Intergroup Dialogue: a Theoretical Positioning

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It has been premised that group based dialogue may be viewed as a face-to-face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups for the purpose of new levels of understanding, relating, and action. Beyond this superficial meaning however intergroup dialogue exhibits a number of definitional and thereby theoretical inconsistencies leading to confusion and lack of clarity regarding the term. Concerns regarding what constitutes a group and of dialogue vie with issues of power to create a diversity of approaches towards multivocal conversation. This paper suggests that a useful approach to understanding intergroup dialogue is to acknowledge that meanings will always be contested. Drawing on academic and empirical examples this paper explores and unpacks different influences and epistemologies that underpin conceptual understandings of both dialogue and of the group. It is noted that group membership may be classified according to positivistic, critical or constructivist orientations while dialogue, although not so epistemologically differentiated, nevertheless draws on diverse scholarly conceptualisations from which it is defined and presented. The paper concludes through acknowledging that our understanding of dialogue itself is an ongoing project involving meaningful interactions across difference.

Introduction

It has been premised that group based dialogue may be viewed as is a face-to-face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups for the purpose of new levels of understanding, relating, and action (Moore Sociological Inquiry 2003). Such an orientation, which reproduces standard understandings of dialogue, nevertheless presents two conceptual problems.

The first area concerns the manner in which we define a 'group'. It is acknowledged that labels based on religion, sexuality, ethnicity or profession are convenient identity markers. Beyond the confines of clear social division however such terms can come under challenge. Not only are the boundaries difficult to define; they are also frequently crossed amongst the plurality of contemporary multicultural society. The second challenge lies in defining what is meant by 'new levels of understanding'. What understandings are valued and how such understandings are defined are two immediate areas of inquiry. These conceptual challenges are not

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simply academic. If we are to make progress on facilitating group based dialogue we need to be consistent with the terms that we are using or at the very least be cognizant of the positions from which terminology may be used.

This challenge is taken up in this paper. Rather than a single, definable entity, this paper suggests that intergroup dialogue may be seen as a collective and flexible term that nevertheless may be characterised according to epistemology aligned with different understandings of dialogue itself. Such an approach is of particular benefit in the academic context as it introduces a means of comparison between different intergroup dialogical contexts. It also serves as a means to unpack the position taken by academics and researchers of their understanding of what can be a nebulous multidimensional term.

A Lack of an Agreed Definition of Intergroup Dialogue (IGD)

A review of the literature reveals that group based dialogue is not one approach or process but rather an evolving set of ideas applied to diverse contexts following diverse models and pursuing diverse aims. Rodenborg and Huynh (2006) for example, have embedded their understanding of IGD according to a psychological model framed by intergroup contact theory. Nagda (2006) has utilised critical education theory to formulate his model of IGD while Abu-Nimer (1996) has taken a largely conflict resolution approach.

Adding to the development of intergroup dialogue as a concept is the fact that research in the area is 'new and evolving' (Nagda, Zúñiga, Chesler and Cytron-Walker 2007, 59). The relatively short time in which IGD has been subject to conceptual theorising and the very different fields which have contributed to this area have led to a plethora of insights and understandings complete with their own disciplinary biases, limitations and methodologies. The complexity in the field is clearly in evidence in the literature. Communication based theories (Dougherty et al. 2010; Unsteady 1994), theories of dialogue (Burkhalter et al. 2002; Gastil, Black, Deess and Leighter 2008), critical pedagogy (Turner 2006) and theories concerning social behaviour and identity utilising or adapting Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis (Barrett 2012; Pfister and Soliz 2011; Rodenborg and Huynh, 2006) are all utilised in theorising IGD.

As a consequence the field of IGD is characterised by a diversity of approaches and conceptualisations and a lack of clarity with regards to both praxis and theory. As Wiesand states (2008, 9) in reference to the subsidiary expression of intercultural dialogue 'the term and concept … is by no means understood and/or used in a homogeneous manner.' Aligned with this statement Anderson (2010, 7) notes that

the 'diversity of meaning [of group based dialogue] inevitably dilutes [its] practical value'. Such viewpoints have led some to argue that the concept is equivocal (Maalouf et al. 2008) in terms of interpretation and vaguely defined and lacking clarity of purpose (Anderson 2010).

