CHILDREN AS CARERS FOR THEIR SIBLINGS IN INDIAN FAMILIES: USING DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY TO EXAMINE CHIDREN'S NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT. Children's sense of self and others emerges from the daily activities they participate in and the cultural roles they play. They are continually engaged in dialogue with the self and with others, deeply nurturing and nurtured by the personal and cultural constructs of their figured worlds. In the telling of their personal experiences, they reveal and reinforce their personal selves in multiple manifestations. In this paper, we draw upon Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and social language and Hermans's concept of multivoicedness and the dialogical self to understand how children see themselves in various roles and how these roles both reflect and construct their socio-cultural context. The care of children by children in the Indian community forms a significant element of childhood and is integral to their role in the family and community. Children's experiences and expressions as carers for younger children will be examined in order to illustrate the emergence of dialogicality in self-processes and cultural meanings with specific reference to notions of the Indian self.

Keywords: children, carer, lifeworld, daily living, ecology, dialogical self, narratives

In an attempt to establish the context for the paper, we incorporate a striking narrative of a child from the novel *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Road*)[1]. The child's thoughts for his sister, although emerging in an instant, seem to have come from a deep and ingrained dialogue with the self.

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[1] *Pather Panchali* is a Bengali novel written by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhayay in 1929. It was translated in English by T.W. Clark and T. Mukherjee as *Song of the Road.* It is the story of a rural Bengali household told through the eyes of two young siblings; their struggles with poverty, aspirations, and the times that they lived in.

All this time Opu had been sitting over his food. He had watched and heard but he had not said a word. He did not know whether his sister had stolen the mangoes. He was quite sure that was not stealing…a few had fallen from the Shonamukhi tree and she had picked them up…he was furious with his mother for pulling her hair out. He loved Durga's hair. He could not say why, but he did, especially when it hung long and dry over her eyes or when the wind blew it straight up in the air; and as he thought of her hair he felt even fonder of her than ever before. It seemed to him that there was no one anywhere to care for her. One thought only possessed his mind, how to drive all her unhappiness away and to make up to her for all the things she had to do without. (Bandhopadhyay, 1929/1999, p. 85).

Children live their lives among many 'others', they participate in everyday cultural processes, experience new situations, make sense of them, and contribute to their and others' life-worlds. In a world of adults, they build their own worlds. These worlds that children inhabit are often disregarded or dismissed by adults. However, for children, these processes and people are formative in constructing the sense of who they are and where they belong. They interact with a myriad of entities- people, relationships, life-histories, physical spaces, social, and cultural systems- all of which constitute their ecology. Children give each interaction, each entity a personal meaning through dialogues they have with themselves, thereby creating and reconstructing a world that is unique and personal, and yet with constituents that form in engagement with the world. The consolidated, dynamic sense of self is what Hermans calls the dialogical self (Hermans, 2001). Accessing this landscape of the self can be accomplished in several ways, and the Personal Positioning Repertoire is one such method by which a person's internal and external positions are mapped in dialogue with an expert (Hermans, 2001). How is it possible to explore children's sense of self? Are they able to look at themselves in the same way as adults and engage in an analytical dialogue? This article makes an attempt to access children's self-space through their narratives gathered as part of a study on care of children by children to explore how this social phenomenon finds expression.

We learn a lot about children's lives by being around them, witnessing their day to day lives and conversations. Navigating through the spaces to find their way; actively participating in the dialogues of life-processes, children's endless reality is truncated through meaning-making, guiding the developing child to specific pathways (Keller, 2007). In theorising about the person-culture interface, Dialogical Self theory (DST) actively decentralizes both the concept of self and the concept of culture, making the interaction between the two as key (Hermans, 2001). As Valsiner (2007) proposes, culture is the dynamic process of person with the environment, of selective meaning-making.

This paper will call upon episodes from the lives of children in their ecological frameworks to explore how the concept of the dialogical self can help explain the person-culture interface in children's lives[2]. The study explores the processes of care of children by siblings in two settings: Rural Rajasthan and Urban Delhi, India. With an ethnographic stance, the study illuminates the cultural spaces of childhood.

