

Investigating how new college students make sense of their communication with individuals from different co-cultural groups and how these experiences shape their identity.

by

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined the interview results of twelve college students in the Southeast region holding either freshman or sophomore status to answer two questions: How do new college students communicate with students of perceivably different co-cultural groups, and how does communication with perceivably different co-cultural groups shape the identity of college students? Through analyzing the data and applying relevant theories, two major themes developed: "Influences from New Co-cultures" and "Lack of Cultural Understanding." These major themes were followed by a total of 5 subthemes. Through this analysis, the researcher found a need for cultural assimilation preparation to be instilled in new college students.

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INTRODUCTION

Of the 2.7 million high school graduates recorded in 2021, roughly 1.7 million of them enrolled in college the following fall (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). With 43% of college students - the highest rate in over a decade - moving away from home to begin their education (Ethier, 2021), it can be assumed that the majority of these college students are being introduced to new co-cultural groups. In the field of communication studies, co-culture is defined as “the perception of membership in a group that is part of an encompassing culture” (Adler, et al., 2020). This “membership” can take place through race, religion, economic class, and or other factors that subsequently form cliques and branches of a preexisting culture.

One excellent opportunity to study these differentiating co-cultural groups and their method of mixing with one another is in the college setting. As students begin to coexist with and learn the experiences and practices of individuals outside of their own co-cultural groups, it can be expected that new facets of perception, understanding, and bias could be formed. Previous studies have been conducted to understand the perception, acceptance, and formation of these groups. Some study the integration of minorities into pre-existing dominant cultures of a particular race (Glenn, Johnson, 2012), while others have focused on how those who experience disabilities adjust to a more inclusive culture (for example, Griesmeyer-Krentz et al., 2022).

With college being the necessary step to many higher workforce positions, it is important that we understand these instances of assimilation as a precursor atmosphere to what future industries and constructs these individuals will hold. MIT Professor Jackson

Lu studied how multicultural experiences can make individuals better communicators and more effective leaders (2021) highlighting just how important this topic is to research.

Problem Statement

The intent for this research was to interview college freshman and sophomores with a series of questions regarding their experiences with individuals of perceivably different co-cultures as they work together through group work in college classes, organizations, or mutual interests. As the research was conducted, two research questions were to be answered; 1.) How do new college students communicate with students of perceivably different co-cultural groups? And 2.) How does communication with perceivably different co-cultural groups shape the identity of college students?

The results of this project will expectantly show how these new college students navigate their way through settings with co-cultures that are perceivably different from their own. The researcher looked for evidence of pre-established biases or assumptions that could have hindered the ability to effectively assimilate to the environment, as well as any aspect that might have facilitated a smooth transition and how either of these discoveries could be used in application to future college student entering an environment with new co-cultural groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories

Understanding the impact that communication with different co-cultures has on these individuals begins with understanding what we know from past research. As mentioned earlier, studies have been conducted exploring many corners of the higher

education system along with how culture presents itself within. Because this current research study consists of interviews with open-ended questions, there is a wide range of plausible communication theories that can be applied to their analyses, allowing us to fully investigate these responses.

Face-negotiation theory, as laid out by Stella Ting-Toomey, focuses on the diverse styles of conflict management used by people from different cultures (Griffin, Ledbetter, Sparks, 2019). A large aspect of this theory is the ‘face’ of the individuals. Face, or how we want ourselves to be seen by others, is suspected by Ting-Toomey to be constantly negotiated by individuals of all cultures. Playing an additional role in face-negotiation theory is the process of facework. Facework is described as “specific verbal and nonverbal messages that help maintain and restore face loss, and to uphold and honor face again” (Griffin, Ledbetter, Sparks, 2019). According to face-negotiation theory, people of different cultures present vastly different facework (Ting-Toomey, 1985). As the results of this study have the possibility of showing levels of conflict, face-negotiation theory could give us some insight as to why this conflict occurs and how their facework plays a role.

Another potentially relevant theory is communication accommodation theory. Communication accommodation theory focuses on adjustment that takes place as people try to emphasize or minimize their social differences between other people they interact with (Giles, 1971). This can happen as people might change their accent or vocabulary to match a specific individual or group, or if someone tries to showcase a more distinguished persona. Two specific expansions on this idea are when someone matching

linguistics to another person, or the opposite, talks in a way that these differences are accentuated.

