

**ON THE GAINS AND LOSSES OF METAPHORS:
A COMMENTARY ON BAMBERG & ZIELKE'S
"DEVELOPMENTAL INQUIRY AND WHERE TO LOOK FOR IT"**

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ABSTRACT. The commentary takes up some of Bamberg and Zielke's (2007, this issue) points of discussion of the concept of dialogicality in the "dialogical self", mainly their critique of building in the notion of dialogue into the self. The status of the self in the "dialogical self" concept, its origin in Bakhtin's metaphorism, and dilemmas in the narrative constitution of self and identity are discussed. The main argument focuses on the problems and critical aspects which arise when Bakhtin's metaphor of the "polyphonous voices" is reified in the construction of the "dialogical self". Furthermore, Bamberg and Zielke's notion that narrators have to take a position towards three dilemmas of narrative identity construction is questioned

Right from the start and already announced in the question mark of their subtitle, Bamberg and Zielke leave no doubt about their sceptical stance towards the concept of the "dialogical self" as a paradigm for studying self and identity in a context of developmental research. In their article, they present critical points which result from a theoretical and conceptual perspective as well as from the standpoint of empirical research, underscoring the weak points of the dialogical self concept.

In my commentary I want to highlight some of their points of discussion which center around the use of the concept of dialogicality. In Bamberg and Zielke's argumentation, "...building in' the notion of dialogue into the self" (this issue, p. 226) poses the main problem and leads to inconsistencies about its role in development. Their main thesis is that dialogicality is "a particular form of speaking - a genre, a discourse mode" (this issue, p. 226) and that any attempts to equate this form of speaking and self-disclosing with a direct access to the self's self-reflections is another form of re-establishing an essentialist notion of self. Against this, they claim to "dethrone" the re-essentialized self and put dialogicality back into real-world dialogues and conversations.

There are three points out of Bamberg and Zielke's extensive and multi-faceted text on the dialogical self on which I will ponder: the status of the self in the dialogical

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self, Bakhtin's metaphor of "polyphonous voices", and dilemmas in the narrative constitution of self and identity.

On the first point, Bamberg and Zielke formulate several objections against the concept of decentralization and autonomy of "voices" in the dialogical self,. One of their strongest critical arguments lies in their pointing out that "a large number of people seem to want to hold on to the project of personal identity - they tend to retrospectively interpret and anticipatorily design their life in a way so it can be attributed to them as *theirs* - at least as a partially self-determined story of accountable/responsible subjects" (this issue, p. 231). This is also supported by a plethora of scientific data about the need for a feeling of self-efficacy as a precondition for health (e.g. Antonovsky, 1987) which corresponds to a sense of a sufficiently coherent sense-making about one's life. This is the rationale for many psychotherapeutic interventions far away from the field of the dialogical self concept (e.g. Omer & Alon, 1997) which aim at the construction of a sense-making and future-oriented narrative, giving the sense of "This is my story" and "I am the hero of my story" as the central figure capable of acting. One might argue that sense making processes of persons who face dilemmas of decision making and action, systematically try to reduce "voices" or arguing and contrasting positions by ruling them out in their ongoing narrative constructions. Moreover, therapeutic work based on the premises of the dialogical self concept does pretty much the same, helping clients to come to terms with antagonistic and overwhelming or disintegrated voices and to render them capable of action by helping them "to put together a better organized, clear and coherent story" (Salvatore et al., 2006, p.205), to reduce a multiplicity of positions to one only which represents an "integrative mixture" (Hermans 1999, see also Herman & Hermans-Jansen, 1995) or to "achieve a metacognitive point of view" (Dimaggio & Semerari, 2004, p.263).

Another sceptical stance against the vanishing of a self furnished with the means of establishing an authoritative instance which can manage and decide on different positions is the crucial role of the I's "power of imagination" in the conception of the dialogical self (Hermans et al., 1992). How can the creation of a multiplicity of positions and their worlds as well as the construction of imagined dialogues be initiated and managed without an intentional and strategic agent? (Straub & Zielke, 2005).

Bamberg and Zielke also question how a multiplicity of arguing voices may be able to maintain sufficiently coherent, lasting and responsible social positions towards other persons in real life, and towards each other in dialogicality within the self. As the authors point out, speaking of dialogue and dialogical intercourse to describe what is going on in a person's mind demands certain features in order to be justified, for instance, complex patterns of turn taking, of forward and backward oriented interpretation, and of securing understanding and mutual acknowledgement. Using the term dialogicality for what seems to go on in a person's mind means blurring the boundaries between metaphorical and descriptive speaking rather than sharpening the

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tools for coming to terms with empirical phenomena. Seen in this critical light, persons' tendencies to talk about their inner lives in terms of competing voices and argumentative positions may rather be a form of communicative as well as self-reflexive competency which is acquired in early relationships with significant others. As a part of communicative skills for living in a culturally globalized world with a high demand for intercultural competency, it may even be a desideratum (Hermans et al., 1992).

