

Monological telling in the dialogical self¹

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Introduction, aims and objectives

The Dialogical Self sees the self as a dialogical narrator with others in the self-structure (Hermans et al., 1992). It argues that *I* can move between multiple positions and these *I* in different positions interact with and have conversations with each other (Hermans, 2002). This paper argues for the therapeutic function of a monologue within the self-structure. Drawing on the author's experience of working through a childhood trauma through an internal monologue that is addressed to an imaginary other after sandplay sessions, this paper explores the value of an other in the self that listens to, receives and witnesses the monological telling without active responses. This paper argues that the monological telling *to* instead of talking *with* gives space to the realm of human experience that is less coherent, inarticulate and fragmented. It gives this realm of experience a chance to be known without imposing on it a narrative structure which it lacks.

As a part of my doctoral thesis which examines the role of narrative in/coherence in counselling and psychotherapy, I engaged in six weeks of sandplay sessions as the 'player'. Each week, with the accompany of a play therapist, I constructed worlds in the sand using various objects including miniatures, stones,

¹ Developed from a doctoral thesis which questions whether lived experience necessarily requires narrative structure and the extent to which a coherent narrative is essential for psychological and emotional well-being, this paper does not follow the required structure in order to be consistent with the meaning of the text.

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shells and so forth - it is believed that the sand world constructed is the external representation of one's internal world. In those six weeks of sandplay, a shell repetitively appeared in my sand worlds which I named the 'scarred shell'. It had evoked strong emotions in me that I did not understand.

Weeks after I completed my sandplay sessions, an event led me to reconnect to a childhood trauma that I had for long not recognised as a major trauma in my life. Although I always remembered it, I did not recognise its major impact on my life even after speaking about it with a therapist. Recognising this childhood trauma allows me to connect to the scarred shell appeared in my sandplay. While I saw the scarred shell as an 'it' then, I now see it as 'me'. Now, I can see and own these scars as mine. The scar shell is wounded and frightened, so is my body. The scarred shell struggles to feel safe. The protection and help offered never feel right or adequate. At the time when the childhood trauma happened, I was not protected as a child and did not know where to seek help. Just like the scarred shell, the wounded child within me wants to hide.

When I first recognised what happened in my childhood as a traumatic experience, I was by myself reflecting on the specific event that reconnected me with the trauma. My realisation started with this sentence in my head 'my body was hurt'. Then I went on: 'it wanted to be close to people, but it was so scared...' Naturally and unintentionally, I started to engage in an imaginary telling to a person who was involved in the event that led to my realisation. My realisation and recognition of the trauma unfolded in the telling. For the first time, I listened closely to and cried for my hurt body. In the midst of the intense realisation that inevitably brought pain, the imaginary telling became a therapeutic means for me.

Initially, I had felt a strong sense of longing to talk to and be known by this

person. I rehearsed in my mind what I wanted to tell him. I imagined telling him about how my body felt, how it was not heard and how it had been affecting my relationships with others. In the telling, I processed my past experience, which then allowed me to understand and accept them. When I saw this person in reality, for various reasons, I did not tell him anything. However, in the following few weeks, I continued to engage in my imaginary telling. I told him again and again about myself. I imagined that I shared the picture of the scarred shell with him and told him about the scars of mine. Unexpectedly, this imaginary telling became a substitute for personal therapy. After few weeks of these repetitive imaginary telling, when I was offered a place in a counselling agency which I contacted when I first started to process the trauma, I did not feel the need to talk with a therapist anymore.

In reality, I was by myself in this process. Perhaps I needed to be alone. However, there is no doubt that I needed to tell someone. I use the word 'telling' here because I notice that it was never an imaginative dialogue between two people. I imagined the content of my speech and the physical environment in which the telling took place, but little about this person's responses. What was important to me was the act of telling and perhaps being received by the imaginary other. Maybe I did not want, or even rejected, a response.

This experience of imaginary telling reminds me of my sandplay. In my sandplay, I often saw touching the sand as a kind of telling: telling that does not need words. The sand is simply being there. As I wrote at the time, '*[[I]t does not reach out to me. It does not offer extended arms. It is receptive without being destroyed, intimidated, or scared by my feelings. It allows, receives, and accepts*'.

This telling to an imaginary other draws connection to the theory of the dialogical self which sees the self as a dialogical narrator with others *in* the self-

structure (Hermans et al., 1992). Bakhtin's polyphonic novel is one of the central notions from which the theory of the dialogical self is developed (Angus & McLeod, 2004; Hermans et al., 1992). A central characteristic of polyphonic novel, as discussed in Bakhtin's (1984) examination of Dostoevsky's novel, is the plurality of independent voices and consciousness that each has its own world and are unmerged with each other in the unity of the event. In other words, there is no single author or narrator in a single objective world, but multiple voices with their own independent views. Similarly, in the theory of the dialogical self, self is regarded as not a unified one, but a 'society of mind' (Hermans, 2002; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004). It is argued in the dialogical self that *I* can move between multiple even opposite positions (Hermans, 2002). These *I*-positions are relatively autonomous and each of them has their own stories to tell regarding their experience from their own stances (Hermans, 2002; Hermans, 2004). These different voices interact with each other and engage in a process of questioning and answering, agreeing and disagreeing (Hermans, 2002). And these voices are qualitatively different (Hermans, 2004). As often described in literature about the dialogical self (Hermans, 2002; Hermans, 2004; Hermans et al., 1992), these voices are similar to characters in a story who exchange information about their respective *Mes*, which results in a complex self.

