

**HOW INDONESIANS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF
COMMUNICATION THEORIES**

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ABSTRACT. This article responds to the concern of some Indonesian communication scholars with the scarcity of "indigenous" communication theories developed by Indonesians themselves. It must be admitted that in our country objective communication theories developed in the West are more dominant than interpretive (phenomenological and critical) ones. This leads to the frequent deductive testing of the existing theories, making our research stagnant. To develop indigenous communication theories, the best solution is to conduct phenomenological (inductive) research on intercultural communication phenomena and critical research on mass communication phenomena (especially television programs) in Indonesia. This will help us to develop Indonesian communication theories as well as to enlighten our society.

Keywords: Phenomenological paradigm, objective paradigm (behaviorism and structural functionalism), critical paradigm

ABSTRAK. Artikel ini merespons kegunaan sebagian ilmuwan komunikasi Indonesia akan kelangkaan teori-teori komunikasi yang dikembangkan oleh orang Indonesia sendiri. Harus diakui bahwa di negara kita teori-teori objektif dalam ilmu komunikasi yang dikembangkan di Barat lebih dominan daripada teori-teori interpretif (fenomenologis dan kritis). Oleh karena itu, penelitian yang dilakukan di Indonesia umumnya bersifat deduktif dan bertujuan untuk menguji teori-teori yang sudah ada. Maka hingga derajat tertentu terjadilah kemandegan dalam penelitian kita. Untuk mengembangkan teori-teori yang khas Indonesia, solusi terbaik adalah dengan melakukan penelitian fenomenologis (secara induktif) atas fenomena komunikasi antar budaya, dan menggunakan paradigma kritis untuk meneliti fenomena komunikasi massa (khususnya program televisi) di Indonesia. Upaya ini tidak hanya akan membantu mengembangkan teori-teori komunikasi di Indonesia, tetapi juga mencerahkan masyarakat kita.

Kata kunci: Paradigma fenomenologis, paradigma objektif (behavioristik dan struktural-fungsionalisme), paradigma kritis.

INTRODUCTION

Some Indonesian communication scholars are concerned with the neglected development of communication theories by Indonesian communication scholars themselves, and with the possibility of developing typical (indigenous) communication theories in Indonesia. To enlighten their concern, we have to discuss first the existing theoretical paradigms of communication we have been familiar with.

At the level of paradigm of social sciences, there are three main paradigms: the objective (classical, scientific) paradigm (behaviorism and structural-functionalism), the phenomenological (constructivist) paradigm, and the critical paradigm, respectively influenced by three prominent thinkers: Emile Durkheim, Marx Weber, and Karl Marx. Certainly we can also mention many other great thinkers such as Auguste Comte, B.F. Skinner, John Watson, Albert Bandura, who have contributed to the scientific paradigm; Alfred Schutz, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, Herbert Blummer, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann who have contributed to the phenomenological paradigm; Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci and Jurgen Habermas, who have contributed to the critical paradigm. Theories under the objective paradigm are often associated with positivistic (quantitative, deductive) research, while theories under the phenomenological and critical paradigms are often associated with humanistic (interpretive, qualitative, inductive) research.

One of the problems to map existing communication theories is that many theories are multidisciplinary in nature. Some theories stem from and are developed by physical scientists, such as Shannon and Weaver's model of communication and their Information Theory. Others stem from Behavioristic Psychology, such as the theory of Stimulus-Response and the Social Learning Theory; from Cognitive Psychology, such as the theory of S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) and its derivatives; from Sociology such as some mass communication theories; and last but not least from Anthropology, such as Edward T. Hall's theory of nonverbal communication.