Imagining the Dialogical self

It is through imagination that we make sense of our experiences; of the kaleidoscopic nature of reality. The centrality of imagination is integral to understanding how children use images and metaphors in dialogues with the self to construct their worlds (Johnson, 1987; Hermans, 2003). In the earlier description from *Pather Panchali*, the child's thoughts about his sister are expressed as images that he gives to this affection. This relation that he has with 'the other' (his sister) becomes an embodiment of his own self; and the other becomes a part of the self. This is the primary assumption of the dialogical self theory.

With reference to a person's identity, Hermans (2003) argues that a person's self is expressed as "who am I in relation to the other?" and "who is the other in relation to me?" (Hermans, 2003, p.104). This alterity is believed to be central to the sense of self. Since this is always an evolving and interactive process, the outside world is a constant presence, and also implies that the 'other' is only partially known or understood, since it is a part of the self.

Is the continually evolving self only a body of thoughts and voices? Bakhtin's assertions about the self as being polyphonic gives each voice a discontinuity, each having an independent world, although constituting a coherent identity as a person matures. These voices in turn come together in dialogue with each other to form a narrative that gives continuity to this self. The self is thus, simply a story that we construct about ourselves from our interactions with others; a personal meaning or person-position embodied as an idea or a thought in the dialogue. And yet, the inner dialogical self is not some fixed private language, it always has an outward criterion (Wittgenstein, 1953/1963). If we look at James's theory of self in this frame, the 'I' self is the thinker that brings the 'Me' selves (actors) together in a coherent manner (James, 1890/1983). What is mine: my relations, my interactions with others, are extensions of myself but they also have a voice of their own which may be separate from mine and yet contribute to my coherent sense of self. This fluidity or flow in the dialogical self gives it a certain boundary as well as boundlessness (Hermans, 2003; Chaudhary, 2008).

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[2] The children, who are in the age range of birth to 12 years, are participants of the ongoing PhD study titled "Ecology of care of children by siblings".

The dialogue with others includes words, intonations, and gestures that are symbolically laden (Mead, 1934). Language has been espoused by many philosophers and theorists of human development as a social process that is more than just content and structure. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes, "It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.—Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others.—And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1953/1963, para 19). He further quotes Augustine to explain how a child uses her language, "and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires" (Wittgenstein, 1953/1963, para 1). This is how she not only begins to understand the social language of the community but also figures her own personal social language. These processes are believed to happen simultaneously. What then is a part of material culture and social systems also becomes a part of person's ways of thinking and living (Wierzbicka, 1997).

Reflecting on the Indian perspectives of self

In the Hindu-Indian view of the self, there are philosophical and spiritual underpinnings to self-knowledge (Paranjpe, 1998) and discourses on self-awareness have been an important pre-occupation of the Hindu scriptures. Self that exists as a person, or personhood, is believed to be one that reflects a plurality of worlds. It is recommended that a person's conduct must always be evaluated from three positions, namely, *desh* (context), *kala* (time) and *patra* (individual) (Sinha, 2002), and lack of consideration to any one of these facts could be misleading. The ancient Hindu treatises of the *Upanishads*[3] have elaborate discourses on Indian notions of self (Sharma, 2008). The true knowledge of self is believed to be achieved through following the *Upanishads* in conduct, in enduring relationships with each other and society, bringing a certain balance to the *Rta* (cosmos) (Sinha, 1998). Prosocial behaviour is vital to this balance. The community, caste, and group to which the person belongs are believed to give an identity to the person, along with biological characteristics like sex. As a part of the identity, an individual is bestowed with obligations towards self, others and society which are a person's *Dharma*. While doing (or not doing) so, the person accumulates deeds- merits and demerits *(Karma)* that transcend through the soul (*Jiiva*) into the future, the continuous cycle of birth and death. It is not just a metaphysical argument but a guiding philosophy for living one's daily life (Saraswathi & Ganapathy, 2002). In the present world, stories from epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, local wisdom in form of folklore, anecdotes, and metaphors are woven in the social and moral sense-making of life-worlds. The past is very much present in India's present (Thapar, 2000).

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[3] Upanishads are a set of Hindu treatises that includes the philosophical principles of the Vedas. These texts delve into the concepts of *karma* (action), *atman* (soul), *moksha* (nirvana), and *Brahman* (the supreme).

