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Tiago Ferreira, João Salgado, Carla Cunha

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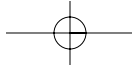
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# Ambiguity and the dialogical self: In search for a dialogical psychology

TIAGO FERREIRA, JOÃO SALGADO AND CARLA CUNHA

*Instituto Superior da Maia (ISMAI), Portugal*



## Abstract

*It is intuitively felt that ambiguity plays a crucial role in human beings' everyday life and in psychologists' theoretical and applied work. However, ambiguity remains essentially non-problematized in psychological science since its foundation. This article analyses positivist and social constructionist perspectives on ambiguity in the context of their epistemological and ontological fundamental assumptions. The relational thesis of social constructionism is further analysed and it is argued that it constitutes a "weak thesis" concerning the relational constitution of human beings. In the second part, a dialogical alternative is elaborated. In this perspective, ambiguity is placed in the context of relationship and both are brought to an ontological ground. Therefore, it is argued, ambiguity is a fundamental property of human experience and plays a fundamental role in the constitution of (inter)subjective processes. The impact of this thesis on dialogical perspective on self is elaborated.*

*Keywords:* Dialogism, self, ambiguity, meaning-making.

## Ambigüedad y yo dialógico: en busca de una psicología dialógica

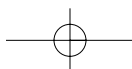
### Resumen

*Intuitivamente se considera que la ambigüedad cumple un papel crucial en la vida diaria de los humanos y en el trabajo teórico y aplicado de los psicólogos. Sin embargo, en general la ambigüedad nunca ha sido problematizada en la ciencia psicológica. Este artículo analiza las perspectivas positivista y socio-constructivista de la ambigüedad en el contexto de sus asunciones fundamentales en el plano epistemológico y ontológico. La tesis relacional del constructivismo social se analiza en mayor profundidad argumentándose que constituye una "tesis débil" en lo que concierne a la constitución relacional de los seres humanos. En la segunda parte se elabora una alternativa dialógica. En dicha perspectiva, la ambigüedad se estudia en el contexto de las relaciones y ambas se sitúan en el terreno ontológico. Por ello, se argumenta que la ambigüedad pertenece fundamental a la experiencia humana y juega un papel fundamental en la constitución de los procesos (inter)subjetivos. Finalmente, se elabora el impacto de esta tesis en la perspectiva dialógica.*

*Palabras clave:* Dialogismo, yo, ambigüedad, construcción de significado.

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*Author's Address:* Unidade de Investigação em Desenvolvimento Humano e Psicologia (Unidep)/ISMAI. Av. Carlos Oliveira Campos. Avioso S. Pedro 4477-695 (Portugal). E-mail: bento\_tiago@sapo.pt - jsalgado@kan-guru.pt



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We all know that ambiguity plays a role in our everyday lives. We constantly confront ourselves with situations where we have to deal with obscure matters or polysemic conditions. Moreover, whenever we start to interpret a single human life, ambiguity immediately appears. However, which has been the role assigned to this notion within psychology?

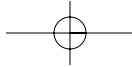
In our view, it is possible to devise two distinct ways in which psychologists have been dealing with this matter. The first, a more traditional one has been to inscribe ambiguity as an undesirable by-product of the imperfection of human beings or, at least, of the imperfection of our knowledge about human affairs. We place this view of ambiguity in the positivist-empiricist model of science. In that framework, ambiguity is understood as “obscurity” and something that we need to overcome and exclude in order to achieve the universal and truthful knowledge about human beings, the goals of this kind of approach.

The second view of ambiguity that we will discuss brings us into the post-modern framework. The social-linguistic critique of the modern framework that has been sustaining psychology’s mainstream created a new global picture, in the last decades. Within that critical upsurge, the social constructionist voice has been especially important, since it has been clearly showing the insufficiencies of the traditional models. As a way of surpassing individualistic psychology and the perspective of self-contained individuals, the social constructionist proposals call our attention to the social-symbolic processes of meaning-making. As a result, given the variety of discourses, narratives or social praxis, human lives were located in a polysemic space. Therefore, ambiguity is recaptured as polysemy and recovered as an essential property of human beings.

Although it may appear an interesting topic of study within the social constructionist movement, we consider that this view of ambiguity has not been as elaborated as we would expect. We will argue that this derives from the difficulties that social constructionism has with ontological issues and reflect upon some of the problems of this approach. Even if this movement considers human relationships as the fundamental ground of every human life, focusing only in the social-symbolic level dissolves, to us, the human subjectivity and does not provide a clear possibility to study the human meaning-making processes.

