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10 The Place of Theory in Development Communication: Retrospect and Prospects

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This chapter analyzes the role of theory in development communication, an area of study conventionally concerned with practical problems and applied research topics. The author provides a review of the theoretical evolution of development communication through the analysis of its three social scientific traditions: the media effects-oriented tradition, the critical theory tradition, and the pragmatic philosophy tradition. Based on this analysis, the author indicates actual prospects for theory building in development communication by discussing opportunities for the formulation of normative theories. This chapter concludes that reaffirming the practical orientation of development communication and supporting intellectual convergence among its intellectual traditions constitute the core tasks that will encourage theoretical creativity in the future.

There are two main difficulties in the attempt to find the place of theory in development communication: (a) its action-oriented nature, and (b) the multiple conceptual dissensions within this field of study. Of course, these two interrelated difficulties, the realm of practice and the realm of ideas, are the dual manifestation of the same problem, or just the two faces of the same coin, to use the popular expression. On one side, the work of development communication scholars has always been enthused by a strong rolled-up-sleeves sentiment: willingness (and often a professional responsibility) to do something, a drive for action beyond mere academic reflection. This tendency to actively engage in or depend on project implementation frequently leads to problem-solving and applied research options, often in the form of project evaluation.¹ This proclivity to roll up sleeves and get to work partly explains the way theory is conceived and used by development communication scholars and their prospects for theory building.

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On the other side, the search for the place of theory in this field of study may be confused by the variations in the meaning and purpose of development communication itself,² an inborn confusion inherited from both the intellectual plurality of the field of communication study and the conceptual disputes about the idea and practice of development.

The unsteady identity of development communication still renders pertinent a question that would likely be perceived as utterly impertinent if it were asked in one of the traditional social sciences. That pertinent question is this: What is development communication? This question is pertinent in the context of this chapter only because there is no precise answer to it. Only a very general definition can encapsulate the diversity of this area of study. We can just contend that what generally holds development communication studies together is a benevolent willingness to study communication phenomena that describe, and also illuminate and help achieve, some kind of (presumably positive) social change, chiefly (and historically) in developing countries although some scholars consider development communication applications not to be limited to the so-called Third World (Wilkins, 2000). In the concept, there is a broad context, a broad topic of interest, and also an overarching sense of purpose, a kind of moral drive. This overly general description encompasses an array of intellectual approaches to development and to communication. This means that development communication is historically dependent on these two areas of scholarly research and practice: development and communication. Analyzing the roots of this intellectual dependency is the first step to clarifying the place theory occupies in development communication.

First, there is the influence of development. Conceptual revisions of development have framed the way development communication scholars approach their work and think about what they do (Wilkins & Mody, 2001). Since the invention of development in the early 1950s (Rist, 1999), development scholars have periodically provided new and revised ideas to guide the economic and social development of the most disadvantaged nations (Peet & Hartwick, 1999). These ideas and ideologies are loosely packaged and labeled, mostly by economists and sociologists, as development theories, models, or paradigms. In this case, theory is understood as the ordinary antonym and complement of practice, a kind of grand theory, or just a paradigm defined in its simplest way: "a basic set of beliefs that guides action" (Guba, 1990, p. 17). Development communication scholars have tended to adhere to one of those paradigms or grand theories. This means that they just position themselves within a general framework of what development is or should be. Servaes (1999) analyzed the evolution of development communication by dividing it according to the chronological involvement of those grand theories, basically a dichotomy between neo-classical and neo-Marxist models of development. Servaes (1999) concluded with another grand theory, the multiplicity paradigm, a model that paradoxically denies the power of any previous grand theory to generalize about the widely heterogeneous experience of development. The multiplicity paradigm is precisely an antigrand theory framework, a position

widely shared today, a time of “epistemological impasse” in development (Escobar, 2000, p. 165), and a time when the concept of development seems to become increasingly blurred³ (Hulme & Turner, 1990).

The classification of development into general paradigms is a very useful referent for communication scholars. Nonetheless, a fixation with these intellectual schemes can be misleading, at least in three ways. First, the chronological perspective can give the wrong impression that paradigms replace each other over time, as if paradigms were isolated in compartments or as if they could not coexist (Servaes, 1991). Second, these paradigms are often presented as dichotomist or exclusivist, as if they could not mix and influence each other in different ways (Kothari & Minogue, 2002). Third, and probably most importantly, paradigm rhetoric may conceal the relative extent to which those grand generalizations actually influence and are operationalized in reality.

