

***AUTHORING AMBIVALENCE: E-MAIL JOURNALS AND  
THE MEMBRANES OF COMMUNICATION ON IDENTITY***

Olga V. Lehmann-Oliveros

*Universidad de La Sabana  
Colombia*

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?*

**William Shakespeare: *Hamlet***

**ABSTRACT.** Dillon (2012) attempts to demonstrate that e-mail journals well function as part of narrative methodologies for the study adolescents' identity. From a dialogical approach, she identifies diverse voices for authoring the self, which gives an account of the tensions between success and social acceptance. Processes of identity – decision making and sensemaking – may occur with higher intensity among persons considered “gifted”. But, even if their intellectual development is asynchronous (Webb, Amend, Webb, Goerss, Beljan, & Olenchal, 2004), some of their trajectories could be synchronic, in relation to other adolescents, such as future planning, self-discovery and goal achievement motivation. I discuss self-making in adolescence by means of semiotic mediation within the ambivalence of past interpretations and future planning, and the inner-outer nature of the self within the borders mind and society.

**KEYWORDS:** ambivalence, sensemaking, decision making, self-making, adolescence, giftedness

The use of Internet is now becoming a daily life issue for many persons all around the world. For instance, in 2011, 30.2 % of world's population got into Internet, showing an increase in 480.4 % from 2000 to 2011 (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2011). Websites concerning mental health, sexuality, interpersonal relationships, and other sensitive topics, are frequently consulted by adolescent users, who consider the Internet as an important tool, which appears to help when they find it difficult to speak with peers, parents, or health care professionals (Paul & Bryant, 2005). But, other than the information that navigates in the Internet, it is also important to consider its functional-

**AUTHORS' NOTE.** Please address all correspondence regarding this article to Olga V. Lehmann-Oliveros, Bienestar Universitario, Universidad de La Sabana. Campus del puente del común Km 7, Autopista norte de Bogotá. Chía, Cundinamarca, Colombia. Email: olehmanno@gmail.com

ity as a communication platform towards social networks, instant messenger, web blogs and e-mails.

For instance, using weblogs, authors usually have an intense expressive intention of their experience, which makes it a certain tool to analyze the multiple positions of the dialogical process of construction of the self within culture (Hermans, 2004). In contrast, when writing a diary [such as an e-mail journal], there is a desire of privacy immersed (Hevern, 2004). And so, one could wonder what do e-mail journals offer for the study of identity?

This was in fact one of the challenges of Dillon (2012), who attempted to demonstrate that e-mail journals well function as part of narrative methodologies to study adolescents' identity. With this purpose, she analyzed 202 e-mails written by 12 adolescents previously considered as gifted. From a dialogical approach, she identified diverse voices for authoring the self, which gives an account of the tensions between success and social acceptance. Further, e-mail journals function as a mirror platform in two senses. First of all, during the reconstruction of I-positions in past and its dialogue with future through possible same/other positions, and on the other hand, during the sharing act of this constructions with the researcher, who also answered the e-mails seeking to mirror the adolescents' thoughts and feelings without judging or predisposing them.

Notwithstanding, the research of Dillon (2012) is primarily focused in the fact the study participants are considered *gifted*, it is also very important to position giftedness during development. Processes of identity–decision making and sensemaking–may occur with higher intensity among persons considered “gifted”. But, even if their intellectual development is asynchronous (Webb, Amend, Webb, Goerss, Beljan, & Olenchal, 2004), some of their trajectories could be synchronic with other adolescents, such as future planning, self-discovery and goal achievement motivation.

For instance, emergence of autobiographical reasoning (McAdams, 1988) is located in adolescence, and even if there is a lack of data about narratives and identity construction during adolescence, there is evidence suggesting that the engagement in sensemaking of past and its incorporation to the self begins from early to late adolescence (McLean, Breen & Fournier, 2010). On the side of older generations, imagining adolescents prepares them to cope with uncertainty and thus, to make projects based on their past allow them to deal with the ambivalence of time conception in life events (Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedeler, Salgado, Gonçalves, & Ferring, forthcoming).

