

**COMMENTARY AND REVIEW OF MCCOWN & AHN'S (2015)
"DIALOGICAL AND EASTERN PERSPECTIVES ON THE SELF IN PRACTICE:
TEACHING MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION
IN PHILADELPHIA AND SEOUL"**

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Introduction

This review and commentary on the article of Don McCown and Heyoung Ahn (2015, this issue)¹ consists of three parts. Following the structure of the article, the first part contains a letter from Rens to the authors, Don and Heyoung, in which the reviewer reacts dialogically and experientially.

The second part is a theoretical reflection on the three following subjects: The use of Dialogical Self Theory as a perspective on the self in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction; the role of the teacher in creating intrapersonal and interpersonal space; and, the role of language in the process of teaching and Mindfulness-Based Interventions.

The third part contains recommendations for future research.

Letter to Don and Heyoung

Dear Don and Heyoung,

Reading your article was a great experience. Your letters made me feel truly connected with the two of you, reflecting relationally on what happens when you are teaching. Having been a teacher for most of my life, both of philosophy and psychology as of tai chi meditation, I recognize many of your experiences and reflections. It showed me the importance of the teacher. Of course, everybody knows a teacher is essential. What it revealed to me is how the importance of the teacher could be used more explicitly; how the self of the teacher affects the teaching.

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¹ Pages numbers in this review refer to McCown & Ahn (2015, this issue).

Your description of the different ways in which participants in classes dealt with intimacy was instructive for me. Don's pupils were eager to share their intimate stories in language and reluctant in touching each other physically. In contrast, Heyoung's pupils were eager to get a massage but were very reluctant to share intimate stories with one another. Too often we don't realize that we live in a relationally co-constructed world - to use Gergen's words - all of us being culturally incorporated bodies with completely different nuances. Once we truly appreciate the differences, openness and space might emerge to embrace other possible selves.

Your description of the role of language and the differences between the Korean and the American cultures is very informative. English as an author-responsible language versus Korean as a reader-responsible language makes us more aware of how we use language in class. As a teacher you have to be mindful of both aspects of language. We live in a world of language, although we share our physical presence as a basic common condition. We start from the same basis: a body born somewhere on earth, with parents speaking a language, showing habits, living in a specific culture, etc. Originally our basic condition (at birth) is similar, but only for a very short period of time.

In my reflections I wondered whether the outcome would have been different if both of you had been trained in MBSR in your own culture and country. What I understand as a reader is that creating space, both in the individual self and in the group, is the core of a good teacher of MBSR. Creating space takes place in how you present yourself non-verbally and how you speak with your participants/group. Gergen and Hermans provide us with strong theoretical and practical tools to better understand how the individual and the collective selves change/transform. Writing letters is a format I like. In my practice I write a personal letter to my clients after the leadership dialogue is completed. People appreciate it, although it is uncommon.

Although I could write more reflections, I limit myself to the teacher, culture and language. With warm regards, Rens.

Theoretical comments

I will first discuss the use of Dialogical Self Theory as a perspective on the self in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. The authors use Dialogical Self Theory in a proper way. However, the current version of the article only partially uses the richness of the theory. I recommend applying the core concepts of Dialogical Self Theory in a more specific manner. Recent literature could be used for that purpose, e.g. Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010 or Hermans & Gieser, 2012. Let me give an example by exploring how the concept of "core position" applies to MBSR. An analysis of their I-positions in the self-reflection of both authors and their intrapersonal dynamics could be a practical and relevant manner to make the implicit conceptions of their selves more explicit. Particularly in terms of potential change/transformation. Authors could have

used the dynamic concepts of DST, such as “promoter position” and “centering and decentering,” to describe what happens in a process of change. Using these concepts could more precisely explore and clarify what happens in the minds and hearts of participants in the MBSR classes. This likewise applies to the teacher and the potential tensions in his/her self-conception. Which I-positions could function as a promotor I-Position in, e.g., Maria’s repertoire? Don could have asked her “When in your daily life you are quiet, while your mind is racing all the time?” In my experience people start thinking when such a question is asked. They start reflecting on their own life in a different way: where/when do I experience quietness while my mind is racing? I will illustrate this with an example from my own practice. I asked a female HR-manager who complained about her not being assertive enough in the relationship with her boss: “When are you assertive under pressure?” She answered immediately and without any hesitation: “as a mother.” If the I-position “I as a mother” were to take a more central role in her life as a whole (centering), it would be an I-position that could promote her repertoire as a whole.

