

## Dialogue as Method and Beyond

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### Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to further the discussion initiated by Saraswati Haider(1998)on Dialogue as method for collection of ‘authentic’ data in social studies. In this attempt, the paper derives its theoretical framework from Martin Buber’s conceptualization of Dialogue as an ‘I-Thou’ encounter with the ‘other’ and attempts to search for the possibilities of ‘dialogue as method’.

After a brief discussion of Buber’s understanding of Dialogue, the possibility of dialogue being more than a method has been explored. Further, an exploration of the relation between the self and the ‘other’ can be understood in dialogue and the involvement of the whole being in such a relation has been done. This is followed by a discussion of the concern about ethical in dialogue and the possibility of writing dialogically.

**KEYWORDS:** Dialogue, Method, Educational Research, Social Research, Interview

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Haider(1998),in her paper ‘Dialogue as Method and as Text’, initiated a discussion on Dialogue as a method for collecting data in ethnographic research. Inthis paper, the focus would be onthe methodological aspects of the above mentioned paper and not on the content and context of the data, i.e.the lives of the women of *jhuggi-jhompri* cluster. In order to further the discussion of Haider’s paper, my paper derives its theoretical framework from Martin Buber’s conceptualization of Dialogue as an ‘I-Thou’ encounter with the ‘other’ and attempts to search for the possibilities of ‘dialogue as method’. Such a study makes even more sense in the light of the fact that Buber himself liked to be identified as a philosophical anthropologist rather than a philosopher.

### **Buber’s conceptualization of Dialogue**

Buber discusses in his magnum opus ‘I and Thou’ (1958) about the two types of relations with the world in which a ‘person’ can enter: ‘I-It’ and ‘I-Thou’. The relation between ‘I and thou’ is a dialogic relation with the other and the relation between ‘I and it’ is non-dialogic. Though a distinction is being made between these two realms, yet they both are not self-sufficient asone cannot earn a living through an ‘I-Thou’ relation and one cannot have mutuality of love in an ‘I-It’ relation. Living through the feelings, experiences, enjoyment, and expressing oneself does not mean love. In love the ‘I’ do not want to have the Thou only for its content, as object; but it is between ‘I’ and ‘Thou’. “Love is a responsibility of an I for a Thou” (Buber, 1958, p. 15).

When the world is approached with an individualistic attitude, a relationship between a subject and object is established, which is the relationship of an ‘I’ with an ‘It’. It is a relation of a person with a thing, of separateness and detachment involving some form of utilization, domination, or control. A relation in which the ‘other’ is experienced and thus

objectified, that is, 'it' is perceived, imagined, sensed, thought-about and felt. The 'I-It' relation is never spontaneous since it has a past only as things can be experienced after there has been an effect. Buber's explication of the 'I-It' relation questions the dependence of positivists, empiricists and pragmatists on the distinction between the subject and the object in method of knowing, for in the realm of 'I-It' only that one can perceive an ordered, detached, reliable, predictable world, which can be verified by the senses alone.

However, when we have an attitude of mutuality, reciprocity and wholeness we address the other as 'Thou'. Only an 'I-Thou' relation can lead up to dialogue in which persons turn toward each other in their being. They accept each other as partner in dialogue no matter what their respective positions are. In an 'I-Thou' relation every act of objectification of the other is violence to the other's otherness.

Buber (1958, p. 7), with the example of a tree, clarifies this difference between 'I-It' and 'I-thou' relations. When one looks at the tree as a picture; or tries to understand various movements in it; or classifies it, makes the tree an object that occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution. However, if one enters into a relation with the tree, when the tree says something to me then that relation is of I-Thou. The 'I-Thou' lives in the present because it is an encounter, an engagement.

Since, Buber conceptualised that the world of relations is prior to an 'I', "his social conception of knowledge is of fundamental significance because it means a complete reversal of the former direction of thought which derived the relation between persons from the relation of the knowing subject to the external world" (Friedman, 1955, p. 164).

According to Buber (2002, p. 22) there are three kinds of dialogue: There is 'genuine dialogue'- no matter whether spoken or silent- each of the participants faces the other in their whole being. They turn to each other with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation. Then, there is 'technical dialogue'- which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding. And third is 'monologue disguised as dialogue', in which two or more men meeting in a space speaks with themselves in intricate and circular ways and yet imagine they have been able to have a dialogue with the other.

