

Moving Through Three Paradigms, Yet Remaining the Same Thinker.

*COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY QUARTERLY*, volume 10, number 1, March

2006, pp. 5-25.

PUBLISHED AS PART OF A SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE SELF-  
CONFRONTATION METHOD AND THE DIALOGICAL SELF

Hubert J.M. Hermans

Radboud University

Nijmegen

Netherlands

Address Correspondence to:

Hubert J.M. Hermans, PhD

Gagelveld 34

6596 CA Milsbeek

Netherlands

Email: [HHermans@psych.ru.nl](mailto:HHermans@psych.ru.nl)

Abstract.

The author reflects on his scientific and professional career as it developed over 40 years. Partly as an autobiographical sketch, he describes three phases, each guided by a specific paradigm: individual differences, narrative, and dialogical. Looking back at the different phases, the author emphasizes the non-linear nature of his development in which the preceding phases continued in the next ones resulting in complex combinations of old and new elements.

Key words: dialogical self, self-confrontation, valuation theory, traits, psychotherapy.

One of the fascinating consequences of looking back at one's career is the discovery of regularities that were not or could not be seen during earlier periods of development. I made my career in psychology, starting my university study in 1960 at the University of Nijmegen and finished it, at least formally, as professor emeritus at the same university in 2002. Looking back, I notice several conspicuous moments or periods in which I felt a strong uneasiness ("Unbehagen" as the Germans would call it) with my own work in psychology. This periodic dissatisfaction did not refer so much to the specific content or quality of my work, but rather to its underlying paradigmatic assumptions. The things which I started with great enthusiasm became rather flat and somewhat empty after some time and instigated me to search in a different direction. Over the years I moved through three paradigms: (a) the *individual differences approach* which motivated me to construct some psychometric tests for the assessment of two motivational traits: achievement motive and fear of failure; (b) the *narrative approach* which inspired me to construct a "self-confrontation method," applied by counsellors, therapists, and researchers in order to investigate the meaning of significant life events as part of a personal meaning system; and (c) a *dialogical approach* which led to the development of a dialogical self theory based on the assumption that the self is not organized around a core or inner self, but consists of a decentralized multiplicity of positions or voices that construct personal meanings as a result of their mutual interchange.

In the present article I will describe the particular ways in which the three paradigms found expression in my scientific and professional work and I will focus on the reasons why I left a particular field in order to move to another. For each of the phases I will give some examples that show how the three paradigms influenced my assessment, counselling, and research work. As I will suggest in the final part of this contribution, my main argument is that the three phases can not be understood in terms of a linear development in which the next phase starts when the preceding phase stops but rather in terms of a non-linear development in

which the previous phases continue to play their part in the next phases. As I will show, this development led to theoretical and methodological constructions of an increasing complexity.

### **The Individual Differences Approach: The Zeal of Test Construction**

As a graduate in psychology it was self-evident for me, as it was for many others, that one can acquire knowledge about persons by describing them in terms of trait categories. In 1967 I defended my dissertation “Motivatie en Prestatie” (Motivation and Achievement), in which I presented a foundation for the construction of a psychological test that aimed at the psychometric assessment of three motivational traits: the achievement motive, debilitating anxiety and facilitating anxiety. Whereas in my research on the achievement motive (Hermans, 1970), I was greatly inspired by McClelland and colleagues’ (1953) classic studies on the subject, my foremost influential models for devising a measure for debilitating and facilitating anxiety were Alpert and Haber (1960).

After constructing some psychometric tests, I was impressed by the critical comments these instruments received from students and practitioners. Although I responded to these comments with fierce rejoinders, the criticism touched some objections that I myself felt, in the background of my mind, towards my own work. However, I could not endorse the criticism fully and openly because this would undermine the paradigmatic basis of my daily efforts.

One of the first questions was posed by students at my own university who were members of the critical student movement at the end of the sixties and, at the same time, subjects in my research. They criticized my achievement motive measure as not only representing but also confirming the core values of the “achieving society” to which they were so strongly opposed. Even my mentor, Theo Rutten, although he belonged to an older generation, questioned the assumptions underlying the achievement measure. During the defense of my dissertation he posed a question that I could not answer in a satisfying way, certainly not at that moment: “What is the nature of this achievement motive? Is it gradually poisoning the social

relationships among the citizens of our society or does it provide the fertile basis for a blossoming society in the future?" From that moment on, this unanswered question continued to function as a fermenting force in my thinking over the decades.

Another problem was raised by the practitioners who applied the tests in their settings. They were particularly concerned about the practical implications of the instruments. Those who worked in educational settings were confronted with the disturbing influence of high debilitating anxiety on pupils' school performance and well-being. Their typical question was: "Now we have an instrument for the assessment of fear of failure, but how can we decrease it?" This was a particularly difficult question, because it asked for the transition from assessment to change. For the decrease of a disturbing fear of failure, the several therapeutic procedures were available, but they were based on theoretical assumptions that were very different from the assumptions underlying the assessment procedures. Whereas the available tests were based on the assumption of the existence of relatively stable traits and, consequently, required high test-retest correlations, counselling and therapeutic procedures assumed the existence of a malleable and changeable self. For my part, I had to face the inevitable conclusion that existing assessment and change procedures were based on very different paradigms and, therefore, their combination had a shaky theoretical foundation.

