Dialogue for Fostering Participation or Manipulation: A Phenomenological Study of a Health Care Company

Devi Akella¹

Abstract
Dialogue is a communication form which enables open and honest communication between employees and management. Without dialogue there can be no exchange of information and ideas nor any shared understandings between labor and management. Dialogue leads to reflection of one’s perceptions, transference of knowledge and understanding, detection and correction of errors and generation of new ideas, and mental schemas and concepts. However, the role of dialogue and its overall effectiveness in designing democratic and collaborative working environments remains “curiously underexplored”. This article uses the power ideologies of Lukes and empirical data gathered in the form of interviews from the health care sector to understand the true purpose and agenda of dialogue in contemporary organizations.

Keywords
dialogue, collaborative and participative communication, third dimension of power

Introduction
Dialogue is a communication process where there is free exchange of thoughts and ideas making it possible to change one’s mental paradigms and outlooks (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000; Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Isaacs, 1993). “People gradually learn to suspend their defensive exchanges and further probe into the underlying reasons why these exchanges take place” (Isaacs, 1993, p. 25). Dialogue can be described as a “sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions and certainties that compose everyday experiences” (Isaacs, 1993, p. 25; Black, 2005).

This communication strategy transforms the quality of conversation by influencing the participants thinking process and their mental paradigms. The entire process of dialogue is based on the belief or assumption that the actions and language of all individuals are influenced by certain values and mental paradigms. Sometimes these notions could be invalid, unfragmented, and incoherent. If individuals are able to reflect on their beliefs and perceptions, it could lead to deconstruction of their mental blocks and patterns of thinking leading to dramatic changes in their behaviors (Isaacs, 1993). Dialogue, by combining collective thinking and inquiry, is able to break through an individual’s mental paradigm and in reaching a mutual consensus (Isaacs, 1993). “Achieving dialogue often results in a deepened sense of connection between oneself and others . . .,” which promotes collective thinking and problem solving within teams (Goodall & Kellett, 2004, p. 167). Dialogue emphasizes win-win relationships, “characterized by high levels of concern for self (and one’s own position) as well as for the other (and for the position advanced by the other) . . . rather than a primary focus on winnings and losing” (Cisnà & Anderson, 1994, p. 14). Dialogue’s foundations are entrenched in “respect, vulnerability, and openness, resonant with Buber’s I-Thou relationships” (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p. 70).

This invitational rhetoric has been described as “cooperative, non-adversarial and ethical” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 115). However, even though the role of dialogue has been accepted in sustaining democracy (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012), this area remains relatively underexplored (Isaacs, 1993; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008; Schein, 1993; Senge, 1990). There is currently a dearth of theoretical and empirical studies which critically explore dialogue (with exception of Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Hujala & Rissanen, 2012; Kalliola, Nakari, & Pesonen, 2006; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008, to mention a few) to shed light on its democratic abilities (Akella, 2003). This article seeks to make a contribution to

¹ Albany State University, GA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Devi Akella, College of Business, Albany State University, 504 College Drive, Albany, GA 31701, USA.
Email: devi.akella@asurams.edu
the literature pertaining to dialogue and its purpose by investigating the following issues:

- Is it possible for an open and democratic communication process like dialogue which is based on common understandings to exist in contemporary organizations? Or is it just another wistful, ambitious ideology?

This article has been divided into five sections. “A Brief Review of Dialogue” section reviews the process of dialogue and its futality in generating democracy within organizations. “Theory of Communicative Action” section examines the communicative rationality philosophy of Habermas (1984) to raise concerns over its effectiveness in sustaining collaborative and participative communication within organizations. “Frameworks of Power” section discusses Lukes (1974, 2005) and his third dimension of power to provide insights on the current issue as to whether dialogue can truly ever be a participative and democratic communication process. “Manipulative Discourse in a Health Care Organization” section constitutes the methodology section consisting of empirical data and its overall analysis. The “Discussion and Conclusion” section of the article consists of concluding thoughts.

**A Brief Review of Dialogue**

There has been a gradual shift from the earlier traditional forms of communication (i.e., discussions, dialectic, and debates) toward dialogue and metalogue (see Figure 1), where decisions are not reached through consensus or heated arguments. Dialogue is different from discussion and debates where all the participants engage in heated interactions to resolve differences. Dialogue ensures open communication where there is a free exchange of thoughts, and ideas making it possible to change one’s mental paradigms (Akella, 2015). Pearce and Pearce (2004) remark that

> the defining characteristic of dialogic communication is that all of these speech acts are done in ways that hold one’s own position but allow others the space to hold theirs, and are profoundly open to hearing others’ positions without needing to oppose or assimilate them. (p. 25)

Dialogue visualizes communication as “thinking together,” creation of new perceptions by building connections and relationships between individuals (Black, 2005).

