

# Virtual Dialogues: A Method to Deal with Polarisation in a Time of Social Isolation Caused by COVID-19

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**Abstract:** How can a method of dialogue stimulate the learning of dialogic principles and practices in a virtual environment and contribute to the confrontation of social polarisation? This was the question that motivated the analysis and discussion of a project developed in Brazil during the months of May and June, 2020, which were characterised by the creation of three dialogue groups

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in a virtual environment (Google Meet). Throughout eight meetings, lasting one hour and a half each, the seventeen participants could learn and practice dialogue, through a method developed by the first author of this paper, based on the ideas of David Bohm, William Isaacs, and Paulo Freire. To analyse the results, three categories were recognized: learning dialogue; dialogue and the virtual environment; dialogue, social isolation, and polarization. The results found indicated that virtual dialogues seem to encourage the learning of dialogic principles and practices and the promotion of the transformation of interpersonal relations with people of different points of view, showing the possible contribution of such a proposal to the confrontation of polarisation. We emphasise that this article is a first qualitative approximation regarding the method, and there is still a long way to go of scientific deepening in the field of dialogue studies in order to ascertain its effects and challenges. Therefore, we suggest future research on the method, in different application contexts.

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**Keywords:** Dialogue, Virtual Dialogue, Dialogue method, Social isolation, Polarisation, COVID-19.

## **Polarisation, Pandemics, and Dialogue**

The historic building and constitution of modern western culture was characterised by certain values, which stemmed from the triad science-imperialism-capitalism, values that mediate our form of thinking and acting. Among these, one can find the fragmentation of reality, the separation between human and nature, the domination and subjugation of the other, the incessant search for profit, competitiveness, and individualism (Harari 2018; Santos 2008).

Modern culture seems, therefore, to be characterised by a predominance of anti-dialogic principles, which overvalue the Self and disregard the Other, who is frequently seen as an object to be dominated and used to one's own benefit (Buber 1979, 2014). As a consequence, the separation between individuals, peoples, and nations is reinforced daily, provoking 'chaotic and senseless conflicts, in which the energies of all those involved tend to get lost in antagonistic movements or disputes' (Bohm 1980, 38).

Many countries are examples of this situation, as indicated by McCoy et al. (2018) and McCoy and Somer (2019) in their studies, who advocated the thesis that there are common patterns for the inter-group conflicts in different countries, leading to settings of intense political and relational polarisation.

The construction of contemporary polarisation takes place when one segment of society, previously unorganised, becomes politically united and starts a mobilisation toward common goals. However, this union takes place, among other factors, due to the action of political actors that bring many a discontent 'under the same banner,' generalising the others (McCoy et al. 2018). As polarisation grows stronger, it transcends the political sphere and permeates interpersonal relations (family, school, work, etc.), corresponding to what the authors call a 'pernicious polarisation,' in

which there is a process of homogenisation of internal group differences, leading to the creation of a collective identity. The differences between groups also become homogenised, and they become one single identity that represents the 'Others' (McCoy and Somer 2019). Thus, polarisation is a process in which 'the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly allied along a single dimension [...]' and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "Us" versus "Them" (McCoy et al. 2018, 18).

As a consequence, people start to see the opposite side as enemies to be exterminated instead of political adversaries, which constitutes a great danger to democratic regimes, as it leads to growing collective feelings of antipathy, mistrust, and fear of the opposite group (McCoy et al. 2018).

In Brazil, the polarisation has become stronger in recent years. An important milestone for its growth is the manifestation of political dissatisfaction in 2013 (Solano et al. 2017), which Santos Júnior (2019, 49) describes as 'a trigger for the Brazilian political crisis that unearthed a set of repressed dissatisfactions and discontent'. In the following year, the population was polarised between 'Petistas' and 'Antipetistas' (respectively, supporters of the workers' party, and opponents of the same party), culminating in the impeachment of then-president Dilma Rouseff, in 2016, and in the introduction of Jair Bolsonaro as a symbol of political renovation in the 2018 elections (Santos Júnior 2019).

As of the writing of this article, the Brazilian setting is still polarised, and it is possible to show the consequences of said polarisation in this pandemic that is affecting the entire world. In the political sphere, there are dichotomies, such as health versus economy, valuing science versus devaluing it, among others. This situation transcends the political sphere, affecting social relations, as suggested by McCoy and Somer (2019), triggering conflicts and violence, both in more intimate social relations between people who are cohabiting for longer due to social isolation, and in the relations established by social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Therefore, it can be stated that we are in the middle of multiple complex and urgent problems, while simultaneously showing little ability for interpersonal understanding and cooperation. As a result, we believe that encouraging the use of principles and practices that can help to overcome this situation is necessary and urgent, and that dialogue is one of the possible paths to that end (Jacobi et al. 2020). Therefore, we seek to answer the following question in this article: how can a method of dialogue stimulate the learning of dialogic principles and practices in a virtual environment and contribute to the confrontation of social polarisation? To answer these questions, sessions of dialogue training were held, virtually, with Brazilian participants. Below, the methodology used in these sessions is explained.

