

Dissensus as part of dialogue in organizational change processes: a case study in an NGO

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Abstract: In this article we discuss, from the experience of action research on organizational change in an NGO, how interpreting the concept of dialogue in organizational theory has impacted the way in which it has been understood and applied in the processes of change that organizations experience. The ontological relationship that has been established between dialogue and organizational change and the interpretative frameworks used, although they have represented a great epistemological and practical breakthrough, have also limited the potential of the concept of dialogue itself by oversimplifying it. The reflective analysis allowed by action research on the case leads us to propose dissensus as an alternative: recognizing dissensus as natural in the organizational context and as an engine of real change. Understanding dialogue only as a search for consensus leads people to hide differences and not properly manage them in the process of change, because talking about organization is talking about relational and communicative patterns that highlight the influence of power, internal asymmetry and diversity in the processes of change. This complexity demands a new look on how to read it and understand it properly without oversimplifying it.

Keywords: action research, dialogue, dissensus approach, consensus approach, organizational change

El disenso como parte del diálogo en procesos de cambio organizacional: un estudio de caso en una ONG

Resumen: En este artículo discutimos, a partir de una experiencia de investigación acción sobre cambio organizacional en una ONG, cómo la interpretación del concepto de diálogo que ha hecho la teoría organizacional ha impactado en la forma de entender y aplicar este concepto en procesos de cambio de las organizaciones. La relación ontológica que se ha establecido entre diálogo y cambio organizacional y los marcos interpretativos utilizados, si bien han representado un gran avance epistemológico y práctico, también han limitado el potencial del propio concepto de diálogo al simplificarlo en exceso. El análisis reflexivo que permite la investigación-acción sobre el caso nos lleva a proponer el disenso como alternativa: reconocer el disenso como natural en el contexto organizacional y como motor de cambio real. Entender el diálogo solo como una búsqueda de consenso lleva a las personas a ocultar las diferencias y a no gestionarlas adecuadamente en el proceso de cambio, porque hablar de organización es hablar de patrones relacionales y comunicativos que evidencian la influencia del poder, la asimetría interna y la diversidad en los procesos de cambio. Esta complejidad exige una nueva mirada para saber leer el diálogo y comprenderlo correctamente sin simplificarlo demasiado.

Palabras clave: investigación acción, diálogo, Enfoque del disenso, Enfoque del consenso, cambio organizacional

1. Introduction

Dialogue is one of the central concepts in action research as has been addressed by prominent authors such as Gustavsen (2007) or Freire (2012). It has also been a concept on which much has been written from very diverse perspectives to try to better understand what occurs *in* and *through* it. But what can happen when we focus too close on a single object? We run the risk of leaving everything else in the shadows. Perhaps with dialogue something similar has happened: so much light on it has obscured the remaining space. In this article we try to shed light on those dark spaces, on what has happened around dialogue while it was at the center of analysis. We consider this to be a particularly relevant debate for action research on organizational change processes.

The focus of our contribution to action research is therefore in the organizational field. Dialogue in organizational theory has been reduced to a communicative event focused on speech and idealizing the results it generates. An example of this vision is found in Ellinor and Gerard (1998) when they affirm that dialogue is a powerful practice of communication that transforms those who practice it. Knowing what meaning is given to dialogue in current organizational theory and how that dialogue has been carried out in the organizational contexts of change, allows us to better understand why dialogue has become such a commonly used word that it has been attributed a behavior oriented towards the search for mutual understanding, the achievement of consensus and the avoidance of dissensus.

This way of understanding dialogue has limited its potential in processes of transformation. In recent years, and influenced by Bakhtin (1985, 1993; 1986, 1994), we find proposals that question these approaches aimed at simplifying the complexity that limit the processes of change and their innovative potential. These proposals rescue the value of dissensus as an approach to understanding dialogue and are proposed as experiences of organizational innovation (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2010). Reflections on dialogue and consensus are also found in the literature on action research (Karlsen and Larrea, 2015). The objective of this article is to propose a strengthening of the value of dissensus in dialogue in association to action research in organizations.

