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Intersectional agencies: Navigating predominantly White institutions as an administrator of color

Robert J. Razzante
The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

ABSTRACT
Administrators of color in predominantly White institutions (PWI) navigate from dual positions of privilege and marginalization. Within PWIs, administrators of color experience marginalization in terms of their racial/ethnic makeup. Specifically focusing on the administrative level, 95.8% of executive provosts and 86.2% of deans of academic colleges are White. At the faculty level, nearly 10% of full professors are people of color. However, even with such exclusionary practices, 87.7% of chief diversity officers are racial minorities. The current study seeks to understand how highly educated administrators of color work for diversity, inclusion, and equity initiatives while navigating from their dual positions of marginalization and privilege. Using the theoretical lenses of co-cultural theory, dominant group theory, and intersectionality, the study seeks to understand how privilege and marginalization ebbs and flows depending on particular contexts. Findings indicate that optimizing privilege through co-cultural praxis and impeding through mentoring are two common strategies used by administrators of color.

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Introduction
U.S. institutions of higher education have a history of racial exclusion. Meanwhile, efforts have been made to increase racial diversity. For example, in terms of undergraduate enrollment, Hispanic/Latinx and Asian/Pacific Islander populations have increasingly populated college campuses more than any other race/ethnicity (Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Minorities, 2017). The number of Whites also increased but by the lowest percentage among any racial group. Conversely, at the faculty level, nearly 90% of full professors at research colleges and universities are White (Trower & Chait, 2002). According to the U.S. Department of Education in 2014, only 14.1% of all faculty are people of color. Needless to say, college campuses still lack racial diversity at the faculty level.

Becoming a faculty member is one thing; thriving is another. Fryberg and Martinez (2014) offer an edited volume expressing the concerns of diverse faculty when navigating a White, male, heterosexist environment. In regards to race, “junior faculty of color have fewer points of entry to long-standing, typically White, typically male, historical
relationships and networks often tied to critical funding sources and with the power to shape academic careers in significant ways" (Osei-Kofi, 2014, p. 75). If student populations are changing, and faculty rates remain stagnant, what then, are the trends among college/university administrators?

Similar to the experiences of faculty, racial minority administrators experience barriers predicated by the exclusive nature of predominantly White institutions. Chun and Evans (2012) conducted a study where they explore the experiences of women, racial minorities, and LGBT administrators. In terms of race, 95.8% of executive provosts and 86.2% of academic deans of colleges are White. Perhaps more striking is the lower, 12.3%, White administrators that hold the same position. Statistics tell one side of the story; experience tells another. As stated by Roscigno, Garcia, and Bobbitt-Zeher (2007, p. 18), workplace inequality is a process that “reifies existing stratification hierarchies—factors beyond the control of any given individual.” In order to embrace difference, diverse bodies and ideologies need to occupy space within institutions of higher education (Ahmed, 2012). It is within this current context that I explore the experiences of administrators of color who occupy dual positions of marginalization and privilege within PWIs. While marginalized in terms of race, administrators of color still have available agencies in terms of other social identities (e.g., age, biological sex, able-bodied, sexuality). Rather than essentializing administrators of color as racial minorities, the current study takes an intersectional approach to exploring the complexity of identity.

In the following paper, I explore the communicative experiences of administrators of color when working within a predominantly White institution. More specifically, the current study seeks to understand how administrators of color work toward diversity, inclusion, and equity initiatives while navigating dual positions of privilege and marginalization. Using the theoretical lenses of co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998b), dominant group theory (Razzante & Orbe, 2018), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), the study seeks to understand how power/privilege – marginalization ebb and flow depending on particular contexts. Through theoretical crystallization (Ellingson, 2009), I use interviews with administrators of color to demonstrate how co-cultural theory and dominant group theory provide an intersectional understanding of administrators of color’s agency in predominantly White institutions. Findings indicate that optimizing privilege through co-cultural praxis and impeding through mentoring are two particular strategies used by administrators of color.

**Literature review**

Scholars across academic disciplines have attempted to articulate the experience of occupying the dual positionality of privilege – marginalization. For example, Feagin and O’Brien (2003, p. 234) use the term “overlapping approximations” to articulate one’s cognitive understanding of institutional oppressions as a result of experiencing oppression oneself. Yancy (2012, p. 8) coins the term, “epistemic advantage” to articulate the knowledge gained as a result of one’s marginalization. Ahmed (2012, p. 217) reaffirms Yancy’s term when she asserts that “the experience of oppression has epistemic significance.” Finally, according to hooks (1994, p. 91), “there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience.” When applied to
administrators of color, overlapping approximations, epistemic advantage, and epistemic significance, can shed light on how such individuals come to gain such insight. Intersectionality theory helps to explore the communicative process behind such insight acquisition. Additionally, an intersectional approach offers a lens to understand how one’s own experience of marginalization can then be used to inform their use of their privileges.

