

Realize This Is My Space:
Applying Co-Cultural Theory to the Interactions of
the Deaf Community and Sign Language Interpreters

Dezira Rodriguez

TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

The Boller Review: Vol. 7. 2022-23

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Introduction
- II. Literature Review
 - A. Co-Cultural Theory
 - B. Deaf Culture and the Deaf Experience
- III. Research Questions
- IV. Positionality Statement
- V. Methods
 - A. Interview Procedures
 - B. Description of Participants
 - C. Data Analysis
- VI. Findings
- VII. Discussion

INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities are often underrepresented and constantly navigate a world designed with the majority population in mind. The first policy to begin protecting the rights of people with disabilities was Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. However, the first comprehensive law to protect all areas of life for people with disabilities occurred in 1992 by establishing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In a CDC Disability & Health Data System report, of the 24.8% adult population self-identified their disability, 5.7% reported identifying as deaf or having severe hearing difficulty (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Since the establishment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), providing a sign language interpreter upon request for a Deaf signer is now a reasonable accommodation that medical, government, and business establishments must secure. Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act defines a reasonable accommodation as an “adjustment or modification provided by an employer to enable people with disabilities to enjoy equal employment opportunities” (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1997). While this law assures the Deaf community that they will not have to pay for this accommodation, conferring responsibility over to these entities allows more control over how the services are provided (McCray, 2013). Business entities can select interpreting agencies they partner with; therefore, the quality of available interpreters will be limited to the employees within an interpreting agency of the business’ choice. The control extends beyond the limitation in agency selection; hospitals frequently prefer to use a video remote interpreter (VRI) instead of an in-person interpreter because it provides convenience for quick service. From the perspective of Deaf consumers, the ease of access for business should not supersede a Deaf user’s preference. For example, in 2015, a Deaf mother in Florida was required to give birth without an on-site interpreter present. The hospital held a stance that VRI is sufficient and abides by the ADA’s policy for “effective” communication (Musgrave, 2015). However, while giving birth, the mother was straining to look at a screen, and internet instability did not guarantee she would have a secure connection throughout the birthing process. Because “effective” is subjective, establishments have more authority to decide what interpreter/agency will show up and how they will show up based on business entity preference, not Deaf consumer preference.

Orbe’s co-cultural theory posits that over time co-cultural groups such as European-American heterosexual middle- or upper-class males, have obtained dominant group status in societal institutions. In comparison to previous referrals of marginalized groups, such as “subcultures” and “minority” groups, the reference “co-cultural” group title aims to emphasize

the value of all cultural groups without a negative connotation that implies inferiority. Through co-cultural theory, the communication between dominant group members and co-cultural group members is studied from the perspective of the co-cultural group members. Thus, co-cultural theory centers on the lived experiences of co-cultural groups navigating and engaging with dominant group structures. Despite Deaf people qualifying as a co-cultural group, minimal research relates to Deaf populations as co-cultural group members. Additionally, while the dominant group perceives Deaf people to have a disability, many Deaf people do not consider themselves to have a disability and maintain a sense of pride surrounding their deafness. This value reveals itself by distinguishing between the word 'deaf' and 'Deaf.' The capitalization is indicative to many Deaf people about one's cultural status in relation to deafness, whereas 'deaf' represents a medical perspective on deafness (De Andrade & Monroe, 2018). In honoring the identification of interview participants, "Deaf" will be used to reflect their pride for their community and experiences, and 'deaf' is only used when specifically stated by scholars or government entities. Culturally Deaf members also emphasize recognizing individuals' sign styles. Sign styles refer to how a person signs and is influenced by factors such as regional variations, age, and personal preference. In maintaining an empowering stance for participants, members will be referred to as 'Deaf' to reflect their preferred term. Through interviewing participants who align themselves with the Deaf community, this present investigation aims to explore the ways that Deaf participants enact communicative behaviors to achieve their intended interaction result when interacting with dominant group members.

Co-Cultural Theory

Co-cultural theory is rooted in the frameworks of muted-group theory and standpoint theory. Muted-group theory, developed by Ardener, asserts that a social hierarchy exists in all societies, thus privileging certain groups over others. Through this concept, it is understood that groups that maintain a higher position in a hierarchical society can assert more power and influence and create a dominant group narrative (Orbe, 1998). Individuals who do not fit within this advantaged group are identified as non-dominant. Standpoint theory is a guiding tenet for constructing co-cultural theory by emphasizing the value marginalized group members' unique perspectives bring into conversation with dominant group members. Following its predecessors, co-cultural theory centers a communicative lens in discussing power and culture.

Thus, co-cultural theory is based on co-cultural group members negotiating their communicative practices with the dominant group. There are six universal factors: preferred outcome, field of experience, abilities, situational context, perceived costs and rewards, and

