THE CONTACT AND COHESION THEORY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK BASED ON THE EASTERN CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Communication is among the main elements and requirements of modern life for all human beings. Communication competence and communication theories help and guide individuals to conduct proper communication and assess the process of interactions among different people. So far, almost all communication theories are developed based on the Western social, cultural and communicative norms, which may not cover works on communications among people in the Eastern parts of the world. This study reviewed and assessed 100 available works on interpersonal communication and intercultural communication from different perspectives. This study also assessed the results of four different original studies on interpersonal communication and intercultural among universities from different social and cultural backgrounds. Through the review of previous works which were available in the literature that mostly belonged the Western parts of the world, and thorough the evaluation of the results from the original studies which were conducted in an Asian country, some differences were found based on the main elements and steps of communication. Through the comparison of the results from the reviewed works and from the original studies, this study suggests a new theoretical framework of direct communication among individuals from different backgrounds under the Eastern context of communication. This study suggest the contact initiation, negotiation, cognition, and cohesion as four of the main steps for conducting successful interactions among people from different backgrounds based on the Eastern communication norms and social perspectives.

Keywords: ,ommunication, ,ommunication theory, contact and cohesion theory

INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of the main achievements of human-beings that helps them to know one another, to establish personal, social, cultural, and political relationships, and to achieve their common goals. Communication enables people to share their values and achievements, and to gain new personal, social and cultural information from one another. As the modern concept of communication is one of the key achievements of the world, the modern world and the ever-growing aspects of globalization and multicultural organizations and environments are also the main outcomes of communication among different people. According to Kim and McKay-Semmler (2013), communication is the main means to exchange social and cultural information and to establish social and cultural relationships. Sinicrope et al. (2007) believe that, in the ever-growing globalized environments, the skill to interact with different people is among the basic needs of people for both their domestic and overseas lives.

by social, cognitive and procedural issues as members with different personalities negotiate and manage the task at hand (Latisha, Anis, Nazira, Surina, & Mahani, 2010; Yong & Wendy Asrina, 2010).

To have successful personal, social, and professionals, people must learn how to communicate with others and must consider communication as one of the main elements of their daily lives. As stated by Lin (2011), communication helps people to learn, to know one another, and to find their places in societies. To conduct fruitful interactions, people need to consider all social, cultural and communicative norms and respect the differences. At the same time, environmental, social and cultural connections among people help them to improve their communication competence. Chi and Suthers (2015) also argue that, existence of close relationships among people help them to learn the essential skills and improve their communication competence.

Communication refers to the ways that individuals interact and exchange their information through the involvement of at least two social systems (Baran, 2004; Barnett, 1997; Huang, 2010). Communication competence refers to some practical knowledge, motivations, and skills that enable people to conduct fruitful communication (Spitzberg, 1983). According to Dusi et al. (2014), people can improve their communication competence through daily practices of interaction with different people.

Besides communication competence, communication theories and understanding of different communicative contexts and different communicative norms are also among the main issues that help people to conduct successful interactions. Information about different theories may also help individuals to evaluate the process of their daily interactions with different people. As stated by Miller (2005), a theory is not a special communicative behaviour, but it helps people to know different communicative behaviours and establish the easy ways for their daily interactions. Communication theories are mostly focus on the basic and fundamental levels of interactions among different people (Kim, 2010; Bennett 1998; Stepanoviene 2011; Vevea, 2011).

Most of the available conceptual frameworks in communication and communication theories are developed in the Western parts of the world and based on the Western social, cultural and communicative norms. Liu (2013) argues that, communication theories mostly were developed by Western scholars and under the Western context of communication. However, there are some fundamental differences between the Western liberal and individualistic lifestyles and the Asian collectivistic and indirect communication styles. People in the West mostly practice the low context of communication which focuses on openness and directness, while people in the Eastern parts of the world practice the high context of communication which focuses on politeness and indirectness (Abu Bakar & Mustaffa, 2013; Gudykunst, 2001; Gao, 1998; Park & Kim, 2008).