Many communication theories, regardless of their roots, can be subsumed under the three main paradigms mentioned above. For example, the Information Theory, Cultivation Theory, the Agenda-setting Theory, Uncertainty Reduction Theory, and Spiral of Silence theory belong to the scientific/objective paradigm. Meanwhile, some theories of discourse, theories of sign and language, message production, and symbolic interactionism (including Goffman's dramatism) belong to the interpretive/subjective paradigm, whereas some theories of discourse, political-economy theories of mass media, and theories of media and cultural studies belong to the critical paradigm (see also Griffin, 1997:484; Mulyana, 2001:44-51; Hidayat, 2003:13).

In my view, at the level of paradigm, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to develop a new paradigm (what kind of paradigm would it be?) beyond the three paradigms outlined above. Yet, we can contribute to each of them.

OBSTACLES HAMPERING OUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE OBJECTIVE PARADIGM

The least opportunity to contribute to the three paradigms is offered by the classical paradigm. Since this paradigm has a deductive character, most of what Indonesian communication scholars can do to contribute to this paradigm is to test existing theories. Most of the theories and their derivatives have been developed in the West, particularly the United States, yet we contribute very little (not to say nothing) to the development of these objective theories. One problem is that there are many "missing links" between what have been found in the communication field in the West and the communication research we carry out here in Indonesia. More specifically, we are not able to trace the development of communication theories and their derivatives through the testing of hypotheses deduced (by western communication researchers) from the previous theories from time to time, since we are not able to buy and read necessary books and especially research journals reporting the relevant research findings. Consequently, the development of communication theories based on this scientific paradigm is stagnant in our country.

Often scholars and especially (postgraduate) students repeat again and again similar surveys (and to a lesser degree experiments) to test similar hypotheses or theories. The difference is that they conduct the research at different times, in different sites, and with different samples. Some hypotheses formulated by our researchers may have been obsolete in the West (as they have been confirmed many times), but our researchers treat them as if they are fresh and are worth testing. Often the variables are operationalized by the researchers in a "naïve" or "sloppy" way, as if the variables have no connection at all with the same or similar variables used and operationalized in the West.

Many of the variables have been used by previous (western) researchers before, using standard variable indicators, or with slight modification. Yet, based on my experience as a supervisor of postgraduate students, students create their own indicators, even though they use the same or similar communication variables. Interestingly, students use not only the survey as a common method, but they also use a similar procedure. For example, using *the Likert Scale*, they collect the ordinal data, converse the ordinal data into the interval data through the method of successive intervals, so that they can analyze the data by the same statistical test (especially through the path analysis). The Likert Scale is so popular as if it can be used to operationalize any variable. Even to operationalize the variable of knowledge (as the results of media exposure, for example), they also use the Likert Scale, which is of course inappropriate (the knowledge variable will be more understood if it is operationalized through the interval or ratio scale).

There is a tendency among our researchers that the more sophisticated the statistical test is, the more prestigious or the better the research will be. This is not necessarily true. I myself have found many excellent international journal articles written by a team composed of two, three, or four professors, using the

Chi-Square, the t-test, or ANOVA. Yet, the articles reporting their research findings are consistent, solid and systematic, thus adding to the existing repertoire of communication theories.

Even if we can always trace the development of communication theories based on the objective paradigm and conduct our own research on the right track, that is, based on the existing accumulated knowledge, this does not guarantee that our contribution will be widely known, let alone internationally. Our obstacle in this case is that the vast majority of us as communication scholars do not write our research results in English. Our inability to report our research results (which might become potential theories) is a huge problem, let alone to publish the same articles in internationally-accredited journals so that our research findings can be reviewed by international communication scholars, discussed in international conferences or discussed in communication textbooks written by prominent communication scholars. This language barrier alone seems to be very difficult to overcome. This will certainly hamper our theoretical contribution to the communication discipline at the international level. And in fact, this language barrier applies not only to our contribution of communication theories based on the classical paradigm, but also on the phenomenological paradigm and the critical paradigm, which I will delineate in the following sections.