The dialogical alternative that we will present appears to us as a more satisfying one, since it states ambiguity as a necessarily present feature of the constitution of (inter)subjective processes. If we were to capture an image of what we want to say with this assertion, we would choose one of a person trying to understand and communicate with another, more specifically, in the movement toward the realm of the other. Within that movement, there is probably a feeling of getting in touch with that other person, but there is always the inescapable feeling of distance, misunderstanding and mystery. In other words, a dialogical conception of human affairs will move ambiguity to the centre of the discussion and even to the very possibility of meaning creation.

In order to accomplish this, relationship must be brought to an ontological terrain allowing psychology to move beyond the positivist / social constructionist dispute over reality status. This way, it becomes possible to surpass positivist reductionisms, dualisms and reification of self, and social constructionist suspicion on reality and subjectivity (see also Marková, 2003a; Salgado & Ferreira, in press).



### **The traditional framework of the self-contained individual: Ambiguity as ambivalence and obscurity**

When we today reflect on psychological science, we conclude that its course and history has been traced as if we were somehow convinced that psychological categories consist on reflexes of nature (Salgado, 2003). In other words, it seems that we are convinced that psychological concepts, like personality, intelligence, unconscious drives or thoughts correspond to natural objects pre-existent to psychological inquiries. This assumption emerges from the acceptance of a positivist-empiricist model of science based on an “epistemological representationalism” (Rorty, 1979).

Fundamental to this model of science are the notions of “knowledge as representation” and “meaning as reference to the object”. It sustains itself on a “doctrine of natural types” which express the idea that natural types of entities exist in the world, each type being a category based on the sharing of essential properties, that is, properties that objects possess by virtue of their own nature (see Salgado, 2003). Simultaneously, the internal representations of objects in the world are taken to be isomorphic to reality (Rorty, 1979) thus allowing for the foundational naturalist assumption that meaning is equivalent to the object of reference (Danziger, 1997). This way, linguistic categories reflect these properties of objects in the world and therefore meanings emerge as pre-established entities that exist independently of human phenomena.

In sum, following the appropriation of a positivist model of science, psychology elected an entity as its study object – the mind – and pursues the project of describing it univocally. To accomplish this, psychology builds itself upon a mentalist / cognitivist paradigm approaching the question of subjectivity from the stance of mental representations.

This brief analysis of that traditional framework is intended to show how western philosophical discourses on truth and certainty and on the individual mind as instigator of meaning led psychology to include ambiguity in the same discursive framework of uncertainty and ambivalence, never attributing to it a theoretically autonomous status nor a fundamental value in psychological phenomena. As Gergen stated, the capacity for diversity and pluralism, the tolerance for ambiguity, the unknown and the limitations of psychological knowledge seem underdeveloped in mainstream positivist psychology (Gergen, Gülerce, Lock & Misra, 1996, p. 501).

The ontometaphysical base, thus allowed psychology to assume an epistemological authority regarding people’s subjective worlds, from which emerged the belief of a privileged access to the internal world of people and a belief in the possibility to univocally describe psychological processes. This way, methodologically, individuals are included in comparability frameworks and their differences being analysed by reference to generalized criteria. As such, a great deal of mainstream has been reducing subjectivity to its mechanical features. The mechanistic point of view, while trying to reduce any subjectivity creates a world of objective facts. In this, ambiguity becomes a problem of methodological limitations or human imperfections. Obvious and discussed examples of this are psychological evaluation instruments or psychopathological diagnosis.

Ambiguity becomes obscurity and the correctness of our psychological descriptions is dependent on our ability to reduce ambiguous issues. For example, the DSM has been evolving in the last three decades as a system primarily devoted to the reduction of ambiguous features of clinical diagnoses (e.g., *DSM-IV-TR*, American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Observable signs

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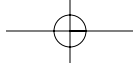
and reportable symptoms are highlighted as ways of decreasing any doubts. Each client or patient must be considered in terms of those objective (and objectifying) defined categories. As such, the subjective and dynamic properties of each person are clearly disregarded. The arguments supporting such system claim for the facilitation of the communication between professionals and the objectivity of such procedure. In other words, the DSM tries to reduce ambiguity to the minimum. However, such reduction of ambiguity has several costs and, in fact, it may not reduce ambiguity at all. First, the DSM is not so "objective" as it is claimed. Even the defenders of this neo-Kraepelinian system (e.g., Shorter, 1997) recognize that the growing number of diagnostic categories and the higher rates of mental disease have also to do with sociocultural issues, such as the discovery of new psychopharmacological products and the installed lobbies within this domain. Moreover, there is another by-product of this kind of "medical categorization": the specific diagnostic labels work as "mediational means" by which the identity of the person is constructed (as it usually happens; see Valsiner, 1998; and also Wertsch, 1991). However, the cultural forces are not fully acknowledged by the professionals and by common people, in general, creating the beliefs (1) that cultural tools (in this case, the DSM's labels) are naturally shaped and (2) that the human psychological problems are solely intrinsic and objective properties of the single person (see Wertsch, 1991, for a revision of similar analysis about categorization of students as "normal", "special" or "handicapped").