communication approach that influence the co-cultural group members to decide between 26 communicative practices (Orbe, 1998). Through communicative approaches, members use a strategy to achieve results by engaging with dominant group members. The communication approaches include nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive. A nonassertive approach includes actions where co-cultural groups are inhibited and non-confrontational. For example, some Asian Americans' response to racist commentary amidst COVID-19 fears was to ignore and walk away (Jun et al., 2021). Currently, there are no studies conducted on co-cultural theory and the Deaf community; however, based on previous qualitative studies (e.g., Johnson, 2014; McCray, 2013; Napier et al., 2019; Napier, 2011, p.82) reporting about Deaf people's experiences, examples from research are used to demonstrate what communicative approaches may look like for the Deaf community. For Deaf people, a nonassertive example could look like frustration and feelings of exclusion because an interpreter excludes background information that disrupts the communication for everyone else, and upon realizing this exclusion, the Deaf person decides to remain quiet out of concern for their presentation to the general hearing population (Napier et al., 2019). An assertive approach reflects the balance between the needs and expectations of both dominant group members' and co-cultural members' desires. For instance, Zirulnik & Orbe (2021) present occurrences where Black female pilots utilize liaisons through trusted dominant group members to mentor them through a white, male-dominated profession. In the context of the Deaf community, an assertive approach may include Deaf community members emphasizing the value of an interpreter with a "good attitude," meaning they value an interpreter that is flexible and willing to "give something" to the Deaf community, and they will seek out those interpreters (Napier, 2011, p.82). Lastly, an aggressive approach fulfills the needs of the individual only, such as Chinese gay men cussing out rubberneckers who stare (Bie & Tang, 2016). For most accounts regarding Deaf people engaging with the interpreter, participants rarely reported any behavior resembling an aggressive approach. This, in part, may be due to their belief that "if you are overly difficult for them [interpreters], then they don't want to help you," which serves as a deterrent to engaging in communicative practices that jeopardize access to an interpreter (McCray, 2013, p.79).

The preferred outcome focuses on the desired result of the co-cultural group member. Preferred outcomes include assimilation, accommodation, and separation. Assimilation attempts to remove cultural differences between both groups in an attempt to fit in with the dominant society. Notably, assimilation is not always for the sake of appeasing the dominant group. However, it can also serve as a form of protection due to the examined perceived cost and reward that co-cultural group members observe. Fox & Warber (2015) note that individuals

from the LGBT+ community often demonstrated values of assimilating to the dominant group in conversation due to the concerns surrounding homophobia and their safety. While assimilation can be a survival tactic, the implications of masking oneself can have detrimental effects on a person's self-concept. Congdon (2014) highlights the effects of negative behavior towards co-cultural group members, such as bullying, when assessing his strategy and attempts to assimilate to dominant group standards. Negative implications for Congdon's assimilation, an individual with Tourette's Syndrome, included a negative self-concept towards his identity as he constantly rejected aspects of himself to fit in. Though there are not any present studies regarding co-cultural theory and the Deaf community, Johnson (2014) documents that some Deaf participants attributed communication breakdowns as a result of their deafness instead of a lack of accommodation from the interpreter. This self-blame elicited a negative self-concept, supporting Congdon's (2014) analysis of the risks that a negative self-concept can have on co-cultural members when they attempt to assimilate into the dominant group.

Accommodation occurs when co-cultural group members require dominant group members to consider co-cultural group member experiences and promote collaboration between the two. Cohen & Avanzino (2010) demonstrate how individuals with physical disabilities negotiated accommodative approaches in the workplace because of the constant negative stereotype non-disabled people place upon people with disabilities. In an effort to require dominant groups to change or shift their framework, people with disabilities opted to utilize an accommodative approach. Lastly, separation tends to reject common bonds with the dominant group and maintains their identity as a co-cultural group member.

Through the interdependence of preferred outcome, communication approach, and perceived cost and reward as factors that co-cultural group members operate on to select communicative practices, nine communication orientations emerged. The remaining three factors (field of experience, abilities, and situational context) are influential to the selection of communicative practices that determine an orientation.

According to Orbe (1998) on page 107, through a co-cultural member's field of experience, which guides perceptions of cost and rewards, and their ability to engage in communication practices, co-cultural group members "adopt communication orientations—based on their preferred outcomes and communication approaches." In combination with the communication approaches and preferred outcomes, co-cultural members select communicative behaviors across nine communication orientations to assume a specific stance during interactions with dominant group members. Each orientation also contains specific communicative practices (i.e., strategies) that individuals enact in interactions. These

communicative approaches—nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive—in combination with preferred outcomes—assimilation, accommodation, and separation—form orientations that co-cultural members navigate when engaging with dominant group members.

In the establishment of the theory, co-cultural theory largely focuses on recognizing a diverse set of co-cultural group member experiences from “women, people of color, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, people with disabilities, and those from a lower socioeconomic status” and the communicative approaches they enact to engage in dominant group interaction (Orbe, 1998, p.130). While most studies applying co-cultural theory often center on the topic of race (e.g., Ruiz-Mesa, 2022; Jun et al., 2021; Zirulnik & Orbe, 2021) and queer studies (Fox & Warber, 2015; Bie & Tang, 2016), Cohen and Avanzino (2010) present another underrepresented group, individuals with disabilities, in combination with co-cultural theory. Cohen and Avanzino’s work (2010) observed the organizational assimilation experiences of physically disabled individuals within their first three months of working at a new job. Through semi-structured interviews with 11 participants, the researchers analyzed the negotiation strategies this co-cultural group opted to enact to navigate the assimilation experience. Results yielded that participants demonstrated an affinity to employing an assertive and nonassertive accommodation stance when operating with the dominant group. This behavior is best explained through an accommodative stance’s perceived cost and reward. Without an accommodative stance, the continued negative perceptions of people with disabilities place this population at risk for the assumption that physical disability relates to intellectual disability. By approaching conversations and interactions with the intent to “reinvent” the rules, co-cultural group members utilized communicative approaches such as dispelling stereotypes, communicating self, and educating others to negotiate with dominant group interaction (Cohen & Avanzino, 2010). The necessity for participants to take an accommodative approach lends itself to the perceived cost and reward for lost opportunities such as promotions, collaboration, and inclusion in the organization without challenging the dominant group to engage with the co-cultural group.

