Studying Communication, Confirmation, and Dialogue

In Dialogue with Maurice Friedman

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CONFIRMATION

"Dear Professor Friedman: ..." That’s how our relationship began—with a letter. I had just finished his book, Confirmation of Otherness, the first of his books I had read cover to cover. "Your fascination with the implications of Buber’s confirmation construct is shared by a growing body of researchers in human communication." It was probably an odd letter to receive, and, in retrospect, seems an odd letter to have sent. He was a well-known philosopher and author of twenty published books. Yet I wrote to him that, in the words of the contemporary movie E.T., "You are not alone." Confirmation, he had written, was one of Buber’s “seminal ideas” that he had “left mostly in seed.” As Friedman put it, confirmation involves “the confirming of one person by another through the first person’s making the other present, meaning him or her in his or her uniqueness, and inducing the other’s innermost self-becoming.”

I had said it a little differently, attempting to translate Buber’s philosophical concept into the realm of human communication: “Confirming behaviors are those which permit people to experience their own being and significance as well as their interconnectedness with others.” We both thought of confirmation as “central” to “human existence” and to the “emergence of the self.”

Prior to writing to Friedman, the highlight of my work on confirmation had been a paper I prepared with Evelyn Sieburg for the 1979 Asilomar Conference honoring Gregory Bateson. The conference was largely organized around invited papers from communication scholars and presentations from present and past members of what has been called the “Palo Alto group,” a loose configuration of psychotherapists and others connected either with Gregory Bateson when he was working at the VA hospital in San Francisco or with the Mental Research Institute. Two slots were available for “competitive papers.” Not only was our paper selected for presentation, but the conference also included a more informal "...unch Panel" where interested conferees could discuss issues related to confirmation theory and research. Our paper was selected to appear in the volume that Carol Wilder, conference organizer, edited from the conference papers and presentations.

Yet it felt like lonely work. It seemed as though few people were much interested in it. The literature consisted primarily of doctoral dissertations, most written at the University of Denver. No one of high status in the field had done any work in the area, nor had articles on confirmation appeared in any of the field’s most prestigious journals.

I don’t know whether it was entirely projection that I thought that he might like to know that he wasn’t alone in his interest in confirmation. I was certainly pleased that someone had published a book on the topic—and a philosopher, no less, and with close ties to Buber. Although I had been critical of some of the empirical confirmation research, I probably hadn’t been critical enough. I knew confirmation was a thoroughly dialogic phenomenon, and looking back this paragraph still makes great sense to me:

Confirming response is dialogic in structure; it is a reciprocal activity involving shared talk and sometimes shared silence. It is interactional in the broadest sense of the word. It is not a one-way flow of talk; it is not a trade-off in which each speaker pauses

4. Friedman, Otherness, 37.
5. Cissna and Sieburg, "Patterns."
6. Ibid., 272–76.
and appears to listen only in order to get a chance to speak again. It is a complex affair in which each participates as both subject and object, cause and effect, of the other's talk. In short, confirming response, like all communication, is not something one does, it is a process in which one shares.

If confirmation, as we said, was "not something one does" but a "process in which one shares," confirmation couldn't be located in individual utterances and responses to them nor in the self-reported feelings of the human psyche, but was to be found only in the larger give and take of the between of human relationships. I was ready to think of confirmation in a broader way. I wrote to Maury in that first letter that although "I suspect you will find the work too dominated by essentially positivist assumptions and quantitative empirical methods, I can assure you that our heart is in the right place." I knew these were too limiting, and Maury's book helped me to understand that more fully.

Maury was gracious enough to write back to me—not right away—but a long and detailed letter, much longer than what I had sent him. His remarkable openness and responsiveness—to a young scholar he had never heard of—continues to impress me still. He discussed directly the research that I had summarized, characterizing it in a way I thought very appropriate—as missing "what Buber calls the between." He even suggested that perhaps this called for a dialogue between the philosophical and social science approaches to confirmation. Talk about confirming!

