

The Return of Subjectivity: From a Multiplicity of Selves to the Dialogical Self.

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Abstract

Psychology has been increasingly recognising the multiplicity of the self. However, this recognition raises the problem of explaining how a sense of self-identity is achieved within a multiplicity of selves. Two theoretical orientations playing a major role in the study of the plurality of the self: the social-cognitive perspective, in which self is studied as an information-processing device, and the social constructionist framework, in which self is understood as a matter of social and linguistic negotiation. Nevertheless, it is argued that these orientations are still trapped in several epistemological problems and the final result leaves no space for subjectivity. Dialogism and the dialogical view of the self are presented as possible solutions for those problems. Conceiving self as a result of the dialogicality, unity and multiplicity appear as two contrasting, but united poles of a dialogical and (inter)subjective self.

The multiplicity of the self has been a topic of discussion for a long time. The human intuition that each one of us has a single and continuous entity seems to be paradoxically denied by the recognition that each person goes through several changes during the life cycle. The debate is quite old: at least, we can trace its origins to John Locke's question "how can I be the same I was in my past?" (see Locke, 1689/1975). When the soul ceased to be the warranty of continuity, personal identity became a problem (Polkinghorne, 1988).

This problem could be regarded as just a pure philosophical question, without any implications to psychology. However, psychologists started to deal with this matter, when they began to ask questions relating to selfhood, at least ever since William James (1890). Moreover, this play between sameness and difference, unity and multiplicity, has also implications for the construction of research methods, collection of data, preferred modes of analyses, and even strategies of psychological intervention.

The Cartesian heritage of our thought is still reflected in the conception of the ego as a sole basis of meaning and consciousness. Consequently, personal identity is regarded as something based on the continuity and permanence of such an inner, homuncular and observing self. However, in the last two decades, the notion of a plural self became appealing to psychologists (Rowan & Cooper, 1999). Regardless of the theoretical orientation, the self is considered nowadays as multiple, varied, changeable, sometimes as chameleon that changes along with the context, sometimes as a double-faced Janus with opposite sides – but always as a differentiated and complex entity. Cognitive models recognise the multifacetedness of the self (Markus & Wurf, 1987), the psychodynamic orientations have emphasised the decentring and multiplicity of the self (see Bromberg, 2004), and the social constructionists argue for a multiphrenic and relational self (e.g. Gergen, 1991). However, for these models, that stress and value multiplicity, resides a difficult question to answer: how can a multiple self still be experienced as a single and permanent person? The issue with personal identity is that whenever we start valuing personal fluidity and change, we face the problem of explaining the constitution of a personal identity.

In turn, the dialogical theory of the self establishes that selfhood processes have a dialogical nature. Drawing upon James's treatment of the self and Bakhtin's analysis of novels as polyphonic arrangements, the self has been characterised as a continuous dialogue and interplay between different I-positions, each one with a specific voice. Consequently, each person is devised as a polyphonic society of mind (Hermans, 2002).

Within this framework, I-position and voice are central concepts and, simultaneously, highly related to the multiplicity of the self. Sometimes, what we take as a voice can be replaced by other concepts. For example,

Stiles (1997), interested in a dialogical understanding of change processes in psychotherapy (see Osatuke, Gray, Glick, Stiles, & Barkham, 2004), recognises that the notion of voice is referring to the same process as the notions of “schema” or “internal object”. We understand this claim as proposing that “voice” refers to segments of human experience that are labelled by other theoretical orientations with different terms. If such is the case, we are dealing with the same object of analysis. Nevertheless, does the use of a different metaphor make a difference? As Lewis and Todd (2004) ask, are we just using different sets of metaphorical expressions that do not have real pragmatic implications? Metaphors are rich and inspiring images, but the substitution of one metaphor with another is only revolutionary if it allows a different understanding of central issues in our field of study. As we shall argue in this article, the insistence on polyphonic qualities of the self may shade the major issue of a dialogical model of the self being its dialogicality – and not primarily its multivoicedness.

