Dr. Tadasu Todd Imahori's Intellectual Journey in Search of Self and Its Impact on the Communication Studies in Japan

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Abstract. As the impact the sudden passing of Dr. Tadasu Todd Imahori has effected still remains vivid in our hearts, the impact that he has given the field through his work as a “communication philosopher” will remain in our minds as a cornerstone of communication studies for a long time to come. Dr. Imahori has helped construct a firm foundation of our academic discipline upon which his successors will build strong understanding of what it is that we mean by “communication.” To observe and interpret the academic impact Imahori has delivered, this paper aims to 1) describe his never ending endeavor to search his own self and argue the ontological and epistemological issues surrounding the concept of “self,” a core construct of communication research, and 2) celebrate the impact and contributions that his work has brought to the academic field of communication in Japan, and show that Professor Imahori will remain in our minds and hearts as a strong mentor.

Tadasu Todd Imahori was appointed professor in the Department of Literature, Division of Foreign Languages, English Section at Seinan Gakuin University in October, 1997. Since he joined the faculty, Professor Imahori demonstrated not only his superb ability to conduct research, teach, direct, and inspire his students, but also his administrative initiative and leadership on as well as off campus.

As most readers are well aware, his strong leadership as president of the Communication Association of Japan has helped the organization reestablish itself as a “flag carrier” academic communication association of Japan. His intellectual drive will be greatly missed, which has challenged many researchers, rookies and well-seasoned scholars alike in such a way that he has encouraged us to view critically the communication theories, concepts, and research methods that have been long developed, tested, applied, and further advanced primarily by our U.S. and European colleagues.

Todd Imahori’s pursuit for better understanding of “self” was responsible for propelling him as a researcher, educator, and most importantly human being to keep questioning some of the most important philosophical issues that surround the academic inquiries into the
existence, change, and growth of an individual through daily symbolic interactions. His professional and personal contributions will remain in the academic history of communication as significant benchmarks both in the U.S. and Japan.

As a colleague, successor as president of the CAJ, and friend, it is my great honor to contribute this article in memory of Tadasu Todd Imahori. This paper purports to 1) describe his never ending endeavor to challenge the philosophical assumptions that have been accepted, or taken for granted in our research in intercultural/interpersonal communication, by referring to his works, 2) touch on the impact that his academic work has brought to the field of communication in Japan, and argue that Professor Imahori's intellectual contributions made to the discipline of communication will help celebrate his life, who will remain in our minds and hearts as a strong mentor.

**Imahori’s Philosophical Challenges**

Though Dr. Imahori was appointed professor at Seinan Gakuin University to fulfill the curricular need for an educator who could teach intercultural communication, and also he may be known as an “intercultural person” in the professional organizations he belonged to, including the CAJ, his identity as a researcher has been that of a communication philosopher.

He had claimed that he would approach problems in intercultural communication as not necessarily a unique sub disciplinary area as early as in the 1980's when he was enrolled in the graduate program at Ohio University. Dr. Imahori’s persistent challenge to question the Western, and more specifically American standards of human communication is apparent in his early work. He wrote an M.A. thesis entitled *An Investigation of Oral Communication among Japanese College Speakers of a Second Language* (1982). He investigated the validity of the concept of and the measurement tool for communication apprehension, a commonly accepted term and research concept in the U.S. then to identify people who had excessive anxiety to speak in public and strike up a conversation with strangers. If applied to Japanese, who have been found to perceive silence not as a sign of incompetence but a manifestation of sensitivity and thus a sign of communication competence (e.g. Kim, 2002), the U.S. communication apprehension standards would characterize them as entirely incompetent and even pathological. Todd and I share the same inclination to challenge the imposition of U.S. standards to the non-U.S. cultures including Japan (e.g. Miyahara, 1999; Miyahara, 2004).