A third problem was of a more philosophical nature and was rooted in my position as a student of psychology trained in two very different traditions. One was the European philosophical tradition in which Heidegger was one of the major figures. My teacher Frederik Buytendijk strongly supported Heidegger's (1962) thesis "Dasein ist Mitsein" (roughly translated as "Being there is being with," that is, our being in the world is intrinsically being together with other people). Building on Heidegger and other philosophers, Buytendijk (1958) advocated a phenomenology of encounter in which he objected to the reification of the human being in scientific enterprises and argued that the specific nature of the human being could only properly be understood as part of a social relationship (see, for example, his beautiful

chapter about the first smile of the child). The second tradition in which I was trained was the American empirical approach. At the end the fifties and beginning of the sixties of the last century, some of the older Dutch professors, impressed as they were by the flourishing of behaviorism and the development of sophisticated statistical and research tools, sent their staff members to the United States for additional training. These staff people came back full of enthusiasm about what they had learned and spread their recently acquired knowledge and visions of an unlimited scientific progress across the broad masses of young students. In the first years of my training, I became involved in both traditions: the European, philosophical tradition in which I learned, from my older teachers, the deeper significance of the notion of “encounter” based on respect for the unique psychological make-up of the individual person; and the American, empirical tradition, in which I learned, from my younger teachers, how to measure and objectify psychological characteristics, and analyze aggregates of individuals in statistical ways, without any attention to their particular personal history. The development of psychometric tests for measuring the achievement motive and fear of failure was perfectly in agreement with the American empirical tradition, but was certainly at odds with the European philosophical emphasis on encounter and its associated rejection of objectification and quantitative reduction. Yet, in the period in which I was working on test construction, I was not bothered by the apparent epistemological tensions between the two traditions. As a young scientist I was involved in an enterprise that was appreciated and rewarded both by my colleagues at the university and by practitioners who were in need for easily applicable methods for the measurement of psychological traits. On a somewhat deeper level, however, I kept the inspiring lectures of my older philosophical teachers as a treasure. Their ideas were just waiting in the backgrounds of my mind to be reanimated at some later moment in time.

### **The Narrative Approach: Personal Meaning and Self-Confrontation**

A turning point was my visit to the United States in 1968, on the invitation of Lewis Goldberg who was one of the “principal investigators” of the Oregon Research Institute in

Eugene, and who had taught as a Fulbright professor at the University of Nijmegen one year earlier. My visit gave me the opportunity to talk with some scientists who had been influential, in one way or another, on my earlier work, such as David McClelland at Harvard University and Lee Cronbach at Stanford University. Traveling through the country, I became more and more impressed by the recent developments in humanistic psychology, advocated by figures as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Therefore, I decided to visit La Jolla, where Rogers recently had founded his "Institute for the Study of the Person." Unfortunately, when arrived, I discovered that Rogers was not on the West-coast but was visiting the East-coast. Nevertheless, the many conversations with his co-workers made me see some basic similarities between Rogers' client-centered approach and the encounter philosophy of my teachers in Nijmegen.

My reorientation in psychology was not only facilitated by the conversations with representatives of humanistic psychology, but also by the many discussions with students from Universities, mainly in California. Feeling very lonely in a hotel in Palo Alto, and biking every day to Stanford University, I was searching for contact with students and joined them whenever I could. I was particularly impressed by the heated discussions between the students and the faculty in physics who were in support of the Vietnam war. I also joined the audience of student leaders at the University of Berkeley who, standing at the top of a building, directed their speeches to a thousand of students, some of them listening while playing their guitars. Although I was a total stranger in this country, I felt part of spontaneously emerging community of equally-minded people, with common concerns, ideals, and opponents and all of this gave me the feeling of witnessing a historical revolution.

This feeling of participating in a revolution and the increasing awareness that psychology, with its experimental and psychometric biases, was neglecting the central place of the person, made me seriously doubt my own work. There were many moments in which I perceived it as being in support of a society that I, like many others at that time, criticized as being guided by

the narrow ethos of economic achievement. Rather than making a conscious decision to reorient myself in psychology, it felt like I was being driven into a direction which I *should* go -- although I had not any idea either about the specific work I could pursue in order to realize my own ideals.

Strangely enough I simply continued my psychometric work as soon as I was back at my own university and I even constructed a new test for the measurement of the achievement motive and fear of failure, this time for children and young adolescents. It took me four years after my travel through the United States, before I was able to decide in a very firm and conscious way to start a very different research project. This happened at a conference on achievement motivation organized by my colleague Heinz Heckhausen at the Starnberger lake near Munich. At the conference colleagues discussed variables like achievement motive, fear of failure, and fear of success (particularly relevant to achievement strivings of women in a culture with different societal expectations for men and women). I felt frustrated because I could not see the relevance of all these concepts and models for the life of the person. At that moment I decided to start a new research project and began to work on it immediately after the conference. It was as if my time in the United States functioned as a fermenting experience that pointed in a new direction, whereas the conference in Germany instigated me to give a response to that experience in the form of specific actions.

At the end of 1972 I started to experiment with a very primitive version of the self-confrontation method. This method was an attempt to find an answer to problems that I had encountered during my earlier work on test construction. I formulated the following starting points (a) the method should enable clients to tell their own stories about their own lives and to articulate them in the form of a personal meaning system (the range of topics should not be restricted to one or a few variables introduced by a scientist or professional like in the typical psychometric test); (b) the method should not assume any split between assessment and change, but rather should facilitate a gradual transition from one phase to another; (c) the

method should not be based on an objectifying relationship but on a cooperative one between counsellor and client; instead of one person being placed in the position of the expert (the therapist) and the other in the position of the lay-person (the client), a cooperative relationship should be established between two experts: the client as an expert on the meaning of his or her own experiences and the counsellor as knowledgeable on theory, method, and a variety of client populations. In summary, the method should be a theory-guided, idiographic instrument in which two experts cooperate in order to construct a personal meaning system (or valuation system) that facilitates a gradual transition between assessment and change.

