

# Dialogue Theories



Frances Sleap  
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Edited by  
Paul Weller



DIALOGUE  
SOCIETY

# Dialogue Theories

The Dialogue Society is a registered charity, established in London in 1999, with the aim of advancing social cohesion by connecting communities, empowering people to engage and contributing to the development of ideas on dialogue. It operates nation-wide with regional branches across the UK. Through discussion forums, courses, capacity building publications and outreach it enables people to venture across boundaries of religion, culture and social class. It provides a platform where people can meet to share narratives and perspectives, discover the values they have in common and be at ease with their differences.

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## Dialogue Theories

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*In loving memory of my mother Angela, and for my father Peter, Esme,  
Georgie, and Sam*

Frances Sleap

*Dedicated to my family, friends and colleagues, in respect, love and  
friendship*

Omer Sener

*In gratitude for Marie Adenau and for life's past, present and future, in the  
year of our marriage*

Paul Weller

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## Foreword

This book is part of the Dialogue Society's ongoing project of researching, promoting and contributing to dialogue. Together with the *Journal of Dialogue Studies* which will be launched this year, and the Master's in Dialogue Studies which the Dialogue Society co-delivers with Keele University, it is also intended to contribute to the development of 'Dialogue Studies' as a distinct academic field. Our hope is that focusing more attention on the academic study of dialogue will build momentum for practice as well as the development and discussion of theory. The study of dialogue would seem to have a natural place in a society oriented towards peace and inter-group respect. Perhaps it may also contribute to nurturing that orientation and creating that society.

At the Dialogue Society we are focused on addressing a deficit of dialogue before it leads to the development of conflict. Once a conflict situation arises, different mechanisms and approaches need to be employed. The question of how best to manage and resolve conflict is of course one of vital importance. However, the question of how to avoid relations breaking down to that extent in the first place deserves equal attention. Exploring dialogue theories and practices contributes to the development of better answers to that question.

In the course of our work and through interactions with other people working in the area of dialogue and good relations, we at the Dialogue Society came into contact with the work of some of the thinkers included in this volume. As we looked further, it became clear that a great number of fascinating individuals in diverse fields had thought and were thinking about dialogue. This book is intended to introduce readers to a selection of those individuals and to the rich range of theories of and insights into dialogue on offer.

A range of definitions of 'dialogue' are encompassed in this book. The Dialogue Society has its own, broad working definition. We understand dialogue to consist of meaningful interaction and exchange between people (often of different social, cultural, political, religious or professional groups) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increased understanding. Our approach is shaped by the thought of Islamic scholar and peace advocate Fethullah Gülen, whose work is considered in one of the chapters in this book. It is very much in keeping with his ethos for people inspired by him to reach out for further inspiration and wisdom from diverse sources.

While this book is intended to be a contribution to an emerging academic field, the authors have endeavoured to make it readable and accessible to a wide audience. In the spirit of dialogue, they and their colleagues at the Dialogue Society invite your feedback and other thoughts, which you can share by sending us an email to [dialoguetheories@dialoguesociety.org](mailto:dialoguetheories@dialoguesociety.org).

Ozcan Keles  
Executive Director

Dialogue Society  
London, April 2013

# Preface

It has been a privilege and pleasure to work with colleagues and friends from the Dialogue Society in the development and publication of this volume. As an Adviser to the Society I am always impressed by the energy that is evidenced in the scope of its commitment to facilitating dialogue with a wide range of individuals and groups.

But I am particularly pleased to be associated with this volume as editor. This is because, together with the new *Journal of Dialogue Studies* (of which I am Academic Editor) the Dialogue Society is seeking, through this publication, to make a contribution not only to the practice of dialogue, but also to the study of it. In doing so, it is the aim of this book both to fill a lacuna in the literature on dialogue in a way that can contribute to the academic study of it, while also being accessible to a wider public that is concerned about and (in different ways) engaged in dialogue.

The dialogue that is explored in these pages is articulated by a range of key figures from different religious, philosophical and practitioner stances. It also relates to a variety of fields of human activity. In fact, much of the thinking, questions and practical outworking of dialogue found in this volume resonate with my own personal, professional and religious history and approach. This includes the so-called 'Four Principles of Dialogue' that were developed by the former British Council of Churches' Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths, of which I was a member in the 1980s. These principles were first articulated in a little booklet originally published in 1981 and then in a slightly revised 1983 edition, called *Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines for Dialogue in Britain*. They are:

1. Dialogue begins when people meet each other.
2. Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust.
3. Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community.
4. And finally, dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.

These principles were initially articulated by British Christians after they set out

to reflect on the (1979) *Guidelines on Dialogue* that had originally been developed by the Subunit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies of the World Council of Churches. However, although their development was very much informed by Christian theological thinking, there is nothing exclusively Christian, or indeed exclusively religious, about the principles. It is in this spirit, too, that the thinkers and practitioners of dialogue whose approaches are outlined in this volume were identified – namely as those who have spoken and acted out of (different) positions of clear commitment, but whose way of speaking and acting in itself constitutes an invitation to others to join in dialogue, which is itself the ultimate aim of this book.

Professor Paul Weller  
Derby, April 2013

# Introduction

This book offers a short introduction to ten thinkers who have made important and insightful contributions to thinking on dialogue. It is intended to inform and inspire anyone with an interest in the meaning, value and potential of dialogue, particularly those engaged in the practice of dialogue in a professional, voluntary or personal capacity. We hope that in these pages readers will discover inspiring new thinkers to engage with, and perhaps new facets to more familiar thinkers. The book also includes discussion of a wide range of practical dialogue organisations and projects which may provide further food for thought and ideas for practice.

While it is hoped that it will be of interest to students and academics working in relevant areas, the book is not written specifically for an academic audience. No background knowledge of the area is assumed.