Although, personhood is believed to be a free flowing entity, in deep entanglement with society, *Karma* is personal. The person is the sole agency and how a life is lead is believed to define the future course of events. Temporality and continuity are central to the notion of *Karma*. The *Upanishads* emphasize agency as constituting an actor *(Karta)*, one who knows *(Jnata)*, and also one who bears the consequences of pleasure or suffering *(Bhokta)* (Paranjpe, 1998). With self-realization as the ultimate goal of life, the self *(Atman)* is deemed as transcendental; a core that witnesses all events without being affected or changed (Paranjpe, 1998). It is the actor, the knower, and the bearer who are believed to be impacted, not the core self. Even while the context is changing, and the impressions and expressions of personhood are being influenced, there is continuity of a self that essentially forms the person, that when you take everything away (so to speak), what remains is this core, indispensable self. This self is assumed to be striving for realisation, eternal bliss and attainment of *Moksha* (freedom from the cycle of life and death). To further elucidate this point, we incorporate *Advaita Vedantist* Sankara's interpretation of unity and sameness of self in the *Upanishads* as noted by Paranjpe (1998):

> Sankara (1980, 1.1.1) begins his commentary on Badarayana's Brahmasutra by saying that although subject and object (*visayin-visaya*) are as contradictory as light and darkness, they appear fused because of an illusory superimposition (*adhyasa*) of the properties of one on the other. Similarly, the *Atman*, which is unchanging and always blissful, appears to be continually changing, now happy then sad, clear or confused and so on, due to the superimposition of the attributes of ego onto it. Reciprocally, the ever-changing ego derives its sense of self-sameness by misattributing the Atman's permanence onto itself. Knowing, acting, and suffering are the properties of the ego, born of the mind or "inner instrument" (*antahkarana*). (Paranjpe, 1998, p. 170).

The inner self *(antaratman)* is believed to be the eternal self *(purusah purano)* and its misconstrual as the constantly fluctuating ego is believed to cause illusion and human suffering.

There are other religions and other texts too that have views about self, and that which influence lives of people in India. Buddhism, another prominent religion in India, denies the permanence of self. Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, believed that there are only impermanent states of feeling and behaviour that are bound by the principle of cause and effect. The law of *Dharma* and *Karma* are integral to Buddhist teachings. Here, we see that a moral dilemma is evident; where on one hand 'self' is deemed as non-permanent and on the other hand, is believed to pass from one life to another to bear the consequences for one's actions. Buddhism takes the middle course and believes that the identity of the person is 'identity-in-difference'. So, it is not the soul but *karma* of the person that transmigrates to the next life (Paranjpe, 1998).

Within the Islamic view, the Arabic word *Nafs* from the *Holy Quran* is most commonly translated to 'self'. It is believed to be the body of knowledge that gives a unique identity to the person. The self is permanent and does not die with death. It changes as one goes through life but does not transform into something it never was. Self is believed to be evolving throughout. The laws as commandments given by *Allah* in the *Holy Quran* facilitate this process. To have a self or believe in one, one has to believe in *Allah* (Ul Haque, 1994).

The Dialogical Self Theory and Indian notions of self

The interdependence between the person and the society (in the construction of self) can be safely presumed as a pan-Indian view. The dialogical self is culturally a very familiar notion, since the socio-cultural context in which Indians grow and socialise is believed to be integral to their sense of self (Chaudhary, 2012; Chaudhary & Sriram, 2001). In fact, to make sense of family dynamics and interpersonal relations which are vital to Indian identity, it is important to see an individual in relation with others (Chaudhary, 2008; Trawick, 1992). There is a consciousness of the family or familism to invoke Roland (1996), and Anandalakshmy (2010), where each member plays a role that influences the life of the other, and relational dynamics and adaptability are key processes. Children participate in family processes from a very early age, thereby developing an acute sense of relationality, interdependence and cohesiveness of the family structure. The family is believed to form the very core of a person's sense of self, and individuals are expected and actively socialized to alter their conduct on the basis of who they are interacting with. Context, person, and situation are key elements of this teaching, in accordance with philosophical traditions.

