

Dialogical self research

Una investigación sobre el ser dialógico

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Abstract

This paper presents the first appearance of a new kind of research, which pushes the limits of qualitative research in a new direction. It is based on the idea of the Dialogical Self (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Hermans & Gieser, 2012) that people are basically multiple, and that the best nomenclature for this phenomenon is to call them I-positions. This gets over the problem with other names such as subpersonalities, ego-states and parts that all of these seem lesser. The term I-positions can include such things as the soul and the spirit, which are not lesser at all. The idea of Dialogical Self Research is that we can take different levels of psychospiritual development (as suggested by Maslow, Loevinger, Kohlberg, Piaget, Cook-Greuter and Wilber) and set up dialogues between them – all within one person. This is a new way of investigating such phenomena, and leads to many more exciting possibilities.

Key Words: Research, Dialogical, Self, Levels of development, I-positions

Resumen

Este artículo presenta la primera aparición de un nuevo tipo de investigación, la cual trasciende los límites de la investigación cualitativa, en una nueva dirección. Está basada en la idea del “Ser Dialógico” (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Hermans & Gieser, 2012), la cual establece que la gente es básicamente “múltiple” y que la mejor forma de llamar a este fenómeno es con la nomenclatura “Posiciones-I”. Esto soluciona el problema que traían otras denominaciones como “subpersonalidades”, “estados del ego” o “partes”. El término “Posiciones-I” incluye aspectos como el alma y el espíritu, los cuales no han de ser menospreciados. La idea de la investigación sobre el Ser Dialógico es que podemos diferenciar distintos niveles del desarrollo psicoespiritual (como sugirieron Maslow, Loevinger, Kohlberg, Piaget, Cook-Greuter y Wilber) y establecer diálogos entre ellos – dentro de la misma persona. Ésta es una nueva forma de investigar tal fenómeno, lo cual lleva a otras muchas más interesantes posibilidades.

Palabras clave: Investigación, Dialógico, Ser, Niveles del desarrollo Posiciones-I

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Personal introduction

Research has long been an interest of mine. It was in the early 70s that I first started writing about research (Rowan 1974), first of all in the field of social psychology. I was very much involved with social psychology at the time, and in fact put forward the view that all psychology is really social psychology.

I was also very interested in group work, and the research which had been done on groups (Rowan 1975). Most of what I know about psychotherapy in practical terms I learned in groups: I made it my business to attend groups led by leaders in the field, such as Bernard Gunther, Will Schutz, John Pierrakos, Julian and Beverley Silverman, Marty Fromm, Jim Elliott, Elizabeth Mintz, Denny Yuson, John Adams, Alfred and Diane Pessa, Jay Stattman, Paul Lowe and so on.

In the later 70s I helped to set up the New Paradigm Research group with people like Peter Reason and John Heron. We had regular meetings to discuss our new ideas about research, and this resulted in the production of a book (Reason & Rowan 1981) which was quite a blockbuster and went on selling copies well into the 90s. The thrust of this book was to push qualitative research (little known at the time) and to spell out its liberating possibilities.

In 1980 I decided that I was a self-actualised person, in Maslow's terms. I had been through ten years of the growth movement, experiencing Gestalt groups, Psychodrama groups, Bodywork groups, Person-Centred groups and other groups, Co-Counselling training (which opened up the world of emotions for me), Primal Integration training (which deepened everything I had learned in therapy), training in Applied Behavioural Science, AHP conferences in Britain and the USA, EAHP conferences in France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain and the UK, political groups such as Red Therapy, leading groups as well as going to groups. I also used LSD as an integral part of my therapy, not to have fun but to open up the spring doors of the mind and hold them open for long enough to do some serious work. In this process I moved from being an introvert (according to standard personality tests) to being an extravert – from preferring books to people to preferring people to books. I also dealt with all the most salient shadow material, going through my implantation stuff, my birth stuff, my Kleinian stuff, my Oedipal stuff, my adolescent stuff and so forth, very effectively. I also dealt with my hatred of women, and came out of that a convinced anti-sexist man, helping to edit a radical men's magazine called *Achilles Heel*.