Each chapter is dedicated to a particular thinker and each comprises the following sections: 'Biographical Introduction', 'Thought on Dialogue', 'Theory and Practice', 'Questions for Reflection', 'Bibliography' and 'Recommended Reading'. The 'Biographical Introduction' places the thinker's ideas in the context of his/her intellectual and personal background. 'Thought on Dialogue' introduces his/her main ideas about dialogue. The 'Questions for Reflection' section offer some starting points for further reflection on the ideas introduced in the chapter. The questions are intended to provide prompts for personal or group consideration of the meaning, relevance and applications of the theories considered. While in this introductory and practically-oriented work we have not attempted to critique the thinkers considered, some of the questions provided hint at possible lines of criticism or starting points for evaluation. The bibliography simply gives full details of every source drawn upon in the chapter. 'Recommended Reading' lists the books and other resources which we would recommend as the next ports of call for interested readers. We have divided each 'Recommended Reading' section into works by the thinker in question, useful secondary sources providing commentary on his/her work, and sources giving information on practical applications of the theory. The balance of these subsections varies from chapter to chapter, depending on the availability of helpful commentary on the thinker's work, and the extent to which his/her thought has been applied in practice.

The 'Theory and Practice' sections require a little further explanation. These sections are intended to bring out the relevance of each thinker for the practice of

dialogue. However, because of the diversity of the thinkers included in the book, the subject matter of this section varies somewhat from chapter to chapter. Where they or others have put their thinking into practice we report on that. In some cases we highlight practices not directly inspired by the thinker in question but reflecting similar principles or concerns. Elsewhere we have considered it helpful to give our own reflections on the relevance of the theory to dialogue practice, and on how dialogue practitioners might use the thinker's insights.

In selecting thinkers to include in the book we aimed at achieving a reasonable balance in terms of religion, culture, gender and intellectual and professional background. However in such a small selection compromises have inevitably had to be made. A second volume, should it be possible to produce one, would seek to rectify some of the obvious omissions. We decided to focus on contemporary or fairly recent thinkers,<sup>1</sup> since this restriction still left us with an ample choice of fascinating candidates. This said, it is worth noting that a number of the thinkers included here draw significantly on philosophers and religious teachers from more distant eras.

Our ten chosen thinkers represent diverse fields, from religious studies and interfaith dialogue, through philosophy and social theory, to communication studies, public opinion analysis and even quantum physics. As one of the ten, Daniel Yankelovich, has noted, it is striking that serious thought on dialogue has emerged out of such diverse fields, with insightful people operating in completely different contexts recognising 'something special about dialogue'.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this phenomenon indicates that dialogue answers a pervasive need in contemporary society. Yankelovich sees the proliferation of dialogue initiatives in the United States as reflecting the 'existential condition' of modern America, which yearns for connection and mutual understanding in the face of the isolation accompanying trends of technological advancement, globalisation and individualism.<sup>3</sup> But, arguably, the 'existential condition' of contemporary American society only accentuates a perennial feature of the human existential condition. Another of our dialogue thinkers, the philosopher Martin Buber, saw dialogue as the mode of interaction which made *any* human life, in any society, worth living.

By this point, the reader may well be wondering what exactly Buber or Yankelovich mean by 'dialogue', and whether they and other thinkers are actually talking about the same thing. Is the 'dialogue' which Yankelovich sees as responding to the malaise of modern America the same 'dialogue' which Buber considers an essential element

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1 Those who are not contemporary were active at least into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

2 Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 24.

3 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 29 ff.

of being human? While there is important overlap between them, the thinkers examined here are not all operating with the same concept of dialogue. It does seem fair to say that all appear to see dialogue as some kind of inter-human process associated with the attainment of understanding and the fostering of empathetic relationship. However, different thinkers stress these two key elements to different degrees. For David Bohm, dialogue is essentially a process of shared thinking, in the course of which a valuable form of relationship might emerge, whereas for Buber dialogue is essentially relationship, though it generally encompasses a cognitive grasp of the other's point of view.

There is no consensus on exactly what sort of activity dialogue is. A number of our thinkers, namely, Yankelovich, O'Neill, Bohm, Armstrong and Nasr, seem to define dialogue in terms of a particular kind of conversation.<sup>4</sup> The conceptions of Gülen and the Dalai Lama seem to encompass a broader range of activities in which people of different cultures, religions and social, political or professional groups come together and interact. This is the sort of concept used by the Dialogue Society, which envisages dialogue as 'meaningful interaction and exchange between people (often of different social, cultural, political, religious or professional groups) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increased understanding.'<sup>5</sup> For Buber, dialogue is a mode of relating which can occur in the midst of activity or inactivity, conversation or silence.

Donal Carbaugh's perspective on dialogue is unique in this volume. While others set out their own ideal of dialogue, his work examines and describes the concept of 'dialogue' or equivalent notions that exist in different cultures. His findings highlight the fact that we have just noted in relation to the thinkers considered in this book: we cannot assume that everyone means the same thing by 'dialogue'. This is an important point for practitioners to bear in mind; the particular form of dialogue that we see as an optimal form of communication may be alien and unappealing to the people of a different group with whom we wish to engage. In imposing a particular model without ascertaining its acceptability for all those concerned we may find ourselves embarking on intercultural dialogue in a culturally insensitive manner.

The diverse thinkers we have included could have been grouped in a number of different ways. We have chosen simply to order them alphabetically and allow

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4 Our chapter on Habermas also deals with kinds of conversation. However, we should note that Habermas himself writes not of 'dialogue' but of 'argumentation' and speech in the context of 'communicative action'.

