

Theorising participation as communicative action for development and social change

ABSTRACT

This article explores, through a basic conceptual-theoretical analysis and a review of relevant literature, the usefulness of employing the communicative action theory of Jürgen Habermas in theorising the elusive notions of participation and participatory communication theory as applicable to project based development (Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Chang & Jacobson, 2010; Jacobson, 2003; Jacobson & Storey, 2004; Ramella & De La Cruz, 2000; Servaes, 1999). The problem with defining participation is that it is ambiguous – both notionally and in actual contexts – as the concept comprises a myriad of dissimilar epistemologies, methodologies and imagined goals, while also representing disparate evaluative measures in thinking about and determining whether or not participation has actually occurred in its various applied settings (Chitnis, 2005; Huesca, 2008; Jacobson & Storey, 2004; McAnany, 2012; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Morris, 2003; Wilkins, 2000).

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, the participatory communication approach has retained its theoretical and practical status as the normative approach in the field of communication for development and social change (CFSC).

The extensive literature on the mentioned approach presents an extensive academic body of knowledge, applied research, and practitioner practice. A cursory glance at the literature indicates that the participatory approach counters the previous hegemony of modernistic thinking as well as the erstwhile application of socio-economic development. In this sense, the approach is the direct opposite of instrumentalist thinking and the prior use of communication in development and social change (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006; McAnany, 2010, 2012; Mefalopulos, 2008; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Morris, 2003; Servaes, 1999; Roman, 2005; Wilkins, 2000b).

The paradigmatic shift from the system to the participatory approach surfaced during the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1990s, participatory communication gained significant momentum as the notion of “development” was reconceptualised within the theoretical framework of Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation’s “another development”. After that, Jan Servaes’s third paradigm, known as the “multiplicity model of development” followed (Servaes, 1999:78–83). These new frameworks promoted *empowerment* strategies, and thus placed the emphasis on a philosophy of *participatory* practices and models of communication to effect meaningful social change (Servaes & Malikhao, 2008:163; Wilkins, 2000b:199–200).

Currently, most notably in the developing nations and communities of the world, there is hardly a development institution, campaign or intervention that does not claim to employ some sort of participation or participatory communication methodology in solving urgent social problems (Huesca, 2008:188–192; Jacobson & Storey, 2004:99–101; Morris, 2003:225–226; Wilkins, 2000a:1). The underlying tenet of thought in this regard is: by employing participatory strategies during development, all participants or subjects engage in so-called mutually beneficial learning experiences. These participants include both facilitators of social change or so-called *experts* as well as the *beneficiaries* of such change. This implies a project or program based approach to development, where an external party manages an intervention.

The primary claim is that such learning experiences could positively transform the lives of individuals and communities in need of change (Dutta, 2011:169). Scholars, development practitioners, the state and private entities accept that the strategic contribution of communication, in the form of people’s participation in their own development, is an essential and valuable component in the success of meaningful initiatives for social change (Chang & Jacobson, 2010:660; Wilkins, 2000b:197).

This form of communication contrasts sharply with the modernisation approach that exogenously imposed ethnocentric knowledge and pre-set development outcomes on participants employing top-down diffusion-based communication models (Chasi, 2011:41). The participatory approach

instead places a high premium on the self-determination of a community and its individual members. Such an approach also impact inhabitants' cultural realities, their individual resourcefulness, innate energy, and ingenuity. The approach enhances their intrinsic local know-how by helping them determine their particular development needs and assess their ability to implement the programmes or strategies that would best address such needs (Morris, 2003:226–227; Servaes & Malikhao, 2008:164).

Implications are that the core feature of the participatory approach is the focus on dialogical communication or the horizontal exchange of information and knowledge between local actors, and the other concerned partners in development (Dutta, 2011:170, 243; Morris, 2003:226). Dialogical communication can link individuals or communities that previously have been overlooked or marginalised in the creation of social change knowledge and related practices. With the aid of dialogical communication, these parties can become active partners in the communication processes.

As Melkote and Steeves (2001:337–339) point out, the emphasis on dialogue requires the structural transformation of the participants' political, social and cultural realities. This focus implies a reconfiguring of power that simultaneously allows (participatory) communication to effect these necessary transformations while at the same time employing (participatory) communication in an actual sense to resolve social problems. Dutta (2011:169–170) argues that participation should not just accelerate the attainment of quantifiable socio-economic and political changes. This approach should also enable individuals and communities to become cognisant of their non-material and existential realities. In other words, if authentic change is to occur, the psychological and mental obstacles and dependencies that constrain the possibilities of social change should also be identified and eventually overcome.