Imahori observed in his Ph. D. dissertation the need for identifying and clarifying for the scholars of communication what it is that we are looking for in our inquiries into human social practices, and what it is that we call “communication.” Dr. Imahori’s strength as an academic inquirer was that he would not leave unchallenged the concepts, theories, and
methodologies commonly accepted as valid, reliable, and widely applicable. He challenged some commonly accepted claims about the classification of communication categories. He states in his doctoral dissertation (1986) that “intercultural communication . . . may not be unique since cultural difference does not necessarily make the process of intercultural transactions more difficult than intracultural communication . . . . Since every individual has different backgrounds in social-economic class, ethnicity, biological sex, etc., all communication encounters between people can be ‘intercultural’” (pp.4-5).

Thus Imahori always approached the study of human communication, focusing on important philosophical issues such as ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Worthy of special mention are his efforts to uncover the profound philosophical backbones of human social interactions by not just looking into people’s predispositions towards communicative behaviors such as attitudes and values, but observing, analyzing, and sometimes evaluating people’s communication experiences themselves (Imahori, 1986).

This approach appears to testify that his focus on “self” as an important locus of analysis was established early and consistently maintained. It also accounts for his academic interest in pursuit of the core of self through research studies in its various dimensions using terms such as “self” (2006a; 2006b), “identity” (2005), “face” (1999a; 2004), and “facework” (2004). He chose to use variables derived from interpersonal, rather than intercultural theory. Thus Imahori has consistently maintained his own identity as a communication educator, theorist and researcher with broad perspectives on the communication discipline rather than confined himself in a relatively narrow domain of intercultural communication.

Imahori’s journey in search of his own “self” had started when he first sojourned in the U.S. as an undergraduate exchange student. His identity was challenged by various interpersonal experiences that made him realize he was neither completely “Japanese” nor “American,” but a person of minority or marginality. That led him to realize one could be viewed as possessing multiple identities depending on how one would negotiate his/her self with others in various social contexts. Todd experienced dilemmas in going back and forth between his Japanese and American self. Imahori (2006a) observes, “The more I tried to become ‘American,’ the more different I felt because of my ‘Japanese’ background; the more I tried to stay ‘Japanese,’ the more I realized how much I had changed since coming to the United States (p.262).”

No matter how well he adapted to the U.S. culture by learning to speak and behave like an “American,” a criterion that he had set forth for his own successful cultural adaptation, Todd felt as though he was never considered to be an “American.” The personal attributes that drove Imahori to search and continue to question and challenge his own self, at the same time making such endeavor publicly known through his writings and oral
presentations, formal and informal, earned him a reputation as a “person of authenticity” (Collier, 2009).

Dr. Imahori’s intellectual traveling path took a turn when he moved from Illinois to the West Coast. Upon his new appointment at San Francisco State University, where the cultural composition was remarkably different from that of the mid West, he found himself committed to “do something about racism as an intercultural communication scholar” (Imahori, 2006a, p.264). He discovered as his first hand experience that Japanese Americans in the West Coast had lived through prejudices and discrimination committed against them. Such a personal commitment inspired Dr. Imahori to conduct what he called a first qualitative study in which he extensively interviewed Japanese Americans who had gone through difficult times through their internment experiences during World War II (2001).

Todd Imahori “confesses” that his life-long goal was to be an intercultural change facilitator (Imahori, 2006a, pp.276-277). Change is to him a goal that a person with sufficient conscientiousness should strive for, and he had set forth his personal and professional goal as to bring about changes for better society where people can more freely express and negotiate their identities.

I vividly remember one instance in a convention hotel room where we were socializing after the sessions, that illustrates his enthusiasm to “educate” whomever he regarded as needing change, and more specifically improvement in their communication behavior, which includes, of course, how they perceive human differences. He was speaking to my former student’s fiancé, and when Todd found out that he was a male chauvinist, he not only strongly criticized his partial and prejudiced attitudes toward Japanese women in general, and his own fiancée in particular, but kept emphasizing the need and possibility for him to have new insights by repeatedly saying, “You can change!”

Given the diverse cultural backgrounds represented in the Bay area where Todd lived for eight years, he came to full recognition and reconfirmation that intercultural communication is not limited to international communication. The study of intercultural communication should include interactions between people who identify themselves by other and more complex cultural indices such as majority-minority divides, ages, gender preferences, sexual identity, and physical disabilities. This approach was greatly appreciated not only in his academic research, e.g. Imahori (2006a; 2006b), but in his classroom teaching.