5 'About Us,' Dialogue Society, accessed 25<sup>th</sup> March 2013, <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/about-us.html>.

readers to explore and enjoy the diverse connections between them. We begin with Karen Armstrong, a writer on religion and former Roman Catholic nun, whose understanding of dialogue is deeply connected with her vision of the compassionate life. Her work draws on the wisdom of a diverse range of great thinkers and religious teachers. Our second thinker, the innovative physicist David Bohm, offers a model of dialogue as 'thinking together' which he himself explored in practice. He believed that dialogue could help us to understand the often incoherent ways in which we think, helping us to address the root causes of a range of contemporary problems. Next, we explore Martin Buber's powerful vision of dialogue as a fundamental form of relating to the other, the mode of being that makes us human. Then we take a look at dialogue from a communication studies perspective, exploring Donal Carbaugh's insights on the meaning of 'dialogue' in different cultural systems. Our fifth thinker is Fethullah Gülen, the Turkish Islamic scholar and peace advocate who has inspired an international movement of dialogue and education initiatives. We explore his philosophy of dialogue, grounded in a profound sense of the primacy of our common humanity and in a cluster of virtues characterising 'people of the heart'.

Next we come to Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, identifying the principles expounded in his speeches and writings and exemplified in his practice of dialogue. We analyse his direct, compassionate style of engagement in interfaith contexts, in situations of conflict and in encounters between science and religion. We then move on to the eminent social theorist Jürgen Habermas, examining his model of rational, transparent and courteous communication. Subsequently we consider the Muslim intellectual Seyyed Hossein Nasr's view of dialogue in the interfaith context, coloured by his keen sense of common spiritual ground between different religious traditions. We also take a look at his view of the kind of dialogical relationship that needs to exist between science and religion. Our penultimate chapter explores Maura O'Neill's insights on dialogue, based on her extensive experience of women's participation in interfaith dialogue. She alerts us to key considerations concerning the barriers that may inhibit free participation in dialogue, and the potential benefits of efforts to ensure true inclusivity. Finally, we consider leading public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich's definition of dialogue, his suggestion of strategies through which it can be achieved, and his vision of the role it may play in revitalising democracy.

As already mentioned, it is hoped that these theories of dialogue will provide dialogue practitioners with inspiration and new ideas, and the 'Theory and Practice' sections specifically seek to relate the thinkers' ideas to practice. The thinkers included have diverse relationships with dialogue practice. Some of them, like Habermas and Buber, present shining visions of dialogue as a uniquely valuable form of human

interaction, portraying the image of the ideal more fully than the mechanics of attaining it. Others carefully bring to our attention some of the concrete difficulties that may be encountered in dialogue; O'Neill explores the profound impact of gender inequality, Yankelovich provides a catalogue of dialogue 'pitfalls' and Carbaugh explores the scope for intercultural confusion.

Some critics of dialogue theorists, such as Michel Foucault, whose challenge to Habermas is touched upon in this volume, see certain theories of dialogue as naive and unattainable illusions that overlook the pervasive human realities of power imbalances and manipulation. Certainly, these phenomena pose real challenges both to the theorists and to practitioners. However, the practitioners we mention in our 'Theory and Practice' sections testify to the usefulness of striving for an ideal, even when it is very hard fully to attain. It is certainly very important to keep in mind the myriad complications and challenges involved in dialogue, as highlighted by some of our thinkers, and by critics. Nevertheless, in our view, they are not grounds for relinquishing the challenges involved in dialogue.

Readers will discover in these pages a range of notable parallels between the thought of these thinkers drawn from such diverse fields and cultures. Former nun Karen Armstrong and the Dalai Lama share the same deep sense of the connection between dialogue and an underlying outlook of compassion, which can be cultivated through practice and commitment. Exploring reports of encounters with the Dalai Lama, one cannot but see him as an expert in the dialogic connection described by Buber. Gülen and Buber share a commitment to the development of education, and a profound sense of the educator's role in introducing children to dialogical attitudes.

It is also notable that these thinkers are in the habit of explicitly drawing on each other and on other dialogue thinkers. Karen Armstrong casts her net wide across the sea of religious teachers and philosophers; Yankelovich draws on Buber and Habermas; Bohm engaged in fruitful dialogue with both the Dalai Lama and with the Indian spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti. Of course, from such deeply dialogical individuals we would expect nothing less.

# Daniel Yankelovich

## Biographical Introduction

Daniel Yankelovich is a renowned American public opinion analyst and social scientist. He was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1924. He studied at Harvard where he gained his bachelor's and master's degrees. After pursuing further studies at the Sorbonne in Paris he stayed in academia and taught as a Professor of Psychology first at New York University and then at the New School for Social Research, New York. He holds honorary doctorates from Washington University and George Washington University. He left academia for a time in 1958 to found his own marketing and research firm. In 1975 he co-founded the not-for-profit organisation Public Agenda, which promotes public engagement in democracy, group reflection and problem solving. He also founded the New York Times/Yankelovich Poll which later became the New York Times/CBS poll. He is the founder and chairman of the business research firm DYG Inc and of Viewpoint Learning, which facilitates dialogue for business and public policy clients. During his career he has held directorships at a range of prestigious firms and he is the author of nine books as well as numerous articles.<sup>1</sup>

In his influential book *The Magic of Dialogue*, Yankelovich notes that, as with so many of the significant thinkers on dialogue who have emerged from a wide range of professions, his discovery of the transformative power of dialogue grew directly out of work in his own field.<sup>2</sup> Public opinion research showed him that, contrary to the conventional view, public opinion does not simply develop through the analysis of facts supplied by the media, but through a process of dialogue. Again contrary to the conventional view, he found that the interplay of facts, values and feelings in this process often leads to considerable wisdom in public judgement. His experience on the boards of various organisations similarly showed that 'in the crunch, on the issues that really count, where the future of the institution is at stake... it is dialogue rather than factual analysis that most engages board members and shapes their judgement.'<sup>3</sup> His experience in both contexts underlined a crucial insight: the better our dialogue skills the wiser the judgements we reach through dialogue. In his writings and practical endeavours he has sought to elucidate and build capacity for skilful dialogue.

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1 'Daniel Yankelovich Papers,' Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut, accessed 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2012, <http://doddcenter.uconn.edu/asc/findaids/Yankelovich/MSS19950027.html#d0e38>.

2 Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 23ff.

3 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 27.

