Bohmian Dialogue: a Critical Retrospective of Bohm's Approach to Dialogue as a Practice of Collective Communication

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In this chapter, I will offer both an appreciative and critical examination of David Bohm's vision and practice of dialogue and how it relates to the field of dialogue studies. Bohm's conception of dialogue was ground-breaking in its time due to its emphasis on consciousness and unfolding a fundamentally different order of communication mediated by collective awareness and insight into the nature of thought and the dialogue process as a whole. Bohm's conception and process aspired to bring the human project of sharing meaning, values and learning forward by introducing practices or ways of being with the dialogue process that interrupted conventional practice at that time. In this paper, I examine key contributions of Bohm's work as well as a number of critiques and limitations of the practice. Finally, I comment briefly on the feasibility of Bohm's practice as a transformative approach to dialogue.

Introduction

Nearly twenty years ago, David Bohm put forward his vision and practice of dialogue. Bohm's conception offered a number of important contributions to the field of dialogue studies, which this paper will address more at length. The main focus of his work on dialogue was to shed insight into a particular way for participants to give their attention to the dialogue content, and the subtle moment-to-moment unfolding process of thought itself. Bohm's conception of dialogue attempted to illuminate the deeper tacit assumptions underlying our thoughts, feelings and the psychological and sociological pressures behind these assumptions for the purposes of realising greater insight into one's self, society and culture and to uncover a social leverage point for deeper change and the renewal of timeless values. Bohmian dialogue (BD) practice involved inquiring into the individual and collective presuppositions, ideas, beliefs, and feelings for the purposes of uncovering a less conditioned and more creative form of collective knowing, learning and thinking together. In this sense, Bohm proposed a form of group communication (committed to a long duration and no agenda) where the objective was not to

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defend opinions and assumptions in a personal way but reveal them in a more impersonal manner (Bohm 1996) that coheres more with the underlying nature of self and world and our deeper participation in it. For the purposes of this paper I will highlight what I perceive to be key contributions of BD to the field of dialogue studies. I will then go on to address a number of critiques and limitations of the practice and comment briefly on the feasibility of BD as a more personally and socially transformative approach to dialogue.

Contributions of Bohmian Dialogue

Suspension

A foundational practice within Bohm's dialogue is the attention-based practice of *suspension*. Suspension helps participants cultivate a firsthand experience of the nature of thought, the limits of rationality, and the creative possibilities of a consciousness-informed process of inquiry. Over time, suspension practice helps individuals become less identified with their habits of mind and points of view. Learning to be less embedded or reified in one's perspective and way of thinking about the world, participants gradually develop a more flexible basis of relationship to their reasoning and emotional processes, as well as how they come to know these processes. Kegan's (1982) language for this process is that we learn how to *have* our thoughts rather than *be* our thoughts, discover how to *have* our feelings rather than *be* our feelings. Or to put this yet in another way, suspension facilitates a shift from a more identified first-person perspective to a witnessing third-person perspective of the very contents of our mind and consciousness. With ongoing practice, suspension gradually changes our fundamental relationship to the thinking process and the underlying habits of mind and points of view in which we are imbedded by putting them in high relief against a background of awareness. By interrupting the engrained tendency to become reified in our ideas and beliefs, suspension facilitates a less attached, yet poised and attentive relationship with our knowledge, beliefs and perspectives. Suspending our thought and emotional processes when encountering moments of difference, dissonance, judgment, requires slowing down our stream of consciousness and mind for the sake of authentic, in-the-moment discoveries and learning. Suspension of our judgments or reactions requires learning to bracket or dis-identify with our views and be open to being influenced by neighbouring perspectives as important partial illuminations of the larger gestalt of the group subject or issue as Bohm elaborates:

> Suspension is not easily grasped because the activity is both unfamiliar and subtle. Suspension involves exposing your reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions in such a way that they can be seen and felt and also be reflected back by others in the group. It does not mean repressing or suppressing or, even, postponing them. It means, simply, giving them your serious attention

so that their structures can be noticed, while they are actually taking place. Suspension may permit you to begin to see the deeper meanings underlying your thought process and to sense the often incoherent structure of any action that you might otherwise carry out automatically. (Bohm, Factor and Garrett 1991)

By slowing down the inquiry and more carefully observing our thought processes, Bohm's notion of suspension invites us to pay attention differently to both ourselves and to other dialogue participants by temporarily loosening our habitual hold and identification with our views and beliefs. As a clearing for inquiry opens through suspension, this creates a shared willingness to be tentative, curious and ultimately less invested in either asserting our perspectives or refuting others' perspectives.

Proprioception

In learning how to suspend our views and opinions in dialogue, we create the conditions for *proprioception of thought*. Bohm remarked that 'the point of *suspension* is to help make proprioception possible' (1996, 25). Bohm borrowed the term proprioception from neurophysiology to convey the significance of giving sustained attention to the movement of our intellectual, emotional and kinaesthetic processes as these unfold in real-time. Bohm's (1996) following example conveys an analogy of the failure of proprioception of the body:

> We know of a woman who had a stroke in the middle of the night. She woke up and was hitting herself. People came in and turned on the light and that's what they found. What happened was that her motor nerves were working, but her sensory nerves were no longer working. So she probably touched herself, but she didn't know that she'd touched herself, and therefore she assumed that somebody else was touching her and interpreted this as an attack. The more she defended, the worse the attack got. The proprioception had broken down. She no longer saw the relation between the intention to move and the result. When the light was turned on, proprioception was established in a new way, by sight. (25)

Bohmian dialogue helps develop our capacity for proprioception of thought, which he claims is needed to offset the fact that most human problems can be traced back to this lack of fundamental awareness (Bohm et al. 1991). Proprioception allows the physiological correlates of our thoughts to enter more clearly into felt awareness in the moment, in turn helping us understand more fully what is taking place by orienting differently by experiencing this deeper connect with the underlying ground of wholeness, which day to day reality is imbedded in.

Lee Nichol (2005) elaborates, 'it is something more like a figure-ground reversal, in which our typical structure of our awareness – with thoughts far more dominant

than our physiology – is reversed, with the physiological responses now coming to the foreground' (23). Given that our bodies live within the spatial-temporal horizons of the present moment, developing the capacity for proprioception of thought helps participants experience a more integrated sense of wholeness by expanding our horizons of personal identity to include greater dimensions of what is real. Furthermore, within the dialogue context, this modality of sensing with one's body in relation to the dialogue helps bring about the conditions for insight and learning to take root, in turn supporting the possibility of transformative shifts in individual and collective consciousness. Proprioceptive awareness is not memory based, but follows from Bohm's proprioception of thought. Isaacs (1996) elaborates:

> Typically we simply see our thoughts as emerging 'from nowhere' and do not detect our own fingerprints on them. In dialogue we seek to cultivate both levels of awareness – reflective awareness and proprioceptive awareness – which could also be stated as awareness of what one is doing as one is doing it. Typically our thinking processes move too quickly, or we do not have the luxury of time, to perceive these forces at work. We have argued that organizations and institutions have a genuine need now to expand their repertoires – make room for inquiry of this sort. (24)

By cultivating proprioceptive awareness, participants within BD groups learn how to break out of the solipsistic representational world of images, meaning and thought, which tends to originate from past experience, however not always. As a way of differentiating this representational world from the unfolding territory of everyday experience, Bohm (1996) distinguished *thoughts* from thinking and *felts* from feeling. For Bohm, *thoughts* and *felts* are an active response of memory and the past. By being attentive to the influences of past conditioning through proprioceptive awareness, transformative possibilities for in-the-moment reflection can occur.

