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## **A DIALOGIC PERSPECTIVE ON OPEN STRATEGY**

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## **A DIALOGIC PERSPECTIVE ON OPEN STRATEGY**

### **Abstract**

Dialogue is essential to open strategy processes, yet it can also engender dilemmas and tensions. These arise from the interaction of two practices, dialogue and strategy, that are characterized by a number of incompatible parameters. We begin by outlining three conceptual approaches to dialogic processes; functional, interpretive and critical. We then present Bohm's interpretive, emergent and free flowing dialogic approach and juxtapose it with strategy as a goal-oriented, directive practice. From this juxtaposition we derive a number of tensions that we discuss along six parameters: leadership of the process, stakeholder participation, communication openness, communication flows, structuring of process, and process goals. We employ Wikimedia's open strategy process as an empirical context to illustrate these tensions. We conclude by outlining directions for further research. These include the need to study how dialogic interactions and open strategy interrelate in practice; gaining a better understanding of the tensions occasioned, and whether and how organizations learn to balance these tensions; and conducting studies from a broader set of paradigmatic standpoints to enrich this emerging field.

Keywords: Dialogue, Bohm, dialogic tensions, Wikimedia

## **A DIALOGIC PERSPECTIVE ON OPEN STRATEGY**

Open strategy is a process that engages internal and external stakeholders in various degrees of transparency and inclusion (Whittington, Cailluet & Yakis-Douglas, 2011). It presupposes at minimum episodic information transfer among the parties involved, and for more meaningful inclusion, continuing dialogue (Heracleous, Goesswein & Beaudette, 2018). Dialogue, as an ongoing process of communication among actors who pursue a particular goal or set of goals, is integral to open strategy processes. As a way of linking an organization with its stakeholders, an effective dialogic process can provide generative diversity to the ideas that inform strategy, and contribute to a strategic direction that has stakeholder and market relevance. There are costs however, as dialogue can also fuel the undesirable side of the dilemmas outlined by Hautz, Seidl and Whittington (2017) and various types of tensions noted by other authors (e.g. Baptista et al., 2017; Heracleous et al., 2018). Ongoing dialogue with little hierarchical, ideational or temporal constraints for example can lead to conflict, inefficient decision making, wasteful use of resources, and pursuit of personal agendas, as pointed out by the dilemma of process (Hautz et al., 2017) and illustrated by ethnographies of a dialogical organization par excellence, Wikimedia (Jemielniak, 2014, 2016).

We begin the chapter with a discussion of conceptual approaches to the dialogic process discussed in terms of a typology of functional, interpretive and critical approaches, building on a corresponding discursive typology (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). We observe that recent studies of dialogue in the context of the emerging field of open strategy processes have tended to fall within the functional perspective, indicating the research opportunities to conduct studies from additional perspectives as the field grows.

The chapter continues with an outline of Bohm's (1985, 1996) ideas on dialogue.

David Bohm was a theoretical physicist who contributed influential ideas to quantum physics and explored the nature of thought and reality. Bohm's (1996) approach to dialogue involves free-flowing meaning and inclusive, ongoing exchange of ideas among equals, without any pre-set agenda, explicit goals or action expectations as an outcome of dialogue. Bohm's ideas on dialogue formed a prominent approach that has influenced subsequent scholars including those working in the field of organization development (Ford, 1999; Isaacs, 1993, 2001; Senge, 1990).

Bohm's dialogic approach was shaped by his philosophical investigations into thought whose operations he believed fragmented a more holistic reality. He argued that we perceive the world as a series of separate entities because of the nature of our mental representations that are shaped by our memories, assumptions and sensory inputs; and that this is both an individual and a collective process. He saw thought as not only reporting on reality, but as participating in forming reality (Bohm, 1992). Bohm argued that what we perceive are only surface, piecemeal aspects of an implicate order, which he saw as the deeper, interconnected, holistic nature of the world. An awareness of these thought processes, that he believed could be fostered by Bohmian dialogue, would lead to a kind of "proprioception" of thought that more accurately and clearly grasps the world, and to the evolution of corresponding shared meanings. Bohm employed the concept of proprioception, the sense of bodily and spatial orientation that humans perceive, as a useful analogue for developing his idea of proprioception of thought. By this he meant the development of a deeper self-awareness of how our thought operates, through paying explicit attention to our assumptions and interpretations in the context of dialogue and in broader interactions.

We juxtapose Bohm's emergent and free flowing dialogic approach with strategy as a goal-oriented, directive practice (Chaffee, 1985). Through this juxtaposition we derive a number of tensions that may arise in the context of open strategy. We suggest that despite the fundamental importance of transparency and inclusion in open strategy (Whittington et al., 2011), features that align with key aspects of Bohmian dialogue, pursuing or espousing these ideals in the context of a strategic practice will almost inevitably engender tensions. We discuss these tensions along six parameters: leadership of the process, stakeholder participation, communication openness, communication flows, structuring of process, and process goals.

