

# Racialized communication met with silence in the classroom

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A new article in the journal *Communication, Culture & Critique* illustrates the ways some college students bear the costs of silence-mediated racialized communication in their everyday classroom activities. Specifically, the essay shows that White privilege enables racially laden communication that regenerates, albeit unintentionally, the social exclusion of American Indian students. Moreover, as the essay argues, this exclusion results not only in myriad unearned stresses for American Indian students but sometimes also in their ultimately abandoning their academic objectives.

Patricia Olivia Covarrubias, M.A., Ph.D., of the University of New Mexico combines interpretive approaches from the ethnography of communication and critical Whiteness theories to draw on data collected from 35 American Indian students in a western U.S. university.

The student accounts reveal that racially charged moments can be and are experienced at complex and multiple levels. For example, one student reveals how a guest speaker made a derogatory comment about American Indians thinking she was White, and no one, including the instructor, corrected the speaker's assumption.

Covarrubias names the arrangement of discriminatory statements with subsequent dismissive silence as "masked silence sequences."

By introducing this concept, the study shows that silence is a powerful communicative phenomenon that affects the perceptions people have of

each other as well as their interactions, including the promotion of prejudice and discrimination.

Silence, like all communication, is cultural. Silence garners its meaning from the systems of beliefs and values within which it emerges and occurs. Thus, silence means different things to different people in different times and places. Moreover, failing to understand a people's distinctive meanings and valuations of silence can and does result in preventable misunderstandings, and even discrimination.

Source: Wiley

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