Dialogic Interaction For Sustainability

Exploring Complexities and Factors that Shape Interactive Processes

A Qualitative Case Study in the Intentional Community of Auroville

Lisa Schwarzin

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Summary

This report accounts for a qualitative study conducted to explore complexities and factors that influence processes of dialogic interaction. ***Chapter one*** introduces the research, outlining its theoretical and societal context as set both among significant challenges of the 21st century, *and* hopeful shifts towards sustainability and transmodernity. Then, intentional communities are portrayed as prototypes for alternative societies, and dialogue is shown to hold potential for enabling groups to develop and implement such alternatives. However, honing in on the prerequisites necessary for practising dialogic interaction, we discover a gap in knowledge. The chapter then outlines briefly the empirical study conducted to address this gap, presenting its case study strategy, purpose, aim and objective, the main methodological features, and its academic and societal relevance. In ***chapter two***, a comprehensive literature review examines key characteristics of dialogue and the role of societal contexts in creating complexities that shape interaction patterns. Then, three categories of factors are shown to also influence dialogic interaction, namely personal characteristics of the participants (e.g. attitudes and competences), interaction dynamics (e.g. competition vs. empathy), and contextual factors of the interaction environment (e.g. communication tools and spatial design). Furthermore, difficulties in the process of learning to dialogue are outlined, and a theoretical framework is provided to capture the influence of complexities and factors on dialogic interaction. ***Chapter three*** moves on to consider the empirical context of the research, describing the Indian intentional community of Auroville where the case study was conducted. This includes a look at its history and vision, the development of the town and characteristics of community life, its governance and economy, and its practices that contribute towards sustainable and transmodern societal transformation. Moving on, ***chapter four*** provides a rationale for the methodology of this research, including its philosophical and ideological underpinnings, the research strategy, and triangulated methods for data collection (i.e. participant observation, ethnographic interviews, study of secondary documents, and an ethnographic diary). This chapter also explains the thematic and constant comparative analysis of data, which involved three phases during and after data collection that focussed either on inductive or deductive reasoning. In addition, the study's trustworthiness and limitations are outlined. ***Chapter five*** presents and discusses the findings of this study. First, we consider some complexities of societal processes that affect the interaction culture and inter-group conflict and collaboration in Auroville, and which warrant adopting a process- and learning-oriented perspective to dialogic interaction. Secondly, the discussion moves on to three kinds of factors that shape interaction at group gatherings: Contextual factors (spatial design, facilitation, and communication tools) are shown to affect the interaction environment in Auroville. Interpersonal factors (diversity, conflicts, and joint visions) are argued to create certain group dynamics; and personal factors (communication style, conscious awareness, and personal development) are demonstrated to influence individual dialogic interaction capacity. The chapter concludes with a modified version of the theoretical framework that attempts to capture how these factors interact along three axes of dialogic interaction. Finally, ***chapter six*** concludes this report, offering the reader some 'take-home' insights, providing some recommendations for dialogic practitioners, and suggesting directions for further study.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER THREE: EMPIRICAL CONTEXT - AUROVILLE, INDIA

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION - COMPLEXITIES AND FACTORS IN DIALOGIC INTERACTION

CHAPTER SIX: THE CHALLENGE OF DIALOGIC INTERACTION - CONCLUDING REMARKS

Figures and Tables

Preface

I remember my father telling me sometime around 1999, when I was in my final years of high school, that communication would be a good choice of study – the fact that the company he worked had recently started to bring in communication skills trainers to assist the management team had obviously made quite an impression on him. As an idealistic young woman who wanted to do something 'good' with her life, however, I could at the time not see much value in helping top-level managers in the corporate sector interact more effectively, and my academic and professional journey took me in other directions.

On this journey, I learned to see quite clearly the range of injustices our human societies are culpable of, like the exploitation inherent to neoliberal capitalism, the destruction of the natural environment, and the global imbalances in power and equity. Over time, my primary interest came to lie in doing 'my bit' to address these injustices, and in the last few years, I have become engaged with initiatives at my university that address sustainability issues, and more specifically education for sustainable development. In an interesting twist to the story, I now have to admit that my father's advice was actually quite right, as this work led me to 'discover' that certain ways of communicating and interacting can play a significant role in the quest to create more equitable, just and sustainable societies.

This insight is also reflected in the research I present here, which examined how interaction patterns are shaped through a range of 'community complexities', as well as different kinds of factors that influence a group's ability to engage in *dialogic* ways, i.e. collaboratively and with mutual respect. Here, I take the perspective that dialogic ways of interacting hold a lot of potential for the collective creation of integrative insights that is necessary to address the challenges of the 21st century in a way that encompasses and addresses their complexity.

This perspective is of course imbued with bias, and I make no claims to be acting as a detached and objective researcher – which I do not believe is possible in any case. Hence, I embrace my normative position and try to make the most of it. It is with great pleasure that I present this piece of work, and I hope you will enjoy it and find it insightful and valuable, whether you are reading it from an academic or professional angle, or simply as a citizen of this earth. I trust you will keep in mind that this study is part of a never-finished process of research, and wish that it might contain some inspiration to your own trajectory of inquiry and action. Moreover, I hope that the insights this study holds can stimulate readers to begin or continue to question and address their own ways of interacting with others, and how this affects their work, personal relationships, and contribution to making this world more sustainable.

Lisa Schwarzin
June 24th, 2011.

Acknowledgments

To Killian
I don't know what I would do without your love and support.

Before we delve into the contents of this report, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the people without whom I would not have been able to carry out this work. First of all, I thank all the residents and guests I met in the amazing and inspirational intentional community that is Auroville. I learned so much from you, and your contribution to this research is immeasurable, as your insights gave it substance, and your comments on preliminary findings were incredibly valuable. My gratefulness extends also to my mentors at Wageningen University, dr. Irena Ateljevic and prof. Arjen Wals, whose support in designing, implementing and writing up this study was very much appreciated, and whose comments were always extremely valuable.

Many thanks goes also to my family and friends, for showing both interest in my research and understanding for the limited amount of attention I afforded them during this project. My wonderful soon-to-be husband Killian deserves a medal for his unending support, especially during the hectic final weeks of writing, as he dealt patiently and lovingly with my moments of panic, helped me to plan my time, and perhaps most importantly, cooked dinner *and* did the wash-up for countless evenings in a row. The support of my mother Anke was also very much appreciated, as she looked after errands I had no time nor mind for, and continuously reminded me not to worry and try not to be so harsh a critic of my own work. My dear friend Irena deserves to be mentioned especially as well, as she was there for me when doubts came up about the trajectory of my work and life, and her wise words and affirmations helped me to gather renewed enthusiasm for my journey on the road less travelled.

Chapter One
Dialogic Interaction for Sustainability
An Introduction

In this introductory chapter, I will provide an overview of the research presented in this report. Starting with an outline of the societal and theoretical context, we will take stock of some of the pervasive challenges humanity is currently facing, and consider the emerging paradigm shift of transmodernity, as well as the rising societal concern with sustainability as beacons of hope. We will then examine how intentional communities are acting as small scale prototypes of this hopeful societal shift, and draw attention to the role of collaborative processes in enabling these communities to realise their visions of societal transformation. Then, I will show that dialogue is seen as one key interactive process here, as it promotes transformative learning and collaboration, and can be used as a tool for promoting societal change. However, I will also highlight that little is presently known about how a community's cultural, historical, and political context affects the practice of dialogic interaction, or what kind of factors support or inhibit dialogue.

Moving on to give an overview of the empirical study conducted for this research, I will then outline the case study research strategy, and state the purpose and research aim and objective. Furthermore, methodological features of the exploratory qualitative research design will be considered, including its scientific paradigm, methods for data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness. Finally, some points regarding the academic and societal relevance of this research will be discussed.

1.1 Societal and Theoretical Context

The World in Crisis – Challenges and Hope

At the beginning of the 21st century, humanity is facing significant challenges to ensure the sustainability of its own habitat. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, some 60% of ecosystems are being degraded or 'used' unsustainably (Worldwatch Institute, 2010). In 2009, 365 species were added to IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species – one per day on average (Mulrow, 2010). We keep dipping our greedy hands deeper into the earth's crust,

extracting its stores of resources. Some of what we dig up, we turn into plastic, which, on its way to forming islands in the ocean, leaves a poisonous trail. Some of our exploits, we burn, filling the atmosphere with green house gases that have set in motion a vicious circle of climate change. In 2008, CO_2 emissions from fossil fuels rose by 2%, despite high oil prices and the economic downturn (Mulrow, 2009). For this climate conundrum, it may well be out of our hands to find a 'quick fix.' The occurrence of natural disasters, 82% of which are weather-related, continues its upward trend (Low, 2009), and in the last 15 years, sea levels have risen twice as fast as compared to the previous 120 years (Mulrow and Ochs, 2010), while several major rivers are drying up and no longer reach the sea year-round (Gardner, 2009).

Despite contrary propaganda in media and politics, an overwhelming majority of climatologists agree that human abuse of the planet is causing the environmental crises (e.g. IPCC, 2007, Steffen, 2010, Weart, 2010). We are not doing ourselves any favour, of course. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, 1.2 billion people now live in water-scarce areas (Gardner, 2009), and 184 million worldwide are forced to leave their homes due to various environmental and resource pressures (Renner, 2008). These pressures and other factors have also led to a rapidly rising price of basic foodstuffs (World Health Organization, 2010), which aggravates the situation of undernourished people, whose numbers rose to 1.02 billion in 2009, which is nearly one in six people on Earth (Pappas, 2010).

But it is not only people in 'underdeveloped' countries who suffer. In the rich societies, neo-liberalist market economies have led to a sharp increase in income inequality, a shift which Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) show to be significantly correlated to rising rates of violence and crime, as well as the degradation of physical and mental health for people of all ages and at all levels of society. Humans are also capable of treating each other in horrible ways. According to the International Labour Organization, 12.3 million people worldwide are subjected to modern forms of forced labour, including sex trafficking (Andrees and Belser, 2009). How is it possible that we treat each other with such little respect and empathy? Wilkinson and Pickett argue that rising inequality leads to lower levels of trust and social cohesiveness, which in turn raises social insecurity and status anxiety, profoundly affecting the way we interact and relate to one another (2010). In other words, inequality and social competition make us more likely to exploit and mistreat each other – and we do it at all scales of society; racism, neo-liberal capitalism, neo-colonialism, fundamentalism and militarism are but a few of the symptoms of our lack of empathy.

Last but not least, we abuse ourselves, blindly accepting our place in the wheel, unable to escape the rat-race. It is estimated that 30 to 50% of people in the workforce are at risk of burnout, as increasing (neo)liberalisation and privatisation changes work cultures to become more demanding and competitive (Kulkarni, 2006). The post-modern consumer society that now

engulfs (admittedly to varying degrees) almost every corner of the earth plays its part in edging on this trend, telling us what we need, turning us into docile servants of greed (Baudrillard, 2004).

All the while, inertia prevails in the face of uncertainty. Who is responsible? What needs to be done? Who takes the first step? Should sustainable development be the foster child of business and government, or will it be a grassroots movement of concerned citizens? While we wait for these questions to be answered, we hang in the limbo; business as usual.

What a pessimistic story, one might think. And yes, it's only one side of the coin. On the flipside, our pressing contemporary problems are increasingly featured in the media, popular culture, education and politics (Smith, 2005, Lockie, 2006), raising people's awareness all over the world. Personally, I find some hope in supranational organisations like the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, and World Wildlife Fund pushing for a more just, equitable and sustainable world. I also think that the rising popularity of organic produce (Raynolds, 2004) and fair trade goods (Fridell, 2004) shows that people are becoming more aware of the implications of their consumption (Arnot et al., 2006). Other trends worth mentioning here are the rising emphasis on measures to address corporate social responsibility, even though some CSR initiatives seem to be more concerned with public profiling, rather than showing genuine concern for the environmental and social costs of 'production' (e.g. Clark, 2000). However, some initiatives also point to the emergence of more drastic shifts in our economies, as certain non-monetary systems of exchange manifest for instance in free hospitality projects such as Couch Surfing (www.couchsurfing.org), a trend which is theorised in works on the gift economy (e.g. Bergquist and Ljungberg, 2001) and caring economics (Eisler, 2007). Some more radical movements also point to hopeful changes in the way we as humans relate to our environments, including the De-growth movement (Research and Degrowth.net, 2009), and the transition town movement (Transitionnetwork.org, 2010).

It seems then, that in the worlds of policy making, civil society, research, business, education, and increasingly in the minds of 'you and me', the term sustainability has become an exhortation – although there still is much confusion about the extent of change required. From the optimists' corner, research is also detecting signs that we might still be able to collectively turn around and start walking in a brighter direction. For instance, the nascent academic discourse around transmodernity concerns itself with indicating the potentiality of an emerging societal paradigm shift towards sustainability, mutual understanding, and respectful engagement with ourselves, each other, and the world.

Glances of a Brighter Future – Transmodernity and Sustainability

This notion of transmodernity is approached by scholars from various angles. The Argentinean historical philosopher Enrique Dussel (1996, 2002, 2004, 2009) sees transmodernity as an opportunity created by de-colonialisation (and missed by the onslaught of neoliberal modernity) to begin shaping a new world order that transcends Eurocentric systems of exploitation and oppression. Another perspective is that taken by the British cultural theorist Couze Venn (2002, 2006a, 2006b), who emphasises that transmodernity would be the reinvigoration of Enlightenment ideals such as the ethical advancement of human societies towards a greater good of universal rights, respect, and mutuality. Such a return to *humanism* could, dialectically lead to and be driven by the transcendence of neoliberal capitalism and exploitative neo-colonial world systems (Venn, 2006b). For these authors, transmodernity is very much a potentiality to which entrenched exploitative social rituals pose significant challenges.

Other authors take a more enthusiastic stance by claiming that transmodernity is a new paradigm that reflects a societal shift in values and ways of engaging with the world. The Belgian futurist Marc Ghisi (2001, 2009), for instance, draws on research in social psychology and politics to argue that the emerging transmodern paradigm is characterised by a heightened planetary consciousness, and non-hierarchical and post-patriarchal structures of governance. Furthermore, he observes a re-enchantment with non-dogmatic spirituality, and a global reconciliation around a sustainable future as central to the transmodern shift, and talks about an emerging knowledge economy, in which post-capitalist modes of production and consumption take center stage. While some of these claims may sound idealistic and farfetched, it is important to note that he is drawing a picture of what a transmodern society may come to look like in a 'best-case scenario' (Ghisi, 2009), acknowledging that the shift is currently not very visible.

The Croatian human geographer Irena Ateljevic (2009, 2011 - forthcoming-a, 2011 - forthcoming-b) takes up from here, arguing that this limited visibility is at least partly due to the lack of a unified 'language' or terminology for the shift. In her work, she shows how various emerging perspectives and practices already embody elements of the transmodern paradigm, covering a broad range of social spheres and academic areas of inquiry, including politics, economics, social activism, education, social psychology, and alternative travel. As such, Ateljevic posits that the notion of transmodernity could act as an umbrella term to unite the diverse range of movements that, often unknowingly, act as catalysts of the shift towards more just, sustainable and equitable worlds.

In a nutshell, transmodernity can be defined as a slowly emerging societal paradigm shift that can potentially overcome exploitative world-systems and move towards more equality through

the promotion of worldviews based on mutuality and interconnectedness, by (re)invigorating common values and ethical principles, and through encouraging mindful and respectful (inter)action in all spheres of life.

As such, the notion of transmodernity bears similarity with the discourse of sustainability, which has penetrated from the field of scientific inquiry to the arenas of politics, economics, business, education, and civil society. Sustainability is fundamentally about reversing the destructive effects of the exploitation of ecosystems and marginalised groups. However, it can be defined in many ways, as Table 1.1 shows.

Definition of sustainability	Source
"The ability of all to live a safe, healthy and productive life in harmony with nature and local, cultural and spiritual values"	Chrisna du Plessis, South African expert on ecological worldviews and sustainable construction (2001)
"Economic growth that will benefit present and future generations without detrimentally affecting the resources or biological systems of the planet"	US President's Council for Sustainable Development (1993, cited in Seidl, 2000)
"Maintaining a delicate balance between the human need to improve lifestyles and feelings of wellbeing on one hand and preserving and enhancing natural resources and ecosystems on the other"	An American architecture bureau (SORIN Architecture, 2010)

Table 1.1: Definitions of sustainability and their proponents

It is fairly evident that these different definitions of sustainability reflect the values and agendas of the people and organisations who utter them. The term can indeed be appropriated for marketing purposes and 'greenwash', as corporations fail to address the fundamental issues of current unsustainable practices (Ihlen and Roper, 2011 in press). Hence, sustainability is essentially a question of values and worldviews. As an idealistic young woman, I wish that we could learn to appreciate each other and our planet as a precious gift that needs to be treated with care and respect. However, I understand that a farmer or producer of goods, for instance, might be tempted to laugh at my face, because it makes much more sense for some to see nature as a resource, the primary purpose of which is to secure human nutrition, livelihood and security.

Sustainability means different things to different people, and it is a fairly vague term. It is necessary to see however, that to some degree, all concepts carry a certain inevitable impreciseness, as knowledge continuously shifts, and concepts are embedded in uncertainty and complexity. Some people have actually termed this as an 'attractive vagueness' (Wals et al.,

2009), as it requires people to give their own meaning to terms depending on a particular context.

Going back to the term transmodernity, I pointed out earlier that it is fundamentally concerned with a move towards more equality. Also, I argued that sustainability is essentially about overcoming exploitative practices. Interestingly, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) draw attention to the importance of reducing inequality in our societies in order to encourage a shift towards sustainability. Based on statistical research, they argue that in more equal societies, people perceive less need for overconsumption, which is at the root of our ongoing exploitation of resources and the 'collateral damage' associated with it. In their own words, "greater equality can help us develop the public ethos and commitment to working together, which we need if we are going to solve the problems which threaten us all" (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010: 233). This further highlights the intricate link between sustainability and the transmodern paradigm shift, and shows that we cannot think of one without the other.

Intentional Communities as Prototype Societies

Of course the transformation towards more sustainable and transmodern societies takes time, a lot of experimentation, and above all patience. When I look at my immediate social surrounding and physical environment, I can see small differences compared to only a few years ago, when none of my friends were talking about sustainability, green electricity was not nearly as popular (or cheap) as it is today, and you could definitely not find organic produce in your local discounter. However, we are far from being carbon-neutral, my country's government still resists enforcing a minimum wage, and I can still 'chose' to buy cheap shoes and dresses without knowing who made them, under what conditions.

But there are places that try to be different. Since the 1940s, the world has seen the emergence of many communal living projects that attempt to experiment with unconventional forms of organising society. These projects represent a deliberate attempt to realise a common, alternative way of life outside the mainstream (Poldervaart, 2001) – although most admittedly still make use of resources and opportunities available 'on the outside', while rejecting what they can of practices they disagree with (Meijering et al., 2007). These projects are often called intentional communities, a concept which refers to a social collective that is formed on the basis of some kind of shared intention regarding its model of society and way of living together (Grundmann et al., 2006).

Often, intentional communities are located in rural areas (Meijering et al., 2007), but more recently, as the issue of sustainability is coming to the forefront of public awareness, new types of intentional communities in the form of eco-villages and transition towns are emerging in

urban areas (Ergas, 2010). Indeed, the underlying intention of a community may be inspired by a range of ideals, including spiritual reasons, ecological visions, or collaborative goals, but it usually involves a distancing from capitalist and scientific discourses, and from the associated values of individualism, consumption and materialism. Often, these communities also attempt to contribute to social change by participating in, advocating, and raising awareness for social and environmental movements (Meijering et al., 2007).

But how do these communities come to exist; how do their members find each other and join forces? What is important to consider here is the concept of 'mobilities', which draws attention to the role of various systems that play a significant role in transforming social life, as they 'enable the movement of people, ideas and information from place to place, person-to-person, event to event' (Urry, 2007: 12). Appadurai's notion of global cultural flows also deserves to be mentioned here to further illustrate the role of mobility. According to him, five 'landscapes' can be distinguished that create dynamic and fluid social interaction across global space. These are ethnoscapes, or the movement of people; technoscapes, or the spread of technology; financescapes, as in the distribution of money; mediascapes, which refer to global information networks; and ideoscapes, or the dissimulation of ideas and ideology (Appadurai, 1990).

Through mobilities and the various 'scapes', people, ideas and resources can be mobilised for a specific purpose, such as the establishment of an intentional community, the spreading of its vision, gathering members, and rallying support. Another factor that plays a role especially in the *growth* of intentional communities is the phenomenon of 'alternative' travel. Since the 1980s, the number of people who roam the world with a backpack on their shoulder and a keen lust for exploration is ever growing (Cohen, 2003), and more recently many of these travellers have taken to 'making a contribution' to the places they visit by offering their skills, insights, or manpower as volunteers (Wearing, 2001). Indeed, after the initial phase of establishment through a group of visionaries and pioneers, many intentional communities are growing in membership because they are 'discovered' by backpackers or volunteer tourists, who find such inspiration there that they decide to become community members. Most likely, these travellers' decision to stay is influenced by the kind of transformational experience often mentioned in the literature on alternative and volunteer travel. For instance, these forms of tourism are said to promote cosmopolitan and transmodern values (Ateljevic, 2009, Swain, 2009) and foster cross-cultural understanding and solidarity (Spencer, 2008, van Wijk et al., 2008, Hak-Su, 2005, Singh and Singh, 2004). Furthermore, volunteer and alternative travel can promote tolerance, goodwill and an ethos of human welfare (Lyons and Wearing, 2008, Higgins-Desbiolles and Russell-Mundine, 2008), and encourage people to develop eco-centric worldviews (Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine 2008) and engage in social movements and activism (McGehee and Santos, 2005). Hence, it is not surprising that at least some visitors to intentional communities decide to join later on.

We might say then, that the amalgamation of mobilities and global cultural flows in intentional communities creates certain 'contact zones', in which people from different geographic, cultural and personal backgrounds come together (Lie, 2003a). In these contact zones, 'liminoid', or transitory, experimental spaces are created, in which the familiar is de-familiarised (Lie, 2003b). Here, people and perspectives, individuals and ideas from different nodes on the spectrum of diversity, who would not otherwise meet, gather and create spaces of intercultural learning (Lie and Witteveen, 2009), all with the intention to work towards alternative social forms. Hence, intentional communities could be described as small group prototypes of the shift towards transmodern and sustainable societies, as they work on a small scale towards realising ways of living and structuring society (Meijering et al., 2007) that are based on equality and harmony with the environment.

A Call for Dialogue

Surely though, the fact that people simply gather to live in an intentional community and aspire to transmodern and sustainable change does not automatically bring about societal transformation. Instead, it is more likely that the members of those communities need to go through a process of individual and collective transformation if their efforts are to have lasting effects. For instance, there is quite some current research looking at the kinds of attitudes and competences needed for the transition to sustainability (e.g. Riekmann, 2011, Mochizuki and Fadeeva, 2010). However, this focus on individuals is not enough, as social transformation towards transmodernity and sustainability needs the paradigm shift to take hold at the collective level as well. While a critical mass of individuals is certainly needed, we also need to think about how these individuals interact with each other.

Here, the role of *dialogue* seems to be central. Ghisi (2001, 2009) for instance, sees dialogue as a central element of transmodernity, as the emerging paradigm provides a platform for non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal dialogue between people of different cultures, worldviews and religions. However, the relationship between dialogue and the emergence of transmodernity can best be described as dialectic. Dussel (2004: 18) sees *genuine* dialogue as a key driving force in the creation of a new world order that truly transcends the exploitative and hegemonic dynamics of Eurocentrism and (neo)colonialism, by proposing "novel and necessary answers for the anguishing challenges [...] of the twenty-first century." As a starting point for dialogue, he recommends certain 'core' philosophical questions, which he believes can serve to bridge culturally different ways of understanding universal human problems (Dussel, 2009).

The call for dialogue is not new; in fact it has been a central notion in the field of social learning and transformative education for quite some time. Prominent figures in critical pedagogy, such as Paulo Freire ([1974] 2007) and bell hooks (1994, 2003), see dialogue as central to raising

what Haigh calls planetary citizens (2008); a next generation of members of society who act as stewards of the earth and its communities. Here, a central idea is that dialogue can lead to transformative learning, which is characterised by a shift in participants' frame of reference (Mezirow, 1978) or way of knowing (Kegan, 2000), and involves 'critical reflection on the unexamined assumptions and expectations that we hold' (Gunnlaugson, 2007: 138).

But what really is dialogue? Ideally, it is an *interactive* effort of people from a range of backgrounds, who co-create novel ideas and understandings through a balanced process of reflexively examining their own and each other's assumptions and perspectives (Gunnlaugson, 2007). In this process, especially when perspectives diverge, dialogue requires an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and cooperation (van Gorder, 2007). At the same time, however, conflict needs to be allowed to arise and be dealt with in a constructive manner (Wals et al., 2009), as it can lead to transformative learning (Wilhelmson, 2006). Although the terms dialogue and dialogic interaction could be used interchangeably, it was decided to use mainly the latter in this research, because it captures more precisely that dialogue is not a static, but fluid and relational phenomenon. Based on a comprehensive literature review, which is presented in chapter two, dialogic interaction was defined for the purpose of this study as ***reflexive conversation and engagement among a heterogeneous group of people who attempt to explore a diversity of potentially incompatible perspectives in a mutually respectful, trusting and collaborative way.***

Dialogic Interaction – Gaps in Knowledge

Given how important dialogue seems to be for societal transformation towards sustainability and transmodernity, we can say that intentional communities that aspire to transmodern and sustainable change could benefit from adopting the practice of dialogic interaction. This is especially the case because a range of mobilities and cultural flows intersect in intentional communities, creating experimental spaces (Lie, 2003a) and contact zones (Lie, 2003b) for a great diversity of people. However, we cannot assume that dialogic interaction would emerge 'naturally' in intentional communities, as their members can be assumed to be just as prone to non-dialogic human interaction patterns as other people. Certainly, our ingrained tendencies towards aggressive defending of beliefs (Dessel and Rogge, 2008), marginalisation of minority perspectives (Putnam, 2001), and intercultural misunderstandings (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995) may stir some doubt regarding the extent to which dialogic interaction is really possible in practice.

As the literature review in chapter two will make more clear, it is difficult to find theoretical accounts of dialogue that make barriers or prerequisites to this way of interacting explicit, and there is also little knowledge available on the role of a community's cultural, historical, and

political context in encouraging or inhibiting dialogic interaction. Furthermore, authors rarely venture into a consideration of power imbalances that may affect the way people relate to each other, especially when groups are highly heterogeneous and may include participants from both dominant and marginalised backgrounds.

So far, it seems as though there has been no comprehensive review of factors that influence dialogic interaction, which is why this research focussed on generating insights on how the practice of dialogic interaction is shaped. In Figure 1.1, the relationship between the key concepts that frame this research are summarised in a conceptual map: This research is set within a context of the emerging societal shift towards sustainability and transmodernity, in which intentional communities may act as experimental fields, aided by the catalytic role of mobilities and cultural flows. The focus of this study, however, is on the practice of dialogic interaction, as this may play a significant role in fostering the transformative aims of these prototype communities.

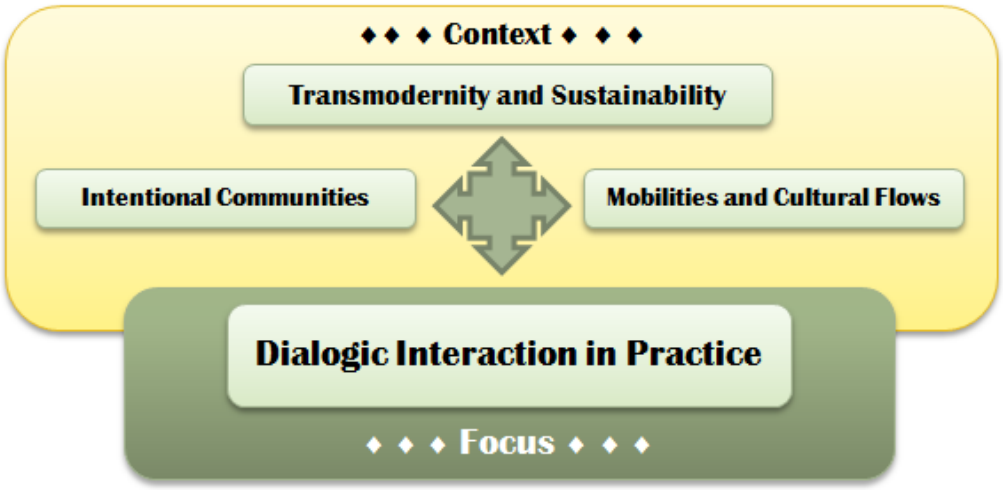


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Map

1.2 Parameters of this Research

While the methodology of this research is described in detail in chapter four, this section outlines the empirical investigation that was part of this study, in order to provide the reader with an overview of what to expect. We will look briefly at the research strategy employed, state the purpose, aim and objective of the study, examine the main methodological characteristics, and draw attention to the academic and societal relevance of this research.

Research Strategy, Purpose, & Research Aim and Objective

Given the above mentioned gaps in knowledge, an exploratory qualitative design was selected for this research, in which (dialogic) interaction processes could be observed in a naturalistic setting under the consideration of the broader context of interaction (Yin, 2003). Hence, a case study was chosen as overarching research strategy, and the intentional community of Auroville in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu was selected as the case.

The choice fell on Auroville since an opportunity to visit the community presented itself , and because it is a highly diverse community that includes people from various cultural, geographic and professional backgrounds. Furthermore, collaboration and intercultural understanding are central aspects of the community's vision (Auroville.org, no date-s), so that it could be assumed that at least some effort to interact dialogically would exist. Chapter three will provide a detailed description of Auroville as an intentional community; here, it suffices to mention only its key characteristics. Auroville is a community of around 2200 people from 49 different countries, which was established by the French spiritual leader Mirra Alfassa and the Indian sage Sri Aurobindo (Auroville.org, no date-q). The vision of the community is to act as "the bridge between the past and the future" by engaging in experimental research and practices to foster collaboration, human unity, and unending education (Auroville.org, no date-i). This involves spiritual practice to transcend egotistic patterns of the mind, as well as the development of sustainable living technologies, all with the intention to meet the present and future "cultural, environmental, social and spiritual needs of mankind" (Auroville.org, no date-c). Auroville has also been internationally recognised by UNESCO as an "international cultural township designed to bring together the values of different cultures and civilisations in a harmonious environment"(Auroville.org, 2010b).

As this research was centrally concerned with dialogic interaction, the PURPOSE of the case study conducted in Auroville was ***to explore how (dialogic) interaction patterns amongst Aurovillians are shaped***.

To address this purpose, the OVERALL RESEARCH AIM was ***to explore the complexities of practicing dialogic interaction that arise from the historical, cultural and political context of Auroville.***

Alongside this consideration of macro-level community processes, this research also addressed a more micro-level RESEARCH OBJECTIVE , which was ***to identify factors that inhibit and support the practice of dialogic interaction at group gatherings in Auroville.***

Methodology

The exploratory qualitative nature of this study warrants a hybrid research paradigm that borrows aspects from constructivism and critical theory. This approach was chosen because it emphasises the role of subjective experience as well as intersubjective cultural processes, and because it endeavours to tease out hidden meanings by analysing social practices, roles, and institutions and their (implicit) connotations and contradictions (Hemingway, 1999).

