

# ***Can Different Community Groups Inform the Way We Communicate?***

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As a Black man in my early thirties, I attended a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Freedom Fund Event. At this event, I became convicted of my implicit bias, formed by the common stereotype that Black people are unintelligent. It surprised me that all the Black keynote speakers at this event could articulate themselves so well. They spoke with a logical progression, had an extensive vocabulary, incorporated statistics for emphasis, and minimally used slang or catchy culturally common phrases. Slang and catchy culturally common phrases seemed to be used strategically to beckon vocal participation among the primarily Black audience. While listening, I judged the keynote speakers' authenticity, questioning the credibility of statistics and proper use of the vast terminology used, as if they were speaking from a script produced not of themselves. When slang or culturally common phrases such as, "can I get an amen" or "do you feel me" were used, I sighed in relief. Finally, they seemed authentic! They sound Black and not so White! I realized I had an imposed ideology that Black people do not articulate themselves as intelligently as White people, and therefore

are not as smart as White people. Certainly, intelligence is not only measured by the way one speaks! Where did I get this mindset? Could it have been my upbringing from my family, culture, and society that esteemed a person who could beautifully articulate themselves through both written or verbal means?

Society, culture, social and familial contexts play a vast role in identity development. The concept of identity spans from physical, emotional, spiritual, and social. For this paper, I will attempt to explain how different discourse communities have shaped my identity, and how social identity construction informed my verbal and written communication. Purposefully and shamefully, the story aforementioned gives a brief insight into the long-lasting inner struggle to prove my intelligence through oral and written means to the White majority I live around. Throughout my life, my different discourse communities have changed, which inevitably has impacted my social identity. As a result, my written and verbal means of communication at times feels inauthentic, but in reality, my identity continues to develop and consequently, my writing or communication does too!

My father is Black and my mother is White. My parents earned a High School Diploma, and my father was offered a basketball scholarship at Linn Benton Community College, which he only attended for one year. Needless to say, both of my parents did not obtain a secondary education. I remember my dad always told my two brothers and me during summer break from school during our late elementary/early middle school years, “read a book!” Even though not once in my lifetime did I ever see my dad or my mom read anything. Not even the newspaper! Despite the hypocrisy, I was the more

compliant child out of the three of us brothers. I remember reading my first book cover to cover one of those summers. The book was titled, *Trapped Between the Lash and the Gun* by Arvella Whitmore. The cover of the book compelled me to read it. Finally, a black boy on the cover! Before I pulverized this book that summer, I think it is important to say I had always worked hard to achieve good grades. I didn't struggle with reading. My desire for academic success was due to the pressure to satisfy my parents and feel a sense of pride. My twin brother was amazing at art, my older brother was a basketball star, and I felt the pressure to excel in something. Stumbling across this book at the library was a pivotal point in my identity development. I no longer was interested in becoming the people in the predominant hip-hop culture media I was exposed to since this book likened modern-day gang-banging to slavery.

For the majority of my preadolescent life, I always sought-after Black friends. I lived in predominantly a White society, and the majority of my Black family lived in Ohio. On infrequent occasions, we would spend time with my Black cousins, who lived in Vancouver, Washington. When visiting with my Black cousins in Vancouver, around fifth grade, they would call me white-washed because of how I dressed and spoke. I was not able to conceptualize the impact these statements had on me at the time. Reflecting on this time, I noticed an influx of Black hip-hop culture possessing my being. I was seeking ethnic identity through the media because I was experiencing identity confusion and had a limited number of Black relationships in my life. Ever since reading the book, *Trapped Between the Lash and the Gun*, I only sought out friendships primarily with White kids. Unbeknownst to me, I was internalizing racial stereotypes toward Black people. The

Black people I saw in the media reminded me of gangsters or gang-bangers. I did not want to be a slave! Eventually, I got what I thought I wanted, a group of all-White friends. Most of them shared similar characteristics to the Black hip-hop culture that I was trying not to emulate. Almost all of my White friends used slang. They would ascribe things they liked as fresh, fire, clean, dope, and sick. They even dressed like the individuals in hip-hop culture. A pivotal experience that exaggerated my identity confusion was when a couple of my White friends expressed that they spoke and dressed “Blacker” than me. I was perplexed by this comment, which inevitably led to the statement of me being white-washed from my Black cousins resounding in my mind.

