
Towards Polyphonic Organization

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Postmodern existence calls us to listen to one another in all our our multiplicity and uniqueness as we accomplish our human work. Monolithic visual models of organization do not support such a summons. Understanding organizations as words – stories, discourses, or texts – is an alternative. Dialogue and polyphony, borrowed from literature and music, are metaphors which assist in understanding and allowing for inclusive change in patterns of organizing among people who perceive, value, and act from different appreciative system (Vickers, 1968) and speak with diverse voices.

Comprehending organization as discourse will first be addressed. Background on M. M. Bakhtin, literary critic, and his work on polyphonic novels will be described, and essential definitions given. His analysis of Dostoyevsky's novels will be portrayed and implications of these ideas for organizational change will be explored.

Organization as Words

Organization theorists have traditionally used visual models to describe organizations. In *Images of Organization*, Morgan (1986) suggested that no one theoretical framework is adequate for understanding complex organizations. He used metaphor, a literary device, to describe eight current streams of organization theory. Most of these metaphors are visual. Only two – the organization as brain and as culture – in part portray organizations as verbal processes; and one, the organization as psychic prison, includes body or kinaesthetic images.

Organizations can be understood as socially constructed verbal systems: as stories, discourses, or texts. For example, Boje (1991) and Boje and Dennehy (1993) showed how an organization can be conceived of as a collective storytelling system. Denzin (1989) demonstrated the application of the social science method of interpretive interaction in studying organizations. Putnam (1990) identified a number of discourse approaches to the field. Barley (1990) and Fiol (1990) employed linguistic terms to illuminate organization phenomena. Martin deconstructed both an analysis of a school board decision

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in light of current thought on racism (1990a) and a portion of a speech by a CEO of a large multinational corporation using feminist theory (1990b). Van Buskirk and McGrath (1992) used organization stories to access emotionality.

Since organizations can be understood as written and spoken words, literary criticism can be a fruitful source to enrich our understanding of what happens as people work together.

Words and Organizational Change

Each person has her or his own unique voice, grounded in the body, formed by experience, and shaped by perception. When people in groups organize or are organized to work together to accomplish a complex task none could achieve alone, there are at least as many voices as there are people. However, some are louder, more articulate, or more powerful than others. Often, these are the voices of those who direct the work and they usually speak in the same discourse. Some voices remain unheard or silent, their words unspoken or experiences unspeakable, their discourses unacceptable or undeveloped, their contributions to the community limited.

When we bind our understanding about organization processes and change to monolithic, closed visual models, it does not occur to us to listen for and to the voices of all who are working together. We are restricted by our bird's eye view and likely to miss the more intimate sounds of people speaking, singing, or crying out to one another. If we hear (or read) only loud, articulate, respectable, or directive voices, we confine our possibilities, limit our range, zero in on only one goal, forfeit chances for individual and collective development.

When we dialogue we engage in praxis, create our social reality, and enact a process of comprehension and transformation. I engage in dialogue with another when I as subject speak my truth to another, also a subject; hear the other's truth; believe that neither is ever closed or finished; know that each has a voice and a means to tell her or his experience; and believe that hearing such experience is vital to understanding, development, and change (Hazen, 1987; 1987-88).

If we conceive of organization as many dialogues occurring simultaneously and sequentially, as polyphony, we begin to hear differences and possibilities. We discover that each voice, each person, is his or her centre of any organization. And it is from each of these dynamic centres that change occurs.

Music and literature can enrich our understanding of the metaphor of polyphony. In this article, the work of M. M. Bakhtin, who used polyphony to describe the world of Dostoyevsky's novels, is explored. It is one source for appreciating the potential this metaphor has for helping us to enact change that includes all who are part of or affected by an organization. Background on Bakhtin and aspects of his work are examined next.

