

**PERSISTENT PATTERNS IN CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS OF THE SELF:  
USING DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY TO UNDERSTAND  
SELF-OTHER DYNAMICS WITHIN CULTURE**

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**ABSTRACT.** Dialogical self theory has facilitated contextual and interpersonal constructions of the self. A major contribution of the theory has been to incorporate relationships with others as fundamental to self-processes. Meaning is believed to be created through basic incongruity between at least two perspectives, the 'I' and 'Other.' Regarding the intersections between self and culture, this approach facilitates "the study of self as 'culture-inclusive' and of culture as 'self-inclusive'" (Hermans, 2001, p. 243). Evidence from the multi-cultural realities of India is provided to demonstrate how the dialogical self theory needs to deal with the dynamics of social relations within multi-voiced environments.

**Keywords:** individuality, interobjectivity, family, negotiation, self-processes, monologicality.

It is reasonably well accepted that self-structures and processes are divergent across cultures. Ideologies of personhood prevalent within any culture predispose specific ways of approaching relationships with the self and others as well as critical domains of activity (Miller, 2001). Since cultural analysis has attained vital importance in human sciences, it becomes significant to assess whether we can employ the dialogical self theory to explore this territory? Specific references will be made to the social dynamics in Indian families as a case for discussion. However, rather than use just the self and other as the critical players in the discussion of the issues at hand, I will attempt to separate the following planes of human activity: individual-individual (self→self, self→other, other→self) individual-group (individual→group, group→individual) and group→group relations. The purpose of this approach is to open up instances of human interactions not customarily addressed in psychology and discuss the importance of integrating inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives to gather a more wholesome understanding of people we live and work among.

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### **Dialogical self theory, interobjectivity and the individual**

As I have gathered from my reading of dialogical self theory, I am going to cull out those points that I find significant for the purpose of this paper; more for my understanding than for explication. References to the theories of James and Bakhtin will also be invoked where necessary

#### **Self structures (self→self)**

The self is created through dialogue between external and internal positions (self as knower and self as known; I as author and me as actor). According to James, (1892), the person is argued to be a conglomerate of everything that is considered his or her own. Whether or not a thing may be part of the self depends on one's emotional attitude towards the object. Gradually a differentiation between the dimensions of material, social and spiritual selves is attained. There is fixed player in self dynamics; the thoughts are the thinkers and the nucleus of the self is created through experience with reality.

There is an assumption of a reasonable degree of choice and quasi-openness between different internal positions that are the different players within the self (Hermans, 2001). Alternate selves are literary characters, each with its own 'voice', sometimes entailing choice in the face of conflict (Barresi, 2002) with some being central (James, 1892). From an early age, a person has multiple perspectives on the self due to the capacity for accounting for first person and third person understandings. First person understanding implies a person's understating of the self, whereas third person prospect suggests a belief about the other person's perspective of the self. This multiplicity greatly facilitates the viable organisation of the self (Barresi, 2002). Dynamics between voices and positions is quasi-independent and dialogical, predisposing the self to perform like a heterogeneous society (Hermans, 2002) created through narrative activity. Observing ourselves from another's point of view will always bring in the other person into the horizon. This is acknowledged in the notion of socialisation. The proposition is that no first person perspective gets completed by being enclosed within the singular outlook or consciousness of another person, or, indeed, in the consciousness of the same person at a later time. Multiplicity is of the essence. Hermans proposes further, that in our concealed thoughts, on the less conscious levels, we are more monological and conservative than we may think in the midst of our more conscious dialogues. It is proposed that we can become more dialogical when we become aware of our sublingual monological constraints (Hermans, 2002). I will pick up this point for discussion later.

**Self-other relations (other→self)**

What does dialogical self theory have to say about early experiences in life and the formative period of self-other relations? Ontogenetically, imitation is argued as the first evidence of the recognition of third person information. Gradually a person learns to integrate first person with ‘imagined’ third person. No one individual at a particular time and space can have complete knowledge; it is only later that this will become a narrative, and then be better understood. A narrative can only form in the revisiting of a personal encounter (Barresi, 2002). True self-other collaboration is an illusion since a person can never fully understand another, but as an ideal, this forms the basis of self-other collaborations (Rommetveit, 1992)). Monological relations are believed to be problematic, resulting from dominant voices, despite the fact that true integration is also believed to be attained only when the dialogue becomes a monologue albeit temporarily. Apart from this, there is not much focus on the processes of dialogicality in the process of growing up.