Fast forward almost a decade, I was still uncomfortable in my skin and had not established an ethnic identity. One area that continued to put the wind in the sail of my identity construction was an academic success. I graduated High School with a grade point average of 3.8. In my early twenties, I had dismissed the idea of only seeking White friends. I assumed a position of letting my passions define me and lead me into my social communities. For example, I loved hip-hop culture and music, and I also loved the academic sciences. These social communities impacted my communication styles. When I was around my hip-hop community, I would use slang, metaphors, and similes to convey emotions. Metaphors and similes are commonly used in hip-hop or rap music. When I was in the academic setting, I had more robust conversations using medical jargon and articulating facts combined with statistics. At this time, I was not secure in my identity among my different discourse communities. Instead, I tried to prove my sense of belonging in these groups. It was not until I had what some may call a “divine

intervention” from God, that I truly learned or felt a sense of security in my identity. I no longer defined myself by my social groups or passions, but I became defined by what the Bible says I am. I knew I was a child of God. I no longer felt the need to fit the status quo among different discourse communities. Rather, my lifelong social experiences, friendships, and community experiences became unified. I no longer felt the need to put on different faces or "identities" to belong in my social groups. I had finally gained a sense of security in my identity.

As a new Christian, I developed new verbal and written skills that I had not previously attained. These new skills came from reading the Bible, listening to preachers, and having profound discussions with other Christians. The summation of medical textbooks, science textbooks, and one full chapter book is all the reading I had completed in my life. Now I was entrenched in the Bible, which exposed me to different writing styles and rhetoric such as allegories, parables, pathos, and logos. Additionally, the Bible expanded my vocabulary as I learned words such as propitiation, atonement, conviction, and retribution, to list a few. For the first time in my life, I regularly used a dictionary to look up words that I did not know because I wanted to understand what I was reading. Also, I noticed my thoughts became more logical in my verbal and written communication as I became fixed on ensuring people understood what I was attempting to articulate. I began using metaphors to enhance logical reasoning in my attempt to explain theological points, rather than using metaphors to stimulate emotion or sensuality as I had previously learned from hip-hop culture.

The last crucial discourse community that has influenced my social identity and written or verbal communication is nursing school. Within my nursing school community, the use of logos has even further expanded as I became more and more familiar with research writing and articulating patient clinical reports. In terms of research writing, a particular format is used to accomplish a specific means. For example, research papers tend to include subject headings such as the aim or purpose, background, methodology, results, discussion, and limitations. Moreover, this logical format is also used in a patient hand-off communication tool by utilizing a situation, background, assessment, recommendation (SBAR) report. Embedded within both the SBAR report and research papers is the use of statistics and medical jargon. Overall, this discourse community has played a significant role in transforming my written and verbal communication in a more professional tone, a logical progression to explaining pertinent information, and utilizing statistics or data to persuade or inform my audience.

Looking back to this paper's opening story, when I was an audience member at the NAACP Freedom Fund Event, can you see any similarities between the keynote speakers and myself? Yes, I share the same skin color as them! I also share the same professional communication styles as them from my nursing school community, utilizing statistics and logic to persuade my audience. In addition, one could say my vocabulary is not small but moderate, which I credit to my Church community or the Bible. Lastly, the use of slang or culturally common phrases that they used I have learned from my upbringing exposed to Black hip-hop culture and minimal time spent with my Black family. Instead of judging the keynote speaker's authenticity, I should realize that their

discourse communities throughout their lives informed how they communicate. I should praise them for their ability to hone in all of their life experiences that have shaped their ability to capture the attention of a wide variety of people in the particular audience they were addressing.

### **Author Bio**

Justin Davis is a senior nursing student for the dual-enrollment program for OHSU at WOU, a husband, and father of two. He enjoys carpentry, gardening, philosophical conversations, theology, and matters pertaining to health equity and mental health. Justin is expected to graduate from the OHSU nursing program this June and begin his nursing practice at Albany Samaritan General Hospital.