Bakhtin

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's life spanned a time and space of diversity and turbulence. He was born near Moscow in 1895 and, before his death in 1975,

worked as a teacher and scholar, was arrested for political crimes, lived in exile, and returned to scholarly respectability. His work reflected the diversity of his life. Clark and Holquist (1984) noted that “few thinkers have been as fascinated by the plenitude of differences in the world”. His “preoccupation with variety, nonrecurrence, and discorrespondence serves to join into a coherent whole the bewildering contradictions of his career”. His work “stands under the sign of plurality, the mystery of the one and the many” and he “revelled in a profusion of subjects, ideas, vocabularies, periods and authorial disguises” (pp. 1-2). Central to his work is the process of dialogue:

At the heart of Bakhtin’s work is a recognition of existence as a ceaseless activity, an enormous energy, which is constantly in the process of being produced by the very forces that it drives. This energy may be conceived as a force field created by the ceaseless struggle between centrifugal forces, which strive to keep things various, separate, apart, different from each other, and centripetal forces, which strive to keep things together, unified, same. Centrifugal forces compel movement, becoming, and history; they long for change and new life. Centripetal forces urge stasis, resist becoming, abhor history, and desire the seamless quiet of death... Bakhtin’s career was a lifelong attempt to understand and specify the various, particular ways in which the great dialogue between these forces manifests itself in other kinds of dialogue (Clark and Holquist, 1984, pp. 7-8).

Bakhtin’s vitality and adaptability speak to us in his work. Not all that he has written is available in English; and that which is (e.g. Bakhtin, 1973; 1981; 1986; Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978) is far-ranging and complex. In this article, aspects of polyphony and the closely related process of dialogue, particularly as portrayed in his work about Dostoyevsky, are examined in light of their relevance to how organizations change. Whenever possible, Bakhtin’s own words are used to portray his ideas.

Definitions

Polyphony. Rooted in Greek words meaning “many” and “voices”, “polyphonic” is defined as “many-voiced” and “producing many sounds”. Polyphonic music is that “composed or arranged for several voices or parts, each having a melody of its own” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971, p. 1094). Bakhtin (1973) extended the concept of polyphony to literature, claiming that Dostoyevsky’s polyphonic novels offered a “new artistic model of the word” (p. vii).

Dialogue. One of the central concepts in Bakhtin’s thought is that of dialogue. While others have written about dialogue (e.g. Buber, 1970; Freire, 1970; Friedmann, 1973; Gitlin, 1990; Gurevitch, 1989; Habermas, 1970a, 1970b; Hazen, 1987; 1987-88), the focus here is on the ideas of Bakhtin, so his definitions are (non-dialogically) used. Dialogue takes place between two persons in mutual, reciprocal relation to one another. It is “the social interaction outside of which meaning does not exist” (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978, p. xiii). Dialogue “means communication between simultaneous differences” (Clark and Holquist, 1948, p. 9) and “Bakhtin’s basic scenario for modelling variety is two actual people talking to each other in a specific dialogue at a particular time and in a particular place” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. xx). Each is a “consciousness at a

specific point in the history of defining itself through the choice it has made...of a discourse to transcribe its intention in this specific exchange” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. xx). Dialogue is an ongoing, open process, is never finished, and always allows for loopholes and change. In Bakhtin’s conception of dialogue, “nothing is ever completed, no word is final, there are no ultimate explanations that everyone, without exception, will accept as exhausting all possibilities” (Clark and Holquist, 1984, p. 347).

Utterance. The basic building-block of dialogue is the utterance, the “unit of speech communication” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 75), spoken or written. It “is always expressed from a point of view, which for Bakhtin is a process rather than a location” and is “an activity that enacts differences in values” (Clark and Holquist, 1984, p. 10).

Author. All who make utterances, spoken or written, are authors who “operate out of a point of view and shape values into forms” (p. 10). The author “manifests his own individuality in his style, his world view, and in all aspects of the design of his work” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 75). Authoring is the “way values get shaped in expression, bringing differences into a tensile complex rather than into a static unity” (Clark and Holquist, 1984, p. 10).

Within *dialogue*, *authors* relate intersubjectively to one another through *utterances*, each perspective expressed in the spoken or written word. This process is a continuing *polyphony*, voices and partners changing, never completed.

