Theorising Dialogue for Community Development Practice – an Exploration of Crucial Thinkers

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Both dialogue studies and the field of community development are reasonably well developed 'communities of practice', however, there has been little direct interplay between the two whereby a theory of dialogue for community development is articulated. This article then attempts to break new ground, setting up a 'dialogue', so to speak, between dialogue studies and community development theory and practice.

The article consists of a systematic exploration of some of the crucial work on dialogue that the author has concluded is relevant for community development theory and practice. The perspective taken draws on the work of leading thinkers from different places and disciplines, including Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Buber, David Bohm, Paulo Freire and Mikhail Bakhtin. Each contributes insights that enhance an approach to community development that centres dialogue within its theory and practice.

Introduction

Both dialogue studies and the field of community development are reasonably well developed 'communities of practice', however, there has been little direct interplay between the two whereby a theory of dialogue for community development is articulated. This article then attempts to break new ground, setting up a 'dialogue', so to speak, between dialogue studies and community development theory and practice.

Having said this, and for people less familiar with the field of community development, whilst acknowledging there are various traditions and frameworks of community development (Campfens 1997), there are numerous agreed upon orthodoxies (Ife 2002). For example, the set of skills and knowledge commonly associated with community development, which can be construed as a mix of propositional and procedural knowledge, usually portray a set of social practices

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through which community development workers assist, enable, and facilitate groups of people or community members to build relationships, develop analyses and work together to address issues impacting on their lives. This often requires some change in societal structures. In a sense then, community development is a social practice that works collectively with small groups of people to bring about social change. Whilst dialogue is *implicit* within most community development practice, as there are important communicative processes at play, this article attempts to make the dialogue theory and practice more explicit.

In doing this, I focus on what is understood as a normative perspective on dialogue. I say perspective to simply signpost that there are many ways through which dialogue can be seen, each focusing on different aspects and implications of this multi-dimensional, dynamic and subtle concept. For example, other ways of thinking about dialogue could be through linguistic-structural, phenomenological, dramaturgical and deconstructive perspectives (Flecha, Gomez and Puigvert 2003). The linguistic-structural perspective would focus on understanding dialogue in *relation to another idea* - something considered non-dialogical. Dialogue, as a linguistic device, is thereby considered meaningless outside of the structural relationship of another idea. From a phenomenological perspective dialogue is understood as an 'ideal type' of practice, that is, practice *given meaning* through practitioner consciousness and their making it conscious in conversation with others. Some of the theorist's views of dialogue explored below are clearly phenomenological. A dramaturgical perspective would focus on the performance of dialogue – how practitioners embody dialogue in particular settings and contexts, also with awareness of settings and contexts whereby such dialogical performance is probably difficult, if not impossible. Finally, a deconstructive perspective would ask: what does the word dialogue do? Within this frame there is no metaphysical presence of meaning to the word dialogue; it is the language itself that creates the presence of dialogue. Such a deconstructive 'reading' of dialogue within community development would also look for cracks in what is inevitably set up as a binary of dialogical versus non-dialogical. It would ask about the silences within the article - the tough stuff, or grey areas usually overlooked.

However, returning to the primary perspectives applied in this article, the notion of normative is used to discuss how some theorists argue dialogue 'should be' – their perspective of an ethical imperative. Yet even my understanding of this is informed by a decision about whether to subscribe to what could be called a shallow as opposed to deep normativity. Shallow normativity is a way of thinking about dialogue and community development in terms of a limited normative set of principles or orthodoxies. The discourse of such approaches would be something like: 'dialogue is *always*....'. Within this approach the norms and customs, that is,

normativity, of such dialogue thinking-practice, is considered shallow because there is no discussion of where these norms come from. They are discussed as being self-evident and are usually framed a-historically.