Thus, this article elaborates the implications related to a conception of self in terms of multiple I-positions, highlighting the differences between its framework and that of other models. Nevertheless, this radical shift of theoretical perspective creates a problem that we would like to address: the question of a sense of unity. Thus, we will also elucidate how a dialogical perspective addresses the problem of unity *versus* multiplicity. In our view, dialogism has the potential to surpass the dichotomy unity-multiplicity and to create a perspective about selfhood processes that equally values those two poles of human experience, allowing the return of subjectivity (not separated from intersubjectivity) to psychology.

Between Unity and Multiplicity

The sense of being the same person during the course of time is central to our lives. Within Western thought, this is associated with the definition of “person” as a single and independent universe. Therefore, if a person is a distinctive and self-contained whole, it is tempting to assume that a homuncular self is regularly present, something like a central unity of processing. In fact, as Richard Rorty (1989) claims, traditional perspectives assume the existence of a core self that is able to introspectively observe the internal space. In fact, the basic question is not “who am I?”, but “what am I?” (Polkinghorne, 1988). The overall idea is to look for an essential self in order to fully describe the person.

Many psychological theories do not endorse such a perspective, and argue for a conception of the self as progressively decentred and multiplied. The Freudian picture of a powerful unconscious represented a first break with the idea of an omniscient self-conscious individual. Moreover, from the very beginning it was evident that multiplicity played a vital role in the life course. The classic distinction drawn by William James (1890) between I and Me led him to admit the need of a plurality of selves, seeing that different social contexts demand different ways of being. Nevertheless, for a long period, the most favoured descriptions of the self assigned a great importance to stability, continuity, and unity (Hermans & Gonçalves, 1999). To exemplify, we can recall the study of the self-concept, a notion that for a long time was analysed as a monolithic structure (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

In the last 25 years, an amazing transformation happened, and the multiplicity of the self started to be widely recognised within psychology, not only implicitly, but also with explicit theories (Hermans, 1996; Rowan & Cooper, 1999). Those claims for the plural self came from several theories, but it is fair to recognise that two kinds of approaches were really decisive in that movement: cognitivism (e.g. Markus & Nurius, 1986) and social constructionism (e.g. Gergen, 1994). These orientations are based in rather different metaphors, but, curiously enough, they converge on the role assigned to multiplicity. We will briefly review these two kinds of approaches, in order to compare them with the dialogical framework.

The Computer Metaphor: Self as an Organisation of Knowledge

In the information-processing approach, the self is conceived of as a mental and cognitive structure compounded by multiple self-schemata (Markus & Wurf, 1987), self-representations (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984), or facets (Marsh, 1986). Each of these structural elements categorises information semantically or episodically in relation to the person. Metaphorically, the person acts as a computer (hardware) that organises information about herself/himself; the global organisation of that information, in turn, works as a software device that formats specific self-images. This structure, entitled as self or self-concept, is thought to be active, since each element (e.g. a self-schema) receives, codifies and decodifies stimuli (input) and establishes a certain course of action (output). Thus, self corresponds to self-knowledge and in being so, selfhood is a matter of

knowledge and representation of the own person. Therefore, self-recognition and self-identity are totally dependent on the elaboration of such a structure: in order to recognise myself I need to create the concept that I am a single person, different from the others; that is to say, I need to create a self-concept.

For a long time, this line of research was based on global assessments of self-concept that reduced it to a monolithic structure. However, Markus and Nurius (1986) criticised this view and along with other researchers (e.g. Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984), proposed a more dynamic perspective that recognised self as a multifaceted phenomenon, introducing notions that have become popular, such as the concepts of “working self-concept” and “possible selves”.

Within this domain, the introduction of the multiplicity notion inspired different lines of research, specifically devoted to the study of self-differentiation and self-complexity (see Gramzow, Sedikides, Panter, & Insko, 2000; Showers, Abramson, & Hogan, 1998). One of the main topics of discussion has been the relation between self-differentiation and psychological adjustment (Linville, 1987) and the debate is far from dead (see Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001; Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002).

Nevertheless, the multiplicity of the self became a topic of intense research and interest. Independently of the optimal level of multiplicity, the cognitive orientation accepts that it is a topic that needs to be addressed. Meanwhile, in literature the expression “self-concept” progressively became known as only “self”. Sometimes, it is hard to remember that we are dealing with a cognitive and mental structure. The self-concept is probably only one part of the story.

