Review Paper

A New Theoretical Framework for the Asian Context of Communication: the Contact and Cohesion Theory

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ABSTRACT: *Communication is one of the main achievements of human-beings and it shapes the main values of humanity. Communication theories and communication competence help people to conduct appropriate interactions with different people and achieve their communicative goals properly. However, almost all available theories in the field of communication are developed and introduced by Westerners which are focus on the social, cultural and communicative norms of Western people. As there are many differences between the Western and Eastern communicative and cultural norms, thus the theories that focus on the Western communicative and cultural norms and perspectives may not cover all aspects of communication in the Eastern parts of the world. Therefore, the mentioned issue was assessed through the review of around 100 available works on communication among different people under both of the Eastern and Western contexts of communication and also through the assessment of results from four different original studies in an Asian country. The results from the review of previous works and also the findings from the four different studies among individuals from different nationalities confirmed the existence of some fundamental differences between the Eastern and Western contexts of communication. Moreover, most of the available works on communication were conducted under the guidance of the Western-oriented communication theories. Through the comparison of the findings from the previous works under the Western context of communication and the results from the original studies under the Eastern context of communication, it became clear that the theories that developed based on the Western communicative norms cannot cover communication studies and communication steps based on Eastern, especially Asian, communicative and cultural norms properly . Thus, this study came out with a new theoretical framework (the Contact and Cohesion Theory) for the Asian context of communication. The steps for the Contact and Cohesion Theory are Contact Initiation, Negotiation, Cognition, and Cohesion. This theory also suggests seven conditions for conducting proper interactions among people from different backgrounds, and the proposed conditions are: coherent competence, coherent heart, self-knowledge, purposefulness, respect differences, flexibility, and shared interests. The mentioned steps and conditions may help individuals to conduct successful interactions under the Eastern context of communication.*
Keywords: Communication theory, Contact and cohesion theory, Negotiation, Cognition, Cohesion

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication is among the main requirements of modern life for all Human beings. 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.

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.

II.   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

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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.

III. 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. 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.

IV. 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.

Tab. 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		

Element							
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

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.

Tab. 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.

Tab. 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. The figure 1 below includes the steps and conditions for the Contact and Cohesion Theory:
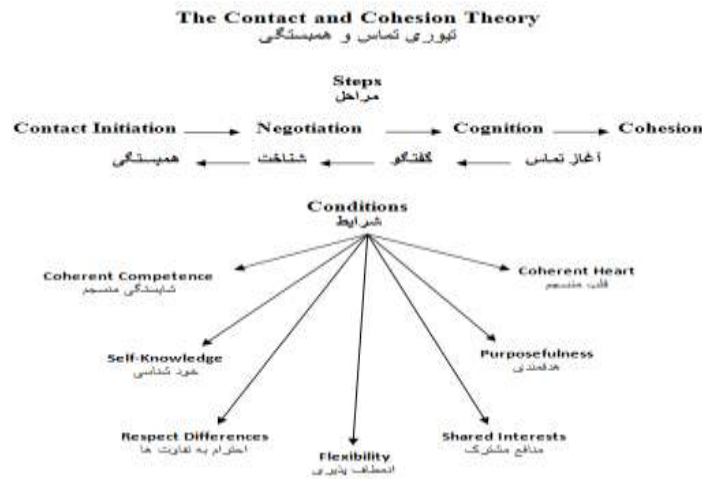
Figure 1: The proposed steps and conditions for the Contact and Cohesion Theory

V. 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 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.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to answer the question whether the communication theories which developed based on the Western social, cultural and communicative norms are suitable to cover communication and communication studies under the Asian context of communication or not. The results from this study confirmed that there are many differences between the Western individualistic communication context and the Eastern collectivistic communication context. Based on the findings from the reviewed works and also from the results of four original studies in an Asian country, the Western-based communication theories cannot cover all aspects of communication among Asian people. Thus, based on the findings from the reviewed works and also based on the results from the originals studies, this study introduces the Contact and Cohesion Theory as a new theoretical framework for the Asian context of communication. This new and Asian-based theory stands on four main steps which are: 1) contact initiation, 2) negotiation, 3) cognition, and 4) cohesion. This theory also suggests seven conditions for conducting peaceful and fruitful interactions among individuals from different backgrounds. The proposed conditions for conducting proper communication are: 1) coherent competence, 2) coherent heart, 3) self-knowledge, 4) purposefulness, 5) respect differences, 6) flexibility, and 7) shared interests. The results from this study and the newly proposed steps and conditions may help individuals to conduct proper interactions under the Asian context of communication.

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