We then discuss Wikimedia as an exemplar of a dialogic organization, and outline its development of a five-year strategic plan using an open strategy process. While the process did culminate in a strategic plan, it was rife with tensions, and we outline these along the six parameters discussed above.

We end the chapter with recommendations for further research. These include the need to study both dialogic features and open strategy contextually and in practice, in order to understand how key features of each domain interact with each other. Further, to incorporate ambidexterity or paradox perspectives that can allow us to understand how organizations can balance the conflicting demands of the egalitarian nature of a dialogic process with the instrumental, goal-oriented nature of strategy. Finally, we point out the opportunity to go beyond the functional paradigm and to conduct studies from different paradigmatic standpoints as the field grows.

## **Conceptual perspectives on dialogic processes**

Dialogue is a composite term with etymological origins in ancient Greek: “dia” means via or through, and “logos” means “the word”, or “reason” in the rhetorical sense of logical argument. The origins of dialogue as a term therefore point towards a process of engaging in discursive and argumentational exchange. Further, “dia” as a directional concept also implies that some goal is pursued via this exchange. Dialogue as a term does not impose a limit on how many actors can be engaged in dialogue. Some organization development approaches such as Large Group Interventions are only limited by the size of the physical space available since in these approaches physical co-presence is deemed essential (Bunker & Alban, 2006; Weisbord & Janoff, 2005). Developments in technology however mean that the number of parties to dialogue can be as large as a meaningful exchange of views would allow. In the case of Wikimedia for example thousands of Wikimedians were involved in contributing to a five-year strategic plan via an open strategy process (Heracleous et al., 2018).

Dialogue has been an influential discursive concept as well as a useful methodological orientation in organization studies, informing studies from a variety of perspectives. Heracleous and Barrett’s (2001) discursive typology of functional, interpretive and critical discursive approaches can enable us to map dialogic approaches along these lines. In the *functional* approach, dialogue is seen teleologically as the sharing of ideas via communicative interaction, in order to accomplish some kind of organizational outcome such as enhancing leadership effectiveness, organization change or strategy implementation. Some authors are more explicit about these connections (e.g. Ford, 1999; Heracleous et al., 2018; Maccoby, 1996; Skordoulis & Dawson, 2007), while others are more

implicit (e.g. Pye, 1995; Schein, 1993). In the functional approach, accomplishing a particular goal gains a higher emphasis than exploring assumptions and processes of interpretation.

In the *interpretive* approach, dialogue is seen more epistemologically and existentially as a way in which assumptions and perspectives can be surfaced, shared and discussed, so that a new shared social consciousness and ways of being in the world can emerge. Even though goals are often part of the discussion, the emphasis here is on interpretative and relational processes rather than goal accomplishment. Ford (1999) for example views dialogue as a reflective, collaborative effort where participants explore their underlying assumptions with the purpose of developing more effective interactions. He notes that “dialogue provides an opportunity for people to examine and authentically deal with their conversations as the fundamental presumptions, presuppositions, assumptions, and backgrounds in which they dwell and to reflect on the implications of those conversations” (Ford, 1999: 490). In a similar vein, Gergen, McNamee & Barrett’s (2001: 682) concept of transformative dialogue refers to “any form of interchange that succeeds in transforming a relationship between those committed to otherwise separate and antagonistic realities (and their related practices) to one in which common and solidifying realities are under construction”.

In the *critical* approach dialogue is seen as a reflexive process of exploration through which assumptions that perpetuate social inequalities and domination can be made explicit, so emancipatory assumptions can be fostered and actions of resistance can be initiated. Influenced by Foucauldian (Foucault, 1972, 1977) or other postmodern approaches, use of language is seen as intertwined with subtle forms of power that include surreptitious agenda control, disciplinary mechanisms and framing of issues in terms of dominant interests (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2001). Thus, Hammond, Anderson and Cissna (2003: 150)

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argue that “dialogue is a human opportunity for discovering or creating truth and empowering action. ... Power, we argue, is omnipresent in this human dialogue. ...power does not exist without dialogue just as dialogue necessarily involves power”. In a similar vein, Oswick et al. (2000) take issue with what they see as Senge’s (1990) rendition of dialogue as a goal-driven, univocal pursuit and argue for a polyphonic, multi-faceted view of dialogue: “‘real dialogue’ is the dynamic and interactive process through which dominant univocal accounts of ‘organizational reality’ can be undermined. Dialogical scripting has the potential to aid the creation of deeper and richer polyphonic understandings of organizations and the process of organizational learning” (Oswick et al., 2000: 900). In this approach dialogue is seen as a form of emancipatory discourse that can enable shared consciousness and action in organizations (Raelin, 2008, 2012).

