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Tracing the History of Participatory Communication Approaches to Development: A Critical Appraisal

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The dominant paradigm of development underwent far-reaching interrogation and criticism in the 1970s by scholars and practitioners across disciplines and from around the globe. Perhaps the most significant challenge to the dominant paradigm of development communication came from Latin American scholars who deconstructed and rejected the premises, objectives, and methods of modernization and its attendant communication approaches. This early criticism stimulated a range of research projects that has resulted in a robust literature exploring participatory communication approaches to development. Participatory approaches gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s and have evolved into a rich field standing in stark contrast to models and theories of the first development decades. In fact, scholars have noted that few contemporary development projects—regardless of theoretical orientation—are conducted without some sort of participatory component, even if this notion is honored more on paper than in practice (Ascroft & Masilela 1994; Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada, 1998; Mato, 1999; White S., 1994). Despite its widespread use, however, the concept of participatory communication is subject to loose interpretation that appears at
best to be variable and contested and at worst misused and distorted (Arnst, 1996; Jacobson & Servaes, 1999).

Indeed, the Latin American challenge for scholars to embrace more appropriate, ethical, and responsive theories of development communication remains unrealized to some extent, creating a sense of conceptual and practical stagnation. One way of reinvigorating this field of study is to review the key elements of the challenge from Latin America and of the subsequent research that has refined our sense of participatory approaches of development communication. Such a review is intended to illuminate the conceptual directions that have been emphasized, elaborated, neglected, and ignored over time. By reviewing the variety of directions that have been explored over time, future paths of research and practice will be suggested for the continued theoretical advance of this field.

This chapter will begin with an abbreviated history of the challenge to the dominant paradigm of development communication that emerged from Latin America in the 1970s.¹ It will then provide a thematic review of the participatory communication research that has emerged since then, identifying the various directions taken by scholars in this field. Placing this thematic review into relief with the Latin American critique will provide a historical map of ideas and interests that will point to future directions. The final section of the chapter will conclude by recovering specific themes that hold the promise of advancing participatory development communication.
Challenging the Dominant Paradigm

In the 1970s, scholars from Latin America began deconstructing the dominant paradigm of communication for development and pointing to new directions for research. This section briefly summarizes this deconstruction and reconstruction, beginning with an examination of the assertions that development efforts were ideologically and materially related to neocolonialism and the extension of capitalist relations. It continues by introducing key, alternative directions for development efforts, including notions of praxis, dialogue, and communication process.

Communication Domination

Prior to the 1970s, almost all of Latin American communication development theory and practice was based on concepts and models imported from the United States and Europe and used in ways that were both incommensurable with and detrimental to the region’s social context (Beltrán, 1975). These concepts and models were guided philosophically by a combination of behaviorism and functionalism prevalent in the social sciences and by persuasion definitions of communication dating back to Aristotle in the humanities (Beltrán, 1980). The development programs and research projects falling out of this philosophical frame tended to focus on individual attitudes and effects, while ignoring social, political, and economic structures that frequently stood in contradiction to development goals. Development was often defined in terms of the adoption of new behaviors or technologies,

1 Although this history draws primarily from Latin American authors, readers should note that the dominant paradigm of development received criticisms across geographic boundaries. Flaws in the conceptualization and administration of diffusion of innovations projects, for example, were identified in both Africa and Asia (Röling, Ascroft & Chege, 1976; Shingi & Mody, 1976).
which were rarely, if ever, examined in terms of their social, political, and economic dimensions. Beltrán (1975) concluded, “the classic diffusion model was based on an ideological framework that contradicts the reality of this region” (p. 190). This persuasion, attitude focus of research not only reflected the culture and philosophy of the Western tradition, it resulted in theories that blamed individuals, not systems, for continued underdevelopment.

But more than merely reflecting the intellectual and cultural history of Western research, early development projects were criticized as a form of domination and manipulation. Freire (1973b) analyzed the term, “extension,” used in agricultural projects, in terms of its “associative fields” and concluded that they invited “mechanistic,” “transmission,” and “invasion” models of communication development. The vertical structure of many extension projects paralleled the hierarchical organization of landlord-peasant relations preceding it in Latin American latifundios, resulting in an unintended continuity of inegalitarian relations. The sense that development projects frequently perpetuated the interests of dominant elites was echoed by numerous scholars at the “First Latin American Seminar on Participatory Communication” sponsored in 1978 by Ciespal (Center for Advanced Studies and Research for Latin America). Influenced by dependency theory that was prevalent at the time, scholars there concluded that uses of mass media in development imposed the interests of dominant classes on the majority of marginalized people, resulting in the
reinforcement, reproduction, and legitimation of social and material relations of production (O’Sullivan-Ryan & Kaplún, 1978).²