There is an apparent consensus in the discourse on the topic and widespread application of participation in social change programmes, namely participatory communication. Despite this development, researchers, planners, and practitioners agree that the concepts “participation” and “participatory communication” have a variety of applications. Using the vivid imagery of a kaleidoscope cylinder, White describes “participation” as colourful, since

[I]t changes its colour and shape at the will of the hands in which it is held. And just like that momentary image in the kaleidoscope, it can be very fragile and elusive, changing from one moment to the next. (White, 2003:8).

In other words, diverse approaches view communication, and concurrently the notion of participation, quite differently based on a complexity of the various development agendas, understandings, contexts, goals, processes and evaluative criteria (Carpentier, 2011:1–4; Chang & Jacobson, 2010:660–661; Huesca, 2008:188–193). The result of such a myriad conceptions and applications is a participatory approach to development that remains vastly under-theorised and fundamentally abstract, as well as empirically difficult to measure (Chambers, 1994; Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006; Jacobson & Storey, 2004; Melkote & Steeves, 2001).

Especially the theoretical multi-faceted nature of the participatory approach is an untenable position since history has proven that the theory and practice of development and communication are conjoined. As the image of the kaleidoscope above suggests, people's view of the world determines how they organise their environment, think about the world, and ultimately, act in this context (McAnany, 2012:6, 88). Bill Easterly (as cited by Quarry & Ramirez, 2009:39), for example, points out that the manner in which top-down commanding "planners" (as Bill Easterly, 2006, terms them), conceive development, ultimately determines the view and implementing of communication by the "searchers" or practitioners in effecting the desired development and social change. To deny this intrinsic link is to frame both conceptions, in a false dichotomy. The reason is that the conceptualisation of social change, in this case, participation, and participatory communication, is integral to the real ways in which meaningful social change is defined. Moreover, how social change is also defined ontologically and epistemologically is crucial to its implementation and eventual measurement (Dervin & Huesca, 1999:170; Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006; Melkote & Steeves, 2001).

Keeping this complexity in mind, the purpose of this article is to investigate the conceptual-theoretical underpinnings of the participatory approach to communication for development and social change. In doing so, the authors concur with previous studies arguing that the German social theorist and philosopher, Jürgen Habermas's (1984, 1987) theoretical framework of communicative action operates on both a theoretical and an empirical-methodological level. Such a framework can, therefore, be helpful in theorising participatory communication for social change (Barranquero, 2006; Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Chang & Jacobson, 2010; Jacobson, 2002; Jacobson & Storey, 2004; Ramella & De La Cruz, 2000; Roman, 2005).

Following the theoretical and empirical investigations of these scholars as mentioned above, this article reviews the central meta-theoretical claims of the communicative action theory that the participatory approach to development can be conceptualised from the perspective of *dialogical* communication. The discussion starts off with a brief introduction to the participatory framework to development communication, as well as an overview of the most debated conceptual-theoretical issues in this field. These outlines will lead to a review of Habermas's theory of the notion "communicative action", the conception of the public sphere and its related concept known as the "ideal speech situation" (ISS). The ISS is enacted by implicitly and reciprocally raising a matrix of four so-called validity claims, namely truth or fairness, sincerity of truthfulness, rightness, and comprehensibility (Habermas, 1984:99, 302–309.) It should be noted that Habermas's communication theory is read from a reconstructed view of critical theory.

1. DECONSTRUCTED AND RECONSTRUCTED DEFINITIONS AND APPLICATIONS OF PARTICIPATION

There is a broad range of literature that attempts to conceptualise a coherent theoretical framework for the participatory approach by focusing on the notions of "participation" and "participatory communication". These studies aim to uncover the place and purpose of theory within the broader discipline of development communication, in light of its recent outgrowth. Thus the objective is

to develop a participatory paradigm that has practical implications for processes of development and social change.

In outlining the place of theory in the participatory approach to development, Roman (2005:311–312) reasons that two major challenges should be considered. Firstly, and as noted in the introductory remarks of this article, historically development communication has been conceived as rather kaleidoscopic and ultimately ambiguous. Secondly, the field has typically been characterised as: “action-oriented” in kind, stressing a commitment and “willingness (and often professional responsibility) to do something, a drive for action beyond mere academic reflection” (Roman, 2005:311–312).

Furthermore, as a sub-field of communication studies, proponents of development communication have also witnessed the evolution of various communication theories within different historical and spatial situations (Mefalopulos, 2008:3–4). Development communication is a vast interdisciplinary field that consists of contrasting and competing definitions of communication, on the one hand, and development on the other. Therefore, it’s hard to provide a fundamental, coherent definition of the participatory communication approach to development (Gumucio-Dragon & Tufte, 2006:xv).

