A First Look at COMMUNICATION THEORY

Transcript of Andrew Ledbetter's interview with Mark Orbe, creator of Co-Cultural Theory
First half: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8x87QW8Jybk
Second half: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtLoolQFnX0

A combined version of the video is available at www.afirstlook.com, and this is the transcript of that version.

Andrew: Hi, I'm Andrew Ledbetter from Texas Christian University, and today I'm talking to Dr. Mark Orbe, who is the creator of co-cultural theory. So Mark, how would you summarize co-cultural theory for us?

Mark: Well, I think the best way to summarize it is a theoretical framework that allows insight into how those people who are traditionally marginalized in a society communicate.

Andrew: OK, and just, in terms of marginalized people, how did you become initially interested in studying the communication behavior of marginalized groups?

Mark: Well, I think all of us at some point in our lives experience marginalization. My particular interest started in graduate school, as I left the upper Northeast and traveled to the Midwest, the rolling hills of Athens, Ohio. And being a product of a multiracial marriage, and being from a lower socioeconomic background, when I started graduate school I really felt like an outsider. And I wanted to understand the process of how that impacts how I was communicating, but then extending it to other groups, and trying to see similarities and some differences about how people negotiate that kind of outsider status. But for me it was race and class as I entered my Ph.D. program.

I never sought out to create a theory. And people always ask me, "how do you create a theory? Can you tell me how you start it?" Well, it just happened kind of organically. I was really interested in getting at the essence of the phenomena of what it means to be different. So phenomenology is the study of phenomena, looking at the essential characteristics of that. And I first started studying African-American men, and then I saw some linkages between other types of groups. So for me, phenomenology has allowed me to study people's stories, people's perceptions of their own lived experiences, hopefully in kind of real time, and the insight that I was able to get from that, the rich narratives, allowed me then to understand a particular experience in a larger context, that oftentimes quantitative research was not, did not allow me to do.

Andrew: So, so, in thinking about these different choices, if we just talk about communication approaches and preferred outcomes, there's a menu, if you will, of nine options that people could pursue. How strategic is that choice? Is that something that people think, "Oh, I really need to kind of figure out purposefully what I'm going to do," or is it more in the moment, they just kind of react and enact one of those, one of those approaches?

Mark: So I'll answer your question by what my normal response is, "Yes." So, it's both/and. I think that part of the basic premise of the theory is that if you are in a marginalized position, you are much more aware and conscious of the outcomes and the effects of your communication. It has to be strategic when you're in a position where you are in a less powerful hierarchical relationship. I think over time, then it might become second nature, where you're not explicitly, consciously thinking about what you're going to do, but it is always grounded in some choices that were part of your earlier lived experience.

Andrew: Sure.

Mark: And I think in different situations—so you have those nine communication orientations, in different situations I might have one primary orientation, but I will be adaptive depending on the situational context, which is one of the factors.

Andrew: OK.

Mark: So I think initially, initially when you find yourself in a position that you haven't been in before, and you're one of a few, let's say in a room, one of the few women, one of the few people who identify as LGBT, Muslim, etc., you're very conscious. And I think over time, the more experiences that you have in that context, you're probably less conscious, but it's grounded in that field of experience that's become normalized.

Andrew: I'd like to talk for a minute about field of experience. What, what do you mean when you talk about field of experience, and how does that shape how co-cultural group members communicate?

Mark: Field of experience is interesting to talk about. I find a great—I have great difficulty talking about it without using the words "field" and "experience."

Andrew: (laughs)

Mark: So it's kind of like the sum of your life. It can be, you know, how you were raised, where you were raised, your schooling. Every experience you have contributes to a larger, kind of, field of experience, or a larger set of, of life circumstances that informs how you communicate in this day right now. So I often tell students, think about it as your life experiences as the baggage you bring, and we all need certain things—sometimes we need to leave certain things in the past, and we still drag them along. But we have these sets of experiences that inform how we're communicating today.