The nature of genuine dialogue may also change with the nature of relationship in which the dialogue is happening. The two aspects that make the various kinds of 'dialogical relations' different are: 'mutuality' and 'inclusion'. Mutuality is there when partners turn to each other in wholeness. The act of 'inclusion' is that which makes it possible to meet and know the other in his concrete uniqueness and not just as a content of one's experience. For example, when two persons are debating over a point they may realise the shortcomings of their own perspective spontaneously, this kind of dialogical relation is 'disputation'. Disputation is abstract because it leaves the wholeness outside the relationship, but it may have an experience of inclusion. Secondly, like in education where 'mutuality' is there but there is one sided experience of inclusion which is the inclusion of the child by the educator. The third kind of dialogue is friendship which has mutuality as well as inclusion by both the partners.

In a research study, different kinds of dialogue may happen overtime or one kind of dialogue may happen repeatedly. However, one may think about which kind of dialogue is best suited for which type of research but one cannot ensure that a dialogical encounter happens when one wishes it to happen.

### **Dialogue as Method and More-than-a-Method**

With any attempt of conceptualizing about dialogue the first assumption that one has in mind is that in such a method there is no final truth but it is understood as “multifaceted, multiplex and polychromic” which “takes on different hues, different meanings, different forms”(Haider, 1998, p. 217). This assumption acknowledges and respects the reality of a person and does attempt to get to any socially constructed or shared fact or description.

However, it is probably not entirely true that a researcher “can get at truth only as he or she sees it, as he or she wants to see it”, because in a dialogue, while one encounters the otherness of the other, one goes beyond one’s own self and thereby supersedes it. Through this supersession one enters into the realm of inter-subjectivity. This encounter with the ‘other’ forces the self to break its own boundaries and expand, thus a dialogical encounter cannot be limited to projections of the self. Thus, here is presented a possibility of a truth that is shared and that emerges in the interactions and encounters *between* persons, unlike Haider’s(1998, pp. 217-218) assertion that since truths are plural therefore “a social scientist then, perhaps, can never really get to *the* truth of any social reality or phenomenon”.

Surely, the ‘other’ is not an object in a dialogical relation that can be perceived in objective ways. The ‘ethical’, therefore, would probably be to acknowledge and accept the ‘other’ as irreducible to any theoretical formulation. In dialogue, the other is a ‘thou’ and not an ‘it’. The self here is like a medium of the expression of the otherness of the ‘other’ and not only a knower or inquirer. Therefore, in Buber’s conceptualization, the ‘other’ comes prior to the self. This understanding of putting the ‘other’ before oneself is different from the conceptualization of dialogue by Humanist psychologists like Carl Rogers and other researchers who see the dialogic relationship as an essentially reciprocal and mutual relationship. This tendency is also visible in the dialectical method of thesis-antithesis-synthesis where there is a possibility of some higher truth by the unification of some truths.

Since the ‘other’ is irreducible to the self, the self can interact with the ‘other’ but cannot capture it or encapsulate it. Thus limiting the encounter and engagement with the ‘other’ in the form of ‘data’ may seem like violence to the ‘other’, yet one cannot live without an ‘It’. “The particular *Thou*, after the relational event has run its course, *is bound* to become an *It*. The particular *It*, by entering the relational event, *may* become a *Thou*” (Buber, 2004, pp. 32, emphasis original). Nevertheless, there is a possibility that the lived experience of one person may get reduced to a text or narrative available for cognitive and linguistic dissection by losing its wholeness for others. Dialogue, here, has to be seen as something more than a two-way communication, or as a mere give-and-take of information. It is to be considered as a relationship between two persons in their wholeness and concreteness. Language cannot encapsulate the happenings in a dialogical relationship and neither can express the experience of being in dialogue in its entirety. Here “human dialogue, therefore, although it has its distinctive life in the sign, that is in

sound and gesture, can exist without the sign, but admittedly not in an objectively comprehensible form” (Buber, 2002, p. 5). Following (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997), this understanding of dialogue is also hinted by the etymological meaning of the word method which is from the greek *methodos* meta- beyond, after, across and *hodos*-path, a traveling, way.