## **Methodology**

We adopted, as an epistemological inspiration (Becker 1994), an interventional and qualitative research study, which seeks to produce an interventional investigation ‘[...] of a micropolitical order in social experiences [...] while proposing an action to transform the sociopolitical reality’ (Rocha and Aguiar 2003, 67). Damiani (2012) and Damiani et al. (2013) apply this perspective to an educational context, producing a research study of the pedagogical intervention type, in which they seek to plan and execute interferences in the learning processes, aiming to improve them in the test of pedagogical practices, which demands the analysis of the effects that result from performing the intervention.

In this article we seek to perform a pedagogical intervention of a micropolitical order to test the effects of the proposed dialogue method, in order to answer the aforementioned research question. To carry out this investigation, it is important to separate the method of intervention from its analysis. First, we describe in detail the pedagogical practice, based on its theoretical framework. Later, data collection and analysis instruments are specified, in order to treat the development of a scientific research study with the adequate rigour (Damiani 2012). These two methods are presented below.

### ***Method of Intervention***

Considering the current situation, in which a pandemic is affecting the entire world, those who could promptly start social isolation as a measure to contain the dissemination of the virus increased the time they need to spend together. This, coupled with high levels of uncertainty and insecurity, contributed to a growth in polarisation and populist rhetoric, which led us to create a small manual with dialogic practices that can aid people in dealing with this situation, increasing their chances of mutual understanding and cooperation.

Later, we decided to create a pilot project of dialogue training in Brazil. The proposal was characterised by the building of virtual groups (Google Meet) in which people could practice dialogue under the guidance of a facilitator, who was responsible for mediating the learning process. With this in mind, the first author of this article announced the proposal on the social network Instagram, inviting anyone interested to participate. The seventeen people who expressed interest were selected and divided into three groups: one with seven participants, another with six, and another with four. It should be highlighted that the identity of the participants was kept anonymous in this research. Each is represented here by the letter P followed by a number (e.g., P4 = participant 4).

The course took place from May to June 2020 and was made up of eight meetings of one hour and a half each. The training was divided in two sections:

1. Four initial meetings of introduction to dialogue, throughout two weeks (with two meetings a week):
  - a. 1st meeting: presentation of the participants; survey of the expectations for the course; survey of the understanding of dialogue; and presentation of the theoretical and methodological principles of dialogue, according to the suggestion made by Bohm (2005) about the importance of people having previous contact with the theory of dialogue before exercising it. In addition, the themes that were of interest to the actors were surveyed, so they could be codified and become the first subjects discussed in the dialogues, in accordance with the propositions of Freire (2017).
  - b. 2nd, 3rd, and 4th meetings: participants were encouraged to start practising the dialogue, according to the course method (which is described further below).
2. Four meetings to further develop the practices learned (one meeting per week).
  - a. 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th meetings: participants were encouraged to further develop their exercise of dialogue, which had started in the previous meetings, by sharing experiences from their personal and professional lives, while also dialoguing about what they had learned.

The change in the frequency of meetings was justified due to how important it was to increase the distance between one meeting and the other in the second section of the training, to increase the chance of participants experiencing situations in which to practise the dialogue in their personal and professional lives.

Additionally, the participants were asked to keep a field journal, an instrument to encourage them to record the educational process they were going through, in which they should write down what they learned, felt, and their insights (Mello 2016; Battaini et al. 2017), making it possible for the researcher to monitor the process of development of each individual.

### **Course Method**

The method adopted in the course was adapted and developed from previous works (Monteiro 2018; Monteiro e Sorrentino 2019a, 2019b) and inspired by the methodological ideas about dialogue proposed by Bohm (2005), Isaacs (1999), and Freire (1983, 2017).

The method is formed by four practices, each one made up of a number of features. The first one is *listening*. Listening in a dialogic way comprises: listening to the pauses instead of seeing them as opportunities to interrupt what the Other is saying; listening without interrupting, even if we have an idea that we believe is incredible and that we want to share immediately; listening without making assumptions or judgements; listening even if we disagree with what is being said.

