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## 7 Psychodrama: from dialogical self theory to a self in dialogical action

*Leni M. F. Verhofstadt-Denève*

### Introduction

In a comparison of the theoretical and practical aspects of dialogical self theory (DST) (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010; Hermans and Kempen 1993) and *phenomenological-dialectical* theory and practice (Verhofstadt-Denève 1988, 2000, 2007), we will focus on a confrontation of two crucial key elements from both theories, namely the model of the ‘multivoiced self characterized by moving *I*-positions’, and the central ‘phenomenological-dialectical personality model’ (Phe-Di P model). This analysis aims to demonstrate that while the theories underlying both models show great similarities, there appear to be marked differences in the methods applied for exploring and stimulating intra- and interpersonal dialogues. Therefore, the theoretical analysis will be complemented by a comparative methodological-practical issue.

In various publications, Hermans has convincingly emphasized the connection between DST and the self-confrontation method (SCM) (Hermans and Kempen 1993), and later also with the construction of a personal position repertoire (PPR) (Hermans 2001b). Similarly, Verhofstadt-Denève described the strong relationship between the phenomenological personality model and experiential-dialectical psychodrama (Dillen *et al.* 2009; Verhofstadt-Denève 1988, 2000, 2001, 2003; Verhofstadt-Denève *et al.* 2004). A brief analysis of (1) SCM and PPR, and of (2) various types of dialogues activated in psychodrama aims to demonstrate that the application of action and drama techniques in addition to SCM and PPR would constitute an effective complement to the constructive stimulation of ‘internal and external imaginal dialogues’ and thus offer an added value to the service of DST. Moreover, psychodrama could also be enriched if used in conjunction with SCM and PPR. A deliberate combination of the SCM, PPR and psychodrama techniques therefore holds a real challenge for the future.

### Theory

#### *Hermans’ model of moving I-positions*

The self can be represented as a space composed of a multiplicity of positions, represented by dots in two concentric circles (Figure 7.1).

*Internal positions*, depicted by dots within the inner circle, are felt as part of myself (e.g. *I* as a mother, *I* as an ambitious worker, *I* as an enjoyer of life), whereas *external positions*, depicted by dots within the outer circle, are felt as part of the environment (e.g. my children, my colleagues, my friend John) (Hermans 2001a). Within the realm of internal positions, a distinction has been made between ‘social positions’ and ‘personal positions’. Social positions can be equated with the traditional term ‘role’ (e.g. father, husband). Personal positions, on the other hand, receive their form from the particular ways in which individual people organize their own lives (e.g. *I* as a perfectionist, *I* as a dreamer) (Hermans 2001b). Many positions, however, are simply *outside* the subjective horizon of the self, and the person is simply not aware of their existence. As possible positions, however, they may enter the self-space at some moment in time depending on changes in the situation (Hermans 2001a).

In order to facilitate dialogical processes, positions were approached as voiced positions, able to tell their stories and implied meaning units. Three kinds of (imaginal) interchange can be distinguished: internal–external, internal–internal and external–external (Hermans 2001b).

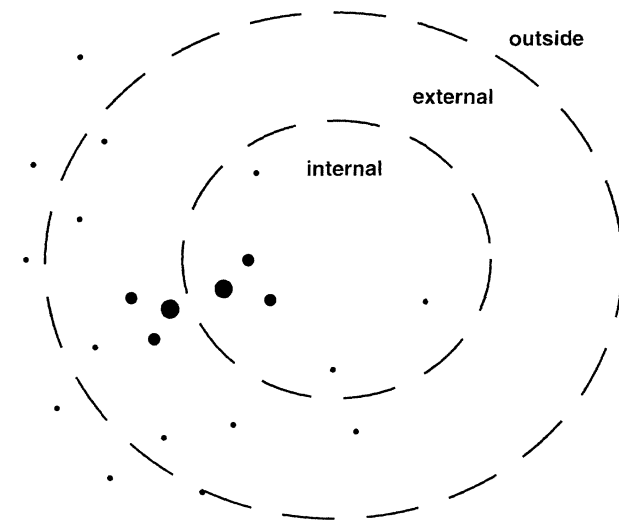


Figure 7.1 Positions in a multivoiced self.

Although intra- and interpersonal dialogues are strongly interwoven, it is necessary to make a distinction between imagination and reality as defined by a particular community. An imagined intrapersonal dialogue (*within the self-space*) may take an entirely different direction in from an interpersonal actual dialogue (*between different persons*). The actual words of the actual other may even force me to reconstruct my opinion as the interaction develops. In fact, the actual other questions, challenges and changes existing positions in the self, and is able to introduce new ones (Hermans 2001a). In the next part we will present a succinct analysis of the Phe-Di P model with systematic references to Hermans' model of moving *I*-positions.