**Interobjectivity and intersubjectivity: Linkages between the group and the individual (group↔individual)**

Although dialogical theory does not spend much time with group interactions, there is an unambiguous acceptance of linkages between self and culture. The self is accepted as “culture inclusive” and culture as “self-inclusive” (Hermans, 2001, p. 243). In another source, Hermans also argues that increasing complexity in society is argued as leading to similar outcomes for the self. Migration and mobility and contact with other ways of understanding the self will stimulate greater uncertainty and expansion of self-structures through a dialogue between local and global positions, and the confrontation between these proliferate several voices and counter-voices (Hermans & Dimaggio, in press). Identifying educational encounters, tourism, internet communication, media, migration and political interconnections between people as accelerating, the authors argue that the forces (both social and natural) bring fresh challenges in their wake.

At this juncture, I would like to introduce the concept of interobjectivity. Moghaddam (2003) declares that in the study of human dynamics, intersubjectivity, the relationships between self and other, is only one dimension of reality. An integral portion of human activity is transacted at the collective level. He terms this process “interobjectivity” to imply those dimensions of culture or society that characterise people’s understanding of others; and claims that in fact, inter-objectivity would also configure intersubjectivity among people. For instance, prevalent beliefs about individuality, autonomy and self-control in everyday life would form the basis for evaluating a person as difficult, self-indulgent or mentally ill. Depending upon the degree of dissonance tolerated by society, the manifestations of fluidity and flexibility of individuals will be assessed.

In the discussion of group and individual interface, it is also important to recognise that this individual need not always be the self. A person learns by watching other people.

### **Levels of social activity**

I would like to proceed with the discussion of self-other-group dynamics in India which will be organised according to the levels of activity that I have found evidence for. Perhaps because of the socially oriented cultural training, I am able to discern the strength of social activity taking place at planes or levels other than self-other and self-self. The indirect learning from viewing the proceeding at these levels forms a critical dimension of self-learning. Everything that we know, I believe, is not something that we have to be participants within. Thus we can see that the following levels:

- Self-structures (self→self): Level I
- Socialisation patterns and self-other relations (other↔self): Level II
- Interobjectivity and intersubjectivity: Linkages between the group and the individual (group↔individual): Level III
- Group↔group relations: Level IV
- Other↔other: Level V
- Group↔other: Levels VI

### **Persistent patterns in Indian social dynamics**

With this format, let us now enter into a specific cultural location. However, there is an important caveat. The attempt here is to discuss prevalent patterns of social dynamics with a special focus on the Indian family. These descriptions do not imply either cultural homogeneity or exhaustive coverage and are meant more as illustrations of ways of living and understanding interpersonal relations. Since most of my work has been with families with young children, many of the examples are taken from this cultural territory. The order of discussion is reversed, starting with group dynamics and ending with self-study.

### **Group↔group dynamics**

Group dynamics in India is characterised by active historical, social and political activity like anywhere else in the world. However, the history of the people, the ancient travellers, early civilisations, multiple kingdoms and colonial experiences makes the regional diversity and social dynamics difficult to describe simply. Some important processes in group dynamics are:

## CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS OF THE SELF

- Largest democracy in the world
- History of caste, language, regional, ethnic diversity
- Social life is characterised by heterogeneity
- Secularism for the constitution of India means acceptance of all religions, not their removal
- Religion is serious business, there are more places of worship in India than schools
- Interobjectivity of personhood (Group→individual)

This section will discuss both levels since the individual can be either the self or another person and vicarious learning is considered as critical in this regard. For example, learning from the ‘mistakes’ that some one else’s child makes is believed to be far more economical for the person and the family. Thus family conversations focus on talk about other people, an important source for the socialisation of children.

The self is understood as an activity rather than an entity, deeply engaged with ‘others’. Socialisation, family relationships and friendships are guided by a family-like closeness that is assumed as the template for all relationships. Fictive kinship terminology is pervasive, and informal everyday encounters and even work-relationships are often guided by filial principles (Roland, 1988). The dynamic process of self-evolution is constructed as constantly changing and sensitive to context and company. Talk about the self is evaluated as leading to ‘ahankar’ or egoism that is believed to interfere with social relationships. In their conversations with children, mothers were found to make comparatively very few references to themselves. Their talk is dominated by talk about other people marked with the variety of kin terms that are available language (Chaudhary, 1999).

Within Hindu ideology, there are profound and prolific references to the self. The formulation of the ‘atman’ is a reference to the irreducible core of selfhood, unknowable through ordinary experience. This core of a person, believed to be a particle of divinity can only be experienced through spiritual self-reflection. The notion of this core sense of self indicates a highly individualist formulation at a spiritual level. This contradicts the manifestations and experience prescribed at a social level. In society, particularly during childhood and early adulthood, a person is believed to be immersed in social activity where ‘otherness’ often takes primacy over the self.

The individual is seen as largely incomplete without others (Chaudhary, 2004; Trawick, 1990). This belief in the essential incompleteness of an individual is a central ideology behind several prevailing practices of family life and is critical to understanding social dynamics and interpersonal relationships. Often, the importance of others is

evidenced when a vital relationship (like a parent or child or spouse) is absent for whatever reason. The prescriptions for stage and age-appropriate contact with others cause people to make persistent and intense references to the absence of the key person/s.