The self-confrontation method is based on valuation theory (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). In this theory the self is considered an “organized process of valuation.” The central concept *valuation* refers to a process of meaning construction in which events receive positive (pleasant), negative (unpleasant) or ambivalent (pleasant and unpleasant) meaning when the person is telling his or her story about the past, present, and future. A valuation may refer to a broad variety of events or circumstances in the life of the self-reflecting person: a precious memory, a frustrating event, the gratifying contact with another person, a disappointing experience, an important dream or an unattainable goal. Because the past, present, and future typically lead to the formulation of more than one valuation, these valuations are *organized* in an affective way, that is, they become part of a structure in which one valuation is allotted a more important or influential place on the basis of its affective properties. Finally, because valuations are part of an historical process (a collective and personal history), some of the valuations change whereas other remain constant dependent on the constancy or change of the situations to which the valuations refer (for a more elaborate discussion of the self-confrontation method in the context of valuation theory, see Lyddon and colleagues in this issue; for a theory-guided combination of valuation and attachment research see Alford and colleagues in this issue).

In order to illustrate the theory and method, I will briefly discuss an idiographic study that shows the coexistence of constancy and change in the valuation system. I do this with the intent to demonstrate some basic differences and even contradictions between the individual differences and narrative paradigm, believing that these differences have significant implications for the practice of counselling.

### *The Coexistence of Stability and Change*

In one of our projects we were interested in how stability and change were represented in the valuation system of individual clients. This could be studied by inviting clients to perform two or more self-investigations with several months between each self-investigation. In one case study (Hermans, 1986), I examined the valuation system of a client, Irene, a 44-year-old woman, who was raised in a very restrictive home and had entered a convent after secondary school. After 15 years of spiritual life she resigned and started to work as an economist in a school. She asked for therapeutic assistance after a period of heavy stress-related headaches. In the first session with the psychotherapist, she reported that she experienced serious obstacles in expressing herself, and her emotions in particular, to other people. As part of the psychotherapeutic intervention, she completed three self-investigations: the first one at the beginning of psychotherapy, the second one after 7 months and the third one after 18 months. The first investigation began with the formulation of a set of valuations as answers to a series of open questions referring to past, present, and future. At the second investigation, Irene was invited to consider the valuations that she had constructed at the first investigation. In such a case the client has several options: she can *keep* the formulation as it was at Investigation 1, she can *modify* the formulation so that it better reflects her present experience, she can *substitute* the old valuation by a new one, she can *eliminate* the old one altogether, or she can add a totally new valuation. After this examination of the valuations, the client is asked to provide for each valuation an affective profile (ratings on a prestructured list of positive and negative affect terms as typical of a particular valuation) so that the affective meaning of the

valuation can be assessed (for a detailed procedure see Lyddon and colleagues, this issue).

This procedure enabled me to examine which valuations remained stable over time and which changed. The result was that some of the valuations were strikingly stable whereas other valuations changed dramatically. As an illustration, what follows are some examples of valuations that remained highly stable between investigation 1 and investigation 2 both in content (formulation of the valuation) and affective profile (the correlation between the affective profiles of the same valuation at Investigation 1 and 2):

1. In the convent I had even less space than at home (.96)
2. I don't give myself easily (.97)
3. I'm able to enjoy flowers and plants (.86)
4. I have a few friends whom I can always go to (.85)

As the text of the valuations already suggests, valuations 1 and 2 were associated with more negative than positive affect, whereas the valuations 3 and 4 were associated with more negative than positive affect. Despite their differences in their affective quality, all four valuations were highly stable across time both in their formulation (Irene preferred to keep the same formulations as she had provided in Investigation 1) and in their affective meaning (see the high correlations between the profiles of two successive investigations).

As the above valuations suggest, a significant part of the system remained very stable over time. Another part, however, showed significant changes. Here is an example of a valuation that was modified because Irene felt a considerable change of its meaning. Despite the change in formulation, she associated the valuation with a very similar affective profile at Investigation 2:

*Investigation 1:* "Work: I get a particular schedule, dreamed up by someone who doesn't have to do it themselves; someone else decides how I have to do the domestic jobs; that gives me the feeling that I can't do it."

*Investigation 2:* “Work: I used to let the other take the initiative; I found that this wasn’t so good and now see that it’s up to me; I used to be inaccessible for the other”

The correlation between the affective profile of the original and modified valuation was .88 indicating a high stability in its affective meaning, despite the change in its narrative structure. As the formulation in Investigation 2 suggests, Irene became aware of her own responsibility in her work situation. However, the awareness of her inaccessibility to other people, colored the whole valuation in a negative way.

Whereas the above valuation changed in formulation but remained highly constant in its affective meaning, other valuations showed strong changes both in content and in affect:

*Investigation 1:* “I don’t dare take the space I’m given; I’m still afraid it isn’t right”

*Investigation 2:* “Now and then I dare to take the space I’m given: then I want to know from the other if it’s right or not”

As the change in formulation suggests, Irene began to enlarge her psychological space and felt less restricted as she used to feel in earlier times. Although she still felt dependent on the evaluations of others, she welcomed this change as very positive. Whereas the valuation was associated with many negative feelings in Investigation 1, the modified valuation in Investigation 2 was associated with more positive than negative feelings, resulting in a negative correlation (-.64) between the two profiles.

