## Socio-cultural Tradition: From Theory to Research

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### Abstract

There are many theories that try to understand the broad nature of communication and how it applies to the individual or society but because of the complex nature of the topic, traditions are formed to help organize and explain different viewpoints and concepts. Robert Craig developed a model that labelled and separated the field of communication into seven traditions (Littlejohn & Foss 34). The socio-cultural tradition is one of the worldviews.  It is the study of one's relationship as a whole to a culture rather than individual differences. This paper closely examines this tradition tracing its origin, showing how it conceptualizes communication and its problems, and juxtaposing it with other traditions. Beyond this, the paper shows how this tradition may be applied in social research: from paradigm to data analysis and interpretations.

*Keywords: Communication theory, social cultural tradition, social research.*

### Introduction: Traditions of communication theory

Scholars hold widely divergent views on what communication is and consequently mapping out the boundaries that mark the field of communication theory has always been an uphill task that has generated enormous controversy and debate.  It is in response to this that Robert Craig, a university of Colorado professor contends, 'communication theory as an identifiable field of study does not yet exist' (1999: 119).

While agreeing with other scholars Craig argues that insisting on looking for a grand communication theory is an exercise in futility.  A better alternative would be to focus on the traditions or approaches researchers have used to study communication problems and practices (Craig, 2007). Robert Craig developed a model that labelled

and separated the field of communication into seven traditions (Craig, 1999; Littlejohn & Foss, 2007; Griffins 2008). These are the semiotic, the phenomenological, the cybernetic, the socio-psychological, the socio-cultural, the critical, and the rhetorical traditions. Although the seven traditions outline and have depth in specialized areas of expertise, they are intertwined and none of them can claim monopoly in explaining all aspects of communication.

The sociocultural tradition is the focus of this paper. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will give a brief background of the tradition focussing on the early theorists who set the agenda for others to follow; highlight how the advocates of this tradition define communication; how communication problems are perceived; suggest communication problems that the tradition addresses and show how this tradition is applied in communication research.

## Background

The socio-cultural tradition can be traced back to the 19$^{th}$ century when communication began to be taken seriously as an academic discipline and a potential field of study. This tradition derives from sociological and anthropological thought. Charles H. Cooley and George Mead, two American sociologists in the early 20$^{th}$ century, contributed heavily to this tradition. (Craig & Muller, 2007). Mead is esteemed particularly for his study and writings of how symbols influence and shape interactions in various contexts.

Additionally, Edward Sapir, a university of Chicago linguist, and Benjamin Lee, his student, also made immense contribution to the socio-cultural tradition. The two scholars are renowned for the Sapir-Whorf theory of linguistic relativity which advances that the structure of a culture's language shapes what people think and do (Sapir, 1921). In other words, the language habits of a people represent their worldview/view of reality. An example that comes to mind is the absence of the word 'cousin' in a number of African languages. Instead the word 'brother' is used to refer to such relations. This has a definite influence on how one perceives and ultimately relates with his/her 'cousins'. The theory of linguistic relativity strongly opposes the

assumptions that all languages are similar and that words are merely used to carry meaning (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2007).

The other scholar whose contribution to this tradition is applauded is Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist.  He argued that unlike animals that react to the environment, humans have the capacity to modify the environment for their own purpose and in the same breath be influenced by the same environment (Lecture notes: Will & Mitchell). To paraphrase his position, we are products of the environment and the environment is a product of human interaction. Indeed this reflects the socio-cultural view that through communication reality is produced and reproduced (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Contemporary socio-cultural theorists grant language even more power (Griffin, 2012).  In their opinion, as people use language in communication, they co-construct their own social worlds.  As such, differences in the social worlds of 'us' and 'them' may give rise to communication problems.  When this happens, it is essential to bridge the cultural gap between the interlocutors in order to create harmony.

**Key ideas of the socio-cultural tradition**

According to Littlejohn & Foss (2011), socio-cultural tradition addresses how our understandings, meanings, norms, roles and rules are worked out interactively. Unlike the psychosocial tradition that focuses on the individual characteristics, this tradition is more interested in patterns of interactions between people. Scholars in this tradition posit that cultural values, meanings, roles and rules are worked out during interactions (West & Turner, 2010).  This implies that culture is created through communication.  We are not born knowing any culture but through the process of socialization we learn culture, and this becomes the lens through which we view the world (Samovar et al. 2007)

Additionally, although theories in the sociocultural tradition appreciate that as individuals we process information cognitively, this is of less interest than how individuals together create the realities of their culture, social groups and organizations (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). For this reason, any discussion of the socio-

cultural tradition is rich in the use of vocabulary such as culture, groups, society, traditions, rules, and norms.

Researchers in this tradition advance the idea that language plays a central role in the construction of reality. In fact theories herein mainly deal with how meaning is created during social interactions. Both the meanings of words and behavioural patterns during such interactions are given high importance (Littlejohn, 2009).