Alternatively, deep normativity is a way of rethinking dialogue and community development in terms of diverse sets of norms and customs that are situated within diverse cultural, literary or historical traditions – hence my use of the language of 'tradition' when thinking of community development. The norms and customs of practice, also potentially discussed in terms of principles, ethics and orthodoxies, do not claim to determine what dialogue or community development is but rather to describe what a *particular tradition* or genre of dialogue and community development is. There is depth to the norms, because they are grounded in historical and other dimensions that are particular and that have stood the test of time. For this reason I am careful to identify the author/theorist informing the discussion, also locating their discipline of thought and the geographical 'home' that I contend infuses and informs their way of understanding dialogue.

Also, I want to resist articulating anything that can be easily 'lifted from the text' so to speak, reduced to an ahistorical and decontextualised definition. So instead, and from a dialogical perspective, I offer a Freirean code (Freire 1975) that hopefully triggers further consideration about what dialogue *within community development* might mean.

With this caveat in mind, I then understand dialogue normatively as a deep, challenging, responsive, enriching, disruptive encounter and conversation-in-context; and also a mutual and critical process of building shared understanding, meaning and creative action amongst groups of people. The actors in such dialogue can include community development practitioners and also members of groups, communities or community-based organisations.

To unpack this code I now trace some theorist perspectives on dialogue, while also beginning to explore implications for what I call as a shorthand 'dialogical community development' (Westoby and Dowling 2013). Having said this, I have not attempted any systematic comparative or critical analysis of these authors. I am not trying to build an over-arching theory of dialogue for community development. Instead the article has been laid out as a systematic examination of some of the crucial work on dialogue that I have concluded is relevant for community development theory and practice. My choice of ideas discussed has been grounded in an iterative dialogue between, on the one hand, my own experience of community development and the reading of the community development literature, and on the other hand, my reading of the dialogue literature. This iterative process implies resonance, whereby I have read each of the theorists and considered their key relevance to

an interpretation of community development theory and practice. Clearly other choices could have been made.

An Orientation: Turning to the Other – Reaching for Understanding

My understanding of dialogue at its very core is informed by the seminal work of German phenomenological philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), who articulated the need for people to engage one another in dialogue by *turning to the other* and *reaching for understanding* (Gadamer 1998, 98; Maranhão 1990, 4).

Community development is a people-centred practice grounded in particular kinds of relationship between people. Gadamer is then drawn upon to highlight that from a dialogical perspective, within community development, the kind of relationships between practitioners and community members, and between community members themselves, is other-oriented, whereby people disrupt self-orientation and instead 'turn to the other', and in that other-orientation there are attempts to reach for mutual understanding of the other. Turning to the other and reaching for mutual understanding requires engaging with other perspectives, or what Gadamer calls 'horizons' (Gadamer 1975, 303ff).

Drawing on the work of Gadamer, anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano asserts such turning to the other requires a reaching to understand the other that is 'immediate, open and authentic' (1990, 272). This reaching for understanding invites each party within the dialogue to be aware of their own prejudices, their horizon so to speak, but also being open to the other parties' questions and claims, allowing themselves 'to be conducted by the object' of conversation (Gadamer 1975, 33). Furthermore there is recognition that there will inevitably only be a *provisional* mutual understanding, recognising that any understanding can only be fleeting, because people, perspective and context change.

For Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, reflecting on Gadamer's contribution to the human sciences, such turning to the other also requires openness. This implies openness to shifting our own views and more significantly, our own identity. For example, he argues that, '[t]aking in the other will involve an identity shift in us' (Taylor 2002, 141). Taylor goes on to assert that, '[t]his is why it is so often resisted and rejected. We have a deep identity investment in the distorted images we cherish of others' (Taylor 2002, 141), and it could be added, ourselves. Dialogue in community development then requires a stance of intention to understand, but also of provisionality and uncertainty, recognising that any attachment to beliefs, ideas, identity-constructions and so forth will undermine capacities for dialogue.