Yankelovich's thought on dialogue is intimately connected to his vision of a reinvigorated American democracy and his efforts to build this. While his understanding of dialogue per se is examined in most depth in *The Magic of Dialogue, Coming to Public Judgement*, published eight years before, already suggested dialogical solutions to the crisis faced by American democracy.<sup>4</sup> Experts dominated political decision processes, while the public felt that they could have no real impact on policy and often disengaged from politics in consequence. To address this imbalance, Yankelovich suggested that the public's role should be strengthened by developing techniques and structures to help the public come to reflected, stable judgement, as opposed to ill-considered opinion. The techniques he proposed were dialogical processes in which ordinary people could 'work through' difficult social and political issues. He continued to explore these processes in practice with colleagues at Public Agenda, Viewpoint Learning and partner organisations. *Towards Wiser Public Judgement*, published in 2012, edited by Yankelovich and his colleague Will Friedman, reviews methods developed through this practice.

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4 Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgement* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press), 1991.

## Thought on Dialogue

As suggested by the title of his book, *The Magic of Dialogue*, Yankelovich considers dialogue to have unique and highly valuable properties. It can ‘strengthen(s) relationships and trust, forge(s) alliances, find(s) truths that bind us together, and bring(s) people into alignment on goals and strategies.’<sup>5</sup> He affirms Buber’s insight that in dialogue we reach beyond the confines of self to an authentic encounter with the other.<sup>6</sup> Dialogue is a way of being and a way of building relationship. He emphasises, though, that ‘dialogue is not... an arcane and esoteric form of intellectual exercise that only the few can play. It is a practical, everyday tool accessible to us all.’<sup>7</sup> Dialogue is a particular kind of talk which requires particular competencies and strategies, some of which are explored in Yankelovich’s book.

This section will focus largely on Yankelovich’s examination of dialogue in *The Magic of Dialogue*, since it is here that he gives his most considered and comprehensive exploration of dialogue per se. We will explore Yankelovich’s definition of dialogue, which he considers reflects what most serious practitioners mean when they use the word. We will take a look at some of the practical strategies for dialogue that he proposes and some of the barriers to dialogue that he outlines. First, though, it is worth noting the crucial role that Yankelovich sees for dialogue in contemporary society.

Yankelovich sees dialogue as a key part of the remedy to a number of interconnected social problems in his own American society. He sees America as suffering from a disturbing tendency towards a ‘culture of technical control’, ‘a mindset... that treats people as objects to be manipulated.’<sup>8</sup> Under the pressures of modern lifestyles, people become trapped in separate compartments, ‘silos’, according to status, politics, ethnicity, beliefs, language and so on. In addition to being isolated, ordinary people are left disempowered and politically unengaged by the sense of the almost complete separation of experts and elites from the general public.

Dialogue has a unique ability to forge channels of communication and understanding between people separated by difference and depersonalisation, responding to a fundamental need in modern society.<sup>9</sup> Further, it can help to

5 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 217.

6 Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgement*, 239 f, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 14 f.

7 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 15.

8 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 157.

9 Part III of *The Magic of Dialogue* (149ff) explores how dialogue might play a key role in revitalising American democracy and addressing the various ‘cultural faultlines’ of contemporary society.

reinvigorate democracy, redressing the balance between elites and the public by strengthening the position of the latter. Public opinion should play an important role in informing policy in a healthy democracy.<sup>10</sup> However, shallow and unstable public opinion cannot perform that role. What is needed is public judgement, in which the public ‘accepts responsibility for the consequences of its views’ and holds them consistently over time.<sup>11</sup> The public does not arrive at such judgement automatically when bombarded with a great deal of information. It needs to ‘work through’ issues dialogically.<sup>12</sup> Facilitated dialogue processes can accelerate the process by which the public work through issues and come to judgment. Such processes are particularly needed to help the American public get to grips with a host of highly urgent contemporary issues, notably the challenge of providing energy sustainably without irreparable environmental damage, and managing ‘troubled relations with the Muslim world.’<sup>13</sup>

We now turn to Yankelovich’s definition of dialogue. He clarifies the differences between dialogue, debate, discussion and deliberation. The difference between dialogue and debate is clear. In debate you aim to win an argument. Dialogue is about mutual understanding, and ‘the worst possible way to advance mutual understanding is to win debating points at the expense of others.’<sup>14</sup>

The relationship between dialogue and discussion is more subtle. Talk becomes dialogue rather than just discussion when three particular conditions are in place.<sup>15</sup> Firstly, there must be equality between the participants, and an absence of coercive influences. Even if outside the dialogue they have very different social or professional status, for dialogue to work they have to try to put this aside so that

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10 Yankelovich shares this position with Jürgen Habermas; see our chapter on Habermas in this volume.

11 Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment*, 24.

12 Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment*, 59 ff; Daniel Yankelovich and Will Friedman eds., *Towards Wiser Public Judgment*, (Nashville, Texas: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010), 18 f.

13 Yankelovich and Friedman eds., *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*, 20 ff, 29 ff.

14 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 38.

15 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 41 ff.

all can participate freely, without fear of any form of intimidation.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, dialogue requires us to listen with empathy. For dialogue to happen we need the ability ‘to think someone else’s thoughts and feel someone else’s feelings.’<sup>17</sup> This demands considerable motivation and patience.

Finally, in dialogue participants need to explore their own assumptions and those of others, and bring them out into the open. Our deeply engrained assumptions about the world and other people can very effectively prevent us from understanding other points of view. As David Bohm notes, we tend to identify our assumptions very strongly with ourselves, and feel attacked when they are commented on or challenged by others.<sup>18</sup> However, in a real dialogue participants suspend judgement when assumptions come to light, allowing these assumptions to be explored in safety. To recap, discussion does not necessarily require equality, listening with empathy or the exploration of assumptions, but these three conditions are the marks of dialogue.

