

## Dialogue on dialogues

Multi-voiced dialogues (dialogism) as means for the co-production of knowledge in and on leadership communicative practices

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The article elaborates on a theoretical understanding of dialogue as a means for the co-production of knowledge in and on leadership communicative practices through ongoing research collaboration that involves leaders, researchers and master students at Aalborg University. Dialogue is viewed from a dissensus perspective, which draws on Bakhtin's dynamic thoughts on the heteroglossic nature of interaction and on multi-voiced dialogues as battles between centrifugal and centripetal forces. The concept multi-voiced dialogues is posited as a means for opening up dialogical moments of change in order to cultivate the creative and transformational powers of dialogues in which new meanings, voices and forms of knowledge emerge. I discuss how this way of framing the dialogical co-production of knowledge challenges the mainstream understanding of dialogical practices by embracing relational, conflictual and contradictory aspects of meaning-making processes. The concept of multi-voiced dialogues aims to challenge authoritative discourses that advocate monologism, unity and consensus.

### Background and legitimacy of research

In this article, I engage a dialogue on dialogues in which two main positions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are sketched– the liberal humanistic and the postmodern approaches<sup>1</sup>. I will posit that the liberal humanistic

approach represents today's mainstream concepts and dialogic conducts. Bakhtin's thoughts on multi-voiced and pluralistic dialogues represent the postmodern take on dialogue. I discuss how this pluralistic and conflictual understanding of dialogue provides a nuanced alternative to mainstream concepts and conducts. Also, it offers a means for the co-production of knowledge in and on leadership communicative practices. The liberal humanistic and postmodern approaches are positioned as representing opposing perspectives within studies of organizational communication that advocate diverse understandings of self and reality, materializing in opposed ideological identities and behaviours.

Before engaging the dialogue on dialogues, I will briefly present the apparatus. This involves a positioning according to new voices in research and in dialogue studies that reveals a critical reflexive take on dialogue in which the taken-for-granted assumption of dialogue as a positive phenomenon is questioned and revisited. I will also present my understanding of organizational practices and briefly sketch the research study, which is the basis of my current PhD project.

By making this backdrop visible, I embrace Bakhtin's inherent thought: any utterance, dialogue or discourse is to be understood in the reflection of its situational *here* and *now* – in its *small time*, in which every now and then breaks through its own time and becomes a part of the *great time* as it lives throughout centuries. This reflects Bakhtin's understanding of the dialectical relationship between situational interaction (micro) and the social world (macro) to which I will return later.

### **New dialogical voices**

Dialogue represents the normative hope of the research referred to. I claim that situational developmental processes staged as multi-voiced dialogues are the 'new black' which challenge mainstream leadership development concepts. At least dialogue forms an ideal supplement in dealing with the challenges stemming from the messiness and complexity that make up today's organizational practices. There is nothing new in this notion. Dialogue has become a buzzword that infuses most strategic decision-making concepts. We are part of an ongoing dialogical turn in which dialogue is a means for handling global, societal, cultural, governmental, municipal, re-

search-based, institutional and/or individual-oriented challenges (Linell, 2009; Märtsin et al., 2011; Phillips, 2011; Phillips et al., 2012).

However, dialogue as a concept and management technique is questioned – or at least the widespread practising of dialogue as a tool for liberal humanistic ideals. The aim of this article is to challenge and oppose it through a postmodern and plurivocal take on dialogue drawing on, for instance, dialogism (Bakhtin, Linell). These new voices disclose that dialogues are often associated with expectations of democratic, participatory processes and emancipating practices that make actors believe that suppressed voices are also given an equal say in decision-making processes – and in the shaping and reshaping of the discursive-material practices they are part of. An interesting finding is that these so-called democratic dialogues are often practiced without a critical reflexivity and in order to enhance neo-liberal norms that favour common grounds, fixed subjectivities and consensus based on an essential pre-communicative humanness. (Deetz and Simpson, 2004; Märtsin, et al., 2011; Phillips, 2011; Phillips, et al., 2012) Another claim made visible is that many researchers (e.g. action researchers) and practitioners practice these ‘positive’ dialogues in a range of settings without scrutinizing the situational enactments of dialogue and also with a lack of deep theorization on the communication processes in which they take place (Deetz and Simpson, 2004; Linell, 2009; Phillips, 2011; Phillips, et al., 2012).

