

FROM DIALOGICAL PRACTICES TO POLYPHONIC THOUGHT? DEVELOPMENTAL INQUIRY AND WHERE TO LOOK FOR IT

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ABSTRACT. In this contribution we start with a critical reading of assumptions that have led to the postulation of a dialogical and polyphonic self. We critically review the empirical basis for these assumptions as resulting from therapeutically informed techniques according to which clients/participants are led to engage in particular modes of self-reflection and conclude that the *positions, valuations, and their connections to affect* are predominantly constructs designed for the purpose to assist in ‘self-reflection’—with the aim to intervene and change the subject’s self positions. This leads to the questions what actually is to be ‘acquired’ and where to look for empirical evidence. We will argue that it is not necessary to anchor dialogicality and positioning *in the self*; that is, we do not need to equip the self with a priori positions and dialogicality. Instead, we suggest that situated, actual conversations may result in positions and that speakers taking these positions subsequently can be described as *dialogical* and *polyphonous*—but that the occasionings of positions best serve as the actual sites for developmental inquiry into their genesis—in contrast to a person’s interiority.

Keywords: : dialogue, positioning, narrative identity, developmental inquiry

DIALOGUES, DIALOGICALITY AND THE SELF

Meeting someone in public, let’s say on our way to work, who talks to him- or herself, will strike most of us as odd. This kind of behavior is considered unusual and strange; we may easily jump to the conclusion that there is something wrong with this person.¹ In case we needed to use a fancier, seemingly more descriptive term, we certainly would not describe this activity as somebody “dialoguing” with himself, but rather as “monologuing.” However, this is exactly what a strand of psychological theorizing, calling itself ‘dialogical science,’ would want us to call this kind of behavior.

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¹ Goffman (1981) explicitly addresses self-talk and its inappropriateness in public as socially situated. When the first author of this contribution recently sat in the public space of an airport in Australia and “skyped” with his partner in the US (i.e., using a communication system that enables the communication by speaking into the microphone of the laptop), he earned looks that communicated that he was talking to himself (or worse: to his laptop).

“Why this?” we may want to ask. Why do scholars in the Academy constantly make things up and seemingly more difficult—calling talk ‘discourse,’ thinking ‘cognition,’ stories ‘narratives,’ and now monologues ‘dialogues’?

The answer is not straightforward, since often an analytic vocabulary, particularly one that sounds counterintuitive, may assist in the revelation of insights that our everyday terminology conveniently covers up.

Something along these lines may be found in the claims that have recently been proposed by ‘dialogical scientists’ who have argued that the self is “dialogical.” More specifically, the argument is that the self is made up of “internal” characters, called ‘voices’ and that these characters differ in terms of their valuations and stake out positions vis-à-vis one another: They dialogue (and even argue) with one another. This kind of claim is built on Vygotsky’s notion of ‘inner speech,’ James’ I-Me distinction, and Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘polyphonic self,’ and it has recently been elaborated by scholars such as Hubert Hermans, Jaan Valsiner, and James Wertsch. And from here this concept made its way into a number of empirical investigations that attempt to make use of the dialogical self. Obviously, the move to base monologues that a person is holding with him- or herself on a dialogical ontology of the self is nothing but a metaphoric extension. This is exactly true: The two usual entities of two people or two parties, who differ in perspectives and consequently dialogue with one another (see Wierzbicka, 2006), have been metaphorically extended into two separate meaning systems or perspectives that are in the process of an interchange. And, so the argument goes, these two (or more) perspectives can be viewed to be housed *in the same* self. The argument moves on with the claim that this metaphorical extension may become practically relevant when doing applied work in the world of teaching, counseling, and helping or working with people in particular institutional settings.

Now, turning the issue one notch up, the question how we acquire—that is, came to use—the kinds of dialogical perspectives that scholars attribute to our deepest interiors, we are facing the dilemma where to look. In other words, what counts as evidence in early childhood that displays that thought is actually ‘inner speech’ and that what is going on inside the mind is actually ‘dialogues’ in the form of contrasting or opposing ‘voices’? One way of answering this question is by the use of strict cognitive research into the forms and patterns of thought in order to show that (and how) these forms and patterns display questions and answers, agreements and disagreements—or other forms of dialogue. Developmental research within these premises typically sees this ability or competence as being rooted (most likely) in some form of (genetic) endowment and maturing under the influence (or with the assistance) of particular

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environmental conditions and influences.² The other way of answering the above question is to turn to ‘real’ dialogues between child and caregivers and document how these interactions gradually transform into what is internal in the form of internal dialogues or voices. The latter actually exists in the form of a long lasting research tradition that attempts to document and build on how early talk slowly transforms into ways of making sense that then begin to freeze (or fossilize) into what we assume to be cognitive or mental abilities. In essence, these two strands of research into how the dialogical self emerges follow two different orientations: one that credits and equips the mind (and even the brain cf. Hermans, 2001a, 2002) with the phenomena under investigation and from early on investigates its unpacking (cf. Fogel, de Koeper, Bellagamba, & Bell, 2002), the other as looking into the socialization processes in which the child slowly acquires dialogicality through and in interactive practices that are taking place as “scaffolds” or in “zones of proximal development.” Interestingly, however, this second strand of developmental research into the notion of dialogicality is very much in concert with a research tradition that attempts to explain how children develop what has been termed ‘communicative competence’ (cf. Ervin-Tripp, 1973; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Hymes, 1972).