To this aim, a data collection strategy based on ethnographic participant observation was used, including techniques such as direct observation of interaction processes, and in-depth informal unstructured interviews with community members (Cole, 2005). Furthermore, secondary documents were studied to reveal recorded observations of interaction processes (Stake, 2005), and an ethnographic diary was used to record ongoing observations (Lindlof, 1995). To record data, process notes were taken during or after observations, and interviews were audio-recorded when this was deemed appropriate. Insights from secondary documents were recorded in the ethnographic diary.

Data analysis began already during the process of data collection and extended into the writing phase. Furthermore, a mixture of thematic analysis (Creswell, 2009) and constant comparative analysis (Jennings, 2005) was employed, which involved reading and re-reading all the recorded material, organising it according to similar topics, and coding for emerging themes and descriptions (Creswell, 2009). In several phases of analysis, codes were continuously interrelated and compared, first inductively, and then deductively by using the theoretical framework developed in the literature review as a guide. Through this process, certain theoretical abstractions emerged, which were used to modify the theoretical framework in a way that captures the findings of this study.

The Trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced by comparing data from various sources through careful and continuous checking of field notes and transcripts, and a code book was used to record the definition of codes and avoid a drift in their meaning, building a coherent justification for emerging themes (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, preliminary findings were discussed with respondents and a fellow researcher (Stenhouse, 1975, Cole, 2005), and I wrote diary-style reflections on the research process and concerns regarding researcher bias (Cole, 2005).

Academic and Societal Relevance

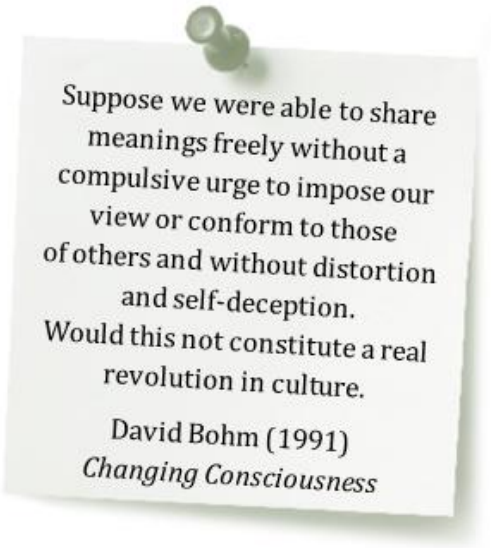
This study moves the scholarly consideration of the role of dialogue in bringing about transmodern and sustainable social change from a mostly idealistic to a more applied debate by advancing knowledge on how to create conditions for dialogic interaction. Furthermore, a

framework will be proposed that could be used to guide further research and academic discussion.

Moreover, the findings of this research also carry societal relevance. As dialogic interaction has the potential to facilitate processes of finding integrative solutions to the pressing challenges of our time, a better understanding of factors that promote and obstruct dialogic interaction processes can be considered of high importance for promoting the shift towards more sustainable and transmodern societies.

Furthermore, the insights gained in this study may be useful for assisting facilitators of interactive processes in enabling participants to practice dialogic interaction. For instance, this may be relevant to communities, professionals or activists who wish to improve their interaction culture by making it more focussed on mutual learning and collaboration. In the field of education, the transformative potential of dialogue also carries great promises for developing innovative teaching methodology that can stimulate personal transformation in learners. As such dialogic interaction can contribute significantly to the agenda of education for sustainable development.

Chapter Two
Insights from the Literature



Outlining the context of this thesis in the preceding chapter, I have argued that our global society faces immense challenges to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy a safe, happy and prosperous life in harmony with a healthy planet. However, against this backdrop we can also detect many hopeful signs of change, as a preoccupation with sustainability is slowly making its way to the forefront of public life and political discourse (Ghisi, 2009, Lockie, 2006, Smith, 2005). In the mainstream, the shift towards sustainable and transmodern ways to organise our societies is still only visible incidentally; however, many prototype collectives exist in the form of intentional communities, which attempt to put alternative visions of society into practice at a small scale (Meijering et al., 2007, Poldervaart, 2001). Nevertheless, these intentional communities are certainly not immune to the 'mainstream' difficulties of life, and their idealistic visions of transforming society are often met by harsh realities and pragmatic problems (Sargisson and Sargent, 2004). In this context, I argued that in their aim to develop alternative societal forms, intentional communities could benefit from adopting the practice of dialogic interaction – a way of relating that is based on mutual support and aims to integrate diverse perspectives.

As the notion of dialogic interaction was at the focus of this research, one aspect of this study was to establish a comprehensive overview of existing insights on this topic. To this aim, a literature review was conducted, for which relevant books and academic articles were gathered through a combination of purposive search and happenstance. As a starting point, I was already aware of a range of literature on dialogue and its societal relevance through previous research on the topic of transformative learning and critical pedagogy. From these sources, more relevant literature could be identified through a 'snowball' technique, and other works were recommended to me by my mentors, colleagues, friends, as well as some of the people I talked to in Auroville. In addition to this relatively unstructured approach to finding relevant literature, I conducted a more strategic search on the *Scopus* database and the library catalogue of my university, using combinations of keywords such as 'dialog*'; 'practic*'; 'interact*'; 'communic*'; 'learning'; 'transform*'; 'conflict'; 'model'; 'framework'; 'stage*'; etc. This enabled

me to find a range of review articles, empirical studies, as well as books from various academic fields relevant to dialogic interaction.

Here, it needs to be acknowledged of course that no literature review can ever be complete – however, I believe that the insights from the literature presented in this chapter can provide quite a comprehensive overview of the concept of dialogic interaction, its link to theories of social change, and the insights available regarding its practice. First, I will show that societal change requires shifts at the individual and collective level and necessitate processes of social learning and personal transformation. Reviewing the literature from various fields, I will then show that dialogue is considered a key catalyst for creating these individual and collective shifts, both from the perspective of Western philosophy and contemporary theories of social and transformative learning, and also according to emancipatory discourses on philosophy and critical pedagogy that have their roots in 'Southern' former colonised countries. However, it will also be acknowledged that dialogue can also serve lesser purposes.

In the second part of this review, we will consider in more detail the main characteristics of dialogic interaction, how it emerges, and who needs to be involved. Here, I will first draw attention to an apparent paradox between the need for calmly flowing conversation (Scharmer, 2009) and respect and regard for other participants (Buber, 1964) on the one hand, and the role of conflict and opposition in stimulating transformative insights on the other (Gadotti, 1996, Putnam, 2001). However, we will see that what counts is that conflict is addressed in a mutually supportive way through critical yet respectful questioning of perspectives (Rule, 2004). Furthermore, we will examine how dialogue emerges when conversation passes through a range of more or less dialogic conversation modes (Scharmer, 2009, Senge, 1994), and discuss some practices that can trigger a group to move into dialogic interaction (Bohm, 1996, Bronn and Bronn, 2003, Gunnlaugson, 2007). Moving on, I will argue that while dialogue needs to involve participants from a diversity of backgrounds (Ateljevic, 2009, Dussel, 2004), we cannot ignore the difference in power and status that come with heterogeneity and are likely to affect (dialogic) interaction (Heath et al., 2006, Flick, 1998).

We will also briefly consider the differences between face-to-face and ICT mediated dialogic interaction, and then move on to the third part of this literature review, where we discuss barriers and prerequisites for dialogic interaction. Here, I will first draw attention to the importance of considering the complexities that emerge from a community's specific historical, political and cultural context and affect dialogic interaction (Rule, 2004, Roper et al., 2004, Burton and Dimbleby, 1995). Then, we will examine in turn three categories of factors that prevent or foster dialogue in small groups; namely personal characteristics of participants, interaction dynamics in the group, and contextual factors of the interaction environment.

The review of personal characteristics will address the necessity for certain attitudes in fostering dialogue (O'Hara, 2003), and discuss the role of different communication styles and a range of competences necessary for dialogic interaction (Bohm, 1980, Baraldi, 2006, Wilhelmson, 2006, Scharmer, 2009, Wals and Blewitt, 2010). Acknowledging that the attitudes and competences needed for dialogic interaction might be difficult to attain, I will also argue that becoming a dialogic practitioner requires a certain degree of personal and spiritual growth (Martin, 2005, Prewitt, 2011).

We will then turn to a consideration of interaction dynamics that impact on dialogue, starting with an excursion on the pervasiveness of certain human tendencies for aggressiveness (Dessel and Rogge, 2008), marginalisation (Putnam, 2001) and misunderstandings (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995). However, will also be emphasised that these destructive forces are counterbalanced by a natural inclination towards harmony and empathy (Hamburg, 1998, Zeldin, 2000). Moreover, we will see that groups can learn to overcome destructive tendencies as they mature over time (Kell and Corts, 1980, Burton and Dimbleby, 1995).

Moving on to contextual factors, we will consider different kinds of intention that may underlie dialogic interaction (Heath et al., 2006), and review the central role of facilitation in practising dialogue (Roper et al., 2004, Ellinor and Gerard, 1998). Furthermore, we will examine how the physical environment can be designed to facilitate dialogue (Wang, 2009, Owen, 1997, Prewitt, 2011) through the creation of a hospitable space that fosters creative and integrative thinking (Brown, 2002, McCoy and Evans, 2002). Lastly, a range of useful communication tools for small and large group gatherings will be reviewed (Owen, 1997, Brown, 2002, Rosenberg, 2003, Gerard, 2005, Wang, 2009).

In a fourth section of this chapter, we will then highlight some gaps between theory and practice, arguing that it is difficult to 'walk the talk' of dialogic interaction. Here, we consider a range of cultural and psycho-social complexities, including the role of dominance and power differences (Wilhelmson, 2006), conformity (Zorn et al., 2006), and ingrained patterns of beliefs and behaviours (Martin, 2005). However, I will also argue that such difficulties can be overcome as groups mature while going through a process of learning to practise dialogic interaction (Kell and Corts, 1980). Finally, I will provide a theoretical framework to summarise and capture the insights of the literature review.

2.1 Dialogue and the Transformation of Society

The shift towards sustainability and transmodernity requires transformations at the individual and collective level. The notion of a *paradigm shift,* which is put forward in the literature on transmodernity, highlights the importance of change at the individual level of worldview that is essential for shifts in social and societal systems to be lasting and sustainable. In other words, it

draws attention to the fact that a sustainable society "starts between the ears" (Wals 2011, personal communication), as individuals adopt attitudes, worldviews and practices that reflect a concern and willingness to care for the planet and its inhabitants. People also need a range of competences to advance the shift towards sustainability, such as interdisciplinary thinking, action competence (Mochizuki and Fadeeva, 2010), collaboration, empathy, intercultural skills, and critical, connective and anticipatory thinking (Riekmann, 2011).

However, individuals don't operate in isolation. Intersubjective experiences of ordinary members of society are the key building blocks of the social world, as common understandings derive from endless refining of expectations, norms and common sense through social interaction (Cuff et al., 1990). Symbolic interactionism, the study of how the self and social environment mutually define and shape each other through symbolic communication, bears a strong relation with the philosophy of pragmatism, which holds that reality is indeterminate and in constant transformation, as definitions are negotiated amongst social agents (Lindlof, 1995). According to the founder of symbolic interactionism, George Herbert Mead (1934), the self is determined largely by others, and the continuing dialectic between the two is what brings about changes in society itself. This dialectic is manifested in face-to-face interaction, in which 'talk' is the means by which people construct their own realities (Lindlof, 1995).

Conversations matter. To the British historian Theodore Zeldin (2000: 14), "conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought." Talking about the powerful impact people's conversations had during the times of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity, he calls for a 'new conversation' that may enable us to find the way out of the seemingly insoluble problems of our times. In this 'new conversation', new ways of understanding can be developed in interplay between individual and collective transcendence of perspectives. In this way, each person shifts their view in a direction that is more shared through a process of hearing, differentiating and integrating multiple voices in a process of dialogic interaction (Wilhelmson, 2006).

Indeed, this notion of dialogue is seen in many fields as a catalyst for new understanding, insight and action (Martin, 2005), and for bringing about individual and collective shifts in mindset, behaviour and organisation. As Rule (2004) puts it, dialogue is a socially situated transformative interactive practice that allows participants to expand the horizon of their perspectives and travel together into uncharted lands. Dialogue is often described as stimulating a 'reordering of knowledge' (Isaacs, 1999), or fundamental changes in individual and collective thinking, and is advocated as a means of raising awareness, encouraging collaboration, and enhancing actions (Roper et al., 2004).

As Rule (2004) explains, in Western philosophical traditions and Latin American emancipatory discourses on philosophy and critical pedagogy, dialogue takes center stage. Works such as Plato's Socratic dialogues, Martin Buber's 'life of dialogue' and Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action are of mention here, as well as Paulo Freire's dialogical education, and Moacir Gadotti's dialectic of dialogue. In the latter part of the 20th century, the call for dialogue became a core part of the social imaginary and a beacon of hope in confronting the challenges of a new era (Heath et al., 2006). In Europe, for instance, intercultural dialogue became one of the key focal areas of the European Union in its quest for establishing peace on the continent. As a report published by the European Communities states, "intercultural dialogue can be a means by which citizens can learn to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world, developing a sense of community and belonging (Schäfer et al., 2007: 95). Furthermore, dialogue is often used in international conflict resolution and peace processes (Dessel and Rogge, 2008).

Jürgen Habermas (1972: 314), the German 20th century sociologist and philosopher, used the term dialogue in a broad sense as a characteristic of an "emancipated society where members' autonomy and responsibility has been realized". However, the American theologian Knitter (cited in Swidler et al., 1990: 34) sees dialogue rather as a *tool* to be used in efforts "to liberate ourselves or others or our planet from whatever form of oppression we agree to be pressing in our immediate context."

This position resonates also with the Brazilian thinkers Paolo Freire ([1970] 2000, [1974] 2007) and Moacir Gadotti (1996). Reviewing Freire's work on dialogue as a call to social action, Singh (2008) defines dialogue as conversations based on dialectical reasoning that enable participants to not only understand, but transform their world and its meaning. According to Rule (2004), these dialogic conversations involve action and reflection, and Gadotti (1996) adds a further layer, emphasising the productive role of conflict within dialogue for driving personal and collective transformation.

This notion of conflict in interactive encounters is also central to the field of social learning for sustainable development. Social learning is an educational approach that assumes that 'we can learn more from each other if we do not all think alike or act alike' and that emphasises collective meaning making (Wals et al., 2009: 11). Essentially, it emphasises the need to bring together people with a variety of perspectives to co-create novel and innovative solutions to the challenges of our time (Wals et al., 2009). When people who are different from each other interact and are exposed to alternative ways of knowing and doing, conflict, disruptions and dissonance emerge, which have long been shown to play a key role in learning and perspective transformation (Berlyne, 1965, Festinger, 1957, Piaget, 1964). In his book *Critical Transitions in Nature and Society*, ecologist Marten Scheffer (2009) refers to the role of 'tipping points' in

creating drastic shifts in ecosystems, and points out that this can also be the case in human societies, for instance in terms of the recent crash in stock markets. In the context of social learning, we can draw the analogy here of a tipping point in thinking: When dissonance is introduced carefully and dealt with in a proactive and reflective manner, it can lead participants to re-consider their views and adopt or co-create new ways of looking at a particular issue. Such tipping points appear necessary in order to generate new thinking that can unblock patterns of mind and break with entrenched systems and routines (Schwarzin et al., 2011 forthcoming).

However, the role of conflict in stimulating social (and dialogic) learning is by no means straightforward. Too much conflict may result in group participants 'blocking' interaction, as their 'comfort zone' is breached, while too little of it is just as likely to prevent any significant learning from happening. The trick seems to be to "learn on the edge of people's individual comfort zones with regard to dissonance: if the process takes place too far outside of this zone, dissonance will not be constructive." If facilitators of interactive processes manage to strike a balance between comfort and tension, creating 'optimal dissonance' by skilfully stretching comfort zones as needed (Wals, 2010: 27), transformative disruptions can occur that push participants away from the 'comforting bubbles' of their own (potentially privileged) position and perspective, and challenge them to view the world from the vantage point of (perhaps marginalised) others (van Gorder, 2007: 38). This can not only lead to shared understanding, but also to the development of relationships based on cooperation and mutual respect (van Groder, 2007), and hence, such learning experiences can be seen as "microcosmic instances of dialogue between the past and the future regarding the nature of society" (Rule, 2004: 325).

The field of transformative pedagogy concerns itself with learning processes that stimulate social change, and here, the call for dialogue is also a central notion. Prominent writers such as Paolo Freire ([1974] 2007) and bell hooks (1994, 2003), see dialogue as central to raising what Haigh (2008) calls planetary citizens; a next generation of societal actors who act as stewards of the earth and its communities. Transformative learning emphasises the role of shifts in participants' frame of reference (Mezirow, 1978) or way of knowing (Kegan, 2000), so that they become increasingly capable of moving from 'either/or' to 'both/and' thinking (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998). Importantly, this process of shifting mindsets involves questioning and reflecting critically on one's own and others' unexamined assumptions and expectations (Gunnlaugson, 2007, Bokeno and Gantt, 2000).

Wilhelmson (2006) identifies three modes of perspective change that occur in transformative learning through dialogue. These are firstly, *broadening within a perspective*, in which participants merely assimilate others' statements into their own view, and secondly, *shifting between perspectives* can occur, which means that a transformative disruption leads to taking on

another perspective. Thirdly, *transcending of perspectives* is possible when participants develop a qualitatively new understanding by looking at their own viewpoint as 'just one' perspective.

Furthermore, she argues that collective transformative learning can be defined as "an active and explicit transmutation that forges several different perspectives into a new alloy of knowledge." In this interactive process, participants revise their assumptions and contribute to developing shared understanding through a synergy effect between mutually adapted perspectives. This shows how closely related transformative learning is to social learning, especially as a prerequisite for this synergetic process is that "people agree to disagree (i.e., that all perspectives are equally considered to be real and true)" (Wilhelmson, 2006: 254).

From the field of communication studies comes yet another discourse on dialogue as a stimulant of social change. Baraldi (2006: 63) states that dialogue and intercultural learning are some of the "key concepts used to identify a new form of transcultural communication in order to defeat ethnocentrism and create the conditions for a multicultural society." In this context, he writes about transcultural communication as a paradox, which implies at the same time a modernist quest for unification in a shared 'new' culture, *and* a (postmodern) emphasis for conserving diversity.

> "In this way, a transcultural form of communication aims to create a new, harmonized and coherent culture of respect and reciprocity, adopting cultural forms that have value in the functionally differentiated society, such as openness, dialogue, learning, adaptation, conjunction, personalized identity and understanding" (Baraldi, 2006: 64).

Hence, through a process of synergetic sharing of perspectives and engaging with transformative disruptions, the experience of dialogic interaction has the potential to transform social life by creating new intersubjective realities and ways of looking at pervasive issues, which, over time, take part in shaping societal and world order. As Martin (2005) would put it, dialogue can create a 'new story' that, if translated into all spheres of life – mythical, theological, ethical, educational, commercial – has the power to redefine our social institutions.

Intermezzo – Dialogue as Inherently Good?

But can we really assume that dialogue always leads to improved mutual understanding and collaborative engagement in shaping a 'better' world? We cannot know who will use dialogue to what purpose – it is naive to assume that only people with good intentions would embark on the dialogic journey. We need to be wary of the idealistic 'ring' the word dialogue has to it, as the term can also be used to mask 'consultative' intentions when certain participants have predetermined outcomes in mind (Heath et al., 2006). In this context, Bendell (2003: 57-8)

speaks of eight intention levels of dialogue, including "dialogue as manipulation" on the lower range, and "dialogue as partnership" and "dialogue as democracy" as more pro-social forms of motivation. In other words, the intention with which dialogue is used may range from a sincere will for mutual engagement with others, to an attempt to control and manipulate, depending on "the larger social, cultural, historical, economic and political context in which dialogue is embedded" (Roper et al., 2004: 13).

And even if dialogue is practiced in a genuine effort to come to novel understandings and innovative approaches, these attempts might be situated in a context that has nothing to do with changing the fundamental assumptions and principles upon which capitalist-consumerist societies and neo-liberal exploitative practices are based. Indeed, communication and leadership practices that use dialogue are quite popular among communication trainers who work with commercial businesses. Here, the intention is to create more innovative, effective, and collaborative teamwork environments (Roper et al., 2004), while the ultimate aim of dialogic practice is to increase profits. For example Bill Joiner, co-founder of an American consultancy, has published several texts on improving business outcomes through dialogic communication and leadership (e.g. Joiner, 2002, Joiner and Joseph, 2007).

Another point to consider is that dialogue is not necessarily suited to all kinds of settings. When the purpose is to divulge large amounts of information, or to find solutions to an issue of emergency, attempts at dialogic interaction might lead to confusion or frustration. Similarly, in situations that require effective and efficient leadership, dialogue might not be a strategy of choice – sometimes, people actually prefer to be told what to do. It is important to keep in mind that most forms of interaction and communication have certain merits – provided they are not harmful or hurtful to any participants. At the same time, they all have pitfalls, too. When groups attempt to practice dialogic interaction, for instance, it is not too difficult to imagine that at a certain point, participants may reach a level of 'dialogue fatigue' or 'saturation' (Wals, 2011 – personal communication), especially when the exchange of different perspectives does not lead to much integrative insight.

However, even though dialogue can be 'misappropriated' for manipulative or strategic causes, and in spite of dialogic interaction not always being the 'right' choice for a particular group's purpose, we should not abandon the concept in theory or praxis. On the contrary, its *potential* for individual and collective transformation clearly makes it attractive for more idealistic and radical work. We will therefore now take a closer look at what dialogue is and how it emerges.

2.2 The What, How, and Who of Dialogic Interaction

Etymologically, the Greek word *dialogos* is a composite of *dia* - meaning 'through', 'between', or 'across' – and *logos*, which can translate as 'the meaning of the word' or as a kind of 'speech-

thought' that is conceived individually or collectively (Jenlink and Banathy, 2005). The mental image that is evoked by this derivation is a "stream of meaning" that flows through and between participants engaged in dialogue, from which new understanding may emerge (Bohm, 1996: 6).

Dialogue then, is a kind of 'focussed interaction' (Goffman, 1963), in which participants are "giving full attention to each other and develop a relationship built on verbal and non-verbal exchanges" (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995: 90). Buber for instance understands dialogue as a way of being, in which "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular beings and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between him [*sic*] and them" (Buber, 1964: 37).

This however could apply to many forms of conversation, even to casual chat between friends. For the purpose of this research, we need to consider additional aspects of dialogue that are emphasised in other works. Dialogue in the Socratic tradition already aimed at creating shared understanding, through what Rule (2004) calls a subversive or critical questioning of established perspectives that reveals inconsistencies. This historical notion of dialogue was however not so much concerned with conversational 'quality'; today, on the other hand, it is often emphasised that dialogue requires an atmosphere of trust and safety (van Gorder, 2007), and is characterised by a certain calmness and sense of mutual respect. Scharmer (2009: 274), for instance, holds that dialogue is about a "deep, calm flow of conversation" that is characterised by "directness, subtlety, and intimacy" and a "heart-to-heart connection and collectively felt presence", as well as open and appreciative inquiry, and listening with an open mind and heart.

Yet, we need to remember that participants probably don't share the same perspectives and normative expectations (Baraldi, 2006), as some level of heterogeneity is present in most groups. So we might wonder how a group of participants, who might disagree profoundly with each others' views, can reach this 'heart-to-heart connection' Scharmer (2009) speaks about. Isn't it much more likely for debate and conflict to occur in a context of a diversity of opinions? While this tension between mutual connection and conflict might seem paradoxical at first, let us recall that some consider conflict to be an integral part of dialogic interaction because of its potential for stimulating personal and collective transformation (Gadotti, 1996). The crux is *how* conflict is dealt with. If it leads to heated debate it is likely to serve only to further ingrain individually held views. However, conflict can play a more enlightening role if it is addressed as 'oppositional discourse', in which participants embrace tensions between different positions and seek to uncover and probe paradoxes and contradictions while respecting their integrity as knowledge claims (Putnam, 2001). Of course it might not always be easy to deal with conflict constructively, and we need not despair if we fail on occasion; if we view dialogic interaction as

a learning *system*, it becomes easier to understand that phases of crisis and instability may alternate with periods of calm and collected engagement (Hurst, 1995).

We should now be getting a 'feel' for dialogue. It is a kind of group conversation that is characterised by mutuality and respectful engagement with each other, as well as open and reflective inquiry into contrasting views, and exposing and negotiating paradoxes and conflicts. However, to understand how dialogue emerges, it is helpful to consider a range of different modes of conversations. Senge (1994) for instance talks about communication ranging from raw debate to polite discussion, to skilful discussion and finally to dialogue, with the difference between the latter two having mainly to do with intention. In skilful discussion, participants strive towards decision making and action taking, while in dialogue, the focus is on generative exploration and creative thinking. Moreover, as Burson (2002: 26) explains, "if one is moving toward dialogue, use of skilful discussion can be understood as a necessary step. […] Skilful discussion methods may serve as a fallback or safe haven when the journey toward generative dialogue is stalled."

Another model of how conversations evolve is Scharmer's (2009) matrix of group interaction. He argues that conversations themselves can be seen as living entities that can move from lesser to higher developed stages. These stages or modes are depicted in Figure 2.1.

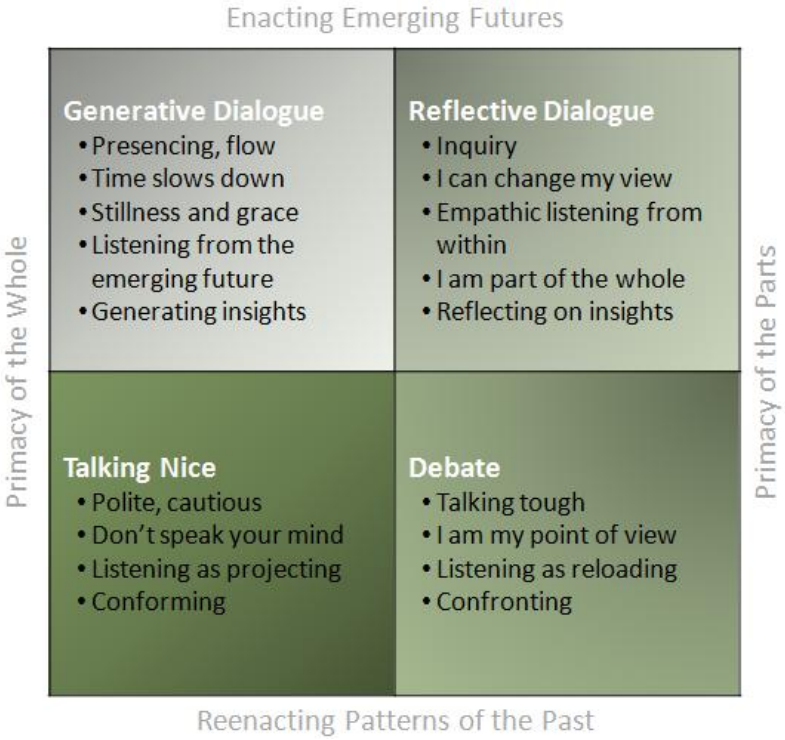


Figure 2.1: Four modes of group conversations – adapted with modifications from Scharmer (2009: 274) and Gunnlaugson (2007: 140).

The first two modes are unreflective and serve only to re-enact established patterns; these are *talking nice*, i.e. polite and cautious chat; and debate, or *talking tough*. While one might argue that debate and discussion can also lead to a potentially fruitful exchange of views, the results achieved through this mode of conversation are usually not integrative, but marginalise certain perspectives while imbuing others with power. The word 'debate' in Latin means to 'beat down' (*de-battere*), and "discussion rhymes with percussion and concussion – acts of force or violence. The purpose of a discussion is to make a point, convince others, or win a verbal battle. Discussions are combative" (Prewitt, 2011: 191).

Mode three and four in the upper row of Scharmer's (2009) model characterise conversations that are capable of enacting emerging futures. The third mode is *reflective dialogue*, and refers to a type of conversation in which participants safely inquire into each other's assumptions, and the fourth mode is *generative dialogue,* a rare type of highly attentive group engagement in generative flow and co-creation towards an emerging collective goal. In this mode of generative dialogue, new knowledge creation is not built on existing insights, but built from moment-to-moment attention to what is emerging in the group (Gunnlaugson, 2007). Furthermore, the experiential quality of interaction is intensified to a sense of timelessness or communion, which can have spiritual connotations and lead to deep bonding among participants as well as significant accomplishments towards the group's goals (Scharmer, 2009).

"Dialogue […] is about truly listening from the heart and taking in the meaning and intent of others" (Prewitt, 2011: 191), and according to Gunnlaugson (2007), both dialogic modes at the top row of the matrix offer ideal opportunities for transformative interaction to occur. And to underline again the importance of dialogue to the sustainability and transmodernity trajectory, I quote Scharmer (2009: 275) when he states that "the higher the complexity of a given challenge, the greater the need to broaden one's conversational repertoire and learn how to operate from [higher] fields of conversational emergence."

But how do we move to the dialogic fields of interaction in which we can access our collective intelligence (Scharmer, 2009)? Figure 2.1 gives some clues already; empathic inquiry, reflection and openness are some key practices, as well as collective co-creation and attention to what is emerging in the group. Let us now look in some more detail at the practices that underlie dialogic interaction.

First of all, we can highlight again that dialogue emerges when participants speak from the heart and are ready to listen with intention (Heath et al., 2006). In addition, Bronn and Bronn (2003) mention three central practices to dialogue; inquiry, advocacy and reflection. Inquiry refers to the exploration of a diversity of perspectives, assumptions and interpretations, and involves "asking clarifying questions, paraphrasing another's ideas to show your comprehension, sharing examples and asking probing questions to further develop an understanding of diverse

positions and rationalities" (Roper et al., 2004: 15). Inquiry, however, needs to be balanced with advocacy, which is about voicing ideas explicitly and providing reasoning to support them (Bronn and Bronn, 2003). This means that participants speak when they feel moved to do so, and provide examples as well as concrete facts, but acknowledge and respect others and their ways of knowing and being as well (Roper et al., 2004).

To be able to achieve this balance, reflection is critical, as it can "make the participant more aware of his or her own thinking and reasoning processes." Firstly, reflection requires slowing down thought processes, and differentiating between one's interpretations and the actual facts and observations that underlie them. Then clarification and agreement needs to be sought on what are relevant 'data', arriving at more shared interpretations (Bronn and Bronn, 2003: 299). Furthermore, in this reflective practice of inquiry and advocacy, silence is an important factor. "By learning how to work with silence, we can identify reactive patterns, generate new ideas, perceive common ground, and gain sensitivity to subtle meanings" (April, 1999: 235). Practically, this means pausing before speaking, refraining from interrupting others, and suspending our tendency to judge (Roper et al., 2004). Indeed, suspension is seen as a key factor in dialogue, and it refers to the ability to be(come) conscious of and identify less with tacit assumptions, habits of mind and points of view (Bohm, 1996). This requires reducing the pace of conventional discourse to listen empathically, and to respond to feelings, intuitions, and shifts in group dynamics (Gunnlaugson, 2007).