Hierarchy, authority, respect and loyalty towards related persons, especially those who are older, leads to strong ties within the family. Development of personhood is ideally believed to pass through varying degrees of affinity between self and others. Intense dependency of an infant is followed by the industrious, though obedient period of learning from wiser adults. The young adult is supposed to have intimate relationships, raise a family, devote himself or herself to household activities and occupation for sustenance. As children grow and mature, the older person is recommended to develop gradual detachment towards an ideal detachment from material, and social dimensions with a focus on spiritual dimensions of the self and preparation for death. Buddhism (as an offshoot of Hinduism) goes further to extend this clause to a life-long acceptance of death as a companion. Every encounter, every relationship is believed to have a consequence on the self. Termed as 'karma', a person's conduct in inter-personal activity is believed to have a long-term impact on the life-circumstances of an individual.

The self is believed to be highly sensitive to context and company. To demonstrate the point, I have picked an ancient story, rather a favourite tale used by the Sage, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa who lived in the 19th century when he attempted to explain the influence of the situation, in this particular case when the attention is focused on misfortune and negativity of context. There is acceptance, adaptation and expectation of conduct on the basis on third person information.

#### The Priest and the Prostitute

A priest lived by the side of a temple. Opposite his home were the quarters of a prostitute. Seeing the constant concourse of men to her house, he cursed his misfortune and one day said to her "You are a great sinner. You sin day and night. Oh, miserable will be your lot in your next life". The prostitute became extremely sorry for her misdeeds, and with genuine inward repentance she prayed to god asking for forgiveness. Prostitution was her profession and she did not know any other means of earning a livelihood. Whenever her flesh sinned, she always reproached herself with greater contrition of heart and prayed for more forgiveness, thanking her fate for the one good thing in her life, living in the proximity of a holy man.

Preoccupied with the hardship of witnessing the daily visits, the priest started counting the number of people visiting her by putting one pebble for every customer in front of her house. In course of time it became a big heap. He sometimes showed her the concrete evidence of her accumulating sins. As a consequence, she prayed more fervently, reflecting everyday on how blessed she was to be living near such a holy person.

The final day came. By rare co-incidence both the priest and the prostitute died on the same day. As the prostitute walked by him through the gates of heaven, the priest was turned back. The messengers of Yama (God of death) took the priest to hell. The furious god man demanded an explanation. The messengers smiled and said "You spent more time in counting the sins of others and cursing your fate". "What about the prostitute?, the priest demanded, "She spent her life in sin, why is she allowed to enter heaven?" The answer he received was thus "Everyday, the prostitute prayed to god, not only asking for forgiveness, but also feeling blessed at having you in her midst. Everyday she thought about you, and everyday you thought about her. Despite being a holy person, your thoughts became obsessed with her sins. This is your punishment".

(Excerpted from Swaminathan, 2006)

### **Dynamics of self→other relations**

From several years of research with and participation within Indian families, the self appears to me to operate more as an inter-personal external activity and less as an intrapersonal one, or at least that there is a clear distinction between the self as it operates in different situations, and the self that is activated internally, the former being the more dominant. Introspection, self-appraisal and self-analysis are not common activities, especially in more traditional communities. Questions about the self, issues of identity, personal opinion, or self-evaluations, were often awkward in the asking and frequently misunderstood; whereas those about family members, especially children, activities and events were far easier to transact and explore. It is true that the urban educated middle-class in today's India may not express such hesitation, but this is the backdrop against which modernity has unfolded. Many features of traditional ideology like other-orientation, group-care of children, loyalty to the family, hierarchy and self-reticence still persist. However, in close companionship with these persisting attitudes is the need for publicity from a very young age (families encouraging young children to perform on stage), competitiveness, increasing availability of choices for consumers, etc. Thus we find a characteristic blend of variety whose range is often rather mind-blowing, given the combinations of possible.

The importance of the other is demonstrated in these extract that I have taken from first year students of 2005-2006 at the college where I teach. In an assignment on self-reflection, one student writes

"I know that growing up means a lot of responsibility. I know that I have to do many things in life, to study well, to be a good role model for my sister who is 'looking at me' (translated from Hindi, she means looking up to me), to fulfil many dreams of mine ..... and of my parents." (2006)\*

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\* All quotes are made with permission of the students.