Through a theoretical exploration, I will discuss how and in what sense a multi-voiced understanding of dialogue can contribute to an alternative and more nuanced understanding of organizational interaction. Current research is positioned according to this new tendency of questioning the common use of dialogues and de-romanticizing the power and promise of the mainstream conduct of dialogues and the taken-for-granted assumptions of dialogue as a positive phenomenon.

### **Organizations as apparatuses**

Focus in the research project is on dialogues conducted in relation to organizational settings as technologies to manage and control employees according to organizational objectives and rationales – for example, dialogue as a means for developing leadership practices. Organizations are viewed as apparatuses that foster certain corpo-

rate communicative practices and actions (Agamben, 2009; Deetz, 2001; Foucault, 1995; Iedema, 2003; Jørgensen, 2007). Apparatuses are seen to be “a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge” (Foucault, 1980, p. ?) that “always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject... [related to] ... a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient, in a way that purports to be useful, the behaviours, gestures, and thoughts of human beings” (Agamben, 2009, p. 11). In accordance with Foucault and several others who draw on and advance his concepts, power is closely tied to knowledge and the crystallization (reification) of certain knowledge forms that we take for granted and that direct us in everyday life. Through this lens, the enactments of dialogue as a management technique are not innocuous. They shape corporate subjects, identities and behaviour that we carry with us into the private spheres of our lives and vice versa. This provides a strong argument for our reflection upon the enactment and consequences of dialogue (as well as any other management technique) as means for developing (corporate) subjects according to certain rationales.

### **The case study – the leadership forum**

The research project concerns the co-production of knowledge in and on leadership communicative practices and involves diverse embodied voices of leaders, researchers and master students at Aalborg University. According to Deetz and Simpson (2004) a post-modern dialogue “requires both forums—places for occurrence—and voice—the capacity to freely develop and express one’s own interests.” (Deetz and Simpson, 2004). In my research project, I provide a forum for leaders, researchers and students in university settings. The aim is to foster the participants’ possibilities to bring their voices and their bodies of knowledge to the scene through researcher-staged multi-vocal dialogues. This opens a space for the participants to reflect on their experience and their taken-for-granted assumptions about leadership communicative practices<sup>2</sup>.

### **Positions on dialogue – liberal humanistic approach**

The liberal humanistic approach builds on thoughts of e.g. Maslow, Rogers. Niches within this position often build on the presumptions

of internally located meanings recovered through the enactment of concepts such as *empathy*, *active listening* and through principles of how to perform the most appropriate helper/client relation with the aim of digging out the resources hidden in the client. This process is often referred to by the metaphor of the *gold-digger* (Kristiansen & Bloch Poulsen, 2000) and/or a *midwife* who nurtures the client to give birth to insights derived from the essence/womb of the client (Alrø, 1996). According to Deetz (1996, 2000), this position can be understood and termed as *interpretative studies* in relation to organizational communication that favours consensus and views integration and harmony as possible organizational states. A suitable metaphor for this position is a *mirror* held by a neutral researcher (Deetz, 1996).

Common to these perspectives is their trust in communication as a tool to find common ground in order to maintain/preserve states of consensus. The perspectives in this position, based on liberal humanistic psychology, view identity as a pre-social, pre-interactional and already fixed quantity. The outputs of the dialogues are often expected to build on the client's thoughts and conceptions of the reality mirrored and facilitated by the helper.

Many professional change-agents perform these liberal humanistic dialogues, and this approach to dialogue seems to permeate our society "found in basic communication textbooks, personal improvement books, and corporate, religious, and community programs" (Deetz and Simpson, 2004). It forms a hegemony that shapes the world from global structures to the individual's life and vice versa. The enactment of these 'positive' and mainstream dialogues causes 1) a tendency to lock on to the goal of achieving a common ground (Deetz and Simpson, 2004; Phillips, 2011) and 2) the stigmatization of individuals by placing the responsibility for dysfunctions on the individual and not at the source/emergence of the problem, that is, in the collective social interactions embedded in conflictual, competitive and power-laden organizational settings. In the Human Relations tradition, concepts such as dialogue are highlighted as positive aspects of organizational practices that incorporate personal benefits for the employees. Less focus is on the financial and efficiency-oriented benefits that organizations reap in the perfection of employees. It also treats existing orders as unproblematic and natural, viewing conflict

and fragmentation as system errors that should be fixed to maintain the former order (Deetz, 2001).

