

BOOK REVIEWS

Face-to-Face Dialogue: Theory, Research, and Applications by Janet Beavin Bavelas

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Face-to-Face Dialogue: Theory, Research, and Applications by Janet Beavin Bavelas

Oxford University Press, 2022, 240 pages, ISBN 9780190913366, £74.00 hardback (Kindle edition available)

Reviewing the late Janet Beavin Bavelas's *Face-to-Face Dialogue* is no easy task — how does one adequately honour the work of a legend in the field of communication? For over six decades, Bavelas has pursued a single, profound question: *What makes face-to-face dialogue unique?* In this masterful book, she answers this question, while revealing dialogue as richer and more collaborative than we might have imagined.

We had the privilege of spending two weeks with Janet Bavelas on Vancouver Island, an experience that left a lasting impression on us. Her unwavering dedication to understanding human interaction by focusing on what can be observed was truly inspiring. She recounted a story of walking along the beach with a biologist, who immediately began categorizing the crabs they encountered — classifying their species, size, and characteristics. Janet, on the other hand, noticed something entirely different: she saw the interactions between the crabs, how they moved and adjusted to one another. This perspective — to see not just individuals, but their interactions — has been the lens through which she has studied communication for more than six decades; it comes alive in her research and writing, offering readers a lens through which they can observe the subtleties of face-to-face conversations.

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This book, lovingly referred to as the “Daughter of Pragmatics” by Janet herself (Bavelas, 2018), serves as a continuation of the foundational ideas introduced in *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Watzlawick et al., 1967). In a way, it feels like coming full circle. Yet, as Janet said, daughters don’t always have to agree with their parents. Instead, they can expand, refine, and sometimes challenge the legacy left to them. This tension between continuity and innovation is one of the many strengths of this book.

Why this book matters

The culmination of 60 years of research, this book has profoundly influenced fields like therapy, coaching, medical communication and relationships. Janet’s focus on face-to-face dialogue highlights the richness of what unfolds between people, moment by moment. She reminds us that this foundational form of communication remains vital—even in today’s digitally-dominated world.

The book debunks pervasive myths, like the sender-receiver model (many still view communication through the sender-receiver model, a metaphor drawn from mid-20th-century telecommunications), or the misconception that body language operates as a separate channel.

Bavelas and her team use microanalysis, among other techniques, to show that communication is not a simple transmission of messages, as suggested by the sender-receiver model, but a moment-by-moment process of calibration—where interlocutors continuously assess, adjust, and establish mutual understanding. Unlike the sender-receiver model, calibration unfolds in rapid, overlapping three-step sequences, with speakers and listeners actively shaping the conversation *together*. Understanding is not merely received, but jointly accomplished, making face-to-face dialogue both highly efficient and deeply interactive.

Despite strong research, outdated models persist in training and practice. While Bavelas’s work has reshaped interactional research, its full impact is still unfolding. This book calls us to observe interactions. Bavelas urges us to move beyond traditional assumptions and ideas about what’s happening “in people’s heads”, and instead focus on what people are actually doing together. This shift reveals dialogue as a collaborative, dynamic process.

Structure

The book is divided into three main parts, reflecting its subtitle, **Theory, Research, and Applications**:

- **Part I: Changing the Focus** challenges individualistic views of communication, emphasising interactions, co-speech gestures, and viewing different research methods as converging or complementary evidence.

- **Part II: Inside Face-to-Face Dialogue** explores research into unique affordances of face-to-face communication, like rapid, simultaneous responses and the use of gestures, gaze, and other resources for mutual understanding.
- **Part III: Dialogues in Applied Settings** applies microanalysis to contexts like computer-mediated communication, autism, medical consultations and psychotherapy, showing how this research informs and improves practice.

Each part is rich with examples and metaphors that clarify complex ideas. The companion website's video demonstrations, narrated by long-term collaborator Sara Healing, add an engaging layer to the book's depth. Though it is not a light read, those who engage with it will find insights that can greatly enhance both their practice and understanding.

What makes this book special

Bavelas's ability to distill complex ideas into clear writing is remarkable. She combines theoretical depth with practical relevance, offering findings that help practitioners refine their work with greater focus and deliberation. This book is not just a resource, but a companion, to revisit, with new insights being revealed at each reading.

Who should read it?

This book is essential for anyone interested in communication – scientists, practitioners, and curious observers.

- For scholars, it offers a definitive overview of interactional research, and guidance on designing such projects.
- For practitioners, it provides resources to refine their ability to see and describe what happens in dialogues.
- For those looking to enhance their communication skills, it offers a lens to observe and improve their conversations.
- For those interested in an interactional perspective, it provides ways to see and analyse interactions — offering not just theoretical discussions, but also observable evidence.

Value for Solution-Focused practice

A shared fascination with language, rather than minds, brought Janet Bavelas, Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg together. Their time at the MRI with John Weakland as their mentor reflects their shared dedication to exploring how we co-construct meaning and change through interactions.

Janet's research helps SF practitioners see the interactional view of communication in action. Her research provides a framework to observe, moment by moment, *what actually happens* in conversations, and to learn from these interactions. By emphasising the critical role of language in co-constructing meaning, her work has significantly strengthened the credibility of Solution-Focused practice.

As for us, microanalysis of face-to-face dialogue has fundamentally informed our practice (see Czerny & Godat, 2024). Thanks to microanalysis, we understand that conversations are always co-constructed millisecond by millisecond. This means that we are always partly responsible for how a conversation unfolds. Whether we intend to or not, we influence our conversations. As Janet put it: "To interact is to influence, and the only choice is how" (Bavelas et al., 2000, p. 10).

Thanks to microanalysis of face-to-face dialogue, we also know how we influence our conversations — through questions, formulations, listening, topic choice, and more. Microanalysis provides concrete insights into how these elements function, giving a clearer understanding of their role in shaping dialogue. This, in turn, enables us — and those we work with in trainings, supervisions, and mentor coachings — to observe our own work more closely. Whether through video recordings or even directly within conversations, it helps develop a heightened awareness of the moment-by-moment co-construction of meaning.

Final thoughts

In *Face-to-Face Dialogue*, Janet Bavelas offers us more than a book — she offers a legacy. It is a culmination of decades of research, and a testament to the power of face-to-face dialogue. It is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the intricate dance of dialogue. It not only deepens our appreciation of face-to-face dialogue, it challenges us to co-construct meaning more deliberately. For those fortunate enough to have encountered Janet's work, this book is a gift that continues to inspire and enrich our practice. For newcomers, it's an invitation to explore dialogue as a profound, collaborative process that is co-constructed moment by moment.

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