Because co-culture is a reoccurring topic in the research and interview questions, as well as a primary focus of the study, co-cultural theory is another applicable theory to this research. As co-cultural theory is an extension of both standpoint theory and muted group theory (Griffin, Ledbetter, Sparks, 2019), it is important to understand those first. As explained by Theorists Sandra Harding and Julia T. Wood, standpoint theory says that our view of the world depends on our social location. Social location is defined as “our group memberships that shape our experience of the world and our ways of understanding it” (Griffin, Ledbetter, Sparks, 2019). Muted group theory, coming from a more power-analyzing perspective on human communication, says that the language of a particular culture does not serve all of its speakers equally (Ardener, 1975). This idea can be applied to all co-cultures that are traditionally muted or underrepresented. With the foundation of co-cultural theory being set by standpoint theory and muted group theory, it can be understood that co-cultural theory focuses on marginalized groups of people and believes that these individuals adopt a communication orientation based on their desired outcome (Orbe, 1998). As data will be collected from identifyingly different individuals, we will be able to see how if at all, these members of different co-cultures adjust their communication in relation to their end goal.

No matter what theory is applied, it is apparent that perception and understanding is different for everyone. Regardless of the approach and the specific cultural experiences studies have homed in on, there are still plenty of gray areas that allow research to be conducted in efforts to understand how college students use their experiences with other

co-cultures to shape their own identity, along with how these experiences contribute to bias and interpretations that form. By analyzing these instances, we are allowed a previously unknown look at co-cultural meshing to be understood with possible solutions.

Assimilation

As people join a new organization, such as a university, the term ‘assimilation’ is often used to describe the process of social integration. Jablin and Krone (1987) describe assimilation as “those ongoing behavioral and cognitive processes by which individuals join, become integrated into and exit organizations” (p. 712). As the researcher of this study is focusing on college students entering a new environment, it is important that we have a key word that groups together any acts of integration through contact between cultures.

Though the investigation of new college students' assimilation to college life as a whole is not new, there is much to be uncovered as most research to date focuses on minority groups. That being said, there is an abundance of these studies that specifically focus on race and ethnicity as an aspect of culture. Jorge Ballinas’s study on Mexican American experiences of microaggression (2017) is one example. In this analysis, we can see several aspects of cultural membership, and more specifically, the downfalls, assumptions and negative connotations that often come with some of these specific groups as their members lose a sense of their personal culture or begin assigning stigmas to specific groups.

Having a stronger focus on the effects of microaggression, Diane Lee, and Amanda Padillo’s study “Acculturative Stress and Coping: Gender Differences Among

Korean and Korean American University Students” showcased the immense stress of acculturation spanning across 86 students of Korean heritage (2014). This is a concerning statistic as 43.6% of undergraduate college students are minorities (United State Census Bureau). There is additionally prolific evidence of segregation due to differences in economic class, religion, and sexuality. Patrick Dilley’s article discusses this topic as it specifically applies to students identifying as part of the LGBTQ community, finding that despite their proven success, they are still assumed to “compromise American society” (2020).

Small Group Communication

As can be seen in the interview guide (See Appendix B), a key section of the participant questions for this study is based on their contribution and experience with group work in the college setting. Discussed in chapter two of *Working in groups: Communication Principles and Strategies*, there are two types of norms that are considered “expectations concerning the kinds of behaviors and opinions that are acceptable or unacceptable in a particular group” (Engleberg & Wynn, 2017, 29). These two norms are known as being either explicit or implicit. An explicit norm is something blatantly stated or written and announced to all group members and that typically comes from a higher authority. On the other side of the spectrum, we have implicit rules that are generally implied based on right and wrong. Typically, most implicit rules are rarely discussed, but still expected in terms of etiquette. This can lead to the assumption that all cultures think the same way and have the same notion of what is right and what is wrong.

Even though the general idea of small group communication and its transitional aspects can be easily summarized, there is still a “so what?” factor that can be best shown

through previous pieces of research as they focus on the individualistic aspects that create these groups. Tianxin Li discusses the mixed feelings former students share towards group work all based on different experiences with different goals (2023) showing the multiple perceptions that can form according to the individuals. Another study found that students' perceptions of the positive attributes of group work were correlated with tolerance for ambiguity, while students' perceptions of the negative attributes of group were correlated with conversational sensitivity (Myers, et al., 2009). Given the prevalence of group work in the college setting, wherein students interact with perceivably different people, this context needs to be thoroughly understood to allow the best possible outcome scenarios.

METHODS

This project obtained qualitative data through individual interviews. The data was compiled in an attempt to understand cross cultural communication and identity development as it is a continuous, interactive relationship-based process that undergoes vast transformation during the period of adolescence (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). This study was approved by the Middle Tennessee State University Institution Review Board.

Procedure

In efforts to recruit study participants, recruitment flyers, found in Appendix A, were posted around campus in common spaces and dormitories. This study was also promoted by Middle Tennessee State University Communication Studies Department faculty in their communication courses and by email, using a separate flyer that can be found in Appendix B. As eligible Freshman and Sophomores reached out, the primary

researcher scheduled their one-on-one interviews, that continued from June to October 2023. In total, twelve interviews were conducted. For each interview, the researcher followed the semi-structured interview guide found in Appendix C, while also asking any follow up questions they found necessary or useful. In addition to Biographical/Demographic questions, the primary questions asked about participants' experiences with new cultures, past experiences, their opportunities to work with these individuals, and several other aspects of interactional college experiences to help the researcher uncover information about the phenomenon. All participants answered questions willingly and gave full consent to use their answers in the study. Each participant's consent was given via signature of online consent form, that is found in Appendix D.