Thus far, it remains somewhat unclear what dialogicality/multivocality is and where to look for empirical grounds to demonstrate its acquisition or development. If it is *just* a particular way to talk, a genre, we would most likely look at the level of actual dialogues and how they emerge between mother and infant as aspects of the child’s pragmatic, communicative development. If dialogicality is *just* a particular way to think and conceptualize the (modern) world in order to make sense of (modern) self and (modern) others, we would look and empirically investigate these conceptions as part of the child’s cognitive development. And here we would have a number of options between more traditional cognitivist approaches that attempt to decontextualize and universalize the human mind and more contextual, sociocultural approaches that view the development of the mind as situated in some form of historical and communal practices—at least to a certain degree. If, however, dialogicality is more than *just* a particular way of thinking and speaking, we would have to look more fully and closely into the practices that assist in accomplishing this sense of identity and identity formation. However, as we all know, the relationship between speaking, thinking, and being in this world as active agents is more complex than that, forcing us to more deeply reconsider and question the basis of dialogicality in order to better position ourselves for the answer to where to look for the empirical grounds to investigate its acquisition and development.

² It is the theory of Trevarthen (1992, 1998) that is most often quoted in this context (see Hermans, 2001a, and Marková, 2003).

In our contribution to this special issue we will not take sides with either of these three developmental orientations. Rather, we will scrutinize the dominant versions of dialogicality and multivoicedness, and we will orient the reader toward their potential but also to their inherent contradictions. Here we will particularly focus on the problems that arise from “building in” the notion of dialogue into the self and suggest that this orientation leads developmental inquiry in the wrong direction. In contrast, we will suggest a developmental orientation that is based on continuous processes of change—within which the notion of the development of the self (as agentive participant in social practices) is nested. We will develop this notion by shedding more light onto the phenomenon of dialogicality and argue that dialogicality first and foremost of all is a particular form of speaking—a genre, a discourse mode. Even though this discourse mode often has become privileged as self-disclosure or confession—and as such is equated with giving more direct access to a self’s self-reflections—we are weary of this conclusion and see it as another form of re-essentializing the self. In contrast to this position, we argue for a de-essentialization of the person, with the effect of ‘dethroning’ and returning the dialogical self into the real-world of empirical dialogues and conversations. In particular, we will call for a return to an investigation of (real) dialogues in everyday, mundane situations before we can credit the person with dialogicality as a privileged territory for investigations.

The Emergence of Self and Identity—Dialogicality Built in?

Current theorizing about self and identity faces a number of dilemmas, if not aporias. The three most pressing ones center around (i) issues of ‘identity and sameness,’ posing the question how it is possible to consider oneself as the same in the face of constant change; (ii) issues of ‘uniqueness and sameness,’ whether it is possible to consider oneself as unique in the face of being the same as everyone else (and vice versa); and (iii) around issues of ‘construction’ (or ‘who-is-in-charge’), asking whether it is the person who constructs the world the way it is or whether the person is constructed by the way the world is.

Responding to these dilemmas in terms of the dialectics between (i) constancy and change, (ii) uniqueness/specificity and generality/universality, and (iii) two directions of fit, the person-to-world and world-to-person direction of fit, points up correctly that these three dilemmas are highly interwoven. It can easily be argued that the construal of the person as same and different across time forms a presupposition for construing others and self as same and different, which in turn can be said to be a basic building block for constructing and changing the world in a productive way. However, when it comes to doing empirical work within the domain of identity research, that is, exploring how actual changes and constancies play themselves out and are made sense of in the lives of human beings, in particular from the perspective of those who live these lives, we are confronted with an additional dilemma: We are perfectly able to

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differentiate between two perspectives on what appears to be the same ‘object’ or ‘event’, we are not able to take the perspective of both of the opposing principles *simultaneously*. Rather, we are forced to choose between one aspect forming the figure, so that the other can become the ground. For instance, when viewing the ‘vase’ in the shaping of black-and-white lines, we can’t see the ‘face’ simultaneously, and vice versa (cf. Bamberg, in press). Being struck with these dilemmas, and still engaging productively in the business of identity research, the concept of the dialogical self is innovative and seemingly productive in a number of ways. It constructs the subject as agentive, though simultaneously situated and contextualized in a sociocultural context; it starts from the assumption that the self is not locked into stability but rather that it exists as something that is multiple, contradictory, contextual, and distributed over time and place. Therefore, it is not confined by just *one* societal discourse and can change and transform and consequently better adapt to the challenges of historical changes and their increasing cultural multiplicity.

