

# YESANDERA: THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

M. M. BAKHTIN, TE AO MĀORI AND MINDFULNESS

For many years we have been working to explore and develop practices of ‘self-in-other’ recognition that can invite us to use each other’s differences as resources in our everyday dealings, and thus work together more productively in our public and institutional lives. Our starting point was extended qualitative research that showed clearly how widespread is the ‘locked-in’ experience of people in today’s world: a dense preoccupation with background imperatives and assumptions that keeps us isolated in *anomie*, and at the same time severely limits our capacity to dwell in and experience the possibilities of the present moment.

The beginning of a route away from this neo-Cartesian dead-end seemed to lie through personal narrative and storytelling. And as we began working in this direction, nearly twenty years ago, we slowly discovered members of a large family of explorers who had been on this pathway ahead of us, including Vico and Kierkegaard, Dewey and James, Vygotsky and Bakhtin, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and many others both dead and flourishing in our present era. Their careful consideration of what it is to be a human person in a world of other human persons provided many helpful signposts, and gave us courage, on a journey that took us further and further away from the taken-for-granted tenets of mainstream, establishment thinking (especially those in the world of organisations).

The influences of these fellow-travellers were all absorbed into the marrow of our work and into our developing practices, in ways that we are scarcely conscious of now. Perhaps the strongest of our present-day influences are those from the worlds of nursing, social care, family therapy and early childhood education. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that one of most enduring and pervasive of all of our influences has been the penetrating gaze of Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher and scholar (1895–1975). Furthermore there is a growing connection between Bakhtinian thinking and Māori scholarship. We are just beginning to appreciate the depth and resonance of this connection. And finally, we think it useful to clarify the similarities and the important differences between our approach and that of the Mindfulness movement, something that sometimes arises in our conversations.

## BAKHTIN

A great deal of the ethos and the intention of Yesandera can be understood from a Bakhtinian perspective (his expressions in bold):

¶ *Its foundation is the utterance.* In Bakhtinian terms, an **utterance** is an entire human expression, from the beginning of a thought to the moment when a response becomes possible. Over the years we have recorded, examined and replayed thousands of utterances from hundreds of workplace conversations, in fields that include pre-school education, social work, healthcare, the performing arts, local and central government, as well as a variety of industrial workplaces. As a result we have come to recognise and pay attention to a range of utterance attributes, most of which have been articulated by Bakhtin. These noticings form the backbone of our learning programme.

¶ *We work with ‘speech genres of the everyday’.* By studying the characteristics and qualities of everyday utterances – and the effects they produce on others – we have developed a typology of workplace speech practice that can be thought of as ‘**speech genres** of the everyday’. So far, we have found eight of these.

¶ *We invite programme participants to experience the same phenomena independently, with an unusual level of intensity.* The programme consists of a set of exercises, each of which begins with a recorded fragment from an archive of workplace conversations. The exercises explore a variety of speech genres as well as further examples of conversational moves that are designed to point towards increased group responsiveness and spontaneity. Listening again to recorded conversation slows things down, and invites attentiveness (viz. Wittgenstein – “It all goes by too fast.”) Each participant listens to the fragments in their own time, answering questions of the form: “What do you notice in this extract?” and “What do

you feel when you hear this form of talk?” We have found that these questions tend to point towards the **addressivity** – the ‘answering word’ – of each utterance.

¶ *Participants then compare their responses with the others in their group.* Comparisons are very revealing. To begin with, each person notices what most matters to them. So their noticing provides a vivid glimpse of their particular way of being in the world. And when they see their own noticing alongside those of others, real differences are immediately apparent. Yet these differences are uncalibrated and untheorised. So they are able to be recognised as additional qualities, perspectives and capabilities rather than as conformist tropes. In this way they ‘open up’ a sense of the relational possibilities within a group, in part by revealing the **unfinalisability** of the human utterance.

¶ *People learn about themselves in relation to each other.* Participants report that they see themselves in a new light as a result of the experience of the programme. All of their noticing is relational, so by these **intersubjective** (perhaps ‘intrasubjective’) means, they discover aspects of themselves they had not formerly appreciated, through the reflection or refraction of their own sense of self in the noticing of others.

