

Co-Cultural Theory

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1. Adriana Intro

Co-cultural theory is a framework intended to shed light on how people who don't have much social power communicate. Cocultural theory, which originated mainly from Mark Orbe's research, concerns how culture and power impact communication. The theory focuses on several social groups typically classified as belonging to minority or subcultural groups. This theory prefers the term co-cultural group. Initially, the theory focused on people with disabilities, women, people of color, people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. More recently, scholars have applied this theory to other populations under investigation, such as the homeless, immigrants, international students, and first-generation college students.

The fundamental ideas of co-cultural theory were developed due to many qualitative investigations that looked at communication processes from the viewpoint of people traditionally marginalized within social structures. These seminal studies employed a phenomenological methodology to inductively collect descriptions of everyday communication, drawing on the concepts of standpoint and muted group theories. The theory, in particular, is predicated on a specific set of presumptions and associated elements that aid in understanding how members of co-cultural groups employ various practices (strategies) that are a component of a broader communication orientation.

The foundational concepts of muted group or standpoint theory are reflected in the five underlying assumptions of co-cultural theory. According to the first premise, every society has a power hierarchy, meaning that some groups have more access to power than others. Men, European Americans, physically fit individuals, heterosexuals, and people from middle-class or higher social classes are among the dominant groups in the United States.

The second premise is predicated on the notion that members of dominant groups hold the majority of positions of influence in society and are used to establish and uphold social structures that are inevitably advantageous to their interests. The impact of dominant group power on members of nondominant groups is examined in the third premise of co-cultural theory. It specifically claims that dominant groups' social structures operate overtly and covertly against people whose cultural realities diverge from those of the powerful. The fourth assumption recognizes the distinctions within and among distinct co-cultural groups while acknowledging the commonalities between groups with comparable social positions. According to the fifth and final assumption, co-cultural group members will be more conscious of the significance of deliberately embracing communication behaviors that support them in navigating dominant societal structures. These kinds of actions will differ both within and between various co-cultural groups.

2. Mia Theory Explanation

- a. The term Co-Cultural refers to marginalized groups of people who are typically given the labels of minority, non dominant, subcultural etc. It refers to people who

are singled out and placed into a category based on things like beliefs or lifestyle. The Co-Cultural theory studies the interactions between these minority groups with dominant cultures by navigating their communication processes. The communication process is what is referred to in this theory as Co-Cultural communication. The adjective, “Co-Cultural” was chosen to represent this term because it is able to describe the word without carrying the negative connotation associated with typical labels. Co-Cultural groups are varied such as women, people of color, economically disadvantaged, physical disabilities, LGBTQ community, the elderly and younger generation, or even religious communities. In some cases, the people who are associated with these groups face severe discrimination and hardships in their everyday lives. They are often dismissed, and looked down upon compared to those who are not categorized into co-cultural groups. People who are not categorized in co-cultural groups feel they have more privilege and power compared to the rest. In this case, we refer to them as “dominant” when in comparison to co-cultural groups. Although co-cultural people are unique and differ in their own ways, from a standpoint of “power” these groups do not hold a lot of authority as much as we would expect. Since people in co-cultural groups are looked at as very differently than others, they are less valued and not taken as seriously as the more dominant group of people. The study of the co-cultural theory shows that members of the co-cultural group would adapt specific communication orientations from the dominant culture into their everyday lives. Observations were made to develop a deeper understanding in the

things they say, or do as they interact with one another within and outside of the co-cultural groups. The communication orientations consist of traits that members in the groups would use with intention of getting a message across, and the approach they chose to achieve that message. In the acts of conversation, sometimes messages are received in a way that it was not intended to be, especially coming from a member of a co-cultural group. This all depends on the approach of how one chooses to communicate and deliver their message to the receiver. Orbe used communication orientation to describe the different types of approaches that were taken within this particular theory. The terms assimilation, accommodation and separation are in reference to the preferred outcomes a member in a co-cultural group may seek to use in conversation with a person in the dominant group. Communicative practices are the acts of verbal and nonverbal traits that are practiced by co-cultural groups on a daily basis with the dominant culture. Some of these traits are, emphasizing commonalities, overcompensating, maintaining personal barriers, increasing visibility or avoiding. As all of these traits are different they each fit into the categories of either assimilation, accommodation or separation. These categories determine whether the co-cultural member in conversation is more assertive and emphasizes their personality and self awareness falling into the assimilation category - compared to someone who may fall into the *separation* category who may be more avoiding, or embracing of stereotypes when speaking with a dominant member. All of these different types of behaviors are all closely observed in the