Besides the influence of development just described, the subfield of development communication is a microcosm of the larger field of communication study. The evolution of this subfield has run parallel to changes in the communication field. In the same way, reevaluations of development communication as an area of scholarly research resemble the entrenched discussions about the status, purpose, and functions of the field of communication study.⁴ This parallel history witnessed the early predominance of the behavioral sciences in the 1950s and 1960s and the emergence of more pluralistic and exploratory scholarship in the late 1970s and on. Some new trends defied previous conceptions of the role of communication within the social sciences, originating the “epistemological battles of the 1980’s” (Monahan & Collins-Jarvis, 1993, pp. 151–152). The result was a more open and eclectic field of study, but also a more fragmented and loose one. The same thing can be said, in a microlevel, about development communication. The same parallelism also applies to the changing conceptions of theory within the field: It is important to underline that communication is “derived eclectically from disciplines with incommensurable intellectual agendas, now often involving radically different conceptions of ‘theory’” (Craig, 1999, p. 122). The consideration of this state of affairs is essential in the ongoing identification of theory uses and prospects in development communication.

If we trace a map of the current intellectual options in communication research, we can classify the field in three broad traditions: empirical social research, social philosophy, and critical social theory (Peters, 1993, p. 135). The first tradition “studies influence, the second theorizes participation, the last unmasks domination,” and each of these areas corresponds to a “political philosophy and its accompanying mode of social inquiry: liberalism, social democracy, and Marxism” (Peters, 1993, p. 138). Exactly the same map can be used to identify the theoretical trends of development communication today. This three-dimensional map is a useful way to find the place of theory in development communication for two main reasons: (a) It situates the field within the social science tradition, which is the most appropriate framework to analyze its theoretical evolution and

opportunities; and (b) it breaks the dependency chain that ties development communication conceptualizations exclusively with changing fashionable labels of development, a tendency that has obscured and narrowed theoretical thinking in this field of study.

In spite of recognizing the utility of this roadmap for the task at hand, it is nonetheless important to clarify that these three traditions are not absolute, static, and pure entities: They are in constant and open evolution and in mutual dialogue with each other. The different perspectives on social sciences that development communication scholars choose to adopt, or are dragged into adopting, are not emerging from a clinical vacuum either. Social science epistemologies and methods, including different ways of understanding theory, are in complex, constant, and dynamic interaction with development policies and ideologies, historical and social contexts, and politics of academe.

This chapter provides a review of the theoretical evolution of development communication through the analysis of its three social scientific traditions: the media effects-oriented tradition, the critical theory tradition, and the pragmatic philosophy tradition. Based on this analysis, the chapter indicates actual prospects for theory building in development communication by discussing opportunities for the formulation of normative theories. Regarding the above-mentioned difficulties in finding the place of theory in this area of study, this essay concludes that reaffirming the practical orientation of development communication and supporting intellectual convergence among its intellectual traditions constitute the core task that will encourage theoretical creativity in the future.

THE MEDIA EFFECTS-ORIENTED TRADITION

The most salient theoretical influence in development communication, following the pattern of the communication field, comes from the ample territory of communication effects. Development communication scholars in this tradition have used both quantitative and qualitative methods to study a wide range of projects on many different development topics, such as health, nutrition, agriculture, and family planning. The overall characteristic of their research is that they are carried out in naturalistic settings and usually function as auxiliary components of wider projects: They study the behavioral and cognitive effects of public communication strategies. Today, the main theoretical strands that support, legitimize, and frame this research tradition are Bandura's (1977, 2002) social learning or social cognition theory, Rogers's (1995) version of the diffusion of innovations theory, and the long list of health behavior change theories (e.g., see Atkin, 2001). Research in this area includes the study of educational mass media campaigns, social marketing, and entertainment-education initiatives.

This is the oldest and most seasoned social scientific tradition of development communication: Its inception is at the origins of development communication as

a scholarly area of research in American universities. In this sense, it is the founding tradition of development communication. A review of the theoretical strands of development communication—and, particularly, a review of this theoretically well-fed tradition—cannot be separated from an appraisal of the historical context that frames its intellectual evolution. For this reason, this section provides a succinct historical review as the introductory linkage to a general analysis of the theories that today guide research in this area.

The Initial Steps of the Founding Tradition of Development Communication

Development communication was born out of a specific conception of development ingrained in a particular historical conjuncture: the modernization paradigm and the start of the Cold War. Most of the early development communication studies were not guided by communication theory, but rather by the pressing imperatives of the modernization theory of economic development. With the invention of the Third World label during the 1950s, “the modernization paradigm became the intellectual property of all the social sciences” (Hulme & Turner, 1990, p. 34). The modernization paradigm was a “model of growth” (Schramm, 1976, p. 45) that advocated top-down national development strategies and centralized macro-economic plans based on transfer of technology from industrialized nations. It was a one-size-fits-all model of “exogenously induced change” (Golding, 1974, p. 43). Efforts were concentrated on the urban minority of African, Asian, and Latin American countries, with the hope that the effects of development policies would gradually trickle down to the rural and most disadvantaged sectors of society (Rogers, 1976c). The modernization paradigm categorized mass media as one of the independent variables in the neoclassical equation of economic prosperity.