These definitions enable us to begin to imagine polyphonic organization as a counterpoint to our usual images of organization as machine bureaucracy or organic system. Bakhtin’s work on Dostoyevsky’s novels offers further amplification of this metaphor, which is rooted in the sense of hearing and is thus more intimate than those rooted in sight.

Polyphony and Dialogue in Dostoyevsky’s Poetics

Bakhtin addressed the particular authorship of Dostoyevsky in *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* (1973). First published in 1929 as *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Creative Works*, the second edition was published in 1963. Dostoyevsky lived – as Bakhtin did and as we do – in an era of “a gigantic breakdown, gigantic changes and unexpected collisions of social structures and systems of consciousness which had never before come into contact with one another” (Lunacharsky in Bakhtin, 1973, p. 28). He was able, in his novels, to give voice to and personify the ideas of his time. Bakhtin explored polyphony and dialogue through examining Dostoyevsky’s relationship to the hero, the place of the idea and the word in his book, and characteristics of plot and genre.

Bakhtin claimed that Dostoyevsky created his novels in full dialogue with the characters in them. Listen to his ideas, hear his voice, learn about how organizations change from his analysis of literature: We are all authors of our organizational reality as we engage in dialogue with one another. We are all heroes. As we give voice to and act on our ideas we create a world of “mutually illuminated consciousnesses” (Bakhtin, 197, p. 80), generate the unfolding

plot, and participate in the carnival of our social reality. In the following sections, I invite your voice as well, to affirm, deny, support, modify, illuminate, build on, critique, holler, cry, and/or howl at what is said.

The hero. Rather than using the voices of his characters to parrot his own ideas, values, and beliefs, Dostoyevsky enters into a dialogue relationship with them. Bakhtin claimed:

The new artistic position of the author *vis-à-vis* the hero in Dostoyevsky's polyphonic novel is a *consequent* and *fully realized dialogical position which confirms* the hero's independence, inner freedom, unfinalizedness and indeterminacy. For the author the hero is not "he" and not "I" but a full-valued "thou" that is another full-fledged "I" ("Thou art"). The hero is the subject of a profoundly serious actual dialogical mode of address as opposed to a rhetorically *acted-out* or *conventional* literary one (1973, p. 51).

This does not mean that Dostoyevsky does not express his own point of view, but that he does not turn his characters into objects to do so, nor does he "attach secondhand finalizing definitions to them" (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 55). Rather, the author's consciousness "reflects and re-creates them in their genuine unfinalizability (which is after all their very essence), rather than creating a world of objects" (Bakhtin, 1973, pp. 55-56).

The idea. In Dostoyevsky's novels, "the image of the idea is inseparable from the image of the person, the carrier of that idea" (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 71). At the same time, the idea is profoundly dialogical in nature:

An idea does not live in one person's isolated consciousness – if it remains there it degenerates and dies. An idea begins to live, i.e. to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, and to give birth to new ideas only when it enters into genuine dialogical relationships with other, foreign, ideas. Human thought becomes genuine thought, embodied in the voice of another person, that is, in the consciousness of another person as expressed in his word...The idea...is not a subjective individual-psychological formulation with a "permanent residence" in a person's head; no, the idea is interindividual and intersubjective. The sphere of its existence is not the individual consciousness, but the dialogical intercourse between consciousnesses (Bakhtin, 1973, pp. 71-2).

We see in Dostoyevsky's work "not a world of objects...but a world of mutually illuminating consciousnesses, a world of coupled human philosophical orientations" (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 80).

Plot. Bakhtin wrote that Dostoyevsky's novels might appear to some to be chaotic, as they have an organic form, based on dialogue rather than a more mechanistic outline:

From the point of view of a consistent monological vision and comprehension of the represented world and of the monological canon of novelistic construction, Dostoyevsky's world may appear to be chaotic, and the construction of his novels a conglomerate of alien materials and incompatible principles of design. The profound organicism, consistency and unity of Dostoyevsky's poetics can become clear only in light of his basic artistic task as we have formulated it (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 5).

