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# Conversation or Intellectual Imperialism In Comparing Communication Theories

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# Conversation or Intellectual Imperialism In Comparing Communication Theories

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## **Conversation or Intellectual Imperialism In Comparing Communication Theories**

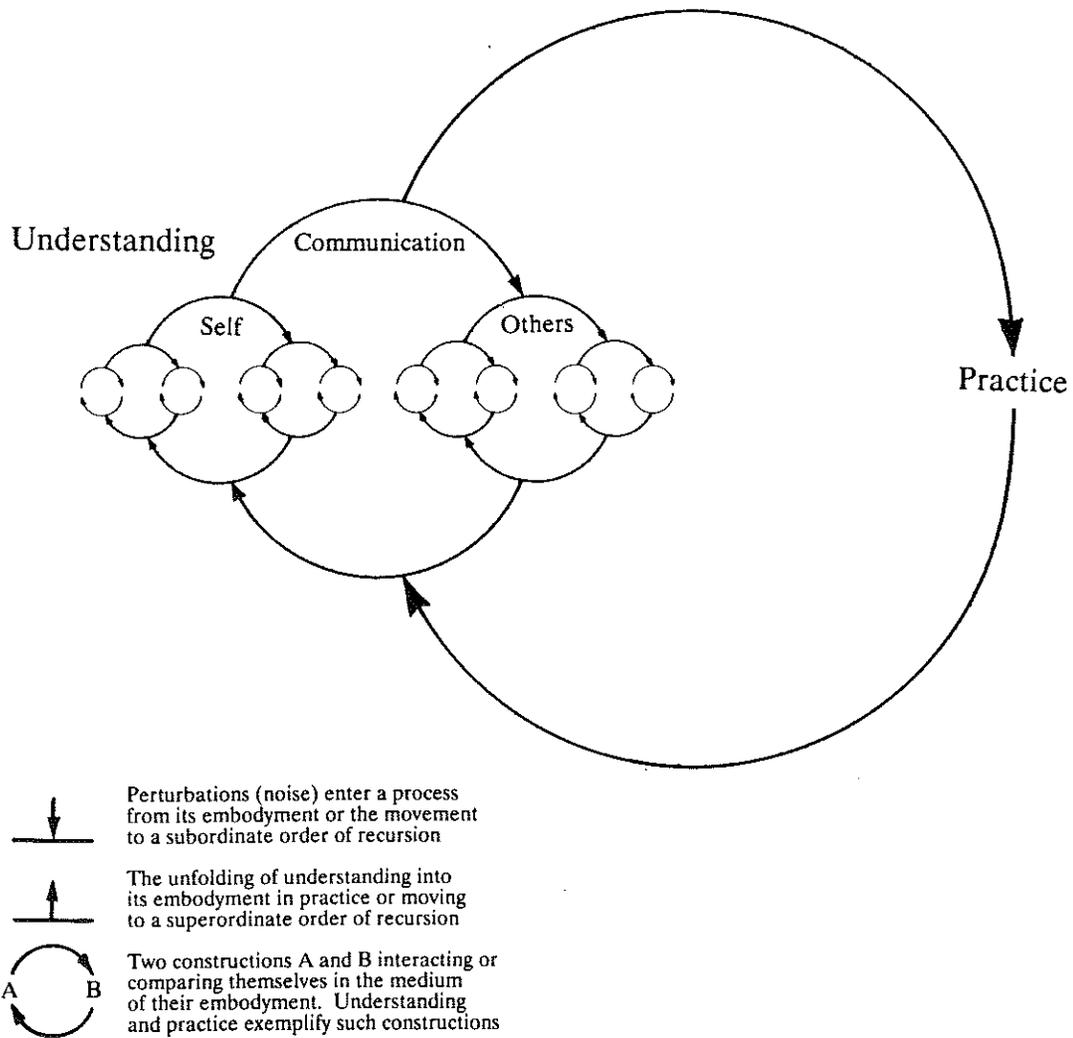
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# Conversation Or Intellectual Imperialism in Comparing Communication (Theories)

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## Abstract

A proposal for a recursive understanding of



and what happens if understanding does not enter comparisons of human communication  
(theories).

