

- Wood, J. T. (2007). A first look at Interpersonal Communication. In *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday encounters* (pp. 9-42). Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.
- Ronai, C. R. (1996). My mother is mentally retarded. In C. Ellis & A. P. Bochner (Eds.), *Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing* (pp. 109-131). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Houston, M. (2000). When Black women talk with White women. In A. Gonzalez, M. Houston & V. Chen (Eds.), *Our voices: Essays in culture, ethnicity, and communication* (pp. 98-104). Los Angeles: Roxbury.

## **5 Main Ideas of the Readings**

1. Communication helps our survival (talking with doctors, asking for what we need, learning about and knowing how to interact with others with different perspectives), safety (calling the police, asking a partner about her or his past sexual practices), belonging (becoming and staying a member of a community), self-esteem (learning about ourselves with the help of others), and self-actualization (learning what we want to do in life as well as understand what life is about). We constantly send and receive messages, intentionally and unintentionally, and successful communication involves using a variety of interactional styles, understanding how things like context, identity, and goals influence interaction, trying to understand how different others view the world, and attending to ethical, moral characteristics of relationships.
2. Wood, using Buber, identifies three types of interpersonal communication: I-It, I-You, and I-Thou. I-It communication happens in informal encounters when the humanity of another is not acknowledged (disregarding a homeless person, or engaging in a cost-benefit encounter). I-you communication is when the existence of another is affirmed usually through the sharing of personal information and the attempt to maintain a “good” image. I-Thou communication is risky, rare, and special. In it, we attend to another as much as we can, not afraid to say how we’re feeling nor do we worry about projecting a good image.
3. Wood identifies eight principles of Interpersonal Communication (IPC): (1) we cannot not communicate (silence communicates; intentions do not necessarily matter); (2) IPC is irreversible (we cannot redo an interaction or take back something we said); (3) IPC involves ethical choices (are we honest with someone when this honesty may hurt?); (4) meanings emerge in IPC encounters (often influenced by cultures and identities and may thus be contentious); (5) talking about a relationship, that is, metacommunication (6) IPC develops and sustains relationships (bringing people together, making sense of what is happening in an interaction); (7) IPC is not a panacea (we cannot fix a relationship by only talking about it); (8) IPC can be learned (at least certain aspects of it, thus the reason for this class).
4. Ronai writes about her *experience* with a “mentally retarded” mother; research has failed to include the experience of children who have mentally retarded parents. Ronai also describes how her relationships with other people (friends, grandmother) were influenced by her relation to and affiliation with a mentally retarded parent. (identity-by-association)
5. Houston argues that interpersonal conflicts between black women and white women emerge because these women “pay attention to different features of talk” (p. 99). For instance, in interaction black women concentrate on each person’s “interpersonal skills, strategies, and attributes;” they value speaking with authority, being forthright, and coming across as intelligent. Consequently, when white women do not possess such attributes, they may come across as “duplicious, arrogant, and frivolous” (p. 100); they may sound “phony” because they have “learned to be more concerned about being proper and polite rather than ‘getting to the heart of the matter.’” Here, black women are more concerned with the form of talk, not necessarily the content of talk, that is, what is *said*. In contrast, white women focus on language style by using “standard talk [English]” and correct grammar and punctuation. Consequently, when black women do not use such ways of speaking, they are viewed, by white women, as “incorrect” or “deviant” (p. 100). Here, white women are concerned with both content (the language used, *what* is said) as well as form (the way language is used, *how* something is said).

## **5 Personal Responses to the Readings**

1. Wood suggests that metacommunication is healthy for a relationship. I agree. However, I also believe that too little and too much metacommunication can damage a relationship. Metacommunication must be used in moderation.
2. I have I-It relationships in my life, but I am not sure if I like them, or believe that, as humans, they are good. Ideally and to the best of my ability, I try to value the human aspect of every person. However, what if I treat a person as human (or how I think humans should be treated) and she or he does not want such attention? Am I wrong? Is she or he wrong? What if my attempts of humanizing another seem forced or condescending?
3. Wood argues that we should try to suspend our ideas/opinions when encountering different ideas. But once we suspend our ideas/opinions, then what? Do we return to our suspended ideas? Do we try to incorporate new ideas into our suspended ones? And what should we do if we disagree with the new ideas? Do we say something? Do we respect the difference? While I believe that we should suspend our ideas/opinions, I also think that there is a limit to doing so.
4. Ronai describes a situation where Collette, a neighbor, steals Suzanne's (Ronai's mother) Social Security card. Ronai tells on Collette, Collette finds out and gets angry with Ronai. Collette soon encounters a situation where she finds that Ronai has lied to Suzanne. Collette tells Suzanne that good parents would "whip" a child for lying. Suzanne seemed to agree, and whips Ronai. Ronai suggests that Collette got enjoyment from the whipping (it was payback for telling). In this situation, I wonder who is at fault for the whipping: Ronai for lying? Collette for stealing and taking advantage of Suzanne's mental retardation? Suzanne for doing the whipping? And when did the whipping begin: With Collette stealing the SS card? With Ronai lying? With the actual whipping itself? (These are all questions about punctuation.)
5. Houston describes three examples of everyday racism: (1) "I never even noticed [that you are black]": this statement erases ethnic/racial experience (colorblind-ness) and redefines a black person in terms of white standards (you are like [white] me); (2) "You're different [from other blacks]": this statement divides the black community into "good" and "bad" blacks (see Yoshino); (3) "I understand your experience as a Black Woman [because I've experience sexism, am familiar with Black popular culture, or am a member of a 'minority' community]": this statement equates two people's experiences, makes them the same rather than being similar.

## **Two Questions about the Readings**

1. Do, and should, we make "allowances" for mentally retarded individuals, particularly in how they interact? (p. 124) Can a "retarded" person be held accountable for her or his actions? Can a person be raped if the rapist has no clue what rape is? (example of "semantic contagion")
2. Houston describes moments of everyday racism: mundane, common instances of racism that seems "trivial" or "normal" to (white) people but are a "constant source of stress for African Americans" (p. 99). Who gets to decide what is racist? Does it matter if someone thinks an act is racist whereas another does not? How much consensus is necessary?

## **Two Examples Related to the Readings**

A scene from *Tell Me You Love Me* (Disc 1, Season 1) shows a couple, a woman and a man, talking about their lack of intimacy. The woman asks, "Why don't we have sex anymore," and the man replies, "I've just been too tired." This is an example of meta-communication—talking about communication or a relationship, particularly because the woman asks the man about their relationship, or rather, what lacks in their relationship (e.g., "sex").

2. The idea that Black women and White women may have different ways of speaking and different kinds of language use reminds me of the criticism against Rachel Jeantel, a witness in the Trayvon Martin-George Zimmerman trial. Some people ridiculed Rachel for being inarticulate and uneducated, whereas others, especially those familiar with language-use and dialect, argued that Rachel was speaking in ways often associated with Black culture/dialect—ways in which the White lawyers could not understand. In the testimony, Black and White ways of speaking/interpreting and understanding influenced how Rachel should be perceived, which, I assume, also influenced how Martin-Zimmerman would be perceived, especially by the lawyers, judges, and the jury.