The roots of intersectionality studies within the academy can be traced to critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Outside the academy, intersectionality studies can be traced to Black feminist thought produced by social critics such as Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth (Crenshaw, 1989). In its current use, intersectionality studies are an interdisciplinary field that focuses on the overlapping layers of social identities (Ferguson, 2012). Commonly conceptualized across various disciplines, intersectionality serves as “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). Current trends in intersectionality studies seek to revisit Black feminist thought while also remaining open to new methods of studying intersectionality (May, 2015). One new approach to intersectionality is applied in this essay by using both co-cultural theory and dominant group theory to understand how administrators of color are both outsiders within, as well as insiders within, depending on the identity that becomes most salient in a given context.

Within the field of communication studies, scholars have articulated experiences of maintaining intersectional identities within organizational settings (Alexander, 2011; Calafell, 2014; Jones Jr. & Callafell, 2012). Orbe (1998a) particularly articulates the experiences of “outsiders within” when exploring the experiences of co-cultural group members in higher education. More specifically, Orbe states, “an outsider within perspective to organizational communication can also assist dominant group members in drawing from experiences of feeling like outsiders in an attempt to better understand the experiences of co-cultural group members” (Orbe, 1998a, p. 273). In this essay, I am interested in exploring how an administrator of color occupies both standpoints of privilege and marginalization, and how this dual positionality informs one’s communicative behavior. In other words, rather than educating other dominant group members of one’s co-cultural experiences, this study examines how a single individual can use their own experiences of marginalization to inform their own use of their privilege. To explore this phenomenon, I use co-cultural theory, dominant group theory, and an intersectional approach to explore the process behind such identity navigation. Such an approach accounts for the fluidity of power and identity as a contextual and intersubjective phenomenon. Furthermore, I navigate this study with the following research question: How do administrators of color negotiate their co-cultural group and dominant group memberships within a predominately White institution of higher education?

In order to answer this question, one first needs to revisit core foundations of co-cultural theory, dominant group theory, and intersectional theory as sensemaking tools. Exploring the constructs of co-cultural theory, dominant group theory, and intersectional theory allows one to better understand the complexity of identity in varying contexts.

Theoretical crystallization

Before exploring the experiences of administrators of color, I find it necessary to find a vocabulary through which to engage a conversation on intersecting identities. The
following sections outline the constructs of the three theories that inform how social identities and communication practices mutually influence one another. Through theoretical crystallization (Ellingson, 2009), co-cultural theory and dominant group theory provide a language to understand one’s simultaneous positions of privilege and oppression.

Intersectionality theory helps to ground co-cultural theory and dominant group theory within the existing conversation of intersectionality studies. According to Boylorn (2013, p. 6), intersectionality “is grounded in the idea that people live layered lives and often experience overlap, making it possible to feel oppression in one area and privilege in others.” As such, exploring co-cultural theory and dominant group theory, intersectionally, provides a crystallization of identity that neither theory fully grasps when used separately.

**Co-cultural theory**

Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998b) originated from a phenomenological study in attempt to understand the communicative behavior of historically marginalized (co-cultural) groups when interacting within structures that generate their marginalization. Co-cultural theory’s roots lie within the theoretical frameworks put forth by standpoint theory (Smith, 1987) and muted group theory (Kramarae, 1981). Standpoint theory articulates how one’s orientation to the world is informed through their social position as being either in the center or the margins of society. Three central points contribute to the development of standpoint theory: (1) people see the world from where they stand; (2) people have multiple, layered identities; and (3) power is inextricably linked to one’s standpoint (Castle Bell et al., 2015). As seen with co-cultural theory and dominant group theory, one’s position and standpoint varies depending on which identities become most salient in a particular context. On the other hand, muted group theory originally articulated the silencing/distorting of women’s voices in a male-dominant workplace. Subsequent uses of muted group theory have explored the distortion that occurs for anyone residing on the margins in terms of race, class, religion, etc.

Taking into consideration standpoint theory and muted group theory, co-cultural theory attempts to localize discourses of marginalization within the field of intercultural communication. Co-cultural theory particularly maintains the following five premises:

1. In each society, a hierarchy exists that privileges certain groups of people; in the United States these groups include [cisgender] men, European Americans, [Christians], heterosexuals, the able-bodied, [native English speakers], and middle and upper class.
2. On the basis of these varying levels of privilege, dominant group members occupy positions of power that they use – consciously or unconsciously – to create and maintain communication systems that reflect, reinforce, and promote their field of experience.
3. Directly and/or indirectly, these dominant communication structures impede the progress of those persons whose lived experiences are not reflected in the public communicative systems.
4. Although representing a widely diverse array of lived experiences, co-cultural group members – including women, people of color, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, people with
disabilities, and those from a lower socioeconomic status – will share a similar societal position that renders them marginalized and underrepresented within dominant structures.

(5) To confront oppressive dominant structures and achieve any measure of “success,” co-cultural group members strategically adopt certain communication behaviors when functioning within the confines of public communicative structures. (Orbe, 1998b, p. 11)

With these five premises in place, Orbe (1998b) conducted a phenomenological study examining the ways in which co-cultural group members interacted with dominant group members. Through phenomenological data analysis, Orbe identified 26 particular communicative practices employed by co-cultural group members (see Figure 1). He also identified six influential factors that help to determine which of the 26 practices one would employ: preferred outcome, communication approach, field of experience, abilities, situational context, and perceived costs and rewards. Of the six factors, preferred outcome and communication approach emerged as the two factors that create the structure in which one of the 26 practices reside. I will currently bracket field of experience, abilities, situational context, and costs and rewards to further explore preferred outcome and communication approach.