I am responding to the two Forum articles on "comparative theory" in *Communication Theory 1.1*.

To begin, let me say that I have always gained new insights from being communicatively involved with unusual people and groups or by experiencing cultures different from my own. It can broaden one's horizon and relativise one's own perspectives. I am therefore intrigued by proposals to enrich communication theories through the systematic application of appropriate comparative methodologies. But, I am also worried, and this paper is largely motivated by the fear, that the epistemological assumptions built into the language used for such comparisons may frustrate these promises and fuel instead an intellectual imperialism which consists in privileging human communication theories that deny those theorized therein the ability to construct, understand, and communicate theories of their own. Such theories can bring forth cognitively disabling technologies and unwittingly institute instruments of oppression that are all the more persuasive as nobody seems to assume responsibilities for them.

Clearly, the appropriateness of any comparative methodology is intricately linked to the nature of the objects being compared, here to theories and practices of human communication, which invariably entail conceptions of human participation. I agree with Brenda Dervin when she writes "that we have failed to develop powerful approaches to comparative theory and this failure ... (lies) in the very nature of the analytic we are now using" and "how we conceptualize ... the communicating human" (1991:60-61). Her paper seeks to affect a shift from comparing entities to comparing processes. I hope to take the idea of a comparative methodology one step further by proposing a discourse based method, a grammar or an epistemological framework not only for the twin problem of constructing communication theories comparatively and of making appropriate comparisons among them communicable, but also for enabling human participation at the same

time. I shall do this in the form of several propositions that I hope will avoid the intellectual imperialism feared. To be honest, by working through these propositions one by one, I myself am surprised about the conclusions to which they led. It could mean the need for a radical reformulation of our communication theoretical and comparative efforts, including some of my own. Whether they are true or not, if they stimulate conversation about communication (theory), then they will have proven themselves viable in their very own terms.

### One

To begin with, the common meaning of "comparison," "com" = together and "par" = equal would render "comparison" = an act of sorting out likenesses (and by implication differences) among objects brought together or this purpose. Consistent with this etymology, and speaking about social systems as the objects of his concern, Majid Tehranian suggests in his paper that comparative theory be based on three premises "(a) that all social systems are unique, (b) that there are yet some features common to all systems, and (c) that the uniqueness of any social system can best be appreciated by comparing it with what it has in common with others" (1991:44). This description invokes the image of overlapping sets of features, like in a Venn-diagram, with the additional requirement that the conjunction of all sets must not be empty. This superficially innocent conceptualization, which rules out that social systems could be related to each other by Wittgensteinian family resemblances, is common indeed. What I wish to point out here is the objectivist presuppositions built into these premises as stated and practiced. The features, found to be either unique or shared, are said to be *features of the objects* (systems) being compared and these features as well as the objects that possess them *reside entirely outside of their observers* or exist independent of them. In fact, *the observer making the comparison* (enacting the proposed comparative theory) *is nowhere recognized* in these features.

To overcome the objectivist view expressed in the above premises let me suggest my first proposition:

**Commonalties and differences arise in an observer's language.**

Indeed, all comparisons presume a conceptual system or a space into which various objects can be placed. There is nothing "objective" about such a space. Spaces always are an observer's construction and it is within such inventions that objects *acquire* commonalties and differences that are of interest to that observer or her community of peers. Thus, comparisons take place in someone's understanding and manifest themselves in her language. An objective "reality" knows neither similarities nor differences.

I believe creating a suitable language for particular comparisons is precisely what Tehranian does, albeit unwittingly, for example, when he constructs a matrix out of two rather abstract variables, one consisting of four "communication and control continuities and discontinuities" and the other of three kinds of "social processes," whose cells enable him to distinguish various communication theories, or, when he proposes a two-dimensional space (surface) for comparing (literally in terms of the orthogonal coordinates invented for this purpose) different development policies. To be clear, what bothers me is not the unquestionably illuminating terms chosen for these comparisons but the implicit claim that they have nothing to do with the authors' own conceptions and interests in bringing forth both the objects being compared and the results of these comparisons. Maybe, in trying to avoid "ethnocentrism" (1991:45), Tehranian seems to go overboard towards an objectivism that paints invariant features on the objects being compared and conveniently projects the scientist's responsibilities for these features on their presumed "nature." My first proposition suggests, *it is not the objects that are same or different by themselves, it is the language used by someone that makes them so and this*

*someone cannot be relieved of the responsibility of having constructed them as such.*

Moreover, and I might add what I will address below, sameness and difference are not the only products of comparisons.