And when I came across the work of Ken Wilber (1980), I found that he was extremely accurate about what I had been through and where I was now. I had moved from the Mental Ego level of consciousness – the consensus trance, as it has sometimes been called – to the Centaur level of consciousness, which is all about authenticity. At the Centaur level we have seen through the falsity of the self-image, and have discovered the truth of the existential self. And this is just the move which Maslow had described as moving from needing the esteem of others to self-esteem and self-validation. (Maslow 1987, Chapter 11)

About that time, I read a statement that anyone who claimed to be authentic could never really be authentic. This worried me a bit, but I later explained it along the lines that the author had probably assumed, as many of us did at that time, that authenticity was the end of the line of self development, and that therefore anyone who claimed to have achieved this was grandiose. Since Wilber, however, we no longer believe that this is the end of the line. Rather is it quite a modest way station, with quite a long way to go to the end of the line – if indeed it makes sense to say that there is a line or an end.

At a certain point after this, I wondered what it would be like to have a dialogue between these two stages of consciousness, which would explore and perhaps eventually encapsulate some of the important differences between them. Since then I have taught many people how to do this, and have found that most people can do it quite well. The Table 1 is what I came up with.

Table 1. The mental ego versus the authentic self

MENTAL EGO	AUTHENTIC SELF
Happy to play a role	Critiques the whole idea of roles
Wants to know other people's opinions	Not interested in opinions

Sees through other people's eyes	Sees through own eyes
Needs support all the time	Needs little support
Needs praise	Likes praise
Brought down by criticism	Meets criticism positively
The power is outside	The power is inside
The world is full of challenges	The world is full of opportunities
Crippled by failure	Energised by failure
Standards come from outside	Has internal gyroscope
Likes to follow the known path	Likes to be creative
Needs to be liked	Likes to be liked
Perception distorted by social needs	Clear perception
Prone to guilt, shame, anxiety	Self acceptance
Cautious	Spontaneous
Ego or close group centred	World centred
Fear of solitude	Like solitude
No peak experiences	Some peak experiences
Fearful of others	Respectful of others
No real intimacy	Capable of intimacy
Humour is often hostile	Humour is not hostile
Creativity is difficult	Creativity is easy
Conforms to culture	Can see through culture
Likes either-or thinking	Sees through either-or positions
Many internal splits	Few internal splits
Defensive	Non-defensive
Logic is Aristotelian, Boolean, Newtonian	Vision-logic, logic of paradox
Struggle to find a centre	Centre is in here

Later I tidied up and improved the first version, and what you see above is the latest version. But the method is still the same: to access the level of consciousness involved, and to speak from that position. The table above has now been used in a number of workshops and other contexts, and has I would say stood the test of time. I was encouraged to find a very similar attempt by Zimring in a later book, from a slightly different angle.

Table 2. I and Me.

(Zimring, 2001: 92)

MASLOW CHART LEVELS 3 – 4 ('ME')	MASLOW CHART LEVELS 5 – 6 ('I')
Socially defined self	Personally defined self
Behaviour guided by incorporated social standards	Goals set by own values
Morality defined by society	Morality based on personal values
Agenda for what has to be done set by society	Agenda set by self
Enables problem solution according to social standards	New, creative solutions
Repository of social knowledge and expectations	Contains self-knowledge
Provides social viewpoint in line with assimilated social values, attitudes and interactions	Reacts creatively to 'me'.
Passive recipient or reactive self	Proactive
Concerned with past and future	Experiencing the present

Focus on others	Focus on self
Lives in roles	Acts from present personal values
Negative feelings and distress occur as a result of judgement of others	Distress occurs as a result of not meeting own goals

It can be seen here how much agreement there is here between his contrasts and mine, and I was encouraged by this to go with this research method. Both of us had had the experience of moving from the earlier level (where most of us are originally located) to the later one, and both of us had seen the differences in very much the same way. At the Mental Ego level (Maslow's middle levels) we think very much in terms of our self-image, whereas at the Centaur level we think in terms of our self.

