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ON THE NON-DISTINCTION OF SELF AND OTHER IN THE NOTION OF PERSONHOOD

Madelene A. Sta. Maria Gerardo L. Largoza
De La Salle University-Manila, The Philippines

ABSTRACT. Chaudhary's (2008) analysis is viewed as compatible with recent findings in the neurosciences that the experience of personhood cannot be limited to "cold" individual rationality and "pure" monologic cognition. The search for, and evaluation of-- other minds is neurologically enabled. Chaudhary's account of the dialogical self in Indian families as unavoidably relational and naturally sensitive to others seems to be the logical outcome of a neurobiological "circuit" for empathy

Keywords: Malay culture, mirror neurons, talk, subjectified participation

The "re-discovery" of the concept of self in research programs in the human disciplines in the 1980s signified a movement away from a regard of the self as mental substance to the notion of self as a product or construction that is built on other people's responses and attitudes toward the individual (Polkinghorne, 1988). Jerome Bruner (1986) captures this view of the self in the following statement:

> [Language] serves the double function of being both a mode of communication and a medium for representing the world about which it is communicating. How one talks comes eventually to be how one *represents* what one talks about. The stance and the negotiation over stance, by the same token, become features of the world toward which one is taking stances. And in time, as one develops a sense of one's self, the same pattern works its way into the manner in which we interpret that "text" which is our reading of ourselves. (p. 131)

Since the responses and attitudes of others to the individual will necessarily be variable and inconsistent, there is a need to identify structures and processes that will synthesize and integrate diverse social responses to come up with a unified experience of the self (Polkinghorne, 1988). Developmental research has not made much progress in closely investigating these synthesizing and integrative processes because it has largely focused on isolated systems and mechanisms of causation that fail to appreciate the child within the world of interactive relations–the child as both active and interactive, as both constructing and co-constructing (Emde, 1994). What is needed was a frame through which the experience of being a social being could be explained and understood. In Geertz's (1973) words:

AUTHORS' NOTE. Madelene A. Sta. Maria is a professor of psychology and Gerardo L. Largoza is a professor of economics at De La Salle University in Manila, the Philippines. Please address any comments about this article to Madelene A. Sta. Maria. Email: stamariam@dlsu.edu.ph

> What is needed is some systematic, rather than literary or impressionistic, way to discover what is given , what the conceptual structure embedded in the symbolic forms through which persons are perceived actually is. What we want and do not yet have is a developed method of describing and analyzing the meaningful structure of experience (here, the experience of persons) as it is apprehended by representative members of a particular society at a particular point in time–in a word, a scientific phenomenology of culture. (p. 364)

Since the pronouncement of Geertz in 1973, researchers have approached the complexity of self definition by positing that the self is fragmented rather than fixed, and by proposing a narration of self which varies according to discourse form and context (Peacock & Holland, 1993). These views can be traced to the growing importance given to the precepts of cultural-historical school of psychology through the seminal ideas of Vygotsky, and to literary criticism, with Bakhtin as one of its most provocative voices. There is likewise a growing interest in conceptualizing individuality in terms of the social other, e.g., Sampson's "ensembled individualism," Shweder, Mahaptra and Miller's "sociocentric understanding" (Emde, 1994). Further, there is an increasing dissatisfaction with the individualism-collectivism explanatory framework for understanding self. According to Sampson (2000), the description of the person in terms of the sharply differentiated person-other boundaries of individualism or in terms of the porous, ill-defined boundaries of collectivism reveals the preference for an either-or understanding in depicting the person-other relationship. Sampson claims that this either-or understanding derives from the perspective of the Christian heritage. He contrasts this to the rabbinic tradition of dialogism where the opposition between person and the other makes no sense. In dialogue, the person is neither sharply differentiated from the other, nor is there blurred boundaries between the self and the other. In dialogue, according to Sampson, the person is both independent and interdependent. When viewed from this dialogic alternative, the person and the other represent voices that participate together in a joint mutual formation of the self.

