Through this theoretical essay, we conceptualize what constitutes dominant group theory. We review existing literature on two essential aspects of dominant group theory: (1) power, privilege, and communication, and (2) co-cultural theory. Drawing from data from two recent studies, we then use the conceptual framework of co-cultural theory to generate an extension that explores the communicative strategies of majority group members. More particularly, we describe five premises, six factors of dominant group communication, nine communication orientations, and twenty-one specific dominant group strategies, all of which represent the key building blocks of dominant group theorizing. Finally, we conclude by offering strengths, limitations, and heuristic implications of this new line of theorizing.

Keywords: Co-Cultural Theory, Privilege, Power, Dominant Groups.

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Introduction

In a review of critical, intercultural communication literature, contemporary scholars posit that “from a larger perspective, each intercultural communication project can be theoretically compared in terms of similar sociopolitical interests and histories and/or differences and distinctions constructed over time between groups” (Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009, p. 31). As noted by political pundits, the sociopolitical influences of Trump’s election caused an increased polarization in the United States (Rodrik, 2016). One recent example of this divisiveness manifested in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a white nationalist protest of the proposed removal of a Confederate monument was confronted by a counter-protest. While White people did fuel the fire of the nationalist protest, not every White person protested in this manner. Other communicative behaviors of Whites included
speaking out publicly (or failing to do so), demystifying unconscious hate (or explicitly reinforcing hate), and remaining silent. Also of note, other individuals of European descent rallied in Charlottesville to condemn the white nationalist messages, including one (Heather Heyer) who was killed when one protestor drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors (Heim, 2017). As such, in order to address Halualani et al.’s call, we need to create new theories that help make sense of ever-changing times. Since its inception in 1998, co-cultural theory has garnered much acclaim in the field of intercultural communication. Twenty years later, we revisit co-cultural theory as a means to inspire an important extension of existing intercultural theorizing: namely, dominant group identity.

Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) examines the ways in which co-cultural groups (groups which have been historically marginalized) interact with dominant groups (groups which have been historically privileged). More specifically, co-cultural theory provides insight into how different factors (e.g., preferred outcome and communication approach) intersect to influence the specific communication practices that traditionally-marginalized group members enact in their interactions with others. Over the past two decades, scholars in- and outside of the field of communication have utilized the theory to increase their understanding of the relationship between culture, power, and communication in a variety of contexts (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). The findings of multiple studies have contributed to a growing body of research that continues to refine and extend the theory (Castle Bell, Hopson, Weathers, & Ross, 2014).

Dominant group theory (DGT) complements, and subsequently extends, the work of co-cultural theory. Using the parallel structures, concepts, and language of co-cultural theory, dominant group theory is geared towards better understanding of the communicative behaviors of dominant group members when interacting with others. DGT, like co-cultural theory, has its roots in the phenomenological experience of human interaction (Orbe, 1998). In order to better understand intercultural communication, it is necessary to explore all cultural locations from which one can enter into an interaction. Drawing from two recent studies that explored communicative behaviors of dominant group members (e.g., White, Christian, heterosexual, and/or male), dominant group theory works to extend co-cultural theory to offer another lens through which to view intergroup communication (Orbe & Batten, 2017; Razzante, 2017).

Dominant group theory should not be regarded as a move to re-center traditional scholarship, which focuses on the communication of dominant group members. Instead, it is best understood as theorizing that is consistent with critical-cultural communication scholarship (Ono, 2009). First, by explicitly focusing on dominant group members, the theory highlights societal power dynamics and the ways in which they manifest in everyday interactions. Second, it resists the essentialism of dominant group members and advances understanding as to the ways in which their rhetorical strategies consciously and unconsciously work to reinforce, impede, and/or dismantle the effects of oppressive structures. Third, and finally, dominant group theory responds to calls to move beyond limited approaches of studying difference matters.
and toward multifocal-relational scholarship (Orbe & Allen, 2008). This includes, but is not limited to, research that values a recognition of intersectionality, ingroup and outgroup similarities and differences, and the need “to gain insight by exploring how the communicative experiences of individuals simultaneously inform, and are informed by, the lived experiences of other[s]” (Orbe & Allen, 2008, p. 211).

Through this theoretical essay, we conceptualize dominant group theory. We begin by reviewing existing literature on two essential components of DGT: (1) power, privilege, and communication, and (2) co-cultural theory. We then proceed to conceptualize dominant group theory through its derivation from co-cultural theory by drawing from findings of two recent studies (Orbe & Batten, 2017; Razzante, 2017). Mirroring the theoretical building blocks of co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998), we offer five premises, six factors, nine orientations, and twenty-one dominant group strategies. Ultimately, our conceptualization encourages an examination of the variety of ways in which dominant group members communicate when interacting with co-cultural groups.

