Failing better. Reflections, comments, and questions considering a social constructionist concept of dialogue

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Summary

Reflecting the growing popularity of the dialogical self in psychology this contribution searches for a psychological theory of dialogue. First, the social constructionist proposal is discussed, considering the constructionist concept of social practice and the model of the individual participant in this practice it implies. Second, drawing from Bakhtin s notion of dialogicality, it is suggested in line with constructionism that dialogues are basically a form of shared social practice. However, the dialogical character of this practice is subject to certain preconditions; and as these include competencies and motives of the participants in dialogue they imply changes for the conceptualization of a dialogical self.

Key words: dialogical self, dialogue, social constructionism, implicit knowledge, aboutness

Zusammenfassung

Besser scheitern. Überlegungen, Kommentare und Fragen angesichts eines konstruktionistischen Dialogkonzepts

Ausgehend von der wachsenden Aufmerksamkeit für die Konzeption eines dialogischen Selbst in der Psychologie befasst sich der Beitrag mit der Frage nach einer psychologischen Theorie des Dialogs. Als ein viel versprechender Entwurf wird zunächst die sozialkonstruktionistische Auffassung skizziert; daran anschließend werden kritische und weiterführende Fragen diskutiert. Den Abschluss bildet der auf Bachtins Dialogkonzept zurückgreifende Vorschlag, Dialoge wie im sozialen Konstruktionismus als geteilte, soziale Praxis zu betrachten. Allerdings werden für deren dialogischen Charakter Voraussetzungen angenommen, die sich auf Kompetenzen und Motive der handelnden Dialogteilnehmer beziehen und damit auch die Theorie des dialogischen Selbst verändern.

Schlagwörter: Dialog, dialogisches Selbst, Sozialer Konstruktionismus, Praxistheorie, implizites Wissen, Intentionalität

Introduction: Bakhtin and the new grip on dialogism in psychology

 Language lives   according to Michail Bakhtin   only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it   (1979, p. 183). The speaking of words or utterances is a living social process where in each and every word the *one*, the addresser, is in relation to the *other*, the adressee (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 86). This concept of the dialogical interaction is directed against a unifying conception of meaning and language, but it leads Bakhtin further: to a rejection of an individualistic, psychological   conception of the subject. The meaning of a word, an utterance, a text is not determined and not product of one author   just like the self is neither an individual project nor a determined or stable construal. Both, word meaning and personal identity, exist on the interface of socio-cultural discourses and relationships.

In academic psychology Bakhtin s account of dialogism is particularly manifest in the numerous

writings and researches on the *dialogical self*. The concept first became popular in the writings of cultural psychology, social constructionism, or critical social psychology (for example Hermans & Kempen 1993; Gergen, 1994; Billig,1996) and soon disseminated not only within psychology via numerous researches or publications, but also in other field of the so called cultural sciences.[1]

Why this popularity? The concept of the dialogical self is perfect, it seems, to emphasize in an illustrative way how psychology can and may adapt to the changing conditions of modern, globalized societies: the model not only illustrates how the individual self is embedded in cultural dialogues, but also that the idea of an individualized, self-identical (core-)self comes out of a particular modernist, i.e., Western view of the person (Hermans, 2001a, p. 240). For some protagonists in cultural psychology the dialogical self sums up empirical aspects of an interdependent self (Ho, Chan, Peng & Ng, 2001), others wonder whether the dialogical self represents the state of mind of migrant people (Bhatia & Ram, 2001), for many others again, in cultural psychology or social constructionism, the striving for a viable version of a non-individualist, relational or dialogical self exemplifies psychology s greater efforts to let wither individualism and to offer a relational concept of human functioning (Gergen, 1994, 1999; Hermans, 2001a; Straub & Zielke, 2005). All these efforts seem legitimate as they help to adapt psychology s models to the conditions of a world where inter- and transcultural dialogues have become an every day necessity. Hubert Hermans has repeatedly stressed this analogy: If the self is depicted as a society, the growing complexity of the world goes hand in hand with the complexity of the self or, more directly: Mixing and moving cultures require a dialogical self (Hermans, 2001b, p. 24).