Imahori also emphasizes the importance of viewing the cross-cultural journey in search of complex self in a positive light. He writes, “Today, as my cultural adaptation continues, I am simultaneously torn and excited by my multiple cultural identities. I am also frustrated with my never-ending status as the ‘other’” (Japanese and American) (2006a, p.259).

Professor Imahori’s journey in search of self continued and faced more challenges after
he returned to Japan to teach at Seinan Gakuin University in 1997. His book chapter entitled “On Living in Between” (2006b) offers detailed and precise descriptions of what he went through when he first started teaching at Seinan. His narratives help the readers, who may have had similar cross-cultural experiences, identify what may sometimes seem very difficult and even disturbing, and “appreciate” them by intellectually analyzing them. In that sense Todd may have experimented himself as a “test case” to see how an individual goes back and forth between different cultures. He writes:

From the beginning of my life on campus (in Japan), I decided to look different . . . .

A year or so after working in my university, I had emerged in the minds of my colleagues and students as a cultural “maverick,” a person outside of their cultural boundaries. Since my image is etched in stone now, my negotiations with the “Japanese” boundaries today are conducted as a “maverick,” not as someone who is expected to stay within the cultural norms. This newly acquired identity has thus given me a certain degree of freedom . . . . Living in Japan, I often need to test out the “Japanese” cultural boundaries so that I know where they lie and how my constraints are defined in a particular situation. Thus my cultural boundary negotiation is a never-ending trial-and-error process (p.276).

Todd has enjoyed the energy from the intercultural turbulence that provided him with new insights into intercultural transactions. It is the destiny of his intercultural life (p.281).

Todd’s decision to return to Japan, once his home culture, after some 17 years of absence, as he reflects as a positive and willing one, was proved by the fact that he could have professionally and legally remained in the U.S., though he had to, albeit pleasantly, struggle in his pursuit of yet a new identity as a more rounded “other American.” He decided to shift his perspective from the U.S. culture to Japan so he could see the field of communication and more importantly himself as an intercultural sojourner from the opposite angle. By doing so Todd attempted to fulfill his life-long ambition to capture the uniquely human symbolic behavior, which we call communication, from the perspective that had been long downplayed, i.e. non-Western perspective. He once said to me that it would be interesting to co-author a book that may be roughly titled *Japanese Interpersonal Communication as Japanese See it*.

A number of works Dr. Imahori produced after his return to Japan with the academic interest mentioned previously, whether written by him alone or co-authored by his colleagues, further contributed to better understanding of the process of identity management and face negotiation, both closely associated with the concept of self. To illustrate, Professor Imahori published a series of articles studying the process of face
negotiation in an interesting social situation, i.e. termination of romantic relationships among college students. While such studies may not have been uncommon in the U.S., they were indeed rare in Japan where the field of communication itself was struggling for its identification within the academic world.

Imahori (1999) states that “Romantic relationship termination is a dark moment for the partners, but at the same time, it is an extremely enlightening episode for understanding how people negotiate their face” (p.129). Imahori's ontological stance that placed competence as a relational construct is clearly stressed as a backbone of this study. Face is not regarded as something that somebody possesses or loses, but rather it is viewed as that which is symbolically co-created, negotiated, and co-developed between participants of interpersonal encounters, or disengagement in this particular study. Thus in English one says, “break up with” someone even when a romantic relationship comes to an end. This is a concept that is not always easy for Japanese to fully understand or appreciate.

The series of studies was continued for the next several years, offering new and somewhat unexpected insights into Japanese people's communication and more broadly social practices. Imahori et al. (2001) on face concerns and facework in social predicaments discovered that Japanese college students were significantly more independent than interdependent in their self-construal, a finding previously suspected but never validated (p.154). They also offered an interesting observation of Japanese females' interpersonal communication; Japanese women prefer direct and bilateral termination strategy and men opt for indirect and unilateral strategy (p.158). Such findings, quantitatively accounted for, are heuristic in that they not only offer accounts for contemporary interpersonal communication in Japan, but also raise new and compelling questions as to what social and perhaps economic and political factors may be responsible for such interpersonal changes witnessed in recent Japan.

