10-18-2012

In or Out? Experiential Learning and Three Consequences of Communicating Group Identity

Anastacia Kurylo
Marymount Manhattan College, anastacia@kurylo.com

Kelli Coghill
Marymount Manhattan College, kellicoghill@gmail.com

Katrina Comber
Marymount Manhattan College, kcomber@mmm.edu

Fernando Taveras
Marymount Manhattan College, ftaveras@mmm.edu

In or Out? Experiential Learning and Three Consequences of Communicating Group Identity

Kelli Coghill, Katrina Comber, Fernando Taveras, Anastacia Kurylo
Marymount Manhattan College

Group identity is intimately tied with self identity. Yet, people often understand their identity as individuals without appreciation for the role others play in their identity. Based on social identity theory this article highlights the role that group identity plays in self-identity and explores three consequences of this association. Case studies present firsthand experiences with the consequences of communicating group identity. These case studies also demonstrate the value of a specific class project undertaken to provide students with a meaningful understanding of these issues.

Considerable research has been conducted to explore how identity is related to communication. For example, theories of identity related to communication include social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the intergroup communication perspective (Giles & Watson, 2008), and communication accommodation theory (Gallois, 2008; Giles & Ogay, 2006). A defining feature of these theories of identity is the role others play in identity creation and maintenance. Communicating about one's own identity often provides the opportunity to communicate about the identity of others. Thus, identities are not isolated from one another and, instead, play off of each other. Ironically, a person's individual identity can often reference group identity.

The way in which identity is connected to group membership is consequential in at least three ways. First, group identity is the basis for stereotypes, which categorize a person into a group membership. Stereotypes are particularly consequential when they lead to prejudice and discrimination (Allport, 1954/1979). This association of a person's identity with their group membership through stereotypes has been a motivation for discrimination in many forms. Tajfel (1969) explains that people who are not previously prejudiced can become prejudiced if categorization into groups is promoted such as what occurred in Nazi Germany.

Second, the way in which identity can be tied to group membership is consequential at the local level. The social construction approach to identity highlights how group identity can be invoked in conversation to accomplish practical interactional goals. For example, Mokros (2003) discusses a relevant

cultural moment. A vendor at a marketplace had a fight with a Jewish customer. The vendor communicated the stereotype that Jews are cheap in such a way as to attempt to justify his participation in the fight. Similarly, Hopper (2003) discusses a conversation in which a heterosexual couple invokes gender stereotypes. In this example, the couple assigns "household chores" by gender stereotypes (p. 109) to explain the behavior of their romantic partner. In both of these examples, the stereotypes function locally in the conversation for the person who communicates them.

Third, it is consequential that identity construction via group membership is not always as obvious as stereotyping explicitly or invoking the name of a group in conversation. Instead, the way in which group membership is discussed in conversation can be communicated subtly and be overlooked easily. In one anecdotal example, an Asian person eating with non-Asian friends in a Chinese restaurant found himself to be the only person at his table given chopsticks. When group membership is communicated in a subtle way, it can still be consequential. On one hand, a person might not be aware that group membership has been communicated in a subtle way even when confronted with prejudice or discrimination. On the other hand, a person may be aware of feeling uncomfortable but, because of the subtlety, not be able to identify what occurred to stir this feeling.

These three reasons for why group identity is consequential are probably not surprising to an instructor or scholar of communication. No doubt versions of these matters are taught in communication courses around the world. Yet, students may find these ideas difficult to grasp in a meaningful way. This article explores a project created in order to facilitate this meaningful understanding for students. This project exposes students to the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which identity is constructed in line with group membership. The article presents three case studies from students that demonstrate the depth of meaning they were able to achieve through this project. Particularly, students learned about the role group identity (i.e., ingroups and outgroups) plays in stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, the way in which it is functional in conversation, and the consequences of communicating subtle messages related to group membership. In doing so, this article provides a road map for instructors to incorporate similar activities in their curriculum to enhance the depth of meaning students are able to achieve about these issues.

Social Identity Theory

One of the most fundamental theories of identity and group membership is social identity theory. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) is premised on the idea that social identity involves both a person's group identity and individual identity. Social identity theory posits that "we are conscious of ourselves as group

members and by viewing the groups we belong to positively (in contrasting them with other groups) we are able to enhance our social identity" (Hinton, 2000, p. 114).

