Future Directions and Discipline Formation for 'Dialogue Studies': Reflections on Critically Analyzing 'Dialogue' in Theory and Practice

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In considering the need for a newly formed research area, or emergent discipline, of 'dialogue studies' this paper will explore three interrelated themes: the concept of 'dialogue studies' and its parameters and framing as an emergent discipline; the potential benefits of such a discipline to practice and policy; and the importance of critically understanding the cultural and epistemological context of 'dialogue' and its role in living with not only diversity, but difference. Whilst recognizing that there is a clear practice-driven need for the development of an area of research under the banner of 'dialogue studies' and that there are existing bodies of research, which such a field can effectively build on, this paper argues that the development of dialogue studies as a field cannot simply bring together and augment existing discourses, but needs to create new perspectives by adopting a multidisciplinary approach. It is also postulated that there is a need to develop an internal critical discourse within 'dialogue studies' which builds reflexivity into future research development and that ultimately any research undertaken in this area has to be both beneficial and supportive of practice, whilst also clearly articulating its successes *and* failures.

Key words: intercultural dialogue, interfaith dialogue, intergroup contact, intergroup dialogue, community tensions

Introduction

The primary question posed by the editors of this journal for its first edition is to ask whether or not there is a real need for the emergence of a discipline under the banner of 'dialogue studies'? It is laudable, and highly appropriate, that the process of developing 'dialogue studies' as a field of research should involve a form of dialogue from the outset. The primary dialogue that is needed however is not that between differing academic discourses (though this is indeed also necessary), but more importantly between the spheres of research, theory and practice. The perceived necessity of 'dialogue studies' is arguably driven predominantly by

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practice and not by scholarly need. It is driven by the need of practitioners, and the policy makers who fund such practice, to understand the true impact of their interventions in what are often highly complex, fragile or sensitive situations. If 'dialogue studies' is indeed a relevant field of research, or even as suggested an emergent discipline, then it is at its very heart an applied one. It is this intersection of scholarly discourse and practical need that this paper will reflect on. In responding to the editors' questions, the concerns and propositions raised in this paper in part reflect my day-to-day concerns in previous practice based roles running large scale intercultural dialogue programmes and projects, and in part it is the concerns of an interested party who returned to academia because of a recognized need to develop adequate research into the role and effectiveness of dialogue in intercultural, cross community and interfaith dialogue. In order to ask what are the benefits, or potential pitfalls, developing a 'dialogue studies' approach and to explore avenues for potential research this paper will explore three interrelated themes: the concept of 'dialogue studies' and its parameters and framing as an emergent discipline; the top level benefits of such a discipline to practice and policy; and the importance of critically understanding the cultural and epistemological context of 'dialogue' and its role in living with not only diversity, but difference.

'Dialogue studies' as an Emergent Discipline

Do We Need a Distinct Field or Emergent Discipline of 'Dialogue Studies'?

Before we even ask what we mean by 'Dialogue Studies' we need to ask whether there is a need for better understanding of how different community tensions or conflicts can be tackled, ameliorated or prevented. There has clearly been growing interest in – and perhaps most especially since 9/11 and 7/7 an increasing policy focus on - creating opportunities for intercultural or cross-community dialogue. Where once was a disparate group of organizations undertaking intercultural relations now we see a veritable industry of intercultural, or intergroup, dialogue in policy and practice (Stephan and Stephan 2013; Nss 2010). If we were to seek a defining paradigm for this area of work it would most likely be that there is a benefit in bringing groups or individuals who are currently in differing forms of 'conflict' together in order to build understanding and reduce prejudice between these groups. There is a growing and extensive body of work within social psychology – intergroup contact theory – that supports this model (for a good overview see Pettigrew 2008; Pettigrew et al. 2011).

However, this paper argues that whilst intergroup contact theory provides us with an excellent basis for some forms of dialogue practice it can only take us so far – it is after all primarily concerned with understanding the role of 'contact' in reducing prejudice. However, the political, societal and cultural backdrop

to conflict or tensions between communities is not simply based on prejudicial understanding of the 'other'. Living with pluralism and difference means that we don't just need to reduce prejudice, we need to manage, engage with, negotiate between and understand multiple worldviews – some of which play a role in what is seemingly intractable conflict. Therefore whilst 'dialogue studies' will greatly benefit from incorporating the paradigm of intergroup contact research, it needs to move beyond it.

What then should the study of 'dialogue' encompass and is a process of discipline formation necessary to achieve this? Discipline formation is surely more a social process of collaboration and finding shared research interests than an epistemological process of the categorization of knowledge. The, in some cases, seemingly arbitrary divides we place on academic knowledge production can in many ways hinder cross-fertilization of ideas or effective cross-boundary collaboration, at worst it has historically created duel lines of questioning which results in disconnected or parallel tracks of research or questioning, competing forms of 'consensus', methodological dogma and the use of undifferentiated terminology or jargon that can quite literally lead to researchers talking past each other (Elsdon-Baker 2009). At a time when funders and members of the academy are beginning to scrutinize the nineteenth and early twentieth century legacy of discipline formation and specialization that is still embedded in the structure of our university systems, is it helpful to start to develop areas of inquiry that seek to define themselves by drawing boundaries between other areas of inquiry? So questions of whether the newly emergent 'discipline' of dialogue studies should, or can, encompass extant areas of research or discourse, for example cultural production or intercultural communication should perhaps be abandoned from the outset. Rather than asking if there is a category of work that has grown out of recent trends in practice that then necessitates the need for the specialization 'dialogue studies', we should be asking: is there enough shared ground and interest between extant areas of research that when brought together can meaningfully add real value to our understanding of 'dialogue' in theory and practice?