## Two

In general, I do not wish to decide for others what communication is or ought to be, what distinguishes a system that embodies communication from one that does not, etc., for this would settle in an a priori manner what we wish to understand through comparisons of different observations of it. To express this attitude, let me simply *say*:

**Everything said is communicated to someone understanding it as such.**

With this second proposition, I am neither suggesting that all communication involves a language (one obviously can say something in pictures and communicate by touch). Nor that communication can only be with someone other than oneself (notes taken and reread by someone can be seen as communications to one's later self), not even that a listener must be accurate in assessing a speaker's intentions. I am sure, everyone who has travelled abroad will have experienced talking to a stranger who seems to have no clue as to *what* one says but clearly understands *that* one wants to communicate something. I am merely suggesting here that the event of something being said, must be understood by *someone* (even if it is only the speaker herself) as being said else nothing is said for anyone, and that the one who understands it as such thereby constructs her own participation in a process of communication, whatever this construction may be.

In the above, I use "said" or "saying something" as a metaphor of all kinds of human practices. There is not just linguistic but also non-linguistic behavior. There

is not just speaking but also writing, designing all kinds of artifacts, etc. All of these are here considered practices.

Also, I seem to be using understanding and constructions interchangeably, but I do wish to emphasize with them two different aspects of cognition. To me, understanding implies the feeling of being in touch with one's world, the confidence that one's cognitive constructions are afforded by it, work alright or fit one's practices. In contrast, construction emphasises the created or invented nature of cognition in a particular experiential domain. Constructions can become manifest in language and the consequences of their practice can contribute to understanding.

Moreover, the proposition considers untenable any claim insinuating that saying, conveying, communicating or even doing something could bypass human understanding. It follows that there can be no text, no discourse, no language and in fact no-thing without someone recognizing it as such. In a way, the proposition turns Watzlawick et al.'s first axiom of communication "one cannot not communicate" (1967:49) around by shifting the position taken from that of an author and instrumental actor to that of a listener and self-declared participant in the process. Indeed, one never can communicate *with* someone who fails or refuses to understand what one says or does as communication. The observer's conceptions are decisive here.

To me, *understanding and practice form an irreducible circular unity*, a reality that resides neither entirely in someone's head, as solipsists hold true, nor entirely outside of its observer, as objectivists claim it to be, but in the dynamic fit between them. We always act (or better see us acting) in our own understanding and we seek understanding when something does not seem to work out in practice, leaving everything outside the circular unity to the unknown. Even the distinction between understanding and practice is drawn in our (my) understanding.

Accordingly, it is not only impossible to speak about our own practice without understanding it as such, we also are constitutionally prevented direct access to someone else's understanding. Understanding someone else's understanding is explaining what that someone says or does, her practice, in ways coherent with our own understanding. Thus, the claim of understanding someone embraces her practice *and* our construction of how she conceives what and while she is practicing what we thereby explain. Understanding and practice establish two complementary perspectives and assign different responsibilities for the observations on others.

Understanding our own or someone else's understanding embeds understanding in itself and makes *understanding a recursively self-embedding phenomenon*. This is not the case for practice. The recursion does not stop with distinguishing in our understanding between our own and someone else's understanding and practice. It is a theoretically endless process and illustrated in the above abstract. *There is no escape into a real world* outside of understanding it as such.

I might add here that the distinction between understanding and practice does not lead to any kind of dualism, whether between mind and body or between language and objects existing independent of their description. This is not to say that the proposition precludes the possibility of someone constructing a dualistic world and behaving accordingly. The proposition merely does not demand such a world and the recursion need not be infinite.