Of course already here we are going beyond what most psychologists are happy to deal with. The idea that there are different levels of consciousness is profoundly unacceptable to the scientific mind. The myth of science says that we are all equal and all the same. The copious research which shows that there are indeed several levels (Piaget 1951, Kohlberg 1981, Loevinger 1976, Graves 1970, Cook-Greuter 2004, Torbert 2004) is ignored or sidelined.

What was now clear in my mind was the idea of dialogical self research. By this I meant going to a particular level of consciousness, familiar and entered at will, and holding a dialogue with another level, equally familiar and entered at will. Wilber (2006) makes a distinction between states and stages. Anyone can enter any psychological or even mystical state at any time, but to live at a particular level for any length of time we have to develop into that stage: and that takes work and dedication. As Hegel (1974/1840) says: "Even that which is most perfect must traverse the path to the goal in order to attain it." (p.75). So what I am saying is that what I am offering in this paper is based on my own dedication to meditation, sufficient to take me to the relevant stage, which I can then enter into at will.

But now we are going on to deal with something even more hard to reach and to some no doubt unacceptable, the spiritual realm.

The subtle level

What Wilber goes on to say is that after the Centaur, the next level is the Subtle. This is very different. Here we admit that we are spiritual beings, with a direct connection with the divine. However, it is a very humble approach, with a complete dependence upon concrete representations of the divine, such as deities, archetypes and so forth. At this level we become fascinated by the work of people like Kerényi (1976), Jung (passim), Joseph Campbell (passim), Starhawk (1989), Arthur Avalon (1978), Barbara Walker (1983), Jean Houston (Passim), James Hillman (passim) and so forth. We soak ourselves in mythology, dreams, visions, and the like, and take an interest in angels, fairies and nature spirits (Bloom 1998).

I spent the years from 1982 to 1990 exploring this realm, with the help of a Wiccan group led by Batya Podos and various forays into shamanism, tantra, western mysteries, astrological psychology, goddess worship and so forth, and wrote a book based on that work (Rowan 1987). I also wrote an article entitled 'The downward path to wholeness in transpersonal psychotherapy', which was later republished a number of times (Rowan 1992) and translated into French. The most important section of my work took place in the Serpent Institute, a training course in counselling and psychotherapy based upon a framework of goddess spirituality. I spent four years with Jocelyn Chaplin exploring that way of seeing the world, during which time I had some very significant spiritual experiences at Avebury, West Kennet, Silbury Hill, Stonehenge and other pagan sites. I joined the Pagan Federation, and developed a simple daily ritual which I incorporated into my morning meditation. At the end of that time I found that I could operate the same kind of research again, this time contrasting the Centaur with the Subtle, with the following result (see Table 3).

Table 3. The authentic self versus the soul or subtle self

AUTHENTIC SELF	SOUL OR SUBTLE SELF
Separate	Connected
Clear perception	Love, heart perception
Likes boundaries	Not much interested in boundaries
Thinks in words, likes imagery	Thinks in imagery, suspicious of words
Uses dialectical way of thinking	Uses intuitive way of thinking
Can use symbols	Immersed in symbols
Interested in people	Interested in people, animals, plants...
The divine may be out there	The divine can be in here
Understanding is the most important thing	Imagination is the most important thing
Interested in knowing	Interested in not-knowing
Thoughtful compassion	Emotional compassion
Finds self in contrast to other	Finds self in other
Creative	Surrendered, inspired
Trees can be beautiful	Trees can be devas
Has internal gyroscope	Has daemon (genius, angel, inner teacher)
Good at psychotherapy	Good at healing
In touch with the body	In touch with the subtle body
Has many skills	Waits for guidance
In touch with own authentic self	In touch with the divine
Steers clear of magic	Can use magic
Uses experiential knowing	Uses intuition
Creativity comes from inside	Creativity comes from outside inspiration
Ecstasy is personal	Ecstasy is divine
Clear about boundaries	Can allow boundaries to disappear
Not much interest in mythology	Steeped in mythology, fairy tales, etc
Sees what is visible	Sees what is invisible

What came out of this was a greater appreciation of the way in which the Subtle is all about surrender. Instead of owning our own creativity, intuition and so forth as at the Centaur level, we open ourselves up to being contacted by the divine. The whole idea of inspiration comes from this level. We are given our music, our writing, our painting and so forth – it does not come from us as individuals. I have now conducted a number of workshops on Intuition, regarded as a feature of the Subtle stage of consciousness, with fascinating results.

