

# METATHEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF INQUIRY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the philosophical foundations that give rise to the different perspectives in social inquiry. The metatheoretical tenets of theory, namely ontology, epistemology, and axiology, and their influence upon the dominant perspectives in social inquiry are also discussed. The post-positivist perspective, the interpretivist perspective and the critical perspective are discussed.

**Keywords:** metatheory, ontology, epistemology, axiology, post-positivist, interpretivist, critical perspective

## INTRODUCTION

Communication, being the bane of societal existence, is a phenomenon that is influenced by a multitude of things. Different people have different concepts of communication. For the scholars among them, the many concepts that shape their various understandings of communication stem from their various philosophies regarding the social world. It is from these philosophical bases that their theories on communication are derived. Double (1999) posits that “philosophers construct *theories* (sic.) to answer philosophical questions.” In order to understand the many (and sometimes, seemingly conflicting) theories that scholars have about communication, it is important to understand how their philosophies on the social world are shaped. Miller (2002) neatly categorizes philosophical foundations into three metatheoretical considerations, namely epistemology, ontology, and axiology. These philosophical concepts are fundamental to theorizing because:

(They address) such questions as what should be observed, how observation should take place, and what form theory should take.

(Littlejohn 1992: 29)

Miller's well structured explanation of theories, or "theory about theory" (p.23), is the foundation needed to understand the various perspectives that scholars have in theorizing communication. Metatheoretical considerations allow scholars to build perspectives or schools-of-thought which in turn provide useful classifications of theories. For the student, these classifications are helpful guides in learning about the field of communication. For the scholar, perspectives provide support for theorizing communication.

This paper will deal with the aforementioned philosophical concepts and resulting theoretical perspectives.

## **METATHEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

Like Miller, Cragan & Shields (1998) agree that "every communication theory possesses...three types of assumptions: ontological, epistemological and axiological" (Cragan & Shields 1998: 14) . Although discussed separately by Miller, she stresses throughout her work that these metatheoretical assumptions cannot be separated when discussing communication theories because they are mutually influential and intertwined. This writer agrees, and a discussion of their fusion will come later in this essay after a separate look at each three consideration.

### **Epistemology**

The first metatheoretical concept mentioned, epistemology, deals with knowledge. Cragan and Shields (1998) explains the concept as pondering "how we know what we know" (p.14), that is, where does knowledge come from?

The knowledge recorded in books, on audiotapes, on film, and even in our heads all come from *somewhere*. Determining where that *somewhere* is are the essence of various epistemological stances. Fuziah (2002) observes that a continuum of stances exists. At the extreme ends are the *objectivist stance* and the *subjectivist stance* (Miller 2002).

Miller posits that *objectivists* view knowledge about the social world as something that can be understood and explained. In their quest to understand and explain the social world, they are constantly seeking recurring patterns (regularities) and causal relationships among phenomena. To ensure the purity of knowledge, a community of like-minded (objectivist) scholars must provide checks-and-balances against the possibility of a theory being influenced by a scholar's perceptions or experiences. This epistemological stance has much to do with the concept of knowledge in the physical world where everything can be observed and empirically verified. In theorizing communication, the objectivist scholar will consider as data only knowledge that can be experienced with the senses or explained rationally or analytically.

Miller further explains that the subjectivist scholar on the other hand, eschews the notion that the social world can be compared to the physical world. The non-humanistic methods of deriving knowledge in the physical world is inapplicable to the social world precisely because the social world and its attending concepts and phenomena are all influenced by humans who have and are influenced by perceptions and experiences. In seeking knowledge, one cannot make a distinction between the knowledge seeker and what he seeks because how he goes about seeking that knowledge and even why he chooses to seek that knowledge have important implications on what he finds and terms as knowledge (Miller 2002: 28) In theorizing communication, the subjectivist scholar will refrain from rigid definitions. Immeasurable concepts such as feelings, values,

perceptions and the like cannot be discounted in the search for knowledge about social world phenomena.