Further, as long as they facilitate the understanding the self's sense through time, narratives are a foundation for the development of personal identity (McLean, Breen & Fournier, 2010). During human development, early adolescence is a crucial and complex stance for self-discovery (Dillon, 2012), but, what could it mean for an adolescent to assume giftedness during self-making? In this commentary on Dillon

**Figure 1. Ambivalence in semiotic mediation**

**NULL CONDITION: *No sign – No ambivalence***

I really don't know what it is and I don't want to know [no sign] → (no ambivalence)  
 MOVE TO CONDITION 1 WHEN AND IF WANT TO KNOW OCCURS

**CONDITION 1: *Fragile sign - Moderate ambivalence or Minimum ambivalence***

I really don't know what it is [certainty 10% uncertainty 90%] but I want to know [fragile sign] → I was almost completely **wrong** [certainty 10% uncertainty 90%] (moderate ambivalence) → fragile sign remains fragile. STAY IN CONDITION 1

OR

I really don't know what it is [certainty 10% uncertainty 90%] but I want to know [fragile sign] → I was almost completely **right** [certainty 90% and uncertainty 10%] (minimum ambivalence) → Fragile sign becomes medium sign. GO TO CONDITION 2

**CONDITION 2: *Medium sign – Minimum ambivalence or Maximum ambivalence***

I think I know what it is [certainty 50% uncertainty 50%] and I want to know [medium sign] → I was almost completely **right** [certainty 90% uncertainty 10%] (minimum ambivalence) → medium sign remains medium sign. STAY IN CONDITION 2

OR

I think I know what it is [certainty 50% uncertainty 50%] and I want to know [medium sign] → I was almost completely **wrong** [certainty 10% and uncertainty 90%] (maximum ambivalence) → medium sign becomes strong sign. GO TO CONDITION 3A or 3B

**CONDITION 3A or 3B: *Strong sign-Artificially minimum ambivalence or No Sign-No ambivalence***

**3A** I don't know anything at all [no sign] → no ambivalence return to NULL CONDITION

OR

**3B** I know [strong sign] → artificial minimum ambivalence STAY IN CONDITION 3 OPTION 3A OR 3B FOLLOWS UNTIL UNCERTANITY IS ALLOWED TO RE-ENTER → THEN GO TO CONDITION 2.

**Note:** This illustration is taken from Abbey & Valsiner (2005, p. 5).

(2012), I discuss self-making in adolescence by means of semiotic mediation within the ambivalence of past interpretations and future planning, and the inner-outer nature of the self within the borders mind and society.

**Semiotics and the ambivalence on dialogical self-discovery**

The Dialogical Self involves diverse tensions between the emergence of I-positions, which are organized by signs (Valsiner & Han, 2008), where feelings serve to reconcile experiences of past with the future to come, in other to guide decision-making (Branco & Valsiner, 2010). Therefore, I-positioning course implies to cope with ambivalence, here understood as the tension of a system between at least two vectors with diverse size and direction that are semiotically organized (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005).

The emergence of I-positions in adolescents -but also in other developmental arenas- talks about the debate of the being, immortalized by Hamlet's words: "*To be, or not to be: that is the question: (...)*". But the being question is also the debate of movement and becoming (Valsiner, 2002) because leaving a position of the self contributes to the emergence of another position, such as Hamlet continues to say in his monologue: (...) *Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles [movement from current position],/ And by opposing end them?*.

Abbey and Valsiner (2005), well explain the role of ambivalence in the emergence of meanings signs within tension. The authors assume that semiotic mediation departs from a null condition where there is no tension between I-positions towards one or more objects and thus, there is no sign. Higher levels of ambivalence – and power of signs- emerge in relation to the increasing certain/uncertain anticipation of future. In Figure 1 (p. 37) the semiotic organization of ambivalence levels is illustrated.

Notwithstanding, ambivalence levels of semiotic regulation do not work by themselves in the ever-emerging condition of self-making, but are catalyzed by signs (Valsiner & Cabell, 2012). More precisely, some signs function as regulators, that is, they promote or inhibit the continuation of psychological processes (Cabell, 2010).

