Dialogism, Monologism, and Boundaries: Some Possibilities for Disability Studies and
Interdisciplinary Research
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Abstract: This article explores the possibilities of dialogism and monologism for disability studies by applying these concepts to a story in which two people orient to boundaries and express some concern over being too close or too distant from each other within a research encounter. It suggests that questions concerning "how close is too close" to research participants, and "how far is too far," are complex and shift in time as people move between merging and unmerging, self-sufficiency and non-self-sufficiency, and finalizing and unfinalizing practices.

Key Words: dialogism, monologism, boundaries

In recent years, there has been a small but growing body of literature that has eclectically woven concepts and theories from different disciplines in an effort to better understand the lives of disabled people (e.g., Bolt, 2006; Couser, 1997; Goodley, 2007). This article is a modest attempt to add to the literature by applying the concepts of dialogism and monologism (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986) to a story in which myself, and a male (Eamonn) who became disabled through playing sport, orient to boundaries and express some concern over being too close or too distant from each other within a research encounter. Accordingly, in terms of structure, this article first describes the concepts of dialogism and monologism as outlined by Bakhtin. It then presents the story in which I and a male orient to boundaries. Following this, through the concepts of dialogism and monologism and in relation to the question, "how close is too close to research participants, and how far is too far," analytic attention turns to my interpretations of the story. The article closes with some reflections on what dialogism and monologism might mean for interdisciplinary disability research.

Dialogism and Monologism

At the risk of riding roughshod over complex concepts, what Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) calls dialogism and monologism can be elucidated and outlined as follows. In dialogism and dialogic speech a person is *non-self-sufficient*. That is, the person exists in relation to other people. Dialogic speech suggests that no matter how personally authentic anyone wants to be or wants to allow others to be, and no matter how separate from others we feel we might be, we are always connected and socially interdependent. As Bakhtin (1984) put it, "A person's consciousness awakens wrapped in another's consciousness" (p. 138). In contrast, monologism and monologic speech can be characterized by a person seemingly claiming to be *self-sufficient*. Here, the individual suggests that his or her existence is clearly bounded and his or her voice is simply his or her own, unaffected or effected by others. Rather than being wrapped up in another's consciousness, the individual is separate from others and can become him or herself.

Furthermore, dialogism and monologism can be described in terms of a person *merging*, or not, with other people. For Bakhtin (1984, 1986), in dialogic speech a person makes a clear demand that he or she does not *merge* with another person. In part this is because, while recognizing that he or she is non-self-sufficient, the person also recognizes that he or she is

different from other people – not apart from each other, but distinct. This view of dialogic speech as involving not merging with another is reinforced by Clark and Holquist (1984) in the following comment:

> "The way in which I create myself is by means of a quest: I go out to the other in order to come back with a self. I live into another's consciousness; I see the world through the other's eyes. But I must never completely meld with that version of things, for the more successfully I do, the more I will fall pray to the limits of the other's horizon. A complete fusion…even if it were possible, would preclude the difference required for dialogue" (p. 78).

Monologic speech, on the other hand, can be characterized as a voice and narrative seeking, explicitly or implicitly, to *merge* with another person. Here, an individual seeks to enter the other's life and fuse his or her own self with the other or assimilate the other to his or her own self. As a result, they seemingly abridge difference and the distance between each other.

In addition to the ideas of (non)-self-sufficiency and merging, dialogic speech and monologic speech can be described in terms of *finalizability* and *unfinalizability*. According to Bakhtin (1984), dialogic speech also begins with the recognition of the other's *unfinalizability*. For him, this is partly because in dialogism the world is not only recognized as a messy place, but also as an open place in which one can never know with certainty who the other is or can become. Thus, in dialogism and dialogic speech there is a sense of unfinalizability as a person avoids giving the final word about the other. In contrast, monologism creates *finalizability*. That is, through monologic speech a person claims the last, the definitive, final word, about who the other is and what he or she can become. As Bakhtin describes it, monologic speech is:

> "Finalized and deaf to the other's response…Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materialises all reality. Monologue pretends to be the ultimate word. It closes down the represented world and represented persons" (p. 293).