In order to come to an understanding of the relationship between different perspectives on dialogue, the defining features of IGD aligned with contrasting epistemological positions are briefly presented. This is followed by disaggregating the two terms 'group' and 'dialogue' as a vehicle for positioning IGD within a clear conceptual framework. The paper shows that a 'group' may be defined differently according to the epistemological framework of the research while dialogue can differ according to context and scholarly influence. The paper ends by utilising the framework so developed in order to unpack two substantive empirical examples from the literature.

Positioning Intergroup Dialogue

As in the social sciences generally, studies in the area of IGD may be categorised according to the epistemological paradigm that they are aligned with. As Bennet (2005) notes, unless these epistemological assumptions are clarified paradigmatic confusion regarding both practice and explanation can compromise credibility leading to ill-informed or even biased understandings of the field under study. The approach taken here is to follow the lead of Davis, Nakayama and Martin (2000) who have categorised the related field of intergroup communication according to the constructivist, positivist and critical paradigms.

Positivist approaches seek definitive understandings based upon the viewpoint that truth may be objectified. This approach has been particularly prevalent with regards to linguistic and communication based theories to group based interactions during the 1980s and 90s in order to explain (and thereby reduce) the perceived dissonance and uncertainty that occurs between members of different cultural groups (Chuang 2003). Although such approaches have been valuable with regards to highlighting measurable outcomes in terms of adaptation, identity changes, networks or acculturation they have also drawn criticism. Bjerregaard, Lauring and Klitmøller (2009) for example raise concerns regarding this perspective in terms of presenting a somewhat homogeneous understanding of difference. As Wiesand also notes (2008) such an approach potentially reduces intergroup dialogue to an activity with fixed ends rather than an interactive communication process whose parameters are constantly evolving and will sometimes produce interim or 'hybrid' results. Further criticism of the positivist approach concerns the manner in which communication (and dialogue) is defined and how it is understood from the perspective of contrasting cultural positions (Carbaugh et al. 2011).

In contrast to the positivist paradigm a critical perspective is more concerned with power and social justice. As Nagda points out (2006) criticality in intergroup dialogue emphasises the manner in which intergroup issues are related to further issues of inequality and the injustices which frame difference. Research on IGD bounded by a critical paradigm focuses on the social structures that construct and maintain difference, highlighting issues of power in the dialogue process both towards the other and to oneself (James 1999). Esteva, writing in a UNESCO report for example, charges that dialogue between cultures must be 'a dialogical dialogue, transcending the planes of the logos of each of the interacting cultures, their conceptual systems, their reasons and values' (2005, 100). The implication, as Esteva makes clear, is that dialogue is always contextualised by power which must be addressed before 'authentic dialogue' can take place. Sorensen, Nagda and Maxwell (2009) support this view highlighting the importance of recognising power and differences in power for the successful facilitation of dialogue between members of different cultural groups. Others who take a critical view include Abu-Nimer (1999), James (1999), Kanata and Martin (2007) and Maoz et al. (2002). The importance of the critical paradigm for understanding IGD is particularly strong where dialogue is contextualised by conflict or in areas of structural inequality. In these instances, as suggested by Mollov (1999) and others (Nagda 2006; Pace 2005; Swiss Academy for Development 2011) a recognition of social justice issues is imperative if IGD is to move beyond the superficial.

The constructivist paradigm contrasts with the two aforementioned paradigms by emphasising knowledge and reality as a construct rather than rationality or perceived differences in power (Vygotsky 1978). As Escobar (2009, 46) notes 'The idea that reality is co-constructed through personal interaction is the fundamental tenet of social constructivism.' Accordingly meanings, identities and perspectives on the world are socially contextualised and may be viewed as co-constructs by the co-ordinated actions of persons in conversation (Pearce and Pearce 2000). Interaction is paramount in social constructivism because it is the process of sharing that results in individuals refining their own ideas and shaping those of others in the particular society. This results in a dynamic interpretation of both identity and of group based belonging which are seen as being continuously undergoing change. As a consequence, dialogue cannot be reduced to communication acts or be solely contextualised by symbols of power but must also include the constructs which emerge out of such communication.