Through co-cultural theory, this study seeks to center on the lived experiences of the co-cultural group, Deaf people, and how they interact with the dominant group, sign language interpreters, which represent hearing individuals. The remaining research in the literature review explains the relationship between Deaf people and sign language interpreters and combines this conversation with previous studies surrounding co-cultural theory. By utilizing the co-cultural framework to examine the underrepresented group, that is, the Deaf community, the following questions are posed to explore further the lived experiences of Deaf people and their interactions with sign language interpreters.

Deaf Community and Interpreter Dynamics

One line of research focuses on Deaf individuals' needs in interpreting relationships. There is an automatic power imbalance between the hearing interpreter and the Deaf signer based on the interpreter's status as a hearing person and a dominant group member. Most often, interpreters and translators are from the same group for which they perform their roles, meaning they often share cultural values and experiences and are in-group members. Unique to a sign language interpreter's position, these individuals must be outsiders of the Deaf community (Gentile et al., 1996). Though there are hearing individuals raised as Children of Deaf Adults (CODA) who understand the Deaf community as having been raised by a member, and other axes of identity (race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) can serve as a commonality between the two individuals, a hearing interpreter/person generally does not have the true lived experience of being Deaf and navigating the world as such. Thus, interpreters maintain a role as out-group members working to bridge the gap between the Deaf world and the hearing world. From an outsider's perspective, hearing people often assume that the interpreter is present for the Deaf person rather than recognizing that the interpreter's presence is necessary for both parties to achieve effective communication. The role of an interpreter is so deeply ingrained as existing solely for the Deaf individual that very rarely do people question the accuracy of an interpreter's representation of the hearing person present. (Young et al., 2019). Unlike Deaf people, hearing people are not burdened with the concern of how they come across to the Deaf person through an interpreter because there is significant control that they have in portraying themselves to others. This privilege in assuming the interpreter is present to provide access to the Deaf person reflects the dominant group's privilege to assume an interpreter's presence to aid in the conversation for the co-cultural group only and an absence of understanding of the interpreting process.

The interpreting process for sign language differs from many spoken language interpretations because often, it occurs simultaneously, whereas spoken language interpreting utilizes consecutive interpreting. While convenient for the hearing person to have everything they say simultaneously interpreted, a burden is placed on the Deaf user by requiring them to watch both the interpreter and simultaneously look at the messenger for cues that the interpreter may miss (Burke, 2017). The hearing party's lack of knowledge for interpreting can also impact the Deaf person. Burke (2017), a Deaf academic, shares her account of attempting to attend a conference and requesting sign language interpreters. Despite multiple attempts to reach out, the conference was silent until the week of the event, when they responded that two educational interpreters were booked. While Burke assumed educational interpreters meant

experienced professionals with an understanding of high-level academic jargon, the two interpreters that showed up were uncertified; one who worked in an elementary school and the other who volunteered in a church and “learned” sign language out of a book. The result of the conference’s ignorance was Burke’s exclusion and inability to engage in the conference despite the general public assuming she was receiving adequate services. Burke’s testimony is consistent with the claim that an interpreter who oversteps boundaries within their role may confuse the hearing consumer and affect the perceptions of the Deaf person’s identity (Napier et al., 2017). While outside of this conference, Burke is an outspoken academic, due to the skillset of the interpreters, her presence at the conference was withdrawn and silent. Overall, the nature of the relationship between a Deaf person and a sign language interpreter is complex, which navigates the line of empowerment and disempowerment through their actions and approach to the role.

Given the power imbalance and common inability of Deaf consumers to select their interpreter, Deaf people tend to place a significant emphasis on desiring a “good” interpreter. According to Napier (2011), the ideal interpreter, in the eyes of a Deaf person, is flexible, has the training, is knowledgeable, maintains their role, and has a good attitude. These values within the Deaf community are understood, although, to the business entities, their decision to select an interpreter is prioritized for the monetary value of the service. At the expense of the Deaf person, lack of flexibility in accommodation within the healthcare setting has led to frustration, oppression, insufficient information about their concerns, and a refusal of services, ultimately disempowering the Deaf person (James et al., 2022).

The negative impact of quality services extends beyond healthcare. For example, within higher education, a dissatisfactory experience with sign language interpreters can result in Deaf students opting to limit their class participation, withdraw from the class, or drop out of college due to the lack of support (McCray, 2013). For semester-long classes, developing a professional relationship with the Deaf consumer is crucial to the overall comfort level and experience of the Deaf person. However, trust is not easily given and requires demonstrating professionalism and respecting boundaries to achieve proper representation (Napier et al., 2017). As part of the professional standards an interpreter is expected to present, the attitude of an interpreter can affect the rapport a Deaf person feels towards their interpreter; these feelings significantly impact the overall outcome of the interpreted assignment (Napier, 2011). The research in this literature review has revealed ways in which the relationship between a Deaf person and an interpreter is critical to the overall experience and impacts for the co-cultural members.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To further our understanding of how Deaf individuals negotiate their identity during interactions with hearing people, specifically sign language interpreters, I pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do co-cultural communication factors influence Deaf individuals' relationships with interpreters?

RQ2: Through co-cultural theory, what communication orientations and strategies do Deaf people utilize most to navigate interactions with sign language interpreters?

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

As a certified sign language interpreter, I bring my lived experience to this study with an awareness that as a dominant group member, I navigate this research emphasizing the lived experiences of co-cultural group members. Institutional Review Board approval was received through Texas Christian University.