Interview participants were given the option of completing the interview either in person or via zoom. Interviews were recorded with the installed audio recorder on an Apple iPad. While the interview took place, the researcher also took notes on printed interview templates to mark anything he found interesting or wanted to touch back on. Using the notes and audio recording, transcriptions were completed on word documents and uploaded to NVivo for coding. Each interview was transcribed within a week of the meeting, resulting in thirty-nine pages of single-spaced transcriptions. Transcriptions are stored on the primary researcher's personal laptop.

Analysis

As it is widely used with most qualitative research, a thematic analysis was used to find aspects of the interview supporting the discussion section of this research study. To appropriately conduct this thematic analysis, the researcher repeatedly read through

the transcriptions of all twelve interviews and searched for patterns that subsequently formed themes. These themes, especially as they appear in qualitative data collected from individuals, can be best understood as reoccurring features, perceptions, and experiences relevant to the study (Creswell, 2009). During the initial interviews, throughout the transcription process, along with set time to analyze the data, the researcher developed familiarity with the evidence and applied theories to the themes, along with categorizing them accordingly. These aspects of inspection, along with the input and guidance from the faculty advisor, allowed relevant themes to emerge.

To organize the findings of this study in an appropriate and well-organized manner, themes and subthemes were compiled in a cohesive format with the aid of NVivo qualitative data analysis software. After the completion of the data analysis, the research questions were again applied to the key focal points of the participants responses. These responses, as they are applicable to the topic, are called attention to in support of the findings and discussion.

FINDINGS

After completing twelve individual interviews, two major themes and five subthemes were detected and accordingly grouped together. The themes that emerged were “influences from new co-cultures,” which contain three subthemes and “lack of cultural understanding,” which had two subthemes.

Participants

All twelve participants discussed in this study are either from the Southeast or have lived in the state where the research was conducted for a significant amount of time.

Despite the shared geographical location, participants come from varying ethnic, educational, religious, and political backgrounds.

Participants ranged from ages eighteen to twenty-four, including six Caucasians, two African Americans, one Hispanic, and three individuals of mixed race. Of these twelve, two identified as male, eight as female, and two as non-binary. A chart of these demographics is provided in Appendix E. All participants were either a freshman or sophomore at a large state university in the Southeastern United States during the time of their interview. Additionally, all participants were assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

Influences From New Co-Cultures

One theme of this study is how individuals' contact with cultures that are new to them impact their way of thinking about both themselves and the values they perceive among individuals who belong to different cultural groups. While this seems like an obvious theme given the name of the study, the subthemes of influences from new cultures form a deeper understanding. These subthemes are Selective Self-Presentation, Participation Easing Division, and Shaping of Values.

Selective self-presentation

Throughout several of the interviews, participants reflected on how this can take place differently depending on both themselves and the 'new' person. When asked how they think other people categorize them in terms of their background, interests, and values, Palmer believes it depends entirely on the individual: "Not that I'm not myself, I just show different sides of myself depending on who I see." Controlling what aspects of

herself she shows feels like a safer way of meeting people than if she were to display her whole self at once. Her act of controlling what aspects of herself are seen, along with another participant, Darian, who says "I typically dress really nicely. I try to make people think I am put together and intelligent," highlight aspects that could be classified as deflecting. Aimee Daramus says deflection is about protecting one's self-image instead of fully presenting themselves as they fear judgement will form (2023).

Another form of self-presentation was apparent in other participants as they seemingly took less precaution when initially meeting new individuals. Responding to the same question, one participant in particular, Reese, pointed out that his personality can be seen as overwhelming. Reese expands on this saying "I go pretty full force [When I meet someone] but it's pretty accurate what other people usually think, and I don't really care because that just how I am so take me or leave me." Much like how Reese embraces the initial perception of others as he shows his authentic self, Avery feels similarly. Avery gives an example by sharing:

I think people are either hesitant or really comfortable around me because the first question I always ask when I meet someone is their pronouns and that can either make them feel welcomed or they'll just give you a weird look and I kind of know to walk away since they don't have the same opinions as me.

As pointed out in the experience, we can see how gestures and actions (such as asking pronouns) are automatically associated with groups people believe they will like or dislike. Participants Riley and Charlie give another angle of insight to this as well. Charlie says that as a woman of color, assumptions are often made before the meeting even takes place:

So many people are also amazed at how mature they think I am because everyone expects me to be ghetto, revealing, and loud when that isn't really the case. When I say I don't drink or smoke most people are like "what?!" just because they assumed...This thinking of my representation through music and tv is taken back when they find out I have a good head on my shoulders.