Having briefly offered a description of dialogism and monologism by drawing attention to some of their key features, it would be remiss of me not to stress that like most binary distinctions, the difference between dialogic and monologic speech is not pure. Indeed, ultimately all speech is dialogical inasmuch as all speech contains remembered voices of others and orients to other people.[1] Yet, as Frank (2005a) argues, "The difference between monological and dialogical speech has practical value for thinking about what kind of people we want to be" (p. 293). Seen in this light, monologic and dialogical speech are less an opposition than a continuum, but the differences between the extremes of this continuum remain useful and significant.

Becoming Disabled Through Playing Sport: Overstepping a Boundary

With all this in mind, I now turn to a story and my interpretations of it. The story can be described as small story (Bamberg, 2006; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009) as it was told during interaction outside the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) of the formal interview. It is re-presented, and taped with consent, and is taken from a conversation over coffee

during a break from an interview with one man (Eamonn) who sustained a spinal cord injury through playing sport and is now disabled.

The conversation took place at Eamonn's house and was part of a confidential, life history interview conducted by myself [Brett Smith]. It was the second interview of a series of three that formed part of a wider research project that focused on men's experiences of suffering a spinal cord injury through playing rugby football union. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and subjected to multiple forms of analysis, including a performative analysis.

Eamonn [pseudonym]: I don't know how you manage to do this research listening to me all day. It must be really depressing for you. Is it?

Brett: Sometimes it can be. But often it's not. Like I said, it's something I really believe in. And anyhow you do make me laugh sometimes.

Eamonn: Yeah, yeah. For the last hour I've been talking about how depressed I've been recently. Hardly a fun afternoon [both laugh].

Brett: For some maybe, but I do know too just how you feel. I've lived with depression, been there, at rock bottom, like you. So I know how you feel. I can identify I suppose is what I'm trying to say. I know what it feels like to be depressed, and when you talk about how you feel, I feel I enter into your world. Anyhow, you'll, I'm sure you'll get better. I know the future looks bad, but you will get better. You'll ride this out. You will be fine. By yourself you'll get out the other side.

Eamonn: But maybe I won't. Maybe I won't get out of this. It's not easy when you're disabled, alone, and down in the dumps. It's not. Nobody knows what the future holds.

Brett: You're right Eamonn. You're right; you just don't know what will happen. And I have no idea what it's like being you. I really have no idea how you feel and am out of order telling you things will be fine. They may not be. I don't know what the future has in store for you or me. I suppose I wanted to close the gap between us, know you better, empathise, but I've overstepped the boundary. I can't ever know what its like to live in your body.

Eamonn: And I can't ever know what its like to live in yours. At least we're talking though, and I've enjoyed it. It's been good today; it's been good being with you. And you never know, someone might learn from what I've said today and over the past year. They don't have to be disabled either. We're all dependent on each other.

Clearly, there are multiple ways in which the story can be interpreted.[2] As read through the concepts of dialogism and monologism, here I interpret it as follows. In the first part, Eamonn and I are speaking *with* each other rather than *about* each other. In so doing, we are developing dialogic speech. As the story develops, however, there is a shift in the story from a dialogical voice toward a monological voice. Here, in claiming to know, identify with, and enter into Eamonn's depressed body, I hint at a shared lived-body experience and begin to seemingly merge with him, thereby infringing on the mutual difference that sustains the boundary between

persons: "But I do know too just how you feel. I've lived with depression, been there, at rock bottom, like you. So I know how you feel. I can identify I suppose is what I'm trying to say. I know what it feels like to be depressed, and when you talk about how you feel, I feel I enter into your world."

This monologic speech, in my interpretation, expands further as the story unfolds. Here I do not suggest to Eamonn that he *might* get better, thereby leaving his future open. Instead, I tell him he *will* "get better." In doing so, I begin to finalize him. Finalization continues when I add, "You'll ride this out. You will be fine." This monologic voice is then strengthened when I suggest that he alone can get himself out of depression: "By yourself you'll get out the other side." Thus, in my words not only do I finalize Eamonn and persist in maintaining the comforting illusion that any of us can, often out of sheer desire to *empathize*, merge with another. But I also continue infringing on the mutual otherness that sustains the boundary between us by treating him as self-sufficient. In doing so, I perpetuate monologic speech as well as (at least) two preferred narratives within Western cultures. First is the narrative of a bounded individual who has the freedom to become him or herself, *by* him or herself. Second, I perpetuate the restitution narrative which tells us that when we are ill we will recover and get better (Frank, 1995).

