Contributions of *Latin American* Perspectives to a Global Theory of Health Communication

*Panel: Mainstreaming Global Theories*

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Salcedo had been sent to Sutatenza as assistant to the village priest… His prime activities were to make sure his church’s coffers were kept replenished and to scold [the] congregation during Sunday sermons,… Not long after his arrival, the senior priest invited Salcedo to preach a sermon. Salcedo accepted, but once in the pulpit, he told the congregation that he did not intend to give them a sermon; instead he wanted to open dialogue with them about improving life in the community. ... [some] in the congregation began to speak up about the problems…Salcedo proposed that they all get together to build a theatre; he would provide a film projector and the films. ... The response was literally overwhelming. ...
Latin American theory

• Develops from the practice of participatory communication in rural communities
• Evolves in response to development paradigms
• Rooted in key principles:
  – Dialogue
  – Participation
  – Voice of the voiceless
  – Local, alternative media (community radio, theater)

Father José Joaquín Salcedo, Radio Sutantez

Radio-based schools, Sutatenza, Colombia
Theory follows practice

• Liberation theology (50s): Moral reaction to poverty & social injustice in LA
  – Organic growth of “mini-media” in rural communities
  – The voice of the voiceless/oppressed

• Theorizing democratic communication (60s): initial reactions to propositions of development as economic growth
  – Concept of modernization as accumulation of wealth for development crashes with the conditions in LA and the ongoing social movement for democracy in development

Theory follows practice

• Criticism to traditional communication theory (70s); new concepts contributed to Western theory:
  – dialogic: versus monologue
  – participatory: versus unidirectional
  – alternative: versus mainstream media
  – participatory action-oriented research: individuals as subjects and not objects of study

• Democratic communication for a democratic society (80s):
  – expand and balance people’s access to and participation in the communication process for “sustainable humanistic development” (Bordenave, 2000).

Luis Ramiro Beltrán

Disputes the *Diffusion of Innovations Theory*

- Pro-innovation
- Pro-persuasion
- Top-down flow of messages and decisions
- Decontextualized communication (access & content)
Communication is the process of democratic social interaction, based upon exchange of symbols, by which human beings voluntarily share experiences under conditions of free and egalitarian access, dialogue and participation. Everyone has the right to communicate in order to satisfy communication needs by enjoying communication resources. Human beings communicate with multiple purposes. The exertion of influence on the behavior of others is not the main one. (Beltran, p.16).

Paulo Freire

Critical Pedagogy

Pedagogy of the Oppressed
(1968, 1970)

- Proposes a new relationship between educators, students and society
  - “Banking” concept of education (students as empty vessels) versus problem-posing education (students as critical thinkers)
  - Problem-posing education leads to conscientização
- Dialogue, ...
  .. communication with and not for the people
Concientização for self-determination

• Paternalism leads to a “culture of silence” (Freire)
• Through critical education individuals can overcome their problems and they must play a role in their self-determination
  – their own models/solutions
• The oppressors must examine their own role for self-determination to occur.

"those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. .. [they almost always] lack confidence in the people’s ability to think, to want and to know.” (Freire, 1970, p. 60).

Juan Díaz Bordenave

Communication for a participative society

• Early proponent of applying Freire’s education ideas to communication.
• Advocated attaining a “humanistic” development (economy, society, ecology) and a “democratic” communication that:
  – Assists in the development of communities cultural identity
  – Acts as vehicle for open citizen’s expression & community deliberation
  – Facilitates diagnosis & to articulate community problems/needs and solutions.

[Bordenave, 1989, 2000]
Communication in community mobilization

[Bordenave, 1998. Relation of communication with community mobilization processes for health. JHU & SAVE]
Impact on theories and approaches

• LA theories have sparked abundant communication scholarship.
• The 2006 communication for social change anthology compiles more than 180 writings that in various ways discuss and add new insights to the concepts and theories contributed by LA scholars & practitioners.
Multiple interventions exist that include principles of LA theory.

- Participation
- Access to communication resources
- Shared knowledge
- Community dialogue
- Participatory evaluation
- Local media
Remaining questions

- Do our interventions create critical consciousness?
- How horizontal, alternative and democratic can communication be in our area of work?
- How do we accomplish this at large scale?
- How can social media support LA theory principles?