Preferred outcome speaks to a co-cultural group member’s desired outcome of an interaction with a dominant group member. Preferred outcome can be viewed as a continuum

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Figure 1. Co-cultural group communication orientations & practices (Orbe, 1998b).
from assimilation to separation. **Assimilation** might become a preferred outcome when the co-cultural group member seeks to eliminate differences in order to reduce their power distance with a dominant group member (e.g., censoring self, mirroring, ridiculing self). On the other end of the spectrum resides separation. Rather than reducing the power distance, **separation** seeks to maintain such distance (e.g., avoiding, embracing stereotypes, attacking). Between assimilation and separation resides accommodation. **Accommodation** demonstrates the desire to negotiate power distances between co-cultural group members and dominant group members (dispelling stereotypes, communicating self, confronting).

Communication approach seeks to determine whether a co-cultural group member chooses to assimilate, accommodate, or separate. Similar to preferred outcome, communication approach can be viewed as a continuum from nonassertive to aggressive. A communication approach speaks to the degree one is willing to negotiate their positionality. More particularly, a nonassertive approach occurs when a co-cultural group member puts their own needs aside in order to maintain the needs of the dominant group member. On the other end resides an aggressive approach where the co-cultural group members stress their own needs while bracketing the needs of the dominant group member. In between the two rests an assertive approach where both the needs/desires of co-cultural and dominant group members negotiate with one another.

Once again, a co-cultural group member chooses which communicative practice to employ based on their preferred outcome, communication approach, and the other four influential factors (field of experience, abilities, situational context, perceived costs and rewards). Here I briefly preview the other four factors as a means to understand the role of perceived agency. Similar to standpoint theory, **field of experience** pertains to one’s perspective based on their lived experiences. **Abilities** pertains to one’s material or symbolic ability to respond to a dominant group member. **Situational context** refers to the most appropriate response considering the locale of the interaction. Finally, **perceived costs and rewards** emerge from one’s past experiences using a particular communicative behavior. Whereas co-cultural theory helps to understand the communicative practices of marginalized groups, there needs to be a theoretical way to understand the variety of ways dominant group members come to use their positions of privilege to either reinforce—dismantle oppressive structures. As such, we turn to dominant group theory.

**Dominant group theory**

Dominant group theory (Razzante & Orbe, 2018) is a response to co-cultural theory that explores the communicative behaviors of those who maintain standpoints of power and privilege. Rather than essentializing all dominant group members as reinforcing their privilege, dominant group theory casts a broader net and complicates the different effects of varying communicative behaviors. More specifically, dominant group theory aims to explain how dominant group members come to challenge and/or reinforce structures of oppression. A more nuanced understanding of dominant group communicative strategies enables an intersectional approach to understanding the reinforcement and/or transformation of structures of privilege-marginalization.

In order to theoretically answer this question, dominant group theory explores the juncture between critical-cultural theorists and intercultural communication contributors. First, de Certeau (1988) articulates the difference between strategies and tactics. Whereas
strategies are used from positions of power, tactics are practices used by those from a position of marginalization. Foucault (1977) defines productive power as the ability to use one’s agency as a means for material changes. Finally, Althusser (2006) describes the process of interpellation as the phenomenon of being hailed into a particular discursive formation. For example, one who identifies as a neo-Nazi may quickly relate to discourses surrounding White supremacy. When taken together, dominant group members can be interpellated into varying discourses of power/privilege-oppression (e.g., color-blind ideology, social justice advocacy, and/or responsible uses of privilege). Furthermore, a dominant group member may use their position of privilege in a spectrum of negative-productive manners. When applied to administrators of color, these theoretical insights show how administrators of color may draw upon strategies, tactics, productive power, and ideological interpellation when maintaining dual positionality of privilege and marginalization.

Within the field of intercultural communication, scholars have taken up the discourse of privilege-marginalization in their own line of work. First, Sue and colleagues (2007), while not communication scholars, have contributed to intercultural communication. Their work on microaggressions allows one to understand how one may use (un)conscious language to reinforce structures of oppression. Furthermore, DeTurk (2011) notes that one may consciously use discursive practices to resist prejudice and discrimination. Finally, Allen (2014) offers a framework for negotiating the dialectical tension between unconscious-conscious thinking and acting. More specifically, she articulates how dominant group members may consciously use their positions of privilege to resist prejudice and discrimination in one instance while also unconsciously reinforcing structures of oppression in another. Allen (2014, p. 9) labels this phenomenon as, “thinking under the influence;” a strategy employed by many dominant group members.

Before continuing, it is important to return to the question raised by dominant group theory: "What about majority group members who, at times, may consciously utilize their societal privilege to dismantle oppressive structures (racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.)?" In addition to answering the question theoretically, there also exist two recent studies that answer the question empirically. Orbe and Batten (2017) examined online comments from self-identified dominant group members in response to concerns raised by co-cultural members after Trump’s election in 2016. The second study collected stories from dominant group members who articulated ways they responded to the concerns of co-cultural group members (Razzante, 2018). From the two studies, Razzante and Orbe (2018) collected 21 strategies used by dominant group members when responding to co-cultural concerns (see Figure 2). What follows is a description of the six influential factors that help to determine which dominant group strategy is (un)consciously employed.

