

# THE GEOMETRY OF DIALOGUE

## CHAPTER 11

### SUMMARY AND POSTSCRIPT: A SEARCH FOR AN ACTION-FACILITATING GEOMETRY OF DIALOGUE

When a person arrives in a communication class seeking to learn new skills, they arrive as a complex whole person in which the psychological, social, linguistic, and developmental aspects are infinitely intertwined. But information about communication and about these facets is divided into many separate disciplines. Developing the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model has been my way of trying to integrate under a single conceptual umbrella many of these widely varying streams of information about interpersonal communication. I have used the three diagrams in the Introduction to aid in this effort because such flow-chart-style diagrams allow an overview of a network of complex relationships, something that is very difficult to do in a straightforward narrative.

The significance of this sort of model is related to the reflexive nature of personhood and the adaptive open-endedness of human nature. So far as we know, we are the only beings in nature whose beingness is significantly determined by their picturing and understanding of their beingness. A description adds nothing to rock or a tree, whereas a life story is an important element of a fully human life. Historically, descriptions of human interaction have partly shaped what they were supposedly only to describe. (Social Darwinism is an example.) I accept the interactive, dialogical quality of our knowledge about ourselves as a higher order fact of life, like the certainty of uncertainty in human affairs.

In trying to assemble information about various aspects of human communication

into a coherent framework, I have been trying to develop a description of interpersonal cooperation that facilitates the practice of interpersonal cooperation. I was encouraged in doing this by the example Prof. Lawrence Brammer, an authority on the teaching of communication skills. Faced with the fact that there was no standard classification or grouping for the forty-seven communication skills he wanted to teach, he decided to group the skills into the categories that he thought would be most meaningful in helping people to learn them.<sup>290</sup> In a similar way, I have tried to organize hundreds of aspects of interpersonal communication into a circle of six clusters as a way of highlighting possibilities for new cooperative action.

In developing the Six Dimensions model and its associated “geometry of dialogue” I have had both teaching motivations and intellectual motivations. I have described my teaching motivations in the preceding paragraphs and throughout this study. In addition to simply wanting to be a better teacher, I became convinced, in the course of reading the works of various psychologists, of a train of inferences about human development. This five-part train of inferences, which I presented at length in chapter 3 and repeat in summary form below, is my intellectual rationale for building the Six dimensions model.

(1) If the central direction of human development is, as asserted by Kegan, a growing awareness of one’s own functioning (thoughts, feelings, actions and interactions, then patterns of thoughts, feelings, actions and interaction, then meta-patterns, etc.), and

(2) if such an awareness of one’s own functioning is, as asserted by Rogers, created by symbolization (storying, modeling, imaging, naming), and

(3) if, therefore, our development as persons is limited by the richness or poverty of our culture’s models and vocabularies of personhood and self-awareness, then

(4) it is worthwhile to try to build a *richly-elaborated, symbolic model of self-awareness, communicative action and personhood* in order to support and encourage people to make

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<sup>290</sup>Brammer, *Helping Relationship*, 22.

the essential journey of full human development.

(5) And furthermore, if the purpose of post-modern theorizing and model-building is, as asserted by Gergen, to illuminate the possibility of new modes of action,

**then**, such *symbolic models of self-awareness, communicative action and personhood* would be more helpful if envisioned from the first-person, active agent (“I’m doing this. How could I do it differently?”) perspective, and expressed in a vocabulary of healthy functioning and development (rather than a vocabulary of illness and deficit).

The gist of this argument is that, “What you can imagine more completely, you can observe more carefully, and you can therefore guide more successfully.” Guiding our interactions toward fulfillment and toward win-win solutions to problems requires a careful and compassionate observing of our interactions. And observing our interaction with others requires a rich descriptive vocabulary of what to look for. The Six Dimensions model is my effort to assemble such a vocabulary of meaningfully related concepts, a geometry of dialogue, from a wide range of the best available research and thinking about interpersonal communication and human development.

### **Postscript, 2002**

In the years since I began writing this book, I have applied many of the ideas presented here in creating a communication skill training guide now in use by many individuals and organizations. *The Seven Challenges: A Workbook and Reader About Communicating More Cooperatively* began in the preceding chapters and has since incorporated much new material. The Workbook is available free of charge as an e-book on the Internet at [www.coopcomm.org](http://www.coopcomm.org), and is also available in print from Trafford Publishers ([www.coopcomm.org/orderbook.htm](http://www.coopcomm.org/orderbook.htm)).

There are several books I would like to write that would expand on themes introduced in this volume. One would be a deeper exploration of fractal complexity. To say that interactions between people, and between families, and between organizations, and between countries, all follow similar patterns is to say that the interaction process

itself is a *fractal* pattern, like the branching of a tree or the shape of a fern. That would imply that if you can solve a problem at one level, you could apply the solution at every level. The late Carl Rogers was certainly working in that direction in his later years as he organized empathic listening seminars that brought together members of cultures in conflict, applying in the world of international relations processes developed in the world of psychotherapy. *The Seven Challenges Workbook*, mentioned above, takes a step in that direction by teaching communication skills that are understood to be equally applicable both at home and at work. I hope in my future explorations of fractal action, to make it all much more vivid, and understandable, and doable!



Fractal Fern by David Nicholls