Thus, because of such difference the theories which are developed based on the Western individualistic communicative norms, may not cover works on communication in the Eastern parts of the world properly. Thus, this study aimed to assess the probable differences between the main attributes of communication theories based on the Western and Eastern contexts of communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of communication theories also belong to Western scholars and focus on the Western norms and perspectives of communication. It was argued that, communication science mostly belong to Euro-American scheme and communication theories also developed by Western scholars. The main object of communication studies in the West is their own people and their own issues, if Westerners work on the issues which belong to other people, they may judged based their own norms and points of views as well (Kim, 2007; Kim, 2012; Liu, 2013). Thus, the miss interpretation and miss judgment of scholars

and researchers in one part of the world regarding the different norms and values of people in other parts of the world may cause serious misunderstandings among different people.

Different people have their own different behaviors and cultural norms (Hei et al., 2011). As different people and different societies have their own different social, cultural and communicative norms, researchers must know the differences and must respect these differences; otherwise, the notion of prejudice may affect their works and their judgments. They must know that there are different social, cultural, and communicative norms, and must know that no one is better from one another and all social and cultural norms and values are the valuable assets of human being that reflect the beauty of differences.

Besides other communication theories, the Attribution Theory of Heider (1958) focuses on both of the internal and external attributes that could affect interactions among people. Heider asks researchers to assess the relationship between internal and external abilities of individuals regarding their daily contacts. The Communication Accommodation Theory of Giles et al. (1991) emphasize on the speech adjustment, vocal patterns and minimizing of the social differences among communicators. The Psychosocial Development Theory of Chickering (1969) focuses on the development of mature integrity and mature relationships among individuals from different backgrounds. This theory includes seven vectors which are: developing competence, managing emotions, moving from autonomy towards interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity.

The Contact Theory of Allport (1954) focuses on sheer contact, competition, accommodation, and assimilation as the main stages during direct interactions among different people. This theory focuses on interactions among people from different groups and is a widely cited theory in the communication field. Tropp (2006) through analyses and evaluation of around 500 works on communication found that the contact theory of Allport (1954) is widely used and is helpful for studies in communication among different people. But, the works which were analyzed by Tropp (2006) were mostly conducted under the Western context of communication.

The contact theory of Allport (1954) introduces four steps for the process interactions among people, which are: sheer contact, competition, accommodation, and assimilation. The results from different studies among students from different cultures and countries (e.g. Sarwari, 2014; Sarwari and Wahab, 2016; Sarwari, Wahab, & Abdul Aziz; 2016; Sarwari, Ibrahim, & Abdul Aziz, 2016) show that, even though the contact theory is a helpful theory, but still cannot cover all stages and perspectives of interactions among different people based on the Eastern context of communication.

Based on the read literature and based on the results from the above mentioned original studies, some attributes and elements such as contact initiation, negotiation, cognition, cohesion, coherent heart, respect differences, self-knowledge, flexibility, shared interests, and purposefulness were identified to be helpful during interactions among different people, especially under the Eastern context of communication (Allport, 1954; Buhrmester et al., 1988; Chen & Starosta, 2000; Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Lagos et al., 2008; Luthar & Burack, 2000; McCraty & Shaffer, 2015; McCraty et al., 2000; Jacob, 2010; Bernston et al., 1991; Kim, 1991; Kim, 2007; Kim, 2012; Paulk, 2008; Matveev, 2002; Michaeli, 2013; Paulk et al., 2011; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). However, most of the above mentioned elements are missing in communication theories. Thus, inclusion of the mentioned elements in a conceptual framework may help individuals and researchers to conduct successful interactions with different and evaluate their interactions properly.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative method was applied to collect the survey data for the four main studies which support this paper. The main instruments were the interpersonal competence questionnaire (ICQ) of Buhrmester et al. (1988) and the intercultural communication competence questionnaire of Matveev (2002). Both of the instruments are designed based on Likert Scale with five options per items. The first data set belongs to the results from four original research projects on communication among university students from different nationalities. The first study which assessed interpersonal communication competence between local and international students of a Malaysian public university had 220 participants. The participants were 100 Malaysian students and 100 international students who belonged to 12 different countries. The second study assessed the characteristics of interpersonal communication among international postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university, and the participants were 128 students from 17 different countries.

