Chapter 6

COMMUNICATING THROUGH PREJUDICE: AN INNOVATIVE CRITICAL-CULTURAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF APPRECIATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

This co-authored book chapter utilizes autoethnographic data as a means to explore what co-cultural practices individuals use in response to prejudicial communication in a variety of contexts. Using a co-cultural theoretical framework, our thematic analysis of judgments based on race, gender, age, and/or sexuality reveals how particular co-cultural communication orientations — and the specific practices associated them — can work to transform interactions containing prejudice toward relationships that are defined by mutual understanding, respect, and self-efficacy. The chapter concludes with a discussion of theoretical, conceptual, and practical implications.
Fueled by human attitudes and supported by institutional systems (van Dijk, 1989), different forms of oppression have long been a constant existence in the U.S. (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). Yet, over time, these harmful forms have become increasingly subtle, ambiguous, nebulous — and consequently difficult to manage (Dovidio et al., 2002; Sue et al., 2007). Considerable research exists that investigates the forms and consequences of, as well as individual responses to, discriminatory communication (for summary, see Camara & Orbe, 2010). This current study takes a novel approach to studying the topic, in that it explores how prejudice and difference can be an integral part of appreciative relationships (Hecht, 1998). Specifically, we draw from self-generated autoethnographic narratives that allow for in-depth analysis of how communicative practices can work through the prejudice toward an appreciative relationship. Within this context, we focus on instances of communicating prejudice — "inaccurate and/or negative beliefs that espouse or support the superiority of one cultural group" (Orbe & Harris, 2015, p. 10).

Our research is motivated by Hecht’s (1998) call for research that values the "appreciation of difference" in relationships, including those which contain moments of, or sustained, prejudice. In particular, the study summarized in this chapter reflects three aspects of Hecht’s implications for future research. First, by focusing on mutually satisfying relationships we assume a "positive or proactive approach toward understanding appreciation and how to create it" (p. 337). Second, our analysis does not "isolate racism from other ‘isms’" (p. 337); instead we examine communication contexts which are informed by prejudices based on age, gender, race, sexuality, and/or socioeconomic status. Third, and finally, we respond to the challenge of incorporating appreciation "in our theories and our methods" (p. 338) by utilizing co-cultural theory as a means to explore relationships where "difference was appreciated and valued" (p. 338).

**EXTANT LITERATURE REVIEW: COMMUNICATIVE RESPONSES TO PREJUDICE**

Much work on prejudice has been generated since Hecht’s (1998) ground-breaking edited volume, *Communicating prejudice*. Scholarship, in and outside of the communication discipline, has examined the manifestation of various forms of cultural prejudice and discrimination across contexts. For instance, we have gained significant understanding of how prejudgments based
on race (Sue et al., 2007; Utsey et al., 2000), age (e.g., Hajek & Giles, 2002),
gender (Swim & Heyers, 1999; Woodricka & LaFrance, 2001), sexuality (e.g.,
Muraco, 2005), and disability (e.g., Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000; Ryan,
Anas, & Gruneir, 2006) are reflected in everyday interactions. According to
Camara and Orbe (2010), the vast majority of this research has explored the
communication of “isms” (Hecht, 1998) while very few examine the complex
ways that people respond to such discourse.

When faced with acts of prejudice, individuals respond in different ways
based on a myriad of factors (Swim, Cohen & Heyers, 1998). According to
Major, Quinton, and McCoy (2002), some of these strategic responses involve
non-confrontational coping strategies that reflect cognitive avoidance,
blunting, denial or mental disengagement (Ruggiero, Taylor & Lydon, 1997).
This appears to be the case especially when existing power dynamics make
more assertive and direct alternatives dangerous to one’s livelihood (Stanback
& Pearce, 1981). A smaller, but growing number of studies report that
individuals also employ direct confrontation, reporting to authorities, and
mediation (Camara & Orbe, 2010; Stokoe & Edwards, 2007). But the question
remains unexplored: How do these responses impact the nature of
relationships? Decisions on how to respond to prejudice depend largely on a
number of factors including situational context and the existence of social
support (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Co-cultural theory (Camara, Katznelson,
Hildebrandt-Sterling, & Parker, 2012) is a communication framework that
provides significant insight into the ways that individuals communicate when
situated in traditionally marginalized social locations. Consequently, we
provide an in-depth description of the theory next.