I don't know what he might have meant by such a dialogue, but it sounded good to me. The national organization in communication had recently instituted a category of convention sessions called "Research Seminars" that were designed to allow a small and select group of people to spend an extended amount of time together discussing a significant issue or line of inquiry. I thought a research seminar would be an attractive opportunity for communication researchers who had an interest in confirmation to meet not only with one another but with philosopher Maurice Friedman, who had just written the only book in the world dealing exclusively with this topic.

So, I asked Maury—Professor Friedman, then—if he would be interested in co-directing such a seminar, which we came to call "Directions in Confirmation Research and Theory," at next year's meeting to be held in Denver in November 1985. I was confident, I said, that I could write a proposal that would be accepted and thought we would have a good number of people interested in applying to participate. Looking back, such an invitation seems almost brazen, but he was responsive and graciously agreed. Again, confirmation. Unfortunately, Maury's back problems flared up right before the convention, and he was flat on his back in San Diego while the rest of us enjoyed the talk about confirmation in Denver. When he couldn't make this seminar, Maury suggested that we arrange another. The participants in the seminar agreed, and the 1986 convention saw a seminar focused more narrowly on "Observing Confirmation and Disconfirmation."

I also wrote a review of Confirmation of Otherness for one of the communication journals, and I told Maury I had done so. He asked to see it, and I was more than a little nervous about sending it to him. Later, I reported that the journal for which I had written it had turned it down, and that now it would "only occupy a bit of my file space." Maury responded that it was "good and could be tightened" and suggested that I send it to another journal. I know now—having written books myself—that book authors like to have reviews of their books published, especially positive reviews. But his motivation was more than seeking to get a positive review into print. Although his suggestion seems so obvious (now), I had not been able to think of anything else that I could do with what I had written, and Maury broadened my horizon. His suggestion, that my review could find a home in another journal, was confirming, and the review was published.

Tom Porter and I undertook to study an issue Maury raised in Confirmation of Otherness. He discussed two closely related problems that complicate the role of confirmation in the development of self. First, in our desire to be confirmed, almost all of us accept a confirmation that comes with "strings attached." We accept an unspoken contract that provides adequate confirmation as long as we are a good boy or girl, student or colleague, church member or soldier. In so doing, confirmation is made conditional. As a person shapes self to conform to the demands of the confirmation of other(s), the genuine meeting of self and other in dialogue becomes less likely. Second, Maury explored difference between confirmation received as a result of one's performance of a behavior or role and the confirmation that recognizes and responds.

7. Ibid., 279.
8. See Cissna, Southern Speech.
9. Friedman, Otherness, 42.
to deeper levels of one’s person. If, initially in our families, we find contingent confirmation, and often receive confirmation for engaging in an approved role, this expectation intensifies as we move into the world of work and pursue broader social relationships. In dialogue, we become most fully ourselves, we realize ourselves most deeply, as we respond to the call of the other—and in dialogue we have not planned what we will say or how we will be. Yet in most relationships we do have expectations for others and they for us. We “know” who we are, and who the other is; we have already accepted one of the “contracts” Maury referred to. The partial confirmation we receive for playing our roles well does not necessarily fully satisfy our human need for confirmation.

Porter and I sought to determine whether people distinguished between the “social confirmation” (and disconfirmation) that comes from performing our roles (which we called acceptance-rejection) and the “personal confirmation” (and disconfirmation) which arises out of one’s unique calling (which we called confirmation-disconfirmation) and whether they responded differently to different combinations of these distinct yet related processes. We used a rather novel methodology: We wrote a few lines that we represented as coming from a play, which were identical in all the versions except for the presence of language suggesting confirmation or disconfirmation, and acceptance or rejection. We next asked several hundred people, mostly undergraduates at our institution, to assume the role of playwright and to write the next lines in the play. Two graduate students coded the lines written by the subject-playwrights as confirming or disconfirming and as accepting or rejecting.