A constructivist positioning to dialogue has received favour both publicly and academically. The Anna Lindh Foundation, for example, a foremost proponent of ICD in the European Mediterranean region takes a predominantly constructivist position. As one of the key authors of its 2010 Report notes, 'intercultural dialogue

is about learning how to tell a shared story' (Silvestri 2010, 48) thus emphasising the importance of shared meaning constructions to the dialogue process. Baraldi (2006, 62) notes that '[intergroup] dialogue is a creative, co-constructed form of communication, based on active participation and empathy'. Likewise Ganesh and Holmes (2011, 85) charge that 'intercultural dialogue requires approaches that examine the cultural co-production of knowledge'. Hoover (2011, 214) also notes that dialogue itself is centred upon 'the creation of meaning in "the in-between"', a position shared by Dallmayr (2004), Flower (2003) and others (Gadamer 1989; De Turk 2006; Eguren 2010).

Arguing for the merits of one position over another is not the prime purpose of this paper. The different frameworks have both merits and shortcomings and may potentially be applied to any intergroup dialogue setting depending upon the observer. Through pointing out that IGD is positioned within an epistemologically, theoretically and practically contested terrain however the ground is laid for identifying the different realities and influences that underpin its various conceptualisations. This in turn can facilitate if not a shared language concerning IGD, at the very least a shared understanding.

A useful approach to this challenge is presented by Otten and Geppert (2009). These authors charge that theory applied to communication across difference needs to be located within a transparent epistemological framework based upon informed understandings of both 'the group' and of 'discursive communication'. By disaggregating the two terms that make up IGD, namely that of 'dialogue' and that of 'the group' and clarifying the influences in the definitions of each, such an approach, at the very least, adds a means of determining the manner in which dialogue itself is determined and thereby useful theoretical constructs which may underpin its empirical presentation.

The Concept of the Group

Otten and Geppert (2009) categorise perspectives on a group according to three major theoretical themes. These have been identified and operationalised as a) shared group membership through the expression of identity b) shared set of social values and knowledges which reside in a person's subjective feelings and operationalised through negotiation and emergent cultural processes and c) contestable codes based upon a resource for meaning making and of power through constructed symbols and signs. Although admittedly there may be other ways of categorising 'a group' the alignment between the orientations presented here and the three epistemological paradigms discussed above suggest at the very least a symmetry in terms of approach.

As Otten and Geppert (2009) suggest, if a study on IGD operates with a strong community understanding of what constitutes a group through drawing sharp distinctions between cultural in-groups and out-groups (e.g. nation, territory, ethnicity etc.), it makes sense to anticipate group-based norms and scripts as potentially meaningful for communication. Furthermore, the communicative and symbolic expressions of group identity can act as useful indicators to explain intergroup interaction. On the other hand basing an understanding of a group upon shared social values and the production and reproduction of knowledge is likely to be more useful in exploring how groups change and evolve in interaction with others. Communication between these groups is more likely to be based upon learning processes as people attempt to understand the other. By way of further contrast an understanding in which group based belonging is seen in terms of structured symbols and signs is open to questions concerning who benefits from constructs of identity and of constructs of the group itself. Such a perspective would view any dialogue as contextualised by and through power.

An example of group based norms which Otten and Geppert are referring to may be seen in Geerd Hofstede's work *Culture's Consequences* (1980). Admittedly this is a somewhat extreme example but one which nevertheless has been enormously influential in the related area of intercultural communication and has spilled over to the field of intergroup dialogue. Hofstede explored business based relationships in forty different countries and on the evidence garnered, developed four (now expanded to six) dimensions that may be attributed to national based membership. These initial four dimensions are associated with power, reactions to uncertainty, orientations towards individualism or collectivism and the degree of caring in a culture. They are principally based on the assumption that national culture itself is homogeneous across both space and time. Notwithstanding the criticism which has been directed at Hofstede's cultural model the approach nevertheless illustrates the connection, whether real or imagined, between identity and membership with an identified group based upon normative ideals. Examples are not of course limited to national identity. Skin colour, religiosity, ethnicity and sexual orientation can all be considered markers of identity which suggest both a sense of group belonging and an identifiable border between members of different groups.

