

Opportunities, limitations, and implications for future research

The fourth, and also the last group of chapters discusses the opportunities, limitations, and implications of the various issues involved in the Eurocentrism and indigenization debate, especially the pitfalls of repeating the problems of Eurocentrism.

Gholam Khiabany is among the first to warn against nativism while we seek to decentralize the West and de-Westernize development and media studies. Nativism reproduces the same false binaries enshrined in much of the literature of the modernisation school, he charges in Chapter 14, and also the culturalist assumptions which have entrapped much of the analysis of the West's "others." While claiming to challenge Eurocentrism and "colonialism," the new nativist approaches focus on culture and identity as the starting point, on the one hand suppressing the internal diversities of "identities" (Islamic, Asian, African, etc.), and on the other hand shifting the focus from the critique of political economy and of the nation-state to that of the critique of culture and of nation.

By bringing back history and historicizing "culture", the chapter examines alternative cultural claims to media and modernity and the search for an elusive authentic "self," with particular reference to the "Islamic World." It is suggested that a focus on "differences" in terms of geographical and cultural locations works to conceal the real and more pressing "differences" which need our urgent attention, and secondly, the revival of "traditions" and "cultures" that are perceived to have existed in defiance of history are providing a non-Western alibi to legitimate modernization and capitalism.

Dissanayake, as one of the first authors to raise the issue of home-grown theories, also calls for the adoption of a self-critical stance in guarding against essentialism, ahistoricism, reductionism, elitism and gender biases in making the effort to formulate Asian theories of communication. He urges, at the same time, that Asian researchers be prepared to engage Western traditions of thought, both traditional and current, at a very serious level of scholarly apprehension. After a review of works made available in the past decades, Dissanayake suggests in Chapter 15 that two types of theory are important to the production of Asian communication theories: type-A theories that deal with traditional Asian thoughts and understandings of human communication, and type-B theories, such as Orientalism and postcolonialism theories, that critically engage Western conceptualities with a focus on contemporary experiences and structures of feeling. Dialogue with the West is both possible and important, as seen in the parallels between poststructuralist theories and the ideas and concepts of Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna, in widening the discursive boundaries of communication studies. Both types of theory hold immense potential for future development, but if the desires and efforts of Asian researchers are to be rewarded with positive results, it is important that they face the manifold complex problems and challenges that are in the way.

Syed Farid Alatas sees similar potential and pitfalls in creating alternative social scientific traditions in Asia. A great deal of progress can be achieved to transcend

the problems of Eurocentrism or academic dependency at the intellectual level. The alternative discourses – discourses that are informed by indigenous historical experiences and cultural practices in the same ways that Western discourses are – should be relevant to their surroundings, original, non-essentialist, counter-Eurocentric, and autonomous from the state and other national or transnational groupings. A variety of non-Western knowledge traditions and cultural practices are all to be considered as sources of theorising and concept building, Alatas emphasizes in Chapter 16. The purpose this indigenization project, however, is not to replace Eurocentric social science with an equally ethnocentric discourse, but to contribute to the universalization of the social sciences by introducing non-Western thoughts and ideas to concepts and theories. The highest level of alternateness and universality therefore refers to the application of locally generated theory that is integrated with other non-Western theories as well as with Western theories to both local and other realities.

The last chapter by Georgette Wang takes the conclusion reached by Alatas a step further, and looks into one of the most crucial issues in the indigenization debate: the conceptual and methodological difficulties but also possibilities in developing universal universality from culture-centricity. On the basis of Kuhn's concept of incommensurability and hermeneutic discourse on interpretation and translation, Wang distinguishes three types of incommensurability in transcultural and transcontextual academic discourse: cultural incommensurability, conceptual incommensurability, and institutional incommensurability. The first step to go beyond Eurocentrism, Wang proposes, is to go to the historical, social, cultural, and even linguistic context of the local and the indigenous and that of the concepts and theories involved, to establish their incommensurability. As incommensurability can be explained, communicated and interpreted, it is possible then to develop commensurability from incommensurability after major differences and similarities have been teased out and organized, and comparisons have been made. The ultimate aim of the exercise is to build commensurate universality – universality that does not base on commonality, but on equivalence and similarity, meanwhile recognizing the openness of the elements constituting such universality.

Changing questions and altering frameworks

All research begins with a set of questions, yet on the issue of de-Westernizing and indigenizing communication research, the most important concern at this stage is perhaps not whether all of the questions have answers, but whether we have produced new research questions and analytical frameworks. The purpose of providing answers, therefore, is to stimulate further discussion and generate more questions, for without a thorough debate, it is likely that the indigenization project will remain in an ambiguous state, with no clear picture of what is involved, what can, or should, be achieved, and where the current effort will lead us.

The collection of chapters in this edited volume has taken the above issues to the next level of discussion by pinpointing the heart of the problem, proposing alternative models, and charting possible future directions. Both similar and

contradicting views are presented. Chung and Khiabany, for example, converge on the point that culture is not the most important factor to consider in tackling the issue of perspective in theorizing communication research, but they disagree on what is the most important one. Yet despite the different interests, concerns, and theoretical orientations of authors, the messages that these chapters convey are difficult to ignore. To establish intellectual dialogue among academic communities it is necessary to go beyond de-Westernization and open up the field of study to thoughts and ideas from a greater variety of sources, to reconceptualize the relationship between binary concepts such as the West vs. the non-West and the culture-specific vs. the culture-general approach, and for those outside the mainstream West to “bring the focus of attention home” to the social and historical contexts in which a study is conducted.

The emergence of modernities outside the mainstream West, and the transformation of Indian Buddhism into Chinese Buddhism are but two telling examples to show how cultural learning, selective adaptation and transformation may take place when there is a major imbalance of power and there are contradictions in values and world-views when such processes evolve, and how Eurocentrism, with its infrastructural and scientism hegemony, had prevented such processes from taking place within the academic world.

The issue is therefore not merely one of the power structure of global academia, but that the community as a whole is deprived of a rich heritage of philosophy and epistemology of different cultural origins (Abdi, 2006) and that the field is deprived of the possibility of growth and development. The problem is more than a matter of “equality” or “balancing the power,” but rather one of continued waste of both academic resources and talents, with chances for greater achievement and breakthrough significantly reduced. If differences, variety and heterogeneity and tension, struggles and creative ideas are at all valued over homogeneity, mimicry and stagnant consensus, the predominance of American and European media and communication methods and theories cannot be seen as the problem of a designated segment of the academic community; it has no boundary, either in terms of geography or of discipline.

Dirlik (2006), in discussing the conflict between epistemological universalism and epistemological multiculturalism, has noted the opportunities and challenges arising from the disintegration of hegemonic universality:

The disintegration of hegemonic universality presents new opportunities in terms of social and political alliances in rethinking the human project across social as well as political and cultural boundaries. But it also presents a predicament of rethinking anew what the cultural and ideological basis might be for such alliances when differences is the order of the day, and suspicion of common values makes for a kind of ideological paranoia.

(Dirlik, 2006, p. 5)

What is truly crucial, is perhaps not what that basis might be, but how it might be formed and cultivated, as even the best of solutions for all needs to be

communicated, debated, and negotiated by all. And such communication, debate, and negotiation is exactly what is called for, and aimed at here.

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