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978-0-521-76526-8 - Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and Counter-Positioning in a Globalizing Society

Hubert J. M. Hermans and Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka

Excerpt

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Introduction

In a world society that is increasingly interconnected and intensely involved in historical changes, dialogical relationships are required not only *between* individuals, groups and cultures, but also *within* the self of one and the same individual. This central message of the present book is based on the observation that many of the social processes, like dialogue and fights for dominance, that can be observed in society at large also take place within the self as a “society of mind.” The self is not considered as an entity in itself, as pre-given, with society as a facilitating or impeding environment, but rather as emerging from social, historical, and societal processes that transcend any individual–society dichotomy or separation.

The central notion of this book, the dialogical self, weaves two concepts, self and dialogue, together in such a way that a more profound understanding of the interconnection of self and society becomes possible. Usually, the concept of self refers to something “internal,” something that happens within the mind of the individual person, while “dialogue” is typically associated with something “external,” processes that take place between people who are involved in communication. The composite concept “dialogical self” goes beyond this dichotomy by bringing the external to the internal and, in reverse, to infuse the internal into the external. We will describe the self along these lines, in terms of a diversity of relationship between different “self-positions” and consider society as populated, stimulated, and renewed by individuals in development. We believe that the self–society interconnection allows one to abandon a conception in which the self is regarded as essentialized and encapsulated in itself. Moreover, it avoids the limitations of a “self-less society” that lacks the opportunity to profit from the richness and creativity that the individual human mind has to offer to the innovation of existing social practices.

Dialogical self theory is not an isolated development in the social sciences. It emerged at the interface of two traditions: American Pragmatism and Russian Dialogism. As a self theory it finds a source of inspiration

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in James's (1890) and Mead's (1934) classic formulations on the workings of the self. As a dialogical theory, it elaborates on the fertile insights in dialogical processes proposed by Bakhtin (1929/1973). Although some of the basic views of these authors have significantly contributed to the development of dialogical self theory, we want to go beyond these authors by developing a theory that receives challenging impulses from the explicit awareness that we are part of significant historical changes on a global scale.

Self as extended in space: globalization and localization

A central assumption of the presented theory is that the self is extended in space and time (see also James, 1890; Rosenberg, 1979; and Aron *et al.*, 2005). From a *spatial* perspective, the self is increasingly part of a process of (cultural) globalization that has the potential to extend the self to a larger degree than ever in the history of humankind. Individuals are no longer living within the stabilized traditions of a demarcated local culture. Rather, different cultures, including their different traditions, values, and practices, are meeting each other in the life of one and the same individual. On the interface of different cultures, a self emerges with a complexity that reflects the contradictions, oppositions, encounters, and integrations that are part of the society at large and, at the same time, *answers* to these influences from its own agentic point of view.

Globalization is not to be considered as a "sea" that floods all areas of our planet with the same water. There is a powerful counter-force, localization, which can be seen as the other side of the same coin. Confronted with the process of globalization that transcends the borders of cities, regions, countries, and continents, people no longer experience their own culture as purely self-evident and "natural." Instead, they become explicitly aware of its specific values, the particularity of its history, and experience it as the "soil" in which they feel rooted and at home. They are willing to defend this home and even use violence in order to protect it. In this sense, globalization and localization are not mutually exclusive but complement each other. Moreover, when involved in the process of globalization, people get in touch, via international contacts and cooperation, travel and trans-locality, tourism, and mass media, with localities at the other end of the world. They are able to open and enrich their selves as part of these encounters or are involved in attempts to close themselves off from any intruding environment. In any case, globalization evokes and even includes localization as its counter-force. In order to articulate the deep interconnectedness of the global and the

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local, Robertson (1995) proposed the composite term “glocalization” to emphasize that the global manifests itself in local forms. As we will argue, the processes of globalization and localization are reflected in the mini-society of the self in terms of global and local positions that can lead to identity confusion or lift the self up to a higher level of integration (for discussion, see Arnett, 2002 and Chapters 1 and 4 below).