Interestingly, it seems as though moving between more or less dialogic fields of interaction is actually a phenomenon experienced by groups as a whole, which can be triggered by relatively innocuous events or shifts in behaviour of individual participants (Scharmer, 2009). For instance, certain conversational practices, such as summarising ideas, or asking for new contributions, can shift a group's interactive field towards generative, or 'mature' dialogue (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995: 227). These conversational practices are summarised in Table 2.1, together with some examples of statements and behavioural expressions.

Although some of the statements in the Table below could be criticised for being a little 'directive' – for instance it might be better to say 'I would suggest doing X.' instead of 'Then why don't we do X?' – we can say that they might indeed be useful in stimulating more collaborative interaction. However, care needs to be taken not to view their role in too simplistic a manner. As will become more clear later on in this review, many other factors play a role in fostering or inhibiting dialogic interaction, and the emergence of dialogue cannot be put down *only* to a person in the group uttering a specific statement.

Conversational practice conducive to dialogue	Example of statement (and behaviour)
To offer information and ideas	How would it be if we did X?
To develop ideas and information, recognising the worth of other's ideas	That's good. And we could do X (leaning forward into group).
To evaluate ideas and information	So how would that work in practice?
To ask for others' contributions or evaluation	So what do you think about X (holding a direct gaze)
To summarise ideas and opinions	So what we seem to be saying is X. Is that right?
To suggest courses of action	Then why don't we do X? (looking around the group)
To praise and recognise others' contributions	That's a really good idea! (smile and direct gaze)
To offer supportive action	All right. Well, I'll take care of X
To offer humour	(making a joke about a problem, using laughter)

Table 2.1: Conversational practices conducive to mature dialogue – adapted from: Burton & Dimbleby (1995: 227).

Moving on though, another vital question along with how to generate dialogue, is who needs to be involved in it. In general, it is important that dialogic interaction regarding a specific topic includes as many stakeholders as possible *directly* (rather than as spokespeople for others) (Heath et al., 2006). In this way, a diversity of perspectives can be expressed and examined, leading to the creation of new meanings (Baraldi, 2006). In the context of transmodern and sustainable social change, it is furthermore of critical importance that dialogue offers equal opportunities for participation (Baraldi, 2006) to people from the margins of local and global societies, so that ingrained 'Western' cultural and political values can be transcended through critical evaluation of both traditional and modern standpoints (Dussel, 2004, 2009). Furthermore, Ateljevic's (2009) review of actors who drive the transmodern paradigm shift implicitly shows, it is important to consider here that dialogue needs to include people from the fields of social activism, academic inquiry, political engagement, and social entrepreneurship. In other words, dialogue should (ideally) include participants of backgrounds not only demarcated by geography, religion, race and social affiliation, but also by categories such as age, gender, and professional field (see Figure 2.2).

However, it also needs to be acknowledged that diversity is not exclusive to extremely heterogeneous groups. Indeed, some degree of diversity is *always* present, even in groups that may seem fairly homogeneous or where participants share a range of characteristics. It can be

difficult to judge when a collection of individuals is 'truly' diverse, as groups can turn out to be quite dissimilar in terms of obscure characteristics that are shaped by personal history and experiences.

For instance, in a group of people who all come from one country, who share a particular interest and work together on one common goal, we might find a range of different preferences, persuasions, and opinions when it comes to a particular topic. In other words, diversity cannot always be discerned by the eye alone – instead, we need to take care to look at the intangible and subtle kinds of diversity, which in the context of dialogic interaction should be 'teased out' to illuminate a range of different perspectives.

Figure 2.2: Dialogue participants

Such open exploration of difference is said to create a process of understanding and a sharing of ideas, combined with a sense of connectedness and a deepening appreciation of alternative perspectives and values (Flick, 1998). However, it is absolutely vital to highlight that we cannot naively ignore the existence of certain power distortions, both at macro and micro scales, which make it difficult for dialogic interaction processes to offer truly equal opportunities for participation. Even in an atmosphere of mutual perspective sharing, culturally dominant discourse norms that reflect dominant 'white' or 'Western' cultural standards and practices can often prevail.

For instance, this can lead to dialogue shutting down when interaction becomes 'too' "emotional, direct, aggressive, personal, irrelevant, unstructured, historical, or unproductive" in the eyes of participants from dominant backgrounds (Heath et al., 2006: 363). Moreover, 'Western' tendencies to 'get to the truth of the matter' and 'dash to pieces' the ideas and opinions of others can make it difficult for a supportive atmosphere to emerge in the first place (Flick, 1998). Hence, dialogic interaction needs to pay attention to such ingrained discourse norms, and must make an attempt to overcome them, since an implicit or explicit reproduction of dominant and oppressive values will inevitably perpetuate their destructive effects (Heath et al., 2006).

We should also consider the kind of 'space' dialogue occurs in ideally. It is interesting to note that the notions of dialogue reviewed here all assume that it involves the 'physical' meeting of

participants. Given the recent exponential growth of ICT-based communication and social networking, one is left to wonder if dialogue could also occur 'virtually' over vast expanses of space. Such dialogue by distance could admittedly overcome certain geographical barriers to equal participation, although barriers to (high-speed) internet access certainly exist as well. Some see great promise in internet-based dialogic interaction in terms of facilitating grassroots dialogue across borders (Schulz, 2011), enabling more connected learning online (Ravenscroft, 2011), or simply to maintain the connection that was established in personal encounters (Castro-Laszlo and Laszlo, 2005). However, face-to-face interaction is, more often than not, considered more appropriate for dialogic interaction. The reasoning here is that the conversational environment of reciprocity and trust that is central to dialogue (Rule, 2004, van Gorder, 2007) is difficult to establish without 'thick' co-presence in which factors such as past histories, body language, pregnant silences, and anticipated conversations and actions create "rich, multi-layered and dense conversations" (Urry, 2007: 236).

Another thing to consider in regards to ICT is the exponential spread of global 'connectedness' through the internet. Compared to only 15 or so years ago, it is unbelievable how easy it now is to get in touch with people on the opposite side of the planet, simply by administering a few 'clicks'. While I sometimes doubt how much initiative people really show to make contact with others who are fundamentally different, the internet's *potential* to act as a catalyst for exchange and learning between people from very different backgrounds still is breathtaking.

There are many issues and nuances to the role of ICT that cannot be explored further here – however, one aspect deserves mentioning, if only for the sake of interest: While ICT puts a sheer unbelievable amount of opportunities and information at our disposal, most of us will recognise that this has also contributed to an ever stronger impetus for instant gratification and immediate results. This, I would argue, is actually quite contrary to the call made by proponents of dialogue to slow down interaction and suspend our tendencies for quick judgment and reaction. Furthermore, the mismatch between our desire for 'quick fix' solutions and the need in dialogue to let integrative insights 'emerge' might be one contributing factor to the phenomenon of 'dialogue fatigue' I mentioned in the previous section. In this context, Nicholas Carr's (2010) book *The Shallows – What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* also offers some fascinating insight on how the internet is changing our ways of thinking and may be affecting our capacity to concentrate, reflect, and contemplate. Hence, we are left to wonder what kind of unintended consequences the rise of ICT may have on our ways of relating, exchanging knowledge, and collaboration.

Dialogic Interaction – A Definition

Although the literature on dialogue tends to paint a rather vague, sometimes mystical picture of dialogic practices (Roper et al., 2004), and while there is little agreement on what is actually entailed in the *process* of dialogic interaction (Heath et al., 2006), the preceding review helped to delineate certain characteristics.

Dialogue is ideally an interactive effort of people from a range of backgrounds who co-create novel ideas and understandings through a balanced process of inquiry, advocacy and reflection (Bronn and Bronn, 2003), in which they critically examine their own and each other's assumptions and perspectives (Gunnlaugson, 2007). In this process of social and transformative learning, an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and cooperation is vital (van Gorder, 2007), while at the same time, conflict and disruptions play a key role (Gadotti, 1996, Wals et al., 2009), as they can lead to participants broadening, shifting, or transcending their perspectives (Wilhelmson, 2006). To resolve this apparently paradoxical emphasis on both cooperation and conflict, we need to understand that interaction is not static but emerges fluidly as conversations move through a range of more or less dialogical steps or modes (Senge, 1994, Scharmer, 2009). Hereby, reaching dialogic fields of interaction can be triggered through certain conversational practices (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995), and the suspension of emotional reactions, judgement and habits of mind (Bohm, 1996, Roper et al., 2004). To practice suspension, it is important to adopt an 'observer' position (Scharmer 2009), attending to what is emerging in the group, as this can enable participants to interact in mutually respectful and collaborative ways despite fundamental differences in opinion.

Hence, we can define dialogic interaction as ***reflexive conversation and engagement among a heterogeneous group of people who attempt to explore a diversity of potentially incompatible perspectives in a mutually respectful, trusting and collaborative way.***

2.3 Influencing Dialogic Interaction

Above, I already pointed out that groups can shift from debate to dialogue in certain circumstances, for instance when certain conversational practices are used. However, we need not forget that interaction is influenced by the whole environment, our previous and current relationships, our past, as well as the process of communication itself (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995). Informal rules for interaction emerge through the interactions of people within a collective, and can thus not be planned. These social norms are embedded into culturally determined 'scripts', which in turn serve as subconscious guides for our behaviour and interaction patterns (Bicchieri, 2006). Hence, dialogic interaction occurs in a setting that is determined by a specific historical, cultural and political context, as well as the discourses and 'traditions' that emerge from it (Rule, 2004). These contexts and discourses create certain

complexities, which affect the broader interaction patterns and communication culture of communities (Roper et al., 2004). In other words, our ways of interacting "reflect the characteristics of the societies in which we find ourselves" (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

In addition to these 'community complexities', we need to investigate which prerequisites and barriers foster and prevent dialogic interaction at the level of interaction in small groups. For instance, group dynamics and individual behaviour emerge both from individual characteristics and motives of participants, as well as environmental variables relating to the immediate location and larger social context of group action (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995). Hence, we can distinguish between personal characteristics of participants, such as attitudes and motivation; interaction dynamics that shape dialogic processes; and contextual factors, such as the design of the interactive environment and the presence of expert facilitators. Naturally, there is some level of overlap between these categories, but it is nevertheless useful to differentiate between them in order to develop a conceptual framework of the range of influences on dialogic interaction processes. In the following sections, I will discuss these barriers and prerequisites in more detail.

Personal Characteristics – Attitudes, Competences, and Personal Growth

The preceding definition of dialogic interaction already hints at certain attitudes and skills that people need to have in order to participate successfully in dialogic interaction processes. According to O'Hara (2003), key attitudes include openness, trust, and empathy, and participants also need to be willing to enter into unfamiliar perspectives (Roper et al., 2004). Furthermore, they need to adopt a collaborative attitude towards interaction (Baraldi, 2006), and be ready to listen and learn from each other (Heath et al., 2006, Rule, 2004, Schäfer et al., 2007). Last but not least, it is also critical for dialogic interaction participants to have a respectful attitude towards people who may be 'different' (Schäfer et al., 2007, Heath et al., 2006). This is captured well by Arnett's (2004) notion of the 'responsive ethical I', which highlights as a central notion in dialogic interaction the quality of "reciprocity and [...] responsibility for the Other and the historical, social, political, and cultural context in which dialogue is emerging" (Roper et al., 2004: 14).

While it is certainly not always easy to extend such compassion to people, especially when one finds their position essentially 'wrong', dialogic interaction benefits when participants can nevertheless see others as doing their best in their own particular circumstances (Heath et al., 2006). Naturally, the need for participants' willingness to suspend judgement in this way and go

beyond their own perspective goes hand in hand with quite a significant amount of determination and positive motivation for dialogue. As Martin (2005) puts it, what underpins attitudes and skills in dialogic interaction is a participant's *intention* to work toward generating new insights and deepening understanding.

We also need to acknowledge that people have different conversational styles, which are often influenced by factors like status and gender. Women, for instance, tend to prefer participative and non-hierarchical interaction patterns (Coates 1991, cited in Burton and Dimbleby, 1995), and tend to be oriented towards cooperation in group situations, while men tend to be more competitive and individualistic (Wilhelmson, 2006). These gendered conversation styles have been found in a range of sociolinguistic studies (e.g. Edelsky, 1981, Tannen, 1998) and are argued to be a result of the social construction of gender (Wilhelmson, 2006). Furthermore, status differences in a group also have an effect on conversational style, as 'superiors' often tend to be assertive in voicing opinions and good at critically evaluating others' contributions, while 'subordinates' are usually better at critical self-reflection and listening (Wilhelmson, 2006).

Furthermore, participants need to develop and cultivate certain dialogue competences, meaning behavioural repertoires that improve their performance (Woodruffe, 1992) in interactions. One such competence is the ability to 'hear' and engage in discourses fundamentally different from one's own (Heath et al., 2006: 363), and to inquire into another's view empathically, "listening from (within) the other" (Scharmer, 2009: 279). Wals & Blewitt (2010) call this competence *Gestaltswitching*, a concept derived from the German term 'Gestalt', which in this context can be understood as mindset or worldview. Gestaltswitching then refers to a person's ability to move back and forth between different mindsets (Wals and Blewitt, 2010), studying contested perceptions to understand how they can be utilised for constructive interaction and innovative co-creation (Schwarzin et al., 2011 forthcoming).

Empathy is not only an attitude, but also a competence necessary for dialogue, as it requires the ability to assume another's perspective, integrate listening and understanding, and express oneself with sensitivity to the other (Baraldi, 2006). Empathy can also be practised through a range of communicative strategies, such as "perception checking, active listening, [...] feedback aiming at clarifying the effects of actions, [and] the utterance of non-aggressive and non-evaluative assertions" (Baraldi, 2006: 62).

It needs to be said, however, that people usually find it difficult to be conscious of the way they interact with others. Here, another competence called *suspension* comes into play, which refers to the ability to enter a mode of awareness in which judgement is suspended on one's own and others' opinions in order to investigate how their interplay shapes interaction (Roper et al., 2004). In suspension, speakers engender "within themselves and their listeners a sense of

where they now all stand and an anticipatory sense of what next is needed to continue their conversation" (Heath et al., 2006: 354).

Interestingly, Bohm (1980: 33) notes that the experience of suspension "may not be very pleasant [...] but if people can share the frustration and share their different contradictory assumptions and share their mutual anger and stay with it," they are able to reach an 'inner observer' mode (Scharmer, 2009) that is central to dialogic interaction. In this mode, a widening of perspective occurs to include a view onto oneself, so that one sees the world and oneself entwined in a process of co-creation. This helps to redirect one's focus and behaviour in dialogic interaction (Scharmer, 2009), and enables participants to control and monitor their own contributions (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995).

Participants can also influence the direction of conversation through deliberate use of verbal and non-verbal cues. For instance, when listening, one can nod and murmur in agreement, or frown, seek eye contact, or murmur 'yes, but...' to indicate a desire to take the floor. Conversely, the current speaker might pass over to the next person by making eye-contact, dropping or raising the pitch of their voice, and/or terminating or relaxing any gesticulation. Furthermore, words like 'anyway', 'OK' or 'right' are often used to shift from one part of the conversation to the next or to close a conversation, whereas tag questions such as 'isn't it?', 'OK?', or 'agreed?' can be used to facilitate ongoing conversation (Burton & Dimbleby 1995).

The competences reviewed thus far echo some of the characteristics of dialogue mentioned in the matrix in Figure 2.1, which described different conversational modes a group might enter into. However, this matrix can create the impression that these modes represent static states; 'boxes' that a group is either in, or not. To highlight the dynamic and fluid character of dialogic interaction, we should consider a framework offered by Wilhelmson's (2006) that shows how different competences *work together* to shape the outcome of dialogic interaction (see Figure 2.3).

According to her, there are four key competences for dialogue, which are to *speak* (asserting one's perspective); to *listen* (empathically and openly); to engage in *critical self-reflection* (acknowledging bias in perspective); and to engage in *critical reflection* (exploring assertions of others respectfully). While these resonate with the competences of Gestaltswitching, empathy, and suspension reviewed above, Wilhelmson (2006) goes further to suggest that two combinations of competences can lead to different, but equally important outcomes of dialogue. Firstly, participants can achieve integration of different perspectives through a combination of listening and critical self-reflection, as they connect personal ways of thinking to those of others open-mindedly. This clearly resonates with the conversational qualities in the top row of the matrix in Figure 2.1; however, the second quality, one might not so readily place in the dialogic squares.

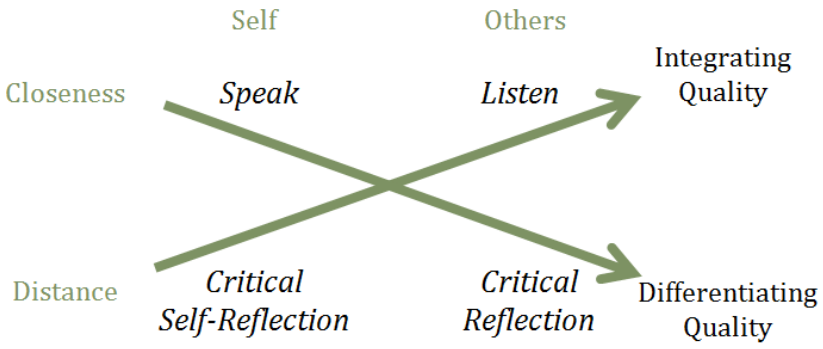


Figure 2.3: Four dialogue competences; adapted from Wilhelmson (2006: 249).

She asserts that when participants speak their mind while reflecting critically on the assertions of others, they are able to differentiate between and analyse perspectives, and investigate problems and contradictions in depth. Hence, we might say that an element of debate or discussion, if done respectfully by asking for clarification and elaboration (Wilhelmson, 2006), can indeed have a positive impact on dialogic interaction. Buber (1970), for instance, offers a suitable metaphor for this when he speaks of the tension between "standing your own ground while being profoundly open to the other; treating the other as 'thou' rather than 'it', and walking the 'narrow ridge' between excessive concern for self and excessive concern for the other" (cited in Heath et al., 2006: 345).

What we need to acknowledge, however, is that it can be quite difficult for people to actually *practice* the communication skills required for dialogic interaction. Indeed, an attitude-behaviour gap has been demonstrated many times, for instance in research on consumer ethics and environmental friendliness (e.g. Papaoikonomou et al., 2011). While the scope of this report goes beyond a detailed consideration of why it might be so difficult to convert intellectual understanding to embodied action, it is worthwhile to emphasise that behavioural intentions are shaped by a range of factors, including attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived barriers, as outlined by Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour. Hence, we need to consider the above mentioned factors not only in isolation, but also in combination.

Another interesting observation is that the attitudes and complex skills needed for dialogic interaction all these they seem to have in common an underlying need for conscious awareness on how processes within oneself are connected to what is emerging in the group and in the conversation (c.f. Scharmer, 2009, Gunnlaugson, 2007, Bohm, 1980). As Buber (1964) puts it, what truly limits the possibility of dialogue is our limited capacity for awareness. However, developing conscious awareness to become a 'dialogic practitioner' requires quite a significant process of personal or even spiritual growth.

Thinking of spirituality does not necessarily have to evoke notions of New-Age or Eastern mysticism; instead, we can look at spirituality as a normal part of human life, as a natural quest for meaningful experiences we can hold sacred (Pargament, 2009). I refer to spiritual growth here because spirituality is fundamentally concerned with fostering awareness of how we are 'connected to the world' and other human beings (Martin, 2005). This sense of connectedness is also emphasised when it comes to dialogic interaction (Buber, 1964, Scharmer, 2009, Bohm, 1996, Gerard, 2005), and it is not just an esoteric notion. Recent scientific developments are moving away from the pervasive Cartesian idea of dualism, which has led to the Western tendency for fragmentation and compartmentalisation in all spheres of life, and the self-absorbed and alienated relationship of humanity towards its environment (Maxwell, 2003). More integrative and transdisciplinary scientific approaches see the world as a seamless network of highly complex interacting processes and forms (Martin, 2005, Capra, 1996), in which humans have their natural place.

Realising this connectedness as a scientific and/or spiritual vision can encourage people to "embrace all living creatures" and can lead to a "widening of our circles of understanding and compassion" (Einstein, quoted in Goldstein, [1976] 1987). Hence, spiritual development can be argued to foster dialogue competence, as it provides a context and vision for interaction to become more mature, impelling us to live deliberately, and affecting how we relate to others and respond to the challenges we face (Martin, 2005).

This process of personal and/or spiritual growth is often associated with a gradual overcoming of the pervasive hold that the 'ego' has on human patterns of self-gratification and competitiveness. The 'ego' refers here *not* to the psychoanalytical concept that refers to the part of the psychic apparatus that mediates between unconscious desires and reality (Freud, 1969). Instead, as Parameshwar (2005) shows by reviewing Smith's (1991) comparison of world religions, the term is also used (more or less explicitly) in most religious and spiritual traditions, where it refers to self-centred drives and competitiveness that stimulate our desire for self-assurance and assertion.

In a way, this emphasis on personal and spiritual growth implies that people need to make a concerted effort to 'tame' themselves, gain distance from their habitual patterns of judgement, and open themselves up for alternative ways of being (Prewitt, 2011). As Martin (2005) argues, an essential spiritual practice is 'mindfulness', which involves openness and focused attention to what is happening, and enables us to be present, experience more deeply, and refine our understanding of whatever we encounter. Hence, both dialogue and spirituality share an emphasis on being present in our interactions with the world (Scharmer, 2009). This can even be conceived as a reciprocal relationship, as suspending personal opinions and refraining from

attempts to convince the 'other' enables us to grow in awareness of how our own perspectives are shaped and how they interact with others (Jenlink and Banathy, 2005).

However, in the context of this need for personal growth to become competent at practising dialogic interaction, we need to consider that "we cannot change alone. Nothing happens in isolation, rather relationship is the fundamental component of all growth and development" (Martin, 2005: 81). Therefore, we will now turn to consider the role of interpersonal relations in fostering or inhibiting dialogue.

Interaction Dynamics – Diversity, Conflict and Empathy

The literature on dialogic interaction draws much attention to the need for mutual support and respect (Wilhelmson, 2006, van Gorder, 2007, Kell and Corts, 1980, Scharmer, 2009). Furthermore, it emphasises the central role of celebrating diversity in a way that does not eliminate disparities, but creates a consciousness of differences, so that they can be sustained within a larger social compact of toleration and esteem (Jenlink and Banathy, 2005: 11). The story of the five blind men trying to describe an elephant can be used here to highlight how important it is to integrate diverse perspectives on a topic (Martin, 2005: 84):

> "One man 'sees' the elephant as a tree, another as a wall, a third as a rope, etc. When you ask the question, which of the blind men is right, the first answer tends to be, 'all of them are right.' But then immediately comes the realization that, of course, none of them is right in the sense of having a complete picture of the elephant. How the blind men need to interact in order for the elephant to emerge is a description of the skills and values of Dialogue."

However, we cannot ignore that when a group of people come together, mutual respect and tolerance of different viewpoints are usually not a given. Instead, conflicts often arise, especially when people feel strongly about (Gerard, 2005) their impression of the elephant. Some even suggest that humans are predestined for conflict, as we naturally compare the known and preferred to the unknown and new, and judge the relative value of people, experiences or ideas in the process of making these comparisons (Prewitt, 2011). In addition, we tend to be attached to our own beliefs and to suppress those of the 'outgroup' in ways that can be quite aggressive (Dessel and Rogge, 2008).

The notion of dialogic interaction as balanced group interaction that co-creates knowledge without marginalising or denying diversity (Baraldi, 2006) might sound a little naive in this

context. Power and status do affect, sometimes subtly and sometimes very obviously, who dares to speak their mind and who is silenced or remains quiet in the first place. Expecting that conflict can be dealt with reflectively and that constructive compromises can be found when the group simply gives up 'trying' for resolution (Heath et al., 2006) might be inappropriate in situations where social inequalities become re-created in asymmetric conversations. According to Wilhelmson (2006), this is the case when group interaction is dominated by one perspective, either in a way that all participants adopt it, or when a competition of perspectives results in less dominant voices being silenced.

While such marginalisation of voices can occur in all sorts of situations where representatives of dominant and subordinate groups interact, an obvious example of power relationships in interactive settings are cross-cultural encounters, which are often influenced by historical tensions related to (neo)colonialism (Dussel, 2002). Furthermore, in these encounters, barriers to understanding are often created by fundamental differences in world views (e.g. collectivist vs. individualist, religious vs. secular, etc.), language and discourse barriers, differences in interpersonal behaviour schemata (e.g. proximity rules, use of smiling, appropriateness of touch), and stereotypes (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995). Here, we need to consider that it is often the marginalised perspectives that tend to be ignored or misunderstood, and become distorted through dominant ideology (Putnam, 2001).

The subtle workings of such power relations are often expressed in a group's internal dynamics, which are shaped by the personal characteristics and history each individual brings to the table. These group dynamics lead to the development of a set of mutual expectations, norms and rules, patterns of leadership, as well as differentiated roles (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995). For instance, it is possible to differentiate between three different kinds of roles (Shaw, 1981). A person's self-concept and needs, social norms, and group pressures shape their *perceived role*, or the behaviours which they believe they should enact. Furthermore, others deem certain behaviours appropriate for a particular group member, which is termed the *expected role.* In interaction, these contribute to shaping a person's *enacted role*, or the actual behaviours expressed in the group.

If these three roles are not in harmony, conflict can be expected to ensue in a group (Shaw, 1981), which, if not addressed proactively and reflectively, can serve to further ingrain dominant perspectives (Heath et al., 2006) and destructive patterns of relating to one another (Prewitt, 2011). We need to see, however, that humans also have a natural inclination towards harmony and peace (Hamburg, 1998). As Zeldin (2000: 48-9) puts it,

> "the feelings of shared humanity, the tears which come to our eyes when we see suffering even in complete strangers, are among our deepest emotions. Every

> time we experience them, we are rediscovering that we belong to that enormous family which is humanity."

Our empathy can balance our destructive tendencies (Hamburg, 1998), and thus it is also possible to have symmetric conversations (Wilhelmson, 2006), in which marginalised voices are encouraged or even given priority, while people of dominant cultural backgrounds engage critically with their own perspective. In such symmetric conversations, discursive power can shift towards more balance, and while this may not always lead to perspective transformation, all participants can learn from each other.

This might in particular be the case when people develop an ability to deal with the challenges of interaction by learning to work together and support one another in developing dialogue competence over time (Wilhelmson, 2006). Through such a process of shared learning, groups can develop a more full understanding of how the roles and characteristics of individual members can be employed to accomplish the group's purpose (Lindlof, 1995). Furthermore, groups tend to develop a shared language that reflects the relationship group members have to each other (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995). Here, it is particularly beneficial for dialogic interaction if groups develop a collective intention to say 'yes–and'. By this, Gerard (2005: 339) means a collective mind-shift that "leads out of debate and 'either/or' comparisons", and enables groups to focus on the present moment and look at the "entire landscape" of their perspectives. According to her, the collective practice of 'yes–and'

- acknowledges the other and demonstrates a willingness to co-create;
- is a way of honouring the other, a first step to creating connection and shared creativity;
- can be a way of saying 'I see your perspective and I would like to offer one that is different';
- and enables a more complete picture of the system of interaction to emerge.

In the context of people *learning* to practice more inclusive interaction, it is interesting to consider that groups go through different stages of formation. Beginnings are often characterised by anxiety and insecurity, which can be followed by phases of conflict and resistance. However, subsequent stages of norming and structuring usually lead to the development of group cohesiveness and co-operation (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995). In a way, this can be described as a process of 'community building', in which central elements are a mutual exchange of opinions and experiences (Kinnucan-Welsch and Jenlink, 2005), and the development of a shared vision or action plan that "captures the imagination of many, inspires, challenges, combines energy and starts from a shared frame of reference"(Wals et al., 2009: 22). Having such a shared vision can significantly improve the outcome of collaborative engagement (Elfving, 2009), and when a group has reached a mature stage of formation, dialogic

conversation is much easier to achieve. This is illustrated by Kell and Corts' (1980) qualities of mature groups, which resonate strongly with some of the prerequisites for dialogic interaction:

- an atmosphere of trust and friendship;
- contributions are weighed according to their value, not according to who expressed them;
- a system of mutual support is in place, promoting positive (non)verbal communication to assist participation;
- struggles and disagreements can be coped with;
- and members are ready to give up positions of status or control for the benefit of achieving the group's goal.

Hence, dialogic interaction involves "a gradual building of relationship over time, with now and then a glimpse of the unexpected" potential for genuine dialogue (Martin, 2005: 72).

Having acknowledged that out of a diversity of perspectives, tensions between conflict and empathy are likely to emerge, we can argue that if a group has time to develop mature interaction patterns, these tensions may resolve and more mutually supportive group dynamics may emerge. However, even when dialogue-supporting group dynamics are established, there are yet some factors pertaining to the context in which interaction occurs, which might influence a group's ability to do dialogue. These factors will be considered in the following section.

Contextual Factors – Facilitation, Spatial Design and Communication Tools

Regarding contextual factors, we can mention first of all that groups may engage in dialogic interaction for different kinds of purposes. Sometimes, dialogue is used as a conversation tool with a specific outcome in mind. This can be to solve a particular problem (Heath et al., 2006), or to reach a higher quality of decisions and actions through mutual insight and divergent thinking (April, 1999), so that conclusions reflect the diversity of positions and perspectives on a given topic (Heath et al., 2006). However, dialogic interaction does not always lead to definite outcomes or the implementation of some kind of action. Indeed, "it may not result in a solution to the identified problem but rather, in a relational resolution that develops from understanding each other's emotions, values, interests, and positions" (Heath et al., 2006: 367-8). In this way, even adversaries can develop a sense of connection and mutual respect. However, one needs to

keep in mind that when there is not enough balance between relational and concrete outcomes, dialogic interaction can become tiresome or manipulative (ibid).

It makes sense then that dialogic interaction can benefit from the presence of an external facilitator, who can guide the group's conversation. Reviewing the work of several authors, Roper and colleagues (2004: 17-8) suggest that facilitators should help a group to

- design the boundaries of the dialogue in terms of topic;
- create, negotiate and reflect on guidelines for the dialogue session;
- encourage transparency and respectful exploration of the participant's own and other people's assumptions;
- monitor group process;
- and work through obstacles and crises together by exploring alternative ways of exposing and expressing divergent perspectives.

However, the facilitator needs to always consider the unique historical, political, cultural and social context of a group, as well as any specific interests and concerns group members may have (Roper et al., 2004). With this context in mind, a facilitator's role can be, for instance, to "help frame times, create an appropriate and safe environment for the conversation, [and] coach people to become more skilled at inquiry and advocacy" so that they invite "curiosity rather than defensiveness." Furthermore, a facilitator may alert participants when their interaction is based on assumptions, or when patterns emerge in the conversation. By asking "questions that help people to reflect on both the content and process" he or she can assist participants to "integrate what they are hearing and move to new levels of understanding" (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998: 212).

Furthermore, when critical or sensitive issues need to be discussed, a facilitator might decide to split up groups in order to enable more shy or culturally indirect participants to 'save face' and express their opinion without having to fear open confrontation in a large group (Scharmer, 2009). It is important to consider though, that facilitators need to be careful with the kind of language they use. Some terms used to describe dialogue practices – like 'listening into the middle', 'collective intelligence', 'co-creation' (Brown, 2002) and 'listening from within' (Scharmer, 2009) – do not resonate easily with some people and can evoke a sense of artificiality or manipulation, which is likely to discourage people from exposing deeply held views and assumptions (Prewitt, 2011). The power of language needs to be kept in mind by anyone intending to facilitate dialogue, and the terms used should be adapted to suit the particular group of participants.

