

ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MY SELVES:
AN INTRODUCTION TO AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF VOICE
DIALOGUE THERAPY

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ABSTRACT: Voice Dialogue is a transpersonal therapy that rejects the prevailing beliefs in a singular-coherent self and that a perceived plurality of internal selves is inherently pathological. Instead, it works with what is assumed to be the normal, and even healthy, multiplicity of selves to enhance wellness and promote creative change. It views this multiplicity as ranging from personal to transpersonal. This therapeutic approach is described, and semi-structured interviews of eight Voice Dialogue practitioners' views of and experiences with this therapy were obtained. A phenomenological analysis of their responses yielded three themes: each self consists of its own distinct qualities; transitioning across selves involves a felt shift or transformation; and there is a neutral space of the aware ego.

KEYWORDS: dissociation, identity, phenomenological analysis, Jung, psychotherapy, sub-personality, personification, transpersonal

Voice Dialogue (Stone & Stone, 1989) is a process-oriented psychotherapy stemming from the Jungian tradition. Developed by Hal and Sidra Stone, it focuses on "reconciling different and sometimes opposing trends within the psyche" (Stamboliev, 1992, p. 14). It provides "not only an excellent map and method for developing our personality but also a skillful tool for including our spiritual essence in this exploration" (Barner, 2012, p.321). This approach is based on the belief that within every person there exist sub-personalities or "selves," and that this multiplicity is a necessary part of the normal structure of human experience. In Voice Dialogue, selves are treated as discrete units of consciousness and ways of being, which can include the transpersonal. Each self constitutes a pattern of expression, which possesses a will, emotional spectrum and worldview of its own. In addition, each self performs different functions in relation to the optimum potential for human growth. Voice Dialogue works with these selves in a facilitative, respectful, and non-judgmental manner. It provides a relational tool for the in-depth exploration of the experience of each of these parts and supports the development of a new, self-transcendent way of relating to each part that allows for a broadening of experience, leading to greater freedom and choice. Heery (1989)

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has positioned the topics on inner voices as relevant to transpersonal psychology, while Stamboliev and Koolbergen (n.d.) have described Voice Dialogue as a transpersonal entryway. Our article presents a basic introduction to Voice Dialogue along with a phenomenological analysis of the experience of being facilitated using this therapy, as described by eight of its professional practitioners.

Voice Dialogue as a Therapy

Stone and Stone (1995) described Voice Dialogue as a “method which enables one to contact, understand, and work directly with these selves [that is] compatible with most psychological systems and can be used with a wide variety of backgrounds” (p. 17). According to Stone and Stone (1989), many selves emerge during development, but people become identified with and embody the selves that have best served to protect them. These protective selves that manage our psyche are called “primary selves,” and most identify exclusively with these. Dyak (1999) put it simply, “We think we are our primary selves” (p. 21).

Inherent in this appropriation of desirable ways of being into identity is the rejection or “disowning” of other selves and potential identities that do not fit what the environment demands or what is thought needed to remain safe and loved. In Jungian (1976) terms, these disowned selves are a part of the shadow. But while Jung’s shadow generally consists of negative content, Stone and Stone (1989) assign no moral attributes to any of the selves. In Voice Dialogue, selves are perceived to be disowned because they stand in polar contrast with the primary selves and the value system they uphold, not because they are objectively bad.

Identification with the primary selves can help people feel safe, in control, and ready to respond. However, this identification can also function as a prison whereby automatic recourse to the disowning of selves with opposite traits can result in freedom and flexibility being substantially diminished. Stone and Stone (1989) argued that people’s attempts to eradicate their rejected selves tend to paradoxically make these selves much stronger “by driving them into the unconscious where they are free to operate beyond our control” (p. 23). These dynamics can be destructive, one dynamic of which Stone (1985) described as “whatever is disowned is projected” (p. 77). Worse, Stone and Stone referred to “our lost heritage” (p. 27) as one of the greater costs, as people become estranged from their rejected selves and all the potential that these selves hold. An experience of selves not part of this system of control can have a liberating effect as it allows for a broader spectrum of potentials to be accessed; that is, de-identification allows for choice.

The process of Voice Dialogue provides direct access to the primary selves, offering “the opportunity to *separate* them from the total personality and deal with them as independent, interacting psychic units” (Stone & Stone, 1989, p. 49). This is accomplished in a deeply valuing and respectful way, as they are listened to intently in order to embody them as a valued part of a larger system. Voice Dialogue “is not oriented towards pathology nor is it focused on discovering what’s wrong” (Stone & Stone, 2007, p. 17) as all selves are honoured and treated with equal respect. Thus, “There is no attempt to change the selves, get rid of them, or

help them to grow up and be more sensible” (Stone & Stone, 1995, p. 17). Selves are not asked to speak with each other, and the facilitator does not negotiate among the selves. Instead, the emphasis in facilitation is on presence and curiosity, not on change.