Early development communication studies, which have their clearest examples in Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958) and the special issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* on international communication, edited by Lowenthal (1952/3), were largely a continuation of academic efforts funded by the U.S. government to understand the persuasive potential of mass media as possible agents of ideology and political propaganda in the first years of the Cold War (Samarajiva, 1987). This political orientation partly explains the formative influence of mass media effects and warfare psychology on development communication research.⁵ The role of mass media was the transmission of messages, charged with Western or modernizing values, with the hope that they would rapidly transform the ideological climate of traditional societies (Rogers, 1976a, 1976c). This change in individual consciousness was believed to be the triggering point of the modernization process (Lerner, 1958). Therefore, development communication scholars were interested in studying how contact with mass media was associated with modern knowledge and attitudes, including the diffusion of family planning, health and agriculture innovations.

Generally, the methods used by communication researchers were (a) correlational analyses of mass media and other national development indicators;

(b) survey research, often guided by diffusion of innovations theory, such as the KAP surveys of knowledge (K), attitudes (A), and practice (P) of family planning innovations (Rogers, 1976b); and (c) some field experiments, like the one conducted by Neurath and funded by UNESCO to investigate the role of radio as an “agent in the transmission of knowledge” (Mathur & Neurath, 1959, p. 105).

The early years of the media effects tradition were characterized by a genuine enthusiasm and optimism about the direct effects of media in accelerating development (Schramm, 1964). Nevertheless, by the early 1970s, this approach (a mindset based on hope rather than scientific evidence) started experiencing a dramatic change. The modernization paradigm of development was radically contested. Development communication was severely criticized and self-criticized, mainly on the two habitual (and interrelated) fronts: communication and development. From the standpoint of communication, the effects-oriented tradition was accused of theoretical naïveté, chiefly for reducing the communication process to a technologically deterministic one-way linear model and for ignoring previous media effects research (Beltran, 1976; Melkote, 1991; Mody, 2000). From the point of view of development, communication scholars were accused of applying an ethnocentric and ahistorical approach that simplified the development process and was insensitive to the social contexts of the target countries.

As a result of this crisis, development communication reoriented its course and almost reinvented itself. This ferment in the field (a ferment that, in some sense, still continues today) set the course for more rigorous empirical research in the effects-oriented tradition, while it also opened the door to new epistemologies and new methodological approaches. Regarding this change, Rogers (1982) wrote in the early 1980s: “It is a new ball game for communication research . . . it is indeed an intellectual revolution” (p. viii).

The Theoretical Framework of the Media Effects Tradition

The new ball game in the media effects-oriented tradition basically meant the adoption of an articulated body of behavior change theories and more refined methods of evaluation research. The game was moved by a renovated interest in media campaigns (Rogers & Storey, 1987). This new interest incorporated a “science-based approach” to the design and implementation of communication strategies (Piotrow & Kincaid, 2001). However, the essence of this tradition remained intact. In fact, “the intuitively appealing idea that media can drive socially significant behavioral change in developing nations persists” (Sherry, 1997, p. 76). Nevertheless this tradition is no more about the self-reliant transmission of prescriptive messages to influence behaviors in a direct way. Purposive media efforts are intended “to influence the knowledge base, or the beliefs, or the social norms underpinning the behaviors rather than just recommending new behaviors” (Hornik, 2002, p. 13).

Most theories used by the effects-oriented tradition come from social psychology. This disciplinary source leads researchers to conceive communication problems

as “situations that call for the effective manipulation of the causes of behavior in order to produce objectively defined and measured outcomes” (Craig, 1999, p. 143). Theories in this tradition systematize the social and psychological variables that explain individual disposition to induced change. The increasing sophistication of this theoretical framework tends to reduce the salience of media as agents of social change—although the varying levels of media influence expected certainly depend on the complexity of the intended effects, among other factors. The primary focus of research is the audience: individuals and social networks. The objective is to understand the process by which individuals and communities adopt innovations (Rogers, 1995) or change their behavior (Bandura, 1967) as a result of media and intermedia communication. The typical theoretical mix of public communication campaigns and entertainment-education programs⁶ usually blends diffusion theory with some elements of social learning theory (now renamed social cognitive theory). Public health media efforts also include theoretical constructions that complement these two principal theories, most commonly, the health belief model (Rosenstock, Strecher, & Becker, 1988) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