This might seem like a minor point but there is a fundamental difference in each approach: the first builds the nature of the disciplinary approach through defining what it is not - what is in and what is out; the second, however, has more porous boundaries which seek to pull in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary ways of working between those with a shared interest understanding dialogue, explaining and predicting its impact and applying theory to practice, or indeed utilising practice in the development of theory. It is surely important in a field that is seeking to employ applied research approaches, and that seeks to understand dialogue across cultural or worldviews, not to start out by creating its own distinct and

segregated research culture, with all the methodological constraints and hegemonic processes that this can engender. The raison d'être for 'dialogue studies' is that practice of dialogue is often difficult to negotiate, highly complex with multiple external drivers, moderators and mediators for its effectiveness or impact, and there is little real understanding of what works well or why. It is therefore important not to exclude any methodological or disciplinary approach that can benefit this area of research – a point this paper will examine further below.

A perhaps more pertinent question is to ask if this is an area already served well within other scholarly discourses. Whilst there are areas of research that have benefited from much time and considerable discussion within the academic literature, for instance intergroup contact theory, there are other areas where there is a lacuna of scholarly research relating to policy or practice based approaches, e.g. intercultural dialogue. Given then the increasing interest in modes and methods of reciprocal engagement that can come under the umbrella of 'dialogue' in both policy and practice, it is arguably important to create a focused field of research in this area which is both applied and practice-led, but also draws on other theoretical and critical traditions to explore the need for 'dialogue' and its role in contemporary social relations.

Defining Meaningful *Dialogue?*

The working definition of 'dialogue' by which this journal has been framed is as follows:

> a meaningful interaction and exchange between individuals and/or people of different groups (social, cultural, political and religious) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increased understanding.

The types of work that might be classed as forms of 'dialogue' in a practice or policy setting are broad and numerous – ranging from school linking activities, interfaith projects, localized community level conflict resolution, right through to large scale international forums or conferences, and many other activities in between. It is no mean feat then to try and define 'dialogue' as part of the process of defining an area of research. The statement above has no doubt been hard won in the process of its formation and also no doubt others will critically analysis various aspects of its meaning, application and implications. This paper will suffice with one word – *meaningful* - to provide a word of caution when it comes to notions of discipline formation. This is not, one hopes, a vainglorious attempt at semantic pedantry, but more an opportunity to explore some of the fundamental questions that will need to be addressed in the creation of a new area of research under the banner 'dialogue studies'. The use of the word *meaningful* could imply that the interactions being

studied have some inherent significance, importance or purpose. This is slightly problematic from both a research and practice perspective.

It is important that any attempts to define the field (or emergent discipline) of 'dialogue studies' do not make implicit value judgments from the outset. Research questions, or the paradigmatic frame for areas of research, should allow an open-ended inquiry led approach and not presuppose the 'positive' benefits or outcomes of the focus of study for that entire discipline. In short it should provide a frame for future research not a solution. Our understanding of paradigmatic development in research draws heavily on the philosophy of science and the work of Thomas Kuhn (1962). As part of the process of discipline formation, there is process by which consensus within a nascent research community is achieved on an open-ended framework of concepts, methodologies and results. A research paradigm is not a value judgment or position statement, nor does it allow for dogmatic positions or cut off avenues for open-ended inquiry into differing mechanisms or processes. And perhaps most importantly paradigms shift over time – a process that is most usually under Kuhn's model brought about by the emergence of anomalous data sets. To move back to the proposition of 'dialogue studies' as an area of research or emergent discipline, I want to ask is there a consensus that 'dialogue' is always *meaningful* and is this a useful way to frame a research area? Can the study of 'dialogue' in practice really tell us what is *meaningful*?

Meaningful in a Research Context

If we are to take an empirical approach (which encompasses all disciplines from sciences, arts and humanities) to this newly formed area of academic inquiry we need to be very careful not to presuppose the outcomes of research or to deny other possible mechanisms or processes. The term *meaningful* does both of these things – it presupposes that all dialogue is *meaningful*, or implies that it is desirable or inherently positive, and it also denies the opportunity to create new modes of positive engagement that do not include 'dialogue'. Most importantly it does not allow us to critically engage with the question of whether 'dialogue' could sometimes have negative impacts or, in which case, when it may not be the most appropriate approach to engage individuals or groups in 'dialogue'.

