The Constructionism vs. Essentialism Controversy Reconsidered:
For further development of Intercultural Communication Studies

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Contents

[Abstract]

　　This article as a critical analysis of the "cultural essentialism" and "constructionism" controversy intends to clarify how these concepts should be dealt with by students of intercultural communication. Here, the author challenges the claim that "classic studies" such as the ones by E.T. Hall and G. Hofstede are essentialistic. Close analysis reveals that the above claim itself is problematic, since the concept of cultural essentialism itself is a "fiction" or 'virtual concept' conceived by constructionistic researchers. The author takes the position that most studies that deal with culture or cultural comparison can be construed as sharing constructionist assumptions based on the tenets given by Burr (1995). This article demonstrates why studies focusing on culture and intercultural communication should be given their due respect regardless of their methodologies, and warns against the trends that regard quantitative studies or different or older approaches as obsolete or essentialistic.

Introduction

　　"I don't want to hear such essentialistic talk any more!"　This statement was thrown to G. Hofstede from the floor at an International Conference in Europe several years ago. As a matter of fact, an increasing number of critical articles have been written, which pose questions about the meaning and validity of the studies of cultures or comparative culture studies (Shaules, 2007; Dervin, 2015).　Itaba (2010, p.33), for example, defines cultural essentialism as an ideology that regards culture essentially as homogenous, uniform as well as fixed, and asserts that cultural essentialism critique is now well established and accepted among academics.

　　Currently, Edward T. Hall, a cultural anthropologist, widely recognized as a founder of intercultural communication studies is now becoming the subject of criticism.　Hall proposed key concepts for cultural comparison such as 'high context', 'low context', and 'polychronic

time', 'monochronic time' orientation to describe the manner in which time and space is used in different cultures. The reason for criticism against Hall seems to come from the assumption that Hall's ways of categorizing culture itself is essentialistic. In addition, Hofstede is also subject to criticism. He is renowned by his study of cultural comparison among different nations of the world by utilizing various dimensions of culture such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Thus, he is now criticized as promoting essentialistic interpretations of culture to the public（Starosta, 2011）.

In the context of intercultural communication education and training, however, cultural prototypes developed by Hall and Hofstede have been widely regarded as important concepts and utilized in many educational settings（Harman & Griggs, 1991）. In other words, teaching the concept of 'culture' and cultural difference has long been considered as the core of intercultural communication education.

Regarding these criticisms, as intercultural communication scholars and educators we are now facing a big challenge. That is, the questions of how and in what way we should deal with the above mentioned criticism, and also, how to define, talk and teach 'culture'. Should we omit classic concepts developed by Hall from our curriculum simply because they are criticized as being essentialistic? Or should we take care not to touch upon characteristics of national culture so that we would not sound essentialistic?

In this paper, the author tries to answer the questions above by examining the status of the cultural essentialism controversy through a wide-ranging discussion of ideologies from various perspectives. Furthermore, the author discusses the fundamental problems inherent in the dichotomous treatment of essentialism and constructionism. Finally, the author concludes by giving suggestions on how those engaged in intercultural communication research and education could deal with the concept of cultural essentialism.

1．Constructionism

The proponents of cultural essentialism critique are regarded as those researchers who claim themselves as 'constructionists'（Oda, 1999）. Thus, let me briefly discuss the broad basis of constructionism, social constructionism. At present, social constructionism is widely discussed not only in sociology but also in a number of fields such as philosophy, literature, anthropology, psychology and history. Ueno（2001, pp.278）has tracked social constructionism back to two scholars by the name of Berger & Luckmann, who were greatly influenced by Hegel and Durkheim. Burger and Luckmann（1966）indicate that reality is socially constructed and therefore the sociology of knowledge must analyze the process of how society is constructed. Their assertions triggered a variety of subsequent discussions until now, and even among those who claim themselves as constructionists, there is no commonality in their stances. There remains only the so-called 'family resemblance'（Burr, 1995）. In order to explain the constructionism to the novice researchers, Burr（1995）briefly gave the

following four tenets to be qualified as constructionism in her book, "An Introduction to Social Constructionism."

1) A critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge
2) Historical and cultural specificity
3) Knowledge is sustained by social processes
4) Knowledge and social actions go together

According to Burr, an approach that meets at least one tenet out of the above four can be classified as social constructionism (pp. 2-5).

Let me clarify the outline of constructionism by scrutinizing the above four tenets. Regarding tenet 1, she emphasizes the importance of being critical of the results and conclusions obtained through observational and experimental studies. This indicates that constructionists take an opposing stance to positivism and empiricism in traditional science. As for tenet 2, Burr stresses the importance of being conscious of what matters in understanding social phenomenon is both historically and culturally relative, and that the categories and concepts such as men, women, and children are the products of history and culture. Accordingly, as history and cultures change, our notions and ways of observing social events will also change. Thus, all ways of understanding are historically and culturally relative. At the same time, she warns against assuming the particular forms of knowledge that abound in any culture are better than that in any other.

