

The Deweyan Pragmatism: Its Implications for the Study of Intercultural Communication

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Introduction

John Dewey is conventionally known as a philosopher and an educator, rarely as a scholar who offered a new way to understand communication and in particular intercultural communication. Pragmatism, which his philosophical writings constitute, can be defined as a practical philosophy of communication, in particular, a practical philosophy of intercultural communication. However, it is often misunderstood as anti-tradition, utilitarian, atheist and so on. People who misunderstand it as such often prejudge it without a serious reading of some of the major original works. Having read them, I am convinced that the uses of pragmatism for humankind are only going to multiply in the years to come. Unlike other theories and worldviews, pragmatism privileges ongoing dynamic interrelations among all forces over rigid conceptual dichotomies. It privileges thoughtful and creative action (verbs) and experience stimulated by, with and in nature and culture over abstract cerebration (nouns) far aloof from the real world; privileges social construction over pre-social structuration. It also privileges future and change over past and status quo. The birth and development of pragmatism could be a blessing for humankind, for it highlights the other side of the same picture, offers an alternative worldview, a new heuristic tool and a possible way of the third kind to address the conflicts between modernity and tradition (largely in the Third World) and between modernism and postmodernism. It has a great potential in mediating the divorced relationship between theory and practice and the sharp conflicts between one extreme and the other.

In the following, I shall discuss Dewey's pragmatism in the following aspects: (1). Dewey's view of the world as a set of fluid and dynamic interrelationships in contrast to the traditional view of the world as mechanistic, polarized and dichotomous. (2). Dewey's view of the function of philosophy; (3). Dewey's view of functions of language and communication in the creation of the social world. Finally, I shall discuss the implications of Dewey's pragmatics ideas for intercultural communication research.

Dewey's View of the World

Dewey is a unique personality. To him, the world is fundamentally a process in which various forces intertwine and interplay. In stability he sees change. In certainty he sees uncertainty. In entities he sees processes. In conflicts he sees interconnections. In homogeneity he sees diversity and particularity. In isolation, he sees connections and hope for communication, coordination and action. He emphasizes that the social world is primarily pre-structured. "For we live not in a settled and finished world, but [we live] in one which is going on, and where our main task is prospective" (Dewey, 1996, p.151). In his writings, he challenges and redefines a series of concepts fundamental to the rationalist architecture.

First of all, he recapitalizes and pluralizes “Truth” as “truths”. Truth is logocentric and top down whereas “truths” is bottom up and a result of communication and social construction. Dewey redefines “mind” as situated activity. “It is primarily a verb”, Dewey says (1958). God to him is not a closed entity but an unfinished process. In terms of understanding the state, Dewey urges us to abandon “the search for causes and forces and turning to the analysis of what is going on and how it goes on” (1954, p.21) because the state is also primarily an unfinished process, “a moving, growing never finished process” (1929, p.295). He also redefines values and permanence. He argues that the statement that values are self-contained, unchanging and permanent is false; “values are as unstable as the forms of clouds” (1929, p.399). Finally, Dewey has a very open idea of permanence. “Permanence” he argues, “is a function, a consequence, of changes in the relations they sustain to one another, not an antecedent principle” (1929, p.322).

Then, he breaks down dichotomies and identifies interconnections and interdependence between the two. Obviously, dichotomies would stifle human experience of and interaction with, the unfinished social process which Dewey would call “nature”. To deconstruct dichotomies is therefore to pave the way to ensure a better quality of such experience and interaction. Dewey makes a painstaking effort to remove such conceptual barriers. He argues that it is the interrelations among forces rather than the entities themselves which constitute reality. He holds that the idea that mind, body, matter and life stand for separate kinds of being is false; they are but results of different levels of interaction among events (1929, p.261). Body and mind are but different parts of the dynamic whole. Therefore, Dewey hyphenates the two concepts “body-mind” to counteract the consequence of the theories which have divided body and mind into two separate entities. He argues: “In making mind purely immaterial (isolated from the organ of doing and undergoing), the body ceases to be living and becomes a dead lump” (1958, p.264) In terms of the relationship between form and substance, Dewey points out the critic’s imposition of the dualistic perspective on art products whose act of creation bears no distinction but perfect integration of manner and content, form and substance (1958, p.109) Nowhere does he try his best to counteract and rectify the serious alienating consequences of such theories of polarization, isolation and compartmentalization than in *Democracy and Education*. To Dewey, education is perhaps the area most polluted by such conceptual dichotomies. Some of the most harmful ones are work vs. play, naturalism vs. humanism, physical studies vs. social studies, labor vs. leisure, intellectual vs. practical, duty vs. interest, vocational education vs. general education, etc... In *Art as Experience*, Dewey criticizes rigid classification, definition and abstraction in art, for they make ends in themselves instead of making themselves as means to enhance artistic experience (1958, p.216). This criticism obviously applies to the conceptual dichotomies in education I have listed above. They have neglected transitional and connecting links between the two ends and have made education into an alienating and isolating, rigidifying and shrinking experience rather than a democratic experience—one of constructive association, integration and growth. He openly urges that the goal of education in a democratic society should be to get rid of such dualisms (1958, p.261) so that one experience could be made freely available in other experiences (1958, p.339). Based on this argument, Dewey even proposes the merge of philosophy of education and philosophy itself. This leads to the topic on Dewey’s view of the function of philosophy.