### **Postmodern approach - Bakhtin's dialogism**

The postmodern position on dialogue that I will explore in the present article has emerged from post-structuralist perspectives in the works of Bakhtin, Derrida, Foucault and Levinas.

Bakhtin's focus is on how new meaning is generated through creative processes of interactive interrelated dialogic utterances. His early work has been classified as philosophical and his later as concerned with issues of linguistics and sociology. From his studies of Dostoevsky's novels, he extracts his controversial concept of the *heteroglossic* nature of interaction from his defractioning of the double-voiced nature of characters and even between the author and the characters in the novel (Morris et al., 1997). From this he develops his sociology of consciousness, claiming that meaning-making in general is fundamentally dialogic as well as a basic human condition. I will mainly focus on the macro-level of social order that Bakhtin posits in the essay *Discourse in the Novel* (1935) and in the essay *The problem of Speech Genres* (1952). In the former he introduces the opposing forces of (social) language – the *centripetal* and *centrifugal forces* – and in the latter he posits a clear and important distinction between sentences and utterances, which also distinguishes written language from interaction.

### **Heteroglossia and meaning-making**

Bakhtin's concepts are closely interrelated, which in itself is an indication of the complexity and entanglement that he sees between the social world and *language, discourses, utterances, consciousnesses and voices*. The social world is created and recreated through mutual, continuous and dialectic processes of dialogical interaction. *Dialogue* appears to be the most important concept as existence and meaning depends on the dialogic relations and the nature of multi-voiced interactions – *heteroglossia*. *Heteroglossia* is ideologically charged, and it forms the fundamental process intrinsic to all social life. He elaborates the idea of the *heteroglossic* nature of interaction/meaning-making by pointing towards the dialogic nature of consciousness (micro) in his analysis of the relationship between the hero and the author (in Dostoevsky's novels) and posits an analogy between the

'author-hero' and the 'self-other' relationships, claiming that we are all self and other and that we develop our individual understandings and consciousnesses through our interrelation with the voices of *the other* (see below) (Morris et al., 1997, p. 12 -13). As previously stated, his later writings, including *heteroglossia*, point towards tendencies in the dialogic making of social life (macro).

So, concepts such as *voice*, *outsidedness*, *other*, *consciousness*, *word*, *utterance* and *language* are closely entangled. For instance, consciousness always derives from a certain situation addressed to a certain situation, and it changes (transforms) the social world from a position of *outsidedness*. The individual consciousness and understanding are an interplay of signs – responses to signs with signs – and “[s]ubjectivity is thus produced on the ‘borderline’ where inner experience and the social life meet, and they meet in signs – in words” (Morris, et al., 1997, p. 14). In Bakhtin’s view, *voice* covers discourses, ideologies, perspectives and themes as well as media for speech and the uttered speech of embodied persons (Bakhtin, 1935). Bakhtin takes his offset in concrete situational *utterances*: “an utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication, and it cannot be broken off from the preceding links that determine it both from within and from without, giving rise within it to unmediated responsive reactions and dialogic reverberations” (Bakhtin, 1952, p. 94). The utterance emerges from dialogue as a continuation of it, as a rejoinder within it; it does not enter into it from the *sidelines*. Bakhtin argues, “this does not exhaust the internal dialogism of the word. It encounters an alien word not only in the object itself: every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (Bakhtin, 1952, p. 272). Interaction is always dependent on the *addressivity* of the word / utterance / discourse as it is always directed from someone to someone. This latter someone can be an addressee in the here-and-now situational setting of interaction, or it can be an outsider in the wider social sphere. The communication in interactions depends on the concrete situation and the addresser’s imagination and sense of the addressee. At all levels of interaction, meaning-making is a two-sided act and a complex process as any word is viewed as the “... reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. Each and every word expresses the ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other’.” (Bakhtin, 1952). To sum up, meaning-making is fundamen-

tally interactive, dialogical and dependent on the addressivity of the utterances and the situational circumstance of every concrete situation. Consciousness, meaning, discourse and subjectivity are part of the dialogue, and they arise within dialogue; they are not carried into situations as pre-given and pre-social commodities by already fixed speakers and subjects from the outside (as perceived in the liberal humanistic approach to dialogue). Meaning and subjectivity are co-produced by the full social interaction of all participants and voices from within and without the creative event.