Suitable for the challenge caused by the global condition, the dialogical self is structured dialogically. It is a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions occupied by the same person , and these I-positions within the self may agree and disagree, interrogate, criticize, and even ridicule one another , any position is like another person in the self, with his or her own voiced or voiceable perspective (Hermans, 2001a, p. 248p). Reading further in Hermans descriptions and definitions of the dialogical self, one has to conclude that the dialogical self not only arises from or is made possible by the multiple dialogues it contains, but is itself a dialogue or a number of dialogues, representing a person s communication process with others in a society of mind (Hermans, 2002, p. 147).[2]

Consequently, in order to understand the dialogical self it is crucial to understand the model of dialogue implied in its description. In search of this understanding, I want to ask about the nature of dialogue more generally: How are viable dialogues across cultural differences possible, and do they call for a new understanding of dialogical communication? What is the (new?) form of dialogical interchange of today s world, especially as the idea of polyvocal dialogues has become popular? What kind of polyvocal dialogue, we may finally ask, would furnish the perfect ground for a viable dialogical self?

Constructionism: Dialogue as a transformative medium of living together

Based on social constructionist premises, proposals have been made which press beyond the traditional and problematic conception of communication or, more specifically, of dialogue as an inter-subjective connection. These proposals critically reflect the problem of presupposed understanding, and locate an alternative, viable account of dialogical interchange. The following sections summarize important aspects of social constructionist and related theories of dialogue.

Kenneth Gergen has repeatedly argued that while thinking of mere conversation does not suffice to understand the nature of dialogical interchange, the constructionist concept refuses to reduce dialogue to the argumentative encounter of diverging positions or to a mediating practice (Gergen, 1999, p. 149; McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. ix). The discourse genres commonly associated with dialogue (like debating, mediating, bargaining) should be reconceptualized, as they all presuppose

that dialogues take place between individual speakers seeking to communicate, and, in most cases, to communicate in the sign of conflict or with the objective to overcome difference. Rather, we should think of dialogue more broadly as a mutual coordination of action (Gergen, 1999, p.160). This broad concept of dialogue is based on several challenging assumptions worthy of discussion. I will sum up some of them in a nutshell first, and then discuss some aspects in detail.

First of all and not surprisingly, constructionism *bids farewell to the individual speaker as author of meaning* who still is too dominant in traditional concepts of dialogic interchange. Quite in line with Bakhtin it is argued that any meaningful act is a result of relationship, of joint-action (Shotter, 1994) or of coordination of action (Gergen, 1999). Consequently, any speaker acting symbolically towards some meaningful utterance is dependent on the concrete or generalized other. Sometimes we even find the strong assumption that there is no meaning to a statement or an action unless it is *affirmed* by the supplementary act of the other (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2002). However, in constructionism, affirmation is not lodged in inter-subjectivity, even mutual understanding does not seem to be a condition of inter-subjective convergence at all. More fundamentally, social understanding in general is referred to as a relational achievement embedded in *coordinated action* (Gergen, 1999, p. 145) or as spontaneously responsive *joint-action* (Shotter, 2003, p. 455) wherein the author as individual agent is lost in the whirlpool of everyday life s exchanging and merging of positions. Applying this concept of dialogue, it is difficult to think of a non-dialogical practice at all; consequently, another constructionist proposal is that *there exists no monological practice*. As meaning always emerges from coordinated action and such action is always dependent on supplementary action, i.e., *any kind of practice is dialogical*.

Moreover, dialogical practice is per definition *multivoiced*, as even when we seem to have only two participants, there are always more voices, making up the one and the other position. And certainly, the role of the participant in such dialogue is not that of the individual and self-determined speaker, but that of a *polyvocal performer*. From the constructionist viewpoint it seems that *the self in dialogue is the sum of its relations* (e.g. Gergen, 1999, p. 131f). The self always speaks with many voices, and the position one may choose to defend at a time is just one from a range many possible positions (Hermans, 2001b). Given the contingent and ephemeral character of any speaker s contribution, convincing the other or achieving a consensus among differing argumentative positions can no longer be the benchmark of dialogue. Rather it seems that one major challenge for the participants in dialogue (for the dialogical selves) is to give up the idea of convincing the other or letting themselves be convinced. According to the constructionist model, even the participants *self-reflexivity* is desired only in the sense of a distinct awareness of the *polyvocality of the speaker and the polysemy of meaning* (Gergen, 1999, p. 162).