Regarding children in Indian society, they are by no means considered passive individuals (Das, 1989). Children are actively ushered into the community through a set of rituals (Uberoi, 2004), where the worlds of children and adults have little or no separation. This guides them to become a contributing member of the community- from being babies who are believed to be the gifts of the gods and closest to the supreme powers to becoming members of society attributed with social as well economic value. Children's research in India has largely been in the domain of care and socialization of children with intended focus on parental behaviour. Ethnographic studies were introduced in India through western research projects, such as Minturn and Hitcthock's 'Rajputs of Khalapur study' (1966) to Trawick's illustrated account of 'facets of love in a Tamil family' (1992).

Children's personal narratives and the dialogical self

DST proposes that there is a constant interplay of dialogues between the various I-positions of self when people narrate their experiences (Hermans, 2002). Every time a narrative happens, a person's sense of the experience is reorganized. Indeed, narratives

CHILDREN AS CARERS FOR THEIR SIBLINGS

interface between self and society providing a continuum of past, present, and future experiences (Ochs & Capps, 1996). By telling stories about themselves and their interaction within ecological settings, children share their knowledge and ways in which they interpret and reproduce this knowledge. It is through personal narratives, that children reveal the intricacies of their everyday lives (Miller, 2009). They share everyday concerns of lives- of care, work, school, home, safety, locality, festivities, fields, animals, religion and so on. Hermans (2001) helps us to see how these narratives constitute the sense of self.

Narratives are not just passively received stories. When a child narrates a personal experience or story of another, she makes the story her own, personalises it, with language that is a 'form of life' (Wittgenstein, 1953/1963). These words have both personal as well as shared meanings. Besides the words, the body language too becomes a form of life- the play of the eyes, the glances children throw at each other, the movements of head and neck, from contraction to the exaggeration of face expressions, gestures, and body's use of space. Language in narratives is more of an experience with internal criteria (I as a child, as a girl, as a carer, as a student) as well as external criteria (what child, girl, carer, family means in society). The point suggests what Das (1998) marks about Wittgenstein's question of beliefs: what do they look like from inside?

Although Herman's theory was first applied in the clinical situations, with adults seeking therapeutic intervention, several attempts have been made to apply the ideas in other contexts, cultural as well developmental. A researcher who listens to a narrative by a child, or observes a child, also undergoes a dialogical process in her head. She goes through the story again and again, being with it for a while, and then weaving it into a 'form' which is in itself a narrative. This inevitably gives the first act (child's narrative or observation) another personal history. Here, we will include a narrative from the PhD study to further discuss how a personal narrative emerges from a child's dialogues with self.

A 7 year-old boy and his sister (3 years) lived with their parents and extended family in a small town in Rajasthan in Northern India. The little girl had a congenital heart condition and cleft palate. The family always extended special care and attention to her and were always protective. The little girl loved to play and would often follow her brother around. Sometimes he took her along; sometimes he hid from her and slipped away. The mother often lamented that the brother would run away and did not take her along, but also knew that he loved her. In another conversation with the researcher, the mother accepted that he was a child too and how much can be expected from him. It was almost as if she was having a dialogue with herself. The boy would give a coy smile when he was being talked about and insisted that he played with his sister. At many instances, he included her (the little sister) in games or let her linger when he was playing. In a later conversation, alone with me, he said that he did not always like having his sister around, saying "I feel love for her but sometimes I also feel

angry. She keeps running behind me. Others makes fun of her, laugh at her. I also laugh. I also feel bad. Sometimes, I wish that she dies…..this time when she went for an operation to the city, I thought that she should not come back"[4].

In the above conversation, the young boy narrated a plurality of perspectives, selves in dialogue, giving the voices a complex yet coherent narrative. His narratives moved from one context to another, one relationship to another and yet, each time he carried the previous one with him, giving it the polyphonic quality that Bakhtin relates with the dialogical imagination of the self (Bakhtin, 1929/1973). In earlier conversations when the mother or other adult members talked about the boy, he shied away. He insisted that he took care of his sister as he is supposed to. He played with her, let her come with him when he went out and protected her when she needed attention because of her illness. He was also aware that his sister was mocked by his friends because of her appearance that was not 'normal'. In the collective, he joined them and laughed at her but also felt protective of her, responsible towards her. He seemed to be constantly dealing with multiple emotions towards his sister. In frustration, he wished that his sister would not survive the surgery, perhaps thinking that it would relief both for her as well as for him; providing a release from the 'different' and 'difficult' life situation.