Table 1 below maps dialogue studies in terms of these approaches. It should be noted that while this typology can be analytically useful for understanding the terrain of dialogue and discursive research, particular studies may not always map neatly within a single approach. Functional studies often recognize that the potency of dialogue to accomplish particular outcomes is based on the social construction role of language. Ford (1999) for example, is particularly interested in how effective dialogue can facilitate organizational change, a classic functional, teleological concern. His views on the nature and socially constructive potential of dialogue however, are decidedly interpretive, as noted above. Further, interpretive and critical studies share a deep understanding of the potency of dialogue and discourse more generally to construct, sustain or change social realities (Heracleous, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), even though the foci in particular studies may differ.



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This typology could inform the theoretical positioning of how dialogue or communication is studied in relation to open strategy processes, whether or not the study is explicitly labeled dialogical. For example, Aten and Thomas's (2016) study of the use of crowdsourcing technology in open strategy processes from a technology affordances perspective and a discursive lens, would fall within the interpretive approach.

Most recent contributions however would fall into the functional perspective. For example, in Heracleous et al.'s (2018) study of Wikimedia's open strategy process the concern was to introduce a dialogic lens to the open strategy literature, understand the role of dialogue at different stages of the process as well as the occasioning of tensions, and to derive organizing principles for effective employment of dialogue in these processes. Further, Gegenhuber and Dobusch (2017) showed that new ventures' modes of linking with stakeholders (broadcasting, dialoguing and including) have differential impression management effects, at different stages of the firms' evolution. Hutter, Nketia and Fuller's (2017) study of participation in Siemens' open strategy process through an online platform found that different forms of participation affected the sense of organizational and virtual community differently; and that stakeholder participation could facilitate strategy implementation and organizational learning.

The open strategy field is emerging, and studies of the dialogic or communicative aspects in this process are also at their infancy. Given this early stage of development, the paradigmatic diversity of studies is still undeveloped, offering the opportunity for further research from different paradigmatic standpoints. So far for example, there do not appear

to be any studies of dialogical processes in an open strategy context from a critical perspective. Such studies could potentially draw from Foucauldian understandings of strategy as a discursive constitutive practice rather than as a rationalist endeavor (e.g. Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Knights & Morgan, 1995). Kornberger and Clegg's (2011) study of the strategy project undertaken by the City of Sydney that engaged the broader community, even though not explicitly dialogical, offers insights on the general approach critical dialogic studies might take.

### **Bohmian dialogue – an ideal-type dialogic process**

Bohm (1996) proposed dialogue as a process through which participants could explore mutual topics of interest in a non-judgmental, generative manner, that could ultimately lead to the transformation of social consciousness. Participants to Bohmian dialogue interact within a “pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change” (1985: 175). Bohm advocated that participants suspend their prior assumptions, beliefs and judgements and engage in a collaborative, ongoing process in a reflective, exploratory manner. Differences among participants should not be hidden but surfaced and talked about. Bohm's dialogue approach can serve as an ideal-type configuration, as an analytical starting point with which features of strategy as a directive practice, and open strategy as a variant, can be juxtaposed.

In terms of the framework of functional, interpretive and critical approaches discussed above, Bohm's ideas on dialogue would fall within interpretivism, and more specifically the phenomenological brand of this tradition. Bohm pays close attention to and theorizes processes of thought (Bohm, 1992). He offers not only an elaborate set of ideas addressing how we form our thoughts, impressions, and knowledge of the world, but also

how we might move towards better ways of thinking about the world and reaching a reshaped social consciousness. Making an effort to be aware of these thought processes in ourselves, and their manifestations in others, is a key feature of Bohmian dialogue. One example is Bohm's suggestion that participants to dialogue suspend their assumptions. By this he meant that they should "neither carry them out nor suppress them. You don't believe them, nor do you disbelieve them; you don't judge them as good or bad. ... think of it as suspended in front of you so that you can look at it – sort of reflected back as if you were in front of a mirror" (Bohm, 1996: 20). Bohm urges individuals to be reflective in terms of how both their own and others' assumptions play out in dialogue, a context where these processes, along with any other themes that emerge, could be surfaced and talked about.

There is also a critical aspect to Bohmian dialogue in that the ultimate result of long term dialogic processes could be a shared consciousness that can perceive reality more holistically in terms of its systemic, implicate order rather than in the fragmented, partial way that our established mental maps lead us to perceive it. As Bohm (1996: 46) noted, "I'm suggesting that there is the possibility for a transformation of the nature of consciousness, both individually and collectively, and that whether this can be solved culturally and socially depends on dialogue". But Bohm's process-oriented, emergent approach is far from the pre-set agenda and politically committed goals of critical theory to expose power inequalities in the status quo and create social change in favor of marginalized groups.