Philosopher Martin Buber describes dialogue as a mode of exchange among human beings in which there is true and full appreciation of the other person. Dialogue explores collective thoughts and underlying processes that govern the mental models and schemas. It is a new form of conversation which allows individuals to communicate and share their tacit knowledge with others, reflect, and then if needed alter their tacit knowledge and information. Dialogue is characterized by “strange otherness and emergent consequences” (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p. 70), individuals are able to evaluate taken for granted rules, assumptions, and voice unacceptable ideas and resolve individual differences. Dialogue enables collective inquiry and reflection (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Isaacs, 1993; Lyotard, 1984; Schein, 1993).

Dialogue is a process which allows people to suspend their defensiveness leading to a free flow of inquiry into their own and others’ assumptions and beliefs (Isaacs, 1993; Raelin, 2008; Schein, 1993). Dialogue is effective in building mutual trust and common ground. Dialogue supports communication, sharing, and learning of new information across different levels of hierarchy and cultural boundaries. Dialogue facilitates mutual trust and makes it possible to tell what is really on one’s mind (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993).

It helps in generating, sharing, and exploring tacit information, and creation of common mental models and assumptions leading to higher levels of creativity and learning within organizations (Schein, 1993). Dialogue enables groups in reaching higher levels of consciousness, and be more creative and innovative. Dialogue is useful in understanding cultures and subcultures. Dialogue helps groups in resolving dilemmas, decision making, building common ground, and reaching mutual consensus (Isaacs, 1993).
In other words, the so-called accepted truths and norms are deconstructed, to open up spaces for new perceptions, new ways of looking at the same phenomenon (Rorty, 1996). Differences between existing formulations are scrutinized through a reflective process of inquiry. Equal power is allocated to all team members, decisions are based on mutual consent rather than tradition, dogma, or coercion. New knowledge is “the endpoint of the process of dialogue and engagement rather than the starting point” (Raelin, 2008, p. 521).

Dialogue can be conceptualized as the DNA of democracy (Pruitt & Thomas, 2007), an ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1984). It is crucial for effective organizational performance and success as it molds and frames organizational learning (Kalliola et al., 2006; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008; Raelin, 2008). Dialogue is a central and crucial element of any model of organizational transformation. Its role and importance becomes particularly imperative for contemporary organizations in the face of turbulent socio-economic market changes that are occurring in the organizational world (Akella, 2015; Johnson, 2006; Senge, 2006).

But how is this consensus reached? How do different people come to a mutual agreement and move toward a common vision without any intimidation and force? Can democracy be created through communication? The next section discusses the communicative philosophy of Habermas (1984) to generate a debate about the realism of collaborative and cooperative communication policies and practices in organizations.

**Theory of Communicative Action**

Habermas (1984) is a critical theorist who belongs to the Frankfurt School of Thought. His major contributions have been in the area of social theory. His philosophy, “The Theory of Communicative Action,” explores how dialogue takes place within organizations (Sitton, 2003). Habermas’s concepts of universal pragmatics and communication action are able to explain how language can be employed to achieve common understanding and allow individuals to reach a mutual agreeable solution and collectively coordinate their actions (Barrett, 2013). According to Habermas (1984), all disputes between teams and individuals can be resolved by individuals if they understand each other and their situation collectively and collaboratively.

People communicate with each other to achieve certain goals or plans. When they speak initially, they communicate their perceptions of the reality or current state of things. However, to achieve their end goals and objectives, individuals are willing to listen, understand, reflect, and reach a consensus. Similarly in companies, employees communicate their feelings, experiences, and perceptions to the management, generating a process of honest, open, two-way communication process whereby differences and conflicts are resolved and agreements are reached (Barrett, 2013).

Individuals offer different perspectives and viewpoints which are evaluated and discussed as a group. Such collaborative discussion allows assimilation of perspectives and reasons and creation of new paradigms.

By focusing . . . actions or beliefs potentially defensible by reasons, we expand the applicability of the concept far beyond the issue of “facts” about the objective world of things, beyond the question of efficiency of interventions into this world. (Habermas, 1984 in Sitton, 2003, p. 45)

Open communication provides the participants an opportunity to reflect, defend their actions, and listen to other person’s viewpoint thereby moving toward reasoned and rational communication (Sitton, 2003).

