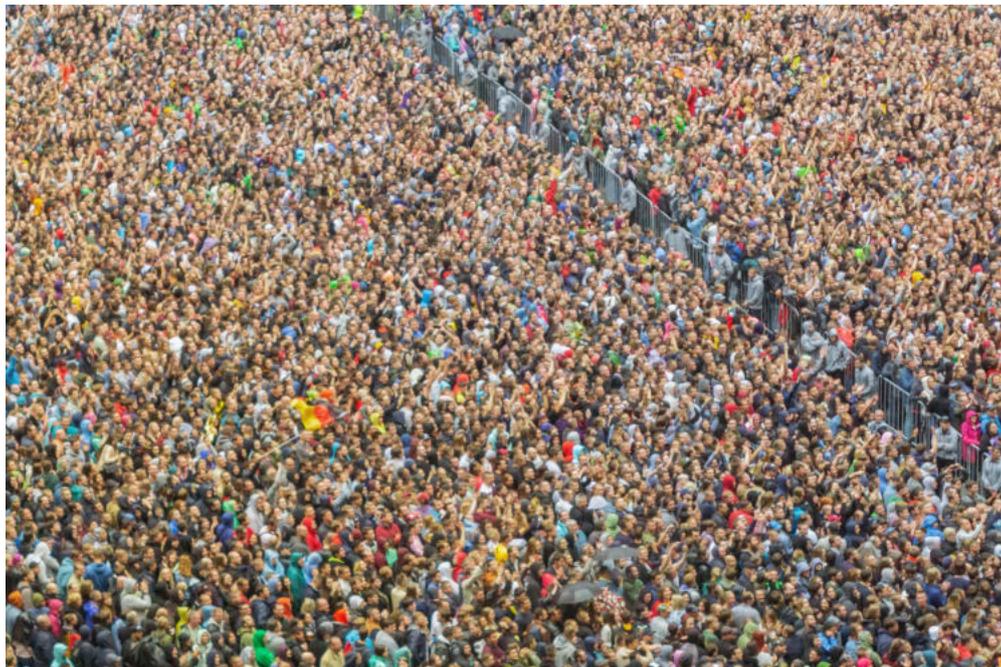


## Changing patterns of interaction through conversations

by Bengt-Åke Wennberg



In any social context, the individual – partly to be able to act wisely but also to maintain one's self-image – needs to understand and find a meaning in the social events one participates in. This is possible through the conversations the person is involved in. These conversations are permeated by the discourses which exist in the society.

If these discourses do not fit the actual situation and its complexity they result in poor cooperation and has a bad influence on the actor's images of themselves. It is then necessary to break the impact of this kind of discourses and establish new ones which better fit the actual situations. This we, I and Monica Hane, have tried to do in the last fifty years.

I have then long struggled to describe how I and Monica Hane has worked with this problem. Mostly to clarify the difference to on the surface similar approaches which do not work. The differences in starting points and

objectives have an impact on how meetings and conversations are set up, on how we choose to participate in the conversation and how to take a position on the relevance of the activity in different contexts.

By chance, I then saw a program describing the working method used by the Nobel Laureate in Literature Svetlana Aleksievich. It occurred to me that as described in the program, completely different qualities were emphasized than as sociological basic data are usually described both in research and in other authors' works.

Aleksievich did not give interviews. She's having a dialog with the other person. From these conversations – often up to 1000 pieces – she then condenses the story she presents in her books. She wants to understand a specific theme, but she also wants the other person to speak freely and undirected about her or his experiences and thoughts.

But Aleksievich has, after all, brought with her a specific theme that she wants to explore with the other person. That is why she carefully think through and worked through different themes several times in the hope that the theme during the conversation will prove interesting both for her and the other person to explore.

She is therefore not a passive collector of information. As a result of the interlocutor's own story, Aleksievich shares his thoughts and experiences. Often the partners view of the theme then changes and he or she exclaims – maybe it wasn't quite the way I told you at first.

The book she was busy to prepare, and the work filmed in the program would, for example, be about "love" as opposed to the previous books that had been about people's experiences and ability to deal with war and abuse. Although the misery of war and oppression appeared in the stories, she in the conversations wanted to capture the underlying and woven stories of love.

