

Task B1.4.1

- Have you had any experience of being in an unfamiliar cultural context in which a language, language variety or dialect unknown or unfamiliar to you was the normal language of communication, and which you needed to learn?
- If so, did you: ■ experience the same feelings Eva Hoffman describes? ■ experience the need to 'reconstruct' an identity, and, if so, did this involve the two phases described in the text by Pavlenko and Lantolf?

IDENTITY, COMMUNITY AND THE INTERNET

Burkhalter, B. 'Reading Race Online: Discovering racial identity in Usenet discussions' in Smith M.A. and Kollock, P. (eds) (1999) Communities in Cyberspace, London: Routledge pp. 63–69, 72–73 (extracts)

Racial identity In face-to-face interaction, an individual's physical characteristics, from skin color to vocal patterns, help convey racial identity. Lacking such physical cues on computer networks, one might predict that discrimination on the basis of race, age, gender, sexuality, class, status, and group membership would disappear. Indeed, some participants use the lack of physical cues to claim any identity they want. An SCAA message suggests: 'You are welcome here! Come on in. Would you like a beer or something? The only true color here is the monitor. Here I can be Black, White or Green.'

The sense of freedom when establishing an online racial identity derives from a persistent belief that racial categorization is determined exclusively by corporeal traits. Although much sociological and anecdotal evidence has challenged this belief, race is still popularly seen as a characteristic of bodies (Spickard 1992). The body does not reveal race irrefutably. Multiracial individuals chronicle incidents in which their physical attributes were variously interpreted. The question multiracial individuals are so often asked – 'what are you?' – displays the problematic relationship between physical characteristics and racial identity. The possibility of passing or being mistaken for a different race in face-to-face interaction is also evidence of the fallible relationship between observable traits and identity (Bradshaw 1992).

Of course, answers to the question 'what are you?' must be appropriate to the individual's observable characteristics. Physical characteristics are a resource that permit and limit a range of interpretations, but they are only one medium among a variety of resources. In online interactions, participants are reduced to textual resources, but these resources can be just as determinant as physical indicators are offline. The posts show that racial identity, although fixed differently than it is offline, is firmly established online. [pp. 63–64]

DECONSTRUCTION: offline, race= physical traits. Online= other traits linked to race

Identity disputes

Over the course of a single message, authors may racially identify themselves in several ways. In the following message, which generated a small thread over a few days, the author employs

a hodgepodge of identity cues:

Hi. I find that many African-Americans where I live (northern California) tend to act in a way they think they should act, rather than just be themselves. I'm acknowledging this because the reality is, the behavior of the minority completely stands out, as opposed to the behavior of the majority. I must say that I am part African-American. I don't feel ashamed of this in any way, but I am ashamed of the African-American behavior of many citizens in my area. I am proud of all the ethnicities my gene pool possesses, while at the same time, I am proud of the ethnicities I don't possess. I ACCEPT those who are different from me. Different is good: it is new. It is unique. It is you. It is me. Let me explain more of what hits home for me.

I must say that I am extremely proud of my mom: She is African-American and she is an individual. She speaks proper English because she chose to get an education, no matter how difficult that path would be. She's had a tough life; she grew up poor in Michigan; her mother died when she was five; she lived in foster homes her whole life; she was looked down upon because of status and her pigmentation. She is a very beautiful person. There are many more hardships to tell about her, but my point is, she's African-American and she is an individual. I want to let African-Americans know that they don't have to act 'black'. It doesn't make you more of an 'African-American' to do things you think Blacks should do. I've had friends who felt that acting 'black' was cool, both black and white ones. Did you know much of what many people refer to as being black resulted from their overseers who were known as 'poor white trash'? It's true. They were the ones the slaves learned English from, yet many people don't realize this.

Please let me know that the majority of African-Americans are not like the ones I see on Ricki Lake. They don't have attitudes, move their necks from side to side, wave their hands in people's faces, speak loud and improper English, don't listen to what people are saying, don't speak out vulgarly, don't resort to violence because they can articulate how they feel.

I'm not trying to put down African-Americans, I want to recognize a problem in the United States. The more people group themselves in simplistic categories, based on skin color, the harder it will be for ALL of us to get along, live as the HUMANS we are. . . Ask me what my culture is and I'll tell you 'I'm American'. [pp. 67-68]

Stereotypes linked to a race are not always true, people who belong to that race can decide to avoid fulfilling those stereotypes (online debate).

Racial identity and disagreement

emphasis on the "part African-American"? why are you ashamed of people you don't personally know? (unless of course, you are referring to the [African-American]folks from your personal lineage?) do you bear the burden for speaking for the race you "partially" belong to?

I'm acknowledging this because the reality is, the behavior of the minority completely stands out, as opposed to the behavior of the majority. I must say, that I am part African-American. I don't feel ashamed of this in any way, but I am ashamed of the African-American behavior of many citizens in my area.

I am proud of all the ethnicities my gene pool possesses, while at the same time, I am proud of the ethnicities I don't possess. I ACCEPT those who are different

from me.Differentisgood:Itisnew.Itisunique.Itisyou.Itisme.

Ummm, excuse me but this little Pollyanna statement just negated the part where you wept tears over the behavior of total strangers. If different is good, you should absolutely love those [African-Americans] that are causing you such embarrassment, doncha think? Methinks you bear more pride for the paler side of your life. Perhaps that is who is speaking in this message?

[pp.68–69]

Consequences for race online

B. Burkhalter

In online discussions, readers treat racial identities as entailing particular perspectives. Offline has a name for the imputation of a characteristic, attitude, belief, or practice based solely on someone's race – 'stereotyping'.

An observer may use physical characteristics to impute a racial identity and from that impute a delimited set of beliefs and perspectives. For example, after I confirmed that I was Black in a recent conversation, the talk turned to professional basketball. My co-interactants assumed that a Black male would be interested in basketball. While this stereotyping is not surprising, imagine that, on hearing of their interest in basketball, I had assumed they were Black. This would also be stereotyping, but an unusual variety.

Stereotyping in face-to-face interaction follows from an assumed racial identity. Online interaction differs in that the imputation tends to go in the other direction – from stereotype to racial identity. A discrepancy arises when a person identified as a member of a particular racial group by his or her physical characteristics offers a perspective that is inconsistent with the stereotype of that group.

In face-to-face interactions, such an inconsistency can be resolved by modifying the stereotype or seeing the person as an anomaly – rarely are the person's physical racial indicators disputed. In online interactions perspectives resist modification because participants confront an immutable text, whereas racial identifications can be challenged.

[pp. 72–73]

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In online conversation: 'they dance samba very well-South American non- white.

Stereotypes linked to a race are not always true, people who belong to that race can decide to avoid fulfilling those stereotypes (online debate).

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Task BI.5.I

Burkhalter states in the text that in face-to-face interaction ‘an individual’s physical characteristics, from skin color to vocal patterns, help convey racial identity.’ Consider:

➤ What physical characteristics, as well as ‘skin color’ and ‘vocal patterns’ can help to convey racial identity? How does that change online?