Later I became aware that there was a thing called the New Age, which somehow purported to be in touch with the divine realm, but which was seriously defective and misleading in a number of ways. And I tried to produce a similar chart now bringing in the necessary contrasts with New Age thinking. This produced the following (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Magic/mythic, new age and psychic/subtle.
Some differences and distinctions**

MAGIC/MYTHIC	NEW AGE	PSYCHIC/SUBTLE
N.B. "The elders" is a phrase to cover any form of traditional authority.		N.B. "The divine" is a phrase to cover any deity figure or other representation.
I fear the other	I love the other	I recognise the divine in the other
The elders know what is true	I know what is true	I am not much interested in truth

The safe place is in the group	I am not interested in safety	Whatever the divine sends me is a lesson to be learned
The divine is beyond me	The divine is in me	The divine can contact me
Symbols and images are laid down for me	Symbols and images are not of much interest to me, but I respect all of them	I see symbols and images everywhere, and they can inspire me
Only the elders are entitled to criticise anything	No one is entitled to criticise anything	It is important to be critical, under the guidance of the divine
The elders can be inspired	I am always inspired	I can be inspired by the divine
Most things are hidden	Nothing is hidden	The divine reveals what it is ready to reveal
I wait for the elders to tell me	I wait for nothing	I wait for the divine to reveal everything
I believe in miracles but I don't understand them	I can work miracles	Miracles come from the divine
The elders have taught us what is negative	Nothing is negative	Negative is just as important as positive
Some things are not meant to be understood	Everything can be understood	I can understand what I am allowed to understand
Astrology is beyond me	Astrology is right	Astrology is quite interesting as one symbol system
Reality can only be manipulated by the holy person	I can manipulate reality	Reality can not be manipulated: but it is usually richer than we think at first
Imagination is dangerous	Imagination is wonderful and can lead to control	Imagination can be an opening to the divine
If the elders tell me to walk on fire, I will walk on fire	I can walk on fire and not be hurt	I can walk on fire if the divine allows me to

Now this one I am not so sure about. We have all had experience of the Magic/Mythic level of thought, because we have all been children, and we have all read about remote tribes that still have all the traditional trappings of thought. But I personally have never immersed myself in New Age thought, and have seen it mainly from the outside, through books, lectures, workshops and so forth. One experience I did have which was revealing, however, was a conference extending over several days in the 1980s. It was run by some people who I think called themselves the Fourth World, though I am not sure about this. We were divided into special subject groups for two or three days, and we were then scheduled to come together at the end and to come out with a manifesto of our beliefs, which would then hopefully be influential in changing opinion.

When it came to the last plenary session, where we were supposed to endorse the manifesto, which by then was complete, there were ten or so people on the platform who had been organising the event. I shall call them the leaders, although they themselves I think would regard themselves more as facilitators. When it came to the point of endorsing and promulgating the manifesto, a hand went up. "We in our group have been discussing racism, prejudice and discrimination, and we would like to add to the manifesto one more sentence: We are opposed to racism." Immediately one of the leaders said – "That sounds a bit negative. Could you phrase it in some more positive way – perhaps "We are in favour of diversity?" There was a pause while the small group put its heads together. Then the voice came back

again: “No, we don’t think that would do. We really want the minority ethnic groups to feel supported and defended by us, and your phrase is too vague to do that job.” The leaders put their heads together. “We can’t accept something so negative. How could you reword it yourselves? We can wait for you to go into the corridor and come to an agreement among yourselves.” But again the group refused – “We want to make clear statement about racism.”

Then a remarkable thing happened. The leaders came down from the platform and sat in a circle in front of the stage, with their arms around each other, and hummed, or perhaps chanted – I can’t remember the exact details. This was supposed to change the energy in the room, apparently. But after a while it became obvious that this was not working. And the meeting broke up in disarray, with no manifesto and no result of any kind. It became obvious that these New Age people could not simply take a vote, because voting must include negativity, and negativity is ruled out. There is of course a contradiction here, because in order to rule negativity out, you have to be negative towards negativity! There is actually a New Age book with the title – “You can’t afford the luxury of even one negative thought”, (John-Roger & Williams, 1995).