co-cultural theory, because it reflects the outcomes of specific interactions based on which communicative approach was taken. Orbe in this theory listened to the way co-cultural group members spoke with the dominant culture, and studied the interactions. Based on his observations, he concluded that three communication approaches each reflected a style of speech or action of the speaker. Nonassertive approach was assigned to those who seem inhibited and confrontational. They are more likely to avoid confrontation and keep more so to themselves. This kind of behavior trait is more likely to give off a “standoff” attitude rather than a welcoming approach. The aggressive approach is perceived as hurtfully expressive to others as it may seem like a controlling approach. People with this approach come off as very honest without the intent of genuinely hurting anyone's feelings. The last approach Orbe observed was the assertive approach which is the middle ground of the aggressive and nonassertive approach. Assertive approach is an expressive behavior where accountability of oneself and others is taken into consideration in a conversation. Each type of individual that is mentioned by Orbe's studies of Co-Cultural theory are unique in their own way. No matter the approach taken to achieve a particular goal, they will always suffer the discrimination of being a co-cultural member, and not in the dominant culture.

3. Mikey Research and review

There are 2 studies found on this theory. The first is done by Robert J. Razzante (MeD), in which he attempts to extend co-cultural theory and compare it to dominant group theory, as well as how dominant groups respond to concerns of those in “co-cultured” groups. The 4 main

concepts Razzante uses is 1) using dominant groups to show and reinforce privilege, 2) coming to a dominant group awareness, 3) using members of dominant groups to support members of co-cultural groups, and 4) using members of dominant groups for disrupting practices of oppression.

Razzante splits his process into 2 parts. The first part is when he uses 26 students to conduct his theory. 15 were men, 11 were women, and 6 out of those 26 were international students. 51% were Caucasian, 22% were Hispanic, 6% were Asian, and 3% were African American. The second part of his process is when he interviewed 7 different individuals not included in the previous sample, in which his interviews differed in geographic location and age.

Razzante then conducted an activity for students and interviewees that would have them think of ways they can identify as dominant group members. He then based this activity off of three important pieces, 1) brainstorming social identities, 2) identifying social identities, and 3) discussing the privilege(s) that come with certain social identities.

In the first part, there was a “no stopping rule” where the participants added ideas to ones already introduced, as well as having everyone insert an idea and question it only at the end of the exercise. In the second, the participants drew 2 triangles, the first for each participant to list the most important identities to the least in 3 segments, and the second to list the most to least important identities for other participants. Afterward, Razzante gathered the results and the participants explored “power plays” via communication and identification. In the third part, the participants were asked to identify social identities that have a strong privilege, in which the participants stated it depended on physical ability, level of education, and age. Some participants identified those with stronger privilege, while others identified those of weaker privilege. He

then asks this question: “Think of the ways you identify as a dominant group member. This may be in terms of age, sex, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. In what ways do you identify as a dominant group member? As a dominant group member, what is your response to the concerns raised by different co-cultural groups (people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+ persons, etc.)? In other words, what have you done in response to their concerns?”

Razzante then extends co-cultural theory toward a dominant group theory by complicating the meaning of dominant group strategies. His findings are as follows:

(Reinforcement of dominant groups privilege) “Participants would often use their dominant group privilege as a means to refocus prejudice and discrimination toward themselves. For example, when asked about his reactions to the concerns of co-cultural group members, one participant thought of a time when he experienced prejudice. More specifically, the participant stated, “I interned for the John McCain campaign and had different coculture people fire back at me...get the door slammed in my face, cussed out, even almost got run over.” By not addressing the concerns of the co-cultural group members and by addressing his own concerns, this dominant group member reinforced a system of power, privilege, and oppression. Other dominant group members were more explicit with their reinforcement of privilege. (Razzante, 2018). Other findings were participants stating that differences are common, that they stick forever, but are not necessarily a bad thing. Participants stated that their prejudice showed very quickly and they learned to be self aware of that and reflect on certain aspects of speech and delivery. And finally, participants in dominant groups stated how they need to practice patience and understanding with those in co-cultural groups.

