Why Opposites Don't Always Attract: Reflections on Binaries and their Implications for Decolonising Development Communications and Education

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that addressing binaries is an important aspect of decolonising development communication and development education (DE). I draw on some key points emerging in research I am currently conducting on ethical communications among international development NGOs in Ireland. Though critique of binaries in development education is often focused on the binaries of 'North-South' or 'local-global', in this article I address other binaries common to development education and communications such as 'means and end', 'real and not real', 'positive vs negative' and 'us and them'. Exploring their implications, I argue that binary thinking doesn't only limit our field of vision but it distorts it, often leading to damaging consequences. This article is not designed to present a full discussion of binaries but to highlight some of the processes at play in relation to them. The hope is that it may encourage us to critically reflect on the effects of what we say and the stories we use in global education as well as in development communications.

Key words: Development Communication; Development Education; Decolonising Development; Binaries; Development Discourses; and Representations.

Introduction

Concerns about binary thinking and its implications for development education (DE) have been mentioned in this journal over many years. These address the binaries of global North and South, which are discussed widely, including by Beals (2013) and Downes (2013), and those of the local and the global (Bryan, 2011) and developed/developing (Briskman et al., 2013). Despite many

comments on the problems with binary thinking, there has been very little detailed discussion of it or of why it's a problem. At the heart of these concerns, and of my focus on binaries here, is an understanding that the terms, phrases or labels that we attach to things to simplify or categorise them all matter. They are influenced by, and they affect, how we see the world and how we relate and act within it. Words literally 'make worlds'.

My concern here is with the prevalence of binaries in the language of development as well as with the binary thinking associated with it. To see or construct something in a binary is to set it up in relation to another as a 'two', like a dualism, but even more than that, it is to position these two as opposites or as polar ends of a spectrum. What happens when we construct the world in these oppositional terms? What is its impact on the relationships and practices constructed around them? Through this article, I hope to encourage more reflection on this issue, especially in relation to development communications and education.

My main argument is that binary language and thinking - and their associated assumptions, hierarchies, simplifications, reductions, oppositional standpoints, dualisms and separations – need to be understood, critiqued and shifted in order to decolonise development communications and DE. By decolonising development communications and DE, I mean challenging colonial and modernist discourses and representations around development. This involves understanding and addressing the cultural, discursive, organisational and institutional processes which produce and reproduce forms of communication based on colonial assumptions, exploitative relationships and exclusionary practices and creating spaces for alternatives based on inclusivity, respect, equality and sustainability. In practice, the term 'development communications' is used to simultaneously apply to a specific area of professional practice within organisations, i.e., around communicating messages, public relations (PR) and social media, as well as to how organisations communicate across different areas of its work, i.e., fundraising communications, communications in and through campaigning, advocacy and education, and communications through different means, e.g., social media.

Across these different areas, decolonising development communications and DE is hugely challenging as it requires significant change in how development is spoken about, the images used, the stories told and in the underlying assumptions upon which development relationships and practices are constructed. It requires much more critique of accepted notions of development (arguments, assumptions, discourses etc), and active engagement with anti-racism, feminism and critical pedagogy, as well as shifting the frameworks of meaning and the language practices that we often rely on.

Though the complexities of many of these issues are outside the scope of this article, I offer some brief illustrations of why it is so important to address binaries in efforts to decolonise development communications and DE. I argue that binaries tend to:

- Establish hierarchies in development thinking, organisation and practice which emphasise the interests of some over others;

- Polarise positions around contested areas of development practice and communications. This makes critique from apparently opposite sides of an argument difficult and it stifles negotiation around meanings and mutual learning;

- Simplify, individualise and/or depoliticise communications around complex realities resulting in damaging practices associated with limiting and distorting perspectives and with stereotyping;

- Fix identities which encourage entrenchment rather than change and practices around risk-aversion rather than transformation.

I begin with a brief discussion of binary thinking before exploring a tension highlighted in my research between fundraising and DE. I discuss its implications with reference to the binary language of 'means and ends', 'the real versus the not real', 'the positive versus the negative' and 'us and them'. The main purpose of this article is to encourage development educators and

communicators to question our assumptions and our use of binary terms and thinking in our own practice.

What is binary thinking?