The second practice is *identifying emotions and feelings* that surface as we listen. This practice is characterised by perceiving the impulses that emerge in us as we listen to what is said, without letting them out or suppressing them. The third practice is *re-admiring*, that is, looking back on what one believes one knows, on what seems to be a truth for oneself and for others who think similarly. During this practice, the process of self-questioning is truly relevant for people to identify their most deeply ingrained values and beliefs. Lastly, the practice of *speaking*. Speaking dialogically is speaking in the first person of the singular without generalisations; sharing the sensations in the body and the feelings provoked by an idea; sharing the thoughts about the theme of the dialogue; sharing personal stories.

These practices can happen in different orders. We can start, for example, by listening, seeking to identify emotions and feelings, which can be shared through speaking, and then carry out the practice of re-admiring. We can also listen, identify emotions and feelings, re-admire, and finally, share our thoughts and insights through speaking.

### **Analysis Methods**

Data collection took place through participant observation (Marconi and Lakatos 2003) during the course; document analysis (Ludke and André 1986; Marconi and Lakatos 2003) from the autobiographical records the participants made in their field journals; and through the application of a questionnaire (Marconi and Lakatos 2003) at the end of the course, which was made up of ten open questions, including a pretest.

The analysis of the data collected was carried out through the identification of phrases (written or spoken) and gestures that indicated dialogic and anti-dialogic characteristics. First, the data collected by the three instruments was analysed separately; later, there was a triangulation of the results (Azevedo et al. 2013), comparing the data obtained from each one. To do so, three categories of analysis were recognised, and indicative questions were formulated (see Table 1).

**Table 1** - Categories and indicative questions.

<b>CATEGORIES</b>	<b>INDICATIVE QUESTIONS</b>
<b>Learning Dialogue</b>	<p>Is there a willingness to learn a new way to think, to communicate, and to act?</p> <p>Are there signs indicating that the four practices are taking place: listening, identifying, re-admiring, and speaking?</p> <p>Are there signs that the main principles of the dialogue are recognised (the importance of alterity, diversity of interpretation, non-imposition of ideas, the timing of the dialogue, etc.)?</p> <p>Are there signs of the recognition that the other is open for a moment of dialogue?</p> <p>Are there changes in the way of thinking about certain aspects of existence, resulting from dialogic thinking and communication?</p>
<b>Dialogue and the Virtual Environment</b>	<p>What is the potential of the virtual environment for dialogue?</p> <p>What are the limits of the virtual environment for the dialogue?</p>
<b>Dialogue, Social Isolation, and Polarisation</b>	<p>Are there changes in the personal and professional relations resulting from the understanding of the other?</p>

Source: The Authors.

## Results and Discussion

In this section, that which was learned by the participants of the course is presented, as well as the challenges that they faced throughout the process. The potential and the limits of the virtual environment are also discussed, as well as the impact of what was learned in the daily relations of the participants during this period of social isolation and polarisation.

## **Learning the Dialogue**

In general, the motivation of the participants to start the process of learning dialogue resulted from a desire to improve their communication abilities, with the aim of confronting their daily difficulties in being understood and understanding the different, which fuel this setting of pernicious polarisation that can be found in many countries in the world (McCoy et al. 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019). This finding becomes evident in P7, who recognises their own ‘growing intolerance with opposite opinions, especially involving political subjects, with friends and relatives.’ These perspectives are reiterated by P10, who expresses willingness to ‘listen more and live with people whose perspectives are different from mine, especially when they can hurt others.’

So, let us continue to the other category of analysis – Learning Dialogue, that is, the learning constructed by the participants. For the analysis, we divided the results found into three other subcategories which feed one into the other: *dialogue practices*, *dialogue principles*, and *identifying the possibility of starting a dialogue*.

### **Dialogue practices**

With regard to learning the practices of dialogue, it was possible to identify that participants experienced and incorporated the ‘listening with attention and respect’ (P3), ‘listening to the silence’ (P9), and ‘listening without interrupting or showing any type of rushed criticism/approval’ (P10). P3 also reported a daily experience that demonstrates this learning:

In phone calls, I showed more respect to the pauses of the other when I could and, when my speech was interrupted, I listened [...] and waited for the perception of the other about their interruption. It frequently worked. The person, when they finished talking, said: ‘I’m sorry, I interrupted what you were saying when I cut in.’ And also [when I interrupted and] [...] noticed in time, I stopped and apologised, or said at some point that I had interrupted them [...] and asked the person to continue [...]. I almost found in myself or in the other an anxiety in speaking and the need to impose [...] an opinion about a certain subject.

