

## **THE RESPONSE OF THE OTHER IN THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP (COMMENTARY ON MORIOKA)**

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**ABSTRACT:** This commentary further explores how therapeutic relationships can create the potential for transformation. Morioka (2008) draws on the dialogical self theory to discuss the role of tension, dialogue, and through the concepts of *utushi* and *ma*, the possibility for new configurations of time and space in the dialogical self. A deep concern for the quality of the response of the other is apparent in Morioka's writing, especially in relation to the promise of new meanings that may be achieved in the therapeutic relationship. Since the therapist plays a central role in providing the appropriate context for such achievements, I advocate for the exploration of multivoicedness in both client and therapist. I also discuss how power differences pervade the social roles of therapist and client, and the significance of this institutionalized inequality in the therapeutic relationship.

Keywords: meaning-making, the other, multiplicity, dialogue, psychotherapy, power

Morioka (2008) introduces innovative ways to think about the in-between spaces within the self, between self and other (intrasubjective, interpersonal, and cultural), and more specifically, within the therapeutic relationship. Guiding the client to achieve the freedom to construct dynamic dialogical spaces has been previously identified as a primary mechanism for transformation in therapy work (Lysaker & Hermans, 2007; Power, 2007). However, Morioka's work further advances an understanding of the process in which dialogue within the self can open spaces to accept and experience multiple selves. In emphasizing the importance of conversational dialogicality, both sequential and simultaneous (as explained in Morioka's article), we as readers gain clarity in how seemingly subtle changes in expression and intonation in dialogue lay the groundwork for powerful changes in meaning.

In this commentary, I continue Morioka's search for creative ways of thinking about these in-between relational spaces and their potential to bring about change. First I discuss the complex nature of the other in the dialogical self, paying particular attention to the social context in which monological forms of being are propagated and reproduced. Then I place my analytical focus more centrally on the relationship between

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therapist and client, drawing on Morioka's reflections on the transformative potential of therapeutic dialogue. I suggest that the process of opening dialogical spaces requires the awareness and engagement of multivoicedness in *both* therapist and client. I discuss issues of power in therapeutic relationships, and pose questions and reflections on how power discrepancies can be reconfigured in a dialogic exchange between therapist and client.

### **The other in the dialogical self**

As Morioka aptly acknowledges, defining the other is a difficult task. Morioka posits -- in a broad sense it means the things, the environment and the world that is positioned *in contrast* (original emphasis) to the self. In this sense, the other is an inevitability, providing the necessary tension to define and create a self in relation to a layered and multidimensional other. In the dialogical self, this process is always in motion, as the self undergoes dynamic reorganizations in response to the collective voices of others in one's intrasubjective and interpersonal world (Hermans, 2001). Hence the line between social and individual is blurred through these ongoing transactions between the self and imagined and actual others.

As Morioka reminds us, we make sense of the world through the exchange of the perspectives of self and others. Therefore the quality of the response of the other gains significance in how one sees oneself and approaches the social world (e.g., with fear, dread, optimism, or confidence). When the other is experienced as unyielding and oppressive, negative valuations become internalized as voices of criticism within the self. An overidentification with the expectations and views of the other can then produce excessive pressure to embody and enact monological ways of being, as Morioka aptly describes. Psychological distress then emerges, in part, from the experience of constraint within prescribed and institutionalized social roles.

The pressure for monological ways of being can best be understood by considering what can be threatening about the multiplicity of the self. A multivoiced, dialogical self obscures the boundaries between self and other in ways that contradict categorizations and divisions of belonging and not belonging, of an authentic self and a non-authentic self. Concepts such as authenticity and purity uphold the fictitious idea that there exists a homogeneous unity within oneself and within social groups (Lugones, 1994). The fiction of purity relies on contrast, in order to designate the other in oppositional terms. Furthermore, this fiction is necessary to maintain a position of power by sustaining social hierarchies based on fragmentation and separation (of pure and thus divisible entities). Hence unity enables the practice of social control by creating explicit boundaries of us and them, self and other, past and present (i.e. whereby a current status becomes ahistoric while also denying further developments into the future). In this sense, an understanding of a shifting and fluid dialogical self holds the potential to disrupt pervasive power structures and oppressive systems.

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A significant goal then is to ease and remove concerns of authenticity (a monologically driven concept) in how one defines one's self in relation to the social world. An apt example of the ongoing struggle to redefine oneself against notions of authenticity is the now largely ubiquitous identity of a diasporic migrant. Bhatia and Ram (2001) speak eloquently about the multiple voices that 'push and pull' between a homeland and a new land, as well as other dialogical negotiations required in enacting a diasporic identity. At times migration instills a greater need and pressure to preserve homogeneous and often idealistic notions of tradition and ethnic integrity, particularly in sociopolitically hostile environments (Yuval-Davis, 1994; Mani, 1993). Alternatively, migration can also provide the opportunity to recreate and revitalize the "old" by interpreting and reinventing cultural traditions to fit current circumstances (Myerhoff, 1978; Kibria, 1994). Such dialogical movements then enable space and freedom for border-crossings across essentialist and stagnant ideas of home, culture, and self.

Returning back to a more local site of interaction, I am deeply in agreement with Morioka in the belief that the inventive process involved in creating new meanings can also be achieved interpersonally, and more specifically, can be facilitated by the introduction of a new interlocutor in the dialogues of the self. The response of the other, the therapist in this case, can yield opportunities to struggle against authenticity and embrace the experience of multiple selves. As Morioka describes, rather than responding solely to the strains imposed by external (actual and imagined) others, the therapist must also address the client's struggles with the constraints of the past, of one's memory of what one used to believe to be one's past, present, and future. Thus the proverb about the Young I and the Old I in Morioka's article appeals for a way to make new meaning of both, seeking and finding healing in a new integrated form. Dislodging rigidity of time and space can then lay the groundwork for transformation, paying particular attention to the transition points that connect the old with the new.