In parallel, regarding psychological processes, psychology included ambiguity in the discursive context of ambivalence, the simultaneity of conflicting psychological processes (e.g., feelings) or even lack of self-knowledge. Clear examples would be the Freudian accounts of the psychological functioning and the cognitive attempts to describe and promote rational forms of thinking. Curiously enough, in these perspectives ambiguity is connected with the solipsistic and obscure features of the Cartesian ego, and the solution is an old one: to found an absolute way to exclude our own ambiguity and uncertainty.

#### **The social-linguistic critique: Ambivalence as polysemy**

Social constructionism (e.g., Gergen, 1991, 1994) social-linguistic critique and dialogical relational perspectives on self (e.g., Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Leiman, 2002, 2004; Wortham, 2001) and knowledge (Marková, 2003a) make the constraints of mainstream positivist psychological science unavoidably clear. In fact, these perspectives emerged from the questioning of traditional philosophical emphasis on the conditions of truth and on an ego as instigator of meaning that formatted a psychological science based on an epistemological authority and on "self-contained individualism", characterized by "firmly drawn self-other boundaries and an emphasis on personal control" (Sampson, 1988, p.16).

Within psychology, social constructionism presents psychological categories as social-linguistic constructions, thus, emphasizing its origin in social-relational conditions idiosyncratic to discursive communities. In continuity with this assumption, in the last decades the social conditions of meaning emergence (of what we take to be real, we could say) and its narrative or discursive organization have become emblematic themes of epistemological configurations or metatheoretical models that followed the crisis of modern epistemology.



The elemental notions are that 1) reality, is the result of social-relational agreements of discursive communities that construct it and 2) that the narrative form constitutes the fundamental linguistic, psychological, cultural and philosophical framework through which we create meaning and understand the nature and conditions of our existence (Brockmeier & Harré, 1997, p. 264).

Thus, social constructionism is able to withdraw ambiguity from the emphatic discourses on truth, predictability and control. Seeing reality as constructed in socially situated discourses, social constructionism emphasizes the multiplicity of coexistent and concurrent realities in social symbolic domain. Discourses are seen to be included in power relations that determine their referential value between each other. Discourses about the self or discourses about human inner worlds are considered in this same global framework. Therefore, ambiguity is re-entered in this global discourse concerning multiplicity and polysemy of meaning.

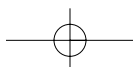
However, it appears to us that the issue of ambiguity remains essentially theoretically undeveloped, particularly if we think about the role of difference within and between people on innovation and the creation of new meanings. The state of affairs may seem rather paradoxical. On the one hand, polysemy is not only recognized, but is also highlighted as a fundamental condition of our semiosphere. On the other hand, it remains to be explained how is it possible to create new meanings – in other words, how polysemy is brought to being.

In our view, this problem is a result of the social constructionist difficulties with ontological issues. In fact, we will argue that psychology is in need of an ontological shift, where the relational processes are considered the constitutive and ontological basis of the psychological realm. From a dialogical point of view, the social constructionist approach presents a “weak thesis” about the relational constitution of human beings. In fact, the exclusion of the Ego and Alter (or I and Other) relationship from their discussion, gets aside the necessary tensional space of meaning-making. Thus, it is our conviction that the possible way out of this labyrinth is to claim a dialogical ontology for psychology. In this sense, we need to further discuss which should be “relationships” position within this discipline.

### **In search of a relational ontology for Psychology: Is the social-symbolic field a viable ontological ground for Psychology and meaning-making?**

Social-linguistic and dialogical oriented perspectives share the emphasis on the relational nature of the psychological realm. This represents a major shift in the way psychology conceives relationships since we are allowed to move from the idea of those relational processes as possibilities of an aprioristic, transcendental self (in the traditional psychological models) and we are lead to consider them as the elemental constitutive matrix of psychological domain. In this movement, these perspectives also came to underline the volatile and ambiguous features of human psychological processes, emphasizing the “processes of social interchange” and discourse.