The Latin American critique of the dominant paradigm, then, moved from the level of specific and misguided models of communication to the level of historical and global theories of domination and inequity. Early on, Latin American scholars suggested that development communication be interpreted from within a global framework guided by dependency theory (O’Sullivan-Ryan & Kaplún, 1978). That is, development projects should be analyzed as integral elements in a global system that actually act to maintain asymmetrical relations. Freire (1973a) went as far as to label the various top-down, modernization projects as “assistentialism,” or social and financial activities that attack symptoms, not causes, of social ills that function as disguised forms of colonial domination. These early suspicions have been confirmed by a more recent analysis of health and nutrition programs in Latin America, which concluded that development projects functioned as an extension of the geopolitical struggle between the capitalist West and the communist East (Escobar, 1995). Moreover, the categories of assistance constructed by donor nations allowed “institutions to distribute socially individuals and populations in ways consistent with the creation and reproduction of modern capitalist relations” (Escobar, 1995, p. 107). The deconstruction of the dominant paradigm of development, then, was a protest against the perpetuation of historical inequities and a

² Dependency was school of thought emerging in Latin America in the 1960s that explained underdevelopment as the result or byproduct of capitalist expansion. Furthermore, the development of underdevelopment was interpreted as part of a process of continuous political economic relations occurring globally between the developed north and the impoverished south, or what has been termed “core-periphery” relations. Key authors include Cardoso & Faletto (1979) and Frank (1967).
call for the invention of humane, egalitarian, and responsive communication theories and practices.

**Toward Dialogic Praxis**

Embracing the notion of praxis—self-reflexive, theoretically guided practice—was an immediate and obvious outcome of the Latin American critique of the dominant paradigm. The modernization project and its concomitant theories of development themselves had been shown to illustrate the inextricable connection between theory and practice (Beltran, 1975, 1980; Escobar, 1995). Through its assumptions regarding the locus of social problems, models of communication as information transfer, methods that placed human objects under the antiseptic gaze of scientists, and findings that confirmed micro explanations of persistent underdevelopment, the modernization approach unconsciously demonstrated the reciprocal and self-confirming relationship between theory and practice. One of the earliest recommendations of the Latin American critics was to acknowledge consciously this relationship, to turn away from scientific positions of objectivity, and to embrace an orientation toward research as praxis.

Much of the inspiration for this shift came from the work of Freire (1970), whose experience in traditional pedagogy was seen as analogous to modernization approaches to development. In traditional pedagogy, teachers typically viewed students as objects characterized by some sort of deficiency and in need of knowledge that could be transferred to them in a linear fashion. Freire denounced this objectivist orientation as sadistic and oppressive, and claimed that humane practitioners could not view themselves as proprietors of knowledge and wisdom. In contrast to this oppressive pedagogy, Freire proposed a liberating approach that centered on praxis. Under this orientation, practitioners attempt to
close the distance between teacher and student, development agent and client, researcher and researched in order to enter into a co-learning relationship guided by action and reflection. In a praxis approach to teaching, development, or research, people serve as their own examples in the struggle for and conquest of improved life chances.

The turn toward research praxis was a radical epistemological move that has been adopted and refined by scholars since then (e.g. Fals Borda, 1988; Rahman, 1993). It posits that the combination of critical theory, situation analysis, and action create a fruitful dialectic for the construction of knowledge, which is systematically examined, altered, and expanded in practice. The elimination of the dichotomy between subject and object, combined with an action-reflection orientation toward inquiry resulted in a heightened moral awareness or conscientização. This liberating praxis generated “thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved” (Freire, 1970, p. 81). The turn toward praxis not only rejected dominant approaches to development as oppressive, it argued for integrating scholarship more directly with development practice.

While this turn provided both a philosophical and epistemological framework for scholarship, it also provided a practical, commensurate method in the form of dialogue. Dialogic communication was held in stark contrast to information transmission models emerging from Lasswell’s (1964) 5-point question of who says what in what channel to whom with what effect. This required development researchers and practitioners to seek out the experiences, understandings, and aspirations of
others to jointly construct reality and formulate actions (Beltran, 1980). Freire (1970, 1973a) provided concrete exercises for initiating critical dialogues to, in effect, deconstruct social contexts, separate out their constituent parts, and reconstruct a thematic universe for pursuing social transformation. Such a process resulted in a “cultural synthesis” between development collaborators to arrive at mutually identified problems, needs, and guidelines for action.

