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Accessing the experience of a dialogical self: Some needs and concerns

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Abstract: This commentary focuses on König's work (this volume) as an opportunity to elaborate on selfhood as a dynamic and dialogical phenomenon. We depart from bakhtinian dialogism and dialogical self theory to focus on the dynamics of selfhood processes and drawing a more explicit theoretical link between the dialogical self and phenomenological experience. The interconnected dimensions of discontinuity and continuity in a multiple, multipositioned self are also elaborated. We defend that the construction of similitude in the self is permitted by self-regulation and self-organization processes that create recurring patterns in a moving self. Finally, the role that the introduction of difference and alterity can play in the promotion of change and development are also discussed.

Keywords: Dialogical self; experience; self-organization; change

Following bakhtinian dialogism – one of the main philosophical origins of the dialogical self theory – and the importance it attributes to communication as a contextualized activity, selfhood becomes addressed as a dynamic process of dialogical becoming (Marková, 2003a; Salgado & M. Gonçalves, 2007; Valsiner, 2002). This means that, if for Bakhtin “to be is to communicate” (1929/1984, p. 187), then, we can

only conceive and construct selfhood through this dialogical quality that constitutes the fabric of humanity. This dialogical framework seems quite adequate for the study of multicultural identity and so we will take this opportunity to focus on some issues that we have selected from Jutta König's work (this volume).

We will begin this journey by elaborating upon bakhtinian relationality to build a ground for understanding selfhood both as a relational and cultural process and product. We will, then, address the dialogical self in its dynamic movement of positioning and re-positioning in time, and detain ourselves in the challenging reflection upon self's diachronic and synchronic continuity and discontinuity. Following this, we will finish elaborating upon the role that the introduction of difference and novelty can play in the promotion of self-change.

Dynamics of the dialogical self

Taking relationships as the basis for human development is an idea assumed quite explicitly by several authors – some departing from a bakhtinian dialogism (like Baxter, 2004; Jacques, 1991; Marková, 2003b; Salgado & Hermans, 2005, to name only a few), others following different thinking traditions (in the line of Baldwin, Mead and Vygotsky– cf. the elaborations of Marková, 2003a, and Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000, upon these traditions). All of these authors, in their own terms, stress the importance of social relationships in human development and somehow support the I-Other dyad as the building foundation for the constitution of the self.

Particularly in the dialogical framework, Marková amplifies Bakhtin's motto and, assuming a relational primacy for human existence, adds quite poetically that “to be means to communicate, and to communicate means to be for another and through the other, for oneself.” (2003a, p. 257). Hence, in this point of view, to address the interplay

between culture and identity construction implies the emphasis on the role that our relational experiences play at the core of human development – and relationships are always embedded in a cultural matrix.

The issue of multiculturalism has been particularly productive, both at theoretical and empirical levels, within the dialogical self theory since to this field of studies this phenomenon appears both as a challenge and as an opportunity to illustrate its emphasis on how our inner complexity is fed by a diverse cultural environment (Konig, this volume; Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Valsiner, 2002). To this perspective, acculturation must be seen as an ongoing process, something that is never quite finished as several other authors in the field have been emphasizing (e.g. Hermans, 2001, Valsiner, 2001).

And if in some situations we might have the possibility of dealing with life in a unambiguous way – becoming almost oblivious to our inner complexity (e.g. when we are involved in a repetitive task, like preparing our breakfast) – the fact is that several daily life experiences face us precisely with the opposite: ambiguous situations that pull us in different directions prompting our inner dialogicality into a consciously felt experience (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005; Ferreira, Salgado & Cunha, 2006 – e.g. imagine that while preparing your breakfast you realize that you've run out of coffee and you start wondering what to do next...). These ambiguous daily life situations face us with discontinuity, breaks or ruptures that challenge us, interrupting our flow of living, making us stop, reflect and resolve inner tensions, drawing upon our symbolic and cultural devices to re-establish situational adjustments and self-continuity (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Iverson & Psaltis, 2003). And these are the moments when we are phenomenologically more aware of the triggering of internal dialogues. Addressing these moments is the point where the dialogical self theory has proven most resourceful,

providing theoretical and empirical tools to portray and access our inner complexity. In doing so, it depicts selfhood as a polyphonic, multivoiced, dynamic trajectory of positioning and re-positioning of the self in an irreversible flow of experience and brings the notions of voice and I-position to the core of selfhood processes (Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992; Valsiner, 2002).