### Official and unofficial voices

Heteroglossia, perceived as the fundamental premise for the existence and making of interdependent consciousnesses, is framed as a battle of opposing voices within an individual who carries both *official consciousness* and *unofficial consciousness*. At the same time, there is a relation to the outsideness and otherness of *alien consciousnesses/voices*. The *official consciousness* is a collection of the inner and outer speech and actions that constitute our behavioural ideology in accordance with our stable values of our community and class (laws, morality and world outlooks). The *unofficial consciousness* is not yet fixed or crystallized into talkable voices, not even in inner speech. In this battlefield of opposing voices, new and unexpected voices and meanings arise and become part of the official behavioural ideology (Morris, et al., 1997, pp. 12-14). Self-consciousness is thus formed dialogically through an inner and outer battle between opposing social voices. The consciousness involving thoughts and experience is internally dialogic, and its 'struggle' or co-existence is shaped and reshaped in the *borderzone* of the consciousness of someone else. The individual (and entangled) consciousness is created and constantly recreated in inner and outer dialogues of *official* and *unofficial voices*.

### Centripetal and centrifugal forces

According to Discourse in the Novel, the term *heteroglossia* can be framed as an understanding of language as ideologically saturated and stratified in which many social languages participate at any specific moment – *small time* – and in its historical time – *great time*. The metaphor of a battle literally involves a state (of mind and of social interaction) full of tensions, conflicts and opposing voices as every utterance "is a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two em-



battled tendencies in the life of language” (Bakhtin, 1952, p. 272). These embattled tendencies within language are the *centripetal* – towards unity – and the *centrifugal* – towards difference – forces. The centrifugal force relates to the battle of diverse voices and social languages and opens up for difference and the emergence of new surprising meanings. The centripetal forces “operate in the midst of heteroglossia” and “struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language... [and are] ... forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thoughts” (Bakhtin, 1952, p. 270). These opposing forces intertwine as every utterance “participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (The centrifugal and stratifying forces)” (Bakhtin, 1952, p. 271). The centripetal force crystallizes “into languages that are social-ideological: languages of social groups, ‘professional’ and ‘generic’ languages, languages of generations and so forth...” (Bakhtin, 1952, p. 271). The centripetal force (monologism) draws towards normative-centralizing systems and unitary languages and doctrines, while the centrifugal force opens up for diversity and alien voices. The ideological development of self, discourses and social hegemonic formations are created through these intense struggles. The previously mentioned turn to dialogue can be understood as this intersection of the generative event with the open-ended continuity of historical processes.

### **Freedom of speech versus authoritative discourses**

Thus, Bakhtin’s perspective seems to allow the total mobility of ‘language of life’ and individual agency / freedom through complete flexibility of speech, for which Bakhtin has often been criticised (Morris, 2003). This is not the case, however, as some *authoritative words/discourses* and *internally persuasive discourses* were historically created as more persuasive and solidified than the opposing discourses (e.g. religious, political and moral discourses) (Bakhtin, 1935). According to Bakhtin, it is possible that the internally persuasive word can unite with the authoritative word, but it is very rare (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). The unifying centripetal forces of monologism and authoritative discourses can be compared to those previously posited as intrinsic to the liberal humanistic concept of dialogue. As described, this concept of dialogue not only permeates our society as an authoritative discourse representing the crystallization

of the centripetal forces in a unifying language; it also frames communication and the subject in agreement with the unifying ideals intrinsic to those operating within the centripetal tendencies. It builds on the linear trust of (organizational) communication to bring order into situations of conflict in order to re-create imagined states of consensus and agreement (unifying)<sup>3</sup>. When looking through the opposing pluralistic lens of heteroglossia, the liberal humanistic approach to dialogue and organizational communication seems to reject and/or overlook the very essence of human interaction in its quest for unification building on the misconception of the ideal of (organizational) agreement and united fronts. Following these ideas, the mainstream concept of dialogue builds on the erroneous perception of identities as already fixed and pre-given. The actors seem to overlook the importance of the situational organizational (socio-political) settings in which they are performed and thereby stress the individual's responsibility in relation to organizational challenges.