The third study assessed the role of interactions among international students on internationalization of higher education and the participants of this study were 118 postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university and the participants belonged to 16 different countries. The fourth study assessed the relationship between English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence with the participation of 220 local and international students of a Malaysian public university and the participants were from 16 different countries.

The second data set belongs to the review of 100 published works on communication among different people. To analyze the related works from the literature, the quantitative content analysis method was used. The quantitative content analysis method was used to find out the quantity and percentage of the use of terms and attributes that include the min concepts and perspectives of communication in different contexts of communication. According to Allen and Reser (1990), the content analysis method as a fruitful analytical tool has been used in different studies. The quantitative content analysis approach uses to produce data that manipulated with different methods. The works were published between the time period of 1990 and 2016. The reviewed studies mostly were conducted in the Western parts of the world. The participants of the reviewed works mostly were university students and university staff, and some studies were conducted in some international organizations and multicultural companies as well. The findings from the four original studies were analyzed through the use of the essential tests from SPSS. The reviewed data were analyzed through the computer-mediated content analyses and the results from both data sets were embedded and reported in the findings section below.

FINDINGS

The results from all four original studies are supportive of the existence of some differences with results from the same or similar studies in the Western parts of the world. Based on the results, the gender and age variables had effects on interactions among the participants of the mentioned studies while these variables did not affect the results in the similar studies in the Western parts of the world (e.g. Aidoo, 2012; Ingman, 1999; Hunter, 2003).

Based on the results, 62 % of all participants reported that their self-confidence and self-knowledge helped them to initiate contacts with different people, and through negotiation they could know one another and reach in the level of cognition. According to the findings, more than half (59.8%) of the participants reported that their flexibility and shared interests helped them to be connected with one another and have contacts and

collaborations in their personal, social and academic lives. Table 1 below illustrates the quantitative results of the four different studies for some elements that helped individuals to conduct proper communication.

Table 1. The overall Mean and SD scores for each element from each study

Element/ Study	Study 1		Study 2		Study 3		Study 4	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Initiation	23.1	4.2	17.2	2.9	22.9	4.2		
Negotiation	20.5	3.7	16.8	3.1	11.8	2.5		
Cognition	25.2	3.9	23.2	3.4	26.4	3.9	15.1	2
Cohesion			20.4	2.8			23	2.8
Competence			17.3	2.9				
Respect differences	21.2	3.7	20.4	3.2			17.3	2.1
Flexibility	22.5	4	21.9	3.1	12.8	3.1	10.9	2.6
Shared interests	20.3	3.9	18.4	2.7				
Self-knowledge					17.1	4.4	10.8	1.5
Purposefulness			21.5	2.9	17.8	3.2	12.4	2.9

Based on the results from four different studies which were conducted at a Malaysia public university, the cognition and flexibility attributes were used in all of four studies and the highest mean scores belonged to the cognition attribute, as 25.2, 23.2 and 26.4 for the first, second and third studies respectively. At the same time, the initiation, negotiation, respects for differences and purposefulness attributes were used in the three studies. The mean scores for the initiation and negotiation attributes were higher in the first study, as 23.1 and 20.5 respectively. It means that, under the Asian, especially Malaysian, context of communication, initiation, cogitation, flexibility, negotiation, respect for differences and purposefulness are the important attributes of daily interactions among different people.

The results from the reviewed works show that the vast majority (87%) of contents of the works belonged to Western issues and were collected and reported based on Western norms of communication. At the same time, the results illustrate that most of the studies (64.3%) were conducted under the theoretical supports of the attribution theory of Heider (1958), the psychosocial development theory of Chickering (1969), the communication accommodation theory of Giles et al. (1919), and the contact theory of Allport (1954). About 20 % of them did not use any exact theoretical framework, and the rest used different parts from the different theories and mostly were interdisciplinary studies. Based on the results from the content analyses, communication competence, contact initiation, negotiation, cognitive ability, coherent heart, flexibility, self-awareness were mentioned and used in different parts of the contents as elements for communication competence and requirements for conducting successful interactions. Table 2 below includes the results from the content analyses of the reviewed works.