Although these notions have been incorporated quite diversely by different authors and researchers (cf. the review of Ferreira, Salgado, Cunha, Meira & Konopka, 2005), we consider them most profitable when we focus on the possibility to address dialogical positions as specific moments of phenomenological experience (thus, bridging Herman's theory with other phenomenological authors like Stern, 2004).

According to Stern (2004), the "present-moment" of our subjective experience corresponds to the feeling of what happens to me in a given moment of phenomenological and experiential consciousness. This implies: a) the recognition of the self as experiential center, and b) being aware of a specific experience that happens now, to me. The subjective experience of the present experience is a gestalt that is usually brief in its duration, but felt with a beginning and an end, since it triggers a specific sense-making (appearing also as a meaningful unit). This experiential unit is accompanied by an affective tone that shifts along with our flow of living.

Our interest in conceiving this dialogical-phenomenological interconnection is also strengthened by the theoretical linkage that can be made between the following three concepts: the "present-moment of our experience", the bakhtinian notion of positioning (Holquist, 1990) and the dialogical notion of I-position (Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992). It is particularly inspiring to us to conceive this possibility of addressing self-positions, that occur moment-by-moment, as successive lived and felt experiences of the I (as a center) in a process of positioning and re-positioning as time

goes by. This phenomenological focus is, then, complemented with the notion of voice, as meaning-making and dialogical skills intervene to make sense of our internally felt multiplicity. Hence, voices vehicle particular meanings rooted in our experiential positions, as attempts to make sense of what we feel and communicate it to others. In more simple terms, to us a voice represents the expression of a specific point of view that emanates from a particular position of the I – as a center – from which something is experienced and uttered in a given moment in time (Holquist, 1990).

Detaining ourselves now in the process of dialogue, we would like to first of all, emphasize voices as the medium for the establishment of dialogical relations between different I-positions succeeding each other in the flow of experience (according to Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992). If, along with Bakhtin, we assume that addressivity lies at the core of human existence, then our experience is communicationally materialized in the notion of utterance. This concept – considered as the bakhtinian basic linguistic unit – also interested other authors in the psychological field, since they conceived an utterance: a) as an *event of the self* (Holquist, 1990); b) as a *self-state* (Leiman, 2004); and, c) a *phenomenal event* (Dop, 2000 – to name a few). According to Shotter (1992):

“The utterance is thus a real social psychological unit in that it marks out the boundaries (or the gaps) in the speech flow between different ‘voices’, between different ‘semantic’ positions – whether between people or within them.” (p. 14)

In this sense, the utterance demarks, an (inter)subjective positioning because the communicational agent is positioning him/herself towards the interlocutor and towards the cultural background that is framing what is being said. The author is, then, a *multipositioned* author – in a temporal movement of positioning and repositioning –

addressing simultaneously the interlocutor and other audiences, including him/herself, and other social discourses that contrast with that specific utterances.

Continuity and discontinuity in the dialogical self

Departing from this multipositioned authorship, the self is conceived as a moving and developmental phenomenon in constant transformation. Alterity resides at the center of what happens at the (inter and intra) personal level, triggering self-discontinuity in the shift between positionings and re-positionings. The self, as an open system, has a fluid and dynamic character requiring a constant adaptation to novel situations in its positioning movement. From this perspective, we have no difficulty in recognizing, the multiplicity and multivoicedness dimensions highly emphasized by Hermans and his followers and specifically highlighted in Jutta König's work in multicultural identity.

However, one of the most striking questions that this theory raises is the problem of self-recognition and integrated agency (cf. Richardson, Rogers & McCarroll, 1998). In fact, we all have a felt sense of continuity, a familiarity within ourselves that contrasts with a fragmented version of our identity. As Hermans (2003) highlights, the dialogical self simultaneously incorporates continuity and discontinuity – in fact, unity and multiplicity appear as faces of the same coin. According to Salgado and Gonçalves (2007), two reasons can justify the intertwining of these two dimensions: on one hand, in an I-position, the I is the experiential center along an uninterrupted transformational movement (there is a synchronic and diachronic union in the same I – Hermans, 2003); on the other hand, we cannot understand this perspective without framing it in a relational primacy that structures human existence.