**The phenomenological-dialectical personality involved in 'intrapersonal' and 'interpersonal' dialogues**

Earlier publications give a detailed description of the basic principles of developmental psychotherapy and the underlying phenomenological-dialectical personality theory (Verhofstadt-Denève 1988, 2000, 2001). We shall confine ourselves to the main ideas here (see Figure 7.2).

In this model, *phenomenological* refers to the unique subjective content and meaning which all human beings attach to themselves and surrounding world. *Dialectical* refers to the underlying process which causes these contents to be created and to develop.

*The phenomenological content: intrapersonal dialogues*

The basic content of the model harks back to William James' *I-me* self-model, as does the view of the self proposed by Hermans. The Phe-Di P model views the person as a dynamic *I-me* relationship, in which the *I* (as subject) is capable of reflection on the *me* (as object). For example, a people can reflect on their capacities and weaknesses. The ability to reflect belongs to the *I*; the result of reflection (capacities and weaknesses) belongs to the *me*.

In the model, the *I* is the person's thinking, feeling, willing, acting, observing and evaluating component. It experiences, reflects, organizes, selects and integrates in terms of self-esteem and recognition by (significant) others (see below). The *I* is therefore more process than content. The *me* can be observed. It is a semantic system resulting from the reflection by the *I* on the *me*? The *I-me* relation creates several phenomenological self-constructions. The interpretations of the social and material world are also part of the *I-me* since they all involve personal constructions and (re)creations. The properties *I* attribute to my friend become part of myself. In the sometimes chaotic multiplicity of person and world

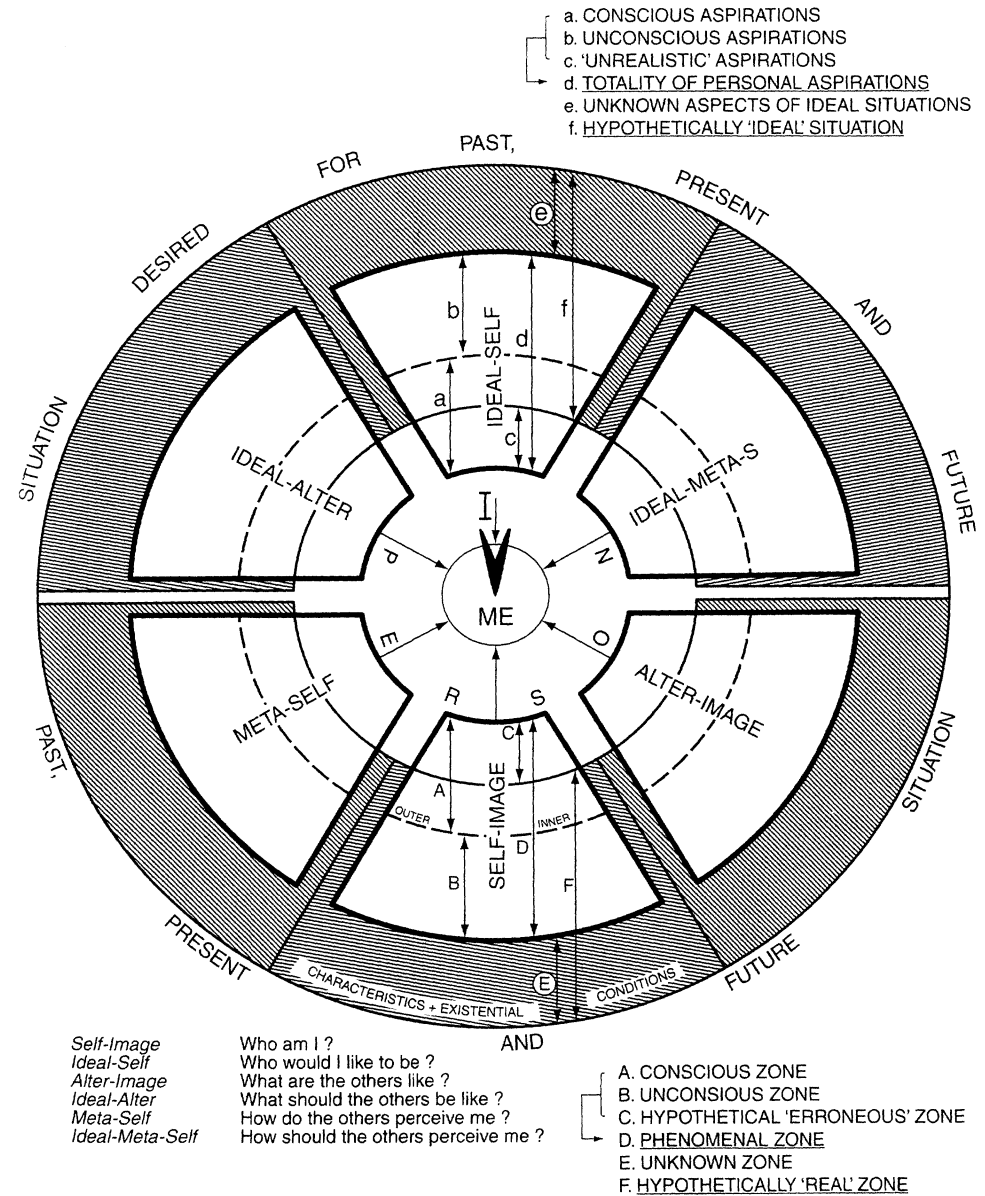


Figure 7.2 The phenomenological-dialectical personality model.