Furthermore, we need to note that the facilitator should not claim too much space in the group interaction, as dialogue is inherently concerned with offering participants freedom to explore

emerging ideas (Roper et al., 2004). Instead the goal should be that the group develops its own direction and capacity for facilitation (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998). Hence, facilitators should say and do as little as possible (Wang, 2009), and "should attempt to work themselves out of a job" (Roper et al., 2004: 18).

Whether designed by a facilitator or collectively by a group, the space in which interaction occurs is another important contextual factor. As dialogue can involve tensions and conflict, this space should encourage openness amongst participants, and be safe and trustworthy (Rule, 2004, Heath et al., 2006), as "there is no dialogue without trust" (Rule, 2004: 330).

Some authors go into some detail in their description of how to create such an environment. For instance, in order to stimulate open communication and decision making (Owen, 1997), the seating arrangements should be circular. In this equal positioning of participants (Roper et al., 2004), there is nothing to break the line of eye contact (Wang, 2009), as this shape has no head or foot, and no higher or lower positions or 'sides' to take (Owen, 1997). Auditorium or panel discussion arrangements on the other hand are to be avoided in dialogic interaction, as the positioning of participants constructs as experts those who stand 'in front', implying that they need to be listened to passively, creating hierarchy where equality is intended (Roper et al., 2004).

Furthermore, it is mentioned that short periods of silence, contemplation or meditation can focus attention in a way that enriches interaction (Martin, 2005). Group size, however, should be limited to around four to five participants, as larger groups can find it difficult to establish the sense of personal connection and shared quality of interaction (Prewitt, 2011, Brown, 2002) that is seen as important in dialogue (Scharmer, 2009). In this context, it is interesting to mention a study conducted by the HeartMath Foundation (Childre, 1999), which "indicates that our hearts are able to send and receive electronic signals that can become synchronized, or entrained, for small group harmony" (Prewitt, 2011: 193).

It is also suggested that designing dialogic interaction environments in the style of a café – with small tables, tablecloths, soft music and decorations (Prewitt, 2011) – can have immense benefits. Such a 'hospitable' space generates a feeling of intimacy as well as informality (Brown, 2002), and allows participants to share information in a way that is equitable and non-threatening (Fouché and Light, 2011). Of course, the assumption here is that trusting communication can thrive in a warm, comfortable, and relaxing environment (Prewitt, 2011). Furthermore, trust and mutual regard can be raised when participants have the opportunity to eat with each other before or at the beginning of a dialogue session, as this leads to informal talk and socialising (Roper et al., 2004).

Spatial layout is also argued to stimulate creativity and integrative thinking, both of which are important in dialogic interaction (Scharmer, 2009). Experimental research conducted by McCoy and Evans (2002) found that several factors in spatial design impact independently on people's ability to think and act creatively. For instance, they found that an excessive amount of cool colours and sterile looking manufactured materials can stifle creativity. Homely furniture also plays an important role in making people feel comfortable, and can promote social interaction and a sense of cooperation and collaboration. Furthermore, visual detail in an environment should be relatively complex. This means that multiple shapes should be present in walls and ceilings, the room should feature ornaments, decorations, and personal items, and surfaces should be equipped with a variety of treatments and textures. Here, natural materials were preferable, and providing a view of nature was also a stimulant for creativity. Conversely, if people are unable to look out of a window, they may perceive the environment as not flexible enough and as limiting freedom and openness (McCoy and Evans, 2002).

This affinity for nature and natural materials, or biophilia, is actually quite well known in environmental psychology (van den Berg, 2005) and research on restorative environments (Ulrich et al., 2004, Ulrich, 1993), and might be related to creative potential because of the tendency for nature views to reduce mental fatigue and restore cognitive capacity (Kaplan and Kaplan, 2003). Furthermore, Prewitt (2011) explains the importance of spatial design by saying that a surprise effect caused by finding yourself in a type of space you would not expect can stimulate dialogic interaction. In other words an environment that challenges one's mental model of organised interaction (Kim, 1993) can evoke a sense of cognitive dissonance (Berlyne, 1965, Festinger, 1957, Piaget, 1964), which causes participants to question assumptions about appropriate interactive behaviour. This may lead to dominant participants taking a less assertive role, and previously marginalised individuals feeling more comfortable claiming interactive space (Prewitt, 2011).

While the presence of a facilitator and a hospitable environment can help participants to reflectively implement guidelines for dialogic interaction (Welp et al., 2006), such as generous and reflective listening, thoughtful speaking, and openness to others (Herzig and Chasin, 2006), certain communication tools can also be of use. For instance, a talking stick is sometimes used as a "signifier of democracy" that enables anyone in its possession to talk as long as they need without being interrupted, which can encourage less vocal participants to share their ideas or concerns (Wang, 2009: 479). Prewitt (2011), however, notes that such props are often ignored or perceived as artificial, and can also be omitted if participants seem able to let each other speak. Furthermore, material for visualising the content of conversations, such as flipcharts, butcher paper, crayons and markers can be provided to aid expression of ideas (Brown, 2002). Assuming that not all knowledge is 'stored' in the intellect, creative insights might emerge through the use of different modalities of expression, such as drawing, or even singing and

moving (Prewitt, 2011). For instance, the use of improvisation theatre games has been noted as useful in stimulating dialogue, as these games can assist participants in learning to pay attention to what is being said or enacted, and to practice going with the flow of 'yes-and' thinking by building upon sequence after sequence of interaction (Gerard, 2005).

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is another communication method worth mentioning. It was developed by Marshall Rosenberg (Rosenberg, 2003, Rosenberg and Molho, 1998) based on research into the link between communication practices and compassion (Sitzman, 2004). The methodology of NVC intends to guide people to express themselves in a more compassionate way that recognises one's own and the other's needs and feelings. Essentially, this is done by reframing judgements and blaming as an expression of unmet needs (Kasumagic, 2008, Rosenberg and Molho, 1998). There are four interaction principles in NVC: Participants are asked to *observe* with focused clarity and without judgment, and to state and accept responsibility for the *feelings* associated with these observations. Furthermore, they need to identify the (unmet) personal *needs* connected to these feelings, and make specific *requests* (not demands) to themselves or to others, which address these unmet needs (Sitzman, 2004, Rosenberg, 2003). These principles aim to enable people to take personal responsibility for their way of interacting, reducing the likelihood of others feeling insulted or victimised (Kasumagic, 2008, Rosenberg and Molho, 1998, Sitzman, 2004, Rosenberg, 2003). In this way, NVC fosters attentiveness, respect and empathy (Kasumagic, 2008), and as such can be seen as a useful tool for dialogic interaction.

Although we mentioned before that dialogue is best practiced in groups that are limited in size to about four to five people, there are also methodologies that are used for encouraging dialogic interaction at larger gatherings, which usually involves circulating participants between smaller dialogue groups. For instance, Open Space Technology (Owen, 1997) is a meeting tool that uses self-organisation principles to guide interaction (deGrassi, 2007). Within a general topic, participants are instructed to post their own discussion questions as well as a time and place to meet. Thereafter, small group conversations ensue, which are then summarised by their hosts in front of all participants. Participants are encouraged to join any group and move between them as they like. The idea behind this method is to gather a range of perspectives on a topic that is of shared interest to participants, so that issues and concerns may be addressed in more encompassing ways. However, the minimal emphasis placed on facilitator interventions in OST can result in frustration (Bryson and Anderson, 2000), especially as marginalised perspectives are not intentionally drawn to light (deGrassi, 2007).

Another technique that can be used to enable dialogic interaction among larger groups of people is the Word Café, which was developed by Juanita Brown (2002) as a variation on the dialogue practices outlined by Bohm (1996). In the World Café, people engage in several cycles of small

group conversations of four to five people. Between cycles, participants are shuffled to maximise exchange of perspectives, while one volunteer per group remains at each table as the host, summarising what previous groups have discussed before the conversation continues (Prewitt, 2011, Tan and Brown, 2005). As such, the technique is a metaphor for everyday meaning-making, as parcels of information are passed on to others, who in turn add their contributions – much like when chatting in a café (Brown, 2002).

Rather than aiming for concrete problem solving or the production of action plans, this method intends to facilitate inquiry through encouraging participants to "share openly, listen without judgment, and to accept diverse opinions" (Prewitt, 2011: 190). However, a World Café is not as easy to implement as it might sound, as it requires significant amount of preparation. Discussion topics that are meaningful and provocative, and stimulate an exploration of ideas need to be carefully crafted. Furthermore, the facilitator needs to create a suitable relaxing environment that is also culturally appropriate, and must skilfully observe the actual interaction process as it ensues. For instance, if needed, he or she should modify guidelines for interaction to ensure that each participant is given opportunities to speak (Prewitt, 2011).

While the discussion presented so far should have provided some clarity in regards to the attitudes, individual and collective practices, and environmental factors that shape dialogic interaction, it needs to be emphasised again that it can be difficult to translate these insights into lived reality. In the next section, we will look at the difficulties of *practising* dialogic interaction in some more detail.

2.4 Walking the Talk

When talking about gaps between theory and practice in dialogic interaction, we can start by saying that it is much easier said than done for participants to understand their own and others worldview and to develop common ground. Even well-meaning and conscientious people can find it impossible to transcend conflicts that arise from interactive encounters (Heath et al., 2006). We need to consider that much of people's communicative behaviour is unintentional (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995), and that spontaneous and unpredictable events, as well as lack of motivation and willingness to experiment can impact on dialogic interaction.

In a sense, dialogic interaction, with its impetus for mutual regard and respect, is asking us to "be less human", to give up our psychological defence mechanisms (Heath et al., 2006: 353) and expose ourselves 'warts and all' to other participants. After all, dialogic interaction requires shifting attitudes and (un)learning conversational skills, and adopting an entirely different culture of communication (Heath et al., 2006). This can be especially difficult in emotionally charged discussions, where creative energy can spiral into negativity and become a destructive force (Prewitt, 2011).

Indeed, many factors favour the emergence of debate rather than dialogue. For instance, traditional (Western) models of interaction stimulate a tendency towards abrasive statements and actions, and communicative habits that reflect power relations, as well as differences in gender conversational styles can lead to marginalisation of some perspectives (Wilhelmson, 2006). Conformity, our tendency for adopting the views of the dominant group, can also distort dialogic interaction, especially when participants are competing for agreement from others (Zorn et al., 2006).

Furthermore, Martin (2005) speaks of a 'prison of perception' that is created by our deeply rooted values and beliefs, which shape our attitudes and behaviours and are encased in emotion, so that they cannot easily be transformed. Scharmer (2009) even refers to our ingrained patterns of interaction as a social pathology and a form of sabotage:

> "we collectively do what nobody wants: we operate in the toxic atmosphere of pathological patterns of conversation [...] because we don't know how to nurture and cultivate the [...] deepening [of] our attention *first* before we start to act on an impulse" (p. 287/299 emphasis in original).

Offering an explanation of how this 'anti-space' to dialogue is shaped, he goes on to describe a process of *conversational absencing*, which consists of seven behaviours that are debilitating to dialogic interaction and can lead to collective collapse. This process starts relatively innocently with saying what others want to hear, and the sometimes unintentional silencing of other views. However, this can quickly lead to blaming others while holding on strongly to personal convictions – and from here, we are not far from manipulating others, manufacturing intrigue, and withholding information, which at its worst is expressed in harassment and bullying (Scharmer, 2009).

While this excursion to some of the cruelties humans can bring (often unintentionally) to interactive encounters alerts us that a range of cultural and psycho-social complexities indeed need to be acknowledged, this should not lead us to give up hope for dialogic interaction. Rather, this acknowledgement of difficulties encourages us to adopt a view of dialogic interaction as a *process*, rather than a collection of practices and conversational guidelines. This process emerges out of fluid, never finished engagement amongst a group of people (Wood, 2004), who usually only manage to move to conversational fields of dialogue (Scharmer, 2009) in certain moments, which may last for a shorter or longer while (Anderson et al., 2004). We might also speak of dialogic interaction as a journey, as this enables us to focus on the "movement of conversation and energy from cross-purposes and collision through deliberation and discussion toward different forms of collective understanding" (Burson, 2002: 24). Furthermore, the conceptualisation of dialogic interaction as a journey also highlights the need

for groups to go through a maturation process (Kell and Corts, 1980), and calls for participants to *commit* to that process (Heath et al., 2006) and its unknown destination.

As this review has shown, this journey involves a whole range of explorations into personal attitudes and behaviours, as well as collective dynamics of a group, and it requires experimenting with different ways of designing interactive space. In the following section, the stations on this journey of dialogic interaction will briefly be summarised, and presented in a theoretical framework.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

As stated in the previous chapter, the purpose of this research was to explore how (dialogic) interaction patterns are shaped amongst members of the intentional community of Auroville. The preceding literature review drew our attention to a range of concepts that are key to addressing this purpose. We first examined some key characteristics of dialogic interaction, like the need to hear both marginalised and dominant voices (Dussel, 2004), and to address conflicting views in a mutually supportive way through critical yet respectful questioning of perspectives (Rule, 2004), while maintaining a reflective stance and suspending judgment (Bohm, 1996). However, we then drew attention to the fact that a group's effort to practice dialogue always occurs within a specific historical, political and cultural context (Rule, 2004, Roper et al., 2004, Burton and Dimbleby, 1995), which creates certain *complexities* that shape interaction patterns.

Then, we turned our attention to three categories of factors that influence the practice of dialogic interaction at the level of small groups; these were *personal characteristics* of the participants, *interaction dynamics* in the group, and *contextual factors* of the interaction environment. Examining these in turn, it was argued that certain attitudes (c.f. O'Hara, 2003) and competences (c.f. Wals and Blewitt, 2010, Bohm, 1980) need to be acquired in order to become a dialogic practitioner, which requires processes of personal and/or spiritual growth (Martin, 2005). Furthermore, we saw that interaction dynamics are characterised by a tension between certain pervasive human tendencies for competition and dominance (Dessel and Rogge, 2008, Putnam, 2001) and our longing for harmony and empathy (Hamburg, 1998, Zeldin, 2000). However, it was argued that groups can resolve this tension as they mature over time (Kell and Corts, 1980). Moreover, considering contextual factors, external facilitation was said to play a key role (Roper et al., 2004, Ellinor and Gerard, 1998), and we highlighted that certain kinds of spatial design (McCoy and Evans, 2002, Brown, 2002) and the use of communication tools (Wang, 2009, Brown, 2002, Rosenberg, 2003) can foster dialogic interaction.

Finally, some further cultural and psycho-social *complexities* were outlined, such as power relations and dominant communication modes (Wilhelmson, 2006), as well as unconscious

patterns of beliefs (Martin, 2005). While these complexities can make it difficult to practice dialogue, a conceptualisation of dialogic interaction as a journey enables us to pay attention to the need for groups to enter a learning *process* in order to become apt at dialogue (Kell and Corts, 1980).

In Figure 2.4 below, these key concepts are summarised in a theoretical framework, which aims to illustrate that the historical, political, cultural and psycho-social context affects (dialogic) interaction by creating certain *complexities* that shape interaction patterns within a given community. Furthermore, it shows that at group gatherings within a community, *personal characteristics, interaction dynamics,* and *contextual factors* create a certain field in which a *process* of dialogic interaction may emerge, given that these factors are supportive rather than inhibitory.

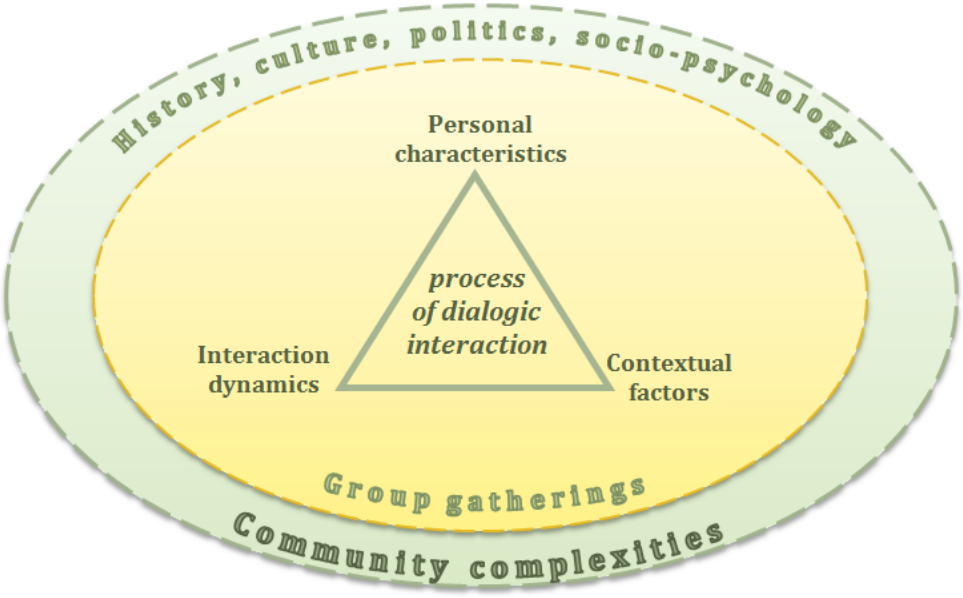
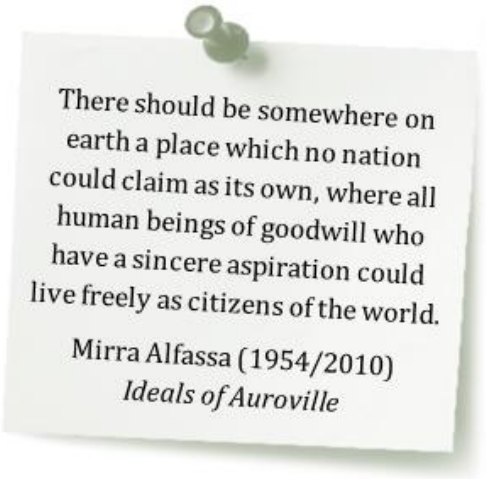


Figure 2.4: Theoretical Framework

This framework was used, to some extent, to guide the research process for the empirical part of this study. As mentioned before a case study was conducted in the intentional community of Auroville in India, where a range of community complexities and factors that take part in shaping dialogic interaction were examined. In the following two chapters, we will go into more detail about Auroville as the empirical context for this research (chapter three), and consider the methodological choices that were made, including a more detailed discussion of how this theoretical framework was used to supplement an initial inductive strategy for data analysis with a second phase of deductive reasoning (chapter four).

Chapter Three
Empirical Context – Auroville, India



As this research project employed a case study as overarching methodological strategy, and any case is an entity embedded in complex historical, social, cultural and physical contexts (Stake, 2005), we will now examine the chosen case – the intentional community of Auroville – before considering the methodology of this research in the following chapter.

First, I will outline some vital elements of Auroville's history: Its founders and spiritual leaders, the development of the fundamental vision of Auroville as a township dedicated to human unity, and the design of an architectural master plan. Furthermore, we will look at challenges in the community's first years, and the establishment of its current organisational structure with the support of the Indian Government.

Moving on to consider what the community looks like now, we will inspect the current stage of development in terms of building the city and gathering community members, and take a look at how Aurovillians live. Furthermore, we will examine how the community is governed through a combination of direct democracy and pragmatic allocation of responsibilities, and outline the main characteristics of the community's economy. Finally, I will provide some examples of innovative practices and projects in the fields of reforestation, sustainability, education, village outreach and capacity development that characterise Auroville as a prototype for societal transformation.

3.1 History and Vision

The decision to set up an intentional community usually emerges out of a particular political or societal context with which a number of people are dissatisfied (Poldervaart, 2001). In the case of Auroville, the original impetus emerged both from a spiritual as well as political context. The founder of Auroville was a French woman named Mirra Alfassa, who was born in 1878 and who is said to have had spiritual experiences from an early age. This lead her to study occultism in Algeria in her twenties (Auroville.org, no date-n), and upon her return to France, she worked with various groups of spiritual seekers. In 1914, aged 36, Mirra Alfassa visited an ashram in

Pondicherry that was founded by Sri Aurobindo, a prominent Indian spiritual leader, who had also been involved in the Indian independence movement. During this visit, she recognised Sri Aurobindo as her mentor, and moved to the ashram in 1920. There, she gave up her birth name, and has since nationally and internationally been known as 'the Mother', a name which Sri Aurobindo gave her when he "recognised in her an embodiment of the dynamic expressive aspect of evolutionary, creative Force, in India traditionally known and approached as the 'Supreme Mother'" (Auroville.org, no date-q).

It was in the 1930s, that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo first developed a concept of an "ideal township devoted to an experiment in human unity" (Auroville.org, no date-c). After Sri Aurobindo's passing in 1950, the Mother dropped the idea for some time. However, in the context of the Second World War, and later the Cold War and eminent fears of global nuclear destruction, it became a more concrete plan. During that time, she took to promoting the idea of Auroville, emphasising that to transcend violent patterns of world history, "an outer activity as well as an inner change is needed and it must be at once a spiritual, cultural, educational, social and economical action" (Sri Aurobindo, 1997: 590).

The overall aim of Auroville has been to create a community of spiritual seekers who practice their 'Integral Yoga' not in the confinement of an ashram, but actively engaged in the world. Their task would be to create new forms of individual and collective life (Auroville.org, no date-n) that are based on goodwill, and emerge through gradual growth in consciousness and transcendence of egotistic drives (Auroville.org, no date-s). In a more secular way, this vision was expressed by the Mother when pronouncing her first public message on Auroville in September 1965: "Auroville wants to be a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The purpose of Auroville is to realise human unity" (Auroville.org, no date-m).

From 1960, the Mother rallied support amongst international followers of Sri Aurobindo, as well as national and international political bodies. In 1966, the UNESCO unanimously passed a resolution to support and encourage the establishment of Auroville as an "international cultural township designed to bring together the values of different cultures and civilisations in a harmonious environment"(Auroville.org, 2010b), and on the on the 28th of February 1968, the intentional community of Auroville was inaugurated in a ceremony attended by representatives of 124 nations (Auroville.org, no date-c). At this ceremony, the Mother pronounced the charter of Auroville, which has remained the community's fundamental vision statement to date. Having some kind of charter is a common practice in intentional communities (Grundmann et al., 2006), and in Auroville, it reads as follows (Auroville.org, no date-i):

1. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville, one must be a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.
2. Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.
3. Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realisations.
4. Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.

Table 3.1: The charter of Auroville

The inauguration ceremony was held at the centre of the future town, near a single Banyan tree on a barren, eroded plateau several kilometre inland from the Coromandel coast, about ten kilometres north of the ashram in Pondicherry, and 160 km south of the Tamil Nadu state capital of Chennai (see Figure 3.1[1] below).

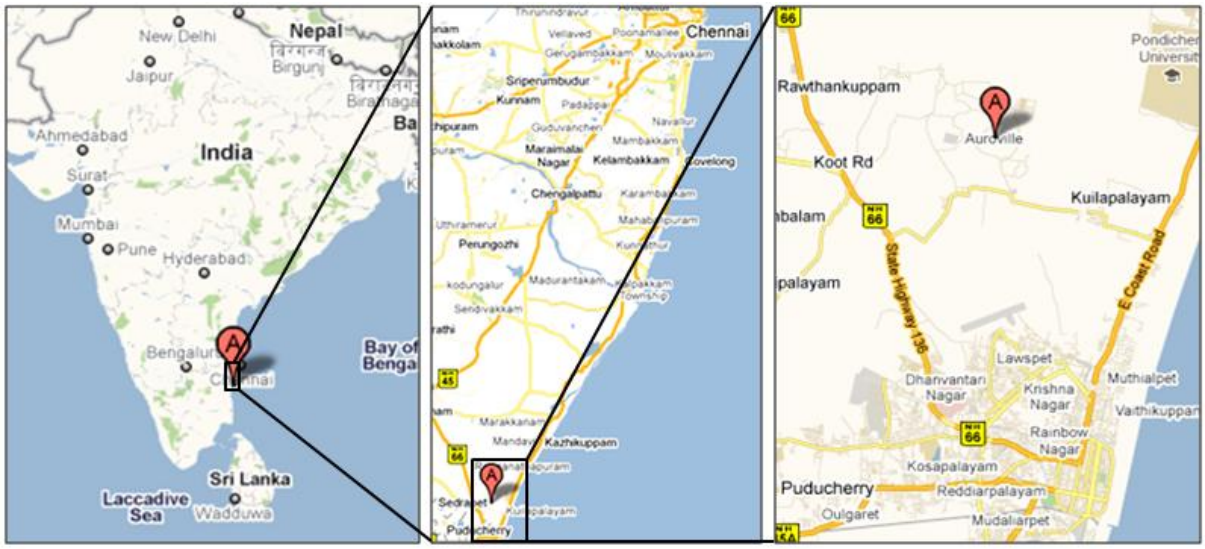


Figure 3.1: Auroville's location in South India

In the ensuing years, a slowly growing group of followers took to putting the loosely formulated vision of Auroville into practice, aiming to work and live together in harmony, to serve the community, and to pursue spiritual, personal, and community development (Auroville.org, no

[1] The sources of images depicted in this and further chapters are provided in the reference list, which can be found on the pages following chapter six.

date-i) – all this while building a city from scratch. For this, a 'master plan' had been developed by the well-known French architect Roger Anger, which foresaw the city to be built in the shape of a galaxy, concentrically warped around the central Peace Area and gigantic Matrimandir meditation hall (Figure 3.2). According to this master plan, which was approved by the Mother, the circular city area would be divided into four zones, each with their particular purpose – such as housing, industry, education and entertainment, and international exchange – and surrounded by a Green Belt for recreation and agriculture (Figure 3.3) (Auroville.org, no date-c). In total, this circular city with a diameter of 5 km would cover about 850 ha, and is intended to house up to 50,000 community members (Auroville Foundation, 2001).

Figure 3.2: The center of Auroville: The Banyan tree in 1968 (left) and the Matrimandir in 2008 with the Banyan tree in the background (right)

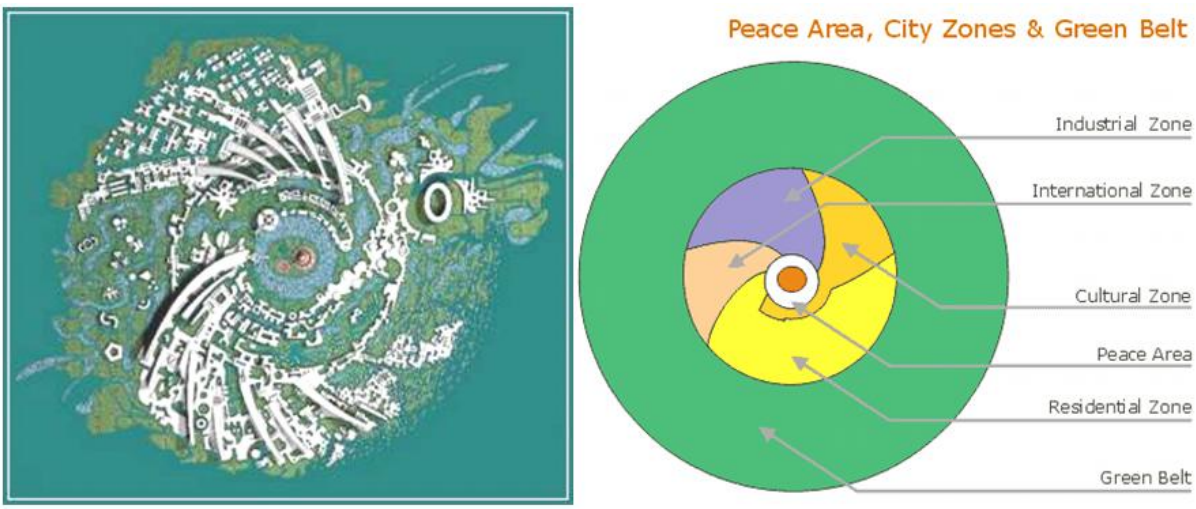


Figure 3.3: The Auroville master plan – Galaxy (left) and city zones (right)

However, for the first thirty years or so, implementing this grand plan proved to be quite a painstaking task, as the environment in which the city was to be built was less than hospitable. The land was red and barren; canyons needed to be dug to retain the monsoon waters, which washed what little topsoil there was into the sea. Trees needed to be planted to secure the soil and provide shade, and simple huts needed to be built. Food needed to be grown and

groundwater pumped from the ground – and all this through trial and error (Auroville Today, 2005, Auroville.org, no date-f).

Furthermore, relations with the seven Tamil villages on the outskirts of the area intended for the city were not always easy, and misunderstandings and conflicts occurred frequently (Auroville.org, no date-g), for instance about the use of land (Auroville.org, no date-f). After the Mother's death in 1973, a violent clash ensued also between the spiritual followers themselves (Auroville Today, 2001). Auroville's assets had been managed by the Mother from her position as leader of the ashram in Pondicherry, and now the ashramites refused to hand over control to the young township. The situation escalated, as according to an article in an Aurovillian magazine, thugs were hired to beat up community members, and charges were pressed based on false accusations (Auroville Today, 2005). The conflict was resolved only seven years later, when the Government of India passed the Auroville Emergency Provisions Act in 1980, which placed the community under direct protection of the government of India. Under this act, all community assets were managed by a specially appointed administrator, until the Auroville Foundation was established in 1992. From then on, all assets have again been managed by this separate legal entity, which is exempt from income taxes (Auroville.org, no date-m).

The Auroville Foundation (see Figure 3.4) consists of several bodies, including a Governing Board, which promotes the ideals of Auroville, reviews and approves basic policies, secures the proper management of all properties, and co-ordinates fundraising (Auroville.org, no date-h). Furthermore, the Governing Board has a Secretary appointed by the Indian government, who may grant Indian residency visas to Aurovillians. The other bodies are an International Advisory Council, and the Auroville Residents' Assembly, which is supported in carrying out its duties by a Working Committee of selected community members (Auroville.org, no date-b).

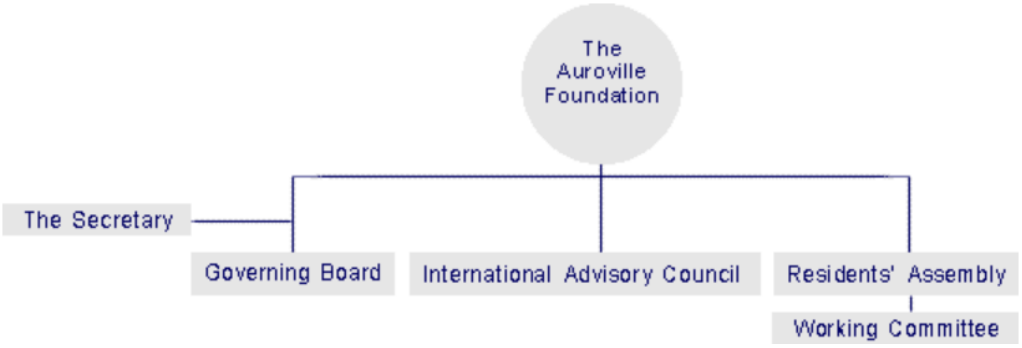


Figure 3.4: Organisational structure of the Auroville Foundation

While this organisational structure of the Auroville Foundation looks very conventional, it should not be overlooked that it is in fact this strategy of adopting a standard, recognisable and 'accepted' way of regulating 'official' responsibilities, which allows the intentional community to

organise everyday matters with almost complete independence. Having gained recognition and approval for the 'top level' structure of the Auroville Foundation, the community members are left to experiment with alternative forms of structuring community life, governance, and economy as they please. In a sense then, we could say that Auroville is cleverly negotiating its independence by adopting conventional structures when necessary, without abandoning the search for new innovative practices on the ground. Some would say that this negotiation between the old and the new is one sign of the community's partaking in the paradigm shift towards transmodernity (Ateljevic, 2009, Ghisi, 2009).