Roman (2005:312) points out that the difficulties mentioned above frustrate theory-building immensely. Theorists have to contend with the intellectual multiplicity of the field scattered with ontological and epistemological nuances, as well as specific intended outcomes. These aspects still resonate when scholars attempt to theorise a participatory approach to communication for social change. The issue is the mentioned conceptual confusion about the nature of social change combined with the uncertainty how a particular type of communication may facilitate such change. This challenge has a direct impact on the actual application of such ideas and eventually the manner in which one evaluates this concept of participation in real terms (Dervin & Huesca, 1999:177).

The type of questions that academics, practitioners, policy-makers, and governments, therefore, usually pose when exploring the notion and use of participation in social change are summarised by Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009:4) as follows:

- What does participation imply for different stakeholders?
- Why and for whom is participation crucial within social change processes?
- Who should participate?
- When is participation appropriate and for whom?
- Which difficulties typically restrict participation and according to whom are these identified as restrictions?
- How does one evaluate participation and participatory processes?

Chang and Jacobson (2010:661) cut through the complexity clutter that these questions raise by simply asking: What is participation and how can one measure it?

The authors, however, propose that these issues can be answered by starting with a basic etymological analysis of the concepts “participation” and “communication”. Chasi (2011:138) traces the etymological roots of “participation” back to its Latin origin in *participationem*, which means, “to take part”. He isolates the main root of the original Latin as *pars*, denoting “part, piece, side, share, assigned or granted a lot”, and *capere*, meaning “take, grasp, lay hold of, catch, undertake, be large enough for, or comprehend”. Through such etymological “slicing and dicing”, Chasi (2011:138.) explains that participation is historically conceived as “involv[ing] those who are considered to be capable or competent being granted a share in the common welfare.”

Swanepoel and De Beer (2006:28) remark that authentic “participation”, in its present-day guise, does not only mean people are merely “involved” in development or initiatives for social change. Rather, they are actively mobilised and engaged to participate fully in all activities of social change processes and at all levels at which these processes take place. Therefore, Chasi (2011:138) points out that the historical roots of “participation” raise the issue of politics, in other words, how a society is established and who can be seen as capable or competent enough to participate in its various forms of enactment. In this regard, Chasi (2011:138) points to crucial follow-up difficulties: How are society’s members, together with their respective individual or collective interests, enabled, or restrained to take part in society’s construction, its reproduction and its sustained well-being?

The grounding of these questions in the context of social change already implies exploring the different understandings of participation. This inquiry includes questions on who is considered capable of taking part in processes of social change, aside from the specific purposes that participation serves in such a setting. Comparably, these interpretations already pose questions about the configuration of societal power relations, as well as how these relations and the structuring of the social system validate the participants in processes for social change. Swanepoel and De Beer (2006:29) aim to discern what people do when it is said that they “participate”. In other words, how is their participation restricted or enabled to the fullest extent; on what level and during which stage of the processes; how can prefigured power balances be reconfigured during such participation; and when does participation simply become the empty talk in charge of co-optation and consultation? Chasi (2011:138) responds to the issues as mentioned earlier by explaining participation as “the granting and assigning of goods, rights and responsibilities” to individuals or groups for them to share in society’s common welfare. However, this response still implies that participation is not merely concerned with how society is enacted, but also how it is redressed, disrupted or transformed when social change is required.

Dutta reflects on the idea of participation and the difficulties of describing participation as:

serv[ing] as a key element in the processes of social change by introducing locally situated issues as well as the framing of the issues into the dominant discursive space of neoliberal governance. It is through participation in the local community forums that community members articulate their agendas of change, identifying the key issues and objectives of social change processes, as well as outlining the strategies and tactics for change. (Dutta, 2011:243).

Therefore, “participation” can be described in assessing how individuals and larger groups can interact “meaningfully in the world”, while also enabling them to critique those constructions or relations that oppress or limit them from prospering fully and equally as members of a society (Chasi, 2011:145, 146; Chitnis, 2005:236; Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006:29-31). Participation thus is more than just a means to a particular end. Instead, the interaction gains value as such by pointing towards a more ethical way of ensuring people’s actual involvement in their sustained wellbeing (Chasi, 2011:147). Mefalopulos (2008:11) typifies this type of interaction as “empowered participation”, describing it as a concept and strategy that allows the relevant stakeholders to consider issues of social change and possible goals co-operatively, and together plan how such goals should be achieved.