The popular diffusion of innovations theory, basically a middle-range theory,⁷ describes the social process by which an innovation (an object, idea, or practice perceived as new) is communicated among the members of a community over time. The focus of the theory is not only on awareness and knowledge, but also on attitude change and the decision-making process that leads to the practice or adoption of an innovation (Rogers & Singhal, 1996). The objective is to explain the dynamics of social construction and gradual assimilation of an innovation. The diffusion literature emphasizes that media are instrumental in raising awareness, whereas interpersonal sources are more influential at decision-making stages (Hornik & McAnany, 2001; Vaughan & Rogers, 2000). The theory includes conceptual generalizations about (a) how and through what media an innovation is communicated; (b) the perceived attributes of innovations; (c) the decision process that leads to adoption (or nonadoption), and (d) the characteristics of adopters. Additionally, there is an increasing theoretical concern about the consequences or effects of innovation adoption (Rogers, 1995). One of the key strengths of diffusion theory is its versatile and eclectic nature. Diffusion of innovations is a conceptual meeting point that embraces other theoretical approaches to help illuminate development communication problems (Roman, 2003). For example, theoretical discussions about the consequences of innovations are often connected to the knowledge gap hypothesis (Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1984; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970) and the communication effects gap hypothesis⁸ (Rogers, 1976c).

Social cognitive theory explains a complex set of psychological processes that must be satisfied before behavior is adopted. Bandura (2002) understood that “most behavior is the product of multiple determinants operating in concert” (p. 139), including cognitive, affective, biological, behavioral, and environmental aspects. Social modeling, or changing through imitation of socially accepted role

models' behavior, and self-efficacy, or the personal confidence in one's own capability to perform a certain new proposed behavior, are the two elements of the social cognitive theory that have been most widely applied by effects-oriented tradition researchers in development communication.

Theoretical models around public health media efforts focus on the individual's perception of new behavior, self-efficacy, perception of social pressure to practice or reject new behavior, and individual assessment of barriers and benefits involved in new behavior adoption. The recent "integrative theory of behavior change" (Cappella, Fishbein, Hornik, Ahern, & Sayeed, 2001) summarizes the health belief model and the theory of reasoned action and also adds some elements of social cognitive theory. This new theory estimates that "outcome behaviors are influenced by skills, environmental constraints, and intentions" (Rice & Atkin, 2002, p. 434).

Theoretical Evolution: Review and Renovation

The major criticism of this body of theory comes in two interrelated forms: (a) its concentration on individual variables, with an accompanying individual blame bias (Rogers, 1995), and (b) its omission of socio-structural factors. These perceived conceptual flaws have been partly a cause and a consequence of the research methods employed: The frequent use of survey methods has eventually forced researchers to use the individual response unit as a constrained and limiting research unit.

Studies in the media effects tradition usually assume that "individuals are in volitional control over their behavior" (Melkote, Muppidi, & Goswami, 2000, p. 19). It is argued that:

an overwhelming focus on individual-level behavior change runs the risk of mistakenly assuming that all individuals (a) are capable of controlling their environment, (b) are on an even playing field, and (c) make decisions of their own free will. Such is seldom the case. (Singhal & Rogers, 2002, p. 127)

The individual blame bias is a predisposition to hold individuals responsible for their problems, ignoring their environmental constraints (Rogers, 1995). The thesis of human deficit or individual ignorance is at the base of the most frequent theory failures in development communication; these failures result from "an incorrect assumption that a particular development problem is amenable to a communication based solution" (Hornik, 1988, p. 14). Although there are some exceptions,⁹ there is a recurrent denunciation of the theoretical gap that fails to account for social structural and cultural factors in the media effects tradition (Melkote et al., 2000)

In any case, it is important to recognize that years of constructive criticism and self-criticism have been well digested, both in entertainment-education and public

communication campaigns. On one side, entertainment-education is leaning toward “more multilevel, cultural, and contextual theoretical explanations” (Singhal & Rogers, 2002, p. 127), including the use of theories of drama (Kincaid, 2002), uses and gratifications, agenda setting, knowledge gap, and cultivation (Sherry, 2002). This move is accompanied by a growing “methodological pluralism” (Singhal & Rogers, 2002) that comprises laboratory experiments and the mix of survey and ethnographic methods (Sypher, McKinley, Ventsam, & Valdeavellano, 2002). On the other side, the media effects tradition, principally the branch of public health communication campaigns, is showing a strong theoretical concern about socio-structural determinants of adoptive behavior (Bandura, 2002), such as institutional, infrastructural, and situational factors of change (Cappella et al., 2001; Rice & Atkin, 2002). At the same time, based on lessons learned from practitioners and the array of theoretical perspectives borrowed from social psychology, a kind of informal know-how theory or normative theory for the design and implementation of public health communication campaigns is slowly taking shape (Atkin, 2001). However, some scholars point out that there is “a fairly well-developed body of theory *for* campaigns but relatively little theory *of* campaigns” (Salmon & Murray-Johnson, 2001, p. 178). In other words, here is a well-articulated body of theories to help guide campaign strategies, but there is not yet a systematic theorization of campaigns as a social phenomenon.

