Understanding the Traditions of Communication Theory as a Field

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Abstract

The seven traditions of communication theory as a field provides a taxonomy of the different schools of communication theory that underpin communication research. The purpose of this paper was to explore and analyze the intricate assumptions and features of each tradition probing on complementarities, disagreements, and tensions of the different theories within dialogic-dialectical dimensions of constitutive communication. As a theoretical paper, the methodology comprised largely of secondary data carefully read and analyzed with situational examples illuminating relational insights of the different traditions. Results indicated that the traditions of communication theory as overarching knowledge structures create a robust understanding of the social meanings in communication foregrounding communication research.

Keywords: communication theory as a field; rhetoric; phenomenology; critical discourse; constitutive communication.

Introduction

The seven traditions of communication theory as a field provide a robust taxonomy of the different schools of communication theory that underpin communication research. Each tradition discusses assumptions, features, problems and solutions of communication practice. Due to the fragmented history of communication theory as multidisciplinary in nature, specific traditions have unique characteristics which can also be explained through the lens of another tradition as highlighted in the dialogic-dialectical assumption espousing different theories having agreements, disagreements, and tensions therein such that logical coherence will not be the sole basis for understanding. For example, the rhetorical tradition accentuates persuasion as an art of discourse which can also be explained using the semiotic tradition in the light of symbolic meanings, gestures and signs as communicative messages.

One of the distinctive assumptions of the field of communication theory is that it is a metamodel, an overarching narrative of constitutive communication as constituted and grounded in social meanings. In other words, this view departs the standard definition of communication as a mode of transmission from sender to receiver. Metamodel, or a model of models of communication theory, likewise, adheres to the idea that communication practice is a metadiscourse instigating discourse of discourse or in layman's lingo, talk about talk.

Theoretical Framework

Communication theory as a field is underpinned by the "Seven Traditions of Communication Theory as a Field" by Robert Craig (2006). The theory reconstructs communication theory as a dialogical-dialectical field according to two principles: the constitutive model of communication as a metamodel and theory as metadiscursive practice. Moreover, communication theories are mutually relevant when addressed to a practical lifeworld in which "communication" is already a richly meaningful term (Craig, 2006).

Methodology

This is a theoretical paper that discusses, explores, and analyzes the traditions of communication theory as a field using secondary data gathered entirely from Internet reading articles. The process required a thorough understanding of the different theoretical assumptions probing deeper insights through examples given.

Results and Discussion

Rhetorical Tradition. This communication theory stipulates communication as an art of discourse. It implies that mastering the skill of communication requires practice and education just like any craft. Rhetorical prowess signifies power just like a public speech where good communication skills of a person creates an impact to the listeners. Because of the diversity of how persons communicate, the theory suggests further research on methods, theories and practices that will hone the craft, among others. However, rhetoric does not necessarily translate validity or truth of what is being communicated. Just like a political speech of certain candidates vying for a position, the notion of 'pure rhetorical exercise' can have connotations of annoyance or meaningless rhetoric when words do not mean action, or when it is basically neutral and without emotions. Nevertheless, rhetorical tradition elevates good communication skills as something to be learned and studied critically as an artful, methodical discourse imbued with logical reasoning.

In a more modern definition, rhetorical literacy refers to skills in understanding the audience roles in shaping discourse, identifying and responding to the audience in terms of writing situation and being aware of one's own ideological stance and the audience's stance (Cook, 2002 as cited by Suryani et al, 2014). This perspective allows for the confluence of sender-receiver relationship. In the Classical Rhetoric of Aristotle, speaker-message-audience relationship is exemplified in ethos-logos-pathos. Ethos highlights a speaker's credibility and authority of the speaker. It connotes interpretation as well. Such interpretative stance is gleaned on a speaker's understanding of the message. Logos underscores the message that needs to be understood which will be conveyed to the audience as pathos.

One example to illustrate rhetorical tradition is listening to a politician's speech. The strength of persuasion emanates from the speaker as an orator. With logos representing the logic of the actual speech, persuasion transcends to the audience as pathos in terms of how the audience is emotionally affected. This can be explained in the way beliefs and ideologies affect the audience, hence, persuaded.