Grounding this in a story of practice, for example, in 2012 I was involved for several

weeks in a community-based education and training process located in a dense urban area of south-east Queensland. The process included twelve residents of local public housing, a colleague and myself as facilitators meeting once per week for eight weeks. The purpose was to explore a vision for community life, examine the issues the people in the group faced and consider collective ways forward. However, during one morning tea some people were engaging in 'idle chatter' commenting about people of colour in the neighbourhood. After morning tea the group gathered and one man, from a pacific island heritage, announced that he was offended by the idle gossip he'd overheard at morning tea and was considering leaving. As a facilitator I was aware, in the silence that occurred after his announcement, that here was a significant dialogical moment for this group. Would they respond to the radical invitation of otherness, calling for genuine multicultural celebration of 'other' or were they going to retreat? It was a moment inviting a shift in the dispositions of the majority participants. I sat on the edge of my seat aware that despite the official community development process – an education and training process to support these public housing tenants develop relevant projects to their lives – here was a moment of dialogical community development *in* the process.

As a community practitioner intrigued by dialogue I have observed that it is often the kinds of relationship that honour difference (perspectives, traditions, claims) while searching for mutual understanding that create both an openness and solidarity. These are important ingredients for collective practice. This is not to suggest it is easy to forge such relations. The story accounted above is illustrative of just how difficult and fragile this relational work can be. Many practitioners and community members stay attached to their own pre-judgements and find it very difficult to remain open and therefore forge solidarity. For Gadamer the imperative to ensure such dialogue is possible is tolerance and openness to one another's perspectives. This in turn requires a willingness to enter the uncertainty of different perspectives and acknowledge the provisionality of any mutual understanding that might be forged (Gadamer 1998, 84ff). Without such tolerance dialogue becomes very difficult, signposting the limits of a dialogical approach to community development and the value of focusing on other approaches in some circumstances.

A Tension: 'Community as dialogue' and Strategic Dialogue

Building on Gadamer's notions of 'turning towards the other' and 'reaching for understanding' I turn to the philosopher Martin Buber, who offers wisdom around what can be identified as a central tension of dialogue within community development (discussed below). Buber has been used extensively within philosophy, communication, educational theory and other fields. Inspired by and drawing on the work of one of my Australian colleagues Anthony Kelly (2008), I have attempted to make sense of what Buber's philosophy of dialogue might mean for community development.

The tension that Buber alerts us to is that within dialogical community development people are invited to 'turn towards each other' (Buber 1947, 25) with an attitude of *authentic encounter*, being open to what can be referred to as an experience of 'community as dialogue'. At the same time there is the need to also be conscious of the *strategic element* of dialogue as a conscious intention to connect and communicate in a particular way named by Buber as 'technical dialogue' (Buber 1947, 22).

To unpack this tension I start with Buber's understanding of community as dialogue. In this sense, community is an experience of dialogue, both in everyday practices of being present to one another, and also in extra-ordinary moments when people experience 'deep presence' with one another (Buber 1947; 1958). For Buber this is ultimately an unconscious experience – to be in dialogue with someone is to be *not* conscious of the dialogue per say, which would undo the presence and instead focus on the dialogue. People are aware of having had this kind of encounter only after the encounter is over. Siri Hustvedt puts it beautifully, arguing that for Buber, 'the ideal relation between human beings resulted in "a change from communication to communion, that is, in the embodiment of the word dialogue"' (2012, 201). This dialogical moment is experienced as an 'in-between' space, emerging from the dialectic between what Buber understood as I and Thou (Buber 1958). It is a third space where neither party to the dialogue gives up their own point of view and yet both experience one another as whole.

This perspective of community has profound implications for dialogical community development. For Buber the dialogic attitude cuts through a world-view that is founded on separateness, which has clear distinctions between subject-knowers, and objects-known, discussed by Buber as a world-view dfof 'I-It' (Buber 1958). While avoiding some of Buber's more mystical orientation (deeply influenced by Judaism) I draw on his humanising vision with a secular sensibility and also acknowledge the contribution of his spiritual impulse towards holism.

