is derived from the presidential address delivered at the 26th Conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS). Because of the pandemic, the conference was held online. While the pandemic has connected us to our common humanity, it has also drawn attention to the dark side of our cultural lives. Colorblindness and othering are two significant concerns that silence opposition to racial and ethnic inequality. Researchers suggest that we are socially wired to cooperate within our group but not without our group. This predisposition for bias cries out for a re-imagining of our communicative practices. I propose that, as communication scholars, we examine our linguistic, rhetorical, and communicative choices from a place of mindfulness. Mindfulness in the time of a pandemic allows us to be with what is in the moment, to be compassionate to ourselves and to others.

***Keywords*:** Colorblindness, othering, racial inequality, borderlands, mindfulness, pandemic

1. Introduction

Greetings. Namaste. Namaskara. As the president of IAICS, I extend a very warm welcome to the 26th conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies.

I thank Dr. Padma Rani, Dr. H.S. Shubha, Dr. Praveen Shetty, Lt Gen (Dr) M. D. Venkatesh and their team of faculty and students at MAHE for their amazing collaboration. We had to move our conference from the seaside town of Manipal to an online environment due to the COVID pandemic. And yet, our conference partners in Manipal stood strong, and I extend to them a huge "thank you" on behalf of IAICS.

I thank Dr. Keith Lloyd, Dr. Kenneth Yang, Dr. Joanna Radwanska-Williams, the Board of Directors, the International Board of Advisors of IAICS, and the Editorial Board of ICS for their behind the scenes work for the Association. Thank you, members and presenters, for your presence and for participating in this conversation about diversity and multiculturalism in contemporary times.

2. Colorblindness and Othering

The pandemic has taught us to live and work differently. It has called on us to re-envision our relationships and our ways of doing things. As scholars of culture and communication, we have been acutely conscious of the interconnections that have bound us over the past year. Often isolated in our homes with very little face-to-face contact with other human beings, we have stayed in touch with each other through online media-- media that were unknown just decades ago. It has been a time of quiet ponderings on how a virus can sweep throughout the globe linking us in a common struggle to stay safe. The virus and its after-effects are going to be with us a while longer. And the conflicts and problems we have had will continue to be with us. Today I shall talk about the dark side of our cultural lives, that which separates us, and also suggest a potential way out of it.

As we consider our common humanity, I want to draw attention to that which becomes a source of conflict and divisiveness. Today I will discuss colorblindness and othering.

3. Colorblindness

"I don't see color" is a statement made by supporters of the colorblind ideology who claimed that they are being neutral towards color and that they treat everyone the same. Amy Ansell (2013) explains the colorblind ideology as "a vision of a non-racial society wherein skin color is of no consequence for individual life chances or governmental policy" (p. 42). Nicholas Vargas (2018) cites an example from the United states. Governor Sandoval of Nevada, a Latino, was asked in an interview about his feelings if his children were racially profiled according to Arizona's law (SB1070) that expected citizens to carry proof of citizenship. His response was that his children did not look Hispanic and would not have such constraints, thereby making it plain that lighter skin individuals are not racialized in the way other darker Latinas are. In many countries, including India, newspapers advertise for fair brides, and for skin products to make skin fairer – skin products which were sold widely until the widespread protests compelled corporations to change their marketing strategies. Thus, the idea that we do not see color is a fraught statement.

Bonilla-Silva (2018) states that by claiming not to see race people can explain racial inequality without any reference to racism. For instance, colorblindness allows people to downplay the continuation of racism by giving nonracial explanations for current racial inequalities in the United States. Beaman and Petts (2020) have examined colorblindness in France. Racial classification is regarded as antithetical to France, and yet research shows that racial and ethnic minorities experience frequent stops by police, an experience not unlike that of racial minorities in the United States. I can extend the colorblind ideology to say that caste blind or religion blind ideologies produce a type of blindness in which the normative or majority culture either cannot see or does not wish to confront their own casteism, racism, or communalism.

The color-blind ideology silences opposition to racial and ethnic inequality. Colorblindness allows people to minimize racism or colorism or casteism and provide individual explanations such as the prejudiced individual is the problem and has nothing to do with a racist society.