Habermas (1984) explains that communicative rationality revolves around participants from different worlds who deconstruct their perspectives and defend their opinions and views using all objective, subjective, moral, and ethical reasons to mutually resolve existing disputes (Barrett, 2013). There are two types of worlds—objective and social. In the objective world, it is possible to reach mutual consensus by rationalizing all issues and problems in a scientific manner (Barrett, 2013; Sitton, 2003). While in the second one, the social world revolves around interpersonal relationships. The objective world lays emphasis on the “state of affairs” while the social world on “norms.” The objective world revolves around instrumental action involving more than one actor and strategic action, whereas the social world comprises of individuals who are bound together, that is, “normatively guided interaction” (Sitton, 2003, p. 46). The social world is a subjective world derived from the participants’ desires, needs, and evaluations. Individuals have feelings, emotions, and desires which they communicate to an audience which interprets them. There is a preconceived notion that people raised in different communities have different perceptions which they deconstruct differently. Therefore, it is not possible to reconcile differences. Habermas on the contrary argues that it is possible to reconcile varying views by listening to others, trying to reach a common understanding, and forming a new stream of thought or language. Habermas uses the Piaget’s cognitive psychology to explain the process of reaching consensus. A child learns to distinguish his or her own subjective world from the external world and then distinguishes between the objective and social aspects of the external world. Cultural and social knowledge expands continuously. Knowledge conceived in pre-modern societies is disempowered by new differentiated categories of understanding (Barrett, 2013; Sitton, 2003). New arguments are born, new understanding is created, and new levels of learning are opened up, “freeing the elaboration of the inner logics of different cultural fields” (Sitton, 2003, p. 51).

It is essential to collaborate with others to accomplish one’s goals in the social life. It is possible to reach consensus by influencing others to your thought process through consent or influence (Habermas, 1984). Influence can be exerted
through threats, force or money, and manipulation strategies. Consent is dependent on communicative action which relies on coordination or rather generation of common knowledge of facts, norms, or subjective experiences. Individuals share their assumptions about the situation, and this sharing binds them together and forms convictions based on reasons. There are two types of speech acts—one seeks agreements based on reasons and other merely seeks to causally affect others. Even though both speech acts are goal oriented, they differ in their process of achievement of goals. In communication process, it is possible for group members to reach understanding through usage of appropriate language. Understanding means weighing and coming to a preliminary conclusion about the reasons given. But interests always enter communication. Conversations can never be value even if the participants are sincere. However, Habermas (1984) argues that participants first defend and justify their positions in discussions and then listen to others leading to strategic actions and mutual understandings. Communication is influenced by the historical and structural orientations of the society. But it is possible to modify these beliefs and values by reflecting on their validity and simultaneously being exposed to new viewpoints and concepts (Habermas, 1984; Sitton, 2003).

But how far is it realistic to assume that it is possible for people to reach such mutual understandings? Is it ever possible to reach a state of democracy—a harmonious state of affairs where labor and management are able to reach a common understanding? Maybe not, democracy within organizations remains a contested terrain, “a polysemous concept open to some abuse” (Pateman, 1975 as cited in Johnson, 2006, p. 253). The concept of democracy is usually aimed to influence the value premises of employees to seek their consent to various managerial decisions and agendas (Johnson, 2006). It is a pretense designed to incorporate employees “whilst isolating them from the seats of power in organizations” (Johnson, 2006, p. 254). Furthermore, democracy “abuses the language of popular consent” (Frank, 2000, p. 274), “the will of people [in the organization] is [linked] with the deed of the market” (Frank, 2000, p. 287). The management under the democracy mantle “legitimates a new corporate culture of consent” (Frank, 2000, p. 208).

Albeit dialogue instead of creating a democratic organization could “become a façade in which the more powerful deploy a rhetoric of democracy to impose their own preferences upon and silence or marginalize the less powerful so that liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 7). It is another illusion of power in display which “is not the same as being empowered” or participation (Jacques, 1996, p. 141). In fact, the main feature of these various democratic methods is to condition the beliefs and values of the employees with those of the organization, under the assumption that “many of the social arrangements under which they live and suppose them to are the only possible ones given the “nature of things”—a notion which usually includes belief in an unchangeable human nature” (Fox, 1974, p. 284). Management just tries to sustain a “picture of work situation as characterized by harmony and trust” (Fox, 1974, p. 249). Emphasis is now laid on achieving all the common objectives of the employees but in reality management is interested in having

a family spirit in the works . . . to try to have one side in industry and not two . . . our view is that to get two sides in industry, what you might term the masters on the one side and the men on the other, to get them up like two armies is really a mistake. (Forrester, 1952, para 70, cited in Fox, 1974)

Therefore, the philosophical assertions of Habermas (1984) and other organizational theorists need to be tested empirically to formulate future lines of research. The next section covers Lukes (1974, 2005) third dimension of power and Foucault’s (1977) archaeology of knowledge and its usefulness in understanding the real purpose of dialogue in contemporary organizations.