¶ *A new sense arises of the capabilities and potentialities of the group.* The final stage of the programme is a shared reflection on the implications of each exercise in the light of the different ‘ways of being’ now apparent across the members of the group. In their concluding gathering, group members explore their newly revealed sense of each other. In doing so, they weave a **chronotope** of narrative perspectives that expresses a new ‘**unity of unmerged voices**’. Groups leave the programme feeling that they have raised their shared intelligence to a new level.

## TE AO MĀORI

We have also begun to appreciate the distinctive relational understandings that can be recognised in *te ao Māori*, (the Māori world view) that are richly expressed in Māori social structures, dwellings, practices of gathering and encounter, artistry and craft, and oratory, language and histories. The study of utterances reveals that each of us brings to every meeting a vast unconscious superstructure of experiences, expectations, assumptions and inheritances – something that Māori understand as *whakapapa*. Bakhtin’s ‘answering word’ can perhaps be recognised as dwelling within this *whakapapa*. By increasing our presence in and sensitivity to the present moment of our encounters, we believe that we can glimpse aspects of each other’s *whakapapa* and as a result, increase the prospects for understanding and productive encounters between strangers in a wide range of settings.

Our study of utterances has also sensitised us to the performative aspects of human expression: the way that small movements of intonation and gesture can profoundly alter the liminal space, the relational threshold that lies between people in their encounters. Oral cultures like Māori incorporate this understanding into their rituals and practices of meeting. (The meeting-place – the marae – has both physical and metaphorical localities for each aspect of encounter and engagement.) The same performative aspects of human expression allow ‘constructive ambiguity’, or the ‘richness of imprecision’ in exchanges: words, phrases and gestures can have multiple meanings that can be understood without having to be resolved into either/or binaries. Context is all.

This kind of relational understanding profoundly alters the nature of the work to be done in our encounters and gatherings. From a Western, mainstream, perspective, work is disembodied, undertaken at a distance from our unreliable selfhood: we bring our observations, facts, interpretations and opinions together, discuss their relative merits, and thereby seek to reach a conclusion about what should be done. But from a relational perspective, we bring ourselves and our histories and futures together, including all of the uncertainties and ambiguities these include, and look for the meaning that arises in the moments of being together that can change us. What happens next is a reflection of how we are changed, and may not even need to be voiced as we find ourselves moving from consideration to committed joint action.

Yesandera is an attempt to re-orient ourselves towards this kind of relational practice.

## MINDFULNESS

At first sight, there appear to be parallels and similarities between our work and that of the Mindfulness movement, as popularised by Eckhart Tolle and articulated by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Mindfulness advocates a shift from mental distractions towards a focus on the present moment. Mindfulness promotes bodily awareness and the importance of the unconscious background.

But there are crucial differences. Mindfulness promotes itself as a therapy and a stress-relieving practice. The purpose of Yesandera is practical productivity improvement. The Mindfulness movement recruits individuals to self-improvement programmes, and in this way is a development of the long Western tradition of individualised self-help. Yesandera, by contrast, resists the pathology of betterment and help. There are no masters or gurus to be admired or imitated. Yesandera is about groups of people with work to do and tasks to undertake together, who can combine their attentiveness and their critical faculties for greater collaborative effect.

But the most important differences are in the underlying ethos and purpose of the two approaches. Mindfulness speaks of 'letting go' and 'listening to the wisdom of the body'. But our relational practices are about the opposite: about 'getting a grip' on each other's capabilities in relation to our own so that we can work together more effectively. So the work of the Yesandera programme is oriented towards how we influence each other in our everyday exchanges, and how we can pay attention to and become more deliberate in our talk and our conduct with others. There is no 'letting go', but instead a re-tuning and re-orientation of our attention, so that we can notice more clearly and respond more directly. The language and orientation of Mindfulness drifts towards the abstract and mystical. Ours is towards the art and the science of human encounter: the practical, demonstrable steps of building capable, purposeful teams of people who value each other's strengths and are unafraid of sharing the burden of everyday leadership between them.

## REFERENCES

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