Semiotic Tradition. As a communication theory, semiotics emphasizes intersubjective meanings that are mediated by signs. What this means is that intersubjective meanings of reality are understood using signs, symbols and language in a socio-cultural group as shared expression. Problems of communication practice can include diversity of meanings, multiple perspectives that can hide essential elements of what is real. Language, for instance, shares commonality of meanings when it is located in a shared community as a social ideology, objectified but there still remains a sub-textual meaning, or meaning within a word that can be relatively understood by some and not by others especially language in different context.

Another example to illustrate semiotic communication is through the understanding of traffic signs as co-constructed meanings such that green light means go; read light means stop. This socially understood meaning connotes intersubjective mediation of meanings.

Phenomenological Tradition. This communication theory emphasizes the existence of *dialogue* and *otherness*. This simply means that communication with the other justifies the purpose of authentic communication within lived practice. Sharing of insightful experience, learning from other stories, interacting from other people provide authentic solutions as interpretative dimensions. This implies that sustained dialogue must be practiced as it produces good results viable for solving communication problems in many forms. In this regard, phenomenology emphasizes respect for others' thoughts and expressions in the same way as relationships emphasize the need for each other.

In communication research, phenomenology is a valuable research design that explores and analyzes the lived experiences of research participants. In doing so, themes are developed as interpretations leading to the creation of essence which is the pinnacle of phenomenological inquiry. One important idea in this process is that phenomenon is understood as "appearance" of reality, not really the physical reality as construed in the lived experience. Meaning to say, phenomenology, in order for it to be genuine, grasps the essence as appearances, assumptions, overarching themes, and values signifying essence.

Cybernetics Tradition. As a theory of information processing, cybernetic tradition in communication emphasizes communication as a system with parts networked together to perform functions that can be broken down and analyzed as units of information. This tradition also deals with input-output relationship while recognizing the importance of feedback and control, cause and effect and dualistic analyses of various phenomena. As a complex system, communication practice identifies various perspectives in communication processes beyond causality and recognizes

uncertainty of results even in controlled situations. As such, the theory looks beyond linear perspective of understanding why events happen as they are and instead it looks at larger connections employing systems thinking in its analysis.

Sociopsychological Tradition. Expression, interaction and influence ground sociopsychological communication theory. It puts emphasis on how humans express themselves to other people through social interaction which influences their behavior or how they impact to others. This requires attention to the causes and effects of behavior as an interplay of individual and social factors that need to be manipulated and moderated to fit in various situations. Its importance lies in the fact that communication in sociopsychological tradition moves with practical reality as it affects the individual imbued with 'conscientious' decisions through behavioral manipulation as previously mentioned. In here, communication plays a vital role in its mediating capacity to fathom depths of human relationship, in understanding the nature of human beings as more than rational individuals - that there is the capacity to connect through dialogic interactions. Finally, theoretical emphasis on social context of meanings and expressions can influence individual's personality and communication practice as well. It is a confluence of these factors that defines sociopsychological tradition in communication theory.

Sociocultural Tradition. Briefly stated, this tradition of communication theory signifies communication process that produces and reproduces shared sociocultural patterns. What this means is that societal values, norms, rituals and other patterns of behavior that are socially practiced are produced and reproduced in the individual level, another way of saying that human behavior is a product of shared cultural values and the role of communication is to maintain and enhance communication codes that address these cultural symbols and patterns. Moreover, there is a high degree of cultural awareness in understanding various cultural misunderstandings, conflicts that require conscientious look in the inner symbols of culture such as norms, mores, among others. The theory, further, speaks of a voice that transcends individualism to one that solidifies cultural identity that is preserved, transferred and reproduced in various communication practices.

Critical Tradition. In this theory, communication is perceived as discursive and reactionary to power structures that result in discrimination, oppression, and similar modes of degenerative situations. Communication practices center on rallying for a cause, for emancipation of certain inequities brought about by progress, capitalism and power that require critical reflection in order to affect change within the system. In here, communication is a catalyst for emancipatory feelings of freedom, justice and hope.