Taking up Marková’s definition of dialogicality as “the capacity of the human mind to conceive, create and communicate about social realities in terms of the ‘Alter’” (2003, p. 249), we would like to begin with a clarification as to who this ‘alter’ is. If this ‘alter’ is the a priori, generalized, other, any excursion into the acquisition of abilities to dialogue with others in everyday, mundane situations is based on the innateness doctrine. Dialogicality along these lines is not a newly developed genre of multivocality that emerged with the novel in parallel to the modern self (Bakhtin, 1986/1993, 1929/1993; Elias, 1974, 1982), but it is assumed to pre-exist this historical and cultural formation process—maybe for the last 200,000 years or longer. In contrast, if the ‘alter’ is the situated, concrete, other, who in the form of communal practices engages and dialogues with the self (and vice versa), we are operating with a different presupposition.³ In this latter case, there is no need to take dialogicality as the resource onto which all concrete conversations and interactive practices have to be built. Rather, concrete, situated conversations are the resources out of which and within which concrete others *and* situated selves are continuously constructed and reconstructed, and, no doubt, out of which ultimately also a notion of ‘alter’ as a generalized other (and also ‘self’ as abstracted from situated practices) can emerge. Whether, and if so, to what degree, these generalized ‘alter’ and ‘self’ become generators for concrete dialoguing should remain an empirical question and not a priori be answered in one or the other way.

In the following, we will develop two critical arguments, both marshaled to locate dialogicality not in the mind of the person, but *in the practices* that we, as human

³ We assume that it is this position that Marková alludes to when she writes: “Ego-Alter exist only within the realm of communication” (2003, p. 257).

beings, engage in with others. First, these practices are aimed toward an attunement and slow integration into how individuals manage themselves as same and different from others and as being the same in the face of constant change (navigating the uniqueness and the identity dilemma, cf. Bamberg, in press). Second, at the same time, but only subsequently, these practices also constitute the site for the emergence of dialogicality *inside* the reflective self. That is, they have the potential to result in what we commonly consider to be the ability to take on different positions seemingly at the same time, to ponder, sort out—in a word, to ‘*reflect*’ various constructions of self (and others) critically and in a seemingly more abstract way. It goes without saying that these reflections can result in the creation of alternatives that subsequently can result in new action potentials and possibly even in new activities. However, it also needs to be clear that this does not need to be so—and that reflection is not the only resource for novelty in actions and in thought.

Bakhtin, Self-Narratives, and Dialogues

The concept of the dialogical self, presented by cultural psychologists Hermans and Kempen (1993), is a theoretical attempt that lets the individual self be absorbed in social practices, contexts, and dialogues: Mental processes, functions, or states that play a role for the self and identity (e.g., emotions or abilities to act) are results of being involved in dialogical communications. This new psychological concept of self is supposed to transcend the “culturally determined boundaries of individualism and rationalism” as it no longer understands the self as a unity but rather as a “multiplicity of positions” (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992, p. 29).

For the authors, the concept of narrativity is seen as a “basic mode of thought” and is at the heart of their theory of self. The (self-)narrative is a particularly apt possibility of ordering events, experiences, and actions in a meaningful way; the self-narrative is an important element of modern identity. The distinction between the narrating and the narrated *I* receives particular attention and is formulated following William James, whose original distinction, according to Hermans and Kempen, between *I* and *Me* can be reformulated in narrative and then in *dialogical* terms. The first step is to understand the *I* as author and the *Me* as actor (Hermans et al., 1992, p 27; see also Sarbin, 1986). In search of a strong theory of dialogicality as feature of self, this distinction then is enhanced in the sense that a narrative self does not need to be a coherent construction but can accommodate radically different, conflicting, or even contradicting narrator positions. However, and in contrast to what may be considered the established reading of James’ approach, the connection to the Jamesian *I* is not meant to imply any kind of reflexive competence of the self.⁴ On the contrary, the *I*

⁴ For Bakhtin himself the meaning of “decentering” of the self (and of word meaning in general) implied the dialogical *reflection* of the contexts through which a word has “passed” as

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functions to *destabilize* the reflexive component of the self, because the second step from the Jamesian Self to a dialogical self results in what may be called the polyphonic transformation of a theory of narrative identity. Within the dialogical self, the authors emphasize, “there is no overarching I organizing the constituents of the Me,” but only a “decentralized,” heterogeneous *multiplicity* of I-positions. These I-positions, imagined as authors of different narrative projections of self, on the one hand, function within any self narrative in a “relatively autonomous” manner (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 47); on the other hand, they are in *dialogical relation* with each other.