Voice Dialogue is aimed at experientially expanding consciousness to broaden beyond the limited selves traditionally embraced. This is approached through the Voice Dialogue facilitation of selves that present in life, and in the symbolic world of the dream process. It allows people to also embrace the opposite forces that exist within every individual in their own unique way and exercise choice. The task in the Voice Dialogue model is to consciously introduce this awareness to executive functioning in order to allow access to disowned selves and, thus, to provide fuller access to rich internal resources, without disrupting or diminishing the effectiveness of the primary self-system. This continual process of expanding functioning to new places of conscious awareness is referred to in Voice Dialogue as the *Aware Ego* process (Stone & Stone, 2000). This can lead to a new kind of relationship with disowned selves, separating from and expanding beyond previous identifications. Awareness, in this case, can be understood in two ways: (a) developing a heightened awareness of the needs the disowned part has expressed; and (b) attaining a position of nonattachment, a concept utilised by many spiritual and transpersonal traditions (e.g., mindfulness practices).

Voice Dialogue as a Transpersonal Therapy

Regarding this approach to nonattachment, Stamboliev (1992) discussed similarities between spiritual awareness and Voice Dialogue approaches. The state of awareness is where integration occurs, and the *Aware Ego* process is the integration itself. This process allows the client to: (a) separate from the parts that are driving him or her without trying to eliminate them; (b) be in a place of awareness; (c) stand in the tension of opposites between conflicting parts of the client’s self-system; and most importantly (d) operate relationally from this position (Stone & Stone, 1989). The *Aware Ego* is the ongoing process of de-identification and self-transcendence that allows one to experience simultaneously a sense of interconnected oneness and a more holistic material existence inclusive of many discrete and collective selves. While the *aware ego* process by definition transcends the personal, it is noteworthy that selves too can be transcendental. Indeed, the “transcendent energy often comes through a deep experience of a disowned self” (Barner, 2012, p.328).

This resonates closely with transpersonal psychology which, according to Friedman & Hartelius (2013), accepts the basic notion that the “self” cannot be simply reified as something that is solid (such as a unitary monad that exists materially) and isolated from interconnectedness with the complexity of the world. The prefix “trans” in transpersonal implies something more than the ordinary Western concepts involving a person, as more can be seen as meaning “across” (e.g., bridging toward radical natural interconnectedness) or “beyond” (e.g., beckoning toward supernatural, and even spiritual, notions) the self. Although this may challenge the deeply held assumptions in the West about the self as individual, a

word stemming from “divid” (as in divided from the rest of the universe), there are alternate notions in Western science that see the self in transpersonal ways, such as Friedman’s (1983, 2013) model of self-expansiveness, as well as the many non-Western approaches to the self as transpersonal, such as found in many schools of Indian psychology (Menon, 2006; see also Friedman, MacDonald, & Kumar, 2004).

Similarly to how the self is viewed within psychology, Western notions of the person as a separate and unified entity prevail as a governing assumption in most conventional psychotherapies. However, Rodrigues and Friedman (2013) described various characteristics of transpersonal psychotherapies that view the self in a more flexible way. For example, Assagioli (2000) in writing about psychosynthesis, a transpersonal therapy that commences with a conventional analysis and ends with a transpersonal syntheses, addressed the plurality of inner experience, explaining that within each of us are sub-personalities that conflict and require being brought into balance in moving from the selves, with which disidentification is encouraged, to embracing a larger, more expansive, sense of Self.

Importantly, in contrast to many other approaches that work with inner multiplicity in a way inclusive of transpersonal perspectives, in Voice Dialogue, there is no “authentic self” or “higher Self,” as all selves are deemed authentic just as they are—and each self has an opposite. This point is particularly pertinent when working with selves that are experienced as spiritual or perceived to serve a spiritual function. In our clinical experience, an ideology that privileges these parts can take away from honoring the whole that is made-up of all of the selves and paradoxically can impede the method’s potential to facilitate a phenomenological transpersonal experience (Daniels, 2002; Walsh & Vaughn, 1993). Further, the disowning of instinctual energies that results from these identifications with spiritually oriented selves can cause problems:

When instinctual energies are disowned over time they tend to build in intensity and eventually turn against us and/or channel through us in destructive ways. As these energies become destructive, we give them a different name: We now call them demonic. —(Stone & Stone, 1989, p. 136)

However, the self-transcendent embracing of opposites is seen to allow for a connection not only with these parts but also with the greater field to which we belong, a consciousness outside of dualistic experience. In fact, the prevailing view in Voice Dialogue is that it is through our developing an ability to hold this tension of opposites, without collapsing into one self or another, that our consciousness experiences expansion and goes beyond the personal and even collective, symbolic or archetypal world of selves. It is this expansion that is seen to facilitate movement towards both conscious mastery of lived experience and connectedness with “Source” or “that which connects us through our origins and their energies, whether these are divine, or cosmic, or both” (Long, 2016, p.10).