Taking all observations together, we see in Irene’s case a quite differentiated picture of stability and change. Some of the valuations remained stable both in formulation and affect, others changed in content but not in affect, and again others changed both in content and in affect. [Note that I restricted the examples to a comparison between Investigation 1 and 2. I found similar changes between Investigations 2 and 3 but in that case there was more emphasis on constancy than change; for more details see Hermans, 1986]

I have presented some data of Irene's case in order to illustrate some specific methodological and empirical implications of the narrative paradigm as represented by the self-confrontation method. In this method, clients are provided with the opportunity to change both the text and the affective meaning of their valuations across time allowing a differentiated picture of stability and change. Such a picture could never be found in the typical psychological test based on the individual difference paradigm. In the individual difference paradigm relatively stable and "reliable" traits are assumed to exist, methodologically expressed by high test-retest correlations between successive measurements. Test items that are unstable over time are typically regarded as representing "random variance" and as not contributing to the "true score" of the trait under investigation and therefore dismissed as "unreliable." In the application of the self-confrontation method, however, I discovered that some valuations showed changes that were highly significant from a therapeutic point of view (e.g., the client's experience of making some progress in working on a personal problem). In apparent contradiction to the notion of "unreliable items," applications of the self-confrontation method showed that precisely the combination of stability and change is typical of effective therapeutic change. As Mahoney and Lyddon (1988) point out, "Embedded within self-change is self-stability – we are all changing all the time and simultaneously remaining the same" (p. 209). On the basis of the application of the self-confrontation method on a broad variety of clients I concluded that stability and change *need* each other; that is, a certain degree of stability is needed in order to realize a significant change. The experience of safety and continuity provided by the stable parts of the valuation system help clients to face the discontinuities in their lives that otherwise would be disrupting. In other words, stability and change are both necessary parts of the therapeutic reorganization of the valuation system (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995).

### **The Dialogical Approach: The Play of Positions**

Whereas the transition between the first and second phase of my career was marked by strong objections and oppositions to the dominance of the individual differences paradigm in personality psychology, the transition between the second and third phase was primarily motivated by some intriguing discoveries in my research program as it evolved over the decades. I found out that people had not simply one story to tell, but rather different or even contradictory stories which seemed to emerge from different positions in their selves. The third phase started in a period in which I explored the role played by imaginal figures in the selves of some clients.

### *Imaginal Figures and Their Separate Existence*

In the course of time, I became very interested in the significant role of imaginal figures in the lives of some clients: supernatural beings, strongly idealized persons, animal-like figures, monsters, a supreme being, or other anthropomorphic figures. Some clients spoke about such characters with the same attention and care they used when speaking about their actual significant others. Gradually, I found out that more clients had such a figure in their mind than I expected but simply did not mention it, probably because it may look strange in a culture in which “others” are traditionally defined as “real others” (see also Watkins, 1986). In order to explicitly explore the role of imaginal figures, Els Hermans-Jansen and I decided to ask more specific questions about the possible existence of such figures and to offer our clients some stimulating examples:

"Is there, in your world, an *imaginal figure* that plays an important role in your life?

What kind of role does this figure play? Is this figure, for example,

- somebody whom you admire and who interacts in some way with you in your mind?
- somebody with whom you converse in your mind?
- some kind of advisor?
- a guardian spirit?

- an enemy who threatens you?
- a monster that may swallow you?
- a human being that manifests itself in the form of an animal?
- somebody who speaks to you from the future?
- an imaginal lover?
- a picture or statue that becomes alive?
- a dead person who is still present?" (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995, p. 104)

We found different types of imaginal figures having different functions in the clients' lives. Some of them were included in the self in order to *compensate* for a felt lack in someone's existence. For example:

- "I wish there was a woman with whom I could go to bed, but there isn't; she is an unobtainable fantasy."

Other imaginal figures seemed to provide *transitional help* when going from one situation or state to another. In the following example a woman conjured up, in the transition from waking to sleep, an imaginal figure that touched her in an intimate non-sexual way:

- "Before going to sleep, there is a person who gives me peace by touching me."

Sometimes we found clients who constructed an imaginal figure as *symbolization* of strong emotions:

- "An animal, a sort of monster, a dragon that is eating me up from inside."

Someone's personal *conscience* can be formed by incorporating the minds of significant others into the self. In the example below a woman tells of her imaginal contact with three deceased members of her family:

- "Grandma, mom, and dad are with me; sometimes I evaluate what I do against what they would think."

Imaginal figures are also important providers of *protection*. They can be the product of a single individual's imagination, but also part of a collective story. A typical example is the figure of a guardian angel in the Roman-Catholic tradition:

- "I have a guardian angel who takes care that everything is turning out well; I assume this beforehand; I therefore take more risks."

Some clients talked about imaginal figures that seemed to have the status of "*ultimate rescuers*" (Yalom, 1980). A woman who attempted to drown herself, later provided the following valuation, suggesting that some higher force was responsible for her survival after a suicide attempt:

- "I pray everyday before going to sleep, also in the day, for myself and also for others... The clearest hint I received when I was lying there at the border; it was as if somebody said to me 'It is not yet your time.' It was as if I then returned to life."

Talking with clients about their imaginal figures, I discovered that such figures could provide the client, in some cases, with a perspective from which they could view their life in a different way than they usually did. Even one and the same event could assume different meanings when regarded from the viewpoint of an imaginal figure. Along those lines, I found out that people are able to shift from one I-position to another, and, correspondingly, to experience different affective experiences. I learned also that different I-positions were not simply separated from each other, but were connected with each other by dialogical relationships (for applications in psychotherapy, see Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004; for more general treatments of imaginal figures see Watkins, 1986 and Caughey, 1986).

#### *Dialogue as a Three-step Procedure*

In order to investigate the dialogical relationships between self positions in a more systematic way, I drew from a model proposed by Marková (1987) and Linell and Marková (1993) who argued that a truly dialogical relationship takes place via three steps:

Step 1: A to B (one person directs an utterance to another person)

Step 2: B to A (the second person responds to this utterance)

Step 3: A to B (the first person revises his or her initial utterance in the light of the response in step 2).