From both a theory and practice perspective these are fundamentally important questions. As Pettigrew summarised in his outlining of future directions in intergroup contact theory 'a greater focus upon negative contact is required. Cross-group interaction that leads to increased prejudice has not been studied systematically' (Pettigrew 2008, 187). In his subsequent 2011 paper reviewing the recent advance in intergroup contact theory Pettigrew further suggests that:

> Not all intergroup contact reduces prejudice. Some situations engender enhanced prejudice. Such negative intergroup contact has received less research attention, but renewed consideration to the issue has shed light on this phenomenon. Negative contact typically involves situations where the participants feel threatened and did not choose to have the contact (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). These situations frequently occur in work environments where intergroup competition exists as well as in situations involving intergroup conflict. (Pettigrew et al. 2011, 277)

Do we need to take the possibility of negative intergroup contact seriously in 'dialogue studies'? Pettigrew qualifies the above statement by outlining three reasons for the seemingly positive response to contact that is found in meta-analysis of intergroup contact theory and surmises that 'the role of negative intergroup contact may not be as crucial as some critics have assumed' (Pettigrew et al. 2011). This may well be the case, however it is possibly an area that deserves further analysis when it comes to 'dialogue studies' as one of the three reasons Pettigrew cites is that:

> the effects of negative intergroup contact are moderated by whether the participant has entered the contact freely' (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). 'When the contact involves voluntary contact, the effects of negative contact are far smaller than when the contact involves involuntary contact – again suggesting the key importance of threat. (Pettigrew et al. 2011, 277)

Given the nature and cultural or geopolitical context of many dialogue interventions which incorporate both the local micro-level of inter-group contact and macro-level discourses that are part of wider societal drivers for conflict, we cannot assume in practice – with the best will in the world - that all participants will enter dialogue interventions either 'freely', with positive expectations, a true feeling of equity and voice, or without feeling threatened by their own perception of or very real power imbalances. Therefore, whilst the impact of negative contact may be potentially negligible and overridden by the positive impact under certain conditions it does not necessarily mean that it is negligible in the context of the practice of 'dialogue'. What I am suggesting is that we need to factor in a better understanding of how to mitigate negative impacts in the management and practice of dialogue – which is often artificial and, by the nature of its funding or the organisations that initiate 'dialogue', may have inherent bias towards one group over another or carry with it real or imagined political agendas. For example, non-belief or agnosticism is often not factored into interfaith dialogue, which by its very nature tends to be run by religious or faith organisations or groups. It can therefore act to exclude those who are lapsed or those who are non-believers – even when it is actively seeking to engage these groups. It is hard given the context of interfaith activities to provide an atmosphere of equity to non-believers when the paradigm of interfaith dialogue has for obvious reasons in the past actively excluded them. This leads

to not inconsiderable suspicion of interfaith activities most obviously within hard line atheist communities, consequently effecting narratives in public discourse. It can in my experience also leave some moderate atheists feeling that they do not have equal voice in dialogue that they feel should include them – even when they are participating within it. That non-believers and agnostics also have a stake in, and a role within, interfaith dialogue is however thankfully becoming more widely recognized within some interfaith organizations or initiatives.

It should therefore not be assumed that all modes of 'dialogue' or community intervention are positive, or even necessary; though there is valuable evidence of the benefits of intergroup contact, this theoretical work is often not as relevant or as applicable as one would like in the field of practice. The defining research paradigm for 'dialogue studies' clearly cannot be that 'dialogue' is something that is in and of *itself* desirable. Moreover, we should recognize that, whilst there is a clear policy and practitioner focus on 'dialogue' based interventions, where there is 'dialogue' theory it can be patchy or localized to certain disciplinary methods or approaches that are not applicable in all circumstances – hence the clear need for the formation of a more holistic multidisciplinary research field: 'dialogue studies'.

Furthermore, even where there are strong traditions of scholarship there can often be a considerable disconnect between theory, policy and practice. The frame for research then should be that 'dialogue' in practice is happening and given that those who take this approach range from the large to the small, the powerful to the grassroots – the potential for well intentioned but poorly articulated or managed policy or practice to damage already fragile relationships between individuals or within and among groups is hypothetically fairly significant. Therefore, work in this area should be focused not only on truly assessing the impact and effectiveness of 'dialogue', but also understanding the context of 'dialogue' both geopolitical and cultural, comparative and definitional work exploring the differing modes and means of 'dialogue', and critical examination of perception of the need for 'dialogue' given its current status as a preferred means of community engagement or management of community/intergroup tensions or conflict.

Meaningful in a Practice Context

A second issue with the term *meaningful* in the context of this definition of 'dialogue' from a practice perspective is that it implies two things:

1. That dialogue is necessarily a *goal driven* process, here outlined as being to increase *understanding*.
2. That dialogue interventions must be *significant,* which can imply a sense of scale or a hierarchy within societal structures.