Primacy of Meta-Awareness (Versus Thought/Feeling) in Bohmian Dialogue

With practice, Bohmian dialogue develops the ability to witness our processes of knowing, feeling and being. Though the witnessing capacity has been with us as a tribe, nation, or species for millennium, BD relies on meta-awareness as fundamental to the collective learning processes of dialogue. As I have explored above, suspension and proprioception of thought gradually help participants create the conditions for a transformed understanding of how they engage with their thoughts and feelings and how they hold perspectives in BD.

Meta-awareness is distinct from proprioception of thought or metacognition in that metacognitive processes involve awareness within the context of cognition, whereas meta-awareness includes, yet extends beyond, the categories of cognitive

reasoning. From these expanded horizons of embodied awareness, participants learn to be *meta-aware* of different intelligences, faculties of knowing, and ways of being in the dialogue.

Meta-awareness contributes to the project of deconstructing rational knowing as the highest faculty of knowing by giving participants the experience of being aware of their epistemological, ontological and existential processes. That is not to say that rationality is marginalised, but rather one of Bohm's key interests was to explore a fundamentally different order of relationship with the thinking process in order to understand its conditioned nature along with its relevant but limited functions.

In part, the meta-awareness process involves becoming aware of the movements of our discursive mind in conversation with others in such a manner that imparts new insight into the role of the intellect as limited servant of a greater unfolding process of co-intelligence. BD works with cultivating an *embodied* meta-aware position to facilitate a less identified way of holding and identifying with our perspectives as primary. This in turn helps create a dialogue environment that is more receptive to difference and diversity. Put in another way, becoming meta-aware shifts our thinking from a mental-reflective mode to a more contemplative, construct-aware mode of knowing and being. Associated with this experience is the transition from being an 'identified being' to 'creative being' (Reams 2003). In this sense, participants discover through BD practices how their habituated process of being identified with their thoughts and feelings tend to block creativity and insight. In developing the capacity not only to dis-identify with their polarised positions (Isaacs 1996), but also to witness the process of learning, participants shift from 'ideas and the subject being the common center' (Arnett 1992, 28) to exploring ideas and the subject in the common centre of *collective awareness*.

In the context of BD, the traditional cycles of action and critical reflection are supplemented with an additional cycle of meta-awareness. Before the emergence of the meta-aware position, participants' attention tends to be quite absorbed by the emerging content of the dialogue itself. With the cultivation of meta-awareness, less of our attention becomes bound up in the discursive realm of thought and the emotional forms of reactivity that tend to be embedded in our thought patterns (Bohm 1996) as conveyed in the last section on suspension.

From experiences facilitating and participating in BD, I have found that meta-awareness can take numerous forms within the individual and the dialogue. In the latter context, meta-awareness often simply involves venturing a meta-conversation about the existing conversation. Within BD, there is a need for recursive conversations about what was just talked about, felt, intuited, or sensed. These recursive conversations may initially bring about frustration for participants who

may claim to experience the dialogue as not going anywhere. This frustration often dissipates if the group can let go of the need for task-oriented objectives in the interests of serving inquiry oriented processes. By attending to these assumptions and processes through a form of collective mindfulness, Bohmian dialogue cultivates an awareness of the distorting factors of memory and disembodied communication (i.e. when the thinking process is divorced from the senses and moment to moment attention).

Limitations of Bohmian Dialogue

In addition to the above mentioned contributions of Bohmian dialogue, there are a number of limitations to Bohm's approach to dialogue that merit addressing.

Diminishment of the Personal Dimension of the Dialogue

Bohm's definition of thought encompasses different personal dimensions of our experience (e.g., physical, emotional, intellectual and intuitional). However, Bohm's labelling of the expressions of these domains as forms of 'thought' tends to overlook vital distinctions, thus limiting the expression and validity of these respective experiences and ways of knowing on their terms. This tended to bring about an implicit reductionism of human experience as 'thought'.