We can better understand this unity as an emergent process of relationships if we look closer to ontogenetic development. According to Bertau (2004), in the encounters of the baby with social others, there is the need for both interlocutors to be simultaneously part of a specific relationship and, as well, to be detached from it – thus, becoming social-and-individual. We claim along with Bertau (2004) that “it is highly interesting that one aspect seems to condition the other” (p.92): in this sense, unity and individuality – as being one either through our relationships with others and through our relationship with ourselves – requires an effort of constructed coherence within experienced difference and discontinuity.

The I is always shown in this dependence of the Other, with whom it is involved; thus, multiplicity appears as the multiple forms of *being-with* (Salgado & Hermans, 2005) and unity appears as ‘the constructed process of detaching from the other in order to keep in dialogue with him/her’. In this sense, subjectivity is the emergent and unifying process of our experiential and symbolic multiplicity, relationally instituted (d’Alte, Petracchi, Ferreira, Cunha & Salgado, 2007). Subjectivity is not enclosed within the I, it also incorporates its addressees, its audiences (internal, external, imaginary or potential) and each new experiential position creates the need to be clear in meaning and create distinctions – simultaneously to ourselves and to others – attributing sense to our experiential ambiguity (Salgado & Hermans, 2005).

Constantly involved in novelty and difference, moment-by-moment, we are thrown to negotiate between present, past and future, between ourselves and the others, chasing the coherence and internal stability so praised in western culture (Salgado & Gonçalves, 2007; Salgado & Hermans, 2005). Bakhtin highlights that we have no alibi for existence (referenced by Holquist, 1990) and this means that we have no possibility of not addressing the world and responding to it – even when we are silent we are

communicating something to our audience. The world is always addressing us and we are impelled to respond to it, being morally responsible for our replies.

In this pursue of internal and external coherence and stability, we agree that the self acts, basically, “as a lazy problem-solver” (Valsiner, 2002, p. 261), trying to construct a familiarity in the present that allows a temporal continuity between past, present and constricting future possibilities. This constraining of the future is, most of the time, also focused on the anticipation of personal disruptions and the attempt to minimize them, maintaining self-continuity.

Along with other authors (e.g. Salgado & Gonçalves, 2007; Valsiner, 2002), we believe that the study of microgenetic development allows the illustration of the interesting aspects of this self-continuity *in the making*. On the one hand, the microgenetic level draws attention to particular and recurrent forms or processes of self-organization and self-regulation within the dialogical self (cf. Valsiner, 2002); and on the other hand, it is at this level that we can capture the specific processes of reorganization in the self that are related to consolidated developmental changes. Thus, it is in the interplay between microgenesis and superordinate levels of development (mesogenesis and ontogenesis) that we can distinguish between what a mundane variation is and what is revolutionary in the self.

Continuity as self-organization of voices

We have become increasingly interested with the possibility of studying patterns between positionings and voices in the dialogical self as self-organization processes that account for this continuity in time (cf. Cunha, 2007a, 2007b). Although this concept of self-organization has been emerging in other sciences in the previous decades – particularly when it refers to the dynamic systems theory (Barton, 1994) – the fact is

that it has not been consistently applied to the field of psychology and particularly to the study of selfhood dynamics. Trying to be more precise, Lewis emphasizes that this concept of self-organization “... is an *idea*, (...) that promises coherent explanation in the study of pattern, change and novelty.” (2000, p. 42; emphasis in the original).

However, for Lewis and Granic (1999), there has been some confusion in the psychological literature around this concept of self-organization, due to the prefix *self* (whereas in other sciences, the self prefix means related to itself; for Psychology, the self acquires a status of scientific object by its own). In this sense, according to these authors, this concept can mean different aspects, like: i) the emergence of order in a complex system (placing the emphasis on the coherence of the system); ii) the proliferation and integration of the system (placing the emphasis on its adaptation); or, iii) the self-organization of the self itself (as an object of study).

Although we might come across these different distinctions, we consider that all these aspects are in order when we try to grasp the self in its self-organizing process. This vision of the self as a self-organizing system, as an emergent phenomena in a socio-cultural and relational background does not contradict notions like intentionality, agency or autonomy – but stresses the need to develop theoretical efforts to articulate these concepts. If we take the self as this self-organizing system, we can try to understand the way it maintains its stability through real-time dynamic processes, selecting information, reducing or amplifying certain effects to maintain its coherence and continuity (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Hence, the empirical challenge is to describe and infer the processes implicated in the construction of similitude and the processes implicated in self-innovation and change.