3.2 Town Development and Community Life Today

Even with the power of governance lying almost exclusively in the hands of the community, the development of the city is of course nowhere near finished. The architectural galaxy plan could thus far not be fully implemented, as only approximately half the required land is currently owned by the Auroville Foundation. Furthermore, a significant portion of Auroville land lies outside of the planned city area and green belt, as initial land purchasing and construction was erratic. Furthermore, land prices have risen more than 500% in the period from 1993 to 2003 alone, due to increasing urbanisation, the growth of the city of Pondicherry, and real estate speculation (Auroville.org, 2008b).

Auroville is in a sense a victim of its own success, not only regarding land prices, but also in terms of population growth. Aurovillians come from 49 countries, with the top five nationalities being Indian, French, German, Italian and Dutch. From 1999 to 2011, the population has increased by 43% from 1564 to 2232, an average of 55 people joining every year (Auroville.org, 2011c, Auroville.org, 2003, Auroville.org, 2008a). However, Auroville has for several years been experiencing a housing crisis, as for several reasons, construction cannot keep up with the influx of new community members (Auroville Today, 2007), who end up having to find accommodation in the neighbouring villages (Auroville Today, 2007). Although this crisis is slowly easing as construction is now focussing on apartment-style housing (Auroville Today, 2009) and temporary lodgings, a recent survey in April 2011 showed that accommodation is still required for 130 people (Auroville.org, 2011a).

Auroville does not provide housing for free though. After a (lengthy) process of joining the community, in which applicants need to convince a special working group that their intention for joining Auroville is motivated by reasons that resonate with the community vision (Auroville.org, 2011d), 'Newcomers' are expected to make a one-time donation equivalent to the value of the house or apartment they are going to reside in. However, they will never own or be able to sell their lodging, as the donation only secures the right to live in Auroville

indefinitely (Auroville.org, no date-r) – after all, the community charter states that Auroville belongs to nobody in particular.

The types of accommodation available are dispersed over a wide range of over 100 residential communities – settlements on Auroville land, which vary greatly in terms of size, style and standard of living, as well as level of interaction among residents (Auroville.org, no date-j). Some residential communities are merely clusters of houses on one piece of land, and others feature anything from urban-style apartment living, to reed huts in the forest. Some have a more individualistic culture, while others pay explicit attention to creating a 'community feeling' and may share some or almost all of their resources. Therefore, Auroville is a community that consists of many smaller communities, which vary greatly in their makeup – and in that way, Auroville is no different from other places.

One might be somewhat surprised at this low level of equity, as the mental image conjured up by the notion of an intentional community may evoke a certain expectation towards equality and/or socialism. It is interesting to note, however, that while it is certainly part of the vision of Auroville that all members of the community should be living in harmony, no explicit reference is made to the need for material egalitarianism. Although material wealth is seen as a potential hindrance to spiritual development if one becomes or remains emotionally attached to it, community members are not confined by any rules and regulations regarding their personal wealth or desired lifestyle. On the contrary, each individual is asked to define their own rules, practices and way of life based on their own conscience.

3.3 Governance and Economy

In terms of governance, we can find an interesting mix of direct democracy and pragmatic allocation of responsibilities. As in many intentional communities, Auroville's governance structure is radically democratic, with (key) decisions being made by consensus (Grundmann et al., 2006, Meijering et al., 2007). However, attendance at the Residents' Assembly, to which every Aurovillian above the age of 18 has access, is usually only about 10 to 15% (Auroville.org, no date-k) – or 20% at the most for 'hot' topics, as one of my respondents put it. This means that many perspectives are not finding expression, and that decision making is dominated by a small group of people who regularly make their voice heard. According to respondents, low attendance at the general assembly is a result of Aurovillians getting tired of never-ending, progress-stalling discussions among opinionated individuals. The cartoon in Figure 3.5, which I found on Auroville's website, may serve to capture this frustration.

To circumvent the fact that consensual decision making is close to impossible in larger communities, the practice emerged to give authority on specific matters to so-called 'working groups'. These develop policies on housing, financial management, community memberships,

village outreach, agriculture and forestry, town planning, and the development of the Matrimandir and its gardens (Auroville.org, no date-l), but in reality, they often struggle to have their decisions accepted by the general community. This situation is aggravated by the fact that in Auroville, no enforcement or policing of regulations takes place, as community members are expected to cooperate and consent out of their own free will (Auroville.org, no date-k). In spite of their limited acceptance, these working groups certainly offer opportunities for individuals to gain significant amounts of power in Auroville, leading to the establishment of what one respondent called 'hidden hierarchies'.

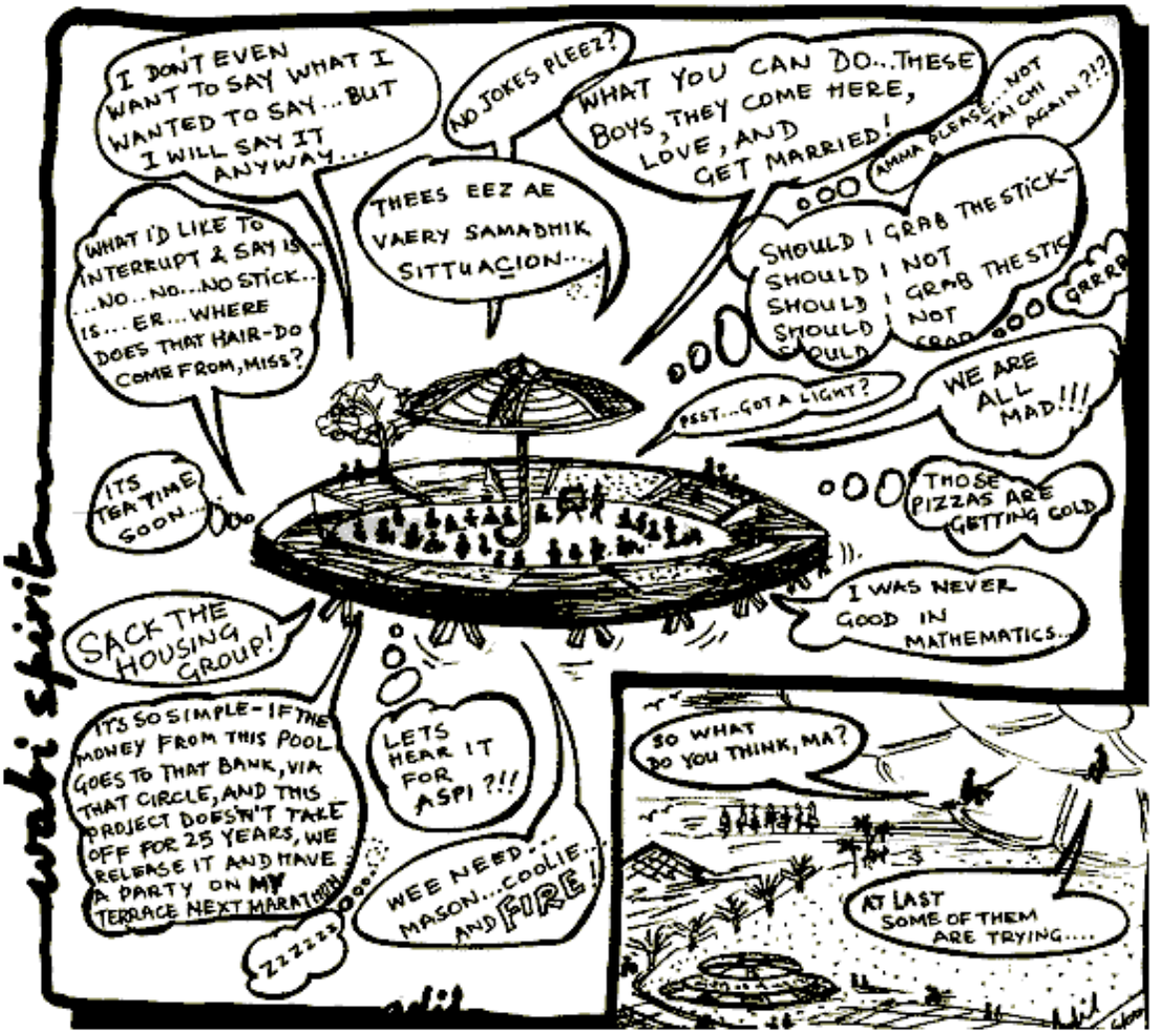


Figure 3.5: An Aurovillian artist's impression of the general assembly

In addition to power imbalance, one can also find significant financial hierarchies in Auroville. In a public talk on the economy of Auroville, I was told that while there are no salaries in Auroville, each community member can claim a monthly 'maintenance' payment in return for their work. This work, however, is seen not so much as a job, but rather as service to the

community, and as an opportunity to develop oneself (Auroville Press, 2010). It usually constitutes a 6-day working week in an area chosen according to one's capacities and aspirations. The maintenance payment amounts to about 5000 to 8000 Indian Rupees (75 – 125 €), depending on the kind of work one does, which is clearly just 'pocket money', even for Indian standards. However, essential goods and services, like clothing, food, education, and basic healthcare are also provided by the community. To encourage internal circulation of money, the maintenance payment goes straight into an account administered by the Auroville Unity Fund (Auroville.org, 2006), from which residents can pay cash-free throughout Auroville, or make cash withdrawals. In addition to this basic financial security of the maintenance payment and free services, many residents go about improving their income by running small to medium-sized businesses (mostly handicrafts, guest houses, organic farming, and food production).

There are around 150 commercial business units in Auroville, about 25 of which are quite successful, some also internationally. These contribute 33% of their net profit to the Auroville Foundation, and provide the monthly maintenance payment to their employees. In the public talk I attended, Auroville's income as a whole was said to have been around 7million € in the financial year of 2008/09, of which 50-60% were donations, 10% government funding, and 30% own income. While Auroville is largely dependent on external funding, it is entirely debt-free, which in current times could almost be considered unique. It is also worth mentioning that, especially in recent years, a large part of Auroville's income is generated through tourism, as the community is becoming increasingly popular among backpackers and spiritual travellers. There are twenty-one official guesthouses in Auroville, which have a total capacity for around 500 guests (Aurovilleguesthouses.org, no date). In addition to this, however, there is a plethora of unregistered guesthouses and accommodation in private houses available in the city and Green Belt areas of Auroville itself, and even more guesthouses in the Tamil villages around Auroville, especially in Kuilapalayam, the village that connects the 'galaxy' area with the beach. In fact, I was told that the population of Auroville doubles at the peak of the tourist season in January and February, when around 2500 guests come to stay.

This influx of visitors is considered as a mixed blessing, however, as it stimulates a rise in prices of consumer goods, and because the busy tourist season is seen by some as a distraction from the 'inner work' that is central to the ideals of Auroville (Auroville.org, 2008c). Nevertheless, tourism also benefits the community by contributing to its rising population and the international support it enjoys, and I was told many times that the role of tourism in facilitating a relatively comfortable lifestyle cannot be denied. Furthermore, the larger Auroville's income, the more money can be allocated to the many projects that provide services to Aurovillians and Tamil villagers, and the various initiatives that address sustainability concerns.

3.4 Auroville – A Prototype for Societal Transformation

The attempts to encourage direct democracy and the emphasis placed on spiritual development through service to the community, are part of what differentiates Auroville from conventional modern societies in the developed and developing world. If we think back to the community's charter (Table 3.1), key notions that come to mind are 'unending education', 'constant progress', 'the bridge between the past and the future', and 'material and spiritual research'.

Indeed, Auroville harbours a great number of innovative projects that try to 'walk the talk' of creating a 'better world'. Reforestation, for instance, is a major concern and has already contributed immensely to the sustainability of the local bio-region. Since the early 1970s, well over a million trees were planted. At first, foreign 'pioneer' trees were used to stabilise the soil, and over time native species of the tropical dry evergreen forest, many close to extinction, were re-introduced, leading also to the return of wildlife (Auroville.org, no date-f). If we look at Auroville now and compare it to 40 years ago, we can get a sense of the transformation that has occurred on the land alone (see Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6: Before and after – Reforestation in Auroville

Sustainable living is also high on the agenda, and a wealth of information on sustainability related projects run by Aurovillians can be found on the Auroville Green Practices website (http://www.green.aurovilleportal.org/). The city area is entirely car-free, and electric scooters are on the rise to replace the petrol-dependent version of this preferred mode of transport (Auroville.org, 2001). Furthermore, town planners want to turn Auroville into an environmentally friendly and sustainable urban settlement that cares also for the neighbouring villages (Auroville.org, no date-d).

All of Auroville's farms are organic (Auroville Today, 2003b), and efforts are being made to convince farmers in the surrounding areas to return to sustainable techniques or use alternative biodegradable pesticides that are being developed in Auroville (Auroville.org, no date-d). Auroville is also a major testing ground for sustainable construction technologies, and the community has been experimenting with alternative energy since the early 1970s, developing solar, wind and biomass energy production systems (Auroville.org, no date-d).

One of the most impressive inventions is a huge solar bowl, 15 m in diameter, which traps the sun's rays in a huge hemispherical mirror, focusing them on a cylindrical boiler. This solar bowl can generate enough steam to cook two meals a day for 1,000 people in Auroville's communal canteen,

Figure 3.7: Sustainability in Auroville – Recycling, biomass production, canyons for water retention, solar 'cooking bowl', and water pumps

the Solar Kitchen (Auroville.org, no date-p). In Figure 3.7, some impressions of sustainability initiatives are portrayed.

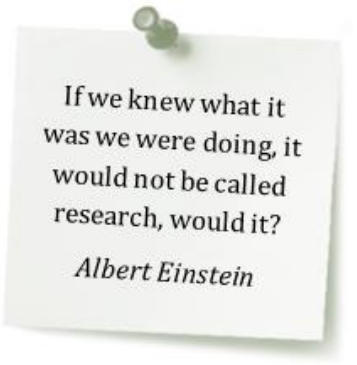
An integral approach to education, based on the teachings of Sri Aurobindo, is also at the centre of Auroville's concerns, as "the mission of Auroville education is not to produce ready-made citizens for a system that cannot anymore find solutions for the problems it has created; it is to help the emergence of men and women able to consciously build themselves on a true basis, while building a new world" (Auroville.org, 2010a). To this aim, many educational research projects are being conducted to create programs that encourage children to develop conscious awareness and discover how to take active charge in their lives (Auroville.org, no date-e). Essentially, however, the ultimate aim for the future of education in Auroville is that schools become more and more irrelevant, as the whole city gradually "becomes a vast campus of unending education and constant progress" (Auroville.org, 2010a). Small steps are already being taken towards this aim; for instance, I was told in a public talk on Aurovillian approaches to education that a recently opened school operates entirely outside of classrooms, visiting different Aurovillians and their projects or workplaces instead. Furthermore, in terms of lifelong learning, there is a wealth of classes and activities in which Aurovillians educate each other (Auroville Press, 2010).

In addition to schools for Aurovillians, the community also runs six schools for children from the surrounding villages (Auroville.org, no date-o). As mentioned in the education talk I attended, these schools are based on a more traditional curriculum to satisfy parents, but aspects of the Integral Education philosophy are also applied. Furthermore, individual Aurovillians have set up educational centres in several villages, such as the Mohanam cultural centre, which aims to provide children from poor families with opportunities to channel their creative energy into purposeful activities that promote solidarity (see www.mohanam.org).

Auroville is also engaged in a considerable amount of outreach and capacity development projects in the 40 to 50 villages of the local region, tackling issues like vocational training and education, wasteland reclamation, provision of health education and services, and women empowerment (Auroville.org, no date-d, Auroville Radio, 2009). Furthermore, Auroville's work has affected regions farther afield, both in India and the world, as the community helps initiate new projects, spreads its knowledge and expertise of innovative technology, and runs participatory workshops on sustainable development (Auroville.org, no date-f, Auroville.org, 2009, Sadhana Forest, 2011).

These and other examples are what incites me to call Auroville a prototype community for the transformation towards more sustainable and transmodern societies. In this context, we will now consider the methodology of this study, which examined dialogic interaction processed that could potentially be of benefit to this transformational role of intentional communities.

Chapter Four
Methodology



As I have argued previously, dialogic interaction is a vital component of efforts to advance societal transitions towards sustainability and transmodernity, and intentional communities can be regarded as prototypes of such social transformations. As little is known about what influences dialogic interaction in practice, this study focussed on exploring how (dialogic) interaction patterns amongst Aurovillians are shaped. The overall research aim was to explore the complexities of practicing dialogic interaction that arise from the historical, cultural and political context of Auroville. Alongside this consideration of macro-level community processes, this research also addressed a more micro-level research objective, which was to identify factors that inhibit and support the practice of dialogic interaction at group gatherings in Auroville.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the methodology underlying my attempt to address this research aim and objective. First, I will outline the fundamental philosophical underpinnings of the constructivist/critical research paradigm from which this study emerges, followed by a description of the case study strategy employed. Then, attention will turn to the triangulated methods for data collection, which included direct participant observation, unstructured ethnographic interviews, the study of secondary documents, and an ethnographic diary. Further elaborations will concern the mixture of thematic and constant comparative analysis that was applied to the data recorded through field notes, interview transcripts and process notes. Finally, strategies to establish the study's trustworthiness are presented and discussed, and limitations of the research methodology are outlined.

4.1 Methodological and Ideological Frame

The assumptive beliefs and theoretical propositions that underlie this qualitative exploratory research bear reference to the constructivist and critical paradigms. Ontologically, the study features elements of both pluralism and structuralism: It emphasises the fluid and dynamic nature of reality (Van den Belt, 2003, Baxter and Jack, 2008), and acknowledges at the same time that social reality is a product of human interaction within complex power structures, which emerge from historical and cultural conditions (Hemingway, 1999).

In this way, I approach inter-subjective experiences of ordinary members of society as key building blocks of the social world, since common understandings derive from endless refining of expectations, norms and common sense through every-day social interaction (Cuff et al., 1990, Baxter and Jack, 2008). Hence, I am viewing dialogic interaction as "participant produced" (McCabe, 2007: 228), and 'talk' as the means by which participants construct their own realities, which shift constantly yet are experienced as objective (Lindlof, 1995). However, care needs to be taken not to forget that inter-subjective encounters occur within specific contexts that are shaped by historical, cultural, political, economic, and institutional factors (Roper et al., 2004). This context provides a frame within which individuals co-create social reality (Hemingway, 1999), which alerts us to also adopt a macro-level perspective that can facilitate an examination of social complexities and their role in affecting dialogic interaction. Key ideological assumptions here are firstly, that the chaos of individual identities and experiences, situated in fluid and dynamic processes, makes it difficult to capture social phenomena. Secondly, however, it is also assumed that normative critique of societal processes and phenomena is needed to identify manifest and latent barriers to the fuller realisation of human capacities (Hemingway, 1999), such as the capacity for dialogic interaction.

Bringing a normative lens to the research process does of course make it inherently value laden (Jennings, 2005): "Research is an interactive process shaped by his or her [the researcher's] personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and those of the people in the setting" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 3). Hence, it is vital to acknowledge how this study has been influenced by my research 'gaze' (Tribe, 2007) and positionality – my personal background, worldview, assumptions, fears and ambitions. Moreover, a closer look is needed at how this study has been shaped by various 'entanglements' – forces like ideology, personal history, and social status – that influence, constrain and shape the process of knowledge production (Ateljevic et al., 2005).

As a graduate student, I am influenced by the research ideologies of my institutional environment, which in my case could be called inter-disciplinary. I have had opportunities to work with scholars from various fields, including human geography, communication science, environmental education, tourism studies, environmental psychology, and sustainable development. My own academic background in health sciences and leisure and tourism studies also comes into play, and I consider myself fortunate to have been exposed to a broad range of academic perspectives – more so perhaps when compared to more 'disciplinary' young academics. Nevertheless, the dominant focus of my work has been, and remains in this study, a qualitative, ethnographic orientation to research, as I tend to be interested in complex topics of inquiry that are difficult to reduce to quantifiable survey items, and demand instead a deep investigation of social phenomena.

More concretely, I have been interested in interpersonal encounters and interaction dynamics since I was a teenager, when I began analysing the patterns according to which conflicts ensued in my family, in an (of course unsuccessful) attempt to 'fix' my parents. I believe that this part of my personal history was not insignificant in shaping my interest for dialogic interaction and its role in contributing to sustainable and transmodern change – and 'tongue-in-cheek', we might wonder if my subconscious ambition has perhaps shifted from fixing family to fixing society?

My intersectionality in the research setting, i.e. my way of relating to and voicing the experience of respondents also played a role (Ateljevic et al., 2005). As a European white woman in my late twenties, coming from an upper-middle class, highly educated family, and having for a long time showed concern for the future of the planet and our societies, I bring certain values with me that leave traces in the research process. In the preparation, analysis and completion phases of this research, I was situated within my comfort zone of being a 'student' and 'writer', but during the empirical part, my position was ambiguous. One the one hand, I was a (paying) 'guest' and 'rich foreigner', while at the same time being an 'outsider' trying to 'look in' and be part of community life as much as possible. I sometimes felt that people had little time for me, which made me uncomfortable when asking questions, and I was challenged by ethical conflicts when acting as covert observer. My status as a relatively inexperienced 'researcher' is also likely to have influenced how respondents perceived and interacted with me; for some it seemed to foster interest and openness, while the purpose for my being in the community was met by others with rolling eyes.

4.2 Research Strategy

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, the intention to observe (dialogic) interaction processes in a naturalistic setting, and my interest in how the broader community context influences interactive patterns (Yin, 2003), the strategy employed for this research was an ethnographic case study. The intentional community of Auroville was selected as an opportunity to visit presented itself, and because the community is highly diverse in terms of its residents' cultural, geographic and professional backgrounds (Auroville.org, 2011b), which meant that I would be able to observe interaction processes among highly heterogeneous groups. Here, it needs to be said that in spite of this high diversity, Aurovillians do of course also have certain things in common, above all the shared aspiration for alternative ways of living, and the intention to combine spiritual development with active engagement and service towards the evolution of societies. Collaboration and intercultural understanding are also central aspects of this shared vision (Auroville.org, no date-s) – as the founder of Auroville put it, Auroville is conceived as "a place where human relationships, which are normally based almost exclusively on competition and strife, would be replaced by relationships of emulation in doing well, of collaboration and real brotherhood" (Mirra Alfassa, [1954] 2010: 6). Given this

presence of a shared aspiration for societal change as well as a joint vision for collaboration, it was assumed that in at least some of the observed interactions, participants would make intentional efforts to interact dialogically (although they might of course not use this terminology).

Auroville also fulfils the requirement of a case study as a bounded and specific system, within which selected phenomena are studied (Stake, 2005). To further delineate the study's scope, the empirical research phase was set to a period of six weeks in December and January 2010/11, during which group interaction processes in Auroville were explored through qualitative ethnographic research. This approach was chosen because it embraces uncertainties (c.f. Martens et al., 2010), and can contribute to critical understanding of naturally occurring interactions (McCabe, 2007). This is the case because the underlying epistemological emphasis on inquiry into the lived experience of respondents (Hemingway, 1999) promotes the collection of first and second hand experiential knowledge (Stake, 2005). Furthermore, the research approach focuses on teasing out hidden meanings by analysing social practices, roles, and institutions and their (implicit) connotations and contradictions (Hemingway, 1999, Stake, 2005). In this way, the role of historical and intersubjective cultural processes in developing an understanding of social phenomena are highlighted (Benhabib 1992, cited in Hemingway 1999).

4.3 Data Collection

Key data collection methods employed in qualitative ethnographic case study research are participant observation over an extended period of time (in this case six weeks), interviews that aim to gather the observations of other people regarding the phenomenon under study (in this case dialogic interaction), and documents in which such observations are recorded (Stake, 2005, Cole, 2005, Baxter and Jack, 2008). Aside from a comprehensive literature review regarding factors and complexities that shape dialogic interaction, a triangulated data collection strategy was employed for this research, in which data from various sources was compared to verify emerging insights (Stake, 2005). These sources included participant observation, unstructured interviews, document study, and an ethnographic diary, each of which will be considered below.

In terms of participant observation, I took part in several group gatherings in which Aurovillians met for a particular purpose, and observed the interaction that ensued. These group gatherings were identified partly through reading Auroville's weekly newsletter, or by asking for recommendations. Furthermore, my role as a researcher shifted along the spectrum from complete participant to complete observer (Lindlof, 1995), which is summarised in Table 4.1.

	Group name	Description of group gathering	Researcher role	Times attended
1	Christmas Play	An international group of eight residents, volunteers, and guests, who wrote and performed the story of Christ's birth for an audience of Tamil villagers	Complete Participant	1
2	Town Hall Staff	Aurovillians involved in several working groups meet regularly to discuss certain issues	Complete Observer	2
3	NVC Practice Group	A group of Aurovillians who meet weekly to practice Nonviolent Communication techniques while discussing communal and personal concerns	Complete Participant	2
4	NVC Guest House	A guest house at which management and staff meet daily in public to discuss tasks for the day	Complete Observer	ongoing
5	Sustainable Management Seminar	A three-day workshop for Aurovillians in leadership roles within the community that aimed to foster communication skills	Participant-as-Observer	1
6	Residential Community	A residential community of 10 Aurovillians who run a guest house together, and whose interactions could be observed in daily work and community meetings	Observer-as-Participant	ongoing
7	Building Team	A group of 4 Aurovillians who co-supervise construction at a building site	Complete Observer	1

Table 4.1: Direct participant observation of group gatherings in Auroville

Furthermore, in-depth informal unstructured ethnographic interviews, or rather 'situational conversations' (Lindlof, 1995), were conducted with community members, revolving around respondents' experience of interactive processes at work, in project groups, and in residential communities. As questions were either tailored to or improvised for particular interviews (Stake, 2005), these informal conversations did not follow any particular plan or pre-designed instrument (Cole, 2005). This approach was chosen in order for conversations to be as naturalistic as possible, and to prevent respondents from giving 'desired' answers (Stake, 2005) or feeling 'exploited' or 'researched', and to avoid creating power imbalances (Lindlof, 1995).

I met respondents either as a result of chance, or through recommendation by people I had told about this research, and in total, I spoke to 40 people: 22 men and 17 women, 33 of whom were Aurovillians, and an additional five were guests, and two volunteers. These respondents were either born in Auroville (2), or originated from a range of countries, including Germany (10), India (8, including 6 respondents from surrounding Tamil villages), Spain (4), France (3), Belgium (2), the USA (2), Australia, Austria, Finland, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Morocco, the Netherlands, and New Zealand.

Some respondents (10) were recurrent conversation partners, while I spoke to others (30) only on one occasion. Sometimes, interviews were conducted one-on-one, and at other times in

groups. Most conversations happened spontaneously (34), either during a group gathering I observed, or outside of an observation context. Some interviews were also scheduled in advance (8). In the Appendix, a list of interview characteristics per respondent is provided. Names are of course not mentioned to protect anonymity – both in this list, and in the discussion of findings presented in the next chapter. As one might expect, the conversations with respondents were of various length, lasting anywhere between 10 minutes and 1.5 hours.

Depending on the situation, my rapport with the respondent, and the length, depth and course of the conversation, I disclosed the purpose of my stay in Auroville and made my research aims explicit. This was the case with roughly half (18) of my conversation partners, and I told most others (13) more generally about my position as a researcher of group interaction processes. Hence, I acted as entirely covert researcher towards nine of my respondents, and at two of the group gatherings, where I took the role of complete participant. The decision to remain 'under cover' on some occasions was based on my judgement of the situation, as my aim was to maintain an authentic relationship with respondents (Lindlof, 1995). At the Christmas Play, my participation was spontaneous and the situation's relevance to my research became clear to me only after the event. At the NVC Practice Group, the type of personal issues discussed made me reluctant to disclose my research aims, and the conversations with respondents in which I remained covert were short and spontaneous, and situated in a context in which I felt voicing my role as researcher would be inappropriate. While such a covert researcher role raises certain ethical concerns and is condemned by some as exploitative across the board (Anderson, 1987, Dingwall, 1980), I followed Lindlof's (1995) recommendation to thoroughly examine my motives for remaining convert on occasion, and discussed my concerns on site with a fellow researcher to investigate whether respondents could be caused any harm.

As a third data source, I studied several documents containing information on interactive processes that I was unable to observe directly or speak to participants or facilitators about. These documents were sourced in the library of one residential community, and included:

- Back-copies of the January 2010 to January 2011 issues of the monthly magazine *Auroville Today*[2], which publishes articles on current affairs.
- Several issues of the Auroville journal *Ritam*[3], which is published by the Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research (SAIIER) and contains articles relevant to the vision and charter of Auroville.

[2] Available: http://www.auroville.org/journals%26media/avtoday/avtoday.htm

[3] Available: http://www.auroville.org/journals%26media/ritam/ritam.htm

- Several issues of the journal *Collaboration*[4], which is, amongst other topics, concerned with work on the continuous development of Auroville's vision.

In these secondary sources of data, I found information on three participatory projects which were relevant to this study's focus on dialogic interaction. These were:

- A project to develop an *Integrated Sustainability Platform* to encourage heightened collaboration between different working committees that tackle sustainability related issues in Auroville. Here, people from diverse sectors were brought together to co-design a collaborative sustainable development action plan.
- The *Dreamcatchers* project, which brought together people working on various aspects of town planning with the aim to stimulate open sharing of ideas and the generation of integrative insights and development models.
- An initiative called *Auroville Vision 2012*, in which a project team gathered community members' visions for the future of Auroville, and subsequently attempted to integrate these visions in an externally facilitated dialogue retreat.

Finally, I used an ethnographic diary to record general observations of interaction processes in Auroville (Lindlof, 1995), and to make field notes outside of the context of particular group gatherings or interviews, for instance when observing interaction in a café or during information events or workshops that were put on for guests and Aurovillians.

To record data, process notes were taken during or directly after group gatherings and interviews. Audio-recording was used whenever appropriate, however these instances were quite limited, as placing a recorder on the table felt like an invasion of the communication space (c.f. Stake, 2005). In the case of the documents on interaction processes I studied, the ethnographic diary was used to record notes while reading these documents.

4.4 Data Analysis

Throughout the process of analysis, data from the various parts of the case study were converged in order to develop an understanding of dialogic interaction processes at the case as a whole (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Both the constructivist and critical research paradigms call for an inductive mode of inquiry (Perry, 1998, Lindlof, 1995), and the same usually goes for research that uses a case study strategy (Baxter and Jack, 2008). However, case studies benefit in their design from a foundational use of literature, and thus, it is recommended to balance induction and deduction in an effort to develop new theoretical insights that are grounded in

[4] Available: http://www.collaboration.org/archives.html

existing understanding (Perry, 1998). Such a balanced approach was also employed in this research, as the theoretical framework outlined in chapter two was used to guide data analysis, albeit not immediately, in order to prevent analytic thinking to become too driven by the framework (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Instead, the process of analysis began already during data collection. This involved taking raw observations and people's accounts of events as a starting point, recording ample reflective notes in the ethnographic diary, and letting the data "slowly resolve into concepts and specific research propositions" through developing an "increasing skill at understanding" (Lindlof, 1995: 56). Furthermore, once tentative interpretations of the data could be made, these 'flowed into' the interviews I conducted, giving me a chance to observe the reactions of respondents to what I believed was emerging from the data, gather their feedback, and adapt my interpretations accordingly (c.f. Cole, 2005, Creswell, 2009).