METHODS

Interview Procedures

Through exploration of the posed research questions, six semi-structured interviews ranging from 30-60 minutes were conducted via the Zoom platform with d/Deaf or Hard of Hearing (HoH) participants who have utilized a sign language interpreter as a service to receive accommodations. Snowball sampling was the primary method for recruitment, and interested participants filled out a Qualtrics survey that collected IRB (Institutional Review Board) approved consent forms and served to determine qualifications for the study.

Four of the six interviews were conducted in American Sign Language and voiced into English for an audio transcript by the researcher, and two interviews were conducted in spoken English. During all interviews, the closed captions feature on Zoom was activated and when signing participants answered questions, the interviewer would voice their answers on audio recording. At the end of each question, interviewees would review the captions to confirm their answer was voiced accurately to their satisfaction before moving to the next interview question. The interview guide questions centered on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing participants' lived

experiences through utilizing a sign language interpreter and their communicative approaches. Participant responses explored their overall interaction with sign language interpreters, the relationship they maintain with them, emphasis on establishing trust, experiences of violations in trust, and how these overall experiences influence their approach to future communicative practices with sign language interpreters. Throughout the interview process, multiple checkpoints were in place to prioritize the voice and accurate representation of each interviewee. At the end of the interview, each participant selected their own pseudonym to add another component of participation in the overall research experience. Additionally, the opportunity to provide their own pseudonym to engage in the research preserved their privacy.

Interview Guide

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner ranging from 30-60 minutes. The questions generated include the following:

1. What is your race, gender, and level of education?
2. How often do you use an interpreter?
 - a. Primarily for what?
3. How would you describe the relationship between you and interpreters?
4. What do you believe are the most important qualities, communication practices, or personality traits of an interpreter?
 - a. How would you describe their role?
5. Can you share some of your earliest experiences working with an interpreter?
6. Who taught you what to do with an interpreter and what was that like?
7. Can you tell me a story about a positive experience with an interpreter?
8. Can you describe a negative experience with an interpreter?
 - a. How did this experience affect you? How did you respond?
9. Tell me a story about when an interpreter broke your trust.
10. What is an example of a time when you felt an interpreter maintained the role and professionalism?
11. (Scenario) When attending class, your interpreter is clearly not voicing what you are signing, or having to ask you repeatedly to sign it again. How do you respond and how does it make you feel?
12. What advice would you give an interpreter in establishing trust within the Deaf community?
13. How do you build relationships with interpreters and what boundaries do you feel are important to set?
14. I am going to be using fake names when I write up this data. I can make one up, or is there a name you would prefer?

Description of participants

Out of approximately twenty Deaf and Hard of Hearing participants contacted, six opted to participate in this study. The sample of participants included five females and one male. Participants reported their highest level of education as: some college (n=1), associate degree (n=2), bachelor's degree (n=2), and master's degree (n=1). The sample of interviewees self-identified as White (n=2), Black (n=2), Hispanic (n=1), and multiracial (n=1).

Analysis

Upon confirmation of interview captions accuracy from participants, transcription services through Rev.com were accessed to transcribe all interviews. Through using a modified version of constant comparative analysis to code for themes from the interview data, all six interviews were coded twice, once during primary coding, which involved identifying basic, general codes to better understand the data, and then lumping the codes into broader themes related to co-cultural theory and the research questions, such as the factors, communication orientations, and practices (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

FINDINGS

Upon analyzing the six total interviews, for the first research question about influential factors in Deaf individuals' co-cultural interactions, three major themes surfaced at the forefront of conversation with participants which served a role in influencing the decision-making process for co-cultural group members when engaging with interpreters. The three factors are field of experience, navigating perceived risk-reward, and abilities. Within each factor, I analyzed why the factor was important for the participants. Additionally, interview data illustrated two co-cultural orientations participants used to negotiate their interactions with interpreters. Out of the various communication strategies reported, assertive accommodation and nonassertive assimilation stood out for frequently incorporating all six participants' communication behaviors. Within each approach, I highlight the salient practices evident in the data transcripts.

Field of Experience: Establishing Trust

Field of experience involves the "sum of one's life events that directly and indirectly influence perceptions, expectations, and understandings of the world" (Orbe, 1998, p. 93). Field of experience played a large role in helping participants understand what behaviors assisted in establishing trust with interpreters based on past experiences. One participant, Jenna, described how critical it is for interpreters to "be personable" during interactions because of how

vulnerable it is to have another person in intimate interactions, such as at doctors' appointments. In her experience, the presence of an interpreter led to a negative interaction with the doctor because the provider made assumptions about Jenna based on utilizing an interpreter. The doctor referred only to the interpreter to inquire about Jenna's medical history, and Jenna kept redirecting the provider towards herself to remind them, "Hey, I'm the patient." Despite these attempts, it was not until the interpreter interjected and established there was no relational connection between themselves and Jenna, informing the doctor, "you need to ask her the questions" that the doctor began to hesitantly engage with Jenna. Through this experience, she reflects that the interpreter directly was not the entire cause for her loss of trust, however, it was "how the hearing client perceived me" that impacted her desire to request an interpreter for another appointment. This one appointment "ruined" the openness to having another person in the room with her and now Jenna prefers to just "figure out something" rather than have an interpreter in the room. As a consequence of this loss of trust, Jenna's withdrawal of interpreter services is one that she recognizes is not "benefitting" to "deny myself access," although the experience "traumatized" her to a point of no return. While Jenna does not use interpreters for doctor appointments anymore, she still utilizes them in other areas such as her education. She has come to appreciate the relationship she has built with them now that they "know how I sign." The ability for the interpreter to accommodate Jenna's sign style (the way a person signs) has proven desirable and important to fostering the "great working relationship" the two maintain.