Multiplicity of the self as a consequence of different relationships is suggested in this disclosure of another student. Discussing with affection the different names she has been given by the people in her life, she writes:

As a child I was not naughty, never used to trouble my parents like staying awake all night. I have 12 different names which have been given by my friends, family and other close relatives:

“\*\*\*\*\* is my official name; my mother calls me *Adu*; My papa, *Adu baba*; My pet name is *Gungun*, My class 10 friends call me *ajubi* (magician), my college friends call me *Adi*, two other friends call me *Adde*, my cousin sister (sic) calls me *Gunnu*, my cousin brother calls me *Guna*, and *Gundi*, another cousin brother (name given), my own brother calls me ‘*Gunguna pani*’ (lukewarm water) and my *chacha* (younger paternal uncle) calls me *Gunua*.”

Self-other relationships are characterised by and acceptability towards fluidity and change depending on a host of reasons like situation, relationship with person, others present, characteristics like relative ages, status, among others. Socialisation is focused on actions of commission and omission. Whereas respect and regards for authority is prevalent, several techniques of manoeuvring one’s position are not only resorted to, but actively socialised for. Language structure and use both permits and allows for such manipulations of perspective. Glossing over interpersonal differences with a host of acceptable behaviours is a common strategy for avoiding confrontation. In conversations among people, especially with children, ventriloquism is an accepted way of bringing in the voices of others in everyday talk. It would be safe to say that the dyad is not a common form of social grouping. Researchers often face difficulty in maintaining instructions for maintaining conditions necessary for field work where single person interviews or individual assessments have to be accomplished. Research encounters are characterised more by collective participation than by single or dyadic interface (Chaudhary, 2005).

Talk among people can be described as ‘narratives of interdependence’ where discussions take place from multiple perspectives (Chaudhary & Kapoor, 2004). For example, in the presence of a grandparent, a mother is likely to address her child differently to indicate the significance of the presence of the older person, making a tacit indication to the child through these interpersonal and sociolinguistic nuances, that their relationship as mother and child can not be exclusive of ‘others’. Talk often proceeds with invoking key relationships to humour, discipline or simply play with the idea of the presence or absence of others. This results in the compilation of narratives that have a socially generated dialogicality and multiplicity. Stories of the self are therefore multiparty; it depends on whose position is involved. The child hears several of these stories in everyday talk, oftentimes meant for social playfulness involving teasing, showing affection, playful distancing etc. These patterns of self-construction were also



indicated in young student's autobiographical memory (Chaudhary & Keller, 2003), where they frequently harnessed their accounts of themselves on other people's descriptions. Although such memory is almost always remembered through descriptions of others, the mentions that these received, the variety of people invoked and the volume of reference to others while describing the remembered self was significantly higher than among the German students with whom the comparisons were made. These findings suggest that there are perhaps different channels for self-memory and 'other-dominated' family discourse does lead to an 'other-oriented' self remembering as well. Thus we can see another linkage between interobjectivity, intersubjectivity and self-self construction. Here it is the remembering of the self through the route of self→other→self. Such an orientation was not evident in the German responses. Even objects were remembered through who had given them or owned them and when. Autobiographical accounts were embellished and transacted through references to critical others.

### **Self-structures (self→self)**

The sense of self is derived from several readings. The sense of self among Indians can be described as 'dividuals' rather than individuals, indicating the fundamental 'other-orientation' of selfhood. In a similar vein, Indians were evaluated as developing a very strong dimension of collective affiliation which Roland (1988) calls the 'Familial self'. As mentioned earlier, the single person is believed to be an incomplete entity and fundamentally interconnected with others, at least for the first three stages of personhood. The constant social referencing that pervades in the individual also results in the development of 'ideal, 'anti, or 'alternate' selves (Chaudhary, 1994).

### **Social systems and interpersonal subsystems (Group↔individual): Proposed linkages between ideological, social and person reality**

To invoke dialogical self enquiries here, it would be pertinent to ask: Does such an 'other-oriented' ideology have specific impact on self-other dynamics? Is it possible that this orientation affects the integration of first and third person information? Will it lead to a higher empathy for the other and a lower emphasis on the self? Will individuals growing up with these patterns be more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse? Will people born and brought up with such an 'other-dominated' perspective find it hard to move to other cultures? What happens when there are serious differences within the family? How do the close ties impact the resolution of conflict? I will attempt to bring up these issues in this section, and also to propose some links.

