Bridging Divides or Deepening Them?
Dialogue under Conditions of Social Injustice

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In a highly contentious political season, dialogue with people whose viewpoints differ from one's own is on a lot of people's minds. In Rachel Wahl's important and timely essay, it is not just dialogue in which each side holds divergent views that attracts her attention. Rather, Wahl studies dialogue where the opposing parties *each feel like* the "decks are stacked" against them *and* the dialogue occurs under conditions of social injustice.

Wahl critically examines an assumption that is widespread in most calls for dialogue, i.e., that *both sides* must enter dialogue with a willingness to learn from those with whom they disagree. Wahl asks: Should this condition apply equally to *all* who enter dialogue and at what cost? After briefly summarizing Jürgen Habermas' approach to dialogue, as well as his critics, Wahl outlines a deliberative model revised in three ways, which she applies to a case study involving forums between police officers and communities of color. It is the third revision allowing for counter-narratives that causes conflict with the symmetric learning assumption.

After observing a number of police/community forums, Wahl discovers what she refers to as a paradox that makes deliberative dialogue intractable. On the one hand, in order for the police to be open to learning they need to not feel attacked. On the other hand, the community members have a right to resist and express their anger. To demand that the marginalized learn from the police may require that political resistance be subdued, reproducing the inequality that these forums are trying to alleviate. Yet, to expect that the police will listen and learn without reciprocity is unrealistic.

Wahl reports that the police became very defensive in light of what

they perceived to be pounding criticism on the part of the community members. They claim to "shut down" when the community members spoke. One white, male officer, Wahl reports, justifies such defensiveness with an appeal to "human nature." Interestingly, Wahl claims that it is not only white people who dispense with listening to communities of color. She points to an African-American officer who recounts that she also does not listen receptively. Increased rather than diminished acrimony on both sides seemed to be the outcome of such dialogues.

Wahl concludes that under conditions of inequality, requiring the marginalized to learn from those in a position of power carries significant risks and trade-offs. These risks and trade-offs, she recommends, should be part of the discussion. In addition, while dialogue and protest might seem in opposition, Wahl insists that those who advocate dialogue need to recognize that both are necessary.

Like Wahl, I am suspect of the expected symmetric learning that proponents of deliberative dialogue presume and I agree that dialogue and resistance need not be mutually exclusive. In my response, I will not focus on Habermas or revised models of deliberative dialogue. Rather, I inquire whether an assumed symmetry creeps back into the paradox that Wahl articulates and what this means for dialogue. First, I emphasize the connection between normative and physical violence and the presumed symmetry that is a consequence of ignoring normative violence. Second, I call attention to the need to understand what discursive practices do. Not considering discourse obscures the precarious asymmetry and makes it difficult to understand why dialogue is not always part of the solution and when it may be part of the problem.

NORMATIVE VIOLENCE AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

The concept of "normative violence" gained attention when Judith Butler[1] used it to name the violence of norms. Norms are violent because they not only enable the subject to be intelligible but also constrain who subjects can be. In her recent work, Butler[2] shifts from a focus on intelligibility to an

emphasis on grievability as she considers the relationship between norms and lives that are publically grievable or lives that matter. It is crucial to consider normative violence, according to Samuel Chambers,[3] because normative violence renders corporeal violence invisible. Normative violence "both enables typical, physical violence that we routinely recognize while simultaneously erases violence from our ordinary view."[4] What is customarily labeled as violence already presumes a body that matters. When a body is not perceived to matter, then a violent act or behavior may not be labeled as "violent."

The Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) affords an excellent illustration of the significance of normative violence. BLM aims to disclose the everyday precariousness of Black lives that is evidenced in "walking while black, driving while black, speaking 'as' black, speaking b(l)ack, shopping while black, being at home while black, being black at school, black at the pool, black in the hands of police, black in prison. Just being black."[5] When BLM spotlights the rampant police violence against Black lives that has resulted in the all-too-frequent deaths of unarmed and innocent Black men, women, and children at the hands of police officers, BLM is focused not *only* on individual physical violence but also on "a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise."[6] Even if they do not employ the term, BLM is focused on the normative system that excuses the violence that Black people endure often through appeals to self-defense. It is the normative violence of whiteness that makes the physical violence against Black lives seem to be so routine that it remains unmarked and devoid of outrage.

In response to the Black Lives Matter Movement, the police and their supporters took up the rallying cry Blue Lives Matter and claimed that police officers are also killed daily for just doing their job. When the police and their supporters disregard normative violence, corporeal violence is understood through a decontextualized, individualist concept of the self in which all physical violence has symmetric costs. As Moya Lloyd explains, we cannot identify certain physical acts as acts of violence unless we first investigate the prior constitution of subjects "in language, in discourse."[7] And this leads to my next point: understanding the role of discourse.

DISCURSIVE PRACTICES AND THE DANGER OF DIALOGUE

The paradox that Wahl describes relies heavily upon leaving unexamined the feeling that police express that they are being overly criticized by the community members. While *what* they are feeling is real, *how* discursive practices function to constitute the community members as at fault for the collapse of dialogue requires critical analysis. Without analyzing what discourse does, the subtle ways that power works through our practices can remain concealed. Moreover, the conflicting feelings of police and community members can seem symmetrical.

One form of discursive practice that has received a lot of attention is Robin DiAngelo's[8] notion of white fragility, which names the ubiquitous discursive practices of white people "in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves."[9] These discursive practices of escape include "the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation."[10] Such moves function to restore comfort and are manifestations of habits of privilege that protect white people from contemplating their role in racism.

Although not all police officers are white, it is instructive to ask what we can learn from the phenomenon of white fragility about the paradox Wahl describes. Challenges to one's worldview or to one's perception of being "good" are unsettling. A discursive strategy that perceives these challenges as "criticisms" rationalizes withdrawing from dialogue and functions to regain the equilibrium disrupted by what the community members said. As DiAngelo insists: "The method of delivery cannot be used to delegitimize what is being illuminated."[11] These terms of engagement insist that we will only be able listen to you as long as you are nice. If you are not nice, YOU will be blamed for the breakdown of the dialogue. Dominance within dialogue is reproduced and what can be learned from counter-narratives is thwarted.

Dialogue is undermined when the police do not acknowledge what

discourse does. In order to expose and interrupt racist systems, the norms, structures, institutions, and discursive practices that protect such systems must be challenged. This will require *not only* a demand for symmetrical listening as Wahl clearly understands, *but also* a willingness on the part of the police to stay in the discomfort of critique. The national conversation around police brutality must take seriously, as DiAngelo notes, that "the water officers swim in"[12] must change. As important as it is to diversify the force and revise police policy, it is *also* imperative to be open to and prepared for challenging the water that we all swim in, and that water is "unexamined whiteness, the everyday of whiteness."[13]

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1 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 1999).

2 Judith Butler, *Frame of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

3 Samuel Chambers, "Normative Violence after 9/11: Rereading the Politics of *Gender Trouble*," *New Political Science* 29, no. 1 (2017): 43-60.

4 Ibid., 44.

5 David Theo Goldberg, "Why 'Black Lives Matter' Because All Lives Don't Matter in America, *Huffington Post*, September 25, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-theo-goldberg/why-black-lives-matter_b_8191424.html

6 http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/

7 Moya Lloyd, "Who Counts? Understanding the Relation between Normative Violence and the Production of Political Bodies," unpublished paper presented to the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, August 31 to September 3, 2006.

8 Robin DiAngelo, "White fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54-70.

9 Ibid., 54.

10 Ibid.

11 https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-and-the-question-of-trust-wcz/

12 http://www.donovanxramsey.com/journalismarchive/2015/5/18/how-to-keep-racism-in-place-an-interview

13 Ibid.