And for me what's important about field of experience is knowing that not every co-cultural group member from the same group—let's say, African Americans—has the same field of experience. So at my university, we have a number of students who come from inner city Detroit, who were raised in predominantly African American neighborhoods, went to predominantly black schools. We also have African American students who come from the upper peninsula, or rural areas. But sometimes at campus, our faculty and staff sees all black students as the same. That's a very different set of experience, where I have an African American student who is the only African American person in their family—they were adopted—and they lived in an all-white town. Their experiences navigating, as a co-cultural group member, Western Michigan University, is going to be different than someone who comes from Detroit, or from Benton Harbor, or another predominantly black area. So, we have to know that field of experience is a really important understanding how people communicate.

Andrew: That makes sense. So, I'm curious too about effectiveness of these different approaches that you've outlined. So you've certainly, I think the theory does a great job of saying, hey, these are the options that, that people often use when they're trying to make their voice heard or perhaps not make their voice heard as they communicate with a dominant group. But, do any of those strategies tend to be more effective than others, particularly if people are wanting to have their views taken seriously as a member of a marginalized group?

Mark: Yes, so, one of the important things, and people—I've had some pushback on this. One of the important things is, I don't view any particular strategy, or any particular orientation, as ideal. As most effective. Because it does matter on their lived experience, it matters on what they want to get out of it, it matters on situational context. So in some context, any strategy could be the most appropriate, because there are times where I assimilate. There are times where I want accommodation, and there are times where separation is my ultimate goal. The key is choosing those practices and enacting them in order that you can meet your larger goal, and those goals might change over time. So I don't think there are any particularly ways in which we can say, OK, this strategy is the most effective for this outcome. It really depends on the context.

Andrew: So you talk about ability as one factor that influences how co-cultural group members seek their preferred outcomes. What are the specific communication abilities or competencies that can help somebody pursue the preferred outcomes that they're seeking?

Mark: Yes, it was interesting because that was a factor—that's probably the least discussed factor of the six factors. And I think I included it, it was important to include given the lived experiences of the individuals who contributed to the theory. I wanted to make sure that people understood that not everyone should assume that everyone has equal abilities. Think about communication approach. So I was raised in the upper Northeast. I do not have any problems enacting my abilities to be assertive and aggressive.

Andrew: (chuckles)

Mark: And when I moved to the Midwest, what I thought was assertiveness, was viewed as aggressiveness.

Andrew: (laughs)

Mark: Because of the cultural norms. I was described as abrupt, confrontational, rude, and I'm thinking back home, this is polite Mark, or "Mahk" as I was known at home.

Andrew: (laughs)

Mark: So I had to work on my ability to enact a nonassertive approach.

Andrew: So in the book, the primary examples of co-cultural groups that we use stem from your research on African American men, members of the LGBTQ community, and also those with physical disabilities. To what other kinds of co-cultural groups does your theory apply?

Mark: There are certain international scholars who studied Koreans living in Japan as a co-cultural group, Roma people in Europe as a co-cultural group. One of the most interesting I found were people studied high school students—high school AT students, like, academically talented students, socially, as a co-cultural group. And I thought—I'm one who believes that you're either going to be a nerd or you're going to work for nerds for the rest of your life. So I struggled with this idea that people in academically talented programs are co-cultural group members. Because typically they—traditionally, I wouldn't see them as a co-cultural group member. But, socially, they are! You know, if you look at the social hierarchy of a high school, for instance—

Andrew: So they're kind of the outcasts, those that are not the popular kids—

Mark: They're not the jocks—yeah, exactly. So I think that kind of creative way in which we can understand different religious minorities, if they are Mormon or Muslim, people have studied that perspective as well. So it's really grown beyond what I initially thought would be the kind of core groups that one would study in really interesting ways. Really interesting ways.

Andrew: So as we have students watching this video, professors, other people watching this video, I'm sure there are many people nodding their heads, saying "Yeah, I get that, I resonate with that, that theory describes my experience as I've communicated in a situation where I'm a member of a marginalized group." What advice would co-cultural theory give to those students who are feeling that kind of resonance with the theory?