This model implies that an initial utterance is changed to some extent by the dialogical process itself. This can be observed in conversations in which people permit themselves to be influenced by the other's point of view. In the first step, A might say: "This is my view." In the second step, B responds: "I have another way of seeing it." In the third step, A modifies more or less his or her initial view: "Now I look at it in another way."

---

Insert Figure 1 somewhere here

---

Inspired by this model, Hermans and Kempen (1993) invited subjects to enter in an imaginal dialogue with a person depicted on a painting. The picture was a copy of Mercedes de Barcelona (1930), a painting by the Dutch artist Pyke Koch (1901-1992). It represents a middle-aged woman, who is placed in a frontal position so that eye contact with the viewer is possible. As part of an extended self-confrontation procedure, clients were invited to select one of their previously formulated valuations, to concentrate on the picture, and imagine that the woman would respond to their personal valuation. After the woman had given an imaginal reaction to the valuation, clients were invited to respond to the woman with the possibility to revise their original valuation. Thus, this procedure involved

Step 1: subject presents a valuation to the woman

Step 2: woman gives an imaginal response

Step 3: subject responds to the woman

Remarkable individual differences were found in the ways clients went through the three-step procedure. One subject, Bob, a 50-year-old man, who participated in this study after a four-year period of depression, gave the following responses:

Step 1: Bob: I always had to manage things on my own; didn't receive any attention, or affection; was superfluous at home; this has made me very uncertain.

Step 2: Woman: This sounds very familiar to me: I've had the same experience.

Step 3: Bob: I recognize the sadness in your eyes.

As we can see, Bob in Step 3 does not seem to modify his original formulation in Step 1. Although he shares with her his feeling, the woman "repeats" this feeling (Step 2), which, in turn, resounds his original feeling (Step 1). This is quite different in the example of Frank, a 48-year-old man, who referred to his work as manager in a company:

Step 1: Frank: I trust most people in advance; however, when this trust is violated, I start to think in a negative way; this can have harmful consequences.

Step 2: Woman: You should keep your openness; however, your trust should become somewhat more reserved and take into account the topic involved.

Step 3: Frank: You are right; I must pay attention to this; reservations in this will also help me to control my negative feelings.

In this case, the woman, perceived as a wise advisor, presents a *new* viewpoint (Step 2), that is incorporated in Frank's final reaction (Step 3), in such a way that the original formulation (Step 1) is revised. Frank's response to the woman incorporates elements from Steps 1 and 2 into Step 3, and thus constructs a valuation with novel elements and a synthesizing quality.

I suppose that the difference between repetitive imaginal dialogues (Bob's example) and innovative dialogues (Frank's example), is indicative of dialogues of people in their everyday lives. The repetitive dialogue resembles the clinical phenomenon of a ruminating self-talk in

which the dialogue seems trapped in a vicious circle (for an example of a repetitive dialogue, see Lysaker and Lysaker's, 2006, description of monological narratives, in this issue). The innovative dialogue, in contrast, can be seen as an indication of a flexible movement from one position to another with a progressive development through the different steps of the dialogical process (for an case study in which an innovative reorganization of the dialogical self is realized through psychotherapy, see Dimaggio and colleagues in this issue).

### *Self-Confrontation Informed by Dialogical Self Theory*

Instigated by case studies as described above, my colleagues and I proposed a decentralized conception of the self as multivoiced and dialogical (Hermans, 1996; 2001; Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992). More specifically, we defined the dialogical self in terms of a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions or voices in the landscape of the mind, intertwined as this mind is with the minds of other people. Positions are not only "internal"(e.g., I as a husband, psychologist, professor, father, lover of gardening) but also "external," belonging to the extended domain of the self (e.g., my wife, my children, my colleagues, my guardian angel, my enemy). Dialogues may take place among internal positions (e.g., a conflict between my position as a husband and my position as a hard-working scientist), between internal and external positions (e.g., I had an argument with my colleague John) and between external positions (e.g., disagreement between my colleagues on financial matters). The dialogical self is not only part of the society at large but functions, moreover, itself as a 'society of mind' (Hermans, 2002; Minsky, 1985) with tensions, conflicts, and contradictions as intrinsic features of a (healthy functioning) self. Like in a society the different I-positions are involved not only in processes of interchange but also in struggles in which some positions are more dominant than other positions (for a treatment of dominance and social power in therapeutic relationships, see Guilfoyle's contribution in this issue; for the role of culture in dominant narratives, see Neimeyer and Buchanan-Arvay, 2004).

In order to illustrate the self-confrontation method as informed by dialogical self theory, I provide the case of Mary, a 33-year-old woman, who was at the border of, what psychiatrists would call, a dissociated identity disorder (for an extensive description of this case, see Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). Mary's father was an alcoholic. When she smelled the scent of alcohol, she was overwhelmed by disgust and panic. As an adolescent she joined a drug scene where she was sexually abused. As a reaction, she began to bath excessively in order "to clean herself." The problems became acute when she married. In strong contrast to her intimate feelings for her husband, there were moments of feeling a very strong disgust for him, particularly when he had used alcohol. When he was sleeping, she felt an almost uncontrollable urge to murder him. When he was sick, and lying in bed, she felt an intense hate, and a complete lack of compassion (as if she saw her father sleeping off *his* drunkenness, as she later realized). At some moments she felt like a witch and she was frightened to death when the witch took almost total possession of her. Sometimes she felt literally strangled by an alien power that was stronger than "herself."

After Mary had described her situation, Els Hermans-Jansen and I discussed her case and proposed that she perform a self-investigation from the perspective of two positions, one from her ordinary position as "Mary," and the other from the position of "the witch." The rationale behind this idea was that, given the split between the two positions, an improvement of her fragmented self could be expected by (a) clearly distinguishing the two positions with regard to their specific wishes, aims, and feelings, and (b) establishing a process of dialogical interchange between the two positions, so that the witch could get the opportunity to tell her specific wishes and concerns. In this way, it was expected that Mary could take the needs of the witch into account, without losing control of her vehement impulses.

