MEASURING KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURES IN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: THE QUESTION OF PRECISION

ABSTRACT

The author seeks to clarify the fact that truth and knowledge are not analogous. Contrary to the Eurocentric existentialist perspective. Rightlighted by 20th century philosophers like Sartre, Bertrand Russell etc, knowledge is what we acquire from daily and past experiences, while truth is what we gain from knowledge.

Therefore, truth and knowledge are situational or limited to a specific group of people or culture. Though knowledge can become more universal than truth because people are free to choose and use information to suit their needs. Equally examined is the problem of measuring truth, culture, the problem of language and method. Finally the issue determining the temporality and spatiality of the cultural variables in communication research was addressed. The fact is that so me cultures and researches manipulate variables at the expense of other cultural traditions still undergoing a metamorphosis, like in contemporary African societies.

RESUME

L'auteur de cet article cherche à clairifier l'idée que la vérité et la connaissance ne sont pas analogues, contrairement à la perspective existentialiste eurocentriste. En plein 20e siècle, des philosophes comme Sartre, Bertrand Russelkl, etc ont soutenu que la connaissance est ce que nous recevons des expériences quoti-

diennes et passées, alors que la vérité est le gain que nous retirons de la connaissance.

Pourtant, la vérité et la connaissance sont en situation ou limitées à un groupe spécifique de peuple ou à une culture. Bien que la connaissance puisse devenir plus universelle que la vérité, parce que nous sommes libres de choisir et d'utiliser les informations pour nos besoins. D'où l'examen du problème de la mesure de la vérité, de la culture, du problème de langage et de méthode. En fin de compte, on a analysé la temporalité et la spalialité des variables culturelles dans la recherche en communication. Le fait est que certains chercheurs manipulent des variables aux dépens des autres traditions culturelles toujours en transformation, à l'instar des sociétés africaines contemporaines.

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In introducing the models of communication research : theories, methods and pragmatics, Ball (1987:24) complained that historians misinterpreted Thomas Hobbes (the 17th century Social Science philosopher) as a «precursor of naturalistic political science», and not as a «methodologically ambivalent person». Ball's concept that the historians record only «great and momentous movements» of big images in order to determine true knowledge, can be perceived within a social context.

The concept that knowledge or «social reality» (Nwanko, 1989:2) can be best atteined by applying alternate or various strategies, is *par excellence*, rhetorical and contradictory to the very purpose of truth and/or reality. For truth to be, it must not be collective, but referential. However, self-knowledge, as perceived by the earlier philosophers: Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, and Spinoza is a construct of truth and not truth itself.

Even their pronounced predecessors of the 20th centuryl: Sartre, Bertrand Russell, Alfred Witchard, Jules Ayer and then, Heidegger, Horkheimer, Brecht, Lukacs, Adorno, and Dreisch have viewed knowledge, and reality mainly from a eurocentric existentialist perspective. But here, I clarify that truth and knowledge are not analogous. Knowledge is what we acquire from daily and past experiences, while truth is what we gain from knowledge. Therefore, truth and knowledge are situational or limited

to a specific group of people or culture. However, knowledge can become more universal than truth, because people are free to choose and use information to suit their needs.

MEASURING TRUTH

Truth can be perceived from one's religious affiliation (Stevenson, 1981:23-30). But truth is a concept, what Aristotle calls *energeia*. *Reality* means energy, force, substance, causality, the soul and religion. As a concept, *truth* is symbolic (Bourne, 1966). The experimental-behavioral psychologist reports that the «bases for a concept may exist in the environment in the form of things which illustrate it (Bourne, 1966:2).

Based on Bourne's explanation, one may postulate, by abstraction, that social reality cannot be universal, because things are not the same everywhere. Thus, the bases or procedure for conceptualizing and explaining social issues must be different for all environments. In other words, what is perceived as «social reality» in Environment «A» may be perceived as socially out-of-context in Environment «B».

The intricacy in generalizing social reality is that measurement standards cannot be generalized. As there are incommunicable innate mythical understandings (Blalock, 1984:25), the individual relies on own senses to understand the world, since only a few human puzzles can be solved through scientific experiment. A person's sense of recognition or worldview differs from another's. Therefore, social reality can be best understood as a referential and pragmatic entity and should be viewed exclusively in environmental and interactional terms. But what kind of social reality do we mean and how do we measure it?