Such a view of a group based on normative ideals and diverse cultural belongings varies considerably from defining a group in terms of shared knowledge and values. Frederick Barth's orientation to the nebulous area of culture is informative here. In Barth's knowledge based perspective on a group, differences are viewed in terms of knowledge asymmetries between interacting persons where knowledge is seen to include feelings, attitudes, information and skills. Likewise interconnections between people are due not to shared belongings but rather to shared knowledges.

Such a viewpoint highlights a number of important areas in the way we may view group membership and consequently intergroup dialogue. Firstly, as noted by Barth (1995) it views different cultural groups in terms of fuzzy boundaries with their own inner contradictions (Anderson 1983; Cohen 2001) rather than discrete and singular units. In support of this position Emberling (1997) has noted that a single person may have many social identities and hence draw connections with members of other groups despite a strong sense of ethnic, religious or political difference. Secondly it lays stress on interactions across groups as an ongoing facet of group membership rather than being an unusual occurrence. Thirdly it situates the group in terms of ongoing change bringing to the fore more dynamic features of interactive cultural exchange in the form of ongoing creativity, co-construction of meaning and negotiated repositioning of the other. By emphasising its transitive nature within a context of indistinct boundaries such an orientation focuses not so much on predetermined identities but rather the experiences and knowledges of people themselves as they move within and across groups.

The concept of group membership based on issues of power presents a further perspective. It foregrounds the manner in which structural inequalities impinge on the life chances of people who self-identify with minority or less privileged social groups. As a consequence group membership is not seen in terms of normative values such as nationality, class or religiosity, nor does it focus on the fuzzy boundaries between groups and corresponding interactive processes. The focus is directed instead to the personal experience of difference. Such a viewpoint encompasses systems of meaning as they relate to individuals as well as systems of social domination that categorise class, gender or education (Eckersley 1989).

Although there may be nuanced understandings of a group that lie between the demarcated normative ideals, social constructions and critical understandings that are discussed above the point is that concepts of a group will generally be aligned with the three aforementioned paradigms. Each will present a vastly different understanding of group belonging and will consequently present markedly different conceptual contexts for understanding dialogue. Group based dialogue where the group is defined by the outsider, for example, is going to differ markedly from such dialogue where a group is formed through self-identification or different levels of access to power. If we are to define intergroup dialogue it is necessary to define at the very least how the group itself is constructed and defined.

The Concept of Dialogue

Unlike the concept of a 'group', the concept of dialogue is not so epistemologically differentiated. Rather it is situated largely (though not exclusively) in terms of a constructivist or a critico-constructivist position alongside a transformative agenda

(Stewart and Zediker 2000). This has been presented in diverse ways including the foregrounding of multivocality (Ganesh and Holmes 2011), ethical well-being (Dallmayr 2009), respect and reciprocity (Baraldi 2006), open listening (Eguren 2010; Pace 2005) trust (Lopez and Monterrey 2004) and dignity (Ignatieff 2001).

Despite this diversity of focus a common trait has been a recourse to the understandings of a number of classic theorists. In this section I discuss four of the most cited classic theorists illustrated through recourse to substantive empirical research. Buber's (1947) concept of relational mutuality, Bakhtin's (1981) internally persuasive discourse, the rational dialogue of Habermas and Freire's (1993) critical reflective discourse are all different with regards to how dialogue is framed and thereby used in order to position. This does not represent an exhaustive list. Rather it is illustrative of the different influences and understandings from which conceptualisations of IGD may be formed.