Children are as much affected by difficult situations as adults. Like adults, children are also constantly trying to figure out ways to make sense of their situation, in this case an atypical one. Of course, children have varied temperaments and they react to situations differently. It is important for adults to realise that children too have complex and multiple worlds engaged in constant dialogue. The young boy in the example cited above indicated an ease with the researcher, voicing a complexity that seems quite precocious, something that he also realised would be too harsh to say to a family member. The dialogue with the self is thus a powerful method not just with adults but also with children making their inner world available to others (Bakhtin, 1929/1973). The dialogical self displays a field of activity (Valsiner, 2002) where different I-positions meet along with processes of agreement, disagreement, negotiation, acceptance and conflict (Hermans, 2001).

Children as Carers for their Siblings: Applications of the Dialogical Self Theory

How a society adjudges an environment of care and development to children is largely based on how it conceives the child (Nsamenang, 1992). In Indian families, the goals of cultural-developmental processes are interwoven with the ideology and practice of care. Children are not only cared for, but they also participate in taking care of others: children, adults, animals, plants (fields) and the household. Generally we see that terms such as 'caretakers' and 'caregivers' are used to for a person who cares for

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[4] Translated from Hindi. All the subsequent quotes of the participants included in this paper are translated from Hindi or a local dialect spoken in rural Rajasthan.

another. The term 'carer' seems more pertinent since it places the agency with the individual. Both the child who cares and the child who is being cared for, are participants in this interaction. They derive their identity from each other. However, the child's identity as a carer is not like that of a mother. There is no translation for 'sibling carer' in Hindi. When questioned about their activities in this domain, children would respond with terms like: "I protect my brother or sister" or "care for", "keep" or "watch out for".

Children gain knowledge about their social roles and cultural practices in group settings in most Indian families (Paranjpe, 1998). Their development of self is largely dependent on the activities and roles they take up in culture. The child contributes to the family's everyday activities, not as assistance or an extracted activity, but as an ongoing process or tradition that is deeply enmeshed into the daily lives (Suneja, 2010). This process spells out the delegation of roles and responsibilities as well as the unfolding of the child's life over the years. Similarly, the role of a child as carer for the sibling is assumed as natural, not always spelt out, except in situations where it is acutely visible. One instance of this was seen in a school teacher's laments about poor attendance of a child on account of these responsibilities. Care of children by siblings is deeply integrated in the lives of individuals as a part of the socialisation process in Indian families.

Suneja (2010) found that when children were asked why they took care of the siblings, they often responded with a comment like: "If not me then who else?" More detailed discussions with children revealed that the phrase carried a sort of imperative, implying that the child, as an older sibling and family member had deeply internalised this responsibility. The argument was simple, if the adults are not available or able, I will look after my younger brother or sister.

On being asked if they take care of their siblings, most children expressed that they did and implied the belief that children everywhere took care of their siblings. Many also expressed that they took greater care of their siblings than children in other, better-off households. In villages, children claimed that they did more work including care of siblings compared to those in urban areas. In the words of one child, "Children of the village are strong. They can do more work. City children can't do so much work". This young girl had an idea, not only about her own life world, but also how it was distinct from city life. This notion had a shared life-history associated with it.

Hermans (2003) stresses that the dialogical self is historically and culturally contextualised. People construct and reconstruct life-histories to manifest as well as sustain links with their present lives. Besides the life history of the person who utters the words, each word has a history as well (Bakhtin, 1929/1973). Children of families who have migrated from villages to cities often invoked village life in their narratives of daily living in the city. The instant sense of belonging (to the village) was evident even

among those children for whom visits to the native place may have been very few and far-between. The image gives a sense of continuity to the otherwise discontinuous, transient, and frequently harsh nature of migration for the urban poor migrants. The child elaborates and internalises this image; giving it a personal history as she carries on with her daily routine, or when she is narrating a story (Miller, 2009). Such dialogues were in clear evidence in this study.