The synthesis and integration of social responses from others can then be achieved through a construct that serves to locate the person in the shared reality with others. This construct is the dialogical self which can be defined in the words of Bruner (1986) whose ideas led to the clarification of the construct:

> How we decide to enter into transaction with others linguistically and by what exchanges, how *much* we wish to do so (in contrast to remaining "detached" or "silent" or otherwise "private"), will shape our sense of what constitutes culturally acceptable transactions and our definition of our own scope and possibility in doing so – our "selfhood." (p. 66)

The notion of the "dialogical self," presented by Hermans and his colleagues in the early 1990s, took form through an elaboration of the ideas of Bruner on the narrative modes of thought and the claims of the Bakhtin on the dialogical narrative (Emde, 1994). The dialogical self is "a complex narratively structured self with many 'I positions' that can be occupied by the same person, a multivoiced self that often includes internal dialogues and that expands the possibilities for experience with others (Emde, 1994, p. 724). Corresponding to Bakhtin's theory of self, an individual appreciates self by integrating third person information about self with first person information about self (Barresi, 2000). The individual thoughts can thus be transformed into utterances which represent dialogical relations which spontaneously occur between the utterance of the individual and that of real or imagined others (Hermans, 1996a). Bakhtin, however, contends that the desired integration of utterances will never happen because the epistemological positions of the third and first person sources of information are different and cannot be merged (Barresi, 2002). The dialogic act that forms the self will however continue and persist because there will be a constant need on the part of the person to actualize the integration of these person perspectives (Barresi, 2002).

According to Hermans (1996a), the notion of the dialogical self presents the possibility for the person's awareness to move from one position to another, from one voice to another, functioning like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of agreement and disagreement, of question and answer, each offered from the vantage point of the positioning assumed by a "voice". Hermans further states that as different voices, these characters exchange information about their respective *Me*'s, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self. Nandita Chaudhary's (2008) use of the dialogical self theory to capture the self-other relations in culture in terms of levels of human activity, i.e., self to self, self to other, individual to group, group to individual, and group to group, may serve to identify the positions that are occupied in the social space within which the person's experience of self is embedded. Chaudhary's treatment, however, retains the dichotomy which is rejected in the conceptualization of dialogue in structuring the self.

For example, Hermans (1996a) makes a distinction in his theory of the dialogical self between position/positioning and traditional roles. Bakhtin's idea of positions correspond to dissimilar voices in conversation with one another transforming the person as he or she moves through the dialogic process of self (Hermans, 1996b). The dichotomy between self and other, or between individual and group, is inappropriate because all these may represent positions within the self, and are experienced within the domain of the self. We go back to Sampson's contention about the nature of dialogue which, by definition, eradicates the distinction and separateness of self and the other. Within dialogue, the self is located and moves within an imaginal space consisting of a variety of positions (Hermans, 1996b). The self as dialogical is

then conceptualized as relational and organizing rather than as a coordination of different elements or schemas that function together (Hermans, 1996b). To posit that the self is a system of internalized schemas and structures would bring us back to the question of how inconsistent and changing information about the world and about the self-in-the-world are integrated to form a unified experience of the self.

It should likewise be noted that in Bakhtin's theory of the dialogical self, meaning is not located "within the individual" but "in between" the self and the other (Bandlamudi, 1994). At any given moment (i.e., the "immediate reality") the individual inhabits a social space and historical time, which is not completely knowable without the other. Both Bakhtin and Vygotsky make the claim that meaning is formed with and through the other. In Ouellette's (1996) words:

> An important guiding principle for those contemporary psychologists inspired by the work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin is that every story one hears, although spoken by a single individual, represents a multitude of voices. As I speak, you hear my grandfather who was a very effective storyteller, my students' questions, the ideas of others that I have just read, and many other contributors. These many voices that we all speak can work in concert, but at some times and places, they can be very much in conflict (p. 359).

The notion of a cognitive multi-faceted self is transformed into a multi-voiced self which is continuously engaged in the process of positioning and repositioning expressed in self-negotiations, self-oppositions, and self-integrations (Hermans, 1996b). Chaudhary has appropriately used cultural psychological approach in her analysis. The discipline is best equipped to explore the complexities of the dialogical self since in this discipline,

> "the cognizing, emoting, experiencing, and evaluating individual is seen as emerging from, operating within, and transacting with a complex set of social relations – an ongoing play between culturally defined realities and reality defining selves" (Bandlamudi, 1994, p. 460).

