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The Art of Intersubjective Dialogue: How to Make Partnership Sustainable

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Abstract

Since human beings communicate, dialogue is a central topic, mainly in terms of partnerships in private, political or business contexts. Often, however, dialogue means double monologue. In order to transform it into a real dialogue, particular strategies are helpful, which can be found during the last centuries. Modern communication partners, thus, can evaluate dialogue-experiences from Biblical time until today to make their relationship sustainable and to apply open, personal, and symmetrical communication as a kind of cultural participation. As demonstrated in this paper, all dialogue participants can draw benefit from such evaluation by transferring and transforming past experiences into current situations. Therefore, the article evaluates texts from both religious and psychological perspectives, and emphasizes both, religious and secular narratives, values, models, rituals and attitudes. Thus, it invites people to make experiences with communication strategies in their relationships and daily life.

Key words: communication, dialogue, intersubjectivity, subject, sustainability

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Partnership consists significantly of dialogue, so sustainable partnership (of any kind) needs particular dialogue strategies and attitudes, which prevent conflicts and provide conflict management strategies.

Dialogue and dialogical existence combine challenges and chances, because dialogue combines different life-worlds, sexes, cultures and generations. Dialogue needs an open-minded attitude, which encourages people to do experiments without being fixed on one single conviction. It also invites following other communication approaches. Appreciating the dialogue partners' differences as enrichment, facilitates particular fruitful kinds of intercultural encounters (Iliško, 2010).

Dialogues can become a kind of communication experiment or research, where all participants have new experiences with spoken and unspoken words and messages. In this context, drawing on analog situations and experiences can prevent making the same mistakes and this measure facilitates transformation (Franzenburg, 2020a). Considering particular questions during the dialogue process facilitates new learning experiences

(from and with each other). Using language further needs an awareness of the details, such as metaphor, body language, non-verbal signals, language and rhetoric style, to understand sublime sub-texts and their particular message information. By combining questions and answers with information and answering more indirectly (by quotes), both partners can shape mutual sustainable learning experiences.

The language of dialogue should, then, be inclusive, inviting and without any discrimination and both partners need to share the same responsibility for such rules (Franzenburg, 2020b). Dialogue depends on a direct personal encounter, which facilitates both chances (close relationship/friendship) and challenges (tight dependencies), through an intensive contact, which is hard to escape. Dialogue needs particular ethics of discourse, which provides equal rights and privileges for all participants in the process.

Communication often shows kinds of open or hidden violence because of its asymmetric structure. The participants, therefore, are required to present themselves not as objects for the other person's questions, needs, or expectations but as autonomous and *complete* personalities with requirements, emotions, experiences, and expectations. In this context, the principles of universalization, moral norms, and consensus are crucial: they are successfully achieved if all participants take part freely by following these rules (Rosenberg, 2005; 2012; cf. Franzenburg, 2021).

People participate by relying on approaches, which prevent violence by means of open and transparent communication about needs, emotions, and interpretations. The current evaluation follows the (psychoanalytical) metatheory of intersubjectivity (Husserl, 1973; Orange, 1997; Stolorow & Atwood, 1992), which focuses on the relation-model that is developed in early childhood and influences human social attitudes during individual life-span. Thus, dialogue becomes an encounter of life worlds instead of sharing information.

Literature Review

In Biblical times dialogue took place between the divine and human spheres and the practice persisted during church history in different kinds of prayer and prophecy. Ancient philosophers, particularly Socrates and Plato (2010), represent an educational oriented approach towards dialogue. Their ideas, in addition, influenced modern philosophers, particularly with regard to dialectics (Spranzi, 2011). Another kind of dialogic approach was applied during the Middle Ages, when models of dialogue were presented, particularly by Cusanus (Nicolaus of Cusa) (1983), and dialogue became a philosophical model (Zappen, 2004). During the Reformation, Luther's Catechisms (1984; 2017) and other theologians' work combine the two-sphere educational and model-like approaches.

In the Age of Enlightenment dialogue became a political instrument, as exemplified by Herder (Koepke, 1990). In modern times, dialogue is more therapeutic, as exemplified by Buber (1996), Rogers (2011), Habermas (2004), Rosenberg (2005; 2012) (Vazhapilly & Reyes, 2017; Wacker & Ziobek, 2018). Each of these thinkers represents and suggests a particular kind of dialogue, which facilitates actual participation instead of two monologues (Hick, 2001; Poe, 2011).

This paper evaluates examples of such approaches in terms of their benefit for a couple's relationship and in terms of the counselors' role in enhancing and assisting this relationship.

