ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Communicating Self-Perceptions of Acceptance or Rejection at the University: A Co-Cultural Analysis of Trans University Students' Communication Strategies

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In light of a continued legislative and social push in the United States to harm already marginalized communities of transgender students, there must be examinations into how to ensure these communities still feel supported at the University. This current study analyzes interview data from trans university students using the levels of self-perceptions of trans acceptance identified by Maulding (2023) and co-cultural theory (Orbe 1996) to determine the impacts of acceptance on their communication strategies. The findings can be applied by those in positions of relative power (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators) to understand how the communication events with trans students may actually reveal their feelings of acceptance or rejection. The findings reveal that each of the four self-perceived levels of acceptance or rejection (i.e., active acceptance, passive acceptance, active rejection, and passive rejection) inspired distinct communication strategies. This study is useful for identifying the potential impacts of acceptance or rejection present in co-cultural communication involving trans university students.

KEYWORDS trans, university, co-cultural theory, self-perceptions, acceptance
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Over 500 anti-transgender bills were proposed throughout the United States in 2024 (Reed 2024). In the first three months of 2025, roughly 800 more anti-trans bills have been proposed (Reed 2025). Not all have passed into law, but every single bill has expanded the landscape of discrimination and hate through which trans folks in the United States must navigate their lives. In addition to bills specifically targeting trans

people, legislation attacking, dismantling, and defunding diversity, equity, and inclusion programs has been implemented in various places around the United States. This has led to the closure of affinity centers designed to support LGBTQ+ students, as well as students of color at several universities (Flannery 2024), often creating hardships at multiple intersections of a student's identity.

In light of this continued push to harm already marginalized communities of students, there must be examinations into how to ensure these marginalized communities still feel supported at the University. This current study analyzes interview data from trans university students using the levels of self-perceptions of trans acceptance identified by Maulding (2023) and co-cultural theory (Orbe 1996) to determine the impacts of perceived acceptance on communication strategies (e.g., educating others or avoiding) utilized by trans university students. The findings can be applied by those in positions of relative power within a university to understand how the underlying motivations for communication strategies chosen by trans students may actually reveal whether these students feel accepted or rejected. At a time when just existing as trans exposes trans students to increased risks of harm, knowing these motivations can help to create more intentional communication events to demonstrate support for members of these communities.

Trans College Students

College is a time for many young people when the shifting of influences from family life at home to college life with student peers creates new opportunities to develop greater senses of their identities. These new influences are important for students who move away to attend college (Goldberg & Kuvalanka 2018) and for students who commute to their campus from home (Booth 2007; Pokorny et al. 2017). Students are learning to adapt to new environments and evolving conceptions of who they are as adults. For cis students who experience gender identities that match their biological sex, this time can be stressful. For trans students, who must face these challenges with the addition of gender-identity-based discrimination and harassment, this time can be stressful and unnecessarily onerous (Evans et al. 2017). Prior studies throughout the past several decades have found numerous examples of harassment, aggression, or violence faced by trans students on college campuses directly related to their gender identities (Chang & Chung 2015; Pryor 2015; Pusch 2005; Singh et al. 2013). These lived experiences and acts of discrimination contribute to a colder campus climate for trans students (Yost & Gilmore 2011) and to perceptions of rejection. For trans students who are not perceiving themselves as accepted, the accessibility of identity exploration may be severely diminished (Maulding 2023) in ways that are not experienced by the cis students attending the same university. Therefore, it is important for studies to focus specifically on ways to help trans students at the University from the perspectives of trans university students.

Self-Perceptions of Acceptance for Trans College Students

Maulding (2023), through an analysis of the experiences shared by the participants, identified four levels of acceptance and rejection for trans students. The four levels identified are active acceptance, passive acceptance, active rejection, and passive rejection. Active acceptance was defined as "the activist level of acceptance," using an

"equity approach" (122). Examples of active acceptance included the campus having a queer and trans resource center focused on the specific needs of these students and professors leading by example with proper introductions of pronouns. For active acceptance, the university or members of campus actively sought ways to support trans students. Passive acceptance was identified as "an equality approach" with "no gaps or differences in treatment between people or communities" (122). Passive acceptance involves treating trans students with the same respect and care that is shown to cis students. For example, a professor can passively accept their trans students by correcting names that are listed incorrectly on the roster. The professor does not have to go out of their way for trans students any more than they would for cis students with passive acceptance.

Active rejection is "when students, faculty, or administration act with the intent to harm or bring down trans communities" (Maulding 2023, 121). Examples included fellow students loudly disparaging trans students' gender expression and professors actively excluding trans folks' contributions from classroom discussions. For rejection to be active, the actions are undertaken knowing they are problematic to the trans communities or with the intent to not accept trans students. Passive rejection, however, occurs when a "lack of understanding about an issue" results "in no perceived need to solve the problem" (Maulding 2023, 125). Although, there is no intent to cause harm, there is also no effort or desire to understand the negative impact of a particular (in)action or policy. An example of this is a university providing only a small number of gender-neutral restrooms in limited buildings around campus. It is possible that those in power believe having gender-neutral bathrooms at all solves restroom-related issues for trans students, without considering the implications or results of having so few gender-neutral bathrooms available.