Once data collection was completed, a mixture of thematic analysis (Creswell, 2009) and constant comparative analysis (Jennings, 2005) was employed, which at first involved reflectively pondering impressions and recollections (Stake, 2005), and reading and re-reading all recorded data, while taking reflective notes. Then, the material was coded for emerging themes and descriptions (Creswell, 2009), and sorted according to patterns recognised in the process (Stake, 2005). This resulted in the creation of a database in which excerpts from raw observation and process notes, as well as quotes from recorded interviews and secondary documents, were collected and arranged in data tables pertaining to the codes and themes developed thus far.

In a further step, the data in each table were coded for sub-themes, and here the theoretical framework developed while reviewing literature on dialogic interaction was kept in mind. In this way, the inductive phase of data analysis was supplemented with deductive thinking, continuously interrelating and comparing codes "to build an ideographic representation of the study phenomenon" (Jennings, 2005: 109). This third phase of data analysis continued throughout the process of writing up and discussing the findings of this research, resulting in a modified version of the initial theoretical framework, which intends to capture and integrate the insights gained in this study.

4.5 Trustworthiness

Needless to say, all research, and perhaps especially qualitative research, is inherently subjective. As Stake (2005: 456) puts it, researchers will under all circumstances

> "pass along to readers some of their personal meanings of events and relationships – and fail to pass along others. They know that readers, too, will add and subtract, invent and shape – reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it differently connected and more likely to be personally useful."

Nevertheless, in much constructivist research, where ontology opposes objectivity, the notion of 'trustworthiness' (Baxter and Jack, 2008) is employed to emulate the quantitative call for validity and reliability. While, strictly speaking, trustworthiness is impossible to check, as each interpretative move subtly alters the 'reality' it is inquiring into (Heron, 1996), one can employ certain strategies for establishing the quality of qualitative research. In this study, this included discussing and confirming preliminary findings with a fellow researcher and mentor, who was encouraged to act as a 'critical friend' (Stenhouse, 1975), as well as discussing tentative interpretations and emerging themes with respondents to aid credibility (Cole, 2005, Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, data collection was triangulated, and data from various sources was compared through careful and continuous checking of field notes and transcripts. Furthermore, a code book was used to record the definition of codes, avoid a drift in their meaning, and build a coherent justification for emerging themes (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, field notes included diary-style reflections on the research process, as well as concerns regarding researcher bias (Cole, 2005).

Generalisability is another concern in qualitative research, and case studies are often used as an initial step in theory building, and can be seen as a small step towards broader generalisations (Stake, 2005). The critical research paradigm – which was used in this research to balance overly relativist notions – also allows for generalisations to some extent (Hemingway, 1999). Hence, careful attempts were made to build on existing theory, expanding the meanings and themes that emerged in this case study to other frames of reference within the larger sphere of inquiry (Lindlof, 1995) regarding dialogic interaction.

4.6 Methodological Limitations

We need to consider, however, that 'ticking boxes' to improve trustworthiness does not guarantee high quality research (Barbour, 2001) – hence, some limitations need to be acknowledged in the context of this research. First of all, the study was designed to be exploratory and limited in scope, and relatively little time was available for data collection. Upon arrival, it also took some time to familiarise myself with the case, meet relevant 'gatekeepers', and gain access to observation opportunities (c.f. Lindlof, 1995). Hence, no claims can be made for the findings to be exhaustive, as some aspects of dialogic interaction were potentially not captured. A more extended time frame would have been of benefit, as it would have enabled more frequent and extended periods of participant observation, and would have provided opportunities to observe interaction when people are less busy with the tourist season, which was the case during my visit. However, the plethora of workshops and gatherings organised while guests are around also enabled me to meet many Aurovillians and long-term guests to talk to and ask about people and projects relevant to my research.

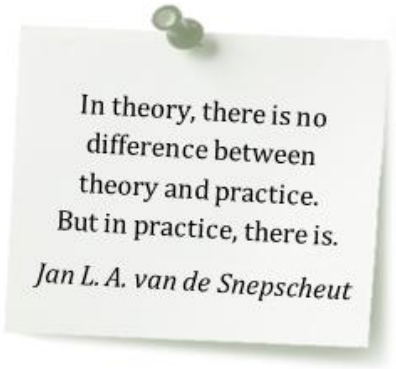
Furthermore, Stake (2005: 456) draws attention to the role of unconscious processes and intuition in producing theory in qualitative research, especially in the writing phase, in which "meanings aggregate or attenuate, associations become relationships, and relationships become theory." This intuitive aspect of (qualitative) research does in no way need to be regarded as negative; indeed all inductive thinking can be thought of as intuitive to some extent (c.f. Simon, 1996). Nevertheless, it points to the possibility that a different researcher might have sculpted a different discussion and theoretical framework, which in turn suggests that additional research is needed to confirm the findings of this study.

It also needs to be said that data selection was not representative, as little strategy was employed to gain access to group gatherings, respondents or documents, because it was difficult to find out specific details about current opportunities for observation and interviews prior to starting the fieldwork. Instead, tactical decisions about what to observe and who to speak to occurred purposively in the field, and often in spontaneous fashion (Lindlof, 1995). In hindsight more preparation could have been beneficial, and the knowledge I now have of Auroville would indeed be beneficial for preparing a more strategic and in-depth data collection approach.

Concerning data collection and analysis, my relatively limited experience as a researcher could also be mentioned, which I attempted to overcome by studying techniques and procedures prior to the empirical phase of this study. Another constraining factor was that due to unfortunate circumstances, data analysis was interrupted for some weeks after returning from fieldwork. While this interruption might have interfered somewhat with my ability to recollect events accurately (Schacter, 1995), it might also have benefited analysis by creating some intellectual distance to the material and empirical context, and my extensive field notes enabled me to pick up easily where I had left off.

Having outlined the general characteristics and limitations of the methodology and methods employed in this research, it is now time to examine and discuss the findings of this study in more detail.

Chapter Five
Findings and Discussion – Complexities and Factors in Dialogic Interaction



In this chapter, the findings of this study are presented and considered in light of the literature reviewed in chapter two, whereby the discussion ensues in three parts. First, I will outline a range of complexities inherent to the macro-level societal processes in Auroville that affect interactive processes and need to be considered when thinking about dialogic interaction. This will include some speculative discussion regarding the dominant interaction culture in Auroville and its potential for change, the way hidden hierarchies impinge on community relations, and how this affects inter-group collaboration. Furthermore, the high prevalence of conflict in Auroville is contrasted with the sense of unity Aurovillians seem to share based on their community vision, and it is argued that this apparent paradox can be resolved by realising that dialogic interaction is not a static phenomenon. Instead, it can be seen as a process of learning and a journey of maturation that involves shifting in and out of more or less dialogic modes of interacting, as people experience success and failure in approaching each other with respect and appreciation.

In the second part, we will then look at the range of contextual, interpersonal and personal factors that shape dialogic interaction on a more micro-level of group gatherings. Examining contextual factors, we will discuss the role of spatial design, external coaching and the use of communication tools and interaction principles in fostering dialogic interaction, while highlighting that they should not be regarded as panaceas, and that their success depends on the intention with which they are used, and the context of interaction. Then, a discussion of interpersonal factors that shape dialogic interaction will lead us to consider the tensions between diversity and conflict in Auroville, highlighting some aspects that make dialogic interaction difficult, while emphasising that developing a joint vision and adopting a process-oriented perspective can help groups deal with these challenges in a positive, even joyful manner. Thirdly, in considering personal factors, a discussion will ensue about the need to balance assertiveness and openness, and to recognise how different communication styles shape dialogic interaction. Furthermore, it is highlighted that developing present awareness and suspending judgment requires participants to inquire into and address unconscious ego-drives

and habitual interaction patterns, a process in which a spiritual outlook on life can be of assistance.

Finally, in the third part of the discussion, I will add a level of abstraction to the discussion of these findings, and suggest an amended version of the theoretical framework presented in chapter two, attempting to capture ideographically how the factors identified in this research interact within and among spheres of influence that shape an unfolding process of dialogic interaction in the context of community complexities.

5.1 Community Complexities and Dialogic Interaction

As outlined before, Auroville is a place where people of a great variety of backgrounds come together to work towards harmonious co-existence and collaborative engagement in activities that benefit the whole community. Adopting dialogic ways of interacting, I have argued, would be of benefit in working towards these aims, but as this discussion will show, certain community-level processes create a range of complexities that affect interaction processes. In the following sections, I aim to outline some of these phenomena that affect interactive processes in Auroville in general, and dialogic interaction specifically. It is of course important to note that my aim is not to show definitive patterns of interaction or to develop explanations for the phenomena observed; instead, I merely aim to highlight a range of complexities of community life that seem to affect the 'interactive space' in Auroville and need to be considered when thinking about the practice of dialogic interaction.

Lack of Communication Culture and Organised Collaboration

First of all, we need to consider what kind of collective approach Auroville has to communication, since dialogue is argued to thrive in a culture that values open and trusting interaction (Rule, 2004) and favours collaboration over competition (Wilhelmson, 2006). Even though collaboration is a central aim of the community, many people I spoke to said that too little attention is being paid to the way communication practices affect a group's ability to collaborate. Most working groups and initiatives do not seem to make use of communication tools or principles to facilitate interaction; a report written in 2006 about an initiative to investigate diverse perspectives of the vision of Auroville (Auroville Vision Project, 2006) stated that:

> "Although meetings are a core part of how work happens in Auroville, until now we have not paid very much attention to our meeting culture (i.e. how to create them as a field of practice – effective, inspiring, generative, and expressing a refined consciousness)."

Several respondents mentioned also that Aurovillians are only recently becoming more aware that communication tools can help them to make interaction more mutually supportive, and that Auroville is in desperate need for more sharing, engaging and trusting forms of interaction, since, after all, the community vision is about progressive harmony and 'human unity'. While these respondents did not talk specifically about a need for 'dialogue', their statements nevertheless indicate that it is dialogic interaction which they seek, as trust (O'Hara, 2003, Kell and Corts, 1980, Rule, 2004, van Gorder, 2007), generative interaction (Gunnlaugson, 2007, Scharmer, 2009, Senge, 1994, Burson, 2002), sharing insights (Flick, 1998, Wilhelmson, 2006), and mutual support (Wilhelmson, 2006, Kell and Corts, 1980) are all key elements of dialogue.

That said, there are indeed some groups and initiatives in Auroville that seem to practice dialogic interaction, as they pay specific attention to creating a generative communication environment and focus on integrating a diversity of perspectives. One example is the *Dreamcatchers* project, which I read about in one of Auroville's journals (Nightingale, 2008), and whose work was showcased in a small exhibition. This project consisted of a series of meetings in 2007 that aimed to "stimulate the emergence of all-embracing solutions to the town planning process in Auroville." Interested Aurovillians were invited to participate in two kinds of meetings to express their visions for the development of the city, and then integrate the various proposals. These meetings occurred at special times of the day (sunrise and sunset) both for pragmatic reasons and to engender a sense of emergence (Nightingale, 2008), and communication techniques that are useful for dialogic interaction, such as a 'talking stick' (c.f. Wang, 2009) and a world-café workshop (c.f. Brown, 2005, Prewitt, 2011) were used in the *Dreamcatchers* process.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to say more about the process and outcomes of dialogic interaction in this project, as I was unable to observe it directly or speak with the project leaders. However, a woman who has been living in Auroville for over 15 years, was able to tell me of several group initiatives she participated in that intentionally used dialogic interaction techniques, including a residential community that practices dialogue, a project for integrating various perspectives on short-term visions in Auroville, and a dialogue practice group.

There has also been a Non Violent Communication (NVC) practice group for several years, in which participants learn to become more aware of destructive communication habits and practice expressing their preferences and needs in a way that is assertive yet inoffensive to others (Rosenberg and Molho, 1998, Rosenberg, 2003). I was able to participate in several meetings of this group, at which my subjective impression was that dialogic interaction was indeed occurring, as conversation flowed calmly and without rush, and participants seemed to speak 'from the heart' (Scharmer, 2009), expressing their ideas and feelings, and offering helpful advice to each other (Wilhelmson, 2006). Also, each person who attended the meeting,

regardless of their age, gender or cultural background, was given space to voice their concern regarding each topic (Wilhelmson, 2006).

These examples show that at present, some individuals, small groups and residential communities in Auroville do explicitly put dialogic interaction on the agenda; so we might say that they create 'pockets' or prototypes in the community where a more integrative communication style is favoured that embraces a diversity of perspectives. Furthermore, the fact that some Aurovillians, although not directly involved in these pockets of dialogic interaction, (implicitly or explicitly) recognise that dialogue can be beneficial for the community, points to a slowly emerging collective attitude towards interaction that might be conducive to an emergence of dialogic interaction on a more broader community level.

However, a member of the dialogic practice group admitted that

> "between 10 and 20% of people in Auroville really have an interest in this kind of stuff. [...] But I think interest in one thing, you know. [...] It's a participatory experience, so people who are actually prepared to participate, maybe at the most 10%."

Hence, vested interest in learning to communicate dialogically seems relatively rare, which indicates that there seem to be other underlying factors that prevent dialogic interaction from becoming common practice in Auroville.

The Pioneer Spirit – Structure Aversion and Resistance

One of these factors might be that while collaboration is in principle something the community aspires to, it is not built into its structures. There are many initiatives that work on specific tasks to run and develop the community, but it appears that little lasting collaboration exists among them. One respondent told me for instance that while several working groups tackle specific sustainability issues, there are no structured attempts to encourage them to collaborate, exchange ideas and generate a common vision.

Actually, a recent initiative to set up an Integrated Sustainability Platform (ISP), which I read about in the September 2010 issue of the monthly magazine *Auroville Today*, tried to address this lack of collaboration structures. This project was led by two Aurovillians, who defined 18 sectors in the community related to social, natural and physical infrastructures for sustainability, and then formed planning teams for each sector that consisted of people who represent the diversity of perspectives in their sector. These planning teams then met regularly for four months to design a five year sustainable development plan. Subsequently, the various planning teams shared their insights with each other in several meetings, and modified their

strategies to improve collaboration between sectors. According to the facilitators of this project, many community groups learnt of each others' existence for the first time, and "realised that there is a need for much greater connectivity and integration between them." However one of the ISP participants told me that nobody is facilitating the meetings between different services anymore, and the plans that were developed are not being implemented, as everyone is back to their work and forgets about the other groups and their work and perspectives. Such lack of follow-up on collaborative projects can indeed be frustrating to participants of (dialogic) interaction processes (Heath et al., 2006), and it may reduce people's willingness to engage in collaboration again at a later stage.

While there are probably many reasons why these different groups don't collaborate anymore, including a lack of funding for maintaining networks, one contributing factor might also be the tendency of Aurovillians to dislike rules and structures, to which several respondents alerted me. An Aurovillian communication trainer said for instance that people tend not to like having a leader, failing to see that leadership and organised communication is essential for achieving any kind of vision, especially, when it comes to creating macro collaboration structures like the ISP. Additionally, one might say that such a tendency for structure aversion could also act as a barrier to dialogic interaction, as this requires participants to subscribe to a range of communication rules and practices (c.f. Herzig and Chasin, 2006).

One respondent expressed the prevailing lack of collaboration and structure aversion quite vividly from a historical perspective: "In the first 40 years of Auroville, people worked on taming the land and the villagers [*sic*], and only now they are starting to tame themselves." Life in Auroville may seem pleasant and easygoing to the present day visitors, who roam the excellent cafe's and enjoy the quietude and shade of the forested land, but in fact the tourist season is Auroville's winter, and for the rest of the year the community has to deal either with scorching heat or the monsoon. One can only imagine what it was like in Auroville's early years, when the land was red and barren and the young community of spiritual seekers and expatriates had to learn from scratch how to go about reforestation, securing fresh water, growing food, and building huts (Auroville Today, 2005). Furthermore, people living in the surrounding Tamil villages were often antagonistic towards the first Aurovillians, who dug water retention canyons through the land on which their goats used to graze, and as many respondents told me, it took many years to establish a relatively peaceful coexistence.

It is not surprising therefore, that the culture which emerged in the community of Aurovillians who saw themselves as pioneers was a culture of struggle and endurance, which didn't exactly foster the attitudes of gentleness, empathy (O'Hara, 2003) and respectful understanding (Schäfer et al., 2007, Heath et al., 2006) that are needed when it comes to dialogic interaction. One respondent explained:

> "The pioneer syndrome is the result of the culture resulting from these bunch of people who decided to [...] start a new life, a new society in the middle of nowhere here, and they have been struggling like hell, just to survive [...], so there is a kind of definite will to oppose."

One can maybe appreciate that the quality Arnett (2004) considers vital for participants in dialogue – the 'responsive ethical I' of reciprocity and responsibility for others – is quite contradictory to such a culture of struggle.

Two women who have lived in Auroville since the late 70s also pointed out that the community was all but inclusive in its early years, and that they, for many years after their arrival, felt actively ignored and marginalised by those who had arrived before them. This resistance towards Newcomers seems to exist to a lesser extent even today, as many more recent members of the community complain that they are not listened to for a number of years by many of the more senior members of the community.

This points to the existence of certain more or less 'hidden' hierarchies in a community that claims to strive towards human unity. Granted, this vision is very idealistic and we cannot expect that equality manifests in a community simply because it is stated as an intention. Indeed, one woman I talked to, and who had been travelling to and living in a great variety of intentional communities over the last 30 years, told me that "they all claim to be non-hierarchical, but they all have more or less hidden power struggles and unofficial hierarchies." This points to a certain tension between, on the one hand, the need for leadership and organisational structures that invite the emergence of certain hierarchies, while intentional communities on the other hand often aim for some kind of egalitarian model of community life.

This basic contradiction between leadership and egalitarianism can lead to hierarchies not being openly acknowledged, so that they operate in a powerfully subtle way. This, we might argue, can foster asymmetric conversation styles in which dominant perspectives have 'the upper hand', and in which marginalised voices are either silenced or may conform (Wilhelmson, 2006), as they are ignored, misunderstood, or distorted through dominant ideology (Putnam, 2001). Furthermore, these hierarchies and somewhat antagonistic attitudes towards new people, ideas and opinions could act as a barrier to creating a more dialogic interaction culture. Such a culture would emphasise the value of each perspective (Flick, 1998) and would discourage from judging individual contributions (Bohm, 1996 quoted in Gunnlaugson, 2007, Roper et al., 2004), so that even adversaries may develop respect for each other's positions (Heath et al., 2006).

Diversity and Conflict

In addition to the aversion to collaboration structures and the pioneer spirit of toughness, resilience and resistance, another complexity that likely affects the (dialogic) interaction culture in Auroville is the interplay between diversity and conflict, both of which are central components of dialogue (c.f. Heath et al., 2006, Wals et al., 2009).

Auroville is diverse not only in terms of cultural demographics, but also in terms of the perspectives people hold on many contentious topics surrounding the development of the community. For instance, a former farm manager mentioned the constant arguments between reforestation and conservation enthusiasts, and farmers and developers. "Everyone has their blind spots and focuses only on their group's goals of what to do with the land." Other respondents drew my attention to the conflicts caused by status differences, and cultural tensions were also frequently mentioned. This includes conflicts between community members from different Western backgrounds, but is most obviously expressed in clashes between the Tamil and non-Tamil population. Many respondents from both backgrounds expressed that Tamil villagers often join Auroville not for the spiritual quest, but to better their standard of living and lift their social status, and this was also discussed in an article I read (Auroville Today, 2001). While most non-local Aurovillians seemed to show understanding for this difference in attitudes, they also feared for their spiritual vision to be 'watered down' if people join the community for 'worldly' reasons. In consequence, as a man who is very involved in administrative processes told me, Tamil Aurovillians often feel that it is more difficult for them to gain entry to the community, compared to Western applicants. On the other side of this conflict, he told me that non-Tamil Aurovillians fear that the community might become "just another Tamil village" if the influx of residents from the surrounding region continues. Other points of confliction between Tamil and non-Tamil Aurovillians, a description of which goes beyond the scope of this chapter, include the level of funding for village outreach, educational opportunities, financial regulations, and clashes between Aurovillians and Tamil workers.

These clashes between interest groups, people at various levels in the social hierarchy, and people from different cultural backgrounds are not in themselves a barrier to dialogic interaction; indeed conflict is seen by some as an essential part of dialogue (Gadotti, 1996, Heath et al., 2006, van Gorder, 2007) because it can lead to perspective transformation and learning (c.f. Berlyne, 1965, Festinger, 1957, Piaget, 1964). However, for conflict to have such transformative effects, it needs to be approached in a proactive rather than avoiding manner, and differences need to be made explicit in a safe and respectful environment (Wals et al., 2009). This, however does not seem to be the case in Auroville, as several respondents told me that community conflicts such as the ones described here are usually ignored and can tend to become permanent or remain unresolved, as mediation is often only sought when collaboration or coexistence becomes almost impossible. Hence, we might say that this points towards

Auroville having a culture of conflict avoidance, which would make it difficult to view tensions as a potential source for learning (Wals et al., 2009).

Sharing a Common Vision – The Power of Intention

Having just talked about the prevalence of conflict and the tendency to avoid it, it may appear striking and somewhat paradoxical that people also talked a lot about Aurovillians having a common vision that unites beyond personal differences. This common vision is of course one of the key characteristics of intentional communities (Grundmann et al., 2006), and in Auroville, it is centred around the intention to learn to work and live together in harmony, to serve the community, and to pursue spiritual development both individually and as a collective (Auroville.org, no date-i). One woman who has lived in the community for over 15 years told me that

> "people share a common aspiration to live in a more meaningful way, with deep aspiration to give and act from a place of goodwill. This is not present in Western societies, or outside Auroville in general. It is a shared aspiration that binds people together there."

This opinion was also shared by a young Spanish couple who had moved to Auroville only about a year ago, and who told me that what binds people together is the common vision and aspiration to create something radically new, and very importantly, something based on a shared spiritual philosophy and spiritual experience. They said that even though people all have their own path and vision, they don't need to justify their aspiration, as everyone still somehow speaks the same language, even though on the surface there are many misunderstandings.

These respondents do of course present this shared frame of reference in very idealistic terms, and at the same time, they speak of conflicts in everyday life. While we might be tempted to jump to the conclusion that the joint vision is used to 'smooth over' the difficulties that people experience in dealing with their differences, a more integrative both/and perspective (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998) can help us to see that the apparent contradiction is in fact merely a tension between people's intentionality, and their limited ability to live that intention all the time. One woman told me that to her, the Auroville spirit is all about

> "working on the two ends of the stick, which is the ideals up there in the sky and the vision we have, and the grounding on this bloody red earth we are walking on. That is to say, really doing a lot of going up and down, [...] attempts and failures. [...] This is the way things actually work."

Hence, we have to see that even if people subscribe to an idealistic vision, they are in fact human beings, who have ingrained habitual patterns (Scharmer, 2009) and shifting levels of motivation and dedication (Heath et al., 2006). Indeed, it is often much easier to talk about something than to actually do it, as intellectual understanding is very difficult to convert into embodied behaviour (c.f. Ajzen, 1991, Papaoikonomou et al., 2011).

Never mind the difficulties of putting the vision into practice, it still provides a shared frame of reference, which could at least in theory provide a fertile ground for dialogic interaction (c.f. Wals et al., 2009), and foster a shared aspiration to serve the community and contribute to the common good. Furthermore, a shared vision and a strong intention can empower people to reach ambitious goals (c.f. Elfving, 2009), because, in the words of one respondent, when people identify with the vision of a project, they gain ownership over the process, and give all their energy to it.

However, in the context of dialogic interaction, we also need to emphasise that rigidity towards a group's shared frame of reference is certainly not desirable (Heath et al., 2006). In other words, a collective vision needs to be flexible and open to adjustment. This was also emphasised by several respondents, who expressed that while a shared vision is essential to the success of a collective aspiration, it must remain flexible and agile to escape the deadlock of reification. For when people identify strongly with a vision, they might become reluctant to modify it (c.f. Martin, 2005, Scharmer, 2009) even if circumstances demand a reconsideration.

Indeed, the teachings upon which Auroville's vision is based are actually quite loosely formulated, and do not give specific instructions for organising community life and work, or for spiritual practice. As one respondent stated,

> "there is a path, and at the same time there isn't, and there is a vision and at the same time there isn't. The vision and path of Auroville are open to interpretation, and only very lose guidelines are given."

However, many people told me that many community members are approaching the vision of Auroville as static, rather than flexible, especially when it comes to an ongoing debate about town planning. This issue was dealt with in detail in an article in the monthly magazine Auroville Today. In the September 2010 issue, the article *Decoding the Galaxy* discussed three different views on how to implement the architectural master plan created in the late 60s. One young Aurovillian called for rejecting the plan because of its disregard for the physical and cultural realities of the land, while another, older Aurovillian felt they "should not abandon anything which Mother gave her blessing to." The third voice presented in the article is by an Indian Aurovillian, who argued that while the vision of the galaxy is an integral part of Auroville,

one must be creative and imaginative in filling in the details, and that responding to the challenges of developing the city requires continuous evolution of the master plan.

Of course none of these perspectives are right or wrong, they simply reflect different levels of flexibility towards an integral part of Auroville's vision; differences which likely arise from the spectrum of experiences members of the community may have, as personal background has a significant influence for instance on the way people conform to commonly held opinions or question authority (Zorn et al., 2006, Martin, 2005). Hence, a young person might tend to be more flexible towards community goals, while a 'pioneer' might want to stick to what little concrete instructions the spiritual founder of Auroville provided. Another important point to consider here, is that it is unlikely for anybody's position to not be influenced at least by some level of personal agenda (Heath et al., 2006). Indeed, several informants mentioned that it is quite easy and common for people to 'corrupt' the vision of Auroville, "masking their own agenda by stating it as the Mother's will" or to justify their argument by stating they 'feel deeply' for it, thereby lifting it to the spiritual realm, where it cannot be debated. Importantly, this tendency for some people to reify or corrupt the collective vision again adds a level of complexity to the possibilities of dialogic interaction, and may act as a barrier to encouraging continuous questioning of perspectives and the emergence of novel insights (Scharmer, 2009).

Summary – The Need for a Process-oriented Perspective

So far, we have seen that the 'interactive space' in Auroville is characterised by several complexities that have an influence on the potential of a culture of dialogic interaction emerging in the community. Aurovillians seem to have relatively little interest in, or experience with using communication tools and principles to create generative and diversity embracing modes of interaction. It was suggested that one underlying reason for this could be the 'pioneer' culture that is likely to have emerged from the community's historical context of struggle and endurance. This pioneerism displays a certain antagonism to the perspectives of newer members, and seems to be related to a certain degree of marginalisation based on ethnic background and social status, as well as a tendency to avoid dealing with conflicts.

Such a culture of opposition and avoidance, it was argued, fails to create a fertile breeding ground for dialogic interaction, as it is in stark contrast with its requirements for empathy, mutual respect, critical evaluation of assumptions, etc. One might of course say that this argument could count for a great diversity of communities all over the world, as we can probably find competitiveness, traditionalist politics, and insufficient conflict resolution practices in many places. My aim is in no way to say that an environment that is little conducive to dialogue is specific to Auroville alone; rather, I wish to point out how difficult it is for a mainstream dialogic interaction culture to emerge, *even when* a commitment to collaboration

and 'human unity' is central to a collective vision, as is the case in Auroville. This collective commitment can provide a shared language and frame of reference in collaborative encounters, but more often than not, intentionality does not necessarily translate into daily practice, where interpersonal issues and personal agendas tend to shape interaction.

Nevertheless, the collective culture in Auroville might currently be in the process of becoming more open to dialogic interaction, as indicated by several initiatives that aim to practice dialogue, and by many respondents stating their preference for developing more mutually supportive and integrative ways of interacting.

In light of these complexities, it makes sense to adopt a perspective of dialogic interaction that recognises the historical, cultural, and political situatedness of each group (Roper et al., 2004), and conceptualises dialogic interaction as a *process* as well as a practice (Burson, 2002), which emerges over time, as groups (Kell and Corts, 1980) develop 'mature' interaction patterns. A woman who has been part of many dialogue initiatives for years, also told me that a group's ability to practice dialogic interaction usually grows over time, peaks, and then declines when conflicts emerge that the group can't resolve. This implies that dialogic interaction is not something that can be switched on or off – people need to learn how to 'do dialogue', interactions are never perfectly shaped, and groups go through phases of success and failure (Scharmer, 2009).

Such a process-oriented perspective enables one to see that on the road to creating a dialogic interaction culture, communities are likely to experience many challenges. This was also emphasised by several respondents, who insisted that it is important not "to pretend that we are already there" and that while individual and collective limitations certainly make things difficult, "if we are patient enough, and just sincere, as the Mother would say, [...]things happen."

Such a patient outlook can also foster a certain humbleness in regard to collective challenges. This seemed to be the case for some respondents I spoke to who had been a part of collective efforts at learning to communicate and collaborate in respectful ways. One woman for instance shared that for her

> "it's in a way also an evolutionary process, [...] we have to take a longer term view. I have much more humility now, less expectations of where we should be. I used to be very frustrated and disappointed; 'Oh, this is slow, why can't we get it?' But now it's like 'Well, that's where we are.'"

5.2 Factors that Help or Hinder Dialogic Interaction

The preceding discussion might invoke a sense of frustration to the pragmatically oriented reader, who might be looking for concrete ideas on how dialogic interaction can be encouraged to emerge in a group of people. Indeed, the 'macro' view adopted thus far of dialogic interaction as a community learning and development process focussed primarily on highlighting how a range of complexities can shape a fluid and ever-changing interactive field, which is inherently difficult to analyse or influence.

At a more micro level however, i.e. in smaller groups that work on a specific task or project, it is possible to take a more pragmatic approach to identify circumstances that can encourage an intentional practice of dialogic interaction. From my observations of group gatherings and the conversations I had with people about their communication practices, it was possible to identify a range of factors that can help or hinder the emergence of dialogic interaction. These can be broadly grouped into three categories – contextual factors, interpersonal factors, and personal factors – each of which will be discussed in the ensuing sections.

Contextual Factors – Fostering Collaboration

In what follows below, I will examine a range of contextual factors that affect the practice of dialogic interaction, including the role of communication tools and interaction procedures, the need to balance outcome and process-orientedness, and the need for aesthetic and hospitable interaction spaces. Furthermore, the role of leadership in dialogic interaction, and the need for variation in facilitation styles will be examined.

There is a wealth of literature on communication tools and interaction principles that a group can adopt to structure its work, achieve outcomes more effectively, and collaborate in a manner that draws out a diversity of perspectives (c.f. Brown, 2002, deGrassi, 2007, van Asselt and Rijkens-Klomp, 2002, Welp et al., 2006, Prewitt, 2011, Dessel and Rogge, 2008). However, judging from what I could observe, meetings in Auroville tend to be badly organised, and are often completely devoid of communication tools, which makes sense given the lack of communication culture already alluded to in the previous sections. One respondent who has been active in many organisational bodies of Auroville admitted that in meetings "there is no system; people gather, and then everyone says whatever, and there are no rules, only minimal respect." Furthermore, a woman who works in Town Hall also stated that "meetings in Auroville don't happen with flipcharts and communication aids. People just turn up and talk – we don't have a culture of communication."