### Three

The axiom that we always act in concert with our understanding of the situation we (conceive to) act in can be extended to human communication as well. I take human communication to manifest itself in some observable form of coordination of human behavior, a braiding of individual practices, a dance if you

wish, that can not do without its participants seeing each other, respecting each others identities or selves and understanding what they do in concert with and in expectation of each other, each in their own terms. Let me be more specific and propose: Human

**communication resides in the unfolding of communication constructions by and of selves and others into intertwined practices.**

On the surface, the proposition seems obvious. I wish to point out here that it does not imply a particular definition of communication (for example, as the transmission of information, as the control of an effect, or as the maintenance of a relationship). It merely says where communication resides and proposes a skeleton, a frame or a grammar into which participants can freely insert their own understanding of it and of each other. It also does not require that the communication constructions individuals enact be shared or have anything in common with each other (like the notion that communication presupposes agreement on rules, a shared language or a common symbol repertoire). In fact, such and similar requirements would bring objectivism right back into the picture and render individual cognition irrelevant or meaningless in understanding human communication. In contrast to objectivist accounts, my third proposition symmetrically expands the second to others by suggesting that *communicators can not very well position themselves as communicators in their own communication constructions without acknowledging other communicators and their respective constructions of each other.*

It is the simultaneous unfolding, acting out, testing for the coherences and subsequent reconstruction of these separate constructions (of how communication is individually constituted for them) into braided individual practices that makes possible for its participants to observe their own involvement as interactive and their behavior as interdependent. I am suggesting that only through such interwoven

engagements with others can participants come to appreciate the consequences of communication constructions substantially different from their own.

To make the point in yet another way, I obviously do not need to see myself as communicating with a stone precisely because I do not have to consider the stone's understanding of itself, much less of myself, when seeking to understand how the stone either responds to my kicking it or why it comes in my way through other causes. Here, causal explanations and the attribution of invariant properties are perfectly appropriate and an objectivist stance may not unduly harm the object being observed, compared or described as such (although from an ecological perceptive, this objectivist position may be questioned, even when it involves stones). In contrast, what marks much of our interest in understanding other fellow beings as humans is their cognitive autonomy, their ability to understand in their very own terms language, themselves, other fellow beings and the circumstances they see themselves as acting in, an understanding that is inherently creative, invents its own modes of operation and can, at least in principle, be appreciably different from anyone's understanding including mine. Understanding, whether stones or fellow human beings, always requires one to act out, to test and reexamine one's involvement with them. *Granting others the same cognitive abilities one claims for oneself in understanding them* (see my ethical imperative in Krippendorff, 1989:88), is not the same as assuming that these others think alike, act alike and live in the same world. The assumption of the latter, although often practiced for various social reasons, would stifle human communication and, when built into scientific theories, prevents its understanding.

#### Four

Note, by saying "everything said is communicated to someone....," I am saying something about saying something and, by implication, communicating about communication, which is what human communication theory is to do. Also note that even though I can use quotation marks to distinguish mention and use in writing, saying something and saying something about saying something takes place in the same language. Evidently, "saying" is *autological* or applicable to itself and comes quite natural to ordinary speakers of a language. Similarly, communication and communication about communication or meta-communication does not require meta-meta communication to be entangled (as logical positivists would require, but anyone's recursive understanding of communication. The simple fact that communication theory too must be communicated to someone, understanding it as such exhibits the self-reference involved in understanding communication.

This is not so in all domains of scientific inquiry. For example, theories in the natural sciences have nothing to say about the language in which they are cast and leave the processes through which they are communicated among peers unproblematized. To most natural scientists, language seems to be transparent (like water may be for fish). As long as this is so, there can be no physics of physics, no biology of biology. But we certainly can conceive of a sociology of sociology, for example, and communication about communication makes sense to us as well. This self-reference makes human communication fundamentally different from the objects of the natural sciences. The language for comparisons referred to in the first proposition is part and parcel of the communication processes or theories being compared. I am therefore suggesting that constructions of human

**communication theories must be able to constitute themselves  
in the very practices they claim to describe.**

To constitute something is to define something from within what is being defined. I am claiming this to be so for theories of human communication. When an observer understands the intertwined practices of others as processes of communication, communicates a communication theory of their practices to them who, influenced by what they hear being said about them, modify their practices according to their individual understanding of it, which in turn gives rise to new observations and a modified understanding on the part of the observer, then the process closes in on itself. The practical consequences of such a theory become the ground for its (re)formulation and the iteration of this process converges to an eigen-form, a fit between each participant's understanding of what is being said and the simultaneous practices they engage in relative to each other. During such iterations, theories of communication either prove themselves viable by adjusting themselves in the face of perturbations arising from their practical embodiments (see above abstract) or disappear. The well known self-fulfilling prophesies exemplify the kind of convergence that any theory can set in motion. It is a process in which the definience brings forth its own definiendum.