**Foundations of existing research**

**Power, privilege, and communication**

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1988) distinguishes strategies from tactics. According to de Certeau’s conceptualization, tactics are used by subjugated groups, whereas strategies are used by groups who hold positions of power. In other words, co-cultural groups employ tactics as a result of their historically marginalized positions, whereas historically privileged groups employ strategies as a means to secure their privilege. More specifically, communication scholars have studied ways in which co-cultural members use communication as a tactic within an oppressive system (Camara & Orbe, 2010; Orbe & Roberts, 2012). Other scholars have studied ways in which dominant groups use privilege to create ingroup/outgroup dynamics (Giles, 2012; Giles, Reid, & Harwood, 2010), as well as to maintain their own power (Moon & Flores, 2000; Nakayama & Martin, 1999).

Similarly, Foucault (1977) articulates how power can be both negative and positive. For Foucault, power does not always result in oppression and dominance. Rather, one with a dominant group identity may enact productive power as a strategy when working from a position of power. Foucault further notes that even those who maintain historically marginalized identities still work within a system of power. More specifically, communication scholars have studied the ways dominant group members use power in productive ways (Allen, 2014; DeTurk, 2011). Other communication scholars call for even more research on the ways in which dominant groups can use power in productive ways (Deetz & Simpson, 2004; Jackson, 1999).

Finally, Althusser (2006) identifies the ways rhetorical acts interpellate a subject. In other words, rhetorical acts capture the attention of certain individuals rather than others. In terms of power, privilege, and oppression, some dominant
group members are interpellated by a social justice orientation. Communication scholars have studied the ways dominant group members and co-cultural group members have been interpellated as allies (DeTurk, 2011), alliance builders (Collier, 2002; DeTurk, 2001, 2006), and social justice advocates (Badger, 2015; Frey & Palmer, 2014). However, not all dominant group and co-cultural group members are open to the power of interpellation. As such, dominant group theory attempts to capture the interpellation of a variety of ideologies (e.g., power evasion, social justice).

Dominant group communication

Within a social constructionist ontology, power, privilege, and oppression are constituted through communication (Fassett & Warren, 2007). In other words, we come to understand power, privilege, and oppression through our everyday interactions. As previously mentioned, scholars within the field of communication studies and beyond have explored how co-cultural groups interact with dominant groups. However, with dominant group theory we seek to understand the ways in which dominant group members communicate with co-cultural group members within oppressive structures. Throughout this section, we wish to preview a few key threads of research that help weave together dominant group theory.

DGT seeks to understand the variety of communicative behaviors of dominant group members. As such, aggressive reinforcement of dominant group privilege manifests through both covert and overt racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. at the macro level. For example, both Feagin and O’Brien (2004) and Tracy and Rivera (2010) studied the ways elite administrators negotiate their personal biases while maintaining positions of institutional power at the macro level. Their personal biases may manifest through continuously constituting an organization of exclusion. In addition, intergroup communication stemmed from the need to understand the ways in which overt racism manifested in intergroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Giles, Choi, and Dixon (2010) provide one particular example of understanding the role of communication between police-civilian interactions that tend to resort to physical violence. While this line of research focused on explicit forms of cultural discrimination, we advocate for an understanding of the multitude of forms (covert and overt) and levels (micro, meso, and macro) in which discrimination can manifest.

In this vein, microaggression literature also is integral to understanding ways in which dominant group members consciously or unconsciously work to reinforce discriminatory practices toward co-cultural groups (Sue et al., 2007). Originally developed around race, microagressions can be applied to a broader context of power, privilege, and oppression. More specifically, there are three ways a dominant group member might work to reinforce discrimination: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Each type of microagression highlights the ways in which dominant groups work to reinforce discrimination at the micro-level. With DGT, we incorporate microagressions into the communicative practices of
dominant group members, but we also understand not all dominant group members consciously or unconsciously enact microaggressions at the interpersonal level.

Divergent to Sue et al.’s work with microaggressions, DeTurk’s work attempts to “articulate an ally identity and to begin mapping a theory of how members of dominant social groups use their social and cultural capital to confront discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice” (DeTurk, 2011, p. 585). In her study, DeTurk uses co-cultural theory to conceptualize practices of dominant group members who wish to become allies for co-cultural group members. In her conceptual framework, allies use their own co-cultural group memberships to illuminate how they can use their positionality to resist prejudice and discrimination. With dominant group theory, we build on DeTurk’s study and offer a larger, more comprehensive theoretical orientation through which to view her work. More specifically, we engage the ways majority group members use their dominant group identities to work as allies.

Thus far we’ve identified scholarly work that largely addresses conscious communicative behaviors of dominant group members when interacting with co-cultural group members. However, like Sue et al. (2007), we do not believe all dominant groups are aware of the ways in which they use their identities to reinforce discriminatory practices. For example, Simpson (2008) noted how the (im)possibility for intercultural dialogue occurs when dominant group members fail to recognize their location within a hierarchical society. Deetz and Simpson (2004) develop a politically responsive constructionist theory of communication that articulates how one cannot develop awareness until they experience radical otherness. Therefore, within dominant group theory, there rests a continuum between unconsciousness and consciousness among dominant group members.

Finally, Allen articulates the process of gaining conscientiousness as challenging one’s “thinking under the influence” (or TUI; 2014, p. 9). With TUI, Allen explores the phenomenon of how a dominant group member seamlessly weaves in and out of consciousness when interacting with co-cultural group members. In other words, dominant group members may work to resist prejudice and discrimination in one instance while communicating in ways (consciously or unconsciously) to reinforce prejudice and discrimination in another instance. As such, the communication of power and privilege is not easily essentialized into either conscious or unconscious communicative strategies. In other words, a majority group member may simultaneously enact a variety of dominant group strategies.