To sum up: the constructionist model of dialogue liberates itself from many modernist impasses or constraints, above all from the illusion that dialogue means the exchange of formerly existent and independent positions of consistent and coherent selves. In the constructionist alternative, dialogue is seen as a *transformative medium* of living together (Roberts, 2002). Beyond being an instrument for exchanging views, it is a medium fostering a special kind of relationship which helps us to move beyond disconnected co-existence to a more promising way of moving on together. Let me end the brief characterization of the constructionist standpoint here and turn to some critical questions.

Dialogue without a subject: may we separate the normative from the descriptive?

From a critical psychological viewpoint, it can be argued that the very challenge of theorizing dialogue arises from having to deal with an epistemic problem of mutual understanding *and* a normative problem of discursive power, recognition and participation. This is especially challenging as the normative and the descriptive frames seem to be interrelated in a contradictory manner: on the one hand, a positive view of epistemic understanding (by way of installing objective truth, but also by way of emphatic identification) is suspect of being implicitly linked to power claims. On the

other hand, the assumption of incommensurability, the impossibility to understand and communicate with different others , has also proved to be highly problematic as it implicitly presupposes distinct entities of meaning and thus conceals the frayed and unfinished nature of cultural life forms (Renn, 2002).

While the constructionist perspective opposes any kind of universal discourse ethics, the moral problem of some voices in dialogue being oppressed or drowned out by more powerful others is not simply evaded. Constructionism here offers the concept of *relational responsibility*, the desired attitude of the participants to invite and support as many different perspectives as possible to join the dialogue (McNamee & Gergen, 1999; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Relational responsibility, a regulative standard even constructionism is engaged with, is supposed to install a kind of ethical principle for productive dialogues without claiming universally applicable criteria for the dealing with conflict, difference or social power. It merely invites all participants to be as open for other positions as possible: this will help to enhance dialogue and reduce fixation without imposing universal standards. The concept is elegant: *As dialogues loosen their binary structure, responsibility loses its monadic taste.* A species of curious openness towards all local and general others seems to be the one tie that binds for constructionist theory of dialogue. Even though, of course, those relations will shift and change their implications any minute, we should see that the constructionist proposal of relational responsibility is itself a regulative criterion for good dialogue. It is a pragmatic criterion for the *to-be-desired model of dialogical action.* In this it is similar to the modern project of discourse ethics (Habermas, 1981). But while some similarities in scope are valued (Gergen, 1999), Habermas approach is in the end declared void as it exploits itself at the bilge pumps of modernity: It is accused of searching for an ideal model of discourse or of applying universalist rational standards. Even the *counterfactual presupposition* of possible understanding or consensus as a feature of the *to-be-desired model* of discourse (which is what Habermas model claims), it is argued, is coercive and will narrow the way we may profit from a polyvocal and transformative dialogue.

In addition, while traditional social psychology tends to overemphasize the perspective of the individual (and thus systematically underestimates the proper dynamics of the social), we have seen that social constructionist writings for good reason have bracketed the question of *individual* experience in order to allow for a truly social psychological account of social process (Burr, 2003, p. 16). In terms of dialogue, however, this avoidance of the individual participant s perspective at all costs brings up new questions. For example, it remains unclear how the described polyvocal speaker (who is rather a performer with many possible I-positions) can possibly be so fundamentally anchored in social relationships or dialogues as it is called for by constructionist and other anti-individualist accounts of successful dialogical existence.[4]

The implementation of the constructionist account of a viable, non-individualist conception of dialogue as coordinated or joint action, leaves some questions concerning acknowledgement and power, regulation and error, and last not least individual participation: First, if *understanding* is not at all between persons, but rather *a* relational flow of coordinated meaning-making how is a dialogical practice to be distinguished from a rather indifferent cacophony, or from the anonymous murmur of discourse (Foucault, 1972)? Second, can dialogues fail at all in this view? Or is mutual coordination really a mere juxtaposition of indifferent voices, like Hermans formulated in the original description of a dialogical self? Third, do the participants, like dialogical selves, exclusively   represent the intersection of multiple others (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 22, similar: Hermans, 2001a) and does that mean that the difference between ego and alter dissolves completely? And fourth, is it possible, with this concept of mutual coordination , to think of procedural criteria for successful or failed mutual coordination? And if so, does the idea of relational responsibility suffice? Last, but not least: if terms like conviction or power of argument lose their meaning completely, what motivates the polyvocal self to engage in dialogue, especially with those who defend a contradictory position towards relevant questions?