**Frameworks of Power**

This section argues for the incorporation of latent and unobservable behavioral actions into the power analysis. Theories of power “have been preoccupied with the more visible dimensions of power as exhibited by individuals’ behavior in decision making on issues, actual or potential over which there is an observable conflict or preferences” (Lukes, 1974, p. 10). For instance, the pluralist school or rather one-dimension view of power focuses on the behavioral characteristics involved in decision making where there is a clear, observable conflict of interests, while the two-dimensional view of power considers cases of non-decision making where there is no conflict, overt or covert. The two-dimensional view of power goes beyond one-dimension view by considering non-decisions where “a decision results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker” (Dahl, 1961, p. 44). Both one-dimension and two-dimension views of power are committed “to behaviorism that is, to the study of overt, actual behavior” (Lukes, 1974, p. 21). One and two dimensions of power ignore usage of power to prevent conflicts from arising in the first place.

In fact, power can also be conceptualized as a process whereby the cognition, perceptions, and preferences of individuals can be shaped to promote the interests of one group over the others (Lukes, 1974). To be able to enforce this insidious power process, it is necessary to explore how it is possible for management to control the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of employees to avert conflicts from arising. So that “. . . others have the desires you want them to have—that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?” (Lukes, 1974, p. 23). The radical school or the third dimension of power envisages power to be a process whereby it is possible to shape the perceptions,
cognition, and preferences of individuals so that they accept the existing nature of things either because they can see or imagine no alternative or simply they consider it to be natural, unchangeable, or divinely ordained and irreversible (Lukes, 1974). The focus is on explaining how it is possible to manipulate or overcome the real interests of individuals to suit the needs of the dominant group (Lukes, 1974).

Lukes (1974) argues power can be exercised “through the control of information . . . ” (p. 23). Dahl (1961) similarly pipes in on how leaders “do not merely respond to the preferences of constituents, [but] also shape preferences” (p. 164).

Lukes revisited his 30 old power philosophy in 2005, to reformulate his radical power views and make it more up to date to current society needs. Lukes (2005) now accedes to the difference between “power over” and “domination.” He accepts his earlier radical views of power (Lukes, 1974) can be categorized within the bracket of “domination.” He elaborates on the conception of “real interests.” Lukes (2005) now states that power can be both agent based and also conceived as a product of structural property (Clegg, 1989). Lukes (2005) states that “social life involves an interplay between agent power and structure, and introduces four sets of distinctions” (pp. 68-69). Power can be

1. exercised with respect to one or many issue(s);
2. context-bound or context-transcending;
3. manifested intentionally or unintentionally;
4. manifested in active exercise or inactive enjoyment” (Lukes, 2005, pp. 74-81).

The first two instances deal with agent-based power while the third and fourth pairs are attuned to structural power. Power can be exercised through various social structures. It can also be manifested through structural features like the historical division of society or one’s social status in society and corporations.

An individual’s preferences and interests can be influenced and manipulated by oppressive social structures. He or she under the effect of invisible domination is unable to make independent judgments. Therefore, he or she becomes reconciled to being lead and dominated. They quietly accept their pain and suffering (Lukes, 2005). “The underdog learns to bear the burden so well that he or she overlooks the burden itself. Discontent is replaced by acceptance, hopeless rebellion by conformist quiet, and suffering by cheerful endurance” (Sen, 1984, p. 309).

To further solidify Lukes’s (1974, 2005) ideology, it should be cemented with Foucault’s (1977) beliefs. Foucault believes that history creates present reality. Reality is culturally specific and historically constituted. History constructs present reality, all perceptions of reality are socially constituted. “Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to the effects of power that induce and extend it” (Foucault, 1977, p. 133). Power shapes production of new truths and new knowledge. The entire process of production of truth and knowledge is “inseparable from power” (Gordan & Grant, 2004, p. 33).

In other words, language by itself need not construct meaning, it is a by-product of historical and structural orientation of society. Language needs to be deciphered within the structural and cultural frameworks of society. The historical frameworks of society govern the meaning construction and content communicated. Dialogue, thus, may look upfront as a democratic form of communication. However, it is also possible to envisage dialogue as a medium whereby information is generated, diverted and manipulated by the top management to control the actions and feelings of employees to effectively seek their cooperation and support. Furthermore, even if employees are aware of the manipulation, they might not rebel against the power sources because of the historical structuration of society—where management always controls labor. There is no escape from power for participants. The entire democratic exercise ends up as a pseudo democracy. There is a need for research to study how dialogue effectively controls and manipulates employees under the cover of democracy and participation.