Still on listening, in the words of P10, it was possible to find signs of their recognition of how important it was to listen without making assumptions: ‘I noticed that my immediate reactions, before the other finished what they were saying, in some cases, were not even in accordance to what I was feeling in the end – sometimes they even stopped being true or even necessary.’

About the practice of identifying emotions and feelings, P9 stated the importance of ‘analysing and identifying what my relation is to some subjects, that is, having self-



knowledge and control over my actions during a conversation.’ Complementing this, P3 mentioned the importance of ‘knowing how to assume a position without being reactive’.

It stands out that the learning of these things was not free of challenge. It is difficult ‘not let[ting] the emotion speak louder to the point of preventing the dialogue’ (P2), ‘not reacting, interrupting the statements of the other when entirely disagreeing with them’ (P3), and ‘waiting for the other to finish talking’ (P5).

About the practice of speaking, it was possible to find signs of how important it is to ‘expose [...] the way of thinking without trying to impose it’ (P7) and knowing ‘how to use certain “keywords” which do not attack the other in the middle of the conversation, such as, for instance, “that does not make sense to me,” “I suggest that...,” and “from my point of view”’ (P9).

This practice also represented a challenge for some participants, as shown by P10, who stated that they had ‘a little bit of personal resistance in opening emotional problems [...], considered [...] quite intimate.’ It seems that, for this participant, the length of the course was not enough to create confidence, which is an aspect of great relevance for dialogue, as suggested by Bohm (2005) and Freire (2017). On the other hand, P12, a member of the same group, stated that ‘we created a strong bond of trust.’ This situation seems to show how each person has a particular process of learning and getting involved with the group, and recognising this situation is very important for those who are members of a dialogue group, especially for the person responsible for facilitating it.

Finally, there was the practice of re-admiring, which took place to a lesser extent than the others, which perhaps was related to the fact that, according to the participants, it was the most challenging one. An interesting example was the experience presented by P7:

I live in a student house with five other people. In the beginning of the year, before the pandemic started, the foreign friend (Turkish) of one of the people who live here, spent two months here to finish the backpacking trip she wanted to do through Latin America. Due to the pandemic, this woman could not go back to her country, and she’s been here in the house since January. She doesn’t speak Portuguese AT ALL, just Turkish and English with a strong Turkish accent. During the quarantine, two women who live here went back to São Paulo, and as a result, there were four people here, including the foreign lady. Of course, the language factor influenced my difficulties in having a dialogue with her a lot, but I was embarrassed and did not have the patience to try and understand what she was saying. With time living together and with the dialogue techniques, I started to talk more to her, and we started to talk more

than just greeting each other. In a long conversation with her about astrology, travels, and professional fields, I worked on how bothered I get with the silence during dialogue. Before the course, whenever there was a moment of silence, I always assumed that the subject was over, and in most cases I would withdraw from the space of the dialogue. During the course, I observed how bothered I got, and noticed that, after the silence, usually another subject emerges, or another observation about the previous subject (P7).

The situation described above is rich in important signs for dialogue. Firstly, the importance of shared linguistic signs (Bohm 2007) for understanding to take place. If that does not happen, the sounds are not accompanied by meanings and signification, and are nothing more than unknown melodies. Another aspect was the reframing of silence, the transformation of the discomfort it causes. The participant had a very well-established reflexive reaction, as suggested by Bohm (2007), when experiencing silence. It was believed to be something uncomfortable, that should be avoided. However, the participant discovered the potential of silence: when ‘another subject emerges, or another observation about the previous subject.’ Furthermore, it was possible to understand and connect to the other, which took place starting with a conversation about many different themes, such as astrology, travels, and profession.

On the other hand, the practice of re-admiring also brought challenges to the participants, as indicated in the reflections from P1:

I believe that re-admiring from a new perspective is the most difficult. Numerous times I notice that I start ‘ruminating’ on the situation or someone’s speech, but it’s quite possible that I am just tripping over my own guesses and forms of thinking and cannot bring new elements to the setting and evolve with the question. Therefore, I see that this is the most challenging issue.

It is interesting to note that they identified the difficulty in the practice and noticed the possibility of ‘tripping over my own guesses.’ This is an important sign of the process of letting go of one’s beliefs. That means that they had already recognised the existence of this habitual and anti-dialogic way of thinking that is present in all of us, this clinging to our ideas, values, and beliefs (Bohm 2005, 2007). This is a sign of the start of the re-admiration process, although they did not recognise it.