Without claiming completeness or systematic order, these questions may be worthwile pursueing,

as they concern ongoing dialogues between persons or groups in multicultural societies as well as those dialogues within which are constitutive for the dialogical self (Zielke, 2006). In the following part of my paper I will trace these questions a bit further and demonstrate coming back now to my first introduction that some clues on how to deal with them can be found in Michael Bakhtin s account of dialogue, dialogical selves and dialogical relations.

Dialogue and the promise of responsiveness

Many readings of dialogicality in psychological approaches concentrate on celebrating the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia and multivocality. Dialogical being in the first place represents, like Michael Billig put it, a continuing carnival of difference and disagreement , whereas the single monologic voice of agreement is to be feared (1996, p. 18). Indeed, this tendency to celebrate the centrifugal is especially to be studied in the writings on Rabelais (Bakhtin, 1965). The carnivalesque promotes ambivalence as central experience, as unique means for opening up the centripetal, hegemonic space of the single truth (Lachmann, 2003, p. 61). The centripetal force is the tendency towards unification, univocality, and closure. Laughter and parody contain the possibility of a complete withdrawal from the present order. The carnival self is clearly social and eager to interact which others; as a temporary life form, always on limited appointment (see Lachmann1987, p. 14). But as this type of self is discontinuous, radically context-dependent, it is difficult to see why it needs to get involved in any deeper communication process with a specific other. Or as literary theorist Caryl Emerson put it, clearly this self implies an endless stream of others, but does not seem to do much with them (2006, p. 37). Some aspects of the parodying speaker in the anarchical carnivalesque indeed remind of a flexible and polyvocal performer idealized in some more liberal versions of a dialogical self. A performer whose intentions are contingent and context-bound, whose (self-)reflexivity is reduced to a serene awareness of containing potentially incommensurable, relatively autonomous voices within.

Whatever we may think of the pains and potentials of this version of a polyvocal self when appreciating the power of the *centrifugal force* and appropriating it for our theories of today, we should not forget what kind of *centripetal force* Bakhtin was confronted with in his every day life: the disruption of any productive ambivalence by hierarchical systems as the one he lived in.[6] And while dialogicality is a central element of the *carnivalesque*, a closer look into Bakhtin s theory of the novel, where the concept was first developed, gives access to another, a different and in my view more *relational* view of dialogical interaction and dialogical selves.

In his book on Dostojevsky s poetics, Bakhtin emphasizes the hermeneutics of daily life (Bakhtin, 1979, p. 226), and the starting point for his theory of word meaning is the conversation structure of the world , where responsive understanding is an essential factor (1979, p. 173). At first sight, this does not make much of a difference: Here, too, meaning implies community and otherness. Utterances and acts require awareness of the otherness of language in general *and* of the otherness of given dialogue partners in particular (Holquist, 2003, p.187). Whenever I speak, *the other* is already waiting, and this other is not a recipient with a passive role, she is not a distanced other-for-me [8], but an active and concrete interlocutor.

Here social scientists and cultural and social psychologists will feel reminded of George Herbert Mead s social philosophy (Nielsen, 2002). Indeed, from a social psychological point of view there are most fundamental similarities insofar as self consciousness for Mead, too, arises from the ability to estimate and take over the other s expectations and projections of oneself, from the ability to see oneself in the eye of the other. Unlike Mead, however, Bakhtin does not suggest that we need the assumption *of already shared meaning* for communication and social interaction. Quite in contrast, he suggests that we need the *assumption of difference* to begin to interact in the first place. This provocative thought goes back to his earliest writings on moral philosophy and the psychology of self. Every ethical act , says Bakhtin, is grounded in the awareness of *difference* (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 13, see Bender, 1998). *Given* this awareness of difference and otherness, however, at the heart of any dialogue there is the conviction that what is exchanged has meaning and that there is a

possible addressee who will *respond*. While understanding does not rely on identity of meaning, nor is it easily acquired through empathic listening, it is also clear here that Bakhtin does not talk about meaning as a fleshless result of anonymous performers, let alone about the mere aesthetic play of signifiers. There must be more to it: there is a version of the generalized other always present, as *super-addressee* (Holquist, 1990, p. 38), granting that I am plunged into constant interaction and never can have my way completely. But as I am dependent on the other, the other is dependent on me. *Responsiveness* thus is a matter of social *and* personal responsibility; the responsibility of being in relation with others (in the sense of relational responsibility) and of being in relation with oneself, which makes the relational self more than the sum of its relations or relationships.