Riley shared an experience relating to assumptions made about her as well. "I'd like to think people just think of me as like Southern but because of my accent I get call hillbilly a lot" further explaining that it is an assumption based strictly on how she talks.

Participation Easing Division

Adapting to an environment such a college, a place with so much variety, can be overwhelming – especially if one goes into it not knowing one's "place." When discussing their assimilation into college life, the majority of participants mentioned how being part of something such as a club or organization helped them feel more comfortable and willing to embrace others. Alex, a participant of color who grew up in a white dominated space felt more comfortable with her increasing involvements.

In most of my honors classes I am the only person of color, which is fine, I just feel a lot of pressure to be better and prove myself. But it's something that has gone away the more I get involved and meet people, the easier it is to feel at place...I haven't had any trouble meeting black people and making black friends which has been really nice.

The decreasing solitude Alex experienced as she found people like her is not unique. Another participant, James, expressed a similar relief when asked what cultures

they had experienced since being in college. James says, “so many queer people which is so exciting because I am queer myself” James continued “but because I come from a Christian background it's so nice to meet other queer people since I was never able to express myself and could never be loud and proud like I wanted until I came here.” James also added that the college atmosphere has helped them branch out to meet new individuals. This newfound level of independence was also expressed by Avery. Avery says, “It wasn't until I got here that I got to see a lot of different people in general and it gives me so much more confidence in myself and my culture.”

While Alex, James, and Avery shared how finding groups they already identified with helped their adaptation, several participants said that the college experience as a whole is what makes them feel most integrated. When asked how work in groups during class has impacted his views, outlooks, etc., Darian, being a non-traditional student said, “Not the group but just being at [University] I can see how diverse everything is and it has helped me as an individual feel more confident to be independent just by seeing all of the other people here.” Reese also reflects on the diversity he observes, stating “Outside of the classroom I feel very free at [University]. Most everyone seems confident and well acclimated and that makes me more comfortable. It's like when everyone is happy or content, I want to be part of that too.”

Despite not having a predetermined social group they were hoping to find, but also needing a more personal connection to feel at ease, we have participants Riley and Blake. Riley and Blake both experienced feelings of isolation until they joined their respective organizations. Riley, explaining a time she felt left out, said

Before I became a tour guide and I was just working at the front desk, I felt a little bit out of place ... I thought that [the tour guides] were superior I guess that's just the time where I felt kind of like less than them.

After she became a tour guide and began to broaden her horizons, she said that “I learned how easy it is to make friends once you get out there it starts to snowball, and you meet all kinds of people.” Blake explained her beginning in college to be a very lonely experience until her second semester. “After getting involved I was so much happier. I was a part of SGA. I served on freshman council and Senate and I'm a part of Greek life as well as two medical clubs. Even though I did feel out of place in the beginning, it was because I wasn't involved.

With these revelations from seven participants, it is clear that involvement is a key element of assimilation.

Shaping of Values

Encountering people from new co-cultures also exposed participants to new values and ways of living. For some participants, this had the impact of shaping and solidifying their own values. As values are a key aspect of culture, it is important that we see if this formation of personal values, and eventual culture begins in college as it is a building block for character development (Antonio and Astin, 2000).

In the research conducted, a variety of participants disclosed this character development as it has applied to them. Ellis in particular struggles with her ideas of culture due to her severe visual impairment.

The idea of race and culture is really hard for me to understand because it isn't something that I as a blind person ever know unless it is explicitly told to me but even then, I still don't really know what it means.

The most interesting part of this is her outlook on different types of people as she says, "I can definitely understand how people bring different things to the table and it is important to appreciate and understand it all." Other participants who obtained a new understanding of culture are Charlie, Reese, and Riley. Charlie says, "I really think that all of these people and influences help me see that there is a lot more to the world." Going in a little more depth, is Reese who shared his newly found understanding of religion. In this he states, "I always thought you had to be a certain way and follow special rules to worship certain figures, but I have met people who teach me that's not true." For these participants, recognizing these differences breaks down barriers between cultures and groups. Much like Reese, Riley discusses how her eyes are open now and she understands much more than she did when she was growing up in a small town.

It is important to note that this specific influence is not the same for everyone. Others might already have values and ideals that are simply enforced by the community around them. This facet of value building as a subtheme is apparent, specifically for participants from historically marginalized groups. Those who chose to answer questions regarding the influence of other cultures said that rather than create a new understanding, their experience has only solidified their values. When asked how her outlook on life and individuals has changed since being in college, Alex says, "I can see though that I have solidified or modified the values I grew up with based on the influence around me." Without further detail, it is hard to understand if the experience solidified her values

through positive or negative assimilation. None the less, Avery said almost the exact same thing claiming “I don’t think I have change necessarily but being in this [College] atmosphere has reinforced my thoughts and opinions on specific things just by seeing people kind of do their own thing” - which also leaves out the positive or negative possibilities that might or might not have occurred.