With respect to tenet 3, Burr asserts that it is through daily interaction, i.e., communication among people in social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated, therefore social interaction and language should be the focus of study. Lastly in tenet 4, she stresses that knowledge and society are built and fabricated through negotiation in human communication, thus actions regarded as appropriate differ depending on the constructions people weave for their society.

What has become evident from this discussion of the four tenets is that there exists a recognition that knowledge and facts are produced through culture, society, and communication, and thus vary from culture to culture (p.5). In other words, according to Burr, constructionism does not exclude the existence of 'culture' itself generated through communication.

In response to the definition of constructionism developed by Burr, Senda (2001) proposed a new index for a constructionistic approach by asserting that while Burr's discussion is persuasive enough in a general sense, her interpretation is not clear enough and weak in explaining the concept. The following are Senda's new tenets:

1) A constructionistic approach has an orientation to examine a society based on knowledge.
2) It is important for us to be aware that knowledge is constantly being constructed

through interaction among people.

3) We should be aware that knowledge (not limited to the narrow meaning of institution) is linked with social institutions in a broad sense.

My interpretations of the above three tenets are that social constructionism research acknowledges that knowledge and institutions are supported and constructed by human interaction, i.e., communication.

Since social constructionism was initially conceptualized in sociology, let us examine some current discussions on the topic. In studies of culture, constructionism seems to establish its superior position as a new methodology, whereas in sociology, it seems to be losing its influence as it fails to explain macroscopic social changes such as the recent expansion of stratified societies (Noguchi, 2008).

Akagawa (2001) points to a number of limitations of constructionistic studies, for example, its inability to deal with "what is not constructed", "problems without claims", and criticism against ontological gerrymandering. As a refutation against these criticisms, Noguchi (2008, pp.37) argues that constructionism does not assert that the conventional methodology, i.e., an approach "to accurately describe the real world," is wrong or does not mean anything. Rather, constructionism is an approach to understanding how the rhetorical world is being constituted and to focus on social process as the subject of research. Noguchi then continues that there is no universal criteria that determines which research methodology is more appropriate or valid, thus we need to make our own judgment based on the purpose of the research itself. In other words, in the world of sociology, constructionists have not yet established their approach as a major methodology, nor has its effectiveness and importance been widely recognized.

２．Were 'classical' intercultural communication scholars essentialistic?

Here, with reference to the definition of Burr (1995) let me discuss those 'Classical' scholars, such as E.T. Hall and G. Hofstede who have been targets of criticism. What needs emphasis first is that researchers and educators of intercultural communication on the whole regard a variety of phenomena and knowledge as culturally specific. Otherwise, there is no meaning in teaching intercultural communication. Intercultural communication studies conducted by scholars (including Hall and Hofstede) that focus on 'cultural' phenomena can be called 'constructionistic, because those studies are done within the framework of Burr's (1995) tenet No. 2, that is, "we understand that categories and concepts we employ are historically and culturally specific".

Most communication researchers and educators assume that people are influencing each other through communication with others, and accordingly, they themselves are always changing. Through such communications new ideas or knowledge are developed and diffused, thus each culture itself is constantly changing. This assumption is regarded as one of the basic principles, and it is in accordance with Burr's tenet No. 3, that is, "knowledge is

supported by social process and social interaction (p.4)."

Furthermore, in consideration of Senda's index No. 2 (that knowledge is constantly constructed through human interaction), it is apparent that Hall's studies and other studies focusing on culture and communication are predecessors or forerunners to Senda's 'constructionist' perspective.

Based on the above discussion, we can conclude that scholars of communication and intercultural communication actually share more or less the fundamental premise of the constructionistic perspective. This perspective warns us against concluding prematurely that scholars who researched the categorization of cultures or who utilized positivism and treated culture as an independent variable are essentialists.

3．Criticism of Essentialism Reconsidered

Essentialism is defined as 'epistemological faith' in that a certain category has essence (Kashima et. al, 2010, p.306) and, therefore, indicates the position of those who believe in the existence of an essence that does not change. While the above definition is regarded as the mainstream essentialism, there are in fact a variety of essentialisms, ranging from a strong position in which an essence exists in every object to flexible essentialism in which essence exists in some objects, but not in others.