In the subject-critical rhetorics of our times, we should say Bakhtin s participant in dialogue Bakhtin s dialogical self is a *decentred, but not erased subject* (see Gardiner, 2003; Mayerfeld-Bell, 1998). *Responsiveness* is the element in Bakthin s theory which resists the complete takeover of the socially dependent, but not determined speaker by the flexible, polyvocal, and selfless performer; and *responsiveness*, too, resists the re-definition of *dialogues* as an idealized, but indifferent juxtaposition of different voices.

The idea of responsiveness calls for an account of *pluralistic, but not indifferent multivoiced dialogues* as a special kind of *meaningful practice*. We may develop this account in connection with Bakhtin s version of dialogism. For reasons mentioned above I hold that our psychological or social philosophical conceptualization should deal maybe beyond Bakhtin s primary interest with the epistemic *and* the moral or ethical aspects of the dialogical challenge. In my view, both aspects are bound together in a pragmatist reading of dialogism and of the dialogical self. In the following lines, I will make three points in favour of this reading. First, I will refer to the assumption that dialogues rely on a kind of shared practice (coordinated action in the words of Gergen) and show where my view is different from that of social constructionism depicted above (1). Then I will argue for the importance of having a notion of a non-dialogical practice, an idea of how dialogical interaction may fail (2). Finally, I will try to fold this back into a view of the relationally and dialogically informed self as a participant in social (and dialogical) practices (3).

Conclusion

(1) Most accounts of dialogical action at some point refer to the notion of common or *shared practice* as the ground of dialogical action. The above mentioned constructionist proposals of dialogue as generation of meaning by coordination of action (Gergen) or through joint action (Shotter), are both closely connected to Wittgenstein s pragmatist concept of *word meaning* being generated/constituted *in use, thus* by the way words are used in a collective practice (Wittgenstein, 1953).[8] Here I only whish to point to the question of *criteria* which have to be met by those who participate in social practice. Are there such criteria anyway? The transformative nature of dialogue depicted above rather seems to indicate the absence of regulations. If we look at the case of *intercultural dialogue* as a prototypical example of dialogues where conflicting world views are at stake it becomes obvious, too, that predefined criteria for deciding on the outcome or the perfect process of a productive dialogue are flawed. Be it the illusion of having access to objective criteria like truth, rational argument, or moral standard, or be it that of having genuine access to the other s world via emphatic understanding whatever we elect as objective criteria for successful intercultural dialogue is bound to contain ethnocentric universals, to presuppose a common world view and to conceal the fact that one dialogue party defends their view of the matter and of the other.

Those cases in particular are said to profit from the experience of a shared practice *independent* of mutual *understanding*, let alone of rationally explained *consensus*. At best, the shared practice may be based on some kind of implicit common ground needed for the coordination of action, which cannot be made explicit (Polanyi, 1967). We may say that *the fact that there is a common practice functions as a kind of non-rationalist rationale for dialogical interaction.*

We should not forget, however, that being able to *participate* in a common practice claims some kind of knowledge from the participants. While not subject to standards of logic or ethical principles of communication, coordination of action is not void of any criteria. Participating in a socio-cultural practice requires *implicit knowledge* of the application of cultural rules (for example the knowing-how to separate a possible from an impossible supplementary in an ongoing dialogue). It is this implicit rule application knowledge by which we have the chance to participate in a truly transformative dialogue with different others, a dialogue that may transform our worldview and even allow for common *world disclosure*, for the exclusively *public* space opening up whenever two or more individuals share a common practice (Taylor 1985, p. 264.).[9]

It is implicit knowledge, too, by which the participants know *when the participation in a shared practice fails or is about to fail:* in those cases where they experience such a radical disappointment of expectations that they cannot think of any supplementary action and where they in the end are bound to leave dialogue in order to reject, rationalize, or otherwise suppress the experience of not being able to go on.