Co-Cultural Theory

According to Orbe and colleagues (Orbe, 1998; Orbe & Spellers, 2005;
Orbe & Roberts, 2012), co-cultural theory promotes increased understanding
of how persons who are traditionally marginalized in dominant societal
structures communicate in their everyday lives. Grounded in the power of
exploring lived experiences through phenomenology (Husserl, 1964; Lanigan,
1988), co-cultural theory emerged from the experiences of a variety of co-
cultural groups, including members of racial and ethnic groups, women,
persons with disabilities, gays/lesbians/bisexuals, and those with a lower
socioeconomic status (Orbe, 1998). Some scholars (e.g., Todd-ManCilllas,
2000) have argued that given power dynamics exist on multiple fronts,
consequently, co-cultural theory can apply both to traditionally marginalized
group members as well as individuals whose life experiences reflect situational
subordinate status (e.g., lower level employees).

The initial work in co-cultural theory centered on the emergence of a co-
cultural communication model; the focus was on specific practices that
individuals from traditionally marginalized groups enact during their
interactions with dominant group members (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). Once
these communicative practices were established (Orbe, 1996), the focal point
shifted to understanding how people came to select certain practices over
others (Orbe & Spellers, 2005) — with a particular focus on six interrelated
factors that influenced co-cultural strategic choices. Each of these factors, in
italics below, is central to the core idea of co-cultural theory.

Situated within a particular field of experience that governs their
perceptions of the costs and rewards associated with, as well as their
capability to engage in, various communicative practices, co-cultural
group members will adopt certain communication orientations—based on
their preferred outcomes and communication approaches—to fit the
circumstances of a specific situation. (Orbe, 1998, p. 129)

Of particular interest to this study is communication orientation, a concept
that refers to a specific stance that is assumed as co-cultural group members
interact with others. Communication orientation, as described by Orbe (1998),
is primarily influenced by two components: communication approach and
preferred outcome. Conceptualized as the communication stance with which
one interacts with dominant group members, communication approach can be
nonassertive (prioritizing other’s needs and desires above one’s own),
assertive (balancing attention to both self and other’s needs), or aggressive
(putting one’s needs and desires above others). Preferred outcome centers on
the co-cultural group members’ consideration of the eventual impact of their
communication with others. Three options exist: assimilation (working to
blend in with dominant culture), accommodation (working within dominant
structures toward change), and separation (creating and maintaining distance
between self and dominant group members). Focusing on the nine co-cultural
communication orientations, and the various co-cultural practices associated
with each (summarized in Table 1), this study aims to answer the following
research question:
**RQ1:** Utilizing the concepts of co-cultural theory, how do relational partners use strategies to overcome prejudice and work toward mutual understanding, respect, and self-efficacy?

### Table 1. Summary of Co-Cultural Practices Associated with each Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of Practices</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizing commonalities</td>
<td>Focusing on human similarities while downplaying or ignoring co-cultural differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing positive face</td>
<td>Assuming a gracious communicator stance where one is more considerate, polite, and</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>attentive to dominant group members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Censoring self</td>
<td>Remaining silent when comments from dominant group members are inappropriate,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>indirectly insulting, or highly offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Averting controversy</td>
<td>Averting communication away from controversial or potentially dangerous subject areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive preparation</td>
<td>Engaging in an extensive amount of detailed (mental/concrete) groundwork prior to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interactions with dominant group members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcompensating</td>
<td>Conscious attempts—consistently enacted in response to a pervasive fear of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>discrimination—to become a &quot;superstar&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulating stereotypes</td>
<td>Conforming to commonly accepted beliefs about group members as a strategic means to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>exploit them for personal gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bargaining</td>
<td>Striking a covert or overt arrangement with dominant group members where both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>parties agree to ignore co-cultural differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissociating</td>
<td>Making a concerted effort to obscure any connection with behaviors typically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>associated with one's co-cultural group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirroring</td>
<td>Adapting dominant group codes in attempt to make one's co-cultural identity more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(or totally) invisible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic distancing</td>
<td>Avoiding any association with other co-cultural group members in attempts to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>perceived as a distinct individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridiculing self</td>
<td>Invoking or participating in discourse, either passively or actively, that is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>demeaning to co-cultural group members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing visibility</td>
<td>Covertly, yet strategically, maintaining a co-cultural presence within dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispelling stereotypes</td>
<td>Myths of generalized group characteristics and behaviors are countered through the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>process of just being one's self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating self*</td>
<td>Interacting with dominant group members in an authentic, open, and genuine manner;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>used by those with strong self-concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intragroup networking</td>
<td>Identifying and working with other co-cultural group members who share common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>philosophies, convictions, goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utilizing liaisons</td>
<td>Identifying specific dominant group members who can be trusted for support,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>guidance, and assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educating others</td>
<td>Taking the role of teacher in co-cultural interactions; enlightening dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>group members of co-cultural norms, values, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronting</td>
<td>Using the necessary aggressive methods, including ones that seemingly violate the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining advantage</td>
<td>&quot;rights&quot; of others, to assert one's voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonassertive Assimilation</td>
<td>Inserting references to co-cultural oppression as a means to provoke dominant group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reactions and gain advantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonassertive Separation</td>
<td>Maintaining a distance from dominant group members; refraining from activities and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>locations where interaction is likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemplifying strength</td>
<td>Promoting the recognition of co-cultural group strengths, past accomplishments, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>contributions to society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing stereotypes</td>
<td>Applying a negotiated reading to dominant group perceptions and merging them into a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>positive co-cultural self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack</td>
<td>Inducing psychological pain through personal attacks on dominant group members' self-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabotaging others</td>
<td>Undermining the ability of dominant group members to take full advantage of their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>privilege inherent in dominant structures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: These communicative practices are examples of tactics enacted to promote each orientation. It is important to recognize that some tactics can be used innovatively to promote more than one communication orientation. For example, communicating self, intragroup networking, and educating others can also work together toward an assertive separation communication orientation.
METHODODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Autoethnography