Theorizing from a Co-Cultural Communication Perspective

Co-cultural communication theory (CCT), as introduced by Orbe (1996), was influenced by muted group theory's call to focus more attention on nondominant, overlooked communities (Wall & Gannon-Leary 1999) and feminist standpoint theory's (FST) recognition of the epistemological advantage of producing knowledge from marginalized perspectives (Orbe 1998a). CCT posits that dominant cultures gain and maintain power by developing communication norms that nondominant (i.e., co-cultural) group members must understand and navigate through communication strategies (Burnett et al. 2009; Fox & Warber 2015; Herakova 2012). Ramírez-Sánchez (2008) notes that these strategies are not prescribed in advance, but instead "obey cultural factors that are both internal and external to co-cultural group members" (91).

Table 1. Communication Orientations

	Assimilation	Accommodation	Separation
Nonassertive Approach	Nonassertive Assimilation	Nonassertive Accommodation	Nonassertive Separation
Assertive Approach	Assertive Assimilation	Assertive Accommodation	Assertive Separation
Aggressive Approach	Aggressive Assimilation	Aggressive Accommodation	Aggressive Separation

Table 2. Co-Cultural Practices and Orientations Summary

Examples of Practices	Brief Description
Nonassertive Assimilation	
Emphasizing commonalities	Focusing on human similarities while downplaying or ignoring co-cultural differences
Developing positive face	Assuming a gracious communicator stance where one is more considerate, polite, and attentive to dominant group members
Censoring self	Remaining silent when comments from dominant group members are inappropriate, indirectly insulting, or highly offensive
Averting controversy	Averting communication away from controversial or potentially dangerous subject areas
Assertive Assimilation	
Extensive preparation	Engaging in an extensive amount of detailed (mental= concrete) groundwork prior to interactions with dominant group members
Overcompensating	Conscious attempts—consistently enacted in response to a pervasive fear of discrimination—to become a "superstar"
Manipulating stereotypes	Conforming to commonly accepted beliefs about group members as a strategic means to exploit them for personal gain
Bargaining	Striking a covert or overt arrangement with dominant group members where both parties agree to ignore co-cultural differences
Aggressive Assimilation	
Dissociating	Making a concerted effort to elude any connection with behaviors typically associated with one's co-cultural group
Mirroring	Adopting dominant group codes in attempt to make one's co-cultural identity more (or totally) invisible
Strategic distancing	Avoiding any association with other co-cultural group members in attempts to be perceived as a distinct individual
Ridiculing self	Invoking or participating in discourse, either passively or actively, that is demeaning to co-cultural group members
Nonassertive Accommodation	
Increasing visibility	Covertly, yet strategically, maintaining a co-cultural presence within dominant structures
Dispelling stereotypes	Myths of generalized group characteristics and behaviors are countered through the process of just being one's self
Assertive Accommodation	
Communicating self	Interacting with dominant group members in an authentic, open, and genuine manner; used by those with strong self-concepts
Intragroup networking	Identifying and working with other co-cultural group members who share common philosophies, convictions, goals
Utilizing liaisons	Identifying specific dominant group members who can be trusted for support, guidance, and assistance
Educating others	Taking the role of teacher in co-cultural interactions; enlightening dominant group members of co-cultural norms, values, etc.

Examples of Practices	Brief Description
Aggressive Accommodation	
Confronting	Using the necessary aggressive methods, including ones that seemingly violate the "rights" of others, to assert one's voice
Gaining advantage	Inserting references to co-cultural oppression as a means to provoke dominant group reactions and gain advantage
Nonassertive Separation	
Avoiding	Maintaining a distance from dominant group members; refraining from activities and or locations where interaction is likely
Maintaining barriers	Imposing, through the use of verbal and nonverbal cues, a psychological distance from dominant group members
Assertive Separation	
Exemplifying strength	Promoting the recognition of co-cultural group strengths, past accomplishments, and contributions to society
Embracing stereotypes	Applying a negotiated reading to dominant group perceptions and merging them into a positive co-cultural self-concept
Aggressive Separation	
Attacking	Inflicting psychological pain through personal attacks on dominant group members' self-concept
Sabotaging others	Undermining the ability of dominant group members to take full advantage of their privilege inherent in dominant structures

Communication strategy selection is influenced by preferred approaches and outcomes. The three strategic communication approaches identified by Orbe (1996) are nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive. Nonassertive behavior includes considering the needs of others above the needs of the self (Cohen & Avanzino 2010). An assertive approach involves respectful communicative expression that represents the needs of the self and others (Orbe 1996). An aggressive approach is more dominant, can be hurtful to others, and assumes control over the choices of others (Cohen & Avanzino 2010).