Lack of Cultural Understanding

The other primary theme detected in this study is the general lack of understanding what the broader concept of culture itself means. From this lack of understanding emerged (1) the general fear of saying/doing the wrong thing and (2) conflating culture and ethnicity.

Fear

As the questions during the interview portion of this research mainly revolved around cultural observations, several of the participants were hesitant to answer, often sharing their fear of saying the wrong thing to or about another culture.

When asked what cultures and individuals Devon, a white woman, has had experiences with, she responded with,

I don’t really like to say too much because I don’t want to say the wrong thing. It gets really messy when you talk about other people and their beliefs because you can say something wrong, and everyone will yell at you and stuff. It’s like walking on eggshells when you don’t understand their life... I feel like I have to take precaution to not upset people. College is very different because if you say

something wrong, they will hang you so to speak so just having to adjust my vocabulary is different for me.

Here, we can see Devon correlate her normative language and expression towards other groups to her upbringing where she was surrounded by individuals similar to her.

This fear is apparent among individuals from historically marginalized groups as well. One example comes from Parker. Parker, a woman of color, says one aspect of her group work she didn't expect was the sheer hesitation "It's like we want to talk, we just don't want to say the wrong thing and mess up." She continues to discuss how it has changed her outlook on how it seems individuals are supposed to communicate:

I have been learning that it's not typical to communicate with people from different cultures mainly because of the anxiety of not knowing differences or saying the wrong thing. It's best to not talk at all then to talk and make a mistake.

Her hesitation had a chilling effect on her group participation.

Conflating Ethnicity and Culture

The conflation of ethnicity with culture was a repeated issue while trying to both conduct and analyze the interviews. Although race/ethnicity is one aspect of culture, when asked questions about culture, the vast majority of responses gravitated in the direction of ethnic or racial backgrounds rather than taking a broader perspective on cultural backgrounds. When asked about new cultures, Alex (a woman of color) responded, "Well racially I haven't had any trouble meeting black people." Similarly, Ellis and Darian shared their racial identity as an immediate answer to their cultural description - highlighting a narrow view of what culture is.

For other participants, although their immediate response described ethnicity, they then expanded their thoughts with broader descriptions of cultural practices and values that coincide with those ethnicities. For example, asking Blake about her personal culture, she responded promptly, “my culture is Uzbek, where we're from.” Uzbek, however, is not a culture – it is an ethnicity. Blake proceeds to follow up on the aspects of this culture:

The hair has to be back at all times, it can never be put down, a lot of jewelry wasn't really allowed. Also, where I come from, we have our pretty much own food and traditions where we are oriented around our family, so family is the number one thing for us. And I think that's the one thing I'm very thankful to learn from, from our culture, that stuck with me. I take my family very seriously over school and over myself. We take our culture seriously and we celebrate a couple of the holidays, such as the religious holiday which is Ramadan. It's celebrated every year, so it's a big holiday for us. There's one more holiday that we celebrate that's called New Rose - pretty much means our new year, but it happens in March. We have a couple of traditional clothing pretty much just for girls, so we wear long dresses just to cover ourselves up just because that's how our culture is.

Discussing her encounters with different cultures and co-cultures, Charlie explains,

My best friend here is actually Pakistani, and I go to clubs and stuff with her. She introduced me to a lot of Muslim practices. I have another friend who is Indian, and I go to her groups and clubs and stuff too and I've learned about their beliefs and foods and stuff like that.

As with many other aspects of this study, this perspective is repeated across all aspects of diversity. Devon shows this while answering the same question as Blake. “Hmmm I don’t know. I mean I have like Scottish and Irish blood, but I don’t know about it. But I am southern so stuff like hospitality and religion, stuff like that. The things I *have* to do.” While one might argue that cultural aspects are synonymous with their coincided ethnicity, religion and hospitality are thought of as southern characteristics, not Irish and Scottish.

Another side to this limited interpretation of culture appears in the participants who believed they had no culture. Reese said “Well, I’m a white Christian so there isn’t very much culture. We are pretty basic and it’s just how it is. Just average.” when describing his culture. James had a similar response “Well, I don’t because I’m white.” Yet, like other participants, they followed it with an explanation of the culture they supposedly lack. “I have southern roots so if I had to compare it, I guess it’d be stiff like sweet tea and BBQ and fried chicken and cookouts maybe. Those traditional things we always do.” This is an interesting descriptive response given the confidence that culture was not a factor in their self-concept.