Dewey's View of the Function of Philosophy

Dewey thinks that the modern Western philosophy is primarily responsible for the polluted experience, distorted reality, stifled education and rigidified thinking. Having come out of ancient Greek mainstream tradition, this philosophy has been used as a tool in the quest for certainty and Truth. In the process, it has created and imposed a complex but static and close-ended linguistic structure upon the unfinished and still going-on reality. It has rendered a rigid worldview which is far aloof from reality and is reluctant to change. To use Dewey's own words: "Any philosophy that in its quest for certainty ignores the reality of the uncertain in the ongoing processes of nature denies the condition out of which it arises. The attempt to include all that is doubtful within the fixed grasp of that which is theoretically certain is committed to insincerity and evasion, and in consequence will have the stigmata of internal contradiction" (1960, p.244). To stop all this means, to Dewey, a substantial reform of this modern philosophy-from its concepts and vocabulary to its goal. Based on his critique of the classic philosophy, Dewey has come up with a new version of philosophy. This philosophy can be called the Deweyan pragmatist philosophy. Dewey thinks (1929) that the classic philosophy, instead of having found Truth, has set up and has been perpetuating a value system. The pragmatic philosophy, therefore, should be a philosophy of criticism. Indeed, the very process of formulating and existence of the pragmatic philosophy is critical of the classic European philosophy. "What especially makes necessary a generalized instrument of criticism is the tendency of objects to seek rigid non-communicating compartments" (Dewey, 1929, p.409). Hence, the function of philosophy at present is to make it clear that there are not substantial differences as those dualistic divisions assume. The goal of the new philosophy should be, according to Dewey, "to facilitate the fruitful interaction of our cognitive beliefs, our beliefs resting upon the most dependable methods of inquiry, with our practical beliefs about values, the ends and purposes, that should control human action in the things of large and liberal human import" (1960, p.36). Dewey also suggests that the pragmatic philosophy should also be a philosophy of self-criticism, for reflection is a tool to reduce narrowness, superficiality and stagnation and a means to secure free and more enduring goods. "Is the standard of values also a value?" He rhetorically questions (1929, p.401). Dewey defines philosophy as "an attempt to comprehend—that is, to gather together the carried details of the world and of life into a single inclusive whole" (1966, p.324). It should be in close connection with reality. "If there are genuine uncertainties in life, philosophies must reflect that uncertainty" (Dewey, 1966, p.327). Since Dewey views philosophy as criticism, education is not only the area which has been most severely rigid by the modern philosophy and therefore a major target of critique for philosophy, he naturally views education as a potential instrument to achieve the goal of philosophy and therefore a practice of philosophy. Specifically, he sees education as a powerful means to both de-educate people with regard to the working consequences of the classic philosophy in education and in real life and to re-educate people with the pragmatic philosophy. In other words, he sees education as the engine for "social reform" (Bernstein, 1966, p.7). Inevitably, Dewey thinks that the most penetrating definition of philosophy is that it is the theory of education (1966, p.331). But of course, both philosophy and education are meant in the pragmatic sense.