Aside from its practical contribution, dialogue was promoted as an ethical communication choice within the development context. Freire (1970) argued that true humanization emerged from one’s ability “to name the world” in dialogic encounters. This humanization was not only denied to marginalized or oppressed peoples, but something that leaders and elites were prevented from attaining, as well, in prevailing communication environments. Grounded in Buber’s notion of “I-Thou” communication, Freire argued that subject-object distinctions were impossible to maintain in true dialogue because one’s sense of self and the world is elicited in interaction with others. The resulting fusion of identities and communal naming of the world did not emerge merely from an exchange of information, however, it required a moral commitment among dialogue partners. “Being dialogic is not invading, not manipulating, not imposing orders. Being dialogic is pledging oneself to the constant transformation of reality” (Freire, 1973b, p. 46). This highly developed sense of dialogue—simultaneously practical and rarefied—pushed scholars to conceptualize the phenomena of their study away from states (attitudes) and entities (media) toward process.
Communication as Process

More than any other aspect of the Latin American critique, the observation that communication was frequently conceptualized in static, rather than process, terms constituted the greatest challenge for development practitioners. Scholars from the north had been struggling with process models of communication since Berlo’s (1960) work so convincingly argued in their favor. Yet Berlo’s construction of the Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver model of communication demonstrated the tenacity of static, linear models that identified components amenable to survey research and development program design. It also demonstrated the elusiveness of the dynamic, process nature of communication.

Latin American scholars introduced a phenomenological orientation, which radically altered the conceptualization, study, and practice of development communication. Rather than focusing on the constituent parts of communication, Latin American scholars introduced more fluid and elastic concepts that centered on how-meaning-comes-to-be in its definition. These more fluid and meaning-centered conceptualizations of communication emphasized co-presence, intersubjectivity, phenomenological “being in the world,” and openness of interlocutors (Pasquali, 1963). This view introduced a sophisticated epistemology arguing that the understanding of social reality is produced between people, in material contexts, and in communication. Freire (1973b)

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3 Antonio Pasquali was fundamental in introducing Continental proponents of phenomenology to Latin American critics of the dominant paradigm of development communication. Relying most heavily on the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Pasquali argued that knowledge of development needed to be generated phenomenologically, that is, through presuppositionless, intentional action in the world. This position undermined---on the most fundamental level---modernization approaches that assumed a separation between subject and object, researcher and development recipient.
captured the sense of the phenomenological orientation toward communication writing:

“One’s consciousness, “intentionality” toward the world, is always consciousness of, and in permanent movement toward reality…. This relationship constitutes, with this, a dialectical unity in which knowing-in-solidarity is generated in being and vice versa. For this reason, both objectivist and subjectivist explanations that break this dialectic, dichotomizing that which is not dichotomizable (subject-object), are not capable of understanding reality” (Freire, 1973b:85).

In other words, traditional development approaches of “understanding reality” through the unilateral definition of problems, objectives, and solutions were criticized as violating the very essence of communication.

Pasquali (1963) went as far as stating that the notion of “mass communication” was an oxymoron and that Latin American media constituted an “information oligarchy” that cultivated a social context characterized by “communicational atrophy.” Though his analysis was aimed at issues of media and culture broadly, the kinds of development communication projects typical of the period were consistent with his analysis. This fundamental criticism of static models of communication led to calls in development to abandon the “vertical” approaches of information transmission and to adopt “horizontal” projects emphasizing access, dialogue, and participation (Beltran, 1980). The Latin American critique of the dominant paradigm as an extension of domination and the call for more egalitarian and responsive approaches to development were followed by a robust body of research into participatory development communication, which is thematically summarized in the next section.
The Rise of Participatory Communication

In the decades following the Latin American call for participatory approaches to development communication, a wide range of theoretical responses emerged. At one end of the participatory spectrum, scholars coming out of the behaviorist, mass media effects tradition acknowledged the critique and have incorporated participatory dimensions—albeit to a limited extent—into their research. On the other end of the spectrum, scholars critical of traditional development communication research embraced participation virtually as an utopian panacea for development. These distinct theoretical positions essentially mark ends on a continuum, where participation is conceptualized as either a means to an end, or as an end in and of itself. In this section I will present these two positions more fully before moving on to review a variety of other themes that reside somewhere between these two extremes.

Participation: Technical Means or Utopian End?

