“What They See as Acceptable:” A Co-Cultural Theoretical Analysis of Black Male Students at a Predominantly White Institution

By: Cerise Glenn, Dante L. Johnston

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Abstract:

This study uses co-cultural theory to explore how African American male college students select and enact communication strategies at a predominantly White institution when interacting with dominant groups. The authors use focus groups and individual interviews to examine the experiences of the participants. Three themes evolved from the data: (a) aggressive assimilation: negotiating stereotypes and self-identity, (b) nonassertive separation: negotiating marginalization and power imbalances, and (c) desire for accommodation: communication strategy impediments. They conclude with implications for co-cultural theory and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: African American males | co-cultural theory | college students | predominantly White institutions

Article:

This study uses co-cultural theory (CCT) to examine how African American men choose to enact certain communication strategies within the dominant cultural space of a predominantly White university (PWI). Black male students have lower retention and graduation rates than their Black female and White counterparts (Pope, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), suggesting that their experiences may be unique from other groups attending PWIs. This study examines how African American men select communication strategies as they decide how to present their social identities with members of dominant cultural groups. We begin with a brief description of issues regarding Black men in higher education to provide context for our study and participants’ experiences. We then provide an overview of CCT and explain the research questions that guide our project. After discussing our data collection and analysis procedures, we explain the preferred outcomes used by the participants. We discuss which specific strategies they use, as well as challenges they face when enacting those strategies. We conclude with theoretical implications for CCT and suggestions for future research.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

As of 2009, African Americans accounted for 14% of students enrolled in institutions of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009). Black men accounted for only 12% of the total male undergraduate enrollment, outpaced by their White male counterparts, who comprised 64% of male enrollment, and Black women, who accounted for 16.4% of all female enrollment (NCES, 2009). Scholars have explored reasons for the difficulties Black men experience in collegiate environments, particularly PWIs. These can include lack of financial resources, internalized oppression, negative experiences within the classroom, and underdeveloped systems of support (see Blake & Darling, 1994; Cuyjet, 2006, Hare & Hare, 1991; Harper & Harris, 2010; hooks, 2004; Jackson & Moore,2006; Jones, 2000; Lipsky, 1987; McJamerson, 1991; Tatum, 1997). Additionally, they face higher levels of isolation, estrangement, and alienation (Cuyjet, 1997, 1998; Sedlacek, 1999; Suen, 1983).

To withstand hostile campus climates, students use networks of support (see Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Haralson,1996; Kimbrough, Molock, & Walton, 1996). Kimbrough et al. (1996) noted how support from family, friends, and religion can mitigate the effects of difficult social environments. Many institutions have also created programs to help Black men succeed in college (Laster, 2006). These groups provide supportive environments where they can succeed academically by facilitating discussions through workshops with Black male role models and other Black students (Bledsoe & Rome, 2006; Brown & Farabee, 2006; Catching, 2006). Although most studies do not specifically address communication strategies Black male students use to negotiate these environments, Haralson (1996) suggested that they may alter their level of assertiveness at PWIs. Cuyjet (2006) discussed the notion of “cool pose” or “masking” where Black men suppress the negative effects of difficult social environments and adopt speech patterns, physical appearance, and material possessions of their peers deemed “cool.” He contended that this may also impact perceptions of Black men in university environments. This study contributes to this body of literature by focusing on the communication strategies Black men enact at PWIs.

APPLYING CCT IN CONTEXTS

CCT provides a useful framework to explicate the complex and dynamic manner that members of co-cultural groups use with members of dominant cultures. CCT examines communication strategies that are expressed within social hierarchies, particularly from the vantage point of members of more socially marginalized groups. Orbe (1998a,1998b, 2004), who developed this theory, uses the term *co-culture* to refer to cultural groups who coexist within social spaces and negotiate their cultural identities within the power structures of dominant cultural groups. Orbe asserts that within various social spaces, co-cultural groups enact a variety of strategies to achieve preferred outcomes when interacting with dominant social groups. Three primary outcomes exist: (a) assimilation (attempting to erase cultural differences), (b) accommodation (mutually beneficial collaboration with dominant culture), and (c) separation (distance from dominant culture). Each outcome in turn has three communication strategies: (a) nonassertive, (b) assertive, and (c) aggressive. The outcomes and communication strategies combine in the

following communication techniques: nonassertive assimilation, assertive assimilation, aggressive assimilation, nonassertive accommodation, assertive accommodation, aggressive accommodation, nonassertive separation, assertive separation, and aggressive separation (Orbe, 1998a; Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Orbe (1998a) asserts that factors, such as personal ability, costs and rewards, and context, influence how co-cultural groups select specific communication strategies associated with the preferred outcomes. Co-cultural members adapt to their environments as they determine the situation merits. This results in a continual trial and evaluation of the aforementioned strategies as they negotiate and adjust their “performance” of their cultural identities in various contexts (Orbe, 1998a).