DISCUSSION

Building on previous research and theory, this investigation was focused around two important questions: “How do new college students communicate with students of perceivably different co-cultural groups?” and “How does communication with perceivably different co-cultural groups shape the identity of college students?” This research strives to understand not only how these interactions occur, but why they occur. Because perceptions, dynamics, and experiences are unique to each person, the answers

to the research questions presented themselves in a reflective way – steering away from a distinct answer, but rather something that requires interpretation.

Theoretical applications

Comprehending how the communicative process occurs among new college students of varying co-cultures, these findings can be interpreted with face negotiation theory, communication accommodation theory, co-cultural theory, and muted group theory.

Face-Negotiation Theory

As it is understood in communication studies, face negotiation, or one's method of self-presentation, is traditionally applied to cases of intercultural communication – especially where conflict might be present (Ting-Toomey, 1985). Because of the dynamics that arise as individuals meet new people, the act of presenting face was a frequently appearing concept throughout this study.

Particularly prominent in the 'selective self-presentation' portion of the research findings, we can see how some participants, such as Palmer and Darian, were more strategic about their techniques of presenting face. Both alluded to a purposefully malleable method of expression. Their method, however, is not the only way of doing this. Reese and Avery projected a more confident form of face, embracing their true selves and refraining from changing it for others – accepting perceptions any way they came.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication accommodation theory, as supported by this study, is understood through the act of individuals purposely presenting themselves in a way to either align themselves with or separate themselves from the other person. While participants partake in this mechanism as described in 'selective self-presentation', it could also be detected in the 'fear' portion of the analysis – showing how some participants, like Devon, don't say much until the values of the person they're talking to is known, allowing her to present accordingly.

Co-cultural Theory

Co-cultural theory was another understanding that can be applied to this study and is specifically rich in some of the statements from Alex and Devon. Alex felt an immense amount of pressure to succeed in a white dominated place – giving us a textbook image of how communication from underrepresented groups can emerge, i.e., being the only person of color. Taking a look at the more dominant side of co-cultural theory, we see how the perception of cultural dominance can be unintentional. Devon, for example, discussed the adjustment in her vocabulary being something she had to learn as her traditional vocabulary presented itself in a more biased fashion.

Practical Applications

While conducting this research, notes were made highlighting the issues that focus on students' understandings, assimilation abilities, and the boundaries of division. From these observations, opportunities to help students assimilate to the college setting were identified. There are two aspects that higher education has the ability to work on.

These solutions might lie in group work, university general education requirements, and organizational participation encouragements. Many participants had little to no experience in college group work, and if they did, it was primarily with people who they picked and were perceived as the same. To combat this, it is important that students of all backgrounds are offered and encouraged to work with a mixture of cultures – especially as this is a key aspect that will take place in the workforce.

While it is important to work with members of different cultures and ethnicities, it is critical that the difference between the two are understood. One of the most prominent themes in this research was that participants had little understanding of the broader meaning of culture. For clarification purposes, culture is something that encompasses the ideas, practices, and traditions of an individual or group. Ethnicity is more aligned with nationality and geographical origin, which is only one aspect of culture. This is by far the most complex obstacle of this research as the question pertaining to the differences was misunderstood. As can be expected, the misunderstanding could cause issues whether they are inside or outside of the classroom. The researcher's solution for this would begin in the earliest stages of college assimilation.

Institutions collectively acknowledge the importance of new students learning where classes are, how to navigate the new environment, converse with faculty, and learn an overview of their newfound university. This primarily takes place during new student orientation. In this time, there is rarely any preparation for the new cultural experiences one will experience from other students. If this were to be implemented, it can be imagined that a lack of fear, which was apparent in the results, will come from it as this

preparation would ideally educate new students on misconceptions, differences, and the importance of cultural diversity.

Some coursework might be another useful implementation in perhaps a cultural communication or culture-based history course as long as it expands the students general understanding of culture and its validity. Another ideal improvement that could be made, either alone or coupled with cultural education, is a requirement of involvement in clubs or organizations. One of the more interesting findings of this study is that participation in group work slowed the construction of division. With stipulations and exceptions applied accordingly, the implementation of club and organizational participation encouragements might be beneficial. If students were required to contribute a specified amount of time serving as a member of a club or organization, changes would likely take place as the students build a closer relationship with people of different cultures over shared interests – subsequently forming their own co-culture.

Limitations

As can be expected with any topic of research, there are limitations that hinder the full potential of the topic's understanding. For the research at hand, these limitations presented themselves through the questions asked, understanding of the topic, and the participant pool available and willing. Due to IRB stipulations and personal boundaries, the interview questions were created as a way to gather general information while keeping from any uncomfortable situations or unnecessary dialogue. That being said, some of the question's responses resulted in more questions than answers – most frequently due to a lack of understanding what the question was asking as they referred to culture.

