

An Alternative Conceptual Framework for Developing a Critical Cross-Cultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to share an alternative conceptual framework of cross-cultural communication using a theory adaptation critical research design. To achieve this goal, the paper presents a historical overview and discusses the characteristics of both Eastern and Western paradigms and their main principles with a focus on the Arabic-Islamic perspective and how the constructs of culture, communication, and critical cross-cultural communicative competence are theoretically conceptualized and developed from that perspective. Using a modified transactional or subjectivist epistemology critical approach, the paper makes links to valuable contributions that the Arabic-Islamic scholars bring to the field of cross-cultural/ intercultural communication that is found to be deeply rooted in three concepts of self. These types of self are discussed within this alternative conceptual and theoretical framework and are found to be based on shared fundamental values that are social, psychological, and spiritual in nature.

Keywords: Critical cross-cultural communicative competence, Arabic-Islamic perspective, Western/Euro-US-centric perspective, theory adaptation, critical research

1. Introduction

This conceptual paper uses a theory adaptation critical research design. According to Jaakkola (2020), “papers that focus on theory adaptation seek to amend an existing theory by using other theories” (p. 23). MacInnis (2011) further elaborates on this type of conceptual papers since they develop a contribution by revising existing knowledge and introducing alternative conceptual frameworks of reference to propose a new or alternative perspective. The goal is to bring a shift of perspective. Another important methodological characteristic of the critical research design used in this paper is the use of a modified transactional or subjectivist epistemology, since the researchers cannot separate themselves from what they know, and this inevitably influences this type of critical inquiry. Based on this assumption, this paper aims to provide a culturally responsive perspective on the concept of critical cross-cultural communication that is different from a Western/Euro-US-centric perspective. To achieve this goal, the paper will offer a brief historical overview and discuss the characteristics of both Eastern and Western perspectives in general with a focus on the Arabic-Islamic view as an alternative perspective.

2. A Brief Historical Overview and Characteristics of Eastern and Western Views

Cross-cultural communication undoubtedly occurred long time ago when culturally diverse people first interacted on this planet. Within the past few centuries, however, the number of interactions between culturally diverse people of various cultures, faiths, and walks of life has greatly increased due to the increase in world population and the advances in technology (Frederick, 1993; Mowlana, 1986; Sehlaoui, 2018; Sehlaoui, 2011; Samovar, Porter, &

McDaniel, 2011). The world population and technological advances have grown at an exponential rate. Undoubtedly all related aspects, such as the number of personal interactions (both face-to-face and via social media), have also grown at an exponential rate. About a century and a half ago, advances in transportation technologies and telecommunication and computer technologies brought and continue to bring an increasing amount of human intercultural contact. While various societies and nations developed their own theories and views of this field and how humans in general deal with each other, it was not until after World War II, however, that an understanding of intercultural interactions became important to government officials and scholars in the United States, for example (Hart, 1996; Martin & Nakayama, 2017). Edward Hall is generally known to be the founder of the field of intercultural communication in the USA with his influence in Europe and elsewhere (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999), especially through Hall's (1959) influential book, *The Silent Language*.

It should be noted here that the historical development of this field, like any other field, has been characterized by the use of different approaches and methodologies as well as different conceptualizations and theories in both the East and the West. According to Martin and Nakayama (2017), there are three approaches to the study of intercultural communication. These include the social science approach, the interpretive approach, and the critical approach. Burrell and Morgan (1988) explain that these approaches are based on different fundamental assumptions about human nature, human behavior, and the nature of knowledge.

According to Martin and Nakayama (2017), the social science approach, which was most popular in the 1980s in the West, is based on research in psychology and sociology. It is based on a positivist view towards the study of the relationship between culture and communication. It assumes that human behavior is predictable and that the researcher's goal is to describe and also predict behavior. The research method used in this approach is quantitative in nature. In this approach, culture influences communication the same way a personality trait does and is a variable that can be quantified and "measured". Culture is viewed from an objectivist/positivist perspective. It is something that can be observed in order to be measured and studied. It should be noted here that this perspective is still the most dominant in the study of cross-cultural communication (Moon, 1996; Sehlaoui, 1999, 2001, 2011).

Martin and Nakayama (2017) also explain how the second approach, the interpretive one, gained prominence in the late 1980s and was founded in sociolinguistics. The ethnography of communication as developed by Hymes (1974) is an example of this approach. Martin and Nakayama (2017) point out that for interpretive researchers, "reality is not just external to humans but also humans construct reality. [These ethnographers] believe that human experience, including communication and culture, is subjective. They also believe that human behavior is creative, not determined or easily predicted" (p. 30). The type of research methodology used in this approach includes, for example, field studies, observations, and participant observations.