The three preferred outcomes of co-cultural communication strategies are assimilation, accommodation, and separation. Assimilation is the desired outcome of fitting in with the dominant culture, despite the potential risk to personal, co-cultural characteristics (Orbe 1998b). Accommodation is being accepted into a dominant culture without giving up a nondominant identity. Separation involves only interacting with members of one's co-cultural groups or close allies unless there is no other option (Orbe 1996), rather than changing oneself or attempting to change the dominant culture.

Together, preferred approaches and outcomes create nine communication orientations, each a "specific stance that [co-cultural members] assume during their interactions in dominant organizational structures" (Orbe 1998a, 269). Table 1 illustrates these nine orientations.

Within these communication orientations are communication strategies. Table 2 from Orbe & Roberts (2012) provides examples and definitions of communication strategies sorted by communication orientation (295). This is not an exhaustive list, as specific strategies can be added or changed to match the data (Orbe & Roberts 2012), but it does provide a useful guide to commonly employed strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This current study analyzed the data collected by Maulding (2023) in order to determine whether the identified levels of acceptance and rejection impacted the communication strategies of their participants. The participants were students at Joan University (JU), who responded to emailed solicitations forwarded by university instructors and the campus queer and trans resource center (QTRC). The call for participants requested the assistance of students who did not identify as cisgender, who were willing to discuss their experiences at JU they believed to be related to their gender identities. These experiences led to the identification of the four levels of acceptance or rejection at the university. The study that resulted in the data being analyzed for this current study received approval from the instructional review board of Joan University. Each participant of the original study affirmed their informed consent to participate.

Research participants

This study analyzed in-depth interview notes and transcripts of six students. For continuity, this current study uses the pseudonyms from Maulding (2023). One student, Adan, identified as trans male/gender-neutral. Grace-Ronaldo identified as nonbinary. The remaining four participants (i.e., Drew, Max, Julian, & Zack) identified as trans male. No participant in this study identified as transfemme or trans female. The participants were majority White, with only two (i.e., Drew and Grace-Ronaldo) identifying as Mexican American. Despite being labeled as a "Hispanic serving institution," JU was also majority White. Future research of this type would benefit from a more intersectional analysis, but this study's focus is centered, solely, around gender identities.

Data analysis

This study involved a twofold thematic analysis. The first round analyzed over two-hundred pages of transcripts and notes from the study conducted by Maulding (2023), using the a priori themes of active acceptance, passive acceptance, active rejection, and passive rejection identified by that study. After dividing the emic accounts of communication events into the four levels of acceptance and rejection, the second round returned to the data, using co-cultural theory as a guide, to explore the ways in which these larger contexts impacted communication strategies. CCT provides another clear list of potential a priori themes to focus the analysis (e.g., field of experience, desired outcome, context). Initially, the data were reassembled into larger categories based upon whether they contributed to or resulted from perceptions of acceptance or rejection. After, the data were further organized by whether the acceptance or rejection fit the more specific definitions of active or passive. Following this, each communication event discussed in the interviews was analyzed to determine which CCT communication strategy the participant utilized. This allowed for a structuring of the data by desired outcome (i.e., assimilation, accommodation, and separation) and then approach (i.e., nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive). Finally, any patterns in strategy found within and between levels of acceptance which might suggest reasons for specific strategy selection were noted.

FINDINGS

The strategies are categorized by perceptions of acceptance and further categorized by preferred outcomes. Table 3 was created to assist the reader with making sense of the communication strategies explored below.

Active acceptance

The only communication orientation utilized by participants who were feeling actively accepted was assertive accommodation. These participants wanted to express and find recognition for their diverse standpoints within the dominant culture of this university (Orbe 1998a).

The first communication strategy utilized by participants perceiving active acceptance was *Communicating Self*. This strategy is defined as "interacting with dominant group members in an authentic, open, and genuine manner; used by those with strong self-concepts" (Orbe 1998a, 250). This is considered an assertive approach. One example of communicating self comes from how Drew expressed himself through his artwork. He described his art department as "very supportive" and "proud of him," stating:

> I felt very accepted in the art department cause like, no one batted an eye. Everyone was like, super understanding. And there was my work, and my work is about me as a trans male. And, like, it's like, my work is about tidbits of my life. Like, I'm exposing myself. And they're just like, they're very proud of me.

Drew communicated with people who encouraged and supported him. Because his experience in this context had been encouraging and accepting, he knew he can be vulnerable and share parts of his marginalized identity through the art he created.

