

# COMMUNICATION AND DIVERSE WORKPLACES: A CO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

**Anurag Kumar, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University**  
**Isha Malhotra, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University**

## ABSTRACT

*The present paper proposes organizational auto ethnography as a viable tool to understand co-cultural perspective of the organizational structure. The study rests on the idea that all attempts to value diverse workforce must be directed to take into account the proposition of organization as communication. As recognized communication as the constitutive element of organization, it is only through communication that a diverse and disparate workforce can be managed and assimilated in the organizational environment which is indeed a complex and polygonal process. A fruitful contribution of co-cultural communication framework is discussed to appreciate the communication structure and orientation of the diverse workforce which is indeed affected by the survival strategies of the co-cultural group members in a hostile world of dominant structure.*

**Keywords:** Co-cultural Communication Theory, Organizational Communication, Organizational Autoethnography, Culture Relativism.

## INTRODUCTION

Diverse workforce may encompass a range of different groups categorized on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, gender, function, ability, language, religion, age, sexual orientation, economic condition and so on. In the workplace, diversity may also be formed on the basis of culture and intellectual ability Bassett-Jones (2005). Managing diversity has indeed been a concern of the organization since long. It refers to a systematic and planned commitment on the part of the organizations to recruit and retain employees with diverse backgrounds and abilities (-Bassett-Jones (2005). Hermon (1996) necessitates developing strategies to manage diversity more effectively by forming an internal diversity team with representatives from all groups of employees in the organization. The purpose of the team should be to respond more effectively to diverse markets and to recruit from a diverse background. Though a plethora of approaches to manage diversity have been recommended by different scholars, the present discussion focuses mainly on co-cultural communication model to address diversity Taylor (1996). The rationale behind highlighting this model is that it marks a shift from the other approaches to diversity management in that it locates the solution to diversity management in the co-cultural groups by adopting a phenomenological approach to observe and understand their everyday communication practices Orbe (1998a). In addition, the study also adopts auto ethnography as a tool to manage diverse workforce as it enables the non-dominant group members for self-representation, negotiation, persuasion, and co-existence Orbe (1998b).

## CO-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION THEORY

Mark P. Orbe in his article *“From the Standpoint(s) of Traditionally Muted Groups: Explicating a Co-cultural Communication Theoretical Model”* (1998), proposes a ground-breaking approach to understand the communicative practices of co-cultural group members in the dominant power structure. He makes use of the ideas *“inherent in muted group and standpoint theory”* which *“focus on how those persons traditionally marginalised in society communicate within societal structure”* (01). Muted group theory has been proposed initially by Shirley and Edwin Ardener who have based it on the assumption that *“in every society a social hierarchy exists that privileges some groups over others”* Orbe 04. Ardener further makes it clear that those groups that function at the top of the social hierarchy determine to a great extent the communication system of the entire society. Over time, the structures of this system-which reflect the worldview of dominant group members-are reinforced as the appropriate communicative system for both dominant and nondominant group members (1978). This process renders marginalized groups as largely muted because their lived experiences are not represented in these dominant structures Orbe 4 However, some research in the area suggests that *“muted”* group members use specific verbal and nonverbal communication practices to overcome attempts to make them inarticulate Kramarae (1981). Orbe, (1994). Standpoint theory has contributed towards the development of co-cultural theory in many ways as it focuses on *“the experiences of marginalized group members within the process of inquiry in meaningful ways. Such positioning recognizes an assortment of standpoints among and within different co-cultural groups”* Orbe 05. The reason behind the emphasis of individual’s experiences is evident in the fact that *“those with and without societal power have conflicting worldviews”* Orbe 05. Further the value of these co-cultural Orbe (1994) perspective is crucial because marginalised group members have the ability to see dominant societal structures from the positioning of an *“outsider-within”* Collins (1986).

The collective co-existence of marginalized people forms a co-culture which may be based on *“age, class, sex, education, ethnicity, religion, abilities, affection or sexual orientation, and other unifying elements”* Johnson (1989), quoted in Orbe, 02. Orbe has used the term ‘co-culture’ *“to avoid the negative or inferior connotations of past descriptions (intracultural, subordinate, inferior, minority, sub-cultural, nondominant, and muted group) while acknowledging the great diversity of influential culture...”* (02). Understanding co-cultural perspective is indeed fulfilling because it *“has great potential to contribute valuable insight into communication processes”* Moon (1996), quoted in Orbe 03 because *“the oppressed can see with the great clarity, not only their own position but... indeed the shape of social systems as a whole”* Frankenberg (1993), 8.