A Human Being Is Not a Computer: A Critical Review of the Computational Metaphor of the Self

In a recent critical review of cognitivism, Ivana Marková (2003) convincingly argues that the so-called “cognitive revolution” is profoundly rooted in history, doubting their revolutionary features. In fact, the cognitive orientation has a strong commonality with ideas that remain quite stable since the seventeenth century. As Marková claims (2003), cognitivism is only a variation of a “foundational epistemology” (which is sometimes referred to as “representationalism”), a widely accepted notion of the nature of knowledge. This epistemological

orientation is described by Marková as something that has its origins in Ancient Greece:

“According to this traditional Platonic/Cartesian epistemology, which is now often called ‘foundational’ (Taylor, 1995b), the objective of the theory of knowledge is the search for truth, certainty, unchangeable universals and indubitable principles, which are to be discovered by the mind of the individual” (Marková, 2003, p. 6)

The main purpose of that kind of epistemology is to create a global theory of mental representations. That tradition started, at least, with Descartes but nowadays appears as cognitivism since this approach shares the same intent. The global image presents knowledge as something based in the minds of individuals that operate through the creation of mental representations of the world (Marková, 2003; see also Rorty, 1989).

This cognitive notion of mind is a mechanistic and disembodied one permeated by the old problems of dualism. Indeed, cognitivism has to deal with uncomfortable questions, such as what do mental representations represent (Marková, 2003)? The answer comes in many forms, since this is an old philosophical debate between realism *versus* idealism and empiricism *versus* rationalism. However, the problem is that no answer seems satisfactory when we start with such a conception of mind and knowledge. Sooner or later, the mind is wrapped in solipsism.

Applying this reasoning to the domain of the cognitive self, we can start by asking what counts as self-knowledge. Pragmatically, self-beliefs and self-representations are assumed as central devices that create a specific self-image. Nevertheless, we may ask: do those representations have any correspondence with the actual person? It is difficult to articulate any clear answer to this question, because it is trapped in the old foundational epistemology. Moreover, the difficulties in establishing a clear base for self-knowledge are directly associated with the reduction of the person to a mechanical object (a computer). Indeed, several authors recognise that the “cognitive self” only corresponds to the self-as-object or reflexive consciousness (Baumeister, 1998). As Markus and Wurf (1987) long ago honestly stated: “Self theorists have abandoned as somewhat premature efforts to describe the active, “I” aspects of the self, and have been temporarily content to elaborate the structural features of the self-concept.” (p. 301). Unfortunately, current research still maintains this orientation and as such this self is a self without subject.

Social Constructionism and the Multiplicity of Self-narratives

Within psychology, one of the most critical voices of the cognitive perspective is the social constructionist one. There is a great variety of perspectives around social constructionism but we would say that the most radical versions assume a postmodernist and a relativistic point of view around the question of the nature of knowledge (e.g. Gergen, 1994). Following more or less the same kind of arguments that we have previously presented, and embedded in the critical philosophical trends of modern reasoning (e.g. Lyotard, 1979; Rorty, 1989), social constructionists strongly criticised the notion of knowledge as a mirror of nature. In order to give up such “foundational epistemologies” or “representationalism”, it is assumed that knowledge is a matter of linguistic and social praxis. Following Wittgenstein (1953), they assume that language and mind are not ways of representing the world or expressing the inner self; instead, language is metaphorically conceived as a tool, an instrument that creates the possibility of certain courses of action. In turn, language is dependent on the relationship between people that conventionally assign a more or less defined meaning to specific words, expressions, and theories. Moreover, this “linguistic turn” assumes that there is no absolute way of judging if a certain belief is right or wrong: “truth” is a socio-linguistic matter, and, therefore, every truth is always dependent on social contexts (Gergen, 1994).

In this way, the construction of meaning is completely dependent on relationships between people, including self-related meanings. Each context specifies certain relational and linguistic games, by which people try to make themselves intelligible to others and try to make others intelligible to themselves. In other words, meaning is a matter of linguistic and social negotiation. Selfhood, in this matter, is only a particular case of intelligibility: what I am is a matter of how we symbolically and pragmatically negotiate the meanings assigned to my own person.