### **Be or not to be: the ambivalence of self-discovery**

It is easier to acknowledge how the past influences one's present, than realizing how present is influenced by future (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005). Imagination during adolescence is concentrated in reconciling the past in the narrations to cope with the uncertain future in order to construct one's life project (Zittoun et al, forthcoming). But, it is not always easy for an adolescent [in cases, neither for an adult] to express "who" or "what" he/she is (Dillon, 2012). From a dialogical perspective, those "who" or "what" are constantly emerging during self- discovery course as I-positions, which obviously involves the ambivalence of decision making. Moreover, other than planning projects and strategies, developmental trajectories during adolescence also include seeking for information in order to make personal decisions (Nurmi, 2004). Thus, the *Who am I* discovering during early adolescence implies the self-awareness of "I as an author of my life" (Dillon, 2012), and, as pencils and erasers are constantly needed by authors when creating characters for a novel, decision-making becomes essential for a cultural-developmental understanding of self-making.

Returning to giftedness, adolescents identified as gifted are often recognized to have an intense focus on reaching success from their talented skills (Webb et al, 2004). One can hypothesize that anticipations of future are linked to the preoccupation of having a perfect performance and avoiding any triumph menace, both based in previous achieved goals and the self-recognition of "I as achiever" by special talents.

Excerpt 5 of *Piggy-in-the-middle*'s journal (Dillion, 2012, p. 17) is an accurate illustration of decision-making through ambivalence and goal-reaching emotions. In Figure 2 the dynamics of ambivalence as well as its relation to goal achievement are presented.

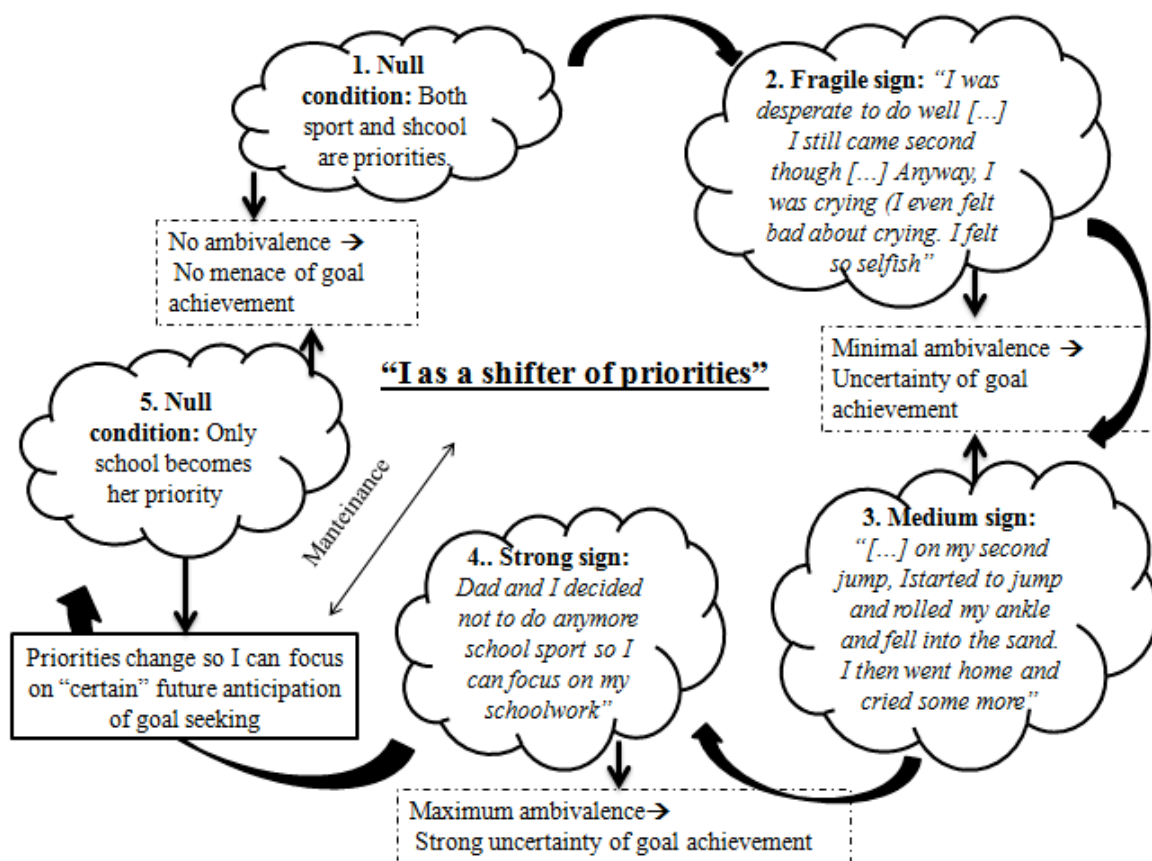


Figure 2. Decision-making from ambivalence of goal achievement.