Orbe has adopted phenomenological method which he finds *“fitting into the exploration of co-cultural communication”* (06) as *“phenomenology represents a philosophic and human science research method that constitute an avenue to provide discursive space where those traditionally muted voices can be heard”* (06). This is performed through, for instance, hermeneutic phenomenology which focuses on the conscious experience of a person as she or he relates to the lived world Lanigan (1979). In addition, phenomenologists Husserl (2012). Merleau-Ponty, (1962). Lanigan (1979) have worked to become a medium for the voice of their co-researchers without necessarily manipulating, altering, or reshaping their life experiences Gluck & Patai (2016). As articulated by Nelson (1989), Phenomenology adopts three steps process: first, collection of description of lived experiences, second, reduction of capta into essential themes, and third, hermeneutic interpretation of themes. In addition, he has extensively discussed a *“co-cultural framework, including a model of the process by which communication orientations are adopted”* (01). Orbe believes in Kramarae’s premises to hypothesis that co-cultural group-*“will*

*share a similar societal positioning that renders them marginalized and underrepresented within dominant structure and in order to confront oppressive dominant structure and achieve any measures of success, co-cultural group members adopt certain communication orientations when functioning within the confines of public communication structures” (7).*

In order to understand “*how those persons marginalized in dominant society communicate with those who have direct access to institutional power...*,” Orbe presents “*six interrelated factors that influence the process by which co-cultural group members communicate within dominant societal structures*” (10). These factors are preferred outcome, field of experience, abilities, situational context, perceived costs and rewards, and communication approach. These factors further culminate into the emergence of nine communication orientations from the standpoint of co-cultural theory group members used during their interactions in dominant societal structures. They are non-assertive assimilation, assertive assimilation, and aggressive assimilation; non-assertive accommodation, assertive accommodation, and aggressive accommodation; non-assertive separation, assertive separation, and aggressive separation.

Orbe in an article “*An Outsider within Perspective to Organizational Communication: Explicating the Communicative Practices of C-cultural Group Members*” (1998) has employed the “*co-cultural theoretical model to organizational communication—one that is situated in the lived experiences of those persons occupying an outsider within positioning*” (232). It highlights “*the lived experiences of co-cultural group members as they function in organizational setting*” which relegate them to a position of outsider within which in turn does not allow them a “*full membership at the core of organization*” (232). However Orbe emphasizes that it is indeed important to note that the outsider within perspective of the co-cultural group members provide them a vantage point as has been articulated by Frankenberg (1993) “*the oppressed can see with the greatest clarity, not only their own position but indeed the shape of social system as a whole*” (08). Thus, it is evident from his analysis that co-cultural model “*offers an insightful approach to studying diversity in organizations from the perspectives of those traditionally situated on the margins of organizational power structure*” (270) Frankenburg (1993).

## COMMUNICATION AS THE BASIS OF ORGANIZATION

It is interesting to note that both of Orbe’s abovementioned articles underline popular assumption that communication is the basis of organization and workplace diversity can be understood and tackled through an insistence on handling Orbe (1994). Organizational communication. However, communication within an organization is Anthony Giddens (1984) not uniform and especially, communication orientation of the co-cultural group depends upon the six influential factors Schoeneborn (2011). Apart from that Orbe has employed his co-cultural communication theoretical model which he has proposed in the societal context into organizational setting indicates that he believes in “*the communication as constitutive of organizations perspective that views organizations as socially constructed through communication*” Castor (2005). Further the relationship between organization and communication is isomorphic which “*treats communication and organization as a monastic unity or as the same phenomenon expressed in different ways. That is, communicating is organizing and organizing is communicating...*” Putnam et al. (1999). Giddens (1984) too believes in similar dichotomy when he says organizations both produce communication and are produced by communication. Dennis Schoeneborn in his article “*Organization as Communication: A Luhmannian Perspective*” (2011) has introduced Luhmann’s theory of social systems to argue “*how communication constitutes organization*” (682). His theory establishes that “*organizations represent a generic social form.*

*Like all social systems, organizations are assumed to be fundamentally constituted by communication” and “the organization is conceptualized as an autopoietic system consisting of interconnected communicative events” which means “the organization only exists as long as it manages to produce further communications, which call forth yet more communications” (670). Similarly, Mcphee & Zaug (2009) propose four types of communication flows which are essential elements for the constitution of organization; membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning.*