This research project builds upon, and simultaneously extends critical-cultural autoethnography as articulated by Boylorn and Orbe (2012). In particular, we use autoethnographic data to collectively explore interpersonal and/or intercultural manifestations of communicative episodes that featured moments of, or sustained, prejudice. This decision to focus on autoethnographic narratives is in direct response to criticisms that quantitative data, like that collected via surveys, fail to capture the interactional subtleties of any given situation (Speer & Potter, 2000).

According to Denzin (1997), autoethnography involves the “turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur” (p. 227). Such an approach encourages a multidimensional exploration of a phenomenon (Mumby, 1993), and when done within a diverse research team, can provide multiple opportunities to engage self- and other-generated perceptions of the same lived experience. Autoethnography has been the method of choice for a number of communication inquiries including those exploring interpersonal and intercultural relationships across a variety of contexts (e.g., Allen, Orbe, & Olivas, 1999; Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1996; Geist & Gates, 1996). In this particular project, we drew from existing research that featured the synergistic energies of collective autoethnographies (e.g., Orbe, Groscurth, Jeffries, & Prater, 2007; Orbe, Smith, Groscurth, & Crawley, 2010). Consulting these pieces, we found that such a collective autoethnographic approach was especially fitting for our scholarly inquiry, given our interest in examining the interactions between self and others in contexts where a myriad of cultural identity markers were negotiated in various ways. In short, this methodological framework allowed us to engage in autoethnographic explorations (Allen et al., 1999) where narratives of self (Communication Studies 298, 1997) were engaged through personal and collaborative reflections.

Process of Discovery

After receiving the call for proposal for the edited book project, Mark approached two graduate students at different universities, Victoria and Rob,
to collaborate on a project. While Victoria and Rob had never met prior to the project, both were interested in exploring issues of culture, power, and communication. Via email, we began our project by self-generating 30 different case scenarios that contained negotiations of prejudice. In particular, each of the co-authors were asked to:

Think of 10 past and/or current interactions/relationships that you perceive as involving prejudice. In other words, you felt prejudged by some aspect(s) of your cultural identity (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, spirituality, etc.). These can be interactions with family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, strangers, etc.

Within each description, we used a number of prompts that guided autoethnographic descriptions with significant depth: (A) What is/was the relationship that you are describing? Who is the person to you?; (B) How did/do you feel prejudged by the other person?; Did/do you feel discriminated against (was/is the person’s prejudice acted upon)?; (C) How did/do you respond to the person’s prejudice?; and (D) How, if at all, did your relationship develop/change over time? Specific attention was paid to generating case scenarios that reflected a wide variety of cultural identity markers, relationships, and situational contexts. This initial process resulted in 21 pages of single-spaced autoethnographic descriptions of personal encounters with prejudice. The 30 case scenarios, as summarized in Tables 2, 3, and 4, reflected a substantial range of bases and sources of prejudgment, as well as situational context. Eleven case studies featured appreciative relationships.