### ***Dialogue principles***

The learning mentioned above encouraged the recognition of the principles of dialogue. Among them, it was possible to find the recognition of the importance of the other, as indicated by P9: ‘we are not “complete” without the other and [...] life only makes sense when we look at the other with empathy, giving meaning to what did not have meaning before.’ This recognition of alterity, in turn, indicates how

important it is to be open to what is different, being ‘willing to listen to the point of view of the other person, respecting and understanding what makes them think like that’ (P7) and ‘giving space to the Other, and trying to be open to ideas that are contradictory to the ones in which I believe’ (P2).

Learning this aids in overcoming the perspective according to which the other, who thinks differently, is an enemy, a perspective based on the logic of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ (McCoy et al. 2018). As a result, the knowledge and humanity of the other are redeemed, as becomes clear in the statements of P10:

I understood that I need to make efforts to see the more human side of people who “err,” especially with regard to hurting or being unjust to the other, which is [what] bothers me the most. I started to dedicate myself more to being able to see humanity in places where oftentimes it is too difficult for me to see. The humanity of the failures not only of others but also of my own becomes something even more intense in my reflections.

Redeeming the humanity of the other is a highly relevant element in confronting the depersonalisation of the different, and, therefore, in confronting the vicious cycle of misunderstanding, intolerance, mistrust, fear, and violence, which result from polarisation, as McCoy et al. (2018) suggest. To do so, it is very relevant to recognise the diversity of interpretations, that is, the diversity of truths that exist and were built throughout the pathway each of us went through in the stories of our lives within the social, economic, political, environmental, and cultural context in which we were raised, making it possible for new meanings to be co-created (Jacobi et al. 2020). This learning becomes clear when P11 says:

I learned that dialogue is the understanding of the truths of others, in the process of building the other and my own truths. I learned that dialogue is an invitation to think together and build new truths, instead of being a conversation in which different points of view are vomited, and there is an attempt to change what another person thinks or to end the conversation with a ‘winner.’

Complementing this, P2 professed to believe ‘that I still need to practice a lot, to become closer to the ideal, but it was a good start. [... I]t is still challenging for me to deal with some situations and understand other positions, but I can start trying to see things in other ways.’ Here, there is an important sign of the recognition that this process is long, as suggested by Monteiro and Sorrentino (2019a). Being open to finding and re-admiring different perspectives about the world requires time and frequency, and, as a result, one must overcome a utilitarian perspective about dialogue, according to which it is a product, a simple tool to be used in day-to-day life.

### **Identifying the possibility of starting a dialogue**

In addition to the principles, the learning of practices also encouraged the ability to *identify the possibility of starting a dialogue*. From the speech of P1 it is possible to perceive the learning to recognise the opening or not opening of the Other to the emergence of dialogue, guiding their way of acting:

I think that the most expressive experience I had, and that even happened more than once in professional and personal environments was [...] the non-dialogue, that is, listening to the commentary or the position of the other, and not reacting, not complementing, not following a path that was primed to become a discussion, since the other had a set and negative position about the situation. As a result, I perceived that the best course of action was being silent and not continuing to discuss the subject at that moment.

Thus, by experiencing the principles of dialogue, it is possible to acquire the capacity to recognise the possibilities for its emergence, characterised by those moments when reciprocity and communion are possible, as Buber (1979, 2014) suggests, and to avoid situations that could lead to misunderstandings and fights.

### **Dialogue and the Virtual Environment**

With the development of the course, it was possible to identify the potential and the limits of the virtual environment for learning and experiencing dialogue. The potential includes signs that the virtual environment encourages the practice of listening to the pauses, due to the dynamic of opening and closing the microphone in the videoconferencing software, since 'to listen to what the other is saying, in the application, other participants must be in silence' (P5). It is clear that this is also important in person, but it seems to be much more limiting in the virtual environment, since the superposition of voices in the software makes understanding much more difficult, and it is very difficult to focus on what one person is saying and ignore the other, as can be done in person. Also, listening to the pauses was an important moment to digest what was heard, and, therefore, an important moment to encourage the re-admiration. Therefore, it seems that the dynamic of turning the microphones on and off in the virtual environment makes it easier and faster to learn how to listen, especially in the beginning of the process. It works as an almost constant form of encouragement for the confrontation of the usual anxiety experienced by people in dialogue processes, as indicated by Bohm (2005) and Isaacs (1999), which can be an obstacle to starting them.