In contrast to constructionism, the word 'essentialism' often is treated or construed as some sort of a slur word (Berg-Sorensen, Holtug & Lippert-Rasmussen, 2010). Actually, the author witnessed incidents where scholars verbally criticized another's study as being too essentialistic. Here, the author would like to pose one question. Is it a meaningless attempt for us to hypothesize the existence of an essence of an object and to explore its existence? She rejects this perspective because, psychologically speaking, we humans have a tendency to explore the essence rooted in the core of any phenomenon and to try to grasp that discovered reality by combining or linking various matters that are similar. This particular way of essentialistic thinking or way of understanding the world is nothing but a part of the process of human information processing (Phillips, 2010). To put it another way, to deny the human nature of exploring essences is similar to denying the perception and recognition process of human nature itself. As the theoretical analysis in any study requires the process of abstraction by making a distinction between external essences and a central essence, such thinking processes and the essentialistic way of thinking are closely tied together (Sayer, 1997).

While an essentialist's approach reflects a fundamental process of human thought, such approach is often misunderstood as a source of prejudice. For example, constructionists often claim that essentialists are prone to advance erroneous ideas, such as, that people (subjects) categorized in the same group are homogeneous or that such characteristics are intrinsic in themselves. Often such serious problems are overly emphasized and are projected as essentialism itself, thus leading to the criticism that essentialism is wrong (Sayer, 1997).

However, in the original definition of essentialism, such tendencies are not denoted in the concept itself. This particular misunderstanding is a big factor in the contemporary bashing of essentialism.

The author postulates that completely denying the search for essences or rejecting the talk of cultural essence are equivalent to rejecting their own investigations into culture, which would leave them into an impasse. It is practically impossible to have meaningful discussions without the essentialist's aspect of whatever the subject of analysis (Fukuda, 2006). Also, in social science it is necessary to explain any event or phenomena through quantification along with the interpretation of meaning and discourse. Under such consideration, denying the research or the result of a study just because of its' perceived essentialist approach is not productive at all, and thus is best avoided.

4. 'Essentialism' in Studies of Culture

Despite the fact that the essentialistic orientation is a part of human ways of thinking and therefore necessary for research, those researchers in the studies of culture are subject to strong criticism. The reason for this seems to come from the fact that the confrontation between cultural essentialism and constructionism can be traced back to the time when the modern anthropology/post colonial anthropology that advocated constructionism heavily criticized the traditional anthropology as being essentialistic (Oda, 1999). To put it another way, 'essentialism' in the study of culture has been treated as a 'virtual enemy' of constructionism, and for those with that perception, constructionism has been understood only within the framework of criticism against essentialism. This historical background continues to have a strong impact on the criticism of essentialistic studies of culture (Mukuo, 2004).

At present, under the influence of these circumstances, cultural essentialism is generally understood as: "each culture has a pure element representing its culture, possessing a clear cut demarcating line with other cultures (Mabuchi, 2010, p.174)." Following such thinking, ethnic identity is regarded as an inborn and fixed quality, which is conducive to the belief that the members of an ethnic group are distinguished eternally by this never changing essence (Tai, 1999, p. 74). Those critical voices against cultural essentialistic studies have been frequently heard in recent years.

Provided that cultural essentialism is defined as such, criticism of essentialism can be considered as valid and natural. However, the question remains: whether there are a great number of culture studies carried out by such an essentialistic approach or tenet. A review of the literature suggests that this is not the case. Let me explain why. Most 'essentialistic' researchers have unavoidably witnessed the rapidly changing aspects in values and assumptions of people living around the world, and they themselves have been influenced by the relationship with other nations, natural disasters, economic situations, and the media environment including TVs, newspapers, magazines, and the internet. In other words, scholars and any other observers know that there is no such "unchanging reality" to be

studied, although there might be an "on-the-spot" reality of a given time and space in which research is being carried out.

The perception that "culture has a centrifugal essence that does not change (Sayer, 1997)" has not only logical inconsistency but also entails an epistemological problem. For example, if one takes the position that culture is located in a certain place like a mineral or it appears suddenly without any involvement or connection with people, then culture may likely coincide with essentialism. Once culture is constructed, could it exist in some quiet place while maintaining its core that does not change eternally? Is there any living thing in our world that never changes? The essential properties of animal species undergo physical aging processes that constantly cause change, evolution or deterioration into new or different substances. From this perspective, culture is incompatible with the idea of an unchanging essence; thus, culture and essentialism are mutually exclusive concepts.

Originally, the constructionism and essentialism controversy was developed within the paradigm of constructionism (Oda, 1999), where 'cultural essentialism' was a 'virtual concept' conceived by constructionistic researchers. Consequently, the fundamental question of why the students of intercultural communication should be bothered with this particular confrontation between the two concepts surfaces.

5．Problems of Anti-essentialism

So far, we have examined the context in which criticisms of cultural essentialism have been brought up. Now let me review the issues that result from criticizing and denying the essentialistic ways of thinking and doing research.