This humanising vision and holistic focus puts the emphasis within community development on a particular understanding of 'community' or more accurately 'communion' rather than 'development'. In fact I often think about the work as 'developing community' rather than 'community development', or at least hold both ideas in tension. Reflecting on the question, 'How does community originate?' in 1930 in a series of published letters, Buber argued, 'nothing but remnants are left nowadays, because everywhere the aim is to rationalise life instead of humanise it' (Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr 1991, 41). He understood community as a humanising experience (with people not treating one another as objects) that was under assault in his lifetime. His reflections invite a process of re-humanisation and resistance to such rationalising assault. Like Buber, I propose that human community, as dialogue, is still possible.

However, and returning to the issue of tension within dialogical community development practice, a reading of Buber also offers up the idea of not only holding the humanising process of community as dialogue, but also holding the strategic element (White 2008), articulated by Buber as 'technical dialogue' (Buber 1947, 22; Arnett, Fritz & Bell 2009, 83). While community as dialogue is an embodied attitude and experience, technical dialogue is a conscious intention within community development to connect and communicate in a particular way. There is a tension between both 'letting go' so to speak and 'being in the flow of dialogue' versus the strategic and intentional technical elements that give community development purpose to the dialogue.

Thinking through this tension, again acknowledging Anthony Kelly's (2008) work in interpreting Buber's ideas for the purposes of community development, I consider this element of dialogue practice through the idea of the movements in working relationally with people (Buber 1947; Kelly and Burkett 2008; Westoby and Owen 2010; Owen and Westoby 2012). Relational community work focuses on the subtle, dynamic *and* at times *conscious* processes of valuing and nurturing relationships between people. Within community work this valuing and nurturing invites an orientation toward the triad of:

- Connection – building relationships of care;
- Communication that is oriented towards learning – which requires, 'withholding the impulse to tell until one understands the context, topic, and the persons' (Arnett et al. 2009, xiii); and,
- Commitment – acknowledging the need for people to work together for change.

Community development practice informed by technical dialogue and this triad engages people with a commitment to both *the practitioner's own* agenda of community and development, but holds that agenda lightly while intentionally listening to people's stories, attempting to understand their concerns and perspectives and therefore engaging with *their* agendas. This engagement requires adeptness in dialogue – an ability to engage text and sub-text while accounting for context. In other words it requires practitioners to be cognisant of what is said, what is potentially meant and what shapes the meaning. There is the need for skilful listening, not merely responding to people's abstractions and generalisations, but purposefully attending to specific words and sentences. It is through artful, careful listening and purposeful response that the movements of dialogue are sustained and connection is co-created (Owen and Westoby 2012; Kelly 2008).

Within community development such tension is most obviously manifest when a

community development practitioner is employed by an organisation (usually an NGO or government agency) to go into a community and 'implement a project or process'. Clearly the worker has an agenda shaped by the mission, vision and donor imperatives of that agency. However, community development as a discourse and set of practices is also guided by the notion that 'the people know best' and that 'people should shape their own development processes'. One can typically frame the accompanying tension through the somewhat over-repeated lens of 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' energies and approaches. Drawing on Buber's ideas, as articulated above, this tension is then negotiated through the practitioner's commitment to both 'community as dialogue' and 'strategic dialogue' whereby they 'hold the agenda' of the donor-implementing agency lightly, giving space for genuine encounters with and between people, thereby honouring the need for people to be able to draw on their own energies and ideas for collective action. However, within the joining process between practitioner and community member, there is also the need for the practitioner to be able to 'bring their own agenda' into the process – that is, the agenda given to them by their donor agency. There is then a process of negotiating the 'I' (practitioner agenda) and 'You' (agenda/s emergent from community dialogue) to find a 'We' (a shared agenda that is reflective of both agency-practitioner concerns and community concerns).