According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), group categorization allows a person to differentiate ingroups to which he or she belongs from outgroups to which he or she does not belong. Once categorized in this way, the person internalizes the ingroup identity and distinguishes this in favorable ways from the outgroup identity. Social identity research explores this internalization of group membership and favoritism for ingroups. For example, in some studies using the minimal group paradigm (e.g., Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971) participants randomly assigned to a group are provided the opportunity to give money to other participants identified only by their group. Results of these studies reveal that participants favor ingroup members even though group membership is arbitrarily designated.

This ingroup and outgroup process does not discriminate on the basis of group membership and, instead, occurs regardless of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other group category. Thus, a person, regardless of privileged status (e.g., white privilege; see Rothenberg, 2004), can be considered an outgroup member depending on how people communicate with that person. Similarly, that same person can be considered an ingroup member dependent again on the communication that takes place. This basic tenet of social identity theory—that anyone can be outgrouped—is often difficult to appreciate on anything but a superficial level especially for someone in a privileged position who may not be able to relate deeply to the experience of being outgrouped because they have not been communicated with in this way. In order to explore the outgrouping process and to gain a meaningful understanding of its consequences, students participated in a class project. Case studies from three of these students are presented here.

Method

Twenty-one students enrolled in an advanced undergraduate special topics course titled Stereotypes and Communication participated in a project that allowed them to apply course concepts and theories experientially. To conduct their research, students were instructed to place themselves for one hour in a situation in which they would be different within the environment and, therefore, be more likely to be outgrouped. Instructions requested specifically that students "choose a situation in which you will be noticeably different than the other folks surrounding you."

Students were not permitted to change themselves in order to exaggerate or alter their identity. For example, a student would be permitted to attend an open Synagogue service wearing a cross around their neck if this is what they typically

wore. However, that student could not attend the service pretending to be a nun. This limitation was placed on students for ethical reasons as well as for substantive reasons. The ethical goal for students was to subscribe to the obligations that researchers have to their participants such as those related to honesty and the avoidance of deception (Smith, 1988). Additionally, students who alter themselves for this type of project may quickly recall that fact when their findings indicate they have been outgrouped. As a result, they may not internalize the experience. Instead they may dismiss the outgrouping as an experience resulting from their persona rather than from who they are personally. Thus, both ethically and substantively it is integral to the learning process that students not manipulate their identity to complete this project.

There was, however, one aspect of behavior students were required to alter for the purposes of the study. Students were required to take field notes during or shortly after their experience in the field. Students were instructed on appropriate ways to take detailed field notes (Lindlof, 1995). In order to treat those they observed ethically, students were required to determine in advance how they would take field notes so as to be as unobtrusive as possible in doing so. If participants suspect they are being observed this could potentially change their behavior (Lomax & Casey, 1998). Also, suspecting that they are being observed could potentially cause discomfort which researchers should avoid to the extent possible in their research (Smith, 1988). To blend into their environment and with instructor approval, students selected from a variety of options such as excusing themselves to the bathroom to take notes in a stall privately to taking notes blatantly in a notebook while giving the appearance that they were studying for class. For example, if texting was the norm in their location, then the student would text their fieldnotes in order to blend in. If they were 'caught' taking notes, students were instructed to reveal that they were taking part in a class project. This, however, did not occur for any student in the course.

After their fieldwork was completed, students were required to write a five page paper on the experience. The paper was guided by required section topics and specific questions asked within each section. Students were informed that they were being graded on the amount of course terminology and sources they applied to their experience as well as being graded on how well they did so. This forced students to engage, reflect, and process the experience in light of course material. In this way, students could not complete the project without having internalized and digested the outgrouping process and their role within it.

Ethical Considerations

Instructors benefit from preparing students for fieldwork. Doing so will facilitate the success of the study, the ethical treatment of its participants, and the mental

and physical safety of students.[1] For the current project, extensive measures were taken to prepare students for their entrance into the field.

First, relevant readings were assigned and discussed extensively in class. These included a reading about ethnographic research methods (Van Maanen, 1988) and a reading about ethics in communication research (Smith, 1988). Discussions in class allowed students to raise questions or concerns about the research process and these readings specifically. Additionally, students were encouraged regularly to speak with their instructor outside of class for any additional questions or concerns throughout the course of the project.

Second, students were allowed to opt out of the assignment by completing an alternate equally time-consuming, albeit more passive, assignment geared towards the same outcome. The alternate assignment involved reading a relevant book (e.g., *Nickel and Dimed*) or reading two scholarly articles and viewing a relevant movie (e.g., *Saving Face*). A list of suggestions for relevant books and movies was available and students were offered the option to select their own relevant book or movie, subject to instructor approval, if they preferred.