Robbins explains that though classification can be helpful, binary thinking 'pits two opposites against each other and also includes the implicit hierarchical assumption that one of the two is inherently more valuable than the other' (2015: 1). She argues that it is applied not only to how different individuals and groups of people have been classified, often leading to 'prejudice, discrimination, and oppressive policies and practices toward the less favoured group', but also to 'opposing ideas and methods of practice' (Ibid.). Thus, we are all too familiar in DE and development communications with the commonly used binaries of place as well as those of identity – us/them, black/white, gay/straight, men/women; of power – structure/agency, powerful/powerless, agent/victim; of development status – developed/developing, donor/beneficiary, NGO/community; of being and knowledge – rationality/emotionality, mind/body, real/not real; and of what counts - measurable/not measurable, individual stories/context, the positive/negative. Each of these serves to fix categories which are based on separatist and hierarchical assumptions which give primacy to one over the other and which produce and reinforce stereotypes. It is one thing or the other, either/or type thinking, which undermines the range of perspectives and experiences on any issue. A 'binary view of development', according to President Michael D. Higgins, 'can all too easily slide into a sense of condescension grounded in unspoken feelings of superiority. At the very least, it divides the world in two, with one side depicted as helpless victims, and the other as their well-meaning saviours' (cited in Zomer, 2015: 148). Rather than the rainbow, binaries give us just 'black' and 'white'.

Scholars from different traditions have been critical of binary thinking and its associated stereotyping (Hall, 1997) and hierarchies (Derrida, 1998), its colonial superiorities and fixed, oppositional identities (Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994), as well as its gender and other identity limitations (Butler, 1990). Scholarship on decolonising development and on post-

development (Sachs, 1993; Escobar, 1995; Ziai, 2015) has contributed significantly to attempts to move beyond binaries in development discourse and representations, to question fixed and separate identities, to challenge universality and homogenisation and to take account of fluidity, complexity, diversity and nuance. And all of this while acknowledging power relations and trying to open up understanding and different knowledge systems rather than closing down meaning. With reference to Grossberg's work, for example, Kumar highlights the role that postcolonial theory has played in going 'beyond fixed notions of identity by deconstructing binary oppositions like colonizer–colonized, Western–Eastern, or dominant– subordinate', implicating 'both sides of such divides in the historical and geographical contexts of colonialism' (2014: 382). Such critiques of binary thinking resonate with Stein and Andreotti's approach to decolonisation which they understand as involving:

> "diverse efforts to resist the distinct but intertwined processes of colonization and racialization, to enact transformation and redress in reference to the historical and ongoing effects of these processes, and to create and keep alive modes of knowing, being, and relating that these processes seek to eradicate" (2016).

So, what does all this mean in practice for the language we use in development communications and DE? And why do I think it is so important?

Beyond the tensions between fundraising and education

My interest in this topic has recently been cemented in the process of undertaking research on ethical communications among international development NGOs (IDNGOs) in Ireland (Dillon, 2021). This research has been undertaken in conjunction with Dóchas, the network of IDNGOs in Ireland. It involved qualitative research with over sixty participants from management and staff of IDNGOs, including fundraising, communications, education and campaigns personnel, as well as with participants from migrant organisations, academia and other key informants.

More specifically, this article emerged from concerns I had arising from repeated reference by research participants to a long-standing tension between fundraising imperatives 'on one side' and the work of DE, campaigning and advocacy (and sometimes communication or public engagement) 'on the other'. Some of these issues were captured by one communications' manager who commented:

> "you'll get those conflicts, so it's like both sides are defending their interests. So I suppose it's to be expected, you'd want that cut and thrust, so that always the coms and advocacy side of the house is trying to push back, what we're trying to do is achieve a power balance but it doesn't always work".

It was described by an educator within an IDNGO in the following terms:

> "there's a lot of tension in all agencies about fundraising and the department I'm working in… I do understand the other team has a different brief, and they're using the means that have been proven to work that I don't happen to agree with always. I think we could be much braver… in terms of targeting people but I have no influence on that".

The inevitability of this tension and that fundraising imperatives usually seem to 'win out in the end' has often been spoken of, at least in my research, in near fatalistic terms. One communications manager explained that though she can have some influence on the images and messages used in fundraising communications, 'there is always some fundraising communication that I'd be uncomfortable with. I think there's always going to be that tension'.