And from this perspective, the article analyzes the experience of the research team in a process of organizational change in an NGO within the framework of action research. Through action research we discuss the dissensus approach as a way to interpret the role of dialogue in processes of organizational change through an organization in a process of change with failed results. It failed due to the inability of the participants to overcome the monological vision of how dialogue should be deployed, denying and rejecting the tensions inherent in communicative processes in general and processes of organizational change in particular.

After this first failed phase, the results of the experience, together with the experience of the research team and the information collected while accompanying the group, show a different and distant reality with respect to the prevailing theory. The tension between the observed, the experienced and what “should be”, generated a series of questions: To what extent has the *mainstream* concept of dialogue limited the process of organizational change? What was generating the emphasis on consensus when understanding dialogue? What is the transformative potential of the dissensus approach?

These questions, the result of the tension between what arises through the experience of change and what theory indicates, opened the possibility of exploring the theorization of the

concept of dialogue to be applied in processes of organizational change, and are what guide the objectives of this reflective exercise on the experience, which are a) revealing dissensus as an intrinsic element of dialogue; b) showing the effects of integrating dissensus into processes of organizational change; and these questions are what c) opening new lines of research through action research.

For this purpose, in this article we will address the theoretical reflection on dialogue in organizational theory and the need to overcome monological theoretical frameworks that limit dialogue's potential. We will also reflect on organizational change and dialogue in their circular relationship, integrating the approaches of dialogue in the processes of change, to deploy a dissensus approach; an approach that, as we will see, allows us to rescue the dialogical essence of dialogue. We will approach the narrative through action research on the organizational change process carried out in the NGO, analyzing the results of said process and ending with the conclusions generated in the experience.

2. Theoretical framework: the concept of dialogue in organizational theory and monological theoretical frameworks

The action research process presented in this article took place in a context in which, though not explicitly consciously, it was assumed that divergence or difference is something negative. This section frames this way of thinking as a natural result of the theorizing generated about organizations.

Organizational theory has been analyzing organizations for decades, but what interests us in this article is to analyze how dialogue is conceived and has evolved from the different approaches of organizational theory, so that through the experience of an action research process, we can better develop the construct of dialogue from the framework of dissensus.

Sisto (2004), in his in-depth analysis of organizational theories, identifies contemporary, modern and more widely disseminated organizational theory as Functionalist Organizational Cognitive Theory. In it the organization is a unified whole, organized, homogeneous, coherent, with clear and predetermined rules that guide people to specific goals.

For Functionalist Organizational Cognitive Theory, even in its most evolved stages in which social psychology and humanism had already permeated its analysis, the mechanisms that were used in the organization served for people to integrate into it, be motivated and correctly develop their functions. This vision involves a simplification of organizational life and, as Sisto states, even decision making was generated through a simplification of the process which, in turn, generated a simplification of reality (Sisto, 2004, p. 60).

Over time, organizational theory evolved into new ways of understanding the organization and the subjects in it, which in organizational practice meant the incorporation of group dynamics as a way to improve the management of the organization itself. In this context, Schein (1993) proposes dialogue as a *technology* for improving the formulation of problems and their resolution. This proposal for dialogue holds a promise: to help groups achieve a higher level of awareness and thus greater creativity and effectiveness in their decision-making processes. We see here how the instrumental value of dialogue is reinforced when understood as a technology, instrument or tool at the service of the organization's efficiency.

This way of understanding dialogue assumes that diversity in human beings is considered a problem since it prevents people from understanding each other. “Why do we have so much trouble understanding each other?” (Schein, 1993, p. 41). This question drives his analysis. Dialogue is the place for problem-solving, becoming a vehicle for understanding (Schein, 1993, p. 40). Consequently, dialogue is the instrument that allows us to reach equality for everybody and advance the organization *as a whole*. Dialogue from this perspective fits with the existing vision of the organization as an orderly, coherent, goal-oriented, linear, causal and complexity-reducing structure, which aims to solve problems and increase efficiency. In this model, “difference” is diagnosed as a disease (Sisto, 2004, p. 85) and dialogue is its cure.