The second and third communication strategies utilized by participants perceiving active acceptance were *using liaisons* and *intergroup networking*. Using liaisons is defined by Orbe (1998a) as "identifying specific dominant group members who can be trusted for support, guidance, and assistance" and intergroup networking as "identifying and working with other co-cultural group members who share common philosophies, convictions, and goals" (250). The strategies are not mutually exclusive. Multiple strategies can be utilized during the same communication events, depending on the communicator's preferred outcome and communication approach (Meyer 2019). Adan identified the faculty advisors of the campus LGBTQ club as trusted liaisons and recognized their shared queer identities, stating:

> The queer club … is good because they have faculty and staff attached, so we know there's certain people we can go to as students, that we can talk to … because they're open and … out and we can feel safe with them.

Adan recognized a shared queer identity among the faculty and staff connected to the campus LGBTQ club. It is because of these queer identities that Adan believed he can trust these members as connections to the dominant culture of this university. Through their accepted association with marginalized communities and affiliation with dominant cultures, these trusted liaisons serve as a bridge between marginalized communities and dominant power structures on campus. He knew he could seek them out for support, safety, and guidance while communicating with members of the campus at large and navigating the spaces of this university, because they were actively supporting his community beyond a "safe space sticker" (Adan).

Table 3. Examples of Co-Cultural Orientations and Practices

	Assimilation	Accommodation	Separation
Nonassertive Approach	Nonassertive Assimilation *Example:* Censoring-Self: Zack chose to censor himself, rather than respond to inappropriate comments about his gender.	Nonassertive Accommodation *Example:* Increasing Visibility: This was not seen in this study but can take the form of deliberately joining organizations to increase the level of trans presence in that space.	Nonassertive Separation *Example:* Avoiding: Drew chooses to avoid unpleasant interactions with cis faculty and students by hanging out with his close friends.
Assertive Approach	Assertive Assimilation *Example:* Bargaining: The students who identify as passing bargain with professors by asking for them to use their correct names while not bringing up their trans status.	Assertive Accommodation *Example:* Educating Others: Drew chooses to educate others about his trans identity through artwork.	Assertive Separation *Example:* Exemplifying Strength: This was not seen in this study but could take the form of highlighting group achievements to convince others to separate with you from the dominant group.
Aggressive Approach	Aggressive Assimilation *Example:* Strategic Distancing: Max does not go to the QTRC or QTRC events because he does not want to be labeled as a trans community member.	Aggressive Accommodation *Example:* Gaining Advantage: This was not seen in this study but can take the form of making a dominant member feel guilty about hardships faced by a marginalized group, in order to gain compliance.	Aggressive Separation *Example:* Attacking: This was not seen in this study but can take the form of bullying members of the dominant group because of their identity in order to create a psychological distance.

Active rejection

With active rejection, participants held two communication orientations: accommodation and separation.

Accommodation strategies

Just as with accommodation for active acceptance, participants seeking accommodation while feeling rejected are attempting to ensure their trans identities are recognized. Adan used the *educating others* strategy from an assertive accommodation orientation in an interaction with one of his professors. In a class titled "Women as Agents of Social Change," the instructor was not "talking about Marsha P Johnson, … Sylvia Rivera, or any of those queer … leaders of color," leaving Adan, a trans student of color, feeling "erased" (Maulding 2023, 123). After his attempts to insert trans women into the curriculum of this course were rebuffed, Adan decided to continue his attempts to

educate his classmates about trans issues. Refusing to assimilate by remaining silent in the face of what he perceived to be "emotionally damaging," Adan attempted to actively assert his desire to educate his classmates about the experiences of trans people. After a more assertive communication approach, influenced by his previous activist work on behalf of trans students, Adan was able to present in class about trans issues.

The second communication strategy identified, *obtaining satisfaction*, is an expansion of co-cultural theory created through this current study. CCT does allow for this type of expansion when necessary (Orbe and Roberts 2012). Obtaining satisfaction is an assertive accommodation strategy defined as using assertive, nonaggressive methods to assert one's voice, with the expectation, but not guarantee, of being accommodated. This strategy is a non-aggressive demand. *Obtaining satisfaction* was employed in Max's interaction with the campus housing department. Despite being a male student, Max was assigned a room in an all-girls dorm. Although Max began the interactions with a negative preconception of interacting with campus admins, believing the administration to be "pretty bad to trans people," his willingness to continue calling admins showed his unwillingness to assimilate. He did not use an aggressive strategy. Instead, he chose to assert his voice and demand to not be housed in an all-girls dorm. The eventual result was being "isolated" (Max) in a four-bedroom dorm, but his desire was strong enough that he still actively asserted his right to be accommodated within the dominant power structure, knowing they had the authority to ignore his assertion for accommodation.

Separation strategies

There were two examples of separation, both of which were nonassertive. The nonassertive separation orientation involves a decision to passively separate, when possible, from interactions or situations involving members of the dominant cultures. Both examples of nonassertive separation were *avoiding* or "maintaining a distance from dominant group members; refraining from activities and/or locations where interaction is likely" (Orbe 1998a, 250). This communication strategy was utilized by Max, Drew, and Adan. Adan spent time in the library to avoid people who will "mess with him." Drew separated himself from the dominant cultures, through the "safe space" he created with his friends. This is where he felt "the most comfortable." Max, when he was beginning his transition, spent his time in the theatre department or the QTRC to avoid the stares and "weird" behavior he encountered from cis students. In each case, these students felt less comfortable around members of the dominant, largely cishetero cultures and avoided interactions with them when possible, preferring instead isolation, interactions with members of queer communities, or the company of close, trusted friends.