This may suffice as a brief sketch of how the authors attempt to incorporate Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogicality and polyphony into their theory of self (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 29). The term dialogicality, in their psychological theory, not only stresses the connectedness of the modern, self-designing human being in real-world dialogues with others but also the structure of the modern self as constituted of polyphonous dialogues, outside of which there is no personal position or point of view at all. Like in musical polyphonous compositions, where the individual voices or instruments are juxtaposed, complement, and break each other, so, too, the characters of a “polyphonic novel” do not simply have different roles in the *one* narrated world. Rather, they themselves produce, each for themselves autonomously, a multitude of different worlds and perspectives, of which the author is just one amongst many (p. 27). This constructivist and pluralist understanding of the self is at the center of the theory. We may state at this point already that due to the strong emphasis on decentralization, it is not entirely clear who within such internal dialogues stands in dialogue with whom and what precisely is the meaning of *dialogue*, since the various communicating voices or identities often are described as incommensurable and merely juxtaposed—and not organized in an integrative or synthesizing manner. In order to examine the concept of dialogicality (in/of the self) more precisely, we propose to look briefly at the root metaphors *dialogue* and *polyphony*, as used originally by Bakhtin, and askew will pose the question how they translate into social-psychological categories of thinking in terms of the *alter*.

Dialogue and Polyphony as Psychological Functions?

Whereas the concept of “polyphony” was first and most impressively coined in the work on Dostoyevsky’s novel (Bakhtin, 1929/1993), the concept of *dialogicality* was introduced in the context of analyzing spoken language, sentences, utterances, and

well as the “reflection of the interrelation with other persons” (Bakhtin, 1979/1986, p. 354). The self, according to Bakhtin, is formed and forms itself in self-reflection and in the reflection of others (cf. Volkmann, 2001, p. 41). Many contemporary interpretations go beyond Bakhtin when they view the “merging” in communicative relationships as a total rejection of a coherent speaking, writing, reading I (see also Marková, 2003).

as the subject to a theory of (word) meaning. *Polyphony*—the idea of independent narratives constituting different aspects of a novel’s narrative—seems to connect well with the study of narrative identity in the cultural sciences. However, how is the polyphony of voices to be understood when referring to persons instead of text and intertextual relations? From a social-psychological point of view, it remains unclear how the polyphonous type of self (internally fragmented and driven by heterogeneous, differing, even contradictory I-positions) is able to remain fundamentally anchored in social relationships and dialogues as the notion of the *dialogical self* seems to suggest and demand. In order to enter and keep up (intimate) relationships, one needs to be able to show commitment as well as distance (Argyle, 1992). In this way, a deeper social relationship, and even the participation in dialogic interaction, requires the ability and willingness to take up one’s own (and to a certain degree, coherent) position in order to resume and communicate a point of view—or, the perspective from which events are seen as related and making sense. The postulation of a (relative) autonomy of the different I-positions *within* the self makes it difficult to imagine this point of view or perspective. Such an unconnected juxtaposition may be regarded as a sign of diversity, but it is not necessarily a dialogical process that moves something within the dialogical self and enriches it.

Dialogue and Polyphony as Social Practice

Keeping this in mind, we might critically ask whether the often anonymous *voices* that not only represent radically different positions but often act for themselves fleetingly and (potentially) inconsistently, are really able to conduct a dialogue—be it a real world dialogue or one that takes place *within* the person. If they do, can this be a dialogue that assumes at least some kind of responsive understanding/taking turns, thus taking this as a minimal definition of the term dialogue? Or do certain popular readings of the Bakhtinian principle of dialogicality resemble more closely a babble of voices in which many different, incommensurable perspectives exist side by side? What does a dialogical relationship mean, and how does the dialogue change the positions that are involved in it? Also, what does this again tell us about *personal* competencies or qualities that may be named *dialogical self*?

Concerning our *first argument*—that dialogicality is always part of or realized in social practices—we find that dialogical practices as any kind of social practice must fulfill certain requirements: From a social and cultural point of view, it cannot be ignored that dialogues or talk-in-dialogues lead to questions of acknowledgement that goes along with turn-taking. Dialogues or talk-in-dialogues also lead to the question of communicative participants interacting with one another in general. A notion of dialogue based on hearers and speakers that are no longer able to sequentially arrange each other, or, from a more reflective position, give reasons for and defend *their* positions (because of just being confronted with independently differing I-positions),

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scarcely permits such questions—let alone a look at issues of agency and intentionality in dialogues.