### Table 2. Basis of Prejudgment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Case Scenarios (N = 30)</th>
<th>Appreciative Case Scenarios (N = 11)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>N = 15 (50%)</td>
<td>N = 4 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>N = 7 (23%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>N = 7 (23%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>N = 5 (16%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>N = 4 (13%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>N = 3 (10%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>N = 3 (10%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abilities</td>
<td>N = 1 (3%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Affiliation</td>
<td>N = 1 (3%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Several case scenarios involved more than one basis of prejudgment (e.g., both race and class were salient issues).
Table 3. Source of Prejudgment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Case Scenarios N = 30</th>
<th>Appreciative Case Scenarios N = 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close Friend/Significant Other</td>
<td>N = 7 (23%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>N = 7 (23%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor/Administrator</td>
<td>N = 4 (13%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-worker/Classmate</td>
<td>N = 4 (13%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintance</td>
<td>N = 3 (10%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>N = 2 (6%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/Subordinate</td>
<td>N = 2 (6%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Member</td>
<td>N = 1 (3%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Situational Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Case Scenarios N = 30</th>
<th>Appreciative Case Scenarios N = 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>N = 11 (36%)</td>
<td>N = 4 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>N = 8 (26%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Conference</td>
<td>N = 3 (10%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home/Private</td>
<td>N = 3 (10%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>N = 2 (6%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>N = 2 (6%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-line</td>
<td>N = 1 (3%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once the initial autoethnographic case scenarios were generated, we each individually read through the data and made notes regarding four elements. First, each of us determined the source(s) of prejudgment, identifying which aspect of identity was at the core in terms of the prejudgment? (see summary in Table 2). Second, using the descriptive list generated by Orbe and Roberts (2012), each co-author identified the: (a) co-cultural practices, (b) co-cultural communication orientations, and (c) co-cultural factors contained in each case scenario. This process was enacted so that each person could become familiar with all of the case scenarios and offer their perceptions. All perceptions were compiled into tables that differentiated each person’s coding and then we met to discuss the similarities and differences. Specifically, we focused on the 11 case scenarios that reflected instances of prejudice within contexts where appreciative relationships existed or emerged. This represented an important aspect of our collective autoethnography because we were able to more fully
discuss the perceptions of our own lived experiences in the context of two external interpretations. At times, perceptions were consistent across the board; however, a number of case scenarios generated considerable discussions regarding the narratives as lived, as recorded, and as ultimately understood in a larger context. These discussions were useful – not to establish any sort of intercoder reliability but – to provide a self-reflexive process whereby each co-author could gain additional perspectives of their interpretation of the lived experience. Field notes were recorded in writing from this meeting and used to further inform the ultimate writing of each of our autoethnographic reflections. Our next section highlights our collective narratives, organized around three thematic insights.

**THEMATIC-ANALYTIC FINDINGS: CO-CULTURAL RESPONSES TO PREJUDICE**

Contemplating, authoring, analyzing, and constantly reflecting on the 30 case scenarios of communicating prejudice provided a powerful means to understand how prejudice impacts relationships with strangers, peers, subordinates, supervisors, as well as family and friends. Almost two-thirds of the case scenarios reflected instances where prejudice seemed to doom the relationship. Within in this section, we utilize eleven of our individual autoethnographic narratives to illustrate three thematic points of insight that help to understand how prejudice is negotiated within appreciative relationships. Specifically, we illustrate: (1) field of experience as solid foundation, (2) the importance of accommodation as preferred outcome, and (3) situational contextualization of nonassertiveness and assertiveness.

**Field of Experience as Solid Foundation**

Our autoethnographic analysis demonstrated how all six co-cultural factors impacted how our responses to prejudgments manifested in various aspects of our lives. However, field of experience emerged as especially important in the eleven case scenarios that reflected descriptions of appreciative relationships. Our first autoethnographic narrative, authored by Victoria, demonstrates the important role that field of experience played in an interaction with a childhood friend regarding her sexual identity.
Coming out and being one of the only “out” queer people in your high school comes with a lot of judgment, support and curiosity. As one of the first or only gay person a lot of my friends have known I was open to a lot of the questions. “Farrah” is a childhood friend, she is Lebanese...she has an outgoing personality and has no filter in her interactions with others. That’s something I enjoyed about her company, her “realness.” At the end of my junior year in high school I started coming to terms with my sexuality and coming out to close friends bit by bit. All reactions had been positive thus far and nothing but love and support had been voiced, but there was a reoccurring element of “shock.”

Farrah and I were going out to breakfast in town and I decided I would tell her of my same-sex sexuality. When I told her “I’m gay,” she sort of choked on her food and immediately brought up my ex-boyfriend. Then quickly moved to “You’re too pretty to be a lesbian, you are just so girly!”

I had to explain to her how sexuality evolves and how at a young age I felt I was supposed to follow gendered sexual scripts and date boys. I went on to say “Do you just think all lesbians are ugly, Farrah?” I spent most of the breakfast making her aware of basic principles of sexuality and gender identity, even showing her some examples of fem lesbians from Showtime’s “The L Word” — explaining that lesbians can have a myriad of different “looks,” some being “femmy” and others maybe “butchy” and everywhere in between. Farrah was very engaged and interested in what I was saying, but it was clear she had never at a conversation breaking this down before.