While the objectivist and subjectivist epistemological stances hold opposing notions of where our knowledge of the social world ought to come from, a *relativist* approach to answering epistemological questions is also possible (Fuziah 2002). The relativist sees knowledge about our social world as emerging from both empirical and intuitive sources. What humans learn through being able to experience things with the five senses and what we learn from introspection, as well as the perceptions and feelings that we have are all part of knowledge. Simply said, the relativist approach to epistemology marries the subjectivist and objectivist stances. It is a holistic approach to communication that takes both views into consideration. While the French scholar, Auguste Comte may have come up with three levels of knowledge, placing theological knowledge at the very bottom of the hierarchy and rendering it fictitious but placing scientific knowledge at the very top calling it a positive and sure thing (Miller 2002: 33), the relativist would find both extremes as valid and acceptable sources of knowledge when theorizing communication and other social phenomena. Knowledge may come to us from a higher being, from introspection or it may also come to us in the form of scientific discovery.

## **Ontology**

The second metatheoretical aspect considered in theorizing communication is the study of our social reality, namely ontology. Littlejohn (1992) explains that “ontological issues in the study of communication deal with the nature of human social interaction” (Littlejohn 1992: 32) In theorizing communication, “ontological considerations” delve into the nature of society’s reality; the “entities that populate the world” (Miller 2002: 24), be they living beings, ideas or events, and the social structures that people live with. Communication theories, regardless of their perspectives, will always address phenomena in the social world.

Defining the social world and its entities however, is a controversial matter. Ontology involves questions about whether the structures of this social world that we live in are concrete almost physical, or if they are simply creations of our minds.

Like the epistemological continuum, ontological stances vary from a *realist* position to a *nominalist* position (Miller 2002: 24) The realist scholar sees the social world as having real, immutable structures that are akin to the physical reality of the physical world. The social structures that govern human lives truly exist and are real. Interpersonal relationships, socio-economic classes, and bureaucratic hierarchy are as real as trees, buildings, and air. Because of the concreteness of the social world, it is imperative that principles of physical science be applied to the study of human communication. In theorizing communication, these scholars search for “universal laws”, patterns, and “causal relationships” (Miller 2002: *passim*).

At the other end of the continuum are the nominalist scholars who do not see social entities as real and hard physical facts. Rather, social structures are nothing but concepts that humans invent and are “external to individual cognition”. (Miller 2002: 24). All attending entities in the social world are essentially nonexistent save for the names and labels that humans create. This writer, however, finds this position difficult to digest due to the fact that social entities have such profound physical effects on humans that it seems quite impossible that they can be nonexistent or not real.

This writer finds that a more acceptable ontological position would be that of the “*social constructionist*” as proposed by Berger & Luckmann. (1967). In *The social construction of reality* (Berger & Luckmann 1967: 19-20) they explain their ontology:

The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society... It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these (thoughts and actions).

(pps. 19-20)

The social constructionist agrees that humans create concepts of the social world, and bestow names and labels upon them, but their adherence to these creative structures in living their lives makes the social world a real world, as real as the physical world. In studying social phenomena, the social constructionist scholar sees “social reality” as being “created through communicative interaction” (Miller 2002: 24). Subjective factors in human communication are taken into consideration even when pondering its more objective elements.

### **Axiology**

A third metatheoretical consideration in theorizing communication deals with questions of values (Fuziah 2002). In following the continuum format used earlier, the objectivist and subjectivist positions on values in inquiry are, respectively, that social world scholarship should be free of values (objectivist), and that values should guide social scholarship (subjectivist). The middle line of thought is that even if so wished, it is impossible to separate values from scholarship.

Miller explains that George Howard (1985) categorized values as epistemic and nonepistemic. Epistemic values provide guidelines for scholarship by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of theories (Miller 2002: 28). They help to ascertain a theory’s reliability, validity, heuristicity and so forth. This writer would contend that epistemic values are quantifiable while nonepistemic values on the other hand are vague and inquantifiable in that they are very human centered, involving emotions, ethics, morals, spirituality and the like. Having distinguished one from the other, Howard posits that one should not allow nonepistemic values to influence scholarship (Miller 2002: 28). Scientific method must be strictly adhered to in order to guard against scholarship being contaminated by them. The researcher must always strive to separate himself from his research and to put aside all nonepistemic values in order to attain the goals of value-free inquiry.

At the opposite end of the axiological continuum, are scholars who believe that nonepistemic values *must* be included in social scholarship. These values should not only determine the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of theorizing, they must also provide a guideline in making suggestions to change society for the better. Nonepistemic values in this case, is inherent to scholarship (Miller 2002: 28-29).