Concerning the *second argument*—that dialogicality as a result of socially participating in dialogical practices has the potential for the emergence of a reflective self—we would like to insist that the autonomous status of the I-positions must not lead to a “selfless” self. Empirical investigations have repeatedly shown that even when taking into account the immense choreography of radically different possible self-constructions, one personal goal that remains significant for young persons and adults is to reflect upon the differentiability, plurality, and heterogeneity of possible action and life orientations and make relevant (self-determined) choices as well as carry out the relevant deciphering that enables such choices in the first place. Furthermore, it is an empirical fact that a large number of people seem to want to hold on to the project of personal identity—that is, they tend to retrospectively interpret and anticipatorily design their life in a way so it can be attributed to them as *theirs*—at least as a partially self-determined story of accountable/responsible subjects (cf. Leu & Krappmann, 1999; Straub & Zielke, 2005).

Furthermore, and this adds a third layer to our argument, it seems important from a methodical and methodological point of view that if dialogicality indeed implies a highly reflective notion of self and self-awareness, it is something that has to be acquired *in talk* or *in interaction*. It cannot be examined or evaluated using methods that focus exclusively on the cognitive (dialogical) functions or competencies of persons. Methods used for the evaluation of the dialogical features of selves, if assumed to exist *inside* the person, will most likely have to concentrate on the analysis of social interaction, social practice or talk, and thereby prolong an inside-outside distinction that may get in the way of good developmental microanalysis. We will take a closer look at this topic in our concluding section.

Self-Confrontation, Evaluations, and Narrative

In this section, we try to catch up and critically scrutinize how the concept of dialogicality as *inside* the self is put to use in empirical investigations. We will rely here on two publications by Hermans (1997, 2001b) where he developed the method of self-confrontation as a procedure that is based on ‘valuation theory.’ This method, consisting of a structured interview technique, centers on a number of relevant life events serving to make the client or participant self-reflective so he/she can engage in procedures of self-investigation. While life story interviewing traditionally is set up to make the participant self-reflective (see Bamberg 2006, in press, for some critical reflections on this approach to narrative), Hermans’ method of self-confrontation adds another layer of reflection to the issue of ‘reflexivity’ that we already identified as problematic. In the data reported in Hermans (1997), Nancy, a 45-year-old female research participant, was initially asked to name and then reflect on her two dominant traits and subsequently to

give accounts about herself with these traits as dominant themes. More specifically, she was asked to “think and feel” in terms of a character with each of these traits, respectively, and to reason about the relevance of these traits—in these two versions—for her own past, present, and future. Thus, asking Nancy to reflect on particular objects and persons that may have been of relevance to her and her life contrasts starkly with the way traditional life story approaches orient their participants toward telling their stories (cf. Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal, 1997; Wengraf, 2006): While life story approaches lead the participants to reflect on their lives by way of narrating, self-confrontation leads the participants to first reflect and through reflection to a form of accounting that has little resemblance to narrating.

In another example in which the client’s pseudonym also was Nancy, the method of self-confrontation is exemplified within a therapeutic setting (Hermans, 2001b). In this case, Nancy was 47 years old and presented with a number of particular self-describing attributes that had been pulled from previous therapeutic sessions (e.g., listening, vulnerable, faithful—these are termed *internal positions*). Thereafter, Nancy was asked to rank (on a scale from 0-5) the relevance of these attributions in relation to particular others (e.g., her child, her father, her partner—these are termed *external positions*). After a relevancy matrix had been established of the overall position repertoire, Nancy then was asked by the therapist to account for relevant moments and people in her past, present, and future in terms of which influences have been/are/will be most influential. It is crucial that the therapist was leading the client through these answers by systematically making the positions clear, the way they had been set up and scaled as relevant earlier, from which the client then was expected to answer (Hermans, 2004, p. 182). The way this kind of interaction is framed in terms of the ‘self-confrontation method’ is that the client is “invited” and given an “optimal opportunity for profound self-reflection” (2001b, p. 343). These reflections subsequently are supposed to lead client and therapist to the deeper insights of what is seemingly inflicting pain to the client, (ideally) opening up the opportunity for inceptions of self-change. To be absolutely clear: While it may be possible to justify this kind of communicative strategy for therapeutic ends, there are absolutely no empirical grounds for why these types of induced reasoning strategies should be argued to form the ontological grounds for what we can call a ‘sense of self.’

We hope to have sufficiently demonstrated that the method of confronting selves to self-reflect essentially targets participants’ argumentative discourse repertoires and reasoning skills. In addition, we have clarified that this interview method does not encourage participants or clients to narrate their stories the way they typically result in more overt valuations of self and others. Instead, this method interrupts the narrative flow of sequentially arranging what happened; it interrupts how storytellers typically begin to reflect on their very own and specifically subjective narrative employment in the course of their telling. Starting with the evaluation and giving attributes of self in

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relation to other characters automatically brackets and frames what is to follow as event sequence. This way of consistently self-confronting subjects/clients gives a very different reasoning and argumentative flavor to the accounts elicited. Although it is very well possible to talk about these accounts as ‘narratives,’ they are very different when compared to spontaneous, everyday narratives. They are different even when compared to narratives elicited in the life story interview method in terms of their structure and interactive purpose and most likely also in terms of the topic and content. Nevertheless, these kinds of verbal responses in these highly structured interviews are taken to represent voices/positions that the participants have brought with them to the interview encounter; that is, they are assumed to have been held *in* the person previously. The interview method of confronting the participant/client with different attributions and valuations of themselves (though with regard to other characters) is taken to constitute the means to tease them out.