### Five

Now, let me get comparisons back into the picture. Elsewhere, (Krippendorff, 1984) I suggested that constructions of communication bridge the consequences of at least three kinds of cognitive distinctions. (1) distinctions among the communicators involved, minimally creating one's own identity relative to various others, (2) distinctions among the things being said and done or felt whether these bring forth different messages, speech acts, states of mind or beliefs associated with each participant and (3) distinctions in time that allow communication to be recognized as an unfolding process. These distinctions probably are grounded in the most basic constructions of how we can live with each other as humans.

I believe Dervin's idea, that communication means the closing of a variety of existing gaps, comes close to this notion except that I cannot see gaps as existing independent of anyone's understanding of them or "gappiness (as) an assumed 'constant' of the human condition" (1991:62), but as resulting from someone's drawing of and acting on distinctions in which already held constructions of reality, language and the medium of others' participation play important roles. Humans draw their own distinctions on top of distinctions drawn previously and develop their own explanatory constructions (including verbally stated theories) to overcome the violence these distinctions bring forth in their own understanding. I am suggesting that the unity of drawing distinctions and designing bridges, decomposing and reconstructing or analyzing and synthesizing always is dedicated to the preservation of human understanding and *the fact that nobody can be forced to understand something as intended, as it exists or as it should be and the fact that nobody can directly observe someone else's understanding attests to the cognitive autonomy of the individuals involved in communication.* Understanding, always is anyone's own and human communication can not be anything but voluntary.

Moreover, proposition one suggests that comparisons are made within a cognitively realized space whose distinctions are continuously drawn and re-drawn by and in the language being used and should hence be considered a step towards understanding. Let me therefore propose:

The cognitive operations of re-creating spaces, re-drawing distinctions, re-constructing, re-examining, **comparing and testing the coherences among (communication) constructions are dedicated to the preservation of human understanding.**

This proposition focuses attention both to the operational nature of human understanding and its maintaining the coherences among various constructions and the practices they inform, here in communication with others. To say understanding

preserves itself presumes the possibility of its disturbance, for example, by the experience of unpredictable consequences, especially from interacting with others, or from various forms of internal (blind) variations, for example, creative decomposition and reconstruction processes. It also presumes that understanding can be reinstated once disturbed. Comparing cognitive constructions is a move in this direction.

### Six

Taking theory to be an observer's linguistic construction that coheres with her own understanding and assuming (with proposition three) that understanding communication entails the understanding by and of the communicators involved, specifically their communication constructions, communication theory becomes an observer's explanatory account of the intertwined practices of participants whose individual communication theories must be inscribed in it. It does not matter here whether the inscribed theories are narrated as such by the participants or reconstructed, based on that observer's understanding of the participants' understanding of their own communication practices. In fewer words, I am suggesting that *human communication theory must recursively inscribe the communication theories of the participants in the process.*

Furthermore, keeping in mind (proposition four) that human communication theory must be able to constitute itself or prove its viability in the practice it informs and (proposition five) that comparisons inevitably are involved in processes of maintaining understanding in human communication, particularly by comparing (the theorists' constructions of) the communication constructions participants seemingly enact, I propose:

**Comparisons of communication theories call for a process  
of conversation among those who practice them.**

This proposition suggests that a methodology for comparing communication theories follow the same recursive grammar as the communication practices each of these theories must be able to describe. Ordinary communicators too are engaged in a continuous testing of coherences, redrawing of various distinctions, reexamining the consequences of unfolding their communication constructions. Comparing in one's own understanding the communication constructions (or communication theories) different participants appear to practice is one of these cognitive processes, except that the issue here no longer is one of establishing commonalities and differences (which would follow the dictates of objectivist traditions) but one of exploring within a suitable language *what different constructions or theories might do to each other when practiced together*. To appreciate different constructions of communication (theories), to prove their viability in joint practices requires conversation, dialogue, non-coercive forms of interaction, mutual accommodation, inviting others into one's own constructions of reality while caring for their cognitive autonomy. The difference between social scientists and everyday practitioners of communication may not lie in how they get involved with each other but in different practices of accounting for their cognitive operations to peers, in different discourses (methodology versus meta-communication) within which they are led to maintain different coherences and, I would add, in radically pursuing human understanding, not submission.

### Seven

With the above propositions in mind, let me finally address Tehranian's question "is comparative communication theory possible or desirable?" (1991:44). Obviously, it always is possible to chose or invent a language that brings forth commonalities, even among objects from seemingly incommensurate empirical

domains. (Hickory, communication, Tibet and I have not only the letter "i" in common but also that they all occur in this sentence). Whether particular comparisons make sense depends on whether a discourse brings the fruits of such comparisons to someone's attention. So, my answer to the first part of the question is an unequivocal *yes*.

In proposing to answer the second part of the question, I am effectively adopting its presupposition, that there is no socially neutral theory. Every theory claims to be about something and engages those understanding it, theoreticians, practitioners and students alike, in albeit different practices that create, reproduce, manipulate, utilize or diminish the phenomena they see addressed. Only in the dualist world construction of objectivism is theory neutral, divorced from practice and independent of anyone's understanding it. We know so well that theoretical advances in atomic physics led to the construction of atom bombs and nuclear reactors which in turn posed additional theoretical problems and thus set in motion a process of reconstructing portions of our world. A predictive theory of attitude change might have been born within an academic environment but, if it enables advertisers, political activists or psychologists to mold the attitudes of particular groups of people, such a theory undoubtedly will give practical support to instrumental intents and induce the social change it can support. Communication theories are no exceptions. They inform a variety of communication practices, whether they come to be embodied in communication technologies, in social organizations or in the communicative practices of individuals. The desirability of a comparative methodology depends on which social practices are fostered by the theories it encourages.

In what follows, I will describe one condition in which theory constructions and comparisons may not need to involve the human understanding by subjects and

examine some of the social consequences of three failures to not invoke such an understanding.

(1) The scientific observer is concerned with phenomena of human behavior subjects either (1a) are not conscious of, like phenomena outside the range of human perception, universal constraints or unreflected habits of thought and action, (1b) may understand but can not vary for effects, like their own biological constitution, physical laws or unconditioned reflexes, or, (1c) have no desire or capability to understand, like knowledge far removed from one's interest or buried in a language too cumbersome to learn. Indeed, neither of these phenomena can serve ordinary human communication well. This is not to deny that scientific discourse and instrumentation, could not give rise to sophisticated communication technologies, like radiowaves did, or causally effect humane existence, like techniques of genetic manipulation can. As long as these manifestations are construed as residing outside the communicators' reach, as unaffected by their cognition, or as merely physically mediating between them, objectivist methods of comparisons and theory construction might be justifiable *in such constructions of reality*. Indeed, the natural sciences have been notorious in creating obscure technical languages that prevent subjects from understanding what this means for them. Whether this practice is ethical in the social domain is another question.

(2) The observer either creates or attends to situations in which subjects find it desirable or appropriate to suspend their own judgement, render their behavior reactive to stimuli, perform functions programmed from the outside and/or take no responsibilities for their own practices. Such situations are typical of controlled experiments, designed to generate data that are conveniently analyzable in causal or correlational terms and common also in many industrial settings in which workers are required to perform albeit complex but entirely mechanical or algorithmic tasks.

Theories created to account for such situations attest to the subjects' willingness to comply with given instructions or to apply to themselves the cognitive constraints their own definition of the situation demands, but say little about the subjects' ability to conceptualize, hypothesize and communicatively construct their own realities in ways different from what experimenters or controllers of the situation envision. Among the social consequences of such practices are reinforcements of a *rationality that renders instrumental behavior as a norm*, the preferential *development of control theories* of human behavior, a conspicuous *absence of theories of specifically human communication* and the virtual silence on issues of cognitive autonomy. (Paradoxically, the law requires experimenters with human subjects to obtain their consent which presupposes the subjects to understand the very controls that prevent them from exercising this ability during scientific experimentations--just for the convenience of rendering objectivist comparisons and causal or correlational analyses appropriate).

