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Bohmian dialogue in groups:
An analogue for therapy?

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Introductory comments; aim of the paper

Therapy inspired by the metaphor of 'the dialogical self' aims at — in some way — furthering more healthy dialogue between voices. What I've found surprising is that reflections on dialogue rarely take serious notice of similarity between group processes and internal dialogue between voices (in a moment you'll see why I don't say discussion of dialogue) [Watkins (1999) is an honorable exception.]

My aim here is thus to inspire cross-fertilisation between consideration of group processes and processes focused on one person (client in therapy). More specifically I'll consider therapies which aim at reducing crippling conflicts between internal voices. An example is where one voice excessively dominates another, Hermans (1999), cf. also Sissel Reichelt's previous presentation.

I'll, however, concentrate on a comprehensive approach to therapy which incorporates Bakhtin inspired views on 'the dialogic self'. CAT (Cognitive Analytic Therapy) — launched by Tony Ryle — furthermore includes Vygotsky's account of how interpersonal operations become intrapersonal operations. Internal dialogue is thus taken to be patterned on external utterances. CAT also incorporate insights derived from the British object relation school in the same general frame (cf. Ryle and Kerr, 2002 for references).

I'll here argue that group processes explicitly concerned with transforming conflicts into cooperation may serve as a fruitful analogue for therapy which is concerned with stagnated or 'warring' voices.

Cases where internal voices are poorly integrated is elaborated in the CAT view of serious personality disturbances as e.g. so-called 'borderline conditions'.

The group approach I'm most familiar with which is useful as analogue for individual therapy is called conferencing. This approach started as part of the restorative justice movement, an alternative [occasionally supplement] to the dominant retributive approach (which emphasises handing out a 'fair' amount of punishment to specific kinds of transgressions of the public order). [In the retributive paradigm warlike metaphors dominate; prosecutor, council for the defense]

In conferencing a neutral facilitator meets with antagonists, protagonists, and supporters of each of the conflicting parties, and others who might have a heavy stake in the outcome. The ecology of the meeting is important. No tables (which would encourage distance), everyone is sitting in a circle (no one at the head or foot). Later we turn to necessary conditions for transforming conflicts (see Neimeyer & Tschudi)
(in press), Moore and McDonald (2000), for details)

On 'dialogue' and desired change

A Bakhtinian view seems to imply that more or less all mental processes can be seen as dialogic in the sense of fruitfully being considered as a sequence of utterances both rooted in previous utterances and pointing to further utterances. [Mikael Leiman (1997) - who is central in the CAT tradition - makes radical moves in this direction.]

I'm somewhat worried by this broad sweep, and furthermore the richness of emotional processes may get short thrift in Bakhtinian elaborations. To me there is a certain austerity evoked by Bakhtinian considerations of 'dialogue'. Elaborating 'dialogism' Holquist (1990, p. 39) writes:

It is thus a stern philosophy. This fact should surprise no one, given dialogism's immediate sources in revolution, civil war and the terror of the purges

Seikkula (1996, p. 198) points to a further problem: Bakhtin does not have a clear distinction between monologue and dialogue. Seikkula then goes on to describe 'monologic dialogue', but we find this terminology cumbersome.

On the other hand the physicist David Bohm (1966) had a far more specific view of dialogue which he came to consider as a panacea for all social problems in our troubled world. In the Bohmian tradition (see e.g. Ellinor & Gerard (1997), Yankelovich (1999) the starting point of understanding 'dialogue' is etymological. A disconcerting number of people think dia connotes two. Bohm, Factor and Garrett (1991) emphasise that the literal meaning is quite different, dia means through and logos means 'the word' and they continue:

or more particularly the meaning of words. The image it gives is of a river of meaning flowing around and through the participants.

Furthermore

Dialogue is not a discussion, a word that shares its root meaning with "percussion" and "concussion" both of which involve breaking things up. Nor is it a debate.

In the following I'll take dialogue to imply Bohmian dialogue unless otherwise specified. The last quotation implies that dialogue has a quite different character than the warlike metaphors of 'winning' or 'loosing' commonly ascribed to arguments, discussions or debates. Yankelovich (1999) emphasises the following as central to dialogue:

* Equality, absence of coerciveness, 'non-tyranny'
* Listen with empathy. Respect and treat the other with dignity

* Bring implicit assumptions into the open and suspend judgment

Considering these aspects Martin Bubers (1958) celebrated 'I and thou' comes to mind. In an I-thou relation the person is sensitive to the other's total experience, and the other is accepted without judgment, comparison, or criticism. In the contrasting I-it relation the other tends to be seen as an object - her full humanity is certainly not recognised - and she is readily classified by means of fixed categories. I-thou/I-it should not be seen as a simple dichotomy, there are a variety of 'intermediate' type relations.