But as the story continues, this monologic speech ends as abruptly as it began. "But," Eamonn interrupts, "Maybe I won't. Maybe I won't get out of this. It's not easy when you're disabled, alone, and down in the dumps. It's not. Nobody knows what the future holds." In these words, as I understand them through Bakhtin, Eamonn disrupts monologism. This is done, in part, by problematizing one's ability to merge with, and offer the final word on, another person. He thus signals that I've gotten too close and overstepped the boundary between us. As a result, Eamonn not only disrupts monologic speech but also sets in motion the potential for dialogic speech.

Midway through the story, with Eamonn's words entering my consciousness, the research encounter as a performance is transformed. The performance shifts from being primarily monological to being dialogical. Initially this shift occurs as I receive words from Eammon and my consciousness becomes wrapped in his consciousness. That is, my voice becomes imbued with the voice of Eamonn, but still remains distinguishable. In this voice that is both mine and Eamonn's, I say: "You're right Eamonn. You're right; you just don't know what will happen." Thus in these words, I signal our non-self-sufficiency and move toward an unfinalizing voice and speech. My voice and speech never merges with Eamonn, but neither is my voice and speech self-sufficient. This dialogical relation is then sustained when I say: "And I have no idea what it's like being you. I really have no idea how you feel and am out of order telling you things will be fine. They may not be. I don't know what the future has in store for you or me. I suppose I wanted to close the gap between us, know you better, empathise, but I've overstepped the boundary." Early in the sentence, Eamonn and I become unmerged as my concern with getting to close to Eamonn is expressed. As the talk unfolds, this dialogical relation continues. In my speech I suggest I was caught in a dilemma between getting too close to Eamonn and remaining too distant. I felt that I'd overstepped our boundaries rather than getting into the boundary space *between* us that sustains dialogism. This embodied knowledge is reinforced as I utter unfinalizing words: "I can't ever know what it's like to live in your body."

The dialogical quality of this talk, and the performance of it, is maintained as the story unfolds further. This is done by Eamonn, however, as he responds to me: "And I can't ever know what it's like to live in yours. At least we're talking though, and I've enjoyed it. It's been good today; it's been good being with you." Here, again, Eamonn's voice is non-self-sufficient and utters unfinalized words: the openness and "unknowability" of the future. It is too an embodied voice that speaks *with* me rather than *about* me, and which comes from a space *between* us rather than *above*. As the story continues, Eamonn becomes a *witness* (Frank, 1995) inasmuch as he assumes a responsibility for telling me what happened: "And you never know, someone might learn from what I've said today and over the past year. They don't have to be disabled either. We're all dependent on each other." This witnessing, therefore, is not a self-sufficient act. It implicates another in what Eamonn witnesses, and thus implies a relationship. This is reinforced toward the end of the sentence in my reading, as Eamonn questions the monological freedom of the individual. In such ways, therefore, we practice a balance between being neither self-sufficient nor merged, which sustains the boundary between us, and the boundary sustains dialogism/dialogic speech.

In sum, the story presented, and my interpretations of it, highlight the shifting dynamics of sustaining and crossing boundaries and how this is an on-going process shaped, framed, and enabled by dialogical and monological relations. We might therefore consider questions concerning "how close is too close" to research participants, and "how far is too far" from them, as neither simple nor straightforward. They are complex and shift in time and space as people move between merging and unmerging, self-sufficiency and non-self-sufficiency, and finalizing and unfinalizing practices. Accordingly, within disability research people may artfully engage in a process of boundary crossing and re-crossing that are, in part, social achievements and performances done through dialogical and monological speech (Frank, 2004).

Some Possible Implications for Disability Studies

With the above points in mind, and given the topic of this special forum, what kinds of interdisciplinary links does this article make between various fields? In what ways might the article further develop an interdisciplinary stance? How might the article develop considerations within and across disability studies and the various participatory/oppressive forms of research that have proliferated? What possibilities do the concepts of dialogism and monologism offer disability studies?