In today's rapidly changing society, false consciousness can be inevitable creating notions of disgruntlement and displacement. For instance, capitalism as generally a free market philosophy creates a false notion of progress when narratives of discrimination and inequality continue to hound individuals in the lower strata of society. These problems become the fulcrum of communication practice espousing revolutionary ideas rallying for change.

Pragmatist Tradition. Pragmatist communication theory arises as a response to incommensurability that pervades in democratic society. As part of Dewey's "Triple Contingency", the interaction between conversing individuals and the public resolves societal problems through the intervention of communication. Its framework is largely rooted on the constitutive model of communication theory that purports reflexivity as communication problems and practices are culturally grounded and the model creates a coherent understanding of the agreements, tensions, issues raised against the foregoing traditions, exemplified in the dialogic-dialectical coherence. What this means is that communication, as it relates to practical reality, will have points of contention and adherence to specific communication theory as it applies to practical situation. For instance, phenomenological tradition will have its incapacity to dwell on deep issues of social injustice as it is not enough that people listen to others' perspectives. A more robust critical tradition that dwells on discursive criticism and reflection will be more potent in delivering change.

Communication theory as non-science is an abstruse challenge that can be argued for and against it. In my capacity as a student of this course, I would like to ponder on some thoughts that would favor communication theory within the realm of scientific inquiry.

First, based on Pavitt's articulation of explanation as a characteristic in scientific communication theory that should establish some form of regularity agrees with its tradition, however, fragmented with each discipline forming different communicational patterns, but coherent and regular within its own field, communication practice exhibits a sense of patterned behavior defined by reflexivity within culture. For instance, sociocultural tradition of communication theory

(Craig, 2007) articulates communication as shared cultural experience exhibits a sense of regularity of communication practice. Such explanation relates to scientific learning that explains phenomena whether it predicts or disproves hypothesis. Corollary to this thought is on verifiability of observation in a scientific inquiry that can also be true to communication theory. In both cases, observed phenomena verify in terms of predictions into the future that will confirm assumptions. It will be noticed that the various traditions of communication as discussed by Craig (2007) has some coherence and incoherence if applied in different scenarios but dialogical-dialectical analogy provides coherence among various traditions in understanding tensions and agreements within theories. This constitutive model empowers communication its sense of verifiability within cultural grounds just like scientific theory that verifies truth or falsity of prediction. This formalizes communication practice as a scientific process rather than construed as ordinary human behavior.

Second, the functional perspective of communication theory articulated as 'good-consequences doctrine" as described by Achinsten (1983) is grounded on systems approach that defines interrelated and holistic functions of communication in general. For instance, using Dewey's Triple Contingency" model of communication that mediates "public" in resolving incommensurability problem, the audience (public) defines certain functional imperatives of dialogue between two persons such that their relationship is related to a higher social process like social problems within given situation. In relation to scientific theorizing, the latter does present a functional layout of what a theory hopes to achieve and for what purpose.

Furthermore, it will be noticed that communication theory come from models where variables are studied in terms of their relationship to each other and how they affect results. For instance, communication as a constitutive model purports its reflexive nature that resides within cultural context, as a pragmatist tradition as everyday practice of communication, as a rhetorical tradition that emphasizes discourse, among others.

Third, causal explanation in communication practice is abundantly applied. OSPR (orientation-stimulus-perception-response) and IPO (input-process-output) models of communication come in many forms of applicability. For instance, sociopsychological tradition of communication theory (Craig, 2007) highlights cause and effect of behavior as a result from communication as expression, interaction and influence. Related to this is Alfred Bandura's social learning theory that incorporates cognitive processing as mediating factor before a behavior is modelled out similar to OSPR model that includes cognitive structure within orientation process. Both models follow a dictum of scientific theory process that accounts for historical findings as inputs to test hypothesis as process in order to achieve a certain output as response.

In the final analysis, it makes sense to me that communication theory is scientific with foregoing arguments highlighted. It is a formal practice of arguing, testing, validating communication practice just like any scientific inquiry. Communication theory achieves objectivity even within limited realms of disciplines as highlighted in its fragmented history, but even so, it continues to verify reliability with communication researches being done.

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