

DEVELOPING THE SPIRIT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Recently the news about radicalism, terrorism, social conflict et cetera have appeared in many printed and electronic media. In spite of the spirit to improve the quality of human communication in the global era, this fact makes most people worried of the future of international or intercultural communication. Briefly this article discusses ethnocentrism, stereotype, world view, belief system, normative values, and attitude as the factors which can be the constraints in developing intercultural communication. Some historical overview relating to the issue of intercultural communication is also highlighted.

Keywords: *communication, culture, ethnocentrism, stereotype, world view, belief, normative values, attitude*

INTRODUCTION

Interaction among human beings, as we understand, is completely complicated. Very often people fail to communicate effectively both for the sake of their personal purposes and also for their business purposes. In daily life they often meet friends, neighbours, sellers in markets, parents and families, who surprisingly or unsurprisingly cannot perceive the delivered message correctly and proportionally so that it avoids misunderstanding. In business situation, the case seems to be similar. Most businessmen are not successful to finish negotiations professionally, handle meetings effectively to achieve right decisions in line with the proposed agenda, respond a telephone call in a good manner and catch the received message in the right way.

Regarding the above-mentioned phenomena of daily and business communication, it is urgent

to learn communication more thoroughly and seriously. The reason is good communication skills can significantly support success in every field of life. In personal or individual life, it is obvious that those who acquire better communication skills will win a friendship compared to those with worse communication skills. In business environment managers with excellent communication skills will, of course, run their business successfully because as it is widely known, communication is the backbone of management. Effective management and leadership depends on effective communication.

It seems obvious that there are many factors which create communication barriers or constraints (many experts of communication use the term *noises* to represent the phenomena) Keith Davis, Hani Handoko, and Judith Dwyer are the examples, to mention a few.

Below, are the discussions about the nature of communication, some communication noises, and factors influencing communication effectiveness, with the focus on the urgency of intercultural communication in the era of globalization.

COMMUNICATION DEFINED

Go back to the fundamental understanding of definitions of communication put forward by some experts, among others, Keith Davis, Hani Handoko, and Judith Dwyer, firstly it should be declared and clarified that those definitions are basically similar and accommodate all communication components or phenomena of communication process. Secondly, the different definitions only reflect the perspective of those experts in trying to give explanation about communication process resulting in giving different emphasis

on certain communication issues in their respective definitions.

Keith Davis (1981: 458) states that communication is a process of transferring information to get understanding. This definition looks simple and general without explicitly mentioning the role of communicators and communicants, the media used, the feedback appeared, and the disturbing noise. The focus of Davis's definition is on the message. Hani Handoko (Zuhdi, 2011: 2) states that communication is a process of transferring information to get understanding involving non verbal language. Handoko's definition looks a little bit different from Davis's in that his definition clearly also gives attention on the role of non verbal language. The special attention on non verbal language surprisingly indicates the domination of non verbal language in a communication process as communication researchers show in their research findings. It is widely known that more than 65% of communication effectiveness is influenced by non verbal language and only less than 35% is influenced by verbal language. Handoko's definition makes us more aware of the importance of non verbal language in spite of our carelessness of functioning it. Many people are still of the opinion that communication means verbal language. Communication up to this extent is considered to be a real communication if non verbal languages are effectively manipulated. Judith Dwyer (Zuhdi, 2011: 2-3) comes with a more substantial definition of communication, he says that communication can be considered as communication if there is a change of behaviour of the communicants receiving a message. It is not enough, according to him, if in a communication process communicants understand both verbal and non verbal language of a communicator but he or she has no intention to obey or follow what is expected by the communicator. In other words, if there is a positive response or feedback not only verbally but more importantly by his or her action, then a

communication can be regarded as a true communication.

It seems that Dwyer's definition is very realistic in terms of its fundamental understanding in our communication life. For example, we give instruction to an employee in our company, and he listen to us. He understands what we say because he speaks the same language but he only listens and not doing anything, of course, it makes us scarry or feel unhappy. What we expect is he does what we want him to do. This fact, arises a question: Why this happens?

CULTURAL PERCEPTION

Keith Davis (Riyanto, Budi Utamingtyas, and Tripriyo, 1996: 8-9) explains eight factor influencing perception, namely self concept, experience, emotion, feeling, family, social values, halo effect, and culture. These factors can make a communicator and a communicant have different interpretation to a delivered and received message, that can take a risk of misunderstanding. In this short article, only cultural factor is discussed with the purpose to discuss more thoroughly about the above-mentioned topic or title.