The following sections present the action research process that allowed these assumptions to be questioned. First, we describe the methodology used, followed by the narratives and the different phases of the process.

3. Methodology: Action research in an organizational change process

As already noted above, the action research process was performed in an NGO that called on the research team to accompany an organizational change. The number of members of this NGO went from twenty-two to sixty-three in a short period. However, the number of those responsible did not increase proportionally. So those who were already doing coordination work continued to do so, but with a greater number of people in charge. This made day-to-day management, communication and coordination more complicated, leading the management to rethink its leadership style.

In response, a process based on the action research methodology was proposed, accompanying the traction groups that will lead the change: managers and coordinators.

The accompaniment process began on October 20, 2017 and ended on May 27, 2019. During this time, 13 training and reflection sessions were held. The members of both groups consisted of executive, economic and financial managers, regional managers, socio-occupational managers, legal, advocacy and participation managers, as well as orientation and psychological care managers.

The sessions included:

- Questionnaire: at the beginning of the sessions.
- Field diary: with observation notes of what they discuss, and with the reflections of the research team before, during and after the session.
- Training session: in which the theoretical contents on leadership and dialogue are worked on.
- Reflection session: analysis of what is happening in the sessions, in the group and its impact on the change process.
- Reinforcement workshops: at the request of the group for issues that need more in-depth treatment.

The approach in which the research team was formed drew from the initial action research sources of its pioneer Kurt Lewin, and determined how people were accompanied. Specifically, the key points that defined this method were:

- The demands raised were worked from an accompaniment “with,” not “for.”
- An initial situation was modified to accommodate a better situation.
- The change does not come from the implementation of a concrete result but from an accompaniment in a process in which there is a more active and prolonged role over time.
- Dialogue is the cornerstone in this way of promoting change.

Each session was previously organized with work proposals that were shared and progressed. Notes were taken from each session based on the observation made by the research team. The different types of notes show the variety of information collected:

- Pre-notes: prior to the session, noting what should be worked on as a scaffold to distribute work time well.
- Observational notes: information about what was observed as reactions, interaction structures, relationship dynamics in the group.
- Content notes: literal notes of what was verbalized both in the dynamics that were carried out and in the conversations that were generated.
- Result notes: impressions of the session at the time of closure.
- Post-notes: contributions considered useful for the change process.

Throughout this process, the activities of the research team within the group consisted of:

- Propose the objective to be achieved, agree on it and work during the sessions on this objective;
- Provide the necessary resources to ensure that what has been agreed is achieved;
- Record what the interaction and dialogues in the group were like; and,
- Report to the group any information about how the sessions progress and how they could incorporate it into the change process.

4. The case study: organizational transformation of an NGO

4.1. Narratives resulting from action research in a failed organizational change process

As we said in the previous point, everything began with a request from the leadership of an NGO to the research team for accompaniment in a change process; we begin to work with the elements that the management itself has indicated: turning towards an innovative humanist, feminist leadership, more participative and distributed, changing the focus from a single leader towards team leadership.

The people in the traction group that would lead the change worked in centers from different places, occupied different positions and hierarchically did not have the same responsibility within the organization chart, but all shared one characteristic: they managed teams. Some had just taken up responsibility recently, others had been in positions of responsibility for some time.

For the training sessions, there were two key elements: the innovative humanist leadership model and dialogue as a catalyst for change. The research team used the CANVAS of the

Innovative Humanist leadership model, designed and developed by Amalio Rey and Ignacio García.¹

This process of collaborative reflection and contrast, action research as a framework and dialogue as a tool, allowed us to have a common methodology that advances through listening, to ourselves and others, and participation.