In the context of the processes of globalization and localization, special attention is devoted to the experience of uncertainty. We will argue that this experience can be a gift as it opens a broad range of unexpected possibilities, but, particularly at high levels of intensity, it also leads to anxiety and insecurity. Given the central role of the experience of “uncertainty” in the present book and the different connotations with which the concept is often associated, a more detailed description is required. We see the experience of uncertainty as composed of four aspects: (i) *complexity*, referring to a great number of parts (of self and society) that have a variety of interconnections; (ii) *ambiguity*, referring to a suspension of clarity, as the meaning of one part is determined by the flux and variation of the other parts; (iii) *deficit knowledge*, referring to the absence of a super-ordinate knowledge structure that is able to resolve the contradictions between the parts; and (iv) *unpredictability*, implying a lack of control of future developments. We assume that the experience of uncertainty reflects a global situation of multi-voicedness (complexity) that does not allow a fixation of meaning (ambiguity), that has no super-ordinate voice for resolving contradictions and conflicting information (deficit knowledge), and that is to a large extent unpredictable.

The question is how the self copes with increasing levels of uncertainty in a globalizing situation. We describe five reactions: (i) uncertainty can be reduced by diminishing the number and heterogeneity of positions or voices in the self (e.g., retreating from the cacophony of contemporary life); (ii) it can be reduced by giving the lead to one powerful or important position or voice that is allowed to dominate the self as a whole (e.g., adhering to a political or spiritual leader); (iii) it can be minimized by sharpening the boundaries between oneself and the other, considering the other as different, strange, or even as “abject” (e.g., xenophobia or supporting extreme right-wing political parties); (iv) in a paradoxical way, uncertainty can be reduced by increasing instead of diminishing the number of positions or voices in the self, particularly when new positions are expected to offer rewards that earlier positions were not able to provide (e.g., searching for new and additional jobs, tasks, and challenges resulting in a cacophonous self); and (v) a dialogical reaction that copes with uncertainty by going into and through this uncertainty rather than avoiding it, in such a way that initial positions are influenced or

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changed, marginally or essentially, by the encounter itself (e.g., meeting with another person, with a group, or with oneself in order to learn, develop, and create). Whereas the latter reaction aims at post-dialogical certainty, the former ones take refuge in pre-dialogical forms of certainty. Along these lines, we argue that uncertainty is not just a positive or negative feeling state, but rather an experiential feature of a self in action.

Self as extended in time: three models of the self in collective history

The self is not only extended in space but also in time. The self is seen as emerging not only from processes of globalization and localization but also from personal (Chapter 4) and collective history (Chapter 2). Spatial and temporal changes in society are reflected in the self as collective voices that are not simply outside the individual self but rather are constituting it. Three models of self and identity, associated with different historical phases, will be distinguished: traditional, modern, and post-modern. The *traditional self* is characterized by the following: a distinction between a lower and imperfect existence on earth and a higher and perfect existence in the after-world; the body and senses as a hindrance to spiritual life; the existence of a moral telos; social hierarchy; authority; dogmatic truths; and connection with the natural environment. The *modern self* is portrayed in terms of autonomy; individualism; the development of reason; the pretension to universal truth; and strict and sharp boundaries between an internally united self and an external other. Moreover, it is expressed in an attitude of control of the external environment, a separation of fact and value, science and faith, politics and religion, and theory from practice. The *post-modern self* is portrayed in terms of a profound scepticism of the universalistic pretensions of master-narratives with their emphasis on totality and unity. In opposition to the modern self, it highlights the importance of difference, otherness, local knowledge, and fragmentation. It tends towards dissolution of symbolic hierarchies with their fixed judgments of taste and value and prefers a blurring of the distinction between high and popular culture. It reflects a far-reaching decentralization of the subject and tendencies towards a consumer culture, and argues for the dependence of “truth” on language communities with an important role of social power behind definitions of what is true and not true, right and not right.

We will show in Chapter 2 that an analysis and comparison of the three models of the self will provide the building blocks for the conception of a dialogical self. In order to arrive at a dialogical view on the self, we start from the assumption that the different historical phases associated

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with the different models are not purely successive but rather simultaneous, in the sense that the previous phase *continues* when the next phase is starting. The simultaneity of traditional and modern elements is exemplified by the coexistence of reason and the belief in destiny and fate, as typical of the contemporary self. The simultaneity of the modern and post-modern models of the self will be illustrated by the upsurge of ego-documents and the “democratization of history.” The simultaneity of the different models results in a *spatialization* of the temporally ordered models creating interfaces in which more complex selves and identities with dialogical potentials emerge. Such a conception of the self recognizes not only the workings of decentralizing movements that lead to an increasing multiplicity of the self (see the post-modern model) but also of centralizing movements that permit an integration of the different parts of the self (see the modern model). The dialogical self is described as being involved in both decentralizing and centralizing movements. Along these lines a dialogical self is portrayed that functions as multi-voiced, yet being coherent and open to contradictions, as well as substantial (see Abbey and Falmagne, 2008; Falmagne, 2004).