Co-cultural theory

Co-cultural theory focuses on the communicative practices of those individuals who are part of underrepresented groups in any particular society (Orbe, 1998). Drawing conceptually from muted group and standpoint theories, it provides insight into the communication practices of people marginalized in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and sexual orientation. Since its inception in the late 1990s, it has been embraced as a core theory for individuals interested in studying
the intersection of culture, power, and communication (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). As such, it has been utilized to study a wide variety of social and cultural groups in diverse situational and geographical contexts across the world.

As established by Orbe and colleagues (Orbe & Spellers, 2005), and extended by other communication scholars (Castle Bell et al., 2014), co-cultural theory provides a framework for one basic question: how do co-cultural group members use communication to negotiate their cultural identities with others (both like and unlike themselves) in a societal context where they are traditionally marginalized? The answer(s) to this question can be generated through an exploration of how six specific factors (i.e., field of experience, perceived costs and rewards, communication approach, preferred outcomes, abilities, and situational context) intersect to inform the strategic selection of various communication practices that are associated with one of nine particular co-cultural orientations (for an extensive summary, see Castle Bell et al., 2014). Scholars from a variety of disciplines have utilized co-cultural theory to explore how different social and cultural groups negotiate their marginalized status within a myriad of situational contexts. Most of the initial research on co-cultural groups was geared toward different groups within the United States. Examples of this significant body of scholarship include Asian Americans countering discriminatory messages (Jun, 2012), LGBT persons negotiating heterosexism in their everyday lives (Camara & Orbe, 2010), first-generation college students managing the new world of the academy (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004), and African Americans in the overwhelmingly White punk subculture (Ramirez-Sanchez, 2008). Studies over the years have moved beyond the United States and applied co-cultural theory to a diverse set of international communication contexts: Brazilian capoeira, Jewish-Israeli gay men, women’s theater in Israel, Japan-residing Koreans, Chinese Protestants in New Zealand and Canada, diversity management initiatives in South Africa, as well as indigenous entrepreneurs in Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii (see Orbe & Roberts, 2012).

All existing studies utilizing co-cultural theory are grounded in five premises, which were outlined in the initial conceptualization of the theory. In summary, these are: (1) societal hierarchy exists, (2) those of dominant group membership use power consciously or unconsciously to reinforce systems of power, (3) dominant structures impede on co-cultural group members lived experiences, (4) different co-cultural groups communicate within similar power-laden contexts, and (5) co-cultural communication involves strategic use of specific communicative practices (Orbe, 1998). These assumptions have proven invaluable in grounding and unifying co-cultural scholarship over the years. However, the origins of a dominant group theory are grounded in an explicit critique of the second premise: what about majority group members who, at times, may consciously utilize their societal privilege to dismantle oppressive structures (racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.)? Our conceptualization of DGT draws from existing research (summarized earlier) and two exploratory studies to respond to this critique.
Although this piece is primarily theoretical, readers can access two empirical studies that support our theorizing. One study analyzed online comments from articles published in major U.S. newspapers immediately after the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States (Orbe & Batten, 2017). More specifically, the study focused on comments from self-identified dominant group members (e.g., those who are white, heterosexual, male, and/or U.S. citizens) to articles that described the concerns of what the new administration’s policies might mean to particular co-cultural groups (e.g., immigrants, people of color, Muslims, and LGBT persons). The findings of this study are central to the development of dominant group strategies when communicating with co-cultural group members. The second study collected stories of critical incidents where self-identified majority group members interacted with perceived co-cultural group members (Razzante, 2017). Data was collected through two primary methods: student response and snowball interviews. Before sharing two to three stories, participants were encouraged to consider the ways in which they identify as dominant group members. Both studies provide empirical data to support the variance and organizing principles (factors) in dominant group strategies. What follows next is our conceptualization of DGT, a theoretical framework inclusive of key building blocks parallel to co-cultural theory.

**Conceptualizing DGT**

Our conceptualization of DGT is offered as an important extension of co-cultural theory. As such, we offer our explication of dominant group communication as another side of the same coin that explores intergroup relations. Within this section, we utilize parallel concepts, language, and organizing structures of co-cultural theory to introduce DGT to the intercultural communication field.

**Five premises**

The fundamental ideas of DGT are grounded in five epistemological assumptions that mirror those associated with co-cultural theory. An explicit articulation of these premises is important, as they directly inform the conceptualization of the theory. Drawing from existing research summarized in our literature review, the five premises are:

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 those from the middle and upper classes;
2. Others—trans persons, women, people of color, Muslims, LGBT persons, people with disabilities, non-native English speakers, and those from a lower class—are marginalized as co-cultural group members;
3. Although representing a widely diverse array of lived experiences, dominant group members will share a similar societal position that provides them with societal advantages compared to their co-cultural group counterparts;
4. While dominant group members share an advantaged position in society, their lived experiences—like their co-cultural counterparts—reflect a diversity of perspectives that resist essentialist understanding; and
5. On the basis of varying levels of privilege, dominant group members occupy positions of power that are used in their negotiation of traditionally dominant communication systems.