What is culture? Why should we understand other's culture in communication? Those are two questions that must be answered in this discussion. Let us begin the discussion with a funny story but gives a serious impact on communication. It happened in 1962, when the US President, John F Kennedy visited Mexican President, Adolfo Lopez Mateos. On the way, on a presidential car, to the Mexican presidential Palace, Kennedy looked at Mateos's wristwatch, and then he said: "What a wonderful wristwatch you have, Mr. President!". He spoke sincerely and enthusiastically while smiling. Listening to this admiration, spontaneously Mateos gave the wristwatch to Kennedy. He said: "This is yours Mr. President!" while releasing it from his hand. Kennedy was extremely surprised and ashamed of what was happening. He never thought that Mateos would give his wristwatch because of his admiration. Mateos

then said to him:” Our tradition teaches us to give everything which everyone likes or loves. So, this wristwatch is yours, Mr. President!”. Kennedy unfortunately had to receive this unexpected gift although he felt inconvenient. Some moments passed. In spite of small and informal conversation in the car, Meteor said to Kennedy:” You are a lucky President, you have a pretty First Lady”. Hearing this admiration Kennedy spontaneously said: “Mr. President, please, take this wristwatch. I do not need it” (Mulyana and Rakhmat, 2010: v).

Let take another example, when we ride on an urban, a big and long bus used as public transport in Australia, we often see Australian teenagers kiss their girl friends demonstratively in front of people or in public area. This is impolite and amoral according to Indonesians. On the other way round, Indonesians often begin a conversation in an urban by asking names, family, address, marital status, number of children, job and so on to Australians sitting in their side, which is considered to be impolite and nosy. It often creates misunderstanding.

Once, a man from Indonesia went to Arab Saudi to practice pilgrimage. When he landed from an airplane in Jeddah, an Arabian man, Syaikh, who was responsible for his accommodation during the pilgrimage, kissed his cheeks as the symbol of respect and honour. But, what happened, then? The Indonesian felt unhappy, scary, and felt worried. He thought that the Arabian was a homo-sexual. He was culturally shocked.

For a Japanese pointing a hand to stomach symbolizes the intention of suicide but for Americans the willing of suicide is expressed by pointing the forefinger to the forehead. Whereas for people of New Guinea suicide is non verbally symbolized by putting fingers like the way someone puts a knife on his neck. Indonesians do the same way.

So, cultural differences become a serious noise in everyone’s communication. If there is no solution given, it can make intercultural communication unbeneficial or unproductive.

Therefore, it is very crucial to seek for the way how to solve these cultural constraints in communication.

WAYS TO CREATE INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

The word *create* semiotically has subtle different meaning from the word *make*. Create means developing something into existence which is originally new. Make, on the other hand, does not mean something new but it reflects the meaning of developing something which has been made before. Thus, it can be a repetition of a production process. To create something, we need what is called creativity. To be creative, innovation in thinking process is needed. So, some serious and continuous efforts must be carried out. It can be only successfully done supposed someone has a deep commitment to open global communication with all people of different cultural backgrounds to get mutual understanding. This is what is called intercultural communication. More obviously intercultural communication can be defined as a form of communication that aims to share information across different cultures and social groups. It is used to describe the wide range of communication processes and problems that naturally appear within an organization or social context made up of individuals from different religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Intercultural communication is sometimes used synonymously with cross-cultural communication. In this sense it seeks to understand how people from different countries and cultures act, communicate and perceive the world around them. (Wikipedia, 9 March, 2015). To achieve all these, here are some recommended points or ways (Mulyana and Rakhmat, 2010: 26, 28) to think about:

a. Be aware of ethnocentrism

It is a general tendency happening in all parts of the world, that people generally perceive what others do on the basis of their own

cultural values. Some aspects of culture, which are fortunately the same or similar do not create any problems but some of it, which are unfortunately different can rise serious and even fatal problems among them. This phenomenon is called as ethnocentrism. To develop a conducive and successful communication, ethnocentrism must be avoided. People should develop a new philosophy in their intercultural communication, that all people in the world have the rights to express themselves in their own cultural expressions. Cultural prejudices have no rights to judge that people are right or wrong, polite or impolite, civilized or uncivilized because mutual communication among human beings will happen on the condition that all people give sympathy and empathy to others. They should try to understand why people are different and this is a mystery why God creates it very fantastically. Giving respect to others' culture reflects an appreciation to God's creation and mightiness.