In the following examples from the study, we can find instances of children's narratives related to care of younger siblings. These instances have been selected to display multivoicedness and dialogicality in children's conversations related to their network of relationships. Reema[5] (7 years) was making arrangements to put her brother Sonu (1 year) to sleep. She put down the cot first, spread out a shawl, and laid him down. She fed him milk with a bottle. When he took no more, she put the bottle down and turned him towards herself. All this while she talked to him, "You will sleep, you will not drink milk?" It was hard to tell whether she was asking him a question or imagining his response. She gently patted him with one hand on his shoulder and other on the hip, in a practice commonplace among Indian families. The child closed his eyes and stopped moving. Thinking that he had fallen asleep, she stopped patting and slowly moved away. The child moved. She immediately brought her hands to pat the child and hummed a tune this time. She slowly withdrew her hands but continued to hum. She kept humming as she cleaned the house and did some other chores around the house. She looked back at the child after every few moments. The child slept quietly. Reema, although only 7 years of age, displayed such a clear understanding of how to ensure that her little brother falls of and stays sleeping. She worked out carefully how she must withdraw gradually to ensure that Sonu was still aware of her presence as she got up to do other things. This she did by humming as she withdrew.

In another case, Anju (11 years) with her sibling Kaju (5 years) and friends lived in an urban resettlement area. The only outdoor space to which they had access was the adjacent road. During her interview, Anju's mother lamented "Whenever you look, she is on the road". Kaju was unable to walk on her own so her sister, Anju, carried her on one side of her waist wherever she went. She took her to the road with her. She brought a cot from the home and placed it in front of the temple, on the edge of the road. With Kaju seated on the cot, Anju played on the road. She came to the sister from time to time; shared a smile, or some laughter. She kept a constant eye on her. Whenever she found her sister drifting towards the edge of the cot, she immediately ran towards her and placed her in the center exclaiming loudly, "You will fall".

These observations illuminate child's sensitivity to the younger sibling, the family dynamics as well as cultural practices. Children negotiate their assumed responsibilities and also find their own ways around it. In both cases, there are hardly

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[5] Names of the participants have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

any words exchanged, but the children are certainly engaged in a dialogical process. The sibling is sensitive to the actions of the younger one and responds to the 'symbolic conversation'. The very young children are also seen as full communicative partners who have desires and memories (Das, 1989). DST gives adequate attention to this dynamics, without reducing it exclusively to either personal choice or cultural practice. DST explains that individuals are aware of the processes of positioning that surpasses any explicit dialogue exchange and even turn-taking (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). This is clearly evident in the above instances. Children may or may not engage in dialogue or activities for the other but they are 'mindful' of each other in fundamental ways. There is a stated and an unstated sense of obligation of self towards others. However, this absorption was not consistent and constant. Sometimes, the children did turn away from the other and attend to self-interests. This demonstrates positioning.

In the next example, we get a perspective of the younger child as well. The example demonstrates how care of children is intricately woven in the daily lives of children. Preeti (9 years) and her siblings and cousins (all younger to her), lived in a village in Rajasthan, and walking to the fields where the adults were involved in farming (mustard and wheat) was a daily activity. On one occasion, she with her siblings went to a nearby well to take a bath. One by one, all children reached the well and enjoyed playing with the water. Preeti helped them in getting their clothes off or pouring water as they rubbed themselves. Within sight, her mother and grandmother were cutting grass for the buffaloes. Preeti picked up a sickle and started cutting grass on one edge of the field. She asked one of her siblings to get a piece of cloth to collect the grass in it. Another sibling came running and held the cloth while that one collected the grass and put it in the cloth. Other children stayed there with the youngest sibling. She gave a piece of cloth to them which they used as a shade to protect the youngest one from the sun. Later, Preeti got all the children in a shady area and started make-believe play as their 'teacher'. All the children surrounded her and listened with rapt attention. Each was called upon to recite numbers, and when one of her own siblings was able to recount, she looked up proudly at me and said "Look, she knows it now, has learnt it from me"

This example extends our understanding of children's dynamics in such a social setting. Within these episodes, everyone has something to gain from the other, as well as being able to offer assistance, however young. 'Being' with each other, they contributed to each other's construction of self. Preeti found ways to keep the siblings and cousins together, engaging them in work, and then teaching them. It was not only beneficial to them but also for her, as she found an opportunity to read and write while taking care of the siblings. She deeply engaged with her ecology; inculcating its various aspects to her own notions of self. The siblings too participated with her in their ecology. They took up different roles: sometimes instructed to, sometimes on their own. They observed their sister; followed her, modified activities, or at times completely

changed the condition. While sharing an experience, children also imbibed it as a personal experience.