Craig (2008) adds that the socio-cultural tradition nurtures communicative practices that esteem cultural differences, value forbearance and understanding and emphasize collective, as opposed to individual, responsibility. Agreeing with the idea of cultural relativity, Littlejohn & Foss (2007) state, 'symbols assume different meanings when you move from one context to another' (p.124). For example the word 'dog' can elicit different meanings depending on the socio-cultural contexts. To most Kenyans a dog is kept for security purposes. As such it stays outside and is not an invited guest into the house. It is sometimes fed on leftovers. Contrastingly to a North American the same animal is a pet, a companion who deserves space in the comfort and warmth of its master's house. It has its special diet and when it falls ill it's taken to a dog clinic for treatment.

Furthermore formation of identities through interactions is key in the socio-cultural tradition. Scholars in this tradition argue that identity is a blend of the individual self with society, social groups and cultures. It is believed, in this tradition, that individuals adjust their identities as they move from context to context and the influence of culture on both communication and meaning cannot be overemphasized (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008).

**Defining communication**

The socio-cultural tradition views communication as the creation and enactment of social reality. Craig (2008) argues that theorists in this tradition view communication as a symbolic process in which reality is produced, re-produced, maintained, repaired

and transformed. This implies that reality, in this tradition, is not an objective set of arrangements outside us but is constructed when actors communicate in groups, society and within cultures.

The word 'produce' in the definition suggests that the actors are creative beings who in their everyday interaction require a good deal of improvisation. This, production, in the long run results in the very social order that makes interaction possible (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). 'Reproduce' on the other hand implies that our daily interactions with others heavily depend on pre-existing, shared cultural patterns. In summary, communication produces a larger social order (macro-level phenomenon), which in turn shapes in-the-moment communication -micro-level processes (Griffin, 2012).

**Communication problems in socio-cultural tradition**

Considering the diversity in worldviews, beliefs, values, backgrounds, contexts and perceptions that come into play during the process of communication, we can envisage the problems these interactions are likely to elicit. In the socio-cultural tradition problems are thought of as gaps across space and time. The former has to do with sociocultural diversity and relativity; the latter socio-cultural change (Craig & Muller, 2007). This suggests that changes in technology, demographics, travel, economic and political systems have given rise to communication problems.

Similarly, international terrorism, immigration patterns, breakdown of traditional social order are other developments that contribute to challenges in communication. As such this tradition has been applied in studies in the following areas: communication and conflicts, communication in relationships, gender and communication, power and communication, how media affects how we think about and respond to the world; communication and context; how society influences the construction of meaning and the influence of digital media on meanings and communication among others. West & Turner (2010) portend that in socio-cultural tradition, problems of communication are theorized as conflict, alienation, misalignment and failure of coordination.

## Theories of sociocultural tradition

The focus in all the theories in this tradition is in the way meaning is created in interactions in real life situations. Griffin (2012), argues that these theories differ with regard to scope of the studies (micro or macro levels); structural determination versus individual agency; and nature of the relationships between levels of social phenomena. There are six theories often associated with this tradition: ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, ethnography of communication, structuration and actor network theory (Craig, 2007). Littlejohn (2009) identifies two others: philosophy of language and sociolinguistics. This paper deals with two theories: symbolic interactionism and social constructionism. The two theories have heavily influenced communication research (Littlejohn, 2009; Craig, 2007; Griffins, 2012).

## Symbolic interactionism (SI)

Symbolic interactionism focuses on how social structures and meanings are created and maintained in social interactions (Littlejohn, 2009). This tradition has its origin in the discipline of sociology with the work of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer (Craig, 2007). According to the two sociolinguists, the way people relate to things depends on the meanings these things have for them (Blumer, 1969). They argue that these meanings are created through social interaction. It's no surprise therefore that this theory was earlier on referred to as social construction theory.

In symbolic interactionism, we determine others' intentions using significant symbols, both verbal and nonverbal. Knowing these intentions helps us modify our messages or responses during interactions. The following is a summary of how it works in SI as advanced by (John et al, 2008):

> Our interaction constructs our reality; our reality establishes our culture and our identity is constructed through our social interaction… We present ourselves like we wish to be perceived and we are the products of how people see us. How they perceive us affects how people act towards us, which reaffirms our identity (p.113).

Mead, emphasized the importance of participant observation in the study of communication as a way of exploring social relationships (Littlejohn, 2009). Blumer and Mead's basic ideas of social interactionism have been expounded and adopted by many social scientists and today are integrated into studies of groups, emotions, self, politics and social structure (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009).

## Social constructionism

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann are considered the pioneers of this theory. At the heart of this theory is the claim that communication is the fundamental activity by which humans constitute their social worlds (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). This theory is built on the notion that 'reality' is a social construction. In other words reality is not external to us but is within us. Using symbols, human beings represent and interpret the meaningfulness of their surroundings and being (West & Turner, 2010).