Aleksievich thus uses people's stories as an empirical basis for her books. They are in the preparation of the book printed verbatim but are not presented as abstracts or quotations and individual descriptions. Svetlana processes and condenses them *to portray the theme* she worked on.

The way I understood the interview, she thinks something like this:

*Imagine a sandy beach. Suppose all the grains are people with experiences, feelings, ambitions and dreams. Studying the beach from above is no use. What you see then is nothing of what really happens between the grains of sand. Simply reporting the stories of the individual grains does not provide any further information about the beach. There's something else worth knowing.*

To know more about the sandy beach, Aleksievich must enter into the sand and talk to the grains. The stories then become individual. They are not connected to each other. If the stories are to be gathered into something worth having in order to discuss the "beach itself", Aleksievich must find in advance the common theme that the various grains of sand also can recognize and see the worth in talking about – in order to change it or preserve it. The talks aim to test Aleksievich's assumptions and engage the conversational partners in the exploration.

Therefore, she needs to constantly process the many stories in order to give her a deeper understanding of what one encounters inside the sand. This understanding differs from the image one can get of just studying the beach from the top and from outside or by presenting a series of independent stories from the grains that make up the beach. That is why she sees many documentaries as lies. Aleksievich wants us to hear people's voices as a choir in whose song – in this case of love – we can recognize ourselves and then participate in.

To arrive at this synthesis, Aleksievich uses herself as the soundboard for the themes she tries out and the stories she encounters. What is told will thus be not only the sum of the individuals' stories, but also Aleksievich's highly personal notions of the unique "human and social" in the theme being discussed.

It was agreed in advance that Aleksievich must write her book and the director of the program – Julén – must create a film based on the same stories. The point is that the "song" that Aleksievich hears the "choir" sing will not be the same as the one Julén hears even if they hear the same stories.

The documentary I saw was thus a separate film about the actual working method behind the book and the film respectively.

Me and Monica Hane recognized us in many aspects of the working method. What sets us apart from Alexeyevich is that we are more interested in how people experience the *microsystems* people form with each other and what shape the sum of all the different actions of persons involved that can be observed of those we speak with? Like in the case of Alexeyevich the chorus of stories of how people see these shapes forms a song. We are then looking for the song that we can each hear and recognize from our own working life?

I suspect that Aleksievich, in her writing, is grappling with the problem that the stories are so much about the suffering of war and barbari that they conceal something that is *also* essential for people to pay attention to and recognize – namely the power of love.

Aleksievich wrestles then with descriptions of misery in order to find the songs of love. We are grappling with what we have called the power of discourse, which means that certain stories are repeated. Other stories will then be hidden. For example, there has been a long-standing view that society, organizations and activities are governed – or should be governed – by a superstructure that defines the discourse to which we all have to adapt. This superstructure has a different character, but it can, by its power to include and exclude, influence the discourse carried out within its 'territory'.

In the conversations we are trying to conduct, the discourses of the superstructure often become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those we converse with respond as they think one should respond and present stories that are compatible with the *dominant discourse*. This connection between power, discourse and collective action *creates a closed system of thought*.

One can then be trapped in a way of thinking, reasoning and acting that is destructive. Even if one sees its disadvantages and is concerned by its consequences, current and power-controlled discourse and its stories cannot be questioned. There are many examples of this both large and small.

The closed thought system means that it is not possible for anyone to capture and understand the actual relationship of individuals to the system or to each other. *The song that could exist is not created*. Despite the knowledge

and experience that one could in principle reason differently and look at each other in a different way, *such voices are blocked*.

Like Aleksievich, we therefore see it as our task to highlight such different voices by making their possible vocals recognizable to all the more. Our hope is that, by allowing more and more people to recognize these different songs, we could avoid the aggressive tone and distrust between the actors that today's discourses contribute to.

This aggressive tone and distrust arise by the fact that discourses, for example, create a lose-lose situation. If you act "wrong" according to the discourse, you can be accused of it. If you act in accordance with the discourse, it will be "wrong", or in each all insufficiently", and you can be accused of it. The self-esteem and self-image of the actors then suffers. This can be abused by power and can then generate many of the problems our society is grappling with.

Therefore, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the interactions we encounter, and to which we ourselves contribute, the different discourses and their consequences for which interventions become legitimate need to be discovered. This makes Aleksievich's working method extremely interesting and useful to all of us.

## References

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