There was an endearing tone from Farrah’s confusion and I did not feel offended. I was the only lesbian Farrah knew at the time and she had no other archetype, except of the stereotypical “butch” lesbian, to compare me to. Over the years Farrah has most certainly become more acquainted with my sexual identity and her nativity has not wedged itself in our friendship. I do not hangout with Farrah as much in the most recent years because we go to different universities across the state. Yet, in our most recent encounter she revealed to me that “I always thought you would just go back to guys.” If any stranger or peer would judge me by their pre-conceived notions on what a lesbian should look like or that this whole thing was a “phase,” I would be deeply offended and run through a laundry list of how/why they are wrong. Since Farrah is a childhood friend I still decide to let it slide and not take her ignorance personally.
Within this narrative, Victoria’s affinity towards an established relationship with Farrah framed her response to prejudice. Instead of being offended, she understood the preconceived stereotypes as a reflection of Farrah’s uncensored honest ignorance about same-sex attracted individuals. Consequently, Victoria focused her response on educating others – specifically teaching her about “basic principles of sexuality and gender identity” and including some popular culture media images to help solidify her points. By being open and honest with Farrah, she also enacted co-cultural practices of communicating self and dispelling stereotypes. Combining nonassertive and assertive accommodation orientations, Victoria was able to maintain a relationship with her close friend while simultaneously expressing her sexuality.

In Victoria’s example, the co-cultural factor of field of experience was most salient with her established relationship with Farrah, something that informed a keen awareness of her particular personality and communicative style. For the example provided by Mark below, the solid foundation of field of experience reflected an emerging professor-student relationship but also a conscious awareness of how faculty of color are perceived in predominately white universities.

Tom was an undergraduate student of mine who was interested in staying at our university to get his master’s degree. He was extremely bright, articulate, and hardworking – someone who I would have loved to work with. I first met him when he was a student in my interracial communication class – one of the few students who reflected dominant group status (white, male, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.). During this class, I got the impression that it was one of the first times where he was expected to acknowledge, and constantly manage, his privileged societal positions.

Tom visited me during office hours several times throughout the semester. We talked about class assignments and his interest in graduate school. Toward the end of the semester, he asked me if I would be open to working with (mentoring) him if he decided to stay for graduate school. When I responded affirmatively without hesitation, he seemed surprised. When I asked him about his reaction, he shared that he had talked with a few current graduate students (all of whom were white) who had told him that “Dr. Orbe only works with black students.” While I disagreed with this perception, I immediately
understood it given that I had a strong record of mentoring underrepresented students in our department.

My initial reaction was anger and frustration that some majority students had this (mis)perception of me. However, this was overwhelmed by Tom's comfort in sharing the information with me and his desire to seek out a mentoring relationship with someone who would clearly challenge him and some of his ideologies.

Tom and I worked collaboratively together during his master's program and we developed a close relationship, including both professional and personal connections, which remains intact today. During his graduate programs – including a PhD at another university – we navigated a number of situations which required an awareness and openness to cultural difference. However, we’ve both gotten to know a lot about one another that has allowed us to see one another in multidimensional ways that resist simplistic cultural stereotypes.

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Within this professional workplace context, Mark enacted a nonassertive accommodation orientation as he negotiated the racial dynamics of a predominately white department. Although he felt some anger and frustration about being misunderstood by some white students and could have decided to adopt a separation preferred outcome, he opted to embrace the opportunity to work with Tom. By doing so, he enacted co-cultural practices – dispelling stereotypes and increasing visibility – that worked to alter existing perceptions of faculty of color in his school. He could have been more assertive and/or aggressive in his approach (e.g., educating others or confronting), but his past experiences had taught him that showing others is sometimes a more powerful tool than telling others. In this example, his response allowed for the development of a close relationship and demonstrated his commitment to working with students from all backgrounds.

The Importance of Accommodation as Preferred Outcome

Without exception, all of the self-generated narratives of communicating prejudice that involved appreciative relationships contained co-cultural practices that reflected the preferred outcome of accommodation. Responding in ways that solely worked toward assimilation and/or separation seemed to block the type of authentic communication that fostered appreciative
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relationships. Interestingly, as illustrated in Mark’s narrative below, cases that involved strong relational ties often times reflected combinations of accommodation and assimilation.

* * *

“Jamal” was a fellow communication professor who I met at our annual national conference. An African American man about the same age as I, he was an officer in one of the association’s groups dedicated to the study of African American communication. As someone who participated with this group for a several years, we were friendly with one another each year during the conference but never had any substantive conversations. We did, however, have several friends in common.