Third, students were required to have their topic (i.e., group category) and location of their fieldwork approved by the instructor. The assignment sheet noted that with regard to choosing a location students were limited in the following way: "No illegal activity; no bar if you are under 21; no dangerous situations; no provoking [the 'natives']." Potentially problematic locations that were not approved included those that raised safety concerns, suggested ethical issues, or were age inappropriate. For example, in one case a 21-year old Yankees fan requested to go to a Boston-oriented sports bar wearing his full ensemble of Yankees regalia but was not permitted to do so for fear that a brawl would occur. Instead he was allowed to go without wearing anything indicating he was a Yankees fan. Not surprisingly, that he was not clapping for the Boston team while the game was aired during his time in the bar was enough in itself—without the necessity of his preferred ensemble—to mark him as different in that environment. As this suggests, when student location ideas were inappropriate, more appropriate options were explored until a suitable location could be approved.

Fourth, students were provided with various forms of counseling and debriefing during and after conducting their study. In addition to class discussions, students were required to have one-on-one meetings with the instructor prior to conducting their fieldwork. In each of several classes prior to the due date for the paper

---

[1] Towards this end, internal review board approval is often sought. At the school at which the study was undertaken no IRB exists and a formal review process is not required. Moreover, the United States Department of Health and Human Service requirements for IRB review suggest the study would be considered to involve minimal risk to participants.

students were provided time at the start of class to discuss any issues they faced in the research process. After the project was completed students spent a class period discussing their experiences with the project. Additionally, students were required to submit a two-page anonymous reflection essay in which they responded to specific questions about their experience, their ethical and personal concerns about the project, the benefits they gained from the assignment, if any, and offer any other feedback including their opinion on whether the project should be assigned in future classes (note: all were affirmative). Finally, when their paper on the project was graded, any notable concerns raised by students in these papers or noticed by the instructor were addressed with students in one-on-one meetings to provide the opportunity to debrief privately with the instructor.

A guided experiential learning process allows students to digest and internalize course concepts and theories in meaningful ways. Three case studies of the projects completed are presented below in the words of the researchers themselves. These three students chose environments for their research that were unique and diverse in ways that yielded particularly insightful findings related to the outgrouping process. In the first case study, Kelli explores age related group identity. In the second case study, Katrina explores religious group identity. In the third case study, Fernando explores appearance related group identity. Kelli, Katrina, and Fernando, respectively, immersed themselves in a conversation related to age, a Hasidic community, and a casting call for models. The case studies discuss stereotypes of these three groups; however, for the purposes of this project the content of the stereotypes themselves and the extent to which the stereotypes are commonly known or accepted is not of primary importance. Instead, what occurs in each narrative is an outgrouping process that transcends any specific stereotype and that results from the invocation of group identity.

Their Experience

Case #1: Kelli
I studied how people of different age groups interact with each other, particularly how middle-aged people communicate with those from a young adult age group when other demographic variables are similar including race, nationality, and socio-economic status. Since both groups are comprised of adults I thought it may be easy for age stereotyping to go unnoticed without careful observation.

To study group behavior based on age identity I used participant observation so that I was involved in the dynamics but did not intentionally manipulate the behavior of the participants in the study. Moreover, because participants did not know they were being observed I was able, to the extent possible, not to influence people to act differently than they otherwise might have. Because I am also an adult, 21 at the time, and in the same race, nationality, and socio-economic group as everyone in attendance, there was an opportunity for everyone to communicate

with me as they would any other adult. I wanted to discover whether or not I would be treated differently than other people based on my age and to see, if this did occur, how it would be communicated. I was also interested in experiencing how I would feel if I was treated differently.

The study took place at my mother's business conference in the Bahamas. I have met most of the people in attendance, a few of whom are good friends with my mother and with whom I was already familiar. The duration of the study involved our time at the bar and the business dinner after. This was a good opportunity to observe how everyone, all of whom were in their 40s, communicated with me since the main purpose of the dinner was to socialize. I consciously tried to act like myself and not alter my behavior although I knew I was conducting the study. Making changes to my behavior might have been particularly noticeable and problematic because I was already familiar with some of the people in the conversation and they might have noticed subtle changes in my behavior. My goal was to encourage those in the group to act as similar as possible to the way they normally would without realizing that they were being observed for the purposes of the study.