Although excellent first steps are made in applying DST on MBSR, the full richness for research and application is not yet used in this article. Using the concepts of DST– core position, promotor-position, centering and decentering – more explicitly would contribute to more precisely understanding how the self of participants and teacher(s) works in the classroom. It would also contribute to the process of transformation of both groups.

The second item regards the role of the teacher in creating intrapersonal and interpersonal space. The article frequently uses the concept of space. A more specific definition of space seems essential to me. In the conversations with Maria and Sooyeon (pp. 45-47) the authors describe how they create space in the participants’ minds and bodies during the training. How the teacher uses and chooses his language is critically important for the result. The space in the selves of both participants is created by the teacher’s verbal intervention in the form of a question or a remark. The role of language and its cultural possibilities and limitations is critically important. How language is used in creating space could be defined and described more explicitly.

In the context of DST I apply Morioka’s concept of space. Morioka (2008, 2012) uses the Japanese word *ma* (間) to describe what happens in a dialogue. The Japanese word *ma* has multiple meanings. “It can imply a space between two things, or it can indicate a space between one moment and another moment” (Morioka, 2012, p. 398). *Ma* refers to both space and time. The word *ma* is also used to describe the quality of interpersonal relations. The process of talking and listening creates unique *ma* between persons. The character *ma* also indicates the space between you and me, and the creative tension in between. Without this lively tension *ma* between individuals might be lost. The relational aspect of you and me are represented in one and the same Japanese character. Here I mention Gergen’s concept of relational being. There can be

no meaning without relation. *Ma* can refer to both external relationships with others, but also with other voices in an internal dialogue, like space between different I-positions in Hermans' DST. Lastly, *ma* can also refer to a pause, a silence in the internal and/or external conversation. The aspect of silence seems to be critically important in mindfulness-based interventions (MBI).

The concept of space could be elaborated and explored more systematically, as this seems to be the core mechanism of change and transformation in MSBR.

The third subject deals with the role of language in the process of teaching and Mindfulness-Based Interventions. As already indicated above, the role of language is important. How you address the participant in the group or individually is crucial. On pp. 42-43 the authors give an example of a conversation between Don and Maria. This illustrates the power of language. Maria herself is unable to redirect her attention. While she is continuously overwhelmed by thoughts, the teacher takes over the lead. With his observations, questions and interventions he redirects her energy in another direction. How this process works deserves more in-depth exploration and description. Being present in the here-and-now, a teacher has to demonstrate the skill to use the right words to get connected with the language and implicit I-positions of the participant. Authors could have spent more energy in exploring and describing this aspect of the intervention.

Recommendations for future research

Some recommendations for future research will now be provided. Dialogical Self Theory and Social Constructionism could be used as a research methodology for MBSR and MBI and as a methodology to enable participants to get a more complete view of different aspects of conflicting and complementing aspects of their selves. The latest developments of Dialogical Self Theory could be applied. For example, by setting up a research with a class of MBSR participants where each of the individuals is enabled to explore their I-position repertoire. In addition to the broad inventory of the participants' position repertoire, a specific focus on stress-generating I-positions and stress-reducing I-positions could be created. This dialogue should be completed before the training starts. Don and Heyoung could have these dialogues themselves, too. Analyzing and relating the I-positions repertoires before and after the training would be relevant, just like describing in detail what happened during the training in MBIs.

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