

LISTENING WITH INTEGRITY: THE DIALOGICAL STANCE OF JAAKKO SEIKKULA

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At Nordiske Nätverksproject's 1995 Stockholm Conference, with my colleague Gunnar Forsberg translating at my ear, I observed Finnish psychologist Jaakko Seikkula conduct, in Swedish, a role-play simulation of a treatment meeting. For shifting a "stuck" situation, Seikkula's understated approach was just as effective as the drama of full-scale network assembly. His stance was gentle, respectful, calm, centered, attuned, and responsive. He was poised to enter painful monologic discourse among network members and guide the conversation into dialogue. I had just begun exploring postmodern literature, having read Anderson and Goolishian's (1988) work on the flight to the conference; meeting and working with Jaakko Seikkula allowed me to witness a brilliant performance of the "not-knowing" stance.

I soon discovered a connection between Seikkula's thesis, that therapeutic change involves a shift from monologic to dialogic discourse, and my own interest in the therapeutic breakthroughs that result from shared expressions of sorrow. Reflecting on the shared expression of sorrow in network assemblies (the "depression phase" of Speck and Attneave's [1973] model), and on expressions of emotion in my psychotherapy office, I found that Seikkula's work helped me to attend to how the communication of sorrow shifts therapeutic conversations from monological to dialogical. Since then, I have been developing the idea that the collective expression of sadness is one way to shift out of monological into dialogical discourse (Trimble, 2000). That project has been informed and enriched by Seikkula's remarkable theoretical work (Seikkula, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995; Seikkula et al., 1995; Seikkula & Sutela, 1990), which draws from sources including Bakhtin (1981), Bråten (1988), Volosinov (1929/1973), and Vygotsky (1934/1962).

The "discourse" in Seikkula's monologic and dialogic discourse is language as utterance; that is, spoken, rather than written language, or than language as a formal system. In dialogue, meaning is jointly produced in the space between speaker and listener. The developmental origins of individual mental life are found in exchanges of utterances between child and parent. The child develops the capacity to organize experience through internal reflective conversation, embodying both speaker and listener roles. Developmentally, dialogue is the original form; monologue emerges from its dialogical origins as a particular form of relationship between speaker and listener. In monologue, the listener is rendered passive; his/her sole function is to receive the utterances of the speaker.

One source of the complexity of the monologic–dialogic distinction is that it applies both to spoken exchanges between distinct embodied speakers and listeners and to internal exchanges between speaker and listener roles within a single embodied person. There are thus a variety of monologic forms. An individual person may be stuck in internal monologic discourse, for example, unable to perceive or imagine life outside of a depressive perspective. In groups, one voice may dominate and silence all others, or all participants may subordinate their individual voices to generate a single monopolistic perspective. Despite the appearance of more than one point of view in polarized disputes, such discourse is monologic because the participants are single mindedly committed to their positions, attending to their opponents' utterances solely for the purpose of refuting them.

Individual mental life is dialogic when the person is open to a multitude of internal voices. Dialogue

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between people can also be multivoiced, or “polyphonic.” In the flow of dialogic conversation, speakers become listeners as listeners become speakers. The sense of the speaker’s words is shaped by the listener’s responses. Dialogue is a vehicle for creativity as new and unexpected meanings emerge between speaker and listener. Bakhtin (1981) characterized dialogue as “unfinalizable.” Because the sense of an utterance is unknown until the appearance of its answering response (which then awaits its own answer, etc.), dialogue is intrinsically unpredictable.

In therapeutic conversations, we often find people caught in a dilemma: Because they have been wounded in some way, they are understandably fearful of the inherent confusion and unpredictability of dialogue, and seek safety in the order and certainty of monologic constructions of themselves and their situations. Once established in monologic positions, however, they become cut off from emergent, not-yet-spoken possibilities for action. Their relationships become thin as they engage only with others who support their monologic positions, resisting those who contradict them and avoiding those who are open to seeing things in new and unexpected ways. One way out of the dilemma may be found in situations in which it feels safe to share expressions of sadness, perhaps because such emotional expression activates the attachment system (Bowlby, 1969). Because dialogue emerges developmentally out of the same relationship events from which the attachment system originates, such situations may reactivate the possibility of dialogue for people whose distress has locked them in monologic positions.

Seikkula’s work, however, does not depend on a search for such expressions of emotion. His treatment meetings make the unpredictable feel safe enough for the most frightened of conversational partners. Certainly, when meeting with people who are acutely mentally ill and those who love them, we can feel compassion for their determination to stick to the predictability of monologic positions. Without challenging, Seikkula and his colleagues embody conviction in the healing power of dialogue as they listen respectfully and responsively to every participant, including the most acutely psychotic. These most frightened of people are soothed as they see that their experiences and voices can be held in the dialogic conversation. As Seikkula (this issue, p. 272) states in his article, “It is easy to imagine that in this type of atmosphere enough security will be guaranteed to proceed to the not-yet-spoken experiences.” The dialogic stance that Seikkula describes has much in common with spiritual practice: As one relinquishes one’s efforts to grasp and control the world, one can allow oneself to be held by a reality larger than oneself.

I am grateful to the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* for publishing Jaakko Seikkula’s preliminary study. It is very difficult to make a language-based treatment innovation accessible to readers unfamiliar with the original language of the innovator. Before reading his study, I had not found a satisfactory example in English of Seikkula’s distinction between monologic and dialogic discourse. By applying Linnell’s (1998) distinctions in a detailed mining of the transcript data, Seikkula has arrived at two accessible examples of dialogic and monologic discourse in treatment meetings. The examples bear repeated reading, as it is difficult to shift out of the set of attending to the content of utterances into the set of attending to the process of conversation. Once one shifts from tracking content to tracking what goes on between the participants, it becomes apparent that, in the first transcript, the patient experiences respectful, responsive listening. As the patient moves to join in the dialogue, both as speaker and as listener, we can imagine how his inner life becomes more organized and coherent as he reflects on what he hears and says. As Seikkula puts it, “What first takes place in outer dialogue in the social domain, may thereafter be evaporated into an inner dialogue.”

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