Here are some examples of valuations formulated by Mary from her ordinary position:

1. "More and more I'm permitting myself to receive"
2. "I want to try to see what my mother gives me: There is only one of me"

3. “In my work I can be myself: I’m planning from which angles I can enter; the trust that I receive gives me a foothold, more self-confidence”

After Mary had formulated these valuations she was invited to provide us with an affective profile from her specific position of Mary. When she was ready, we invited the witch to give an affective rating of the same valuations from her specific perspective. When we compared the ratings from Mary with those of the witch, we found strong opposites in valuations 1 and 2. Both valuations were experienced as very positively by Mary but as quite negatively by the witch. Apparently, these kind valuations had a positive meaning for Mary but the witch, hard as she was, felt a strong contempt of Mary’s soft experiences. However, very different from the contrasts in case of valuations 1 and 2, both Mary and the witch revealed a high degree of positive and a low degree of negative feelings regarding valuation 3. As the formulation of this valuation suggests, the witch could cooperate very well with Mary in her work situation in which she could permit herself to assume a tougher and more aggressive attitude toward people. As the different affective profiles suggest, Mary and the witch were adversaries in some situations (particularly in the relationship with her husband) but could cooperate quite well in other situations (at work).

Part of the procedure was to invite also the witch to present her valuations. Here are some examples that express an attitude that was remarkably different from that of Mary herself:

4. “With my bland, pussycat qualities I have vulnerable things in hand, from which I derive power at a later moment (somebody tells me things that I can use so that I get what I want).”
5. “I enjoy when I have broken him [husband]: From a power position entering the battlefield”

In these cases the witch had very positive affective associations with valuations 4 and 5 whereas in contrast, Mary experienced both valuations in a very negative way. As we see, Mary and the witch tend to have positive associations with their own valuations but negative

associations with the valuations from the other party. At the same time we see an important exception: whereas Mary and the witch had strongly contrasting experiences in the relationship with her husband (e.g. valuation 5), they could cooperate quite well in the work situation. This suggests that the valuations are not organized according to a simple “good girl” vs. “bad girl” opposition, but rather according to the specificity of the situation. This suggests that the witch is not *entirely* “dysfunctional” but rather adaptive in some and maladaptive in other situations.

After the self-investigation, we as therapists discussed with Mary two ideas that were based on our analysis of her two-fold self-investigation. First, we advised her to move (e.g., by sport, biking, or walking), in order to give expression to the dammed up energy of the witch. Second, we proposed her to keep a diary in which she could write her daily observations, in order to sharpen her perception, and discuss them with us in the next meetings. In the beginning of this therapeutic process, the therapists asked Mary to attend to her own experiences. By making daily notes, she trained herself to make fine discriminations between the impulses, reactions and emotions of the witch and those of herself. In a later phase, she started to explore new actions. The therapists’ strategy was to prevent Mary to split off from or suppress the witch, but rather to motivate her to be as alert as possible of the witch’s appearance: When the witch came up, Mary decided to first take a break and begin walking (moving was important for the witch) so that she could become involved in a quiet negotiation process that could result in more balanced decisions.

One year after the first investigation, Mary performed a second one. Before Mary started her second self-investigation, we tried to follow the same procedure as in the first investigation. We asked her to take her "ordinary" position of Mary, and then the position of the witch. Somewhat to our surprise, she was not able to do so. Although she seriously attempted to take the position of the witch, it was almost impossible for her to let the witch speak in the same way as she had done one year before. When Mary was confronted with the

valuations from the witch from the first investigation, she was able to modify these valuations in accordance with her present experiences. The person who was speaking, however, was not simply the witch, but some combination ("Mary-witch") or even primarily Mary. In order to examine this significant change in more detail, we invited Mary to indicate for each of the valuations if the words "I" or "my" referred to Mary (M) or to the witch (w):

4b. "I [M + w] want to be clear, don't want to manage along the game of the sweet pussycat: sometimes, however, my (w) reactions are too fierce"

5b. "When I [M] feel that I [M] get in touch with my [w] power, I [M] use all my [M] energy to fight against this. I [M] don't want that power, it is too painful"

The result of this exercise was that most "I" and "my" words were indications of Mary. One of the exceptions was valuation 4b, in which the word "I" referred to a combination of Mary and the witch, and the word "my" to the witch. These findings are significant from a psychotherapeutic point of view: The valuations that were originally formulated by the witch (with strong affective opposition from the side of Mary), were developed in such a way that one can recognize at Investigation 2 the original (Investigation 1) formulations from the witch, whereas the (modified) valuations at Investigation 2 are primarily from Mary! This can only mean that Mary has taken the lead in situations that were originally under the control of the witch.

However, the observation that Mary's valuation system has improved does not mean that a perfect symmetrical dialogical relationship has developed between the positions of Mary and the witch. There are signs of a continuation of a struggle between the two positions. Most clearly this is expressed in a valuation (not mentioned above) in which she said: "...then I [M] enter into a fight with myself [w]..." This suggests that Mary's development can, at least for some part, be understood as a "dominance reversal" (Hermans, 1996) of two positions: initially the witch was dominant over the witch, at least in some situations, whereas later Mary

became dominant over the witch in the same situations. This means that the witch did not simply disappear but she was allotted a different place in the organized self-system.

Although there were, in Investigation 2, still indications of struggle, there were also signs of increasingly symmetrical dialogical relationships. This was particularly expressed by the following valuation:

6. "When this hard side [w] comes and I [M] recognize it, I [M] get in touch. I [M] can look at it and examine from which it is a signal. I [M] then make a good use of it [w]."