These five premises are an important building block in establishing the foundation of DGT. As such, they inform the other theoretical concepts—factors, communication orientations, and dominant strategies—that reflect the core of DGT.

Factors influencing dominant group communication
Consistent with co-cultural theory, DGT features six factors that influence the communication of majority group members: communication approach, interactional outcome, field of experience, abilities, perceived costs and rewards, and situational context. This section describes each of these factors individually and discusses how they operate synergistically.

Communication approach
Communication approach, as a central factor of dominant group communication, focuses on messages that reflect different points along a nonassertive-aggressive continuum (Orbe, 1998). A nonassertive communication approach prioritizes others’ needs and expectations compared to one’s own. Typically, a nonassertive approach includes actions where dominant group members seemingly are inhibited, non-confrontational, and/or innocent. An aggressive communication approach lies on the other side of the continuum. Aggressive communication reflects times when individuals put their own needs and expectations above those of others. Aggressive communication includes actions that are hurtfully expressive, self-promoting, and controlling: those that fulfill individual needs with little concern for others. Assertiveness lies within the center of the communication approach continuum. By definition, an assertive communication approach is one that reflects a balance between attending to the needs and expectations of self and others. In other words, assertive forms of communication allow dominant group members to stand up for their own rights without violating the rights of others.

Interactional outcome
A second factor influencing dominant group communication is interactional outcome. By definition, interactional outcome refers to the effect that majority group messages have for individual or collective interactions with others. Based on existing research (Orbe & Batten, 2017; Razzante, 2017), we conceptualize three different outcomes that fall within a continuum. First, messages can reinforce existing
oppressive structures (e.g., institutionalized racism, sexism, etc.). Various examples of explicit discriminatory messages and microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) reflect dominant group communication that works to support the status quo. In contrast, a second interactional outcome is to dismantle existing oppressive structures. Majority group members who utilize their privileged social standing to fight against prejudice and discrimination of co-cultural group members—to work as allies (DeTurk, 2011)—would desire to have this particular effect. Third, and finally, are dominant group messages that impede existing oppressive structures. This particular interactional outcome includes interpersonal communicative behaviors that counter everyday prejudice and discrimination of co-cultural group members. An example of this would be the use of microaffirmations (Powell, Demetriou, & Fisher, 2013). While affirming, such micro-level messages fail to confront dominant (macro-level) societal structures that inform the prejudice and discrimination.

Field of experience
Field of experience is best defined as the sum of an individual’s life events. As such, it is an all-inclusive concept and can include memorable messages from family members and friends, socialization through educational and spiritual organizations, past experiences with co-cultural and dominant group members, and observations of others. The influence of one’s past experiences is an important consideration in the constant process of considering, selecting, enacting, and then evaluating how one communicates. Similar to co-cultural theory, crucial to DGT is the acknowledgement that each majority group member simultaneously will have a similar and different field of experience; consequently, they may consider and exhibit different communicative behaviors (Orbe, 1998). Over time, each individual engages in a dynamic process of constructing, and subsequently deconstructing, the ideals of what constitutes appropriate and effective communication with others. As such, each new interaction is added to one’s field of experience and continues to shape subsequent interactions with co-cultural and dominant group members.

Abilities
A fourth factor that affects dominant group communication is an individual’s capability to enact different communication behaviors. This particular factor draws attention to the reality that not all majority group members have the same skill levels or opportunities to enact each of the different strategies (discussed in next section). At first glance, most majority group strategies in Table 1 appear to be possible for all dominant group members. However, the ability to draw from the array of potential communicative messages may vary greatly depending on the individual’s characteristics, socialization, and situational circumstances. For instance, a dominant group member whose field of experience is void of any meaningful interactions with co-cultural group members may be oblivious to their own societal privilege. This set of lived experiences makes it difficult to challenge societal systems of which they have little understanding. In addition, others will struggle with using different communication approaches (e.g., being aggressive). One’s ability to
Table 1 Sample Dominant Group Strategies by Communication Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonassertive Reinforcement</th>
<th>Assertive Reinforcement</th>
<th>Aggressive Reinforcement</th>
<th>Nonassertive Impediment</th>
<th>Assertive Impediment</th>
<th>Aggressive Impediment</th>
<th>Nonassertive Dismantling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring one’s privilege</td>
<td>Redirection</td>
<td>Endorsing the status quo</td>
<td>Recognizing one’s privilege</td>
<td>Affirming co-cultural concerns</td>
<td>Confronting oppressive rhetoric</td>
<td>Sacrificing self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of awareness of, or outright refusal to acknowledge, the societal privilege that comes with dominant group status</td>
<td>Highlighting aspects of one’s identity that reflect disadvantage, as a means to de-emphasize one’s own privilege</td>
<td>Communicative messages that rationalize, support, and/or endorse existing ideologies, values, and oppressive institutions</td>
<td>Verbal acknowledgements of one’s own societal privilege that increase awareness for others</td>
<td>Acknowledging the legitimacy and magnitude of co-cultural issues and the realities of societal oppression</td>
<td>Explicitly naming dominant group messages as ignorant, hurtful, and/or discriminatory to co-cultural group members</td>
<td>Efforts to challenge institutionalized oppression that come with significant personal cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remaining neutrally silent</td>
<td>Resisting group essentialism</td>
<td>Dismissing co-cultural concerns</td>
<td>Engaging in self-reflexivity</td>
<td>Educating others</td>
<td>Setting an example for others</td>
<td>Microaffirmations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of oppression but not speaking out to avoid conflict</td>
<td>Objections to criticisms by others that generalize majority group members into one large homogenous group</td>
<td>Communicative messages that regard co-cultural concerns as trivial, illegitimate, or outright false</td>
<td>Ability and willingness to reflect on the consequences of individual thoughts and actions as dominant group members</td>
<td>Drawing from one’s own growth—cognitively, emotionally, spiritually, etc.—to facilitate the growth in others</td>
<td>Communicating in ways that can serve as a model for other dominant group members</td>
<td>Everyday exchanges that feature affirming messages to others because of their disadvantaged co-cultural identities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
communicate in diverse ways can be enhanced through greater mindfulness, rehearsal, motivation, and experience. Yet, the competency levels of dominant group members—like their co-cultural group counterparts—varies significantly.