In the awareness that any evaluation of historical developments is risky as it may be colored by a contemporary perspective, we give an overview (Chapter 2) of what we see as assets and shadow sides of the different models of the self. For example, as assets of the pre-modern self we consider the connection with nature, the existence of community-based meaning and moral awareness, whereas the strong hierarchical order, the overly moralistic attitude, and restrictive religious dogmas are marked as shadow sides. As assets of the modern self, we refer to the emergence of personal autonomy and self-development that has liberated many people from the oppressive forces of the hierarchical structures and dogmatic truth pretensions of the traditional period. On the other hand, we see several shadow sides in the modern model: it has led to a self that is encapsulated within itself and is at risk of loneliness; it has resulted in a loss of the basic contact with the external environment and with nature; its typical dualism between self and other and its exaggerated attitude of control and exploitation has eroded the intimate ties of traditional community life and has threatened the ecological balance of the entire planet. As assets of the post-modern model we refer to several developments: the liberation of the self from its imprisonment within the walls of an intrinsically centralized and stable structure; the recognition of historical and social circumstances and the impact of history, language, social networks, globalization, and technology; the broadening of the role-repertoire of women beyond traditional constraints and the improvement of their participation in society; freedom and variation

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beyond the masculine ideals and patriarchal social structures of modernism; more sensitivity and openness to the multiplicity and flexibility of the human mind, the perception of daily life from an aesthetic perspective, and more room for humor and play. The post-modern model, however, also has its shadow sides: the relativistic stance leading to an “anything goes” attitude; the lack of an epistemological basis for a meaningful dialogue between groups or cultures; pessimism and lack of hope; persistent doubts about progress; a one-sided focus on change, flux, and discontinuity resulting in a lack of rootedness or feeling at home; and the flattening of experience resulting from an increasing consumerism, as the “easiest road to happiness.” On the basis of a comparison of the three models of the self – traditional, modern, and post-modern – we sketch a fourth model, a dialogical one, that is the result of a *learning process* that takes into account both the assets and shadow sides of the other models.

The extension of the self in space and time forms the basis of dialogical self theory. It would be a misunderstanding to conceive the self as an essence in itself and its extensions as secondary or “added” characteristics. In contrast, the dialogical self is formed and constituted by its extensions.

Dialogue refers not only to productive exchanges between the voices of individuals but also between collective voices of the groups, communities, and cultures to which the individual person belongs. Collective voices speak through the mouth of the individual person (e.g., “I as a psychologist,” “I as a member of a political party,” or “I as a representative of an ecological movement”). Dialogues not only take place between different people but, closely intertwined with them, they also take place between different positions or voices in the self (e.g., “I’m a smoker but I’m also concerned about my health, therefore I make the agreement with myself to ...”). Dialogue, moreover, assumes the emergence or creation of a “dialogical space” in which existing positions are further developed and new and commonly constructed positions have a chance to emerge. Dialogue implies addressivity and responsiveness in human interchanges, but it is more than that. It implies a learning process that confirms, innovates, or further develops existing positions on the basis of the preceding exchange. As a learning process it has the capacity to move the self to higher levels of awareness and integration. As such, it is more specific than the broader concept of “communication.” Dialogue is one of the most precious instruments of the human mind and is valuable enough to be stimulated and developed, particularly in situations where learning is hampered by monological communication. At the same time, we believe that a profound insight into dialogue and knowledge about its

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potentials can only be achieved when we recognize its constraints. There are situations where there is no dialogue or where it is not possible (e.g. in situations with large power differences between the participants) or even not required (e.g., a general who has to take a quick decision in wartime). The crucial question is not: Is the person dialogical or not? But rather: When and under which conditions is dialogue possible and can it be fostered.¹

