**Intradisciplinary connections: Exploring the construct of “membership” across communication scholarship**

(Dis)ability Membership

A Paper Delivered by J.W. Smith at the 99th Annual Conference of the National Communication Association (NCA) in Washington, D.C.

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Code switching as defined by Martin and Nakayama (2013) is a technical term in communication that refers to the phenomenon of changing language, dialects, or even accents. One reason they argue that groups engage in code switching is to “avoid accommodating others” (p. 257). I would like to discuss how persons with disabilities (the “in” group) and especially those with more obvious physical disabilities (i.e. blind and visual impairment, deaf and hard of hearing, and mobility impairments) utilize this phenomenon to separate and accentuate their uniqueness from the able bodied community *and* those with less obvious disabilities. How is this “in” group communication enacted to ensure credible membership in this exclusive community, and what are the implications of this enactment for successful and effective dialogue between communities? I further contend that there is a non-verbal aspect to this phenomenon as well and that particular communication contexts encourage the enactment of code switching.

**“The Club” and the Problem**

“In her work on code switching, communication scholar Karla Scott (2000) discusses how the use of different ways of communicating creates different cultural contexts and different relationships between the conversants. Based on a series of interviews with black women, she notes “the women’s shared recognition that in markedly different cultural worlds their language use is connected to identity” (Martin & Nakayama, 2013)

This focus of Dr. Scott is the more common way that code switching is generally discussed and experienced i.e. racial and ethnic issues often focusing on the black community. My contention in this brief discussion is that it occurs in a variety of cultural settings and especially the community of those with disabilities. My experience has been that it functions more as an exclusionary tactic as opposed to an accommodating goal of conversance.

 So what is “the club”? It is comprised of those of us who are in what I call the “big three” as stated earlier blindness and obvious visual impairment, deafness and obvious hard of hearing, and mobility impairment and obvious developmental disabilities. I emphasize obvious because the inability to hide the disability is a key ingredient in both the status and contextual acceptance in this special “club/in group”. It is a unique culture with specific guidelines for membership e.g. are you disabled enough to really claim membership and what are the implications of these often unspoken requirements?

 Allow me a brief personal story. While at a conference some years ago my friend and I returned to our hotel room and on our way encountered a mutual acquaintance. As we begin to talk it became clear that our acquaintance had a great deal of sight and it was also clear to me that my friend either had forgotten this or never knew it. He immediately lapsed into group code speak with comments like “you really have to be blind to understand” and “it’s a visual thing, you know” and “isn’t braille great?” After our mutual acquaintance had left, he shared with me how he could not believe that she had so much sight and how it was probably very difficult for her to really understand our world. I strongly disagreed with him and told him so but I chose not to pursue the conversation any further at that point.

 This example is one of several that I have experienced in a variety of contexts and it highlights the problem of this “in group” communication that often occurs as a way of excluding others. Unfortunately, it is often intentional and quite rude but I understand why it happens. Many of us with disabilities have used it to try to maintain a safe space away from pity and paternalism and well-meaning people and as a way of bonding and sharing unique experiences. But the problem goes deeper because it often makes the “outsider” feel quite defensive and excluded and in many ways it demonstrates the very same thing that those of us in the community fight against i.e. feeling shut out, having others try to speak for us and often being felt like people would rather communicate with the disability instead of the person with the disability. Finally, the problem is also not just limited to communication between people with disabilities and TABS (temporarily abled bodied) but it also rears its ugly head when there is a diverse meeting of even members of the “big three” and one of those groups dominate the context both in terms of numbers and or philosophy. Simply put, I have observed tension and contention when people from the deaf community dominate a particular environment or people from the mobility impaired community dominate it. In short, everyone believes that their part of “the club” and more importantly, their communication issues relative to their population, should dominate particular contexts.

