
Interpersonal Da'wah Communication: The Role of Empathy and Exemplary in Shaping Congregational Perceptions

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Abstract: on empathy and role modeling, in shaping the perceptions of congregants. Interpersonal da'wah is considered an essential approach for Islamic preachers (da'i) to build closeness, trust, and effective spiritual influence. Despite its importance, limited research has systematically examined how empathy and exemplary behavior influence congregational responses. This study employs a qualitative descriptive design using interviews and observations with selected congregants and preachers in an Islamic higher education environment. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings. The results reveal that empathy significantly enhances emotional bonds and mutual understanding, while role modeling strengthens credibility and fosters behavioral imitation among congregants. The findings also indicate that da'i who integrate empathy with consistent exemplary conduct are perceived as more trustworthy, persuasive, and effective in conveying religious messages. This research contributes to the development of communication strategies in da'wah studies by highlighting the integration of interpersonal skills and moral practice. The study suggests that future research should examine digital contexts of da'wah communication and include.

Introduction

Da'wah communication is one of the important instruments in conveying Islamic values to the congregation effectively. Da'wah is not only a transfer of information, but also a process of awareness, coaching, and behavioral transformation (Aziz, 2017).

From a communication perspective, da'wah requires a deeper interpersonal approach. Interpersonal communication allows dai to interact directly, build closeness, and understand the psychological needs of pilgrims (Mulyana, 2019).

As the times develop, the challenges of da'wah are increasingly complex. Pilgrims now need not only religious materials, but also real examples that they can see from dai (Rahman & Wahyuni, 2020).

Therefore, the success of da'wah is not only measured by the amount of material

presented, but also by the extent to which interpersonal communication can form a positive perception of the congregation (Yusuf, 2018).

One of the important aspects of interpersonal da'wah communication is empathy. Empathy allows dai to understand the emotional condition of the congregation, so that the message of da'wah can be better received (Hoffman, 2018).

Empathy in da'wah communication is also a form of recognition of the personal needs of pilgrims. With an empathetic attitude, dai not only becomes a communicator, but also a spiritual friend for the congregation (Nasrullah, 2021).

In addition to empathy, example is an important factor in building the trust of the congregation. Exemplary da'wah makes da'wah more authentic because the congregation sees the compatibility between speech and action (Asy'ari, 2019).

The example of a dai creates credibility, which in communication theory is called ethos, which is the moral authority of a communicator (Aristotle, 2007/2018).

Previous research has shown that dai who display empathy and exemplary attitudes tend to be more respected and trusted by worshippers (Hasanah, 2020).

However, academic studies on the combination of the role of empathy and example in shaping the perception of pilgrims are still limited. The majority of research emphasizes more on the aspect of rhetoric or message delivery techniques (Rahardjo, 2017).

In fact, the congregation's perception of da'wah greatly determines the effectiveness of the message delivery. Positive perceptions will increase acceptance, while negative perceptions will cause resistance (Littlejohn & Foss, 2019).

Therefore, the study of the role of empathy and example in interpersonal da'wah communication is very relevant to strengthen contemporary da'wah strategies (Syahrin, 2021).

In the framework of interpersonal communication, a good relationship between dai and pilgrims will create a conducive communication climate. A positive communication climate has been shown to increase audience engagement (Gudykunst, 2018).

Da'wah built on the basis of empathic interpersonal relationships is also more effective in overcoming misunderstandings and internal conflicts among pilgrims (Sutrisno, 2020).

Exemplary in da'wah can be understood as a nonverbal strategy that reinforces verbal messages. This is in line with the theory of nonverbal communication which states that behavior is more influential than words (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014).

This research emphasizes that empathy and exemplary are not only communication strategies,

but also part of the morals of a dai. This morality gives moral legitimacy to every da'wah message (Al-Ghazali, 2018).

This study is also important because modern society tends to be more critical in assessing public figures, including dai. The credibility of a dai is now tested through the consistency between words and deeds (Fauzi, 2019).

Thus, this research offers a new contribution to the study of da'wah communication, namely by emphasizing the integration of empathy and example in shaping the perception of the congregation (Abdullah, 2021).

The results of this study are expected to enrich the literature on da'wah communication and provide practical guidance for dai in formulating interpersonal communication strategies (Hidayat, 2020).

