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Communication and Engagement for Social Justice

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From mass to interpersonal media, from citizen to governmental or corporate interactions, a communication for peaceful social change involves different screens, spaces, creative resources, means of expression and actors. All utterances, all messages, all images – both through direct experience (interpersonal communication) or through representation (mediated communication such as art, media or education) – relate together in the identities of individuals and their participation in private and collective spheres. These communication scenarios can become empowering processes when defined from the agency of individuals and geared towards social justice. The communicative action of present-day citizen movements demonstrates this point.

In this light, this essay focuses on communication's role of empowering civil society's participation in transformative political peaceful actions for social justice. We explore how communication can help build awareness of social injustice and jumpstart and maintain such social action through continued engagement. On the one hand, this study aims to better understand how society can become aware of the violent and unjust effects of certain actions, their cultural and symbolic consequences and how they are connected to social injustice, especially of certain communicative behaviors. On the other hand, we promote a communicative and educative project that addresses violence and injustice by developing sensitivity to the suffering of others. We argue that it is this feeling of responsibility that leads people to act in order to eradicate such practices.

As proposed by the Peruvian communication activist and theorist Rosa M^a Alfaro, the aspiration of a communication for social change is to share a communicative wisdom that can potentially transform social movements into moving societies. She speaks about empowered societies characterized by an

“illusion of being informed,” by a “communicative demand” based on “information, wisdom and communication.” In order to approach innovative ways to build empowering communication, we have to consider variables from identity (individual cognitive and emotional models) to mass communication discourse design. It is important to emphasize the communicative elements that produce disengagement and to also look at the influence of values, emotions and beliefs in such processes or in those of pro-social engaged behaviors.

We focus on raising awareness of the ways beliefs act as filters between reality and society. These belief filters may provoke fear if the ideologies of others pose a threat to one’s own. Potentially, they act as barriers between individuals, different cultures and social actors. In recognition of this, we need to first become aware of these filters and second to transform them. This requires reconstructing such violent frames, which stem from our fears and are reproduced in ideologies, behaviors and culture. Our final goal would then be to work with “engagement frames.”

As highlighted by narrative power analysis, there are certain frames that constitute a hegemonic symbolic violence. Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning suggest that in order to make systemic social changes, change agents must understand the stories and institutions that underlie contemporary social systems. Actors need be aware of these stories and institutions and also understand how thinking and behavior is influenced and configured by them. These ideas underscore the consequences of symbolic constructions and the citizen’s power of changing hegemonic/conventional wisdom, particularly when it is violent for others or for oneself. As Kevin G. Barnhurst states, political communication “grows out of processes but also out of how actors and collectivities imagine politics, envision communication, and leave traces of those images in the actions they take.”

In these communication scenarios, complex cognitive processes are activated. To understand how they work, it is useful to employ “moral sensitivity,” a concept from cognitive psychology. The empirical studies of Jonathan Haidt and James R. Rest have demonstrated that such sensitivity implies the ability to detect an ethical dilemma and foresee how our actions will affect others. In

parallel, our previous empirical research, which focuses on engendering social justice sensitivity, has shown that a message can have the capacity to prompt an ethical judgment in the individual as well as certain emotional reactions. This rational and emotional circuit functions as the trigger that activates citizen action when the emotions are empathic, such as compassion or indignation. In this regard, violence has to be defined as immoral and unjust so that it activates these empowering emotions. Thus, a social justice sensitivity implies the ability to empathically understand the presence of violence. It also entails becoming emotionally involved (indignation) and also cognitively involved (through beliefs of the injustice and the immorality of that violence) in order to orient individual and collective action to avoid or transform violence. Accordingly, beliefs of immorality and injustice have a direct effect on social engagement processes.

When applying this to present-day contexts of social action, we are confronted with two scenarios. First, and mainly as a result of Non Governmental Development Organizations (NGDOs) communicative tradition, social action is framed as aid, suggesting a strong link between social causes and charity. Second, occupy movements have started to introduce new frames of injustice and indignation. Therefore, when thinking about fostering people's engagement with social justice, it is important to take into account two associated difficulties: on the one hand, the public's familiarity with the frame of charity (associated with positive behaviors) and, on the other, their relative unfamiliarity with unjust and immoral frames. Additionally, we cannot forget the mainstream construction of social movement protests as social unrest. The social imaginary of charity as it has been constructed involves vertical superiority moral relations. This makes it counter-cultural and difficult to provide alternative social justice frames necessary for raising awareness and engaging people in social justice movements.

To change this, it is necessary to activate certain emotions of guilt and pity as well as indignation and condemnation. Emotions of guilt and pity have been socially constructed in communication for aid for a long time, while indignation and condemnation have recently been introduced by new social movements. Previous research suggests that questions of social justice are enhanced when accompanied by a condemnation of the situation and by the example of other society members acting for justice in relation to them.

Therefore, we find a pull factor for other people in street protests, such as the Arab Spring, the 15M or Occupy movements.