Bohm held that "in principle, the dialogue should work without any leader and without any agenda" (1996: 17) and was emphatic that the process should not a priori aim to result in any decisions: "in the dialogue group we are not going to decide what to do about anything. This is crucial. Otherwise we are not free. We must have an empty space where we are not obliged to do anything, nor to come to any conclusions, nor to say

anything or not to say anything. It's open and free. It's an empty space" (1996: 19). Bohm believed that this empty space could be generative, and could allow insights to emerge that went beyond the knowledge and understanding with which the group started.

Bohm's (1985, 1996) views on the dialogic process as a way for groups to develop shared meanings and novel understandings have influenced subsequent theorists and reflective practitioners, particularly in the organization development field (e.g. Ford, 1999; Isaacs, 1993, 2001; Senge, 1990). Several contributors to Bushe and Marshak's (2015) volume on dialogic organization development draw from Bohm's ideas. Dialogic processes in an organizational development context have pragmatic goals, often to address particular strategic or operational challenges organizations are facing and to produce aligned action to address these challenges.

It is useful to note the changes that arise when a set of ideas traverses their original context to be employed in new domains, such as Bohm's phenomenological dialogic ideas shaping the interventions of the pragmatic organization development field. Bohm insisted for example that dialogue should not be beholden to any single or particular purpose; and that if a purpose emerged in the proceedings, it should be subject to ongoing change. He also noted the difference between a dialogue and a discussion, where discussion is more of an analytical point-scoring exercise rather than a collaborative exploration of meaning: "...the word 'discussion', which has the same root as 'percussion' and 'concussion'. It really means to break things up. ... Discussion is almost like a ping-pong game, where people are batting the ideas back and forth and the object of the game is to win or to get points for yourself. ... In a dialogue however, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it." (Bohm, 1996: 7).

A juxtaposition of Bohmian dialogue and strategy illustrates important points of disjuncture along key parameters. Table 2 below outlines six such parameters, their status within a Bohmian dialogic process, their status within strategy as a goal-oriented practice, and potential resulting tensions when a dialogic process that at minimum tries to be faithful to Bohm's approach or aspects of it, is employed as part of an open strategy process. These six parameters were selected as they refer to key aspects of both Bohmian dialogue as well as strategy. For example, Bohm was clear that dialogic processes should be leaderless (even though some facilitation may be needed at the early stages), goal-less, and structure-less. Also that they should be inclusive of any stakeholder who wished to participate, with open communications where information flows in a non-hierarchical manner. These dimensions are also key to strategy processes that typically involve leaders who control resources and make decisions within a more structured process that has particular goals, and decide which stakeholders should participate. Communication openness is circumscribed by confidentiality and competitiveness issues, and communication flows involve levels of hierarchy.

Open strategy as a variant of broader strategy processes operates within these constraints. The challenge however is that open strategy, with its emphasis on transparency and inclusion, aligns well with principles of Bohmian dialogue. Therefore there is a schizophrenia at the heart of open strategy: Bohemian (and Bohmian) ideals on the one hand, and the competitive, goal directed nature of strategy on the other hand. To use Bateson's (1972) term, open strategy is caught in a double bind; it has to live by two sets of injunctions that are mutually contradictory. This double bind gives rise to the types of tensions described in Table 2 and exemplified by the Wikimedia case and by other research we describe below.

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Table 2 about here  
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It is interesting to note that organizations may wish, for reputational or impression management purposes, to convey that they view stakeholders as equals in the dialogic process, that they are keen to receive inputs from as broad group of actors as possible, and that they are open and transparent in the communicative process; i.e., that they want to dialogically engage along the lines of important aspects of a Bohmian approach to dialogue. Whether organizations are really committed to these aspects or whether they are superficially espoused, and the effects on arising tensions, would be interesting to investigate empirically.

Several of the tensions outlined in Table 2 can be seen in recent empirical studies of open strategizing. For example, tensions of power dynamics, tensions of information transparency and tensions of communicative integration were found to be central to the radically open strategizing process of the Premium Cola Collective (Luedicke et al., 2017). These tensions were referred to respectively as power asymmetry, information asymmetry and information overload in Luedicke et al.'s (2017) study. Baptista et al.'s (2017) study of the use of social media in open strategy processes illustrates the tensions of process design and tensions of teleology that arise when unstructured, free-flowing ideas without a clear goal interact with the structured, teleological processes of strategy as a directive practice. Baptista et al. (2017) found that tensions were occasioned within different combinations of extent of feedback moderation on the one hand, and extent of network capabilities to connect with others and contribute on the other hand. They also found learning effects

where organizational capabilities developed to improve the process and mitigate the tensions.