At the close of one conference meeting, Jamal asked what I was doing for dinner; shortly thereafter we decided to walk to a restaurant nearby and eat together. During dinner, in his role of association officer, Jamal asked me about my interests in running for an office. I responded by saying that I might be interested in the future, but that it wasn’t something that I wanted to do before I got my publications off the ground. The conversation then moved to my interest/motivation, as a non-African American, in being a part of a group that studies African American communication issues. As Jamal raised this issue, I got the feeling that this was one of the reasons why he initiated the dinner in the first place. I explained that I was a bi-racial person who had been raised in a predominately Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood, and my scholarly interests reflected that set of lived experiences. His response was point-blank: “You can describe yourself as bi-racial, but I’m always going to see you as a white man.” I was taken aback by his comment, and thought about invoking the importance of agency in self-definition; instead I allowed the conversation to flow to different topics without responding directly to his comment. I didn’t think that I needed to persuade him to see me differently than I saw myself, but I did feel that he had prejudged me in terms of his own racialized categories.

Given the history, both in terms of society at large and this particular group, I felt like I could understand Jamal’s concern about my involvement in the group. So, my response was not to confront his perceptions but to show him my commitment to the group and African American communication scholarship through my work (e.g., service to the group, publishing, mentoring, etc.). I was confident that his perception of me would change by simply getting to know me, as me. As such, this one interaction didn’t define
our relationship; instead it brought to the surface an issue that existed implicitly.

Over the years, Jamal and I developed a relationship that went beyond that of professional colleagues. We became friends who looked forward to hanging out during our annual meeting and keeping in touch the rest of the year. The more that we got to know one another, the more he was able to see my interest as genuine and invested. In many ways, and in several instances, he became one of my biggest supporters in the academy.

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In this example, Mark articulates a keen awareness of a historical distrust of non-African Americans in this particular organization (field of experience). Accordingly, he strategically enacted practices associated with nonassertive accommodation – namely increasing visibility and dispelling stereotypes – in his interactions with Jamal. While these were his intentions, his co-authors helped him to question if he wasn’t in fact, averting controversy and practicing overcompensation. Reflectively, he questions his behaviors and wonders how his actions were perceived by Jamal and others in the organization: Was he simply being himself, or was he working extra hard to prove that he was not like other non-African Americans? This leads to the possibility that his behaviors might be perceived by others as more assimilation rather than accommodation. In either case, his response to prejudgments based on race fostered a long-time meaningful relationship.

Just as Mark was able to enact nonassertive accommodation with Jamal in the example above, Rob’s example below shares another instance of how one can practice nonassertive accommodation in order to build healthy, authentic relationships. Rob’s example highlights prejudgments based on gender (and possibly age) and demonstrates how communicating one’s honest feelings between supervisor and supervisee can ultimately bring both parties closer together.

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“Zoe” and “Caitlin” are the director and assistant director of a student affairs office at my undergraduate university. I had been working closely with Zoe and Caitlin for about a year as one of two student coordinators that works year round in the office. The other student coordinator, Ryan, was also a white male who was a year older than me. Of the four of us, I felt that my communication style was the most androgynous/feminine. Whenever Zoe and
Caitlin needed to make a decision, I sometimes felt like my perspective went unnoticed.

At the end of my second year, Ryan and I graduated so it was time for Zoe and Caitlin to hire two new student coordinators. During a morning meeting, Zoe encouraged more females to apply for the positions because she felt women who are more qualified than men usually decide not to apply for higher positions (That year 74% of our leaders were female). In the next couple of days, Zoe, Caitlin, Ryan and I interviewed each candidate for the new coordinator positions and I regret having to miss the last interview to go meet up with my first-year students. I left my final interview feeling like we all agreed on the two people to hire, one male and one female; both very qualified for the position. The interview I missed happened to be a female that ultimately was hired as a student coordinator. Zoe and Caitlin made their decision right after the interview without me in the room, and they happened to decide on two females. Ryan and I both agreed that the male advocated for was the more qualified individual for the position. However, the bottom line is that Zoe and Caitlin thought otherwise. Once again, I felt like my opinion didn’t matter.

I found out about the student coordinator hirings from Ryan, and I immediately called Caitlin to ask her why she didn’t run the two coordinators by me before she finalized the decision. She told me that she and Zoe felt that they hired the two people they were looking for. After the phone call I tried to take a nap to sleep my frustration away but I wasn’t able to. I then tried to read my frustration away, but that didn’t work either. I finally decided to write a letter to Caitlin about why I disagreed with her choice, but I never had any intention of actually sending it. That night at the last session of the day, I asked to speak with Caitlin about what had transpired, and in a personal yet professional way I told her how I felt about not being included in the final decision. Empathetically, she understood where I was coming from and told me her reasoning behind her choice.

