

What's in a word (or a picture)? Constructing and demolishing roadblocks to community

“Improving Minority Institution Collaborations at NASA”
NASA Ames Research Center
October 25-26, 2009

Linda Billings, Ph.D.
Research Professor, School of Media and Public Affairs
George Washington University
Principal Investigator, NASA Astrobiology Program
libillin@gwu.edu, <http://lindabillings.org>

“How can we build partnerships and strengthen our collaborations with minority institutions?”

“What are the roadblocks and/or misconceptions that hinder progress?”

“Beyond requirements...is NASA truly
a welcoming organization?”

“The self-fulfilling prophecy”

Robert Merton (1948)

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a socially constructed “reality” that is the product of, and depends for its existence on, assumptions and ideas and beliefs that have no basis in physical reality.

“The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation.”

If we define situations as real, then they are “real in their consequences.”

More from Merton...

“Under the benevolent guidance of the dominant in-group, out-groups are continuously subject to a lively process of prejudice which goes far toward vitiating mass education for tolerance.”

“Despite the teachings of amateur psychologists, blind panic and aggression are not rooted in human nature. These patterns of human behavior are largely a product of the modifiable structure of society.”

“It is only with the rejection of social fatalism implied in the notion of unchangeable human nature that the tragic circle of fear, social disaster, and reinforced fear can be broken.”

“Scientific” understanding?

Genetic differences between and among individuals and groups

“Official” concepts of race, ethnicity, etc.

(Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, General Social Survey, public opinion polling...)

2009: what a year...

January 20: Inauguration Day

July 16: Officer Crowley, meet Professor Gates

Sept. 9: President Obama, meet Rep. Wilson

“Boy, Oh, Boy”

Maureen Dowd (Op-Ed page), NY Times, Sept 13, 2009

“Fair or not, what I heard was an unspoken word in the air: You lie, boy!”

“I’ve been loath to admit that the shrieking lunacy of the summer – the frantic efforts to paint our first black president as the Other, a foreigner, socialist, fascist, Marxist, racist, Commie, Nazi – had much to do with race.... But Wilson’s shocking disrespect for the office of the president...convinced me....”

“Coming to Terms with Cultures”

Gerry Philipsen, U. Washington

(National Communication Association, November 2008)

We can learn how to communicate effectively and productively in cultural situations that are initially unfamiliar, even threatening:

- Listen: attend to what people say about “local” codes of communicative conduct.
- Scour the text: search thoroughly through the communal conversation in all its modalities.
- Embrace nuance: submit to the complexities of cultures and of communal life.
- Talk: first, the give and take of interaction between parties who take each other, and what they say, seriously, and, second, talk spoken in ways that engage fully the idioms for talk of the cultures in play in the particular case, with “talk” serving always as a figure of speech meant to represent all the means and modes of communicative conduct.

“Race and Diversity in the Age of Obama”

Orlando Patterson, Professor of Sociology, Harvard University

The New York Times Book Review, August 16, 2009

“How can white citizens, who publicly embrace black citizens as athletic heroes, matinee idols, pop-music kings, talk-show queens, senators, governors, and now president, continue to shun them in their neighborhoods, schools, and private lives?

In their insistent celebration of racial identity, how complicit are black Americans in their own social isolation?

And will Barack Obama, who delicately straddles both worlds of immigrant success and black identity, be able to broaden the inclusion of African-Americans?

We watch and wait.”