4. Othering

Such an ideology then raises the specter of the constant othering of non-normative bodies. Before I discuss othering, let me bring to you a disturbing quote from Patrick Crusius who shot to death 22 people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in the USA. He wrote, "Hispanics will take control of the local and state government of my beloved Texas changing policy to better suit their needs. They will turn taxes into an instrument of a political coup which will hasten the destruction of our country …" (LaTribuna, 2019). While his statements had no basis in reality he used this misinformed view to justify his killing of members of the outgroup living in the borderland. It is important to note that El Paso is a border town and its population is 83% Hispanic.

4.1 Othering in the Borderlands

In a powerful and poignant stroke of the pen, Gloria Anzaldua (1987) captures the sense of being in the borderland in her poem Borderlands. An excerpt is below:

> To live in the Borderlands means to
> put chile in the borscht,
> eat whole wheat tortillas,
> speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
> be stopped by la migra at the border checkpoints;
> Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to
> resist the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle,
> the pull of the gun barrel,
> the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;
> In the Borderlands
> you are the battleground
> where enemies are kin to each other…

Anzaldua describes the lives of the othered group in the borderlands. History, as we know, is littered with the corpses of othered groups. And the marginalization of othered groups continues to this day. It behooves us to pause and consider the groups in our own nation states or cultures that are othered and scape goated for existing problems. Many scholars have examined othering. Here I choose a description from Smith (2019): "Scholars commonly have defined othering as the practice of labeling a people or culture as different from one's own group. Otherness is often defined through observable features or some aspect of the out-group's culture. And, it is a struggle for the out-group to shed the other label that the in-group places on them. To other an entire people or culture is to create at least in the mind of the in-group, a hierarchical relationship that justifies the domination and subordination of the out-group." (Smith, 2019, p.6). Othering has serious physical and mental health consequences for the out-group members.

Research in neuroscience informs us that the brain prompts us to view others in a biased way, categorizing individuals as "us" vs. "them." Green (2014) states that cooperation evolved not because it is nice but because it gives us survival advantage. And that is why we are socially wired to cooperate with members of our group but not with those outside our group.

5. Mindfulness

In the midst of these difficult realities, one potential avenue has always been available to us. I propose that we, as communication scholars, examine our communicative practices from a place of mindfulness. While mindfulness is a recent introduction to some countries in the West, mindfulness has a long history in India, in China, in Japan, and several other countries. Meditation as a practice originated in India and is described in the ancient texts: Upanishads, Vedas and Smritis.

Practicing mindfulness allows one to be fully present in the moment, to experience the moment without prejudice or expectation. Thus, it ought to provide the gateway to interrogate all forms of oppression.

Mindfulness is not a panacea. If you belong to the oppressor group, then mindfulness will not remove your ignorance, and if you are the oppressed group, mindfulness will not remove your situation. What mindfulness will do, however, is provide a moment of quiet, an opportunity to examine thoughts and emotions with wise attention. We rarely think about what we are thinking. Mindfulness will cut through habitual thought patterns, through years of conditioning (King, 2018). Being in the moment, watching our thoughts as they come and go, without judgment, will create an awareness of our perceptions. Such a practice will facilitate the development of a calm interior life in the midst of a turbulent external situation.

The hope is to create an awakening, an awakening to compassion. Our role as scholars of communication is to be mindful of how through our linguistic, rhetorical, and communicative choices we can disengage from racial dominance and contribute to creating a society with racial, caste, and religious harmony. We can use our speech, our media training, our social media engagement to speak out against injustices. For scholars and activists engaged in social justice work, mindfulness helps maintain serenity through difficult times.

Mindfulness is especially useful at this moment in time, during our pandemic days. It lets us be with the uncertainty of the unknown and stay centered amidst our discomfort. We appreciate ourselves, become compassionate to ourselves and then widen our circle.

The pandemic has also created a consciousness that we are all connected. Vaccinating the citizens in one country is not enough when a variant from another nation may change the equation. As intercultural scholars we have discerned the meaning and significance of our webs of connection; it is up to us to make the difference. As a matter of fact, the solutions are here, we need to look at them with fresh eyes, we just need to embrace them.

Once again thank you to the organizers and you, our members, for the constancy of your support.

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