While we clearly see the value of viewing participants, or any conversationalist for that matter, as having access to a repertoire (or better: a vocabulary) of self descriptions (the *polyphonic self*), it is unclear what the positions or voices are made up of. It sounds as if these positions have been practiced previously in real-time and real-place conversations and from there they apparently have become settled, sedimented, decontextualized and fossilized (“*internalized*”—cf. Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003) in the form of a repertoire in the person’s mind. As such, they are assumed to be available to be called up and practiced in real-time conversations whenever needed. Self-confrontation then is an interview method that apparently can shortcut into this repertoire, where the positions are sitting on a shelf, in an orderly but highly decontextualized fashion. Here they are easy to access, and if executed well, this method can bring the client/participant to rework reflectively the valences of these positions, with the ultimate prospect “to achieve a unity of the self via its polyphonization” (Hermans, 2001b, p. 363).

Although this approach sounds attractive, there are central ingredients of positions and positioning that remain unclear if not problematic. First, it remains unclear who is doing the positioning of the different voices/positions within the mind or how it is accomplished without the assistance of the self-confrontation method. Second, although claimed to rely on ‘narrative,’ we wonder whether the method of self-confrontation actually may rather be considered as ‘anti-narrative.’ Third, we are afraid that the notion of the reflective self that engages in the activity of self-reflection and self-reworking may actually resemble too much the highly rational though abstract mind—closely related to the Sunday activities that recently have come under scrutiny in narrative theorizing (cf. Bamberg, 2006, in press; Freeman, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006). Lastly, we are beginning to wonder how the notion of voices and positions as speaking agents inside the mind is any different from the notion of a unitary self and whether dialogical approaches to self and identity are really replacing the traditional

self. In the following, we will briefly work through these four concerns and elaborate them.

(i) Bakhtin himself often had to face the critical question that it was not clear who was “orchestrating” the different voices in the polyphonous novel. The same critical question arises concerning the dialogicality of self: If the dialogical self is characterized by diverging I-positions which somehow are communicating *in* the person and are successfully making sense of each other in an “authorless” way, then, who is telling the mind (in case the mind is making the decisions for how to act) how to choose one position over the other? Or to put this dilemma more simply: Who is winning, and why? After all, it seems to be difficult to presuppose that “opposed” positions are always already dialoguing with and against each other and that somehow, miraculously, something good will come out of it. The response to this kind of critique points to the only “relative autonomy” of the differing voices (e.g. Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 88; see also Hermans, 2001a) and emphasizes that—despite the absence of any unifying entity like a persistent, stable self—there must be some kind of “synthesizing force” within the self. It can be assumed that this synthesizing “force” will determine the meaningful constellation of I-positions towards one another, which we may refer to as “dialogical.” Already in 1993, Hermans and Kempen conceded that there must be such an orchestrating instance and coined the (capitalized) name “Self” for it:

The Self can certainly be considered an *I-position*, too, but it is of special nature. It has the capacity to juxtapose and interrelate the other positions that neither apart nor in their incidental relationships can achieve any synthesis of the self as a whole. (p. 92)

Only a few pages later, however, part of this is taken back by the claim that “the Self is always threatened by the dominant aspect of dialogue” (p. 95; cf. also Hermans, 2001a). This “explanation” may rather be called a good problem definition than a problem solution (see critically Straub & Zielke, 2005; Zielke, 2006).

In sum, we are lacking an explanation for how what can be considered a potentially self-*destabilizing* dialogicality can become an essential feature of the person/the self. From a developmental perspective, fundamental steps in the parent-child-relationship have been claimed to enable the infant to pursue something like dialogical communication (e.g., Fogel et al., 2002; Rochat, 2000). In order to place this dialogical achievement within the person and to be able to explain how the self may gradually achieve dialogicality as a central feature of self, the metaphor of internalization is borrowed for describing how “external” dialogues are somehow converted into an “internal” capacity or characteristic of the person/the self. We will come back to the question of internalization below.