The dialogue unfolded on two dimensions: as a **method and as an object** for change; the people responsible would acquire competences in dialogue that would allow them to deploy their leadership and, at the same time, the interactions that occurred in the meetings were being analyzed from the observation of the research team and in contrast with the group.

The proposed dialogue was drawn from a variety of sources. On the one hand, seeking its application, a practical perspective was used and oriented to understand dialogue as a tool (Bohm, 1997; Isaacs, 1999; Scharmer, 2015). On the other, the philosophical perspective of Moratalla's dialogue (2006) was also used. In this way, dialogue as an instrument of change was joined by a philosophical aspect related to dialogue as an attitude (dialogical) that complemented the first.

However, finally, what happened during the process completely distanced itself from the expectations; everything that happened turned this perfectly idealized and ideal approach around.

4.2. A newly created team and many expectations in the process

As the process progresses, what emerged begins to drift away from what could be expected from that ideal of dialogue that had been outlined at the beginning. Something starts to throw the group off balance.

The meetings were held once a month, and the reflection sessions lasted one morning. They were intense sessions in which the dialogues were particularly relevant and from the first moment the desire was evident that the process entailed a result in the form of a tool, roadmap, solution, means for decision-making, which allowed them to advance in their performance. But where was the change? The question is, "What do you expect to take away from this process?" people answered:

- Tools to be able to lead better.
- A paper that displays the work that each person does in leadership to be able to measure well what additional things to do, without exploding along the way.
- Tools for us, for my team, to improve well-being and effectiveness.
- Being able to agree on how far leadership goes, on what to make decisions.
- To reach agreements and respect them on how we are going to do things and what we are going to do, and their limits. (Content Notes, Personal Communication, October 20, 2017)

That instrumentalized vision of the organization also dragged everything that was generated in it. Session after session dialogue was fraught with tensions that seemed to keep the group moving forward, or at least that was the feeling. This led the research team to a deeper reflection on dialogue in organizational change processes.

1 For more information visit www.amaliorey.com.

4.3. The reality shown is neither good nor bad; it simply is

As the process progressed, what was happening in the group was not unfolding according to the projected “ideal” vision. This is when the need arose to compare with other theories on dialogue and organizational change, whether what was happening in this group was something that could be explained epistemologically from other paradigms or was there something in the way the process was being carried out that was not adequate.

What was going on? It seemed that confusion and frustration abounded, both in those who participated and in the research team itself, which hindered the course of the sessions. These feelings appeared very early, already in the second session the group expressed the need for guidelines to follow so as not to “get tangled up,” as they themselves verbalize, describing how they want the sessions to be and in the agreements that they consider basic for proper functioning:

“Take care of people. Respect the diversity of “subjectivities.” Respect what we agree. We want this to be “operational.” Specify. The upcoming sessions must be organized, structuring them and clearly focused on the task. Provide tools to move forward” (Previous Notes, personal communication, October 27, 2017).

Also identified in this second session were messages from the research team to the group along the same lines:

“we are not going to fix everything now, we are not going to have all the tools already to be able to apply them, but what is given to you, what is provided to you, apply it, be aware of applying it and how, and analyze what happens next, and share it” (Previous Notes, personal communication, October 27, 2017).

This situation that is identified as an “entanglement” can be understood by seeing the diversity of expectations and needs that they wanted to cover through the process. Faced with the question of ‘what do you want to take away from this session?’ an answer was a “consensual model” (Content Notes, personal communication, October 27, 2017), but that “model” could not constitute a miracle and that “consensus” was far being reached. Moreover, perhaps it was not necessary or advisable as an aim, seeing that its dynamics veered towards divergent communicative and relational patterns on which strong emotions were activated and from which it was difficult to get out and move forward.

Intuiting that the dilemmas that could arise included interesting dimensions to work with and with which to advance through dialogue, the group was asked to identify those aspects of the leadership model that they consider to pose greater difficulties, without achieving it, the strength of the internal dynamics of the group ended up prevailing, failing to advance the proposed objective.