This is an expansion and solid foundation for how to use and test the co-cultural theory. It gives way for people to think about how people face prejudice, understand how minorities deal with it, and how to support and understand solutions for underlying bias and oppression people of marginalized groups face.

The second study is done by Mark Orbe himself, as well as Sakil Camara. Their study takes a direct approach at how individuals respond to discrimination based on race, sex, age, sexual orientation, and disability.

Orbe uses 30 students from 14 different classes, and has them complete a survey with a chance of incentives. The survey contained questions based on demographic information, as well as questions to report levels of uncertainty, predictability, anxiety, and powerlessness in terms of their experiences as targets of discrimination. The survey also yielded a section where each participant provided a story about an incident of discrimination, that impacted them the most, including what happened, with whom, and where.

Orbe reduces and dives deeper into certain data to focus on certain acts of discrimination. Then, he analyzes the quality of each story. Orbe classified his results in 4 different categories; insults and deprecating comments, differential treatment, stalking incidents, and unskilled/incompetent. Here are some examples:

[Insults and deprecating]; a) “I heard her tell another staff member that Black’s comments don’t know any better. I confronted her and she insisted it was the truth.” b) “He was my supervisor at work. We got along, but he always made fun of me and my accent. He would call me Consuelo which is not my real name.” c) “A boy in my gym class kicked me and hit me and called me faggot and fairy.”

[Unequal Treatment]; a) “I was shopping at the store and I noticed the woman who worked in the store was continuously asking other white customer if everything was okay...the woman never asked me if I needed any help.” b) “Every time I made a suggestion or comment the younger man completely ignored me.”

[Sexual stalking]; a) “He made a comment about my butt in some jeans.” b) “The manager came behind me and rubbed himself on me.”

And finally, [Unskilled/Incompetent]; a) “The band would have better luck if they’d get a guy to book for them.” b) “I don’t sell these cars to women.” (Orbe, Camara; 2010)

The next set analyzes the setting and relationship to the individual for each answer given. Here are some examples:

[Stranger to individual]; “While I was working as a vet assistant one day I encountered a man who had trouble with his cow.”

[Acquaintance to individual]; “My boyfriend’s father was the perpetrator.”

Here’s an example of when a black woman described her reaction to a black man in an all-male setting: I was working in a lawyer’s office where there were five males and myself. The men were lawyers with big egos. One of the lawyers in particular felt he was God’s gift....He tried to get me out on a date with him. He also would approach me with conversations about his sex life and how well he could please a woman. A couple of times he got too close to me, and he tried to place his arms around me. I was aware of what kind of personality he had, so I did my best to stay away from him. (Orbe, Camara; 2010)

Here's another example of when a black woman confronted a man making racist remarks and comments, and how the woman handled the situation head-on: Two years ago I got into a confrontation with a white male in a Taco Bell parking lot. This Taco Bell was located in a predominantly white neighborhood. I had just finished eating lunch there and I was going to head back to work. So I jumped in my car, started to back out and this white pick-up truck was passing behind me. He was driving fast, a little too fast in a parking lot. We almost hit each other. So we both stopped at the same time and rolled down our windows. I told him to go first and that I didn't see him. He then goes on to say, "You didn't see me, you black bitch. You can't drive." I was nice at first, then after hearing that racist comment, I became furious. I told him he shouldn't be driving so fast in a parking area and I called him "white trash." Then I drove off and continued to park.

In conclusion, this study contributes to how discrimination from a communication perspective supplies us with an opportunity to understand and digest what Camara and Orbe are attempting to break down, by noting and analyzing what is taking place in these events and encounters, and the result of said encounter. Orbe and Camera explore these 3 chronological pathways on, 1) how discrimination acts communicatively transpire, 2) how they become symbolically managed, and 3) how someone decides to respond to said encounter. This expands on co-cultural theory at the source. The clear comments and research done by Orbe should be a message to other researchers who seek to understand the relationship between culture and communication through culture.

4. Jordan Discussion/ Conclusion

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References

Lastname, C. (2008). Title of the source without caps except Proper Nouns or: First word after colon. *The Journal or Publication Italicized and Capped*, Vol#(Issue#), Page numbers.