I decided in advance to take notes on my cell phone so that I was not recording or taping the dinner without their consent or making them feel uncomfortable by taking notes in an obvious way. Because it was a business conference, others in attendance were also texting and so this behavior did not stand out as being unusual. I also used my cell phone. I collected my data by typing short and abbreviated notes a few times on my cell phone, as subtly as possible. I kept my phone on my lap for most of the study and would quickly write notes when I saw someone else check their phone at the table. This enabled me to avoid potentially seeming rude for texting at the table.

I used knowledge that I had gathered through books, articles, and notes related to stereotypes and communication to help me observe the situation and analyze it afterwards. Since we had talked about ingrouping and outgrouping extensively in class I was able to recognize the dynamics in which group membership was being communicated. Despite the fact that they were not all the same gender or, even, exactly the same age, they put themselves in one group and me in another by categorizing me as young and communicating with me in a way that sent this message. Before my study, I felt comfortable around this group and did not feel that I was too different than any member of its members. I did not perceive myself as an outgroup member until I was aware of these messages being communicated. This behavior made me feel uncomfortable to the extent that I began to feel younger than I was and had to remind myself "I'm 21."

Difference was communicated in more ways than I expected especially considering I was 21 years old. It seemed as though everyone at the dinner treated

me as being much younger even after they found out my age. I was stereotyped as innocent, sweet, and pure (Earle, 2010). Before dinner, while having cocktails at the bar many people approached me asking if I was having fun. I only observed people asking me this question; they did not ask my mom although she was standing next to me. It was often asked in a high-pitched voice as if the person asking was talking to a child. A friend of my mom's asked if we wanted drinks then shifted his eyes to my mom presumably for approval. This occurred despite that I am 21 and that the drinking age where we were located is 18. Once we sat down for dinner I was asked about school, which was a common topic possibly due to the fact that people did not feel comfortable asking me about anything else. The discomfort people had with choosing topics to discuss with me was evident throughout the conversation. For example, it happened multiple times that people would swear then apologize to me for swearing. This was one of the more obvious ways in which people communicated with me differently than they did with others. Another less subtle observation made was that there was debate over whether or not a certain dirty joke was appropriate to tell in front of me. When someone said "she's 21!" the joke was finally told. Afterwards, I noticed people glancing at me to see my reaction.

I was surprised by how frequently differences were communicated. I may not have recognized these messages had I not been conducting this study. The group seemed to be completely unaware of how uncomfortable communicating these differences caused me to feel. I made attempts to alleviate my discomfort to no avail. Every time someone swore and apologized I would say, "no it's ok," and laugh, tell them I'm 21 and my friends say worse, or do something along those lines. In retrospect, by doing so I communicated that I was indeed a member of their ingroup. However, they continued to apologize despite my attempts to align myself with their ingroup.

At times, similarity was communicated. Certain topics of conversation discussed provided the opportunity for me to be communicated with as an ingroup member. For example, I talked about sports with one couple. During this conversation, I did not notice that I was being treated differently than they would any other sports fan. When we were talking about sports or anything else that I could relate to or contribute to that was unrelated to age, I felt a lot more comfortable and it seemed as though the group no longer thought of me as an outgroup member. This may be because their salient ingroup changed from adults having drinks, telling dirty jokes, and so forth to fans discussing the less age relevant topic of sports. When age was no longer salient, the ways in which I communicated my identity and the ways in which others communicated with me allowed me to be constructed as sharing a common group membership. It is interesting to note that my communication was consistent with how I felt. When I was treated as an ingroup member I communicated in a friendly and engaging way; however, when I was

treated as an outgroup member, no doubt because I did not like how I was being talked to, I communicated in a way that indicated disinterest. In this way, my communication contributed to the construction of my identity as an outgroup member.

The identity for me they communicated was made salient by the dynamics of those in the conversation. Some people present knew me prior to when I turned 21 and my mother was present during the entire study making my identity as "child," rather than adult, salient. As a result, they were primed by the saliency of my child identity instead of processing that I was 21, and therefore an adult like them, and polarized our group identities in a way that emphasized age difference. It was easier for them to rely on the salient categorization than to get to know me on a personal level. Young adult as a salient identity related to age was communicated by participants throughout the conversation. Their understanding of young adult as a category was informed by stereotypes which played a role in how I was seen as young despite being an adult. Although 21-year-olds are old enough to hear swear words and drink, they communicated with me in an overly cautious way feeling the need to apologize over and over for what presumably they viewed as inappropriate behavior to engage in with someone of my age.