Deliberation, Yankelovich considers, is ‘a form of thought and reflection that can take place in any kind of conversation.’ It is a problem solving activity involving the weighing up of different options.<sup>19</sup> This activity can happen, according to Yankelovich, in dialogue as well as in discussion or debate. It is only when imminent consensus and decision become the priority of the conversation that dialogue’s

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16 Yankelovich’s vision of dialogue reflects Habermas’s notion of communicative action in which people speak together in order to achieve understanding and move toward collaboration, and emphatically not to coerce or manipulate one another. Yankelovich’s thought is influenced by that of Habermas, which he discusses in *Coming to Public Judgment*, see especially 215 ff. Like Habermas, Yankelovich appears to have very high expectations for dialogue. It seems well nigh impossible for power imbalances to be entirely cast aside. Nevertheless, facilitators can at least attempt to move the situation in the direction of equality, for instance through thoughtful recruitment, ground rules, the example they set and interventions during the process. Alison Kadlec and Will Friedman explore practical strategies for ensuring inclusive and egalitarian processes in their article ‘Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Power,’ *Journal of Public Deliberation* 3, no. 1(2007).

17 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 43.

18 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 45.

19 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 37. Definitions of deliberation, as distinguished from dialogue, are given by the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation: <http://ncdd.org/rc/what-are-dd> (accessed 2nd August, 2012), and by Ute Kelly and Lisa Cumming in *Civil Society Supporting Dialogue and Deliberation*, (Carnegie UK Trust, 2010), 7. These definitions differ from Yankelovich’s approach in that they present dialogue and deliberation as separate, though related, kinds of conversation. Kelly and Cumming cite Levine’s specification that deliberation at least in aspiration, “aims toward a reasoned consensus.” Yankelovich does not seem to see consensus as an essential aim of deliberation.

essential focus on mutual understanding gets lost. Dialogue, though it often leads to decision-making processes, must be kept separate from these for each to function properly.<sup>20</sup>

Yankelovich's very practically-oriented book examines a range of examples from his own experience, mostly drawn from the world of management, and draws out key lessons and practical strategies for promoting quality dialogue. We will include below Yankelovich's summary of the fifteen strategies he identifies, but first let us briefly explore some of these in the contexts of the case studies from which he abstracts them.

One of the cases discussed is a conversation at a meeting of the trustees of a prestigious research institute. In the course of the conversation tension arose between the business trustees, who felt that the institute was becoming too specialised, and the academic trustees, who were all specialists and believed that specialisation was essential for the institute's success. A breakthrough came with a comment from one of the business trustees. He noted that the other business trustees were all generalists who were naturally uncomfortable with specialisation, but that specialisation had actually made the institute great. He ended by saying, 'So if we are uncomfortable, that's probably a sign that the institute is doing something right.' Essentially, he recognised the limitations of the perspective of his own group. He thereby cleared the way for a real dialogue. Everybody laughed, the tension was broken, and people were able to start empathising with each other and exploring their common challenges.<sup>21</sup>

Let us turn to the strategies that Yankelovich draws out of this example. One of them is this: 'Clarify assumptions that lead to subculture distortions.'<sup>22</sup> People have different sets of values and preoccupations depending on their different subcultures – the particular professional, social and cultural groups to which they belong. These assumptions can create all kinds of tensions. We need to identify them in order for dialogue to work. This is exactly what the business trustee in the example managed to do.

Note too how helpful it was that the business trustee focused on the assumptions of his own group. In recognising our own assumptions we make ourselves a little vulnerable and people often respond by becoming more empathetic and open. Identifying other people's assumptions can easily offend them. Yankelovich suggests another strategy: 'Bring forth your own assumptions before speculating on those of others.'<sup>23</sup>

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20 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 56f.

21 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 59ff.

22 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 65.

23 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 66f.

In a rather different example he discusses a public conversation on parental involvement in education, run by Public Agenda. A man turned up who had not been invited and was known as a difficult character. At the start of the meeting he directed a couple of unfriendly comments towards some of the teachers present, but later he seemed to settle into the spirit of the dialogue, waiting his turn and listening to others. Having been allowed to participate, he started to appreciate the fairness with which the meeting was run. At the end he shook hands with the head teacher and thanked her. The dialogue was constructive and a relationship was mended.

Yankelovich suggests this strategy: ‘Err on the side of including people who disagree.’<sup>24</sup> If we only include those who agree with us, the dialogue might boost everyone’s morale, but it will not help heal any divisions. Including those who disagree makes a dialogue more authentic and credible and gives it a chance to effect reconciliation.

The full list of practical dialogue strategies identified by Yankelovich is as follows:<sup>25</sup>

1. Err on the side of including people who disagree. *Taking a risk often pays off, bringing greater mutual understanding between divided groups and individuals.*
2. Initiate dialogue through a gesture of empathy. *Acknowledging ‘the legitimacy of the point of view of the other’ often breaks down barriers of defensiveness and allows dialogue to begin.*<sup>26</sup>
3. Check for the presence of all three core requirements of dialogue – equality, empathic listening, and surfacing assumptions nonjudgmentally – and learn how to introduce the missing ones. *Without the presence of all three there can be no real dialogue.*
4. Minimize the level of mistrust before pursuing practical objectives. *Efforts towards cooperation will be futile without a certain level of trust.*
5. Keep dialogue and decision making compartmentalized. *They are different kinds of process and if confused will undermine each other.*<sup>27</sup>
6. Focus on common interests, not divisive ones. *Concentrating on shared interests is more conducive to dialogue.*

24 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 103f, 107f.

25 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 127f. The strategies are given in Yankelovich’s words. Brief further explanation by the current authors is given in italics.

26 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 105.

27 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 57.