In order to illustrate the framework in Table 2 and to develop issues for further research, we discuss below how Wikimedia developed its five year strategic plan via an open strategy process; and explore the tensions that arose in this process. The discussion of Wikimedia draws from the study by Heracleous et al. (2018), whose authoring team includes Philippe Beaudette who acted as a facilitator for the open strategy process and subsequently was Director of Community Advocacy at Wikimedia.

### **Wikimedia Foundation as a dialogical organization**

The Wikimedia Foundation was founded in 2003 to provide a governance structure for various Wiki projects, including Wikipedia. Wiki projects are carried out by volunteers, who operate within local Wikimedia Chapters that are decentralized, independent organizations overseeing Wikimedia projects within their regions (Beaudette, 2012). Self-governance of the global volunteer community through local chapters is complemented by the institutional umbrella of the Wikimedia Foundation (Morell, 2011), and by a Board of Trustees.

Wiki projects develop via inputs and information exchange among thousands of volunteers, in a process of ongoing dialogue enabled by technology, that transcends physical and temporal boundaries. These dialogic interactions and inputs are subject to substantial amounts of regulation, enforced by volunteers who wield bureaucratic power and social authority. There are over 1,200 regulatory documents, with the 50 more important ones amounting to around 150,000 words (Jemielniak, 2016). Experienced Wikimedians can apply for one of several levels of administrative power which grant them

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corresponding access to wikis, for example to serve as “bureaucrats” on local projects or “stewards” in global roles (Forte, Larco & Bruckman, 2009). The ongoing dialogue process occurs through various online platforms such as the Wikimedia Meta-Wiki, focused wikis on particular themes, local Wikimedia Chapter wikis, Wikimedia Signpost and a number of mailing lists.

Wikimedia projects follow a number of content-management and dispute resolution principles to aim for quality and non-partisanship, such as “consensus over credentials”, “neutral point of view”, “verifiability”, and “no original research”. Despite advice to aim for consensus, avoid personal attacks and edit wars and act in good faith, there are ongoing vendettas being played out on the site. Jemielniak (2014: 59) notes that “conflict is possibly the most common form of interaction that people take part in or otherwise observe on Wikipedia”. In a context of lack of hierarchy and formal authority, where equality and consensus are valued, and 80% of Wikimedians involved should agree on a course of action, long disagreements and ongoing tensions are rife: “arguments can grind on *ad nauseam*. Even the most insignificant topics become bones of contention. ... deciding whether the proper spelling ... should be ‘yoghurt’ or ‘yogurt’ took ten large debates, and many conflicts between editors” (Jemielniak, 2016; 368-369).

### **Wikimedia’s open strategy development via a dialogic process among thousands**

In 2009 Wikimedia’s Board of Trustees decided that the organization should develop its strategy based on the principles of transparency, collaboration and stakeholder participation, that were central to its DNA. The strategy project facilitators decided that in this process the principle of consensus would not be implemented as rigidly as in regular



Wikimedia projects. Rather, transparency needed to be balanced with clarity and structure so that difficult decisions could be taken and a strategic plan ultimately developed.

Thirty-seven experienced Wikimedians volunteered to become project convenors; they organized and merged proposals, facilitated participation, encouraged ongoing contributions and resolved disputes. They coordinated with other convenors via a to-do list and regular discussions using the organization's internet relay chat (IRC) infrastructure. Discussion summaries and IRC logs were posted online. The process was overseen by Wikimedians with "sysop" (system operator or administrator) rights, six "bureaucrats" and the Foundation's steward team.

While the process was transparent and participative, its top down initiation and structure was perceived as going against the organization's tradition of community-led projects; an issue of substantial online critique and debate. More fundamentally however, as discussed in the next section, these critiques were animated by the tensions between the organization's open, transparent and emergent culture with the requirements of strategy as a directive practice.

The open strategy process involved four phases: level-setting, deep dives, synthesis and call to action. In terms of *level-setting*, a "strategy wiki" was created to serve as the online hub for the process, supported by a knowledge base with factual data, opinions, and research on Wikimedia as an organization. Volunteers were invited to submit proposals on what were the pertinent strategic issues that should be addressed by the process. The proposals were posted, rated, debated, grouped and merged. In terms of *deep dives*, a task force committee made up of 15 individuals selected volunteers to staff 14 task forces made up of 5-10 individuals each, that each addressed a strategic issue within the three emergent categories of sustainability, development and accessibility. While the task forces aimed for

consensus as a decision-making principle, individuals within these groups were granted with the power to make the final decisions. There were teething troubles in terms of quality of recommendations, that were subsequently addressed.