On the other hand, P7 stated that 'the tools that deactivate the microphone and the screen reduced the flow of the dialogue.' This observation can be interpreted from the situations in which the person feels an internal push to start speaking, a power that moves, and becomes frustrated to realise that they had started speaking, but the

microphone was off. We hypothesise that this situation is the result of the participants' lack of intimacy with the virtual dynamic, which can be developed through consistent use.<sup>1</sup>

Another potential is the promotion of meeting people who are physically distant. In the groups, there were people from different cities from the state of São Paulo, one person from the state of Santa Catarina, one from Mato Grosso, and two from Rio Grande do Norte. In addition, participants reported 'time flexibility' (P9) and that it was 'easier [...] to participate in the meetings [since] a meeting in person, in addition to the time spent in the meeting, needs to consider the time I take to get there and the [financial] expenses that I will have just by going to the place of the meeting' (P11).

One last potential found was the inciting of a feeling of safety. 'My impression was that the virtual environment offers the comfort of one's own home' (P3). 'I feel that the virtual platform put people in a place where they feel comfortable and safe to express themselves' (P8). This feeling of comfort and safety may result from the fact that people are in an environment they know, in front of the screen of the computer, less exposed and having a more distant contact than the one they would have in meetings in person.

On the other hand, the lack of physical contact was mentioned by some participants as a limitation of the virtual environment, since 'the physical presence may promote closer connections between the participants, which may be more continuous through time' (P1). According to P13,

Experiencing this proximity in this space is challenging, since we have to deal with this distance between people. This proximity often originates in conversations after the meeting, or during coffee throughout the meeting. And in virtual meetings, we connect at a certain time and disconnect in another, 'automatically' and we leave no space for conversation that could make it possible for us to know each other better and establish a stronger bond of trust.

This statement indicates the importance of side conversations, that are more intimate and enable the creation of bonds. These situations do not seem to take place in the virtual environment. When someone speaks, everyone else listens. It is different from when we are in a party, for example, and we can bring someone to the side to speak more intimately.

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1 It is worth highlighting that a recommendation was given to all participants to leave their cameras on, so that everyone could see each other. Furthermore, it was decided, collectively, that if someone wanted to speak, they should make a specific sign to the camera, which also justifies the need of keeping it on.

Another reported limit of the virtual environment was the problems with the internet connection, 'which can be unstable and provoke small interruptions' (P2). Furthermore, 'virtual meetings restrict the participation of people who do not have internet or devices to participate in the meetings' (P11).

Finally, the limit to the number of participants should also be highlighted. We tried to work with small groups, with less than ten people, which is the opposite of the suggestions by Bohm (2005), according to whom this work should be done with groups from 20 to 40 people, for a cultural microcosm to emerge, in which different perspectives about the world can meet. Additionally, it was possible to find that there was a certain homogeneity, in general, in the ideas and values of the participants, which can be an obstacle to starting dialogues (Bohm 2005, 2007). This situation may be explained by the fact that all these participants originated from the Instagram of the first author, since the dialogue groups were divulged through this social network, meaning that the bubble formed by its algorithms would have affected the selection.

To overcome these limits, we tried to bring the idea of the different to the reflections, to stimulate the exercise of re-admiring. It seems that the results presented in the previous sub-item reiterate the efficiency of this strategy, since the limits seem not to have been obstacles for the learning of the practices and principles of dialogue. Also, some participants were capable of bringing the learning that was built in the dialogue group, an environment in which the different was not physically present, to their personal relationships, environments in which relations with the different happen daily, as the sub-item below will show.

## **Dialogue, Social Isolation, and Polarisation**

In this category, the relations and contributions of learning dialogue to deal with the social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the confrontation of the polarisation of interpersonal relations, were identified.

It was possible to find signs that the virtual dialogue groups brought, during moments of isolation, emotional embracing, as P2 made clear: '[the course] happened during the quarantine and helped to relieve social isolation a bit and even to meet other people.' In addition, this helped P5 to adapt and reinvent:

[the group] happened in a stage of the isolation in which I had no objectives or commitments. Due to this commitment, I started reorganising my life, committing to other practices, and getting back in touch with a healthy routine within these crazy times. Being able to meet new people also made me open up in an incredibly positive way, with a lot of listening, no judging, it was very important for my mental health!

Another important outcome was the emergence of the desire to connect with what is different, as the next excerpt shows: 'In these times of social isolation, participating in the course [...] revived my interest in getting in touch with people who think differently' (P7). This interest is remarkably relevant, it is a precondition for the dialogue to start and for the pernicious polarisation to be confronted. Without openness to the other, there is no meeting of the dialogical reciprocity, as Buber (2014) suggests.