This vast background created a fertile soil for the claims that defend the multiplicity of the self. People change while changing contexts. This idea, clearly stated by William James and even by the social-cognitive models, is evidently present in social constructionism. The only necessary condition for that multiplicity is to share different relational networks that assign different and even opposing meanings to the same matters. For the postmodernists, this situation is almost overwhelming nowadays. Gergen (1991) reminded us how much we are

expanding our social networks, leading to a process of “social saturation”. Diversity creates a “multiphrenic self”, a self that needs to deal with different kinds of ways of meaning-making. Moreover, this expansion of networks also reduced the social control and normalisation, typical of societies with more stable relationships.

For social constructionism, the inner realm of the self is just a myth created through our language and social games (Gergen, 1994; Shotter, 1993). Thus, in the most extreme forms of social constructionism, the inner mental space is replaced by social relationships. In sum, the traditional assumption of an “inner world” is treated as something that actually happens between people: the mind and the self become socially distributed processes.

Within this framework, these processes of social negotiation are the central focus of study. Emotions, for example, traditionally considered important dimensions of subjectivity, are alternatively treated as socially constituted relational devices (Gergen, 1994). The sense of continuity and permanence – the sense of identity – is something that arises from the continuous processes of creating and granting intelligibility and coherence in the course of relationships with others. We are not dealing with an inner self, but with a performed self, considered as a process of presentation and social indexation of the person.

In this context, narrative became a very appealing concept for social constructionism. This approach considers narratives as social and relational devices used by the person to maintain some sort of coherence in social exchange. Stories and history precede the individual and live through the relationships. The person uses them as a way of co-constructing meanings with others. At the same time, this framework agrees with those who claim that self-narratives are ways of recollecting the past and projecting the future, a process by which some sort of unity is created (Polkinghorne, 1988). Gergen and Gergen (1988) clearly stated: “In developing a self-narrative the individual attempts to establish coherent connections among life events” (p. 19). Nevertheless, social constructionism views these narratives as social constructions, and not as individual properties of the individual: “we view self-narratives as *properties of social accounts or discourse*. Narratives, are, in effect, *social constructions*, undergoing continuous alteration as interaction progresses...self-narratives function much as histories within society do more generally” (Gergen & Gergen, 1988, p. 37).

The point is to characterise each human life as a totally social embedded process: everything that happens, happens between people and not inside each person. There is no inner self, no specific individual properties to account for what the person is and is not. Narratives, emotions, and thoughts, are basically socially constructed words and stories through which we assign meaning to us and to our world. This creates space for the celebration of multiplicity. However, that multiplicity of social exchanges of postmodern times can also create a feeling of emptiness and incoherence.

A Story Has Always a Teller and a Listener: The Vacuity of Self in Social Constructionism

The social constructionist critique has a broad scope and is profound. In fact, they completely deconstruct the “foundational” or “representational” epistemologies that large parts of psychology take for granted. They convincingly argue that we need to replace the traditional mechanistic theory of the mind and the metaphors of language/mind as “mirrors”. They also invite us to accept the social, relational, and dialogical features of meaning-making.

Nevertheless, within social constructionism there are several problems that remain to be solved. First, the recognition that there is no objective foundation for mental states leads social constructionists to reject the pertinence of accepting an internal and subjective space. This deprives the individual of almost any psychological sphere. From our point of view, this has to do with a confusion between two types of hostilities, typical of Wittgenstein and his followers: the hostility directed to the immediacy of the mind and hostility against privacy (Salgado, 2003; for a discussion of this matter within philosophy, see Rorty, 1989). When we reject a representationalist epistemology, we are also rejecting the assumption that knowledge is completely based in the subjective and isolated mind – in other words, we deviate from the idea that the origin of knowledge is the immediate access to internal states, as would happen in the Cartesian theatre of the mind. Nevertheless, the rejection of this assumption does not necessarily leads us to accept the second kind of hostility, somehow typical of the most radical versions of social constructionism: the lack of private or internal experiences. In other words, we see no reason to support the social constructionist rejection of the private and subjective side of human life. It must be clear that we are not claiming that knowledge is grounded in the single and isolated individual (or

mind); it is only an admittance that, once familiarised with some particular language, the individual has authentic private (in opposition to public, explicitly shared) experiences. As a clear example, the best way to know if someone has some sort of pain is to ask it to the person.