It is not necessarily to repeat the dark history of Hitler in Germany and Nazi in Italy of which a nation kills another nation with hatred and arrogance. No respect and understanding towards mankind. Intercultural communication relies on the spirit of humanism and equality of human beings apart from their races, religions, culture, ethnicity at cetera. The spirit of friendship and sincere relationship will make mutual intercultural communication possible.

Ethnocentrism can take place in a multi racial country or among different countries, a region in a multi ethnic country and other areas in which people are culturally different. In Indonesia, for instance, there was a conflict between Madurese and Dayakese. In America, in the past time there was a war between Europeans and Indians. Also Blacks and Whites in Social War. In smaller cultural groups of society often happens social conflicts such as what happened between Ahmadiyah and Sunni people in some cities in Indonesia and Pakistan. In India Sikh and

other sects of religions often involve in a serious conflict. Conflicts among Sunni and Syiah in Iran and Irak, as we know, almost happen along the year.

Ethnocentrism in some cases not only relates to belief in religions but also chauvinism. Groups of ethnics in some parts of the world, as noted in history, feel that their ethnicity has been created the most superior. Jews feel the most superior in the world even up to today. They have been created as the most superior race. It is their belief and they teach this belief through generations. In the other parts of the world, Chinese feel that they have the greatest culture. There is no other cultures that can compete the greatness of Chinese culture. So, Chinese have the privilege to dominate other races or nations. This belief is also culturally indoctrinated to all Chinese generations. The race of Aryan in Germany, in the other side, is of the opinion that the race of Aryan is the most honourable race that God ever created. Potential of racial conflicts can be very dangerous if people are not aware of the urgency to create intercultural communication to save the earth of the possible chaos and destruction. Ethnic cleansing, which ever happened in the darkest part of the history of human beings, must be seriously avoided or prevented.

b. Avoid stereotype

People of different cultural background very often beyond their awareness give negative appreciation to the behaviour of their counterparts. Negative generalization is very frequently addressed to them. For instance, Australians generally think that Chinese are greedy, aggressive, intolerant, and also economical and asocial. The case is also what can be partly experienced in Indonesia from the point of view of Javanese. As to the Arabians living in Java, most Javanese thinks that they are economical, religious, and are proud of their ancestors. This description explains that stereotype is not the right thing to follow. This negative generalization of ethnical characteristics is entirely bias. When

we try to communicate personally to people of different ethnical background, it turns out that such generalization is not correct. Therefore, it is factually false to communicate to people while having the stereotype in our mind. Positive thinking is the best capital to begin interpersonal and intercultural communication.

c. Understanding World View

Perhaps it is not simple to give definition about what is really meant by world view. Giving description and some concrete examples can make this discussion more efficient. World view is related to those things like cultural orientation towards God, mankind, nature, universe, and some other philosophical issues concerning the concept of creation. Briefly, world view can help us to know our position and our strata in universe.

World view is eternal and transcendent. It is the fundamental basis of culture. Moslems, of course, have a different world view compared to Chatholics, Christians, and Jews, to mention a few.

American Indians have the belief that human-beings are a part of universe. They cannot be seperated. They exist in partnership. They are naturally in unity. It is their world view. On the contrary, Euro-Americans have the belief that human beings are the centre of universe. They are superior. Universe is theirs. They are seperated to each other starting from their creation. Nature and universe can be explored and exploite for the benefit of human beings.

Our understanding about world view can help us to communicate more wisely to different people with different world views.

d. Understanding belief system, normative values, and attitude

Belief, such as religion often fail to create peace among its confessors or followers. This happens not because of the teachings of the religion but because of their misinterpretation about the substance of the religious teachings.

In some parts of the world many people treat their religion so exclusively that makes big communication gap with other followers of different religions. This makes interactions among them under high tension, prejudices, and in the end can create serious social conflicts. In islamic world, different practices of ritual worships (like what is taught in fiqh /islamic legal jurisprudence) very frequently trigger social conlict. Less understanding towards others' belief potentially can result in less intercultural communication. We also know that conflicts among different religion followers have occurred almost in all parts of the world. This is the worst fact and reality showing the lowest spirit of intercultural communication among human beings. Allah has stated in the holy Qur'an that He created human beings in different genders, namely males and females, different tribes and nations to interact to each other. He, then stated that the most honourable human beings in the face of Allah are those having the strongest belief in Allah.