Considering “participatory communication”, Mefalopulos (2003:3–4) describes this action as inclusive of the theoretical frameworks and practices of communication employed in involving individuals or community members in the various stages of development. By identifying the Latin word *communis* (literally: “to make common”) as the roots of “participatory communication”, he argues that in the social change setting, participatory communication aims to “make something common, or to share”. In other words, through participatory communication, people share their different epistemologies, worldviews, understandings and perceptions about their cultural and developmental realities. This interpretation is in line with the notion of *communicāre*, which denotes the verb or action “to share, divide out, communicate, impart, inform, join, unite” and “participate in” (Harper, 2016).

In light of the descriptions above, some issues should be kept in mind when conceptualising the idea of participation and participatory communication in development and social change. These issues include an intricate set of ideas about aspects such as: agency; individual or collective needs and interests; development consequences or purposes; structural conditions and power configurations; local knowledge; capabilities; scale or level; stages of social change; self-reliance, the place of culture in the social change context; and evaluating whether “real” participation did take place (Chasi, 2011:46–147; Dervin & Huesca, 1999:177; Morris, 2003; Waisbord, 2001; Wilkins, 2000b). In other words, how can scholars and practitioners critically engage this matrix of ideas and practices of participation to facilitate meaningful, authentic, and sustained social change in people’s lived experiences and their particular environments?

The concept of participation gained much inspiration from the work of the Brazilian educationalist, social change practitioner and activist, Paulo Freire (1921-1997). His research and experiential knowledge about adult education and literacy programmes in the 1970s is invaluable. He investigated the ontological, political and pedagogical limits to communication models and strategies aimed at empowerment and positive social change in “Third World” settings (Barranquero, 2006:920; Freire, 1996; Morrow & Torres, 2002:3). Notably, Freire focused his research on the projects of individual emancipation from oppression that ultimately would deliver authentic social change. He sought to uncover how this emancipation could be achieved through a radical methodology of continual dialectical dialogue and interaction between development subjects engaged as equal partners in problem-posing and problem-solving processes (Barranquero, 2006:921; Freire, 1996:25, 67; Närman, 2006:98–99).

Freire's "dialogical pedagogy" approach denounces traditional models of "banking education" in which outside "teachers" or experts just transfer their "knowledge deposits" to local "learners" as passive, empty "receptacles" and "containers". The learners, in turn, simply need to store, memorise and re-apply the imparted knowledge deposits to transform their lives and change their environment (Freire, 1996:52–53). Freire argues that social, political or educative change is, however, impossible if such a conditioning mode of education is followed. The reason is that it deprives local actors and communities of the chance to reflect critically on their realities, circumstances and on whatever transformation they desire (Freire, 1996:60). As an alternative, Freire posits that dialogical praxis should replace "banking education" correcting the idea that outside experts can only dump their knowledge and worldviews on "passive" learners or recipients and hope that meaningful, real change will eventually occur.

According to Freire dialogue, new discursive structures and communication channels are created, which are then utilise to involve and engage beneficiaries. The latter should be guided to identify their needs for development and social change and the best way to organise themselves to address these needs (Melkote & Steeves, 2001:339). Freire (1996:73–74) views dialogue as a critical mode of thinking or reflection that evinces further key ideas without which communication; learning and ultimately action toward transformation cannot take place. In the dialogical mode the once dichotomous "teacher-of-the-student", or "subject-object" relationship, is reconfigured as a dialectical learner-teacher or subject-subject relationship. Such a relationship allows for critical reflection and awareness (or conscientisation) and learning through mutual problem-posing and problem-solving (Freire, 1996:61–62; Ramella & De La Cruz, 2000:276).

Central to the reasoning above is the contention that ordinary people (i.e., those local individuals or communities who must ultimately benefit from development initiatives) should participate in the decision-making structures, mechanisms, and processes. These decision-making tools are designed to promote their emancipation from controlling structures, policies, practices and values that may inhibit meaningful social change in their daily lives and particular circumstances (Melkote & Steeves, 2001:337).

In this sense, participatory communication necessarily means that the role-players involved in the development process should enjoy an equal chance to contribute fully to planning, enacting and evaluating the development process and its intended benefits. On the other hand, the local knowledge base of the local actors, as well as their extant social contexts, must also drive the desired processes of social change from beginning to end (Chitnis, 2005:230; Dervin & Huesca, 1999:170; Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006:xx; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009:2). Nevertheless, these particular challenges are compounded by the fact that conceiving and actualizing the principles underlying the notion of "participation", are far less exact or explicit in ontological, epistemological, policy and methodological terms than would be expected from such a normative approach (cf. McAnany, 2012:95–96).