Curiously, this reasoning shows that social constructionism, in its efforts to overcome the old dualisms (mind/body, person/society, subject/object) falls into one of the poles relating to this problem. For example, they value the social side so much, that they deny the person almost any kind of privileges. At the same time, while denying any subjectivity, they almost objectify people.

For some of the critics of social constructionism, this movement is still trapped in the same old problems created since Descartes. As Marková (2003) states, the relativistic stance assumed in this stream of thought destabilises all kinds of knowledge and does not create a solid alternative to foundational epistemologies. The deconstruction operated, interesting and valuable as it is, does not provide a viable alternative. Marková (2003) goes even further, comparing social constructionism with the computational approach in psychology:

“Paradoxically, in its most extreme versions, the ‘postmodern’ social constructionism is ontologically and epistemologically close to the most extreme versions of mental representation theories in the cognitive and computational science... All knowledge is relativist. There is nowhere to go either from the individual solipsism of cognitivists or from the social solipsism of postmodernists. In both approaches reality loses ‘reality’ and becomes unreal.” (Marková, 2003, p. 16).

In sum, radical social constructionism seems to forget subjectivity. Even if we need to conceptualise it in a relational/dialogical way, subjectivity is still a topic that needs to be addressed. The dialogical perspective has been calling attention to that fact for some time now. As one of us stated previously, there is a conceptual difficulty in that framework related with the problem of knowing what the self is. “Is it a story or is it the teller of the story? how could I make a distinction between my dream and the fact that I am the person who is telling this dream?” (Hermans, 1996, p. 38). In a dialogical perspective, that distinction is not only a valid one but also a necessary condition for the possibility of meaning-making.

From Dialogism to the Dialogical Self Theory

The dialogical self theory (Hermans, 2002, 2004a, 2004b; Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992) has been evolving in the last decade as a framework that attempts to create a solid alternative to the traditional conceptions of the mind and of the self, without falling in a solipsistic or relativistic point of view. This approach is directly influenced by the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin, an influential thinker in several fields of human sciences. It would be simplistic to reduce dialogism to Bakhtin's work since this orientation has a long tradition of thinkers (see Marková, 2003). However, his originality and profundity created the possibility to expand dialogism to varied fields, such as psychology. Thus, we will refer especially to his work, but with complete awareness that he is not the single and isolated "dialogical thinker".

Bakhtin and Dialogism

There is no easy and consensual way of defining dialogism (see Holquist, 1990; Marková, 2003). Nevertheless, it can be argued that dialogism is an alternative epistemology, or even ontology (see Marková, 2003), that claims for the recognition that human existence and human meanings are created within and by relationships. Nobody exists alone – in fact, every human being is, from the very beginning, involved in a relational and communicational process. In the last decades, developmental psychologists have in a clear way been stating this idea: infants are born with amazing possibilities of communication, something that brings to the foreground relationships as the most important devices of development (Aitken & Trevarthen, 1997).

This assumption of a primacy of relationships is quite close to social constructionist's proposals. However, it does not lead us to dissolve the person in the social realm, as happens in that approach. Indeed, it is the opposite: a relational existence necessarily creates two bounded, yet contrasting, poles: a centre and a periphery (Holquist, 1990) – or, in Marková's (2003) terms, an Ego and an Alter. The emergent existence is an existence that relationally defines itself within and by that contrast. This explains why Bakhtin (1984) stated so clearly "*To be is to communicate*" (p. 287). Each human being is constituted as a communicational agency.

This relates with the Bakhtinian analysis of existence and language. In this framework, language is always permeated by a central feature: double addressivity (see Bakhtin, 1981). For Bakhtin, each utterance is always addressed toward an object (or, more precisely, addressed

toward the specific available discourses about a given object), but it is also addressed to an interlocutor. This movement positions the person, in that moment, toward the object, but also toward Other(s), and within this process personal meanings are created. Utterances and language bound people together in a dialogical fashion within relationships (of agreement but also disagreement, of closeness but also separation, of empathy but also antipathy; see Hermans, 2004b). Moreover, the words used are also half given and half created (Bakhtin, 1981): they are part of the social heritage, but they are always recreated, enacted and embodied by a specific person in a specific moment of relationship.