Almost as quickly as Latin American scholars articulated their objections to mainstream approaches to development communication, some of the leading figures of the dominant paradigm acknowledged the criticisms and reformed their projects (Lerner, 1976; Rogers, 1976; Schramm, 1976). They acknowledged that their conceptualization of development had been oversimplified by focusing narrowly on individuals as the locus for change, theorizing in a universal, evolutionary manner, ignoring cultural specificity, and emphasizing mass media. But this recognition did not lead to the wholesale rejection of their empiricist approach. In fact, Lerner (1976) defended social science’s inviolable methodological assumptions of ontological continuity and social regularity, which were threatened by the Latin
American rejection of objectivism and promotion of communication-as-process. Rather, dominant paradigm scholars acknowledged the general value of popular participation in development, recognized new uses of media to “unlock local energies” (Lerner & Schramm, 1976, p. 343), and expanded research to include interpersonal networks in addition to opinion leaders. To an extent, the concept of participation served to reform the dominant paradigm, making it—in the words of its proponents—more expansive, flexible, and humane (Rogers, 1993).

Such reformist approaches to participation are used by major institutions such as the World Bank and Mexico’s dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (White, K. 1999; Mato, 1999). Their top-down efforts are supported by theoretical arguments that participation be conceptualized in ways that disassociate it from any particular ideology (Chu, 1987; 1994). By ideologically neutralizing it, participation is seen as compatible with social marketing, capitalist expansion, and global trade (Moemeka, 1994). In fact, King and Cushman (1994) have argued that participation be conceptualized on highly abstract level where a “nation’s people and its government” fashion themselves as global competitors participating in the arena of world trade. They discard the value of grass-roots participation, local knowledge, and cultural beliefs as “old myths” that are incompatible with the contemporary reality of globalization.

Less dismissive of grass-roots participation but still consistent with empiricist, top-down approaches to development is recent research in entertainment-education (Singhal & Rogers, 1988; Storey, 1999). Rather than neutralizing the ideological element of participation, entertainment-education draws on findings emerging
from cultural studies to advance predetermined objectives in areas such as “reproductive health.” A sophisticated theoretical framework drawing from studies in reception and popular culture has been constructed to conceptualize texts as open systems activated by audience participants that render media products incapable of manipulation (Storey, 1999, 2000). Rather than using this assertion as the basis for promoting grass-roots communication broadly, the notion of “open texts” has functioned primarily as a justification for expert-produced, entertainment-education products. Coupled with the theoretical contributions of Mikhail Bakhtin, this approach uses the concept of participation both to guide the development of “pro-social content” through audience surveys and focus groups and more importantly to impute wide-ranging and long-term consequences via the “social dialogue” of individuals, institutions, and culture. More than any other research genre, entertainment-education has used the concept of participation to bolster the administrative position of the dominant paradigm.

The apparent contradictions of using participatory elements to enhance the status of traditional development practices has received intense attention by communication scholars. A recent, historical analysis focusing on the discourse of development suggests that the Latin American call for participation constituted a counter discourse to the dominant paradigm that was “easily co-opted by the established system and rendered ineffective or counter productive” (Escobar, 1999, p. 326). Indeed, the most pernicious instances of instrumental uses of participation appear to be attached to large agencies connected to the state or to transnational regimes such as the U.S. Agency for International Development or the World Bank (Mato, 1999; White, K., 1999).
The role of scholars who have integrated participation into essentially top-down development theories has been interpreted as akin to engaging in a “conspiracy theory” to redeem the dominant paradigm from the interrogation it experienced in the 1970s (Ascroft & Masilela, 1994; Lent, 1987). When put into practice, such uses of participatory communication exemplify, at best, passive collaboration, at worst, manipulative consultation done only to help advance a predetermined objective (Dudley, 1993; Díaz Bordenave, 1994). In fact, one development practitioner argues that any uses of participation will evolve into an “insidious domination tactic” if incorporated into the development discourse due to its historical association with Western political hegemony (White, K., 1999).

Few scholars would agree with this extreme position, especially those reviewed above who advocate administrative uses of participation. Moreover, a group of scholars conceptualizing participation as an end in and of itself has articulated utopian visions of the role of people in their own development. These visions are premised on a somewhat romantic belief that peasants, indians, and other marginalized persons possess local wisdom and a virtuous cultural ethos, and that participatory processes are inherently humanizing, liberating, and catalyzing (Dissanayake, 1985; Vargas, 1995; White, S., 1994). Beginning from such premises, scholars have prescribed totalizing processes of participatory communication where all interlocutors experience freedom and equal access to express feelings and experiences and to arrive at collective agendas for action (Díaz Bordenave, 1994; Kaplún, 1985; Nair & White, 1994a). Under these circumstances, all people are said to take ownership of communication and to experience empowering outcomes. These utopian visions of
development communication have been called “genuine” and “authentic” participation, as opposed to the manipulative, pseudo participation reviewed above.