This dialogical process creates the possibility of what is often discussed within community development practice as 'a common agenda'. Again, there is a fundamental tension here. While dialogic practice reaches for understanding and coherence, community development theory and practice requires something else. People need to not only connect and understand one another while also reaching for coherence; they also need to reach some *mutual agreement* to propel joint action. However, dialogic practices tend not to seek agreement – they seek understanding. Agreement is usually the realm of dialectic conversations where people reach between thesis and antithesis, seeking synthesis (Sennett 2012; Kelly and Sewell 1988). It seems prudent to therefore acknowledge that embedded within dialogical community development there are both dialogic and dialectic logics – and an awareness of when each is at work is crucial to skilful practice.

A Reaching: for Collective Coherence and a Participatory Consciousness

Building on this challenge of finding a 'common agenda', I turn to the North American physicist David Bohm whose seminal work on dialogue invites consideration of the importance of reaching for collective coherence (Bohm 1996). His work is particularly pertinent for the group processes that are often central to community development and often relate to difficult, if not intractable social challenges. Recognising that people can get stuck within their own presuppositions and perspectives, Bohm suggests it is only through genuine group dialogue that

people can disrupt their individually oriented, entrenched thought. Yet, to consider creative ways to respond to difficult and intractable social challenges requires this kind of disruption. He identifies ways in which a new collective coherence can emerge from the flow of meaning that happens when defensiveness is reduced and many perspectives are shared within a group.

Bohm's understanding of coherence is illuminated by his physicist's comparison of normal diffused light with focused laser light. For Bohm, coherence (importantly for our purposes this is not necessarily agreement) signifies focused analysis, insight, and thought. Bohm's idea of thought as a complex system (Bohm 1994) is significant because, within his understanding of dialogue, to mistake your own thinking for thought is to be unaware that individual thinking is located (or constructed) within a larger 'structure' of thought emergent from society, tradition and history. To become conscious of this structure or system is a step forward, and requires a letting go of attachment to one's own thinking.

Community development workers are often accompanying people, usually within groups or community-based people's organisations, attempting to engage with entrenched social or community issues. Therefore the need to imaginatively reach for collective coherence is crucial. In a nutshell, Bohm's contribution is that dialogue within groups can shed real light on difficult issues. Sometimes within community development practice I refer to such collective coherence as a 'narrative thread' emerging from the interplay of centrifugal forces (diffusing diverse ideas and perspectives) and centripetal forces (drawing together of ideas and perspectives). The idea of collective coherence and narrative thread recognises that the 'truth of the matter', an analysis of what could be done, rarely emerges from one person, truth or perspective, but from the flow of meaning-making emergent from deep listening and attention to the collective meaning making possibilities.

For many years I have been a part of a collegial community of interest, the South East Queensland Intercultural Cities Forum (SEQICF), which aimed to encourage deep intercultural dialogue and engagement across the region. Several years ago SEQICF designed and facilitated a dialogical process, 'Out of the Shadows', which brought people together for two days with the aims to: identify new and emerging intercultural issues in south-east Queensland; document differing perspectives on these emerging issues; and be a catalyst for coordinated responses to prevent inter- and intra- cultural conflict. The 'Out of the Shadows' process created a safe space for dialogue, where people from different religious and cultural backgrounds, with a variety of ways of understanding inter-cultural conflict and different roles and responsibilities, could meet and hear one another's experiences and perspectives. Participants included families, young victims and young perpetrators of violence, cultural elders, community representatives, frontline workers, academics, policy

analysts, and government workers in multicultural affairs, police, social policy, community development and community safety.