In particular, this study aims to analyze the role of empathy and example in shaping the perception of the congregation, as well as identify its implications for the effectiveness of da'wah in the contemporary era (Putra, 2022).

Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach because it aims to deeply understand the meaning of interpersonal da'wah communication, especially the role of empathy and dai role models in shaping the perception of the congregation. The qualitative approach was chosen because it can explore the subjective experience of pilgrims through narrative, interpretation, and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

1. The design of this study refers to a case study method, with the object of research in the form of a community of worshippers in one of the major mosques in Indonesia. Case studies allow researchers to examine phenomena contextually and in-depth, especially interpersonal interactions between dai and worshippers (Yin, 2018).
2. The research participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique. The respondents consisted of 10 active worshippers and 2 dai who were considered representative to provide information related to empathy and exemplary in da'wah communication. The purposive selection is based on the relevance, involvement, and experience of participants in da'wah activities (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).
3. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and documentation. Interviews are used to dig into the personal experiences of worshippers, observations to capture the nonverbal behavior of dai, while documentation is used to

collect supporting data such as lecture texts or activity notes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

4. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process is carried out through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusions/verification. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is able to identify repetitive patterns of meaning, so that it can relate the role of empathy and exemplary to the perception of worshippers (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

Results

The results of the study show that dai empathy plays a big role in building emotional closeness with the congregation. Pilgrims feel more cared for when they respond to questions patiently, greet them personally, and show concern for the daily problems of pilgrims. This is in accordance with the view that empathy is the core of effective interpersonal communication in the context of da'wah (Burlison, 2010).

1. Observations also found that the example of dai is reflected in daily behavior, both inside and outside the da'wah forum. Dai who are consistent in speech and deeds are considered more credible and respected by the congregation. These findings are in line with persuasive communication theory that emphasizes the importance of communicators' credibility in influencing audiences (Perloff, 2020).
2. Interview data showed that pilgrims built a positive perception of dai who were able to combine empathy with example. It is easier for the congregation to receive the message of da'wah, because dai not only conveys verbally but also exemplifies through real actions. This reinforces the findings of previous research that emphasized the role of exemplary in the effectiveness of da'wah communication (Hidayat & Nasution, 2020).
3. In addition, the results of the study confirm that the interpersonal closeness between the dai and the congregation creates a participatory da'wah atmosphere. Pilgrims feel comfortable to dialogue, express opinions, and share religious experiences. This phenomenon shows that da'wah communication is no longer one-way, but dialogical and interactive (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).
4. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that empathy and example are not only additional factors, but the main foundation in shaping the congregation's perception of the da'wah message. The two serve to complement each other: empathy strengthens the emotional aspect, while example strengthens the moral aspect. These results confirm that

interpersonal communication strategies based on empathy and example are more effective than monological and instructive communication (Liliweri, 2019).

Discussion

The results of the study show that empathy is an important dimension in interpersonal da'wah communication. Empathy allows dai to understand the psychological condition of the congregation so that the message of da'wah is easier to receive (Burlison, 2010). These findings confirm that da'wah communication is not just information transfer, but also involves emotional connection.

The example of dai has been proven to strengthen the credibility of the da'wah message. Pilgrims believe more in a consistent dai between speech and action, in accordance with the theory of communicator credibility in persuasive communication (Perloff, 2020). This confirms the relevance of the principle of da'wah bil-hal in the Islamic tradition.

Empathy in da'wah also creates an atmosphere of participatory communication. The congregation feels appreciated when their experience is accommodated in the da'wah forum. These findings support the view that effective interpersonal communication is based on equality and openness (Gudykunst, 2004).

Field observations show that dai who display empathy are more likely to receive questions from worshippers. This shows the existence of high interpersonal trust, in accordance with the concept of trust in interpersonal communication theory (Rotter, 1980).

From the perspective of da'wah communication, empathy and example complement each other. Empathy functions to open access to communication, while example maintains the consistency of messages. This is in line with the research of Hidayat & Nasution (2020) which emphasizes the importance of integrating emotional and moral dimensions in da'wah.