My own conclusions lead to the assumption that several of those points of criticism can be traced back to the dialogical self's origins resting on Bakhtin's metaphor of the "polyphonous voices" as one main pillar. Why should Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel (a novel as a piece of artful work which, after all, comes from the pen and the creative mind of a real-world author) be applied to the self, a psychic structure, and in what sense? It is the clinging to a metaphor which stems from literary criticism and undergoes the double refraction of metaphoric speech and of being transferred from one phenomenal domain (a literary text) to a totally different one (psychological concepts of the self). This may be the origin of some of the inconsistencies in the dialogical self theory. The metaphor seems semantically overstrained and empirically underdetermined (or even undeterminable). Hermans himself aims at linking theory and empirical research: "Conceiving self and culture in terms of a multiplicity of positions with mutual dialogical relationships entails the possibility of studying self and culture as a composite of parts. This enables the researcher to move from theory to detailed empirical evidence and, back, from empirical work to theory" (Hermans, 2001a, p. 243). Nonetheless, a lot of empirical research done in the context of the dialogical self seems to presuppose the adequacy of the concept and to look for empirical data that offer illustrations (and save the metaphor) rather than to test its limits and constraints. Seen from a viewpoint of empirical investigation, dialogicality lies itself at the heart of all methods of data collection whenever participants give accounts of their thoughts and reasonings. When referring to their inner worlds, they necessarily adhere to interactional rules and practices which bring researchers into negotiations and procedures to secure understanding. Methods work by the very same processes of dialogicality which are meant to be the research phenomena in question, but may be artefacts. To ascribe to dialogically produced data the status of representing the structure of the self, seems to neglect their origin in interaction. This point is elaborated in Bamberg and Zielke's analysis of the valuation method favoured by Hermans (Hermans, 2001b) which by its instructions to the participants produces exactly the sort of evidence needed for the theory.

As Bamberg and Zielke rightly point out, there is a demand for empirical work on dialogicality in every form of its appearance in social contexts. This might be those fluent and ephemeral mundane interactions as Bamberg (2006) and Georgakopoulou (2006) put forward with their research program of "small stories". It might, as well, be

done with elicited life stories or self confrontation activities, in psychotherapies or in ethnographic and culture-oriented studies.

Apart from these critical points, I would like to mention some aspects of the dialogical self concept which I consider as seminal. For research, one of the most important merits of the dialogical self approach may be its cultural sensitivity and its openness to non-western conceptions of self, thus stimulating the intercultural dialogue which is fervently promoted by researchers from non-western psychologies (e.g. Chaudhary & Sriram, 2001). As mentioned earlier, due to its openness the dialogical self conception seems to offer common ground and to provide answers to questions about cultural globalization and heterogeneity. In this approach the self can be considered as culture-inclusive and culture can be considered as self-inclusive (Hermans 2001a). Empirical data originating from cross-cultural research on self and dialogical practices may challenge and broaden the view in identity and narrative research, as well as criticize and clarify our culture-bound metaphors and their tendency to reify our images.

Another highly instructive domain of research is the question of the character and genesis of intruding voices and of the special features of disorganized and fragmented narratives which, by their destructive impact on everyday life must undoubtedly be called pathological (e.g. Dimaggio, 2006; Dimaggio & Semerari, 2001; Neimeyer, 2000). As in other fields of research, looking closely at disturbed and destructive processes may provide insights into less overt everyday skills and underlying structures.

One final point of Bamberg and Zielkes argumentation, however, does not seem to be convincing to me. Based on the conception of the three dilemmas of the opposing forces at work in the narrative constitution of self and identity - change or constancy, uniqueness or sharing self with others, and whether I did things (direction of fit person-to world) or things were done to me by external forces (direction of fit world-to-person), they argue that on a pragmatic level there is no solution to the dilemma and that the building of a story of self requires us to take a specific position. This conception is backed up by another concept which can only be taken metaphorically: the famous gestalt figure of the vase and facial profiles, which, in a given moment, allows us to see one side only and never both perspectives simultaneously. It remains unclear whether this problem of having to take sides in the dilemma is a problem of research concepts and methods of data analysis, or whether it also has to be faced by everybody doing his or her identity work. From the perspective of the analysis of empirical narratives and conversations, I believe this argument is flawed. Everyday dialoguing and narrating shows that positions are not linguistically fixed. They can be left vague and ambiguous, making use of the built-in vagueness of language games as a resource. Persons in dialogues - or in autobiographically informed accountings as well - need not clarify

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whether a fluid and momentarily actualized I-position is situated on one or the other side of the dilemma or, so to speak, presents the vase or the face.

The allure and the intuitive appeal of the concept of dialogicality as the basis of the self demands that we empirically scrutinize its heuristic and theoretical value and its limitations, instead of using data that fit easily into the concept. It could be most rewarding not to look for evidence for the dialogical self, but to explore how and when - under what communicative obligations and chances - persons interactively make use of positions and voices to shape and back up certain positions.

The dialogical perspective is undoubtedly a most creative and intriguing cornucopia of ideas, a research heuristic and a creative battlefield, but it should not yet be considered a theory of the self. To make use of another metaphor, rather than being a precise navigational instrument, the dialogical self theory may be better thought of as a flotilla of boats out on the sea, looking to discover new lands.

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