2. PARTICIPATION AND DIALOGUE

This article maintains that communication, in the Freirean sense of a dialogical pedagogy, provides the fundamental analytic and methodological framework in which participation can occur that involves communication and social change. The participatory approach is therefore described as an empowerment framework and strategy whereby outside facilitators or various interested parties, as well as local communities and their members, engage in communication aimed at reciprocal understandings about development and processes of social change (Chang & Jacobson, 2010:661, 667; Mefalopulos, 2008; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009:2).

The interaction between the concerned parties is based on dialogical communication as a particular kind of participation whereby local actors share in the generation of different epistemologies and practices focused on development needs, desires or goals. Therefore dialogical communication facilitates and reinforces people's participation in their development (Servaes & Malikhao, 2008:93; Waisbord, 2001:18). Dialogical communication thus entails the most fundamental principle and mode of the participatory approach.

According to Freire's view of a dialogical praxis, social issues can only be addressed if education can dispense with the idea of "banking" or diffusion-based approaches. Freire maintains that "banking education" frustrates dialogue and consequently limits people's ability to know, name and understand their realities (Freire, 1996:64). Banking education negates peoples' agency to become acutely aware of their worlds, which enables them to convey their particular narratives. Conversely, participation in the form of dialogue enables individuals to become critical thinkers who can decide for themselves how to address or redress social difficulties (Freire, 1996:64–65; Ramella & De La Cruz, 2000:277).

In the context of development communication, critical dialogue encourages the respective parties to become cognisant of their unique lived circumstances and particular social development needs. This type of dialogue also suggests the best way to design appropriate solutions or interventions to remedy unwanted conditions or structures that impede the desired social change. Freire (1996:65) terms this approach "problem-posing education". He further describes it as a dialogic theory and method by which individuals can dynamically reflect and act in ways that affirm their value as human beings while helping them to effect real, meaningful change in their daily lives. Freire aptly summarises: "Yet only through communication can human life unfold" (1996:58).

Freire's pedagogy focuses particularly on a process where interpersonal interaction and engagement between so-called teachers and "students" occurs. In these communicative circumstances, the roles of teacher-student and student-teacher reverse dialectically (Freire, 1996:53). During this dialectical role-exchange and critical dialogical discussions, participants individually and collectively discover how to gain a mutual understanding of the other's diverse interests, needs and circumstances – and thereby of their own. Freire emphasises that individual self-consciousness is crucial during the process of social change. This awareness should allow individuals to reflect critically on external conditions that enable, or the restrain them. They should

also identify the inherent subjective situations that limit their real freedom to participate in the construction and reconstruction of their lives (Freire, 1996:53). In essence, the dialogical method intends to secure the individual's the freedom or emancipation from oppressive, unjust systems or structures.

After communicative and critical reflection, individuals must, however, take action to generate or create possible solutions or strategies through which to encourage change. The reason is clear: objective reality cannot be transformed simply through cognition (Freire, 1996:35). Only once action follows on reflection, then people are empowered to gain ownership of their lived experiences and environment, and ultimately their future (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2006:30; Waisbord, 2001:18). Chasi (2011:148) confirms this view: "Society achieves nothing and is devalued when it is crafted without regard for the individuals whose actions and interests give rise to the social."

In this regard dialogical communication thus serves as the tool and platform that help individuals, as members of a larger community or society, to improve their lives not only individually but also communally. As explained previously, the conceptual framework above has much in common with the theory of communicative action.

3. PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION AS COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

With the above discussions in mind, this article defines participatory communication as the active participation through the dialogue of individuals in all stages of social change processes intended to encourage their personal and collective development and transformation. According to this perspective, and in the context development and social change, participatory communication involves a process in which different external parties and local actors and communities attempt to share different knowledge-sets, worldviews and practices to (or intending to) reach mutual understanding.

Habermas's theory of communicative action provides a rich theoretical-conceptual framework that will aid a wider conceptualisation of the participatory approach's most fundamental idea, namely dialogue. As mentioned previously, Jürgen Habermas (1929-present) is a German philosopher whose large interdisciplinary intellectual design has covered a broad range of disciplines and related topics in the human and social sciences. As the leading contemporary exponent of the so-called second generation of the Frankfurt School's critical theorists, his interest lies in continuing the "incomplete project of modernity" by recovering its rationality thesis in the face of the various criticisms from postmodernists and other "radical critics of enlightenment" (Benhabib, 1997:39; DoP, 2005:256–257; Edgar, 2006:xiv-xvii; Finlayson, 2005:xi; McCarthy, 1984:v-vi; Ritzer & Goodman, 2003:561–564).