**Some Possible Solutions**

 In his article “Pushing Forward: Disability, Basketball, and Me” the author Ronald Berger comes face to face with the “insider/outsider” dilemma as a result of raising his daughter that has cerebral palsy:

Having moved many years ago from Los Angeles to the Midwest, a land of

few Jews, I have grown accustomed to living as an “outsider,” an ideal place

for a sociologist who observes. I was not quite prepared, however, to be

treated as an outsider by other people with disabilities. I do not know why I

was so naïve.

When I first began reading the disability studies literature, dominated

these days by writers who have disabilities, I was confronted with the question,

“What are you doing here?” (Branfield, 1998, 1999). It was as if I was

being told: You who are able bodied, who are not disabled, need not apply.

This is our terrain. Please leave us alone. We do not need or want your help.

Research by the nondisabled is exploitative—“nothing about us without us”

(Charlton, 1998). (Berger, 2004)

Unfortunately, this is not a unique occurrence for people like Berger and I will not spend the time here to go into all the details of the article but suffice it to say that it has become a bigger challenge for a number of reasons in recent years. There is now more attention on people with disabilities and much of that is positive but it also brings the necessity to include the diverse worlds of people with disabilities i.e. it is not a simple cut and dry existence like some books or films would like to have us believe. As I stated earlier, I hope that you will get the article for yourself but I thought it was instructive to include here some of the solutions proposed by Berger:

I was quite frankly angered that my motivation was being questioned. I

felt on the defensive and quickly sought to legitimate my presence. I told

them about Sarah—she is the reason I am here. Do you not think it is important

to understand why some people with disabilities are managing to do

well? Do you not want people with disabilities to do well? Of course they did,

and with this my presence was accepted. We began to reach a meeting of the

minds, a rapprochement, a feeling of camaraderie that we were all in it

together. A little personal disclosure goes a long way.

As I read further in the disability studies literature, I was pleased to come

across welcoming voices (Darling, 2000; Duckett, 1998). To turn away the

nondisabled, some said, is to reproduce the same patterns of exclusion those

who are disabled have been fighting against. In an article on disabled people’s

opinions about disability research, I learned that some did not want to

leave the field in the hands of a small cadre of academics with disabilities who

may have a professional agenda of their own that does not represent the interests

of the diverse constituency of the disabled (Kitchen, 2000). This field of

inquiry should be open to all. They ask only that researchers approach the

topic from a “disabled-friendly” point of view—that they are able to empathize

with people with disabilities (verstehen), not misrepresent the experiences

of the disabled, and use their research to advance the principle of equality

for the disabled (Kitchen, 2000, p. 36; also see Darling, 2000). (Berger, 2004)

In my mind, this really sums up the issues but I want to conclude with two final observations and potential solutions. First, to those who may feel excluded at times- try not to get too defensive and try to understand the “insider/outsider” dilemma and double consciousness that is often experienced by those in traditionally underrepresented and marginalized groups. Often, the exclusionary tactic is not intentional or personal and in fact it is necessary; albeit I will admit rude and fraught with risks. As a TAB or non-member of the dominating group in a particular context, a simple stepping back and objective inquiry might be helpful at times.

 Second however, those of us with disabilities have to be aware of our accountability in aspects of these communication exchanges as well. This was brought home to me in a very arresting way at the end of a class presentation that I did for a colleague at my university. After spending about 45 minutes talking about what “outsiders” should do to make communication between those of us with disabilities and those of us without more effective, a female in the back of the room with a clear international accent said “you’ve spent all this time telling us what we should do but what is your role and accountability in these situations?” I must tell you I was caught off guard by the excellent comment and question and it has caused me since to be mindful of the transactional nature of communication. It is a give and take and therefore those of us as members of the “big three” need to do all in our power to lessen the tension and not to do things to throw additional road blocks in the paths of those that could be potential allies. Additionally, as I did with my friend, we have a responsibility not to let other members in our group enact ineffective and destructive code switching tactics.

References

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