The generalized premises and prescriptions of utopian scholars have been accompanied by equally optimistic renditions of participation by researchers who offer more concrete directions for development practice. For example, various phases in development—identifying problems, setting goals and objectives, planning procedures, assessing actions—have been identified, each one necessitating the full participation of intended beneficiaries (Kennedy, 1984; Midgley, 1986; Nair & White, 1994b). This has been accompanied by policy recommendations for the reorganization of major social institutions, such as the media system, in order to bring communication structures in line with participatory communication development approaches (Servaes, 1985). Placed on a continuum, these utopian, normative theories stand as polar opposites to the functional, administrative notions of participation advanced by scholars approaching development from a more conventional perspective.

The evolution of polarized conceptualizations of participatory development communication has been noted in a number scholarly reviews that have distinguished the two poles in slightly different ways. In fact, early research in this area suggested that participatory communication function as both a means and an end in development, thus foreshadowing the distinct conceptual paths that would be followed in the decades to come (O’Sullivan-Ryan & Kaplún, 1978). A number of scholars have interpreted this means-end division as a convenient and fruitful way of guiding communication decisions in development projects (Chu, 1994; Decker, 1988; Kaplún, 1989; Rodriguez, 1994). That is, a limited
role for communication—participation-as-means—may be appropriate in projects focused on teaching skills, carrying out prescribed objectives, or producing highly polished media products. Under such circumstances, social impacts are viewed as ephemeral, goals are immediate, and interaction is formal. In contrast, an expansive role for communication—participation-as-end—is appropriate in projects aimed at organizing movements, transforming social relations, and empowering individuals. Under such circumstances, social impacts are perpetual, goals are long-range, and interaction is fluid. Other scholars noting the means-end continuum in the research have been more critical of the distinction, arguing that participation-as-means is nothing more than a thinly veiled reincarnation of the dominant paradigm (Melkote, 1991; Vargas, 1995; White, S., 1994). They argue that this approach invokes participatory communication in an instrumental, manipulative, dominating manner that undercuts its theoretical legitimacy. While they recognize the existence of the gradations in the evolution of the concept of participation, they reject the means-to-an-end perspective as an illegitimate appropriation. Regardless of the subtle distinctions characterizing the ends of this continuum, these scholars have noted that most theory development of participation has not been predominately means or end, teaching or organizing, pseudo or genuine, but some version that resides between the poles. The remainder of this section reviews major concepts and issues that have emerged over the years but that defy convenient location at either end of the conceptual continuum.

From General Theories to Concrete Practices
The bulk of theoretical research into participatory communication does not claim an exclusive means or ends focus, but does vary in
terms of level of abstraction, issue of attention, or topic of interest. This section of the chapter briefly summarizes these various theoretical contributions moving from general and abstract scholarship to more applied and concrete research. This review will touch on the general notions of multiplicity, power, and popular mobilization, as well as specific attention to levels of participation, media applications, and concrete methods of inquiry. The purpose of doing this is to display the various degrees of participation that have emerged over the years and to stake out some of the dominant patterns of interest that this field has generated. Holding these general patterns in relief to the origins of interest in participatory communication will form the basis for making recommendations for future research.

