

Come the Millennium

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I have a Utopian vision of a new multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field that would provide an intellectual home for all of us who are now far-flung and often isolated from others with common interests. Our new field could be called, simply, *Dialogue*. Just as many other fields have taken their names from what they study (e.g., Communication, French, History), there is no need for an "-ology." In all our diversity, Dialogue researchers would be unified by a common focus and a commitment to some key principles, which I will try to anticipate here.

THE MINIMUM UNIT OF STUDY IS DIALOGUE

Dialogue is "a conversation between two or more persons" (Onions, 1973, p. 539). The upper limit is informally set at "a small group," but the lower limit is absolute: All studies include at least 2 participants. An

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individual alone is extrinsic to dialogue (as are individuals' reports about, comments on, or perceptions of their dialogues). Studies of an individual's acts without considering the acts of the interlocutor would have to be done in other fields. Also, of course, there has to be actual, spontaneous dialogue. The study of hypothetical talk might remain alive in other fields but made-up conversations would never get a foothold in Dialogue—not least because they are usually boring.

A dialogue is not the sum of information exchanged by individuals. A clear rebuttal of the reductionist view of dialogue can be found in Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986) and Schober and Clark (1989). In the latter experiments, two individuals had a dialogue in which one of them explained to a partner how to do the task at hand. A third individual overheard their entire conversation but could not participate. In spite of having all of the same information, the overhearer never did as well at the task as the partners who participated. This measurable difference in performance demonstrates that a dialogue is more than the utterances of individuals; it is a unique event created by those individuals, moment by moment.

THE FOCUS IS ON DIALOGUE FOR ITS OWN SAKE

In our new field, the concepts as well as the data would always be dialogic. No one would start with an individual concept and stretch it or double it to fit dialogue. Each phenomenon to be studied would be unique to dialogue. None would be treated as a by-product or indicator of an individual process or construct, such as emotion, cognition, personality, competence, gender, and so forth.

An excellent example can be found in Edwards and Middleton's (1987) reanimation of Bartlett's (1932) distinction between memory and remembering. *Memory* is a hypothetical mental state or process. *Remembering* is "a discursive practice situated in a specific context and subject to specific purposes [and is] profoundly dialogical" (Jonsson, Linell, & Saljo, 1991, p. 5). The traditional, individualistic view is that memory is primary and remembering is simply a means through which memory can be retrieved. We choose to study remembering for its own sake, as an

intrinsically interesting process through which versions called *memories* are shaped in dialogue.

Ideally, in the new field of Dialogue, no one ever has to answer questions such as "Don't you think the individual is important?"; "You can't deny there are individual differences, can you?"; or "I know you don't believe in cognition, but what about . . . ?" (to which my answers would be "Yes," "Yes," and "I don't care"). Such questions would be considered, at the very least, rude because they imply we should be working in another field or doing another field's work for it. More important, such questions are embarrassingly superficial. First, choosing not to study something is not the same as denying it exists; all of us respect the laws of gravity without having to become physicists. Second, the truths and interests of one field have no hegemony in another; there is no rational basis for a preferential hierarchy of fields. Biological or cognitive explanations are in no sense better or necessary explanations of dialogue. They are simply irrelevant.

THERE ARE ENTIRELY NEW EXPLANATORY PROCESSES

Although we will always focus on the phenomena first, we will not eschew explanation and understanding. On the contrary, we have struggled and still struggle with how and when to generalize from our observations. Of course, the explanations would not be sought in intrapsychic processes, such as intention, cognition, or personality, or indeed in any other processes external to the dialogue itself. Nor would it be acceptable to casually invent unfalsifiable mental explanations ("He was trying to . . ."; "She meant to . . ."). Moreover, the necessity to be "micro" in our analyses has continued to erode the utility and credibility of global explanations, such as "gender," "relationship," "goal," and so forth, each of which would have to be scaled to the finer and more precise level at which dialogue occurs.

More generally, the term *why* would finally fall into disrepute, to be replaced by more useful questions such as "How?" and "With what effect?" (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Our students would learn the difference with exercises that present them with interesting data and require them, first, to ask "Why?" and to document where that

question leads, then to ask "How?" and "With what effect?" of the same data. It is always exciting to see the new possibilities that the latter questions open up.

ANY METHODS ARE WELCOME

Methodological chauvinism and civil wars would become things of the distant past (Bavelas, 1995). "Qualitative" or "quantitative," "experimental" or "field" studies would be judged only by their excellence. After all, choosing a method is like choosing a wrench: It has to fit the job at hand. A method has to be a good way to answer the question at hand; if it isn't, then it is not a good method for that question. Like any good artisans, Dialogue researchers would take pride in choosing exactly the right tool and also in keeping up their skills in the widest variety of techniques, as well as learning new ones. Creative new combinations of methods would be valued, particularly if they were specifically suited to the understanding of dialogue.

Similarly, sectarian differences over preferred settings will have disappeared. Neither experimentalists nor field researchers would imply generalizability to all other settings; both would acknowledge the specificity of context and our obligation to identify and account for all relevant contextual features, wherever they appear (Bavelas, 1984). (As an experimental social psychologist, I would be particularly happy to see the term *naturalistic* retired. After all, naturalistic means "*as if natural*"; is the opposite "*artificialistic*"?)

There would be a primary focus on the phenomena (versus "top-down" approaches). Therefore, inductive methods leading to new phenomena would be highly respected. Staying close to the data would lead to more and more collaboration, convergence, and replication. The ultimate delight would be to say to a colleague, "Hey, I saw that too!" Our shared ethic would be to pool data and accumulate consensual knowledge, understanding that this is a slow process. Neither fads nor insider knowledge would be socially acceptable.

An example of convergence from entirely different methods can be found in our studies of listener's responses. Goodwin's (1986) analyses of conversations in the field led him to identify two different kinds of

responses by listeners, continuers (such as "Mhm"), and assessors (such as "Oh no!"). In our experimental research in the laboratory, we independently found the same distinction, between what we called *generic* and *specific responses* (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 1995). Superficially, our two methods could not have been more different, but we were both looking at the dialogues very closely, so we both saw what the participants were doing.

THERE IS A HIGHLY RESPECTFUL ATTITUDE TOWARD THE PEOPLE WE STUDY

Finally, in my Utopia, we will have departed from many of our colleagues in other social sciences in our increasing respect for the individuals whose behaviors we study so closely. Whereas others often assume that their subjects are asocial, inherently individualistic, competitive, and only superficially socialized, we see every day how they spontaneously collaborate and integrate their actions with each other, how they co-construct the dialogue.

It has also been common, in the past, to assume that ordinary people are unskilled communicators, in need of expert (and often expensive) training in speaking and listening skills. Yet we observe how inherently skillful they are in their communicative acts. What they do always makes sense, and the best communication training may simply be to learn to appreciate these untaught skills.

The mechanical approach to human communication will have gone the way of 19th- and early 20th-century Newtonian mechanics. The interlocutors do not transmit information over conduits in physical packages; they interact at the level of meaning. They do not make physical movements, such as inclining the head; they indicate understanding by nodding. They play with and elaborate on their meanings, always developing new ones in the course of the conversation.

That is my Utopia. We are not there yet, but closer than we think.

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