A form of middle axiological position contends that because values are so imbedded in human thought and action, it is impossible for inquiry to be free from the influences of human nonepistemic values. As Miller (2002) words it:

Values ...(are) lenses through which we view the world, and these lenses (are impossible to eliminate) in any portion of the scholarly process.

(p.28)

Following the same line of reasoning as that of the subjective epistemological stance, the middle axiological road contends that nonepistemic values are so imbedded in human perceptions that striving for value-free scholarship is useless. The values intrinsic to each scholar will influence not only how findings are recorded, interpreted and presented but even their field of research and what they look out for when collecting data.

Miller (2002) contends that the scholar who rejects values objectively observes the social phenomena through a glass window. The scholar who uses values not only as a guide but also as a goal theorizes with a passion and fervor to end human woes. The scholar who contends himself with the eclectic existence of values in himself and his subjects readily accepts that all these values influence his theorizing (Miller 2002).

## **METATHEORETICAL FUSION**

Having looked at the three underlying metatheoretical considerations of theorizing communication separately, it must be stressed that the seemingly parallel concepts of epistemology, ontology and axiology are actually one.

Epistemology, being the study of where knowledge comes from has everything to do with ontological assumptions of what is real. A fine illustration can be found in religious beliefs and values. An ontological assumption that there exists a higher being that transcends our sensory capabilities would allow for theological sources of knowledge. Without such ontological foundations, epistemological assumptions that knowledge could be attained through divine revelation would prove illogical. The same ontological assumption gives credence to an axiological position of morality based on a set of spiritual rules that a corresponding epistemological stance presents as divine knowledge. Holding on to those very same axiological positions would be senseless without the attending ontological and epistemological assumptions. And thus these supersensory metatheoretical considerations are interwoven concepts that cannot stand separately.

Similarly, more empirically based metatheoretical stances support one another in constructing our social world. A very objective, analytical and sensory based epistemology that sees only verifiable facts as knowledge gives rise to a realist ontology that sees the social world as consisting of observable entities. An axiological stance favoring epistemic over nonepistemic values may be important to such an epistemological position that would have no method of quantifying morals, experiences and emotions.

## **THE RISE OF PERSPECTIVES**

Having discussed the three metatheoretical considerations however, a dilemma arises. How is one to come up with a theory about society when the very being or reality of society is a hot debate (questions of ontology)? How is one to develop knowledge without knowing for sure its roots (questions of epistemology)? And how is one to choose between good and bad, when it cannot be ascertained whether values ought to be clung to or discarded? Furthermore, how does one dissect and discuss communication when what it exactly is

cannot be agreed upon? Neuliep (1996) quotes several leading communication scholars when stating that over 100 different definitions of communication exists.

The interrelated nature of epistemology, ontology and axiology combined with the various differing conceptualizations of the phenomena called communication, makes theorizing a complicated endeavour. To make more sense of communication theories, systems of classifications of metatheories and communication concepts are used. More precisely, the various metatheoretical positions and meanings of communication evolved (and are still evolving) into systems of classifications (Miller 2002).

Yet, even such systems are neither universal nor uniform. Mcquail (1987) “described” different kinds of communication theories as being “social scientific” theories, “normative” theories, “working” theories and “common-sense” theories (Baran & Davis 1995: 27). Littlejohn (1992) classifies communication theories into “structural and functional theories”, “cognitive and behavioral theories”, “interactional and conventional theories”, “interpretive theories”, and “critical theories” (p.13). Neuliep (1996) categorized communication theories as “general / metatheory (*sic.*)”, “topical”, “contextual” and “humanistic”. (p.44) Cragan & Shields (1998) formats communication theories into headings of “general theories”, “contextual theories”, and “microtheories” (p.10).

Other communication scholars, likewise, subscribe to different systems of theory classifications. Following in this paper’s tradition of focusing on Miller’s work, the next few paragraphs will touch on her system of theory classification.

Miller (2002) explains that different metatheoretical stances lead to very different perspectives in theorizing communication. Miller discusses the post-positivist, interpretive and critical perspectives.

