Ahora! Struggles of Collaborative Work Amongst Latin Americans

Javier Tibau
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg, VA 23061 USA
jtibau@vt.edu

Marisol Villacres
Escuela Superior Politecnica del Litoral
Km. 30.5 Via Perimetral
Guayaquil, Ecuador
lvillacr@espol.edu.ec

Katherine Chiluiza
Escuela Superior Politecnica del Litoral
Km. 30.5 Via Perimetral
Guayaquil, Ecuador
kchilui@espol.edu.ec

Abstract
Research about collaborative work in Latin America suffers from endogenous misconceptions about our perceived homogeneity. At the same time, focused research emerging from the region on the topic of collaboration is woefully inadequate both for our purposes and to address misconstrued, misunderstood and over-generalized inferences made by the larger international community. The lack of sufficient research in the region has philosophical and pragmatic consequences.

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H.5.3 [Group and Organization Interfaces]: Computer-supported cooperative work.

Introduction
In this position paper, our aim is to call to notice the importance of the differences amongst the similarities of Latin American cultures, and how they affect how we work together. It is especially notable in CSCW, where many audio-visual context cues are stripped in the communication channel. When viewed externally, through a North American or European lens, Latin America is a homogeneous region. As a product of Iberian colonization,
our nations share a religious background, racial features, socio-economic class divisions, customs and language (excluding Brazil and the Guyanas of course). Our lands are ecologically diverse, rich in bio-resources and full of potential. Are we then, indeed, homogenous?

Although these facts have meant that Latin American countries do share similar cultural characteristics and behavior, similarities do not equal homogeneity. Assuming this is not only wrong but also dangerous. It is a mistake to interpret these facts as cues to put our cultures together under a single identified group. We wish now to give a linguistic illustration of how communication is distorted when false grounding is perceived. The words “ahora” and “ahorita” carry different meanings in Spanish, both stemming from the same root, “now” (i.e., a call to action in the present tense).

Interpreters of one such call will recognize that one of the words requires immediate action, while for the other the action can be delayed—though not for long. Strangely enough, the pairing of words and meanings change depending on the country! This particular example baffles an Ecuadorian meeting a Mexican and vice versa. Prioritizing activities can become challenging when doing collaborative work. The perception of having common ground is destroyed, possibly along with other mutual perceptions of responsibility, punctuality and shared values.

Why Is It Important To Emphasize That We Are Different?

At the core of the the third paradigm of HCI is the conception that all of our interpretations and understandings of phenomena are situated. That meaning and the construction of meaning is dependant of context. Understanding our context, to address amongst many things the “inherent messiness of cross-cultural research” in (and with) Latin America, is clearly a topic worthy of attention for our researchers. Given the growing movements of internationalization, remote work and ubiquitous usage of personal computers in communication, it should be no surprise that we need to address the cultural aspects of interaction design.

A quick overview of publications at CSCW in the last two years show that there is a healthy interest in cross-cultural issues for collaboration. There are several studies like Matthiesen et al. [7], and Dorairaj et al. [4], aiming to study the effects of culture in geographically distributed teams doing software development. However, none of the research seems to be focused on Latin American cultures.

Our proposition is that Latin American CSCW faces two types of problems:

- Those of reconciling our differences and reaching common ground.
- Understanding how the methodologies, theories and frameworks of HCI apply in our context.

Finding Common Ground

Following the linguistic analogy, it is peculiar that cross-cultural CSCW research often focuses on the issues with translation and/or use of multiple languages [8, 5, 10, 9]. Although language issues are not perceived as major barriers for collaborative work between Latin Americans, it would be interesting to study how our differences, small as they may be, compare to those of
more dissimilar dyads of cultures. Do we find the same patterns of communication and grounding on a smaller scale? We expect that the problems found in language extrapolate to grounding in other parts of the culture.

To try to understand some of the problems faced in real work situations we interviewed with Xavier Ochoa, an Ecuadorian researcher leader in learning analytics and learning technologies in Latin America. Through his work on collaborative projects in the region [2, 1] he can attest to the experience in collaborating with Latin Americans through the use of many CSCW tools (e.g., shared repositories of documents, wikis, survey tools, google docs for collaborative writing and various videoconference applications). His observations on the characteristics of collaborative work amongst Latin Americans are that our shared culture does not emphasize factors such as deadlines over, for example, the accomplishment of good work. To that effect, Latin Americans are enthusiastic and participative but enjoy and require a good deal of leadership, constant communication between team members and follow up of the tasks. He also says that as individuals we yearn for context and validation of our interpretations through feedback, in contrast other cultures value individualism and the idea that things can be “self-explanatory”. At the same time, Ochoa remarks that there are important differences in the way people work, some countries favor very hierarchical structures in the workplace while others do not.

Concluding Remarks
The aim of this paper is to underline the importance of the differences amongst the similarities of LA cultures and how they affect the way we work together, a research agenda that unveils these actual differences and similarities is needed. This paper is a call to action for the Latin American research community. We propose that we start with an ambitious study that enables researchers in the field to identify the actual challenges and issues faced, when doing research with and about CSCW. Such study should include a number of leading CS and HCI researchers and practitioners that could highlight the most used methodologies for CSCW, how successful these methodologies are, and how appropriate they are for the Latin American context. In this way the results of this study could enlighten future research and give focus on potential projects that could be developed by the community.

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References