2) Let me give a short example to demonstrate the significance of this matter. In my work with intercultural professionals in psychotherapy, a German therapist told me about a female Turkish Islamic client who came to her practice. The woman, who was about thirty years of age, covered her entire face save the eyes with a veil (tschador). The therapist, whom I had interviewed to report on intercultural competence in psychotherapy, told me that this was not a case of misunderstanding, but one of successful intercultural communication: *I told her to take off the veil, as otherwise I could not work with her. After I made this clear to her she reflected a short while and then took off the veil. She accepted it and we could begin with our work.* I do not want to discuss now the problematic implications of making something clear to someone or accepting in terms of intercultural understanding and in the face of the specific power-imbalance of the patient-therapists dialogue. For the sake of argument, I want to focus only on the question of success or failure of dialogue. One possible interpretation of the therapist s rigid imposing *her way* is that she was very close to the experience of *not being able to go on*. That she felt not seeing the face of her counterpart would startle her so deeply that her professional expertise would leave her, that she would lack *implicit knowledge of how to apply her professional expertise in this context*. Thus, she felt the dialogical communication between patient and therapist in this case would fail and she chose to avoid failure, to exclude the possibility of not being able to supplement the other s actions. Imposing *her* law of dialogue (no *veils*), the therapist ensured that the interaction could continue at the cost of recognizing difference and thus of a potential enhancement of her clinical expertise. Of course, there are many reasonable motives, even professional ethics, which may have brought the therapist to do so. But I think that this example reminds us of the difficulty of just sharing practice in case of radical difference. It draws our attention to the startling and destabilizing effects of facing radical difference   and to the possibility of the failure of dialogue.

Let us take the freedom to consider the other option: what happens when I *do not* exclude the experience of failure, neither from the real dialogues in my life world, nor from my theoretical model of dialogue? Can we even valuate the possibility of failure as a central element of dialogical practice? After all, in some cases the experience of failure is the key for *perceiving* difference which otherwise would remain *veiled* (as was the case in the therapy session). In this sense failure is a crucial challenge for transformative dialogues. We may remain with Bakhtin and say: The experience of failure is the central challenge to change. It is the chance to *know* that there is difference in the first place and then to be *responsive* towards otherness   sometimes at the cost of not knowing how to go on. What John Shotter envisioned as the responsive quality of joint action (Shotter, 1993) will have to include a notion of failure in one formulation or another if *responsive* is to mean more than indifferent listening.

Consequently, the *possibility* of the experience of failure is the missing theoretical link between consensus and cacophony for a concept of dialogue which avoids levelling differences or idealizing common understanding, but which allows for participants to be in a relationally responsive

relationship. Further, and with this I return to the self in dialogue: the insight into the responsive quality of the dialogical act also changes the idea of the participant s stake in meaning-constitutive, transformative dialogues. Why should we engage in dialogue after all?

3) Empirically, we engage in dialogue because the subject of conversation means something to us. Philosophically we may discuss the question of a specific intentional quality of the way mental states and events are *about* other things (Dennett, 1987), the criterion for aboutness being that those things matter to the agent.

Why should I change my view of the world, if I may only add it to the sum of other views? Why should I change my cultural construction of the world and of the self in the face of experiencing difference just in order to enhance my repertoire of possible I-positions? Plurality alone will not motivate as long as I do not know for the sake of what I should acquire it.[10] Participants do not only engage in an aesthetic play when engaging in dialogue: they need to solve problems and make ends meet. Pragmatic criteria like the primacy of problem solving are not the main aspect of the participants aboutness as a condition of dialogue. The understanding of *dialogue as a permanent experience of otherness* (in the sense of Bakhtin) makes the experience of failure a condition of dialogue. *In search for the other, I search for failure* knowing that this is the only way to change and the only chance to participate in the co-constitution of new worlds with different others. Participants do engage in this search not despite, but because they are post-souvereign, de-centered *subjects* (Butler, 1997).[11] De-centering the self is not giving up identity. For good reason, identity, continuity, coherence and hence autonomy of the self have been undermined. They can never be fully and definitively reached. But this insight by no means renders the *paradoxically structured aspiration*, the *striving* for identity superfluous or obsolete.