Similar to co-cultural theory, a dominant group members’ use of a particular strategy relies upon the combination of six influential factors: interactional outcome, communication approach, field of experience, abilities, situational context, and perceived costs and rewards. Whereas co-cultural theory aims to understand one’s preferred outcome, dominant group theory examines the interactional outcome. Interactional outcome can be divided into a continuum of reinforcement of oppressive structures to the dismantling of oppressive structures.

The reinforcement of oppressive structures occurs when a dominant group member uses a strategy that (un)consciously reinforces the ethnocentrism of dominant group members’ field of experiences (e.g., remaining neutrally silent, redirection, victim blaming). On the
other end of the continuum lies the dismantling of oppressive structures. These strategies occur when dominant group members (un)consciously use power/privilege to decenter structures that allow for privilege and marginalization (e.g., sacrificing self, identifying as a co-cultural ally, forcing). One should note that dismantling strategies, without the consultation of co-cultural groups, may do more harm than good. Finally, in the middle of the continuum resides the impediment of oppressive structures. A dominant group member might (un)consciously impede oppressive structures by recognizing one’s own privilege, educating others, or confronting oppressive rhetoric. Taken with the other five influential factors, dominant group theory offers a variety of ways dominant group members can be interpellated into using their power/privilege in reinforcing, impeding, and/or dismantling strategies (see Figure 2).

Up to this point, co-cultural theory and dominant group theory have been previewed as two particular intercultural theories that shed light on the communicative behaviors of marginalized and privileged groups, albeit separately. What lacks is an exploration of how the two theoretical frameworks can be used simultaneously to understand how one individual can be both privileged and marginalized depending on which identities become most salient in a given context. In the context of predominantly White institutions, both theoretical frameworks shed light on how administrators of color take up

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**Figure 2.** Dominant group communication orientations & strategies.
agency in their dominant group memberships while also maintaining a co-cultural identity in terms of race. This section turns to intersectionality theory to better understand how both theories work together. Intersectionality theory becomes the glue that binds co-cultural theory and dominant group theory together.

**Intersectionality theory**

Crenshaw (1989, 1991) advocated for the study of identity through a multidimensional approach rather than a single-axed approach. Whereas a multidimensional approach considers “compound discrimination” of identities, a single-axed approach maintains focus on one particular identity (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 148). Using *either* co-cultural theory *or* dominant group theory would lead to a single axied approach to studying identity. Using both, allows for a multidimensional approach that inspires research that explores identity as dynamic, fluid, and contextual. Studying identity through a matrix views allows for a more complicated understanding of the ways identities become salient.

McCall (2005) attempted to understand how one could study intersectionality identities empirically. She developed a continuum to make sense of how we come to understand the ontology of categories in such research. On one end of the continuum lies *anticategorical* studies which asserts that social identities are too complex for distinct categories. On the other end of the spectrum lies *intracategorical* studies which asserts that categories are stable through humans’ use of such categories. Finally, the less known approach is *intercategorical/categorical* studies. Categorical studies recognize the utility of categories when placed in relationship with one another. That is, through a dialogic relationship, the ontology of categories become more complicated and nuanced. This essay embraces the categorical approach to understanding positions of power/privilege and oppression.

Ferguson (2012) attempted to further understand how to study intersectional identities empirically. According to Ferguson, scholars studying intersectionality either ascribe to a dominant affirmation approach or a dominant objection approach. The dominant affirmation camp believes that intersectionality can be used as a social scientific tool to studying intersectional identities. The dominant objection camp believes that intersectional identities are too complex to study empirically and should remain discrete. I align myself with the dominant affirmation camp as a means to bring co-cultural theory in tension with dominant group theory to empirically understand the liminal experiences of administrators of color.

Both co-cultural theory and dominant group theory were created from people’s lived experiences. Through phenomenological analyses, Orbe (1998b) and Razzante and Orbe (2018) identified various ways co-cultural group members and dominant group members communicate with their interlocutors. The categories of privilege and marginalization are created through human intersubjectivity but also serve as sites of resistance and transformation. Intersectionality theory serves as the connecting theoretical link through which we can come to understand the relationship of one’s own, and simultaneous, positions of privilege and marginalization. Whereas co-cultural theory and dominant group theory have been used empirically in separate studies, this is the first study that attempts to use both in tandem. What follows is a small-scale pilot study that attempts to use both co-cultural theory and dominant group theory when understanding the intersectional positions of privilege – marginalization of administrators of color.
Methods

According to Chun and Evans (2012), 84.2% of academic administrators are White and 66.0% are male. Certain administrative positions are more homogenous than others. For example, 95.8% of executive vice provosts are White, and 84.0% are male; 86.2% of deans of academic colleges are White and 80.7% are male. Perhaps most striking is the racial and gender makeup of chief diversity officers: 87.7% of chief diversity officers are racial minorities, and 56.1% are female. In order to crystallize co-cultural theory and dominant group theory through an intersectional approach, I decided to interview administrators of color who maintain a leadership position within diversity and inclusion initiatives. Focusing on administrators of diversity and inclusion initiatives provides a sample of participants who are all working toward the same general goal within a similar position demographically.