This is a possible path for overcoming charity frames that restrain equal and just social transformation processes and for introducing others of equality and collective action for justice. This shift from charity relations to relations of social justice needs to recover values of equality, social justice and broadmindedness, which are not individualistic or consumerist focused ones. These positive pro-social values lead, according to Nicolas Sireau, to “collective action frames.” Andrew Darnton and Martin Kirk highlight this idea in their study of the framing of poverty. They focus on how to increase the UK public engagement for eradicating it. Collective action frames emphasize self-determination. Self-determination refers to the individual’s sense of agency to make change for the betterment of society (empowerment and self-awareness). From this perspective, we must reject values of self-enhancement and incorporate values of self-transcendence, which are linked to values of personal openness to change. According to Tim Kasser and Richard M. Ryan’s Aspiration Index Life-Goals, this approach to life has the potential to increase a feeling of agency, one connected to affiliation and community feelings.

It is difficult to consciously access and transform these deep frames. How can we be conscious of the frames and beliefs that influence our behavior? In order to detect and interpret these types of violence as unjust and immoral, how can we be aware of how they relate to institutional, political, structural or cultural violence? How can we visibilize them in order to activate an emotional response of indignation that would in turn lead to engagement in actions for social change? And, how can we do so in a re-framing process that targets the aforementioned frames and values?

We propose a conscious peace education as a learning method for self-consciousness. People learn through edu-communicative processes to “become aware of,” to understand the ways in which people participate in violence and injustice –both on an individual and a societal basis. Communicative and educative processes can make us conscious of the frames

that are constructed by our beliefs and of how we use them to interpret and incorporate (or reject) new beliefs. Conscious peace education focuses on acquiring attitudes and abilities necessary for modifying and incorporating new frames when the frames we employ become violent through, for example, the exclusion of others' identities, ways of life or collective proposals. This conscious peace education involves formal, non-formal and informal contexts, including communication and entertainment.

This self-awareness is linked to a global vision of the pain or damage human beings can cause. Developing a social justice sensitivity makes us sensitive to, and conscious of, ethical dilemmas, and empowers us to work together on new dynamic, plural and inclusive frames. Transforming individual consciousness can foster new beliefs that co-construct meaningful changes in the dominant ideological fabric (frames). The underlying goal is for conscientious people to recognize that a certain tension emerges from judgments and the imposition of one's own ideology. This tension results from a fear of not being right, of not being recognized, of losing the frontiers of our ideological frames of reference. Such tension causes very different and subtle nuances of violence. Therefore, for engagement processes, it is vital that non-violent social change processes incorporate the fact that our frames of reference are just one reference frame, but not an all-encompassing frame under which we all have to live. This acceptance decreases tension and allows us to open up empathically to other ways of seeing and framing. Through discussion and acceptance, we can understand the reference frames of others. Through these dialectics of understanding and positive vulnerability inherent in allowing, daring and trusting, peace can be projected from the individual to the community and then back again. It also potentially influences how we represent, frame and interpret reality.

From this approach, communication for social justice is linked to self-conscious education processes. This self-awareness development addresses the individual's capacity for increasing their attention to their inner cognitive processes. It also focuses on how these processes can create violent cultural patterns or non-violent ones for creating collective action frames. Defending our own beliefs can generate violence. By allowing others to question our beliefs, frames and structures, we reduce the tendency to defend ourselves from the

other and thus release inner tension. If violence feeds violence, our need to defend our own beliefs also feeds mistrust and a stronger desire to defend them. These beliefs are justified by a constructed culture. Therefore, the broader the reference frame, the lower the inner tension resulting from our emotional defensive answer. Embracing these broader frames, we are more conscious of the emotional processes that take place, and our fear of losing our references decreases. These awareness processes result in more peaceful and non-violent social relations.

In present-day communication scenarios, these edu-communicative processes for social justice face other barriers, which previous research measuring people's engagement has detected. First, people's agency is at times restrained because of a feeling of powerlessness that results from a perception that previous citizen initiatives did not achieve the desired outcomes. Second, some people lack a deep understanding of the structural and systemic actions needed to change the underlying social control frames and policies. Many times this is due to the public's distance from the areas or topics approached and their complexity and long-term variations. Third, people lack deep and practical knowledge of the complexity of the issues related to social justice and the effects of social and collective decisions and actions. In other words, citizens have not been trained in a collective cultural wisdom, which leads to stereotyping, misunderstanding the roots and nature of certain issues or not getting involved in their effective solutions. Therefore, this cultural wisdom should be integrated through conscious educative communication.

This edu-communicative project requires bottom-up and top-down learning processes. We need to progressively work on abilities and narratives that help us become aware of the frames that delimit our cognition, decisions and actions and increase our cognitive flexibility in order to embrace difference and a multiplicity of worldviews. At the same time, we have to spread, negotiate and incorporate new frames based on peace values. Working towards higher levels of consciousness allows every individual to detect rigidity in their beliefs, values and deep frames and to explore how, where and when they cause violence to others. We propose holistic models that not only involve awareness of the

symbolic constructions of cultural products and public and private discourses, but also the deep cognitive frames they legitimize and through which they are processed. All together, they configure our social, economic and political (international) relations. This interdisciplinary applied project can only be realized by working consistently and in a coordinated way through communication, education and political and legal action.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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