Dewey's View of the Function of Language and Communication in the Creation of the Social World

Dewey thinks that meaning is social and acquired by individuals who participate in the social and therefore language is socially developed. He says: “the principle that things gain meaning by being used in a shared experience or joint action” (1966, pg. 16). He casts doubts about the pure representation of language and warns against the encroachment of linguistic media upon an intimate direct experience. He states: “there is always a danger that symbols will not be truly representative; danger that instead of really calling up the absent and remote in a way to make it enter a present experience, the linguistic media of representation will become an end in themselves” (1966, p.232). Direct experience, to him, seems to be away from constraints of the linguistic realm. Dewey does explicitly recognize the limits of the language in *Art as Experience*, although not as radical as Wittgenstein’s statement that the limits of the world are determined by the limits of the language. Dewey defends the legitimate existence of art by stating: “If all meanings could be adequately expressed by words, the arts of painting and music would not exist. There are values and meanings that can be expressed only by immediately visible and audible qualities, and to ask what they mean in the sense of something that can be put into is to deny their distinctive existence” (1958, p.74). He further states elsewhere: “Language comes infinitely short of paralleling the variegated surface of nature. Yet words as practical devices are the agencies by which the ineffable diversity of natural existence as it operates in human experience is reduced to orders, ranks and classes that can be managed. Not only is it impossible that language should duplicate the infinite variety of individualized qualities that exist, but it is wholly undesirable and unneeded that it should do so. The unique quality of quality is found in experience itself; it is there and sufficiently there not to need reduplication in language. The latter serves as to how to come upon these qualities in experience. The more generalized and simpler the direction is, the better it becomes. The more uselessly detailed it is, the more confusion it causes. But words serve their poetic purpose in the degree in which they summon and evoke into active operation the vital responses that are present whenever we experience qualities” (1958, p.215). Dewey seems to suggest that while language is inherently limited, language can also be reformed in order to better guide experience rather than to stifle experience. He cites the body-mind issue to illustrate how important it is to trash the old philosophical vocabulary and create new ones so that a new philosophy and even a new way of life can be possible. He states: “Body-mind designates an affair with its own properties. A large part of the difficulty in its discussion—perhaps the whole of the difficulty in general apart from detailed questions—is due to vocabulary. Our language is so permeated with consequences of theories which have divided the body and mind from each other, making separate existential realms out of them, that we lack words to designate the actual existential fact” (1929, p.284). To reform the classic philosophy then, means first and foremost to transform the rationalist language into the pragmatic one—the one capable of capturing the dynamics of our daily living and capable of enriching our living experience. This makes the pragmatic philosophy a gigantic task—a task to create a systematic language which is non-dualistic, action-oriented and more intimate with relations, processes and even uncertainty and chaos. Such a language which is “a form of action and in its instrumental use is always a means of concerted action for an end” (1929, p.184)

Dewey stresses communication more than language, although his ideas of the two are interconnected. Indeed, his re-conceptualization of language serves as an intellectual initiation into his accent on communication. He argues: “The heart of language is not “expression” of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is

communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership” (1929, p.179). To Dewey, four forces should interplay in the social world. They are experience, communication, education and democracy with each in the sequential order. Dewey’s “experience” is least structural, and least constrained by the dualistic vocabulary and ideas. It is the venture into the unknown in order to know. It is the precondition and the content of communication. Communication functions as a bridge between experience and education in that “education consists primarily in transmission through communication” and communication is also “a process of sharing experience”) 1966, p. 9). Democracy, among the four, seems to be the end goal of the other three forces. Dewey states: “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1966, p.87). Therefore, to Dewey, communication occupies a central position in the four forces in tearing down the dualistic philosophy and in reconstituting the social reality-the making of democracy.

Dewey seems to strongly believe in communication as a major force of social construction. He defines communication as sharing an experience (1966, p.9) and participation (1929, p. 204). Not only the communal membership is enhanced, but also the sense of community is actualized through communication (1929, p.206). Implied in participation are opportunities for and processes of social and cultural change. To Dewey, communication can be instrumental in the following:

1. Communication conditions consciousness (1929, p.187) and shapes society (1966, p.4). Communication (“association with fellow beings”) exerts a major influence upon the formation of the mental and moral disposition (1929, p.33). Society is largely the result of communication. “Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication” (1966, p.4). The last statement is crucial in that it reverses the traditional view of communication as derived from and dependent on culture. To Dewey, communication is vital in creating, recreating and sustaining democracy-an ideal society and culture. It functions as a process of cultural formation and reformation.
2. Communication is usefully destructive. It could dissolve custom and occasion reconstruction (1966,p. 86). “When communication occurs, all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking” (1929, p.166). it is not only able to wash away dualities, but also has a potential to dissolve class, party and professional boundaries on condition that communication is free (1929, p.281).
3. Communication is creative. First it is educative. Dewey says: “Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine life) is educative” (1966, p. 5) because it modifies and expands the participants’ experience. Then, it transforms ways of acting (1929, p. 292) and increases number and variety of habits (1929, p. 281).
4. Communication is also a powerful way to create commonality and consensus. For example, on one hand, Dewey states that “consensus demands communication” (1966, p.5), on the other hand, he argues that communication

is the vehicle to make individual experience become a shared property (1966, p.9).