This study utilizes interviews with six particular administrators of color (five females, one male) with varying geographic dispersion (east coast, rural Appalachia, southwest, etc.). These administrators also vary in age (range of nearly 40 years), hierarchical position ( chancellor, chief diversity officer, department chair, center coordinator), and institutional size. Among all the differences, each administrator has commonalities of being dominant group members in terms of being highly educated, middle class, able-bodied, middle-aged, and cis-gender. As such, the administrators I interviewed all maintain a certain degree of privilege, and marginalization within a predominantly White institution as a racial minority.

The interviews for this study took place during the fall of 2017, nearly one year after Trump’s election as president of the U.S. Administrators were willing and able to comment on current trends occurring on their respective campuses regarding their political climates in response to Trump’s election. The interviews ranged in time from 45–60 minutes and took place either in person or through the virtual communication system, ZOOM. I recruited participants for this study in one of two ways, (1) through my personal network, or (2) through an email request to various diversity and inclusion administrators of color on my current or previous campuses. Once recruited, I used a semi-structured interview guide to ask each administrator the same set of questions to quickly reach theoretical saturation in this theoretical pilot study (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Small, 2009). Once collected, I transcribed the interviews in preparation for data analysis.

Data analysis

My data analysis procedure aligned with what Tracy (2013) calls a phronetic iterative approach. A phronetic iterative approach begins by using an emic primary coding cycle of open coding 20% of the data. Once saturation is reached, the codes are then lumped together into roughly 10–15 codes which then get applied to the whole data-set deductively. An iterative approach allowed for me to discover any themes that fall outside the theoretical frameworks of dominant group theory, co-cultural theory, and intersectional theory. What follows are two key themes that further explicate the phenomenon of dual positionality of privilege and marginalization: optimizing privilege through co-cultural praxis and impeding through mentorship. I particularly use exemplars to demonstrate how culture becomes “imagined, constituted in communication, and constrained by social structures and ideologies over a trajectory of time by people and institutions” (Collier, 2002, p. xi).
Optimizing privilege through co-cultural praxis

The gospel-turned-soul artist, Sam Cooke, was known as a keen observer and a staunch reader on Black history. In a 1964 interview, Dick Clark asked him about the secret to his success as a popular singer-song writer.

I think the secret is really observation, Dick … if you observe what's going on, I try to figure out how people are thinking and determine the times of your day, I think you can always write something that the people will understand.

Sam not only observed the times of his day during the African-American civil rights movement, but he also read about and studied discourses surrounding racial oppression. Cooke optimized his position as a movement intellectual in popular music through his combination of theory and practice (praxis). That is, the combination of personal experience and education, allowed Sam to keep his pulse on racial tension in the U.S. that ultimately helped him use his position to reach his audience through lyrical content.

Jane may not be a famous soul singer like Sam Cooke but she is an effective ethnographer. Coming from a working-class background, Jane moved her way into the academy. As a Black woman, she often ascribes her initial hiring as a professor to the fact that she is a “two-fer.” That is, not only was she hired because she was Black, but also because she was a woman. She can easily ascribe her hiring as such due to the fact she was called upon more frequently than the two White women with whom she was hired. Right before Jane achieved tenure, she changed her area of study to “that which people assumed of me,” identity politics. What follows is an excerpt from Jane's experiences that also align with those of other administrators of color:

I earned full professorship, I became a department chair, then I became an associate dean in the college of liberal arts and sciences and all the while I was doing this work around diversity and inclusion, that is to say, my research, my teaching, my publications, my presentations, I began to go out and do speeches, etc. And when I became an associate dean I decided to create a diversity council for my college which they didn’t have and I had been very fortunate to have supportive leaders who both recognized my potential and gave me the autonomy to optimize it. So as I was working as an associate dean and in that role I was also responsible for reappointment and tenure cases and frankly at all those roles I was pleased to bring both my own personal experience and professional experiences as well as theories and frameworks from the discipline of communication to bear.

Jane educates others from two positionalities. As a Black woman, Jane utilizes her personal experience to understand the standpoint of being marginalized. At the same time, Jane uses her position as a highly educated scholar to provide empirical data to support her personal experiences. That is, Jane informs her own administrative practices through both experience and education. That is, Jane optimizes her position as an assistant dean through optimizing co-cultural praxis. Jane optimizes praxis when she not only understands the overlap of her own experience and her education, but then she acts accordingly to gain legitimacy among her peers. At the conclusion of the exemplar, Jane notes how rare it is for academic administrators to study what they practice as an administrator. Furthermore, Jane advocates for change within her highly educated, Black female body that has been historically marginalized from higher education, and more particularly, administrative positions.

Intersectional theory advocates for a multi-dimensional approach to understanding one's positionality. When taken separately, Jane’s Black womanhood and her highly
educated self fail to offer room for discussion on how she can use her intersectional positionality to create effective organizational change. That is, the single-axied account of her marginalization as a Black woman only offers one aspect to her communicative potential as an academic administrator. Similarly, her identity of being highly educated fails to account for all her personal experiences of marginalization that informs her education. As such, combining her experience of marginalization and privilege offers a more dynamic understanding of how exactly she uses her position as a Black female assistant dean to create change within a predominantly White institution.