Of specific interest, however, would be linguistic references by members of a culture focused in the self-other integration – the means by which we come to know of other minds and their possible worlds (Bruner, 1986, p. 64).

The Dialogical Self in Malay Culture

In the Malay languages (i.e., Bahasa Malayu, Bahasa Indonesia, and Tagalog, a Philippine dialect) are found references that represent a nondistinction of the self and the other. In these languages we find a difference made between the "exclusive we" (*kami* in Bahasa Malayu and Indonesia, and in Tagalog) and the "inclusive we" (*kita* in Bahasa Malayu and Indonesia, *tayo* in Tagalog). *Kita* and *tayo* represent a consciousness of an experienced oneness between the self and the other. Consequently,

these references organize the self into a dialogical mode where voices of others in one's social world are merged into the consciousness of the self. This is evident in Hassan's (2005) description of *kita:*

> Here I and You coexist in atmosphere of pronounced subjectivity; in other words, it is a dialogical mode in which the individual constituents find conditions for mutual self-enhancement and personal self actualization. The Kita mode is a dialogical mode of being together with others in spite of being oneself, since self-reduction is not a prerequisite to maintain Kita as a shared world of I and You. Neither is the Kita mode dependent upon the presence of others outside it…the Kita mode is experienced as a self-sufficient Gestalt. (p. 24)

According to Hassan, the *Kita* mode is a mode of "subjectified participation" (p. 29). In a similar vein, Salazar (1991) has made the claim that the Philippino word *tayo* is a perspective that exists within the discourse of one's culture – it is directed within the culture and is not influenced by discourses outside one's culture:

> *Lumalawak at lumalaki ito alinsunod sa mga taong nakapaloob dito. Lumalawak at lumalaki ang kabuuan kung ang lahat ng mga tao ay nag-uusap-usap at nagkakaintindihan dahil iisa ang wika…na umiiral/nagbubuklod sa kanila.* [This expands and becomes larger with the number of people who come within it. The whole expands and becomes larger when the people within it speak and understand one another using one language…which encompasses/unites them.] (Diestro, 2004, p. 12)

The *tayo* mode engages the individual in a discourse of cultural experience with others who share the same cultural experiences (Mortel, 2004). Both *kita* and *tayo* impart a consciousness of a shared world where positioning and voices are comprehensible within dialogue. The self can thus avail of different approaches of relating within an "inclusive we" mode, where selves in the shared social world are now available, possible and actualized in consciousness within a given point in time.

Another influential thinker in Filipino psychology has also clearly demonstrated that Filipino awareness of self had to be dialogical with the construct of *loob* (literally translated as "inner space") as an important element of experience within one's world. Alejo in 1992 showed that awareness of self (*malay sarili*) is not confined to an awareness of one's bodily existence, or an awareness of one's existence: acting, creating, relating in the here and now. According to Alejo,

> *Hindi lamang sarili ko ang naisasaloob. Pati ang aking kapwa ay "nasa" loob ko…Bawat "ako" ay mula sa kapwa, kaloob ng kapwa, naimpluwensyahan ng kapwa. Kahit saan ako tumingin, naroon ang bakas ng aking kapwa…Ang*

> *malay-kpawa ay hindi isang estatikong kalagayan. Maaari itong sumibol, tumubo… Ang pangyayari sa buhay natin ay nakakapagdududlot sa atin ng isang uring "pagkagising" sa katotohanan bahagi nga ng ating kalooban ang iba.* [It is not only my self that is in (the inner space). The other[1] is likewise "in" my loob…Every "I" comes from the other, provided by the other, influenced by the other. Wherever I look, there is a trace of my other … the awareness of the other is not a static condition. This (awareness) can develop, grow…The events in our life provide us with a kind of awakening to the truth that we share in the inner space of others] (Alejo, 1992, pp. 86-87)
>
> *…lumilitaw na ang loob ay isang kalawakan at kalaliman ng mga makahulugan kong pakikipag-ugnayan. Dito, maaari akong saktan o bigyan ng tuwa. Dito ako tinatalban. Dito ako nagkakamalay at nakadarama. Dito ako may sarili at may daigdig.* […it has now become apparent that loob is an expanse and depth of my meaningful relationships. Here, I can be pained or be given happiness. Here, I am affected. Here I gain awareness and can experience. Here I have the self and a world.] (Alejo, 1992, p. 99).