In the *synthesis* phase, a strategy task force of 20 individuals was formed to integrate prior proposals into a draft of Wikimedia's five-year strategic plan, which outlined five strategic priorities (quality content, innovation, increasing participation, growing readership, and stabilizing infrastructure). The task force brought together over 900 proposals and recommendations into around 1500 content pages. In the final phase of the *call to action*, the community reviewed and refined the five strategic priorities. The community was invited to debate the rationales underlying the priorities, key indicators, possible targets and other measures, a call to action was launched inviting volunteers to implement the plan, and the completed five-year strategic plan was published.

### **Dialogic tensions in open strategy processes**

Tensions were endemic in Wikimedia's open strategy process. These did not just arise from the customary approach to Wiki projects of open participation, robust debate and even conflict that are enabled by the lack of hierarchy and the need to reach consensus (Jelmieniak, 2014; 2016). Rather, they arose from the interpenetration of two domains with differing assumptions along key parameters, as shown in Table 3. Broadly speaking, Bohmian conditions of dialogue where interlocutors are seen as "equals within a conversational space" in on-going interaction (Gergen et al., 2001: 705) on the one hand, occurred in the context of strategy as a structured, directive, hierarchical practice that aims to accomplish particular outputs and results (Chaffee, 1985) on the other hand.

In Wikimedia’s case for example, as Table 3 shows, tensions arose from the hybrid structuring of the process, where both hierarchy and network elements were employed; and from the hybrid nature of the process goals, that were both deliberate and emergent. These were respectively referred to as tensions of process design and tensions of teleology in Table 2 above. The multi-directional communication flows, and the nature of the leadership process as both relational and also emergent within centrally set boundaries occasioned further tensions. These were referred to as tensions of communicative integration and tensions of power dynamics in Table 2 above.

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Table 3 about here  
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The Bohmian approach to dialogue advocates equality among participants, self-reflexivity, free flow of meaning, and ongoing exploration that suspends assumptions and appreciates others’ points of view, aims for convergence, and aspires to show new ways of being in the world (Beech, MacIntosh & MacLean, 2010; Bohm, 1996; Gergen, 2001; Gergen, Gergen & Barrett, 2004). Strategy as traditionally understood and as practiced by most organizations does not sit well with the above conditions. Strategy is seen as the responsibility and province of senior management, who have discretion on and how any inputs by others are treated. Despite the perceived unfashionableness of strategic planning, the practice is alive and well, and it places the task in the hands of particular individuals who are seen as experts in carrying it out (Whittington et al., 2017). As Mack and Szulanski (2017: 385) note, “in centralized organizations, top managers have traditionally played an influential role in directing the strategy of the organization, and increasing inclusiveness and transparency may lead to situations where the authority of senior

management is challenged or undermined by subordinates. ... The general trend toward greater openness in strategizing thus creates a tension for organizations that rely on more conventional and centralized forms of decision-making.”

Strategy involves the need to make difficult choices among competing alternatives, requires leaders who can make such choices, is constrained by scarce resources and limited time, and necessitates the need to commit and align resources in the pursuit of objectives. Committing to and carrying out Bohmian (or Bohm-inspired) dialogue within a strategy process is an existentially challenging and precarious balancing act.

It is worth noting that Bohmian dialogic conditions would be most at home in open source peer production such as the process used for the computer operating system Linux, as well as Wikimedia’s ongoing projects, such as Wikipedia. The imposition of a central and structuring authority in Wikimedia’s open strategy project challenged the usual community-led practices and engendered a significant amount of tensions.

While the open strategizing process involves inherent tensions, these arise in the pursuit of functional outcomes. As shown in Table 3, the process goals of creating a strategic plan at Wikimedia were indeed accomplished, assisted by a delicate negotiation of arising tensions. Further, tensions could be generative, as for example when visuals or other boundary objects enable differing assumptions and agendas to become discussable and be negotiated, leading to robust discussions that ultimately support a shared understanding of an organization’s strategy (Knight, Paroutis & Heracleous, 2018). In Wikimedia’s case, tensions spur individuals to be engaged, better defend their points of view, be watchful and vigilant of others’ contributions, and to make higher quality contributions in the first place. The success of Wikimedia projects in terms of their impact attests to the generative power of tensions. Wikipedia for example is ranked as the 5<sup>th</sup> website in the world in Alexa’s top

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500 sites list (after Google, Youtube, Facebook and Baidu), an outcome accomplished by an organization with miniscule resources as compared to other organizations owning top sites.

### **Directions for further research**

Studies to date have shown that dialogic processes can take different forms within different contexts. Some considerations for example include the rate of communicative interaction, the extent to which contributions are indeed taken seriously by an organization, the resources an organization devotes to an open strategy process, whether participants are co-present or interact via technology, and whether the technology is easy to use.