The media effects tradition uses theory mostly in two ways: (a) to frame studies within a legitimate stream of theory (even in cases when this stream is appropriated a posteriori and does not really affect research design), and (b) to derive hypotheses from it and advance theoretical refinement. That is, theory is mainly used for academic legitimating and theoretical verification purposes. However, theory is also used in the design and evaluation of communication interventions (Hornik & Yanovitzky, 2003). In this case, development communication scholars erase the line that conventionally separates theory and practice. In the same way, the progressive development of a normative theory for health communication campaigns would also be a transgression of classical empiricist rules. As indicated before, it is often the case that development communication scholars, besides taking care of evaluation research, are often involved in project implementation.

THE CRITICAL THEORY TRADITION

It would be quite difficult to provide an overview or a unified definition of what critical theory is (Stirk, 2000). It is easier to summarize what critical scholars generally stand for. For scholars in this tradition, the subject of knowledge is no longer disengaged and disembodied, and scientific categories are not timeless, necessary, and unconditioned (Hoy & McCarthy, 1994). Their scholarship is politically explicit. It “subscribes to a Marxist politics and its attendant

method of ideology critique” (Peters, 1993, p. 138). Their work is led by a normative stance: The world is unjust and should be changed. The study of power is the overall centerpiece of this tradition (Wilkins, 2000; Wilkins & Mody, 2001). Their general goal is to unveil the invisible apparatus of power that holds the strings of development policy and practices.

Taking into account that critical theory comprises highly diverse and even divergent schools of thought, the influence of this tradition in development communication can still be condensed into two broad points: (a) a primary focus on the systemic analysis of the diverse contexts of its object of study; and (b) a general disapproval of positivistic epistemology (understood as value-free research that radically separates the inquirer from a controlled object of study).

On one hand, scholars in this tradition engage in a totalizing scrutiny of the structural, historical, and institutional webs that surround a specific communication strategy. First, as has been pointed out in the previous section, there is an emphasis on the structural, institutional, and historical contexts of development communication projects. This approach dates back to the origins of development communication, but became central in the early 1970s with the criticism of the modernization paradigm and the rise of the dependence theory¹⁰ and other alternative models of development, mostly pushed by Latin American scholars (Beltran, 1976; Díaz-Bordenave, 1976). In this sense, critical scholars pay special attention to socioeconomic variables such as education, gender, income, and other factors that may explain differential access to the benefits supposedly facilitated by a communication program. Secondly, these scholars underscore the “futility of examining communication apart from its institutional setting” (Beltran, 1976, p. 118). Their attention goes not only to the effects of communication strategies but to who controls and designs these strategies and for whose benefit. In this line, a proposal for a critical analysis of purposive communication campaigns would look like this: “[R]ather than passively accepting that all social engineering efforts described as in the ‘public interest’ are actually so, one must examine the underlying assumptions of the campaigners as well as the values they are implicitly and explicitly promoting” (Salmon, 1989, p. 20).

On the other hand, this tradition “challenges commonplace assumptions about the objectivity and moral-political neutrality of science and technology” (Craig, 1999, p. 147). Empirical social science is accused of complying with the establishment and helping maintain the status quo.¹¹ The critical tradition is concerned with the political nature of scientific knowledge: Who decides what is knowledge, who produces it, for whom, and with what purpose. In relation to this interest in the power dynamics of knowledge creation, there is a recent critical approach to development communication that involves the analysis and disclosure of power structures embedded in institutional discourses of development (Escobar, 2000; Wilkins, 1999). Some scholars argue that the issue is not only communication for development, but communication about development (Wilkins & Mody, 2001). The recent advocacy for a critical content analysis of development discourse as

a new task for development communication scholars derives from the poststructuralist theory of development,¹² “a social theory that starts by recognizing that language and discourse are constitutive of social reality” (Escobar, 2000, p. 166). The study of the politics of representation and the power issues involved in the creation and diffusion of utilitarian and development-oriented information by external change agents are also an increasing concern of critical scholars, particularly after the emergence of new communication technologies, such as the internet, that facilitate the creation and diffusion of different kinds of content for community development goals (e.g., Schech, 2002).