What can be done when different interests are consigned to the position of opposites battling against each other for power? What happens when the immediate interests of fundraising are seen to override the long-term aims of education or campaigning?

Listening to research participants over the past months encouraged me to question the implications of understanding this tension in these binary terms. If fundraising is seen to be on one side and DE on the other, for example, as if in binary opposition, with communications sometimes somewhere in the middle, it would seem very difficult for DE to overcome what research participants see as its subordinate influence on communications within IDNGOs. This binary between fundraising and education can also lead to an assumption that the images and messages used in DE are beyond question and that problems only exist in relation to the 'worst forms of stereotyping' or 'the flies in the eyes' type of images associated with extreme fundraising ads. Such thinking has led to a lack of questioning of new marketing techniques that IDNGOs use, according to Cameron and Kwiecien (2021: 4), where:

> "the underlying narratives about poverty and development continue to portray the global North as a benign set of actors with the ultimate agency to solve the problems of poverty and injustice through charity and self-interested consumption".

It has also resulted in insufficient critique of the language and representations used in DE.

This tension (or binary) of fundraising versus education has other related binary associations, language and arguments, between 'means and ends', what is regarded as constituting 'the real and not real', between 'positive and negative' representations and the 'us and them' trope mentioned above. I discuss each of these in turn below in order to illustrate some of the critiques of binaries I mention above.

Means and ends – establishing hierarchies

As indicated above, when fundraising is seen as separate from education, it can imply (and justify) that the role of fundraisers is different to those of educators, that its aims are different, and often that they take precedence over those of education because of their immediacy and significance. In my research, most

participants identified fundraising as the most (or second most after the organisation's values) significant influence on the images and messages used in IDNGO communications. As a result, in light of competition for funds and in an increasingly globalised fundraising market, many communications and fundraising staff involved in my research seem to reluctantly accept the argument that the 'end justifies the means'. They argue that funds have to be raised by whatever means have most financial results. Though they aim to be 'as ethical as possible', some fundraisers concede that in order to raise funds, they often have to rely on simplistic messages and stereotypical images. As one fundraising manager put it:

> "You really have to have pretty hard-hitting images in order for people to respond to it. It is the way it works… the only thing that really works from an investment perspective is the hard-hitting ones on TV. That is a bit of duality in the work we do, on one hand, we don't want to upset people but on the other hand, we need to make sure that the budgets we're using for fundraising are being used in the best possible ways".

Some educators within IDNGOs involved in my research talk about trying to introduce complexities in the face of their organisations' overly-emotive and individualised communications. At the same time, they often have to accept the murky reality that their work is based on funds sometimes raised through problematic means, while they fear that it compromises the work they do. As one such educator commented in relation to the fundraising communications of some organisations:

> "I'm shocked when I see a lot of the stuff. Genuinely shocked. I do feel it's undermining what departments like mine want to achieve … most don't look at the systems, there's no connection, the connection is missing. They're not looking at root causes of a situation. It's very immediate… we're a humanitarian response agency, but at times I say let's just pause, let's just pause and look at the bigger picture".

A related binary argument made by some is that fundraising is required to support the work of the organisation and the needs of people 'on the ground' and that this has priority over sensitivities that people 'here' might have to negative and disturbing images that are portrayed in the process. This 'needs of people on the ground versus sensitivities of donors here' binary is also based on the limited and distorting idea that international development equates with overseas development intervention or assistance. This reinforces a damaging conflation of international development with aid, which obscures understandings of its associations with capitalist expansion, modernity and coloniality. It also serves to underplay the role of education and campaigning in challenging such systems and in supporting transformative alternatives. The 'needs on the ground' versus 'sensitivities here' binary supports a common assumption that marketing and fundraising needs to be directed at what audiences will respond to. The most effective fundraising, when constructed in those binary terms, is that which raises the most money, no matter what the short-term or long-term costs. Thus, simplistic, 'hard-hitting' fundraising can be justified in the name of 'common sense'. When fundraising 'common sense' is set up in opposition to people's 'sensitivities', the argument for reproducing stereotypes is reinforced on the dismissal of critics who are seen to be reluctant to face reality, or who are overly concerned with political correctness.

