

Theory Rising From Practice: Listening to Mindanao

The rich experience of Mindanao provides a lot of food for thought in reference to two inquiries when we link practice with theory:

- What theories of change do the experiences/processes suggest?
- What existing theories or theoretical lenses contribute to understanding the Mindanao experience?

Five reflections emerged as I was listening to voice of peacebuilding in Mindanao

1. Peaceweaving: Web Strategies
2. Complexity Theory
3. Community as the locus of change
4. Binding Effect of Conflict and Dialogue
5. Pedagogy and Positive Deviation

1. Peaceweaving: Web Strategies

“When spiders unite they can stop a lion.”
Ethiopian Proverb

“In the 70’s and 80’s we were birds in our nests. In the 90’s we became spiders.”
Roc Roc -- Breakfast at the Café Uno

- From Social Capital to Social Change Capital
- Networking as strategy: Making relationships and interdependence visible
- Platforms for public participation
 - a. New Forms of Accountability in Governance
 - b. New Forms of Adequate Representation (negotiations and stakeholders)
- Omnipresence of Church in a Catholic context

2. Complexity Theory

“You plant seeds. By grace they grow.”
Sister Josefina

“This country needs, and unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1932

Complexity Theory (Quantum, Chaos Theory) suggests that complex adaptive systems

- Self organize and adapt around stimuli, resources, and needs in the system
- Change in one aspect of the system affects other aspects
- Social change is itself adaptive and innovative, rarely predictable, relies on context, stimuli and system
- Change is multi-faceted, complex, and mixes interdependent sets of people and processes
- Difference between a complex system and a *complex adaptive system* is the difference between a military marching band and a jazz trio or a drumming circle

Mindanao peacebuilding may well represent a living example of a complex adaptive system which suggests:

- Conflict is multi-causal and multi-faceted
- Peacebuilding is a garden of a 1000 flowers (vegetables and fruits); “halo halo” of peacebuilding
- Bold, persistent experimentation from which sustainability rises
- No one action/process accounts for change, sum total of actions
- Highly adaptive, deeply cultural and contextual, extensively interactive

3. *The Locus of Change: The Impulse of Local Initiative*

“A village knows its own snakes.”
East African Proverb

Theories that have guided sustainable development, appropriate technology and rural appraisal suggest sustainability of desired change requires:

- Local knowledge is key for understanding context and sustaining change
- Processes must be accessible, respond to realities on the ground, and renewable without excessive, but superficial support from outside
- Participation and ownership are community processes without which solutions, no matter how good, tend to collapse

Mindanao appears as a living laboratory of local initiatives in which the keys appear to be participation, local knowledge, ownership and accessibility.

It stands as rather extraordinary example of interdependence of broad goals and independence of local action, the core of network theory applied, for good and bad.

When applied to the daunting challenges of current global affairs this approach stands in stark contrast with other competing theories of peace and security.

Most intriguing is a comparison in the arena of finding ways to respond to violence and terrorism. Security studies in international relations have long relied on analysis that suggest:

- Power relations matter most, power is measured primarily by economic clout and military strength
- Terrorism can be directly confronted through policing and traditional military means (War on Terror)
- Isolation of the enemy helps identify and control their actions

Mindanao, particularly localized dialogue initiatives, seem to suggest that

- Relationship building even with known enemies is the pre-requisite of engaged change
- Local knowledge, culture, and cross-cutting relationships create in-roads that provide myriad options for engagement, nonviolent options to pursue change
- Security ultimately is about quality of relationship not size of weapons

4. *Encounters and Organic Gardening: The Binding Effect of Conflict and Dialogue*

Conflict not only divides, it binds people together.

Lewis Coser

“What is distinct? We are trying just trying to love our neighbor. We want to be good neighbors.”

Myla Leguro

In conflict theory a most poignant understanding emerged in sociology that conflict does not just divide people/communities, it also functions to bind people.

- Internal cohesion against an outside threat or enemy
- Increased polarizations helps solidify and give platform to more extreme leadership
- Multiplicities of conflict in a community can cross-stitch relationships

Mindanao Interreligious Dialogue suggests

- Local dialogue, homegrown dialogue of immediate relationships in communities affected by violence bind people together across the lines of social/religious division
- Dialogue as neighborliness, as concern that the well being of your children is tied to the well being on my children, creates a web of empathy and interdependence
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5. *Pedagogy of the Compassionate: Pursuing Positive Deviation*

“Speak always to the love of God. Use words if you must.”

St. Francis of Assis

“Peace training programs are not just learning spaces, more importantly they are social and integrating spaces for encounter and relationship building.”

Grassroots Peace Learning Center

“We believe four and five year old children can learn to dialogue and be compassionate. To do so, their teachers must be facilitators who model a different approach to conflict.”

Sister Josefina

Traditional approaches to education/pedagogy relied heavily on content transfer and knowledge management.

Popular education, driven by Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, proposed conscientization -- understanding of self/community in context and as an agent of change at personal and social levels.

Mindanao experiences propose a kind of popular education plus, aimed not only at conscientization, but the formation of character and life vocation of individuals and whole communities as a way of creating "positive deviation."

Positive deviance in peacebuilding: The study of why some people deviate away from practices of hatred, crime, violence and isolation, when social, structural, and cultural conditions suggest these as logical, even mainstream responses within their environment. It requires:

- Character formation rather than exclusively skills/knowledge
- Vocation as life journey immersed in dialogue and truth seeking
- Building capacity of individuals and communities

Of special note we might link some of these ideas

- Indoctrination assures adherence to proper belief. Mindanao seems to propose that positive deviation from violence/division requires a belief in the inherent call of compassion, relationship and dialogue, even with enemies.
- Beyond indoctrination, Mindanao pedagogy has an element of *inpraxification*: the cultivation and development of practices that build capacity for compassion, dialogue, and nonviolence.
- Compassionate *doxis* and *praxis* require movement beyond boundaries. In fact more accurately stated "life-learner" chooses to live in the threshold where one community meets another, one person meets another.
- Character/vocation formation in a pedagogy of the compassionate would seem to promote that people be true self/community while open to Truth that rises from committed, touchable relationships with others who are different or believe differently (organic neighborliness).