The tenets of CCT have been applied to co-cultural group members’ interactions in a variety of settings including organizations, universities, and everyday lived experiences. These studies address co-cultural groups identified by race and ethnicity, such as African Americans and people of Japanese descent (Nicotera, Clinkscales, & Walker, 2003; Orbe 1998a; Matsunaga & Torigoe, 2008). Scholars have also used CCT to examine different groups in the university setting, such as first-generation college students, international college students, and people who have experienced discrimination in this context based on factors such as age, race, and sexual orientation (Camara & Orbe, 2010; Orbe, 2004; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Urban & Orbe, 2007). These studies reflect the array of communication strategies used by various co-cultural groups, including the desire for co-cultural groups to assimilate into the dominant culture, in addition to the ways they challenge marginalizing experiences with dominant culture. The findings show a preference for assimilation and accommodation outcomes in most cases and discuss the numerous communication strategies co-cultural members use to achieve these preferred outcomes.

Orbe's (1994) seminal study, which led to the development of CCT, examines the communication strategies of Black men in a variety of social contexts. This study shows that Black men often learn how to interact with non-African Americans through direct talks with others, observation, and trial and error. This study also asserts the importance of learning to “play the part” when interacting with both African Americans and non-African Americans to garner acceptance from European Americans without showing too much social distance from African Americans to avoid appearing as a “sell out.” Our examination of African American men's communicative experiences at PWIs contributes to the body of literature pertaining to the university context. We aim to add depth to how co-cultural members perceive university environments by examining their experiences in a multitude of smaller contexts within this larger context. These smaller contexts include negotiating spaces to complete their academic work (such as the library), social spaces (such as student lounges and parties), and living spaces (such as their residence hall rooms). To examine how the participants select and adjust their preferred outcomes and communication strategies across a variety of contexts usually in the larger organizational structure of the PWI environment, the following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: What preferred outcomes do African American men select across contexts at predominately White institutions?

RQ2: What communication strategies do they enact to achieve these preferred outcomes?

METHOD

Participants and Data Collection

This project is part of a larger study examining African American undergraduate men participating in an enrichment program at a mid-size PWI in the Southeast. All of the participants self-identify as African American and represent a diverse range of fields within the university including the social and natural sciences, as well as applied fields such as nursing. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 34, with an average age of 22. The participants attended six monthly topical sessions over the course of an academic year. Topics included managing money, personal relationships, and public safety. The number of attendance of the sessions ranged from 10 to 25 participants.

We used a phenomenological approach to gather and analyze data. This approach encourages the participants to discuss their everyday experiences in their own words as opposed to adhering to questions and ideas predetermined by the researchers (Denzin, 2001; Orbe, 1998a; Patton, 2002). Focus group interviews were conducted with participants who volunteered to talk with the researchers. Focus groups were used to foster direct interaction among participants in a conversational manner (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Patton, 2002). During these focus groups, participants were encouraged to reflect upon the sessions and discuss any issues regarding their adjustment to the PWI environment. They were asked to describe ways in which they respond to these issues. IRB approval was secured and all participants signed an informed consent form. Thirty-seven students participated in five focus groups. They ranged from four to 15 participants, with an average size of 10 participants. The duration of the focus groups ranged from 35 minutes to an hour and 33 minutes, with an average of 62 minutes. Because of the large size of some of the focus groups, the researchers also conducted semistructured individual interviews with 10 participants who volunteered to elaborate on the experiences they discussed during the focus groups. Consistent with phenomenological inquiry, semistructured interviews use open-ended questions that provide the participants with opportunities to express their experiences (Denzin, 2001; Orbe, 1998a; Patton, 2002). Participants were asked to discuss the barriers they encounter on campus, strategies for negotiating those barriers, perceptions others in the university have of them, and any other stories they wished to share. The interviews lasted an average of 38 minutes.