Mark: Well, I hope there's some validation that they feel in terms of their own experiences and some, almost, solidarity, if you will, seeing that there's commonalities. So oftentimes when students read this, they know the theory, they've lived the theory, now they have labels and a, kind of, conceptual framework that allows them to explain what they've been feeling to others in a way in which now they feel validated. Where it's just not always about them and their own experiences and really feeling isolated that they're the only ones who participate in this particular strategy, this particular practice. So I think, outside of that, I'm hoping that the advice is: Be mindful about the choices that you make—one my big mantras with my students is, "make good choices"—you know, so if you decide to utilize this, go for it, but use it the way in which works best for you. But it also allows people to know they do have choices. So if you are a co-cultural

group member, you don't have to assimilate. That is not the only way that you have to communicate. Be mindful, if you make other choices, there are certain perceived costs and rewards that come with those. But I believe in agency, and allowing people to sense that they're not stuck in having to communicate in one particular way.

Andrew: So I'm sure there are those watching this video that say, "you know, I'm not a member of a co-cultural group, at least, most of the time I don't identify in that way, I'm a member of a dominant group." What advice does the theory give to somebody who would recognize themselves as tending to be part of a dominant group?

Mark: My entire graduate career was steeped in assimilation, early on, and using the strategies of overcompensation and extensive preparation. Like, I was that person who had to read articles three or four times, and then I would look words up and I always felt like I had to overprepare. And in that particular context, I don't think people recognized that. But for me that was my only point that I was going to be able to succeed. So to have a dominant group member recognize that, if I ever had a professor—I never did—but if I ever had a professor say, "Wow, it seems like, you know, you went the extra mile on this," and in my mind I had to go the extra mile just to reach the average. But having that acknowledgment is fine as well.

I will tell you at this National Communication Association conference, one of my colleagues at Arizona State and I have created this dominant group theory. So we're looking at how dominant group members, their perspective, because co-cultural theory is grounded in the perspective, the lived experiences of co-cultural group members. And if we're really going to understand the interactions between co-cultural groups and dominant groups, we should also pay attention, as—his name is Robert Razzante—told me, we need to pay attention to dominant groups, and he identifies predominantly as a dominant group member. So we're trying to understand dominant group communication with the same nuances and complexities that we have been trying to understand co-cultural group members.

Andrew: So the goal then is to identify, hey, these are the strategies or approaches, preferred outcomes that dominant group members engage in, is that—

Mark: It is, it is, it is. And right now, Razzante and Orbe have a piece in press at Communication Theory, which was the place where co-cultural theory was probably first published, in '98, and we did the same thing, we kind of outlined the communication orientations for dominant group members. There were some shifts in terms of some of the factors, so instead of preferred outcome, it was interactional effect, in terms of how do dominant group members either reinforce these dominant structures, how do they impede them on the interpersonal level, or how do they dismantle them? So even dominant group members have choices in terms of how they communicate, if they're just going to reinforce the sexism in the room, or if they're going to impede and disrupt it on an interpersonal level, or are they going to work to actively take down some of the structures that inform sexism.

Andrew: Mark, would you consider co-cultural theory to be a critical theory?

Mark: You know, I don't think it fits nicely into some of the paradigmatic structures that we place theories in. It was grounded to be interpretive, to be kind of descriptive in its power. But because it acknowledges the power imbalances, I think it is a critical theory. I wouldn't necessarily started out thinking about it in that regard, but because I was studying issues of oppression, issues of marginalization, it has to be understood in that context that we're studying power dimensions. And there is some critique, some critical approach to it in that regard.

Andrew: All right. What's the role, then, of listening in co-cultural theory?

Mark: It's just key. It is, it is key. Oftentimes I'm in a certain situation and I don't say a lot. My grandmother once told me, "God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason," so you should listen twice as much as you speak.

Andrew: Good advice.

Mark: She probably told, probably told that to me specifically, but it's OK. So for me, but people say, "Well, you're a communication person, why aren't you talking?" And I'm like, "Well, I'm a communication person. I'm not a speech person necessarily. So I'm communicating; I'm just listening." And I think what it is, is—so now, field of experience, it's your life story. And I have found, when you take the time, and people allow you to understand their life story, you see them in transformative ways. So if we can see one another as a product of a larger life story, and not just as a unidimensional character, that, that's key. And you can only do that through listening.