Like Jenna, Bambi acknowledges the value of building a "connection" with the Deaf community. Bambi feels an appreciation for interpreters that demonstrate transparency by creating a constant line of communication between herself, all involved interpreters, and the hearing members. For example, when attending community college, she had a team of interpreters who were "on top of it" by making sure everyone was included and ensuring she never felt like she was "left out," and if she missed class, the professor was quick to accommodate. Because of the open communication and excellent teamwork, Bambi feels confident that "if I didn't have that, I don't know that I would've made it past community college." It is apparent that experiences with interpreters influenced the behaviors and expectations for future interactions. For Jenna, she hopes to one day consider bringing an interpreter back into the medical setting, and for Bambi, her supportive environment is part of the reason she continued her educational journey and obtained a bachelor's degree. Participants consistently identified the qualities and characteristics of trust to be maintaining a professional boundary, showing up early and conversing with the Deaf person, maintaining a good attitude,

and remaining transparent with access to all information. While these values are echoed throughout interviews, Bambi also offers up an example of what trust is “not.” In describing the value of building connections in the Deaf community, she pauses to caution interpreters not to overstep their boundary of involvement. Bambi believes trust is not interpreters “taking over our platform” through “teaching ASL” because there is a recognition that ASL is “our language, and it’s our right to teach.” This example stems from Bambi’s own field of experience and now serves as a defining factor in evaluating interpreters and the ability to feel respectfully supported by them rather than feeling like they must compete with interpreters to teach ASL, a language they grew up with and primarily use to navigate the world. Trust for Deaf consumers goes beyond the immediate interaction; they have lasting implications for the Deaf person's future encounters and are considered when predicting consequences about their communicative behaviors and choices.

Navigating Perceived Risk-Reward: Predicting Consequences

Navigating the perceived risks and rewards occurs when co-cultural group members “evaluate the anticipated costs and rewards governed by an individual's field of experience” (Orbe, 1998, p.102). The perceived cost and reward largely influenced participants’ ability to select decisions that resulted in the greatest reward. During a doctor’s appointment, Xamien analyzed the perceived cost and reward to determine how he manages his emotions in a stressful situation. As Xamien inquired about his health with the doctor, he noticed the interpreter had a bad attitude and constantly asked him to repeat himself. Because of continuous interruptions, he felt the conversation with the doctor was being stalled. In that moment, he felt “really upset and angry,” however, he realized his emotions must be managed because he fears a reaction will give the doctors the “wrong impression of me.” Xamien’s understanding of costs and rewards depends largely on his own field of experience that guides him to censoring his true emotions. In his own analysis, he believes the consequence of reacting emotionally will reflect poorly on himself and not the interpreter; this fear outweighs the reward of freely expressing himself. By not reacting at all, he ensures he is able to still receive services without causing more disruption for the interaction. Based on his prediction of consequences, he decides to “fake it till you make it” and try repetitively to ensure the interpreter understands so they can relay the message to the doctor. Similarly, Sylvia also demonstrated an understanding of costs and rewards, as she found herself needing to accommodate for the interpreter during a doctor's appointment. Sylvia reported being sensitive to the interpreter’s odor due to their lack of antiperspirant, and it was so bothersome that she gathered up the courage to request the interpreter reapply some. The

interpreter denied the request and informed Sylvia that the odor did not bother them, so it is fine. Sylvia apologized for bringing it up and immediately felt regretful for addressing the issue at all.

But that really put me in a bad spot. I felt like people were looking down at me, and I really was just wishing that the interpreter would realize that this is my space that they're coming into, and then people are now looking at me like I'm the bad person rather than the interpreter.

Initially, Sylvia's concern about the body odor stemmed from the worry that the interpreter's presentation would reflect poorly on her, however after being rejected, she felt extremely aware of the disapproval from the hearing people present and felt the actions of the interpreter have now portrayed her negatively. Sylvia expressed a desire that the interpreter understand their role and place in the interaction which is that they are coming into a space that should not automatically be assumed to be theirs. Originally, Sylvia chose to act on expressing her concern due to the predicted consequence of being perceived negatively due to the odor, however, acting on this concern still resulted in a negative outcome. The result made Sylvia feel more insecure and discomforted despite the appointment centering on her experience. For Deaf people, interpreters are viewed as responsible to facilitate communication, and as Jenna stated, present for the "vulnerability" of having a "stranger" in the room. When a conflict occurs with the interpreter, Deaf people often have to advocate for themselves, most often advocating to another hearing entity, such as the doctor's office front desk as Xamien did, or contacting the interpreting agency directly. The necessity to file a complaint on a dominant group member to another member of the dominant group creates an inescapable mediation experience for Deaf people.

Abilities: Inescapable Mediation

Abilities acknowledge the "relative ability to engage in different behavior," while all 26 practices present themselves as appearing viable to all co-cultural groups, the communicative practices vary depending on personal choices and situational context (Orbe, 1998, p.95-96). In general, people tend to choose communicative practices that align with their personality style and the social situation they find themselves in. For example, while aggressive practices exist, people that identify as less confrontational will favor communicative practices that align with their level of self-perception, stating that "I'm still a very nice person" so "in that moment, I wasn't going to say anything." Though Ruth has aggressive communicative practices available to her such as confronting, her own level of comfort and personal characteristics influence her

overall abilities to engage in an aggressive communicative behavior. The behavior she ultimately gravitates towards is utilizing liaisons to navigate the dynamic without addressing the interpreter directly by “let[ting] the disability service people know” to receive a change in interpreters for her on-going class. Because Ruth relies on the services of an interpreter to obtain equivalent access in the classroom environment, she approaches a third party outside the interpreter-client relationship to mediate the situation. Importantly, the disability services department’s interpreter coordinator is a part of the dominant group as a hearing person. Through utilizing a liaison, Ruth still operates within the dominant groups structure as she must request a change of interpreter to another dominant group member. The necessity to advocate for oneself to the dominant group while simultaneously attempting to circumvent engaging directly with the interpreter, another dominant group member, creates an inescapable mediation for a Deaf person.