For Bakhtin (1981), language and utterances were the major topic of discussion, since his ultimate goal was the development of a dialogical analysis of discourse, especially novels. However, all his work is permeated by the notion that language and human existence share a common goal: to create meaning through addressivity or communication. The subjective *I* is created within the intersubjective experiences of being-with (or being-against) Others.

This eliminates the different kinds of the old Cartesian dualism (Hermans, 2004a, 2004b; Salgado & Ferreira, in press). The personal realm is bounded with the social-cultural realm, not as independent entities, but as mutual defining poles (Hermans, 2002; Valsiner, 1998). Moreover, the mind is not conceived of as a single and isolated matter, but as a dialogical process of communication with others and with oneself (Hermans, 2004b).

From Bakhtin's Polyphonic Novel to the Dialogical Self

In his analysis of linguistic forms, Bakhtin valued the novel as the most supreme form of exploring dialogicality. More than poetry, novels enable a truly dialogical exchange between different kinds of world views, embodied and voiced by different characters (Bakhtin, 1984). When this potentiality of novels is actualised by the author, as was the case of Dostoevsky, a polyphonic novel is created. Dostoevsky was able to move himself to the world views of different characters, enabling them to have a specific voice: "For the author the hero is not 'he', and not 'I' but a full valid 'thou', that is, another and other autonomous 'I'" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 63). The characters are not treated as tools or objects by which the author creates a unified view of the world; on the contrary, the final result and purpose of the novel is to

enable the exposition, the debate and the dialogical exchange of different languages and consciousnesses.

The metaphor of polyphony implies the dialogical notion of voice. For Bakhtin, dialogicality involves an embodied addressivity: in every process of meaning making, an *I* addresses, anticipates and responds to an interlocutor (physically present or not) voicing a specific positioning toward that audience. Thus, whenever the author of a novel dialogically penetrates the perspectives of different characters, different voices emerge and polyphony arises.

Based on this line of reasoning, Hermans et al. (1992) conceived the self as a dynamic multiplicity of different I-positions in the landscape of the mind. This perspective assumes selfhood as a highly dynamic process, since the *I* is always in a process of positioning and repositioning towards actual or potential audiences. Throughout that process, the *I* is able to move from one position to a different one, depending on the exchanges that take place in internal and/or external dialogues. Assuming a narrative stance, Hermans (2004a; 2004b; Hermans et al. 1992) establishes that each I-position has its own story to tell, each one functioning as interacting characters in a story, establishing specific relationships (e.g. agreement/disagreement). Self becomes a complex narrative process.

This perspective adds a spatial dimension to the narrative perspective. Globally, narrative psychology has been insisting in the temporal dimension of narratives, which are defined as devices that organise events in a temporal plot by which we create a sense of self-identity. Nevertheless, a story is always told from someone to someone else in a given moment and context. A dialogical perspective clearly states the need of including teller and listener to the story-telling events, contextualising and spatialising the notion of self.

In previous works, the dialogical theory of the self insisted in these polyphonic qualities of selfhood, since this perspective enables a dynamic picture of the unstable processes happening at every moment (see Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004). Doubts, conflicts, inner divergences and oppositions between people are all excellent examples of such dynamics. However, a full dialogical account of selfhood does not restrict itself to the multiplicity of the self. In our view, it can also bring a new look of the individual that reconfigures subjectivity and personal identity as communicational processes.

The Basic Elements for a Dialogical Account of Self

The self is populated (and instituted) by several kinds of actual or possible I-positions. However, we must keep in mind that this multiplicity is derived from the dialogical properties of the self. If personal meaning is brought to being in the act of addressing someone else, the person will change whenever the audience changes. Thus, it is not the multiplicity of the self that institutes dialogicality (as seems to be the case in cognitive formulations); it is dialogicality that institutes that differentiation within the self. Selfhood and otherness are intertwined processes, and the relational contrast between I and Other (the audiences) becomes a fundamental element of subjectivity. The addressed audiences are a constitutional part of the self, and the *I* is able to occupy and speak from that position. In other words, the other may function as another I: “the other person, or another ‘object’, are not simply known as objectified realities or internalised objects, but can be known only as they are allowed to speak from their own perspectives. The other as ‘alter ego’ has two implications: the other is like me (ego) and, at the same time another one (alter)... self-knowledge and knowledge of the other become intimately intertwined” (Hermans, 2004b, p. 21).