One of the more general and fully articulated concepts to emerge from the participatory communication tradition is the notion of multiplicity in one world (Servaes, 1985, 1986, 1989). This approach recommends strong, grass-roots participation in development efforts, but explicitly rejects universal approaches to its application (Servaes, 1986, 1996a). Instead, it emphasizes the terms “diversity” and “pluralism,” suggesting that nations and regions cultivate their own, responsive approaches to self-determined development goals that emerge out of participatory processes. The reluctance to advocate universal theorizing stems from the observation that even within fairly homogeneous cultures, competing political, social, and cultural interests and groups will be found (Servaes, 1985). The conflicts inherent in all social systems suggest that “rigid and general strategies for participation are neither possible nor desirable. It is a process that unfolds in each unique situation” (Servaes, 1996a, p. 23). Eschewing even “general strategies for participation” constitutes a naive faith in the
power of communication to negotiate stark political differences and
casts multiplicity into a relativistic arena that has difficulty
sustaining coherence within the larger discourse of development.
The strain on theoretical coherence is evident in the introduction of
universal principles and totalizing concepts that accompany this
relativized communication approach. The early multiplicity
research, for example, claimed that a universal “right to
communicate” formed the basis for all multiplicity approaches to
development communication (Servaes, 1986). Later scholars
adopting the multiplicity framework reiterated this position and
added that “cultural processes” should be granted primacy in both
the study and practice of development communication (White, R.
1994; Wildemeersch, 1999). Most recently, Servaes (1998) has
suggested that a “global ethics” grounded in principles of
democracy and respect for human rights be adopted unilaterally by
development agencies. This tension between a rejection of
universal approaches and the advocacy of global principles is a
contradiction that permeates the development communication field
generally in its attempts to reconcile subjectivity/agency and
Moreover it is emblematic of a widespread reluctance among
scholars to establish normative standards of participatory
communication on philosophical grounds (Deetz, 1992). While this
contradiction does represent theoretical incoherence, it more
significantly demonstrates the desire to honor differential forms of
human agency that generate diverse cultural practices, while
reckoning with the material constraints of an undemocratic, profit-
driven communication environment.

Another area of general, theoretical attention in participatory
communication has centered more closely on those material
constraints by focusing on the role of power in development. Early advocates of participatory approaches either ignored the issue of power or naively called for its general redistribution within and between nations. More recent research has focused explicitly on power and conceptualized it in a nuanced and problematic way. For the most part, power has been theorized as both multi-centered—not one dimensional—and asymmetrical (Servaes, 1996c; Tehranian, 1999). This role acknowledges the force of institutions and structures, but emphasizes the role of human agency in reproducing and transforming them (Tehranian, 1999). Within this generalized framework of power, participatory communication is seen by some as being a potential source of social transformation (Nair & White, 1994a; Riaño, 1994). By virtue of the differences—ethnic, gender, sexual, and the like—that multiple social actors bring development projects, participatory communication reveals how power functions to subordinate certain groups of people (Riaño, 1994). Furthermore, participation functions to cultivate “generative power” where individuals and groups develop the capacity for action, which can be harnessed to reshape and transform conditions of subordination (Nair & White, 1994a). While mindful of the asymmetrical characteristics of power in society, these positions are generally optimistic regarding the prospects of transformation via participatory communication.

Less optimistic are scholars who see participation as either insufficient or problematic in and of itself in terms of altering power relationships in society. For these scholars, participatory communication may be helpful in attaining structural transformations in the land tenure, political, or economic arrangements of society, which are viewed as the root sources of subordination (Hedebro, 1982; Lozare, 1994; Nerfin, 1977). As
such, participatory communication is necessary but not sufficient for engaging and altering power relationships. In fact, participatory communication that is not guided toward an a priori structural goal, such as building progressive institutions or deconstructing dominating discourses, runs the risk of dissolving into a self-indulgent exercise or being coopted by an established and elitist organization (Escobar, 1999; O’Connor, 1990). Worse yet, participatory communication by itself is capable of reproducing inegalitarian power structures, especially in regard to gender relations (Wilkins, 1999, 2000). For these authors, the relationship between participatory communication and dominant power structures is neither transparent nor unproblematic.

An approach to the issue of participatory communication and power that most explicitly bridges the agency-structure divide is the scholarship that focuses on the role of participation in relation to popular movements. One position in this research argues that popular movements are inherently linked to participatory communication projects because “liberation” is an axiomatic quality of participation (Riaño, 1994). That is, the openness required of participatory communication leads to awareness of differences that reveal inequalities and result in movements to address and transform them. A distinct but related perspective notes that participation emerges from popular movements that engage in structural reforms but rely on continual regeneration through broad social participation (Servaes, 1996b; White, R., 1994). Large-scale popular movements, therefore, serve as valuable laboratories for breaking through artificial boundaries that obscure the role of participatory communication in the transformation and reproduction of dominant relations. Some scholars have gone farther and suggested that development research actively align
itself with popular movements in order to yield insights that contribute directly to participatory, social change projects (Rahman, 1993; Servaes & Arnst, 1999). This nexus between participation and popular liberation movements constitutes and entry point for negotiating problematic issues of power.

**Concrete Applications and Operationalizations**

Research attending to abstract theoretical concerns of multiplicity, power, and mobilization demonstrates the negotiation of the means/end polarity in the participatory communication literature. But a range of scholarship focused on more specific issues and concerns defies simple means/end classification, as well. This section of the chapter briefly reviews scholarship focusing on more concrete issues such as levels of participation, media applications, and research methods.