Bassett-Jones (2005). It is interesting to note that the constituents (culture, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, physical abilities, social class, age, socioeconomic status, and religion) which are at the core of diverse workforce, have been underlying elements of co-cultural groups. That further explicates that any attempt to manage diversity in the organization is to highlight the strategy of managing different co-cultural groups. Sadri & Tran (2002) in an article *“Managing your diverse workforce through improved communication” support the idea that “managing diversity is the most appropriate strategy and... improvements in supervisor-subordinate communication will assist organizations towards goal” (228). Proposing superior-subordinate communication as one of the solutions, they suggest two approaches to manage diverse workforce: managing personal growth and mentoring. Thus they propose mentoring communication as one of the strategies to manage diverse workforce. Loden (1996), Morison (1992) & Spragins (1993) too expound that mentoring is a win-win phenomenon as it can help the mentor to change any inaccurate stereotypes he/she may hold and this will, in turn, help to eliminate feelings of ethnocentrism Morrison (1992).*

Different researchers in the area of managing diversity have presented varying approaches to manage diversity. For instance, Meares et al. (2004) in *“Employee mistreatment and muted voices in the culturally diverse workplace”* have proposed that a discursive communication method should be applied to manage diverse workforce which has been muted by repeated silencing over time and ambiguity of policies. The communication with the muted group may be encouraged by increasing the level of comfort and likelihood of sharing experiences of mistreatment. It can also be done through intervention method where employees can be asked to talk about mistreatment of silencing and providing a forum for discussion in the focus group to bring about their problems into the public realm (23). In addition, the other way can be to facilitate a system of constant feedback from employees regarding their perceived treatment in the organization. Apart from that organizations should have policies that clearly state to the employees what behaviour is inappropriate and what to do if they are mistreated Day (2007).

Similarly, Robert Day in *“Developing the multi-cultural organisation: managing diversity or understanding differences?”* (2007) have identified two main approaches to managing diverse workforce: defensive and developmental. Among them, he prefers developmental approach to address diversity which considers cultural difference positively as diversity incorporate different values, assumptions, expectations and behaviour which may offer different perspective. It may also offer to strengthen the organization through shared learning, better communication and new perspective. Further, Day suggests that through training, workshop or skill development may understand that apparently strange behaviour has its own cultural logic as the way in which a group of people have tried to solve common problems. Mary Vielhaber Hermon (1996) emphasises on the need of a diversity team to promote understanding among all employees through communication and shared problem solving will build understanding and commitment to a diverse organization that respects all employees. The function of these diversity teams would be to promote communication to build understanding and commitment to diversity. Through open communication with advisory panels representing women and minorities, managers can learn to

understand the barriers, subtle or explicit, that limit the effectiveness of employees.

### DISCURSIVE COMMUNICATION APPROACH

Though above-mentioned idea of managing diversity may seem relevant and appropriate, it is a view which looks at the issue of diversity from the dominant perspective. The dominant perspective to manage diverse workforce may marginalise the “*experiences of nondominant groups or diverse workforce*” (Outsider within 230). As “*the oppressed can see with the greatest clarity, not only their own position but...indeed the social systems as a whole*” Frankenberg, (1993) or as bringing nondominant into centre of analysis assists in the process of revealing standpoints of reality Collins (1986), it is mandatory to locate the everyday communicative experiences of co-cultural group members who have occupied nondominant position at the organizational structure.

It is conspicuously clear from the above discussion that in order to effectively manage diversity, the complex phenomenon of co-cultural groups needs to be understood. However, an outsider approach to these co-cultural groups may not lead to complete understanding rather misinterpretation. The aforementioned deliberation also necessitates an inevitable stipulation for an altogether unique approach is required to address the organizational diversity. As a result, all the stakeholders in the organization should be taught about a co-cultural group by the inside member. The entire idea of managing diverse workforce in an organization rests on establishing better link between the individual and the organization which appears to have been somehow broken because of the distinct cultural, linguistic, ethnic and economic conditions, organization auto ethnography, suggests Maree Boyle & Ken Parry may be an appropriate method to bring that change.

### CONCLUSION

The locus of the argument carried in the entire discussion may well be construed in the spatial autonomy that is embedded in auto ethnographical method for relativist perspective and denial of the constructivist ideology. However, since diversity is a multilayered phenomenon, it should be approached with a multiplicity of approaches. It is not only the responsibility of dominant group, for instance to manage the diverse workforce, it is equally the responsibility of the co-cultural group to make sincere efforts to accommodate in the organization with constantly communicating to themselves and teaching other about their cultural orientation. In addition, it is a collective responsibility of both the groups to foster an environment of mutual trust in the organization where an individual irrespective of his/her group affiliation feels free to share his/her story to further facilitate organizational growth. It may further be suggested that organization should constantly get their communication audit done on time to time.

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