### **The Self, the ‘Other’ and the Intersubjective in Dialogue**

Further, Haider(1998, p. 220) posits that “the simulation of objectivity appears to be the brain child of an androcentric social science emphasizing the higher value of reason and rationality over emotion and affectivity and hence objectivity over subjectivity”. However, if we are accepting that “no matter how much we may wish it, there is no escape from one’s subjectivity” (1998, p. 219) then it does not make sense to abide by or to speak in dualistic terms, rather this warrants for a move from the subjective-objective duality to a more inclusive category of the inter-subjective. A dialogical relation has the potential of transcending the hierarchies, dualisms and dichotomies of subject-object, observer-observed, knower-known, fact-value, mind-body, and reason-feeling as they both enter into a relation when there is an encounter with the otherness and they both enter in a sphere “which is established with the existence of man as man but which is conceptually still uncomprehended, the sphere of ‘between’” (Buber, 2002, p. 241). Moreover, even after the encounter, while recollecting or recalling the relational happenings, the boundaries of designed roles such as interviewer-interviewee also become fuzzy as the dialogue becomes an encounter involving the whole being of the persons mutually involved. This is not to say that all differences vanish or that there are no subjectivities in an inter-subjective relation, but that they become manifest and clear, thereby, a scope for further dialogue gets created. The ‘consensuses’ or ‘mutually agreed positions’ can be achieved in the intersubjective relations only. One cannot agree more with Haider(1998, p. 220) in saying that “the act of simulating objectivity cannot but end up distorting the subjective but rich, authentic experience of reality that the social scientist may have gone through”, but it must also be added that this rich and authentic experience of reality cannot be there without a mutual intersubjective dialogical relation with ‘others’. Dialogue, when conceptualized in this way, involves *life-lived* rather than *life-shared* only. Here the conceptualization of a scientist as someone dealing strictly with the material or the tangible would seem limiting and narrow.

Moreover, in a dialogical encounter the knowledge of the ‘other’ is also irreducible to the knowledge that the self has, which is what Haider(1998, p. 218) has emphasized by quoting (Kumar, 1994, p. 7) that “knowledge is in no case unitary and acquirable through one current method, rather it is plural and heterogeneous, with truths being the norm, not Truth”. The ethical in dialogue is not to reduce the otherness of the other to the self by transcending it, and neither is it to let the self dissolve into the other, but to co-exist with mutual respect. Dialogue, as method, gives space to this plurality and multiform knowledge by not trying essentially to merge the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ into each other or in any third alternative, as is the case with the process of dialectic. Dialogue affirms the ‘other’ and ‘agreement to disagree’ in true sense.

This openness definitely requires one “not to act in bad faith” as Haider(1998, p. 218) posits and to approach the other “with full honesty, openness and forthrightness”.

Moreover, it requires complete mutuality and inclusion to be a fully dialogical relation. However, this conceptualization of a dialogical encounter takes us beyond the usual understanding of research as an *intentional* and *planned* step-by-step process to a conceptualization that focuses on *openness* and *trust* in the other; from an attitude of *knowing* the 'other' to discovering oneself with the other; from I-knowing-you to '*being-with-others*'; and from being *subjects-of-someone* and *subjected-to-something* to *participants* with their subjectivity acknowledged and affirmed.

### **Being-in a Dialogical Relationship**

A dialogical relationship involves the whole being of persons and not just their reasons and feelings alone. These encounters have the power to evoke deepest emotions. Moreover, when such a dialogical encounter leaves a lot to be thought and felt for a long time, for example, Haider experienced helplessness and guilt after meeting women of *jhuggi-jhompri* cluster, it indicates the way dialogical encounters change us and shows us that we *care*- which is the basic way of being-in-the-world according to Heidegger. Thus, it also depicts the power of a dialogical research to take us to the very basic questions of our existence and being. Buber calls it the realm of 'the between' or the 'interhuman'. It is "a separate category of our existence" (Buber, 1965, p. 72). The interhuman is the realm between men rather than a social aggregate. Moreover, any realm can be the realm of the interhuman, if for a person "the other happens as the particular other" (Buber, 1965, p. 74). It is when one becomes aware of the other in such a way that a dialogical relation is established and they regard each other as partners rather than using each other as objects that the realm of the interhuman appears. Buber (1965, p. 75) called the unfolding of the sphere of the interhuman as 'the dialogical'. Buber makes is clear at the outset that "it is basically erroneous to try to understand the interhuman phenomena as psychological" (Buber, 1965, p. 75). The meaning of the conversation cannot be found neither in one or the other partner nor in both together but in their dialogue, but in the 'between'.