The next section covers methodological issues, empirical data, and analysis.

### Manipulative Discourse in a Health Care Organization

This study is interested in examining the democratic characteristic widely accepted as ingrained within the communication ideology of dialogue. It is interested in answering the following question: Is dialogue really democratic, collaborative, and participatory in reality? Or just another façade to sustain management regime for its employees with their willing consent?

To be able to answer these questions, it is necessary to understand and analyze the subjective interpretations of individuals, their views and opinions about the communication processes existing within the company. Qualitative methodology therefore is an appropriate choice. Within qualitative methodology, the case study method is useful in investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context (Yin, 1989). “In general case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigation has little control over events and the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real life context” (Yin, 1989, p. 13). The author further chose in-depth structured interviews to enable collection of the subjective views of employees within an organization.

A case study was undertaken within the health care medical services sector in southwest part of United States. Access into the organization was gained through a gatekeeper who
was a colleague of the researcher. The organization will be referred to as NET. Prior pilot study indicated that NET could be classified as a learning organization. It is an accepted fact that dialogue happens to be an integral component of learning organizations (Akella, 2015; Senge, 1990). NET is a community outreach program under the local community hospital. The program is an in-school, interactive program delivered by a staff of nurse educators and support personnel. The goals of NET revolve around promotion of healthy moms, dads, and babies, decreasing repeat pregnancies, decreasing child abuse, increasing self-esteem, and preventing school dropout. NET seeks to accomplish all its objectives through prenatal, parenting, and teen health education to all schoolchildren in its nearby counties. In other words, NET . . . is a school nurses network . . . we are concerned about teen pregnancy, both the mother and child, school kids to keep them in school . . . we have healthy lifestyle programs and projects about asthma related problems are some of the activities . . . (Nurse 15)

A total of 16 in-depth interviews were conducted within different hierarchical levels. Table 1 provides information about the interviewees in NET.

The researcher spent around 4 weeks at NET. She made appointments for interviews via phone and email. These interviews lasted from 20 min to 45 min and were conducted during office hours on work days on the office premises. The identified sample was asked questions pertaining to their work, types of communication channels, relationship with superiors and colleagues, and overall characteristics of the organization—style of leadership, structure, and performance appraisal systems. All interviews were recorded on tape and in addition short notes were written of the impressions gained of the person and the interview process. This gave a complete picture of what happened on field. The interviewees made no objection to the tape recorder and were apparently not concerned by its presence.

After collecting the empirical data, the tape recorded interviews were transcribed. All empirical data were thematically analyzed. First, the interview quotes were read a number of times. The author then identified common words, phrases, and perceptions that were coded. These common codes produced patterns which were categorized under themes. The themes and patterns which emerged have been tabulated in Table 2.

The next few subsections explain the empirical results. There emerged three broad themes under which the various patterns were categorized. The first theme was whether participative communication could also be interpreted as a manipulative strategy by the management. The second theme was if open and collaborative communication allowed management to watch over its employees. While the last theme revolved around whether it was democracy or just compliance to management rules and regulations.

**Empirical Analysis of NET**

**Theme 1: Sharing of information versus manipulative strategy.** NET as mentioned earlier is a community nurses program for school students residing in the surrounding counties. Ninety-five percent of its employees consisted of nurses who were placed in the hierarchical orders of certified nurse assistant (CAN), registered nurse (RN), and head nurse. All nurses were placed in different schools in the surrounding areas—“we are all in different schools like 26 different schools . . .” The management of NET was dependent on both technological and traditional communication channels to maintain a regular flow of information among the nurses scattered in different public school systems. Information was generated and shared through emails, cell phones, land line phones, and meetings both vertically and horizontally. These communication channels enabled employees to remain in contact with each other throughout the week. As explained by the nurses,

“. . . we go in, come, check our emails and see the students . . .” (Nurse 10)

Communication channels allowed nurses to share reports, student-related issues, doubts, and concerns; discuss; and implement possible solutions. These channels enabled distribution of regular administrative updates and work to all nurses by their manager (i.e., Annie) as well. As a nurse explained,

Phone calls I initiate it I need to talk to someone [laughs] I don’t have all the time but if I need to [laughs] emails you know that all staff we get all the information, big information like that but sometimes if it is student related information chart related information . . . I had situation about student then was on phone like how did you deal with this . . . my colleagues we were brainstorming how they had treated it and I was like “so cool” we shared information because it helps students who are our target audience. (Nurse 12)