I felt uncomfortable by the way I was treated even though I was with familiar people and age is not something I am insecure about. It became frustrating that I was being viewed as a child instead of a 21 year old adult. I can only imagine how much more frustrating or hurtful it would be to be outgrouped over something I already felt insecure about or something that would not change over time such as ethnicity or height.

These results are valuable because this was not a situation where stereotyping or outgrouping would be obvious or even expected. Many times when people think about stereotypes, they think that people who use them are prejudiced and purposely being offensive to the group being stereotyped. I was certain that this group of people had nothing against me or "young people"; however, I still felt uncomfortable and frustrated. This demonstrates that even less common or less obvious stereotypes communicated in a conversation could affect people negatively.

This study also made me aware of how often subtle stereotypes are used and made me wonder how often I express group differences and stereotypes subtly and if I make people feel as though they do not belong without realizing it. If a person feels like part of an outgroup, similar to how I felt at times during my study, I would recommend trying to change the salient group membership being communicated by changing the topic of conversation or pointing out a similarity. I would also recommend that someone correct the person communicating the

stereotype, keeping in mind that the person may not realize that they are causing anyone to feel uncomfortable.

Case #2 Katrina

I chose the Hasidic community because I had a few experiences with them while living in Brooklyn. I was always very curious about their culture and the stereotypes that follow them. It is also a culture that was very different from mine and I was interested in exploring that. To prepare for my participant observation study I explored research on Hasidic religious practices and cultural norms. Based on this research and because it is a culture that I am not a part of I knew I would stand out greatly when I was within this community. I have bleached blonde hair, facial piercings, and typically wear red lipstick. My goal was to see for myself what I could find out about how Hasidic cultural identity is communicated from being immersed in a Hasidic neighborhood. I also wanted to see if, based on my observations, the stereotypes of Hasidic culture were accurate.

I choose to explore a Hasidic community within New York City off of the G train and walked around within that area for about two hours. Because I knew from my research that Hasidic communities are typically closed communities, I prepared to not talk to people and to keep to myself while exploring the neighborhood. To conduct the participant observation I used a notebook and pen to write my field notes. As I walked around, I carefully wrote down observations without being too obvious. I spent some time sitting on a bench smoking a cigarette in a park within this community. The location was not extraordinary and, yet, my presence in this location made those around me take notice. It was during this time when some of the most interesting observations occurred.

It was clear from how people communicated nonverbally with me that I was a member of an outgroup. I knew I stood out by the glances I received from people, mostly women and children since there are cultural norms about eye contact between men and women. This was particularly communicated through stares. My blonde hair, red lipstick, and facial piercings stood out quite brightly among this group, and they made it known by stares. No one spoke to me. When I tried to make eye contact, any eye contact was abruptly discontinued as the person quickly turned away.

Additionally, being laughed at was a sign of being outgrouped. I walked by a group of school children crossing the street who looked at me, started speaking with each other and laughing at me, and then walked away. Additionally, they communicated my piercing as a sign of difference by touching the spot above their lips where my facial piercing is. This was done in a blatant, not subtle, way so that it seemed their way of pointing out to me as well as to each other the difference between us and that they were identifying and laughing it. I was stared at, laughed at, and just overall ostracized for being there. I felt naked the entire

time. I felt as though I was being watched by everyone with every move I made and I was communicated with in a way that showed me I was an outcast in that community.

In conducting this study, I realized that my feeling that I was being stereotyped by them led me to act in a certain way that could have also fed the stereotypes against me. I quickly became nervous and uncomfortable. When that happens my defense mechanisms go up making me look mean and tense. I must have seemed like someone who was unfriendly and not sociable.

I also realized that being outgrouped made me use stereotypes against their culture as well. At the time, I interpreted their behaviors, and particularly the stares, to mean that they saw me as a threat. I perceived them as representatives of a Hasidic community that were closed minded and naïve. I stereotyped them as seeking "an avoidance of the secular world [where] barriers are seen as critical to protecting against secular influences" that threaten their way of life (Fried, 2010). I assumed they stereotyped me as someone rebellious (Hines-Brigger, n.d.) and, therefore, who was dangerous to their community and way of life. In making these assumptions, I engaged in meta-stereotyping wherein I stereotyped the group based on the stereotypes I assumed they held of me. I did not realize I was stereotyping until I reflected upon the experience. How they communicated with me meant I was an outgroup member. My presence more likely bolstered their value and pride in their own ingroup identity than posed a threat to it.