However, placing the relational assumption on the ontological ground represents a major problem for social constructionist perspectives, particularly by the defence of an “ontological muteness” (Gergen, 1994, p. 72). For instance, Gergen argued that “The domain of the relational is no less constructed than anything else we take to be real – whether in mind or nature” (Gergen, 1999, p. 114). Thus, the relational ground seems to lose its ground. This ontological muteness of social constructionism seems to be creating, in a self-referential mode, difficulties in the defence of their own proposals.





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Despite several claims from social constructionism towards the rejection of any ontological compromise, in fact, it is impossible to assert anything without such a compromise. Several authors within that movement have come to realize this and stating the opposite claim – that “it is not possible to be ontologically mute” (O’Connor & Hallan, 2000, p. 242). On this base, it has been stated that:

The ontology presupposed in discursive psychology takes persons to be originating centres of activity. Since they [persons] are ontologically elementary they have no internal psychological complexity. (...) Cognitive processes are properties of discourses, and hence have their primary mode of being in interpersonal symbolic interactions. (Harré, 1995, p. 369)

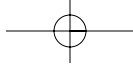
As such, we see in this approach, a focus on the social and linguistic, in detriment of the personal and experiential. Instead of solving the Cartesian dualism, they seem to be moving to the other side of the pole. Nevertheless, is the social constructionist approach (and its implicit or explicit social-symbolic compromise) a viable and alternative description of our psychological existence?

We see two complementary problems with the social-discursive solution. First, it does not allow for an intrinsically relational conception of self since relationship is positioned and discussed always outside the domain of the individual. Therefore, it maintains the traditional ontological separation between the individual and the social (Marková, 2000). Consequently, social constructionism holds on a weak thesis of relationship. Moreover, since relationship is considered “as constructed as anything else” and therefore dissolved within social-symbolic realm, individuals have to be considered previously constituted. But individuals remain largely a non-covered topic of analysis.

The second and complementary problematic question has to do with the consequences of such a weak thesis of relationship. At this point what come to be inquired are the sociological conditions of language use. The following statement from Bourdieu (1982, cit in Jacques, 1985) seems to uncover the entangled problem, namely, the absence of the tensional properties of relationships inhabited by individuals: from a strictly linguistic point of view, it does not matter who can say it does not matter what, the simple soldier may order his captain to “clean the latrines” (...), from a strictly sociological point of view, (...) it’s clear that it does not matter who cannot affirm it does not matter what (p. 71)

The underlying problem thus resides precisely in the “it does not matter who can or cannot say it does not matter what”. The social constructionism emphasis on the social-linguistic perspective leads individual’s subjectivity to be retracted into social realm. Yet, there are no two human beings alike; there are no two equal human positions towards the world; and there is no possibility to fully access or understand other people’s feelings or thoughts. Moreover, the very possibility of communication resides on difference. The pragmatic argument that substitutes ontological commitment (which we can state for instance in Gergen’s repeated emphasis that his proposals do not intend to be true but are only contributions to social praxis; e.g., Gergen, 1999, 2001) loses its ground since, as Jacques (1985, p. 78) has clearly phrased: in any way we might come to define it, dialogism concerns the transactional structure of each enunciation. All the forms of pre-established homology, disregarding the multiple, compromise the possibility of dialogue.

In moving to the social-symbolic domain in detriment of intrinsic relational qualities of individuals, social constructionism appears to be one more of those traditional universal categorical schemas. Even though social constructionism



emphasizes multiplicity, it previously has disregarded the alterity structure between any two individuals, somehow maintaining the “separation thesis”.

#### *Forms of separation*

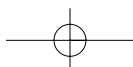
The notion of separation thesis of Robin West (1997) addresses those discourses that assume individuals are separated from one another and that first there are individuals, that then engage in relationships with other individuals. Reflecting on these notions, Carr (2003) argues that in some schools of psychology the “language of the self and other gets used in a manner to carry on the implication that self is necessarily separate from, and prior to, other” (p. 117). As Carr (2003) then concludes “self and other are cast as constituent elements in a perceived relationship of the intersubjective nature of the human condition itself, but the implied presumption is that self must necessarily be privileged over other” (p. 118).

Psychology developed to recognize and emphasize the intersubjective and relational nature of human beings, which contemporarily has led these notions to become most frequent in psychological literature. However, the maintenance of this separation thesis prevents psychology from assuming a relational ontological framework. In a social linguistic critique, whether from post structuralism, social constructionism, or narrative framework, the I is considered as a social symbolic category and the other is conceived as a generalized social symbolical other. In this social symbolic ontology what seems to be lost is the simultaneous and by-directional role of a real other in the constitution of a real I. Or, to use Jacques (1985) words, what is missing is the perception that the most important thing in language is not linguistic (p. 18). Simultaneously, the fundamental tension entangled in pragmatic relationships between the real I and other is disregarded in favor of social symbolical processes.