Taking into consideration the significant position Dewey holds about communication in human affairs, and the relationship communication has with experience and education, one might as well conclude that Dewey's pragmatic philosophy is not only a philosophy of education, but also a philosophy of communication. A communication function as the nexus and mediator between the old and the new and it is the substance of society and culture.

Implications for Intercultural Communication Studies

Obviously the Deweyan pragmatism has a lot to offer to intercultural communication studies. As a matter of fact, it has been creatively appropriated by The CMM Group led by Vernon E. Cronen and Barnet Pearce in their creation of the communication theory "the Coordinated Management of Meaning" (Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Pearce, 1994). In the following, I shall reconceptualize the conventional intercultural communication studies in light of the Deweyan pragmatism. I shall discuss the following aspects: the basic fundamental concepts of the current intercultural communication research; activism in intercultural communication research.

Most of the basic cultural concepts of the current intercultural communication research are geographical and biological in nature. For example, we have geographically rooted cultural concepts such as Asian, Asian- American, African, Afro-American, European, European American, Latin American, the Eastern Culture and the Western Culture and so on. We also have biologically/genetically rooted cultural concepts such as masculine as in the terms "masculine culture" and the "feminine culture", the Jewish Culture, the Chinese Culture and so on. We also have cultural concepts based on time as a frozen state rather than a process such as the ancient culture, traditional culture, youth culture and so on. Some other cultural concepts are based on nationality, corporation and so on which are generally regarded as close entities. From the Deweyan perspective, while some of these kinds of cultural concepts are relatively fluid, most of them are close entities as hard as iron blankets. However, it is exactly on the basis of these close-ended cultural concepts that the intercultural communication mainstream research has been conducted. Indeed, such concepts are the building blocks which constitute foundation of much of the current intercultural communication research. While Dewey has critiqued the dualistic philosophy, one has sufficient reason to critique the taken-for-granted use of such close-ended cultural concepts, for if culture is fluid, it is these close-ended cultural concepts which have made cultures seem static. Researchers who have used these concepts without any reflection may not only view culture as static using such lenses, but also end up perpetuating such as a static and mechanic view of culture to other researchers such as their students and intercultural communication practitioners. As a consequence which is contrary to the purpose of such intercultural research, such research ends up perpetuating perceptual gaps between among cultures and unintentionally discouraging people of different cultures from maximum socializing together. Different groups of people who are labeled as such tend to see society as more divided than connected. Due to heightened intensity of interaction among cultures around the world, cultures have been crisscrossing in every corner of the globe. It is becoming more and more difficult to tell what belongs to which culture since there has been a lot of cultural hybridization going on which challenges the conventional thinking about and perception of cultures. Such a static view of culture has

already become inadequate in accurately express such as cultural and intercultural dynamics. Since Dewey proposes to create a new vocabulary of philosophy which is in close touch with reality as a growth process, we as intercultural communication scholars and researchers should reflect upon the undesirable consequences of static vocabulary of intercultural communication research so that it will facilitate our research rather than stifle it.

As is synthesized above, Dewey stresses experience and communication as fundamental dimensions of human activity. With reference to intercultural communication research, Dewey's ideas could function as a heuristic tool in reconceptualizing what is research, what the goal of research is and what kind of agenda can be formulated. In light of Dewey's view, intercultural communication research could legitimately include activism as a definition of research, as a research goal and part of research agenda. There are two dimensions to this activism. First, such researchers should become active in self-interrogating the underlying assumptions about fundamental variables in research such as culture and communication, the so-called "research discoveries" or "research findings" and unintended consequences of such "findings". In extension, they should become active in seeking to create a new and more nuanced vocabulary to capture the open-ended nature of culture and communication. Besides, intercultural researchers must spend a significant amount of research time in close contact and interaction with real-life people of different cultures without the research agenda in mind instead of only staying in the offices or labs crunching numbers. Culture and communication are much more complicated, complex and dynamic than numbers and words and researchers' own limited imagination. Preferably such researchers are able to speak the native language of the people with whom the researchers are interacting and studying. In other words, they must be not only library smart, lab smart, but also street smart about cultures and communication. Unless they seriously invest in such research activism, intercultural communication researchers would find themselves doing research projects which may defeat their own original purpose-to improve intercultural communication.

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