It is not rare to get the impression that the critical approach to development communication may have more to do with the political economy of development than with communication itself. The interdisciplinary (or antidisciplinary) approach of critical academics makes them stretch their scholarship to a point from which it is gradually more difficult to justify their inclusion within the communication field. However, their mission is clear. The role of the critical theory tradition is to indicate and denounce. It functions as a vigilant lighthouse of development discourse and practice. It is not a specific theory or a theory-oriented tradition in the conventional sense of the testable and falsifiable theory most critical scholars despise. Additionally, it is evident that the critical tradition is not the only stream of social science that produces critical scholarship. This tradition brings a way of looking at things, a perspective, a panoramic focus that points its attention to previously unnoticed objects of study. It tends to present itself in hybrid form, mixed with elements of the other two social science traditions of development communication. The critical perspective has stimulated significant changes in development communication, as proved by the influence it has had on the media effects tradition explained above, at least in three ways: (a) motivating self-reflection about the role of communication in development, (b) helping broaden theoretical endeavors, and (c) encouraging the exploration of different methodological options.

THE PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY TRADITION

The pragmatist philosophy tradition corresponds to participatory communication for development; in this sense, it could be renamed the participatory tradition. This social scientific tradition in development communication got its first impulse in the 1970s, when the attention of some communication scholars shifted from large-scale projects to microlevel rural projects. This tradition presents a particular set of ideas about the nature and goals of social science and an accompanying collection of guidelines or tools to put those ideas in practice. As the name pragmatic philosophy indicates, reflection and action are firmly interrelated in this tradition. On the side of reflection, it has a rich philosophical heritage, developed

by thinkers such as Dewey (1991), Bernstein (1971), and Rorty (1979), and popularized by social philosophers and activists such as Freire (1970). Pragmatic philosophy conceives science as an action-oriented form of social inquiry that follows the premises of democratic participation (Deetz, 1999; Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Research is understood as a cooperative group effort to solve collectively identified problems.

Scholars in this tradition perceive communication as an end in itself, not a means to an end (Wilkins, 1999). Generally, there is no attention to communication effects; the interest is in the role of communication in the collaborative process of reaching self-help goals. Scholars become research facilitators and development partners. For them communication is not "a descriptive science but a tool of change" (Díaz-Bordenave, 1976, p. 151). Participatory communication is also a "political activity based on changed power equations" (Thomas, 1994, p. 54), in this sense, significantly connected to the critical tradition. There is a wide literature about the strategic application of participation to community development (e.g., see Cohen & Uphoff, 1980). Nevertheless participatory communication is a very flexible instrument frequently used beyond the confines of academia (Beltran, 1993; Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada, 1998; Gumucio-Dagrón, 2001), with an independent life outside the intellectual endeavors of a social scientific tradition.¹³

There has been a lot of research and theorization about participation, mainly by sociologists and political scientists, but their work "does not represent a systematic theory of participatory communication in development" (Jacobson, 1994, p. 69). Participation has been justified philosophically, and some of the resulting premises of that abstract conceptualization have been translated in reality through the application of different research methods and strategies of participatory communication (Jacobson, 1993). However, for different reasons, there is not enough evaluation research about development projects that purport to be participatory (Frey, 1998; Thomas, 1994) or, in other words, researchers have not shown, in a theoretically integrated way, the role of participatory communication in development (Jacobson, 1994). Partly because of this, and despite the clear epistemological and methodological base of this tradition, the concept and use of participation in development communication are still elastic and loose, debilitated by rhetoric and recurrently manipulated and politicized for different purposes. In any case, although participatory communication "remains under theorized and lacks fundamental definition" (Jacobson & Storey, 2004, p. 99), there are recent signs of change in how development communication researchers in this tradition use and think about theory (e.g., Jacobson, 2003). For example, today we can see how some scholars use Habermas's theory of communicative action to analyze the participatory processes of a communication program in Nepal and to suggest a set of participatory communication indicators for use in the evaluation of development communication projects (Jacobson & Storey, 2004). In other words, there is a current movement in the participatory tradition to use theory as a basis for conceptual clarification, including the development of empirical indicators to evaluate the role of participation in communication projects.