Despite problems with this binary, it does highlight the significant challenges for decolonising development communications in an increasingly globalised and competitive fundraising context. I hope to address these challenges in subsequent articles on development communications.

What's real or not, positive versus negative – polarising positions and stereotyping

A second argument related to the binary between fundraising and education is based on another simple binary around what constitutes understandings of 'the real' and the 'not real' in development communications. Whether in fundraising or in education, in social media or in campaigning, different

understandings of reality are supported and produced. The argument among some goes that images or stories which portray people in extreme poverty or in vulnerable or crisis situations cannot be criticised because they 'represent reality'.   Others, and those 'on the other side' are critical of such representations of reality because they do not adequately reflect complexity and because they can lead to stereotypes.

An example might help here. A common criticism of development communications, especially in fundraising campaigns, is the use of images of people made vulnerable and in need. These reflect common tropes such as images of children with flies in their eyes or of refugees displaced due to conflict or of women and children queueing for food. Though such images, and the stories related to them, represent 'real' situations, a significant problem arises, when such examples are seen to constitute 'the reality'. When these IDNGO representations are then questioned because they don't tell the 'full story', their legitimacy is often claimed on the basis that they represent real situations or the experiences of real people. Their 'not fakeness' is drawn upon to legitimise them in the face of criticisms that they do not reflect complexity or diverse realities. Being attuned to how binaries can set up polarising, though persuasive, arguments in this way can help to identify what's missing or under-emphasised in any portrayal, and to understand that reality is often much more multi-dimensional than representations of so-called 'real' or 'true' situations suggest. It can also highlight some important aspects of stereotyping that are often overlooked in the defence of 'the real'.

Stereotypes become constructed in a number of ways, including through repetition of the same or similar narratives and images, over-focus on a limited range of tropes, and concentration on the use of familiar frames. As such, what is real becomes constructed into stereotypes 'of the real', which are sometimes based on specific instances of reality.   Thus, presenting 'real' experiences repeatedly as if they reflect 'the real', while silencing and under-emphasising others, serves to limit and distort complex realities. Though a detailed discussion of the myriad problems with stereotypes is beyond the scope of this article, one research participant's comments on them provide an

important reminder of some of these. Coming from a sub-Saharan African country and working in international development in Ireland, she explained her concerns about the effects of stereotyped communications:

> "the harm it does to people, it's like racism, it's how it makes me feel… the bullying… the abuse people get because of the assumptions about how they lived before they came here… do you live in trees?... the verbal abuse, racial abuse, bias in employment, still I get that. The assumption is that the person is not capable. It is damaging lives… people's mental health…"

In decolonising development communications and education, exploring the relationship between communications and stereotypes, truth and reality is essential. It is also ever more important in the context of concerns about fake news, deliberate attempts to manipulate people through marketing and on social media, and in the face of growing populism. So, does it matter if what's real is presented in stereotypical terms if organisations do not deliberately set out to distort or manipulate? What can organisations do when people tend to respond best to the simplist and starkest of communication strategies? These questions are crucial for communicators and educators, especially when they believe that IDNGOs 'do good' and when they have good intentions to communicate ethically. In considering the binary of 'the real' versus 'the not real' and its implications for stereotyping, we can see the need to look beyond intentions. The effects of our communications often matter most.

Positive versus negative images, messages and stories

Many people attempt to address some of the limits of these binaries and stereotypes in communications, and between fundraising and education, through challenging 'negative' stereotypes with the presentation of more 'positive' images and stories. But even in doing so, other binaries are drawn upon or set up between 'positive' and 'negative' images and messages, and between 'us' and 'them'.

Replacing negative stereotypes with positive ones, or trying to focus 'more on the positive', can have the effect of glossing over complex challenges, denying trauma, exploitation and abuse and obscuring the political and structural dimensions of people's lives. It has also had the effect of replacing one stereotype in development communications, i.e., of the suffering African child, with another, the smiling African child, while maintaining a White Saviour or neo-colonial development gaze. Thus, in replacing the negative with the positive, communicators and educators can inadvertently serve to reinforce and deepen the infantilisation, homogenisation and generalisation of the African continent, for example. They can also reinforce positive tropes associated with particular forms of development, the successful rural businesswoman, for example, or assume that girls' successfully graduating from school equates to gender equality. Such 'success story' tropes tend to be linked to positive constructions about the role of IDNGOs and aid in development which can undermine and silence the myriad other factors involved in social, economic and political progress (Gaynor, 2019). This is not to say that more positive stories and more diverse and active accounts of development in different contexts are not needed. Even though this is the case, it is also important to take account of the dangers associated with pitting the positive against the negative in a limited binary way.