Barner (2012) states explicitly that Voice Dialogue Therapy is a process that allows one to cultivate a transpersonal awareness:

Voice Dialogue in itself is a spiritual enquiry. It is a process of ‘emptying out’. I acknowledge that all my thoughts, feelings, and experiences are just parts of me which I can externalise and dis-identify from. By physically placing them outside of my system and then questioning what remains, I become aware that I don’t know who I am and in the absence of my personality, I feel empty and filled with a luminous energy at the same time. The process of this ‘emptying out’ includes all the traditional elements used in spiritual enquiries: mindfulness, awareness, non-judgement, compassion, dis-identification and choicelessness. If I keep following the thread and stay with the process I start to realise that I am all these different energies, but they are also all just parts of my personality. I can watch them and experience them outside of myself, so who is this ‘I’ that is doing the watching? This resembles some of the oldest spiritual techniques of self-enquiry to reach enlightenment and it is exciting to recognise that Voice Dialogue can assist people in integrating their transpersonal nature; not by trying to transcend their personality but by deeply exploring and accepting it. (pp. 324-325)

It might be argued that the aforementioned Voice Dialogue-driven process of self-enquiry described by Barner (2012) is consistent with various transpersonally-orientated philosophical systems that focus on cultivating a direct experience of Absolute Reality. One such system is a school of Hindu philosophy referred to *Advaita Vedanta*. Practitioners of *Advaita Vedanta* use various injunctions (e.g., *Karma*, *Jnana*, *Bhakti*, or *Rajas* yoga) with the aim of facilitating a direct experience of Ultimate Reality referred to as *Brahman*, which is one’s supreme identity (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1981). However, as Absolute subjectivity, *Brahman* cannot directly experience itself as a perceptible object, for then it would cease to be the subject (see, for example, Rock, 2005). Wilber (1993) illustrated this point by comparing the situation to a sword that cannot cut itself, an eye that cannot see itself, a tongue that cannot taste itself, or a finger that cannot touch its own tip. This argument is reiterated in Baladeva’s commentary to the *Vedanta-sutras of Badarayana* in which he wrote, “If the Self could perceive His own properties, He could also perceive Himself; which is absurd, since one and the same thing cannot be both the agent and the object of an action” (Vasu, 1979, p. 331). This is what is meant in the *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad* when it is stated that, “You cannot see the seer of sight, you cannot hear the hearer of sound, you cannot think the thinker of the thought, you cannot know the knower of the known” (Swami & Yeats, 1970, p. 138). Similarly, as previously stated, during the Voice Dialogue process, Barner (2012) acknowledged that, “I can watch them [parts of my personality] and experience them outside of myself, so who is this ‘I’ that is doing the watching?” (p. 325).

A View of Multiplicity

In cultures focused on materialism and individualism, such as in the contemporary West, the notion of selves, as opposed to a unitary self, can be perplexing (Glover & Friedman, 2015). Perhaps this derives from the Western notion of soul, as most theologies from the dominant Christian tradition grant each person only one eternal soul, which forms the essence of the human being. This is reflected in many

Western social institutions, such as the criminal justice system that attributes individual responsibility in terms of a dichotomized guilt or innocence despite complex patterns of causation, varying from the macro-level of sociology (e.g., poverty) to the micro-level of biology (e.g., compromised brain functioning). Overall, the governing motif in the Western tradition has been to either deny multiplicity in personality or to deem it pathological. If each individual can have only one soul, then other entities sharing a body must not be part of that whole, hence are seen as unholy (i.e., un-whole), such as in demonic possession. Of course, there can also be phenomena related to multiplicity that are seen as positive from this view, such as possession by the “holy spirit.”

As cultural evolution has moved much of such religious language and their implicit values into the secular realm of psychology, this has led to rejecting many phenomena related to multiplicity as being pathological rather than as part of the range of normalcy or even evidencing the possibility of optimum human potential, such as envisioned in transpersonal psychology. This has also become a basis for cultural imperialism as non-Westerners, who may readily accept the multiplicity of selves in a way congruent with their cultures of origin, can be discounted in the West as being “primitive” or diagnosed as pathological using standards that are presumed scientific but really rest on parochial value judgments.

While the notion of the multiplicity of internal selves being a normal phenomenon remains controversial in contemporary Western psychology, this idea is not unique or novel. Its remnants occur frequently in colloquial language, such as “I was beside myself” and “I don’t know what got into me,” hinting to its residual acceptance at some levels within the folk psychology of Western culture.