In terms of the kinds of interdisciplinary links between disability studies and various other fields, this article has eclectically woven together data generated from a project focusing on men's experiences of becoming disabled through playing sport with theories and concepts from such fields as medical sociology, qualitative research, the sociology of the body, and narrative psychology. For example, from medical sociology it has shown the reproduction of the restitution narrative and, in relation to the sociology of the body, drawn attention to the idea that our bodies matter and our experiences of depression are embodied. The article further shows recent ideas from narrative psychology, including the extent to which our conversations are mediated by powerful cultural narratives (e.g., restitution narrative) that prompt us to say things we don't always believe. It moreover shows in action the idea that researchers in the field of

narrative should consider using not only big stories from formal interviews, but also those stories from outside the formal context of interviewing – that is, the small ones. In addition, the article has made disciplinary links between disability studies and the field of qualitative research methods inasmuch as both often advocate that to understand others, obtain significant knowledge, and do ethically admirable research we should empathize with our participants. The article has also signalled this aspiration to empathize in action through a small story. In such ways, therefore, the paper moves toward further developing an interdisciplinary stance.

Empathy

In making interdisciplinary links between disability studies and various other fields, however, the question needs to be raised, "How does this article develop considerations within and across disability studies and the various participatory/oppressive forms of research that have proliferated? What possibilities do the concepts of dialogism and monologism offer disability studies?" One response is that the article develops critical considerations on the practice of empathy and brings to the fore the possibilities dialogism and monologism might have for better understanding empathetic relations (see also Mackenzie & Scully, 2007). Within and across disability studies and the various participatory/oppressive forms of research in different fields that have proliferated, there have been calls for researchers to engage with participants in an empathetic manner. A reason given for this is that by empathically imagining the life of the other person, a researcher may increase his or her ability to better understand another person's life, engender rapport, reduce emotional harm, and thereby develop research that moves toward working *with* rather than *on* disabled people. That is to say, the research becomes less oppressive and more ethically admirable.

Yet, while empathy can be an important consideration within disability studies and may be vital to working with disabled people as part of participatory forms of research, we should not forget its limits. The concepts of dialogism and monologism offer us some possibilities on understanding these limits. For example, the monologism and dialogism and the story presented alert us to the risk that empathy can turn into a form of symbolic violence. One form of violence is empathetic projection (Frank, 2004, 2005a). This relates to believing that one can empathically imagine being in the others' shoes and treating him or her as feeling what I feel. But in this scenario, as in the story re-presented earlier, empathy can easily turn into projection, or sometimes introjection, which is an illusion that one can truly put oneself in the place of, and unify or merge with, another person. This symbolic violence of empathetic projection claims that you are as I am, and I *know* how you feel. In projecting oneself onto the other through empathy the difference between two people is denied. In denying that difference, one denies the other person and empathy tends toward unification, thereby becoming monological. Accordingly, without denying that empathy can be useful, the concepts of monologism and dialogism help call attention to the *limits* of empathy so that we might be cognizant of the complexities involved and are self-reflexive of how we do empathy within and across disability studies and participatory/oppressive forms of research. As Frank (2005a) points out, "Dialogue begins with empathy, but sustaining dialogue requires recognition of the limits of empathy" (p. 298).

Finalizing and Unfinalizing Research

Another way the concepts of monologism and dialogism make interdisciplinary links and develop considerations within and across disability studies, and offer possibilities for disability studies, is by drawing attention to a core ethical demand – that is, not finalizing another person. This is a particularly pertinent demand, and can have profound implications, for developing various forms of participatory research and avoiding oppressive forms of research. Finalization can occur when a researcher claims to have the last word about who another person is and what they can become. That is to say, the researcher engages in monological speech. Yet to finalize the other person through monological speech is, for Bakhtin (1984), oppressive since it can leave that person "hopelessly determined and finished off, as if he [or she] were already quite dead" (p. 58). For Bakhtin, all that is unethical begins and ends when one human being claims to determine all that another is and can be. The authorial word of the researcher becomes the person's fate.

Therefore, as brought to the fore by the concept of monologism and dialogism, it would seem important that researchers from across the disciplines aspire to try and avoid monological speech, which utters the last word about the person(s). But, of course, that is often easier said than done. This is particularly so, given the disturbing observation made by Frank (2004, 2005b). As he points out, the claim of groups within and across disciplines to *professional* status often depends crucially on their socially sanctioned capacity to utter monological finalizations:

> "Young professionals are taught that in order to be recognised as a professional, and to sustain the prestige of the profession in society, they must utter words that claim to be the *last* word, the definitive, finalising word, about those who fall within their purview, whether these are patients, students, defendants, clients, or research participants whose participation has definite limits. The worst implication of monologue is that those who are thus finalised come to expect to be spoken of in this way and…forget to notice the falseness of the approach" (Frank, 2005b, p. 967).