But, however, it cannot be denied that these same communication channels allowed the management to keep abreast of the information flowing and being generated throughout the organization. It also enabled them to send out regular updates and new reports to align employees’ mind-sets with those of the management’s goals and objectives. As the project coordinator revealed in her interview,


| Table 1. List of Interview Participants. |
|----------------|----------|
| Levels                      | Number  |
| Certified nurse assistant  | 5        |
| Registered nurse            | 4        |
| Head nurse                  | 4        |
| Office/project coordinator  | 2        |
| Grant coordinator           | 1        |

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Table 2. Themes and Patterns.

| Themes                                           | Recurring patterns                          | Interview quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Relevance                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Sharing of information vs. manipulative strategy** | Flow of information                          | “emails and phone calls [pauses] we have go to emails we come to know what is going on so emails helps us so call the clinics . . . over things are changing . . . Annie [his superior] gives administrative updates.” (Nurse 2) “we go in come, check our email, see the students . . . ”. (Nurse 10) “. . . you get involved with work with that it allows you to develop your personality at school at work at community that is why I like it so much . . . ”. (Nurse 14) “. . . informative meetings monthly . . . ”. (Nurse 9) “. . . we have staff meeting every month we have set agenda.” (Nurse 14) “staff development and training and update meetings . . . ” (Nurse 1) “awareness, training and update meetings . . . ” (Nurse 7) “social gatherings are cool [shrugs] . . . are appropriate are good to keep things going, cement relationships we work, we are nurses are scattered so every time we meet it is like a mini party we are like ‘Oh my gosh haven’t seen you for ages!’ in that respect it is good we meet each other.” (Nurse 14) we have social events regularly pretty much monthly we have one end of the month then one in December . . . [laughs] we have baby showers, “wedding parties things like that when something happens someone moves away like last month something else happens . . . tragedy . . . like two members had death in their family we do that you know . . . ”. (Nurse 13) “we mingle it is social events like a family outside the family. NET is a family we call Annie MUM it is like a family I love it [laughs].” (Nurse 16) “we go to lunches, celebrate things together, we care close, we come together, emails we come together . . . ” (Nurse 15) | Flow of information both virtual and face-to-face to keep abreast of the latest happenings and news within the organization. Formal meetings enabled management to keep abreast with the latest happenings within the organization. Also regularly indoctrinate the employees about their expectations. Informal meetings encompassed personal lives of the employees. Office boundaries extended into employees’ home as well. |
| **Collaborative communication vs. watchdog mechanism** | Information control                          | “. . . monthly meeting if we need to keep any service related information we take of it in our monthly meetings . . . ” (Nurse 12) “. . . emails, phone calls . . . we sure do work, send in reports, illness work reports, headaches, stomach aches, send those reports . . . ” (Nurse 11) so if I don’t clock in, there is Amanda the office assistant she will email “oh you didn’t clock in today?” (Nurse 13) “Annie can talk to anyone, county school system, principal, staff, Annie can walk in and talk to anyone she wants . . . and if one is not happy, Annie hears about it, we have many eyes on us.” (Nurse 14) “we mingle it is social events like a family a family outside the family. NET is a family we call Annie MUM it is like a family I love it [laughs].” (Nurse 16) “we go to lunches, celebrate things together, we care close, we come together, emails we come together . . . ” (Nurse 15) | Tracking flow of information allows management to control employees better. Virtual and face-to-face communication mechanisms allow management to keep an eye on the employees. Informal social events create a feeling of family which helps management to exert more control over the employees. |
| **Compliance to rules vs. democracy**             | Fake democracy                               | “. . . take orders and follow them.” (Nurse 11) “just do my job and work with people in my department . . . ” (Nurse 11) “I am fine to do what I am told . . . ” (Nurse 15) “. . . we are paid workers . . . ” (Nurse 6) “. . . can improve on communicating and working with one another.” (Nurse 6) | Under the façade of democracy existed stoic employee acceptance to management control. |
emails and phone calls [pauses] we have gmxs we come to know what is going on so emails helps so we call the clinics . . . over things are changing . . . Annie [his superior] gives administrative updates.

Management had access to all information via communication channels. Management also had the opportunity to discover employees’ personalities, interests, and feelings. The feelings of friendship and bonding were sustained through different communication channels. Management was able to control employees’ mental schemas via communication channels.