Jane furthermore narrates her experience of working her way up the organizational hierarchy of higher education. Becoming a full professor offers Jane a formal level of organizational privilege within the academy. As such, Jane, a highly educated Black woman, currently works within the historically oppressive structure of a White institution to use her position of privilege to begin dismantling her racially exclusive campus. She does this in two ways. First, Jane’s presence and advocacy work begins to challenge Chun and Evans’s (2012) statistic that 84% of academic administrators are White. That is, her physical body alone challenges the majority White workforce. In addition, Jane’s ideological interpellation is that which challenges whiteness ideology through her activism. Second, Jane uses accessible rules and resources of being an associate dean to create a diversity council. Taken together, Jane uses her experiences of marginalization and her scholarship around privilege – marginalization to optimize her position as an associate dean.

Through the lens of co-cultural theory, Jane practices assertive assimilation and assertive accommodation as a Black female. Assertive assimilation manifests in her extensive preparation to deal with discourses of privilege – marginalization in organizational settings. Whether she intended for it to happen or not, Jane’s area of scholarship materialized in her position as an associate dean where she actively worked to disrupt whiteness. Jane additionally exercised assertive accommodation when she utilized (dominant group) liaisons by collaborating with members of her leadership team. As a co-cultural administrator, Jane was able to network with those in power. As a dominant group member, Jane engaged in both assertive impediment and assertive dismantling of oppressive structures. Assertive impediment occurs when she, as a highly educated administrator, affirms co-cultural concerns by valuing research on power, privilege, and oppression. Her affirmation of co-cultural concerns manifests as assertive dismantling when she assumes responsibility for change by creating a diversity council for her college. However, in crystallizing co-cultural theory and dominant group, one can see how Jane used one particular communicative practice that comes from both marginalization and privilege.

Jane’s example has larger implications for administrative hiring practices in higher education. First, it is important that administrators have personal experiences of the particular initiatives they aim to achieve. Jane currently serves as her university’s vice chancellor of diversity and inclusion. Chun and Evans (2012) noted that 87.7% of diversity inclusion administrators are racial minorities. What Chun and Evans fail to note is whether racial minority administrators have an advanced degree in topics related to power, privilege, and oppression. As in Jane’s case, when one’s co-cultural status is paired with a dominant group membership, administrators can glean from their own experiences of marginalization to inform how they use their own positions of power and privilege to educate others from a professorial position. In this case, Jane’s education paired with her personal
experience allowed her to reach her various faculty and administrative audiences through her optimization of praxis.

In returning to the original research question, Jane provides an example of a co-cultural group member who simultaneously maintains the position as a dominant group member. As Collier (2002) noted, identity is dynamic, contextual, and a site of contestation. Maintaining the tension between co-cultural membership and dominant group membership, Jane uses her co-cultural experiences to inform her conscious use of dominant group privileges to impede and dismantle oppressive structures. Ultimately, Jane optimizes her position of privilege by combining theory of difference, organizational change, and intercultural competence, with her use of the rules and resources of her administrative position to practice more conscious and responsible uses of privilege. Ultimately, Jane exemplifies one who optimizes her privilege through co-cultural praxis by embracing her co-cultural and dominant group intersectionality, while using the former to inform responsible uses of the latter.

**Impeding through mentorship**

Nothing will work, unless you do – Maya Angelou
The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any
– Alice Walker

Sue grew up in rural Arkansas. As a Black female in a predominantly White area of the country, she was frequently told to dream small and not expect much for herself. Being the rebel she is, the older Sue got, the more she began to dream. Growing up in rural Arkansas as a Black woman was not easy. Early in her education, Sue noticed she was being tracked into a career path that would limit her potential. Sue made her way through her undergraduate and master’s degrees but was still not sure which career path to pursue. Ultimately, she applied for a PhD program in one thing she was passionate about, critical race theory in educational contexts (although she failed to name it as such at the time). After earning her degree and after working at two previous institutions, Sue finally became the first college-level director of diversity, equity, and inclusion at a larger research institution in the Midwest. Sue’s current position consists of working with students, faculty, and staff on the institution’s pursuit toward a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable campus. At the time of our interview, the student population of Sue’s university consisted of 61.4% White students (less than 4% Black) and 71.9% White faculty (less than 8% Black). Among all of Sue’s responsibilities, she really enjoys working with students the most. What follows is an exemplar that demonstrates a common mentoring conversation between racial minority administrators and students:

I don’t know how many times I’ve heard this. I talked about this as a freshman, I’m talking about it now, now you’re [a mentee of Sue’s] talking about it as a second year master’s student. Well, you know what? I was in college in the early 2000s, girl, and we were talking about the same thing. My framing of that to students is that this should tell you that this is structural… It has a little to do with you but it tells you that when you look back at the history of institutions and all that… they found that the same thing those students [Black students at Missouri] were pushing for in 2014–15, were the same things those students were pushing for in the 70s. And I heard that used as a case study, but this lets us know how structurally embedded these things are. And I think they will continue to be so it’s important to be able to navigate this for, especially Black and brown bodies.
In this example, Sue uses her positionality as a highly educated Black female to educate her female student of color. Sue endured structures of oppression all throughout her educational career. When a female student of color approached her, Sue was able to rely on personal experience to relate to and motivate the student for change. Rather than working with other administrators, Sue used her position to empower the next generation of highly educated women of color. Furthermore, Sue raised a critical consciousness within her student to recognize current struggles through a historical lens. That is, in looking back into history, the student was encouraged to holistically understand the nature of her own current struggles. Mentoring for Sue becomes a means through which she can use her position of power and privilege to impede her predominantly White university.