interpretations, we distinguish six *me*-constructions (or *me*-dimensions), each corresponding to a central question (see Figure 7.2):

### Central I-questions

1. *Who am I?*
2. *Who would I like to be?*
3. *What are others like?*
4. *What should others be like?*
5. *How do others perceive me?*
6. *How should others perceive me?*

### me-constructions

- self-image*
- ideal self*
- alter image*
- ideal alter*
- meta-self*
- ideal meta-self*

These six questions constitute the basis of a therapeutically practicable and 'living' personality model consisting of six *me*-constructions. For every human being, the starting point is a unique, subjective (phenomenological) interpretation of oneself and one's surrounding social and material reality at different levels of consciousness, knowing, time and action.

The content of the personality constructions, as a result of the *I-me* reflection, will be briefly illustrated by self-descriptions from one of my clients. Kevin, a 17-year-old boy, had a fight with his drunk father in order to protect his mother; the father as a result was permanently paralysed, and Kevin suffers from extreme guilt feelings.

The first two constructions relate to the self:

1. *As I am in the world in which I am living (self-image)*: 'I am Kevin. I'm 17. I have no friends. I no longer trust anyone. Everything used to be nicer in the past; we were a real family then and my parents loved me. I'm a bad son to them. Life has become meaningless and I don't think this is going to change.'
2. *As I would like to be in a world in which I would want to live (ideal self)*: 'I'm Kevin as I would like to be. I have friends I can trust, and a girlfriend who truly loves me. I get along well with my parents. Weather permitting, I occasionally take my dad out for a walk in his wheelchair. I often give my mum a hand in the household and sometimes look after my brothers. We love each other.'

The third and fourth constructions concern my creation of the other(s):

3. *As they exist as persons in their world (alter image)*. Kevin speaks as his mother: 'I'm Kevin's mother. I am 39 years old. I have a large family and my husband's in a wheelchair. He has fortunately stopped drinking. I sometimes feel very tense, but I keep fighting for my husband and my children.'
4. *As I believe they should be in an ideal world (ideal alter)*. Kevin as his mother: 'I'm Kevin's mother and I feel quite happy. My husband has become

friendlier, gentler, also towards the children. We're again forming the warm family we used to be. I can better cope with the situation now.'

Both alter images relate to the construction of our meaningful material and social world. They are the 'others inside us', so to speak. These others are of course very closely related to our self-image. They contribute towards positive or negative self-esteem.

When thinking about the others in greater depth, I am inevitably confronted with the question of how the others view me and what I mean to them (meta-self). Basically, the meta-self is part of the alter image, but given its considerable therapeutic importance, this dimension is treated as a separate *me*-construction:

5. *My construction of the image others have formed of me and my world (meta-self)*. Kevin as his mother: 'You can't trust Kevin. He's much too quick-tempered, he doesn't control himself at all, and this caused this nasty accident. The police came. He ran away. How on earth can he do something like this to his parents! He's depressive now. I can't stand it any longer.'
6. *My construction of the way others should perceive myself and my world (ideal meta-self)*. Kevin as his mother: 'I think Kevin's a good lad – he loves me a lot and he protected me from my bullying husband, who used to beat me. He saved my life. If only my husband hadn't been so aggressive, Kevin wouldn't have had to stop him and he wouldn't have fallen! Kevin's certainly not to blame for the accident. Kevin has a girlfriend and he recently got a job at the post office. I know he's happy and this makes me happy too.'

In summary: the construction of the self-image and ideal self not only implies an active conversation with *oneself* about one's own qualities, weaknesses and strengths, but also includes social self-related questions (cf. 'social roles'): 'Who am I in relation to others? What is my task to them as a son, a brother?' Both contents are highly comparable to Hermans' 'internal personal I-positions' and 'internal social I-positions', respectively (see Figures 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3). In contrast, the four other dimensions, alter self and ideal alter; meta-self and ideal meta-self, are the result of our personal construction of these significant others – 'What are they like?, What do they think and feel?' and 'What image do they have of me?' – comparable to Hermans' 'external I-positions' (see Figures 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3).

It is important that the content of the six dimensions can be analysed by the same basic features such as time, location, consciousness, possibilities of alternative interpretations, and (un)known concepts (see Figure 7.2).