Us and them – fixing identities

As outlined earlier, many post-colonial and post-development theorists have commented upon the dangers of seeing the world in 'Us' and 'Them' separatist and hierarchical terms. In this journal, Oberman and Waldron (2017: 25) argue that this binary is even evident in how seven to nine-year old's 'understand the relationship between developed and developing countries and in the language with which they express their ideas'. Among the many problems associated with the 'Us' and 'Them' binary and fixed identities are simplistic assumptions about who the so-called 'beneficiaries' are in relation to development practice. It is also associated with the different types of ethnocentric or racist othering, victimisation and passivity encapsulated in the phrase 'these people'.

One example of 'us' and 'them', which is used widely in development communications, in fundraising and in DE, and which merits attention here, is the phrase 'enabling people to tell their own stories'. Often considered benign, it is assumed to promote localisation and decolonising development through promoting greater diversity and the inclusion of 'more voices from the global South' in development communications. Despite this, because it is cast in binary terms, it can undermine these important efforts.

Though not stated, it usually assumes that the 'people' involved are those in the global South, drawing on the accepted notion of development as what happens 'over there, out there and down there'. In so doing, experiences and responsibilities around poverty, inequality and justice are dichotomised and framed through a North-South rather than a global lens. With a global lens, 'telling their own stories' would apply as much to those experiencing homelessness and direct provision, homophobia and gender-based violence in Ireland and across Europe as it would to people experiencing these and other realities in different countries in East and Central Asia and in Africa and South America.

This phrase also presents problems in its emphasis on overly-individualised effects of global injustice, and establishes an unspoken binary between the individual experience and the environment or structural context within which people live. In so doing, it undermines the complex political, economic and social structures contributing to poverty, inequality and human rights abuses. The emphasis on individuals 'telling their own stories' can lead to under-attention given to critiques of wealth creation or to problematising over-consumption. In the absence of such structural analysis, when those experiencing poverty and displacement, inequality and abuse constitute the centre of attention, there is also a danger that the people involved could inadvertently be assumed to be entirely responsible for their own fate. While 'telling their own stories' can begin with individual, family or community accounts, they should never end there. There is an important role to be played by fundraisers, communicators and educators in making the links between the

personal and the political (Dillon, 2019), and the global and local (Dillon, 2018) economic and socio-cultural contexts which affect them.

Conclusion

This article has been influenced by research I have conducted on ethical communications among international development IDNGOs, which will be discussed in greater detail in future publications (Dillon, 2021). In short, that research highlights the significant work to be done in this area within the IDNGO sector and the urgency of that work. Participants expressed their interest in and commitment to promoting ethical communications in IDNGO communications. While many identify the strengths and benefits of the Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages (Dóchas, 2007) for supporting ethical communications, most feel that it needs to be updated at the very least, and that additional measures need to be agreed and put in place within the sector to strengthen implementation of the values outlined in the Dóchas Code of Conduct. These range from calls for IDNGOs to promote greater equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) around development narratives to calls for anti-racism and decolonising all aspects of international development communications and organisational practice. More specifically, points raised include calls to democratise the sourcing and recording of content; promote stronger practices around consent; ensure more diversity and greater focus on people telling their own stories; emphasise complexity; and the need to shift to more inclusive, egalitarian and active language. While many advocate more education, training and support structures to advance these measures, others favour a strengthening of the governance systems around communications in the sector.

The discussion on binaries in this article is an attempt to engage readers in some of the debates and challenges around decolonising development communications. It reinforces the point that language and thinking matters. Using simplistic, oppositional categories limits and distorts our understanding and engagement with the complexities of development. Many of the binaries discussed here reflect and construct relationships and practices based on stereotypes, they reinforce colonial and modernist

hierarchies, and they individualise responsibilities. Taking a step back and examining these binaries may enable us to begin the task of decolonising development communication and education. At the very least, it should help us avoid the trap of assuming that what we say and do are not the problems – they often are.

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