Genre. Bakhtin traced the roots of Dostoyevsky's polyphony to antiquity, grounding his work in a serio-comic genre. One of the primary influences is the tradition of carnival:

Carnival is an eminent attitude toward the world which belonged to the entire folk... in bygone millennia. It is an attitude toward the world which liberates from fear, brings the world close to man and man close to his fellow man (all is drawn into the zone of liberated familiar contact), and with its joy of change and its jolly relativity, counteracts the gloomy, one-sided official seriousness which is born of fear, is dogmatic and inimical to evolution and change, and seeks to absolutize the given conditions of existence and the social order. The carnival attitude liberated man from precisely this sort of seriousness (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 133).

The carnival “is not an external and immobile framework which is applied to a ready-made content”, but an “artistic vision... which makes possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things”. Carnival makes relative “everything... externally stable and already formed” (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 139).

The word. Bakhtin emphasised that his commentary is on language that is alive and concrete, an interpersonal rather than linguistic phenomenon:

Language is alive only in the dialogical intercourse of those who make use of it. Dialogical intercourse is the genuine sphere of the life of language. Language's entire life, in whatever area it is used (in everyday life, in business, science, art, etc.), is permeated by dialogical relationships... It is quite understandable that the dialogue must lie at the centre of Dostoyevsky's artistic world, and the dialogue not as a means, but as an end in itself. Dialogue is for him not the threshold to action, but the action itself. Nor is it a means of revealing, of exposing the already-formed character of a person; no, here the person is not only outwardly manifested, he becomes for the first time that which he is, not only – we repeat — as far as others are concerned, but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically. When the dialogue is finished, all is finished (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 213).

Bakhtin, then, described Dostoyevsky's novels as situations in which each hero is a subject, “another full-fledged ‘I’”, recalling the I/Thou relationship about which Buber (1970) wrote. Language is alive, a concrete, interpersonal process. To speak is to be and the hero lives only in dialogical relationship to another; the idea is interindividual and intersubjective. Plots are organic and unfold in dialogue, and may appear to be chaotic when viewed from a more mechanistic or monological perspective. The novels are rooted in a serio-comic genre heavily influenced by the tradition of carnival, a process which humorously turns traditional or bureaucratic power relationships upside down. In dialogue, nothing is ever finished, complete, or neatly agreed on by all. In the following sections, I respond to these assertions and articulate implications for how diverse groups of people create, organize, and as they change accomplish complex tasks.

Implications for Organizational Change

Bakhtin describes Dostoyevsky's novels in postmodern terms: they are multivoiced, intertextual, openended, upside down, seemingly chaotic. If we imagine organization to be like these novels, we can learn more about how change can and does occur in work settings.

I list below some implications which I have drawn from Bakhtin's work:

Organizations are sound. Berendt has told us that: “*The World is sound*” (1991). He asks:

Is the world a single, unimaginable huge cosmic musical instrument? And the structure of the microcosm... is it primarily sound, too? Are the shapes of leaves and crystals, are human and animal bodies also sound? Words and language – are they, above everything else, sound? Are we ourselves sound? Is that which we call soul and spirit sound? And the relationship we call love – is it controlled by sound progressions? Are *we* the players of the instrument? (Berendt, 1991, p. 18).

Are organizations sound? Let us suppose that they are. As we hear what goes on in them, we learn something different from what we see. Hearing is more enduring than sight. We can hear before we are born, and it is likely that our hearing is the last sense to fade as we die. Hearing is more intimate, as well. While we can see farther than we can hear, we can hear more, and more precisely, than we see (Berendt, 1991, p. 35). We can close our eyes, but we cannot close our ears (Berendt, 1991, p. 139).

For example, while people's bodies are controlled in organizations (Hetrick and Boje, 1992), their stories are less so. Van Buskirk and McGrath (1992) pointed out that we can listen to stories in order to access emotionality in organizations and distinguish one emotional discourse from another. We can hear feelings while we might not see them expressed.