Taking the first point, tacit practice based knowledge would suggest that it is not always helpful to frame interventions as being goal orientated as it can either imply a deficit model approach i.e. the assumption that it is only through engaging with the 'other' or experts in dialogue that one can gain an increased understanding or fill a supposed deficit in ones own knowledge. The goal of building understanding implies an information or knowledge exchange which can often, however well meaning an intervention is, be inadvertently or uncritically seen by participants and organisers alike as a unidirectional transfer of information, not necessarily a reciprocal process. Implying a goal orientated approach could thus potentially create problems with participants perceptions of the existence of unequal power relations – that it is 'they' not the 'other' that is there to learn. This is most evident in concerns that can be voiced within broader communities that those who are engaged in 'dialogue' are somehow being 'duped' or unduly influenced by the 'other' they are in dialogue with. The impact of these concerns or perceptions of 'deficit models' of engagement has been the subject of systematic discussion in science communication discourses, and perhaps this would be a useful starting point to explore the impact with regards the role of dialogue in community or social relations. Clearly knowledge exchange or building *understanding* is not a value free exercise and any goal-oriented approach needs to have both a sound ethical and epistemological underpinning as discussed later in this paper.

With regard to the second point we need to collectively ask ourselves does this framing of 'dialogue' also imply that some forms of dialogue are more *meaningful* than others or are we interested in all forms of 'dialogue'? *Meaningful* is as a category something that is subjective, not objective – how do we measure *meaningfulness* or indeed who decides the *criteria* according to which one intervention is *meaningful* and another not? Is the world forum on intercultural dialogue more important in terms of research and practice than a small-scale grassroots project that reaches only a small, localized targeted group, who have little or only micro-level influence beyond their own immediate circles? Are leaders or varying elites our primary target and does it really matter if we change the perception of one individual? Do the micro-level processes involved in localised grassroots dialogues have any influence on policy or the reduction of macro-level conflict? Some have argued in relation to intergroup contact theory that the micro-level may not be as influential on the macro-level conflict as we might like to assume (McGarry and O'Leary 1995; Pettigrew 2008). As Hewstone (2003, 355) states 'there is plentiful evidence that contact does not prevent people massacring former neighbours. It is important, then, to acknowledge that contact cannot offer 'immunity', and we should not have unrealistic expectations of what it can achieve.' Whilst I am not advocating focusing on certain forms of dialogue over others, it is perhaps appropriate for us to reflect carefully on these points in relation to 'dialogue studies'.

On the other hand there is also a growing body of literature on intergroup contact and relations that show that vicarious or indirect forms of intergroup contact can play a positive role in reducing prejudice. (Dovido et al. 2011; Gomez et al. 2011; Mazziotta et al. 2011; Hewstone and Swart 2011). It is clear then that we need to be aware of the impact of 'dialogue' interventions on the groups beyond those directly involved, but it is important to recognize that this may only be a localised 'positive' effect. In a world that is increasingly more interconnected and whose extant power structures are changing in ways that we cannot necessarily predict we perhaps need to clearly position research into 'dialogue' within the broader social and political context – taking a multi-level network approach that does not solely focus on discrete interventions as exemplars of the whole. Pettigrew has similarly argued that within the study of intergroup contact theory:

> to argue that prejudice has little or nothing to do with intergroup conflict is an extreme position, to say the least. Rather extensive findings to date reveal that *intergroup contact is a necessary but insufficient condition by itself to resolve intergroup conflict.*
>
> A more valid criticism, however, would be that social psychologists have as yet not placed enough emphasis on transforming intergroup contact theory into an easily applied remedy within specific institutional settings. In particular, practical applications require multilevel, structural context for intergroup contact policies. (Pettigrew 2008, 196)

Towards a Sociology and Social History of 'Dialogue'

The unique, and often artificial, way and settings in which 'dialogue' practice takes place means that a potentially very beneficial area of sociological research within 'dialogue studies' should be focused not only on the interplay between the micro-level and the macro-level impacts of 'dialogue' interventions, but also on research that seeks to understand dialogue in practice itself through a sociological frame. The practice of 'dialogue' does not happen in a vacuum, therefore we should not see 'dialogue' only as discrete set of activities or interventions, but as networks of actors, organisations, interventions and activities. Quite often specific actors are playing different roles in the practice of 'dialogue'; the same faces grace various events, boards, and advisory committees – as with any area of practice and policy or even research, the usual suspects abound at senior professional levels of 'dialogue' practice. Therefore, a meta-analysis of not only the societal impact of 'dialogue' practice, but also the social history or sociology of 'dialogue' as a movement or discipline – examining the key players, organisational structures and networks - would be beneficial in helping to build an understanding of the role, impact and *meaningfulness* of 'dialogue' interventions in society. Kulich and Zhang (2012) have already begun this process for intercultural communication by constructing

a theoretical and analytical framework for a social history and sociology of the intercultural fields. This may seem an early juncture to suggest similar for 'dialogue' studies, however as Kulich and Zhang argue:

> Though, a historical project by definition looks back, it most helpfully does so if the recollections and framing of the past leads us to reflection, reframing, and creative refocusing for moving forward. Any review of where we have we been should conclude (or re-begin) with where we should or could be going. (Kulich and Zhang 2012, 899)

'Dialogue studies' potentially covers a range of disciplines and practices including some that are emergent and others that are relatively well established, such as interfaith dialogue or work that draws on Allport's contact theory. Therefore, it would be timely to develop a similar sociological and cultural/oral history mapping of the understanding of, and influences on these fields of work to inform, or help to reframe, future research or practice in this area.