We found that respondents distinguished between acceptance-rejection and confirmation-disconfirmation. Not only, for example, did they add different kinds of lines to the play when the previous lines had been confirming rather than disconfirming, and accepting rather than rejecting; but they wrote different lines following confirmation than they did following acceptance (though both were “positive” appearing conditions) and different lines following disconfirmation than rejection (both seemingly “negative” conditions). Further, the respondents seemed to attach greater significance to confirmation and disconfirmation than they did to acceptance or rejection. For example, seldom did our playwrights produce lines that extended disconfirmation, although they often communicated rejection to the other. Disconfirmation was added system-

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atically to the play only in one situation: when the other had “received” confirmation and felt confirmed by it and yet had extended disconfirmation. By contrast, rejection was extended to the other far more often and under far wider circumstances.

All of us are attached to our ideas and roles, and we know that others are as well. This study showed that at some level people also recognize the heightened importance of those deeper aspects of self that reach to the ontological levels of personhood. Although Laing is surely right that total confirmation of one person by another is an “ideal possibility seldom realized,” the need for confirmation—as a person, and not overly conditional—remains essential to all of us for the emergence of a healthy self and fundamental to any process we can call dialogue.

THE BUBER-ROGERS-FRIEDMAN DIALOGUE

About the same time, Rob Anderson and I wrote a paper in which we attempted to show that the work of Carl Rogers contained a viable and valuable concept of dialogue, which, we argued, was best understood as a philosophical praxis. The editor of the journal we eventually submitted it to told us that the author of an encouraging yet critical three-page single-spaced review had agreed to his revealing the reviewer’s identity; of course, it was Maury. He called our paper an “important contribution” and encouraged its publication. Although he disagreed with us in several respects, he did so directly and thoughtfully, withholding neither his disagreement nor his praise. More confirmation. After further revisions, the essay was published, our first on dialogue.

Rob and I wanted to continue to work together, and Maury became instrumental in shaping the direction of our collaboration. We had decided to study dialogue in action based on the published “dialogues of Carl Rogers.” We had started work on the project, obtaining tape recordings of several of the dialogues, when Maury invited us “together or separately,” he said, to participate in his “International Interdisciplinary Conference on Martin Buber’s Impact on the Human Sciences.”


11. Laing, Self and Others, 98.


13. See Kirschenbaum and Henderson, Carl Rogers.
held at San Diego State University, October 1991. Neither of us had anything ready, and the conference was only four months away, so we decided to focus our attention on the tape recording of the 1957 Buber-Rogers dialogue. Our goal, as I described it in a letter to Maury accepting his invitation, was to examine their interaction "as an effort at dialogue, under rather special and in some ways difficult circumstances. We are trying to see what we can learn about dialogue from examining the efforts of these two gifted communicators to engage in it." Maury said our proposed paper sounded "fascinating." Maury, we were soon to learn, had also written about the dialogue, although we did not see his paper, "Reflections on the Buber-Rogers Dialogue" until after ours was completed.

Initially, Maury asked presenters to prepare papers that would be 50 minutes to an hour in length, but summarizable in 20 minutes. A couple of weeks before the conference he asked us to send along a 20-minute summary so the respondent could read it in advance. We could, he said, send the full paper later. We had not yet quite finished the full paper, and we didn't think we could produce a summary without finishing the full paper. Finally, barely in time, we got the paper—a fifty-page monster—off to Maury in early October and quickly received a brief response. The paper, Maury said, was "marred" by a "tendentious and defensive quality." And it was "much too long for any book we might consider." But he did say he was willing to show us what he meant, and we hoped to arrange an opportunity during the conference not only to discuss the paper with him, but also to interview him, as the only living participant in the dialogue.

We had a couple of pages of questions, and over lunch one day Maury was willing to talk with us about them. He subsequently wrote us five single-spaced pages in which he explained his critique of our paper and his reasons for concluding that we were tendentious. In his concluding paragraph he recognized that he was not being diplomatic, "not," he said, "have I withheld anything." He said that he was not defending Buber against Rogers, but "defending both of them and their dialogue against what seems to me to be your distortion of it—a distortion based on assumptions about what an ideal dialogue should be." Ouch! The conclusion, obviously, hurt; but we were grateful for the attention he had given the paper. We thought he had misunderstood us at some points, and at others that we hadn't expressed ourselves as well as we would have wished. We knew it wasn't a polished final paper—the time crunch to prepare it was enormous.