Data Analysis

The focus group and individual interviews were transcribed by the graduate student researcher and analyzed by the senior and student researcher. The focus groups yielded 97 pages of text and the individual interviews yielded 149 pages of text for a total of 246 pages. Pseudonyms were

assigned to the participants to protect their confidentiality. We used Denzin's (2001) notion of contextualization, a phenomenological analysis that uses a grounded, inductive approach to thematic categorizations of data. Contextualization entails locating essential themes and understanding their meaning by locating them back in the stories of their occurrence as told by the participants. During the first phase of data analysis, both researchers analyzed the transcripts independently noting themes that occurred within the transcripts. Next, both researchers met to compare their categorizations of the experiences of the students until agreement was met. For this study, we analyzed the data again applying the tenets of CCT to the students' experiences, specifically the communication strategies the students engaged, avoided, and/or desired to use in a variety of settings in the university environment. For instance, the theme of "distancing" as a communication strategy was categorized under the preferred outcome of separation. In addition, we reexamined the transcripts for factors influencing their decisions to use these strategies and to ensure that the tenets of CCT reflected the stories of the participants.

RESULTS

The participants select all three outcomes (assimilation, separation, and accommodation) in varying degrees when making difficult choices regarding how they communicate their identity across distinct contexts of the university environment when interacting with dominant group members (RQ1). Their use of communication strategies and preferred outcomes (RQ2) are reflected in the following themes: (a) aggressive assimilation: negotiating stereotypes and self-identity; (b) nonassertive separation: negotiating marginalization and power imbalances; and (c) desire for accommodation: communication strategy impediments. These themes reflect how perceptions of stereotypes projected onto the participants by members of dominant social groups, constructions of their self-identity, and perceptions of power imbalances impact their selection and use of specific co-cultural communication strategies.

Aggressive Assimilation: Negotiating Stereotypes and Self-Identity

The participants, who aspire to assimilate, desire to fit in with dominant society through eliminating or minimizing cultural differences and distinctive characteristics (Orbe, 1998a). From an organizational perspective, assimilation can be viewed as the successful process of integrating into organizational cultures to be perceived as an "insider" (Bullis & Stout, 2000; Jablin, 2001). The participants believe that Black men have to work incredibly hard to assimilate into White culture to gain acceptance because of racism and negative stereotypes. Nathan explains his perceptions of how White people see him. He states, "You don't respect me as a person. I am just another nigger basically … I am not just an individual to y'all." Several participants nod in agreement to these sentiments. Despite this perception as a permanent outsider, several participants strive to assimilate into White culture on campus. These participants primarily use mirroring and dissociating to distance themselves from stereotypes and gain the acceptance of members of White culture at the PWI they attend. Mirroring is a strategy where members of marginalized co-cultural groups elect to reflect the verbal and nonverbal

communication patterns of dominant culture to gain access to the resources members of dominant groups possess (Orbe, 1998a). The participants often couple mirroring with the strategy of dissociating to separate themselves from negative stereotypes. Dissociating involves attempts to blend in with dominant culture by consciously avoiding stereotypical behavior when in the presence of people from that dominant culture (Orbe, 1998a). Jonathan states, "in order to make some of the connections in college that we need to make or to not get branded as the guy who is going to rob me, you cannot dress a certain way." Jason feels that because there are people who have limited exposure to Black people and have encountered those exhibiting the "thug" persona, Black men have to be careful not to "trigger" that stereotype when interacting with Whites. The thug stereotype portrays Black men as violent criminals with little concern for the well-being of others (see Ogg & Upshall,2001). He believes that even though all Black men do not reflect this persona, White people have no way of knowing if he is a thug if he dresses in a style associated with that stereotype. These students nonverbally mirror their perceptions of dress that is "acceptable" to White people that simultaneously distance them from negative stereotypes, such as wearing khaki pants and polo shirts.