Bakhtin

Bakhtin primarily focuses on the notion of dialogue as a human condition, as an ethical imperative, and even as a prerequisite for thinking (Pace 2005). In particular his notion of dialogue is directed towards the social nature of dialogue, and the inherent struggle within the dialogical space (Pace 2005). According to Bakhtin human thought becomes genuine thought only under contact with another thought, a thought from a different person. This however requires an acceptance and a unity of the self in order for people to accept the other. Keaten and Soukup (2009), in their modelling of interfaith dialogue, favour the reciprocity, vulnerability, and subject-other relationship conceptualized by Bakhtin. As they note:

> In our review of dialogue theory in communication,... we found Bakhtin to be the most influential to contemporary understandings of dialogue across cultural differences. From Bakhtin's conception of dialogue, reciprocity is an inherently ethical concept emphasizing mutuality, honesty, responsibility, and difference. The dialogic participant must relinquish self-driven control (i.e., monologue) and embrace vulnerability or 'humility'. (2009, 168-187)

Buber

The perspective of Buber (Abhik, 2001) who views dialogue at the heart of every human existence, is closely aligned with that of Gadamer. According to Buber (1970), there are two primary attitudes and relations between human beings. These may be classified as the 'I-Thou' relationship and the 'I-It' Relationship. The former is characterised by qualities such as 'mutuality', 'openheartedness', and 'love' in the sense of responsibility of one human for another (Johannesen 1971, 375). Buber (1970) sees the dialogic relationship in terms of helping humans attain their

completeness by understanding one another in a spirit of authenticity. As LaFever (2011, 128-129) argues Buber's approach is especially useful due in a large part to the manner in which it is contextualised by the social context:

> Buber's (1972) definition…emphasizes the embeddedness of dialogue in social context. … Buber posited that meaning constructs not only the interpersonal relationship but also the societal institutions that govern human action.

Habermas

Habermas (1984; 1987) takes a somewhat different approach, claiming that conversation is a powerful regulative ideal based on a mutually constructed form of rationality (Kim and Eun 2008). From his perspective while dialogue does not necessarily require equality, it does entail some sort of reciprocity and symmetry. Habermas calls this the 'ideal speech situation'. In dialogue there exists always the claim to reason and through it the opportunity of resolving issues through rationality. His theory of communicative rationality may be viewed in terms of a sharing and a renewal of cultural knowledge and action directed towards social integration and solidarity. James (2003) theorises that those involved in dialogue do so strategically rather than on the basis of moral equality. As a consequence most understandings of dialogue are fundamentally flawed as they overlook the initial conditions which constrain actors involved in the dialogue process. As James notes in reference to Habermas, his framework 'can better initiate an examination of the strategic logics that enable and constrain inter-group dialogue' (2003, 158).

Freire

Freire (1993) focuses his pedagogical approach to dialogue on constructions (and deconstructions) of identity. Dialogue, in Freire's terms is always contextualised by power and acts to confront, expose and liberate (1993). However, Freire did not limit himself to structuralised power but also took on board concepts of empowerment. Accordingly a major barrier to dialogue is not simply power difference between people but also the inner barriers people place on their own belief that they are the equal to the other. As with Habermas, an essential aspect of Freirean dialogue is critical reflection. Freirean dialogue however extends beyond Habermasian logic to include faith in the other to negotiate their own way in the world. Thus at its core there is a sense of trust, dignity and a sharing of journey in dialogue, 'the permanent search of people together with others for their becoming more fully human in the world in which they exist' (Freire 1993, 95-6). Nagda et al. (2007) utilises a Freirean perspective on dialogue aligned with a perceived importance towards criticality and consciousness raising in their practices and empirical studies of intergroup dialogue programs in select college campuses. As Nagda et al. note:

> For a genuine dialogue to occur it is just as important for members of
> privileged groups to understand how they and others have been affected by
> privilege as it is for members of less advantaged groups to understand how
> they have been affected by subordination. (2007, 9)

Unpacking Intergroup Dialogue

Through utilising the aforementioned understanding of IGD it becomes easier to
unpack IGD and how it is used and presented in the literature. This section utilises
two examples in order to showcase this process. Nagda et al. (2009) sited intergroup
dialogue within a college setting between members of the college's white and black
communities. Fraser et al. (2011) have described a self-identified dialogue project
which specifically looks at development from the perspective of Masai women.