As this study only recruited either Freshman or Sophomore status participants from one University with no offered compensation, the pool of contributors was slim. The recruitment period taking place primarily over the summer months was another contributor to the small number of participants. It would be inadequate to claim that the answers of twelve participants could effectively represent the student body as a whole. Because of this, it is important that further research is conducted.

Future Research

This research allows for multiple opportunities to further its validity. Because the study was conducted with a small sample, it would be beneficial to study different regions and higher educational classification is a possible route to pursue. Additionally, having this study applied in a longitudinal matter to the same cohort of participants their freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior year has the potential to pinpoint what aspects and conditions of college life are best for cultural assimilation.

Conclusion

In the process of interviewing twelve university college students holding either freshman or sophomore status on their interpretations and experiences with culture, participants provided a wide range of experiences and viewpoints that allowed the research to be analyzed under multiple lenses of theoretical scrutinization. In this analysis, two themes and five subthemes were detected as an attempt to answer the research questions of (1) How do new college students communicate with students of perceivably different co-cultural groups? And (2) How does communication with perceivably different co-cultural groups shape the identity of college students? The researcher of this study found that there is a serious lack of definitive cultural knowledge, leading to general

misunderstanding and falsehoods around groups people perceive to be different from their own. To help this lack of understanding, the researcher proposes several opportunities that would allow for a deeper understanding around cultural assimilation.

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Study Title: Investigating how new college students make sense of their communication with individuals from different co-cultural groups and how these experiences shape their identity.

Protocol Number: TBD

Approval Date: TBD

Principal Investigator: Alexander Hamilton

Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

Study Description and Purpose: The intent of this research is to interview college freshman and sophomores with a series of questions regarding their experiences with individuals of perceivably different co-cultures as they work together through group work in college classes, organizations, or mutual interests. The results of this project will expectantly show how these new college students navigate their way through settings with co-cultures that are perceivably new to them. As data will be collected from identifying different individuals, we will be able to see how if at all, these members of different co-cultures adjust their communication in relation to their end goal.

Target Population: MTSU Freshman & Sophomores

Risks & Benefits: Participants will be asked about their experiences interacting with others on paired or group school work. Depending on your personal life experiences and circumstances, this may include discussion of uncomfortable or unpleasant moments.

However, no participant is required to discuss anything they don't wish to discuss.

Participants may not benefit directly from participation in this study, although some may find it cathartic or even enjoyable to have an open-ended discussion about their experiences working on school projects with others. By participating, you will be enhancing knowledge about identity and intercultural communication in the field of communication. This will potentially highlight common issues where students need increased support.

Additional Information:

Contact Information: abh7a@mtmail.mtsu.edu

Principal Investigator: Alexander Hamilton

Contact Information: abh7a@mtmail.mtsu.edu

Faculty Advisor: Elizabeth Dalton

Contact Information: Elizabeth.dalton@mtmail.mtsu.edu

For additional information about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at irb_information@mtsu.edu. (<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>)

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Email

Subject Line for Email Recruitment:

Body of Email: My name is Alexander Hamilton, and I am currently working on my honors thesis. In order to effectively execute my research, I am needing 20 – 35 freshman/sophomore standing MTSU students from varying backgrounds. The intent of this research is to interview college freshmen and sophomores with a series of questions regarding their experiences with individuals of perceivably different co-cultures as they work together through group work in college classes, organizations, or mutual interests.

Dear, MTSU Freshmen and Sophomores

Introductory Paragraph (optional):

IRB Details: TBD

Study Title: Investigating how new college students make sense of their communication with individuals from different co-cultural groups and how these experiences shape their identity.

Protocol Number: TBD

Approval Date: TBD

Principal Investigator: Alexander Hamilton

Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

Target Population: MTSU freshmen/sophomores

Risks & Benefits: Participants will be asked about their experiences interacting with others on paired or group schoolwork. Depending on your personal life experiences and circumstances, this may include discussion of uncomfortable or unpleasant moments.

However, no participant is required to discuss anything they don't wish to discuss.

Participants may not benefit directly from participation in this study, although some may find it cathartic or even enjoyable to have an open-ended discussion about their experiences working on school projects with others. By participating, you will be enhancing knowledge about identity and intercultural communication in the field of communication. This will potentially highlight common issues where students need increased support.