*Piggy-in-the-middle* recognized herself as both sport and intellectual gifted, being her pseudonym prove of her position in between two talents (Dillon, 2012). In the situation presented in Figure 2, she is making sense of an experience of sport performance, which becomes a sign for decision making, based on the previous recognition of her special talent. The **null condition** of the sign reflects no ambivalence of her sport skills and so on, the anticipation of triumph in future. But, when her performance is not the one she expected (she came second and not first), the **fragile sign** is evidenced by increasing ambivalence of possible goal seeking, as she notices that it is possible to lose, and goal achievement anticipation is not that certain. Even more, when she falls down during the second jump, the **medium sign** emerges as future anticipation of failure becomes more evident. Then, the **strong sign** emerges when she and her father decide to choose one of her special talents, so that she will not focus any

more on school sport activities avoiding losses, and finally, when academic school-works become her only priority for goal seeking, it emerges again a **null condition** (semiotically different from the first one) where it appears no ambivalence about priorities, but also about goal seeking. In sum, anticipating—with all the emotions in between—possible losses in sport activities, she rather direct her trajectories towards academic performance in which she anticipates success, so that she can still position herself as a “shifter of priorities.”

In fact, it is precisely the “goal achievement”/“non-goal achievement” anticipation, which works as a regulator for decision making in order to promote goal achievement and the reaffirmation of possession of talented skills. Let’s take another excerpt of the narratives presented in Dillon (2012) to look in depth at these semiotic regulation in adolescents considered gifted.

*Lexie*, a 13 years old girl, writes: “*Women like Condoleezza Rice, Hilary Clinton, Angela Merkel and Anita Roddick have achieved much in their lives and I asked myself why I wouldn’t be able to do exactly the same, maybe even more, by learning from their mistakes*” (Dillon, 2012, p. 15). As it is evidenced, during self-making, *Lexie* recognizes she is not any of the prominent women she mentioned (neither yet a prominent woman), but the desire of becoming like them is straight related to the awareness of her special talents, because she thinks forward that it will be possible to become like them in future. Anticipating success from talented skills, she compares herself with famous and successful women, and she is able to say she could be even better because she is that intelligent to learn from their mistakes. In this sense, following successful models, will serve her to anticipate her actions and promote goal achievement (Dillon, 2012), and to assume the “I as self-reliant” position guides her, together with the giftedness assumption, during decision-making and future planning.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the dialogue between internal and external positions, that comes into scene when *Lexie* used the qualities of famous and successful women all around the world to talk about her special skills. These internal and external positions are part of the self -but still extended to the environment-, and in that sense they gain significance by means of the transaction over time during the emergence of I-positions (Hermans, 2001). And in consequence, the position of “*I as self-reliant*” does not exist without self-comparison with successful models: Think about self-efficacy and social learning by means of modeling (Bandura, 1983).

### **Conclusion: Be or not to be and the inner-outer borders of the dialogical self**

It is not upon to us to separate the inner-outer nature of the self, but to work in its borders in order to describe, interpret and generalize how their relationship constitutes the human condition, and how our development is interdependent to it (Marsico, Cabell, Valsiner, & Kharlamov, in press). Inner positions of the self raise their importance always in relationship with external positions (Hermans, 2001) being a

researcher who reads our journals, or prominent women we compare with. I cannot question “who am I?” without questioning “who am I in response to others?” (Hermans, 2003), also considering myself as an addressee of my messages (Valsiner & Cabell, 2012).

In particular, the self-discovery for adolescents implies to plan future in order to cope with the uncertainty of their life (Zittoun et al, forthcoming). But in the case of adolescents identified as gifted, where the goal seeking motivation is more intense (Webb et al, 2004), one could hypothesize that it is the higher intensity of goal achievement motivation which functions as a semiotic regulator during future planning, decision-making, and sensemaking. Furthermore, as emotions serve as a pivotal prompt for the reevaluation of goal seeking of from talented skills, this study not only challenge the mainstream that adolescents’ self is more doing than feeling (Dillon, 2012), but corroborates the role of affective processes on the micro genesis of the subjective [or intersubjective] phenomena (Branco & Valsiner, 2010), which implies to consider that decision-making is about sensemaking (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008) and that senses made both from doing and feeling, are mediators of future planning.