Nagda et al. (2009) state their reliance on Buber and Bakhtin for their understanding
of dialogue. They also refer to Freire's critical consciousness as influential in the
formation of what Nagda et al. (2009) term a critical-dialogic model of dialogue.
As they note:

> This model of intergroup dialogue, by combining both the critical and
> dialogic elements, differs from those that are focused more on deliberating
> about policy issues without in-depth relationship building and without
> informed structural analysis of inequalities.

The reason for the above quote is not simply to show the manner in which the
authors see their understanding of dialogue but also to highlight their understanding
(and mine) that dialogue can mean different things from different perspectives.
Highlighting this difference points to the need from an author's standpoint of
identifying the understanding of dialogue that their research project is aligned with.
Nagda et al.'s approach to identifying a group is similarly critically defined. In this
particular study a group was contextualised by differences in the manner in which
self-identified members of different groups have or are denied access to power in
society due to their race.

Critically looking at empirical studies of IGD through understandings of
dialogue and of the group is relatively simple when scholars clearly articulate their
understandings of both as Nagda et al. have done. It is at the margins however,
where scholars may identify their project in terms of dialogue but leave a messy trail
as to their theorising of such, that the articulated approach identified in this paper
becomes of value.

Fraser et al.'s (2011) paper raises a number of conceptual issues. Their understanding
of dialogue originates from two main sources. One is identified as Dutta and

Pal's dialog theory (2010) and the other as Baraldi's theory of intercultural dialog (2006). Dutta and Pal in turn draw selectively only on one source (Hammond, Anderson and Cissna 2003) largely reducing dialogue to a concept of 'listening to the other' (369) in the context of marginalised groups. Fraser et al.'s other main source, Baraldi (2006) is similarly devoid of broader dialogical concerns. Baraldi's understanding of dialogue presents rather as an aspect of cultural fusion aligned with the notion of dialogue as 'a creative, co-constructed form of communication' (2006, 62).

Despite this constructivist orientation to dialogue, missing from Fraser et al.'s formulation are discussions on broader concepts such as criticality, rationality, ethics and mutuality that are characteristics of scholarly understandings of dialogue as discussed above. Furthermore Baraldi draws on positivistic formulations of both communication and of a group to round off his basic theoretical framework. This is not to demean his approach but rather to point out that it appears less than adequate in terms of providing a conceptual framework for Fraser et al.'s project.

This ill-defined dialogical framework has important consequences. Fraser et al.'s concept of a group is, for example, an issue. One concern is that it presents the six rural Masai women participants as representatives of Masai women in general, a positivist portrayal which is not met in reality. The other concern is the neat division of the two groups into a research team and Masai women. The former is scarcely represented in the research report, undermining the central feature of IGD, that it involves at least members of two groups. Little mention is made, for example, of the long term involvement of members of the research team in the lives of the participants beforehand, nor of the inclusion of Masai members. This blurring of the two groups introduces a level of unmentioned complexity and suggests that dialogue may be a result of an ongoing cultural fusion rather than simply the research project itself. For this reason perhaps the project appears to concern itself more with voice than with dialogue. It outlines a mechanism for those on the social margins to express their views and their world. We get little understanding of the motivations of the Masai women participants for taking this step, however, beyond their involvement in a research project.

The portrayal of the research project as a dialogue needs to be at the very least circumscribed by a more definitive framework of how such dialogue is defined. This is not to question the value of the findings of this particular research project, nor their representation of an under voiced reality. Rather it points to the need to be definitive about our definitions and unpack the meanings that we use thus reducing rather than adding to nebulous nature of IGD as it currently presents.

Conclusion

All understandings of IGD are epistemologically differentiated and can draw on a number of influences in their formulation. Unless we, as scholars, are clear in how we arrive at our definitions of IGD, particularly in how we see both 'dialogue' and the 'group', confusion over the meaning of IGD is likely to continue. This is a cause for concern. IGD represents an important mechanism for bringing people together and building understanding. It becomes vital that at the very least we understand and can state our own position so that others may learn from both our successes and failures with regards to the ongoing project that is intergroup dialogue.

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