After our talk, I feel Caitlin realized how I felt about my opinions being overlooked. She pointed out that there was nothing we could do about the decision that was already made, but she also asked how we could improve the hiring process going forward. I felt that she made an effort to include my thoughts and opinions moving into the next year. I also let Zoe know how I felt, and she agreed that she might have rushed a decision without hearing all points of view. I feel my relationships with Zoe and Caitlin reached a deeper personal level after articulating how we all felt.
This example demonstrates how Rob utilized an assertive accommodation orientation in order maintain a healthy work relationship with Caitlin and Zoe. Considering the space and time of the decision, Rob could have practiced nonassertive separation by using the co-cultural responses of avoiding or maintaining barrier to conceal how he felt. Instead, he considered the perceived costs and rewards of his communication approach and decided to communicate self by asking to meet with Caitlin and Zoe to share how he felt. By interacting in an open and genuine manner, both sides grew together in better understanding of how to make communal decisions in the future.

Situational Contextualization: Nonassertiveness and/or Assertiveness

Consistent with the tenets of co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998), a hyperconsciousness for strategic practices exists when individuals feel the tensions of ingroup/outgroup positioning. A final thematic insight that emerged from the autoethnographic data related to the importance of situational context in discerning a particular communication approach. As demonstrated with the two examples in this final section, both nonassertive and assertive approaches appeared most conducive to the development and maintenance of appreciative relationships. The first case scenario illustrating this point of thematic insight was generated by Rob.

"Tammi" was a black middle age woman who I met at a diversity training conference. The first night of the conference I decided to sit next to Tammi, two other black women, and one white woman. I didn’t know anyone at the table so I naturally felt a little uncomfortable.

During the first night, I tried breaking the ice so I asked one of the ladies at the table if she was a student at a nearby college. She corrected me and said that she actually worked at the college as a fulltime employee. I told her I was sorry because I thought she was a student because of how young she looked. Tammi overheard my reasoning and she quickly questioned me why I didn’t think she was young enough to be a student herself. Everyone burst into laughter and I turned beet red for making prejudgments of my own (it didn’t help that this was at a diversity conference of all places). I felt I was being attacked for my comment which I regretted making.
On the second day of the conference, I purposefully sat next to Tammi so I
could right my wrong from the day before. During one of the breaks I asked
Tammi what kind of music she listened to, but she thought her music was too
“old” for me. Before she told me her favorite artists, she asked me who some
of my favorite artists were. I told her that my top three artists/bands were Sam
Cooke, Al Green, and The Beatles. She quickly responded by asking if I was,
“an old black man stuck in white man’s body.” I thought that was hilarious,
and she went on to share some of her favorite artists that she thought I would
like.

As the conference went along, Tammi and I grew closer together. I began
to understand her humor and I realized she would never let me live down that
comment I made on the first night. However, at the end of the conference she
told me I was like a son that she never had. That comment alone made my
week.

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This scenario provides an example of how Rob emphasized
commonalities between Tammi and himself in order to develop a better
understanding of each other across differences based on race and age. After
the first night of the conference, Rob could have practiced nonassertive
assimilation by censoring his comments in order to avert any more
controversy. He also could have practiced nonassertive separation by avoiding
any activities or locations where interaction was likely to occur. Instead, the
situational context of the conference and his field of experience influenced
him to continue to develop a positive relationship through sharing common
interests in music (emphasizing commonalities). Next, Victoria provides
another example of how situational context informs a balance of co-cultural
communication orientations practice in order to build an authentic relationship.

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“Tayo” is a male college friend from Nigeria who I have bonded with
over sports. I was captain of an Intramural (IM) Co-Ed soccer team and asked
if he would be interested in playing and he was enthusiastic about the league.
We had a fun season but were not very victorious; another male player from
Africa scored all but one of our goals. One night at a bar after a game Tayo
and I were talking about our performances, other teams and IM rules. One of
the co-ed league rules revolving gender was that goals scored by women are
worth two points versus one point for goals scored by men.
I expressed my disapproval of this logic, how it was a sexist microaggression often found in sporting institutions. Tayo responded saying that the rule was necessary to make it fair, just like in tennis matches. He claims it’s proven that women have inferior physical skill sets, and body make-up, compared to men.