It was possible to find signs of the contribution of learning dialogue to interpersonal relations during the moment of isolation. The dialogue can help transform conflicts. On one hand, it can help to avoid transforming a conflict into a fight. On the other, it can help in cases in which the conflict has already become a fight, by resignifying the interpersonal relation. Below, a situation experienced by a participant of the dialogue groups, in their family, in which it is possible to see this interrelation between dialogue and conflict:

[I was] home with my parents. We were at the table, after lunch, talking about the importance of changing some attitudes and starting more healthy/sustainable habits. I started talking about consuming meat and how important it was for us to consume less of it, and analyse everything it entailed, especially now, since we are in a pandemic that showed many crises we have been experiencing for a long time (social, environmental, political, economic). I noticed that the statements of my father were bothering me, as he didn't agree exactly with what I was saying and said that we did not need to stop eating meat and that meat was important. Then I gave an example, talking about a friend who is vegan and extremely healthy. At this point, I said that maybe her health was better than his, by the way. Then, he got terribly upset and started saying that this was all nonsense and the conversation started going down a path of pure argument and aggressivity. I got up from my chair, very upset, and left the kitchen. I thought a lot about this situation and about how I became enveloped by the feelings that came to me without being able to stop and think about what was happening and what it all meant to me. I could not practice the dialogue, be it internally or with my father, without letting my internal references be 'shaken.' I wanted to convince him about my point of view and when this didn't seem to be possible, I got completely frustrated. I wanted him to understand how important it is for us to consider the relations of meat consumption to climate change, the destruction of the Amazon, and other issues, for example. I could have talked to him about this more calmly, without getting angry, more peacefully, without trying to convince him of anything (P13).

In this report, it is possible to notice that the conflict was triggered, but not resolved. However, the story continues, with a new situation that took place some days later:

He [my father] bought candies and I opened the candy package to eat some. He provoked me (I mean, I felt provoked by him) when he said that if I wanted

to keep a healthy diet, I couldn't eat that, and then he started laughing. I laughed too, but I started to feel a bit bothered/sad because maintaining my new eating habits and transforming them into something ingrained was being a challenge. I took a deep breath, and I knew that I did not want to enter that flow of misunderstanding caused by my non-dialogic actions. I did not want to start an argument with my father, who, at that moment, I thought did not want to start one with me either. And I managed, by a second, to hold back the flow, the automated and more 'aggressive' response. I took a breath and thought about what I was feeling. And then I said [...] that he was right, that I was trying to improve my eating habits, but since I liked that candy so much and had some strong affective memories about it, I couldn't resist and ate it, but that it was true that I did not want it to be a part of my new habits for a healthier life. Then, he stopped laughing and said: 'That is true, dear, you are right. I imagine it must have been a long process for you, you should eat it. I am just kidding.' At that moment, I felt that we created a new space between us, even if for a few seconds, a space in which we could genuinely talk to each other. It was interesting. I imagine that in more difficult situations, this first 'breath' is really challenging. However, it is remarkably necessary for the creation of this dialogic space that can grow between people.

In the second part of the report above, it is possible to notice that the teasing based on the earlier conflict was transformed by the dialogic posture of the participant, who encouraged their father to understand their desires and the challenges involved in achieving them. Therefore, it becomes clear that the dialogue is also an invitation, never an imposition. When we act dialogically with the other, there is a chance we encourage them to enter the same relation with us, transforming conflicts, improving coexistence, and opening spaces for cooperation. This is the opening that, corroborating Bohm (2007) and Freire (2017), makes the dialogic process free and, simultaneously, freeing.

Another important report of an interpersonal relation is from P11:

I feel that the greatest difference the dialogue is bringing to my daily life during the quarantine is related to my relations with the people who live with me. Since my thoughts are very different from those of my relatives, confrontations were always common between us, but after I started the course, I felt a change in me in the way I make an argument about something, even in the way that I do not state an opinion I have in moments when I notice that a dialogue would be impossible. I noticed that I am more sensitive to the perception that there should be no dialogue, and to the possibility of starting one.

Then, the participant reported a situation experienced with their mother regarding a controversy that took place in the Brazilian context, about the way artists consume alcoholic beverages in the live presentations they make from their houses and transmit



through YouTube, in events targeted at encouraging food donations.

My mom, who is against the portrayals of the ingestion of alcoholic beverages in the media, stated that she was against the lawsuit that is being carried out against the singer Gustavo Lima for that reason.<sup>2</sup>

She: The singer Gustavo Lima should not be sued for this. This is unacceptable, he is in his house, he should do what he wants.

I: Why?

She: Soap operas, Big Brother, and other TV shows also do this, and they are not sued. The man was at his house.

I: And are you in favour of alcoholic beverages in these other places?