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(ii) While it can be assumed that all stories are shot through with a certain amount of self reflection, life stories or life-forming and life-transforming event stories are based on a particular kind of self-reflection. Typically, the elicitation conditions for life stories are likely to position the participant to account for life as a coherent or at least somewhat cohering string of events (cf. Bamberg, 2006, in press)—resulting in the answer to the request to explicate one’s ‘sense of self.’ In other words, asking participants in life story and life event interviews to account for a coherent life presumes and results (most likely) in what is easily interpreted as an underlying unitary origin from where the self-narrative has been put together. Asking participants in interviews that follow the method of self-confrontation to take different and even contrastive positions and argue them out pull for something very different. From the perspective of the life story interview, such interview strategies interrupt the narrative flow that can lead to the construction of a coherent sense and force the participant to account for different perspectives and even orientations. In this sense, confronting participants with differing perspectives and engaging them in a sort of reasoning discourse that justifies these different positions is “anti-narrative”, that is, it disallows the narrative powers to integrate and unify. This is not meant to imply that life story interviews are in any way a better methodology when compared with the self-confrontation method. Rather, while one pulls for a more unifying orientation vis-à-vis self and identity, the other pulls for diversity.

(iii) In sum then, both interviewing strategies, the life story as well as the method of self confrontation, are dialogic techniques that pull for different forms of reflection that subsequently are claimed to be at the essence of the subject. In contrast to both theories, we have argued (Bamberg, 2006, in press; Freeman, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006) that this focus on reflection (and in particular self-reflection) in recent strands of identity research seriously underplays and undertheorizes people’s participation in practices that are more everyday and mundane but nevertheless self-constructive. Simultaneously, life story method and self-confrontation overemphasize (which, however, is similarly not sufficiently theorized) people as mental, cognitive information processors who seem to act on the basis of cognitive (rational?) decisions. It is important that this argument is not misunderstood as the denial of the possibility that people engage in self-monologues or as denying the existence of cognition, information processing, and rationality. However, to ground a sense of self (and others) in internal (psychological) constructs seriously underestimates and undermines the dialogical/discursive origins of our interiors and underplays the role of practices as sites for self-construction.

(iv) Bringing these points of divergence together, it remains unclear whether a polyphonic self that is grounded in interactive techniques of self-confrontations is any different from the unitary self that is assumed to originate from self-reflections elicited by an explicitly narratively-formulated life story interview technique. In sum, rather

than engaging in debates between which notion of self is more adequate or real, we are suggesting to engage in deeper explications of how these different notions are produced (or co-constructed) in different interactive/dialogic practices. None of them has an intrinsic predominance over the other. At best, it can be argued that different construction strategies of self may come in as productive for different purposes such as therapy or counseling. Rather than looking and trying to find the subject ‘behind’ what is said in these interview situations, we suggest to seek the self as self-constructing in such situations. In other words, the situations in which a sense of self is coming to existence when dialoging with real others, such as in interviews, but also in other, more mundane and everyday situations, are telling enough. While it seems to be a tendency in traditional research on self and identity to start from an abstract and reified notion of self, we suggest going back to the study of the actual processes in which selves talk to others and in these processes form a sense of who they *really* are.

The Development of Dialogues—Concluding Remarks

In our concluding remarks, we intend to return full circle to the question that guided our ruminations on dialogicality and the multivocality of the self. If dialogicality and multivocality are taken to be basic principles that make us humans individuals and social, what is it that is to be acquired? More specifically, how can this ‘acquisition process’ be approached in the form of empirical inquiry?

In contrast to Hermans, who places positioning in the mind of the individual, we have argued for anchoring the notion of positioning in interactions (Bamberg, 1997, 2003, in press). In other words, we suggest taking positioning out of the mind—at least if it is posited there as an a priori category the person seems to come equipped with—and viewing positioning as first of all taking place in concrete situations that are historically and socioculturally embedded. Thus, these situations are situated and situating the participants; at the same time, the participants actively and agentively position themselves and each other in these situations. Consequently, the ground for empirical studies, including developmental inquiries into positioning and dialogicality, is what is happening in these situations, that is, what people-in-interactions do—how they position themselves (and others), and in positioning themselves become positioned.⁵

Our critique of Hermans’ notion of self-positions is very much in agreement with Lysaker (2006), who asks:

⁵ A different formulation of the same dialectic is to see people in interactions as positioned first—and their actions and interactions, that is, the way they agentively position themselves and others, as consequent of how they are positioned. We will have to say more about this dialectic process in the following paragraphs.