Many of the participants also use code-switching as part of mirroring and dissociation communication strategies when they interact with members of dominant social groups. This strategy involves switching from a vernacular style of speaking to more standardized versions of English (see Gardner-Chloros, 2009; Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Jared explains, "you can't always talk how you want to talk—talking loud or talking Ebonics … because that is perceived as … you are ignorant.'" He adds, "I can switch it up and talk just as professional and probably more professional than you can … You kinda gotta assimilate to White culture—what they see as acceptable." These participants view self-presentation as a series of choices, with the "smart" decision being one that mirrors what members of White culture view as socially acceptable. They believe that dressing in khakis and a polo-style shirt and code-switching from vernacular to standard forms of English helps to distance them from African Americans who exhibit stereotypical behavior. Mirroring and dissociating may help the participants gain acceptance into White culture, but it can also contribute to dissonance when interacting with African American peers and when attempting to integrate the performance of mirroring and dissociating with affirming notions of their self-identity. Jonathan understands that he may appear to be a "sell-out" to his fellow Black peers who can view his attempts to assimilate into White culture as efforts to deny his Black cultural identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2010; Orbe, 1994, 1998a). He believes that the acceptance into White culture is worth the cost because it is vital to achieve his career goals. He tries to convince his peers that advancing his self-interests is not selling out because he is still essentially the same person.

Jason explains that integrating notions of his self-identity with the ways he performs what he perceives as "White culture" is more important to him than obtaining the acceptance of his African American peers. He states, "I feel like I can be comfortable and still be a good Black man and staying real wearing khakis and a tie." Although he feels comfortable code-switching

and mirroring what he considers “White” forms of dress, he expresses great discomfort modifying an important aspect of his physical appearance, his hair (which is locked), to assimilate. He understands that dread locks receive a negative reaction from members of dominant social groups as he states, “People are going to look at that say, ‘oh, you are dirty’ or ‘you from the hood'—just all kind of generalizations go with a hairstyle like this. I'm not willing to change my hair—not for them [Whites] anyway.” Jason expresses great frustration and intrapersonal conflict when trying to balance his desire to assimilate into dominant culture with his need to maintain his self-identity that he enacts by locking his hair. He prefers to adjust his language and style of dress to foster assimilation because he can still “keep it real,” but feels he cannot maintain his sense of cultural authenticity if he cuts his hair. Because of this tension, he feels that he cannot fully assimilate because there is no way to maintain his Black cultural identity without evoking negative stereotypes associated with dread locks that exist in dominant White culture.

Nonassertive Separation: Negotiating Marginalization and Power Imbalances

A smaller amount of participants maintain what they perceive as more culturally authentic social identities when not in class. These students use nonassertive separation communication practices, especially avoiding, preventing interactions with members of the dominant social group (Orbe, 1998a). Derrick explains vehemently, “I am not going to change the way I dress. I am not going to change the way I speak.” If the social interaction does not pertain to academic experiences, he prefers to interact with members of his co-cultural group. The larger group of those who prefer avoiding do so not because of their self-defined cultural identities, but as a reaction to previous encounters with members of the dominant cultural group. Darius states that he decided to attend a PWI because he wanted to meet and interact with different types of people. Another student who concurs with this sentiment discusses an interaction with White students at a campus party. Nathan explains that they were drinking and some of the White students started calling him “Lil Wayne,” an African American male rapper often associated with the “thug” image. When he asked them to stop, one laughingly replied, “Call him Waka Flocka” (another African American male rapper). Nathan explains, “At that point I chose not to be around that … to y'all, I'm just a man with dreads.” He used the strategy of leaving the situation in this instance (Camara & Orbe, 2010). Given this field of experience, he now prefers the avoiding communication strategy.

As noted earlier, Derrick refuses to use accommodation or assimilation strategies because he believes that this causes him to compromise his self-defined sense of social identity. He feels that his refusal to modify his speech and dress coupled with stereotypes that members of more dominant social groups have of Black men as “thugs” or “gangstas,” communicates that others should fear him before he has had the chance to engage in interpersonal dialogue. He explains, “I feel like with my size and being Black and dark-skinned … I feel like I might not want to be controversial or confrontational. And at night time, like, I really have experienced people being-looking very scared at me.” He uses the strategy of avoiding and no longer opts to attempt

interpersonal dialogue with White people on campus, even though he would still like the chance for people to see that he is not a violent person. He continues, “I have literally walked across the street myself if I see a group of [White] people and I am walking … I guess for them I am just making them safe than sorry. Just go across the street, avoid the situation.”