Benefits of 'Dialogue Studies' to Practitioners and Policy Makers

Whilst there is an element of the usual suspects at the senior professional level in the field of dialogue practice a lot of the work undertaken in the delivery of dialogue is undertaken by volunteers, interns or those in lower paid roles at the beginning of their careers – there is, as with many professions these days, a precarious nature to the working life of many individuals in this field of practice and it is not unreasonable to suppose then that the actors within these groups are highly transient. This potentially creates two interlinked problems, which the creation of the field of 'dialogue studies' could effectively counter.

1. 'Reinventing the wheel' in the design, delivery or development of dialogue practice.
2. Little or no effective 'institutional memory' of frontline delivery.

It is important to remember that we do not live in an ideal or equal world and often those who are delivering, developing or maintaining the practice of dialogue projects or interventions for various reasons do not necessarily have access to, or may not even be aware of, the scholarly discourse or even online resources that focus on 'dialogue' related research or practice. The processes at play in this observation are an area that merits study in its own right. The individuals delivering 'dialogue' practice in its broadest sense come from a variety of cultural, educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, comparative studies exploring the approaches, expectations, and the modes and means for dialogue in practice across these contexts would be not only interesting from a scholarly perspective but also very valuable

in developing a sociological understanding of the cultural and social context of 'dialogue' processes in terms of behaviours and practice. It would also potentially add to the growing discourse in intergroup contact theory, which challenges the idea that the benefits of contact are possibly culturally contingent. As Pettigrew (Pettigrew et al. 2011, 276) highlights, 'we do not observe wide discrepancies in mean contact effects across the thirty-eight nations in which intergroup contact research has been conducted'. However, it would be interesting to explore if the success of varying modes or methods for the practice of 'dialogue' are culturally contingent. Experience and anecdote suggests that it may very well not be the case that modes or methods are culturally contingent, rather that the expectation or assumptions that certain interventions will not work within different cultural contexts impacts on delivery of or choice of 'dialogue' projects internationally – clearly this would be a useful area for more systematic study or a meta analysis of existing research.

A contributory factor to the lack of institutional memory in dialogue practice is the reporting bias in terms of the evaluation and monitoring of dialogue projects or interventions. We may have scholarly debates about the merit of publishing negative results or replication of other results in prestigious journals, but as many who have worked in the non-HE context will tell you the reporting of negative, or null impact, in project delivery can be the death knell to funding streams – it is not in many organisations' best interests to report too widely that their projects have been less than successful. This is not to say there is not institutional learning, more that the impact of lessons learnt might be incredibly localised to networks of close collaborators, individual organisations or even specific teams within larger organisations. Furthermore, approaches to evaluation and monitoring can be highly variable or in some cases non-existent. Often evaluation and monitoring of 'dialogue' interventions is based purely on feedback form style data collection and is an after thought, not something which is embedded into the design of interventions or activities. Though as more systematic research in this area, such as that of Stephan and Stephan (2013), is beginning to demonstrate an evidence-based approach based on effective quantitative and qualitative assessment of dialogue interventions, which can then inform the design and delivery of intervention programmes is plausible, possible and desirable – though there is still a long way to go in this area of work. Conversely, where evaluation and monitoring is competently done there can often be a lack of research resources to effectively analyse or disseminate the data sets. This is perhaps one of the most valuable benefits to both policy and practice that the creation of the field of 'dialogue studies' can contribute – a practical and scholarly 'institutional memory'. The proviso, of course, is that for such approaches to be effective they have to be developed inclusively with practitioners, and that any resulting resources have to be open access and accessible to practitioners at all levels.

Whilst there are some useful resources in the public domain, it is important to remember that these are static, or worse dogmatic, unless linked into not only the more recent critical discourse or research, but also shifts in geopolitical or societal changes (e.g. changing use of technologies); toolkits and guidelines all have a shelf life.

The disconnect between theory, research and practice is not a unidirectional issue, however, it is important that those developing theory take a more applied approach to understanding the pressures and constraints of working at the coal face of delivery and policy implementation. For example, within intergroup contact theory a number of researchers have built on Allport's original four optimal conditions for contact: equity of status between groups; shared or common goals; intergroup cooperation or sustained contact; and authority, law, custom or institutional support for contact (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998; Ron et al. 2010). There have been other conditions that have been added including use of a common language or voluntary participation (Pettigrew 2011; Ron et al. 2010). These conditional factors are implicit in intergroup contact theory – though as Hewstone (2003, 352) observes these 'and many other conditions considered in the literature, should be thought of facilitating rather than as essential conditions'. In the complex world of 'dialogue' practice it is often not easy to actually achieve many of these. Within intercultural dialogue in particular you may be operating in conditions where nearly all of these facilitating conditions are absent – what is needed then is more research into the opportunities for positive engagement in less than ideal circumstances. For example, it has become fairly common practice to engage in intercultural dialogue through the use of translators and with little opportunity for sustained contact – as otherwise any form of 'dialogue' would be impossible. It may in fact be the hardest groups to bring together that are the most important to enable dialogue between and as Evanoff (2004, 443) argues ultimately 'it is not the similarities but the differences which are problematic in intercultural communication and must be worked through'.