**Perceived costs and rewards**
A key principle of co-cultural theory is that all communicative behaviors have potential (un)anticipated and (un)desirable consequences (Orbe, 1998). This idea is reinforced in DGT through the fifth factor of dominant group communication: perceived costs and rewards. Each message, when enacted by a particular person in a specific situation, will have an effect on self, others, and potentially society. This is reflected in the dominant group factor of interactional outcome. In addition, the costs (e.g., social isolation, guilt, public condemnation) and rewards (e.g., continued social privilege, self-fulfillment) for enacting different dominant strategies may not be perceived the same by all majority group members. Instead, particular perceptions of different costs and rewards depend largely on the field of experience and interactional outcome of particular individuals. For example, the same outcome (e.g., social acceptance by other dominant group members) may be evaluated as positive or negative. Unlike co-cultural communication, dominant group communicative behaviors may not always be enacted with an explicit understanding of their consequences. However, an explicit goal of DGT is to raise awareness of how everyday interactions can work to reinforce, resist, and/or dismantle societal systems of oppression.

**Situational context**
The final factor that plays a salient role in dominant group communication is situational context. Situational context is broadly conceptualized and involves a

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**Table 1 Continued**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertive Dismantling</th>
<th>Perceived costs and rewards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenging oppressive ideologies</td>
<td>Questioning the legitimacy of policies that unfairly discriminate against co-cultural group members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying as co-cultural ally</td>
<td>Communicating in ways that challenge policies that negatively affect co-cultural group members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assuming responsibility for action</td>
<td>Assuming an action-oriented approach that utilizes one’s own privilege to work against systems that foster that very privilege</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aggressive Dismantling</th>
<th>Perceived costs and rewards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forcing</td>
<td>Pushing your agenda to advocate for societal change with little to no regard for dominant group members’ concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking advantage of one’s privilege</td>
<td>Using one’s societal standing to challenge oppressive structures at the expense of co-cultural groups’ agency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
number of issues, including physical environment (e.g., the close quarters of a crowded public place, social contexts of a cocktail party, or the perceived “safe” space of online anonymity), geographical location (e.g., rural southern community or busy city in the upper northeast), and timing (i.e., time of day, week or year). In addition, situational context is impacted by the private or public nature of the interaction, and the presence or absence of other dominant group members. According to existing co-cultural research, individuals do not typically select one practice, or cluster of practices, to use for all interactions (Orbe, 1998). Instead, depending on a number of different factors, different messages are used in different situations. The same dynamic occurs with dominant group communication. In short, dominant group members may adopt different strategies depending on the particular set of circumstances inherent to the situational context (e.g., a majority group member may make different language choices in the presence of co-cultural group members).

**Dominant group communication orientations and strategies**

Another core concept of DGT are communication orientations that feature various dominant group communicative strategies. As illustrated in Figure 1, two factors—communication approach and interactional outcome—intersect to formulate nine different dominant group communication orientations. This particular concept refers to specific communicative stances that dominant group members assume during their everyday interactions. Each communication orientation is primarily defined through the spectrums of specific interactional outcomes (reinforce, impedance, 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Approach</th>
<th>Interactional Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reinforce Dominant Oppressive Structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonassertive</td>
<td>Nonassertive Reinforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Assertive Reinforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Aggressive Reinforcement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1** Dominant group communication orientations.
impede, or dismantle oppressive structures) and communication approaches (non-assertive, assertive, or aggressive). Particular dominant group messages, as explicated throughout this section, are associated with each orientation. Typically, majority group members will adopt different communication orientations based on the four remaining factors (field of experience, abilities, perceived costs and rewards, and situational context). Next, we describe how each orientation is inclusive of related dominant group strategies, as gleaned from recent (Orbe & Batten, 2017; Razzante, 2017) and other existing (e.g., Sue et al., 2007) research studies.3