Ruth is not alone in this experience of inescapable mediation, five of the six participants shared experiences where they encountered conflict with an interpreter. Whether it was Sylvia’s interpreter interjecting their personal questions into a doctor’s appointment; Bambi’s interpreter that caused discomfort in the classroom; Joy’s interpreter whose tardiness delayed a surgery; or Xamien’s interpreter who had difficulty voicing Xamien’s concerns, none of the participants opted to engage the interpreter directly about the issue. Xamien decided, “I can’t trust them” and determined his best option was to contact the doctor’s office and inform them, “please do not use that specific interpreter again.” Expressing dissatisfaction with an interpreter still has some caveats, as Xamien acknowledges: “It’s tough. They [businesses] already have an agreement. They already have a vendor, being the interpreting agency with their contract.” This agreement between the two entities complicates the variety of interpreters available for services to the Deaf person. As a solution, Xamien must now negotiate with the other dominant group, hearing people in the doctor’s office, in assuring them “you can call other interpreters that agency has” to emphasize he does not want that specific interpreter anymore.

Nonassertive Assimilation

Nonassertive Assimilation occurs when co-cultural group members implement communicative practices, such as averting controversy, censoring self, emphasizing commonalities, and developing a positive face to “blend in unobtrusively into dominant society” (Orbe, 1998, p.110-111). A primary communication strategy used by participants was developing positive face. Developing positive face is the practice of becoming more “respectful,” and “polite” when interacting with dominant group members (Orbe, 1998, p.67). All participants expressed

the need to manage expectations of dominant group members' reactions to them. For example, Joy shared about how she navigates group conversations.

Trying to navigate that conversation smoothly and I want to join, but also at the same time, people talk so fast and over each other when they're hearing because they can. But for Deaf people with an interpreter, you can't necessarily do that. And so hearing people often misunderstand that about Deaf people because Deaf people tend to interrupt or try to interrupt early, and I don't want them to think that about me.

The quote above illustrates how Joy's attempt to not appear rude guides her communicative behavior in this interaction. The concerns of participants extend beyond the fear of appearing rude. Ruth manages the expectations of dominant members by trying to differentiate herself from other members of her co-cultural group. Although she utilized an interpreter through her entire undergraduate and graduate career, upon entering the workforce she has hesitation about using an interpreter because "I just always had that feeling that I didn't want people to look down on me." This concern about the dominant group's opinion determined Ruth's decision to abstain from equal access and to "suffer[ing] through it." The common thread between these two lived experiences reported above demonstrates a concern about how dominant group members perceive them, mostly focusing on the opinion of general hearing members with minimal experience of Deaf culture. In addition to participants' awareness of navigating the general hearing population's perceptions and stereotypes of Deaf people, all six interviewees demonstrated developing positive face with interpreter interactions directly. When Bambi had an interpreter that appeared discomforted by the class content, Bambi comforted her telling the interpreter "it's okay," despite internally feeling that the interpreter was making things "really awkward." While outwardly Bambi was kind, patient, and understanding to the interpreter's behavior, she was thinking to herself, "do I really have to use you as my interpreter?" for the rest of the semester. For Joy and Ruth, developing positive face serves as a strategy to appear unobtrusive to the dominant groups' norms. Bambi illustrated another reason co-cultural group members opt to present a positive face toward interpreters by avoiding conflict through validating the interpreter's behavior.

Aside from the most salient communicative practice that reflected non-assertive assimilation, one participant engaged with averting controversy by shifting blame from the interpreter onto themselves. During Ruth's story about the interpreter who attempted to proselytize her, she speaks on the story and states that his behavior was a violation of the "interpreter code of ethics." After a pause, Ruth chimes in again and shares blame for the

encounter by believing “in some ways [it was] my fault because I joined in to say, ‘Okay I’ll meet with you.’” Ruth appears to evaluate the accusation as too harsh and places blame on herself for the interpreter’s actions in an attempt to appear unobtrusive to the dominant group.

Assertive Accommodation

Assertive Accommodation occurs when co-cultural group members’ behavior is guided by striving to create a “cooperative balance” between both the co-cultural group and the dominant group (Orbe, 1998, p.114). The co-cultural practices enacted within this orientation expect the dominant structures to incorporate the co-cultural groups’ lived experiences. Communicative approaches within this orientation include communicating self, intragroup networking, using liaisons, and educating others. Primary communication practices utilized by participants included four people indicating the use of intragroup networking and all six people engaging in educating others. Intragroup networking occurs when co-cultural members network with each other as a means to understand navigating within dominant structures (Orbe, 1998). Ruth incorporated intragroup networking into her life when she entered college and received an interpreter for the first time. There was a lot of uncertainty for the dynamic she would have with the interpreter, and questions raced through her mind, “Who am I supposed to look at? Do I look at the teacher? Do I stare at him [interpreter] the whole time?” After Ruth met another woman in her class who had experience with an interpreter, she relied on her new friend to show her how to interact with and use the interpreter. Bambi recognized that intragroup networking can be empowering when she utilized an organization called the Deaf Action Center, which has contributed to her knowledge of ADA law. She started to learn through the organization that “you have the right to an interpreter” and attributes her confidence in the law to her connection at DAC.