In a way, we are dealing with an apparent paradox. On one hand, we need to separate the person and the social; on the other hand, we need to put together those two poles. Valsiner (1998) introduced a distinction between two possible strategies of separation that may lead us out of this labyrinth. The aforementioned and traditional strategy is called an “exclusive separation” thesis, operating a clear separation between the person and the social world as two distinct entities. In contrast, Valsiner (1998) presents the inclusive separation orientation as characterized by an emphasis on the “processes that separate and unite different parts of the same whole in simultaneous terms” (p. 15), thus distinguishing three facets – the person, the environment and the relationship. The simultaneous emphasis on the primacy of the relationship and on the radical asymmetry and alterity of the two elements in relationships are fundamental assumptions of dialogism. Consequently, following this strategy, the person and the social become two bounded elements, distinct but united.

#### **Calls for a dialogical psychology and its difficulties**

For some decades now, this point has been made concerning the need to move beyond a philosophy of language, a symbolic or linguistic criterion for an intersubjective perspective on human being (e.g., Habermas, 1992; Jacques, 1985, 1991). Following this thought, the psychological study of newborns has arrived at a theory of intersubjectivity that has been described by Trevarthen (1998) as “no less than a theory of how human minds, in human bodies, can recognize one another’s impulses, intuitively, with or without cognitive or





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symbolic elaborations” (p. 17). It is such a project that we think psychology should look forward.

In a dialogical perspective, although the emphasis is explicitly on the addressivity of every psychological phenomena and therefore on the constitutive role of the Other to individual psychological processes, it is interesting to notice that, except for a few authors (Marková, 2003b; Salgado & Ferreira, in press), ontological discussion scarcely emerges. Simultaneously, and perhaps as a reflex of this paucity of ontological elaboration of the notion of dialogicality, dialogical perspectives on self remain based on discourse (Wortham, 2001), signs (Leiman, 2002), or imagination (Hermans, 2004). As may be seen, and despite recognition of the significant advances introduced by these approaches, what all of them share is the implicit reliance on mental representations, and on consciousness movements, as an underlying ground.

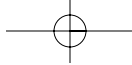
However, as Deleuze (1995) wrote: “The history of the long error is the history of representation, (...). For the Same, or the Identical, has an ontological sense” (p. 301). Thus, the forgetfulness of alterity and difference on the description of the psychological realm leads us always to the traditional ontological commitments that we are trying to escape. “Difference is not and cannot be thought in itself, so long as it is subject to the requirements of representation” (Deleuze, 1995, p. 262). This is, to think on the Other as a representation is to think on the Other from the perspective of the Same (Marcos, 2001). As such, these authors are leading us to the conclusion that the dialogical project, based precisely on structures of alterity, on the notion of insoluble difference and asymmetry between I and Other, will only be attainable following the substitution of the Same (of mental representations) as ontological entity. The question therefore seems to be how to build a strong thesis on relational constitution of human subjectivity by answering how can the other be in myself and not be me?

### **Dialogical psychology: Towards a relationally instituted human being and a relationally functioning self**

The difficulty the previous models (positivism and social constructionism) do not seem to overcome appears to reside in how to maintain individual subjectivity and complexity while conceiving a relationally instituted human being. In fact, psychology has been addressing this issue for decades. Relation-object model in psychoanalysis, or interpersonal schemas (Markus & Cross, 1990) in cognitivist oriented models are some examples of this. Nevertheless, this has been done maintaining consciousness as the criterion of human subjectivity.

Dialogism, emphasizing the addressivity of every human phenomena allows to surpass the exclusive separation strategy to which we earlier attended to. However, the concept of dialogism will only be of particularly relevant value to psychology if considered as an ontological and even an epistemological framework. In dialogical literature, there have recently been some proposed arguments that point this way (see Marková, 2003a, 2003b; Salgado & Ferreira, in press). From another point of view, it can be said that the concept of dialogism will allow a moving forward of the positivist / social constructionist dualism in the possibility of being conceived as an ontological and epistemological framework.

Considering the relational principle as logically and transcendentally irreducible and centering the problems of reference and subject in a communicational space, dialogical framework is allowed to move beyond both



self as sole instigator of meaning (cf. Jacques, 1991), and meaning as criterion of subjective life. Instead of conceiving relationship as an emergent possibility of self, dialogism emphasizes the ontological primacy of relationship which leads to a conception of the psychological realm as inextricably interconnected with communicational processes. Therefore, we will conceive relationships as logical pragmatic spaces that reconcile the referential and interlocutive relation (Jacques, 1991). Moreover, those assumptions lead us to search for a description of psychological elements as communicational agencies instead of psychological objects (Jacques, 1991) therefore allowing to begin solving the problem of the other in the self.