Another example of nonassertive separation involving avoiding specific communication situations that are uncomfortable or unpleasant was provided by Max. During his first two years at this university, before he was able to live as stealth, not every instructor would accommodate Max's request to use his name and pronouns. Max stated:

> Ever since I came I was out even though I didn't look like the guy. I still like emailed all my professors and like I told everybody. For the most part [everyone accepted the name and pronouns] and then if there was any that

> wouldn't, I just dropped their classes and switched. … They … would give some excuse that like legally grading wise it has to say like a certain name or something, which doesn't make any sense because like 90% of professors would do it.

Max was not allowed to transition at home and knew what it was like to not have his trans identity recognized by others. His previous experiences influenced his decision to avoid situations, when possible, that would involve denying his trans identity. With the freedom he felt at JU to transition and strive for acceptance as a trans man, he refused to be misgendered and deadnamed by his instructors. The desired outcome was to separate himself from that situation.

Passive acceptance

As with active acceptance, no participant perceiving passive acceptance employed any separation orientations. However, both assimilation and accommodation strategies were used by participants perceiving passive acceptance.

Assimilation strategies

Passive acceptance was the only perceived level of acceptance that involved all three approaches of assimilation. Nonassertive assimilation techniques are chosen by those whose desired outcome and approach are not intended to disrupt the existing power structures (Camara and Orbe, 2010). The nonassertive assimilation strategy utilized was *censoring self* or "remaining silent when comments from dominant group members are inappropriate, indirectly insulting, or highly offensive" (Orbe 1998a, 249). Zack described using this strategy when told he is "passing enough where [they] never would have guessed" he was trans. Rather than choosing to correct this assumption that men must look a certain way to avoid suspicion they may be trans, Zack perceived the statement as evidence he is "male masculine presenting to the point where people don't question it." His stated goal was to live as stealth, with his gender unquestioned. He maintained the agency to out himself only if "it's necessary to the conversation" or required to understand his standpoint on a topic. In the context of general conversations, Zack did not see it necessary to disclose his trans status. Therefore, being able to pass without question was a result of the blending in afforded by passive acceptance and no correction was needed when he was told he passes well enough. Therefore, he used the censoring-self strategy and did not correct his co-communicators.

The assertive assimilation orientation, while maintaining the goal of assimilation, takes on less passive communication techniques and does not necessarily privilege the needs of the self or of the dominant culture (Orbe 1998a). The assertive assimilation strategy found in the interviews was *bargaining* or "striking a covert or overt arrangement with dominant group members in which both parties agree to ignore co-cultural differences" (Orbe 1998a, 249). This took the form of Max and Julian emailing their professors informing them of their names and pronouns when they did not match the names and pronouns on the class roster or email. Although other trans students emailed their professors to request they use the correct names and pronouns, the other trans students were more open about their trans status. The attempted bargain was for the teacher to use the proper names and pronouns, without having to discuss their trans status or differences any further. Max and Julian preferred to live

as stealth and attempted to assimilate as cis men. Through successful bargaining, Max and Julian did not have to out themselves as trans to any person other than the instructor. *Bargaining* allowed Max and Julian to retain more agency over their own self-disclosures of gender identity.

With the aggressive assimilation orientation, the desire of the self to "fit in" with members of the dominant society is communicated as more important than the need to maintain a connection to the communicator's marginalized cultural groups. These communicators actively attempt to distance themselves from members of their marginalized communities (Orbe 1998a). There were two aggressive assimilation strategies utilized by participants in this study. The first is *mirroring*, defined as "adopting dominant group codes in an attempt to make one's co-cultural identity more (or totally) invisible" (Orbe 1998a, 249). Drew used this strategy while on campus through his posture. "When I'm out there walking around, I kind of like, I walk normally, but sometimes I kind of like I try to sit up straighter. … I try to like mimic a guy" (Drew). Drew's field of experience told him that cis guys are taller than him, so he attempted to make himself physically larger. He changed his natural posture and stance in order to change the way he was perceived. Drew believed that being taller would connect him to cis men, rather than trans men.

The second aggressive assimilation strategy is *strategic distancing*, or "avoiding any association with other co-cultural group members in attempts to be perceived as a distinct individual" (Orbe 1998a, 249). The participants in this study who used strategic distancing (viz., Julian and Max) identified as stealth and used strategic distancing simultaneously with mirroring to distance themselves from trans communities while assimilating with the cis male communities. Julian described this as "flying under the radar." Max mentioned that, although he is a member of the LGBTQ communities, he doesn't "really identify like that." In choosing to strategically distance themselves from trans communities, in favor of aligning more closely with the more dominant cis communities, they minimized connections to their trans identities.