The dialogical self has to be distinguished from “inner speech,” usually described as the activity of “silently talking to oneself” and emerging in the literature in the form of equivalent concepts such as “self-talk” or “self-verbalizations” and related concepts such as “private speech” or “egocentric speech” (for review, see Morin, 2005). The dialogical self is different from inner speech in at least four respects: (i) it is explicitly multi-voiced rather than mono-voiced and is engaged in interchanges between voices from different social or cultural origins; (ii) voices are not only “private” but also “collective,” and as such they talk through the mouth of the individual speaker; (iii) the dialogical self is not based on any dualism between self and other: the other (individual or group) is not outside the self but conceptually included in the self; the other is an intrinsic part of a self that is extended to its social environment; (iv) the self is not only verbal but also non-verbal: there are embodied precursors of dialogue before the child is able to verbalize or use any language.²

The process of positioning as basic to dialogical self theory

One of the basic tenets of dialogical self theory is that people are continuously involved in a process of positioning and repositioning, not only in relation to other people but also in relation to themselves. This tenet is elaborated in Chapter 3, which leads us to the heart of dialogical self theory. Inspired by the three models of the self, traditional, modern, and post-modern, we focus on some of the main concepts of the theory. Referring to the notion of “difference,” central in the post-modern model, we deal with multiplicity and differences in the self, showing that actions that take place between people (e.g., conflicts, criticisms, making agreements, and consultations) occur also within the self (e.g., self-conflicts, self-criticism, self-agreements, and self-consultations), illustrating how the self works as a society of mind.

Given the basic assumption of the extended self, we argue that the other is not outside the self but rather an intrinsic part of it. There is not only the actual other outside the self, but also the imagined other who is entrenched as the other-in-the-self. This implies that basic

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processes, such as self-conflicts, self-criticism, self-agreements, and self-consultancy, are taking place in different domains in the self: within the *internal* domain (e.g., “As an enjoyer of life I disagree with myself as an ambitious worker”); between the *internal and external* (extended) domain (e.g., “I want to do this but the voice of my mother in myself criticizes me”); and within the *external* domain (e.g., “The way my parents were interacting with each other has shaped the way I deal with problems in my contact with my husband”). As these examples show, there is not a sharp separation between the internal life of the self and the “outside” world, but rather a gradual transition. This, however, contrasts clearly with the phenomenon known in the literature as “othering” that is characterized by a sharp demarcation between self and other. Surprisingly, the transition between self and other is gradual in some situations, but sharp in other ones. This leads to the conclusion that the dimension open–closed is crucial for permitting dialogical relationships.

On the basis of the philosophical literature, we argue that the mind does not simply coincide with itself, but rather *needs itself* in order to arrive at some clarity about itself and the world. In order to find meaningful answers in uncertain situations the person has to interrogate himself in order to find the proper direction. The mind is involved in a series of proposals and disposals to itself that reflects the basic “imperfection of the mind,” that is, the mind is a question to itself that cannot immediately be answered or a problem to itself that cannot immediately be resolved. This imperfection, which leaves room for the darker realms of the self (populated by “shadow” or “disowned” positions), strongly contrasts with the clarity and transparent unity of the modern Cartesian conception of the self. The metaphorical movements from one position to another in the landscape of the self are ways of gaining understanding about the self in relation to the world.

The verb “positioning” is a spatial term. It refers to the process in which the self is necessarily involved when part of a world in which people *place* each other and themselves in terms of “here” and “there.” When a person positions herself “somewhere,” there are always, explicitly or implicitly, other positions involved that are located in the outer space around us or in the inner metaphorical space of the self. In this sense, I position myself as agreeing or disagreeing, as loving or hating, or as being close or opposed to another or to myself. An important theoretical advantage of the term positioning is that it can be used not only as an active but also as a passive verb. From birth onward we are *positioned* by our social environment (e.g., as boy or girl, as black or white, as belonging to a majority or minority) and much of our active positioning can be seen as a monological or dialogical answer to these influences. We get engaged in

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dialogues or monologues when such positions become voiced positions that are heard or not heard, answered or not answered, and receiving space for expression or not.