A number of researchers have worked to identify differential levels and intensities of participation in development projects. These scholars have identified stages of participation, ranging from initial access to communication resources to active identification of development issues and goals to full authority in project governance (Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada, 1998; Krohling Peruzzo, 1996; Servaes, 1996a). These stages are usually conceptualized as being guided either by contextual qualities of the participants themselves or by organizational constraints of the supporting development institutions. For example, Thapalia (1996) suggested that development practitioners cultivate a stronger, more directive role for themselves—something she labeled “transformational leadership”—aimed at constructing a shared vision and commitment to action in a community. She argues for resurrecting the discredited notion of “leadership” because egalitarian participation is frequently incommensurable with the desires and
interests of local people. Like the constraints created by local cultural contexts, organizational characteristics impose limitations on participation, as well. Large development agencies most frequently implement participation on limited level, such as using focus groups in the initial phase of an information campaign, because of organizational goals and limitations on time and resources (McKee, 1994; Wilkins, 1999). The various levels identified by these researchers are conceptualized in a complex interaction with contextual and structural constraints that move beyond the binary means/end continuum suggested by other scholars. Furthermore, they are acutely concerned with concrete applications of participatory communication in development.

Another area of scholarship that has focused on communication applications concerns participatory uses of media in development. Soon after the Latin American challenge to the dominant paradigm of development, scholars began focusing on participatory applications in media. Fueled by a series of Unesco meetings that led to the declaration for a New World Information and Communication Order, these scholars identified the concepts of access (to communication resources), participation (in planning, decision-making, and production), and self-management (collective ownership and policy-making) in media development (O’Sullivan-Ryan & Kaplún, 1978; Berrigan, 1981). Since then, systematic attention has been given to various aspects of participatory media, including audience involvement in message creation (Mody, 1991; Nair & White, 1993a; 1993b; 1994b; Thomas, 1994), identity construction (Rodriguez, 1994), and institution building (Díaz Bordenave, 1985; Fadul, Lins da Silva & Santoro, 1982). In fact, an entire communication subfield of “alternative media” has spun off of the initial criticisms of the dominant paradigm and call for
participatory approaches to social change (see Atwood & McAnany, 1986; Huesca & Dervin, 1994; Reyes Matta, 1983; Simpson Grinberg, 1986).

While scholarly attention has been given to many abstract and concrete issues relevant to participatory communication, the area of research methods has been neglected to some extent (Ascroft & Masilela, 1994; Melkote, 1991). Recently this situation has begun to change, however, with scholars emphasizing the importance of advancing research methods that are commensurate with the philosophy and theory that underpins participatory communication for development (Dervin & Huesca, 1997, 1999; Jacobson, 1996; Servaes & Arnst, 1999; White, R., 1999). At the level of methodology, this requires thinking through the ontological and epistemological assumptions that mandate the dissolution of subject-object relations and lay the groundwork for participatory communication for development (Dervin & Huesca, 1999; Jacobson, 1993, 1996). It also requires the establishment of criteria of validity in order to fulfill the self-reflexive, evaluative dimension of research, as well as to advance comparative studies in the field. Such criteria might be imported from parallel communication theories, such as Habermas’ ideal speech situation (Jacobson & Kolluri, 1999), or they might emerge from the practical outcomes of the research process itself (Escobar, 1999; Servaes & Arnst, 1999). At the level of method, an orientation toward participatory action research has been suggested as perhaps the most compatible approach to the study of participatory communication (Einsiedel, 1999; Escobar, 1999; Jacobson, 1993; White, R. 1999). Such methods are explicitly political, calling on researchers to align themselves with specific social actors and to embrace their goals and purposes. The recent attention to
methodology and method may foreshadow renewed interest in conducting empirical research into participatory communication for development.

This brief sketch of the multiple issues receiving scholarly attention was intended to identify the major patterns shaping our understanding of participatory communication for development. By examining these patterns against the issues raised in the Latin American challenge to the dominant paradigm, I intend to identify some fruitful directions for future research in the concluding section of this chapter.