NET also communicated face-to-face through regular staff meetings and social gatherings as well. All interviewees mentioned the existence of formal meetings and social events. There were different types of meetings:

staff development and training and update meetings. (Nurse 1)

Another was,

awareness, training and update meetings . . . (Nurse 7)

All organizational meetings were held on a regular basis to keep abreast of the happenings within the company. For instance,

. . . we have staff meeting every month we have set agenda . . . (Nurse 14)

Again,

we have monthly meeting if we need to keep any service related information we take of it in our monthly meetings . . . (Nurse 12)

These formal meetings consisted of training sessions, awareness and reflective sessions, and guest speaker sessions. All formal meetings had a clear agenda and purpose, and attendance was mandatory at the meetings. NET also had light, informal, social gatherings:

we have social events regularly pretty much monthly we have one end of the month then one in December . . . [laughs] we have baby showers, wedding parties things like that when something happens someone moves away like last month something else happens . . . tragedy . . . like two members had death in their family we do that you know . . . (Nurse 13)

These meetings lasted 1 to 2 hr, were monthly, and were supervised and initiated by NET’s director Annie. Informal meetings encompassed the personal lives of the employees. Personal events of employees were celebrated, personal tragedies were shared with colleagues and peers. Colleagues ended up becoming friends. Office boundaries extended into employees’ homes as well. Employees’ lives became more office bound with the lines between personal and office becoming blurred.

As another nurse explained,

we mingle it is social events like a family a family outside the family. NET is a family we call Annie MUM it is like a family I love it [laughs]. (Nurse 16)

Similarly,

we go to lunches, celebrate things together, we are close, we come together, emails we come together . . . (Nurse 15)

All employees were, thus, effectively brought together as one unit, one team, and one family by the management through both formal meetings and social events—“a family outside the family.” Management thus had effectively designed a system where all employees were controlled through unobservable communication networks. Office work, office time, social life, all were now dominated by the management. Every sphere of the employees was being influenced by the management without any conflicts or direct confrontations or verbal disagreements.

The notion of closeness, “don’t have many problems,” no differences of opinions, perceptions, or similar conceptions of reality could have been inculcated among the employees. Common norms, values, beliefs, and membership codes were created by the management and all employees were indoctrinated accordingly. The net result was all employees spoke in a similar voice because they had similar norms, values, and beliefs—“help and support your family.” The process of domination was complete. The dominated and the domineers had similar perceptions of reality now.

Collaborative communication versus watchdog. All nurses agreed that these meetings and virtual communication channels lead to sharing of information, collaborative discussion, and exploration of their opinions and views. Nurses commented,

. . . have to come together and talk about things . . . (Nurse 10)

. . . understand the importance of listening to others before making big decisions . . . (Nurse 6)

On the exterior, NET’s communication channels displayed all the characteristics of dialogue—openness, trust, honest feedback, and ability to voice their opinions and concerns without fear. But the issue as to whether this dialogic communication, inspite of being close, was democratic, is debatable. Whose goals, objectives, did this process of dialogue serve—management or employees?

Meetings served the purpose of sharing information, learning new ideas, getting to know new people, and increasing one’s social circle. But these informal meetings also ensured that employees’ social lives were absorbed within the organization. All employees are now essentially forced to engage in social relations with their colleagues and take an
active interest in the personal life of their colleagues. Employees’ both professional and social lives are now being controlled by the management. By organizing time for work and play, management has successfully eliminated the boundaries between work and home. The narrow boundaries which segregate home and office no longer seemed to be relevant. The continuous bombardment of messages like “one family,” “Annie is like our mum,” both officially and socially meant that the employees were now instinctively guided by those beliefs and values.

The management was able to control the flow of information generated and assimilated within the entire organization. Employees were under the impression it allowed free exchange of information, provided assistance and feedback as and when needed, and helped in sustaining close relationships with colleagues. Harmonious relationships were developed across the entire organization. Team work, friendships, and trust was created and sustained across hierarchical levels. Positive energy was generated which increased the overall productivity and services offered by the organizational unit. However, it can also be argued, these channels had the power to regulate and monitor the work of employees, keep “an eye” on their social relationships, and remove any forms of resistance and dissensions with the management. As one nurse commented,

so if I don’t clock in, there is Amanda the office assistant she will email “oh you didn’t clock in today?” (Nurse 13)

Again another person pointed out,

Annie can talk to anyone, county school system, principal, staff, Annie can walk in and talk to anyone she wants . . . and if one is not happy, Annie hears about it, we have many eyes on us. (Nurse 14)

Thus, open flow of communication inspite of possessing elements of participation and collaborative spirit also regulated and monitored the work of employees and removed employee dissent and resistance. But was this control absolute and total or were employees aware of these control being imposed on them by the management?