Nonassertive reinforcement
Nine dominant group communication orientations exist, the first of which is non-assertive reinforcement. This communicative stance represents an approach that is more covertly complicit in its support of dominant oppressive structures. Nonassertive reinforcement is an orientation that is typically reflective of majority group members who passively interact with others, yet continue to benefit from unearned entitlements that come with that social/cultural location. As such, ignoring one’s societal privilege is a communicative behavior associated with this particular communication orientation (see Table 1). This orientation is a likely choice for individuals who remain largely unconscious of power differences. While they question a co-cultural group member’s need to critique societal oppression, they typically remain neutrally silent about such issues. For example, a European American man may refrain from criticizing #BlackLivesMatter protests in public but privately argue that #AllLivesMatter sends the same message without being racially biased.

Assertive reinforcement
Dominant group members whose communication behaviors reinforce oppressive societal structures also may reflect an assertive communication approach. Similar to attempts that passively maintain the status quo, an assertive reinforcement stance works to balance the needs and expectations of both dominant group and co-cultural group members. However, given the inherent advantages of their majority group status, individual communication ultimately reinforces oppressive societal structures. Through this dominant group communication orientation, some dominant group members will resist attempts by others to group them with all other dominant group members (resisting majority group essentialism). Others will deflect accusations of privilege by highlighting specific aspects of their own identity that reflect traditionally marginalized identities (redirection). For instance, a white female bisexual woman might downplay any privilege that comes with her race, and instead focus on the disadvantages that come with her gender and sexual orientation identities.

Aggressive reinforcement
Compared to other options, an aggressive reinforcement orientation to dominant group communication takes on a determined, sometimes belligerent approach to
maintain the status quo (or even expand the reach of existing oppressions). This communicative stance prioritizes a dominant group member’s desire to reinforce existing intergroup dynamics to the point where co-cultural rights, needs, and desires are given little to no consideration. Individuals operating within this communication orientation enact such dominant practices as endorsing the status quo, dismissing co-cultural concerns, and blaming the victim (see Table 1). The common denominator of these three strategies is that dominant group members give little consideration to the rights of co-cultural group members; instead, they focus their messages on maintaining the status quo. Microaggressions—specifically microassaults and microinsults (Sue et al., 2007)—would also reflect an aggressive reinforcement communication orientation.

Nonassertive impediment
The intentional outcome of impeding oppressive structures stresses the importance of interpersonal messages that interrupt manifestations of oppression in everyday interactions. Some dominant group members adopt a nonassertive communication approach to their impediment efforts. As such, individuals who operate within a nonassertive impediment orientation to dominant group communication counter existing prejudice and discrimination against co-cultural group members, albeit in covert, indirect ways. The primary dominant strategies associated with this particular communication orientation are engaging in self-reflexivity and recognizing one’s own privilege. Messages associated with a nonassertive impediment stance prioritize co-cultural concerns while the needs of dominant group members’ needs take a back seat. As such, strategies reflect subtle and delicate ways to counter oppressive messages that reflect the status quo. For some majority group members, a nonassertive impediment orientation may be their norm; for others, it may reflect a first step in the journey of adopting other dominant group orientations.

Assertive impediment
A nonassertive impediment orientation strategically privileges the needs of co-cultural group members as a means to negotiate oppressive structures. In comparison, an assertive impediment communication orientation seeks a balance between attending to self and others’ concerns while interrupting manifestations of oppression in everyday interactions. Several different dominant group practices appear to promote impeding oppressive structures through an assertive communication approach: affirming co-cultural concerns, educating others, and setting an example for others (see Table 1). As the most centrally-located communication orientation, this dominant group stance may appear as an ideal approach. However, consistent with co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998), such an assumption is problematic. The ideal communication orientation can only be determined through the perspective of individual dominant group members, which is contextualized by an intersection of each of the six factors. In other words, the best communication orientation is determined by the particular majority group member. No orientation is ideal for all individuals in all situational contexts.
Aggressive impediment

Within certain dominant structures, nonassertive and/or assertive attempts to disrupt oppressive encounters are not enough. Consequently, an aggressive impediment communication orientation may be necessary. For majority group members adopting this particular stance, the goal is to alter negative interactions for co-cultural group members. In order to achieve this interactional outcome, their communication must be direct, substantial, and sometimes might be seen as self-promoting or pushy by others. Individuals who adopt an aggressive impediment orientation, however, are not overly concerned with dominant group perceptions; instead, their priority is their effort to promote change in the everyday lives of co-cultural group members. Two particular dominant practices are associated with this orientation: confronting oppressive rhetoric and microaffirmations. While these practices are effective in changing the dynamics of interpersonal communication, they do little to challenge societal oppressive structures. This is not the case for the final three dominant communication orientations described next.

Nonassertive dismantling

At first glance, nonassertive attempts to dismantle dominant oppressive structures seems unlikely, if not impossible. As Frederick Douglass (1857) once asserted: “Power concedes nothing with a demand. It never did and it never will.” Given this commonly accepted principle, it stands to reason that only assertive and aggressive forms of communication can lead to societal change. However, we identified one specific dominant group strategy that fits within a nonassertive dismantling approach: sacrificing self. This particular strategy prioritizes the needs of co-cultural group members over one’s own needs: the textbook definition of nonassertiveness. Dominant group members who sacrifice themselves open themselves up to all kinds of costs (e.g., arrest, financial loss, social isolation, loss of employment) in order to demand change of oppressive societal structures.