The construct of *loob* represents that dialogical space where worlds of intentionality in self development and awareness are experienced by the individual. For Bruner (1986) these worlds are captured through stories:

> For stories define the range of canonical characters, the settings in which they operate, the actions that are permissible and comprehensible. And thereby, they provide, so to speak, a map of possible roles and of possible worlds in which action, though, and self-definition are permissible (or desirable). As we enter more actively into the life a culture around us, as Victor Turner remarks, we come increasingly to play parts defined by the "dramas" of that culture. Indeed, in time the young entrant into the culture comes to define his own intentions and even his own history in terms of the characteristic cultural dramas in which he plays a part – at first family dramas, but later the ones that shape the expanding circle of his activities outside the family (pp. 66-67).

The process of "selfing" is therefore contextual and may be most apparent in emotional experiences where the actions of others are experienced as part of the self. These experiences are rendered available through narratives of selves in the culture and through linguistic references that signify a nondistinction between the self and other, i.e., through terms that represent an "inclusive we" mode of experience and in terms, such as *loob*, that connote the space within which the Other participates in one's engagement with the world. In these conditions, the monologic self shifts to the dialogic self, the individual self shifts to a relational self where the contradictions of varied positions, experiences, and views evident in one's social world are lived to make possible and to actualize the individual's engagement in culture.

The Dialogical Self and the Neurosciences

These accounts of the dialogical self in Indian (and now Malay) culture may suggest something more compelling than a shared set of mental schemas and socialisation processes. Recent findings in the neurosciences seem to provide broad support for the non-monologic conceptions of self that are coming to the fore. These findings, exemplified by the discovery of the *mirror neuron*, make it possible to offer a neurobiological basis for hitherto "literary/impressionistic" accounts of the relational self – and, at best, indicate pathways to Geertz's ideal of a scientific (i.e., materialist) phenomenology of culture.

A mirror neuron is a neuron originally found in the monkey ventral premotor cortex (area F5, see Fig. 1) which fires both when the animal performs an action and when it observes the same action performed by another (possibly conspecific) creature (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2005). The classic case is when neurons in a macaque fire both when the monkey grasps a nut and when it sees a human grasp a nut (thus the "mirror" metaphor). Gallese and Goldman (1998) suggest that this mirror system underlies the human ability to share each others' mental states, providing an automatic simulation of actions, goals, intentions and thus establishing a neurological basis for empathy in human beings.

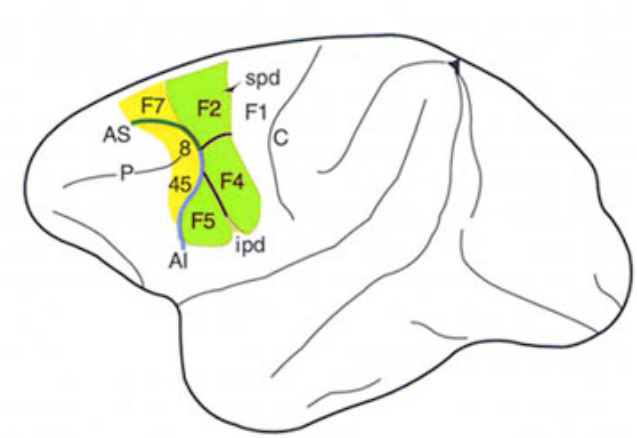

Figure 1. Macaque brain. Area F5 shows location of mirror-neuron activity.

Evidence based on single neuron recordings of the existence of mirror neurons in humans is lacking at present, although Rizzolatti and Craighero (2004) survey indirect evidence for their existence based on brain imaging studies, TMS (transcranial magnetic stimulation) experiments, and EEG/MEG (electro/magnetoencephalography) results (see Fig. 2, next page).