Before he identified as stealth, Max would communicate his trans identity through artifacts (i.e., pins) and attendance at pride events. Now, Max preferred to live his life not "associated with any label or anything." However, Max identified as stealth and had the ability to pass as cis. By choosing not to disclose his trans status, minimizing his connections to trans communities, and living without labels, Max was likely to be assumed a cis male. This is the result of his strategic communication. Max stated his goal was to "live as cis male." His aggressive assimilation helped him do so.

Accommodation strategies

The assertive accommodation strategy, which was utilized by Zack, was *educating others*. Educating others is defined as "taking the role of teacher in co-cultural interactions; enlightening dominant group members of co-cultural norms, values, and so forth" (Orbe 1998a, 250). When the information about his transness was "story relevant," Zack would disclose information about his trans identity. Zack spoke about educating his classmates in a philosophy course about his experiences as a trans male. His instructor made him feel accepted in class through opening the floor for students to discuss their personal experiences. This was open to all students, not just to trans students. During his interview, Zack spoke about how feeling accepted in class en-

abled him to use those opportunities to educate his classmates about issues he had experienced as a trans male.

Passive rejection

Just as with perceptions of passive acceptance, participants perceiving passive rejection employed nonassertive assimilation, aggressive assimilation, and assertive accommodation strategies.

Assimilation Strategies

There were three examples of the strategy censoring self, a nonassertive assimilation technique. They all involved being misgendered by campus faculty and staff. In these situations, the instructors, faculty, and staff were not intentionally misgendering the participants to harm them. Rather, the instructors, faculty, and staff did not see misgendering as an issue large enough to worry about correcting. The examples of this strategy come from Grace-Ronaldo, Drew, and Max. Grace-Ronaldo described being misgendered by their instructors even after two attempts to correct the instructor's mistake. In this situation, after their accommodation attempts were denied, Grace-Ronaldo employed censoring self with the preferred outcome of assimilating with their fellow students. Drew described "feeling tiny" and without the power to assert himself while interacting with faculty and staff and chose to censor himself, rather than correct their misgendering.

The third example came from Max's communication with campus doctors. At the time of his interview, Max could not think of a single instance of a campus doctor calling his name and could only recall instances of being called by his birth name. He described the process of seeing a campus doctor as an always expected routine, stating:

> I'll go to a doctor's appointment, and they'll like call on my birth name, like, look around, and then I'll stand up, and then they'll like say it again, because they're like, you must have misheard me. And I'm like, no, that's me. And then they'll just like, stare at me for a second and then they'll be like, okay.

This deadnaming occurred in a public waiting room, sometimes with other students around, after he had already written his name for the receptionists at the check-in desk. He had no choice but to go through this process in order to be seen by a campus doctor. To expedite the encounter in the public waiting room, Max chose to censor his corrections, until after he was in a private location with the doctor. This approach allowed him to avoid a public confrontation regarding his trans status, which was important, because every such encounter disrupted Max's desired ability to live as stealth.

Another form of assimilation with passive rejection was the aggressive assimilation strategy called mirroring. Drew employed this strategy when he felt passively accepted and when he felt passively rejected. While interacting with members of faculty he feared might not respect him and accept his gender identity, he attempted to take on more communicative cues that would be expected of cis male students. In addition to standing taller and being mindful of his posture, Drew mentioned strategically deepening his voice while introducing himself as Drew. He asserted his desire

to assimilate into the dominant culture by taking on what he perceived to be a more masculine sounding voice.

Accommodation strategies

In the same way Adan utilized the strategy of using liaisons for active acceptance, he used this strategy while perceiving passive rejection. During his first year at JU, Adan attempted to navigate the "cisheteronormative" and "cishomonormative" contexts around campus. He was able to seek advice and support from trusted cisgender friends who could lend their perspective and experience to assist with his navigation. He explained they were helpful during this period because they "would steer [him] clear from certain people and put [him] towards people that [he] should talk to … and classes [he] needed to take as a trans person at [JU]." When Adan perceived his trans identities as passively, or in some cases actively, rejected, he was able to communicate with liaisons he could trust and be vulnerable with, which made it easier for him to navigate JU.

The second assertive accommodation strategy paired with perceptions of passive rejection was obtaining satisfaction. Drew was asked by his boss to dress more professionally. His boss handed him a women's blazer. Drew relived the story, stating:

> I was wearing my cargo black pants and a dark navy-blue t-shirt. And [my boss told me] I have an assignment to go to and I had to wear like a polo. He was like the President might be there. I was like, I doubt that, but he made me put on a women's blazer and I was like, um, I had no idea. I, I was afraid, and I felt like I couldn't say no. So I put it on. I just felt so, I felt so dysphoric immediately. And I just, like it was awful, and he said how does Drew look and I was like, I know I don't look good … He's like, you look good. I was like, no, I don't and my coworker, the guy coworker, he was just like looking at like, I know, he felt so uncomfortable. And I just like I took it off. And I was like, can I go back to my dorm and just quickly go get my polo.