7. Use specific cases to raise general issues. *Referring to concrete examples helps people to appreciate the issues at stake.*
8. Bring forth your own assumptions before speculating on those of others. *Highlighting the assumptions of others can easily sound accusatory, whereas recognising one's own sets a helpful example of self-awareness and openness.*
9. Clarify assumptions that lead to subculture distortions. *When the assumptions associated with particular subcultures are shaping a conversation without this being recognised, tactfully identifying them can bring helpful clarity.*
10. Where applicable, identify mistrust as the real source of misunderstandings. *Mistrust prevents openness and inhibits dialogue. Sometimes simply recognising that this is happening is enough to help people overcome it and converse more openly.*
11. Expose old scripts to a reality check. *We interpret reality through 'the web of beliefs, values, assumption and customs that have shaped our views over decades of experience.'<sup>28</sup> It is valuable to bring assumptions to the surface; sometimes when we do, we see that they are no longer valid and need to be amended.*
12. Focus on conflicts between value systems, not people. *Avoid stereotyping people according to their subculture.*
13. Be sure trust exists before addressing transference distortions. *Sometimes the dynamics of previous relationships interfere with current ones. For example, the experience of being taken advantage of by a relative may make a person touchy when a colleague asks her to do something outside her official role. Bringing such 'transference distortions' into the open can explain and ease mysterious tensions between people. However, examining these 'ghosts' of past relationships can be personally threatening, and it should not be attempted where there is not a relationship of trust.<sup>29</sup>*
14. When appropriate, express the emotions that accompany strongly held values. *Emotions are a legitimate and important part of the process of dialogue.*

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28 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 108 f.

29 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 87.

15. Encourage relationships in order to humanise transactions. *Encountering one another as individuals on a human level breaks down stereotypes and hostility.*<sup>30</sup>

As well as identifying positive strategies for dialogue in his book, Yankelovich explores some ‘potholes of the mind’. Most dialogue participants, he suggests, will find it easier to adopt the strategies than to get over their own ‘potholes’, ‘deeply engrained habits that undermine dialogue’.<sup>31</sup> He lists ten. We can briefly summarise them here. One problem is holding back, being unwilling to take the risk of speaking. Another is ‘being locked in a box’, being unable to see beyond the restrictions of the same old ideas and solutions. People might tend to move towards action prematurely, cutting the dialogue short, or they might be inclined to listen without hearing, being ‘unwilling to make an extra effort to understand others when they are not wholly articulate.’ It can be difficult when people start at different points, with some having explored an issue deeply while others have barely started to grasp it. Another problem occurs when people cannot resist ‘showboating’, showing off their knowledge, toughness or intelligence at the expense of real dialogue. Some people find it difficult to break the habit, engrained in the practice of many professions, of scoring debating points at others’ expense. Others cannot resist the game of constantly adopting a contrary point of view. Some people are unable to go beyond discussion of their own pet preoccupation. Similarly, some leaders find it difficult to really listen to other dialogue participants because they are so concerned with pushing their constituents’ interests.

Yankelovich suggests a number of steps that participants and facilitators can take to counter these problems. Sometimes a facilitator can make progress just by recognising the potholes that come with certain participants and making small adjustments, such as providing icebreakers to help those who tend to hold back, or giving a little extra time so that somebody can do their ‘showboating’ and then settle down to real dialogue. Individuals will sometimes overcome their particular

30 Yankelovich’s dialogue strategies are more numerous and subtle than the list of guidelines one might introduce to participants at the beginning of a dialogue session. A workable set of ‘Guide lines for Dialogue’ is given on the website of Viewpoint Learning. They are as follows: 1. The purpose of dialogue is to understand and learn from one another. You cannot “win” a dialogue. 2. All dialogue participants speak for themselves, not as representatives of groups or special interests. 3. Treat everyone in a dialogue as an equal: leave role, status and stereotypes at the door. 4. Be open and listen to others even when you disagree; try not to rush to judgment. 5. Search for assumptions (especially your own). 6. Look for common ground. 7. Keep dialogue and decision-making separate (dialogue comes first). Viewpoint Learning, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2012, <http://www.viewpointlearning.com/about-us/ground-rules-for-dialogue/>.

31 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 129 ff.

potholes in the course of the dialogue, where there is time for this. Some may also benefit from individual training where they have the necessary motivation.<sup>32</sup>

In *The Magic of Dialogue* Yankelovich anticipates a growing readiness to devote time and energy to dialogue and the development of the skills needed for it because it addresses pressing needs in contemporary society. This prediction is to some extent borne out by the growth of a new social movement which he comments on a decade later in *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*. This movement seeks to reinvigorate democracy through a range of more or less dialogical initiatives.<sup>33</sup> In the next section we will take a look at the efforts of Yankelovich, his colleagues and others to harness the ‘magic’ of dialogue for the good of society and the health of democracy.<sup>34</sup>

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32 Yankelovich notes a number of American organisations providing such training. See *The Magic of Dialogue*, 143.

33 Yankelovich and Friedman eds., *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*, 25 f.

34 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 217.

## Theory and Practice

Yankelovich's theory of dialogue comes from concrete experience, some of which was gained through the work of the non-profit organisation Public Agenda, which he co-founded in 1975. His insights continue to feed back into the practice of Public Agenda and of his company Viewpoint Learning, founded in 1999, which facilitates various forms of dialogue for business and public policy clients.<sup>35</sup> In the work of these organisations, Yankelovich's vision of how dialogue can help revitalise democracy is put to the test.

This section will focus on the work of Public Agenda and its partners. We will explore their methods and look at a case study. We will also touch on some of the possibilities and challenges for the further development of this kind of work, and note the development of a new 'deliberative democracy movement' composed of similar initiatives.

Public Agenda's first involvement in community dialogue was in its support of the National Issues Forums (NIFs), a nationwide network of forums facilitating public conversations on important issues ranging from civil rights to health care reform. Yankelovich, along with David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation<sup>36</sup>, was instrumental in the development of these forums and Public Agenda provided issue guides to inform the conversations. Public Agenda has since developed its own public engagement processes, along with resources and training to support them, but these processes and the NIFs both use a kind of dialogue called 'choicework'.