The third approach, the critical approach, includes many assumptions of the interpretive approach, such as the subjective nature of reality and the importance of studying communication in context. According to Martin and Nakayama, (2017), critical researchers focus in their analysis on macro-contexts (for example, the political and social structures and socio-economic powers that influence communication and human interaction). Martin and Nakayama (2017) explain that critical scholars in this field are always interested in understanding the power relations in communication. From this perspective, "culture is seen as a site of struggle, a place where multiple interpretations come together, but where there is always a dominant force. A goal

of critical researchers in cross-cultural communication is not only to understand human behavior but to change the lives of everyday communicators" (Martin & Nakayama, 2017, p. 35).

Martin and Nakayama (2017) consider culture as "the core concept in intercultural communication" (p. 38). The field of cross-cultural communication has also influenced the way culture is taught in the fields of communication and education. However, this influence is based on a traditional and predominant view of culture (Moon, 1996; Sehlaoui, 1999, 2001, 2011). According to Samovar and Porter (1997), culture is defined as "...the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by people in the course of generations through individual and group striving" (p. 11). In fact, according to Sehlaoui (1999, 2001a, 2011, 2018), most textbooks use this traditional definition of culture in the field of education. According to Moon (1996), intercultural communication researchers "must seriously consider whose interests are served by continuing to construct culture primarily in terms of national boundaries and by maintaining the current focus on the development of 'intercultural cookbooks' for interaction" (p. 75). The outcome of this conceptualizing of culture is that diverse groups are treated as homogeneous, differences within national boundaries, ethnic groups, genders, and social classes are obscured, and hegemonic notions of culture are perpetuated as shared by all cultural members (Moon, 1996; Sehlaoui, 1999, 2001, 2011). Most often, intercultural encounters, according to Moon (1996), are studied within dyads where two disembodied, ahistorical beings communicate across cultures. This prevailing conceptualization of culture combined with the Euro-US-centered communication studies and pedagogy become an issue when it comes to the ethics of the field of communication and cross-cultural communication. Hegemonic conceptualizations of culture and cross-cultural encounters will certainly contribute to more racial and cultural divide rather than help eliminate or reduce such conflicts or stereotypes (Sehlaoui, 2011). Therefore, there is certainly need for an inclusive and culturally-responsive perspective in this area and allowing other Eastern views to be heard and represented.

3. Beyond the Euro-US-centered View

According to Ishii (2008), the field of communication ethics has come to attract academic attention of a growing number of communication researchers and educators (e.g., Casmir, 1997; Cooper et al., 1989; Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994; Johannesen, 2001; Martin & Butler, 2001). Communication ethical theorist, Penman (1992), critically argues that "...the old paradigm, broadly falling under the rubric of "empiricism", has not got us where we want to. . ." (p. 234). Furthermore, another intercultural theorist, Kincaid (1987), asserts that "[a] look at communication theory from different cultural perspectives will contribute greatly to the future development of the field" (xiii). Like Ishii (2006), other researchers (e.g. Ayish, 2003; Kim M. S., 2002; Mawlana, 2007, among others) critique the potential weaknesses of the prevailing Euro-US-centered communication studies and pedagogy and offer alternative perspectives and practices in communication theory and cross-cultural communication which also have implications and impact in the field of education. This growing movement to search for a new paradigm is a natural phenomenon in the fields of communication studies and education, especially as Western communication theories have been propagated around the world as having a strong element of universalism. This hegemonic view has also been critiqued in the field of teaching and learning about culture in education (e.g., Sehlaoui, 1999, 2001). However, recently,

the Euro-US-centered view or approach has been challenged first on the basis of “obfuscating the unique cultural characteristics of non-western societies as significant components of communication theorization” (Ayish, 2003, p. 79) which led scholars from these non-western societies to share their alternative views.

In her book, *Non-Western Perspectives on Human Communication*, Kim, M. S. (2002) pointed out that our current ideal of personhood is achieved through self-assertion, by displaying “yang” communication behavior: confronting, demanding, talking, being assertive, being aggressive, being competitive, bragging, and expanding in human (communication) behavior. To balance this disequilibrium, according to M. S. Kim, an integration is needed by “yin” behavior: being responsive, indirect, cooperative, intuitive, yielding, and aware of and considerate of the other’s feelings. Both yang and yin, self-assertive and integrative tendencies, are necessary for harmonious social and ecological relationships. Unlike the Euro-US-centered view, Eastern views tend to be more interactive and holistic in nature, in that everything affects everything else. This holistic and integrative view is also found in the Arabic-Islamic view and theory of cross-cultural communication. In contrast to these Eastern views, most Western thought tends to emphasize an analytical view in which component parts are treated without often seeing a relationship to the whole (Kim, M. S., 2002). Notice that the word “tends” and “most” are used above, since there are some thinkers among the Western tradition who combine what is analytical with what is holistic. The focus in most Western theories tends to be on the symptoms, which according to Eastern wisdom are merely the “footprints” left by energy imbalances (Kim, M. S., 2002). The analytical, materialistic, and atomistic approach simply fails to capture the essence of human cross-cultural communication process. Unfortunately, today’s world dominant culture is often characterized as being inegalitarian (e.g., sexist, racist, classist), intensely competitive, technical-scientific-rationalist dominant ideology, materialistic, and technocratic (Giroux, 1981, 1992; Shannon, 1992; Tomlinson, 1990, Sehlaoui, 1999, 2011). So, how does the Arabic-Islamic view, as another alternative Eastern perspective, conceptualize and approach the study of cross-cultural communication?