We have tried to empirically address this challenge in previous research (cf. Cunha, 2007a, 2007b), following real-time variability in meaning-construction. This

allowed us to capture three distinct patterns of self-organization of voices in the dialogical self: 1) a dominant voice that suppresses and silences alterity (other voices trying to participate in dialogue); 2) a coalition of two voices that feed each other and suppress alternate voices; and 3) an unstable multivoicedness, where several voices appear and are immediately suppressed by the next expressed voice, without any clear domination of any one. Although these patterns are consistent with what has already been theoretically depicted by previous authors in clinical samples (cf. Dimaggio, 2006; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2004; Lysaker & Lysaker, 2004; Valsiner, 2002), we consider that this study had a two-fold innovation: first, the demonstration that each of these specific types are also involved in the organization of “normal”, everyday experience; and second, the empirical depiction of the emergence and development of these patterns in real-time process analysis¹.

Difference, imagination and novelty in the promotion of change

Having elaborated on self-organization and the construction of sameness in the dialogical self, we would like to focus now on the other face of the problem: the role that difference, alterity and otherness play in the promotion of human change and development. And this is what has been particularly addressed in Konig’s work.

According to Hermans (1999), while we engage in a self-reflection process, we are able to confront ourselves with the difference and alterity of self-positionings that voice different perspectives from our usual one and these can be contradictory and tensional. These different positionings and voices can also come from imaginary characters (like personal heroes) that, by being given dialogical qualities, can act as I-positions and introduce different resources that sometimes the person would not

¹ In the context of this research, the dominance of a certain voice (or voices) was operationalized as the repetitiveness of its expression in the succession of positionings of the self in the flow of time and meaning-making.

recognize in himself/herself (Hermans, 1999). The confrontation with this inner contradiction and tension can create two end-points: in one hand, it can trigger self-regulatory semiotic devices that maintain the usual self-organization pattern or, on the other hand, it can open a window of possibilities for the emergence of new meanings. This latter developmental trajectory can create the «difference that makes the difference» (Bateson, 1972/1999, p. 381), prompting personal change and, at the limit, lead to self-reorganization. These are the processes conceived as underlying the *Innovation Exercise* (Hermans, 1999) that served as the departure point for König's research procedure (this volume), but they can also explain the broader notion of personal change and human development (either in psychotherapy or everyday life). König's intention with this research procedure applied to global nomads was precisely to understand if different cultural positions could be identified by the participants and if they could be acting as flexible resources to solve daily difficulties (like those that arise in the management of a multicultural world).

However, according to Lyra (1999), the conflicts between self-positions are just one of the multiple forms of generating the alterity and innovation underlying reorganization. According to Bakhtin (referenced by Hermans, 1999), it is mostly in the I-Other real relationship that novelty emerges because the contact with the alterity of a real other creates the more striking need to construct and negotiate a common, shared communicational ground of meanings. This effort for the co-construction of meanings introduces a tensional difference zone that is also a «zone of proximal development» (Vygotsky, 1934/2001) and interlocutors participate in a joint, negotiated scaffolding of meanings (Cheyne & Tarulli, 1999).

In our own empirical research, we developed an interview procedure designed to promote personal innovation very much in line with Hermans' *Innovation Exercise*

(1999), that we called *Identity Positions Interview* (cf. Cunha, 2007a, 2007b; M. Gonçalves & Cunha, 2006). Throughout this interview, several narrative tasks are presented to the participants in the attempt to create change processes in meaning-making and promote innovation in the usual perspective around a personal difficulty. These tasks are always framed within a real relationship (interviewer-participant) even though they try to activate, within the participant, imaginary dialogues with (absent) significant others and promote dialogues between the self in the present and projected futures (as-if movements; cf. Valsiner, 2007). We decided to frame the procedure within a real relationship and focus on its unfolding in time instead of a design that captures the beginning and the end products of an individual reflection of the participant. Our decision had three main reasons: first, we assumed that a real relationship with an other would be always more productive in the promotion of novelty because of the need to jointly construct meanings that had to be explored and understood by the two interlocutors; second, because the confrontation with the alterity of an other is considered by us as amplifying the potential developmental zone that can be achieved together and would not be achieved by the individual participant; and third, most importantly, for creating the opportunity to (at least partially) access to the inner-dialogical processes engaged in the self-reflecting tasks. Our assumption upon the power of a real relationship in promoting self-innovation and narrative change has also been empirically tested through the tracking of innovation-moments both in therapeutic and non-therapeutic changes (cf. M. Gonçalves, Matos, Salgado, Santos, Mendes, Ribeiro, Cunha, & J. Gonçalves, 2010; Gonçalves, Santos, & Matos, in press).