Research Method

Evaluating and comparing the texts in terms of differences and common ideas is necessary in order to find out whether there is a kind of transcultural perspective. The paper will analyze the sources by applying the method of *Grounded Theory* with the following steps (in elementary form) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): identification of an area of interest and data collection, interpreting the data and further data collection by open coding (keywords), theoretical sampling (emerging patterns) by taking notes while reading, concept and category development (axial coding/comparison).

Research Findings

After applying *Grounded Theory* to the chosen works, the following core-themes emerge concerning the different meanings of dialogue:

1. *Combining spheres.* As exemplified particularly by the religious and value-oriented texts, dialogue combines different life-worlds, not only divine and human, but also different sexes, cultures, or generations. Appreciating the differences of dialogue partners as enrichment facilitates particular fruitful kinds of intercultural encounters. These texts encourage each partner to formulate his/her messages as a half dialogue instead of a monologue. The response, however, is, or may be, insecure, or other than expected.
2. *Finding/developing new ideas.* The Socratic Maieutic exemplifies that dialogue – as already mentioned – needs an open-minded attitude, encouraging people to prevent being fixed on one single conviction. Like Socrates in Plato's dialogues (2010), who puts his partners into aporetic situations by his questions, in order to open them to innovative thoughts, modern couples can help each other to develop open-minded attitudes. Dialogues carried out in such a mode can become a kind of communication experiment or research, where all participants have new experiences with spoken and unspoken words and messages.
3. *Finding models.* Cusanus (1983), who shared dialogue models with others, exemplified that following other communication approaches can widen the mental horizon. Drawing on analogous situations and experiences prevents making the same mistakes and facilitates transformation. In this way the partners can benefit from traditions, rituals, belief systems, and convictions of other times, situations, and contexts.
4. *Learning by encounter.* Luther (1984; 2017), Ursinus, and Olevianus (2016) identify that considering particular questions during the dialogue process facilitates new learning experiences (from and with each other). By combining questions and answers with information and answering more indirectly (by quotes), both partners can shape mutually sustainable learning experiences. Asking and answering by using a suitable method becomes crucial: only if questions show genuine interest and answers react precisely to the question, does an honest dialogue emerge from a double monologue.
5. *Living responsibly.* Herder (Koepke, 1990) clarified that using language needs an awareness of the details, such as metaphor, body-language, non-verbal signals language, and rhetoric style, in order to understand sublime sub-texts and their particular message besides information. The language of dialogue should be inclusive, inviting and without any discrimination, so that both partners need to share the same responsibility for such rules.

6. *Encounter with a "You."* Buber (1996) and Rogers (2011) identify that dialogue depends on a direct personal encounter, which facilitates both chances (close relationship/friendship) and challenges (tight dependencies), through an intensive contact, which is hard to escape. The participants therefore represent – as mentioned above – not objects for the other person's questions, needs, or expectations, but autonomous, *complete* personalities with requirements, emotions, experiences, and expectations, which people are required mutually to meet during the dialogue.
7. *Dialogue means participation.* Habermas (2004) identified and clarified that a dialogue needs particular ethics of discourse, which provides equal rights and privileges for all participants in the process. This aspect highlights both the chances (transparency) and the challenges (dependency) of applying particular communication rules. Following Habermas (2004), the principles of universalization, moral norms and consensus are crucial and can be fulfilled if all participants partake freely by observing the following rules: 1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse. 2a. Everyone is permitted to question any assertion. 2b. Everyone is permitted to introduce any argument into the lesson. 2c. Everyone is permitted to express his attitudes, desires, and needs. 3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2). (Habermas, 2004; cf. Isaacs, 1999).
8. *Non-violence.* Rosenberg (2005; 2012) highlights that communication often shows kinds of open or hidden violence because of its asymmetric structure. Participants are obligated, therefore, to apply approaches, which prevent violence by open and transparent communication about needs, emotions, interpretations. Such practice needs the following rules or steps: observe without evaluating, identify and express feelings, connect feelings with needs (of autonomy, celebration, integrity, interdependence, play and spiritual communion and physical nurturance), make positive specific requests (Rosenberg, 2005; 2012).
9. *Intersubjectivity as framework.* When life-worlds encounter, new projects can emerge, which make actions from thoughts and arguments (Muth, 2009).