In addition to issues regarding social identity and stereotypes, *all* of the participants fear negative interactions on campus at night with the university police. Even the participants who prefer aggressive assimilation communication strategies switch to nonassertive separation strategies when on campus at night. Isaac states, “I have been here for four years and I will not go to the library after 12 [am].” He explains that he has been approached by campus police and interrogated about why he is out so late and if he is engaging in criminal activity. He continues, “I believe there is a separation for me as a Black male. I have been harassed a couple of times … white or Asian [people] they have a privilege to walk to the library and not be harassed.” Terry recalls an interaction he had with campus police. He notes that he understands that the university police had the right to think he was suspicious because he had accidentally locked himself out of his car one evening and was trying to open it with a hanger. He thinks that their reaction was excessive, however, as he states. “They had sent six police officers … They had me surrounded. That was crazy … All my Black friends were walking by like, ‘You good? You need any help?’ But the other people were just scared and they ran.” Even though he understands that it may have looked like he was engaging in criminal behavior, he believes the fear he noticed with the bystanders who were not Black has marked him as a criminal in their eyes. Although he felt more comfortable with his Black friends asking to help, he did not want to involve them in the situation in case they would all be arrested.

One of the younger participants, a freshman, notes that he has not been stopped by the campus police yet, but has been warned by numerous African American male students to avoid situations where they will follow or harass him at night. Xavier has also not directly encountered the campus police but states that the campus alerts are enough to make him avoid the campus at night when possible. He explains, “the reports they send out via email all the time, text messages I get where it just says Black male between 5′4′ and 6′2′ … between 150 and 210 [pounds] … What the hell? That's everybody [Black on campus].” Although he may be exaggerating the parameters of the description of Black criminal suspects (other students were laughing as he was talking), many of the participants agree that the campus crime alerts that primarily feature Black men may cause members of other cultural groups to consider them criminals because they “fit the description” of a suspect. This results in an overwhelming desire to engage in the avoiding communication strategy at night when they can. The fact that a new freshman is anticipating a negative interaction with the campus police also speaks to perceived power imbalances that may result in negative consequences for these students.

Desire for Accommodation: Communication Strategy Impediments

A smaller amount of participants directly challenge the other participants who elect to assimilate into dominant culture. They view assimilation as an unattainable goal and believe that they should challenge the perceptions dominant culture has of them, as well as African Americans who have internalized those values. Confronting is their primary desired strategy, although they believe this is not always the best course of action in social situations where there is a significant power imbalance. Confrontation is an aggressive accommodation strategy with the desired goal of working within dominant social structures to directly address uneven distributions of social power among cultural groups (Orbe, 1998a). Terry states,

I think we got to fight this issue that we cannot get to that Booker T. mentality, we cannot get there [assimilation] … It was almost like we were being manipulated—going over to their side … the [Black] professor ended up getting the same treatment. They got on suits. It does not matter … clothes ain't got nothin' to do with it. Being a Black man is enough to get you pulled over in certain cases so we cannot try to make it seem like it is our fault or we cannot do anything about it. We have to take action for ourselves.

This participant expresses frustration with using communication strategies to assimilate in nonassertive ways, particularly through style of dress. He believes that no matter which communication strategies he uses, he will never garner enough social power to be seen as an equal in the eyes of members of dominant society. Mike also feels that confrontation is best for enacting social change; however, this may not be a feasible strategy because it comes with significant consequences. He believes that

When it is time for us to get up and take action it is like, “Oh, no the Negros are mobilizing. Let's get the fire hoses. We cannot have them driving in our neighborhoods taking over our streets.” So how do you act without being viewed as the violent radicals?

These students desire to be more aggressive to be more integrated into campus life, but fear that it may appear as too aggressive by dominant group members. They struggle with ways to work within the dominant power structure without further separating themselves from the dominant group. These participants use the strategy of censoring self so they do not magnify cultural differences or alienate themselves from others while they attempt to resolve how to enact aggressive accommodation strategies without appearing as if they want to separate from others (Orbe, 1998a).