(3) The observer relies on objectivist comparisons and constructs theories without references to the very processes of human understanding that constitute the phenomena being observed. I am distinguishing here two cases:

(3a) Accounting for communication processes in terms of causal, correlational or stochastic theories. Since such accounts are not much different from accounts for the behavior of trivial mechanisms, the metaphorical stone for example, I would argue that theories of this kind also trivialize the communication practices being expected of subjects in everyday situations. Indeed, theories concerned with information transmission, message effects, attitude change and those relying on metaphors of power and resistance, like the notion of persuasive force, leave no place for human agency or human cognition in them. Theories of this kind are the basis of a behaviorism that declares understanding irrelevant or a mere

figment of the subjects imagination and has led to the educational implementation of all kinds of mechanistic concepts of the learner.

(3b) Focussing attention on large systems and highly abstract accounts of communications, social institutions, communication networks or whole cultures. Tehranian's interest in such systems exemplifies this concern. His comparisons might seem justified in view of the practical difficulty if not impossibility of

interacting with systems composed of numerous human constituents. However, I see two problems with objectivist comparisons of large and abstract social systems.

(i) The omission of references to the human understandings, discursive practices and pattern of communication that constitute the systems being considered justifies constructions that have nothing to do with how a system is constituted and denies the relevance of human involvements. Yet, no culture, no discourse, no human communication could be observed without its participants continually recognizing, reproducing, practicing and constituting it as such. (ii) Paying mere lip service to the importance of cognition and language by assuming them to be invariant and the same for all constituents of the systems being compared prohibits accounting for most processes of human communication in them, which are largely set in motion by cognitive differences. This analytically convenient practice is evident in the common assumption that the members of a particular culture think alike in most respects, that the speakers of a language must use the same communication codes and that the participants of a social system are interchangeable. The class and function concepts in sociology are a typical outgrowth of this assumption. I would argue that social systems always are constituted by numerous individuals who continually redraw socially relevant distinctions and reconstruct what the system is *for them*, their own idiosyncratic *understanding being embedded in a network of communication practices*. In either of the above two omissions, objectivist observers

become lost in their own conceptualizations and the ethnocentrism Tehranian sought to avoid becomes blatantly evident.

It seems to me, by not granting the communicating humans (whose practices are being observed, compared, explained and theorized either individually or as members of larger social systems) the same cognitive abilities that scientific observers must claim for themselves when constructing theories about them, *researchers assure for themselves the exclusive privilege to determine what is real.* Armed with a detached methodology, *understanding becomes the providence of scientists.* And objectifications of the systems being constructed and compared, *cognitively disable its constituents and make it impossible for them to realize their own contribution* to them. The theories such comparisons legitimize may be appealing for their simplicity but they also *serve those interested in domination and control* and support technological and cognitive constructions that *enforce a widespread submission* to conditions constructed as real.

Finally (4), I am again suggesting two related cases. (4a) The observer may respect the subjects' cognitive autonomy but does not engage them in conversations concerning the theory proposed about them. Archeologists, historians and literary researchers, having to construct their theories from surviving fragments of past discursive practices, naturally are confined to this condition. In contrast, conversations with individual members of living social systems could create attention to what a scientific theory suggests, stimulate objections and elicit elaborations conducive to and coherent with their practices of living, both individually and as members of larger social constructions. In such conversations, members also could become aware of what they had not noticed before, change their behavior in response and by implication require that the theory in question be reconstructed to reflect the new realities it created. However, failing to engage subjects in such negotiations and viabilitating practices *keeps the criteria for accepting*

*a theory entirely external to the system being compared and privileges a scientific discourse at the expense of the discourse generated within the system.* By itself, the participants' discourse may be equally deficient. Unlike what ethnomethodology claims, entirely emic theories, using entirely internal validity criteria, rarely are as insightful about existing practices as when challenged from the outside through conversation. In theories that constitute themselves in such conversations the participants' understanding becomes recognized and inscribed. In contrast, communication theories that emerge out of the received non-participatory environments are *unlikely able to account for communication as a negotiated phenomenon.* At the very best they reflect the workings of a scientific community.