So this made quite an impression on me, and I now treat this negative attitude to negativity as a crucial part of New Age thinking, and a very important flaw.

Having had a good look at the Subtle, the next stage, according to Wilber, was to deal with the Causal.

The causal level

With the Causal we enter the deep ocean of mysticism, where there are no signposts, no landmarks, no handrails and even no words to describe it. This is very different from the rich and colourful world of the Subtle, with all its concrete representations of the divine. And yet to enter it all we have to do is to give up the contractions which stop us from admitting that we are there already. If the Subtle is the realm of soul, the Causal is the realm of spirit (Cortright 1997).

I spent the 1990s in experiencing and studying the Causal, and found it to be a fascinating realm. Through my regular meditation I touched the Causal stage of psychospiritual development many times, so that at the end of that time I was able to access the Causal at will. Of course this is the realm of paradox, where our normal vocabulary breaks down altogether. It does not matter whether we describe it at the One, the All or the None – it is all the same mystery. But again I tried the same research technique, of going back and forth between the two states of consciousness – the Subtle and the Causal, with the following result (see Table 5).

Table 5. Subtle self versus causal self

SUBTLE SELF	CAUSAL SELF
Fascinated by symbols	No interest in symbols
Concerned with gender	No concern with gender
Polytheistic	Monotheistic or nontheistic
Juicy compassion	Constant clear compassion
Knows many techniques	Invents techniques as necessary
Deep linking with the other	No need for distinction between self and other
Interested in angels and auras	No interest in such things
Values diversity	Sees through distinction between unity and diversity
Fascinated by paradox	Paradox runs through everything
Values the third eye	Rises above the third eye
Focused on many beings	Focused on Being
Concern to build up resources	Infinite resources without concern
Creative approach to problems	No concept of a problem
Deeply identified with Nature	One with Nature
Can relate to trees as devas	Is all the trees in the world, and all the tree-

	cutters too, and the no-tree
Has compassion for the unfortunate	Has compassion for the unfortunate and for the fortunate
Wants the World Soul to be well and happy and free from suffering	Knows that the World Soul is already well and happy and free from suffering
Wants to save what was lost	No one has lost everything
Unafraid of what is alien	No fear because nothing is alien
Rejoices in the Many	One-ing
Rejoices in the rich taste of all	There is nothing to taste, and no one to taste it. Or perhaps there is just one taste.
The centre is up there, or down there	The centre is everywhere
Offers the deepest form of empathy	Not interested in empathy

As a psychotherapist, one of the things which interested me most was the lack of empathy at this stage of development. At all the previous stages, more and deeper empathy was the order of the day – culminating in the full Linking, or transcendental empathy, of the Subtle (Rowan & Jacobs 2002, pp 80-84). But here, at the Causal level, there was a penetrating and in some way pitiless perception of the truth of the person, underneath all the layers of false assumptions and defensive barriers.

Obviously at this stage solitary meditation can lead to self-deception, so I embarked on several experiences of sharing with others, going to Buddhist retreats and Vipassana workshops and Ch'an offerings, where I got confirmation of my *kensho*. This was reassuring, and led me to believe that I was on the right track. I kept a record of my work in meditation, which showed a definite progression from a rather crude understanding to a much deeper appreciation.

I then found that it was possible to work in psychotherapy at this level, and wrote up my findings in a paper (Rowan, 2005).

The nondual level

Then all through the years from 2000 to the present I was working with the Nondual, and getting the hang of that. This is very different from the Causal. As Wilber has well put it, we can conceive of the continuum from the earliest states of consciousness to the Causal as a series of stages, and can conceive of the movement from one stage to the next as progress and achievement. But if we picture this continuum as a ladder drawn upon a piece of paper, the Nondual is the paper itself. In other words, the Nondual is not an item on a continuum, but something quite different. This important distinction is not always recognised, however, and many people at the Causal level speak and write as if they were communicating from a Nondual position. Again I drew attention to this mistake in my paper (Rowan, 2007).