Assertive dismantling

An assertive dismantling orientation to dominant group communication maintains a balance of self and other’s needs in its attempt to invoke societal change. As such, people who adopt this communication orientation are more confident and self-assured in their identities, something that is reflected in the messages that they send to other dominant group members. In some instances, majority group members draw from parts of their identities that are marginalized as inspiration to fight for change (e.g., an Asian American Christian woman who fights against anti-Muslim policies). Challenging oppressive ideologies, identifying as a co-cultural ally, and assuming responsibility for action are dominant strategies of assertive dismantling. While the latter two strategies may appear fitting for assertive impediment, the distinguishing characteristic is that they focus on institutional change (rather than impacting interpersonal interactions).
Aggressive dismantling

Aggressive dismantling is the ninth, and final, dominant group communication orientation. Like the label reflects, this communicative stance is adopted by majority group members who are determined to fight institutional oppressive structures with little to no concern for others. Their objectives may be achieved, in the words of Malcolm X (1964), “by any means necessary.” Dominant group members utilize this communicative stance in two primary ways. One use occurs when the dominant group member’s need to facilitate change outweighs the considerations of other dominant group members who want to maintain the status quo. A second use occurs when the dominant group member aims to facilitate change without considering the desires of co-cultural group members. In other words, ignoring the concerns of co-cultural groups may be aggressive dismantling that promotes aimless dismantling for dismantling’s sake. As such, the strategy of using one’s privilege occurs when majority group members recognize the unearned entitlements that come with their identities and utilize them to change policies that benefit both them and co-cultural groups. In this regard, dominant group members are prioritizing their desire for equality over individual self-interests. Another dominant strategy, forcing, may be associated with dismantling oppressive structures without considering the concerns of co-cultural groups.

DGT: strengths, limitations and directions for future research

Dominant group theory extends co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) to understand the variety of ways dominant group members interact with co-cultural group members within oppressive structures. More specifically, DGT mirrors the six strategies of co-cultural theory to understand different dominant group strategies and their effects. Through our theorizing, we posit a continuum of three communication approaches (nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive) and a continuum of three interactional outcomes (reinforcement, impediment, and dismantling of oppressive structures). Along with four other factors of dominant group communication (field of experience, abilities, perceived costs and rewards, and situational context), we posit nine communication orientations (see Figure 1). Ultimately, DGT extends co-cultural theory to better understand the other side of the coin of intergroup communication.

In addition to extending co-cultural theory, we incorporated other critical-cultural theories. We first explored the work of critical theorists to understand the variety of ways power influences interactions (Althusser, 2006; de Certeau, 1988; Foucault, 1977). We then examined how scholars use critical theory to make sense of interactional outcomes of power-laden interactions (Allen, 2014; DeTurk, 2001, 2006, 2011; Sue et al., 2007). More specifically, we incorporated DeTurk’s conceptualization of an ally to understand the ways in which one can use their positionality in support of co-cultural group members. We also incorporated Sue et al.’s conceptualization of microaggressions to understand the variety of ways dominant
group members interact with co-cultural group members in conscious and unconscious ways. Finally, we embraced Allen’s understanding of “thinking under the influence” as a means to demonstrate how dominant group members can use their privilege to consciously dismantle oppressive structures and unconsciously reinforce oppressive structures at the same time.

The significance of DGT is twofold. First, DGT challenges the essentialist assumption that all dominant group members work to reinforce their privileged societal position. Through our theorizing, we offer a more complex understanding to the variety of ways dominant group members might communicate when interacting with co-cultural group members within oppressive structures. As such, DGT offers a heuristic value for scholars, students, and practitioners when understanding everyday intercultural interactions (Shoemaker, Tankard, & Lasorsa, 2004). A second point of significance of DGT is its ability to enter conversation with co-cultural theory in order to provide a more holistic understanding of critical intercultural communication. In other words, co-cultural theory and DGT further illuminate how one may maintain positions as both a co-cultural group member and a dominant group member. As such, a dominant group member can better understand how to effectively resist structures of oppression when gleaning from their own co-cultural group memberships. This “epistemic advantage” (Yancy, 2012, p. 8) of learning from one’s own positions of marginalization has been labeled as “overlapping approximations” (Feagin & Vera, 1995; O’Brien, 2001). Such epistemic advantage through overlapping approximations reinforces the need for more co-cultural group members in decision-making positions when dealing with diversity and inclusion initiatives. In sum, through the combined lenses of co-cultural theory and dominant group theory, one can better understand the complex role of communication between culture, power, and privilege.