The mentioned communicative paradigm that Habermas has developed in the 1970s and 1980s drew the attention of scholars in development communication. Throughout his career Habermas has attempted to offer a reconstruction of the subject-centred rationality model, which is responsive to the desublimation of reason, deals with the disenchantment with modernity and rationalisation,

while re-evaluating the contradictions contained in modernity, all based on a communicative paradigm (Habermas, 1984, 1987; McCarthy, 1991:x; Rasmussen, 1990: 2, 4–5). As a counter to the consciousness paradigm the rationality thesis focuses on how the increasingly unstable capitalist society, based on instrumental reason, encroaches on all other forms of social life and actions, or rather, the lifeworld in which an “enrichment of life” is still possible (Habermas, 1984:8–15; Rasmussen, 1990:2; Ritzer & Goodman, 2003:563). The comprehensive, communicative action theory suggests the possibility of further conceptual developments of dialogue and deliberation as a participatory communicative means for social change or development.

An extensive body of research attempted to expand the leading work of Thomas Jacobson. He employed the communicative action theory as a more rigid, coherent theoretical framework to conceptualise participatory communication (Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Chang & Jacobson, 2010; Jacobson & Storey, 2004; Pan, 2012; Quinlan & Robertson, 2010; Ramella & De La Cruz, 2000). Whereas a number of these studies were conceptual in nature, others attempted to actualise certain meta-theoretical assumptions of the communicative action theory in the form of various empirical studies. Below follows a brief description of some of the findings of these studies.

Burnside-Lawry (2012), for example, explores how organisations can improve their listening competency when engaging with their stakeholders. This qualitative study was focused mainly on organisation-stakeholder communication but also investigated concepts in participatory communication, organisational communication, public relations, listening, and service quality (Burnside-Lawry, 2012:103–104). She adapted Jacobson’s model of participatory communicative action to study the mentioned stakeholder-organisation communication. Burnside-Lawry (2012:117) concludes that, in an organisational setting, corporations could improve their interaction with their stakeholders by applying the concepts of sustained dialogue, negotiation, and listening between the participants involved. She developed the Burnside Organisation Listening Competency Questionnaire as a result of the research. This questionnaire can be used for an in-depth analysis of listening competency in organisational-stakeholder communication.

Chang and Jacobson (2010) continued Jacobson’s original research on participatory communication as communicative action by designing an operational protocol to evaluate citizen’s participation in a city government’s policy-making process. By applying Habermas’s framework of validity claims and his “ideal speech situation” (ISS), these authors conclude that citizens perceive to have participated in policy-making that affects their daily lives, when they have the opportunity to dialogue freely and fully with one another as well as could express their diverse perspectives and reach a mutual understanding (Chang & Jacobson, 2010:676).

In the same vein, Pan (2012:iii-iv) studied how Chinese citizens – in the context of social and political science – confer legitimacy to the following structures: leadership, collective decision-making groups, organisations and government. For Pan, such legitimacy is based on apparent administrative effectiveness and efficiency (i.e. quality of the outcomes of policy decisions). Pan compares this legitimacy with the contribution of procedural and deliberative communication (in a Habermasian framework) to the quality and legitimacy of bureaucratic outputs from these

structures. Considering Habermas's communicative variables, Pan's findings show that the government's performance and speech conditions (cf. Habermas) were clearly related to people's perception of the legitimacy of the government decisions and its consequences. Additionally, the study underlines the role of communication in political legitimation by concluding that perceived speech conditions regulate the relationship between assessing government's performance and its perceived legitimacy.

Ramella and De La Cruz (2000:274–278) explore the issue of a community's participation in health promotion, and the communicative practices and power relations that underlie it, by viewing this participation concerning three theoretical frames. These include a combination of literature on community psychology, Habermas's critique of instrumental rationality and Freire's critical pedagogy. These researchers maintain that epistemologically speaking, participatory health communication is a volatile subject field. According to them, the "participative turn" in health communication requires a critical examination of the different aspects of participants' agency and subjectivity and how these conceptualisations form and position understandings of "participation" (Ramella & De La Cruz, 2000:272).

Following Habermas's design, they conceptualise participation as communicative action, arguing that it can occur in everyday communicative situations as a procedural, intersubjective mode of interaction that negates instrumentalist reason and purposive communication. By choosing communicative action as their theoretical reflexive lenses, they reread Freire's conception of critical consciousness and the intersubjective use of communication as a means to restore individual and collective agency (Ramella & De La Cruz, 2000:276). These researchers conclude that participation in the context of health communication policies and initiatives can only occur if all interested parties engage with one another according to "procedural engagements" that enable all participants to voice their concerns and needs (Ramella & De La Cruz, 2000:282–283).

Barranquero (2006:920–922) and Jacobson (2002, 2003) provide useful summaries of theoretical convergences and continuities between Habermas and the participatory approach inspired by Freire, based on dialogical communication.