#### *Relation as ontologically and transcendently irreducible*

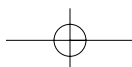
The notion of dialogicality states a relational principle (cf. Jacques, 1985, 1991). This means that the ego loses its ontological primacy, its aprioristic condition since it exists only in the moment in which a relational process is initiated with an other. Psychological existence comes to being in that relation with an other. Roberts (1989) states this in a curious way when he says that, in Bakhtinian thought, the reality principle coincides with the radical otherness principle. In fact, the dialogical concept implies this notion of radical asymmetry between any two people, which establishes the background for a possible relationship. In the space of significative indetermination between two people, lies the possibility for relation and intersubjectivity since the tension originated between any possible positions in any communicational act is a conditional presupposition of communicational occurrence (Bakhtin, 1986; Marcos, 2001).

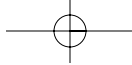
As we said, dialogical framework introduces in psychology the conceptual instruments to move beyond traditional egotism and recent dilution of subjectivity by social constructionism by assuming the postulate of relational constitution of subjectivity. Of fundamental importance here, is to underline that this movement becomes possible due to the emphasis made by a dialogical framework on communication. As Marková (2003b) stresses, following Bakhtinian thought, “Ego-Alter exists only within the realm of communication” (p. 257). In fact communication appears to be the theoretical space to place I-Other inseparability and relational precedence preventing theoretical and methodological dialogical formulations from returning to the traditional philosophical and scientific frameworks that shaped psychological science.

#### **Meaning as difference**

The image is quite common: imagine a world where everybody looks the same, wears the same clothes, reads the same newspapers, says the same things everyday, have the same thoughts – a world with no difference. What would be meaning in such a world? Probably, it would be a set of fixed and immutable entities – a world without any ambiguity. Nevertheless, it would be a dehumanized world, a world with no particular voice, in a word, a totalitarian society.

This image illustrates the following idea: the exclusion of ambiguity of the human realm is only possible if subjectivity can be completely removed. In fact, the search of an eternal and absolute point of view – the God’s eye view (Putnam, 1981) – is only possible if every specific, individual and idiosyncratic perspective is removed and silenced. This justifies why “subjectivity” is still so commonly regarded as something negative by common sense. The long quest





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for that absolute point of view, so typical of positivistic thinking in psychology, creates objective descriptions – but disembodied, a-historical, and impersonal. Such words are words of no particular person—and therefore these are words of no one.

Human meaning, in that sense, is brought to being by difference, contrast, tension, disagreement. On a dialogical perspective, a human existence is a communicational existence. Thus, it always needs two communicational agencies (the addressee and the addressed others), and the communicational act shows the way of overcoming the difference between those two poles (I/Other). In a sense, meaning is created through a common understanding; but the original difference and asymmetry between those poles is a necessary condition for that bridge. In other words, meaning is always dependent on the play between sameness and difference.

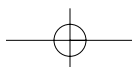
This perspective establishes tension as a necessary condition of meaning. Dialogue, so commonly conceived of as a way of establishing a common understanding and cooperation, is also a matter of struggle, misunderstanding, and tension.

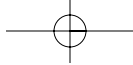
### Ambiguity and the dialogical self

If we assume a dialogical perspective, we will need to embrace ambiguity as an emergent and continuously present property of selfhood and meaning-making processes. Meaning is conceived as a process of communication between, at least, two agencies. In turn, this relationship is understood as something constantly permeated by a “radical difference” between Ego (the elocutionary agency, the I) and the Alter (the addressed audiences, the Other). In that way, meaning is no longer seen as a fixed entity because it is always a matter of negotiation in a communicational act. In other words, meaning is always a product and a tool of communication. Thus, there are two complementary sides in this process: on the one hand, the creation of meaning creates a bridge between those two poles of the relationship (I/Other, or Ego/Alter), a common agreement that enables the mutual coordination; on the other hand, this process necessarily involves a tension space of difference and contrast between those same poles. Deleuze (1995) claimed something rather close to this, when he stated that the Same is not able to communicate with the Same. In our view, relationship is always a matter of joining together and articulating what is different.