One of the central notions in the dialogical self is addressivity (Hermans, 2011). Hermans (2011) suggests that as in external dialogue with real people, different selves address each other in their interchange with each other. They talk *with* each other. Different *I*s, as subject, talk and respond to each other from their own positions; they talk about themselves which is the *Mes*, as object. These interchanges, as external conversation with others in daily life, can change the

selves' view on themselves (Hermans, 2011).

Addressivity is at the centre of my experience written above. There was a need to tell someone about it. Imaginarily telling it to a person served me therapeutically. However, instead of talking *with*, which indicates a two-way dialogue, I talked *to* the person in imagination. It is suggested that in psychotherapy when telling their stories, the client also listens to their stories through the therapist's empathic reflections (Angus & McLeod, 2004). In my imaginary telling, I was listening to myself and my wound again and again, not through the response of another but simply through the telling. Therefore, instead of a dialogue, what I needed seemed to be a monologue that was received or witnessed by another. Similarly, I sometimes wrote letters to the figures in my sand worlds including the scarred shell. Most of the time I did not have imaginary two-way conversations with them. Sometimes before my personal therapy sessions, I would rehearse in my mind what I would like to say to my therapist, but when I said it out loud, it felt different from my monological 'rehearsal'. The actual speech often did not feel satisfactory. In my monological telling, I told an imaginary other about myself in the way I needed – I might say something repeatedly, disregard the chronological order, or restart and reorganise my telling at any point.

In the theory of the dialogical self, self is seen as social: positions in the multi-voiced self are occupied by others (Hermans, 2004). The *I* takes another person as a position that *I* can occupy, which offers an alternative perspective regarding the world and the *Me* (ibid). My experience resonates with the dialogical self in the crucial place of an other in the self. I seem to need an other even when I am not engaging in actual conversations. However, instead of moving between various *I* positions and engaging in an exchange among these positions, I seem to need an other to allow

me to further immerse into the place I am at and be the person I experience myself as at those particular moments. For me, this other, whether it is an imaginary person, sand, or figures in my sand world, is the 'alter ego', is 'another I' (Hermans, 2004:21). However, instead of speaking from their own perspectives, they act as an other that is being there and receiving my perspective without speaking their own. On one hand, my need for an other resonates with the concept of self as dialogical. On the other hand, there is a central role of a monologue that is being received yet not actively responded to, which I relate to the obligation to others in narrative.

Narrative is an act of externalising and publishing oneself. Narrating, similar to Foucault's view on confession as elaborated by Butler (2005), is an act of publishing oneself in words which makes one appear for another. The performative act of becoming this externalised and publicised self entails loss. As Butler's (2005:114) elaboration of Foucault suggests, it requires one to give oneself over to the 'publicized mode of appearance'. In other words, one needs to move out of the solitude of oneself to become a self that is situated in the public and social relation. The loss involved here is the inwardness that is pre-constituted. This moving out of and publicising oneself, as well as the loss involved, are necessary for the interpersonal connection, as interpersonal relationship is always situated socially. An account of oneself is always addressed to another and it always takes place in the normative structure (Butler, 2005). My monological telling that refuses an active response from an internal other seem to be a resistance to the loss of the solitary self. I place the *I* and the *Me* that this *I* experiences in the absolute centre which cannot be obtained in a narrative that is given to an active other.

The resonance among the theory of the dialogical self, Foucault's, and Butler's philosophy is the place of the other in the ontological constitution of the self

and one's relation to oneself. The dialogical self sees the self as social with the other inside the self's construction (Hermans et al., 1992). Foucault, according to Butler (2005), sees one's relation to oneself as social and public. Butler (2005) sees the ontological constitution of the self as inherently relational: self emerges in being addressed by and addressing to others within context that is out of one's control or not of one's choice.

My monological telling can be understood as an expression of the co-existence of the need to be known and to preserve the solitary self. As Winnicott (2016:439) writes when he talks about the dynamic between our private self that is not communicating and at the same time wants to communicate and to be known: 'It is a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek in which *it is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found*'.

Conclusion

Although dialogue is at the centre of the dialogical self theory, in this paper, I argue that an internal and relational monological telling in the self-structure gives space to the realm of human experience that is less coherent, inarticulate and fragmented. It gives this realm of experience a chance to be known without imposing on it a narrative structure which it lacks.

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