### **The Post-Positivist Perspective**

Miller (2002) contends that communication (and social sciences ) being a rather new field of inquiry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, had little to refer to. Guidance came in the form of the established field of physical science which placed great emphasis on scientific method in creating and testing theories. Kerlinger (1986) described it as “a systematic, controlled, empirical, and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about the presumed relations among observed phenomena” (Wimmer & Dominick 1994: 7) Scientific method placed importance on searching for constancy and causal associations of phenomena, and emphasized generalizations and universal explanations of the world. Early scholars of communication adopted this scientific method and applied scientific principles to their study of the social world.

The post-positivist perspective illustrates how epistemology, ontology and axiology are interrelated. It is these complimentary metatheoretical stances that gives rise to post-positivism.

A post-positivist ontology views the social world as real and objectifiable. This allows for an epistemological position that knowledge is “out there” waiting to be discovered (Littlejohn 1992: 12). To find knowledge, scholars must “search for regularities and causal relationships among (entities in the social world)” (Miller 2002: 36). In a cyclic explanation, this search is possible precisely because those “regularities and causal relationships” truly exist and are indeed out there to be found.

Accompanying such ontological and epistemological stances is an axiological goal of value-free inquiry. In observing and quantifying the social world, post-positivists strive to be as objective as possible, while accepting that scholars are human and therefore

the possibility exists that bias and personal values may influence their work. Karl Popper (1962) proposes that a community of scholars cooperate in studying one another's works to protect the neutrality of scholarship from being compromised (Miller 2002: 43).

Such an axiological position emerged because of an epistemological stance that places great value on universal explanations of phenomena. In order to achieve such explanations, methods of discovery and analysis must be consistent among different researchers. If they are not, steps must be undertaken to minimize any possible differences. Hence an axiological goal of value-free inquiry that recognizes the fallibilities of human scholars and strives to rectify them is needed (Miller 2002).

In the fashion of studying the physical science, in theorizing communication post-positivists aim to discover and explain human interaction, to predict social relationships and to control social phenomena (Miller 2002).

### **The Interpretivist Perspective**

As opposed to the post-positivist outlook on the social world, the interpretivist scholar holds that because reality is subjective, knowledge about the social world does not lie around in wait of discovery.

The combination of ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions that give rise to interpretivist perspectives is inseparable. Miller (2002) contends that discussing them as individual concepts would be "artificial".(p.52) However, a discussion of complimenting and supporting metatheoretical assumptions is still needed in explaining this perspective.

A subjectivist epistemological position held by interpretivists is that there do not exist universal and causal explanations of social phenomena. What is epistemologically important is to understand phenomena as it is comprehended by different realities. One may ontologically and axiologically subscribe this to the different perceptions that individuals have about reality (Littlejohn 2002: 12) and the different experiences that shape those realities and their attending values.

To best explain interpretivist realities, a social constructionist ontological position can be used. Different individuals and different societies construct their own social worlds because each different person and each different society sees the world through different lenses. This results in "multiple realities, none of which can be seen as more true or false than the other" (Miller 2002: 52). To understand any reality, "the mental and social processes that are continually constructing that reality" (p.52) must be treated with thorough consideration. These processes are mutually influenced by the experiences and the values held by different individuals and societies.

In hand with its subjective epistemology and social constructionist ontology, the interpretivist perspective holds a value-laden axiological view of scholarship. As explained above, the different realities held and how those realities are understood are influenced by values inherent to the individuals and societies under study, and also to the researcher himself.

The close relationship among the metatheoretical assumptions of the interpretivist perspective illustrates how this perspective would be impossible without the underlying epistemological, ontological and axiological considerations.

## The Critical Perspective

Miller (2002) explains that a third perspective, the critical perspective, does not find it enough to merely offer explanations and representations of the social world and ending scholarship at the discussion stage. Moving beyond the “representational” (p.60) plane, critical scholars strive to rectify imbalance in societal and individual human interaction for the betterment of the unfortunate. In theorizing communication, reform of the social world is their ultimate goal.

Jurgen Habermas (1971) termed the critical scholar’s epistemological stance as having “critical-emancipatory cognitive interests” (Miller 2002: 67) where critical analysis of the social world is imperative in order to identify social imbalance favoring one dominant group of people over another weaker group. Once this societal order is identified, scholars must act as agents of emancipation, creating a new, more balanced social order.