'Dialogue Studies' in its Cultural Context

Ethics, the Co-construction of Cross Cultural Ethics and 'Truth' Claims in Intercultural or Cross-community Dialogue

It is impossible to ignore or deny that the most pressing cultural divisions in the world today are often related in part to differing perceptions on the role of faith or belief in society. The prejudices we experience against individuals' or communities' beliefs are often part of a far more complex set of interacting cultural or societal drivers, rather than simply a prejudice against one religious stance or another. There are of course many other factors we need to take into account – for instance,

inter-generational conflict, economic circumstances, migration, gender, ethnicity - among many others. However, some of the fundamental aspects of these conflicts are related to ethical or epistemological stances – differing perspectives on how we should live our lives and indeed on how we even view or understand the world around us. How can we then engage in 'dialogue' between not simply differing cultural practices, but *differing worldviews*? How do we deal with *difference*, not just diversity?

For example, the seeking of 'common ground' through sacred text interpretation or scriptural reasoning is an approach that is adopted in some forms of interfaith dialogue, but whilst this has no doubt been a useful approach it has its limitations. By finding common ground in one group are we actually just changing the parameters of the group with which we identify by creating a shared 'other'? And whilst intergroup contact theory studies have shown that decreases in prejudice through contact can generalize and that reduction in prejudice can be transferred from the immediate out-group to other out-groups (Hewstone, 2003) – how can this possibly work when common ground is in part formed against the background of distinguishing a shared out-group or 'other' based on worldviews or beliefs? For instance, Muslim, Christian and Jewish approaches to finding scriptural common ground can intrinsically, and epistemologically, exclude non-Abrahamic faiths, polytheistic or animistic believers, agnostics or non-believers – as they incorporate fundamentally different worldviews or ways of understanding of the nature of 'truth'. Hypothetically, in this instance could seeking 'common ground' create a larger 'in' group and potentially more starkly draw lines between the 'in' and the 'out' groups than those that existed at the outset?

Conversely, if we are to include all faiths and none in interfaith dialogue then perhaps the only 'common ground' we could find agreement on is that we all have an interest in finding a commonly shared view on morality, or in other words that we all share an interest in living a 'good life', though acknowledging this (which is a useful start) would really not tell us much about what a good life is or how to live one. And as that dialogue has been underway from at least the development of ancient Greek philosophy onwards we cannot necessarily expect to find a resolution. How then can we identify common ground or shared interests in these contexts where there either is none or where the seeking of common ground becomes an exceptionally or nonsensically reductionist approach, or it fails to adequately acknowledge clear, and to some extent, immutable differences?

As a practitioner of intercultural dialogue one of the issues that one has to deal with on a daily basis within both the personal and professional realms is how to navigate the twin icebergs of imperialism and cultural relativism. On the one hand, how can you effectively create spaces for dialogue without either being seen to

be (or actually) promoting one culture's value systems, worldviews and beliefs as more acceptable or preferable to another, an approach which ultimately frames any activity with an implicit value judgment and can inevitably lead to a power imbalance between participants? On the other hand, how can you create spaces that do not inadvertently imply a relativistic stance, which may reinforce, mitigate criticism of or even endorse practices, political systems, regimes or elites to which you as an individual, your organisation or dialogue participants are fundamentally opposed?

As Evanoff (2004, 440) has argued, 'an adequate framework for intercultural dialogue on ethics is provided by neither universalist nor relativist approaches.' Instead Evanoff proposes a 'constructivist approach' that eschews cultural relativism and adopts a co-creation approach to universalism, suggesting that norms and principles can be actively *produced* through the joint effort of particular individuals engaged in the process of dialogue. Tolerance, from this perspective, means that the participants in a dialogue acknowledge the limitations of their own particular perspectives and remain open to the differing perspectives of others. (Evanoff 2004, 454)

The author argues that through this process there is the opportunity to create new perspectives on ethical debates, for example human rights. Whilst this is a compelling argument for a dialogical process to navigate the choppy waters between differing cultural norms or values, it is not necessarily the most appropriate approach when is comes to dialogue that seeks to find a path through different cultural perspectives on truth claims, epistemologies, beliefs or world views. Hypothetically for instance, how does a UK based scientist maintain mutually beneficial dialogue with an Iranian Ayatollah – when one is versed in western empirical philosophy, the other in Islamicised versions of Aristotelian logic? They have quite literally incommensurable viewpoints and ways of seeing the world. Yet there are indeed circumstances when this dialogue may be necessary and desirable. However, it is hard to find common ground when to do so one must reframe ones entire worldview and capitulate to another, or alternatively when one must concede to a world view that one cannot understand or find a way to accept as reasoned or reasonable for oneself. How do we negotiate or maintain reciprocal dialogue around issues of fundamental importance to us all when the point of contention is actually concerned with the nature of 'truth'; especially when the 'truth' claims, for example certain areas of scientific knowledge, are in and of themselves viewed as imperialistic? Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for 'dialogue studies' is to explore how one can effectively reciprocally engage groups that have conflicted epistemological worldviews in 'dialogue' without implying a value judgment and respecting differing cultural perspectives, but without sacrificing necessary empirical 'truth' claims that are fundamental to the well being of us all e.g. that climate change is caused by anthropomorphic factors or that use of condoms can reduce the spread of HIV.