Thus, the other is included in the self-space. Within a dialogical perspective, subjectivity is the opposite side of the alterity of our lives, always established upon intersubjective experiences. The subjective side of the individual is not an encapsulated and isolated mind, but a matter of communication with others and with oneself.

How subjectivity would be described in such a model? Salgado and Ferreira (in press), inspired on triadic dialogical models (see Jacques, 1991; Leiman, 2004; Marková, 2003), propose a description of subjectivity as a communicational process composed by 3 intertwined elements: there is always an *I* (a centre of the here-and-now experience) addressing an *Other* (an Other-in-the-self, the actual content of the current experience, the not-I-in-me; Holquist, 1990); however, this relationship is always mediated by an invisible third party, namely *potential audiences*, where the personal meanings of I and Other are negotiated. Thus, while one person is intersubjectively addressing another person in a dialogue, there is also a simultaneous process of internal dialogue with other potential audiences, personally and socially relevant for the matter under discussion. The process of intersubjective exchange can also take place with objects (for example, talking to a cherished object), with other

living forms (for example, talking to a cat) or even with oneself (for example, when the content of the experience is focused on a specific thought). In all these cases, we develop a dialogical relationship as if we were engaging in a dialogue with someone else.

Thus, every intersubjective experience has always a subjective and private side. However, subjectivity here is understood as the personal side of a communicational process, and not as the foundation of knowledge. In turn, “private” is here considered in the sense of “something that is not necessarily shared”: we have thoughts and feelings that are not necessarily communicated to “real others”, even if they are parts of the actual dialogical process.

Subjectivity and the Dialogical Self: Joining Together Unity and Multiplicity

At first sight, it could be thought that such a model would have a great difficulty in dealing with the question of unity, or, if you want, self-identity. However, it is our conviction that this is not the case. In our view, unity and multiplicity of the self are two simultaneous by-products of a dialogical existence. In one sense, each person inhabits several I-positions while addressing different audiences and themes of dialogue. The term “position” implies that everything that is said, is said from one place toward a specific background, and its “location” depends not only on what is said but on the relationship between what is said and the global surroundings. The *I* emerges by reference with an Other. Thus, if we conceive the *I* as the centre of the here-and-now experience, the *I* will remain to be the centre of the experience of the person from one moment to the next, even though it occupies a different positioning. In this sense, the specific position occupied by the *I* can radically change from one moment to the other. Moreover, we agree with the idea that we are “colonised” by different ways of assigning meaning. As Bakhtin (1981) stated, we live in a heteroglot world. That diversity implies doubts, argumentation, conflict, dispute, between different world views – in a word, it implies multiplicity.

Nevertheless, within a dialogical approach a scenario of multiplicity and heteroglossia *implies* unity, at least for two reasons. First, a human being is able to subjectively sense and centre every experience in herself or himself (the *I* side of the subjective experience). Dialogically, to be an *I* is to relate with someone else or to address someone else. In that movement, the *I* emerges as a centre, but, by definition, in a mutual dependency of the

Other. Moreover, the *I* does not exhaust selfhood and subjectivity since these are compounded by the other two elements: the addressed other and the invisible audiences. Nevertheless, this “centredness” quality of the actual experience is fundamental to create a subjective sense. In the temporal movement, from moment to moment, the *I* may occupy a different position, for example, stating something quite different from what it was saying until then. In a sense, this is a different position; in another, it still remains an I-position: unity and multiplicity are brought together in the notion of I-position.