Although I conducted the study to find out about the communication of cultural identity and the accuracy of stereotypes of members of the Hasidic culture, I found that during my study, because of the way I was reacted to, I found myself stereotyping the Hasidic culture. I assumed they felt threatened by the potential for me to influence their children suggesting I was in the enviable position. In contrast, it is more likely in retrospect that they viewed me as unworthy of attention, someone to be ignored, or worse mocked as with that group of children's response to me. Even in the situation as they were communicating my position as an outgroup member I still viewed myself in a privileged position of being an ingroup member of the dominant societal culture.

In conducting my study, I found that, by being stereotyped, or at least it seeming that way, led me to stereotype as well. Therefore, it is important to take a step back and look at how you as an individual are communicating, even without words and to realize just how much we stereotype whether we realize it or not.

Case Study #3 Fernando
Conventions of beauty, both masculine and feminine, are factors that undeniably shape the way we lead our daily lives. In the United States, the socially-constructed notions of attractiveness as depicted in commercial media directly

translates to feelings of inadequacy in many American men and women. Day after day, we willingly accept (or at least, involuntarily absorb) the omnipresent images of tall, slender men and women informing us of something new we should pay attention to. These individuals are carefully selected (by various arbitrarily-appointed media overlords) in order to coerce the average American into consuming a product with subliminal promises of social mobility. The message conveyed is either 'this product will make you appear more like this attractive person,' or 'this show will allow you to live vicariously through this beautiful celebrity." For the purposes of this observational study, I decided to briefly explore the stereotypes associated with people working in the beauty and fashion industries. Superficial, cutthroat, shallow, curt, and perhaps insolent are all adjectives that might be used to stereotypically describe casting agents and models in the fashion industry when perceived though the lens given to us by the media (Young, 2011). The goal in conducting this research was to determine whether or not these stereotypes would be true from the perspective of an outgroup member.

To conduct the study I researched and attended an open call for male and female models for a Levi's advertising campaign. I felt this location was appropriate because I postulated that it is during these castings that the actualization of the stereotypes of people in the fashion and beauty industry would be the most evident. Because I am substantially below the height of the average male model, I figured I would be considered a member of the outgroup. Despite any prior information I had about what the experience would be like and the fears I had about being harshly judged, I tried to remain objective.

My plan upon entering the field was to see if anyone at the casting would engage with me first. For instance, I assumed I would have to check in to the casting somehow and that I would have to interact with one of the individuals who would be working for the casting office. Otherwise, I limited social interactions by initiating conversation only when necessary with the forty or so people in the office. I used my Blackberry to appear as if I were occupied with something other than observing and analyzing the individuals around me. I found it to be more discreet to take notes on my Blackberry rather than scribbling into a notebook. Most of the people at the casting were preoccupied with their own electronic devices or socializing. I wanted to avoid drawing any attention to myself and blend in unobtrusively with the surrounding environment.

The only people who spoke directly to me were succinct with their messages. The woman who signed me in hesitated when doing so and questioned me about my height. This made me aware of my position as an outgroup member since this question was not asked of others. The only other male that was not as tall as the others did make me feel more comfortable so I stood near him in the waiting

room, communicating that he was an ingroup member to enable me to be more comfortable. However, when we entered the casting room with the others, he stood before me in line, and revealed a comparable physique to the other men in the room. Any feelings of solidarity I thought I had with the "other short guy" quickly vanished.

When called to go into the casting room with 15 other models, both women and men, I was noticeably the shortest person. We were asked to perform a series of tasks upon stepping in front of the camera, including answering questions regarding our taste in music and clothing. Men were asked to remove their shirts. I had not anticipated this happening. As I watched the other men do so, I became increasingly nervous. My body did not look like theirs. However, I went up and followed directions and tried to look confident. I was approached in the same way as the others.

The way people communicated with me lent support to the stereotypes that I had in mind. For example, the message from the woman that checked me in fit my stereotypes of people in the industry being curt and superficial. Despite confirmation of some of my stereotypes, the behavior was not as extreme as I expected. I assumed I would not be warmly welcomed in this setting, which I was not, but I also was not outwardly rejected. Although I knew I was an outgroup member, the ways this was communicated were more subtle and less frequent than I expected. Moreover, it is possible that other reasons triggered the behavior than simply a stereotypical norm in the culture. Perhaps, in any other setting where I go unacknowledged, I would attribute it to the fact that people are occupied and focusing on other things, which would be perfectly acceptable to me.

