

Listening, Hearing and Speaking: Brief Thoughts on the Relationship to Dialogue*

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Over the years I have sustained an interest in client voices and the importance of the expertise they bring to therapy (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). This interest came from my clinical experiences and in what I refer to as a collection of assumptions related to social construction theory and postmodern philosophy. Clinically, I was curious about clients' experiences and descriptions of successful and unsuccessful therapy: the process of the therapy and the relationship with the therapist (Anderson, 1997). I interviewed clients that I met at the Houston Galveston Institute and in my consultations around the world with other therapists' clients. In this study clients often spoke of particular kinds of what may be called a therapist's manners, actions and responses that seemed to be related to the therapy's success and vice versa. As I listened to their words and tried as best I could to understand their meanings, the importance of listening, hearing and speaking and the relationship of these relationships and conversations that were transforming in nature caught my attention. This learning partly informed what I refer to collaborative-dialogue.

Dialogue

The notion of dialogue has been in cultures for centuries. Dialogue or *dia* (through) *logos* (word), in early Greek society, for instance, referred to conversation and the generation of meaning and understanding through it. More important than the product produced through dialogue was having a space for and participating in the process of dialogue. Historically, the space and process for dialogue are evidenced in many cultures, for instance, the talking circles in some indigenous cultures and in the Japanese concept of *Ba* which refers to a space or condition for dialogue (Nonaka & Noboru, 1998; Pribadi, 2010).

One summer I visited the ancient Court Chancellery in Lucignano, Italy that dated back to the 12th century. I walked into the Chancellery, a small room with vaulted ceilings and an arched doorway. In homage to the greatness of the court justices, the walls and ceilings were covered with 15th century frescoes that depicted Roman and Biblical heroes. My eyes went to the arch and ceiling rising above it. I noticed that on each of the arch was an angel was blowing a trumpet. Latin words flowed from the trumpets. I learned from the guidebook was that the inscriptions were intended to remind the justices of their role. On one side, "Speak little, listen to much and keep your aims in mind" and on the other, "Listen to the other side."¹ The clients mentioned above remind us that the century old references to dialogue seem as fitting today as they were then.

Much is written today about dialogue and conversation for a general readership and especially in the business literature (Groysberg & Sline, 2012; Veemnam & Hart, 2014). Often, dialogue is described and treated as something that can be learned to do, along with formulas or steps to follow to achieve it. Reducing dialogue to a technique-drive activity minimizes the complexity and naturalness of it.

For me, dialogue refers to a form of conversation: talking or conversing with one's self or another toward a search for meaning and understanding—out loud, silent and with or without words. In and through this dialogic search meanings and understandings are continually interpreted, reinterpreted, clarified, and revised. Newness in meaning and understanding emerges, and thus, possibilities are generated for thought, feeling, emotion, action, and so forth. In other words, transformation is inherent in dialogue. True dialogue cannot be other than generative.

My bias is influenced by Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of humans as dialogical beings – referred to as *dialogism* by some scholars of his works (Holquist, 2002). Assumptions central to Bakhtin's position are: we are always in dialogue with others, our world and ourselves; the importance of a multiplicity of voices and perspectives to the development of knowledge; each perspective is influenced by a unique position; everything is relational (e.g., perspective, reality, meaning, etc). For an excellent overview of Bakhtin's contributions to social science disciplines see Holquist, 2002.

Dialogue involves having a metaphorical, though sometimes a literal, *space* for people to connect and talk with each other. It involves a process in which participants engage with each other in shared or mutual inquiry: jointly examining, thinking, questioning and reflecting. In and through dialogue meaning and understandings are continually interpreted, reinterpreted, clarified, revised, and expanded. These characteristics distinguish dialogue as a dynamic generative joint activity.

Dialogue is a relational and collaborative activity, influenced by the multiple larger contexts and discourses in which it takes place and the relationship between the dialogical participants or conversational partners (Anderson, 1997). Wittgenstein talked of relationship and conversation going hand-in-hand: the kinds and quality of conversations that we have with each other inform and form the kinds of relationships we have with each other and vice versa. Dialogue invites of its participants a sense of mutuality--genuine respect and sincere interest regarding the other. While at the same time, dialogue invites a sense of belonging and ownership.