**Compliance to rules versus democracy.** This democracy was only an outward appearance, an external façade. Employees were not altogether convinced about the existence of complete harmony, freedom of speech, and equal partnerships with management. Employees were aware of being dominated and influenced. Yet there was quiet acceptance, for, it had been ordained by the historical structuration of society. Guarded criticism, in gentle and softer tones, emerged during the course of interviews. An employee mildly put in,

. . . can improve on communicating and working with one another. (Nurse 6)

If communication is so open “very good and easy to communicate” where “no one feels discouraged to voice their opinions . . . ” and everyone’s voice “can be heard,” there should be no need for further improvement? But then maybe it is not entirely what it seems. It is not entirely democratic, there is influence existing, power is being exercised to create compliant employees. One nurse was a little more outspoken. She put it across well:

. . . take orders and . . . follow them. (Nurse 11)

She further clarified,

Just do my job and work with people in my department. (Nurse 11)

It was just a job, inspite of emphasizing and advertising the happy family package where everyone bonded with each other and coordinated as a team. All these feelings were externally aired to keep management satisfied and to stay out of trouble, while the true story was “ . . . we are paid workers . . . ” (Nurse 6). All employees had sort of accepted this dominant-dominated concept, where one had to let the powerful best judge their interests and preferences keeping in mind the survival of the organization. As a nurse realistically piped in “I am fine to do what I am told . . . ” (Nurse 15).

There is evidence that employees are aware of the power processes in place, how they were being manipulated under the façade of democracy and equality, and how dialogue was being used to make them reveal their feelings, opinions, to avoid conflicts and indoctrinate them to management’s way of thinking. However, this control was not completely totalizing because employees were aware of the control mechanisms but were still quiet and docile. They were under the impression nothing could be changed, it was ordained by the society.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Research on dialogue and its democratic value, both theoretically and empirically as a medium of communication in organizations, is lacking. This article makes a contribution in the areas of dialogue and collaborative communication and power dimensions. The article traces the literature on dialogue and then integrates it with the philosophical elements of Habermas (1984) communicative rationality, Lukes (1974, 2005) third dimensions of power processes, and Foucault (1977) power ideologies. Empirical data in the form of 16 interviews, gathered from a single case study within the health care sector, provide insights as to whether communication can be collaboratively generated, shared, and resolved despite the existing historical structuration of the society.

A variety of communication channels exist in contemporary organizations consisting of social gatherings, emails, and telephone calls to formal monthly departmental meetings.
Dialogue could be both face-to-face and virtual as well. Communication methods on the exterior seemed to support open and honest communication of opinions and viewpoints. Communications channels lead to sharing of information, modulation of personality and career opportunities, generation of new ideas, and creativity. However, the employees’ values, perceptions, and opinions had been so effectively modulated and controlled by the management that except for some minor negative comments, everyone spoke the same language.

The communication channels allowed the management to discover the complete personality, attitudes, and feelings of their employees. The management was now able to exercise power over the employees easily. The employees were dominated; their feelings, thoughts, and emotions were influenced and manipulated to suit the “real interests” of the management. Employees voiced their preferences, opinions within the norms defined by the management. They were autonomous, free to make decisions but according to the pre-determined regulations determined by the management. Their actions, voices, and social lives were all engulfed by the management. Employees were powerless, willing to acquiesce to this scenario and state of affairs. This does question the existence of complete democracy and open communication within an organization. It is the right of employees to openly voice their opinions and expression, honestly share their feelings about work issues and non-work issues as well. However, with the existing unequal distribution of power within corporations, freedom to openly voice opinions and views may not be possible.

This study is just a beginning in understanding the elements of power present in the process of dialogue. There is a need to undertake further research to fully explore the various dimensions of power exerted by dialogue and its aftermath. Future studies could supplement interview data with participant observations. This would allow capturing data which cannot be divulged in interviews. Employees may not feel comfortable disclosing negative information about the organization and its management to the researchers. Therefore, researchers might need to explore and adopt new research methods to gather rich, empirical data, which could provide insights about the negative implications of subjugating employees and turning them into powerless, docile subjects. It would also give visibility to this insidious exercise of power giving employees some leverage in changing their destinies and in creation of better working environments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research study is an extension of an Undergraduate Research Project for which funds were received by the author from Albany State University.

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**Author Biography**

**Devi Akella** is a full professor of Management at College of Business, Albany State University, Georgia where she teaches Human Resources Management and Organizational Behavior at the undergraduate and graduate levels.