Upon reflection, I realized that I may have found the stereotypes about people working in the beauty and fashion industries to be true based on the stereotypes I had prior to this study and my own insecurities about my height. I took peoples' indifference to my presence as hypothesis-confirming information (Hamilton, Sherman, Ruvolo, 1990). In another setting, I might have excused the behavior, if I had noticed it at all. However, in this setting I felt that people did not talk to me because I appeared as if I did not belong. Yet, I went into the casting assuming that people would react to me in a different way. While preparing for and during the observation, I was regularly confronting ideas of beauty I had internalized. These had caused me to outgroup myself through my own behavior because I felt that I did not belong there. For example, I actively chose to avoid initiating conversation with the people around; yet, when I found that no one extended the offer of conversation in my direction, I attributed it to the accuracy of the stereotypes.

To understand that their behavior did not necessarily fit stereotypes I needed to reflect upon the experience and my own identity. In the moments when I was conducting the study, it was easier for me to interpret how group members communicated in a way that was consistent with stereotypes rather than confront any feelings of inadequacy I had of not 'measuring up' to the standards of beauty that group members have taken part in establishing.

Our minds cannot easily avoid the use of stereotypes because we are programmed to obtain information and automatically fill in the gaps in another person or group's story. However, if a stereotype with the potential to negatively impact the perception of a particular group is communicated in conversation, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the stereotype, even if it may be based in a kernel of truth, does not apply to every member of the group and to reflect upon our own motivations for using stereotypes.

Discussion

Each of the case studies presented informs us about the consequences of communicating group identity. As discussed earlier, the first of these consequences involves issues related to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. In Case # 1 Kelli discusses how stereotypes of a specific group identity can emerge through communicated stereotypes even when that group identity is not warranted. Moreover, she points out how stereotyping can have an emotional impact on the target when she notes that she felt uncomfortable and frustrated by having an unwanted group identity thrust upon her. In Case #2, Katrina notes that her feeling of being prejudiced against led her to stereotype in response. By stereotyping the group in return for their stereotyping of her she was able to redefine her group membership as the more acceptable and valued group. This fits with what social identity theory would predict. The group identity she attributed to those she observed allowed her to bolster the value she had for her own group identity. In Case #3, Fernando realizes that he has internalized the stereotypes of physical attractiveness in a way that made him assume his group identity was salient and that people were stereotyping him regardless of the way they actually communicated. Unlike Kelli who was stereotyped to an extent she did not expect, Fernando's expectations about the presumably inevitable discrimination he would face led him to assume group identity was playing a role in behavior although his field notes did not support his assumption.

A second consequence of communicating group identity involves the local functionality of communicating a group identity in a conversation. In Kelli's project, Case #1, she found that those with whom she was conversing were able to align themselves with her mother as an ingroup against herself as an outgroup member. Additionally, by looking to Kelli's mother for approval of some of their comments they were privileging her mother as having the more dominant group

membership. This was arguably a wise conversational move given that Kelli's mother had a powerful professional position amongst those in the group. In Katrina's project, Case #2, the children who laugh are able to communicate group identity in such a way as to gain pleasure and bond from doing so. In this way, and to Katrina's detriment, their laughing serves essentially the same function as might communicating an ethnic joke in a conversation. While it alienated Katrina as an outgroup member, it served to provide an opportunity for alignment and humor amongst those who were laughing. In Fernando's project, Case #3, Fernando potentially communicated his group identity by situating himself near the other person at the casting call who was of shorter stature. By doing so, he communicated nonverbally that he shared his group identity as an ingroup with another person present so as to deflect the expected view of him as an outgroup member.

A third consequence of communicating group identity results from the subtle ways group identity can be communicated. This is perhaps the most poignant finding of these experiences. It is potentially overwhelming to realize the frequency with which group identity is communicated. It is also surprising to realize that group identity is communicated both to construct outgroups, which was anticipated in these projects because of the directive to be different in the situation, and to align with ingroups, which was not primed to the same extent. Finally, the realization that group identity is communicated subtly exposes the ways in which group identity can shift even in a single conversation. In the first case study, Kelli provides several examples of others using group identity to outgroup her, but also provides examples in which her ingroup identity was communicated such as in conversations about sports. In the second case study, Katrina notes how her nonverbal messages such as her clothes, hair, and makeup as well as her facial expressions communicated her outgroup identity at various times throughout the observation, although she had not planned to do so. In the third case study, Fernando overlooks the ingroup identity messages that are communicated such as the common use of cell phones, the quiet atmosphere, and the similar treatment he receives in the casting call.