In choicework, participants are divided into small, diverse groups of ten to fifteen people, with specially trained local facilitators. They are presented with several different approaches to a particular issue or problem. Issue guides or a presentation provide sufficient information for participants to grasp the issue. These resources are presented in language that will make sense to participants and in terms relevant to their experience. Participants consider which approach they favour and explain their reasons to each other. In the course of this exchange, people gradually adjust their perspectives to absorb the complexity of the issue which is revealed by people's diverse viewpoints and experiences. Ultimately the group considers possible ideas

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35 Notably, Viewpoint Learning provides stakeholders with a better understanding of public opinion through day-long dialogues in which groups of citizens 'work through' issues: <http://www.viewpointlearning.com>, accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2012; Steven A. Rosell and Heidi Gantwerk, 'Moving Beyond Polls and Focus Groups,' in *Towards Wiser Public Judgement*, ed. Yankelovich and Friedman, 110 ff.

36 <http://www.kettering.org>, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2012. The Kettering Foundation is 'a research institution devoted to trying to find ways to increase citizen participation in society, by asking the question; "What does it take to make democracy work as it should?"'

for action and potential next steps. Finally the groups come together to share key elements of their conversations.<sup>37</sup>

For community dialogues to work effectively, painstaking planning is required. Public Agenda conducts considerable preliminary research to make sure that issues are framed in a helpful and engaging way. To be authentic, and trusted by diverse participants, the process must be 'owned' by a local planning team, comprising representatives of groups with differing perspectives. Careful recruitment of participants and the selection and training of suitable local facilitators are crucial in order to include all sectors of the community and to achieve an environment of equality in which all participants genuinely have a voice.<sup>38</sup>

Real progress in mutual understanding has been consistently observed in both Public Agenda dialogues and in the NIFs. Reflecting on the NIFs, practitioners involved note that while opinions may not be changed, choicework participants develop a more mature understanding of the 'costs and consequences of different courses of action', and 'of why others' opinions differed from their own.'<sup>39</sup> A comment from a participant in a Public Agenda community dialogue on education reflects how satisfying this process can be: 'Having a conversation like this totally takes you outside the box... you're able to hear other people's ideas about what's going on, and also you're able to share your ideas, so I think that this was magnificent.'<sup>40</sup> Participants make progress in 'working through' an issue and consequently leave as more 'aware and confident citizens' who are better able 'to inform and support relevant public policies.'<sup>41</sup> Further, while dialogues like these might not give policy makers a clear indication of majority opinion on a specific issue, they tend to highlight the values, concerns and priorities that citizens share, and which should be reflected in the policies of truly democratic leaders.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to these immediate benefits, public dialogues may inspire action by different individuals and organisations, build connections between diverse groups and have a lasting impact on local political culture. In Bridgeport, Connecticut, a

37 Daniel Yankelovich and Will Friedman eds., *Towards Wiser Public Judgement*, 56ff, 83.

38 Alison Kadlec and Will Friedman, 'Thirty-Five Years of Working on Public Judgement at Public Agenda,' in *Towards Wiser Public Judgement*, ed. Yankelovich and Friedman, 79ff.

39 Keith Melville and Robert J Kingston, 'The Experience of the National Issues Forums,' in *Towards Wiser Public Judgement*, ed. Yankelovich and Friedman, 63.

40 'Achieving the Dream Communications: Communications Part 2' video, Public Agenda, accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2012, <http://www.publicagenda.org/media/multimedia>.

41 Will Friedman, 'Coming to Public Judgment,' in *Towards Wiser Public Judgment*, ed. Yankelovich and Friedman, 138.

42 Melville and Kingston, in 'The Experience of the National Issues Forums,' 71.

community choicework dialogue on education supported by Public Agenda sparked a series of dozens of similar dialogues on different topics arranged by enthusiastic local organisers; the local community developed a lasting capacity for community dialogue. Local policy makers gradually became more inclined to engage with citizens' perspectives and the community developed an ethos of responsibility and 'an ability to hold leaders accountable in reasonable ways.'<sup>43</sup> The dialogues on education led to hundreds of new volunteers in schools, renewed efforts by schools to engage with parents and beneficial new policies. Clear improvements in educational attainment were seen in the town, perhaps due not only to concrete changes in schools but also to the beneficial effects of a surrounding culture of active engagement with civic and community life.<sup>44</sup> The Bridgeport dialogues powerfully demonstrate the potential of community dialogue initiatives to bring about real social change.

Will Friedman, the President of Public Agenda, sees two main challenges ahead for this and similar organisations in their efforts to enhance the quality of democracy: 'ensuring that efforts to support public judgment lead to significant impacts; and scaling up deliberative work from the local level, where it has been applied most successfully, to the level of national politics.'<sup>45</sup> Regarding the first challenge, Friedman explains that while it would be foolish to obligate policy makers to implement every recommendation coming from public deliberation, they do need to be accountable to the participants in some way if the latter are going to trust that their participation counts. Policy makers should be expected to continue a dialogue with citizens and 'say why they choose to respond more to some [ideas] and less to others.'<sup>46</sup> Concerning the challenge of bringing dialogical and deliberative processes to the level of national politics, Friedman highlights three avenues to explore: the potential for the media, notably 'new media', to serve a role in helping

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43 Kadlec and Friedman, 'Thirty-Five Years of Working on Public Judgment at Public Agenda,' 90.

44 Kadlec and Friedman, 'Thirty-Five Years of Working on Public Judgment at Public Agenda,' 93.

45 Friedman, 'Coming to Public Judgment,' 131.

46 Friedman 'Coming to Public Judgment,' 136.

The Sustainable Communities Act is an interesting UK example of a mechanism requiring government to listen to and negotiate on proposals from citizens, while not being obliged to implement them. Local Works, accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2013, <http://www.localworks.org/pages/the-sustainable-communities-act>.