Therefore, we could say that the very possibility of meaning-making is lodged in this distance between I and Other. We are not claiming that difference and contrast are more important than similitude and closeness: we are just saying that relationships are grounded in those two complementary sides. As Bakhtin argued, the I emerges as a contrast with the Other, with whom a relationship is established. Therefore, the *I* occupies the experiential centre of the process, but this *I* emerges by reference with an Other. Thus, in a dialogical perspective we can no longer separate subjectivity and intersubjectivity, because they are interconnected processes. Moreover, meaning-making is something emergent from that process of creating some kind of bridge between two different poles. Thus, a specific meaning is always a matter of positioning toward a specific background, by which the I establishes a relationship with the Other.

Therefore, a dialogical perspective assumes that intersubjectivity is grounded in a tensional space, where difference plays a vital role. There is a difference between I and Other, but there is also other sorts of differences necessarily





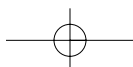
present. We are able to distinguish, at least, two other kinds of differences involved in a process of relationship.

First, there is the difference between what is communicated and the referents of that communication. The signs, gestures and actions of a specific communicational act refer to particular objects, but they are not immanent properties of those objects – they could be better conceived as possible and mediated actions toward the world and the Other inscribed in some particular social and more or less consensual praxis. It is possible to reduce those signs to their logical and formal properties, as happens with words in a dictionary. However, that would be to forget their fundamental property – they are tools by which we create relationships, and they have their roots not in the objects themselves, but in the multiple possible ways we may act upon those same objects. Thus, we face a scenario of some indeterminacy of meanings. In other words: meanings are not fixed entities derived from a direct relation in which the “communicational content” is equal to the “object”; instead, they are ways and products of negotiation with the Other relating to possible actions toward that object. Thus, the processes of meaning-making are necessarily polysemic spaces, and not ways of discovering the final and absolute truth about the world.

However, there is still a second issue about “difference” particularly pertinent to the problem of ambiguity. The asymmetry between Ego and Alter calls our attention to the problem of subjective appropriation. This problem has been discussed by different lines of thought (Valsiner, 1998), but inside dialogism it has been a topic of discussion at least since Bakhtin. In his discussion about the role of words in his system of thought (see Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986), he argues that every utterance is half given and half created. Whenever we use a communicational and more or less consensual sign in order to communicate, we are using something that we inherited from our community. However, the specific subjective experience that is undergoing in this process involves an active process of reconstruction that assigns a particular and unrepeatably meaning to the signs being used. Thus, there is a process of appropriation by which the sign acquires a personal and subjective texture. We would like to add that we see this whole process as experiential, affectively charged, by which a sense of self is constantly constructed and reconstructed.

Moreover, if we consider that this happens in the context of an irreversible flow of time (Valsiner, 1998), each passing moment always has a twofold dimension of old and new, of shared and personal. The integration of (psychological) time within this equation of meaning-making is essential. We see a strong connection between the dialogical dynamics and the psychological constitution of the present and irreversible moment. Human life is a process of continuous and present adaptation to the past in face of an anticipated future (the next moment, the absent but anticipated words of the other). The arising meaning at this moment (for example, a given verbal sign that solves the puzzle of the present moment) is unrepeatably. It may be quite similar to past situations and to future ones, but the specific contextualization – and the lived moment in which the sign is created experienced sign created moment – is unique, unrepeatably, and, also, ambiguous. Meaning of signs is always about change (Marková, 2003a). The same may be applied to any kind of human action: it may be similar to something else, it can be a kind of personal habitual pattern, but it is never the same event of being. Mystery and change is our psychological milieu; re-actualization and self-organization are the continuous task.

Those fundamental features of human life make it clear that subjectivity is necessarily present – a dimension that has been somehow forgotten in



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psychology (Salgado & Hermans, 2005). However, if subjectivity and personal and unrepeatable experiences are necessary dimensions of every human life at each passing moment, this singularity creates a necessary ambiguity in our lives. It is thus, if we assume that subjectivity and ambiguity are necessary conditions of our psychological realm, we will have to confess several limits in our scientific psychological studies. Nevertheless, we think this option is preferable, instead of reducing our lives to their pretended “objectified” properties.

In sum, a dialogical perspective assumes difference between *I* and *Other* as a necessary condition for meaning-making. Departing from this axiomatic claim, ambiguity will be an emergent property of every communicational act, since it involves processes of personal, subjective, and unrepeatable meanings.