Rowan (1990) conducted an extensive review of the history of sub-personalities within the therapeutic domain. He wrote that the question of whether there are parts of a person which can be talked to “as though they were separate little personalities with a will of their own has intrigued nearly everyone who has had to work with people in any depth” (p. 7). Carter (2011) more recently conducted a similar review, and maintained that references to the experience of self-multiplicity go back to antiquity, such as Plato describing himself as a charioteer trying to control two horses (his spiritual and appetitive selves) and St. Augustine writing about his current self being tormented by his former pagan self. Carter also discussed Freud’s model of the mind as split between conscious and unconscious, with the unconscious formed by clusters of sub-personalities, as well as Jung’s archetypes and complexes, from this vantage. Extending this from the psychoanalytic tradition, object relations theorists, such as Guntrip, Fairbairn, and Winnicott, speak of internalised parental objects and false selves (St. Clair, 2004), while Berne (1961), creator of transactional analysis, discussed ego states, citing research that demonstrated that “two different ego states can occupy consciousness simultaneously as discrete psychological entities” (p. 17).

These conceptualisations are not limited to the psychoanalytic world. In psychodrama, Moreno (1955) worked with the client as protagonist stepping in and out of roles, while Perls (1968) in gestalt therapy explained top dog and underdog roles, leading him to the introduction of techniques, such as two-chair

work. One therapist wrote, “In my office there are ten chairs, but they’re not set up for group therapy; they’re for individual work” (as cited in Rowan, 1990, p. 85). Family therapist Satir (1978) also spoke of discovering the inner theatre, as she encouraged all to love their multiplicity.

From the research hypnosis tradition, Hilgard (1986) dealt with the hidden observer during hypnotic inductions while, from the clinical hypnosis tradition, the Watkins (Watkins & Watkins, 1993) noticed that clients often revealed different personalities under hypnosis. Beahrs (1982) spoke of simultaneous co-consciousness functioning within a multilevel consciousness, and rejected the view that dissociation should be viewed as an either/or phenomenon, instead arguing that it is better understood to exist along a dissociative continuum that includes varied dissociative and hypnotic states, as well as sub-personalities.

Many more recent approaches to working with internal multiplicity have also since emerged. Internal Family Systems Therapy (Swartz, 1995), Cognitive Analytic Therapy (Ryle & Fawkes, 2007; Ryle & Kerr, 2002) and Parts Psychology (Noricks, 2011) are examples of these. Also noteworthy is Mearns and Cooper’s (2005) inclusion of the various configurations of self within an individual from a person-centred framework. This list is by no means exhaustive, as there are many more whose work is pertinent to the subject of normal internal multiplicity, whether they discuss this in terms of sides, selves, parts, voices, energy patterns, aspects of personality, sub-personalities, ego-states, or I-positions. Power (2007, p. 188) summed this well: “There is a large degree of variation in the proposed architectures of a multiple self both within and between different paradigms,” and these variations are largely subject to the theoretical underpinnings of their developers.

Over the last two decades, much of the discourse on internal multiplicity has been focused on its potential implication for theories of subjectivity, with authors arguing both modern and postmodern perspectives (Aron, 2001; Fairfield, 2008; Reis, 2005). This discourse has also pervaded the realm of political science, highlighting the potential political consequences of a decentred/postmodern self (Flax, 1990, 1993). Recent years have seen a resurgence and intensification of interest in this phenomenon, largely due to the ground-breaking work of Hermans (2003, 2011, 2012) and his many collaborators on the now well established Dialogical Self Theory, in which multiple internal voices are central to dialogical accounts of the self (e.g., Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004; Dimaggio, 2006). In this view, there is a society of inner selves functioning within each individual and that simultaneously participates within a broader societal context.

A further contribution to this burgeoning interest comes from the proponents of Emotion Focused Therapy, who base their work on a philosophy of dialectical constructivism that views “humans as being constituted of multiple parts or voices” (Elliot & Greenberg, 2007). Perhaps the most interesting development in this area comes from Stiles (1997) and his many collaborators (e.g., Stiles, Honos-Web, & Lani, 1999; Osatuke, Gray, Glick, Stiles, & Barkham, 2004), who emphasized listening to different voices during therapy and who view personality as a community of voices. According to their Assimilation Model, voices are seen to

have agency: “they are understood as active entities having their own thoughts, feelings and intentions, rather than as passive packets of problematic information acted upon by a unitary person” (Stiles & Angus, 2001, p.113). A positive aspect of these recent models is their tendency to be integrative. Stiles and Angus (2001) clearly stated that: “the assimilation model is an integrative model, meant to describe changes that occur in any type of therapy” (p. 112).

In order to understand more deeply the way in which Voice Dialogue is experienced, we engaged in a phenomenological analysis of facilitators of that therapy. They are expected to develop conscious relationships with their own internal selves as a prerequisite for effective work as a Voice Dialogue facilitator. Much of their training involves experiencing Voice Dialogue from a client perspective, and they are encouraged to seek regular facilitation for their own inner processes, including of course with their selves. The aim of the present study was to explore the phenomenology of using the Voice Dialogue method.