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Should we regard them [self-positions] as positions adopted consciously or unconsciously by some persistent “I,” such that an “I” is the source of movement and animation in the dialogical self, or should self-positions be understood as semi-autonomous forces, an impersonal sea upon which inner speech bobs, doing its best to describe the darting it witnesses as something like a course? (p. 44)

And we similarly align with Goffman (1969), who argues that

a status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is nonetheless something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized. (pp. 65-66)

Having somewhat clarified our position on positioning,⁶ it should be clearer that this is not anything the person is born with as his/her internal equipment, and neither is it first “out there,” in what seems to be a ‘social’ realm,’ only to be picked up—sooner or later—to be incorporated into the mental realm of the self. Rather, positions are actively taken as parts of practices that manifest themselves in the form of everyday and mundane activities such as arguments, descriptions, and narratives but also in conversing, dialoging, flirting, debating, lecturing, and entertaining. The list is seemingly endless. Of course, it is possible to reflect on these mundane activities and pull them together under some reflexive umbrellas; in the above we have alluded to reflections in the form of life stories and/or in reflections that can be elicited in situated self-confrontations. However, it seems to be evident that inquiries into when and under what circumstances it is possible to engage children in life stories or self confrontations—although answers to these questions may be illuminating—have nothing to do with the developmental question of dialogicality and multivoicedness.

For the remainder, we will only touch briefly on the question of a developmental approach to dialogicality that follows up on our stance on positioning and dialogicality. Taking up on the debate in this issue between Valsiner (2007, this issue) and Susswein, Bibok, and Carpendale (2007, this issue), we find ourselves in agreement with Susswein et al.’s criticism of the container metaphor of internalization as too restrictive as well as with Valsiner’s response that Susswein et al. fail to resurrect a viable alternative. Their debate, nevertheless, is highly illuminating with regard to the larger question of what it is that is developing and how we can empirically approach the phenomena that

⁶ Positioning has become a central concept in the empirical work of the first author of this article (cf. Bamberg, 1997, 2003; Korobov & Bamberg 2004a, 2004b).

represent the issues under investigation. Following Susswein et al., we also consider the domain for empirical inquiry into dialogicality and positioning to be the sites where ‘being social’ and ‘being individually unique’ are at display and continually practiced in the form of reiterated, habitual, and ritualized performances. It is at these sites where the properties of positioning and dialogicality emerge, hailing subjects into being, and where these iterative performances also (in a subsequent way) present themselves for the potential of empirical inquiry. What Susswein et al. fail to show, which opens up their suggestions to Valsiner’s critique, is how these practices result simultaneously in a sense of continuity and discontinuity as well as uniqueness and generality, and last but not least, who is in charge in the construction process. It is with regard to the latter that Valsiner jumps in and charges Susswein et al. with not being able to account sufficiently for relating the person to the world and the world to the person.

Let us briefly elaborate. Any developmental approach is confronted by the following three dilemmas: (i) *the Identity Dilemma*, that is, how I can be the same in the face of constant change (and vice versa); (ii) *the Uniqueness Dilemma*, that is, how I can consider myself unique in the face of all the sameness with others (and vice versa); and (iii) *the Construction or Direction-of-Fit Dilemma*, that is, who is in charge of what—the person of the world, or the world of the person?⁷ While Susswein et al. use the site of practices to establish ‘mastery’ as the organizing developmental principle and attempt to legitimize their approach within “an evolutionary epistemological conception of cognitive development,” it is Valsiner’s attempt to resurrect and hold onto the agency of the person. Valsiner correctly points out that Susswein et al. are not addressing the *Construction/Direction-of-Fit Dilemma* and fail to incorporate into their approach that and how the person’s agency plays an important, if any, role in what Susswein et al. credit to ‘mastery.’

In the hope of contributing to some resolution of the debate and simultaneously to clarify further our own position, we suggest that both parties fail to differentiate between two levels of abstractions: While it is absolutely necessary on one hand to argue at a more abstract level that opposing forces are at work in the constitution of self and identity in the face of these three dilemmas, it is of utmost importance on the other hand to realize that there is no resolution. To build a story of self and identity requires taking positions: it is *either* change *or* constancy; it is *either* uniqueness *or* what I share with others; and it is *either* I who did it *or* it was/is done by external forces to me, whereby I am being placed in the role of an undergoer. Although it is possible, after the invention of the novel, to weave these different perspectives together in a story that consists of fluctuating moments, each of these moments is constructed from an *either/or perspective*.

⁷ For a more detailed account of these dilemmas see Bamberg, in press.

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The implications for developmental research on issues of positioning and dialogicality are relatively straightforward. If we can not take positions as a priori housed in the mind as our starting point, it may be reasonable and opportune, as Susswein et al. suggest, to start at the level of practices. Although it may be possible to look at certain practices and their changes over time in terms of ‘competency’ and ‘mastery,’ and how the accomplishment of a certain level of mastery may feed back into new practices and in turn into new levels of mastery, this way of longitudinally mapping out developmental achievements is not the only way and often also not a very productive way. As we have suggested elsewhere (Bamberg, in press; Korobov & Bamberg, 2004b), there is an alternative way to study development by investigating moment-by-moment changes in actual dialogues in a microanalytic fashion. Taking this orientation, we are not forced to study solely or even predominantly how children become masters of adult practices but can turn to everyday practices where a sense of self is continuously under construction. And when it comes to the study of the emergence of dialogicality, this is exactly what we end up suggesting.

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