As this valuation indicates, Mary does not simply suppress her hard side, but gets in touch with it and examines it as a "signal." A more cooperative attitude toward the witch is also expressed by her next remark: "I then make good use of it." Apparently, she uses the energy of the witch for her own purposes.

Mary's case is also relevant from a theoretical perspective. The concept of the dialogical self has two main defining features: intersubjective exchange and dominance (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). These features typically coexist and are strongly intertwined. Dialogue always has an element of dominance and dialogical relationships can vary considerably on the dimension of symmetry vs. asymmetry, as Linell (1990) has argued. In Mary's case, we see both forces at work. In this field of tension, between interchange and dominance, Mary is attempting to find her way.

In summary, the dialogical self provides a theoretical framework for distinguishing different positions in the self, for assessing their associated valuations and affective characteristics. Moreover, it offers a basis for the transition between assessment and change. Instead of neglecting, suppressing or splitting off incompatible positions, positions are taken up in a dialogical process. There is attention not only for their intersubjective exchange, but also for their relative dominance. As part of this strategy, the incompatible position is not simply "cured" or treated as an undesirable symptom, but taken seriously as a partner with whom it is possible to get "on speaking terms." Instead of removing a "maladaptive" part of

the self, the position repertoire is enriched and broadened in such a way that a health-promoting reorganization of the self can take place. The dialogical process, with dominance and struggle implied, is a road to the integration of incompatible positions as meaningful parts of a multivoiced self.

### **Non-linear Development and Increasing Complexity**

Looking back at my own career in psychology, I vividly remember the emotionally tuned reasons which made me move from the individual differences to the narrative paradigm, and, later, from the narrative to the dialogical paradigm. Strikingly, when I go back to these transitions in my memory, I had the feeling of starting with something entirely *new*, at the same time leaving the old paradigm behind. In the beginning of the seventies I was convinced of the fact that the self–confrontation method was entirely different from, and even contrasting to, the measurement of motivational traits. In the beginning of the nineties I was equally convinced of the “revolutionary” movement to the conceptual framework of the dialogical self. However, was it so new as I thought it was?

In the past months when I compared the three phases more carefully and systematically, I began to realize that they were not only discontinuous but also showed obvious signs of continuity. For example, when I started to construct the self-confrontation method, I did so with the conviction that this was a method that provided clients with the opportunity to investigate *themselves*, instead of being tested by a professional. At the time, I was reading James (1890) classic chapter on the self and became aware of the theoretical significance of the distinction between the *I*, or the self-as-subject, and *Me*, or the self-as-object. The self-confrontation method became an invitation to clients to investigate, as subjects, themselves as objects. The open questions, leading the construction of valuations, were intended as questions that required clients to pose these questions to themselves. At the same time, I was impressed by May’s (1966) proposal that the human being is not only an object but also a project. Along these lines, I saw the self-confrontation method as an attempt to bring together

the self-as-subject, the self-as-object, and the self-as-project, and this was materialized by devising the method as a gradual transition between assessment and change. Moreover, I invited clients to sit not in front of me, but to sit side-by-side, reading the open and inviting questions of the self-confrontation method together and starting a conversation in order to deepen and develop their initial answers. I did so in order to symbolize an attitude of cooperation which I saw as strongly contrasting to the objectifying and reifying nature of an objective test. All these theoretical considerations and methodological procedures were realized in the conviction that I was simply doing something “entirely new.”

However, as soon as I started to invite family members, friends and colleagues to cooperate with me in applying the method on themselves, I discovered that valuations were not simply to be understood as a loose agglomeration of narrative meaning units, but rather as an *organized* system. In order to study this organization more systematically, I introduced a series of affective terms that allowed me to construct some quantitative indices. One of these indices, the correlation coefficient, enabled me to calculate the affective similarities and contrasts between valuations (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). One of the discoveries, that was an eye-opener to both clients and practitioners, was the fact that valuations, although referring in their text to very different personal meanings and very different situations, could show a high similarity in their corresponding affective profiles. In this way it became possible to find under a larger variety of manifest valuations a limited number of “narrative themes.” Such themes greatly helped the client to become aware of some fundamental issues in their lives and to use them as starting points for making a gradual transition between assessment and change. I emphasize this aspect of the method in order to show that the measurement aspect so typical of the first phase of test construction was *continued* in the second phase in which the self-confrontation method was constructed. In this way, a method emerged that had not only qualitative aspects (the narrative text of the valuations) but also quantitative aspects (the affective profiles and indices), the latter aspects being a continuation of the measurement

procedures of the first phase. In this sense, the second phase was different in some respects but similar in others.

Similar observations can be made about the transition between the second and third phase. The exploration of clients' imaginal figures and imaginal conversations with characters on paintings were certainly new in comparison with the preceding phase. I found out that people did not simply have one integrative life story available but rather shifted from one to another I-position during the act of telling. Moreover, clients seemed to be able to tell stories or fragments of stories from different angles (e.g., presenting a different view as a professional than as an intimate friend). Working with clients and reading Bakhtin's (1929/1973) discussion of the "polyphonic novel," I became aware of at least two fundamental differences between "mainstream" narrative psychology and dialogical psychology. Whereas narrative psychology typically assumes the existence of one more or less integrated self-narrative, dialogical psychology assumes that dialogue is able to surpass any existing narrative. This implies that dialogue may disrupt or undermine any existing narrative and that the shift toward another position may lead to a different story, even about the "same" events. A person may cry while telling a sad experience to one person and laugh about it when being with another person. [For the pervasive influence of shifting I-positions on storytelling, see the difference between causal attribution and causal explanation, Hilton, 1990, and the phenomenon of "co-narrated storytelling," Miller et al., 1992]

Although the third phase brought some significant innovations in comparison with the second phase, it was a continuation of this phase in some significant respects. The self-confrontation (second phase) was already based on the assumption that clients, in performing a self-investigation, are not only able to tell their story to a therapist, but also to address themselves in a dialogical way (third phase). Moreover, the notion that the position repertoire (third phase) was organized and could be reorganized was already present in the notions of organization and reorganization of the valuation system (second phase). Continuity between

the phases can also be observed on the methodological level: the measurement procedures of the psychological tests in the first phase, was continued in the quantitative indices of the self-confrontation method in the second phase and, again, continued in the quantitative indices of the Personal Position Repertoire method (Hermans, 2001) in the third phase. In other words, discontinuity and continuity between the succeeding phases were co-existent.