I hope to have explained that neither aboutness nor responsiveness are exclusive qualities or competencies of the individual subject; both are also constitutive elements of a dialogical practice. They are what makes the dialogical co-constitution of meaning different from the murmur of discourse and from the anonymous, endless play of signifiers. A model of transformative dialogue requires a definition of the participants stake in dialogue: their critical assessment, their commitment (aboutness) and, maybe, even their personal aspiration of a transitoric identity worth defending, explaining and hopefully: changing (Renn & Straub 2002; Straub & Zielke, 2005).

Granted, in comparison to the idealized multi-voiced polyvocal self choosing from an enormous range of possible positions in dialogue, the endeavouring participant I envisioned here may seem constrained and sometimes anxious. Wanting to achieve what cannot be attained and is at best present in the modus of denial and remaining calm in this paradox situation is probably one of the most challenging tasks for the self. But whatever we may think about the anxious constraints of this participant: at least we may say of her pains that they matter to her if only in the sense of Samuel Beckett, who, in his late and enigmatic prose piece Worstward Ho (1983), expressed his aspirations towards the identity project of being a good writer with an apparently paradoxical challenge: Try again. Fail again. Fail better .

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Endnotes

1 A good insight into the ongoing transdisciplinary discussion of the dialogical self can be achieved at the biannual international meetings of the International Society for Dialogical Science (ISDS) or via the electronic, multidisciplinary International Journal of Dialogical Science (IJDS).

2 For a more detailed discussion of the dialogical self as a dialogue within the person see Zielke, 2006.

3 In his contribution to this volume, Gergen pursues some of these questions in more detail.

4 For a number of connected questions concerning the viability of a non-individualist self see Zielke & Straub, 2007, p. 340.

5 Both the concept of dialogue and that of polyvocality have been overstressed and almost stereotyped into catchwords by some all too inclusive interpretations (and translations), the concepts themselves being wide and not selective in the original. This will not keep me from trying to provide a specific reading of them I hold to be helpful. But I am aware that all interpretations are biased, all translations make mistakes and that, as Bakhtin translator and theorist Caryl Emerson puts it, famous peole will always generate myth (2006, p. 25).

6 Bakhtin was banished from the centre of official Soviet culture and recognized the emancipatory power of that which pulls away from the centre. While he also had some experience with the centripetal force in literature and politics, he lived through the revolutionary euphoria of the 1920s, participated in a text culture that promised and practiced openness, de-hierarchization, hybridization. At the same time he could watch the soviet society increase closure and hierarchization. For him (and in contrast to many) the experience of revolution, of the post-revolutionary avant-garde in Russia meant the experience of plurality of worlds, intercrossing of cultures: this experience determined his approach to Rabelais (see Lachmann, 1990, p. 61).

7 i.e., the picture I make of the other, judging their outward, behavioral appearance, tin other words: my projection of the other (see Bakhtin, 1965).

8 I refer to some problems of a relativistic reading of Wittgenstein s pragmatist concept of word meaning in social constructionism and to the concept s possible implications for the individual agent s role in Zielke, 2004, Chapter 4.

9 This *public space* for Taylor, is to be specified as a *tacit* common ground (1985, p. 264); it is an element of language, but not part of the explicit, but the implicit linguistic knowledge. Reaching beyond Wittgenstein, Taylor emphasizes that this public space , a space of shared meaning, to which neither participant has access without the other, will eventually change the cultural language

of either side.

[10] Similar to aboutness, but pretentious, is Heidegger s Worumwillen (for-the-sake-of-which) (Heidegger, 1996).

[11] Judith Butler s subject-critical account employs Freud s idea of melancholy (Butler, 1997) and its re-orientation against the Law of the Father (Lacan, 1991). The post-sovereign subject knows that it is not autonomous, but not determined either. The subconscious and refused loss which shows in the melancholic structure of the post-souvereign subject implies the rebellion of this subject against this Law and thus, the subconscious mode of resistance. The societal, discursive power may regulate what is to be grieved upon , but it is not always as effective as it wants to be.

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