To develop intercultural communication we shoud appreciate whatever the belief of others. Confessing a certain religion is everyone's right. There is no prevelege for someone to force someone else to confess a certain religion. Even Allah gives freedom for all human beings to follow and believe in His teachings or deny them. It is obvious that Allah wants us to live in a harmony. No discrimantion, no conflict, no war among human beings. That is why the core of religious teachings of revelations given to all His messangers, is always about great moralism (*akhlaqul karimah*). Having *akhlaqul karimah* as the most important quality of everyone's personality, makes interactions among human beings in all over the world peaceful and more humanistic. No hatred, no anger, no radicalism, and no war that make social conflicts.

The most spectacular example for the above description is in the golden era of the country;, named Madinah Al Munawwarah (the Glittering Madinah or Megapolic

Madinah). The leader of this prosperous and peaceful country was Muhammad, the last messenger of Allah. The population of Madinah were mostly Christians and Jews. Interestingly, the leader of this country was a muslim. Muhammad, was famous for his justice, intellectuality, humility, and care to all his citizens and residents. Under his leadership all people in Madinah lived in prosperity and wealth. In Madinah confessions of religions and tribes lived in ideal harmony. They became brothers and tied in the spirit of humanism. This is basically a real practice of cross cultural understanding and excellent public relations. Al Firdaus (2013:48-50) says that the outstanding of Muhammad relies on his outstanding personality (*akhlaqul karimah*).

Multicultural communication

In addition to the above ways to create intercultural understanding, DuPraw and Axner give the following tips written in their article entitled Guidelines for Multicultural Collaboration. (DuPraw and Axner: <http://www.pbs.org/ampu/crosscult.html>, 12 April 2015):

- Learn from generalizations about other cultures, but do not use those generalizations to stereotype, "write off," or oversimplify your ideas about another person. The best use of a generalization is to add it to your storehouse of knowledge so that you better understand and appreciate other interesting, multi-faceted human beings.
- Practice, practice, practice. That is the first rule, because it is in the doing that we actually get better at cross-cultural communication.
- Do not assume that there is one right way (yours!) to communicate. Keep questioning your assumptions about the "right way" to communicate. For example, think about your body language; postures that indicate receptivity in one culture might indicate aggressiveness in another.

- Do not assume that breakdowns in communication occur because other people are on the wrong track. Search for ways to make the communication work, rather than searching for who should receive the blame for the breakdown.
- Listen actively and empathetically. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Especially when another person's perceptions or ideas are very different from your own, you might need to operate at the edge of your own comfort zone.
- Respect others' choices about whether to engage in communication with you. Honor their opinions about what is going on.
- Stop, suspend judgment, and try to look at the situation as an outsider.
- Be prepared for a discussion of the past. Use this as an opportunity to develop an understanding from "the other's" point of view, rather than getting defensive or impatient. Acknowledge historical events that have taken place. Be open to learning more about them. Honest acknowledgment of the mistreatment and oppression that have taken place on the basis of cultural difference is vital for effective communication.
- Awareness of current power imbalances - - and an openness to hearing each other's perceptions of those imbalances -- is also necessary for understanding each other and working together.
- Remember that cultural norms may not apply to the behavior of any particular individual. We are all shaped by many, many factors -- our ethnic background, our family, our education, our personalities -- and are more complicated than any cultural norm could suggest. Check your interpretations if you are uncertain what is meant.

CONCLUSION

To create ideal and productive communication among human beings on the

earth, every individual has to learn others' cultures, tries to comprehend and understand them as an inherent part of life existence. Mutual interaction will only happen if every individual has awareness that intercultural understanding is the best solution for global communication. Diversities should not create irrational prejudices, ethnocentrism, chauvinism and so on which cause social conflicts.

God has created human beings differently in terms of their races, cultures, languages, beliefs, and so forth to make life more colourful, beautiful, and meaningful. It is in the opposite side of natural law if human beings deny diversities and hope that human beings should be in uniformities. A picture with one colour on its canvas cannot be said as a real picture and surely cannot show its beauty. A beautiful picture willy and nilly must be made of different colours!

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