In this instance, the strategy obtaining satisfaction was an escalation from an uncomfortable assimilation to oblige the manager to an assertive demand to be accommodated. Drew felt powerless to say no to his boss's request and put on the women's blazer. Soon after, however, his being forced into the center of prolonged attention and his dysphoria demanded a more assertive communication strategy to change that unpleasant situation. The desired outcome was no longer to assimilate. It was now to be accommodated. His boss had the power to deny his request, but his need to be accommodated still led to his use of *obtaining satisfaction*.

CONCLUSIONS

When participants perceived acceptance at this university, there were no examples of separation strategies. This was true for both passive and active acceptance. Both passive and active acceptance involved examples of assertive accommodation. When feeling accepted in the communication contexts, the participants chose communication strategies that allowed them to seek accommodation for their marginalized co-cultures. Active acceptance included communicating self, using liaisons, and intergroup

networking as strategies to seek accommodation. With perceptions of passive acceptance came the strategy of educating others about trans issues. What is clear is that when supported and accepted most of the trans participants chose to be involved with campus as members of their marginalized communities. They felt comfortable enough to assert their right to be accommodated.

However, there is one difference between communication influenced by self-perceptions of active and passive acceptance. Namely, when participants felt only passively accepted as members of trans communities, they employed a variety of assimilation strategies. This was not the case for active acceptance. With passive acceptance, participants attempted to remain silent when faced with discrimination, to make deals with members of the dominant culture, and to strategically code themselves as members of the dominant group while distancing themselves from their marginalized identities. This could be a result of feeling accepted enough to not feel the need to separate from the dominant culture, but also not accepted enough as members of a marginalized community to assert that identity.

When participants perceived rejection in the communication context, there were examples of assimilation, accommodation, and separation strategies. The students had to choose between communication strategies that would allow them to assimilate, take activist roles, or stop attempting to change the power structures governed by the dominant culture. With active rejection came the activist strategy of educating others. Participants who felt actively rejected also chose to avoid interactions with members of the dominant culture. With passive rejection came censoring self and mirroring to assimilate and using liaisons and obtaining satisfaction to assist with navigating less-accepting spaces. The appearance of the separation strategy only occurs when participants felt actively rejected at this university. These students distanced themselves from microaggressions and discrimination, rather than attempt to change the communication environments.

When comparing acceptance versus rejection, many of the same communication orientations are present. With active acceptance, all three strategies were assertive accommodation. With active rejection, two of the three strategies were assertive accommodation strategies. The difference between these assertive accommodation strategies is the context in which they are situated. Rather than feeling comfortable enough to share information about trans identities with acceptance, the accommodation is more of an attempt to force a change in what the dominant cultures accept. The examples that come to mind are Drew creating art to communicate aspects of himself after feeling supported by the art department and, by contrast, Adan speaking up for trans folks after the problematic events in his women as agents of change course forced him to continue his activist work.

When comparing passive acceptance to passive rejection, we see the same communication orientations with nonassertive assimilation, aggressive assimilation, and assertive accommodation. This time, however, the contexts do not provide so neat a contrast as with active acceptance and rejection. It is not clear from the data whether the students who experienced passive acceptance attempted to assimilate because they did not feel their trans status was accepted. With Max, Julian, and Zack, the reason for their aggressive assimilation strategies was because they wanted to be perceived as cis men. However, Drew's assimilation technique of straightening his posture may

be because he did not perceive active acceptance of his "slouch" (Drew). He could be straightening his back for the same reason he deepens his voice when experiencing perceptions of passive rejection: he wants his identity as a man to be accepted by the other communication participants. Data from all six of the participants analyzed for this study included descriptions of being in environments in which the participants felt accepted or rejected. This study was able to explore the impact of perceptions of acceptance on the selection of communication strategies through the participants' own experiences at Joan University.

Limitations

There are three primary limitations to this current study. The first is that no participant identified as transfemme or trans female. It is useful to have the experiences of transmasc, trans male, and nonbinary participants, but a wider picture of the co-cultural communication experiences would be possible with an analysis of the experiences of more trans communities. Future research would benefit from a more focused call for participants to foster a more nuanced understanding of the impacts on various groups who do not identify as cisgender than this exploratory study was able to achieve.
The second limitation is that this study did not explore the potential impacts of the participants' intersecting identities. The intent was to determine whether trends existed between perceptions of acceptance and communication strategies. The study did identify potential trends, but a deeper analysis of participant identities would be useful for understanding additional factors at play during these communication events and strategy selections.