There was a process of community engagement in the months before the event, and an invitation to participants explicitly stating 'principles of dialogue' that they accepted as a condition of participating in the two days. The main activities through the two-day event were 'fishbowl sessions', a series of facilitated dialogues with between eight and ten key informants in the centre of the room, with another sixty or so people watching and listening from rows of seats on either side. In terms of outcomes, the analysis provided a rich depth of material that informed new directions in policy and practice. Some of the more promising directions emerged precisely from the points of unresolved tension and contested understanding that were highlighted in the dialogue, but from which a narrative thread emerged.

Such a story, drawing further on Bohm's work, signposts the importance of thinking holistically. Critiques of modernist, reductionist ways of thinking and working in community work are echoed in Bohm's insights into the fields of scientific thinking and working. However, with that critique he offered an alternative – that of dialogue and holism (Bohm 1980). His idea of 'taking part in the truth' recognises that there is always a broader complexity within the work than any one person can understand. He acknowledges therefore the need to think holistically, but he also argued that people can never 'see the whole' because 'the whole is too much' (Bohm 1996, xii). Instead he offered the idea of a *participatory consciousness* emergent through dialogue with one another, whereby '[e]verything can move between us. Each person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it' (Bohm 1996, 31). In this dialogical space people are not trying to convince or persuade each other of 'their truth', but are reaching for a common coherence.

Again, within the space of community development such practice is not easy. People rarely come to a group with the stance of reaching for such coherence, but rather tend to be habitually attached to their own ideas and perspectives. Hence, dialogue requires community workers to clearly present and model new ways of practising, ways that disrupt the habitual tendencies to be self-oriented rather than other-oriented, and persuasion-oriented rather than coherence-oriented. In the above story several months of work were required to create the climate for dialogue and then within the dialogue two-day event explicit principles of dialogue were discussed to draw people into this new mode of 'participatory consciousness'.

An Intention: Transformation and Questioning

Gadamer, Buber and Bohm argue that dialogue, as they describe it, requires transformation. If someone genuinely turns towards the other, opens themselves to the flow of conversation and difference, then there will be a disruption to their perspective and experience of the world. This is personally transformative, and is hopefully experienced in many people's everyday life through conversation. However, it is the Brazilian Paulo Freire who best articulates the role of dialogue as a catalyst for social and structural transformation (Freire, 1972). Freire, best known as an educationalist, has deeply influenced many fields of inquiry and practice, including community development. Contemporary examples of that application to community development would be Anne Hope and Sally Timmel's *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers* (1984) and Margaret Ledwith's *Community Development: A Critical Approach* (2005).

From a Freirean perspective dialogue very deliberately and carefully fosters a critical and transformational space. Within such a space people set out to do what Freire (1972) calls 'naming the word and the world', thereby being able to ask strategic questions and challenge de-humanising social relations. From Freire's perspective dialogical practice is not only about 'turning to the other', listening, connecting, learning and finding collective coherence and potentially shared agendas. Applied to community development it is also about practitioners eliciting a mandate from the people they are engaging with. This is a mandate to do critical analysis together, pushing the boundaries of how people together interpret the shared world, and then creating 'other' spaces of awareness and possible action. For liberation psychologists Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman (2008) what is crucial about Freire's contribution to dialogue is his emphasis on context. For them, Freire's work emphasises 'coming to understand the context one is in, gaining voice to address this context, and being able to creatively engage in efforts to transform it' (Watkins and Shulman 2008, 192). Contemporary initiatives such as REFLECT groups exemplify this understanding of transformational dialogue focused on context.

For example, within REFLECT groups, supported by several INGOs around the world, but particularly ActionAid, people come together to explicitly question the social, economic, cultural and political forces that shape their world. The internal assumptions such as, 'we are poor because we are stupid or ignorant' are, through the Freirean kind of questioning, disrupted, leading to potential transformational agendas.