Discussion

The following topics seem worth considering concerning the functions and value of dialogue training:

1. *Facilitating transcultural competence.* Dialogues are encounters where one person approaches from his/her limited life-world to another (alien) life-world, particularly concerning gender differences (Gray, 2012). In this context spirituality becomes a particularly important factor for transcultural contact (Rosenberg, 2005; 2012), because it widens the context and horizon of communication (Bensing et al., 2003). Dialogue training, therefore, needs spiritual and translation practice by using metaphors, symbols, and rituals (Franzenburg, 2020a). Such an attitude has a particular spiritual character, because by sharing common spiritual needs and attitudes people can overcome frontiers of religion or confession by dialogue (Geikina & Balode, 2019),
2. *Awakening creativity.* The Socratic method's success in educational contexts invites people to apply it to other contexts, such as partnership or counseling (Bensing et al., 2003). Facilitating a "culture of weakness" (Matthew 5) allows confessing

the lack of answers and solutions; it creatively encourages mutual searching and research. Thus, hidden or neglected competencies, ideas or dreams, and visions become open for actualization and realization. Dialogue training needs creativity training by using artifacts, body language, and art.

3. *Assisting vicarious learning.* Following the dialogue models of Plato (2010), Cusanus (1983), and others facilitates life-changes by model-learning (Bandura, 1969). In partnership both partners do not start from point zero but follow their families and peer-group traditions. Evaluating these traditions, rituals, and belief systems, therefore, invites developing our ordinary lifestyles in the counseling process. A new awareness of family and other traditions becomes possible, as well as drawing benefit from them. Dialogue training needs a systemic view by analyzing (inter-) dependencies and relations between group/team/family members (Bohm, 1996).
4. *Facilitating contact.* To live together in harmony and open-mindedness, in touch with oneself, the other person, and the transcendent and fundamental basis of the partnership, are core conditions for any conversation, particularly in the religious context (Blyth, 2014; Jagnow, 2005; Noyce, 1982). In such situations, eye contact might be sufficient to indicate whether there is a disorder or disturbance in the relationship (Holland & Nelson, 2007), which then has to be analyzed. Authentic communication becomes possible as a result. Dialogue training needs awareness and contact training by means of becoming aware of feelings, emotions and perceptions without any interpretation.
5. *Enhancing awareness.* By recognizing the different aspects of communication (credibility, context, content, clarity, continuity, consistency, channels and capability of the audience), partners can make their observations transparent before going into interpretation. This approach can prevent misunderstanding, disappointments, and conflicts by applying holistic communication with information, message, emotions, transparency, and participation, and through awareness of nonverbal messages (symbols, rituals, body-language: Barden & Williams, 2007; Bensing et al., 2003; Gladstein, 1974; Navarro, 2018). Dialogue training, therefore, needs transparency training by using the right w-questions and confirmation-questions.
6. *Encouragement for self-esteem.* Besides contact with oneself and the other person, compassion influences both intra- and interpersonal relations. People consequently allow the positive within them to emerge and to be dominated by love, respect, understanding, appreciation, compassion, and concern for others (as “open windows”). They thus prevent self-centered and selfish, greedy, hateful, discriminatory, suspicious, and aggressive attitudes from taking over (as strong “walls”). (Rogers, 2011; Rosenberg, 2005; 2012). The self-confidence of both partners can prevent negative thoughts, stereotypes, or attitudes. Dialogue training needs stereotype-training by individualizing stereotypes of any kind (ethnic, social, political).
7. *Applying democratic structures.* All authors agree that partnership, both between two lovers and between counselor and client are just like public relations of any kind, and depend on symmetric communication (Murphy, 1991). During the communication process all participants therefore become aware of hierarchies and discriminating structures, particularly in family contexts. A systematic approach is, therefore, helpful in facilitating transparency about each member’s particular role and responsibility (Rutledge, 1966). Dialogue training also needs democracy training in terms of providing opportunities and methods for participation (group, plenum, feedback).

8. *Meeting one's needs.* According to the concept of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), observations, feelings, needs, and requests come together, making dialogue a reciprocal exchange. Both expressing these elements honestly and receiving them belong together as an empathic stance, a consciousness of more profound needs, and a compassionate intent. People can experience such attitudes, even if the particular communication does not entail any verbal exchange between the partners (Rosenberg & Chopra, 2015). Dialogue training will benefit from reconciliation training by mutually appreciating needs and emotions in an open-minded way.
9. This *reciprocal character of intersubjective dialogues* facilitates creative encounter and constructive communication in different dimensions (thinking, feeling, working).

Conclusions

According to the concepts of dialogue during the past centuries, the following statements seem crucial: making (any kind of) relationships sustainable means preventing conflicts and providing strategies. Relationships, therefore, need a framework for spiritual dialogue through symbols, rituals, metaphors, in order to become sustainable.

Relationships also need awareness of verbal and nonverbal communication in dialogue, as well as an agreement about transcultural values. Relationships further need symmetric communication, participation and empathy for the other's life-worlds to become sustainable. Dialogue training facilitates creativity, self-esteem and responsibility and encourages shaping one's own experiences in any situation of encounter and communication.

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