The third primary limitation is that this study includes only the experiences of trans students at Joan University. It is true that most studies employing the lens of co-cultural theory do rely on smaller and more limited sample populations. However, it would be beneficial to the goal of ending trans-based discrimination and hardship to see this work continue on different campuses. It is possible that a larger sample of the populations would provide more ways to identify perceptions of rejections and even more suggestions for improvement than those listed below as practical applications.

Theoretical applications

The first theoretical contribution was a comparison of co-cultural communication strategies with different levels of perceived acceptance. It was useful to use the categories of perceptions of acceptance identified by Maulding (2023) as lenses while exploring the participants' communication strategies. This allowed me to isolate the role of context in communication strategy selection. Although context is a fundamental aspect of CCT (Orbe 1998a), no previous studies have examined the communication strategy selections between the same participants as the perceptions of acceptance changed in different contexts.

The second theoretical contribution is the addition of the assertive accommodation strategy obtaining satisfaction. This strategy serves as a final step in assertive accommodation, just before aggressive accommodation. Aggressive accommodation is characterized by taking away the choice to accommodate or not from members of the dominant group (Orbe 1998b). Obtaining satisfaction does still allow for the dominant group member to deny the accommodation (e.g., Drew's boss could have denied

his request to change clothes), but it does assert an intent to be accommodated more forcefully than other assertive accommodation strategies. This new category was created, rather than stretching the definition of an existing category to fit this type of communication. This additional strategy may prove beneficial to future studies using co-cultural theory.

Practical applications

The first major practical application of this current study is an examination of how self-perceptions of acceptance or rejection impact communication strategies of trans students. Feelings of acceptance led to an overall better relationship between trans students and their programs, instructors, and campus. This led to more open discussions about their needs and experiences as trans students or to spaces where they were able to focus on their education rather than their gender. On the contrary, perceptions of rejection led to separation strategies and isolation. This led to participants avoiding campus organizations, dropping courses, and feeling erased. Understanding the motivation for communication strategies can help staff, faculty, and administrators create better campus environments for their trans students.

The second major practical application is a list of directives for improving the University compiled from suggestions given by the participants. What follows are the goals and visions of trans university students who have lived the various levels of acceptance through rejection as trans students. They come from looking out with the epistemological advantage those in positions of relative power cannot claim and with the desire to improve conditions for the trans communities to follow.

There are three university-level suggestions. The first is a call for the university to be more vocal with their advocacy for trans students. When trans students feel more actively accepted through this vocal advocacy, they are in better positions to thrive. Examples of this vocal advocacy includes creating space at every table to discuss issues impacting students and requiring campus-wide training that includes trans issues as more than a hurried afterthought.

The second university-wide suggestion is for the university to be more mindful with official documents and the ways they perpetuate cisnormativity and trans erasure. This includes allowing students to change their names on emails, campus documents, and student IDs to reflect their true names, as opposed to their deadnames. Being deadnamed can be a source of intense emotional distress. This is not something any student needs to experience whenever checking (often-required) student email accounts or showing a requested student ID.

The final university-wide suggestion is for universities to conduct a purposeful audit of when resources use only male or female options. This includes providing more gender-neutral restrooms around campus. This also includes providing menstrual products in spaces beyond women's restrooms. Campuses may also look into including trans-friendly products, such as menstrual pads designed for more culturally masculine underwear, for sale in the student stores or for free in all restrooms.

There are also three suggestions for faculty and staff. The first is that there should be more accountability for faculty and staff taking gender-sensitivity training seriously. Unfortunately, the lessons in these trainings (e.g., helping students survive and heal from sexual assault and preventing sexual harassment) may prove vital for the

safety and success of all students. The faculty and staff need to truly be able to help all students.

The second suggestion is that faculty and staff need to learn how to respectfully use the names and pronouns of all students. Not every trans student has the financial or institutional means to legally change their names. For some students this is not a possible task. That should not mean that those students do not have their identities respected at their university.

Finally, every classroom should be a safe space for trans students. Faculty need to know how to stand up for trans students and how to provide this safety for them. This should be declared on the syllabi. This should also be manifested in an openness to consider the ways the curriculum might be harmful. For example, a social justice course curriculum that does not include the contributions of trans folks should be open to discussion and expansion.

Through these six suggestions, trans students would be less likely to experience feelings of institutional or personal rejection at their university. They would be less likely to have to adjust their communication strategies in order to participate in communication events.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although, this study does not purport to solve all of the issues faced by trans students at universities, it can be used to help those in positions of relative power understand how their own communication of acceptance or rejection impacts the communication strategies and university experiences of trans students. Every communication event involves a communication strategy. For members of co-cultures interacting with more dominant cultures, those strategies can be identified using co-cultural communication theory. It is clear that perceptions of acceptance or rejection influence the choice of communication strategies. Improving those perceptions of acceptance at any university, will potentially lead to contexts in which trans students feel comfortable enough to employ the strategies that make them feel empowered, rather than invisible or erased.

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