Even if more investigations are to be done in these arenas -both considering asynchronic and synchronic nuances of gifted adolescents development and its relationship with decision making-, one of the main contributions of Dillon (2012) for the Dialogical Self Theory, was to put in context special abilities of the self into the study of identity, describing the tensions of self-positioning that emerged in adolescents considered gifted, as future planning, goal achievement and social acceptance.

#### References

- Abbey, E., & Valsiner, J. (2005). Emergence of meanings through ambivalence. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research [On-line Journal]*, 6(1), Art. 23. Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-05/05-1-23-e.htm>
- Bandura, A. (1983). *Principios de la modificación de la conducta*. Salamanca, Spain: Ediciones Sígueme.
- Branco, A., & Valsiner, J. (2010). Towards cultural psychology of affective processes: Semiotic regulation of dynamic fields. *Estudios de Psicología*, 31(3), 243-25
- Cabell, K. (2010). Mediators, regulators, and catalyzers: A context-inclusive model of trajectory development. *Psychology & Society*, 3(1), 26-41
- Dillon, L. (2012). Email as an arena for authoring a dialogical self among gifted young adolescents: A qualitative study. *International Journal for Dialogical Science*, 6(2), 1-33.

- Hermans, H. (2001). The dialogical self: Toward a theory of personal and cultural positioning. *Culture Psychology* 7(3), 243–281.
- Hermans, H. (2003). The construction and reconstruction of a dialogical self. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 16, 89–130. DOI: 10.1080/10720530390117902
- Hermans, H. (2004). Introduction: The dialogical self in a global and digital age. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*. 4(4), 297-320.
- Hevern, V. (2004). Threaded identity in cyberspace: Weblogs & positioning in the dialogical self. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 4(4), 321-335
- McAdams, D. P. (1988). *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- McLean, K., Breen, A, V., & Fournier, M, A. (2010). Constructing the self in early, middle, and late adolescent boys: narrative identity, individuation, and well-being. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 20(1), 166–187. DOI: 10.1111/j.1532-7795.2009.00633.x
- Miniwatts Marketing Group. (2011). Estadísticas Mundiales Del Internet, Usuarios del Internet y Población por Países y Regiones. Retrieved from <http://www.exitoelexportador.com/stats.htm>
- Nurmi, J.-E. (2004). Socialization and self-development: channeling, selection, adjustment, and reflection. In R. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 85-124). New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Marsico, G., Cabell, K., Valsiner, J., & Kharlamov, N. (in press). Ambiguity of borders: The self and the others. In G. Sammut, P. Daanen, & F. Moghaddam (Eds.), *Understanding self and others: Explorations in intersubjectivity and interobjectivity*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Paul, B., & Bryant, A. (2005): Adolescents and the Internet. *Adolescent Medicine Clinics*, 16(2), 413-426. DOI: 10-1016/j.admecli.2005.03.001
- Valsiner, J. (2002). Irreversibility of time and ontopotentiality of signs. *Estudios de Psicología*, 23(1), 49-59
- Valsiner, J., & Cabell, K. (2012). Self-making through synthesis: Extending dialogical self theory. In H. Hermans & T. Gieser (Eds.), *Handbook of dialogical self theory* (pp. 82-97). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.



## AUTHORING AMBIVALENCE

- Valsiner, J., & Han, G. (2008). Where is culture within the dialogical perspectives on the self? *International Journal for Dialogical Science*, 3(1), 1-8. Retrieved from [http://ijds.lemoyne.edu/journal/3\\_1/pdf/IJDS.3.1.01.Valsiner\\_Han.pdf](http://ijds.lemoyne.edu/journal/3_1/pdf/IJDS.3.1.01.Valsiner_Han.pdf)
- Webb, J., Amend, E., Webb, N., Goerss, J., Beljan, P., & Olenchal, R. (2004). *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnoses of gifted children and adults: ADHD, bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, depression, and other disorders*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Zittoun, T., Valsiner, J., Vedeler, D., Salgado, J., Gonçalves, M., & Ferring, D. (forthcoming). *Melodies of living: Developmental science of human life course*. New York: Cambridge University Press

(This page intentionally left blank)