She: No, children grow up learning that this is normal.

I: Should these places be sued?

She: Yes, children do not know that the soap operas are lies, they think that it is real life and will want to reproduce it.

I: Live transmissions represent the real, daily life, in the house of people, right?

She: Yes, but the soap operas and other shows are on TV, inside the house.

I: Do you think that children have access to these technological tools at an increasingly younger age?

She: Definitely, and that is extremely dangerous.

I: What is your opinion about artists who make live transmissions while drinking?

She: I would prefer that they did the transmissions without drinking, calm, so this behaviour does not seem common in daily life.

I: Why do you think that Gustavo Lima should not be sued?

She: I think he should, it is right. The justice system is what is wrong, since it does not sue the channels and TV shows that have been doing this for years.

This was one of the first times I managed to use questions to show incoherence in the statements of someone.

In this case, it is possible to notice how central moral and political issues are to the conversation: whether the consumption of alcoholic beverages is acceptable during live transmissions of artists throughout social isolation, and the impact of this behaviour on children and adolescents. The mother, at first, believed that 'inside their house, each one is free to do what they want.' As the questions progressed, she managed to identify an incoherence between this belief and the one according to which 'children should not be encouraged early to consume alcoholic beverages,' resignifying her

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2 Brazilian singer and composer of "sertanejo".

initial understanding.

This report highlights the purpose of the dialogue learning method used here: to learn how to understand the other, we do, during the course, the exercise of understanding ourselves. It is like we are our own subjects of study! Since we learned to do the internal exercise of identifying our beliefs and values, their origins in our story, the emotions and feelings connected to them, and our intentions and actions to make them come true, we can *encourage*, through *questions*, these practices in other people, and thus think together, fostering mutual understanding. This idea is also in accordance with Freire (2017), who proposed new questions instead of answers to the questions, reinforcing the process of reflection and dialogue.

This circumstance triggers the possibility of a process of disseminating dialogue. People who learn and start practicing the dialogue can become *pollinating agents* in their daily relations, encouraging others to dialogically exercise their thinking.

Furthermore, these agents can take the role of *insider-outsider*, proposed by Kilmurray (2019), characterised by 'people who have credibility within their group but, at the same time, recognised that the political stagnation in it demands the infusion of the oxygen of external criticism and ideas' (no page number). That means that these agents can oxygenate the dialogic posture of their groups – relatives, friends, work colleagues, contributing to the confrontation and dissolution of the current polarised settings, and creating the conditions necessary for collective and articulated actions to emerge, so they can deal with the numerous challenges that humanity currently confronts.

## Final Considerations

In this article, we presented and discussed the application of a method of dialogue made up of four practices: listening, identifying emotions and feelings, re-admiring, and speaking. The results found showed interesting signs that this proposal can help people to start experiencing dialogue, recognising and resignifying ideas and beliefs held, and can lead to transformations in their behaviours about the situations of conflict, and, consequently, their daily interpersonal relations with people who have different perspectives about the world.

In addition, the constant practice of dialogue on the part of the participants can lead them to stimulate the experience of such learning in other people, becoming pollinating agents of the dialogic principles, meaning that the results of a virtual dialogue group, such as the one reported here, are not limited to the participants, but can expand like an invisible wave through the interactions they establish and maintain with people they share experiences with.

It was also possible to identify and discuss the potential and the limitations of using the virtual environment to carry out dialogic meetings. The potential seems to be greater than the limitations, since the process that was started made it possible to learn dialogue and led to cognitive and relational changes.

It was also possible to identify the potential of the method for confronting social polarisation, since it seems to foster in the participants the rescue of others' humanity, the recognition of otherness and the desire to meet with the different. Thus, the method of dialogue, applied virtually during the period of social isolation of the pandemic, presents itself as an interesting and promising way to confront the polarisation experienced in Brazil and other democratic countries.

Finally, we emphasise that the present article is a first qualitative approximation regarding the method, and there is still a long way to go of scientific deepening in the field of dialogue studies in order to ascertain its effects and challenges. Thus, we suggest performing new research studies, in several application contexts, that investigate the hypothesis that the method fosters the learning of dialogue practices, which stimulate cognitive and relational changes in people, enabling the co-creation of collaborative actions that promote structural changes in their socio-cultural contexts.

In addition, we suggest that research be carried out to investigate more deeply the application of the method in a virtual and physical environment, unveiling the potentialities and limits of each one, as well as carrying out research together with social psychologists and political scientists, based on quali-quantitative methods, on the applicability of the method of dialogue proposed here to confront social polarisation.

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