Transparency and inclusion as key concepts of open strategy can be operationalized in very different ways by organizations. Dialogue is essential to both. Meaningful transparency implies that stakeholders are able to not only access relevant information, but also seek clarifications and interact with organizations as needed. Meaningful inclusion implies that stakeholders would need to feel that their inputs are at least heard and considered, and that they could have an impact on strategy or other processes, which would necessitate dialogue.

Both dialogic and open strategy processes therefore are contingent, context-embedded and context-dependent. A first research direction is that given the emergent state of the field, there are opportunities for a deeper understanding of the key features of dialogic interaction, the key features of open strategy processes, and how these two sets of features interact. This would allow us to develop practice-based, middle-range theories that are sensitive to the nuances of dialogue and open strategy. For example, it would be fruitful to research whether dialogic processes differ in contexts where stakeholder participation in

boards of directors is legally mandated, such as for example in Germany, Austria, Norway and Sweden (ETUI, 2015), versus where these are voluntarily initiated by organizations.

Second, we have argued above, drawing from Bateson's (1972) double bind concept, that Bohmian dialogic processes and strategy as a directive field sit uneasily with each other. There is a number of tensions along key parameters. It is possible however that organizations could develop capabilities (Baptista et al., 2017) to balance the competing demands that give rise to these tensions. Therefore the ambidexterity (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008) and paradox (Papachroni, Heracleous & Paroutis, 2015) perspectives could offer insights as to what these capabilities might mean, both conceptually and in practice.

Thirdly, given the emergent stage of the open strategy field and the embryonic stage of dialogic studies of open strategy, there is opportunity to expand the number of paradigmatic perspectives that are being employed. The functional perspective is currently dominant; interpretive and critical studies would offer additional insights to help advance the field, particularly to give a more nuanced view into dialogical and open strategy practices, and into the experience of the actors that are being engaged in these practices.

With respect to methodologies, as well as intellectual resources, the field of organizational discourse (Heracleous, 2007) has substantial resources to offer; for example in terms of the ontological understanding of language, rhetorical aspects of argumentation, and issue framing. Further, the broader field of discourse enriched by social theory can lend immense conceptual resources, such as dialogical concepts from Habermas (1984, 1987), Luhmann, (1995), Bakhtin (1981) or Buber (1970). Luhmann's (1995) dimensions of meaning (sociality, factuality and temporality) for example have been used to discuss the dimension of openness in open strategy (Dobusch et al., 2017).

Heracleous, L. 2019. A dialogic perspective on open strategy. Forthcoming in Seidl, D., Whittington, R. & von Krogh, G (Eds.), *Cambridge Handbook of Open Strategy*, Cambridge: CUP.

Further, the qualitative, case-based, ethnographic, grounded theory approaches associated with strategy as practice research would be an appropriate fit with dialogical studies of open strategy processes, given that triangulation of linguistic and observational data can be revealing and provide insights to nuances of context that would not be otherwise available (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013).

Open strategy as a practical endeavour would seem vacuous without some form of ongoing dialogue, whether or not related communications are labelled or recognized as such. Understanding open strategy would entail a solid grasp of the dialogic processes that permeate and shape open strategy. Given the significant rate of failures, uncertainties and challenges in realizing strategy, an understanding of the dialogic processes of open strategy would be vital for both theory and practice.

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**TABLE 1**

**Dialogical perspectives along functional, interpretive and critical lines**

Dialogic perspective	Dialogue definitions	References
<p><i>Functional</i>: Dialogue seen as communicative interaction and sharing of ideas, from a teleological perspective. Dialogue serves as a means of accomplishing outcomes such as organizational learning, strategy implementation or organization change</p>	<p>“Managing is about dialogue – listening and talking – and about ‘doing’ – taking action” (Pye, 1995: 445)</p> <p>“...through dialogue and inquiry, organization members play a role in defining outcomes for their firms (Powley et al., 2004: 68)</p> <p>“...dialogue is a necessary condition for effective group action” (Schein, 1993: 42) ... “dialogue aims to build a group that can think generatively, creatively, and, most important, <i>together</i>” (pp. 43-44, emphasis in original)</p> <p>“The Socratic dialogue is particularly suited to organizations and companies that are in a process of change, in which basic norms, values and goals need to be challenged and explicitly communicated if the organization is keen to promote alignment across all levels” (Skordoulis &amp; Dawson, 2007: 998)</p>	<p>Ford, 1999; Heracleous, Goesswein &amp; Beaudette, 2018; Maccoby, 1996; Powley et al., 2004; Pye, 1995; Schein, 1993; Skordoulis &amp; Dawson, 2007</p>