Table 2. The descriptive results from the content analyses

Element/ Attribute	Number of works used the term	Percentage
Initiation	75	75
Negotiation	42	42
Cognitive	83	83
Cohesion	12	12
Coherent heart	4	4
Self-knowledge	52	52
Purposefulness	36	36
Respect differences	48	48
Flexibility	61	61

Based on the outcomes from the embedded results of the two data sets, some elements and conditions were identified as effective elements and conditions for conducting interactions with people from various backgrounds, especially under the Eastern context of communication. Table 3 below shows the main elements and conditions for conducting successful interactions under the Eastern context of communication which were found based on the results of the two above mentioned data sets.

Table 3. The steps and conditions for successful interactions in the Western societies

Steps	Conditions
Contact initiation	Coherent competence
	Coherent heart
Negotiation	Self-knowledge
	Purposefulness
Cognition	Respect differences
	Flexibility
Cohesion	Shared interests

The results are supportive of the formation of a new conceptual framework based on the Eastern context of communication to help individuals to conduct proper communication. Figure one below includes the steps and conditions of the Contact and Cohesion Theory:

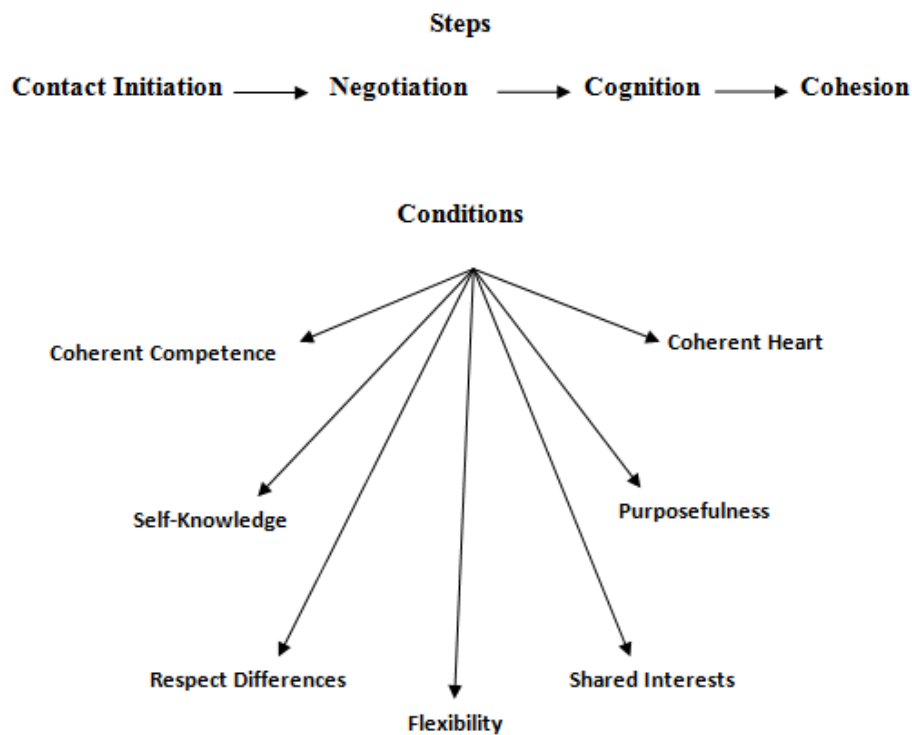## The Contact and Cohesion Theory

Steps

Contact Initiation → Negotiation → Cognition → Cohesion

Conditions

Coherent Competence · Coherent Heart · Self-Knowledge · Purposefulness · Respect Differences · Shared Interests · Flexibility

Figure 1. The steps and conditions of the Contact and cohesion Theory

DISCUSSION

Communication is among the main factors that affect daily lives of all human-beings, and communication theories affect the ways people communicate and assess their daily interactions. Proper communication enables people to learn, to share their information, to help one another, and to partake in the development process of their societies. Kim and McKay-Semmler (2013), and Lin (2011) also focus on the effectiveness of interactions among different people on sharing their different values and establishing social and cultural relationships. Social skills, communication competence and suitable theories and conceptual frameworks ease the ways for people to conduct fruitful interactions with different people. Miller (2005) believes that communication theory helps individuals to know different communicative norms and to choose the suitable ways to communicate.