### **Political democracy and familial authority**

On the surface of it, it seems that the political system in India and its reputation as the world's largest democracy is one such social patterning that appears in ideological contradiction with the prevalent hierarchy. However, here is my explanation. Indian society is based on deep-seated hierarchies and inequality. Although the formulation of

inequality was initiated for the purpose of social organisation, over the centuries, the systems have been used for the purpose of exploitation and abuse of people as much as reassurance, protection and commitment for those believed to be in need of guidance and support. Thus we can say that interobjectivity in India is based on organised hierarchy. Despite being the largest democracy in the world today, social life in India is marked by serious hierarchy in every sphere of life. Interestingly, acceptance of social inequality does not seem to interfere with the political activity where the pursuit of power is marked (or marred) by serious inequalities between the powerful and the populace. The adoration, even worship of leaders as more than human is certainly something that characterises Indian politics. The political organisation is based on serious difference and divides, between ethnic groups, political ideology, religion, language etc. ‘Secular’ according to the Indian constitution means something very different from the usage of the term to describe the freedom of state from religion as it was first used. Secularism in India has a Hindu flavour to it. It implies the public recognition of the equality between religions (Sen, 2005). I propose here that democracy in India is generated by group identity and the acceptance of multiplicity (in religion, caste, region and language) rather than on interpersonal equality. The presence and acceptance of multitude of ‘groups’ and ‘group identities’ leads to the intersection of collective representation that results in a peculiar version of democracy.

### **Other-oriented socialisation and the sense of self**

Socialisation of children is particularly oriented towards the real or imagined other. The absence of family is often marked as a source of distress for an average Indian. In the case of childhood, for instance, the “.embeddedness of children within the group” is an important feature of social life of Indians (Raman, 2003, p. 90). As mentioned earlier, mothers actively invoke relatives, friends, imaginary figures, and children are constantly encouraged to and rewarded for considering the perspective of the ‘other’ person, the training for different I-positions, perhaps. Although initially this is a generalised pattern towards all people the child comes in contact, soon there emerges a complexity in network of relationships where a differentiation between different ‘others’ becomes evident. Despite this, the quintessential or ‘generalised other’ (Mead, 1934) is always evident.

An example can be seen in the recent encounter that one of my doctoral students had on a railway platform. She was waiting for a train to arrive. Nearby, a woman and her child also awaited the arrival of the train. Soon the curious child began to tinker with things lying around them, also initially hesitating, she began exploring Pooja’s bag lying between them. The mother noticed this and soon admonished the child with a commonly heard reprimand, “Don’t do this, or aunty will get angry. What will she (Aunty) say? What a badly brought up child you are?”. This reaction of parents is typical. The third person is often invoked as a much more powerful agent than either the child herself (self-

regulation) or the adult addressing the child. This activity is usually well-accepted by the unknown adult who instantly joins in the interpersonal task of socialising the young child. You would rarely hear an adult refusing to participate in such a social engineering of children. This initial orientation is in consonance with the gradually unfolding self of individuals as we have noted in much of our research. In the autobiographical study mentioned earlier, and the examples of the students referring to their memories of themselves, we find a resonance with the 'other-orientation'.

### **Context-sensitive conduct**

Children are trained to be sensitive to the situation, particularly the presence of the other. As the child grows, there are greater demands placed for situation-specific conduct, even if these are contradictory and sometimes also stressful. Chaudhary and Kaura (2003) reported that in one study, adolescents reported that they were expected by parents to express competitiveness and caution at school and among peers and cooperation and consideration with family members. This phenomenon seriously questions the dichotomy of cultures on the basis of traits like individualism/collectivism, since either or both would find application depending on the situation. Although there were initial claims of difficulty with these demands, older subjects in the study began to understand and rationalise the demands as if they were better adapted to society.

The construct of dharma (Menon, 2003), or rightful conduct clearly describes the layering of moral conduct and the sequence of hierarchy. Swadharma or self-duty is seen as the first level and therefore the lowest, to be sacrificed for the group levels. Then comes kul-dharma (or duty towards the family) then group-dharma and eventually dharma of humanity, which is the highest level of commitment. Any contradiction of interests and moral dilemmas are often resolved through invoking this kind of a dialogue between layers of activity. The 'hierarchy of deeds' is (I feel) proposed to treat the dilemmas that face a person in the face of such conflicts. The Bhagavad-Gita is a treatise in such dilemmas and one of the most popular spiritual texts still alive in the minds of Hindus. The construct of 'dharma' stands in sharp contrast to and often in opposition with the 'rights', sometimes leading to serious discrepancy between State and society (Bhatia, 2000).

### **Unified families and incomplete individuals**

In large families with multiple units living together, discord with members of the extended family usually resulted in bitter exchanges, lawsuits and physical separation. Relationships are suddenly expected to be realigned to adapt to the new dynamics. Such demands on children have repeatedly surfaced, in research as well as interpersonal encounters, to be deeply stressful for children, who often retain very fond memories of a childhood together. Gradually, however, these patterns become deeply accepted and

internalised. Such attempts are oriented towards maintaining family loyalty and group secrecy, and when the family splits, the loyalty is also realigned towards the smaller unit.