The voice is the source of authority. Recall that Bakhtin told us that the *utterance* is the basic building-block of dialogue, "the social interaction outside of which meaning does not exist" (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978, p. xiii). All who use their voices to make spoken or written utterances are authors, each proclaiming his or her individual style, perspective, uniqueness.

In a bureaucratic organization, the dominant discourse – and thus source of control – is the bureaucratic one (Bullis and Glaser, 1992; Hawes, 1992). Postmodern theorists stress the importance of other discourses, other voices (Boje and Dennehy, 1993; Rouleau and Clegg, 1992) as a counterpoint and source of resistance to bureaucracy. Among these is feminist discourse that grows from women's experiences (Bullis and Glaser, 1992; Ferguson, 1984). Ferguson proclaimed that discourses of resistance to bureaucracy are "found in the language of the oppressed, the excluded, the renegades, the critics, and the 'losers'" (1984, p. 82). These discourses are sources of change, since they are different from the discourse of power.

Members of these groups and others can take courage to speak, from their own experience, locating their authority in their own voices rather than outside themselves in bureaucratic rules, roles, and hierarchy. If any of us listens with a postmodern ear, she or he can hear such voices in any organization. They may be suppressed, muffled, inarticulate, halting, but they are there.

Ecofeminists Bullis and Glaser (1992) extend their analysis to include species other than humans and the earth itself. They ask us to consider forms of experience absent from our current theories about organizational change; alternative voices beyond verbal and non-verbal language; symbol use as a human limitation; listening as important to communication as speaking (p. 57). If we hear, rather than see, organization, we can more easily sense these

considerations: we are able to hear the whispers, hums, chirps, moans, calls, rumbles, and songs that go before and beyond words.

We learn from Bakhtin, then, that each voice is a source of authority for the one who embodies it, and thus power is centred in each being, rather than in a socially created power structure. When we listen to polyphonic organization, we hear harmony, dissonance, clash, counterpoint, silence, complex rhythms.

Language, ideas and organizations are alive. They live not within a person or outside of a person, but among people. They are created, sustained, and changed in dialogue. In postmodern thought, differences are life giving (Boje and Dennehy, 1993). In dialogue when we recognize and cherish our differences, confirm another's "independence, inner freedom, unfinalizedness and indeterminacy" (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 213), we allow space for transformation for the other, ourselves, and our connections with one another.

Dialogue is not just a process in an organization, but organization itself. Without dialogue, we do not organize. Nor do we survive. Bakhtin told us that dialogue is not a means to an end, but the end in itself. "When the dialogue is finished, all is finished" (1973, p. 213).

There is order in chaos. What may appear to be chaotic from a monological perspective of a single discourse, when heard, is profoundly interrelated, alive and synchronistic. In a research study, I used an exercise based on Proff's (1975) journal writing method: I asked members of three organizations to imagine their organization as a being and to dialogue on paper with that person. Many different images were generated. Two of them, described here, were polyphonic.

One organization, founded by a regional consortium of religious communities to educate about and lobby for issues supporting peace and justice, was undergoing a change in staff members and rethinking the relationship among staff, Board, and members. A staff member imagined seeing the organization as "a circle of hundreds" and hearing the organization as "a lot of voices, remarks coming from every direction".

Another group, founded to disseminate knowledge about the psychology of C. G. Jung, had been experiencing confusion, conflict, dissension and polarization for several months. A founder and Board member who had nurtured the mostly volunteer organization for over a decade imagined it this way:

The Centre looks like a family or heterogeneous group of unique persons, which I find amazing. There are diverse ages/stages/voices and they do shout out a joyous noise, but it is not yet in harmony. Some are quiet and some are noisy; some are peaceful and some are aggressive, but the group edge has a boundary of a circle.

She later addressed the organization:

I feel you are a variegated group of individuals with separate and distinct voices. I think it will be a very hard work to listen carefully, quietly, and totally to each of you and then to include *all* of your voices in our work.

In both of these cases, what at first looked like chaotic situations, when imagined and “heard”, were understood as diverse relationships in which pattern could be discerned and from which new liveliness and direction could grow.