One can denounce this non-participatory research practice, which is so much part of positivist research traditions, as arrogant, elitist, observer-centered, authoritarian, undemocratic or whatever. It yields *communication theories that those theorised about may never know or have no say in if they do.* Their practical applications *privilege the designers* of communication technologies and their *users* (e.g. in the role of senders) *with instrumental intents by providing them predictions and instruments of control without subjects' consent.*

(4b) Regardless of the form a proposed theory may take, the observer is interested in *generalizations* beyond what was either observed or proven viable in conversation. Generalizations *presume commonalties* between what was observed and what these observations are assumed to speak about as well. Generalizations also *leave behind anything unique*, in the case of humans, the contingencies of embodied experiences, the subjectivity of understanding and above all, *all manifestations of cognitive autonomy.* To summarily dismiss them may be a rather heavy human toll to pay. In the first of the four conditions being discussed here, I listed several phenomena and generalizations about them might prove less problematic. This is not so in the social domain. Scientific generalizations always

are public and general theories of human communication, having to be inserted into and survive the very process they describe (see proposition four) both claim and practice their extendibility beyond the commonalities observed or consented to. I am suggesting that *by failing to encourage dissent* among those to whom a theory is claimed applicable, *general theories can impose commonalities where they may not or do not need to exist and prevent individuals affected by them from exercising their cognitive autonomy*. Indeed, in the social domain, most generalizations, for example concerning cultural norms, social class distinctions, common communication codes, sign-functions, shared conventions, social prejudices or institutional constraints tend to be *constructed as historical facts of social life, as super-individual certainties or as self-evident standards, not as communicatively negotiated cognitive constructions*. *Their constructed nature easily is forgotten and the possibility of communicatively deconstructing them is suppressed*.

Generalizations also claim their territories. *Without participation and consent, the more general a theory is claimed to be, particularly by scientists not taking responsibilities for their own inventions, the larger the territory it covers, the more widespread the suppression of human communication becomes*. Moreover, *the more abstractly that theory is stated, the less likely is it for individuals to see how their own constructions could be responsible for it and the more hidden becomes the consequent suppression*. Because of this, *general theories* about how communication works,--all of which, I would claim, reflect but some theorists' cognitive constructions--not only *validate themselves by forcing subjects' submission* but also *lay the foundation of an intellectual imperialism that is all the more difficult to overcome as their disowned constructions disable reflection*.

Finally, back to the question "is a comparative methodology desirable?" With objectivist methodologies in hand, this depends on which side one is on, the privileged knower or the generalized and cognitively disabled known. From a

constructivist perspective, this depends on whether or not those theorized about are entitled and enabled to shape theories concerning them in conversations and whether or not the uniqueness of their cognitive autonomy is provided a place in their construction.

### Summary

In the preceding, I have argued that human communication is a special kind of phenomenon, one that brings its own language into the very picture a theory needs to paint and embeds the comparisons this language enables in its very own process. This led me to conclude that comparisons of human communication theories that do justice to the communication processes they claim to describe must take place and prove their viability in *conversations* or *dialogues that honor the cognitive autonomy of their participants and offer each the opportunity to contribute to the construction of such theories, at least by visibly practicing their own understanding of them.*

Whenever theories are compared and constructed to explain phenomena that also lie in the domain of human understanding for those of whom they claim to speak, ethical considerations become inevitable. This is true for most social theories but especially for theories of human communication which can bring forth and sustain processes most central to individual self-understanding and the construction of society constitutionally involving them. My proposal has been *to distribute the ethical responsibilities such theories entail* by engaging those involved in conversations that could comparatively (re)construct them in the practice they inform. *Abstract and general theories accepted without advice and consent from those involved as informants or constituents of the system of their concern, can become oppressive and support an intellectual imperialism that prevents individuals from realizing their own and most precious cognitive autonomy.*

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