The above examples shared dialogical space between two or more children that provides a possibility to have multiple dialogues with the setting as well. This gives a direction into examining DST in the purview of the eco-cultural framework. In the next section, we shall further elaborate on this notion.

Children making sense of their ecology- the shared dialogical space

Children inhabit several, and a variety of spaces- the field, the street, the school, the neighbour's home, and the park. They continue to develop nuanced understanding of access and boundaries, giving their own meaning to the spaces they live in. Each space where they spend time gathers meaning. Puja (12 years) lived with her family in an urban resettlement area. Each narrow lane was cluttered with physical structures, people and other things. The houses with one or two rooms were only large enough to accommodate the few belongings of the family. There was also the inherent physical danger of the nearby roads filled with traffic. Parents often stopped children from venturing out. With her siblings, Puja found herself a place to play. At the nearby temple, which was also considered safe by the parents, the children ran around freely. In this example, it was the local temple that emerged as a meaningful space for the children, and became central to their lives on account of the safety as well as approval of the adults.

In the socio-cultural space where they live, children also imagine a life with an unflinching belief in god, and the existence of ghosts and spirits. Their stories reflect a dialogical self engaged in fitting the pieces, navigating the thought processes and framing the images into a coherent narrative. Rizwana (8 years) lived with her parents and siblings in urban Delhi. In many of her conversations, she used the word *Allah* as if a companionship with *Allah* was ingrained in every weave of her life-world. She told me that if we were kind to others and respectful towards our parents, *Allah* would be kind and grant us heaven. But if we were bad and did something that *Allah* does not approve of, *Allah* will count it and punish us. She further explained what 'bad' meant- if we do not help our parents, if we do not take care of our siblings and hit them. I asked her what if sometime she did not want to take care of her siblings or hit them. She looked up and slowly smiled "I will explain to *Allah*. He understands at times". Many times, children would talk of a god as a communicative partner, one who they negotiate with, fight with, or ask for a way. In a problem situation, while saying, "Oh God! What should I do?", they engage in a dialogue with the self as if one of the voices/selves was in fact god. After hearing the stories that surround them, children themselves became storytellers for each other, telling and re-telling stories of their lives where god played an integral role. When one child insisted that her brother was a gift from god earned by

her for praying everyday in the temple, she spoke of a close, a more personal relationship to god than just going to the temple with her mother.

Often children endowed their dialogues of the self with another 'being'. Whether it was their interactions with god or angels, or having an imaginary friend, children would speak out the dialogues to them; their presence was integral to the dialogical process. Many times they did not have the other 'being' contribute to the dialogue. In some other cases they would take up the role of this partner as well and imagined that the other person was saying it. Children also played out dialogues of the self when another being was not imagined but actually present. For example, cousins Hema and Lalita (5 years), who were always together, often carried out the dialogical process of self with each other. They may or may not have engaged in a dialogue but were constant companions in being 'present' in each other's representations of the various I-positions. Perhaps some of these intense dialogues may be peculiar to children's imaginary worlds.

Discussion

To explore the expanse of the lived experiences of people and "to discover who people think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it, it is necessary to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which they enact their lives" (Geertz, 2000, p. 16).

In our everyday lives, we witness children, and can easily invoke images of children's play, fights, classroom scenes, punishments, fear, joy, and so on. We see them in a world of adults; as persons who are not adults but who manage to fit in that world; how they grow up into becoming adults. A deeper engagement or even a closer look into the life of a child reveals the world of children. A world where they are making sense of their everyday lives- how do I play with my little sister, what do I do if I want to go out and play, why is there violence at home, what do I do in the class when the teacher is not there, what should I talk to my friends, and like this, they imagine so many other forms of life embodiments. They are constantly engaged in dialogues with the self. In applying DST to the lives of children in this study, several important findings emerged.

For children, caring for the sibling is part of everyday living. In most cases, they are not constantly 'in charge' of the child. Caring is also not a contractual or an extracted activity. Children are both companions as well as carers for their siblings, and their narratives exposed a seamless, assumed responsibility for the younger child. Younger siblings on their part displayed respect and obeisance to the older ones. Children's narratives and observations reveal their perceptions about caring for their sibling- what all they do, how they devise ways of taking care, when do they not like to do anything for the sibling, when does it affect their play or studies. All these scenarios form a part of a dialogical process that includes other aspects of the child's life-world.