We wrote back separately—Rob at far greater length than I. Rob explained our points of difference, and some of what we thought was Maury's misreading of our paper. Maury responded again—five more pages. This was, Maury said, a "mism..."—Buber's concept to designate "the failure of a real meeting" between people. "I hope this letter can do something to repair the breach, or, again using Buber's terms, the order of the world that I have unwittingly injured." Rob and I didn't agree entirely with all of his specific observations—and still don't—but we respected our points of difference and understood them and each other better. And we valued Maury's willingness to discuss these and his invitation to submit a shorter version of the paper for his contemplated book.

I now think that both Maury's claim of tendentiousness and our objection had some validity. We thought, and still do, that when Maury has written about Buber and Rogers and their dialogue, that Buber has gotten the better: and fuller treatment. That is probably as it should be for Maury—he thinks that when they differed that Buber was right, and, since the dialogue, he has emphasized their differences more than their similarities. We think, too, that occasionally his representations of Rogers haven't been as complete or as nuanced as his discussions of Buber. We wanted to tip the scales back a little, and in our effort to argue some of the case that Rogers didn't argue for himself, our hastily written first paper probably didn't express our views as well as we would have wished. As we continued to work on the project, refining one essay and another, and eventually a book and then a second one, we gained a fuller perspective and, I think, provided a more balanced treatment of the dialogue. In defending not only Buber but the dialogue Buber, Rogers, and Friedman created together, we thought Maury seemed to miss what we intended as the most fundamental point of our paper: That dialogue is not an ideal concept but a practical accomplishment enacted within constraints on each occurrence. Because we pointed out limitations of Buber and to a lesser extent of Rogers, Maury read us as adopting an ideal conception of dialogue, when we meant to be saying the opposite.

14. See Friedman, "Reflections."
15. See Anderson and Cissna, "Buber-Rogers Dialogue."
16. Friedman, Buber: Early Years.
After the conference, Rob and I began to divide this lengthy paper into shorter manuscripts that could be submitted to different and appropriate journals. Our first submission was a close analysis of the text of the Buber-Rogers dialogue, which we sent to the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. Although the identity of the reviewers was not revealed to us, Maury again wrote a detailed and thoughtful review (we could now recognize his reviews!). He "strongly" recommended publication, while explaining his "questions, corrections, and emendations." Rob and I were especially pleased that the essay appeared in a special issue devoted to dialogue, which also included Maury's essay on their dialogue.

Rob and I wanted to use a chapter, "The Partnership of Existence," from Maury's *Touchstones of Reality* in our edited collection with Ron Arnett, *The Reach of Dialogue*. Maury not only graciously permitted its use (without fee), but Rob reminded me that Maury also expressed satisfaction at seeing this essay, a favorite of his, back in print. In it Maury argues for a very realistic conception of the "partnership of existence," in which "we become our selves with one another... Paradoxically, we only know ourselves when we know ourselves in responding to others."

Through responding to the other, even in disagreement or opposition, we fulfill our responsibility to others. We gain the strength to oppose from being confirmed, and in opposing, directly and honestly, we confirm the other as well. Yet, Maury says, we cannot achieve dialogue by an act of our own will, for dialogue is a two-sided process. In some ways, in this essay, Maury was describing the emergence of our dialogic relationship.

