

**WHO SHARES THE “SHARED REALITY”? A BRIEF COMMENTARY ON  
SAKELLAROPOULO AND BALDWIN’S “INTERPERSONAL COGNITION  
AND THE RELATIONAL SELF”**

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**ABSTRACT.** In the paper of Sakellaropoulo and Baldwin an implicit assumption is made that shared reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996) equals harmony among inner voices. This commentary focuses on another possible way of providing the concept of shared reality with dialogical meaning. It is argued that shared reality of a certain interpersonal relation that a person has in the outer world becomes the building timber of a corresponding I-position in her or his inner world. Within such dialogical meaning of the construct of shared reality an important element of the original meaning can be preserved, according to which shared reality is basically an interpersonal phenomenon.

The article is an admirable example of solid research on phenomena that are very subtle and hard to grasp by scientific means. Indeed, the special value of the article lies in the fact that it builds links between mainstream psychology and the dialogical approach. However, without challenging this generally very positive impression, I would like also to raise an issue that deserves careful consideration, and this relates to the context of the relationship between dialogical science and mainstream psychology.

In the article a remarkable and very relevant reference is made to the notion of shared reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996), which has recently been intensely investigated by way of the social cognition approach (Echterhoff, Higgins & Groll, 2005; Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko & Hardin, 2005). However, the question of how to understand the concept of shared reality in the dialogical domain is not as obvious as one may infer from the words of Sakellaropoulo and Baldwin. Their proposal to understand ‘shared reality’ as harmony among different I-positions (“... *lack of understanding among inner voices (i.e., the absence of shared reality)*”, p. 60, this issue) is only one of at least two different ways of providing this notion with some dialogical foundation. The other is to recognize it as an inner property of every I-position separately, being – as a given position itself – a product of a certain social relation. For example, there can be the position of a father’s daughter in a person’s personal repertoire, created in past relational episodes and experiences that this person – let’s call her Mary – has had with her father. The particular inter-subjective reality that Mary shares with her father in

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their real encounters is reflected in her inner I-position of the father's daughter. Mary could then experience the special coloration and flavour of that reality in the presence of her father as well as in his absence. Therefore the shared reality of a certain interpersonal relation that a person has in the outer world becomes the building timber of a corresponding I-position in her inner world. Shared realities are then — the material that I-positions are made of.

Providing a concept of shared reality with such dialogical meaning should enable us to preserve an important element of the original meaning, according to which shared reality is basically an interpersonal phenomenon and is developed by individuals in order to build or maintain their social bonds. As stressed by Hardin and Higgins (1996), shared reality is a means of fulfilling not only epistemic, but also affiliative needs. The latter should not be neglected; in fact, there is considerable empirical evidence for the moderating role of affiliation motivation in processes of social tuning, by means of which shared reality is developed (Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko & Hardin, 2005).

Endowed with such dialogical meaning, the construct of shared reality appears as an analogue of the concept of discourse, or Bakhtinian “social language” (see Wertsch, 1991). They both mean a system of symbols together with its social context and relevant social practices. It is in the notion of discourse that one can find this very special quality of “creating” a phenomenological world that is actually lived by the discourse participants and considered the true reality. This quality is similarly essential in the shared reality concept.

Of course a discourse *between* different I-positions is also possible, and we can follow Sakellaropoulo and Balwin in focusing on this aspect. However, I believe that it is worth remembering that such an inner discourse – or inner dialogue – is secondary in the ontogenesis of a dialogical self, while the outer one, owing to which I-positions are formed, is primary. Although a dialogue between different I-positions can be considered the main instrument of personal growth, it remains only a potential that in particular cases may or may not be actualised (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, Wertsch, 1991). As is illustrated by Bakhtin's famous example of an illiterate peasant (compare Shotter, 1999), plurality of mind is given, whereas dialogicality is something that must be personally achieved or elaborated. Of course dialogicality can be understood as a process of sharing one I-position perspective by another I-position, but prior to any such process, the inter-subjective realities exist that are shared with significant others - and in my opinion, this fact should be of central concern of all dialogical theories of shared reality.

There is one more reason for referring the dialogical meaning of the concept of shared reality to what is inside each I-position separately, as opposed to the space

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between them: and this is the specificity of every I-position, which constitutes its identity and uniqueness and differentiates it from all other positions. These differences are often profound and refer to the ontology as well as the epistemology and axiology of the different shared worlds. They are crucial for distinguishing between different I-positions. If two positions are immersed in the commonly shared reality, then they can be considered to be not more than just two voices of the same discourse, as for example a teacher-voice and a pupil-voice inside the same conventional school discourse (Wertsch, 1991). Moreover, the theory of dialogical self proposes a quite new pattern of well being, different from the one that is presumed in the paper by Sakellaropoulo and Baldwin. The dialogical pattern is rather the ideal of “the inner democracy”, of which the harmony between different I-positions is not a prerequisite. For “the inner democracy” only a sufficiently symmetrical dialogue between positions is indispensable, but it can be also – in particular – a dispute or even a quarrel. On the contrary, a harmony without such a dialogue may be suspected of being a kind of hidden domination of one position over the others, as in the case of the totalitarian ego (Greenwald, 1980, 1982), something which certainly has little in common with psychological health.

Here I have focused a lot of attention on this question – though it is a relatively minor issue in the article itself - because it seems to me that a lot depends on the way we view the relevance of mainstream psychology concepts when it comes to dialogical research (and vice versa), especially in the case of the promising concept of ‘shared reality’, whose particular importance for building bridges between experimental social psychology and social constructionism has also been recognized by a number of experimentalists (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002). Finally, it is worth mentioning that, whereas Jost and Kruglanski advise their colleagues to engage more courageously in theorizing, their recommendation for social constructionists is to enhance methodological rigor in their studies – and this is exactly how Sakellaropoulo and Baldwin benefit by their paper. By using numerous examples of empirical results and advanced experimental procedures, they point to possible directions for dialogical research. And so, it only remains to be said that this article represents a fine contribution to the newly-launched journal.

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