Method

Phenomenological analysis is a qualitative method that explores how human consciousness understands “*what appears to us*” (Fischer, 1998, p. 114) as phenomena. The phenomenological researchers engage in process-focused studies investigating “the way things are experienced by the experiencer, and . . . how events are integrated into a dynamic, meaningful experience” (Hanson & Klimo, 1998, p. 286). Previous research has used this method to investigate a wide range of phenomena, such as the experience of meditation (Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994), being unconditionally loved (Matsu-Pissot, 1998), and the meaning of awe (Bonner & Friedman, 2011). This type of analysis has the advantage of allowing researchers to identify essential aspects of experiences with minimal preconceptions. It is thus inductive rather than deductive, and well suited for exploring relatively unknown phenomena in an open-ended way. In the present study, we applied the principles of phenomenological research originally developed by Giorgi (1975) and subsequently expanded on by Colaizzi (1978) and Elite (1998). See the “Phenomenological Analysis of Original Protocols” sub-section later.

We used an interpretive method guided by an invitation to: “please describe in as much detail as possible your experience being facilitated using Voice Dialogue,” followed by reflective listening and general phenomenologically oriented questions such as what was the felt meaning of your experience?

Participants

Voice Dialogue facilitation is used in a number of settings, including counselling, art therapy and other forms of psychotherapy. Voice Dialogue facilitators may or may not be therapists. Prospective participants were initially sourced by compiling a list of Voice Dialogue facilitators from an Advanced Facilitator Training course, offered by Voice Dialogue International and attended by the first author. The authors were interested in interviewing participants who have had substantial

experience as *recipients* of Voice Dialogue facilitation and who had been facilitated recently and often enough to provide a rich and detailed account of their experience. Attending an advanced training with Voice Dialogue International is available only to experienced Voice Dialogue professionals, who can also provide evidence of having received a substantial amount of Voice Dialogue facilitation themselves. An invitation for expressions of interest to participate was therefore sent out via email to the 14 Voice Dialogue facilitators who attended the advanced training with the first author. The facilitators contacted were encouraged to notify other facilitators in their network, who had attended similar advanced training in Voice Dialogue, of our study. The details of two additional suitable prospective participants were obtained in this way. While the first author had met a number of the prospective participants at other various Voice Dialogue professional events, there were no supervisory relationships with any of the prospective participants or other power differentiation issues to consider.

A total of 16 Voice Dialogue facilitators were contacted. Ten respondents expressed interest in participating. Participant information sheets were sent out to the 10 respondents outlining the following: who will be conducting the study; the purpose of the study, time commitments, and mode of inquiry; risk, withdrawal options, confidentiality and handling of data; ethical considerations; and contact information. Of the 10 respondents, one was not able to participate at the agreed time and was, subsequently, not contactable. Another participant withdrew after commencing the interview.

Thus, eight Voice Dialogue practitioners voluntarily participated in the present study. See Table 1. Participants ranged from 47 to 66 years of age ($M = 56.5$, $SD = 5.8$). 7 were female and one was male. Participants had been working as Voice Dialogue facilitators from 4 to 23 years ($M = 16.87$, $SD = 5.9$). The time lapsed between our interview and participants' last Voice Dialogue session ranged from 1 day to 2 months. With one exception, all participants reported that the number of times they had been facilitated themselves "go well into the hundreds."

We note that, since its inception, Voice Dialogue has been practiced by an increasingly large number of therapists, where it has become used as a coaching tool in corporate environments, as a professional development tool in the arts, and

TABLE 1
Participants' Sex, Age, Profession and Length of Time Since Last Voice Dialogue Facilitation

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Profession	Length of time since last time facilitated
Linda	F	54	Voice Dialogue Facilitator and Counsellor	4 days
Sarah	F	62	Freelance Artist	2 weeks
Elisabeth	F	59	Psychologist	4-6 weeks
Maartje	F	47	Senior Executive, Coach and Trainer	2 months
Collin	M	66	Retired Businessman	1 week
Catherine	F	54	Consultant, Voice Dialogue Facilitator & Trainer	1 day
Kirstin	F	54	Counsellor, Trainer	3 weeks
Kaia	F	56	Voice Dialogue Teacher and Facilitator	1 week

consciousness teachers have incorporated it into their work. The statement is consistent with the varied role descriptors of the eight participants listed in Table 1.

Interviews

The first author (ZB) used semi-structured interviews to elicit information from our participants. Typically, phenomenological inquiry stipulates that a real-time, face-to-face dialogue between researcher and research participant is the most effective method of eliciting the essential aspects of an experience (e.g., Giorgi, 2000). However, due to the considerable geographical distances separating the participants and the researchers we opted to conduct interviews via video chat using telecommunications application software (i.e., Skype). Although one participant withdrew after commencing the interview, there was no indication that this related to the online method of communication. With the exception of some technical connection issues concerning one participant, the authors did not observe any qualitative difference in communication or the establishment of rapport with participants via Skype compared to more conventional non-telecommunications approaches.