The above epistemological outlook can only be possible with an axiology that emphasizes (nonepistemic) values. Without a strong notion of right and wrong, injustices of the social world cannot be possibly identified. Subsequently, without an ingrained obligation to help the underdogs, one will not have the passion and determination needed to become a social activist, which, pragmatically, is a vital part of being a critical scholar.

In theorizing communication in the critical fashion, a realist based ontology is imperative because it provides the foundation for analyses. In order to seek out the wrongs of the social world the critical scholar must first believe that social injustices truly exist, and in order to maintain the drive to want to rectify them, he must believe that his efforts will have a real impact upon individuals and the society they live in.

Thus in the critical perspective, epistemology, ontology and axiology are inextricably linked.

## INQUIRY IN AN IDEAL SOCIAL WORLD

Fuziah (2002) loosely places Miller’s perspectives in a continuum; the post-positivist perspective as being quite objective and scientific, the interpretive perspective as being rather subjective, and the critical perspective as a somewhat misfitting middle view. This writer finds that all the earlier mentioned perspectives possess merits and flaws in their role as foundations for theorizing communication. The post-positivist perspective, while providing a systematic and methodological way of pondering social phenomena, places too much emphasis on attaining its goal of value-free inquiry. Such an emphasis may be pertinent in studying the physical world, but is somewhat misleading when applied to the social world which is made up of humans and their interactions which are very subjective, unquantifiable and very much influenced by individual and societal values. To be fair, however, it must be acknowledged that without the post-positivist perspective, later developments of perspectives might not have been possible, for they grew out of a dissatisfaction with the overly empirical nature of post-positivism. At the same time, the scientific method is a useful guide for observing, recording and representing of social phenomena.

The interpretivist perspective, being more humanistic, provides a more relevant foundation in pondering the social world. In accepting the notion of multiple realities, interpretivists are not constrained in their observations of social phenomena, and are able to allow inconsistencies in human interaction. However, in eschewing the plausibilities of causal relationships and generalizations, confusion may arise from the countless



possibilities and combinations of human interaction. While every human is an individual and every society unique, there must be acknowledgement of certain common traits in all human beings and communities.

The critical perspective holds very noble aims in reforming society. Indeed, there are many wrongs that do need to be righted, but not all social hierarchies are oppressive and need to be reformed. That is, there are many theorizing instances when one does not need to go beyond the representational stage of inquiry. The route to social balance proposed by the critical scholar is also subject to question. In the next paragraph, this writer will suggest a different path.

It may seem that this writer refuses to either subscribe to nor eschew any school-of-thought in theorizing communication, however, the seemingly sitting-on-the-fence stance held is actually a partial acceptance of all the aforementioned perspectives. This writer believes that an ideal social world is one where individuals and societies hold cooperative relationships but are self-sufficient and independent. Therefore, following in the critical perspective's tradition, scholars who study the social world (thus presumably know more about it than the rest of the human race does) must take the lead in rebuilding the social world so as to reach such an ideal state. In doing so, gradual and local influence on human interaction would be the method to change society. Radical reform that upsets order and balance and leads to chaos, however temporary it may be, is unacceptable to this writer. That being said, it must also be pointed out that the act of influencing and changing human interaction should only be done when the best of individuals and societies have yet to surface. At the same time, an interpretivist acceptance of multiple realities is imperative as this writer believes that different societies and communities hold dear different values, have gone through different experiences and thus have different perceptions of the social world. Different societies function differently, which is why self-sufficiency and independence is essential in the ideal social world. The post-positivist perspective would also be contributory with its systematic scientific method of observing phenomena. Generalizations of certain social phenomena would be useful for assessing progress in reaching the ideal social world. While other perspectives also lay claim to systematic inquiry, the scientific method with its strictness of variable definitions and boundary delineations can provide uniformity in observations of contrasting and diverse phenomena.

## **CONCLUSION**

For both the student and the scholar, understanding of metatheoretical concepts and the perspectives that arise from them is essential in theorizing about the social world. Philosophical tenets are the foundations of any kind of inquiry, but especially so of human communication. The metatheoretical considerations and perspectives outlined in this essay are but one view of countless philosophical foundations to inquiry and scholarship. For any kind of achievement in pondering the phenomenon called communication, the student and the scholar must prepare for himself a solid philosophical foundation and a distinct purpose.

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