A prime example of I-it relation is the diagnostic interview where the point is precisely to classify the other. In his classic castigation of psychiatric diagnosis - 'labelling' - Scheff (1975) equates labelling with I-it relation. [It seems simpler to contrast I-thou/I-it than Seikkulas dialogue /monologic dialogue, and I will further use dialogue in a Bohmian, I-thou sense.]

While I would hesitate to say that I-it relations should always be avoided, it can be stated as a general goal - both for groups of persons, and for internal voices - to move as far as possible in the I-thou direction.

Let's now look at dialogue and conferencing with a view to providing fresh input to therapy in 'the dialogic self' [plural self better?] tradition.

A similarity between the start of a conference and the start of therapy is that crippling conflict with plenty of hard negative emotions (anger, fear, anguish) rule. For persons with strong conflicts it is difficult, if not impossible to see the antagonist(s) as full human beings. (In extreme cases not only they but also anyone supporting them are just seen as evil and should be eradicated). In therapy there will also be heavy negative emotions to cope with, and either 'open conflict' between voices or different 'voices' might promote quite different agendas, leaving both the client and persons close to her in confusion or despair.

A common formula for desired change is: From conflict/I-it/negative emotions to cooperation/I-thou/positive emotions.

Elaborating this we consider the following points:

* Make sure that all relevant participants attend.
* self-reflection and 'reflecting team' and
* equality and non-tyranny
* stages in healing process
Who shall attend?

The general principle is that everyone with a heavy stake in the outcome [and/or being in a position to make valuable contribution] should be included. An example from the present international scene to underscore the importance of this injunction at the group level is the demise of the Oslo process, Galtung (2000), Brand-Jacobsen & Jacobsen (2000). One reason both for the initial praise for this process - and its later cessation - may be that the two parties with very high stakes in the possible final outcomes were both deemed unworthy of attending; Hamas on the Palestinian side and perhaps not less belligerent orthodox Jewish groups on the Israeli side. This probably reflected a sad naivite in the Norwegian social democratic credo: You can only negotiate with 'reasonable' people. Whatever 'reasonable' might imply this capacity will not increase in a subgroup being left out!

This is obviously not the place to go further into this volatile sphere. A parallel from therapy is found in Westen (1990) where he gives an example of a cognitive behaviour therapy, oriented to specific problems, where the therapist was unaware that she had been in mortal danger. Murderous impulses in the client were not touched.

I read Sissel Reichelt's case story as recognizing that the violent, perhaps macho oriented voice in Heron was not given sufficient attention in the therapy. How should this voice have been identified from the start?

Concerning methods for identifying the relevant voices Hermans' has shown how his SCM (Self-Confrontation Method) may be put to good use by inviting a client to provide and evaluate a set of important themes (valuations) from two opposed points of view. While Hermans' recognizes that more voices might be brought to enter the dialogue I fear that his method may be cumbersome with more different voices. Ryle has here an advantage in that he provides lists of states (which can be seen as 'voices') and gives the client the opportunity of adding her own unique states/voices. [It's of course pleasing for me to see that my FLEXGRID has been found useful in giving more nuanced description of the states (Golynkina and Ryle, 1999). The important point here, however, is that more attention should be given to develop methods for identifying voices. I do not see SCM and the CAT approach as competitive. Both have shown their usefulness, and there are ways in which they might be combined. A variety of other methods have been proposed, cf. Cooper and Cruthers (1999). I suspect that different schools tend to stick with their own favorite approach, but we need research to clarify under what circumstances what kind of methods will be most appropriate, A difference between therapy and constitution of a group is that with a group it may be difficult to have other persons enter at later stages, whereas I see no reason why 'emergent' or previously 'non-recognized' voices should be left out of a continuing (intrapersonal) dialogue.]
Note on 'self-reflection' and 'the reflecting team'

Considering the other points there is a special problem to address. By what process do different (internal) voices influence each other? [When reading about the dialogical self instances where the voices each bring forth their own message with little or no attention to the others abound. Therapy, however, deals with change and this implies mutual influence.] Outlining therapy of borderline patients Ryle and Kerr (2002, p. 181) state: "The explicit aim must be to aid integration through the development of self-reflection ('the eye becomes an I')", Hermans also refer to self-reflection when discussing change (1996, p. 18)

Since the capacity for self-reflection is severely limited in borderline conditions (due to early neglect and lack of interest from caretakers) I would have expected more attention to how to develop self-reflection in the CAT tradition.

Reflecting on the genesis of 'self-reflection' from a Vygotskian point of view self-reflection must have its origin in external communication. When this has been deficient, a possible therapeutic route would be to provide external models epitomising healthy reflection.

This provides a fresh look on the 'reflecting team'; a strategy introduced by Andersen (1995). Here two or more other therapists may enter the room and have a conversation about the client and her therapy. Both client and therapist listen to a conversation taking place in the reflecting team. New voices are thus brought into the conversation between client and therapist.