Bohm's (1996) emphasis on creating an 'impersonal fellowship' was intended initially to help people transcend the limitations and reactive conditioning that arise when individuals are identified with the more personal or egocentric aspects of self and dialogue. This identification tends to take the form of unreflexively taking a position in an argument and advocating for the particular perspective one adheres to. To Bohm, such a position was nonsensical or a dramatic and often quite distorted illustration of the reflexes of thought in action. For Bohm, a true dialogue required moving beyond the ego and memory informed domain of thought and its conditioned processes to arrive at a more intentional, presence-oriented process of communication that was to a degree at least, free of the fundamental conditioning influences endemic within argument and debate culture.

Nevertheless, by emphasising the need to go beyond the personal or to build a kind of transpersonal or post-personal fellowship, this often led to diminishing the significance of personal experience within Bohmian dialogue circles and in some cases marginalising it. While this may not have been intended, Bohm's preoccupation with observing and learning about the process of thought itself left BD groups prone to abstract and idiosyncratic forms of contemplation that at times lacked skilful awareness of how to work with and potentially transform the widely prevalent conditions of conversation that inhibit deep dialogue when members are overly identified with their experience, thoughts or emotions.

Although suspension was useful in relaxing this identification, Bohm did not bring about a practice to help participants *re-identify or re-claim their views* from a more liberated or empowered place informed by a transformed understanding that is capable of drawing upon the less- or non-egoic dimension of our personal experiences without being overly identified with this aspect. Because suspension encouraged a disidentification with thought and emotion, participants at times found it difficult to know how to skilfully work with their own feelings and thoughts as an authentic and empowered expression of their lives in the world, and so this tended to create an impaired or limited capacity to influence and work with people who were not familiar with the processes of Bohmian dialogue, which is of course most folks.

Inadequate Understanding of How to Support Generativity in BD

Bohm's preoccupation with transcending thought and emotion led to an underdeveloped awareness of how to work with creative emergence in conversation. For example, redirecting one's awareness to different perspectives or places within one's self and the emerging dialogue involves learning to subtly move our attention to sensing the source of the stream of shared meaning of what is trying to emerge through the greater dialogue group as people share their contributions. Put in another way, redirection involves literally redirecting one's attention to the newly emerging content and 'to the source of the mental process rather than the objects within it' (Varela 2000). Bohm's thinking tended to be focused on transforming our relation to the objects within the mental process, but often did not go far enough upstream in our awareness to get at the source of creative emergence itself. Attention was not generally deployed to apprehend something new directly, but rather indirectly through suspension and insight from a focus on transcending past understandings and shared meaning.

As such, Bohmian dialogue process tended to arrive at the new through the disentanglement with our conditioned, reflexive process of thinking and feeling in the conversation. It moved into this emergence through a kind of via negativa, that is through eliminating *what isn't*, we arrive or step back into *what is*. However, the challenges with such a process is it tends to involve an ongoing re-orientation from what came before or a sensitivity to what is obscuring the unconditioned or source of thinking and feeling directly.

There is a subtle but significant difference in this practice in contrast to say a via positiva practice such as presencing (Scharmer 2007), which aspires to bring about a direct apprehension of the possible arising future through the present moment. The differences in orientation are subtle, however where BD begins with the past, presencing begins with the present, sensing into the arising future. Where BD is

strengthened by encountering the new through the old, presencing is strengthened and empowered by becoming the new directly in the communication process, i.e. *Self as source*. BD processes such as suspension are steeped in an implicit separation or dualism between one's self and what is arising. As such, suspension gestures involve an ongoing deconstructing, removing and cleaning the dialogue of its 'impurities' or 'habits of mind'. Bohmian dialogue thus struggled with 'seeing from within the source of what is emerging, letting it come into being through us' (Senge et al. 2004, 45).