### **Dialogical Ethics as basis of an Ethical Research**

It is quite often said that "research concerned with human beings is always an interference of some kind" (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004, p. 175), which raises a valid question regarding the ethics of research. Moreover, Haider(1998, p. 219) raises another important concern for privileging voice of one group over another while quoting Gupta (1995, p. 619) that when intersubjectivity is methodologically and purposively curtailed, it is in a way denied. This denial is violence to the 'other' in a dialogical situation. From, the dialogical perspective, the 'ethical' is to acknowledge and accept the 'other' in his otherness; as irreducible to the self or to any propositional formulation of the self. In dialogue, the other is personified and considered a 'thou' rather than a mere object or an 'it'. It is to be open so as to let the realm of the interhuman unravel itself during the engagement rather than to keep moving along with a pre-defined flow chart or sequence of question or themes.

Moreover, when Haider(1998, p. 221) is concerned with the intersubjectivity between men and women research participants, it is to be reiterated that sex differences constitute only one kind of otherness amongst various other bases of otherness like, race, class, caste, religion, nationality, perspective, or even the embodied self. Thus the 'culture of



silence' that gets perpetuated is a violence to the other's existential reality. Inclusion of these voices then is about respecting them as equal to one's own rather than attempting them to 'mainstream', 'normalize', 'categorize', 'control', or 'suppress' them; instead of a patronizing gaze it is a meeting of the eyes. Only when the participants feel respected that they can open up and engage with the researcher, and only then the researcher will be able to be a part of their lived reality.

### **Writing Dialogically: A Paradox or a Possibility**

Writing about such dialogical encounters is an altogether different matter as the words always fall short of the complete expression of the experiences of the being. Writing, in a way, is violence to the experience which is nonetheless necessary. It is in a way transformation of the 'Thou' to an 'It' but still has the potential to become a 'thou'. Research writings, like that of SaraswatiHaider's, do point to a direction towards a dialogical encounter with social and cultural 'others', who are marginalized and oppressed. They make one aware and sensitive to their voices, narratives and experiences. These efforts make us come face-to-face with the dehumanizing and alienating structures and processes and help us to have a glimpse of our own humaneness. Writing of such experiences also enables one to deconstruct them and critically reflect on them to become more conscious and critical of the human existence, however, they cannot replace the original experience with the 'thou'. In other words, the signifier signifies the signified but cannot become the signified. However, in dialogical research writing, if there is a possibility of any such writing, one can be nothing but 'honest', 'pluralistic' and 'open to multiple voices'. Such writing would be intended to establish relationship with others.

It seems relevant here to elaborate more upon the outcomes of a dialogical research. It is obvious to talk about 'data' whenever we speak of a research, however, the nomenclature 'data' itself is an objectification of the experience and reality of the 'other'. This inherent leaning towards obtaining something 'concrete', 'objective', 'unbiased' seems to belong to a particular ethos and as long as these are a part of the discourse of dialogue, one will always also have difficulty in theorizing any method that addressed the personal and the non-concrete reality.

Since dialogical research is about the lived experiences of the participants, one cannot take these experiences as static and concrete. These experiences and their meanings change every time one re-lives, re-calls, reflects or shares them with others. Though it is true that the researcher cannot go back to the original experience, but one must not reject it also. One may object that if the socially shared experience is not the experience, then where is the real experience? For this, one has to understand that our basic assumption is that one cannot capture other's experience in totality as it would entail the loss of the otherness of the 'other'. This is an important difference between conceptualizing experience as shaped necessarily through social discourse, and experience as an encounter between 'I' and 'Thou'. The difference in assuming that encounter between the self and the other is within the context or that the context is within this encounter has a direct bearing on the conceptualization of dialogue. This difference hints towards the differing conceptualization of the 'other' and the 'intersubjective' in social constructivist perspective and Buber's philosophical anthropology. In this reference, it would suffice to

mention that where for the social constructivist the social determines the experience, for Buber it is the lived relationship with other that matters.

I would like to submit this contribution to the discussion initiated by Haider(1998) on 'Dialogue as Method and as Text' with the belief that her conceptualizations are important in the way of establishing dialogue as a 'method' and also as a 'relational reality'.

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