Essentially, Habermas proposes communicative action as a unique type of dialogue aimed at co-ordinating different actors' diverse perspectives, i.e., to (or "intending to") create mutual understanding among participants (Habermas, 1987). According to Chitnis (2005:230), participatory communication entails empowering individuals and communities through dialogue. Based on this view communicative action could facilitate and maintain a particular social relationship between discussants who collectively seek to address a particular social issue. From this viewpoint, rationality is seen as intersubjective human communication instead of instrumentalist, monological reasoning. For Habermas, communicative action is fundamental to human existence and communication, while taking place in the "public sphere".

He describes this sphere as the "social realm" in which private individuals or autonomous groups gather and freely discuss matters of general concern with a view to forming a public opinion that

would influence governmental decision-making (Habermas, 1989). Although Habermas's concept of a public sphere could be read mainly as a historical category, in contemporary terms it could be seen as covering a broad variety of settings and formations (Habermas, 1989:xviii). For example, on the macro-scale of development, the mass media is often used as a deliberative forum, facilitating discussion among private and bureaucratic entities. As the "fourth estate", the mass media operates as the intermediary between citizens and the state by holding political leadership accountable for their decisions and performances. On a micro-level, a public sphere can take on any form of interpersonal communication that emerges when individuals communicate in a face-to-face or other mediated form.

Communicative action comprises two meta-theoretical categories. Firstly, Habermas explains that for communicative action to take place, formal pragmatics encloses certain criticisable validity claims which function as the ontological foundations of mutual understanding (Habermas, 1979:1–67; 1984:664; Morrow & Torres, 2002:41–42). Habermas maintains that he:

... shall speak of communicative action whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding (Habermas, 1984:285–286).

According to Habermas, if language facilitates mutual recognition, then particular universal structural components must underlie its use (cf. Jacobson, 2003). These are known as validity claims and include the claims to a) truth; b) rightness; c) subjective sincerity; and d) comprehensibility. When two or more individuals communicate they implicitly or often consciously judge one another's statements about whether their utterance is: a) factually accurate; b) reflects the true, honest intentions of the speaker; c) is appropriate given the normative setting in which the statement is, and d) is clear and intelligible (Habermas, 1979:58–59).

For Habermas, mutual understanding can only be reached if parties reciprocate these four validity claims during communication and interaction. Thereby the possibility should be kept in mind that any of these claims can be problematised or challenged at any time during open discussion. Essentially this conception of communication as a communicative rationality, argues that communicators can only construct knowledge and devise action plans about social issues, once these interlocutors have dialogued or engaged intersubjectively about raised issues, and only if the "force of the better argument" prevails (Habermas, 1984:10, 18; 1990:88–89). Validity claims, therefore, regulate human communication and interaction toward mutual understanding and the coordination of possible further action flowing from the understanding.

The second set of conditions for communicative action refers to the so-called "ideal speech situation" (ISS). Habermas points out that it is not sufficient simply to raise and challenge validity claims. Rather participants should also be able to enter into discussions with the prospect that certain speech conditions will prevail. These conditions enable authentic, unconstrained dialogue and the expectation is that the goal of this form of dialogue is understanding or perhaps even agreement. Only once validity claims have been raised and met, and speech conditions have been satisfied, can it truly be said that meaningful communicative action has taken place.

These speech conditions include the following regulations:

- All participants have equal opportunity to express any assertion they wish.
- Participants have equal opportunity to challenge any statement they want.
- All participants can participate fully in discussions without restriction concerning either the topics or the participants.
(Habermas, 1987:126; 2001:97–99; Jacobson & Storey, 2004:103).

Specifically stated, the ISS stresses the dialogical nature of knowledge in describing how problematised validity claims can be negotiated consciously rather than intuitively (Habermas, 2001:100–101). Just as the term would suggest, the ISS imagines ideal conditions under which balanced discourse or metacommunication can take place. The ISS thus sets the scene for open and transparent communication between participants and continued action towards understanding.

4. CONCLUSION

This article aimed to highlight some of the difficulties associated with theorising the participation approach to communication in the context of development and social change projects and programs. Essentially, the field of communication for social change has a longstanding conceptual-theoretical incoherence that complicates the task of defining what participation precisely entails. This theoretical confusion is the outcome of an extended, rich historical tradition of divergent thinking or theorising about the place and contribution of communication in development and social change (McAnany, 2012:87–88). Furthermore, various conflicting definitions of the concept of “development” continue to confuse the communication practice’s overall contribution to effecting social change.