So far, most of the theories and conceptual frameworks were developed by Western scholars and focus on the Western norms of social lives and communication. Based on Kim (2007) and Liu (2013), communication theories mostly focus on Western communicative and social norms, because almost all communication theories were developed by Westerners. As different societies and different cultures have their own communicative norms, thus theories which developed based on the social and cultural norms of one context of communication may not work in other areas and under different contexts of communication.

Theories which developed based on the Western norms and Western cultural values mostly focus on the individualistic and liberal lifestyles, while people in the Eastern parts of the world mostly practice different perspectives and interact based on the collectivistic norms of communication. According to Abu Bakar and Mustaffa (2013) and Gudykunst (2001), there are many differences between the Western and Eastern lifestyles

and communicative norms. Westerners prefer to be open, friendly, dramatic and direct when interacting with one another, while Easterners prefer to be polite and exchange their messages indirectly. Thus, the theoretical norms also could bring different results from one context to another one. The results from this study confirmed the main elements and attributes that help individuals to conduct interactions with different people under the Eastern parts of the world are somehow from different from main elements of the same process under the Western context of communication.

Heider (1958) focus on the relationship between the internal and external attributes that could affect interactions among people, and Chickering (1969) focus on the development of mature relationships between individuals from various backgrounds. While, in the Eastern parts of the world this theoretical condition may not work and people may be sensitive towards establishment of mature relationships with different people. Giles et al. (1991) ask individuals to minimize their social differences to conduct successful interactions, while in the Eastern parts of the world people could persist to keep their personal, social and cultural differences while interacting with one another. Allport (1954) introduces competition and assimilation as two of the main stages of his contact theory. Whereas people in Eastern parts of the world could consider the term of competition as a negative term and they may also do not want to assimilate thorough their interactions and they may prefer to interact, negotiate, know one another and establish some relationships instead of assimilation.

People in the Eastern parts of the world, especially in most of the Asian countries besides being friendly and besides conducting daily interactions with different people, prefer to preserve their own personal, social, cultural and historical values and norms as well. Thus, after initiating contacts with different people, negotiation, cognition, and cohesion steps may help individuals to have successful interactions under the Eastern and Asian context of communication. The results from the original studies which were carried out in a Malaysian academic environment illustrate that the cognition and flexibility attributes are the most important elements of successful interaction among different people under the Asian context of communication.

Moreover, based on the results from the four studies which were conducted at a Malaysian university, the initiation, negotiation, respects for differences and purposefulness are also among the main attributes of interactions among different people under the Asian context of communication. To say it in other words, to have successful interaction with people from different nationalities under the Asian context of communication, individuals must consider the cognition, flexibility, and purposefulness as important elements that could affect their interactions and they must respect differences during their interactions. The results from this study and the suggested steps and condition may help individuals and researchers to perform proper interactions, and to assess communication among different people appropriately.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the differences of the main elements and attributes of communication theories between on the Western and the Eastern contexts of communication. According to the results, most of the available communication theories are developed by Western scholars and based on their own social, cultural and communicative norms. Based on the findings, almost all of the reviewed works were conducted under the theoretical guidance of the Western-based communication theories. This study also found some differences between the main elements and concepts that lead interactions among different people from the Western context of communication to the Eastern context of communication.

This study suggests a new theoretical framework which stands on four main steps which are the contact initiation, negotiation, cognition, and cohesion. The results from this study and the newly proposed steps may help individuals to conduct proper interactions and consider the differences between the Western and Eastern contexts of communication when interacting with different people.

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