Friedman refers readers to examples of 'deliberative processes tied to concrete outcomes via the post-deliberation exercise of various forms of power' in Archon Fung, *Empowered Deliberation: Reinventing Urban Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

the public work through issues and develop public judgment; the potential for 'the institutions that touch us all', namely schools and workplaces, to introduce practices that will develop skills in dialogue and deliberation; and the potential of local public engagement initiatives gradually to build capacity and demand for 'a truly national deliberative politics'.<sup>47</sup>

The organisations founded by Yankelovich do not stand alone in their efforts to reinvigorate democracy through dialogical processes. Efforts on this front have attained the proportions of something of a movement.<sup>48</sup> National networks such as the Deliberative Democracy Consortium and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation facilitate the sharing of ideas and resources across organisations.<sup>49</sup> Everyday Democracy and Search for Common Ground are two examples taken from a large pool of organisations.<sup>50</sup>

The 'deliberative democracy movement' is primarily a North American and Canadian phenomenon. However, there are dialogue initiatives using similar methods in the United Kingdom, although they are less prominent and less connected. The Transition movement uses dialogue and deliberation to seek community led responses to the challenges of climate change and peak oil.<sup>51</sup> Bradford University's Programme for a Peaceful City has used various forms of public conversation to build understanding between diverse participants on divisive issues.<sup>52</sup> 'Reading the Riots', the major research project run by the Guardian newspaper and the London School of Economics following the civil disorder of

47 Friedman in *Towards Wiser Public Judgement*, ed. Yankelovich and Friedman, 139 ff; 145.

48 See Yankelovich and Friedman eds., *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*, 25 f. It is worth noting that while Yankelovich considers this movement an exciting and very important development, he 'winces' at the name given to it by leading participants: 'the deliberative democracy movement'. The term 'deliberative' suggests a process that is essentially rational, whereas in his experience dialogical processes essentially involve emotions and irrational elements. (He adopts a rather more holistic approach than Habermas.)

On the deliberative democracy movement see also: Ute Kelly and Lisa Cumming, *Civil Society Supporting Dialogue and Deliberation*, (Carnegie UK Trust, 2010), 31; Martha L. McCoy and Patrick L. Scully, 'Deliberative Dialogue to Expand Civil Engagement: What Kind of Talk Does Democracy Need?' *National Civic Review* 91 (Summer 2002): 117.

49 Deliberative Democracy Consortium, accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2013, <http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/>; National Consortium for Dialogue and Deliberation, accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2013, [Ncdd.org](http://www.ncdd.org).

50 Everyday Democracy, accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2013, <http://www.everyday-democracy.org> (Everyday Democracy was formerly called the Study Circles Resource Centre); Search for Common Ground, accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2013, <http://www.sfcg.org>.

51 Kelly and Cumming, *Civil Society Supporting Dialogue and Deliberation*, 16.

52 Kelly and Cumming, *Civil Society Supporting Dialogue and Deliberation*, 11.

August 2011, included a number of ‘community conversations’ in riot-affected cities.<sup>53</sup> The Dialogue Society’s ‘Community Engagement Dinners’ manual gives practical advice on getting community dialogue started through local dinner and discussion evenings.<sup>54</sup> Ute Kelly and Lisa Cumming, in their report for the Carnegie Trust, explore how civil society might support the growth of dialogue and deliberation in the UK and how these processes, facilitated on a large scale, could help to address some of the major challenges facing our society.<sup>55</sup> Yankelovich is by no means alone in appealing to the ‘magic’ of dialogue to address democratic deficiencies, social ills and intractable political and environmental dilemmas.

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53 ‘Reading the Riots launches Community Conversations,’ the Guardian, 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2012, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/feb/08/reading-the-riots-community-conversations>.

54 The manual can be downloaded from the Dialogue Society website, <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/publications/community/653-community-engagement-dinners.html>.

55 Kelly and Cumming, *Civil Society Supporting Dialogue and Deliberation*, 29ff.

## Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever been struck by the ‘magic’ of dialogue? In what context? Was it the kind of dialogue that Yankelovich (or one of the other thinkers in this volume) describes?
2. Does your experience support Yankelovich’s argument that it is through a process of dialogue with others that we come to judgement about political issues?
3. If you were facilitating a dialogue, what steps might you take to ensure the presence of each of Yankelovich’s three key conditions (equality; listening with empathy; surfacing assumptions)?
4. What might you do to avoid or respond to the following potholes?<sup>56</sup>
  - a. Some participants holding back, being unwilling to take the risk of saying anything.
  - b. People ‘starting at different points’.
  - c. People listening without hearing, being ‘unwilling to make an extra effort to understand others when they are not wholly articulate.’
  - d. People ‘showboating’ - showing off knowledge, toughness or intelligence at the expense of real dialogue.
5. Would the ‘choicework’ dialogue techniques used by Yankelovich and his colleagues work as well in countries other than the United States?
6. What proportion of the population would dialogue initiatives have to reach to have a real impact on the health of a democracy? What would it take for such efforts to reach that proportion of the population (in terms of civil society effort, political will, time, resources etc)?

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56 Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue*, 129 ff.

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## Recommended Reading

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This book aims to advance theoretical and practical engagement with dialogue by introducing the work of ten individuals who have made important and insightful contributions to thought in this area. The thinkers selected come from diverse fields, from religious studies and interfaith dialogue, through philosophy and social theory, to communication studies, public opinion analysis and even quantum physics.

A great deal of hope seems to be pinned on ‘dialogue’ in the contemporary world. The word is regularly raised in the context of a range of pressing issues, from the need for intercultural understanding in a globalised world, to the economic and ecological crises crying out for creative, collaborative responses, to the political process of policy and law-making at both national and international levels. Dialogue would thus seem to merit serious reflection and experimentation. The thinkers considered in this volume are among those who have afforded it this kind of attention.

This introduction to their work is intended to inform and inspire anyone with an interest in the meaning, value and potential of dialogue, particularly those engaged with dialogue in a professional, academic, voluntary or personal capacity. No background knowledge is assumed. It is hoped that in these pages readers will discover inspiring new thinkers to engage with, and perhaps new facets to more familiar thinkers. The book also includes discussion of a wide range of practical dialogue organisations and projects which may provide further food for thought and ideas for practice.

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