Thus, while reading König's article we are left with a yearning to better understand how these participants experience their cultural positions leaving us inevitably engaged in hypothetical understandings of their experiential processes (e.g.

what exactly does Lisa mean when she says – “I like to be busy with myself like this; it makes me feel safer.”? – quoted from the case of Lisa in the Results section of König’s manuscript). And when considering the use of Likert scales, we start questioning what the meaning around a specific rating is? Certainly different individuals attribute different meanings to numbers and ratings which can trigger very interesting thoughts, memories and reasons that help us, as researchers, to focus on our participant’s experiences and reflective processes. Even though there is a widespread use of rating scales in Psychology, considering that they are generally considered a rapid and «problem-free» method for collecting data with big samples, we claim along with Wagoner and Valsiner (2005; Cunha, 2007a, 2007b) that these kind of methodological devices lead the researcher to a simplified understanding of the target phenomena also preventing its access to the richness of the psychological object he/she aims to study. Using rating tasks in a traditional form leads to a «mutilated introspection», as Wagoner and Valsiner named it (2005 – curiously, these authors take these rating scales and use it, creatively, as a tool to explore and deepen the meaning making processes aimed at in their research).

Nevertheless, for us, König’s work (this volume) is another interesting contribution emphasizing that imagination seems to occupy a fundamental role in human development and multicultural experience, in particular. For example, a global nomad, while facing a difficult task might start imagining how he would resolve that particular situation as a person from origin A, or as a person from origin B, or as an enriched person that is able to integrate both cultural experiences. In fact, the importance of imagination is very much in line both with the narrative and dialogical tradition. Its importance in Psychology started growing with the narrative movement’s highlight on the fictional nature of human life that gave imagination a central role never

attained before in the study of *psyque*, self-narratives, therapeutic change and relational/cultural dynamics (Cunha & Ferreira, 2006). Hence, it is through imagination that one can explore, actualize and expand the possibilities of what is not yet present, but is made present as potential development and self-innovation (M. Gonçalves & Cunha, 2006).

Conclusion

We tried to comment on Konig's work (this volume) by focusing on some of her contributions to the understanding of multicultural identity and elaborating on our personal views upon other interesting questions raised.

We have argued that experientially we are always dealing with an inner complexity and outer complexity particularly noted in a globalized society – that is why acculturation is an ongoing process. The ambiguous life situations that we face moment-by-moment foster inner and outer dialogues in the attempt to promote self-adaptation and self-continuity in changing contexts and situations. This inner complexity is, according to the dialogical self theory, not only multipositioned but also multivoiced, as I-positions make use of semiotic and cultural tools for expressing the experiential here-and-now (Hermans & Hertenstein, 1998; Valsiner, 2002).

We also elaborated upon a more explicit interconnection between the dialogical self and phenomenological experience, characterizing selfhood as a dynamic and emergent process. We argue that this emergent conception of the self, taking experience as dialogue is consistent with bakhtinian dialogism and makes utterance the basic unit of meaning-making.

Alterity and discontinuity were also described as residing in the center of a dialogical self searching for self-continuity in a moment-by-moment basis. We consider

that this self-organization of the multiple I-positions that are assumed by the developing self is achieved mainly through forms of regulation of multivoicedness (cf. Valsiner, 2002). Alterity is, then, turned into similarity and discontinuity is surpassed by self's construction of continuity. We consider that these real-time, dynamic processes are particularly empirically highlighted through the use of microgenetic methods.

We have also elaborated on the developmental opportunity that the introduction of difference and novelty can play in the promotion of self-change. We commented on Hermans' *Innovation Exercise* (1999) and König's (this volume) adaptation for her research purposes, emphasizing particularly the dialogical processes that the method provokes. And although the *Innovation Exercise* draws particular attention to the spatial distinctiveness of I-positions (in their question-and-answer confrontations), we assume that this method can also be complemented with a microgenetic focus that grasps the transformational movements of positioning and repositioning of the self occurring throughout the passage of time.

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