### **Creative forces of dialogues**

Bakhtin represents optimism towards the creative and generic forces of interaction in which authoritative discourses and apparatuses can be contested. This article and the critical reflexive voices in research that question the taken-for-granted assumptions of dialogue as positive can be seen as an opening towards opposing voices and centrifugal forces that contest the authoritative discourse of the mainstream conduct of dialogue. Dialogism and heteroglossia can guide our perception of the reified knowledge forms in (organizational) concepts of interaction and meaning-making towards what Rick Iedema (2003) has framed as a 'grand question' rather than a 'grand theory', shifting focus away from finding one explanation towards a sensitiveness to the uniqueness and open-endedness of interaction, dialogue and meaning-making. So, focus can be shifted to the meanings, consciousnesses and identities in their socially entangled makings in the heteroglossic nature of interaction.

### **Dialogical studies**

In relation to organizational research, this pluralistic way of understanding research can be termed as *dialogical studies* and described through the metaphor of a *lens* (Deetz and Alvesson, 2000, Deetz 2001). In accordance with Bakhtin's perspective, this leads to the de-

velopment of practical knowledge and takes a dissensus approach to the understanding of communication and reality. The affinity to Bakhtin is evident as struggle, conflict and tensions are seen as natural states of interaction. The researcher is naturally acknowledged as one of the constituents and not reduced and confused as being a neutral 'onlooker'. Research is inevitably seen as a move into a conflictual site and aims to disrupt the former order and co-create a provisional order in which new insights contribute to the ongoing production of knowledge and change<sup>4</sup> (Deetz, 2001). The researcher can cultivate centrifugal forces of language and oppose the authoritative crystallized voices/discourses in local settings. Cultivating openings to the heteroglossic creative nature of social interaction in which new meaning arises can do this. This understanding of dialogue and its transformative potential is seldom included in management studies and organizational literature (Storch and Shotter, 2011), and methods explicating ways to stage these plurivocal dialogues are few (Deetz and Simpson, 2004).

### **The preliminary open-ended conclusions of the dialogue on dialogues**

The potential of applying Bakhtin's thoughts to the field of organizational communicative interaction and research in general is potent. It offers significant aspects to my situational research project and the staging of multi-voiced dialogues as well as to the analysis of the situational enactments of these dialogues.

Firstly, I have argued that interaction, meaning-making, co-production of knowledge and identity-work can be viewed as open-ended processes embracing tensions and struggles between opposing and contradiction-filled embodied voices, discourses and consciousnesses (official, unofficial and alien). Secondly, meaning-making and co-production of knowledge have to be understood in their continuity and in relation to and entanglement with their *small time* – here-and-now – and their *great time* – the socio-political circumstances. And thirdly, looking through Bakhtin's lens and comparing his pluralistic view on dialogue to the mainstream liberal humanistic concept, has exposed that the hegemony of the liberal humanistic concept is a clear turn to monologism. In its efforts of the creation and recreation of agreement and consensus and its imagination and trust in finding common grounds and fixed subjec-

tivities, it enhances intrinsic centripetal forces without giving voice to the heteroglossic nature of interaction.

Bakhtin's pluralistic way of framing communication and interaction has implications for research in organizational practices. The aim of my research project is to explore the transformative potentials of multi-voiced dialogues. I do this by embracing the heteroglossic nature of interaction in the staging and facilitation of processes in the leadership forum while being sensitive towards the creation of meanings and identities through opposing forces within language. This leaves space for alternative perspectives and actions that the mainstream liberal humanistic management of dialogue does not allow in its quest for consensus, neutrality and fixed subjectivities.

The turn to dialogue and critical reflexive voices, including the current research project, represents the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia. In this way, I attempt to open up for opposing voices and insights in the beauty of the contradictory and heteroglossic nature of communication that allows us to perceive and enact organizational practices in ways that embrace their complex and power-filled realities. This effort 'makes things a little messier' and opposes the authoritative discourse of the liberal humanistic approach to dialogue and opens up for new and surprising meanings and insights.

## Notes

- 1 The critical hermeneutic approach to dialogue represents a third major position represented by Gadamer and Habermas. Due to limitations of scope, I omit this approach in present dialogue.
- 2 The research project draws on the dialogic tradition of Action Research represented by Pålshaugen and Gustavsen, among others. (Bager and Frimann, 2012).
- 3 These thoughts have clear affinity to those of governmentality (Foucault, Agamben). Dialogue can be viewed as an apparatus and as relations between centripetal forces towards unity and consensus that forms the subject in a certain (corporate) manner. This dialogue is elaborated on in my current PhD-thesis.
- 4 Studies of this type are also characterized by the development of locally situated problems and concepts in collaboration with participants.

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