4. The Arabic-Islamic Approach to Cross-cultural Communication

The Arabic-Islamic holistic approach to cross-cultural communication offers another Eastern unique perspective. This view offers a balanced and interactive relationship between what is materialistic (physical) and what is spiritual (metaphysical). It should be noted here that this worldview was promoted and applied for more than one thousand years during what is referred to in Arabic-Islamic history as the golden age of Arabic-Islamic civilization. The period between 680-1680 is what constitutes the golden and enlightened age of 1000 years of the Islamic civilization. Professor Salim Al-Hassani (2010), Emeritus Professor at the University of Manchester and Chairman of the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilization (FSTC), UK, clearly explains that...

We are repeatedly told, against our curiosity and logical thinking, that history had taken a negative turn in the 6th century. After the Greeks and the Romans, all knowledge, science and technology disappeared. The world went into a dark and obscure period age. We are also told that suddenly, and somehow miraculously, the Renaissance in the 16th century rose out of ashes. This is very strange. Because, first of all, it assumes history to be discontinuous. We are told that Europe lived in

darkness. People who expressed any liberal idea, any scientific innovation, would be burnt at the stake. We were taught that our present ideas originally stemmed from people like Aristotle, Galen, Ptolemy, and Archimedes. These became household names. Yet, we know nothing of what happened during the ensuing 1000 years until the emergence of the names of Copernicus, Galileo, Isaac Newton, William Harvey, and so on. About a thousand years missing from the history of humanity, because this subject has not been taught only in Europe but has been copied by other nations in the world. Even the Muslim world copied this concept (Al-Hassani, 2010, p. 10).

The following two diagrams illustrate the fact that our modern human civilization did not rise from nothing and that the missing link in the development of human civilization was made possible by the Arabic-Islamic contribution between the 5th and 16th century. The two charts show what *is currently* taught and what *rightfully should be* taught at schools today. Dr. Al-Hassani (2012) addressed the question of “What impact has this now on the mentality of our young people?” He explains that our youth will be misled to “believe that humanity owes all its progress, all its scientific achievements, all its innovations and technology to the West, to the European West: It started in Greece, it went to sleep and it was awakened (hence the word “Renaissance”)” (Figure 1). Muslim scholars had either founded scientific fields of inquiry or had developed them from previous nations and civilizations, but unlike their Western counterparts, they fully recognized and acknowledged those contributors. Figure 2 shows how this history should be taught.

600 CE - 1600 CE

History of Science and Civilisation as taught by many education systems



Did modern Civilisation really rise from nothing?

Figure 1. History of Science and Civilization as Taught Today

600 CE - 1600 CE

History of Science and Civilisation as should be taught:

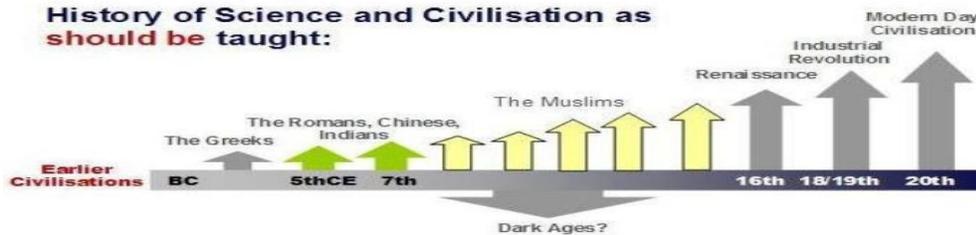


Figure 2. History of science as it should be taught. Source: Al-Hassani (2012) *One Thousand Years of Missing History and Innovation in the Islamic World: Learning from the Past to Design the Future*. <http://muslimheritage.com/>

The above quote from Al-Hassani (2012) challenges the status quo and how Arabic-Islamic views and scholars have been marginalized or obscured and that includes their contributions to the field of communication. Given the rise of Islamophobia in the world today and the spread of myths and misconceptions about Arabs, Islam, and Muslims, this marginalization may be amplified. One of the myths regarding Arabic-Islamic civilizations is that many people think of Arabs and Muslims as being good at calligraphy for decorating buildings and mosques, especially when they go to the Arab-Muslim world and explore the attractive decorations and engravings on the walls. Others may only associate the Islamic civilization with fundamentalism and extremism or the *One Thousand and One Nights* stories and mythology. While such literary and artistic aspects of this civilization are also part of this civilization, many seem to miss the contributions of the original pioneer scientists and scholars who founded many aspects of our modern civilization, including the Arabic-Islamic contributions to the field of cross-cultural communication, according to Al-Hassani (2012).