The present and emerging future are left open to explore as Bohm was reluctant to posit a methodology or practice for creativity or engaging creativity directly in communication, arguing that this would be yet another by-product of our conditioning, of the inherit limitations of thought itself. By interfacing with the present through the past, BD participants are left to develop the capacity to engage their awareness in a distinct manner from say presencing, where there is an interest in voicing what participants intuitively sense is trying to emerge – whether in the form of emerging knowledge or meaning about a given subject, or an insight into the group process of learning itself. BD opens a social space of learning into the nature of how collective mind and consciousness function, but the practice falls short of empowering BD participants to cultivate a generative way of knowing and learning from what is not yet manifested (i.e. the emerging future).

BD Tends to Produce Disorienting Dilemmas and Confusion for Groups

Examining the tacit assumptions underlying our views can be prone to triggering disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow 1978), which are internal ruptures or interruptions in our taken-for-granted understandings of our self and worldview. Proprioceptive awareness enables individuals to explore unfamiliar ways of knowing (epistemology), being (ontology) and learning, in turn offering participants a practice to reconsider previously held views in the present, enabling new perspectives to emerge. Bohm was greatly invested in the notion that thought functions much like a system and that it needs continual contact with awareness to see the larger whole of reality out of which thought makes abstractions.

As such, his dialogue process tends to focus a lot more on this exploration of the nature and process of thought, often inadvertently leading groups into a reflective condition where individuals become more invested in teasing out nuanced distinctions and deeper meaning that lead to further iterations of abstraction.

As I have observed, this can at times amount to obscure forms of philosophising or an overreliance on certain aspects of BD, which can lead individuals to get tangled up in their meta-processes, producing a non-versatile and at times idiosyncratic form of conversation that is arguably no longer serving the subject or the lives of the participants in ways that were originally intended. Bohm's (1996) conception

supports a restricted form of initial facilitation in the interests of helping participants distinguish between dialogue and other modalities of conversation. Bohm refrained from 'proposing means, methodologies to help the vast majority of people understand and make sense of the experience of dialogue' (Cayer 2005, 168). According to Cayer (2005), this led others to misunderstanding and diluting Bohm's original vision of dialogue within different settings of practice.

However, preliminary facilitation could have been extended into later stages of BD to address the periods of confusion and disorientation that arise during different stages of the dialogue. In my experience facilitating and teaching BD, dialogue is commonly experienced to be an unpredictable and at times perplexing process of conversation that has no goal or preconceived outcome. Because of Bohm's more idealistic and less pragmatic objectives, he was less concerned with how to integrate BD into work settings for example.

Following Bohm's initial work, the two year MIT Dialogue Project overseen by William Isaacs and colleagues attempted to build a new actionable theory of dialogue. During the mid nineties, disagreements of interpretation between advocates of BD and scholar-practitioners drawing from the research from the MIT Dialogue Project arose from differing assumptions about the purpose and intent of Bohm's conception and how it might be integrated into organisational contexts. Though Bohm differentiated dialogue from debate and discussion, he didn't offer frameworks or theory to support adequate scaffolding for participants to establish the conditions for dialogue to emerge, particularly in the contexts of organisations where results and team learning are important.

Summary and Recommendations for Further Research

Bohm's conception of dialogue was initially introduced from his work with groups and extensive conversations with the world philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti. For his conception of dialogue to be useful to the emerging field of dialogue studies, I believe there is in part a need to continue to reframe, redistill and reinterpret Bohm's work within a larger conversation of dialogue-based thinking so as to optimally place his contribution in service of a more generative communication offering. The subsequent work of Isaacs and Scharmer has in part attempted this via the MIT Dialogue Project in the 90s; however a more comprehensive undertaking could be of great value to learning organisations and communities, particularly those groups who are committed to embodying deeper practice-based communication processes within more practical contexts of work where the quality of results and outcomes are as important as the quality of processes that led to their emergence. In this sense, further research is needed to better understand the ways in which Bohmian dialogue processes are capable of advancing collective wisdom and collective aspects of leadership development in organisations.

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