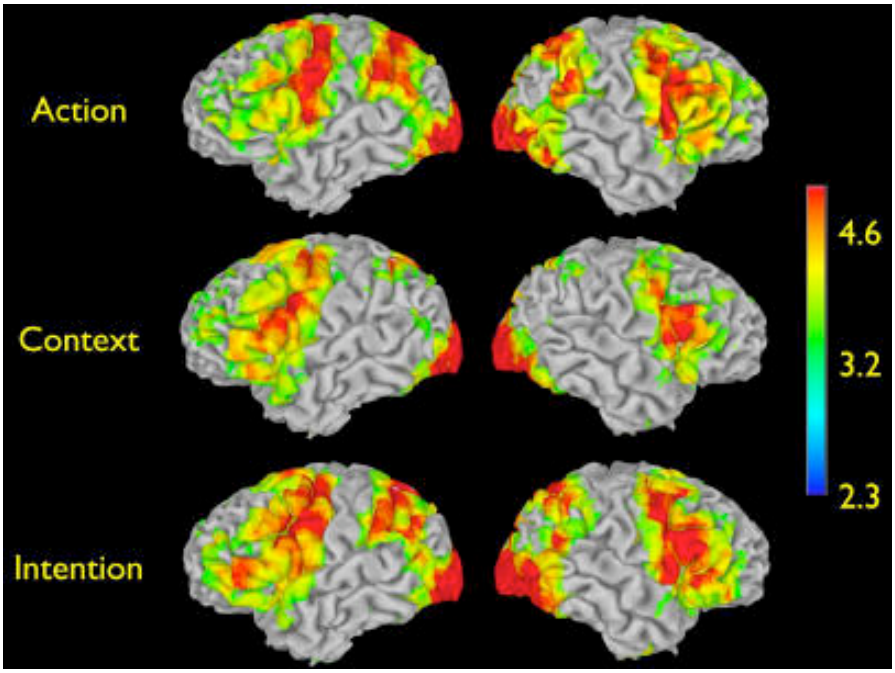

Figure 2. Areas of increased neural activity in human brain for action, context and intention stimuli (left) compared to rest (right). Note similarity between action and intention activity in the parieto-frontal cortex (Iacoboni, Molnar-Szakacs, Gallese, Buccino, et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, all studies of mentalising, or the capacity to represent others' beliefs, intentions and desires, show the involvement of one brain area – a part of the medial prefrontal lobe called the anterior paracingulate cortex. Neural activity here is high not just when a person mentalises about thoughts but also when the person attends to his or her own state.

This mirroring property of the neural system is said to enable people to share mental states, feelings and sensations. In the hypothesised schema, when an observer sees or imagines another person in a particular emotional state, the system automatically activates a representation of that state in the observer, complete with the associated autonomic and somatic responses (Preston & de Waal, 2002). These responses do not require conscious and effortful processing but can be inhibited and controlled in certain instances by one's cognitive faculties. It is believed that this ability to empathize is an adaptation akin to the evolution of the human prefrontal cortex, whose development is closely linked to the emergence of human morality (Schulkin, 2000).[11]

Research on the properties of the mirror neuron system is still in its infancy and a certain amount of controversy has arisen on account of popular but less than careful

claims about the role it plays in language learning, imitation, and mentalising (see Hurford, 2004, for a detailed treatment of these issues). However, the strongest evidence for a neurobiological basis for a built-in "mind reading" capacity among humans comes from studies of patients who have suffered damage to certain parts of their brains.

For example, patients with focal damage to the prefrontal cortex, the orbitofrontal cortex, or the superior temporal sulcus – regions involved in moral judgements and moral behaviour[iii] – exhibit a variety of antisocial and sociopathic behaviours, including the absence of regret, embarrassment, or pride (Miller, Darby, Benson, Cummings, & Miller, 1997; Beer, Heerey, Keltner, Skabini, & Knight, 2003).

It is also widely recognised that autism is an organic brain disorder with multiple causes that also injures the innate *theory of mind* (the awareness that others have mental states that differ from one's own; Frith & Frith, 1999) and hampers its full development (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985). Scanning studies of those with autism and those with focal brain lesions indicate that the theory of mind is found in a distributed neural system incorporating the medial prefrontal cortex, which includes areas activated in monitoring the self's inner states, and the superior temporal sulcus which along with moral judgment is also associated with the detection of movement of animate objects, especially eyes, hands and mouth (Sabbagh & Taylor, 2000; Frith & Frith, 2000; Puce & Perrett, 2003; Frith & Frith, 2003).