The Arabic-Islamic view of cross-cultural communication offers a critical and holistic approach in developing what is referred to as a critical cross-cultural communicative competence (C⁵), according to Sehlaoui (1999, 2011). C⁵ is defined, according to Sehlaoui, as one’s ability to effectively communicate with individuals from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds while being respectful, tolerant, passionate, but critically aware of the socio-economic and political

contexts and power relations in such contexts. From the Arabic-Islamic view, C⁵ is deeply rooted in the three concepts of self as a social, psychological, and spiritual whole. The self from this perspective is divided into three levels in the Arabic-Islamic tradition, according to Mowlana (2003), who based his conceptualization of self from the Holy Quran, the sacred scripture of Muslims as well as the praxis of the Sunnah (words and deeds of the Prophet of Islam). The third and highest level is called *annafssu al mutmainnah* النفس المطمئنة (the balanced self) which is also the highest level of C⁵, a person's ability to critically communicate with people from other diverse backgrounds while keeping their balance through compassion, respect, and tolerance. The second level is *annafssu allawamah* النفس اللوامة (the critical self) which uses a critical perspective towards the self and its relation to the socio-economic, spiritual, and political context to establish a balanced self. The first and lowest self is *annafssu al-amaratu bissu* النفس الأمانة بالسوء (the evil self) or uncritical and the cross-culturally incompetent self. Like the yin, as explained by Kim, M. S. (2002) above, the *annafssu al mutmainnah* (the balanced self) is cooperative, indirect, humble, yielding, compassionate, responsible, calm, cooperative, and virtuous. In a word, it is balanced. These qualities become crucial in using C⁵ effectively. To reach the balanced level, the person has to go through stages of development. The mechanisms whereby such process takes place, from the Arabic-Islamic perspective, are called in Arabic *jihad annafs* جهاد النفس (the struggle of the self) as well as “*amr bi al-ma'rufwanahy'an al munkar*” الأمر بالمعروف والنهي عن المنكر “commanding what is right and prohibiting what is wrong” as explained by Mowlana (2003) and as stated in the Holy Quran, for practicing Muslims who adhere to this worldview or perspective, as follows:

” كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ “

This verse means in English: “You would be the best of peoples, evolved for humanity by enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong” (Yussef, 1982, 3:110). Of course, the concept of *jihad annafs* جهاد النفس in this context is referred to as the great struggle of the self, since one has to fight one's own evil first and achieve *annafssu al mutmainnah* (the balanced self) that fights for social justice and what is considered morally right. Transgression, micro-aggression, or any type of violence has no place in such worldview as will be explained later. These three levels of self are in an interactive relationship and constant struggle for achieving balance and establishing a socially just and safe community. This critical self-awareness reflection and the following description of the three types of self are based on a broader spiritual concept of cross-cultural communication and a critical conceptualization of culture as defined in the next section. These three types of self clearly show that humans are born with the freedom of choice and the ability to grow to be good or evil. Arabic-Islamic views adhere to the idea that humans are born with a clean natural instinct that contains both good and evil. It is primarily the environment of a person that will promote one side over another. Hence comes the importance of education and the socio-economic and political context. It is the responsibility of parents, teachers, and society as a whole to help that individual reach the third level of *annafssu al mutmainnah* and achieve that balance through quality education and a high level of spiritual intelligence which becomes an integral part of what it means to be cross-culturally competent in this alternative perspective. According to King (2010), spiritual intelligence is defined as:

“a set of adaptive mental capacities which contribute to the awareness, integration, and adaptive application of the nonmaterial and transcendent aspects of one's existence, leading to such outcomes as deep existential reflection, enhancement of meaning, recognition of a transcendent self, and

mastery of spiritual states” (pp. 1-2).

This transcendentist-existentialist view is based on the dynamic nature of culture and on an interrelationship and dialectical nature of three different “spiritual states” as explained below.

5. A Critical Definition of Culture and Three Types of Self

From a critical perspective, culture is defined here as a dynamic process (Giroux, 1992) of "lived antagonistic relations within a complex of socio-political institutions and social forms that limit as well as enable human action" (p. 26). Quantz (1992) explains that critical discourse defines culture as "an ongoing political struggle around the meaning given to actions of people located within unbounded asymmetrical power relations" (p. 483). In other words, and based on the mechanisms that shape culture and behavior in this Arabic-Islamic perspective, culture is a struggle (which translates in Arabic as “jihad”) over meaning and representation within and outside the self that goes beyond the psychological, socio-political, or social forms to include the spiritual and the ethical realms as well. This holistic view requires that the Arabic-Islamic culture should always be understood in its socio-economic, political, spiritual, as well as ethical aspects in any given context. It should be viewed as a dynamic process within a given context in which individuals are in a constant struggle for attaining the ultimate balanced self “annafssu al mutmainnah” and seeking a meaningful *representation* and the need to have an authentic voice through the mechanisms of jihad (the struggle of the self) as well as “amr bi al-ma’rufwanahy’an al munkar”, “commanding what is right and prohibiting what is wrong”. This usually translates into a call for social justice, tolerance, and balance in the community at large. The concept of balance is closely tied to the concept of moderation in all aspects of life as the Arabic-Islamic ummah/community is described as a nation of moderation in the Quran as follows:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا

“And thus we have made you a just and moderate community that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you” (Yussef, 1982, 2:143). Moderation and balance as major concepts in both the Holy Quran and Sunnah are emphasized; yet, a lack of understanding and a lack of an effective critical cross-cultural communicative competence can lead people to follow their self that incites for evil and fall in the extremist and sometimes violent and unbalanced behavior.

The common misconception here regarding the Arabic-Islamic culture is the narrow definition that is attached to the word “religion” in relation to Islam as a religion. The word religion in Arabic is “deen” which includes that which is mundane and materialistic as well as that which is spiritual, social, and moral. These realms are in a dialogical and interactive relationship with the spiritual concept of “taqwa” (righteousness) at the center of such relationship. These components will be discussed and elaborated on further under the conceptual framework below. As educators and scholars in the field of cross-cultural communication and in order for us to understand the alternative perspective described here and eliminate stereotyping to build bridges between the East and West, we need to understand that the concept of religion “deen” from this view is holistic and encompasses all aspects of life. Theoretically and practically, it is supposed to regulate all types of behavior with the goal of attaining the above-mentioned balance. The next section will address, with more details, the three stages of development to achieve this balance.

6. The Self That Incites to Evil

The first source of all natural states is designated by the Holy Quran, the holy scripture of all Muslims, as the “annafssu al-amaratubissu”, which means the self that incites to evil, as stated in the original text as follows (Verse 53, Chapter 12):

"إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ"

This means that "it is indeed typical of the human self (sometimes translated as soul) to incite humans to evil" (Yussef, 1982, 12:53). This is opposed to the attainment of a perfect moral state, as it urges the person towards undesirable, evil, unjust, or violent actions. Thus, the tendency towards doing evil due to an imbalance and lack of self-control is a low human state which predominates over the mind of a person before they enter upon the moral state. This is humans' natural state when they are not guided by high moral values, a belief-system, and understanding. At the stage of the self that incites to evil, the human beings follow their natural instinct in eating, drinking, sleeping, waking, anger, lust, and provocation without any self-control. Lack of balance at this developmental stage leads to some behaviors that usually result in physiological, social, spiritual, and psychological problems which often might lead to violence and conflicts with the other.

7. The Reproachful and Critical Self

The second source of the moral state of humans, according to Islam, is designated as “annafssallawwama”, as stated by the Holy Quran (Yussef Ali, 1982, Verse 2, Chapter 75):

"وَلَا أَقْسِمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ"

“I call to witness the reproachful and critical self” (Yussef, 1982, 75:2). In other words, “I call to witness the self that criticizes itself for every vice and its lack of moderation or restraint”. This reproachful self is the second source of the human being's state of mind from which the moral state is created. At this stage, a human being ceases to resemble animals. They will use their higher order critical thinking skills. By using this kind of self, the human being advances from the state of the self that is prone to evil and reaches the state of the critical reproachful self. By going through this critical self-evaluation, the person has become worthy of honor and reaches a high status, morally, intellectually, spiritually, and socially. The reproachful self prevents humans from submitting to their natural desires and leading an imbalanced existence. The goal of this stage of self is to be in a good state of mind and should practice good morals and behavior. Self-indulgence should not be manifested in any aspect of human life at this stage. Moderation and balance govern all aspects of life. Natural emotions and physiological desires should be regulated and monitored by reason and a set of moral values to achieve the third stage of the development.

8. The Soul at Rest and Balanced

The third source can be described as the beginning of the spiritual state of mind which is called by the Holy Quran “annafsealmutmainnah”, that is to say, the soul at rest and balanced, as is stated in the following verses:

"يَا أَيُّهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ، ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً، فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي، وَادْخُلِي جَنَّاتِي."

“O soul at rest that has found comfort in Allah return to your Lord, you are well pleased with Him and He is well pleased with you. Now join My servants and enter into My Garden” (Yussef,

1982, 89:27-30). This is the stage when the soul/self of a person being delivered from all weaknesses is filled with spiritual powers and establishes a relationship with the Divine, with other creatures, the community at large, and the universe as a whole. The self at this stage undergoes a great transformation in this life and is promised a happy and prosperous life while still in this physical world and to enter Paradise in the Hereafter, because of its achievement not only of physical, social, and spiritual balance, but because it has reached the level of satisfaction in its connection with the Divine World.