What was observed most intensely was the dilemma between consensus and dissensus, a dilemma that essentially compromised the way dialogue was understood and put into practice. To try to more clearly identify the scope of this dilemma and also make the group aware of its nature, they were asked to name, in one word, what that dynamic of “entanglement” is for them, more specifically, what word they would use to describe how they perceive themselves in that “entanglement”: “Irresponsibility, Distrust, Pluralism, Perplexity, Perseverance, Diversity, Frustration, Diversity of consensus, Reflection” (Content Note, personal communication, October 27, 2017).

These words show how each person lived and felt that dilemma in different ways, for some it was a source of frustration while for others it simply represented the diverse nature that characterized them. But even the research team’s experience was compromised as we see in

one of the result notes: “the session is gone” (Result note, personal communication, October 27, 2017). It seems that the perception of the research team itself was also not being positive, or in any case, the way of interpreting what happened in the session.

In this way, it seemed that, in this group, the diverse, the different and divergent perspectives collided and without knowing what to do with it, or how to work with it. This reality did not seem to favor process’s progress, but paradoxically it did not seem to prevent it either; it simply took the group and the research team themselves to a place where progress was not visible, not at least in the way they hoped to see it.

4.4. Dialogue in practice, is it a practice of non-dialogue or perhaps more dialogue than ever?

The notes that were collected throughout the sessions reflected how the dialogues were developing in the group, as has been collected in previous sections, the people commented that the dialogues seemed to occur in the form of a loop and that the contents were excessively dispersed, it seemed that the dialogue did not lead the group to the place where they believed they should be.

To respond to this concern, team members were provided with more content on guidelines for developing dialogue and dialogic attitudes in teams, such as the Democratic Dialogue chapter of the book *Territorial Development and Action Research: Innovation through Dialogue* by James Karlsen and Miren Larrea (2015), and a supporting presentation where some keys of “The Art of Difficult Conversations” were collected (Sacanell, 2016), all in order to have more tools to manage those difficult conversations.

Dialogue was ceasing to be a magic word and the practice of dialogue was proving much more difficult than its ideal and idealized theoretical developments. Dialogue was being perceived as a space for participatory conversation that was too open, unproductive and a threat to the process, running the risk of becoming a space for majority voices that concealed plurality. The challenge this posed generated questions like: “How can we make common decisions, taking into account the diversity of each process?” (Content note, personal communication, March 23, 2018).

At that time, the key for the group itself and the research team was to increase awareness of how their dialogues were held and how far they were from the idealized conception of the dialogue from which they started. A reflection was necessary that allowed them to see the need to act differently in their interactions and in their communications. The group showed a dialogue that did not fit into the premises established in the scientific literature on how dialogue should be in organizational theory. This feeling was explicitly verbalized: “I really think there is no dialogue in what we do. That’s the feeling I get. I notice physical and verbal tension.” (Content note, person communication, January 11, 2019).

It seemed then that the ideal dialogue could not coexist with tension. The difficulty in managing diversity continued to generate unrest. When asked what they should do to manage diversity, the answers were: “Accept diversity”, “Open one’s mind to what can be contributed,” “Lower the level of demand (homogeneity),” “Ask us and ask them, what each of the people on the team contributes,” “Challenge: be attentive to respect for diversity,” “Empower other skills from others (collective learning)” (Content notes, personal communication, November 20, 2017).

The need to work to accept diversity as a value in the team and for the process was increasingly imperative. The difficulties in advancing the process of organizational change, weighed especially on some people who began to feel that the exercise of their leadership was going to be a more difficult task to carry out than they initially thought: “I came here full of hope, but lately on a practical level I feel that I cannot apply it.” (Content note, personal communication, March 23, 2018).

However, other people were more hopeful about the change: “For me it is a challenge on how to manage in a reality like this, where there will be moments of greater conflict. We have to see how we can go about talking about it, informing *why we do* things.” (Content note, personal communication, July 5, 2018).