Phenomenological Analysis of Original Protocols

The original protocols of the eight participants were analyzed using the principles of phenomenological research originally developed by Giorgi (1975) and subsequently expanded on by Colaizzi (1978) and Elite (1998). In accordance with this standard phenomenological inquiry, the data were analysed using the following procedural steps:

1. Each original protocol was read and reread in order to develop an understanding of a professional's subjective experience associated with being facilitated in Voice Dialogue by another professional.
2. The salient statements, phrases, or sentences were extracted within each original protocol.
3. The extracted significant statements with the same meaning were integrated and translated into constituent themes where we translated the participants' "words in a way that remained true to the underlying essence of the experience itself without severing any connection with the original protocol" (Elite, 1998, p. 312). This process allowed us to formulate comprehensive themes for each participant.
4. The constituent themes were subsequently examined across original protocols. Those constituent themes judged to have the same meaning were pooled into comprehensive constituent themes.
5. A fundamental structural definition was then formulated by integrating comprehensive constituent themes into a "final definition paragraph" (Matsu-Pissot, 1998, p. 325). The definition provided a succinct description of the essential constituents of being facilitated in Voice Dialogue.
6. Each of the participants was contacted via email and invited to provide feedback and verification with regards to the comprehensive constituent themes.

Results and Discussion

We are combining our results and discussion section because the interpretive nature of our phenomenological method does not allow for clearly separating these two categories. Our analysis revealed the following constituent themes for the experience of being facilitated in Voice Dialogue: each self is felt as consisting of distinct qualities; a shift or transformation is felt in going from one self to another; and the Aware Ego, a key concept in the Voice Dialogue approach, is perceived to be a neutral and distinct experience, felt as a space.

Each Self Has Its Distinct Qualities

With regard to each self being felt as consisting of its own distinct qualities, participants struggled to describe the experience of having parts or selves in any global terms. Instead, consistently they underscored a qualitative difference in the emotional, cognitive and physiological experiencing of each self. For example, Elizabeth, a psychologist, qualified her response: “the experience really varies according to the self that’s being facilitated.” She then added:

I experience it as um... as a change of consciousness as well in which I’m speaking from a particular part of myself that has a particular physical kind of being, that has a particular sort of mental attitude, that has a particular sort of emotional correlates that go with it. So, the particulars of it vary according to the self.

Other reports made by participants echoed a similar theme. For example, Maartje, a European executive and trainer, stated:

You could say that each self is carrying some kind of energy. For example, a pleaser is carrying a very open-hearted energy. When I’m into my pleaser I smile and look at the world and I look at what people need and that goes along with an energetic feeling in my body. Like the energy is outwards, it is toward other people. It’s more open, more... soft. It’s like sensing the desires of other people.

Voice Dialogue facilitator and trainer Catherine reported:

I’m always amazed by how distinct the quality of each self that comes out... sometimes more than others but there’s ah... definite... physical characteristics, emotional energy that goes with that part that comes out and ah different opinions and often, different body language or feelings in my body.

Interestingly, these references to the body when describing the distinct qualities of each self were prevalent among participants. All participants assigned physiological attributes that correlated to the experience of having specific selves facilitated. For example, Linda, a counselor and Voice Dialogue facilitator, explained:

I have certain selves that reside in different parts of my physical body, like my protector evokes a feeling in my gut and it's like a flutter. My Pusher – physically I can feel the tension in my neck and back. . .umm. . . my good mother – my heart seems to expand and open up and is. . .you know. . . that expanded heart makes me more receptive to what is happening to the other person, so each self seems to have a physical sensation. Some. . . you know the rational mind is more. . . 'heady.'

Freelance artist Sarah described the contrast in visceral qualities present within opposite selves:

When I'm facilitated and I'm in the energy of a particular voice, I can feel the difference in my body. Tension in different places, awareness of my voice and its projection or lack of projection, um, or volume. Also, just emotions that come up [...] then when I go to the opposite side for a facilitation of whatever energy it is that I've been in, again the visceral components of that energy are very much the opposite of what I experience on the other side.

While some participants acknowledged the presence of particular bodily sensations attributed to particular selves, others described these visceral qualities in more active terms. Rather than just locating the presence of a self in specific areas within the body, these participants described how each self actively animated it. For example, Voice Dialogue teacher and facilitator, Kaia, described how the selves animate her gestures:

All of the selves have a way of feeling in my body and also a way of holding my body, animating my body. I often have very distinctive gestures that I can notice, that's helpful for me to notice later on, to bring to awareness, or ways of moving my hands, or holding my head in a certain way, or facial expressions or how I occupy the space of the room, my proprioception of the room is affected quite a bit by whatever self I am in.

The amplification and experiencing of the distinct qualities of each individual self is an important aspect of the Voice Dialogue process, as it greatly assists the clients to gain clarity regarding their own experience. Voice Dialogue aims to create a relationship with and allow greater access to, the resources inherent in these sub-personalities. A heightened awareness of how each self is embodied reportedly assists clients in both recognising the part in them that is reacting to a particular situation and being able to consciously invite experiencing from a different part if they so choose.