As assertive accommodation focuses on ensuring that the dominant group accepts and includes the co-cultural group, all Deaf participants illustrated through educating others an expectation and desire for the interpreter to “match” the client’s sign style. Educating others occurs when co-cultural group members make “educating others a primary objective of their communication” (Orbe, 1998, p.73). This practice influences how the participants perceive interpreters and contributes to the overall level of trust they have in being represented by the interpreter. When speaking about the qualities of a good interpreter, Joy states:

I think it is really important that their qualities or their skillset, they need to understand the client and how to communicate with the client and in their preferable method. Matching the Deaf person first of all is most important. It's

really important for the interpreter to accommodate the client. It's never okay to tell the Deaf person that what they're signing is wrong or incorrect. The interpreter should learn from that person.

Joy equates an interpreter's skillset to their ability to accommodate to the unique sign style of each Deaf person and believes that interpreters should always learn from Deaf people. The expectation for interpreters to enter a constant state of learning from the Deaf client reflects the overall expectations of assertive accommodation to create a "cooperative balance." Consistent with all participants, everyone emphasized the importance of interpreters "matching" the Deaf person. Sylvia echoes this value by concluding, "I think a good interpreter has the ability to code switch and meet the person where they are." A crucial aspect for all participants was demonstrating their effort to educate others and seeing the interpreter apply that lesson into their work to represent the client.

DISCUSSION

It is clear that co-cultural theory is a useful application to examine how Deaf people's lived experiences influence the communicative behaviors they enact when utilizing a sign language interpreter and hearing people. This study highlighted key findings that expand on co-cultural theory looking at people with disabilities, specifically the Deaf community, a group navigating co-cultural interactions that are imperative to their lives.

The participants highlighted the importance of building trust between the Deaf individual and the interpreter, a crucial factor in co-cultural communication. The participants' field of experience with interpreters shaped their perception of the interpreter's behavior and strategies, which in turn influenced the level of trust they had in the interpreter. This value is consistent with previous research focusing on Deaf consumers and interpreter dynamic relationships (Napier, 2011). Napier's work (2011) centers on how Deaf people define a "good interpreter." However, these findings led to expanding on the definition of a "good attitude," which Deaf people often used to summarize an individual that was professional, engaged, and trustworthy. In this study, each person articulated a story where an interpreter broke their trust, as well as how these behaviors are communicated. Analysis of the key points in the participants' examples reveals that the turning point for the loss of trust demonstrated a violation of one or more of the values that a Deaf person expects from their interpreters to adhere by: maintaining professionalism, being engaged, and establishing trustworthiness.

According to co-cultural theory, the influential factors guide an overall communication orientation that co-cultural group members will enact. Though this study focused primarily on the interactions of the direct relationship between a Deaf person and an interpreter, participants demonstrated a distinction in their behavioral response based on situational contexts. Assertive accommodation adopts the mindset of taking into consideration both (co-cultural & dominant) group needs. All six participants presented a strong opinion that interpreters should always “match” the client, recognizing that the behavior accommodates their sign style. This desire for linguistic accommodation is consistent with research in both McCray (2013) and Johnson (2014), who highlight Deaf participants’ complaints surrounding unskilled interpreters that do not use a language level suited for the Deaf client. Directly engaging with the interpreter warranted a different negotiation strategy than utilizing the interpreter to maintain a channel of communication with the other hearing party member. For example, when discussing the value of a good interpreter, participants emphasized expecting the interpreter to linguistically accommodate to their preferences. This expectation is demonstrative of an assertive accommodation approach. Although, when discussing conflict with an interpreter in the presence of a hearing member, assumed to be unfamiliar with Deaf culture, Deaf participants adopted a nonassertive assimilation approach. Participants were fearful of appearing rude, being judged, and overall experiencing a negative response from hearing people because of stereotypes such as “Deaf people interrupt often,” which is in part due to the privilege hearing people have to allow conversation and turn-taking to move rapidly. This resulted in participants withdrawing from conversation to blend in with the group. This withdrawal strategy is consistent with (McCray, 2013), where withdrawal represents a power-balancing strategy for the minority group to achieve their intended result and gain power in the dynamic. Through the lens of co-cultural theory, the withdrawal leads to a nonassertive assimilation negotiation strategy that achieves its intended result of combating negative perceptions of Deaf people.

Furthermore, participants utilized liaisons when dissatisfied with an interpreter’s experience instead of directly approaching the interpreter. This assertive accommodation practice was unique because it was consistently used across all participants. Orbe (1998) posits that while all 26 communicative practices are available to each co-cultural member, members may be limited by their own personal characteristics and the situational context. Though each member maintained different personal characteristics and their personal experiences presented different situational contexts, every participant chose to utilize a liaison to bypass direct confrontation with the interpreter. McCray (2013) notes Deaf people’s awareness of the increased benefit of maintaining positive rapport with interpreters. When the Deaf consumer

maintains a friendly demeanor towards the interpreter, the Deaf consumer obtains more power because more interpreters look forward to working with them. While accommodations are required by the ADA, a “qualified” interpreter is not a guarantee; therefore, Deaf consumers utilizing liaisons allows them to achieve their goal of changing an interpreter without threatening their face with the interpreter and risking other interpreters’ hesitancy to work with them. However, the liaison is still a dominant group member, hearing people. Ultimately, while Deaf participants are negotiating strategies to achieve effective communication with the intended hearing parties, they are simultaneously negotiating relationship dynamics with interpreters to maintain a positive experience to establish a good rapport.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights information that can assist interpreter training programs for teaching incoming interpreters about the power dynamics and negotiation strategies Deaf consumers balance when utilizing an interpreter. Furthermore, the research brought forth discussion about the challenges Deaf consumers faced when requesting a change of interpreter after having a negative experience. By identifying this problem, interpreter training programs can adopt strategies and standards for how interpreters should always introduce themselves when meeting the client to ensure the client is empowered with information if the job is dissatisfactory.