Neither from an ethical or epistemological perspective is it always possible or desirable to find a lowest common denominator common ground or easy resolution. It is more a case of complex negotiation of shared vested interests, values and agreed pathways. At best we can hope for a continual negotiation of our meta-level shared interests - living without want or fear - of which 'dialogue' is one process. This is perhaps going to be one of the biggest challenges in coming years. How do we negotiate the challenges and changes ahead of us – climate change, rising global populations, increasing divisions between the 'haves' and 'have nots', scarcity of resources including fuel, food and water, technological advances that at once bring us closer together (and also conceivably further isolate us) and perhaps most importantly for 'dialogue studies' the increasing need to effectively live with and manage 'difference', not just diversity. To achieve this, perhaps one of the defining characteristics we need to articulate is not that 'dialogue' should always seek common ground, but that it may be through 'dialogue' that is not afraid to tackle contentious issues that we can learn to *accept*, if not always truly *understand*, difference.

Historical Approaches to 'Dialogue Studies'

Further to examining the social history of dialogue in theory and practice, another aspect of 'dialogue studies' that would perhaps provide a beneficial engagement with the humanities would be to study of the use of historical narratives or oral history within 'dialogue' interventions themselves. There are a number of projects that engage in intercultural, interfaith or cross community dialogue utilizing historical narratives as a resource. There are a number of projects that have adopted this approach in recent years for example the British Council's *Our Shared Europe* project or the Open University's *Building on History: Religion in London* project. This can be a valuable approach to contextualizing micro- or macro- level conflicts or conflict narratives with 'dialogue' participants. However, in a similar way to the ethical and epistemological factors discussed above, we have to remember that history is not simply a tool for retelling or relating the 'past'; it is a process of critical engagement with a range of sources and often differing discourses. It is not simply another 'value neutral' tool in the dialogue toolbox. There are a number of problems we can encounter when using historical narratives in 'dialogue' activities, interventions or projects.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that we can sometimes by using histories of past conflicts to discuss contemporary tensions actually alert participants to past conflicts that they were unaware of – thus inadvertently stoking contemporary tensions or conflict narratives. The second issue relates to the way history is written or interpreted – especially when it comes to political or epistemological debates. It is important to critically analyse the source of, or possible agenda behind, a historical

discourse or historiography, as it is very easy to create a historical narrative through the lens of contemporary thought. This implies either a subjective framing which does not take into account the broader social context or differing perspectives, or adopts a progress model approach which suggests that history is part of an inevitable 'progress' to contemporarily significant concepts e.g. enlightenment or democracy (often referred to as Whig history). The problem of 'Whig' history is clearly problematic when one is seeking to engage across cultures where there is a long history of conflict or for instance where the post-colonial legacy is most apparent.

The third caveat to utilizing historical approaches relates to our understanding of the impact of trauma on oral history accounts and collective memory. There is a fairly significant body of work that has been done to critically explore the role of personal testimony and collective memory in the writing of the history of traumatic events, perhaps most notably in relation to Holocaust survivors' testimonies (Roth and Salas, 2001). The last two points are perhaps the most compelling reasons to bring historical research into the arena of 'dialogue studies': firstly to understand the processes at play in the construction of historical narratives in relation to historical events and the role that this plays within dialogue interventions; secondly to better understand the processes of, or potential for, co-construction or even reconstruction of historical narratives within 'dialogue' activities or projects. It would be really very interesting and beneficial to practitioners to build a better comprehension of how these different historical narratives interplay or impact within the practice of dialogue; and thirdly to develop a more thorough understanding of how these processes could inform new modes or methods for dialogue practice.

Possible Impacts of 'Dialogue' Interventions on Wider Conflict Narratives

Another area that would merit further study is to examine the broader societal context of 'dialogue' practice and the role that 'dialogue' itself could play in wider conflict narrative formation or re-enforcement. How does the representation of dialogue or the inclusion of certain groups impact on public perception of conflict between groups or relate to public levels of trust between communities? Can this have both negative and positive impacts?