Clearly, children are constantly assimilating the ways of the world. They are socialised into cultural roles by observing the adults around them. They follow them, listen to them, need to be protected by them, and yet they are not just subjects of socialisation. The process of self construction is far more complex than this. The notion of dialogical self opens several possibilities into researching how shared voices have personal meaning and a person's voice imbibe a multitude of life forms. As mentioned earlier, these life forms in their ecology could be people, relationships, life-histories, physical spaces, social and cultural systems- all of which constitutes the dialogical space.

Although children's selves were complex and multiple, carefully nuanced in dialogue with others and the spaces they inhabit, there were some interesting observations that seemed typical of young children's magical world. The dialogues with an imaginary 'other', the conversations with god or other equivalent displayed an interesting tendency, guided by the local conversations that children here engaged in. Additionally, from the findings of this study, it seemed that children clearly thought that the researcher was outside of their immediate world and therefore non-threatening for candid discussions. They felt comfortable enough to bring up issues that they perhaps would not have even with their own parents.

Child's experience is the crux of all learning and this experience takes place in collaboration with others through processes such as scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; Tudge & Hogan, 2005). Dialogical space builds on this understanding. It further locates the dialogical self perspective in an eco-cultural framework. Researchers have illustrated how cultural goals, parental ethnotheories and child developmental processes are embedded in a nested eco-cultural environment (see LeVine, 1974; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Weisner, 2002, 1997). The dialogical space not only consolidates the physical, psychosocial and cultural components of the ecology but it also focuses on how children make meaning of them in their daily lives through activities and dialogues with self and others.

Children engage with the dialogical space in many ways through play. Play, like imagination is an integral part of children's lives (Piaget, 1952). Its transient nature is visible in how children move through the contours of play or how play seeps in the things that children do. Play enables children to voice their thoughts, while they reproduce or reconstruct the events from their lives. They build *microcosms* of the world they see and live in; of the adult activities that they witness. They place themselves as a perceptive self engaged in constant dialogues in this constructed, dynamic imagery. The ability to articulate this dialogical process and give a personal role to the dialogical self helps children to interpret the world. They become active contributors, and do not remain mere background voices to studies that try to explore the life-worlds of children.

In the episodes of the study invoked in this paper, children are tellers of their lives. For a researcher, the process of privileging an entry into the child's physical as well as other layered socio-cultural passages describes the essence of methodology. Both, the researcher and the participant are engaged in a reflective journey; the field work is an experience for both. In a way, our positioning is internal and also external. And yet, we as researchers, whether from inside the community or not will have only 'that much' knowledge (notion of complete knowledge is an elusive, almost a surreal pursuit) about the ecological lives of children and their families. An ethnographer and the participant therefore have a responsibility over one another, to recognise the separateness of the other and the limit of one's understanding of the other (Das as quoted in DiFruscia, 2010).

The presence of siblings and children from the neighbourhood as constant companions enables the dialogical process. Caring for the younger ones and socialising them into the cultural processes is found to be integral aspect of everyday living. Siblings may or may not 'do' things together but there is a stated as well as unstated sense of obligation, of responsibility towards one another. Being with the child and in a constant and expected state of mindfulness of each other, there are moments when the child overcomes the self in caring for the other, and sometimes the reverse. Adults in their lives did indicate an understanding of this and communicated as much while discussing their children. Although expected to care for their younger siblings, their child-like desires were recognised. These multiple positionings of the self are in constant dialogues that lead to assimilations and contradictions. And yet somewhere for the child to be on the move in life, in everyday sense of experience of continuum in time, with a certain sense of self-worth, all these positions have to add up peacefully and hold cultural advantage. In fact, the simultaneity of one and many positions of self resonated well with the local beliefs in the importance of *desh* (context), *kaal* (time) and *patra* (person). Through the constant differentiation and integration of dialogues with self and with others, children continue with their daily lives; with their endearing qualities of playfulness, imagination, and optimism strive towards an experience of childhood in their ecology.

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