The socially constructed meanings are reciprocated, sustained and eventually entrenched in formal institutions like schools, families, government and religious sects and passed on to succeeding generations. To a great extent these generations accept them as given and inevitable. Nobody ever questions their authenticity or validity (West & Turner, 2010). Communication scholars into constructionism study how symbols, language, discourse and media create and shape our realities. For example media scholars have used this theory to study how routines of news gathering professions result in a selective, manufactured product; how repetition of media narratives frame our understanding of controversial issues; and how audiences use shared knowledge and customs to interpret media content (Lecture notes: COM-381).

## Socio-cultural tradition vs. other traditions

Traditions of communication theory influence one another and may disintegrate, fuse or combine in new ways. Indeed, contemporary research in communication often integrates new ideas from different traditions in a creative manner that leads to innovation in the field. It is therefore not rare to find fusions of sociocultural tradition and other traditions of communication theory.

In spite of this development, socio-cultural tradition still voices criticism against other traditions. For example, it criticizes the socio-psychological tradition for its excessive individualism, insensitivity to cultural differences and inattention to macro social influences (Craig & Muller, 2007). In the same breath it criticizes classical rhetoric for its naïve assumptions about agency and semiotics for divorcing signs and symbols from the larger socio cultural contexts from which they function (Craig & Muller, 2007).

**Application of socio-cultural tradition to research**

All researchers have to seriously consider specific plans and procedures for research that ultimately influence methods of data collection and analysis. Once a researcher has identified a field of study, the next thing to do is to decide on the design to be used to study that topic. Some of the factors that influence this decision are the researcher's view of reality; procedures of inquiry; and specific methods of data collection; analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2011).

The socio-cultural tradition holds the view that communication and its problems are best understood and explored from the contexts of culture, society and groups. Therefore it would almost naturally be biased toward qualitative research. According to Creswell (2011), qualitative research is a means of exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Jwan & Ong'ondo (2011), further argue that this approach to inquiry 'emphasizes a naturalistic search for relativity in meaning, multiplicity of interpretations, detail and flexibility in studying a phenomenon… ' (p. 3). It would follow then that the researcher in this tradition would be seeking to understand and explain the various possible meanings of a subject in its natural setting. This is a flexible process that allows room for emerging issues.

In addition to design, a researcher needs to identify philosophical worldview(s) that he or she espouses. In support of this, Dornyei (2007) contends that a good study should clearly articulate the philosophical paradigms within which the study is situated. Ontology and epistemology are two key issues to be considered in thinking

about philosophical worldviews (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011; Creswell, 2011; Lichtman, 2006).

Ontology is largely defined as the nature of reality or being or the views we have about reality. Looking back at the definition of communication in the socio-cultural tradition, it's no doubt this tradition renders itself readily to the relativist tradition. In this view, the tradition appreciates the existence of multiple realities created by different individuals and groups at different times in different circumstances (Griffin, 2012). On the contrary, the realists believe that there is a real world out there and there are no alternative views of reality (Dornyei, 2007).

Epistemology is the views we hold about the nature of knowledge. Every researcher, knowingly or unknowingly, brings some set of epistemological assumptions into the research process and these assumptions shape his or her understanding and interpretation of findings (Lichtman, 2006). There are two common epistemological considerations: positivist and interpretivist-constructionist (Creswell, 2009; Lichtmann, 2006; Dornyei, 2007). The socio-cultural tradition posits that through communication reality is produced, reproduced, maintained, repaired and transformed. This therefore means that it sits well in the interpretivist-constructivist epistemological viewpoint. The researcher and participants co-construct reality and interpret it in their specific ways. In this co-construction, construction and interpretation of reality the influence of culture, society, and groups is given special attention.

Taken together design, ontological and epistemological views influence a researcher's choice of research methods. According to Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011), case study, ethnography, discourse analysis, the narrative and grounded theory are the most commonly used methods in qualitative research..

With regard to data generation techniques (often referred to as data collection techniques), in the socio-cultural tradition, which I have already placed in qualitative research, data is mainly made up of words which may be in spoken or written form.

There are a number of techniques in qualitative research. Some of which are: interviews, semi-structured or unstructured; informal conversations; observations, participant and non-participant; focus group discussions; documents; journals (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011).

Finally, in the last stage of data analysis and interpretation of the heaps of data generated, scholars in this tradition apply the six steps recommended in qualitative research:

Transcribing the data; re-familiarising with the data; first Phase coding; second Phase coding; third Phase coding and producing a report (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011).

**Conclusion**

In summary the sociocultural tradition, unlike any of the other six traditions, focuses on the how our groups and cultures influence what we say; how we say it and the interpretations we give to messages we receive, which ultimately shapes our worldview. As Littlejohn and Foss posit, 'Reality is the sum of all the parts when viewing people as components and the influence the sum has on the individual' (2008:43). I find this tradition to be one of the most valuable when it comes to communication. Granted, individual qualities play a significant role in communication but we cannot underestimate the influence of culture, whether we are aware or not, in giving us rules of what, why, where and how we communicate. Even in times when we rebel against these rules, we are conforming to another set established by society on rebellion or resistance. At any given time therefore communication is culture and culture is communication.

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