Social groups act with an individual like coherence. Some evidence for this is available from work on sibling relationships, roles and responsibilities of parents and family dynamics. Any individual is seen as 'essentially incomplete' unless placed within a constellation of relationships (Chaudhary, 2004; Trawick, 1990). The critical dialogues are between family members. Dissent and difference can be felt but not voiced, perhaps encouraging the development of a core sense of privacy more as an outcome of the surface cohesion rather than an accepted reality. Appearances are important and family members are sensitive to nuances and small acts of commission and omission. Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to say that family relationships are marked by self-assured monolocality. Parents are usually quite confident of their positions and views. However, due to the closeness of the bonds, breaking up of family relationships due to differences are marked by bitterness and dissent. Children report a deep sense of betrayal while discussing their memories of breaking up of large joint families. Only in very few cases is the fission of family groups taken as an eventuality.

Social conduct, doing things for the sake of others even though you may not believe in them is seen as a trivial dilemma. Of course the former would be a far more credible reason for doing or not doing something rather than one's own convictions. I argue here that this belief in the 'incompleteness' of the individual is linked with the ideology of the centrality of the family. By declaring that the individual is unable to live alone, the family is arguably the default group for the self.

### **Self-constancy amidst persistent otherness**

I have often wondered how the 'self' survives in such a socially dense upbringing. The high emphasis on sociality in early childhood is in fact attempted, I propose, to be balanced by later detachment (the notion of *sanayas*), otherwise there would be little renewal of relationships, and people would stay absorbed in life long filial absorption. The gradual detachment suggested for older people (although it may not always be manifested, and this is an important source of difficulty in families) is perhaps meant to counter precisely such an outcome. Also, the belief in the isolated status of an individual soul (*atman*) inaccessible and unknowable, wandering alone from one life to another, is a construction that prevents the existential collapse of the self in such a high 'other-oriented' life. Fuelled by the ideas about the illusory nature of reality, the ultimate aim of life as detachment from this world, the experiences of the self or soul are argued as transient and ephemeral. These arguments are particularly important for not becoming too absorbed either in one's sentient happiness or situational misery. Everyday discourse repeatedly invokes these ambient ideologies whenever the situation requires.

### **Dubious selves and benevolent others**

It is constantly reinforced that the opinion of others (particularly the family) is best for the person, a fact that may often even escape the person under discussion. Authority and hierarchy is transacted under the belief of a benevolent superior. In many instances, particularly, intra-familial, it is articulated that parents know what is best for the child, whether it is in terms of subject choices, career options or future partners. Although some of this may be changing with the entry of increased choices, such autonomy will always be confronted by a formula for uncertainty. Monologicality is argued as being good for the other person. There are limits to dialogicality, in the local belief. The interesting finding in much of our research has been the constant endorsement that we encounter in the responses of children and young people. Intergenerational agreement, togetherness (not necessarily harmony) and correspondence characterises Indian families (Saraswathi, 1999). Coordinating group relations is an important social skill to develop. The freedom is always acknowledged to be 'within limits' where these limits are clearly defined and may be different for different families. Although this may be seen from the outside as restrictive, I have argued that with the clause of benevolence, affection and concern, such practices are believed to be mostly comfortable and reassuring rather than restrictive. Such a construction is typical of familial relationships and is argued as prevailing even under adverse circumstances, predisposing vulnerability in some instances that are more easily described in fictional accounts (Kapur, 2006).

### **Human categorisation: Reviewing the dialogical self theory**

The importance of experiences with significant others that is proposed within the Dialogical Self theory are in fundamental resonance with the ideology of personhood in Indian culture. There are, however, many issues that emerge from the discussion that could be potentially addressed using the principles of the theory. I particularly want to focus on group↔group and group↔individual levels of activity since the individual self positions are already integrated within the theory. I would particularly like to focus on contentious issues of group identities, equality and power at both these levels of activity. The vicarious learning that takes place at levels V and VI, where an individual is just watching social activity between other individuals or between groups and others, needs to be acknowledged here.

### **Composite selves and group identities**

I feel that dialogical self theory falls short of recognising the consolidated nature of social groupings. Although cultural levels of activity are sometimes invoked, groupings like the family, political party, peers, extended kin, village, etc. often collect and act in a manner where the dynamics can be likened to a self. Perhaps we need to accept that the linkages between self and society can also work in the other direction (Hermans and Dimaggio, 2007), that societies can act in self-like ways, the social-role

assignments may be the equivalent of I-positions. Since societies and selves are both imagined entities, such a transference seems possible in both directions, the self being influenced by society, as is commonly discussed; but also the reverse, a social group being fascinated by the idea of a self-like congruity!

Among humans, beliefs in group distinctiveness has cohered and divided people so intensely that the dynamics of social distancing is a matter of serious concern. We are capable of creating groupings of human “kinds” that are “results of unspoken contracts between fickle minds and changeful reality”, making human groupings highly mutable (Berreby, 2005, p. 44). On occasion, affiliation with group identity can even become strong enough to dissolve a sense of self, resulting in over-identification with a group or a cause, what Valsiner refers to as “hyper-identity” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 498), the instance of the ‘other’ completely eclipsing the self.