Meanwhile, there is also a second reason to state that unity and multiplicity are complementary, yet contrasting poles of the self. This second argument has to do with the human ability of communicating not only with other human beings, but also with oneself. If we assume that thought is, in fact, a dialogue with oneself (Hermans, 2004b) we do not need to assume that self-consciousness is grounded in a kind of internal or homuncular ego or observer. Consequently, it is possible to admit that self-consciousness is a matter of communication with oneself (Jacques, 1991), a matter of our ability of relating with ourselves. Once again we conclude that unity and multiplicity are bounded together: to relate with myself in a communicational way, I need to be the same (an *I*), and yet different (an Other). Thus, dialogically self-consciousness is a matter of unity and multiplicity at the same time. Moreover, this ability of self-communication, fed by the “centredness” feeling of each passing moment, creates the need to be intelligible not only for others, but also for ourselves. Consequently, the person is always in a process of negotiating and pursuing with others and with herself or himself some sort of coherence and maintenance through time.

Conclusion: A Dialogical Self Is Much More Than a Multiplicity of Voices

The long lasting problem of self-identity is a classical paradox. We all have the experience of being as we were, and yet different. We all try to accomplish the task of uniting our diversity, but whenever the task seems to be reaching an end, we realise that it is always unfinished: indeed, the task itself has changed ourselves. We are launched in an irreversible time, where each one of us creates and recreates our own identity.

In the last decades, the recognition of multiplicity has been growing, under the influence of social cognitive models and social constructionism. Nevertheless, the tension between unity and multiplicity remains, because it

seems incompatible to simultaneously see the same person as a single and a multiple entity.

Throughout this article, we suggest it is possible to conceive the multiplicity of the self in a way that dissolves the apparent contradiction between our sense of unity and our sense of being multiple. In this final comment, we would like to highlight two specific ideas that seem fundamental in our proposal: the dialogicality of human beings and the triadic structure of a dialogical self.

We defend that the self is brought to being by the communicational processes established with others and with oneself. Thus, to fully describe such complex processes, the self is always in the process of negotiating meaning with others. This dialogical approach has been evolving in the last decade as a new perspective about the self. In this framework, the highly dynamic aspects of selfhood are strongly valued, and, as such, multiplicity is brought to the foreground. Nevertheless, that should not blind us to the fact that multiplicity of the self is derived from the dialogical features of human life. To assume the opposite perspective – that inner multiplicity is the cause of dialogicality – would imply to remain trapped in an individualistic conception of self. Thus, we are claiming that a dialogical account of the self must keep dialogicality as its main feature.

Therefore, we believe that such an account makes a difference when compared with other models that are also claiming for the recognition towards the multiplicity of the self. We may admit that the term “voices” may refer to the same segment of human experience as the terms “schema”, “scripts”, “internal objects” or even “narratives”. Nevertheless, in a dialogical account, such notion implies a complex and embodied relation of communication – and that makes a difference. Voice is not only a different facet of the self or a supra-individual narrative – voice is the tool by which the necessary relationship of communication is established.

Along that process of continuous negotiation of meaning, the I-position is continuously changing, creating a scenario of multivoicedness. Nevertheless, those different voices are always the tools by which the *I* establishes a specific relationship with another. Thus, within a dialogical perspective, multiplicity becomes something like “the multiple ways of being-with”. At the same time, it is by this same process of positioning towards others that the person is subjectively instituted.

Thus, subjectivity becomes a relational or dialogical production.

These processes are necessarily complex and we propose that the subjective side of a dialogical self is better conceived of as something based on a triadic structure of communication. In this proposal, we understand the *I* as the agency that establishes a relationship with an Other. This Other is always an Other-in-the-self and not exactly the real other. However, this relationship between the *I* and the Other-in-the-self is always mediated by a third party or potential audiences. Thus, the self-space is a space permeated by the relationship with “others” that work not as mere internalisations and static representations, but as different subjectivities. In a way, the person internally constitutes others (the addressed person or a potential audience) as different agencies, with specific worldviews, intentions and motivations. Moreover it is through this I-Others relation that the sense of being a person is created.

In this article, we dealt with the question of unity and plurality, a variety of the long lasting Cartesian dualism. We believe that a dialogical approach is well-suited to solve and lodge some of the other varieties of that problem. Problems such as the relation between mind and body, rationality and affectivity, and person and society can be framed in a refreshing way if a dialogical strategy is followed. Such an approach may become a useful tool in the task of uniting those traditional antinomies.

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Research Profile

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