Although each student reports about a different group observed in a different location, the commonalities across the studies are insightful. As is obvious once comparisons are made across these projects, an appreciation can be gained for the commonalities of these experiences. Students realize that no matter what group they typically view as salient for their identity, given another set of circumstances they may be viewed and treated as the outgroup. This fosters a vicarious sense of empathy that cannot be gained from textbooks, lectures, or class discussion. In their own ways, students were able to explore course concepts that expanded their understanding of research on group identity.

In addition to providing insights about the communication of group identity, this article offers a plan to instructors who wish to incorporate a similar assignment into their own courses. The information contained in the sections titled methodology and ethical considerations, as well as the case studies themselves, provide insights into the ways in which an instructor can facilitate such a project. The case studies are particularly valuable in that they discuss the assignment from the student's perspective. The case studies provide a variety of insights into the planning before and the behaviors engaged in during fieldwork. Moreover, these case studies provide a peek into the unforeseeable ethical issues with which students can be confronted when undertaking this type of project.

Upon reflection and as discussed in this article, Kelli, Katrina, and Fernando each identify with the feeling of difference that was produced by the outgrouping process they experienced. They also each identify specific behaviors that construct this ingroup and outgroup difference and demonstrate how this outgrouping occurred even with groups from whom they did not expect such differences to emerge and even from their own behavior. Having the opportunity to undertake this experiential project and actively engaging in decision making as a researcher by choosing the group they observe, selecting the location for their fieldwork, and planning how they would use their researcher's toolkit to make their observations enabled these students to take ownership of their learning process and resulted in a deeper understanding of course material.

Conclusion

The case studies discussed here provide the opportunity to explore three consequences of communicating group identity. First, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination provide considerable motivation to explore group identity. Second, group identity is of interest to explore further because of the ability for it to be used in conversation to achieve desired interactional outcomes. Third, the ability for subtle references to group identity to be overlooked in conversation warrants taking a closer look. The case studies discussed here were based on a class project that provided students the opportunity to explore these issues further. Instructors who wish to expose their students to a more meaningful understanding of these issues may consider conducting a similar study.

References

Allport, G. W. (1954/1979). *The nature of prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Earle, G. (2010, April 26). *Story stereotypes-Part 3-The age of innocence.* Retrieved from http://www.whythisisgood.com/?p=579

Fried, H. (2010, July 29). *Stereotyping orthodox Jews*. Retrieved from http://www.frumsatire.net/2010/07/29/stereotyping-orthodox-jews/

Gallois, C. (2008). Intergroup accommodative processes. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of communication* (Vol. VI, pp. 2368-2372). Oxford: Blackwell.

Giles, H., & Ogay, T. (2006). Communication accommodation theory. In B. Whaley & W. Samter (Eds.), *Explaining communication: Contemporary theories and exemplars* (pp. 293-310). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Giles, H., & Watson, B. (2008). Intercultural and intergroup communication. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of communication* (Vol. VI, pp. 2337-2348). Oxford: Blackwell.

Hamilton, D. L., Sherman, S. J., & Ruvolo, C. M. (1990). Stereotype-based expectancies: Effects on information processing and social behavior. *Journal of Social Issues, 46,* 35–60.

Hines-Brigger, S. (n.d.). *Tattoos & body piercing: Marks worth making?* Retrieved from http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/YU/ay0798.asp

Hinton, P. R. (2000). *Stereotypes, culture, and cognition: Psychology focus*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press.

Hopper, R. (2003). *Gendering talk*. East Lansing, MI: State University Press.

Lindlof, T. R. (1995). *Qualitative communication research methods*. London: Sage.

Lomax, H. & Casey, N. (1998). Recording social life: Reflexivity and video methodology. *Sociological Research Online, 3*, 1-37.

Mokros, H. (2003). *Identity matters: Communication-based explorations and explanations*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Rothenberg, P. S. (2002). *White privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism*. New York: Worth.

Smith, Mary J. (1988). *Contemporary Communication Research Methods*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Tajfel, H. (1969). Cognitive aspects of prejudice. *Journal of Social Issues, 25*, 79-97.

Tajfel, H. (1970). Experiments in intergroup discrimination. *Scientific American, 223*, 96-102.

Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Tajfel, H., Billig, M., Bundy, R. P. & Flament, C. (1971). Social categorization and intergroup behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, 149-178.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 2-24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field*. IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Young, C. (2011, May 23). *"Model stereotypes" (a post from Codie Young's blog)*. Retrieved from http://www.isthisitmodelsreview.com/2011/05/23/model-stereotypes-a-post-from-codie-young-blog/