**MEETING**

My relationship with Maury has been much more "distant" than I suspect is the case with most of the contributors to this volume. I have been neither his student nor his colleague. We have never lived in circumstances that provided regular opportunities for interaction. We met personally and face-to-face for the first time in Chicago at that 1986 convention where we co-chaired the second of the research seminars devoted to confirmation and he served as respondent to a program, "Multiple Conceptions of Dialogue," that I had organized. I recall our having a breakfast or lunch together before the seminar, and I imagine we had a dinner as well. We next met five years later at his 1991 Buber conference in San Diego. We didn't spend much time together then—there were fifty or more people at the conference, most of whom, I'm sure, he knew better than he knew me and most of whom were surely far better and more significant Buber scholars as well. He did, however, make time to have lunch one day with Rob and me, and in addition to lunch, he became the first person we interviewed for our project on the Buber-Rogers dialogue.

Another five years later, we met face-to-face again. My national association was going to hold its 1996 annual convention in San Diego, not far from where Maury lives, and I organized a program on "The Future of Scholarship on Dialogue," which was intended to honor Maury for his work on dialogue while enhancing dialogic scholarship in communication. Rather than the usual format of a series of papers in honor of Maury, I asked him to deliver a short address, after which he would join a small panel, seated in a circle, with the audience all around. The panelists would discuss among themselves and with Maury—hopefully, even engage in a measure of dialogue regarding—the implications of Maury's talk for the future of scholarship on dialogue. At Rob's suggestion, I asked Maury to respond to a particularly timely passage from his *Touchstones of Reality*, even though written many years earlier. Rob and I had dinner with Maury and his wife Aleene; and several program participants, including Maury, had lunch immediately before the program.

The next year I was teaching a small doctoral seminar on "Dialogue." A dozen of us were meeting each Tuesday evening. One Thursday I learned that Maury was going to be giving a talk at the University of Florida the following Monday evening. Unfortunately, that day was my younger daughter's seventh birthday, so driving two hours to the lecture was out of the question. But my class met the night following his lecture, and I wondered whether Maury might be available then. I tried to call him in San Diego and learned that he was already in Florida.

17. We were pleased that a much revised and abbreviated version of the paper appeared in Maury's book.


19. "For the covenant of peace, both the means and the end are the building of true community—the community of others. It is not requisite upon a community to forego all action for the sake of a lone dissenter. But much depends upon whether it takes the action as a real community or just as a majority, which is for the moment able to override the minority. The reality of community is polyphonic; it is many-voiced. In real community the voice of the minority is heard because real community creates an atmosphere of trust which enables this minority to make its witness" (Friedman, *Touchstones*, 287).
Fortunately, I was able to reach him, and he readily agreed to come to the class. Rather than asking him to lecture or give a paper, I asked him simply to talk with us. I asked the students to bring questions (about Buber's thought and life as well as Maury's). Everyone was very pleased, and a number of us went out to dinner afterwards.

More recently, Maury came to my campus a second time, in the spring of 2000. Word of how engaging and thoughtful, open and responsive—that is, dialogic—he was with my graduate seminar reached the ears of the dialogically-oriented Associate Vice President for Diversity Initiatives who initiated the effort—and provided most of the funding—to have him return. Maury and I had lunch and, with a group of my students, dinner, as well as a couple of car rides. He gave a lengthy afternoon seminar on "Dialogue and Community," and a University Lecture Series address in the evening.

**DIALOGUE**

Over twenty years, living on opposite coasts of the U.S., with very different academic backgrounds and departmental affiliations, Maury and I have corresponded much more than we have talked in person. And whether by letter or more recently, email, our correspondence has been intermittent and mostly related to arranging projects and answering my questions about Buber. We have talked on the telephone only rarely, and we have been together only the five times noted above. For me, each one has been important and memorable.

20. We had read, among other books, Buber's *I and Thou*, The Knowledge of Man, and Between Man and Man, including Maury's introductions to the later two works.