These comments reflected the turning point the group was heading towards, the awareness of the dynamic element of the process. At that turning point the practice showed the possibility of looking at the theory from another perspective. This was the key moment in which something changed with respect to the way of understanding the dialogue, in which the team itself was aware that something was happening: What if what is happening – tension, lack of consensus, diversity that does not converge on one point – was also dialogue?

5. Theoretical frameworks that allow resignifying the dialogue to understand the situation

The question derived from the aforementioned experience can be understood as the beginning of the research team’s search for more suitable frameworks to address the processes of dialogue in action research. Part of this literature already existed when this case study took place, however, the team started from an interpretation of the consensus-oriented dialogue. We believe that there are still action research teams that prioritize this interpretation of dialogue. By providing this conceptual section, as a continuation of this case study, we intend to help readers face similar dilemmas, to connect with the concept of dissensus from that experience.

5.1. Overcoming the division in approaches to dialogue in the organization: a dialogical approach to advancing the process

If we understand organizational change as permanent, evolutionary, unstable, as a constant flow of social relationships, we need an approach to dialogue that includes diversity as the organization’s relational essence and engine of development. We do not want to construct a “caricature” to explain order (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002, p. 568) when reality is richer, more varied, more diverse and more complex.

To make a comprehensive analysis of organizational change we should go beyond those reductionist divisions of complexity and perhaps assume what Garmann Johnsen, Holstkog and Ennals (2018) propose: that organizations are by nature human discourses and decisions in which the dichotomy of “good” or “bad” depends on how those discourses develop and evolve and how they are taken into consideration in their management.

Action research on dialogue in organizations must be approached from perspectives that have to do not only with what is said, with words, but also with how it is said (ontology of language), its material and cultural context, and taking into account power as a variable (Gergen et al., 2004).

Change is itself a never-ending process that requires a constant construction of meaning through and for the people involved. Therefore, it requires a high level of interaction among the members of the organization. It means that “change” becomes an endless challenge in terms of having to co-construct through people’s participation (Jabri, 2017, p. 10).

Dialogue, in these circumstances, must be no longer a tool but a need to maintain ‘responsiveness’ in a more conscious place, only by keeping those interactions active and open is progress made in the constant change.

5.2. The dissensus approach, an approach that allows us to rescue the dialogical essence of dialogue and the reality of the organizational context of change.

In Organizational Theory it can be said that two divergent perceptions of understanding organization coexist: harmony-consensus; and conflict-dissensus (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2014, p. 204–205). The first considers organizations as stable structures formed by well-integrated elements where all elements of the organization have a function. The goal in organizational life is none other than to maintain order and contribute to the organization by agreeing on shared values. In the second, organizations are seen as tensions between different interests where issues of power are implicit. Conflicts are not threats but disagreements between parties that produce tensions, but at the same time provide opportunities for learning.

If we take into account this second perspective, we see that dissensus and conflict cease to be something to be avoided or fixed, since they are integrated into the essence of the organization as constituent parts of it and an engine of change. But in general, it is a difficult approach to assume because it could seem that an organization understood from this perspective lives in a permanent “restlessness.”

Inspired by the Scandinavian tradition led by Bjørn Gustavsen of “democratic dialogues,” Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2013; 2014; 2006, 2010, 2014, 2017, 2021) apply the approach of dissensus as a critical perspective to the analysis of dialogue in their action research processes. In fact, this perspective permeates throughout this article that undoubtedly finds inspiration in Gustavsen (2007).

At this point it must be emphasized that making dissensus visible as a constituent element of the dynamics and development of organizations does not imply denying the existence of consensus, but rather it implies not perpetuating a way of thinking about organizations (Buela, 2016). Dialogues should be organized in such a way as to allow all points of view to be expressed, silent voices to find space and criticisms to be heard. Therefore, the dissensus approach is born of situated thought and requires practice (Buela, 2016, p. 27). There is a need for spaces where it can be found. And for this to be possible Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen propose a double perspective of the dissensus approach (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2010, p. 161–162):

- *Dissensus organizing*: Dialogues should be organized in such a way that all points of view can be expressed.
- *Dissensus sensibility*: relational quality that means openness to address potential disagreements or tensions in team conversations, whether categorical (different viewpoints) or relational.