Three of the participants also discussed assertive accommodation strategies, such as using liaisons and educating others, but did not have much confidence in their results. Using liaisons entails working with dominant group members who have more social power (Orbe, 1998a). Brandon feels that this would be a good strategy to use when filing discrimination claims against the university police. He states, “If you got [White male in upper administration—name omitted] somebody like that supporting you, then it is going to look a little bit different than just me and you [other Black male students] coming in there. Now you are dealing with people who can get

rid of them.” Jason explains that when a university officer came into his dorm room using deception to gain entry, he took that as an opportunity to correct the officer's stereotypes. He explains, “The cop told me when he came into my room, ‘You have a mic? You rap? And I was like, ‘No, I sing.’ And he was like, ‘Oh. I figured you rapped.'” The discussion the participants had regarding their rights with university police, such as if search warrants were needed to enter a room, if an officer could lie about an emergency to gain access to a room, or if an officer needs to disclose the reason the student was stopped, reflects that they have little confidence in the effectiveness of these strategies due to “university politics” and perceived lack of genuine support from White officials. Jason explains,

I don't think police fear any consequences. They know a majority of the time they can do whatever they want and nothing is going to happen … I just wished on this campus the White people could keep the Black people safe.

Another interesting finding regards how perceptions of Black police officers can drastically disrupt perceived abilities to use communication strategies. Two participants who express interest in integrating into the campus community discuss how they perceive Black officers as part of the dominant power structure instead of as potential allies, even though they are in the minority on the campus force. Jared states,

I am more uncomfortable with a Black police officer than I am with a White police officer because they are thinking just like White police officers … they will even push you to give you a harder time than the White cops.

Isaac generally uses nonassertive strategies of communicating to dominant groups, but the surprising presence of a Black officer caused him to spontaneously use an attacking community strategy, which is associated with aggressive separation (Orbe, 1998a). He explained he was walking on campus with a friend when they got approached by a Black and a White officer. His friend advised him not to say anything, but he “lost his cool” at the mistreatment from a Black officer. He recalls how he aggressively attacked both officers. He told them, “It is funny that the police department has become an organization that adopts Klan values and Uncle Tom values.” When the Black officer who was surprised by his statement, asked him what he just said, he replied, “I will tell you what I said and looked him dead in his face … Now you probably want to take me in the back, don't you?” He explains that his friend told him he should not have spoken to the officers in that manner, but he was “heated” because he was just trying to go into a building to print some journal articles for class and was surprised to be approached by a Black officer. He probably will not be as aggressive or use the attacking strategy in the future but explains, “That is not cool. Every Black male who goes to [university name omitted] should have the exact same rights that a White student has.” These statements reflect a desire to accommodate, but little faith that this can occur within the current power structure on the campus. Furthermore, the presence of Black officers, who are members of the same co-cultural group, elicit an even more aggressive communication response than the White officers because

they are perceived to be members of the dominant cultural group. This also reflects how marginalization can occur with members of the same co-cultural group (Orbe, 1998a; Ramirez-Sanchez, 2008).

DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study used CCT to examine the experiences of African American men at PWIs, as well as how these experiences influence their preferred communication outcomes across various contexts in the university environment. As Woldoff, Wiggins, and Washington (2011) suggests, student retention does not rest solely on the academic programs but by being able to fit within the "social fabric of the institution" as well (p. 1073). Therefore, understanding the co-cultural communication techniques students used in this study suggests that students are negotiating ways to achieve this. Most of the participants used assimilation strategies, which is consistent with prior work in university environments (e.g., Camara & Orbe, 2010). Many of the participants, however, also showed a strong preference for nonassertive separation. Although some participants preferred accommodation, they did not have much success implementing these strategies given their lack of social power in the PWI environment. The communication matrix of preferred outcomes and communication strategies of CCT suggests that specific communication strategies will achieve the desired result. This theory notes how practice selection and experience influence communication strategy enactment processes (Orbe, 1998a). However, it does not specifically address how co-cultural groups negotiate a strategy of one preferred outcome that "triggers" another in the minds of dominant cultural groups, which may cause them to move across different preferred outcomes of the CCT matrix while they contemplate ways to enact their desired outcome. For instance, Mike desires to confront social situations when interacting with dominant group members, a strategy of aggressive accommodation, yet fears it may be perceived as too aggressive or violent. Consistent with the aggressive accommodation strategy, Mike desires to work within the structure of the PWI environment to enact social change (Orbe, 1998a). He hesitates to use this strategy because members of dominant cultural groups may view it as attacking, a strategy of aggressive separation. Even though his preferred outcome is accommodation, he uses the strategy of censoring self, a strategy of nonassertive assimilation, while he contemplates the best ways to enact aggressive accommodation. Although he currently uses a strategy associated with assimilation, he ultimately desires ways to aggressively work within the PWI structure to enact social change. As Orbe's (1994) study affirms, these students are still in the process of learning how to interact with non-African Americans in the PWI environment. This study shows that they can censor the ways they interact with members of dominant groups while they use the focus groups (and perhaps other social interactions not discussed among the participants) to talk directly with other African Americans and avoid the "error" side of the trial and error strategy (Orbe, 1994).