21. Maury has relationships with others in the communication field. In addition to Rob Anderson, whose relationship with Maury is implicated in this essay, his relationship with John Stewart helped us to locate our first copy of the audiotape of the Buber-Rogers dialogue (initially we asked Maury if he could provide us a copy of the tape; he couldn't find it, but referred us to John Stewart to whom he thought he had sent a copy some years earlier). John also attended the 1991 conference on Buber, and served as an associate editor of the *Martin Buber and Human Sciences* volume. Maury wrote the foreword to Ron Arnett's book on *Communication and Community*, and Ron also participated in the 1991 conference. Maury has met with Barnet and Kimberly Pearce to discuss their work with public dialogue (e.g., Pearce and Pearce, "Combining Passions and Abilities," 2001; Pearce and Pearce, "Public Dialogue: An Expanded Schoolwide Dialogue Process"), and he has contributed to Joseph E. Grofman's work on Buber and dialogue as well (see bibliography, Grofman, "Dialogics Rhetoric").

22. We continued our exploration of the Buber-Rogers dialogue (e.g., Anderson and Cissna, "Criticism and Conversational Texts"; Anderson and Cissna, *Martin Buber and Carl Rogers Dialogue*; Cissna and Anderson, *Moments of Meeting*; Cissna and Anderson, "Theorizing about Dialogic Moments") as well as pursuing other dialogue-inflected projects (e.g., Anderson et al., *Dialogue*; Anderson et al., *Reach of Dialogue*; Hammond et al., *Problematics of Dialogue and Power*).

The work that Rob and I have been collaborating on since 1985 is the best and most important scholarly work that I have done. Without Maury, we might not have done it at all, and certainly wouldn't have done it for as long or, I think, as well as we have.

This substantial body of scholarship owes an enormous debt to Maurice Friedman—whether it will have any significant influence is yet to be seen fully, and isn't the point of this chapter. Our work would have been impossible at more than one level without Maury, yet, at times, Rob and I have been critical of Maury. I think we tested him. We argued with some of his interpretations and analyses, and initially expressed our disagreements less artfully than we might have. At first, Maury was, perhaps, a little bit defensive—we were, seemingly, criticizing the host and his intellectual parents and in-laws, and doing so at his own table. But if he was at all defensive, it didn't last long, and Maury soon welcomed our attempts to explore and clarify issues regarding the Buber-Rogers dialogue. He has been a model of graciousness: following one request, providing us relevant excerpts from the Buber-Friedman letters he had at home; following another, giving us written permission to explore their letters in the Martin Buber Archive in Jerusalem; and many times responding to various questions about Buber and Rogers and their dialogue and especially about the dialogic thought of Martin Buber. He has read drafts of our work and given us valuable suggestions informally, as well as through the more formal journal review procedures.

Maury has written a lot about confirmation and about dialogue, and he is also a confirming person and a practitioner of dialogue. I don't know how much my work, or Rob's and my work, has influenced Maury. He has now acknowledged what Rob and I called the "unfolded roles" at the center of the Buber-Rogers dialogue, without which, we argue, one can't understand it as a rhetorical and dialogical accomplishment. But I don't think he has changed his mind about much as a result of our work. This is okay. Our work exists in relation to his, but not just as a dialectical counterpoint, for Maury has been willing, more than willing, eager really, to engage in conversation with us about these issues. He hasn't
relinquished his positions, and he has supported the dissemination of our positions, even when they disagreed with his own. Our relationship hasn't been entirely smooth—we have had episodes of both "mismatching" and "miscommunication," as Maury described them. But dialogue isn't about smoothness—it is about hanging in there, representing one's own position fully, and being open to others' positions as well. We have confirmed each other, even while disagreeing. Ours has not been a perfect case of dialogue, but there are no perfect or ideal cases of dialogue. Rob and I have shown, I hope, something of how Buber and Rogers developed a dialogic relationship in moments of their brief meetings, despite many obstacles. My relationship with Maury has had elements of dialogue, not as an ideal, but, as Rob and I said of Buber and Rogers, a "practical achievement coauthored anew in each concrete instance."


Dialogically Speaking
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edited by
Kenneth Paul Kramer

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Pickwick Publications
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com


Cataloging-in-Publication data: Dialogically speaking: Maurice Friedman's interdisciplinary humanism / edited by Kenneth Paul Kramer.
xxvi + 304 p. : 23 cm.

Manufactured in the U.S.A.