From the present point of view a 'reflecting team' can be viewed as providing a Vygotskian 'zone of proximal development', [ZPD] showing a good dialogue without conflicts, or abrupt shifts. Reflection can be carried out with compassion, showing how different perspectives need not imply destructive conflicts but can be seen as harboring potential for constructive change. The topic – how to understand the clients' predicament – is bound to have a strong intrinsic interest! [In severe cases it might be advisable to start with short simple displays of 'the reflecting team', lest one strays too far outside the current ZPD.]

Equality and non-tyranny

In conferencing a major principle is to make sure that everyone gets to voice her/his position and that each voice gets a fair hearing and deliberation. Furthermore no-one should get to dominate the scene at the expense of others. I have the greatest respect for Sissel who in discussing Heron in retrospect can see that they probably gave the 'conforming'
Heron too much space (support), and - as previously mentioned - at the expense of giving voice to a macho oriented voice; certainly a voice not getting much attention from nice, anti-violent Norwegian female therapists!

Hopefully the metaphor of regarding 'the I more [as] a federation than a single nation' (Ryle and Kerr, 2000, p 36) and the therapist seeing her task as facilitator might here be helpful. The therapist/facilitator would have an overriding responsibility for the overall process but in this task it may be counterproductive to give any one 'nation' [self-state] space at the expense of others.

**Stages in the healing process**

In conferences any Bohmian dialogue / I-thou orientation is very far from being realised in the first stages. Here the hard negative emotions will dominate and any I-thou orientation is simply impossible when such emotions reign. However, these emotions must be allowed expression before constructive work can begin, (this is neglected in social constructionist views with its often cavalier treatment of the emotions). After every voice has had its say, however, there will usually be a transitional stage before positive emotions - enabling cooperation - take place. This stage is called 'collective vulnerability', usually marked by sadness and shame where shame both signals that social ties have been broken and at the same time a wish to have the bonds restored (Moore & McDonald, 2000, p. 50-52).

Bob (Neimeyer) and I describe an illustrating case from Moore & McDonald's practice where a father was consumed by anger and hate towards a young woman, Jill, who during drunk driving accidentally had killed his beloved daughter. In the conference he gave his anger free vent; epitomising in a particularly virulent way an I-it relation towards Jill. After everyone had had their say, however, there came a moment when he passed around a picture of the terrible accident scene and a reverential silence fell over the group only punctuated by the occasional sob of a participant: A common feeling of collective vulnerability, the frailty and brevity of life, experienced as a physical deflation. In the following sequences this was followed by the father engaging in a remarkable collaborative venture with Jill; signalling that he could experience her full humanity (move towards an I-thou relation).

Interestingly a similar stage seemed to occur in some of the meetings in a province in Northern Finland which Seikkula (1996) describes. This refers to pioneering attempts to use not only professionals but also family and friends to help 'schizophrenic' patients. When everyone present had experienced that their pet ideas would not work there was a similar feeling of deflation as above, but then the ground was
paved for cooperative work. [See Seikkula et al. 2001 for general evaluation of the project]

I was reminded of this stage when I read a moving case history about Sam in Ryle & Kerr (2000, p. 189-197) Sam - who had been severely abused as a child - had a long story of crime and violence. He wanted help to control his violence and for being scared of closeness, and came with four selves which he wanted to be on better terms with each other. Two of them: Heartless Sam, dividing the world into abusers and abused, rejected by the others, and Benjamin Sam; a beaten up, spaced out child. A turning point came after a session where the therapist had challenged his view that she - like others - would see him as no good ("The abusers had taken the goodness off us", he had said).

I quote: "At the following session a sadder Sam described how he had been talking to Benjamin Sam, and when his wife noticed his sadness he had for the first time been able to give her an account of his experiences... Sam went on to describe his shame and fear regarding what he had experienced...these events represented his deepest fear that the abusers had left their badness inside him." We see that Sam could clearly expose his vulnerability!

I don't know to what extent a state of shame and vulnerability can be generalised, but at least concerning narcissistic disorders Ryle and Kerr write "The key task is to make it tolerable for the patient to be sad and vulnerable...If sadness is not reached, little changes. (p.186-187)

**A note on motivation**

As a member of an Oslo team preparing conferences we have sometimes felt apprehension as to what might happen. For instance would someone resort to violence during the meeting? At such moments one of us would - almost as a mantra - say: "We must trust the process". That is to say; properly prepare every participant and follow the ground rules [here only hinted at] and everything will turn out well (as it did).

An additional important prop for me has been to read Baumeister and Leary (1995) on "The need to belong" where they marshall a strong set of arguments for regarding this need as a fundamental human motivation, transcending most conventional "attachment theories". Granting this, wouldn't it be equally, if not more reasonable to postulate a similar need for the 'states forming a confederacy' (a person) to have a similar need to belong together? Paraphrasing our friend Sam; Can't we all recognise moments where we want our separate selves 'to be on better terms with each other'?
References