When I came to do the dialogical self research on this contrast, this is the way it came out (see Table 6).

Table 6. Causal versus nondual

CAUSAL	NONDUAL
The Dance of Being	It's not at the end of any continuum
No desires	No such thing as a desire
Eternal infinite selfing	Nothing needed
Not the peace of ignoring everything, but the peace of embracing everything	Who indeed?!
No need to get attached to Freedom, either	Laughter... Laughing...
There is no portal! I am already there! I have always been already there!	Ecstasy doesn't need an experiencer

The Clarity and the Mystery are one and the same	Not this, not that – and not NOT, either!
Steady breath of compassion	Not about altered states of consciousness – no one here to be conscious!
One-ing...	...Already given up long ago...
The Inner Light and the Inner Dark are one and the same	The brightness of the fog
Just this. Just this.	Two onions and a piece of string
Of course I am God! Of course I am not God!	What do you mean – "God"?
What ecstasy!	What ecstasy?
The Earth is empty!	What Earth?
It's all here! Nothing is missing!	Eleven fingers
No fear, because nothing is alien	The sun in the mud
Compassion flows freely.	Blood runs uphill exploding
The centre is everywhere	What centre?
Can't explain it	Not the slightest need to explain it
I insist on the absence of categories	No need to insist on anything
No fear	No one to be afraid of anything
Thou Art That!	What?
Meditation is the way	Meditation is a pile of dead leaves in the driveway
Paradox is an important key	Paradox, schmaradox!
Big Mind	Big Joke
The biggest prison of all	What prison?
It's all there!	Where?
At last! It all makes sense	At last! It all makes nonsense

Again this is a more recent version, because it did not seem to make sense to go back to the less adequate earlier findings.

Someone I showed this to said that it showed a big Zen influence, so I produced another version which was less provocative in that way, but there did not seem to be any point in including it here. Ken Wilber is also interested in these matters, and has contributed his own understanding, based on a great deal of research, of this distinction:

Table 7. Causal and Nondual

Wilber (2000: 197-297)

SOURCE	CAUSAL	NONDUAL
Aurobindo	Overmind	Supermind Sat-chit-ananda
Vedanta	Causal	Turiya
Vedanta	Bliss mind (Anandamayakosha)	Brahman-Atman (Turiyatita)
Adi Da	Nirvikalpa	Sahaja bhava
Alexander	Root mind Pure self	Brahman-Atman
Wilber	Formless mysticism Causal unity	Spirit and world process Nondual mysticism
Hazrat Inayat Khan	Wahdat – witness	Zat - absolute

	consciousness Djabrut-cessation Formless	consciousness Nondual
Mahamudra	Simplicity Cessation Emptiness	One Taste Form/Formless unity Non-meditation
Daniel Brown	Cessation Advanced insight	Enlightenment: A,b,c
Traditional	Nirvikalpa – cessation Jnana – Nirodh, Nirvana	Sahaja Non-meditation Bhava
Yoga Tantra	Causal consciousness Black near attainment Cessation	Clear-light Emptiness
Duane Elgin	Global creativity (flow)	Global wisdom (integral)

This shows how respectable the distinction is. However, what I have discovered is that numbers of people who claim to be working at the Nondual level or site refuse to recognise this distinction, and therefore cannot distinguish between the Causal and the Nondual at all. Examples include, Tony Parsons (2000), Richard Sylvester (2008), Ramesh Balsekar (1989), David Loy (1988), Peter Fenner (2007), John Prendergast (2007) and others. The compilation of Jerry Katz (2007) is the same.

In my opinion these examples show how interesting dialogical self research can be, and how it can be a real addition to the existing research paradigms. More information on all this can be found in my book (Rowan 2010).

Cautions

It must be clear immediately how great are the opportunities for self-deception in this approach. However, I believe the dangers are more apparent than real. We check out the findings with others, as in other types of qualitative research. And I have tried this out in many workshops where I have asked people to do the exercise of writing a dialogue between two selves at two different levels of consciousness. Invariably something interesting comes out, and it has been very striking to me how similar are the results of other people to my own. Perhaps the reader would like to try the experiment of writing a dialogue between any two positions of their own.

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