I interjected saying that we have been conditioned to believe this and I didn’t feel supported as a woman because of the rule. Tayo joked saying I thought “girls” would be happy about that. Here Tayo made the assumption that I enjoy or “appreciate” this covert act of sexism and take it as a “privilege.” I told him obviously I don’t care about the rule that much since I still take part in the league, but it is something that has bothered me.

This was one of the first incidents that my feminist identity was salient in my friendship with Tayo. Our friendship has flourished and we still often play sports together. Although I may have ruffled his perceived “truth” of women and men in sports, I don’t think the conversation made him an objector of the rule or swayed him on women’s sporting competence.

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Victoria’s autoethnographic case scenario with Tayo reflects a classic example of two friends who ultimately “agree to disagree” about an issue. In this particular interaction, Victoria engages in educating others by explaining her perception of – and disagreement with – rules based on gender stereotypes (communicating self). Her friend, Tayo, seemingly refuses to accept her perspective and maintains his gendered perceptions of female athletes. Despite this difference, the friendship continues to flourish. Through our co-cultural analysis, we can understand how Victoria has enacted bargaining whereby she and Tayo create an unspoken rule to ignore their competing views on the issue and focus on the other enjoyable aspects of their friendship. This case scenario demonstrates the reality that appreciative relationships typically involve the negotiation of difference on some level.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Responding to Hecht’s (1998) call for more research on the positive aspects of relational difference, this research study uses autoethnographic data to explore how individuals negotiate prejudice in appreciative relationships. Through collective critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014), we engaged in a self-reflective process through which we were able to understand
how prejudgments based on race, gender, age, and sexuality could enhance—and not necessarily deter—relational development. Co-cultural theory (Orbe & Roberts, 2012) served as a productive theoretical framework for our analysis. In particular, it prompted three important findings regarding the negotiation of cultural difference, in the form of prejudice, that exists in various stages of relationship development.

First, field of experience serves as an important foundation and helps to situate prejudicial communication within larger contexts. As demonstrated within our analysis, drawing from one’s complex set of lived experiences and the particular interactions of a specific relationship inform how individuals interpret and respond to being prejudged. Accordingly, instances of prejudice steeped within cultural difference are negotiated differently within established relationships than with strangers or acquaintances. Second, the co-cultural preferred outcome of accommodation is most associated with the development of appreciative relationships. The vast majority of our autoethnographic narratives of prejudice were not a part of appreciative relationships; instead the prejudgments seemed to doom the development of any meaningful interaction. In these scenarios, we enacted co-cultural practices that were associated with the preferred outcomes of assimilation and separation. These responses did not permit for any sort of authentic communication. However, accommodation-based practices promoted the type of honest and open interactions whereby relationships could productively negotiate the prejudice of difference. Our third, and final, conclusion is that both nonassertive and assertive communication approaches are instrumental in creating and sustaining appreciative relationships. Earlier conceptualizations of co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) emphasized that no one communication orientation is ideal; strategic responses must reflect a negotiation of various factors. Our self-study demonstrates how several different co-cultural factors (e.g., situational context, field of experience, preferred outcome) lead to practices that reflect different communication approaches. For instance, negotiating relational prejudice productively involved both nonassertive (e.g., increasing visibility) and assertive accommodation (e.g., communicating self, educating others) orientations.

The study makes significant contributions to how cultural difference, in the form of prejudice, can be negotiated in positive, mutually satisfying relationships. As such, it makes valuable contributions to the study of communicating prejudice (Hecht, 1998) and the utility of co-cultural theory (Orbe & Roberts, 2012) in research that explores the inextricable relationship between culture, power, and communication. Additional research is
warranted to continue this line of inquiry. First, we call for scholars to embrace the intercultural dialectics of similarities↔differences and privilege↔disadvantage (Martin & Nakayama, 1999) in their examinations of relational communication. A dialectical framework provides insight into the ways that opposing poles exist and require constant attention; it advocates for a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” approach. In terms of appreciative relationships, this requires scholars to explore how individuals negotiate ways in which they are both similar and different, as well as how they both experience various forms of cultural privilege and disadvantage. Second, we urge intercultural communication researchers to draw from other theoretical frameworks to deepen our understanding of appreciative relationships. For instance, even within our analysis summarized in this chapter, we saw direct applications of communication theory of identity (Hecht, Warren, Jung & Krieger, 2005) that could add to our analysis in terms of how personal identities are enacted within various relational contexts. This is one of many theories that could be applied to this area of research. In closing, our innovative cultural autoethnography provides an excellent foundation for future studies that look to examine how individuals negotiate multiple aspects of themselves in relational contexts with others who reflect a similar set of complex identity markers.

REFERENCES