In addition to its strengths, DGT inherently has some limitations, especially in its infancy. Both approaches (co-cultural theory and dominant group theory), if used separately, continue to promote a uni-dimensional approach to interactions (Orbe & Allen, 2008). That is, both theories highlight the salience of one or more aspects of identity that situate someone as a co-cultural or dominant group member in a particular interaction. A second limitation of dominant group theory mirrors that of co-cultural theory (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). Like co-cultural theory, DGT requires interlocutors to discern which identity has the greatest saliency in any given situation. For example, a person who is upper class and transgender may have difficulty in identifying their dominant group membership of class when interacting with a person who is cisgender and working class. Finally, DGT is limited when two interlocutors both identify as co-cultural group members. That is, both interlocutors may consider their co-cultural group memberships to be most salient when interacting with one another. Such a scenario requires a thorough acknowledgement of the role that perceptions and meta-perceptions play within intercultural communication contexts.
These limitations notwithstanding, our current conceptualization of DGT serves as a starting point for further dominant group theorizing. That is, dominant group theorizing embraces the potential for change over time. For example, Orbe and Roberts (2012) encourage theorizing through diverse methodologies, theorizing new dominant group practices, theorizing complicated dominant group positionality, and theorizing dominant group communication in international settings. Future dominant group studies may even mirror those of co-cultural theory. For example, one might conduct a qualitative content analysis of dominant practices when confronting discriminatory acts (e.g., Camara & Orbe, 2010). Other scholars may create measurement scales that provide opportunities for correlations among variables (e.g., Lapinski & Orbe, 2007). Ultimately, dominant group theorizing allows for the extension of identifying new dominant group communication strategies that reside within each of the nine communication orientations. For example, what are messages dominant group members might use when consciously or unconsciously reinforcing oppressive systems? Alternatively, what are the means through which a dominant group member becomes an ally (DeTurk, 2011)? Dominant group theorizing through future research is crucial in identifying a variety of interactional outcomes of dominant group members’ strategies. In other words, future research can help make visible the complexity and nuance of dominant group strategies.

Conclusion

As an extension of muted group theory (Kramarae, 1981), co-cultural theory was launched by a simple observation extending a basic idea of the theory: women are a muted group, but all women do not remain muted (Orbe, 1998). Our conceptualization of DGT followed a simple path of observation in relation to a core premise of co-cultural theory: all cisgender, heterosexual, European American men are dominant group members, but all of these men do not communicate in ways to oppress others. What followed from these critical reflections are a body of communication-based theorizing efforts that explore one primary question: how do co-cultural and dominant group members negotiate their cultural locations with others? While the question is fairly straightforward, co-cultural and dominant group theories synergistically provide an important framework demonstrating the complexities of interactions informed by various dynamics of culture and power.

Dominant group theory addresses Halualani et al.’s (2009) call for research that addresses changing sociopolitical times. As such, one could use DGT as a way to make sense of the variety of ways White people responded to the concerns of co-cultural group members during the white nationalist protest in Charlottesville, Virginia. Similarly, scholars can continue to use DGT as a theoretical framework to understand the ways dominant group members use their positions of power and privilege to either reinforce, impede, or dismantle structures that are classist, sexist, heterosexist, etc. Future studies can add empirical research that demonstrates the
variety of ways dominant group members (across a variety of identity groups) engage in the dialectic of reinforcing or dismantling oppressive structures. Furthermore, DGT can serve as both a descriptive theory and a normative theory (Grossberg, 2010). DGT is descriptive because it locates and makes visible the ways dominant group members may be using their power and privilege in the reinforcement of oppressive structures. Yet, DGT is also normative in that it makes suggestions for those dominant group members who wish to use their power and privilege to promote greater socio-cultural equality.

Through our theorizing efforts, we demonstrate dominant group theory’s relevancy as both a theory of its own and as an extension of co-cultural theory. On its own, DGT allows readers to identify the ways in which they identify as a dominant group member in different situations. Situating oneself as a dominant group member allows the opportunity to make visible the different strategies one may use when confronting oppressive structures (as well as potential outcomes of such strategies). In relation to co-cultural theory, readers can begin to situate themselves as both co-cultural members and dominant group members. Taken together, co-cultural theory and dominant group theory offer a more holistic understanding to one’s social and cultural group memberships. Ultimately, a more complex understanding of one’s group memberships allows for a more complicated view of how communication, power, and culture permeate all intergroup interactions.

Notes

1 We say “at times” to signal that dominant group members may practice both resistance and reinforcement and they may do it both consciously and unconsciously. This aligns with Allen’s understanding of “thinking under the influence” (2014, p. 9). In other words, dominant group members may consciously resist oppressive structures in one instance while unconsciously reinforcing oppressive structures in another.

2 Co-cultural theorizing (Orbe, 1998) uses preferred outcome as the second factor. We adopt a variation for dominant group theorizing to acknowledge how intention may differ from effect. In other words, majority group members may not consciously have a preferred outcome in their communication; however, the outcome or effect remains most salient.

3 Dominant group strategies, along with their corresponding definitions, are largely gleaned from those identified by Orbe and Batten (2017) and Razzante (2017). A few other strategies have been articulated by other scholars (e.g., DeTurk, 2011; Sue et al., 2007). In-depth examples of these strategies can be found in these publications.

References


Douglass, F. (1857). If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Retrieved from [http://www.blackpast.org/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress](http://www.blackpast.org/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress)