**Revisiting Key Concepts**

The future of participatory communication for development is uncertain because of serious practical and conceptual impediments facing it. Practical impediments include a lack of institutional support as the approach’s long-range, time-consuming, and symbolic (*conscientização*, empowerment) dimensions do not conform to the evaluative criteria of many development bureaucracies (Arnst, 1996; Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada, 1998; Servaes, 1998; Servaes & Arnst, 1999; Wilkins, 1999). These same scholars note that strong participatory projects transfer control from officials to beneficiaries and are often met with resistance from experts whose power is jeopardized. Conceptual impediments include definitional fuzziness, exemplified by the wide-ranging scholarship outlined above (Ascroft & Masilela, 1994; Jacobson, 1994; Vargas, 1995; White, S. 1994). Several scholars have noted that because of this definitional fuzziness, dominant communication patterns and oppressive social relationships can be and are reproduced under the guise of participation (Kaplún, 1985, 1989; Wilkins, 1999).
While the challenges to participatory communication for development appear formidable, reasons for optimism are provided by scholars who have documented renewed interest in this approach (Ascroft & Masilela, 1994; Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada, 1998; Melkote, 1993; Nair & White, 1993c; Vargas, 1995). Attention to participation as a component in development is being embraced by both small, non-governmental organizations as well as large institutions, albeit in problematic forms as documented above. The challenge before contemporary scholars is to continue advancing this area of theory and practice in light of the practical and conceptual impediments currently facing it. Such advancement can occur by revisiting key notions that have been pursued and neglected in the 30-year-old call to participatory communication.

On the conceptual level, scholars should redouble their efforts to base development practices and analyses on definitions of communication that emphasize its dynamic process nature. Much of the conceptual fuzziness in this field is due to instrumental adoptions and adaptations of participation in projects that are essentially attempts to improve information transfers and cloak them as communication. Furthermore, this fuzziness is compounded when participation is incorporated into applications clearly based on linear models of communication, such as “message development.” Freezing communication action into static components effectively ignores the dynamic process roots of the Latin American challenge and slides back into the linear models that guided modernization and its top-down projects. Concerns about moving from state-entity concepts to process-dynamic models are evident not only in communication, but in other social science disciplines, as well (Dervin, 1993; Bruner, 1986; Fals Borda, 1991). Adopting process models as the foundation of theory
and practice will provide conceptual guidance for negotiating the means-end polarity and for distinguishing participatory communication from information transfer.

Other conceptual components worthy of recovering and reinforcing are the ethical and political mandates that underpinned the Latin American call for participatory communication. These mandates have become obscured, if not lost altogether, as scholars have emphasized multiplicity, the primacy of culture, and other notions that have effectively relativized the meaning of participation. Although the early denunciations of the dominant paradigm called for dialogue, democracy, and participation, they did so with a clear sense of moral commitment to strive for social justice. The claim to moral authority was grounded in the liberation theology movement popular at the time but never claiming a prominent place in the theoretical challenges to the dominant paradigm. Consequently, the liberation theology connection to the call for participatory communication has been lost in all but a few research projects conducted in subsequent years (Díaz Bordenave, 1994; Fals Borda, 1988; Tehranian, 1999; Vargas, 1995). Nevertheless, the work of Freire—whose adult education project in Recife was modeled on Catholic base community meetings—has been infused consistently with references to theologians and declarations of faith and commitment to oppressed groups in society (Freire 1970, 1973, 1997; Horton & Freire, 1990). The intensity of these dimensions were maintained in his most recent analyses of neoliberal Brazil in the 1990s, when he suggested, “It is urgent that the disowned unite and that we all fight in favor of liberation, transforming this offensive world into a more people-oriented one, from both a political and an ethical standpoint” (Freire, 1997, p. 46). Strengthening the ethical and political grounds of participatory
communication for development will function to enhance conceptual clarity and to reduce the likelihood that participatory projects will reproduce inegalitarian relationships.

One practical step that researchers can take to advance the agenda of participatory communication for development is to begin aligning themselves with new social movements that have emerged recently worldwide. New social movements constitute a nexus where concerns for communication process, social justice, and broad participation converge as natural laboratories for exploring participatory communication for development. A number of researchers noted above have already identified popular movements as an arena worthy of scholarly attention. Their suggestion is further strengthened by the recent attention given to method and methodology, particularly those that advocate an action orientation to scholarship of and for social change. The intensive study of new social movements will not only give scholars direction in their research, it might address some of the issues of efficacy raised by development bureaucracies that demand demonstrable evidence of broad, material consequences of specific projects.

The concept of participatory communication for development is the most resilient and useful notion that has emerged from the challenges to the dominant paradigm of modernization. It has generated a diverse body of scholarship that has issued new challenges, identified problems, documented achievements, and advanced theoretical understanding. The past 30 years of research demonstrates substantial progress, but more than that, it contains important traces for the continued advancement of scholarship in this area.
References


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