ASSESSING PROSPECT FOR THEORY BUILDING

Two of the central themes that emerge in debates within the communication field are our capacity for creativity, considered as “our ability to generate original theory,” and social relevance, or the capacity of our work to “improve the human condition” (Monahan & Collins-Jarvis, 1993, p. 151). These two core values are central for development communication scholars as well. In general, the social relevance of development communication research is rarely questioned, although there is always some dissension mostly coming from postdevelopment and critical scholars (Escobar, 2000). In contrast, after analyzing its three traditions, it can be argued that the creative competence of development communication scholars is rather low. From a conventional standpoint, investment in social relevance seems to be inversely proportional to theoretical creativity. On one side, development communication keeps with the value of social relevance by applying research to particular problems in specific contexts. On the other side, context-bound and applied research “is often at odds with the norms associated with creating useful theory, such as keeping research generalizable to a diversity of situations and perspectives” (Monahan & Collins-Jarvis, 1993, p. 154). One of the biggest challenges in development communication today is preserving the values of social relevance without threatening the opportunities for theoretical creativity. Given the critical interdependence of those two values in development communication, the most relevant aspect at this stage is to understand how its practical orientation (a common thread of its three traditions) has the potential to determine or condition what kind of theories may be generated.¹⁴

In conventional social science “there is a ‘categorical distinction’ between research and practice, between the development of scientific theory and applications of this theory to practical problems” (Greene, 1990, p. 228). There is no such distinction in development communication, not even in the media effects tradition, the only tradition that regularly uses theories as an instrument to generate research questions and hypotheses. This is again a manifestation of a larger shift in the field of communication, in which “conventional definitions of theory have lagged far behind practice” and “no longer reflect the actual range of theoretical work in the field” (Craig, 1993, p. 28). Some scholars, who conceive communication as a “practical discipline” (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 248), are proposing alternative conceptions of communication theory. These scholars defend the development of what they call practical theory (Barge, 2001; Craig & Tracy, 1995; Petronio, 1999), a kind of normative conceptualization oriented to action. Practical theory (or normative theory) is “centrally concerned with what ought to be; it seeks to articulate normative ideals by which to guide the conduct and criticism of practice” (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 249). It is clear that development communication leans toward practical and normative theory. A practical theory is not only an articulated body of knowledge that explains a particular phenomenon; it is also a flexible guide for action. It is not a prescriptive set of indications either; it is a theory that can be tested and refined through consecutive waves of action and reflection.

Theory and practice are not separated; they are in dialogue. These scholars understand that “applications should enhance theoretical development and in turn theoretical development should enhance applications” (Cragan & Shields, 1999, p. 102).

The foundations of action research may provide some direction in the definition of criteria for the assessment of the workability and credibility (i.e., the validity) of practical theories of development communication (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Nevertheless stipulating a clear set of parameters for rigorous evaluation of normative theories is a pressing duty for communication scholars at this point. In addition, although the rationale behind practical theorization spells out its value and usefulness beyond the boundaries of academe (Cissna, 2000), it is obvious that the institutional acceptance of these theories by the mainstream community of scholars constitutes another important challenge.

The three traditions together contribute to determine how these practical theories will look like: (a) The critical theory and the pragmatist philosophy traditions emphasize the need for a systemic conceptualization of problems, preserving the values of locality and specificity; and (b) the effects tradition underscores the importance of generalizability. The intersection of the three traditions demands a subtle balance between practical applicability across different contexts and universal categorization of ideas in the construction of normative theories. In this sense, although the different procedures to formulate, test, and judge practical theories are still to be seen, there are some incipient examples that attest a certain social scientific eclecticism in the way those theories are taking shape in development communication. The clearest example is the integrative theory of behavior change (Cappella et al., 2001) cited above. Another important lead in this direction is the area of organizing for social change (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995, 1997; Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, & Papa, 2000). Development communication scholars in this area study the process of personal and community empowerment. They adopt different intellectual perspectives and multimethod approaches that are conducive to a practical theory of organizational communication for community development. These efforts are consonant with research on new social movements,¹⁵ a subject that may serve as a reference for theoretical inspiration in development communication (Huesca, 2001). Also, new attempts to rigorously conceptualize participatory processes in development communication programs are a very positive contribution to the field (Jacobson & Storey, 2004). In addition, the strategic use of information technologies through the establishment of public access facilities, usually called tele-centers, is leading the way to new conceptualizations on the role of new media in rural development by combining different intellectual approaches (Roman & Colle, 2003). Tele-centers appear as an opportunity for an integrated study of small media institutions, communication channels, and messages. The intersection of these three elements, a community-based organization that uses different media to create, search, and diffuse locally relevant content, makes tele-centers a unique laboratory for researchers interested in studying how communication facilitates the process of economic, social, and

cultural change, while presenting a great opportunity for theory testing and theory building (Roman, 2003).

The situation described in this chapter clearly illustrates a call for “theoretical and methodological tolerance” (O’Keefe, 1993, p. 81). This is not a new call or a new hope. In the initial years of this area of study, Lowenthal (1952–1953) envisioned that international communication “may even serve as an integrating force among many branches of the social sciences and humanities” (p. vii). Theoretical creativity in this field is incompatible with strict specialization or exclusivist rejection of different approaches to knowledge and understanding. A reductionist approach to social science, divided into irreconcilable isolated compartments and primitively satisfied with their own limitations, would only impoverish our understanding of the multiple problems and opportunities at stake in this field of study. That is especially the case in the interdisciplinary crossroads of development communication, an area of scholarly reflection that is also an area of social action.