This lack of procedures for interaction can not only make meetings very ineffective, as the Aurovillian communication trainer asserts, who thought that "the people running services and

working groups in Auroville are in need of very basic communication techniques." It also prevents a fruitful exchange of perspective, as groups in which no attention is paid to communication tools and practices tend to be dominated by a handful of assertive members (c.f. Prewitt, 2011, Wang, 2009). Furthermore, a lack of structured interaction inhibits a group's ability to detect issues as they emerge, as communication tools are useful for promoting a more process-oriented attitude to communication (Wang, 2009), which one respondent thought would help members of his residential community improve their ability to learn from each other.

This points to the importance for dialogic interaction procedures to be both outcome and process-oriented, and the according need for tools, principles and practices to facilitate both of these aspects of collaboration. For instance, it is important to balance an effective approach to whatever task a group is involved in with a sincere attempt to hear and synthesise all perspectives on the topic (c.f. Heath et al., 2006). Especially in more formal meetings, such as those of the various working groups of Auroville, I observed and was affirmed in my interpretation by several respondents that the focus tends to be on finding solutions quickly and without too much consideration of a range of ideas. In some residential communities and groups, however, explicit attention is paid to creating a balance between 'getting work done' and ensuring everyone is heard and their ideas appreciated. Groups achieve this for instance through holding regular 'sharing' meetings alongside management meetings, or including reflections as part of each formal meeting. Either way, the reflective and generative components create a space in which respondents said they can "talk with each other how they are doing as people" and where they "can share anything with full confidence."

Nevertheless, my general impression of interaction processes in Auroville was that 'structured' reflection and integrative communication are relatively rare. This might be related to the phenomenon of structure aversion I outlined above, where I argued that Aurovillians tend to prefer not to be 'limited' by rules and regulations, but to live, work, and interact freely. While this attitude might have prevented a constructive application of communication guidelines in some cases, it is also reasonable to say that the preference for freedom, unconventionality and creative expression that many Aurovillians seem to have, might have contributed to the tendency for groups to pay attention to the environment and 'atmosphere' in which they interact.

I am suggesting this, because the aesthetics of the environment seem to play a large role in Auroville in general. Buildings are designed in ways that balance beauty with functionality and express the dreams and aspirations of the community (Auroville.org, no date-a) (see Figure 5.1 for some impressions of architecture in Auroville). This attention to detail makes sense when

we consider that the spiritual founder of Auroville herself had a strong affinity for art and beautiful things, as she saw them as a manifestation of the Divine (Auroville Today, 2003a).

It is not surprising then that the environment in which group gatherings take place is often designed in a way that is conducive to dialogic interaction. For instance, efforts are regularly made to sit in a circle, often also without a table in the middle behind which participants could 'hide', and special times of the day, like sunrise and sunset, which evoke certain celebratory or solemn feelings might be sought out for group gatherings, depending on their purpose.

Figure 5.1: Impressions of architecture in Auroville

At the meetings of the nonviolent communication practice group, elements that contributes to creating a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere, which seemed conducive to dialogic interaction, were for example the fact that in the centre of the circle in which participants sat, the facilitator had placed some flowers and props for the session, and that the meeting began with a brief meditation and sharing of how each person felt. Such relatively simple strategies can help to create a atmosphere of togetherness and trust, which enables participants to approach interaction in a more collaborative way (Owen, 1997, Prewitt, 2011, Brown, 2002, Wang, 2009, McCoy and Evans, 2002). Furthermore, the gathering took place in a homely

environment, where participants were welcomed with some tea and a slice of cake before sitting down together. While one might not think much about the role that an everyday occurrence like eating together might have on dialogic interaction, sharing food has indeed been recognised as a very effective way of reducing anxiety in group gatherings, and stimulating group cohesiveness and openness to what each person has to say (Roper et al., 2004). Maybe what according to popular wisdom counts for love is not so different for empathy and collaboration – the way to someone's heart is through their stomach.

Going back to some more widely accepted ways to encourage dialogic interaction, we can draw attention to the role of communication tools like the ones that were described in chapter two (Owen, 1997, Wang, 2009, Prewitt, 2011, Rosenberg and Molho, 1998, Rosenberg, 2003). As mentioned before, communication tools are sometimes used in Auroville when the aim of the group is specifically to gather and integrate a variety of perspectives on a certain topic. For instance, one respondent mentioned talking sticks and their value in encouraging more silent members of a group to speak out and voice their opinions. For him, the key benefit of these kinds of tools is that they "guarantee that anything you say there is going to be listened to with respect. [...] This can be useful for a transformative process, [...] especially with certain difficult [and sensitive] topics." In a description I read about the *Dreamcatchers* project (Nightingale, 2008), it was explained that talking sticks were used "to maintain space for listening and to limit our tendency of rushing to speak as soon as someone else has finished," and that it was important when using this tool not to allow any censoring or discussion of ideas. This resonates with what Wang (2009) notes about the use of talking sticks as signifiers of democracy, as they can assist in empowering people to speak their mind without fear of being judged.

Sometimes, communication tools are also used to resolve conflicts in Auroville. One respondent gave the example of a meeting in which two working groups came together to resolve an ongoing debate. They were asked by a facilitator to role play each others' perspectives, and some participants decided to have a bit of fun with this technique:

> "We started to do like a comedy or a parody of their discussion, exaggerating everything and ridiculising [*sic*] all of them. We had a great time both of us, [...] we told them jokingly all kind of things that we never told them otherwise, [*pause*] but how much it facilitated, I don't know."

This quote points to a dilemma with communication tools, especially the more complex ones like role plays and games: While they can be fun, lead to a more honest expression of perspectives, and generate new insights (Gerard, 2005), it can be questionable how much is really achieved in terms of a synthesis or transformation of perspectives (Dessel and Rogge, 2008). Such kinds of communication tools often require the presence of an experienced facilitator in order to be successful (deGrassi, 2007, Heath et al., 2006, Prewitt, 2011), and

demand a high degree of openness and willingness to cooperate on part of the participants (Prewitt, 2011).

When talking about the use of communication tools in Auroville, we also need to mention the nonviolent communication (NVC) practice group, as a whole range of interaction and reflection methods from this field can be used to generate dialogue. These tools usually encourage participants to distinguish between factual observations concerning the situation or the people involved, the judgements that one makes about these observations, and the feelings and needs underlying these judgements, and essentially aim to find non-blaming and constructive ways to address questions or issues (Rosenberg, 2003, Kasumagic, 2008). The Tamil services manager of a guesthouse run by the facilitator of the NVC practice group, told me that "using NVC principles in the daily workers meetings is really helpful, because you can express your needs and feelings without hurting others." He acknowledged, however, that it "is more difficult to do this for some Tamil workers, because it is not in their culture to be very direct in conversations, but it still creates a very harmonious working environment."

This points to the fact that communication tools and interaction guidelines for dialogic interaction should not be regarded as panaceas (Heath et al., 2006). Instead, their appropriateness needs to be judged depending on the cultural, political, and social context in which they are to be used (deGrassi, 2007, Prewitt, 2011). Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight that no particular communication tool or practice works for all situations and all people, and care needs to be taken not to overload participants with rules and regulations, as this can lead to frustration and stifle rather than encourage participation (Prewitt, 2011). For instance, at the Sustainable Management Seminar it became clear that while some participants really enjoyed an interactive style of chaotic brainstorming and fast paced action, others did not find this generative at all, and were frustrated by the lack of order and definitive leadership. Hence, we need to emphasise that unfortunately there are no 'magic tricks' to enable people to move into dialogic interaction modes (Gunnlaugson, 2007, Scharmer, 2009); instead, people need to be willing and patient to experiment with different contextual aides.

Leadership can also be an important factor in letting dialogue emerge, as paradoxical as that might sound, given the notion of equality that is associated with dialogic interaction (Baraldi, 2006, Roper et al., 2004). The presence of a facilitator is often needed when making attempts at dialogue, especially as a group is in early stages of formation (Roper et al., 2004), and one respondent said that without a facilitator, group dynamics often lead to battles of will. Furthermore, another respondent emphasised that it is especially important to have a skilled facilitator when it comes to sensitive topics and dealing with tensions.

Put simply, the tasks of a facilitator of dialogic interaction center around observing group dynamics and steering interaction (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, Roper et al., 2004). However,

many Aurovillians mentioned a range of complex responsibilities as key tasks of a facilitator; these included to act as a kind of 'guard' of the group's process, "protecting the space" of interaction; providing guidance and structure to the interaction; summarising what is being said and asking for clarification; and ensuring that everyone gets to have their say. Furthermore, respondents emphasised that a facilitator should be "committed to the collective vision and not pushing egotistic agendas", and that he or she needs to be recognised and accepted by all participants. In other words, it is important that the facilitator is not subject to a conflict in roles (Shaw, 1981). All these different responsibilities indicate that facilitating (dialogic) interaction is easier said than done, and should maybe be considered an art in itself – the limited availability of skilled facilitators can thus be regarded as another barrier to dialogue potential.

When a group is only beginning to engage in dialogic interaction, it can be especially necessary to draw on some facilitation or coaching, as illustrated by one respondent's experience with a project that aimed to define a roadmap for the vision of Auroville. This project, according to a report published by the respondent and her colleagues (Auroville Vision Project, 2006), aimed to facilitate "a creative communication process that [is] comprehensive, inclusive and participatory, to understand and synthesise the collective sense of priorities" regarding the city's development. Here, the project team realised early on, that the community gatherings they organised were not very popular or generative, so that they had to collect different perspectives through 'deep interviews' with individuals and small groups. Subsequently, the team attempted to "weave together" these different perspectives with the help of an external facilitator, who guided the project team's interaction with the aim to "do dialogue". The group found this way of interacting "fantastic and extremely generative", and even set up a dialogue practice group, which runs to this day and currently has about 10 members.

What this example highlights is that it can initially be difficult for groups that are inexperienced in dialogue to create generative interactions. However, with some guidance these difficulties can be addressed, as a facilitator can help the group to create a safe and trusting environment, assist in reflection processes, and ask prompting questions (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998: 212). Furthermore, facilitators should implement guidelines for dialogue, and encourage respectful exploration of perspectives (Roper et al., 2004). However, as a group matures and is more able to practice dialogic interaction (Kell and Corts, 1980), participants can go over to facilitate interaction themselves (Roper et al., 2004), as this particular group also did by creating the dialogue practice group.

Another interesting point was made by the trainer of the Sustainable Management Seminar, who mentioned that there are always different needs in a group, and that no facilitation style suits everyone. To this, we might add that some more assertive styles might be less appropriate for dialogic interaction, as participants need to be given space to explore emerging ideas and

insights (Roper et al., 2004). The way different facilitation styles affect interaction was also observable at the range of meetings and gatherings I attended. At a meeting in Town Hall, for instance, the facilitator employed a highly assertive style, enacting leadership by giving the word to certain participants (but not all of them equally), and going through the agenda point by point, often only informing participants rather than asking for input. The facilitator of the nonviolent communication practice group on the other hand led the meetings in a calm and ordered way, speaking without haste and making the procedures very clear; yet she remained open to suggestions for change, adjusting the protocol when this was recommended by a participant. Judging from my observer point of view, this latter style of facilitating was much more conducive to dialogic interaction than the former, as it created an atmosphere of trust, openness and sharing. This led to many thoughtful contributions from the participants, whereas the Town Hall meeting was a messy example of participants competing for speaking time and attention space. Of course the two meetings were of very different natures, with the Town Hall meeting being entirely outcome oriented, while the NVC practice group did not have a set agenda or task to fulfil, so that most attention could be given to the *process* of interaction. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the Town Hall meeting would have benefited significantly from a little more balance between working through the agenda, and attention to group processes, if not to stimulate dialogic interaction, then at least to create a more enjoyable collaboration climate.

While facilitation, the design of the interaction environment, and the use of tools and principles for communication can help to make group gatherings more dialogic, it is important not to forget that the dynamics *between* the individuals of a group are often highly complex (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995), which is why we now turn to consider some interpersonal factors in dialogic interaction.

Interpersonal Factors – Dealing with Diversity

In this section, we will consider a range of interpersonal factors that significantly shape interaction, including different approaches to dealing with a diversity of perspectives and the role of emotions and conflict. Furthermore, the benefits of a joyful collective attitude to the challenges of interaction, and the importance of having a joint vision will be discussed.

To start with, it should be quite obvious that the diversity of perspectives so emphasised in dialogue (e.g. Heath et al., 2006) is in itself a factor that influences interaction. Many respondents talked about this diversity as a key to generating interesting and encompassing insights in dialogue, and one respondent even thought that diversity increased the resilience of his residential community:

> "If you include many different people, you will also include people with problems, but also the people with solutions to these problems. It's like inviting antibodies into your immune system. […] [for a system to be resilient] it needs to be diverse. It has to have many people with different opinions and competencies, with different weaknesses, in order to really survive and prosper."

This is all quite in accordance with academic discourses on dialogic interaction, where diversity is considered a stimulant of innovative ideas that can make our currently failing social systems more resilient (c.f. Wals et al., 2009). In practice, however, my observations lead me to suggest that groups may manage to deal with diversity to various extents. While staying in one residential community, I joined a group of residents, volunteers and guests who had spontaneously decided to put on a Christmas play for the families of Tamil staff. In the impromptu rehearsal, it was suggested and quickly agreed that each actor would speak in their native language, while the play was narrated in Tamil. However, when an elderly community member who had been living in Auroville for around 40 years suggested calmly to make the plot more culturally relevant by adding a joker-narrator, this was ignored by the group. I would argue that this example represents a relatively shallow level of dealing with diversity, as the group acknowledged different perspectives only superficially, ignoring that culturally inappropriate aspects of the play might have a patronising 'feel' to the Tamil audience. Furthermore, dialogic interaction did not occur during this rehearsal, as participants remained in the conversational fields of 'talking nice' and 'debate' (Scharmer, 2009) (see also Figure 2.1).

In the Integrated Sustainability Platform project, on the other hand, a more integrative approach was taken, as according to the facilitators, who were interviewed for the September 2010 issue of the monthly magazine *Auroville Today*, attention was paid to gathering people with different viewpoints, "so we could get deep and interesting discussions." Here, we might say that interaction might have reached the level of 'reflective dialogue', which focuses on inquiry into different perspectives (Scharmer, 2009). Moreover, the report on the *Dreamcatchers* project (Nightingale, 2008) lets us assume that a yet more intense level of integration of diverse perspectives could be achieved:

> "Participants were encouraged to 'feel into' the strength of each proposal, rather than to fight for their own vision [...] [and] in many cases a point was reached where a particular solution or approach simply percolated through the filters of our perception. [...] Seemingly disparate and diverse pieces converge into a new sense of purpose and direction for the topic under consideration."

This does indeed sound like this project group might have experienced 'generative dialogue', which according to Scharmer (2009) is characterised by a flow of insight generation in a collective state of attention to what is emerging. The fact that this published account of the experience might present interactive realities in a somewhat favourable light needs to be acknowledged of course, but in any case, these examples are merely intended to be illustrative of the different extends to which a diversity of perspectives can be 'dealt with', or rather, to put it more dialogically, 'embraced'.

When it comes to actually practicing such a welcoming approach to difference, the *Dreamcatchers* report went on to explain that:

> "This requires participants to embrace the possibility of 'both/and' solutions as opposed to 'either/or' decisions and further that they remain open to key insights with which to 'tai chi' difficult situations so that the resulting solutions transform a seemingly intractable problem into a profound opportunity. [...] The aim was to seek the highest common factor through a synthesis of [diverse perspectives]."

One respondent emphasised that in practice, this actually requires looking beyond interpersonal differences: "We might have a very opposite way of looking at things, doing things, and we have affinities that are not at all corresponding, but still we respect the person and we try to see if there is a way to unite looking at a higher goal."

Again, this resonates with what is said in the literature about dialogic interaction; it requires openness (Scharmer, 2009), switching between perspectives (Wals and Blewitt, 2010) and creating synergetic insights (Wilhelmson, 2006) through respectful engagement with each other (van Gorder, 2007). However, a simple truth is that it can be quite difficult to *practice* openness, respect, and synergy, especially when it comes to contentious issues or instances of conflict, as these are often associated with passionately held opinions (Dessel and Rogge, 2008, Prewitt, 2011). Most respondents felt that it is necessary to keep emotional reactions in check when trying to interact dialogically; in conflict situations for instance, it can be useful to remember that "the other person is just expressing their needs, so you don't have to take it personally anymore, which prevents you from reacting emotionally."

However, an added level of difficulty to practice dialogic interaction emerges when conflicting values are not detected or made explicit within a group. One Aurovillian told me about an instance, which occurred when she was living in a residential community in which dialogue practice was part of regular meetings. The community had managed to create a very harmonious way of relating to each other, but at some point a conflict ensued because a young Tamil resident began stealing from the community, and even though the community tried to

resolve this in a harmonious manner, a communication breakdown ensued. According to the respondent, the underlying cause of this breakdown was a fundamental difference in worldviews: "We've grown up in different ways. Even if we're sort of sharing a common value base, we have our different lenses, our cultural worldviews, this is a big part of what's separating people." And her partner added that "we can't imagine their kind of world and the lenses through which they look."

This indicates that it can be very difficult to practice *Gestaltswitching* – the switching between different mindsets to understand an issue from all vantage points (Wals and Blewitt, 2010) – when cultural barriers are involved. In this example, it makes no sense to speculate why the incidence of theft might have occurred. However, the woman thought in retrospect that the Tamil resident did not participate as fully in the community's dialogue practice as it had seemed. This indicates that certain discourse norms might have dictated interactions in the mostly Western residential community (Heath et al., 2006), leading the young Tamil man to conform to what was expected of him in an effort to fit in (Zorn et al., 2006). However, we need to be careful in offering interpretations here, as I only heard one side of the story; yet, this example shows that in theory, switching between different mindsets is much easier than in practice. Furthermore, it draws our attention to an important consideration; the practices for dialogue suggested in the literature may actually reflect Western assumptions regarding interaction. For instance, the emphasis on open and respectful expression of opinions could be in stark contrast to more indirect cultural interaction schemata (Burton and Dimbleby, 1995). Such preferences for avoiding direct confrontation are, according to some Tamil respondents, also prevalent in Tamil culture.

Of course, clashes of perspective are not only brought on by different cultural backgrounds, but also emerge when people are prejudiced against each other, or when they have a history of animosity. One volunteer told me that people in the residential community where he lived and worked don't particularly like each other, and that issues don't get resolved because they are ignored. Indeed, he described the interpersonal problems of the residential community as a 'cancer' that makes it impossible to communicate effectively and deal with recurring issues in the community's activities constructively. In this context, another respondent pointed to the need to release emotional tension at times, and gave the example of a town hall meeting in which the issue of racism and discrimination came up:

> "So the meeting became quite hot, and […] the facilitator was trying to summarise what was being said, and to get people to calm down, but we said 'let us fight between us, give us time to discuss, don't come between always, we want to fight today, so let us fight.' […] Because sometimes you yell at each other and tell everything you need to say, and […] sometimes those kind of meetings are necessary – you feel well, released."

This illustrates quite well the tension between avoiding conflict and welcoming it, which is also evident from the literature relevant to dialogic interaction. Some authors seem to place more importance on creating harmonious interaction (e.g. Baraldi, 2006, Bohm, 1980, van Gorder, 2007), while others emphasise the role of conflict in stimulating transformative experiences (e.g. Gadotti, 1996, Scheffer, 2009, Wals et al., 2009). Here, we need to emphasise again, that while this might seem like a contradiction, if we recognise that interaction moves dynamically through the different conversational modes of 'talking nice' and debate, to reflective and generative dialogue (Scharmer, 2009), we can see that moments of emotional outburst and conversation collapse don't mean that the group cannot reach dialogical modes of interacting later on, when their interaction 'system' has absorbed the crisis, so to speak, and has found some common ground once again (Hurst, 1995).

What also struck me as interesting in observing how people deal with conflict was that in many instances, Aurovillians seemed to be able to put their personal differences aside relatively easily, even when they had just been fighting. A respondent who had experienced many clashes during official meetings in Town Hall, explained:

> "Sometimes, the atmosphere is hot, […] but afterwards people embrace each other, and normally, there are no bad feelings. […] We feel that in spite of these clashes on the surface, we feel the fraternity given by the same kind of [*pause*] faiths, beliefs, and aspirations [*pause*] I don't know, perhaps experience between all of us, and that softens this kind of thing. For me it's normal, and even bigger clashes, after we go and hug each other, doing jokes."

I also often heard people making fun of the difficulties they experience in living in a residential community, or at the challenges of working towards spiritual as well as secular visions. Once I was talking to a group of architects, town planners and construction workers on a building site, who mentioned that it is always so difficult to work as a team, and then there was laughter and one of them said "well, that is part of the vision of Auroville."

This is of course somewhat contradictory to what other respondents told me about the tendency of conflict to remain unresolved and become ingrained; however, this ability to laugh at communicative challenges shows that at least some people also have a certain awareness that they are part of a process of individual and collective development that cannot always be 'smooth sailing'. This awareness seems to help them transcend conflicts by seeing them as part of the 'deal'. Arguably, this positive attitude in the face of conflict would be beneficial for dialogic interaction; however, the importance of *process awareness* in fostering this attitude is not commonly mentioned in the literature on dialogic interaction. Some authors speak of dialogue as a journey (e.g. Burson, 2002), but they don't necessarily emphasise that participants being aware of this might help them transcend non-dialogical conversational modes.

What seems to be an important factor in developing such process awareness, is having some kind of joint vision, whether this is the overall aspiration of the community, or a more context-bound goal. In the above quote describing the joyful approach to interpersonal clashes, the respondent specifically mentions that it is a sense of 'fraternity' that emerges from sharing the same aspirations, which enables people to deal with challenges positively. Furthermore, several respondents indicated that if a group or community is dedicated to developing a shared vision, they will be able to collaborate successfully.

Indeed, the development of a shared vision is central to group bonding processes (Wals et al., 2009), as it promotes the process of community building (Kinnucan-Welsch and Jenlink, 2005) and developing a collective identity (Castro-Laszlo and Laszlo, 2005). This in turn influences, I would argue, the level of motivation and intentionality with which a group approaches building a collaborative interaction environment. For without a willingness to listen and learn from each other (Heath et al., 2006, Rule, 2004, Schäfer et al., 2007), dialogic interaction is unlikely to occur. Intentionality, however, is not only collective, as it is shaped by the motivation of individuals in a group. Hence, we need to now turn our attention to the personal factors that shape dialogic interaction.

Personal Factors – Transforming Behavioural Patterns

We have seen so far that communication tools and the creation of a collaborative and trusting atmosphere can help dialogic learning to emerge, although their application can require the expertise of facilitators. Conflicts and tensions within a group, however, can interfere with the success of these contextual aides, unless a shared vision and sense of direction provide motivation for collaboration. To make things even more complex, we also need to consider the idiosyncrasies and communication habits of individuals that affect interaction, such as assertiveness and openness, and the ability to suspend judgement and be aware of one's own interaction habits . Furthermore, the ensuing discussion will focus on the role of vital needs and emotions in affecting dialogic interaction, as well as the underlying impact of sub-conscious drives of self-centredness and competition. Finally, I will emphasise that these personal factors point to a need to engage in significant processes of personal growth in order to be able to practice dialogic interaction, which can also be linked to spiritual development.

One thing that makes it difficult to move into dialogic conversational modes is excessive dominance of individual participants (Wilhelmson, 2006). In several group gatherings, I was struck by the competitiveness of conversations, as there were usually several people who were quite assertive, spoke loudly and often, or kept asserting their communication space with short statements like "Yes!", "Right.", or "But..." The less vocal participants often seemed distant or resigned, especially after having failed several times to get their own perspective heard. This

was the case both at the Town Hall meetings, and at the Sustainable Management Seminar, and according to several informants it is a regular problem at meetings and in communities.

However, respondents acknowledged at the same time that one key element of good group communication is for participants not to hold on to their own opinion or idea too rigorously. Such attempts at being impartial are closely linked with listening skills, which were also mentioned several times as essential to dialogue. As the facilitator of the Sustainable Management Seminar insisted, "it's important to take your time when you are working in a group. Listen to each other, don't interrupt." If we recall Wilhelmson's (2006) framework of dialogue competence, we can see, however, that both assertiveness regarding one's own ideas and open-mindedness towards those of others are needed for successful dialogic interaction, but that both need to be in balance. One respondent mentioned that in order to stay impartial, it helps to try to see another person's perspective or their behaviour in the group as arising from their own personal baggage and history. In this way one can develop a better understanding for people whose ideas and practices might differ from one's own. Providing some advice on how to do this, another respondent remarked that it is about

> "trying not to react and to be angry, and to be resentful, and all this kind of stuff. And learning how to get distance and to accept that the other is different, that we might have a very opposite way of looking at things, doing things, and that we have affinities that are not at all corresponding, but still we respect the person and we try to see if there is a way to unite looking at a higher goal."

These remarks echo the notion of suspension, which is emphasised in the literature and refers to a heightened awareness of the interplay between people's perspectives (Roper et al., 2004) and the (sometimes uncomfortable) intention of 'staying with' the tensions this interplay evokes (Bohm, 1980) until they are dissolved and the difference in opinions can be viewed in a neutral or even positive light.

I was told several times, however, that many Aurovillians experience difficulties being aware of processes within themselves and in the community and therefore unreflectively keep pursuing their own egotistic agendas, focusing only on what's best for them. One respondent said that "they are just not conscious enough to see the bigger picture […] and different perspectives" and another acknowledged that some people are ego-centred and "find it difficult to see the needs of others." According to a woman who participates regularly in the dialogue practice group, an ounce of realism is needed when considering dialogic interaction: "The reality is, well you try to work it out with actual human beings, and all of their complex personalities, and egos, and sensitivities, and everything – it's just a different ball game."

In fact, I got the impression that people tended to be quite knowledgeable about the kind of attitudes and practices that foster dialogic interaction; however, I only experienced truly good dialogue skills with the NVC practice group, where everyone was poised, alert, respectful to others when they were speaking, and trying not to interrupt. In most other settings I observed, there seemed to be much less mutual regard and shared esteem, and people did not take the time to consider what others had said, but went straight into rebuttal. At a town hall meeting, during a particularly heated discussion that featured even some personal attacks – which according to the chairman happens quite regularly – I noticed a poster on the wall with a quote from Sri Aurobindo[5], which talked about self-control in meetings, and summarised some of the most vital practices of dialogue, like avoiding debate and hurtful talk, using quiet and calm speech, speaking only when the contribution is interesting or helpful, and questioning one's own opinion (c.f. for instance Bohm, 1980, Isaacs, 1999, Roper et al., 2004, Scharmer, 2009). Despite the fact that all these rules had been broken within the first thirty minutes, after the meeting, something happened that I found quite remarkable: The chairman pointed to the poster, laughed, and said: "We should all pay more attention to that, but we always forget," and another participant replied: "Well, we are all emotional beings!"

I think this event captures very well the conundrum we find ourselves in when our vital needs take precedence – when we get emotional, tired, or frustrated, it becomes exceedingly difficult to be self-aware and 'control' oneself. This 'fragility' of human beings and their limited ability to be the master of their own body and mind is only rarely stressed in the literature. Prewitt (2011) mentions that emotionally charged discussions are less than conducive to dialogue, and Martin (2005) offers the notion of a 'prison of perception' that is created by our deeply rooted beliefs and values; however, the human limitations to dialogue should be acknowledged more thoroughly. As one respondent explained, "maybe 90 percent is unconscious, and not always behaviour comes out of rational options – many times there are desires, and the vital, and these control things. […] The rational part is only one segment." Overcoming this hold that the unconscious exercises over us requires becoming aware of and learning to control what many respondents called the 'ego'. One woman told me that she is part of a group of colleagues in which

> "we are learning to overcome our own limitations, antipathies, bad experiences, [...] you know this kind of thing is just human stuff. […] I have to let go of my personal agenda. And it is very painful, because then you are confronted with your ego."

[5] SRI AUROBINDO (no date) *Letters on Yoga IV,* Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram. p. 1555

This notion of 'ego' is indeed commonly used in spiritual teachings to refer to the self-centred and competitive drives (Parameshwar, 2005, drawing on Smith, 1991) that keep us from understanding that we exist in a state of mutual connectedness and co-existence (Martin, 2005). Granted, in daily life, having a strong ego is not always negative, because it provides direction and motivation. One respondent explained:

> "Your ego is your horse to ride on. And it's good to have a horse, you are going much faster than walking, but sometimes, your horse ego wants to go here and there, and you have to put him back on the track."

This ambiguous role of the ego reminds us again of the need for balance between assertiveness and detachment, which is also seen in the literature as key to dialogic interaction (c.f. Wilhelmson, 2006). Of course an individual's extent of egotistic drives for self-assertion and personal gratification also has quite a significant impact on the interaction and communication patterns she or he might develop. Here, a large degree of self-centredness is likely to affect people's dialogue competence negatively by fostering over-assertiveness and preoccupation with one's own perspectives, ideas and opinions (Martin, 2005, Jenlink and Banathy, 2005).

Looking at such subconscious competitive drives allows us to see that addressing counter-dialogic interaction patterns can require a concerted effort at personal transformation. Some Aurovillians I talked to mentioned that in order develop the ability to interact dialogically with others, one needs to be willing to do some "basic query work", "to face our dark side", and "to think about your shadow, because this is what we suppress." One respondent explained that

> "to overcome our egoistic functions […] we really have to learn our reaction system, how we are functioning, and then overcome that, […] but then you also have to talk about [...] what usually hinders us to reach this level."

Another person added that it is necessary to "go beyond yourself and your fears." Furthermore, it was mentioned that people need to learn to see challenges as learning and development opportunities, and that they ideally need to start creating transformative challenges for themselves. While this resonates with the notions of constructive conflict (Gadotti, 1996, van Gorder, 2007) and transformative disruptions (Wals et al., 2009, Wals, 2006) put forward in the literature on transformative and social learning, it highlights the need for these experiences to be linked to a process of honest self-inquiry, with the aim to transform not only opinions and perspectives, but deeply anchored ego-attachments and patterns of relating to others.

In practice, again, this is not an easy endeavour at all; in the words of one respondent "it is so difficult to be open to this, because we just want to remain in our comfort zone" – human beings are often tightly wrapped up in their own little world, in their ambitions and self-centred

wishes. And to change one's habitual interaction patterns and automatic reactions, we first need to become conscious of them. One woman I talked to explained:

> "Only when you are in a state like that, conscious of your own and others' hypocrisies, you realise how your differences actually don't matter at all, and then you are able to focus on what really matters: making the [collective] vision manifest."