This study is unique by centering co-cultural theory in conversation with the Deaf community; however, it has its limitations. First, the participant pool consisted of six interviews in total. Future studies could benefit from expanding on the number of participants to provide more perspectives from the Deaf community. Additionally, this group consisted of both Deaf and hard-of-hearing members. Although both lived experiences were valuable, their abilities to assert power varied. Separating the group experiences can allow more focus on the respective experiences of each as co-cultural members but with varying degrees of ability to engage in certain co-cultural practices. The personal experiences of these co-cultural members demonstrate the distinction in Deaf members’ negotiation strategies with sign language interpreters and the importance for interpreters to prioritize establishing trust with Deaf consumers. Overall, this study reveals the constant awareness that Deaf members maintain when interacting with dominant group members. Notably, the takeaway is that participants want interpreters to maintain transparency, establish trust, and “realize this is my space.”

REFERENCES

- Bie, B., & Tang, L. (2016). Chinese gay men's coming out narratives: Connecting social relationship to co-cultural theory. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 9(4), 351-367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2016.1142602>
- Burke, T. B. (2017). Choosing accommodations: Signed language interpreting and the absence of choice. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 27(2), 267-299. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2017.0018>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, *Division of Human Development and Disability*. Disability and Health Data System (DHDS) Data [online]. [accessed Apr 22, 2023]. URL: <https://dhds.cdc.gov>
- Cohen, M., & Avanzino, S. (2010). We are people first: Framing organizational assimilation experiences of the physically disabled using co-cultural theory. *Communication Studies*, 61(3), 272-303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510971003791203>
- Congdon, M. (2014). What's wrong with me?: An autoethnographic investigation of the co-cultural communicative practices of living with tourette syndrome during adolescence. *Qualitative Report*, 19(50), 1. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1411>
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2008). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd ed.). *Sage Publications*.
- De Andrade, V., & Moroe, N. F. (2018). Hearing children of deaf parents : Gender and birth order in the delegation of the interpreter role in culturally deaf families. *African Journal of Disability*, 7(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v7i1.365>
- Fox, J., & Warber, K. M. (2015). Queer identity management and political self-expression on social networking sites: A co-cultural approach to the spiral of silence. *Journal of Communication*, 65(1), 79-100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12137>
- James TG, Coady KA, Stacciarini J-MR, et al. (2022). "They're not willing to accommodate Deaf patients": Communication experiences of Deaf American Sign Language users in the emergency department. *Qualitative Health Research*. 32(1):48-63. <https://doi:10.1177/10497323211046238>
- Johnson, S. G. (2014). *Silent voices: The experiences of deaf students in community college* (Order No. 3727171). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1719052894).
- Jun, J., Woo, B., Kim, J. K., Kim, P. D., & Zhang, N. (2021). Asian Americans' communicative responses to COVID-19 discrimination in application of co-cultural theory. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 32(3), 309-327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2021.1922103>
- McCray, C. L. (2013). *A phenomenological study of the relationship between deaf students in higher education and their sign language interpreters* (Order No. 3576030). Available from Health Research Premium Collection; Nursing & Allied Health Premium; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1467451998). http://library.tcu.edu/PURL/EZproxy_link.asp?/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/phenomenological-study-relationship-between-deaf/docview/1467451998/se-2

- Musgrave, J. (2015, June 22). Deaf woman sues to get interpreter at delivery. *Palm Beach Post, The (FL)*, p. 1A. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1561F89AF4339DF0>.
- Napier, J. (2011). "It's not what they say but the way they say it". A content analysis of interpreter and consumer perceptions towards signed language interpreting in Australia. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2011(207), 59-87. http://library.tcu.edu/PURL/EZproxy_link.asp?login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/not-what-they-say-way-content-analysis/docview/887495266/se-2
- Napier, J., Oram, R., Young, A., & Skinner, R. (2019). "When I speak people look at me": British deaf signers' use of bimodal translanguaging strategies and the representation of identities. *Translation & Translanguaging in Multilingual Contexts (TTMC)*, 5(2), 95–120. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ttmc.00027.nap>
- Napier, J., Skinner, R., Young, A., & Oram, R. (2017). Mediating identities: Sign language interpreter perceptions on trust and representation. *Journal of Applied Linguistics & Professional Practice*, 14(1), 75–95. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jalpp.36014>
- Orbe, M. (1998). Constructing co-cultural theory: An explication of culture, power, and communication. *Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE*.
- Ruiz-Mesa, Kristina (2022). "We're talking about race!:" Communicative practices of chief diversity officers. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. 050(3), 309-326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2022.2083432>
- U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1997, January 15). *Equal Opportunity Employment Commission Fact Sheet: Disability Discrimination*. EEOC.GOV. Retrieved May 3, 2023, from <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/fact-sheet-disability-discrimination>
- Young, Alys, Rosemary Oram & Jemina, Napier (2019) Hearing people perceiving deaf people through sign language interpreters at work: on the loss of self through interpreted communication, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 47(1), 90-110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2019.1574018>
- Zirulnik, M. L., & Orbe, M. (2019). Black female pilot communicative experiences: Applications and extensions of co-cultural theory. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 30(1), 76-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2018.1439422>