Being new to her institution, Sue feels cautious with the changes she hopes to implement. She joins meetings but only answers when she’s called upon. Furthermore, she cannot help but notice that she’s one of few women in her administrative meetings. Through the lens of co-cultural theory, Sue practices nonassertive assimilation by developing positive face, censoring self, and averting controversy. Rather than trying to send soundwaves throughout her college, she keeps quiet in hopes of being accepted by her peers as a new member of the college. Furthermore, when called upon to speak at meetings, Sue engages in assertive assimilation through extensive preparation. That is, she makes sure to fully prepare for her meetings through researching relevant topics for her meetings. Feeling limited by the structures at play, Sue works within her means to make change. Rather than dismantling structures of oppression, Sue hopes to impede through mentoring.

As a racial minority administrator, Sue takes advantage of her contact with students. Whereas she feels limited to make change with her peers, making change with students comes more easily. When meeting with her student, Sue uses assertive impediment through affirming co-cultural concerns, educating others, and setting an example for others. That is, Sue acknowledges the pain of her student, taps into her own experiences through empathy, to then offer advice through educating her student. More specifically, she then engages in aggressive impediment in challenging oppressive structures as a means to educate and set an example for her student. Ultimately, Sue appeals to her student as a means to bring about awareness of structural limitations. It is through her relationship building that Sue begins to act within her privilege and marginalization.

Through placing herself in her student’s concerns, Sue is able to develop a trusting relationship that empowers her student. She does so through embracing both her power-privilege and marginalization. Through an intersectional understanding one can come to better understand Sue’s actions. She recognizes her limitations through the structural forces of whiteness and patriarchy. Sue also recognizes the potential she has in educating young people of color toward creating a different future. Although she’s not dismantling structures of oppression, Sue engages in assertive and aggressive impediment as a means to raise critical consciousness. A critical consciousness becomes a beginning step in helping the young student of color realize the hegemonic forces at play within higher education. Sue uses her dominant group membership as a highly educated administrator to leverage her co-cultural empathy at a micro-, interpersonal level.

Martin and Nakayama’s (1999) paradigmatic orientations distinguish critical humanism and critical structuralism. Whereas critical structuralists attempt to change structures
of oppression, critical humanists attempt to raise an awareness first. Within her specific situational context, Sue does not have the abilities or field of experience to dismantle oppressive structures of racism or sexism. Rather, she works within her means to raise a critical awareness for her students through affirming her student’s concerns, setting as an example for her students, and educating her students about oppressive structures within higher education. Furthermore, she aggressively impedes through confronting oppressive rhetoric as a means to demonstrate that these barriers will not go away if people fail to take action.

Sue’s example encompasses larger implications for administrators of color who lack tangible rules and resources to make structural change. Intragroup networking, alliance building, and dialogue allow for young administrators of color to begin raising an awareness about oppressive policies and practices on college campuses and society at large. Foucault (1977) notes that where there resides power, there also resides a means to resist. Even when young administrators of color feel powerless in changing oppressive structures, they also find a means to resist through the mentoring students. At the same time, it is necessary to keep in mind the need for continued structural change that allow administrators like Sue to use the rules and resources allocated to their position to make necessary changes. Ultimately, when navigating different institutional ideologies regarding culture (Collier, 2002), impeding through mentorship becomes one specific strategy that resists hegemonic forces at the micro-, interpersonal level.

When considering Jane and Sue’s exemplars, one can see how co-cultural theory and dominant group theory are used intersectionally to crystallize and add more nuance to the dual positionality of privilege and marginalization. Co-cultural theory is used to show how administrators of color are already placed in a position of marginalization within a predominantly White institution. Dominant group theory then demonstrates how these highly educated, middle-class, able-bodied individuals use their available means to cultivate an agency to impede and/or dismantle oppressive structures such as whiteness ideology. Among the dominant group strategies demonstrated by Jane and Sue are educating others, setting an example for others, and assuming responsibility for action. When taken together, these strategies crystallize into optimizing privilege through co-cultural praxis, and impeding through mentorship. Struggling through the tension of privilege and marginalization helps administrators of color tap into a felt sense that can only be experienced by administrators of color within a predominantly White institution.