According to CCT, "different practices are considered the most appropriate and effective depending on the specific situational circumstances" (Orbe, 1998a, p. 98). This study also

elucidates the importance of understanding how situational encounters in contexts not directly connected with academic performance affect students' perceptions of the university. The fear and persistent aversion of interactions with university police officers suggests that African American men may have more severe social issues and power imbalances to contend with than interactions in the classroom. Surprisingly, the participants expressed the most challenging experiences on campus at night when they were going to the library and trying to study for their classes. It may help these students tremendously if universities create programs that promoted dialogue with police and students of color or promote clearer guidelines of students' rights when interacting with campus police to reassure them of their safety.

The hostile reaction to African American police officers on the campus also warrants more attention. This could contribute to work that explores how co-cultural group members marginalize other co-cultural group members as described in Ramirez-Sanchez's (2008) work regarding Afro Punk culture. It may also connect to perceptions the participants have of Black officers "selling out" that they discuss when their peers criticize them for attempting to assimilate into the dominant culture. Those that prefer aggressive assimilation perceive themselves more as "playing the part" to garner acceptance into dominant culture and vehemently refuse the notion of being a "sell out" (Orbe,1994). Conversely, they see Black officers as "sell outs" because they have become part of an oppressive structure more so than attempting to be successful within it while maintaining cultural norms associated with Black men. This tension reflects how African American men at PWIs are hyper aware of their social identities and are conscious of "what they [White people] see as acceptable" as Jared states, but also are equally as conscious of what other Black men see as acceptable. A limitation of our study includes not taking into account how personal differences and history of interacting with dominant group members impacts the students' experiences. Future examinations of the communicative experiences of African American men could examine how they see other African American men that occupy positions associated with more social power on campus. It would also be interesting to examine how the field of experience component of CCT, including personal backgrounds and previous experiences with members of dominant groups, influence how the students use communication strategies to contribute to understanding within-group differences of African American men at PWIs (Orbe, 1998a).

Additional theoretical implications include partnering CCT and theories pertaining to social identity. The participants' experienced (dis)connections among their social identity, identification to the PWI, desired communication outcomes, communication strategies enacted, and perceptions of rewards and costs. Tensions occurred among conflicting notions of identity because of intrapersonal conflicts pertaining to self-defined notions of identity and notions of identity projected onto the participants by dominant group members. This resulted in identity gaps for some of the participants, especially for Jason and those who preferred strategies associated with aggressive assimilation. *Identity gaps* refer to conflicting notions of identity from different sources (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003; Jung & Hecht,2004). For instance, Jason

desired to assimilate and attempted to negotiate his physical appearance and speaking style to facilitate this outcome. His refusal to cut his dread locks to further his desire to assimilate demonstrates that he believes the reward of assimilation comes at too great of a cost of sacrificing his self-defined notions of Black cultural identity. Because he believes his hair evokes negative stereotypes, he struggles to mitigate the effect his hair has on social interactions with dominant group members. Though most participants chose to use assimilation strategies, this does little to negate the negative stereotypes that are associated with Black men in society, reflecting the great difficulty in mitigating identity gaps.

Perceptions of identification with the university environment significantly influence the perceived impact of co-cultural communication strategies the participants attempted to use. The concept of identification pertains to perceptions of belonging or fit in a certain environment (Aronson, 1992; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Identification as the "other," especially when dominant group members associate the participants with violence and crime, motivated the participants to avoid contact with dominant group members on campus at night. Although some of them elected to use communication strategies associated with assimilation in the daytime, they switched to a separation strategy on the opposite side of the preferred outcome matrix out of fear for their safety and well-being. This also suggests a type of dual, yet contradictory identification processes where the participants only feel connected to the university in certain spaces and at certain times of day. Future studies could further explore the influence of identity and identification on co-cultural groups' communication strategies that may conflict with their preferred outcomes.

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