Thus, the dissensus approach in dialogue, proposed by Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, tries to make criticism and different interests a legitimate part of the process, thus including them. It thus activates a process in which differences in points of view, interests, tensions and conflicts are used as a vehicle to generate innovation. What is interesting is that dissensus becomes a “vehicle for change” (Kristiansen, 2013, p. 96) through dialogue.

6. Revisiting the case: Diversity, different feelings and consensus, a light along the way

At the beginning of the article, we described this case as a process of failed organizational change. This responds to an initial interpretation of the case from the classical perspective of the theory of dialogue. However, this does not mean that it did not generate very relevant lessons. The new theoretical frameworks proposed in the previous section allow us to return to this case and reread it through new perspectives in relation to consensus and dissensus.

Given the story, today we can ask ourselves what perceptions each person had about consensus and dissensus, what value they gave to these terms and what they meant for each of them in their day to day. We may also ask ourselves how those concepts had been constructed in the collective imagination of the organization and to what extent that way of understanding them could determine the way in which the initial steps in the change process were being taken.

In any case, it was recognized that each person’s unique feelings, their diversity, made the process of change and the work to be developed more complex: “It is difficult to work with people who are not the same as you.” (Content note, personal communication, November 20, 2017)

For some people this diversity represented something negative: “We confused not agreeing with a bad vibe.” “There has to be a good vibe.” (Content note, personal communication, November 20, 2017). For other people diversity was a natural thing that in no case should constitute an obstacle: “That is professionalism: accepting what is different,” “There is diversity of roles, opinions, people. We (this group) are the example,” “We are different.” “Different roles, potentials.” (Content note, personal communication, November 20, 2017)

For others, the different attribution of value was at the origin of this diversity: “Some capacities are valued more than others.” (Content note, personal communication, November 20, 2017)

Undoubtedly, this different way of experiencing the difference, and what it could mean in the process being developed, generated questions that led the group to place itself differently in what the consensus refers to: “How do we act with respect to this? [to the fact that we are all different], do we try to work on it or not?” (Content note, personal communication, November 20, 2017)

One of the statements even questioned the process of change itself since it could lead the organization to liquidate its diverse and plural nature: “We are going to change so that we all think the same.” (Content note, personal communication, November 20, 2017).

This statement opened the debate of whether the narratives created in the processes of change generated change when they are monological, or what they really do is destroy the organization’s own diversity. How was working on change through dialogue related to “thinking alike?” Does change mean eliminating diversity? Does working on diversity mean eliminating it? Why weren’t they able to pick up and hold the various aspects of different perspectives? What concept were they having of change? What concept were they having of consensus? Why couldn’t they progress from dissensus?

These questions also led to a state of uncertainty in which to openly consider whether change could be seen as something positive in organizations, or whether change was actually felt as a threat that permeated organizational processes with insecurity. This situation led to the question of whether dialogue could be the enabler of this new (and better) reality. It was not clear whether what they were looking for was to resist change so as not to lose the diversity that characterized them as an organization, and then dialogue became a not so efficient tool, or if that was the natural dynamic of a process of change. Was the research team witnessing that the reality of change was a complex movement and the concept of dialogue being worked on did not help to accommodate it?

The need to activate a critical perspective on the theoretical approach to change and dialogue as a tool to enable it became imperative. And as the process progressed, those chaotic dialogues were being accepted as something “normalized.” They stopped being seen as a “problem,” and instead were taken as a possible “symptom” that provided information to the group, thus allowing for a better understanding of each other.