We will try to clarify this perspective, exploring a simple situation of interpersonal communication. Imagine that a person A states “x” (for example, a specific desire “I would love to take some days off with you”). The addressed person, B, clearly understands this statement. If that happens, we could say that a communicational bridge was established between those two people. Thus, for the sake of the argument, we will suppose that there is, at least, a partial mutual definition of the situation. In that case, something is defined and ambiguity is reduced. Nevertheless, ambiguity is not eliminated, because the specific meaning of “x” for A is different from the meaning it has for B. Moreover, that ambiguity feeds the following mutual actions that will take place, usually in order to create some sort of joint activity. In that process, ambiguity may be reduced, but the whole interchange between those two communicational agencies is fed by the always present ambiguity. Intersubjectivity appears as a dance of mutual coordination, where ambiguity never disappears.

However, we can probably have an even more graspable phenomenological feeling of ambiguity in our intrapersonal experiences. If the intrapersonal space is configured by alterity, our self-experience is also permeated by this otherness. I am familiar with me, but I am still a kind of stranger that questions and argues with me. Launched in irreversible time, from moment to moment, a person gains a constant feeling of these divergences and fluidity. At this point we come closer to Merleau-Ponty (1969), who claims that we are never completely self-present. The self, as a live agency, is more a matter of “how” than a matter of “what”, more a matter of continuous becoming than a matter of analytical description. Others are probably more easily objectified and monologized than me, something that may explain why people tend to interpret others’ actions as the result of personality traits while they tend to have a more situational interpretation of their own behaviours (Ross, 1977). We would say that ambiguity lies at the very heart of the subject.

What are the consequences of this line of reasoning for the conceptualization of self-identity processes? Psychology has been built as if we were convinced that human lives can be reduced to their precise and objective features. Thus, the study of personal lives has been somewhat oblivious to their ambiguous properties. In addition, most of the time, ambiguity has been equated with lack of self-control or self-knowledge and, as such, as something to be eliminated.

In our view, this is only part of the story, and thus, we feel the need to redefine the role of ambiguity. It is also our conviction that a dialogical perspective is well prepared for that task. Indeed, in a dialogical perspective it is possible to define self-identity as a matter of relationship with oneself (Salgado & Hermans, 2005), a process in which ambiguity must play a vital role, fostering movements toward higher levels of complexity. Self-regulation has been described as a process composed by two complementary operations: differentiation and hierarchical organization (Valsiner, 2005). In face of the



ambiguous features of our lives, constituted by an intersubjective and fluid matrix, we may be more or less “open” to novelty and “otherness”. In other words, we may vary in our ability of integrating the unavoidable differences. Openness to the other and the corresponding openness to the new meanings brought by others’ eyes are movements that foster differentiation. However, such openness is also a challenge and, frequently, a struggle, because it implies the development of new and more complex forms of self-regulation. Whenever that integration is achieved, the potential scope of experiences becomes broader and more complex. However, that openness must not dissolve the self on the other, something that alerts us to the need of some closure.

### Conclusion or The never-ending process of overcoming the difference with oneself

In a dialogical perspective, the problem of self-identity is conceived of as a matter of constantly relating with oneself (Jacques, 1991; Salgado & Hermans, 2005). It is through that process of self-relating that I can recognize myself as a continuous entity that goes through several changes, while remaining the same person. However, this possibility of self-relating is grounded in some kind of internal separation between the “teller” (or “doer”) and the “listener” (the audience or the Other). Thus, the internal psychological space is a matter of sameness and difference, the necessary conditions for any communication.

This sort of internal division is always present in each passing moment. Thus, self-identity processes can be directly associated with the mythical figure of the double-faced Janus: there is always the active I that addresses an Other-in-self, but this Other is still Me. Human existence always becomes co-existence, even if only with oneself; and co-existence is an ambiguous kind of existence. In each passing moment, the self becomes a new blurred image and a challenge to the last image we have just created of ourselves. Thus, we are constantly thrust in a space filled with our own ambiguous features.

This process of self-relating, by which an I-position addresses another part or parts of the same person (the addressees) is probably commanded by regular and familiar patterns. As Valsiner (2000) claims, the self is a lazy problem-solver. Nevertheless, this constant ambiguity and difference within oneself is always creating new challenges that may foster the development toward new levels of complexity and abstraction. This dimension has not been fully explored in the dialogical framework, but it seems reasonable to suppose that people may progress toward higher levels of abstraction, creating a more integrated self-perspective.

Thus, the multiplicity of contexts and daily problems that a person confronts creates a great variety of possible I-positions, some of them fostering inner conflicts, oppositions, and strong doubts about self-definition. Ambivalence, doubts, conflicts, may work as signs of perpetuating fluctuations within oneself (see Valsiner, 2002), but all these oppositions are also challenges that appeal to new kinds and innovative solutions. Nevertheless, the flow of time and the ever-changing conditions of our existence creates a dynamic field where no final and precise answer is possible to the question “who am I?”.

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