Unlike individuals with healthy brains, those with autism experience difficulty in automatically ascribing motivations, intentions and emotions to moving and interacting abstract figures[iv] (Castelli, Frith, Happe, & Frith, 2002). Among healthy children who played a finitely repeated "prisoner's dilemma" game, a standard test of cooperative/competitive behaviour, the degree of development of theory of mind was correlated with greater levels of cooperation. On the other hand, the decisions of autistic participants were not founded on a well-developed, innate theory of mind but rather on a "rule-based, awkward compensatory mechanism" (Happe, 1994) even though the results were often reasonable approximations of those from mentalising subjects.

Since the ability to recognise other minds is critical to reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships, it is probably no surprise that the faculty has survived and is constantly activated throughout an individual's life (Berreby, 2005). Some argue that the biggest evolutionary advantage humans have had is the ability to generate large-scale cooperation even among millions of people who may have no meaningful physical connection to one another (e.g., religions, global justice movements, etc.). Part of this ability may originate from the mirror neuron system, which provides a common hard-wired facility to consider the information available from alternative minds or "voices". But perhaps it is reasonable to suppose further that human-generated *signs* such as those coded in language, especially in the ontogenical processes of early socialisation, would

come to encourage constant sensitivity towards other minds – possibly, with different degrees of intensity across cultures.

Even with this limited discussion, it seems clear that the reflections upon the dialogical self described by Chaudhary appear compatible with these findings from the neurosciences. Both agree, for instance, that the experience of personhood cannot be limited to "cold" individual rationality and "pure" monologic cognition in the face of revelations about the brain's hard-wired ability to form, search for, and evaluate other minds. Interestingly, Chaudhary's account of the dialogical self in Indian families as unavoidably relational and naturally sensitive to others seems to be the logical outcome of a neurobiological "circuit" for empathy. At the very least, it seems a far cry from the conceptions of human agency that have dominated the social sciences for over a century.

Evidence for the existence of a built-in faculty for imitation and mind reading likewise lends support to Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development that depend chiefly upon the analysis of signs and other mediating tools. Even if the origins of sociality, empathy, and the propensity to reciprocate are still contested, the science of mind seems to accommodate the idea that the arbitrary structure of language can contain embedded social preferences, ideals, and values that, once activated, can cue rational and non-rational brain faculties, constrain behaviour, and generate a large diversity of outcomes.

Having said this, the process of making these ideas amenable to mainstream social science will require at the very least a closer fit among concepts and levels of analysis. The problem of all such work of course, is that bodies of theory develop according to specific disciplinal needs. Economists by training, for instance, find it difficult talking about subjective experience, psychologists are sometimes less sensitive to the role circumstances play in decision-making, while neuroscientists continue to wrestle with their share of foundational issues (e.g., how to map regions of the brain or how to link mind-level concepts like free will or reciprocity to their brain-level/neural counterparts). Much more work clearly needs to be done, but the indications are promising.

Notes

i. Since there is no English equivalent to the term, *kapwa* here is roughly translated as the Other. However, Enriquez defines *kapwa* to be "a recognition of shared identities´(Enriquez, 1978, p. 103). Enriquez points out that the concept of kapwa contains both the ideas of interaction (*pagtutunguhan*) and value or conviction (*paninidigan*). Enriquez maintains that value or conviction is attached to one's feelings to the other so that hypocrisy is avoided in a relationship. The *kapwa* relationship is characterized by being-one-with-the-other.

ii. More generally, evolution would favour the development of empathic abilities. In experiments, it has been shown that people with stronger empathic abilities are better predictors of others' motives and actions (Singer, Seymour, O'Doherty, Kaube, et al., 2004).

iii. Moll, Zahn, di Oliviera-Souza, Krueger, & Grafman (2005).

iv. The evidence that the theory of mind is allocated a specific type of circuitry is tied to findings from a well known experiment (Heider & Simmer, 1944). In it, subjects were presented with a short film (less than a minute) featuring various shapes moving on a blank screen. The proposition that a hard-wired capacity to "see minds" was supported by the answers subjects gave when asked to report what they saw: each one, including some very young children, imputed consciousness and agency to the shapes, and ended up telling the "story" of the film.

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