For Friere dialogue therefore requires a process of careful and critical questioning (Freire 1975). This is a crucial contribution to an understanding of dialogical community development, albeit his understanding of dialogue is shaped by

dialectic logics. Freire's idea of dialogue involves careful and critical questioning, not only by community development practitioners to community members, but between the two, understood as *mutual* critical questioning. A dialogue oriented towards the critical but also inviting mutuality requires practitioners to understand the 'delicate relationship' (Bell, Gaventa and Peters 1990; Freire and Horton 1990) that they are engaged in within transformational practice. It requires exercising some authority as an 'expert' in dialogue (guiding a process) but not allowing a drift towards authoritarianism (Bell et al. 1990; Freire and Horton 1990, 61). Skilled practitioners offer their own perspective and questions lightly, and are receptive to the perspectives and questions of others. As Watkins and Shulman put it, 'the animator [practitioner] co-creates with the group participants a space in which dialogue becomes possible' (2008, 193). This critical dialogue can only occur when people no longer see the given world as normal or natural (Freire 1974/2005, 57), but instead understand the world as emerging from historical and cultural processes that are open-ended, open to questioning, and able to be transformed.

I now step back briefly. Freire importantly sees the world as historically and culturally constructed to be understood through questioning. Is Freire arguing that his notion of dialogue is a-historical? To pause and reflect on that question I turn to the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), considered by some to be the first to coin the word 'dialogic' (Sennett 2012, 19).

A Reflective Pause: Genres and Culture

One of Bakhtin's contributions to thinking about dialogue is that there are many genres of spoken and written communication – each with different implications for dialogue. By genre I mean a particular style of communication, with characteristics that 'fit' that style. Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) adds to this, arguing that real understanding might only occur in dialogue when people correctly identify a conversation to be in a particular genre. Bakhtin himself wrote that, 'we choose words according to the generic specifications' (Bakhtin 1986, 87). Within dialogue there is the particular conversation at play between two or more parties, but the 'rules' or characteristics of that conversation are contextualised by the genre, which is in turn historically and culturally constructed.

Returning to Freire, clearly his notion of dialogue as careful, critical and mutual questioning represents a particular genre of dialogue, different to that previously discussed in relation to say Gadamer and Buber. For example, as already mentioned, Freire's genre of dialogue would have been powerfully shaped by the rules of Marxist dialectics. This insight of Bakhtin's is very helpful for community workers, ensuring that they not only partake in dialogue, being open to encountering the other, but that they also attempt to understand the genre of dialogue that they are a part

of. Genres or the 'rules of dialogue' can be very subtle, varying within and across cultures and often it requires painstaking efforts to learn about the situation at hand.

For example, a Western Australian colleague David Palmer shared with me how in the Kimberley desert indigenous people have a cultural practice of 'side ways talking'. This refers to the idea that it is often considered rude to come straight out and tell someone something directly, particularly if it has to do with their lack of knowledge or a mistake. Instead people often tell stories about a fictional third person, for example, 'I know this other bloke who came up and did this thing once...he didn't know it but he was really causing offence'. For the astute person who is open to, and understanding of the local rules of dialogue, the story initiates space for the person to re-consider their actions. Awareness of such rules, or more often awareness that people often do not know the rules, alerts community development workers also to the illusionary hope of complete understanding.

Positionality: a Responsive Dance

Continuing this examination of how notions of dialogue relate to community development, I turn to a second idea elicited from Bakhtin's work – that of the community practitioner's awareness of their own *positionality*. Community development *practice* is often described as 'skilful means', understood particularly as an ability to skilfully dance the dance of relationship, being present and responsive to the other and the moment.

Bakhtin explicitly talks about people's social life being the product of 'a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies' (Bakhtin 1981, 272), particularly understood as the tensions between the centripetal and the centrifugal (discussed above in reference to Bohm's work). This idea has been crystallised through further reflection on Bakhtin's dialogics by New York based sociologist Richard Sennett. Central to Sennett's interpretation of Bakhtin's work is the idea of dialogic whereby, 'no shared agreements may be reached, [but] through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another' (Sennett 2012, 19). From this idea Bakhtin developed the concept of 'knitted together but divergent exchange' (Sennett 2012, 19), perhaps more easily imagined the way Sennett explains it, likened to musicians playing jazz, each bouncing off one another, eliciting nuanced responses as complexity flourishes (2012, 19). Within this bouncing and responding something happens.