On the basis of my own experiences, I learned that it makes sense to make a distinction between linear and non-linear types of development. In linear developmental models different phases or stages are assumed to follow each other up in successive ways: in every new phase the individual has to face new tasks or problems that were not present in preceding phases. Linear models assume that the individual leaves the preceding phase behind when a new phase begins. In non-linear models, in contrast, tasks and challenges of the preceding phase continue in the next phase and are taken up in a process in which elements of the preceding and the next phase are *simultaneously* present and form complex combinations. The latter type of development is precisely what I have experienced in my own career.

Looking back at my own transitions and turning points, I feel that the nature of my self-awareness was remarkably different at different moments in my career. Being *in* a transition from one phase to another, I seemed convinced of the innovative qualities of the new phase: it had the aura of something “totally new.” However, reflecting on the same transitions after many years of work, I became aware of the many similarities and continuities among the several phases, resulting in the feeling that it was “not so new at all.” Here we touch the difference between the enthusiasm of the developing scientist who follows his/her immediate impulses and the reflective thinker who critically examines his/her own development as part of a life-review. Maybe, the young scientist needs an optimal amount of blindness in order to create favorable conditions for possible innovations.

## References

- Alpert, R., & Haber, R.N. (1960). Anxiety in academic achievement situations. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 61, 207-215.
- Bakhtin, M. (1973). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (2nd ed.). Transl. R. W. Rotsel. U.S.A. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis. First ed. published in 1929 under the title *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* [Problems of Dostoevsky's Art].
- Buytendijk, F.J.J. (1958). *Das Menschliche: Wege zu seinem Verständniss* [The human: Roads to his understanding]. Stuttgart, Germany: Koehler Verlag.
- Caughey, J. L. (1984). *Imaginary social worlds: A cultural approach*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hermans, H.J.M. (1970). A questionnaire measure of achievement motivation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 54, 353-363.
- Hermans, H. J. M. (1986). Stability and change in the process of valuation: An idiographic approach. In A. Angleitner, A. Furnham, & G. van Heck (Eds.), *Personality psychology in Europe: Current trends and controversies* (pp. 23-43). Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger.
- Hermans, H. J. M. (1996). Opposites in a dialogical self: Constructs as characters. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 9, 1-26.
- Hermans, H.J.M. (1995). *Self-narratives: The construction of meaning in psychotherapy*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hermans, H.J.M. (2001). The construction of a personal position repertoire: Method and practice. *Culture & Psychology*, 7, 323-365.
- Hermans, H.J.M. (2002). The dialogical self as a society of mind. *Theory & Psychology*, 12, 147-160
- Hermans, H.J.M., & Dimaggio, G. (2004) (Eds.). *The dialogical self in psychotherapy*. New York: Brunner & Routledge.

- Hermans, H.J.M., & Kempen, H.J.G. (1993). *The dialogical self: Meaning as movement*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Hilton, D. J. (1990). Conversational processes and causal explanation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *107*, 65-81.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology* (Vol. 1). London: MacMillan
- Linell, P. (1990). The power of dialogue dynamics. In I. Marková & K. Foppa (Eds.). *The dynamics of dialogue* (pp. 147-177). New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Linell, P., & Marková, I. (1993). Acts in discourse: From Monological Speech Acts to dialogical inter-acts. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *23*, 173-195.
- Mahoney, M. J., & Lyddon, W. J. (1988). Recent developments in cognitive approaches to counseling and psychotherapy. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *16*, 190-234.
- Marková, I. (1987). On the interaction of opposites in psychological processes. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, *17*, 279-299.
- May, R. (1966). *Psychology and the human dilemma*. Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand.
- McClelland, D. C., Atkinson, J. W., Clark, R. A., & Lowell, E. L. (1953). *The achievement motive*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Miller, P. J., Mintz, J., Hoogstra, L., Fung, H., & Potts, R. (1992). The narrated self: Young children's construction of self in relation to others in conversational stories of personal experience. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, *38*, 45-67.
- Minsky, M. (1985). *The society of mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Neimeyer, R.A., & Buchanan-Arvay, M. (2004). Performing the self: Therapeutic enactment and the narrative integration of traumatic loss. In: H.J.M. Hermans & G. Dimaggio (Eds.). *The dialogical self in psychotherapy* (pp. 173-189). . New York: Brunner & Routledge.
- Watkins, M. (1986). *Invisible guests: The development of imaginal dialogues*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Yalom, I.D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books

### Author's Note

I thank Els Hermans-Jansen for the opportunity to cooperate as a co-therapist with her as a therapist and for her lasting contribution to my scientific and professional development over the years.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hubert J.M. Hermans, Department of Psychology, Radboud University of Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, Netherlands. Electronic mail may be sent to: [HHermans@psych.ru.nl](mailto:HHermans@psych.ru.nl).

Website address: [www.dialogicalself.info](http://www.dialogicalself.info).