Additional Information:

Contact Information: abh7a@mtmail.mtsu.edu

Principal Investigator: Alexander Hamilton

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Faculty Advisor: Elizabeth Dalton

Contact Information: Elizabeth.dalton@mtsu.edu

For additional information about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at irb_information@mtsu.edu. (<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>)

Concluding Paragraph (optional):

Survey Link: n/a

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Date of Interview: _____

Place: _____

Time: _____

SECTION I – BIOGRAPHICAL/DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

1. Name/Pseudonym:
2. Gender:
3. Age:
4. Racial identity:
5. Resides in:
6. Occupation:
7. Employment status:
8. Year in school:
9. Transfer status:
10. Hometown: (urban/suburban/rural?)
11. Religious affiliation:
12. Political affiliation:

SECTION II – QUESTION CATEGORIES, GRAND TOUR QUESTIONS, AND PLANNED PROMPTS

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
 - a. Where did you grow up? What was your hometown like?
 - b. What was your high school like?
2. Tell me how you felt about coming to and arriving at MTSU.

- a. Do you have any memorable experiences about when you first arrived on campus?
3. Describe your cultural background (as you understand “culture”).
4. When someone meets you for the first time, how do you think they categorize you in terms of your background, interests, and values?
5. What different types of cultures or cultural groups have you encountered or noticed since arriving at MTSU?
 - a. Tell me about a time when you encountered someone whom you believed to have a different background/interests/values/culture from you.
6. Tell me about a time when you felt “out of place” (either here or elsewhere-school, work, socially, etc.).
 - a. What made you feel out of place?
7. In your MTSU classes, what kinds of paired or group projects have you worked on? These can be big ongoing assignments or short-term group work in class.
8. Did these group projects include people you perceived to be from a different background than you?
 - a. How did those classmates differ from you?
 - b. How did you feel/what were your expectations about working with them?
 - c. How did the experience go overall? Was the project/assignment a success?
9. Did you learn anything from working in this group?
 - a. What, if anything, surprised you about this experience?
10. Has anything about you changed – in terms of what you know, how you see the world, your understanding, etc. – since working in this group?
11. Is there anything you learned from this experience about a specific cultural group?

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Investigating how new college students make sense of their communication with individuals from different co-cultural groups and how these experiences shape their identity.

Protocol Number: TBD

Approval Date: TBD

Principal Investigator: Alexander Hamilton

Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

You are being asked to participate in a research project. The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it.

1. Purpose of the study: The intent of this research is to interview college freshman and sophomores with a series of questions regarding their experiences with individuals of perceivably different co-cultures as they work together through group work in college classes, organizations, or mutual interests. The results of this project will expectantly show how these new college students navigate their way through settings with co-cultures that are perceivably new to them. As data will be collected from identifying different individuals, we will be able to see how if at all, these members of different co-cultures adjust their communication in relation to their end goal.

2. Description of procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study: Thirty-five individual, in-person, interviews will be held with ten identifying males and ten identifying females of freshman and sophomore status from MTSU. As this study focuses on the shaping of identity in new college students, freshman and sophomore students will be interviewed as they are less likely to have become acclimated to an environment with numerous new cultures. These interviews will be executed and analyzed over the summer and fall of 2023

3. Compensation for participation: None

Here are your rights as a participant:

- a. Your participation in this research is voluntary.
- b. You may skip any item that you don't want to answer, and you may stop the research at any time. Note that if you leave an item blank, you will be warned that you missed one, just in case it was an accident. You can still click that you don't want to answer. Some items may be required in order to accurately present the study.
- c. There are no risks associated with your participation besides possible discomfort with some of the questions.
- d. There are no real benefits to you from participating besides possibly learning something about the research.
- e. You will NOT be asked to provide any identifiable personal information.
- f. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private, but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with people at MTSU (such as the MTSU Institutional Review Board) or other agencies (such as the Federal Government Office for Human Research Protection) if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

Contact Information: If you should have any questions about this research study please contact: Alexander Hamilton at abh7a@mtmail.mtsu.edu

Principal Investigator: Alexander Hamilton

Contact Information: abh7a@mtmail.mtsu.edu

Faculty Advisor: Elizabeth Dalton

Contact Information: Elizabeth.dalton@mtsu.edu

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at irb_information@mtsu.edu.
(<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>)

If you're ready to get started, please make your choice below before clicking the arrow button.

Thanks again for volunteering your time to this project!

I have read the information above. I am at least 18 years old. I believe I understand the purpose, risks, and benefits of the research, and I know what I will be expected to do as a study participant.

I consent to participate

I decline to participate

APPENDIX E

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Gender Identity</u>	<u>Racial Identity</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Year in School</u>
Alex	Female	African American	19	Sophomore
Parker	Female	Mixed Race	18	Freshman
Ellis	Female	Native American	18	Freshman
Charlie	Female	African American	19	Sophomore
Darian	Male	Mixed Race	24	Sophomore
Palmer	Female	Caucasian	18	Female
Devon	Female	Caucasian	19	Sophomore
James	Non-Binary	Caucasian	18	Freshman
Reese	Male	Caucasian	19	Sophomore
Avery	Non-Binary	Hispanic	18	Freshman
Riley	Female	Caucasian	19	Sophomore
Blake	Female	Caucasian	21	Sophomore

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