If one views *truth* as a paradigm (which is alright) of *social reality*, there should be no question of, or claims about communication researchers dismissing administrative research paradigms in favor of critical research paradigms or vice versa, since both methods help to reveal a certain percentage of truth/fact. Both *true* and *false* information are constructs of social reality, they are indeed a practical part of human nature and based on the fact that they control human behavior, the extent of that control needs to be measured. But here, the question arises: How should cultural dynamism be measured? Should there be a particular theory or method to be used in measuring cultures?

MEASURING CULTURE

An attempt at examining culture as a dynamic entity has caused communication researchers to come up with some explications on different concepts of culture and the marketability of those cultures through electronic media. From a cognitive perspective, the dynamism of a culture and its superiority over another, has been a greater concern for several communication researchers and sociolinguists (Alleyne, 1980:25). This concern does not prevail because of interactiveness between communication scholars but through a psychoanalysis of members in that culture. Since such cultural concepts as deviance, socialization, lifestyle, elite and ethnicity are defined differently by communication researchers, they should be measured differently. For instance, one cannot determine that because Africans do not keep to a specific time to do work, they are lazy. Africans view time differently from others. Therefore, their work ethic and output effectiveness should not be measured according to tardiness but by the amount and quality of the work done.

In assessing the interactiveness of cultures as concepts of social reality, it is rife to explicate the schematic interrelationship of cultures. Since one culture is different from another, *empirical reality* in the one culture may seem unethical, abnormal and unacceptable in the other. For example, language and socialization codes are different in different societies. And different cultures tend to make different judgements on human behavior differently and they rely on different forms of evidence for different reasons and at different times.

Diversity in culture leads to a diversity in popular expectations and values. Different kinds of information and ways of applying information presuppose multiple methods for producing, processing, storing and applying them (Nwanko 1989:8). However, unfavorable evaluation in communication research may result from a lack of, or insufficient knowledge in a language.

THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE

The human communication researcher, Nwanko (1989) posits that language, because it has public and formal codezs provides a different structure of expression, has different implications

in human relationships and different forms of interaction. Bernstein (1974:28), and Edelman (1979) emphasize the emotive rather than the logistical implications of language in human relationships. Nevertheless, the overall effect of categorizing language, or considering one language as *formal* and preferable to the informal language, is discriminatory in terms of determining their value in communication research. A researcher who conducts a study by using only formal language may get false findings if the arget audience constitues low-verbal people. For instance, in Lusting's study, the researcher found that people do not talk very much because they are shy (1976:455). The problem with that type of study is that it labels the *effects* of human behavior and ignores the *process* of behavior - the nature of that shyness and a technique - to show whether or how the shy ones can communicate effectively without using the *formal* language. Lustig's survey like audience-perception studies certainly needs a specific, appropriate procedure; a researcher's knowledge of the cultural behavior of the subjects to be studied and their language codes. Additionally, the researcher should use knowledge obtained from that study to suggest new issues within the same research context that are worth addressing and produce innovative theories for using appropriate linguistic skills to conduct research.

THE PROBLEM OF METHOD

There is a difficulty in applying a valid or reliable method for the understanding of multiple cultural experiences. That difficulty lies in a researcher's knowledge of languages in contextual cultural institutions. Although methods are common to Social Science researchers, «methodological approaches tend to be preferred over others» (Nwanko, 1989:12). The question then, is: How can a scientific method that applies to the Western world be applicable to another world ? By reverse thinking, can the scientific method be used for research on, for example, Third World issues ? Yves, but it depends on the paradigm of the method, the purpose of the research, the target audience and/or subject to be studied. Empirical research, because it is descriptive, may be appropriate in determining, for instance, the African view of childbirth. The appropriate technique to be used in this case, would be interviewing a sample of villagers in their respective languages

across that continent. The interviewer, here meaning the participant-observer, and the target audience must be inter-dependent in order to determine justifiable findings. They must understand the culture and group habits of the subjects prior to using the instrument.

CONCLUSION

Crucial to the communication research process are temporal and spatial frameworks and their roles in updating methodological standards, to equate chaning cultural variables. The problem, however, with determining the temporality and spatiality of these cultural variables is that some cultures and researchers manipulate variables at the expense of other cultural traditions still undergoing a metamorphosis, like contemporary African societies. Such variables as oppression, development, individuals, communilism, tribalism, freedom, masculinity, femininity, and equality will continue to change because they are of different levels of importance in different cultural communities at different times. Therefore, they will be measure'd differently by communication researchers.

RECOMMENDATION

While a definite statement can never be made as to what specific innovative theories and methods should be advanced to communicate beyond cultural boundaries, methods appropriately shaped to fit the theoretical and practical; the values, beliefs, demands and goals of target audiences from different cultural backgrounds are needed since societies are changing frequently nowadays.

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