A carnival attitude liberates bureaucracy. The carnival of the middle ages, which took place between the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Lent, was rooted in the common people and gave power to the powerless and voice to the speechless. The attitude of carnival is echoed in current celebrations of Mardi Gras.

In carnival, the world is topsy-turvy. People put on different personae as they put on costumes and masks. Gender and status are fluid. Things are not always – or not ever – what they appear to be. Identities shift and polarities collapse. For example, the village fool could be bishop for a day and turn the usual rules upside down. The Fool and the Trickster are archetypes associated with the carnival. As they trick us and make us laugh, we are liberated from fear, gloom, and seriousness. Bakhtin would suggest that we take this attitude and these archetypes with us into the sombre world of bureaucracy.

Postmodern theorists embrace carnival as they de-differentiate, refuse to categorize, listen to many discourses and voices, and defy polarities. We are all here and we are staying. We all speak and we all listen. When the centre of authority is in the voice of each person, the hierarchical pyramid collapses into a circle of sound. When we dialogue with one another, the bureaucratic monologue is drowned out by the humming of a living group of people organized to do their work.

These implications drawn from Bakhtin’s work lead us to different ways of understanding change in organizations from the more traditional ones such as unfreezing-refreezing and force field analysis. They caution us not to swallow whole bureaucratic discourses which seem inconclusive, such as management by objectives and total quality management. They can enrich and enliven other traditional methods of organization development such as process consultation and feedback. They point to a method of organization change research, as well.

Implications for Organization Change Research

For more than two decades, dialogical inquiry has shaped inquiry into change among organizations and communities of people. In describing literacy training projects in Brazil, Freire (1970) explained how dialogue based on mutual, reciprocal relationships is the foundation for learning and teaching liberation rather than oppression. Freire’s work has formed, in part, the theoretical foundation for the generation of knowledge through participatory research in a number of community education and organization projects. Tandon (1988) summarized the tenets of participatory research, a method of creating knowledge that contributes to social transformation, and contrasted it with traditional social science research based on empiricism and behaviourism. Brown and Tandon (1983) compared this method with action research. Participatory research “explodes the myth of neutrality and objectivity and

emphasizes the principles of subjectivity, involvement, insertion and consensual validation” (Tandon, 1988, p. 7). Thus, working within this method, the social scientist’s relationship to research participants is similar to the relationship between Dostoyevsky and the hero, an I/Thou relationship. Knowledge about a social reality is generated through dialogue. This liberating process can and does change people and their patterns of organizing with one another, including the existing balance of power.

Such research has been done around the globe (e.g. de Souza, 1988, Gaventa, 1988; Orefice, 1988). Published projects range from the formation of an education network on nuclear disarmament in the Roman Catholic diocese of San Francisco (Moriarty, 1989) to conflict resolution in a British community centre (Randall and Southgate, 1981) to rural development in India (Tandon, 1981). Elden (1981) described participatory research in a commercial bank while Brown and Kaplan (1981) wrote of using this method in a US factory. De (1984) detailed a successful large-scale workforce democratization project in India. Hazen (1987) described dialogue as an important process for those wishing to understand and change organizations; and Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) and Cooperrider (1990) presented the inclusive concept of appreciative inquiry as a complement to action research in organizations.

Conclusion

Polyphony and dialogue are metaphors for organizational change based on sound rather than sight. They support inclusive change as they help us to hear living organizations or people who speak with one another in their own voices. We can imagine organization as a performance of a play, as do Boje and Dennehy in their description of the long-running Los Angeles play *Tamara*, in which the audience follows actors from room to room of a multiple set (1993, p. xxv); or as an improvisational jazz number in which all participate; or as a carnival at which we wear many personae.

These postmodern metaphors are counterpoints to the bureaucratic discourse, ways of understanding organizing as intersubjective and constantly changing.

I have dialogued with Bakhtin’s ideas, using them to bring what are usually background aspects of organization into the foreground. As true dialogue is never finished, I invite those who read this to respond in your own voices with other discourses.

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