In the same vein, the theoretical challenge is not only limited to divergent conceptual thinking on participation, participatory communication, and development. The problem also extends to the realm of practicing or acting on behalf of development (Roman, 2005:312). The participatory paradigm remains a conceptually and practically imprecise framework, and McAnany (2012:95) describes the difficulty of expressing its exact identity as the need to identify “the role of theory in defining and justifying practice.”

Informed by various conceptual and empirical studies based on the theory of communicative action, this article examined certain key conceptual-theoretical categories of communicative action. These categories could be useful in defining and in evaluating participation and participatory communication within the context of social development (Chang & Jacobson, 2010; Jacobson & Storey, 2004).

In a developmental communication setting where an external party and beneficiaries are usually present, validity claims and the ISS permit all parties to come to the table with the expectation that the discussants’ particular development needs, perspectives, and goals will be open for

discussion and negotiated before any action takes place. As Freire (1996:69) points out, if social transformation is to take place, this right to “name the world” does not belong to a fortunate few. Rather it is the right of every human being to be able to voice fully, dialogue and negotiate their understandings of the mediated world to change it eventually. According to this theoretical frame, all participants (benefactor and beneficiary) have the basic human right and are encouraged, to participate in an open forum (i.e. “public sphere”) and to communicate about any given social topic in an intersubjective manner with the expectation of reaching consensus.

No one individual or group, however, has the right to dominate the dialogue, the relationship under construction or the outputs of such deliberations. In practical terms, the ISS holds the potential to actualise a dialogical forum to facilitate ethical participation. Participants are free to raise their concerns on a particular development situation or topic and likewise are free to challenge one another’s utterances and assumptions about the mentioned issues or contexts. In practice, this means that multiple individual perspectives and interests are negotiated (i.e., by the force of sound reasoning) before development plans or campaigns are devised and implemented.

Since communicative action supports open discussion, it also provides space for participants from a diversity of social and cultural backgrounds to converse. This unrestricted debate means that the knowledge exchanged through such deliberations are social or inter-subjective. The decision-making on development and plans flowing from these discussions are based on collective learning and joint planning, and not simply the strategic, asymmetrical exchange of information or perspectives between “experts” informing “recipients” – typical of a modernistic approach to communication. Participatory communication works from the presupposition: only when all concerned participants or actors were given the symmetrical opportunity to problematize, reflect and act from their particular perspectives would authentic communicative action have been realised. This signifies that communicative action and the ISS provide the necessary regulative ideals and conditions for empowered participation to take place.

Regarding the scale or level at which participation occurs, Jacobson and Storey (2004:106) consider the conception of the public sphere particularly useful insofar as communicative action can take place in a variety of settings or social realms on either micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Participatory communication, read from the perspective of communicative action, could occur in small-groups, at the community level, or even on a national scale where political debate takes place, or large-scale transformation programmes are devised. Moreover, these levels can even be considered as interrelated as for example, development and politics simultaneously take place on a community and a national level. In addition, development projects can vary in size (thus also level) at different times during its various stages of maturity (Jacobson & Storey, 2004:106, 116).

Nevertheless, raising and meeting validity claims and maintaining ideal speech conditions do not suggest that agreement will realise in each case, or that all forms of communication takes place in good faith. Habermas intends that these speech acts and ideal conditions should moderate communication in a procedural sense instead of a strategic one where only certain individuals’ goals and needs are met. Therefore, Habermas also differentiates between communicative action

that takes place in the lifeworld, and strategic action that belongs to the system world. Whereas communicative action is process-oriented, strategic action aims for success and effectiveness; hence it is goal-oriented. This is especially important in development programs where there is an external intervention, as external partners are usually goal-oriented.

From this perspective, communicative action also allows participants to the development process to identify dominating or restrictive incidents of social action that only satisfy egotistic, systematic development solutions or goals. Though validity claims and speech conditions are seldom met in the real world, these conditions still allow a process of communicative action aimed at mutual understanding. As Jacobson (2003:9) explains, communicative action entails participation since it is not just a “means-to-an-end” mode of communication, rather it is valuable in itself by allowing all interests to be considered and also deliberated cooperatively. From the conceptual view posed by Habermas, it is, therefore, on the other hand, possible to identify non-participatory communicative practices or situations where one party or dominant group dictates the discourse or praxis on development (Jacobson & Storey, 2004:106).

It is, however, not sufficient to conceptualise participation in isolation from development settings in the real-world (Jacobson & Storey, 2004:116). Future studies should encourage additional critical inquiry on the relevance and pragmatism of employing Habermas’s theory as a conceptual framework. Such a framework may be employed to identify the true nature of participation, and to explore how participation, based on communicative action, can be empirically measured during the different stages of planning, implementing and evaluating.

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