Maartje provided an account of a particular Voice Dialogue facilitation in which, while talking about an issue that was causing her to feel disempowered, the facilitator noticed her hand moving in what seemed to be a chopping motion. The facilitator made a phenomenological observation drawing her attention to her hand and used the gestalt technique of amplification (Mackewn, 2004) by asking her to "make it bigger." This resulted in the facilitation of a Samurai-like self whose presence was a surprise to her. Contact with this self was made through its physical

animation of her body and led her to access an inner resource that was not previously available to her. She reported:

So I made it bigger and I made it bigger and ... I stood up and then it changed into a “samurai,” in silence, without talking, making this movement with the whole of my body and then I just discovered it was a samurai, I didn’t know that when we started, but it just turned into a samurai and it was a very, very impressive session which really freed part of myself that is able to defend me and speak up for me when things happen for me that I don’t like.

It is noteworthy that participants also attributed a consciousness, will, or motivation to each self. Kaia, for example, underscored the sense of relief purportedly felt by a self when its concerns are truly heard:

It’s a relief for that self to be seen and listened to by me, certainly by proxy through the facilitator but for that self to be extrapolated out, to be put out there always feels like a big relief for that self to have its own moment to be fully appreciated and heard.

Sometimes the selves were described or referred to by the quality they bring, often using generic terms employed by Stone and Stone (1989) for commonly present selves (e.g., “my pusher,” “my pleaser,” “my critic”). Sometimes parts were given a name or a name was attributed to them. One such example was provided by Catherine, who recalled a Voice Dialogue facilitation she had a few years prior in regards to an issue she was having with her young son’s unruly behaviour. In the course of this facilitation, she discovered a conservative, male self within her. Affectionately, she referred to him as “Calvin” and credited him with her choice of attiring that morning. She explained:

He said: “spare the rod, spoil the child!” And just went on and on about how kids should do exactly what they are told and it was just remarkable and he was just there dressed like a pilgrim pretty much and his name was Calvin which I found pretty interesting too – my family are like, generations of Methodists, both my parents and their parents ... after that session, when I would feel anger ... I could just say ‘oh hello Calvin,’ you know, ‘you know we’re not going to use the rod here,’ you know and kind of move him out of the driver’s seat.

Interestingly, both in this example of “Calvin” and in the earlier “samurai” example provided by Maartje, the selves accessed seem to go beyond one’s individual experience toward the transpersonal. Also noteworthy is that both experiences resulted in a creative adjustment put forward by the experiencer. In Maartje’s case, a relationship was formed with a part that provided access to a new and more useful way of responding in uncomfortable situations. Catherine separated from a cross-generational, cultural self that was dictating her reactions, also allowing her to create a different kind of relationship with it and subsequently with her son.

Typically, the selves purportedly fulfilled the positive performative function of imparting information about their needs and motivations as well as the needs of the

person as a whole. Linda explained: “the parts are often very happy to speak, like they’re happy to be heard... if there’s a rapport or a trust I know that the self will offer more information.”

A Shift or Transformation

As previously stated, in addition to the shifts implicit in moving between distinctly different parts, participants described shifts that occurred within each self as its concerns were being voiced and heard. Although, it was not always clear whether this shift was being experienced (a) by the facilitated part as a result of having been heard; (b) by the participant [as client] as separation from that part started to occur with the introduction of awareness; or (c) by both. For example, Maartje reported:

You can feel energy changes within the energy of the self when you talk to it a little longer. Sometimes, for instance, a self can become sad or can become more quiet. Sometimes it means that there’s a shift toward another self but sometimes it’s the same self having something new to inform you about so there is a little energy shift – that can be the case.

While a sense of spaciousness was mostly attributed by participants to the “middle space” or the Aware Ego process, Catherine gave an example ascribing a drop in tension to the experience of a self:

Sometimes while they are talking, like the longer a self talks... what I often experience like yesterday, after that part got to talk about how she was overwhelmed and it’s hard to make choices and she didn’t feel like she had enough help making choices then she started to relax and that feeling of dullness left my body while she was talking. So it’s like that... I do I often experience that... there might be a tension or contraction or some kind of stress and as the self gets to express itself and have time to do that, it’s like a spaciousness, it’s more open... and it is like relief really, a kind of release and then a kind of relief.

Counselor and trainer Kirstin, explained a shift that can happen within a self:

I can go to a part of myself that is initially very upset and when I hang in there then it becomes clear that it’s not so much to do with grief or sadness it can actually be an energy that’s really wonderful and open and free but it’s so upset because it can’t be there usually so that’s a shift in the energy and sometimes that’s very profound.

Sarah provided the following example to describe a “levelling out” that occurs for her in response to a self being facilitated. Here it seems unclear whether the shift occurred within the self being facilitated, affecting the whole system, or if a natural separation into the “middle space” started to occur once the self had been heard:

After a certain point when it’s been heard you know ah or facilitated through a particular voice um I can feel the energy shift in my body.... Well it’s not

necessarily a tension that I'm aware of, like I said, there's parts of my body that will be tense, or perhaps my stomach will be upset or I feel anxious – so I guess you could call it tension, and um when I've been heard, it's like there's a real levelling out of energy. It's kind of difficult to explain. It also happens when I do yoga, so um, there's just a calming down of the whole system.