OUR POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEORIES BASED ON THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL PARADIGM

While the objective paradigm promotes the unity of knowledge, the phenomenological (constructivist) paradigm does not claim such idealism. According to the constructivist paradigm, social reality (communication phenomenon, if you will) is very complex, multiple, fluid, and relative. Put in another way, all aspects of the reality affect each other simultaneously and are not to be seen as causes and effects. According to the phenomenological paradigm, communication participants are active, creative, and have free will, so that their communication behaviors are often unpredictable. Consequently, the proponents of the phenomenological paradigm aim to develop theories inductively but not to make them generalizable. In other words, this alternative paradigm aims to develop hypotheses (or theories) based on specific contexts of space and time (see Mulyana, 2001:147-148). For the proponents of the phenomenological paradigm, it does not matter much whether different researchers will come with the same or different results after they investigate the same problem, even though they will appreciate similar research results (but will never assume that the results will be the same). The objectivist researchers do not adhere to this principle. For them, if two researchers have come with different or contradictory findings, either one or both researchers are misled.

We now have greater needs to develop phenomenological theories based on the assumption that many scholars and institutions have doubted the explanatory

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power of classical approaches to examine many important issues faced by our modern society. This is also related to another assumption that scientific developments themselves are closely related with changes in the larger socio-economic context that are more complex in the postindustrial society, the postmodern age, and the information society. Thus, phenomenological approaches are deemed important and also scientific to cope with these social changes, justifying a search for new theories and methods to comprehend social and cultural change and complexity (see also Jensen, 1991:1-2).

Viewing that theories can be contextual (culture, space, and time-bound), this means that we do not have to stick to the unity of knowledge as claimed by the objectivist. Thus, the phenomenologists have more opportunity to develop their own communication theories in various fields of communication: business/organizational communication, health communication, agricultural communication, development communication, intercultural communication, etc. Of all these communication fields, intercultural communication is worth noting. Due to the nature of intercultural communication itself, and the nature of the Indonesian society (composed of hundreds of ethnic groups with their respective languages and or dialects), we are more likely to develop indigenous theories of intercultural communication in Indonesia if problems and issues faced by our multiethnic people are investigated through the phenomenological paradigm. Simply speaking, this paradigm fits the nature of intercultural communication and the assumptions behind this discipline (see also Casmir, 1983; Rakhmat, 1990).

When we study intercultural communication, based on the phenomenological paradigm, it is reasonable to assume that the Indonesian people who have different cultures will attribute different meanings to the same verbal and nonverbal messages, depending on how they define their symbolic environment. (Or they attribute the same meaning to different verbal and nonverbal messages) . These meanings will be subjective in nature or at best are closely related to their respective culture. So using the phenomenological paradigm, I believe that there will be so many contextual theories (substantive theories based on grounded research), some of which may be potential to be developed into formal theories (see also Mulyana, 2001:175).

The development of intercultural communication theories in Indonesia will contribute not only to the development of communication discipline and academic community in our country, but also to the development of Indonesia in general. The results can be used by bureaucrats as invaluable data and information to formulate relevant and useful policies to take the people to prosperity and peace in Indonesia. There is no doubt that interethnic and interreligious conflicts that have taken place in Indonesia for the past decades are rooted in the objective perspective of the central government in developing the country. The government always thinks that all Indonesian people are the same (with the same historical background, aspirations, and ideals). On the contrary, Indonesian people consist of many ethnic groups who may have different values, and therefore, cannot be

treated the same way. What is called "good" or "bad," or what is assumed "ownership," "happiness" or "prosperity" in Java might be different in Kalimantan or Papua. The objective paradigm to investigate intercultural issues in Indonesia is not too useful if we want to improve our country, including the existing practices of how different groups of Indonesian people interact with each other. In other words, instead of criticizing the existing policies and practices, the objective paradigm tends to confirm and strengthen them.

TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL COMMUNICATION THEORIES IN INDONESIA

The weakness of the classical paradigm is also clear when we want to improve the existing practices of the Indonesian mass media, especially private Indonesian television which is full of entertainment constituting the large-scale deception of the people making them stupid and spoiled. How can we educate the people and motivate them to work harder if most of our television programs broadcast by our ten private TV stations are *Dangdut* programs portraying the sensual parts of the female singers (especially Inul Daratista and her followers), infotainment programs gossiping celebrities, crime programs portraying terrible corpses and blood, and mystery programs depicting and promoting ghosts as if they are real. For example, in one mystery program it is narrated by one private television station that one of the horse carts in the Yogyakarta palace was used by the past Yogyakarta Sultan to meet Nyai Roro Kidul, without indicating whether the story was a fact or a hoax.

To criticize the practices of our mass media, especially television, and to enlighten our readers and viewers, it is imperative to use critical theories. What I mean by critical theories are not only merely the critical theories we have known so far, such as those advocated by the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas), cultural studies (especially advocated by the Birmingham School), and feminist studies, but also the normative theories that stem from our own cultural Indonesian values. It is debatable whether we already have normative communication theories rooted in our ideology (*Pancasila* or whatever it is). Yet, I believe that Indonesians---most of whom profess religions---already have normative theories based on their respective religious sources of teachings, for instance *the Qur'an* and *the Sunnah* (Prophet Muhammad's practices) for Muslims, and the Bible for Christians. All we have to do is to develop them to meet the modern practices of the mass media.

Elsewhere I have discussed *the Qur'an* and *the Sunnah* as the criteria to evaluate the practices of the mass media (see Mulyana, 1999:121-134), while Johannesen (1990) also discusses normative communication theories (communication ethics) derived from Christianity, which have similar principles to Islam. For example, as mentioned by Johannesen (1990:89), the Old Testament and the New Testament clearly warn the Christians as well as the Jews not to lie and to slander. More specifically, the New Testament warns that on the

Judgement Day Christians will be responsible for every word he or she has said. Johannesen cites the argument put forward by Charles Vennstra and Daryl Vander Kooi who have develop religious communication ethics, that since man is created in the image of God, man deserves full appreciation, that we have to communicate with them based on full love and respect as we worship God. In Islam, there is no controversy that gossiping or backbiting is forbidden according to both the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*. So is the publication of sensual pictures such as those of naked or even half-naked women. These basic principles destroy the foundation of modern (printed and electronic) journalism such as found in various tabloids and magazines and television infotainment programs in our country.

I believe that the prophetic paradigm of communication rooted in the teachings of God is the one that we Indonesians can develop to the fullest degree, especially if we intend to live our life meaningfully (why we are here in this world, where we are heading to, and what we have to do to reach our destination safely) and if at the same time we intend to guide our (low-educated) people to prosperity, happiness, and peace. I have no doubt that the usefulness of these normative theories can be "tested empirically," although we can never fully grasp that the results are truly empirical due to our limited perception and knowledge. For instance, it can be hypothesized that gossiping celebrities through television contributes to the divorce of the two celebrities who are a husband and a wife. It is interesting to observe whether this hypothetical statement can be corroborated by some phenomenological research or even scientific research.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The objective research tends to maintain the status-quo, while the phenomenological research tends to construct alternative forms of reality, and the critical research tends to deconstruct the status quo and evaluate it for the betterment of society. Unfortunately the last two approaches to develop alternative theories are not always appreciated by objectivist researchers, notably in our country. The objectivists tend to judge findings resulted from qualitative-interpretive research as unscientific or at least unreliable.

Certainly our big task to develop phenomenological and critical theories of communication in Indonesia, especially to criticize messages disseminated by our mass media, is not easy. Some of us may even doubt whether we can really develop normative theories based on our Indonesian values (if they ever exist), or our religious teachings and whether such normative theories can improve our society.

Both the government and business enterprises (including the mass media) have enjoyed their status-quo. Scholars who advocate humanistic-interpretive approaches (especially critical ones) are more likely to be treated by them as a threat rather than as partners. This is a big challenge for us as communication scholars.

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