In the following section, I focus on the central role of the therapist in facilitating new meaning-making in dialogue. I advocate for the exploration of multivoicedness in *both* client and therapist. I also discuss the significance of power relations in therapeutic conversations and generate specific questions about how the concepts of *utushi* and *ma* may help us to reconceptualize and reform these discrepancies of power.

### **Multivoiceness within the therapist and the issue of power in therapeutic relationships**

The concepts of *utushi* and *ma* both emphasize and rely heavily on the response of the other. As one of its multiple meanings, *utushi* can be characterized as responsive action, and in the context of the dialogical self, as an exchange through which changes in intonation (Morioka's *tonus*) can result in powerful transformations of meaning. In dialogic conversations where *utushi* is made possible, the utterances of the client are met with empathic response, a constant gesture through which the client's multiple

voices may be heard by the therapist. The therapist must then first recognize the plural voices within the dialogical self, in order to provide the kind of response that will facilitate the client's experience of multiple selves. In essence, an expansion of meaning is aroused by the therapist's ability to imagine other possibilities of thinking about the past, present, and future. Similarly with *ma*, the response of the therapist is paramount in the formation and continuation of "lively tension" in dialogue, thus developing the in-between relational and temporal space necessary for creative meaning construction. Much rests on the therapist's skill in guiding the meta-narrative of the client about the self in order to promote freer, more accepting versions of a sense of self.

From a dialogical perspective that now includes *ma* and *utushi*, and given the centrality of the therapist's role, I believe a necessary next step is to consider the dialogical world within the inner sphere of the therapist. The meeting of dialogical worlds requires active participation from the therapist in acknowledging the struggle between monological and multivoiced selves within her own experience of the self (Haskell et al., 2004). Then the therapist brings this acknowledgment to the relationship and to dialogues where small changes in intonation carry great significance. The client is given the opportunity to tell different storylines about one's self, but in relation to the multiple narrative threads made available in the response of the therapist. In other words, if I as the therapist can bring in my multiple voices to the fore, I will then construct a space and a quality of interaction where many voices can be heard and recognized.

Priel (1999) also discusses the importance of the internal dialogue of the therapist in providing dialogical spaces of self-exploration:

From a dialogical perspective, the analyst's internal dialogue is a basic constitutive aspect of the process of analytical understanding. According to the Bakhtinian perspective...this understanding is made possible only when the external and internal dialogues intersect. The analyst's fantasies and associations provide the active responsive context from which the "counterworld" that meets the analyst's discourse can ripen. (p. 500)

Although Priel speaks from the particular perspective of psychoanalysis, I believe this theoretical stance cuts across any genre of psychotherapy, if and when the goal is to create a setting where multivocal dialogue can exist.

While focusing on the therapist, and more specifically to the dialogical self within the therapist, the question of power becomes relevant and salient. As Morioka discussed, the achievement and process of *utushi* and *ma*, as well as the potential for sequential and simultaneous dialogicality in conversation, must meet the conditions of a collaborative stance and a reversal of dominance between client and therapist. However, Guilfoyle (2006) reminds us that no matter how egalitarian the dialogically oriented therapist may be, the roles of therapist and client are institutionalized roles already

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fraught with power differences. Using a clever illustration, he provides evidence regarding the rigidity and inequality of these roles by simply transcribing a stretch of talk in a therapy session and asking the reader to identify the therapist and the client (whose labels are not provided in the transcript) by the quality of their exchange and each speaker's utterances. Not surprisingly, the task is not at all difficult, as one quickly identifies the client as the person whose accounts are considered open for further interpretation and whose general inclination and expectation is to remain malleable for future transformations (Guilfoyle, 2006). Hence the author asserts that despite the conscious efforts involved in creating collaborative relationships, the institutional force of these social and historical roles places limits on practical applications of the dialogical perspective.

Gonçalves and Salgado (2001) question how we as therapists may be able to provide opportunities for empowerment to our clients. Rather than relying on the therapist's superior knowledge on theory and methodology, these authors suggest that we negotiate with the client in what the client may experience as helpful in exploring and bringing out different voices to the fore. In fact, sometimes giving voice to what has been left silent in the past may result in increasing difficulty and strife in the individual's social world. Since therapists and clients do not start from a horizontally organized power dynamic, it becomes even more essential to consider how power may impact the dialogical quality of therapeutic interactions.

Morioka also emphasizes the importance of reversing the role of expert with the client, whereby the client is given the opportunity to exercise this expertness in dialogue with the therapist. This may not be so easy, however, as sometimes clients expect the therapist to play the expert role and may become disillusioned with the therapist's reluctance to fulfill this role (Guilfoyle, 2006). However, this is where I believe some generative questions and possibilities may arise, in that the relational, spatial, and temporal configurations built by *utushi* and *ma* may disrupt these social expectations and reorganize structures of power within the therapeutic relationship. How can two individuals engaged in lively tension (*ma*) construct an in-between space that reconfigures power in creative ways? When the client achieves a meta-perspective, a self-distancing *ma*, do they appropriate and experience feelings of self-authorship and willfulness? Alternatively, returning back to the discussion regarding the exploration of multivoicedness within the therapist, can the therapist also be positioned as malleable, concurrently affected by the dialogical process in therapy? I believe many opportunities exist in exploring the potential for the restructuring of power in therapist-client relationships, especially as we deepen our understanding of how the dialogical perspective can inform the process of meaning making and transformation in psychotherapy.

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