**Discussion**

Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998b) examines the ways in which historically marginalized groups communicate within marginalizing structures. Dominant group theory (Razzante & Orbe, 2018) attempts to understand how people who maintain identities of power/privilege come to communicate within structures that allow for power/privilege and oppression to exist. Taken separately, the two theoretical frameworks offer a unique way of understanding communicative interactions from marginalization or privilege. When taken together, the two theories offer insight into how one communicative practice manifests from both marginalization and power-privilege simultaneously. Furthermore, both theories offer a means to categorically account for communicative behaviors of both power-privilege and oppression are present within one individual.
In employing co-cultural theory and dominant group theory together, one can understand how one’s own marginalization can inform their communicative behaviors from a position of privilege. More specifically, in this study, administrators of color chose to employ particular communicative strategies based on their abilities, field of experience, situational context, and perceived costs and rewards. I introduced Jane in the first exemplar. Jane is a former senior-level faculty member who now serves as her university’s vice chancellor of diversity and inclusion. Jane has direct contact with the provost and the provost’s cabinet. As such, she has many resources at her expense to dismantle and impede whiteness ideology within her institute. More specifically, she balances both her power-privilege and oppression through educating her peers on the importance of diversity and inclusion. Additionally, she practiced an assertive dismantling of whiteness ideology through creating a diversity council during her time as assistant dean. I then introduced the story of Sue. Sue lacked the rules and resources of Jane but she did work within her abilities, field of experience, and situational context to mentor young students of color. Rather than dismantling whiteness ideology, Sue assertively impeded patriarchy and whiteness within her university by empowering her student to recognize how racism is structural, systemic, and institutional.

Both Jane and Sue offer insights into the complexities of power-privilege within one individual. In this pilot study, the degree of one’s privilege is informed by their ability to use available rules and resources for institutional change. What Jane and Sue teach us is that various avenues for change exist for administrators of color within predominantly White institutions. Jane had more agency to create structural change, whereas Sue worked to create change through raising a critical consciousness in her students. Furthermore, both administrators used their education and personal experiences of marginalization to better inform how they then used their positions of power and privilege. Rather than simply gaining an “epistemic advantage” (Yancy, 2012), or recognizing one’s “overlapping approximations” (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003), Jane and Sue act. Rather than merely educating dominant group members as an “outsider within” (Orbe, 1998a), Jane and Sue use their “outsiderness” to then inform their own “insiderness.” That is, they use their own experiences of marginalization to better inform how they use their positions of privilege as highly educated administrators.

**Conclusion**

As an extension of co-cultural theory, dominant group theory seeks to understand how privileged individuals communicate within structures of oppression. Taken separately, co-cultural theory and dominant group theory highlight the patterns of communication from either privilege or marginalization. This study embraced an intersectional approach in coming to understand how one uses both dominant group practices and co-cultural practices within one communicative action. As such, I addressed McCall’s (2005) call to empirically measure how racial minority administrators communicate from their intersectional standpoints. Scholars in various disciplines have identified the advantage one gains from deepening their awareness as a result of being marginalized (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003; Orbe, 1998a; Yancy, 2012). This study attempts to extend their research through offering ways marginalized group members use their gained awareness for action from a position of privilege to create change within a predominantly White institution of higher education.
With such an exploratory study, there inherently remains limitations. First, the experiences of six racial minority administrators were used to identify key co-cultural and dominant group practices. While I reached saturation with six administrators, more interview participants might lend to new practices not discovered through these administrators. Additionally, more interview data may have uncovered additional co-cultural and dominant group memberships. In other words, the most salient identities that arose where race, gender, and education status and more interviews may have uncovered contexts where other social identities become most salient. To address this limitation, future research is needed to consider interviewing more participants as well as participants in varying contexts. That is, rather than focusing on racial minority administrators in higher education, future studies might consider understanding the dual experience of privilege – marginalization in health organizations, government programs, community groups, etc. Additionally, future studies can also explore how intersectional identities manifest through a dyadic interaction. That is, how does one’s self-concept of marginalization or power/privilege manifest in relation to their interlocutor’s positionalities through a dynamic, intersubjective process. Studying an intersubjective process may help to inform which identities become most salient in particular contexts, and why.

This current pilot study attempted to intersectionally crystallize co-cultural theory and dominant group theory through the use of empirical data. The main interest guiding this study was to understand how one can communicate from both a position of marginalization and privilege simultaneously. It is with this dual positionality that administrators of color may cultivate intersectional agencies when navigating predominantly White institutions. When doing this work, one must maintain a high level of rich rigor, sincerity, and ethical considerations. That is, this work runs the risk of reinforcing dominant ideologies of hard work, individualism, and the American Dream. As such, scholars must keep in mind how interpersonal interactions take place within larger structures of power and oppression. There remains ways to resist structures through communicative acts that dismantle, however, outright dismantling of structures of oppression comes with personal and professional risks. Future studies, like this one, can continue to find those minute ways of impeding oppressive structures like Sue until one gets to a position to actively dismantle like Jane.

Notes

1. Co-cultural theory and dominant group theory have much overlap, especially in regards to the influential factors of abilities, situational context, perceived costs and rewards, field of experience, and communication approach. Any extensive summary of co-cultural theory regarding these factors simultaneously introduces dominant group theory. As such theoretical crystallization becomes a useful tool to demonstrate this overlap as more nuanced and illuminating.
2. The authors note the possibility of dominant group members both consciously dismantling structures of oppression and unconsciously reinforcing structures of oppression at the same time. More specifically, they use Allen’s (2014, p. 9) term, “thinking under the influence.”
3. Five who identify as Black and one who identifies as bi-racial.

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