### **Assumptions of equality and attributions of inequality**

Categorising is an activity that assists in an economising our encounters with reality. Human categories are based not just on shared characteristics, but also on problem-solving. For most categories we use, there is a basic assumption of equatability although the category in itself may have arisen on another criterion. However, this sort of assortment is tethered to specific assumptions and conditions, and cannot be treated as exclusive labels since the attributed features may be hidden, disagreeable or unacceptable. In our investigation of self-other dynamics, we mostly assume a theoretical equality among people; yet in our conduct, serious attributions of inequality persevere. Dialogical self theory accepts such divergences, but does not apply this to the level of social groups interacting with the individual and with each other. Theory and practice need to be better reconciled within a unifying discourse in the larger discipline.

### **Dialogical intersubjectivity and monological interobjectivity?**

I feel that dialogical self theory has an ambivalent approach to the construct of monologicality. Perhaps my experiences with my own culture urge me test the limits of dialogicality and the advantages of monologicality. At some point, Barresi (2002) also admits that monologicality is periodically attained when a person settles with an understanding, but the state is believed to be transitory and easily shaken by fresh intrusions. Perhaps this belief in the fragility of monological positions is linked with the ideology of a fundamental autonomy of an individual’s psyche. In a more socially patterned belief-system, monologicality is imposed, resorted to, argued for and even sought! Oftentimes, monologicality by a person in authority is defended as favourable for a person primarily because the older or wiser or other person ‘knows better’. Perhaps when such a proposal can imply the curtailment of free thought or speech or human rights. However, in the Indian community, monological ‘voices’ of authority are believed to be reassuring and favourable in most situations.

As human beings, we are known to be far more capable of understanding ourselves from multiple perspectives without making the same concessions to others. The fundamental attribution error is a case in point. I make mistakes because we are human. You make them because you are Turkish or Greek ,or poor or rich, whatever class I might chose to induce. In most instances, shared understandings of people are characterised more by monologicality than otherwise. I feel that dialogical self theory needs to deal more directly with these habitual attributions that we make.

### **Internal sociality and external individuality?**

Internal individuality and external sociality are the common ways of understanding individuals who have a private sense of self and a publicly apparent social self. Dialogical self theory transcends this simple association and initiates the idea of internal sociality. I would like to propose another dimension, that of ‘external individuality’ as a phenomenon. This term is suggested to describe a common need of people who have grown up with individuality as an essential human attribute. The notion of individuality is, I think, an attribute of all human beings, the question of difference lies in the degree and detail that we choose to disclose or disguise. The need to assert ones individuality in arguments, positions or perspectives is clearly truncated in socially oriented socialisation. Often this is taken to mean either the absence of opinion, or the absence of a ‘spine’. I feel that such evaluations are often misplaced. As Sen (2005) suggests in his title, argumentation is an age-old practice among Indians. One has to know when and whom to argue with. As described earlier, argumentation, protest and disagreement can take many forms, often taking the pragmatic details into account. Such difference in the ‘meaning’ of attitudes is important to consider in the analysis and interpretation of cross-cultural data.

### **Concluding thoughts**

#### **Literary minds: The narrative creation of self and society**

“Narrative imaginings,” the making up of stories, is a fundamental constituent of human thought. This capacity actually plays havoc with the mind’s understanding of itself since it creates the impression of the self as all-knowing (Turner, 1996, p. 4). This weakness of the mind to treat apparent reality of the self and world as pervasive has been identified in Hindu theory as an outcome of ‘Maya’ or illusion, an important characteristic of life.

We imagine realities and construct meanings. The everyday mind performs these feats by means of mental processes that are literary..... Cultural meanings peculiar to society often fail to migrate intact across anthropological or historical boundaries, but the basic mental processes that make these meanings possible are universal. (Turner, 1996, p. 11).

The capacity of the mind for narrative activity, to imagine, construct and follow a story sequence, is responsible for the creation of the idea of the self as well as the belief in ‘human kinds’ (Hirschfeld, 1996). Categorisations are a creation of the mind to economise attention and simplify understanding. Correspondingly, our assessment of ourselves is known to be fundamentally different from our assessment of others. To complicate matters further, which others we include and whom we include will always remain an elusive

To be human is to be intended towards the other. We provide for ourselves transcendental figurations of what we think is the origin of this animated gift: mother, nation, god, nature. These are names of alterity, some more radical than others (Spivak, 2004, p. 72)

Our classification of groups has been proved (despite the desperate efforts of many) to be largely unfounded. Instead of looking for similarity and then making groups, human collectives have been known for joining a team, and then deciding on similarities (Berreby, 2005). We create associations and then expect people to live by them. In fact the CAPS (Computer-assisted passenger screening) activity in airport terminals that identifies travellers as suspicious on the basis of specific factors (like delayed bookings, purchase of tickets in cash etc.) just did not match the conventional separations of people by appearances that was being followed during that time (Flynn, 1998). We are not able to fully grasp the reasons for such passionate investment in groups. The ties that bind also become the reason for hatred and violence.