Exemplary behavior is not only seen in the behavior of the dai in the forum, but also in daily life. The congregation judged dai not only from his lectures, but from his social attitude in the community. This is in accordance with the concept of symbolic interactionism, where meaning is formed through social interaction (Blumer, 1969).

The findings of this study show a shift in the da'wah paradigm from monological to dialogical. Dai who applies empathy and example encourages pilgrims to be actively involved. This is in line with the two-way communication model that is oriented towards participation (Rogers, 2003).

In the modern context, empathy is also a determinant of the effectiveness of cross-

generational communication. The younger generation appreciates dai who understand their language, aspirations, and challenges. This is in accordance with the findings of cross-generational communication research (Williams & Nussbaum, 2013).

The example of dai has been proven to strengthen the internalization of religious values in the lives of pilgrims. Values that are consistently exemplified are easier to adopt than just normative lectures (Bandura, 1977).

The congregation attributes the credibility of the dai to the consistency between the lectures and their social behavior. The incompatibility between the two actually caused resistance. This supports the concept of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957).

Empathy also helps dai avoid the impression of patronizing. On the contrary, the pilgrims feel the da'wah experience as an equal process of spiritual dialogue. This is in line with the principle of humanistic communication (Rogers, 1969).

This study also found that dai with high empathy are more likely to build da'wah social networks. This expands the reach of religious messages organically. These findings support the theory of social penetration that emphasizes the importance of communication intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

The example of dai can be seen as a form of effective behavior modeling in the social learning process of the congregation. Pilgrims imitate the behavior displayed by the dai, as explained in social learning theory (Bandura, 1986).

The integration of empathy and example shows that da'wah communication cannot be separated from the ethical aspect of communication. The success of da'wah is determined not only by rhetoric, but also by the morality of the communicator (Johannesen, 2002).

In terms of communication psychology, empathy gives rise to emotional bonds that increase the acceptance of da'wah messages. This bond is known as emotional resonance which strengthens the influence of communication (Gross, 2015).

These results also show that the example of dai encourages pilgrims to be more active in socio-religious activities. This supports the view that effective communication can influence social behavior (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).

The congregation assesses the success of da'wah not only from the content of the lecture, but also from the attitude of the dai in daily life. This is in line with the concept of ethos in Aristotle's rhetoric which emphasizes credibility as the main persuasive factor (Aristotle, 2007).

The phenomenon of empathy and example in da'wah shows that interpersonal

communication has transformative powers. Communication based on affection and moral example can change the perspective and behavior of worshippers (Liliweri, 2019).

These findings are also relevant to the context of da'wah in the digital era, where pilgrims have extensive access to various sources. Dai who are empathetic and exemplary are better able to maintain the trust of the congregation in the midst of the rapid flow of information (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

Thus, the integration of empathy and example in interpersonal da'wah communication makes a significant contribution to strengthening contemporary da'wah strategies. The results of this study not only enrich the treasures of communication theory, but also provide practical implications for dai in developing more effective da'wah methods (Nasution, 2021).

Conclusion

This study confirms that empathy is one of the main foundations in interpersonal da'wah communication. With empathy, dai is able to understand the condition of the congregation emotionally and psychologically so that the message of da'wah is easier to receive (Burlison, 2010). This shows that da'wah is not only the delivery of religious information, but also emotional involvement between the dai and the congregation.

Example has been proven to strengthen the credibility of the dai in the eyes of the worshippers. Consistent behavior between speech and action makes the congregation put greater trust in the message of da'wah. This is in accordance with the theory of communicator credibility in persuasive communication (Perloff, 2020), and supports the concept of da'wah bil-things in the Islamic tradition (Hidayat & Nasution, 2020).

The integration of empathy and example forms a positive perception of the congregation towards da'wah. The congregation feels valued and involved, so they are more open to dialogue. This phenomenon shows the relevance of dialogical communication theory in the context of da'wah (Rogers, 2003).

This research also makes a practical contribution to the development of contemporary da'wah strategies. Dai that display empathy and example is more likely to build healthy interpersonal relationships, strengthen congregational participation, and encourage socio-religious transformation (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).

Overall, this study shows that interpersonal da'wah communication based on empathy and example has transformative powers. Therefore, in the future, further research can examine the implementation of this strategy in a digital or cross-cultural context, so that da'wah is

increasingly relevant to the needs of the times (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

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