His earlier work (1999) on face negotiation in romantic relationship terminating situations had advanced some evidence that traditionally accepted gender roles in Japan may have been challenged. The findings of the study offered proof that women are socialized to be more nurturing and thus more other-oriented than are men who are more achievement oriented, and thus more self-oriented. The men in the study showed that they favored Fading Away and Fait Accompli, both perceived to be self-oriented face strategy, indicating that men in Japan are indeed showing the tendency to avoid conflict and interpersonal tension, a characteristic often associated with women. The women, on the other hand, showed preferences for State-of-the-Relationship Talk, Mutual Pseudo-de-escalation, and Pseudo-de-escalation, all making some reference to the relationship being terminated, while men prefer strategies that do not provide any account about the relationship being terminated. This willingness by women to talk about the relationship thus
shows greater levels of assertiveness to grapple with the difficult social situation of relational termination. All these imply changes in sex-role orientations in Japan.

Much of what Imahori had discovered and proved in his individual research studies appears to be incorporated and integrated in his more recent work co-authored by his long time fellow researcher, Bill Cupach, in their article in 2005. Dr. Imahori's earlier interest in studying communication in a more positivistic and deterministic fashion, quantitatively identifying and examining variables in the process of human communication for deductive hypothesis testing, gradually shifted towards more holistic, interpretive, and critical approaches. Such shift is clearly witnessed in some of the claims he makes with Cupach (Imahori & Cupach, 2005).

Cupach and Imahori (1993) had earlier defined identity as “self-conception - one's theory of oneself” (p.113). They claim that identity serves as a framework for understanding one's self and the surrounding world (2005, p.197). Being able to negotiate one's own self and identity in a given situation contributes to one's communication competence. Thus competence is not what one possesses or does not, but rather synthesis of what a person and his/her partners coordinate, co-create, and co-maintain in each encounter.

Intercultural communication competence is, therefore, culture-synergistic because relational partners negotiate their own idiosyncratic ways of behaving competently within their relationship and this relationally negotiated competence reflects a synergy between the individual partners' distinct cultural expectations for competence (p.195). This is an eye-opening remark about the concept of communication competence, as it had been regarded as a person's composition of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that influence the levels of effectiveness and appropriateness of a given communication behavior.

As commonly seen in his work, Imahori incorporates his own personal experience in cross-cultural adaptation into his writing on identity management. This tendency illustrates Imahori's "mindfulness" in daily interpersonal situations, including intercultural ones. For example, "identity freezing" that appears to be born out of his personal experience when he was regarded as the "other American," is an interesting concept and it is well elaborated in Imahori and Cupach (2005). Todd had earlier experienced a situation in which people in the U.S. regarded him as a young Japanese man who could not speak English well enough to get around. Since the cultural memberships, which are readily accessible cues such as accent and clothing, constitute the first type of information people obtain about each other, they tend to see each other only as members of their respective cultures and ignore other aspects of each other's identity (p.199). When people disregard the other attributes, identity freezes, and it is a face threatening act.

Identity Management Theory (Imahori & Cupach, 2005) suggests a set of principles to promote competent communication between intercultural partners: (a) establish relational
identity through increased coactions, symbolic convergence, and coordination of relationship rules; (2) view cultural differences as assets rather than barriers; and (c) recognize that identity management and relationship management represent two sides of a single coin (p.208). These principles summarize their academic findings and if applied well they would contribute to people's interpersonal communication competence not only in intercultural but intracultural situations also.

All the academic work that Imahori has produced demonstrates his careful and consistent attitudes toward building, validating, and also challenging theories that have been built and further developed by scholars of communication studies primarily from the U.S. perspectives. Such attitudes and researcher ethics coupled with his commitment to be an intercultural communication change facilitator characterize Imahori as a conscientious and productive communication philosopher. The next section will discuss what influence Imahori has brought to communication studies in Japan.