In this sense dialogue involves not-knowing and uncertainty. Sincere interest in another necessitates not-knowing the other and their situation ahead of time, whether the knowing is in the form of previous experience, theoretical knowledge, or familiarity. Knowing can preclude being inquisitive and learning about the uniqueness of the other. Because perspectives change and dialogue is transforming, it is impossible to predict how a story, for instance, will be told, the twists and turns it may take, or where it ends up. Not-knowing refers to the way that one thinks about the construction of knowledge, including having a critical and tentative attitude about what you think you know (i. e. theory, facts, truths, beliefs, and assumptions), and the attitude, tone, manner and timing in which it is offered. In my experience presumed knowledge is best offered tentatively as food for thought and dialogue rather than with an objective such as instructive interaction. Maintaining a not-knowing posture and entertaining uncertainty are critical for the freedom of expression necessary for dialogue to have the opportunity to take its unforeseen natural or fortuitous paths.

Listening, Hearing and Speaking

Dialogue involves the reflexive, intricately woven process of listening, hearing and speaking. Listening is part of the process of trying to understand what the other person is saying. We try to understand by responding to what we think the other has said. Responding to understand involves being genuinely curious, asking questions to learn more about what is said (not what you think you should have been said) and checking-out to learn if what you think you heard is what the other person hoped you heard. In other words, we speak to invite the other to speak so that we can listen. We respond to the other's response to understand what we think we have heard. In each position we are a respectful learner. This is the therapist's manner.

Dialogue in the sense of having a transforming nature operates along a continuum: Sometimes we are less in a dialogic process and sometimes we are more so. What counts is the entirety of the relationship and conversation. In and through dialogue we are both being and becoming. For me, the words in the Court Chancellery speak to the importance of listening, hearing and speaking.

Following are tips for a therapist's manner that prepares and optimizes the conditions that invite the other to engage *with* us in, more so rather than less so, in what I call collaborative-dialogue. Importantly, inviting and sustaining collaborative-dialogue requires a shift in orientation which naturally guides actions that invite it. In other words, dialogue does not require repeatable skills. Also,

- Dialogue requires collaborative design of its focus, process and imagined or hoped for outcome. This is part of the process of co-generating newness in meaning, understanding and action. In other words, collaborative design requires inviting, respecting the other person's expertise.
- You can be prepared for dialogue but you cannot plan it. Dialogue is a natural, spontaneous activity that occurs moment-to-moment. Dialogue, therefore, cannot be step-ordered and its process is not sequential or repeatable. In other words, it cannot be implemented, orchestrated or managed. Each dialogue is unique to the participants, their situations, circumstances and goals.
- Dialogue is rhizomatic; there is no one entryway and no entryway is more correct than another. It is sporadic; it wanders and surprises and takes unexpected twists and turns. In other words, dialogue cannot occur without interruption and snags, but it must have overall sustainability.
- Differences of opinions, values and truths are inherent in dialogue as they are part of everyday life. What may be seen as barriers to dialogue such as tension, non-clarity, ambiguity, incoherency, uncertainty and misunderstanding are necessary for dialogue to be creative and productive. In other words dialogue is multi-dimensional.
- Each encounter, relationship and conversation is part of past, present and future ones. Each dialogue entails a multiplicity of voices, of those present and not present. Dialogue also occurs with multiple contexts that influence it such as historical, cultural, organizational, relational, etc.
- Dialogue requires trust in and openness to the other and their difference as well as openness to being questioned, critiqued and not agreed with by the other. It is important to be careful to not too quickly assume you know what the other person means and to not fill in the blanks or details of the other person's story or what is thought to be behind the story. What is important is to try to understand from the other's sense-making or logic map, not yours. This requires checking-out to make sure you understand the other's perspective as best you can, and keeping in mind that understanding does not mean agreement.
- Pauses and silences are important for dialogue. They provide opportunity for to think about what you think you have heard, to reflect on it, and to preparation to speak. This means that inner talk is equally important to out loud talk.
- Some actions do not invite dialogue. For instance, dialogue is not trying to persuade the other to understand or agree with you. If you try to get the other to understand or agree, you are not in dialogue with yourself or the other or with yourself; nor does striving for consensus or synthesis. Similarly, asking questions you *think* you know the answer to or to get the answer you want does not invite dialogue. In other words to truly engage in dialogue one must be able to let their passions, trusts and understandings be challenged by the others and to challenge them themselves.

In sum, the intent and hope of the inviter of dialogue is: to Invite and engage one's self and the other in dialogue. The hope is to create a process of "dynamic sustainability". Returning to my earlier words, dialogue requires the opportunity for listening, speaking and hearing.

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Endnote

1. Please see [www.harlene.org/writings/Listening, Speaking](http://www.harlene.org/writings/Listening_Speaking) for an earlier version of this story and the ideas discussed in this paper.

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