In short, these three stages may be called the natural, moral, and spiritual states of human beings from this Eastern Arabic-Islamic perspective. The natural urges and instincts of humans become very dangerous when they destroy the moral and spiritual qualities/values and lead to disaster and imbalance as was described by Kim, M. S. (2002) above when the *yang* is dominating the self. To achieve balance, from the Arabic-Islamic perspective, humans go through stages of development while using a self-struggle (self-based jihad) process which is a prerequisite for establishing social justice and peace in the world. In addition to achieving the goal of balance with the inner self and the outside world, there are other fundamental principles on which the Arabic-Islamic perspective towards cross-cultural communication theory and praxis is based. The next section will describe this conceptual framework in more details.

9. A Conceptual Framework that Contributes to Communication Ethics in the Arabic-Islamic Perspective

Hamid Mowlana (2003) discusses five major concepts of the Arabic-Islamic worldview that could serve as the fundamental principles of communication ethics from this perspective. These principles that derive from the Islamic Holy book, the Quran, include: 1) *tawhid* (monotheism and harmony), 2) *amr bi al-ma'rufwanahy'an al munkar* (joining what is right and forbidding what is wrong), 3) *ummah* (the concept of community), 4) *taqwa* (righteousness), and 5) *amanat* (trust). The first and most fundamental outlook regarding human beings and universe in Islam is the theory of *tawhid*, which implies the unity of God or monotheism, coherence, and harmony between all parts of the universe. Hence comes the integrative and holistic view that underlies this Eastern and alternative view to the Euro-US centered paradigm. A second principle that guides the ethical boundaries of the theory of communication in the Arabic-Islamic paradigm is the concept of "*amr bi al-ma'rufwanahy'an al munkar*" or "commanding what is right and prohibiting what is wrong." In Islamic theory and praxis, people are required to share the responsibility of guiding one another, and each generation has the responsibility of guiding the next. The third concept of a *just ummah* or global community that is socially just becomes the ultimate goal. This concept of community transcends national borders and political boundaries and calls for all humans to achieve this goal. The notion of community in this Arabic-Islamic view makes no distinction between public and private or what is spiritual and what is materialistic; therefore, what is required of the community at large in this world is likewise required of every individual member, privately. To attain a balanced self, one must have balanced material and spiritual needs. Accordingly, the *ummah* (global community) must be exemplary, setting the highest standards of performance and a reference point for others with social justice being its goal. Within such community, individuals strive to create that balance via the critical self. The community and individuals must avoid excesses and extravagances, be steadfast and consistent, moderate and balanced, and socially just. Individuals in the *ummah* should know what to accept and what to reject, have principles, and, at the same time, remain

adaptable to the changing aspect of human life, the dynamic nature of human culture, promoting scientific research and learning, development and progress for a better and socially-just world. Hence comes the importance of knowledge or what is referred to as *ilm*, a concept that will be explained later. This does also require that its members have to struggle to achieve a balance between what is spiritual and what is material through their critical reproachful self. The fourth principle is the central concept of *taqwa* or, roughly translated, as piety or righteousness. In Arabic-Islamic societies, *taqwa* is commonly used in reference to the individual's "fear and love of The Creator/The Lord" and the ability to guard oneself against the unethical forces; however, the concept of *taqwa* goes beyond this common notion of piety. It is the spiritual, moral, ethical, and psychological capacity to raise oneself to that higher level, which makes a person almost immune from the excessive material desires of the materialistic world, elevating the individual to a higher level of self-consciousness while at the same time achieving material success and happiness in this life which is the desired goal of *annafsealmutmainnah*, the balanced self.

The following diagram illustrates the Arabic-Islamic conceptual framework described here. As shown on the diagram, the fifth concept of *amanah* or trust signifies great responsibility which has been entrusted on the human being for his or her deeds in this world. It is all about trust and being worthy of such trust to build an ethical behavior. The next section will describe the major sources that contribute to our understanding of Arabic-Islamic thought and how they contribute to the formation of an alternative theory of cross-cultural communication and ethics. The conceptual framework that forms the basis of the Arabic-Islamic perspective towards culture and cross-cultural communication is derived from the main fundamental sources of Islam, i.e., the Holy Quran (the sacred text of Islam and word of God or Allah) and Sunnah (Praxis: deeds and words (hadiths) of Prophet Mohammad). The achievement of balance by individuals in society is also governed by what is referred to as the "Golden rule in Islam". This rule can be summarized as "Love for humanity what you love for yourself". This principle was stated several times by Prophet Mohammad. In fact, An-Nawawi (1999), one of the great scholars of Sunnah, explains that this principle is the root of all good character and manners. The primary expression of this teaching is stated in the following authoritative hadith in the Prophet's Sunnah:

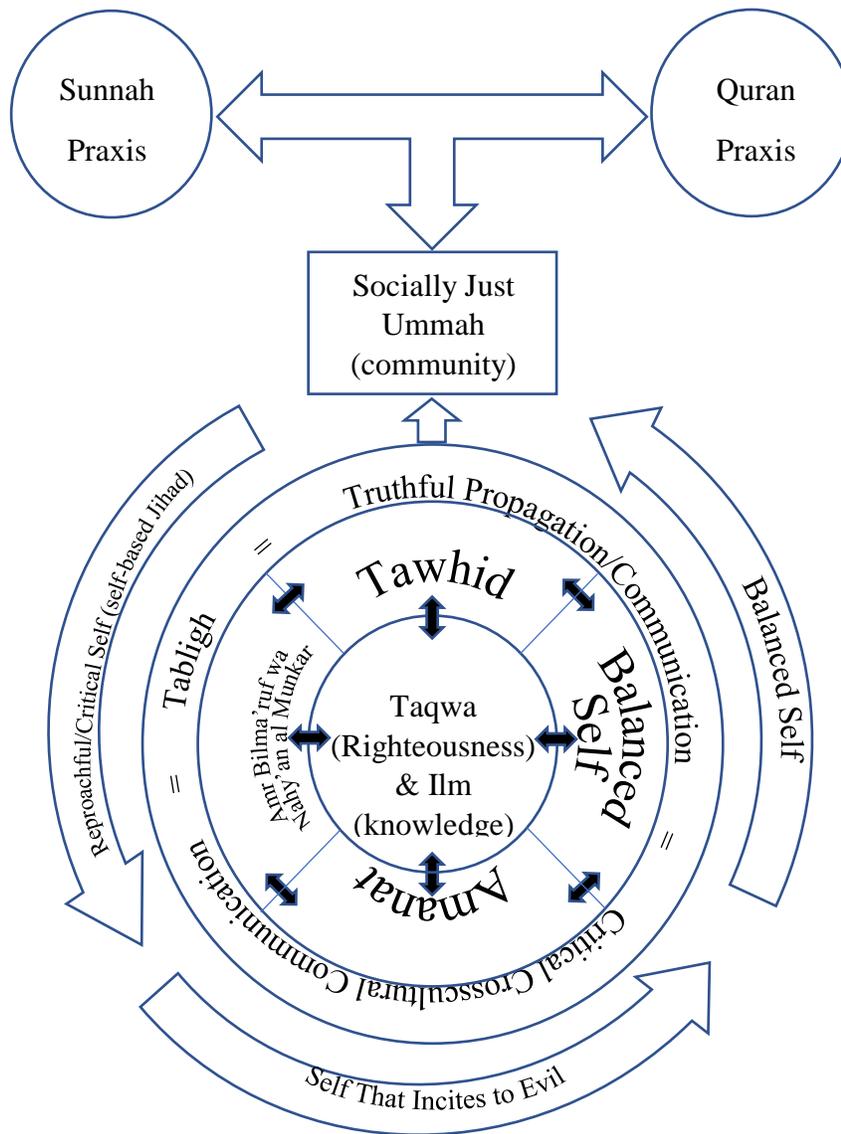


Figure 3. Arabic-Islamic Conceptual Framework for Developing Critical Cross-cultural Communicative Competence

Source: Sehlaoui (2022)

"لَا يُؤْمِنُ أَحَدُكُمْ حَتَّىٰ يُحِبَّ لِأَخِيهِ أَوْ قَالَ لِجَارِهِ مَا يُحِبُّ لِنَفْسِهِ".

“None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or neighbor what he loves for himself” (Ṣaḥīḥ An-Nawawī, 1999, Hadith 13).

In another hadith, cited in its original Arabic text below, the Messenger of Allah said: "The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe, and the believer is the one

from whom the people's lives and wealth are safe" (English translation of Sunan an-Nasa'I (2007) Hadith 4995 Vol. 6, Book 47).

قال رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " الْمُسْلِمُ مَنْ سَلِمَ النَّاسُ مِنْ لِسَانِهِ وَيَدِهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنُ مَنْ أَمِنَهُ النَّاسُ عَلَى دِمَائِهِمْ وَأَمْوَالِهِمْ " .