One of the conditional facilitators for the reduction of prejudice within intergroup contact theory is the need for group salience or clearly defined categories, in terms of the identities of participants within an activity (Pettigrew et al. 2011; Hewstone 2003). As Hewstone outlines:

> Recent research has accumulated evidence that group salience is a key moderator of the effect of intergroup contact on criterion variables (Hewstone 1996). The salience of group boundaries should be maintained

> during contact (e.g. by making participants *aware* of their respective group memberships) to promote generalisation across members of the target outgroup. The importance of group membership salience during contact has been demonstrated both experimentally (e.g. Brown et al. 1999; Van Oudenhoven et al. 1996) and in correlational studies (Brown et al. 2001; Brown et al. 1999). These studies provide evidence that the generalisation process (from the judgements concerning single individuals *to* the whole outgroup) is favoured by the presence of a link between those individuals who have actually been encountered and the group as a whole. (Hewstone 2003, 353)

Whilst this is clearly supported by the research that has been done from a social psychological perspective, it leaves us with some interesting theoretical questions that are perhaps beyond the bounds of intergroup contact theory and more within the bounds of 'dialogue studies' – the most important being the need to build an understanding of the impact of 'dialogue' activities on those who are not engaged with them or part of the immediate circle of participants. In a nutshell, what are the unintended micro and macro level consequences of 'dialogue' interventions?

It is arguable that one of the drivers for conflict are the polarizing narratives, or overt propaganda, we see at play within public space discourse at large. One example would be the assertion that there is a necessary clash between 'Islam' and 'Western Values'. If we are to accept that these narratives drive conflict, it is clear that we need to work to deconstruct or challenge binary positions between groups that are in 'conflict' or 'clashing' in order to deconstruct monolithic or prejudicial narratives about the 'other'. And contact through 'dialogue' is one possible route to achieving this aim; indeed some of the evidence from research in intergroup theory has shown that contact can act to ameliorate monolithic representation of out groups with those who engage in contact or their circle. However, both the direct and indirect impact from this kind of contact is limited to those who participate or their associates. What impact does framing of group salience or binary group identities within dialogue activities have on those not involved even by proxy, or indeed those who are actively hostile to these forms of dialogue? Whilst there may be positives in promoting group salience or identity within dialogue activities, might it actually be working to reinforce binary or monolithic representations within wider society?

For example – a Christian/Muslim interfaith project, which adheres to enhancing the identification within and between each group as either 'Christians' or 'Muslims', will act to reduce prejudice between participants and their friends, family or colleagues. However, these events don't occur in a vacuum. What role could this binary framing of interventions or events have in maintaining binary framing in public space discourse? However, by promoting the need for 'dialogue' are we in

fact reinforcing that there is something intractable and oppositional at play between two groups, or that there is a precedence or preferential treatment for one, or both, of those groups within the public domain? This might seem a negligible, or slightly provocative, point, but it is one that is important to grapple with when we consider the role that we as researchers and practitioners can play in fueling or framing conflict narratives. For example, there has been little academic research done to understand the acceptance or understanding of evolutionary theory within 'Muslim' communities, yet there is a growing (mis)-perception in public discourse that there is a necessary clash and that most Muslims are anti-evolutionist 'creationists'. In seeking to discover the real perception within these communities or to engage in dialogue in this area a number of public events have been framed in a binary way – 'Evolution' and 'Islam'. This has thus in turn potentially further fueled the public space discourse, through discussions in the mainstream media or social media, that these are oppositional world views and that there is a monolithic 'Islamic' response to modern science. Whilst the activities or events themselves have been potentially productive for these involved, outside in the realm of wider public space discourse they may have inadvertently exacerbated the notion of a clash.

Conclusion

In response to the question of whether or not we should develop a distinct academic field of 'dialogue studies', I advocate that given the practice and policy focus on 'dialogue' as an approach to some of the most pressing problems of our time, it would be remiss not give this area more scholarly focus and attention. With that endorsement come some caveats. In the process of developing a distinct field of research we need to be careful to frame 'dialogue studies' in an open ended and flexible way that allows for three underpinning principles:

1. Dialogue studies by its very nature is led by practice – as this is where the principle need for research in this area comes from. Therefore, research in this area that seeks to identify relevant theoretical frameworks or concepts needs to either be practice-led or aware of the limitations and needs of practitioners. Where possible research and resources should be aimed at enabling more effective practice as well as helping to better articulate the impacts of that practice in order to shape future interventions, policy and implementation in this area.

2. Dialogue studies cannot be constrained by existing research traditions in relevant areas but should build on the evidence that already exists and add value to this by bringing new perspectives from interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches from across the social sciences, humanities and arts. This will allow us to revisit some of the fundamental axioms in other fields e.g. whilst 'contact' might always be beneficial under certain

conditions we do not have to assume that 'dialogue' will also *always* be beneficial. We should be aware that 'dialogue' often plays a different role within a broader societal or cultural context and it is not, for instance, always, or only, about seeking to reduce prejudice.

3. Dialogue studies thus needs to actively take into account the broader societal and cultural context of dialogue interventions; and this includes taking a reflexive approach to understanding the role of dialogue practice and policy in shaping or impacting upon societal issues or discourse. There is clearly a significant need for an area of research that can encompass both the micro- and macro- level factors at play within community tensions or intergroup conflict in relation to the effectiveness of dialogue interventions. Second to this is the need for a sociological and historical understanding of the nature of 'dialogue' itself as a both a movement and an emergent discipline. This research should seek to provide a critical account of any feedback between the overlapping areas of theory, policy and practice, which will in turn help to inform future practice and research - shaping the field itself.

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