However, she also acknowledged, as did many other informants, how challenging it is to actually practice such conscious awareness. To become aware of one's idiosyncrasies and behaviour patterns is in itself not an easy feat, never mind holding this awareness *during* a group conversation *and* acting upon it by modifying our responses. The Aurovillian communication trainer I spoke to explained that one way of doing this is to "always separate fact from fiction. Ask yourself 'What is happening?' – the facts – and 'What is the impact on me?' – your interpretation." Another respondent put it this way: "People need to be able to carry conscious awareness into every minute of their life." Indeed, "being in dialogue calls on us to listen to our internal conversations as we listen to others" (Prewitt, 2011: 191). Hence, participants in dialogic interaction need to be able to achieve a very 'present' state, acutely aware of one's thoughts and emotions, the dynamics of the group, and the emergent discussion (Bronn and Bronn, 2003). In this state, which requires a certain level of inner and outer silence (April, 1999), one can move from a reactive to a reflective stance, enabling a calm and collected pattern of interaction, which is essential for dialogue (Scharmer, 2009).

We might say then, that to become a 'dialogic practitioner', one needs to embark on a journey of personal development (Prewitt, 2011, Martin, 2005), which involves questioning one's ego-attachments and self-centred drives, becoming aware of and learning to modify one's unconscious reaction and interaction patterns, and developing a capacity for awareness in action. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in Auroville, many people referred to this process of personal growth as a spiritual path. One couple I talked to even had a term for it; they described it as vertical development – gaining a higher consciousness and a more removed or detached perspective on their current state of being and of work, as opposed to horizontal development, in terms of acquiring new skills and understanding. As such, this notion of vertical (spiritual) development resonates with the link between dialogic interaction and spiritual growth several authors make explicit in terms of a growing sense of connectedness to others and the world (Martin, 2005), and a raising of one's capacity for conscious awareness (Jenlink and Banathy, 2005) and mindful presence and focused attention (Martin, 2005).

Spiritual development was also seen by some as central to the transcendence of unsustainable attitudes and practices, which is interesting here, as we are talking about dialogic interaction in the context of shaping alternative societies. One respondent explained:

> "I don't think we can have an integral view of sustainability if we don't speak about the sustainability of the human being, you know the whole inner dimension. […] People need to change, and I am wondering, well how do you want to change the behaviour of the normal people when […] [their only] god is consumption and money? And when you enter some kind of transformative spiritual path, the focus is on the transformation of the individual person."

Spirituality was also mentioned by many as one of the key elements of what has made Auroville's success possible. In the words of one respondent:

> "One of the most remarkable aspects of the human psychology in Auroville is the tenacity and endurance. […] Without the spiritual dimension that gives force to all of us, this would not be possible, this effort to continue for years and years [despite constant struggles]. If you have some kind of spiritual force in you that impelled you to do something. [...] If I did not have this, [...] I can tell you, I would be one of the most cynical people in Auroville. […] The sustenance of everything is this thing, and if that would not be present, Auroville would disappear in months, it would wipe out Auroville completely. Without that I am nothing. With that, I have been very active these 16 years, I am very motivated, but without that, I would be an empty shell, an empty human, I tell you, nothing."

Hence, spirituality – which we can also refer to simply as a sense of meaningfulness in life – seems to be important in shaping a person's intentionality and goodwill for contributing to the common good (Martin, 2005, Pargament, 2009, Jenlink and Banathy, 2005), which in turn can be said to be beneficial to creating a collaborating and compassionate dialogic way of interacting (c.f. Martin, 2005). However, this is yet another aspect of dialogic interaction that is only rarely acknowledged in the literature.

5.3 Three Axes of Dialogic Interaction

The thematic analysis and discussion of the findings of this research has shown so far that dialogic interaction is a highly complex phenomenon as well as a long-term process that is shaped by a range of complexities inherent to community life, as well as several contextual, interpersonal and personal factors that influence group interaction.

We first looked at a range of complexities inherent to the macro-level societal processes in Auroville that affect interactive processes and need to be considered when thinking about dialogic interaction. Here, we saw that while some 'pockets' of the community intentionally practice dialogue, the interactive culture of Auroville as a whole features certain elements of antagonism that run contrary to dialogic interaction, and which are likely to have emerged out

of a history of pioneerism, struggle, endurance and conflict. This antagonism expresses itself in unofficial hierarchies and status categories that lead to the marginalisation of some groups within Auroville, in a prevailing lack of structures for facilitating collaboration between different sectors and fractions of the community, and in a tendency to avoid dealing with frequently arising conflicts.

However, we also saw that people in Auroville tend to be aware of, and call for more respectful, sharing and collaborative ways of communication, which might point to an emerging shift in the interactive culture, an argument which is also supported by the finding that Aurovillians, despite their differences, seem to share a common and uniting vision and aspiration when it comes to collective life. Finally, it was argued that this apparent contradiction can be resolved if we adopt a process-oriented perspective to dialogic interaction, recognising that people's intention to relate to each other in respectful ways that celebrate and integrate the diversity of perspectives and worldviews does not always easily translate to embodied behaviour. A process of learning and maturation is required to overcome non-dialogic interaction patterns that are situated within a historical, cultural and political context. With this process-oriented perspective in mind, we looked at a range of factors that shape dialogic interaction on a more micro-level of group gatherings, and identified contextual, interpersonal, and personal aspects that influence how people interact with each other.

When examining contextual factors that seemed to affect dialogic interaction in Auroville, we saw firstly that the limited use of communication tools and interaction procedures for structuring and facilitating effective yet appreciative communication tends to lead to 'messy' patterns of interaction in which dominant people assert their perspective while silencing marginalised voices. However, in certain circumstances, groups sometimes ask external facilitators or coaches to assist with dialogic interaction by helping the group to apply communication tools, such as talking sticks, the world café method, role plays, and nonviolent communication principles. Such tools should not be regarded as panaceas, as they often require expert facilitation, are unlikely to suit every type of group, and may be inappropriate in a given cultural, political or social context. Nevertheless, they can be especially useful when a group wishes to resolve conflicts or address a contentious topic in a way that integrates diverse perspectives. In other words, dialogic interaction methods need to be used intentionally to prove successful. Furthermore, it was argued that it is critical for dialogic interaction to provide a hospitable and aesthetically pleasing environment that fosters a sense of equality and trust, and that this is an aspect that groups in Auroville tend to pay explicit attention to.

In the section on interpersonal factors that shape dialogic interaction, we looked at several levels at which groups in Auroville manage to integrate the diversity of participants' perspectives, and discussed that it can be difficult to deal with diversity when it comes to

contentious issues, fundamental differences in worldview, and animosity between participants. Furthermore, it was argued that it can sometimes be necessary to revert to debate to vent negative emotions – however, this is not necessarily contrary to dialogic interaction, if we keep in mind the process in which groups move through and shift between different modes of conversation, but may not consistently reach dialogic states. It was also suggested that participants having an awareness of dialogic interaction as a process that bears inherent difficulties can actually help them deal with these challenges in a positive, joyful and humble manner. Here, it seems as though having a shared vision is central to participants being able to develop such process awareness.

Lastly, we considered how participants' idiosyncrasies and communication habits may affect dialogic interaction. It was argued that a balance needs to be struck between assertiveness and openness to the ideas of others, and that participants need to practice 'awareness in action' and suspend judgment to 'stay with' the tensions emerging from interaction until they dissolve and different opinions can be looked at in a more neutral way. While acknowledging that it is difficult to overcome unconscious and habitual interaction patterns of debate and discussion, it was also highlighted that this implies the need for honest self-inquiry and personal development. Specifically, participants need to become conscious of, and attempt to transform their self-centred and competitive ego-drives in order to become genuinely open to embracing the views and experiences of others. Finally, it was of note that in order to gather the necessary motivation for engaging in such a deep journey of personal growth, it seemed to be beneficial to be on a spiritual path, or more broadly, to be committed to lead a meaningful life of goodwill.

While the findings regarding the community-level complexities that affect dialogic interaction are quite specific to Auroville, they nevertheless help us to assert that when examining dialogic interaction *in practice*, we need to consider how the cultural, political and social context takes part in shaping interaction patterns within a given community. Furthermore, the practices and characteristics of groups and individuals discussed in the second part of this chapter can be assumed to generally play a role in shaping dialogic interaction. Here, we need to emphasise of course that these factors are not determinant of interaction, but that their interplay needs to be kept in mind when investigating how dialogic interaction occurs in practice.

Turning now to add a level of abstraction to the discussion of these findings, I would like to suggest certain amendments to the theoretical framework I initially presented in chapter two (Figure 2.4). This amended framework aims to capture how *interaction* between the contextual, interpersonal and personal factors creates a certain group setting in which dialogic interaction may slowly emerge (see Figure 5.2). First of all, I would argue that the factors described above do not operate in isolation, but interact and mingle, and in combination form *spheres* of influence that affect dialogic interaction. In this way, the contextual sphere of influence creates

the *interaction environment*, the interpersonal sphere triggers *group dynamics* to arise, and the personal sphere shapes participants' *dialogic interaction capacities*, all of which are situated in a 'fuzzy' broader context of socio-psychological, cultural, historical, and political complexities

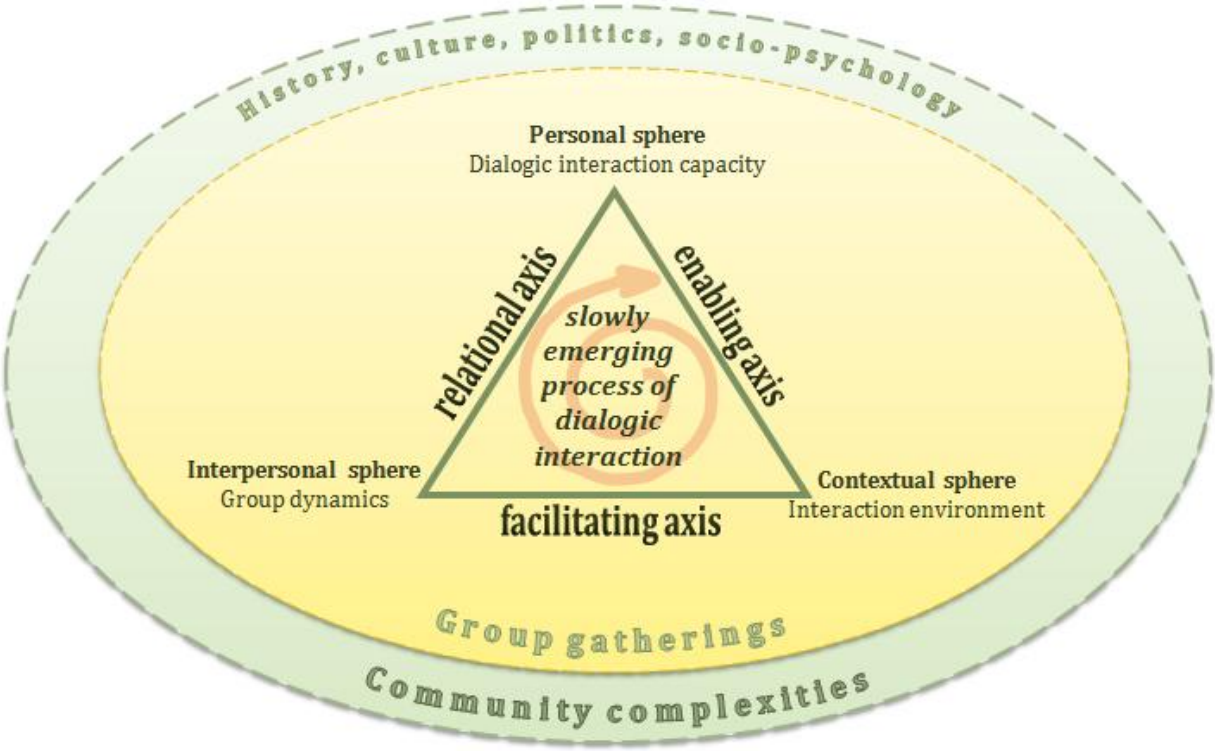


Figure 5.2: A framework for dialogic interaction

Furthermore, the three spheres of influence also interact, which in Figure 5.2 is represented by three axes that connect the individual spheres, which I conceptualise as the enabling axis, facilitating axis, and relational axis. The *enabling axis* describes the relationship and continuous interplay between the personal and contextual spheres. One the one hand, an individual's intention to adhere to dialogic interaction principles, and to make an effort to become aware of and transform ingrained patterns of self-assertion and competition is needed to uphold a positive interaction environment. On the other hand, the degree to which the environment supports individual efforts through a hospitable atmosphere, external coaching, and communication tools can be used to motivate and empower participants.

Secondly, the *facilitating axis* pertains to the influence of the interpersonal sphere over the contextual sphere and vice versa. In this case, we can say that a dialogic interaction environment supports the emergence of respectful and appreciative group dynamics by stimulating trust and comfort, and by offering facilitation techniques that enhance group-esteem and ensure that each participant gets to voice their opinions. Conversely, positive group

dynamics can foster receptiveness to these contextual factors, while ingrained conflict and a high degree of emotionality can inhibit their success.

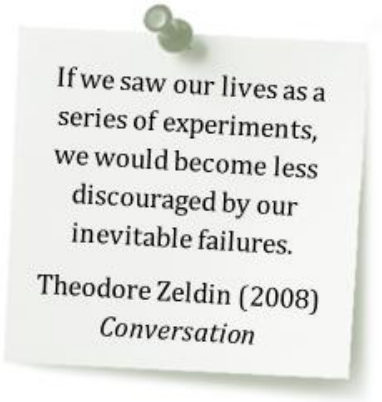
The third axis in this framework is the *relational axis*, which refers to the dynamics that exist between the personal and interpersonal spheres. Here, we need to consider that people's collective and individual ability to create new understanding from divergent views is enhanced by supportive and meaningful relationships between participants, who in turn are able to carry the results of their personal growth into interactions with others. In other words, the progress individuals make in transforming ego-centric ways of relating to others enables them to deal with emerging group dynamics and tensions in a constructive and integrative way.

Finally, the framework proposed here highlights also the fact that dialogic interaction is a process, which in Figure 5.2 is represented by the central spiral. This slowly emerging process of dialogic interaction is shaped by the constantly changing communication environment, shifting group dynamics, and evolving dialogic interaction capacities of the individuals involved. We might also say that the three spheres of influence, and the way they are connected along the three axes, as well as the community complexities within which the group gathers create a 'field' of interaction, which might be more or less conducive to a process of dialogic interaction.

This emphasis on *process* helps us to acknowledge the critical role of patience, commitment, and intentionality when it comes to *learning to* transcend personal, collective and contextual barriers to dialogic interaction. Moreover, if participants of dialogic interaction become aware of their attempts at dialogue being situated within a process of learning, they are more likely to approach the unavoidable difficulties of this journey with humbleness and appreciation.

This *interplay* among personal aspiration to engage in dialogue, harmonious group dynamics, and a hospitable interaction environment is not sufficiently acknowledged in the literature on dialogic interaction, and neither is the gap between theory and practice, and the necessity to *learn* both individually and as a group how to 'do dialogue'. Hence, I offer the preceding framework in the hope that it may support further research, education, and practice in the context of dialogic interaction. Now, however, it is time for some concluding remarks.

Chapter Six
The Challenge of Dialogic Interaction
Concluding Remarks



Dialogic interaction is not just a way of creating enriching and insightful encounters between people from a diversity of backgrounds. It's fundamental principles of mutual respect, suspension of judgment and open exploration of perhaps contradictory perspectives make dialogic interaction a potential catalyst for the much needed individual and collective mind shift towards sustainability and transmodernity.

We all know that the transformation towards a more equal and sustainable world requires that stakeholders from very different arenas pull together and develop comprehensive and encompassing approaches and pathways to solutions. Wouldn't it be wonderful if politicians, business and non-profit representatives, educators, social and environmental activists, and citizens from the four corners of the globe could come together in a way that openly examines their respective positions on societal transformation and fosters mutual understanding and a spirit of collaboration?

While most people would agree that this is a desirable goal, the case study of interactive processes in Auroville presented in this research showed that stimulating dialogic interaction requires far more than merely assembling a diverse range of people in one place and asking them to interact in mutually respectful ways. Auroville is an intentional community where most residents buy into the communal vision of progressive harmony, human unity and collaboration – but even given such intentions, dialogic interacting does rarely emerge by itself.

In this concluding chapter, I will offer the reader some insights to 'take home' that can enable us to better understand the kinds of shifts necessary for dialogic interaction to become part and parcel of a community culture. Here, I will draw on the findings presented in the previous chapter, adding my own suggestions and ideas. Furthermore, I will provide some recommendations on how dialogic interaction can be encouraged, and make suggestions for future research.

6.1 Take-home Insights

The Challenge of Walking the Talk

Why does dialogic interaction not just happen? I have argued many times while reviewing relevant literature and discussing my findings that it is difficult to walk the talk of dialogic interaction. This is due to a range of factors emerging from all three spheres of influence I conceptualised in the framework provided in the previous chapter (Figure 5.2).

Ingrained behaviour patterns and unconscious tendencies for competition and egotism can make people reluctant to be open to the suggestions and insights of conversation partners. Moreover, it is difficult to be conscious of our interaction patterns, let alone of those emerging in a group; and it is even more demanding to 'suspend' reactions and judgment. Let's face it; we are often quite unable to play master over our body and mind.

This is especially the case when a group is only just establishing itself, and participants are (subconsciously) more concerned with establishing their status than with 'listening deeply' to what is being said. Furthermore, we tend to find it difficult to establish a 'sense of connection' when talking to people who have fundamentally different worldviews, whether these are culturally determined or through ideologies we don't agree with.

While the presence of an expert facilitator can help groups to mature and deal with 'hot' topics, we don't always have people skilled enough to fill this role in our immediate vicinity. Furthermore, the 'hospitable' environment necessary for dialogic interaction is far from reach in many contexts where dialogic interaction would be beneficial, such as the institutions of education, politics, and business.

The Need for Cultural Change

To create more warm and welcoming interactive physical and social spaces that can make people comfortable to let go of assertiveness and explore their different perspectives, a new interaction culture needs to emerge, in which different standards and assumptions guide the way people relate and connect to each other. As our discussion of complexities showed, the practice of dialogic interaction within a community is shaped by and reflects its history, political convictions, and social characteristics. Hence, a process of cultural transformation is needed to enable dialogic interaction principles to emerge on a larger scale.

Such cultural transformation, however, requires a pervasive process of change, in which all domains of public life adopt what Martin (2005) calls a New Story. At the moment, the old story

in most of the countries that are the biggest perpetrators of unsustainable practices is about survival of the fittest, individualism, and domination. For dialogic interaction to move from the margins to the middle, a new story of mutual respect, connectedness, and collective support needs to be told by the makers of popular culture, preached from the pulpit, talked about in the media, proclaimed by politicians and activists, and embraced by educators. Moreover, the new story needs to be crafted by representatives of both dominant and marginalised cultures and backgrounds, so that it is in itself based on a dialogic effort to find universal ethical principles (Dussel, 2004). In due time, this new story is likely to trickle down to form new attitudes and values, and eventually also new private and institutional practices that embrace the dialogic spirit.

Personal Development is Essential

Along with this cultural transformation, individuals also need to engage in processes of personal growth to become dialogic practitioners. Even if the new story seeps into all areas of life, it is likely to remain a 'feel good' fairy tale if people are not willing to start questioning and adapting their own behavioural tendencies.

As we have seen, this requires first of all that people become conscious of the way they interact with others. In this effort to raise consciousness, the practice of 'mindfulness' is important, which involves removing part of our attention from our immediate action and taking an observer stance, in which it becomes more easy to distance oneself from habitual patterns of reaction and emotion. Through this distancing and growth in awareness, people can discover how their perspectives are in fact not so much their own, but are shaped by the context in which they operate, which makes it easier to let go of opinions and consider the plausibility of other viewpoints.

Furthermore, the practice of mindfulness, which as I mentioned before is a major part of many spiritual orientations, can also enable people to develop a more humble and accepting outlook on the challenges that *learning* to practice dialogic interaction entails. This can be the case, I would suggest, because mindfulness is about gaining distance not only from personal opinions, but also in general from processes of interaction. Hence, mindfulness can enable us to reconceptualise the challenges of dialogic interaction as a journey full of adventures and opportunities for growth.

No Dialogic Interaction Without Intention

Nevertheless, it needs to be said that even if cultural and personal transformation are taking place, dialogic interaction still requires that people in a group individually and collectively commit *intentionally* to putting dialogue principles into action. Although some argue that groups can indeed spontaneously reach dialogic states of interaction (Scharmer, 2009), these instances do not reflect that interaction habits have changed. This may sound like common sense, but if groups and the individuals within them don't *want to* learn how to do dialogue, they will hardly get there.

What's more, we need to again point out that intention is not necessarily all that's needed, we have repeatedly seen that a certain conundrum exists between our willingness to try and our limited ability to 'do dialogue'. Yet, this may be exactly where the crux lies… Attempts at dialogic interaction are bound to fail sometimes, but we cannot allow ourselves to be discouraged by that – in spite of all the difficulties, we must keep trying, with sincerity.

6.2 Recommendations for Dialogic Practitioners and Advocates

From the insights gained in this study, we can draw some recommendations for those who wish to practice or facilitate dialogue. First of all, the fact that there are certain interaction principles and communication tools available that can be useful for dialogic interaction (c.f. Bohm, 1996, Owen, 1997, Brown, 2002, Rosenberg, 2003) may be useful, as groups can decide on using certain tools and principles, and facilitators have a range of techniques to draw from, depending on the characteristics of participants. Furthermore, the framework provided in chapter five (Figure 5.2) can serve as a guide for designing opportunities for dialogic interaction. Although many of the community complexities and the factors in the three spheres of influence, as well as the interplay along the three axes is certainly difficult to influence, the framework can nevertheless be useful for analysing and understanding the 'field' of dialogic interaction that applies to a particular group. Importantly, a better understanding of this field can then assist facilitators and dialogic practitioners to address specific concerns that inhibit the group's capacity for dialogue.

However, practitioners need to keep in mind that there are no magic tricks to ensure groups will reach dialogic interaction modes. Instead, people need to be willing to experiment with different techniques, and recognise that sometimes dialogue just doesn't happen. This uncertainty also holds in regards to spatial design. It was emphasised several times that a hospitable environment is conducive to dialogic interaction; however, the exact specifications of what makes an environment hospitable are likely to depend on the context of interaction and the group's cultural characteristics. For instance, when the purpose of the group is to find an

integrative solution to a high-stakes issue, an environment that is very informal might produce resistance among participants.

Furthermore, the interplay between facilitation and independence needs to be considered. While it can be relatively easy for a group to adhere to dialogic interaction principles like attentive listening, the suspension of judgment, and open exploration of contradictory perspectives with the assistance of a good facilitator, ideally groups should aim to be(come) able to do without one. Hence, facilitators should gradually prepare groups to be able to practice dialogic interaction by themselves. Here, it is vital for participants to realise that some level of honest self-inquiry might be needed for this, which might at times involve painful insights and significant hurdles. Nevertheless, facilitators can encourage people to view this as an opportunity for personal growth, and try to laugh at the difficulties they experience.

One area where dialogic interaction could be of particular relevance is in the field of education, as the transformative potential of dialogue carries great promises for developing innovative teaching methodology. Such methods could develop dialogic competence while at the same time encouraging students to question their own perspectives more, and approach those of others with more openness, creating balance between inquiry, advocacy and reflection. Here, we need to mention, of course, that the use of dialogic interaction in education is somewhat contradictory to traditional teacher-student models, as dialogue requires an abolishment of the idea that any particular person in the group might have more or 'better' knowledge. Hence, educators who wish to adopt dialogue as a methodology for creating stimulating and insightful interaction need to first question and adapt their own understanding and practice of 'teaching'.

If we take a larger perspective to consider the impact that dialogic interaction could make on processes of finding integrative solutions to the pressing challenges of our time, it also makes sense to recommend that practitioners should act as advocates of dialogic interaction. In the same vein, they might also see themselves as advocates of the cultural change towards mutual respect, connectedness, and collective support that is needed to create a more supportive societal environment for dialogic interaction. In this context, practitioners might want to start telling the 'new story' I spoke of above through the range of channels available to them, and encourage others to do the same.

In this sense, it would be wise to connect advocacy for dialogic interaction with the movement towards sustainability that is already gathering momentum, especially since the fundamental values underlying the call for sustainability and the practice of dialogic interaction are very similar. Sustainability in a sense emphasises inter-generational respect and regard for others and the environment, while in dialogue, this applies to more immediate attention to mutual respect in the present moment, as interaction ensues.

6.3 Future Studies – How to Raise the Profile of this Research

No research can ever tell the whole story, as this exceeds anyone's knowing (Stake, 2005). This is of course particularly the case in exploratory studies like the one presented in this report, and we need to be careful with regards to its findings and the conclusions drawn in this chapter. There certainly is a need to investigate how dialogic interaction processes are shaped in greater detail, within a more extended scope, and a more evaluative research design.

Furthermore, we can point to several opportunities for future research. For instance, the theoretical framework for dialogic interaction developed here could provide a skeleton for academic discussion, and for research that aims to evaluate how certain factors influence interactive processes, making them more or less dialogic. In this context, it needs to be mentioned that the intended outcomes of dialogue, such as the development of integrative insights and mutually supportive relationships, have not yet been thoroughly evaluated (Dessel and Rogge, 2008), which points to another focus future research on dialogic interaction could adopt.

A theme that came up quite consistently both in reviewing the literature and conducting the field work for this study was the seemingly paradox need for both conflict and harmony in dialogic interaction. This emphasis on both transformative disruptions and an environment of mutual support and collaboration is another aspect that could be interesting to study. How exactly do conflict and harmony relate to each other in dialogic interaction? And what is the role of 'tipping points' (c.f. Scheffer, 2009) between the two in stimulating or inhibiting dialogue?

In this context, we can also draw attention to the role of the design of interactive space in stimulating dialogue. This sphere of influence seems to be quite neglected in the literature relevant to dialogic interaction, which might be related to the difficulties of evaluating the impact of environmental factors on human behaviour. However, we cannot ignore that the physical environment seems to have a significant impact on the way people behave and interact, and future research might consider which elements of interactive spaces are more or less conducive to dialogue. Here, the question of how comfortable such spaces should be comes into play as well – after all the aim of dialogic interaction is often to trigger people to leave their comfort zone.

Researchers might also like to investigate how dialogic interaction can be practised in the classroom. Although dialogue is indeed a prominent term in (critical) pedagogy, I believe much needs to be discovered in terms of how the widespread adoption of dialogic education can be promoted. Here, future studies would be welcome that criticise the role of educational institutions in producing 'standardised' graduates who fit the moulds of the industrial age, and

are often unable to think for themselves, let alone contribute creatively to the knowledge economy.

Finally, I would like to mention that instead of looking at dialogue in small groups where participants meet in person – as this study did – it would also be interesting to consider the potential of information and communication technology in dialogic encounters. How can an interpersonal connection of mutual support and respect be established between dialogue participants who have never met in person? What factors need to be considered in this type of machine-mediated interaction? And is it even necessary for people to 'talk' in order to interact dialogically? How does dialogic interaction between participants in a group differ from dialogues in which participants exchange and attempt to synthesise ideas in written form?

Having come to the end of this report, I hope that the insights gathered therein could be of value to the reader, be it in an academic sense, or for personal or professional interest. Throughout, I have done my best to provide as complete a picture of this research as possible within the scope of this document. A certain level of personal bias is unavoidable in this feat; nevertheless, I trust the reader could get a good sense of the 'essence' of this study and where it might lead in terms of further investigations.

Even more so, I hope this work could inspire some readers to seriously consider the role dialogic interaction may play in our search for pathways to solutions in response to the pervasive challenges humanity is facing in the 21st century – not only in intentional communities, but also in mainstream society. I conclude with the very first epitaph of this report – "Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards, it creates new cards" (Zeldin, 2000: 14) – and extend a heartfelt call to all of us who feel deeply concerned and responsible for the future of this planet and its inhabitants – Let us embark on a journey of becoming dialogic practitioners; change the way we interact with others, the world, and ourselves. Let's create some new cards!

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Image Sources

Figure 3.1	www.maps.google.com
Figure 3.2	Left: http://www.auroville.org/thecity/matrimandir/banyan_tree.htm Right: http://www.auroville.org/thecity/matrimandir/Amphitheatre.htm
Figure 3.3	Left: http://www.auroville.org/thecity.htm Right: http://www.auroville.org/av_brief.htm
Figure 3.4	http://www.auroville.org/organisation/aurovillefoundation.htm
Figure 3.5	Photograph taken of a paper map purchased in Auroville
Figure 3.6	http://www.auroville.org/organisation/imprssion.htm
Figure 3.7	http://www.auroville.org/environment/env_introduction.htm
Figure 3.8	Top row: http://www.auroville.info/ACUR/masterplan/proposal.htm Bottom left: http://www.auroville.org/environment/canyon_walk.htm Bottom middle: http://www.auroville.org/research/ren_energy/solar_bowl.htm Bottom right: http://www.auroville.org/research/ren_energy/wind_energy.htm
Figure 5.1	Top left: http://www.auroville.org/thecity/architecture/arch_louis.htm Top right: http://www.auroville.org/thecity/architecture/agnijata.htm Middle, first 3: http://www.auroville.org/thecity/architecture/arch_hybrid.htm Middle right: http://www.auroville.org/thecity/architecture/two_at_once.htm Bottom left: http://www.auroville.org/thecity/architecture/arch_roger_anger_house.htm Bottom center: http://www.auroville.org/thecity/architecture/arch_public_buildings.htm Bottom right: http://www.auroville.org/thecity/architecture/collect_housing/linesofforce_update.htm

Appendix: Interview Characteristics per Respondent

Respondent number	*m*	*f*	Origin	Aurovillian	Guest	Volunteer	Interview scheduled	Spontaneous conversation	recurrent conversation	Semi-overt research	Overt research
1		x	Auroville	x				x	x	x	
2		x	Auroville	x				x		x	
3 (rec.)		x	Auroville	x			x				x
4	x		Austria	x				x			
5		x	Belgium	x				x			
6		x	Belgium	x				x			x
7		x	Finland		x			x		x	
8	x		France	x				x	x		x
9	x		France	x				x			
10 (rec.)		x	France	x			x	x	x		x
11	x		Germany		x			x			x
12		x	Germany	x				x	x		x
13		x	Germany	x				x			
14	x		Germany	x				x	x		x
15	x		Germany		x			x	x		x
16	x		Germany	x				x		x	
17 (rec.)	x		Germany	x			x				x
18		x	Germany	x				x			x
19		x	Germany	x				x			
20	x		Germany	x				x		x	
21		x	Hungary	x				x		x	
22	x		India		x			x		x	
23	x		India	x				x		x	
24 (rec.)	x		Israel	x			x				x
25		x	Italy		x			x			x
26	x		Morrocco	x				x			x
27	x		Netherlands	x				x	x		x

Respondent number	*m*	*f*	Origin	Aurovillian	Guest	Volunteer	Interview scheduled	Spontaneous conversation	recurrent conversation	Semi-overt research	Overt research
28		x	New Zealand			x		x		x	
29 (rec.)	x		Spain	x			x	x	x		x
30		x	Spain	x			x				x
31	x		Spain	x			x				x
32		x	Spain	x			x				x
33	x		Tamil Nadu	x				x		x	
34	x		Tamil Nadu	x				x			
35	x		Tamil Nadu	x				x			
36	x		Tamil Nadu	x				x		x	
37	x		Tamil Nadu	x				x	x	x	
38	x		Tamil Nadu	x				x		x	
39	x		USA			x		x	x		x
40		x	USA	x				x			
Total	**23**	**17**		**33**	**5**	**2**	**8**	**34**	**10**	**13**	**18**
(rec.) = interview was audio-recorded											