Living in dissensus seemed to bring new elements to the change process, even more suited to the dynamics experienced, something that was reflected in the closing session, when asked the questions of how they feel when they leave and what they take away: “I leave restless and I get clarity. We repeat a pattern, but this does not overwhelm me;” “Well, today I was comfortable. I liked it. Now I have to think.” “Fine. At one point I decided to not say anything. A step back.” “Today I better understood what we are doing. I’m tired of dialogue, from opinions. We are in a loop. Happy to see it.” “Satisfied and reassured by a thing we are unaware of in these sterile debates. The more you express it, the more you become aware and there will come a time when we might better communicate.” “I leave satisfied. I like this space. We spoke serenely. I have the impression that we are moving forward with this. This has a meaning and an end.” (Content Notes, Personal Communication, December 5, 2017).

So, could learning to sustain dissensus in dialogue be what this team needed?

7. Conclusions: Bakhtin and Sweden, a gateway to new and more complex dialogical perspectives. The value of the difference.

As a conclusion, let’s return to the initial, specific objectives we aimed to reflect on. The first specific objective for reflection was *to reveal dissensus as an intrinsic element of dialogue*. The way in which dissensus emerges in the analyzed case involves integrating a broader view

of dialogue, seeing it as a process, not so much as a product. Understanding dialogue as a process and focusing on differences as a driver of change implies integrating dissensus as a natural element of it. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2005, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2017, 2021) develop this proposal. In the research results, dissensus is revealed as an emerging and enabling element of change when the organization works on dialogue from a dialogical perspective where one side and the opposite emerge, tensions remain alive and forces oriented to unity coexist with the forces that welcome difference.

As for the goal of *showing the effects of integrating dissensus into organizational change processes*, we must emphasize that the organization is not always prepared to work on dissensus. Dissensus can be a frustrating experience in the process of change, generating unease and insecurity among the people who experience it. The stresses of change processes require an organization not only willing, but also prepared to sustain them as a valuable source of learning and knowledge *in, for and by* change. At the same time, mechanisms and competencies are needed so that these tensions not only emerge, but are sought and worked *from* them, *with* them and in the development of new relational and communicative models.

Finally, as for the last objective, *to open new lines of research from the action research*, below we outline future lines of research:

- We must continue to generate interpretative frameworks that enrich the experiences that are generated in organizations.
- Organizational life should be investigated further, not what it should be, but what it is. Perhaps then the theory would gain substance.
- It is necessary to counteract the monological, linear and simplified accounts of complexity in organizational theory.
- More processes of change observed and analyzed in depth would be needed to validate results.

The dissensus approach opens a world of reflective possibilities that leads to expanding the initial concept of dialogue; it is an approach that better reflects the complexity of human interactions in organizational contexts, and that is why we consider it as a proposal to be taken into account in organizational processes of change.

As Bager (2014) points out, the neoliberal quest to achieve and obtain efficient, streamlined and controlled organizational environments seems to be a chimera. Demonstrations of monological authority, which need not be authoritarian, and centripetal forces seeking unity and consensus in and through the processes of change themselves, rule out the heterogeneous nature of organizational life. This narrows down their views and does not reflect the circumstances and complexity at play in human interactions in organizational settings.

In organizations, many models of how to understand it coexist. This plurality creates tensions. Pure models of organization do not exist, but we are faced with a plurality of models or approaches that coexist in organizations, in their processes, in the minds of each of the workers, and in the subsystems that compose them. The lack of references that counteract these interpretative frameworks and allow re-signifying the concept of *control* in the new reality means that people also do not know how to act in the face of certain challenges and adapt to what they already know.

Organizations do not need simplifying frameworks of their reality but, on the contrary, theoretical frameworks and paradigms that accommodate tension, paradox, contradiction as

their natural elements that provide people and teams with integrative and broad approaches to reality that consider the organization as a space of experimentation from which to nourish and question the organizational theory itself to continue advancing in its practices; action research becomes one of its most valuable tools as it has tried to show in this article.

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