As was discussed earlier, there is a consensus among researchers that an essentialistic approach that assumes the natural and fundamental commonalities of race and gender is a problem since such belief easily leads to discrimination and prejudice. Nevertheless, there is little consensus among scholars on how to deal with the concept of essentialism (Wagenen, 2007). This is because if we deny essentialism completely for the study of race, we might have trouble conducting research. According to Wagenen (2007), there are two issues accompanied in this connection, that is, 1) race cannot be used as a variable in analysis, 2) such concepts as racial identity and racial subjectivity cannot be employed in analysis.

Concerning the item 1, if we accept that race is a concept that was fabricated, the subject of research should be on how race is constructed. Thus, the researcher cannot employ race or racial categorization as the index of their original research.

Next, let us consider the item 2. The social categories such as 'race' and 'women' are considered to be a very important part of their identities, especially for such people as social minorities and who are oppressed in society. Furthermore, as a matter of fact, they are realistically influenced by the categories applied in the society. This indicates that even though these categories are socially constructed and do not exist in reality, they surely 'exist' in the mind of each individual in our society. Nevertheless, if these categories are

denied simply because they are essentialistic, we will face problems in discussing these particular matters. Moreover, we may lose our voice as well as the chance of rectifying the problematic situation if we altogether discard the important concepts simply because they sound essentialistic. In fact, there are a number of scholars who utilize the concept 'strategic essentialism' in a way that intentionally recognizes the existence of essential identity, when needed（Prasad, 2008; Eide, 2010）.

Considering these arguments, it is quite clear that in a variety of studies on such subjects as society, culture, and other concepts created and produced by people, complete denial or questioning the reality of 'essence' might result in building barriers to the progress of research, not to mention to the understanding of the subject being researched.

Conclusion

While constructionism is losing its power in sociology in recent years（Noguchi, 2008）, constructionism seems to assert more impact in cultural studies by spotlighting essentialism as its 'virtual enemy.' This author would like to argue that the problem lies in the prevailing attitudes on the part of scholars who treat constructionism vs. essentialism as a dichotomy, and make snap pejorative judgments about those studies not rooted in constructionism as essentialistic studies. This picture of two parties asserting their own correctness is not much different from the unproductive conflict between quantitative vs. qualitative scholars that have been going on for the past few decades.

What this author wants to posit is that it is possible for the kinds of studies that do not advocate constructionism to be construed broadly as constructionistic studies, as long as they are dealing with cultural phenomena. Criticism therefore must be directed to the attitude of those who believe in the unchanging nature of essence that is endowed with each person and use it as the basis of racial stereotype and prejudice, rather than to the studies that try to examine a cultural essence and show results obtained from a particular research.

The author stresses also that denying research and talking of culture is the same as denying our own voices that must be heard and also negating our own tradition and the contributions from previous scholars. In this particular connection, the author believes that students of culture and intercultural communication should not be afraid of being called or misunderstood as being essentialistic, and continue doing the research or writing about culture with confidence, knowing that they cannot be essentialistic simply because their research is not conducted in accordance with someone's perception of a constructionist procedure.

As Fuss（1988）argues, treating essentialism and constructionism as dichotomous disturbs the creativity of humans and could present a hurdle in comprehending the nature of human beings and culture. Particularly, intercultural communication as an academic discipline should fundamentally be proud to have a problem-solving orientation as its essence, and aspire to resolve the issues and problems arising from the differences in cultural background（Ishii & Kume, 2013）. The purpose of critical intercultural communication research should therefore

spotlight the injustice the socially handicapped persons are forced to face and suggest guidelines to solve the problems (Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Hanaki, 2011). Taking these social missions that intercultural communication scholars bear into consideration, we need to remind ourselves again that our studies are for promoting mutual understanding among cultures and constructing a sustainable peace in the world, where currently all kinds of conflicts and wars are occurring due largely to the differences created by humans such as in cultures, religions, languages, and nations.

In an age when not only people, but also various concepts are undergoing dynamic changes, due to the rapid development of the Internet and global transportation, the concept of 'culture' itself is dynamically changing. Accordingly, studies of culture are becoming more and more difficult to conduct. Under such circumstances, both studies attempting to figure out the reality within the group, and ones discovering the process of construction of culture and other concepts, as well as those exploring the maintenance of culture, are all necessary. Any kind of research, usually limited within its epistemology and ontology, can reveal only one dimension of a complex reality, and thus, adherence to only one research paradigm is likely to cause a hindrance in the development of knowledge. Finally, the author suggests that what is necessary for intercultural communication scholars and educators alike is a flexible as well as a bold posture to cross over the framework of contemporary knowledge and accept different approaches simultaneously, as asserted by Martin & Nakayama (2010).

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