Two useful ideas for dialogue within community development can be pinpointed from this wisdom. The first is that Bakhtin's work suggests a skilled community

practitioner needs to be conscious of self in relation to the practice *and* relationships formed within the practice. This is the jazzy exchange – conscious of self as musician/practitioner and also conscious of the exchange with others in creating the jazz piece. Secondly, I find it helpful to understand this particular exchange as an *embodied dialogue* and to imagine it metaphorically as a responsive dance (see also Poulos 2008, 119).

Understanding this particular exchange as embodied dialogue foregrounds the idea that while community development practitioners need to learn the faculties and skills of dialogue or exercise their dialogical muscles, so to speak, there is a sense in which the faculties and skills eventually inhabit the practitioner[1]. Like when playing jazz, a musician has to become technically proficient, but that alone does not make a good jazz player. The skills get inside the jazz player and are drawn out or evoked in a context of resonant exchange.

In a similar way practice as a responsive dance requires the technical proficiency of the dance moves, but also requires a letting go of the focus on skills only, and instead becoming aware of a dancer's own movement in relation to the other dancer. A responsive dancer gets into the flow of dance. Community practitioners, embodying dialogue, then are not so much conscious of dialogue but are in a state of responsivity and flow, attentive to a diverse ecology of relationships.

Such practice is crucial in community development enabling practitioners to not become to stuck or focused on pre-determined goals or strategy, but instead opening themselves up to the flow or fluid like shifts that are subtle but quintessential to social processes. To position oneself in a responsive embodied stance enables the practitioner to be attentive to the narrative thread that is emergent from the tensions between centripetal and centrifugal tendencies (see Westoby and Kaplan 2014).

Summing up

This article has considered some traces of dialogue theory relevant for community development. I began with Gadamer's orientation of turning to the other and reaching for understanding, Buber's paradoxical understanding of community as dialogue but also the potential for strategic dialogue, and Bohm's insights into collective coherence and participatory consciousness. I then considered Freire's articulation of dialogue as a catalyst for social and structural transformation, triggered through careful, critical and respectful questioning, and paused to reflect on Bakhtin's understanding that genres of dialogue are culturally constructed. The

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1   For this insight I acknowledge the conversation of 27 community practitioners, facilitated over three days by Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff during July 2012.

normative understanding is finally rounded out with Bakhtin's understanding of positionality and its implications for dialogue imagined metaphorically as a responsive dance.

In attempting to break new ground, setting up a 'dialogue' so to speak between dialogue studies and community development theory and practice, I would also suggest more work needs to be considered in this area. For example, whilst this article focuses on theorists, future studies could be conducted that are more empirically oriented, studying for example the kind of dialogue occurring, or not, between community development workers and constituents of communities or other stakeholders. This is occurring in work that might be named as, amongst others, assets-based community development, sustainable livelihood work, community-led development, collective narrative practice (story-telling approaches) or community organising (as per the Industrial Areas Foundation of the USA, or more recent manifestations such as London Citizens). Other work could also focus on how community workers negotiate the kind of tensions I have identified between community as dialogue and strategic dialogue emergent from Buber's theorising, or how practitioners remain responsive to the social situation at hand when most 'development theory' is oriented towards pre-determined goals and strategies.

As per my comments within the opening paragraph of this article, I have not attempted any systematic *comparative* or *critical* analysis of these authors. I am not trying to build an over-arching theory of dialogue for community development. Instead the article has been laid out a limited yet systematic introduction to some of the crucial work on dialogue that I have concluded is relevant for community development theory and practice.

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