Given all this, how might actual interdisciplinary research practice strive to be dialogical rather than monological? According to Frank (2004, 2005b) dialogic speech begins with the recognition of the other's unfinalizability. One way that this may be practiced is tied to a key question for qualitative research, medical sociology, disability studies, narrative psychology, and many other disciplines: "*What can one person say about another?*" As various researchers from different disciplines all propose (Couser, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Frank, 2005b; Sparkes, 2002) research is, in the simplest terms, one person's representation of another. In Bakhtin's dialogical ideal, for researchers working within and across disciplines the research report that one represents another's life must always understand itself not as a final statement of who the research participants are, but as one move in a continuing dialogue through which those participants will continue to form themselves, as they continue to become who they may yet be. The researcher needs to recognize that the participant's future is *open* and *uncertain*, and thereby consider representing him or her as such (Frank, 2005b).

Furthermore, for Frank (2004, 2005b), given that dialogic speech begins with recognition of the other's unfinalizability within a dialogical relation, one person can never say of another, "This is who such a person *is*." One can say, at most, "This how I see this person now, but I

cannot know what she or he will *become*." Dialogue depends on perpetual openness to the other's capacity to *become someone other* than whoever she or he already is. Likewise in a dialogical relation, any person takes responsibility for the other's becoming, as well as recognising that the other's voice has entered one's own, and that as researchers participating with disabled people there is the desire and possibility that research instigates change. As Frank (2005b) says:

> "The dialogical alternative emphasises research participants' engagement in their own struggles of becoming; its focus is stories of struggle, not static themes or lists of characteristics that fix participants in identities that fit typologies. Moreover, dialogical research requires hearing participants' stories not as surrogate observations of their lives outside the interview but as acts of engagement with researchers. In these acts of engagement, the researcher does not passively record where the respondent is in his or her life. Any research act is necessarily reactive in its effects: The researcher, by specific questions, and even by her or his observing presence, instigates self-reflections that will lead the respondent not merely to report his or her life but to *change* that life…. Research does not merely report; it *instigates*. The ethics are that instigation rest on the premise that has been endemic at least to Western thinking since Socrates: The examined life is a good thing, not always an immediately happy thing but an unavoidably important thing" (p. 968).

Closing Thoughts

Having outlined explicitly how this paper modestly develops an interdisciplinary stance, and highlighted some possibilities of dialogism and monologism for disability studies, some caveats and limitations need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the story presented here along with the points and possibilities raised above are not offered as any model or template of procedures. This is because, as Frank (2005b) cautions, it would be monological; such a model or template would finalize the researcher and their participants. As such, the story along with the points and possibilities raised are offered as guides, providing threads that others may follow and develop if they choose.

Secondly, the story presented is a transcribed exchange based wholly on tape-recorded interview data. No contextual and interactional factors, like bodily orientation, gesture, space, smell, were recorded during the research encounter. As a result, my interpretations of it focus wholly on the meaning of the words exchanged, but at the expense of a whole range of contextual and interactional factors. As Gubrium and Holstein (2008) put it, "The accent on the transcribed texts of stories tends to strip narratives of their social organisation and interactional dynamics" (p. xv). Accordingly, it is important that--when possible in future research--we aspire to document and take the range of contextual and interactional factors into account. This is especially so given that, as Bakhtin (1984) stressed, the particularity of utterance and the significance of both linguistic and extralinguistic elements in the production of meaning are vital.

Clearly, then, there is much work to be done in relation to dialogism, monologism, narrative, boundaries, extralinguistic elements, disability, and interdisciplinary research. I hope this article, as a potential resource, invites others to critically reflect on their relations with others

within research encounters, how they orientate to boundaries, and the consequences this may have on them and others. Whilst not the only or the best way, theories of dialogism and monologism can be useful in this process, and may help in our efforts to engage in interdisciplinary work.

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Endnotes

[1]A special thanks to Lucy Burke for kindly bringing this to the fore of my attention.
[2]Bakhtin died on the morning of March 7, 1975, from complications of emphysema and was attended only by a night nurse, who noted his final words as being, "I go to thee" (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 343). At a memorial service later that year in Moscow, a number of intellectuals gathered to read his works and discuss the impact of his career. Among those speaking was Shakespeare scholar L.E. Pinsky, who warned against any single, authoritative interpretation of Bakhtin's works (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 344).