In the dialogical self both multiplicity, (in the line of the post-modern model of the self) and unity (in the line of the modern model) are central concepts. Therefore, it is our concern to make the notion of unity and continuity fit with a conception of a self that acknowledges the existence of difference, multiplicity, contradiction, and discontinuity. With this purpose in mind, we introduce several concepts that are discussed with reference to the considerations of unity and multiplicity: *I-position*, *meta-position*, *coalition of positions*, *third position*, *composition*, and the process of *depositioning*. Together, these concepts elaborate on the tenet that the process of positioning is basic to understanding the workings of the dialogical self as a spatio-temporal process. Moreover, they give access to the study of a rich diversity of phenomena that can be explored in their interconnection.

In the notion of *I-position*, multiplicity and unity are combined in one and the same composite term. Unity and continuity are expressed by attributing an “I,” “me,” or “mine” imprint to different and even contradictory positions in the self, indicating that these positions are felt as belonging to the self in the extended sense of the term (e.g., “I as ambitious,” “I as anxious,” “my father as an optimist,” “my beloved children,” and even “my irritating colleagues”). As differentially positioned in time and space, the self functions as a multiplicity. However, as “appropriated” to one and the same *I, me or mine*, unity and continuity are created in the midst of multiplicity.

Another concept that leaves room both for multiplicity and unity is the *meta-position*: the *I* is able to leave a specific position and even a variety of positions and observe them from the outside, as an act of self-reflection. The advantage of taking a meta-position, alone or together with others, is that the self attains an overview from which different, more specialized positions can be considered in their interconnections so that “bridges of meaning” can emerge and well-thought-out plans can be executed. We will discuss the main features of meta-positioning as an observing or meta-cognitive activity.

Unity and multiplicity are also combined in a *coalition of positions*: positions do not work in isolation, but, as in a society, they can cooperate and support each other, leading to “conglomerations” in the self that may dominate other positions. For example, a conflict between “I as ambitious” and “I as enjoyer” can influence the self for some time in negative ways. However, when “I as ambitious” learns to cooperate with “I as exploring something new,” a reorganization of the self can be achieved

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with more coherence between the original positions of “ambitious” and “enjoyer” as a result.

Finally, when there is a conflict between two positions in the self, this can be reconciled by the creation of a *third position* that has the potential of unifying the two original ones without denying or removing their differences (unity-in-multiplicity). In order to examine the societal importance of the development of third positions, we will discuss several examples: the case of a lesbian woman in Catholic Brazil, Roman Polanski’s film *The Pianist*, and the case of Griffin, a white man who lived for some time with a black identity.

In the context of artistic considerations, we will discuss the concept of *composition*, where the emphasis is on positions in the self as part of a pattern. This concept will be illustrated by an analysis of the mescaline experience depicted in Aldous Huxley’s book *The doors of perception*, and the prominence of patterns in Cézanne’s paintings. In this context, we also explore the similarity between Rollo May’s treatise of creativity and Martin Buber’s exploration of *I–You* relationships.

Inspired by the experience of a “meaningfully ordered cosmos,” central in the traditional model of the self, we will deal with the possibility of the *I* as becoming involved in a process of *depositioning*. This notion emerges from the insight that the farther-reaching experiences of the human mind are not so much *in* the self-positions but rather *between* them, giving the self access to a wider field of awareness. We will discuss three forms of experience in which the *I* becomes depositioned: (i) a unifying form of awareness where the *I* is able to identify itself with a great variety of positions, at the same time being detached from them; (ii) a “dualistic” form of awareness where the *I* is strongly detached from specific positions, while remaining conscious of their existence (however, not identifying with them as in the unifying awareness); and (iii) a form of awareness that is characterized by an absence of any sensory experience, yet offering an experience of “union.” In all these forms of awareness, silence, not in the sense of absence of words but rather as a “speaking silence” and “being fully present,” is a constitutive part of the experience. They illustrate that there are experiences in which dialogue evolves not as successive turn-taking but as simultaneous presence.

Inspired by the moral nature of the traditional self, we will examine the main features of “good dialogue,” as a desirable societal and developmental enterprise. Nine features were outlined: good dialogue, as a learning experience, *innovates* the self; it has a certain *bandwidth* referring to the range of positions allowed to enter the dialogue; it acknowledges the unavoidable role of *misunderstandings*; it develops in a *dialogical space*; it recognizes and incorporates the *alterity* not only of