<p><i>Interpretive:</i> Dialogue seen as a process that can engage with and shape agents' experiences of the world, mental maps and actions through effectively understanding and engaging with each other's perspectives. In the process new ways of looking at and being in the world can emerge</p>	<p>Dialogue is a “<i>stream of meaning</i> flowing among and through us and between us ... out of which may emerge some new understanding” (Bohm, 1996: 7, emphasis in original)</p> <p>“... talk is a vehicle for communicating between organizational constituents who, through dialogue, from time to time, find or create coherent ideas or images that reconstruct their understanding of organizational reality ” (Hatch &amp; Ehrlich, 2002: 108)</p> <p>Dialogue is “a reflective conversational mode; a diagnostic moment where participants can review their existing mental models, and a generative moment where emergent mental models may be shaped” (Jacobs &amp; Heracleous, 2005: 344)</p> <p>Dialogue is a “sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience” (Isaacs, 1993: 25)</p>	<p>Beech, MacIntosh and MacLean, 2010; Bohm, 1996; Bushe &amp; Marshak, 2009; Gergen, Gergen &amp; Barrett, 2004; Gergen, McNamee &amp; Barrett 2001; Hatch &amp; Ehrlich, 2002; Isaacs, 1993; Isaacs, 2001; Jacobs &amp; Heracleous, 2005</p>
<p><i>Critical.</i> Dialogue seen as a reflexive process of exploration that can expose taken-for-granted power inequalities, social domination and institutional constraints, with the aim of activating and fostering a critical consciousness and inspiring emancipatory or resistance-oriented actions</p>	<p>“Defining dialogue provides the very closure of a subject matter that dialogue resists; however, three dialogic themes contribute a priori constructs ... (a) dialogue as generative, (b) dialogue as grounded in diversity, and (c) dialogue as critical of power” (Heath, 2007: 149)</p> <p>“Meaningful dialogue in this sense requires a critical deconstruction of ideological constraints operating on the existing consensus on interests and needs” (Kersten, 2000: 238)</p> <p>“... dialogue is seen as the genetic material for building a culture of democracy freeing people from institutional forces that limit their personal autonomy and leading to their acquisition of a collective consciousness” (Raelin, 2012: 819)</p> <p>“Dialogue must bring with it a new conceptualization of power in order to create equitable conversations in the face of knowledge differences” (Zoller, 2000: 198)</p>	<p>Hammond, Anderson &amp; Cissna, 2003; Heath, 2007; Kersten, 2000; Oswick et al, 2000; Raelin, 2008; Raelin, 2012; Zoller, 2000;</p>

**TABLE 2**

**Juxtaposing the Bohmian dialogic process with strategy as a directive practice**

<b>Parameters</b>	<b>Bohmian dialogic process</b>	<b>Strategy as directive practice</b>	<b>Dialogical tensions in open strategy</b>
Leadership of process	Participants as equals	Senior managers control resources & decision process	Tensions of power dynamics
Stakeholder participation	Everyone can in principle be included	Selected stakeholders can be included	Tensions of participation
Communication openness	Information exchange is free and unconstrained	Information exchange is bounded by confidentiality and competitiveness issues	Tensions of information transparency
Communication flows	Network-oriented communication flows	Hierarchical-oriented communication flows	Tensions of communicative integration
Structuring of process	Unstructured, free-flow of ideas	Process is designed to deliver particular outcomes by particular times	Tensions of process design
Process goals	Process does not aim to reach a decision but to develop new shared understandings	Decisions should be reached so that investments and actions can follow	Tensions of teleology



**TABLE 3**

**Dialogical tensions in Wikimedia’s open strategy process**

<b>Parameters</b>	<b>Traditional strategy process</b>	<b>Open source peer production</b>	<b>Wikimedia’s strategy process</b>	<b>Dialogical tensions in open strategy at Wikimedia</b>
Leadership of process	Top-down, transactional	Relational, emergent	Relational, emergent, with boundaries set centrally	There was facilitated open dialogue, but within “container”, aiming for particular types of outcomes
Stakeholder inclusion	Only selected internal stakeholders	Any stakeholder who wishes to participate	Any competent and sufficiently committed stakeholder	Requirement for strategic competence meant potential contributors were excluded
Communication openness	Controlled and confidential process	High levels of transparency	High levels of transparency	Pre-existing high levels of transparency and lack of requirement for confidentiality mitigated this tension
Communication flows	Mostly top down	Peer-to-peer	Peer-to-peer, top-down, bottom-up	Horizontal communications characterized by open dialogue, vertical communications guided by requirements of strategy
Structuring of process	Hierarchy	Network	Hybrid, both hierarchy & network	Network engendered open dialogue; hierarchy created instrumental guidelines
Process goals	Deliberate	Emergent	Hybrid, both deliberate and emergent	Strategy plan was created, based on broad ranging dialogical engagement and delicate negotiation of tensions