I think one of the reasons why we have not been able to paint a consolidated picture is on account of our disciplinary boundaries and bounded-ness. There are interdisciplinary differences in the ways in which human beings are classified. Pure scientists either talk about single individuals or all of humanity and remain rather uncomfortable about anything in between, psychologists seems to neglect the fact that people see themselves as “more than individuals”; history often ignores individuality (Berreby, 2005, p. 30), literature permits temporary transfers of agency (Spivak, 2004) and economists construct ‘identity’ to mean affiliation with a collective (Sen, 2006). Such interdisciplinary incompatibility inevitable reduces the chances for making cross-references between disciplines and leaves us rather isolated in the search for answers.

The fragility of collectives is based on what Spivak refers to as the “irreducible curvature of social space”, the lack of access to the viewpoint of another (2004, p. 29). In the functioning of collectives, however, this incipient frailty is farthest from the sentiments of real people since it would seriously shock their sense of belongingness. Individuals learn to believe in collectives and these affiliations are strong and pervasive.



## CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS OF THE SELF

Let us take the instance of gender. Having grown up both as a spectator and participant in Indian-ness, I have often wondered about the strength of gender as a recognised category. Of course patriarchy forces a focus on maleness and the arrival of a male child has been proved to be demographically favoured by portions of the Indian population, enough to skew the national statistics. However, as an ambient scientist of family relationships, I have failed to find the category of gender to be strongly present in family and community life. Similar findings have been arrived at in the case of the Yoruba, Africa, where gender is secondary to age (Oyewùní, 1997). Far more significantly, it is sub-group membership, like language use, paternal or maternal kinship, family, caste, village or region that are significant. Gender comes into play perhaps only when it the minimal distinguishing between two people. The assumptions behind gender differences are that in some deep sense, people are all the same everywhere. However, it is important to acknowledge that “people in those other times and places have not talked about the subject with our human-kind categories” (Berreby, 2005, p. 62), and debates that rage in some locations need not be ones that are even recognised in others. International aid-agencies proliferate with misplaced agendas regarding policy and social action in directions that are at serious odds with local populations.

Recently an award-winning poem is doing rounds of the internet. Although I have not been able to identify any source other than my sister’s mailbox, I thought it was rather appropriate here. It reads:

*And you calling me coloured?*

When I born, I black,  
When I grow up, I black,  
When I go in sun, I black,  
When I scared, I black,  
When I sick, I black,  
And when I die, I still black

And you ..... white fella,  
When you born, you pink,  
When you grow up, you white,  
When you go in sun, you red,  
When you cold, you blue,  
When you scared, you yellow,  
When you sick, you green,  
And when you die, you gray

And you calling me Coloured?

(Anonymous, 2005)

The dialogical self theory provides us with an effective framework for understanding the self. It is through understanding ourselves, our own “kind-mindedness” the beliefs of our own collectives that we can begin to understand the different human-kinds that the minds of people have created (Berreby, 2005, p. 44). Through this presentation, I hope I have been able to demonstrate my agreement with and elaboration of Moghaddam’s (2003) proposal that interobjectivity the way in which people understand ‘others’ is also a significant plane of activity in addition to self-self and self-other activity constructing a network of associations, sometimes complementing, sometimes reversing, often contradicting, but never neutral or concerned with the multiple levels of activity. In fact as we have seen, there is a high correspondence between the patterns of interobjectivity and intersubjectivity, either to create similar patterns, or to generate a dialogicality. The interconnections are important. Although it is simple to draw linkages between interobjectivity and intersubjectivity, the threads run through other planes of activity between the individual and group:

- individual-individual (self→self, self→other, other→self)
- individual-group (individual→group, group→individual)
- and group→group relations

It is only when we consider all levels that we will be able to recognise and discuss the automatic, hidden, sublingual and frequently sinister outcomes of human conduct. Such an undertaking cannot be accomplished without collaborations and integration of perspectives, both cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary. Disciplinary boundaries have prevented us from gathering our resources and benefiting from developments in other fields. Most scientists make references to research conducted within their narrow area of sub-specialisation. Theoretical disputes between disciplines have become polarised between humanism and identity politics, and serve as instances of the “unexamined politics of collectivity” (Spivak, 2004, p. 28). Perhaps disciplines like comparative literature will provide us with that degree of openness and doubt that is an essential ingredient of self-other analysis. It is at the intersection of numerous disciplines and various cultures that our understanding will be truly enhanced.

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