**Imahori's Influence on Communication Studies in Japan**

As previously discussed, Tadasu Todd Imahori established and maintained his professional identity as a communication philosopher, rather than an intercultural communication scholar though he may be commonly known as one. As such his contributions to the academic field of communication are remarkable in two distinctive ways. First he has helped build a bridge across the diverse sub-disciplines of communication studies from rhetoric, interpersonal, and organizational, to intercultural communication. Secondly as evidenced in his recent work published in *Speech Communication Education*, Imahori has reached a “philosophical plateau” of the communication scholarship.

The field of communication studies in Japan had experienced “diversity” among its specific sub-disciplines rather in a negative sense. It may be an ordinary tendency as we have witnessed in the communication scholarship in the U.S. (e.g. English vs. Speech, Communication vs. Theatre, scientific vs. humanistic approaches). Such competition and rivalry for recognition may be a healthy sign for the discipline insofar as it contributes to constructive arguments of philosophical issues that the overall field of communication must confront. Given the relatively brief history of communication studies as a discipline in Japan, however, the competition, especially in a win-lose format, may do more harm than good.

As he wrote in the *CAJ News* (2008), Imahori as a member and president of the CAJ has clearly recognized the need for identification and clarification of the ontological issue of the discipline itself. By focusing on the question of, for instance, how identity may be relationally and culturally shaped and shared, Imahori has always attempted to search a common philosophical foundation that underlies the overall discipline of human
communication. Self, after all, whether it may be construed independently or interdependently, is a critical issue that we must all deal with in any communication study as long as it concerns itself with human communication.

Had he been narrowly interested only in pragmatic questions of how one can become a skillful intercultural communicator, for instance, the active dialogues among scholars of communication and those in cultural studies, literature, and anthropology as the CAJ has maintained its annual convention theme entitled “Communication and X (respectively referring to other disciplines in liberal arts and social sciences)” in the last several years, would have never been realized. Just as self can be identified and developed only in relation to others through the symbolic process that we call communication, the identity of the field of communication can only be established and appreciated by clarifying the common ground with and differences from other neighboring disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and politics, just to name a few. Imahori’s work has served communication studies as a strong driving force especially in Japan in its developmental stages as it is now being recognized as an interdisciplinary but independent area of study.

The “philosophical plateau” that Imahori has reached in the field of communication is ascribed to his ability to integrate various methods of inquiry along with their respective philosophical foundations. When he first started to teach at Seinan, and to attend communication conventions in Japan, Imahori identified himself as a researcher with a positivistic orientation, and deductively hypothesis testing statistician. Some of the early studies he published since he returned to Japan (e.g. Imahori, 1999a; Imahori, 2004) followed the positivistic principles. Imahori (1999a), for example, tested to see whether U.S. born taxonomy of face-saving and relationship termination strategies would apply to Japanese.

In the work he calls his first qualitative research in 2001, Imahori extensively interviewed Japanese Americans about their individual experiences through the internment period during and subsequent times after World War II. The study may have reconfirmed in Imahori’s mind the importance of the concept of “self” that he had professionally and personally searched throughout his life. It is only human that is capable of looking at his/her self from another perspective. Without such self reflexivity we would not be able to function as social animals, symbolically identifying, negotiating, and confirming ourselves. As researchers and educators of communication studies, we must, as Imahori (2008) suggests, not only describe how we position ourselves in relation to the object of study (e.g. culture, people’s communication behavior) but also examine how we are reflected and defined by our cultural, relational, and personal identity.

The profound and sharp philosophical arguments about the subject-object issue stems from his own personal intercultural experiences in the U.S. and further developed throughout his career as a philosopher both in the U.S. and Japan. By integrating his
positive orientation with interpretive and critical approach to the study of human communication as practiced in the last several years, Imahori has reached a position where he can have an overall picture of the study of communication in such a way that he can guide and supervise, albeit symbolically, the subsequent inquiries into the unique and somewhat mysterious social practice that is called communication toward a gradually enlightening direction.

Despite his sudden passing, may the year 2009 mark the beginning of a new era, when Imahori’s successors will initiate and continue to endeavor to strengthen the philosophical foundation of the study of human communication upon which many practical issues surrounding our society may be critically, yet constructively argued. Tadasu Todd Imahori will forever live in our minds and hearts.

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