The conceptual framework presented in this paper is first based on the theory and praxis of the authority of the sacred book (The Quran) and the Sunnah as illustrated in the diagram above (Figure 3). It is also based on the contributions of various Arabic-Islamic philosophers in the area study of ethics or what is known in Arabic as “*ilm-Al-Akhlaq*” in the works of early philosophers who contributed to our understanding of the Arabic-Islamic civilization such as Al-Farabi (870-950), Ibn Sina or Avicenna (980-1037), and Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126-98), who have contributed significantly to our knowledge and understanding of Arabic-Islamic philosophy and the classical Arabic-Islamic systems of ethics and theory of communication. For example, it was Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), the founder of sociology, who first theorized about communication as a social institution which is developed according to the need of the community. Social communication or *truthful propagation* is referred to in Arabic as “*tabligh*” تَبْلِيغ, a concept that was introduced by Ibn Khaldun in the 14th century. This type of truthful and critical communication provides many people from diverse races, languages, and histories, a common platform for participation and having an authentic voice and establishing a socially just community or ummah as shown on the above diagram. According to Ibn Khaldun (1967), the Arabic-Islamic states, governmental agencies, and political systems of wide power and large authority have always had their origin in religious principles based either on prophethood and propagation or on a truthful propagation “*tabligh*” carried out by “*Khateeb*” or orators/communicators (Ibn Khaldun, 1967, pp. 125-127). The theory of communication and global community integration is well stated by Ibn Khaldun (1967) in his influential book “*al muqaddimah*” المقدمة (The Prologue). Ibn Khaldun cites “*truthful propagation*” (*tabligh*) of social communication and group cohesion عصبية (assabieh) as two fundamental factors in the rise of world powers as states and large communities (Ibn Khaldun, 1967, pp. 123-127). The concept of “*tabligh*” in Arabic means communication of a message truthfully as the message becomes a trust “*amanah*” in the hands of the communicator in general. Ibn Khaldun was one of the first thinkers to point out that communication based on spiritual, moral, and ethical values, as described earlier, is the web of human society and that the flow of such communication determines the direction and the pace of dynamic social development as well as the establishment of social justice.

Communication and cross-cultural communication is supposed to be governed in the Arabic-Islamic tradition by ethical criteria that are deeply rooted in the previous spiritual concepts of self and the above-mentioned principles. For example, related to the concept of taqwa, human beings are endowed with innate greatness and dignity, according to Mawlana (2007). Recognizing that freedom of choice, including faith, is a condition for the fulfillment of obligation, the human being is held responsible to perform his or her obligations within the conceptual framework of ethics described above, according to the Quran and Sunnah. The Quran states:

"لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ ۚ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ"

“There shall be no compulsion in the acceptance of deen [religion]. The right course has become clear from the wrong” (Yussef, 1982, 2:256). Freedom is as an important element in the ethical conceptual framework of Arabic-Islamic communication both on the individual and community levels. Thus, the concept of *taqwa*, that is attained out of such free will becomes an essential virtue, and should be the fundamental and central ingredient in almost every action of an individual. This is why it is placed at the center of this alternative perspective of cross-cultural communication (see above diagram). *Taqwa* leads to the creation of a holistic (spiritual and material) balance of a global community or state. The socio-economic and political context of communication in an Arabic-Islamic community emphasizes intrapersonal as well as interpersonal communication over impersonal types. It also focuses on social communication over analytical or atomistic communication, and intercultural global communication over nationalism (Mowlana, 2007). Modern ethics in the Euro-US-centered paradigm tend to be predominately social in nature; whereas, in Arabic-Islamic societies that tendency is holistic and is both social and spiritual in nature. As the Quran clearly states: “The noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the best of you in conduct and *taqwa*” (Yussef, 1982, 49:13). Character and ethics are emphasized in both the Quran and Sunnah. A major principle guiding the ethical boundaries of *tabligh*, truthful communication, in the Arabic-Islamic view is the principle of *amr bi al-ma'ruf wanahy'an al munkar* or “commanding what is right and prohibiting from the wrong.” This explains the responsibilities of individuals in guiding each other, especially those individuals and institutions that are in charge of such leadership role.

Finally, the concept of knowledge, or “*ilm*” in Arabic, is also central to the theoretical framework of an Arabic-Islamic communication paradigm. In order for someone to develop their critical thinking skills, they must have knowledge that is gained from the developmental stages described earlier. Sardar (1993), for example, describes communication from this alternative perspective as intrinsically related to the fundamental Quranic concept of “*ilm*”. He explains that “*ilm* is a defining concept of the worldview of Islam. In fact, the influence of the concept of *ilm* is the basis of all aspects of a Muslim individual and societal behavior” (p. 43). Through *ilm* (knowledge), an individual is transformed into one with a balanced self as this knowledge is acquired through the critical self-struggle process. A good character that promotes virtuous actions and balanced self is embodied in knowledgeable people. Therefore, the Quran praises those who occupy high positions in the field of knowledge as follows in Chapter 58, verse 11:

”يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ”

“Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who have knowledge by degrees” (Yussef, 1982, 58:11). The Arabic-Islamic view of knowledge and critical thinking, from an epistemological perspective, is comprehensive and holistic as it ties knowledge to both that which is materialistic and that which is spiritual (Yusuf & Abdulsalam, 2011).

This alternative perspective requires the use of one’s intellects to establish the balanced self, achieve *taqwa*, and develop a critical cross-cultural communicative competence that promotes social justice in the community at large. This goal is stressed in the Quran, chapter 49, verse 13 as follows: “O People! Verily, we have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes in order for you to know each other. Verily, the noblest among you in the sight of Allah, is the most righteous and best in conduct” (Yussef, 1982, 49:13). The Arabic-Islamic view described here, as an alternative perspective, will hopefully help both Eastern and Western

scholars and educators from both sides to promote more cross-cultural understanding and contribute to bridging the cultural divide.

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