NOTES

1. In this sense, it is worth noticing that “evaluation literature has rarely been concerned with the importance of theory in evaluating a program or with how to incorporate theory into evaluation processes” (Chen, 1990, p. 17). Evaluation research usually focuses on scientific methodological issues, without paying much attention to the theoretical implications of the programs examined.

2. Despite the different names this field of study has received, this paper will refer to it henceforth by the generic title development communication.

3. It is difficult to provide a general or unanimous definitions of development: “For most writers authentic development is perceived as being broadly concerned with the improvement of the conditions of existence of the majority of the population and particularly of the poorest (...) Any attempt to be more precise than this, in terms of specifying and prioritizing the conditions to be ameliorated and indicating the means of attainment, must be seen as a personal preference reflecting the individual’s values, and is unlikely to meet with general approval” (Hulme & Turner, 1990, p. 6). Probably reflecting his personal preference, Rogers (1995) defines development as “a widely participatory process of social change in a society intended to bring about both social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom, and other valued qualities) for the majority of people through their gaining greater control over their environment” (p. 127).

4. Communication, since its inception as a scholarly field of study in American universities, has endured the habit of discussing convergence and divergence, competing social science traditions, and intellectual separatism (Rogers & Chaffee, 1993). There is a bulky literature about field fragmentation, disciplinary identity crisis, ferment in the field, and every kind of possible criticism and self-criticism from any imaginable perspective, since Berelson (1959) published his pessimistic state of communication research back in the 1950s.

5. Rogers (1994) indicates this Cold War orientation when he explains Schramm’s work at Stanford University: “A further reason for Schramm’s interest in international communication was his strong sense of patriotism, coupled with a belief that the main post-World War II problems for the United States lay in its Cold War conflict with the Soviet Union and in the related issue of Third World development, which U.S foreign policy at that time defined as a struggle with the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of people in Latin America, Africa, and Asia” (p. 469).

6. “Entertainment-Education is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior” (Singhal & Rogers, 2001, p. 343).

7. Theories of the middle range are “theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behavior, social organization and social change” (Merton, 1968, p. 39). Theories of the middle range organize a body of findings from replicated studies into a structured system of principles. Theories framed in this way must be amenable to empirical testing and falsifiability (Chaffee & Berger, 1987).

8. The knowledge gap hypothesis states that higher socio-economic status segments of a population tend to acquire information at a faster rate than lower strata, so that the gap between these sectors tend to increase rather than decrease. The communication effects gap hypothesis is an extension of the knowledge gap: it expands the theory by focusing also on behavioral and attitudinal dependent variables, besides mere knowledge or information gain.

9. Despite the frequent criticism, there is no unanimous agreement about the general oversight of structural explanations in the media effects tradition. For example, Hornik (1989) also considers that, in contrast with the mostly psychological focus of American domestic literature on the effects of public information campaigns, “many scholars concerned with development communication look first to ‘system’ (or structural) explanations, secondarily to social network explanations and only reluctantly at individual psychological explanations” (p. 114).

10. The dependence theory, in the Marxist tradition of sociological analysis, criticized the early indifference to the historical context of developing countries and the inattention to the imperialistic inertia of the international macroeconomic system. “The myopia of developmental theorists, if not ideological, results from their tendency to view societies in static isolation without an adequate context in the international pattern of relationships” (Eisenstadt, 1976, p. 39).

11. It is important to underline, in any case, that critical theorists occasionally use empirical methods (Rogers, 1994).

12. “The poststructuralist analysis of development shows the ways in which the discourse of development has produced an efficient apparatus that systematically organizes the production of forms of knowledge and types of power, linking one to the other, in the production of Third World social reality” (Escobar, 2000, p. 166).

13. “In spite of participatory communication being a relatively recent topic of interest for academics, its story spans over the last fifty years, from the time Radio Sutatenza started in a remote area of Colombia and the Bolivian miners organized to set up community radio stations in their mining districts” (Gumucio-Dagrón, 2001, p. 8).

14. The issue here is not the multidimensional set of challenges posed to rigorous scholarship by socially relevant projects, although some of these challenges (time and budget constraints, conflicting stakeholder agendas, etc.) may have a significant effect on the way theory is used and the capacity for theoretical creativity in development communication, as indicated before.

15. “In the most general sense, new social movements have been defined as heterogeneous groups forming outside of formal institutions and operating in discontinuous cycles to forge collective meanings and identities that direct action” (Huesca, 2001, p. 421).

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