In any event, what is evident is that for the participants of this study, facilitations of selves were always accompanied by some sort of experiential shift akin to relief that progressed cathartically as each inner self expressed its needs and concerns. A further shift or an enhancement of that shift was experienced when moving to the “middle space” of the Aware Ego. Participants also described a more profound shift that accompanied the experience of being facilitated in Voice Dialogue, a shift in experience in a deeper sense involving meaning. Participants underscored an experienced sense of “newness” that was accompanied by “relief” or “surprise” after a self has “spoken.”

Participants also conveyed routinely gaining tangible insight through the process of Voice Dialogue facilitation, into themselves and the nature of their experience. Insights were reportedly retained and incorporated into the lives of participants after the resolution of specific Voice Dialogue experiences. Participants described some of these shifts as having a transformative effect with significant long-term gains. Indeed, participants made multiple references to long-term effects of specific facilitations. An example of this was in the following account provided by Maartje:

And ever since that session, I was. . . I had become aware of that and ever since then I look at people's eyes. So it seems like some new kind of contact was born in that session, I will never forget that one. [Laughs] But you know, I can remember maybe all the sessions that I've had. They are all very. . . they leave an imprint which is tremendous, so I can recall them quite literally. It's a very powerful method.

Participants underscored the often therapeutic effects of their Voice Dialogue experiences. For example, Linda described an early experience of Voice Dialogue whereby a therapeutic shift she described as “profound” had occurred:

I had been really, really hard on myself. Like, my inner critic, I had [...] a killer critic and I was suicidal, 'cause I couldn't figure a way out of this... [situation] with my daughter, I felt like I was harming her. . . and so immediately after the dialogue I understood why I had been pushing off of my daughter everything had just started to click into place. So I had compassion for myself, compassion with my daughter and my inner critic. It was like, all of a sudden I was like standing on this big ladder looking down and the critic's voice that was telling me I was a screw up as a mother and my kids are going to be better off without me. . . umm. . . that voice quieted. . . and I had been aware of that critical voice in my head ALL the time. It was profound.

She later added that this facilitation led to a complete shift in her experience and that it changed her relationship with her daughter. While some participants emphasised immediate and lasting shifts that occurred when they were first

introduced to the model, others underscored a maturation process in their experience of being facilitated using Voice Dialogue and that time and experience with the approach deepened the quality of their facilitations. For example, Kaia explained:

I guess I would just say the experience of being facilitated now is different from when I was earlier on. It's much more fully embodied. It's a much more sensual experience than it used to be. [...] the other experience I have of being facilitated is a great sense of relief. It's a big sense of relief [...] for that self to have its own moment to be fully appreciated and heard, so there's that quality inside it as well, umm.. and also there's a very big feeling in general of gratitude cause of the... not only because of the experience that those sub-personalities have but also for me the human being that I actually have a way to not be entrapped in all of the selves. So those are other things that I subjectively experience in the experience of being facilitated. Like a deep feeling of appreciation.

Other participants highlighted cognitive insight as an important aspect of the shifts that occur when being facilitated in Voice Dialogue. Collin, a retired businessman and Voice Dialogue enthusiast who assists at various Voice Dialogue experiential training programs, explained:

I find it quite engaging. I'm interested in what's happening in the sessions, interested and surprised often that something came up that I didn't anticipate ... 'cause I just saw that self all of a sudden...it was a sudden thing! I didn't even know that self existed before ... and it was when I was being facilitated in the vulnerable selves ... and I had the insight –oh! These are the vulnerable selves! They're not causing any trouble for me, no they're just sitting there, feeling vulnerable.

Similarly, Catherine emphasised the cognitive integration that accompanied the shift in experience, contributing to the formation of new meaning and sustainable change:

It's like umm... it's like having, for example, there's an experience that maybe I've had throughout my life a certain feeling or mood or attitude, or even pattern or difficulty and then once during that facilitation after I've met that self, that's distinctly come out and spoken, then it's like all of a sudden it makes sense, how that energy or that attitude or feeling has been woven into my experience and now it's separated and it's very distinct and there's a kind of... there's a sensation I have... relief sounds a little funny but umm... it's just like 'oh yeah now I understand!' it's also a feeling of like umm having more awareness, greater awareness... and also, what I notice is ... there's always ... I see a shift in my experience and in my daily life after I've been facilitated, often without having to go back and work with that self a lot, I'll see a shift in my umm ... in my experience or my attitude or my behaviour even, my actions.

However, the most dramatic and profound shifts described by participants tended to be experienced on multiple levels, going beyond cognitive insight. It is noteworthy

that the changes described were purportedly brought about by the shift itself rather than by any decision to change as a result of an insight. As Kirstin described it:

I didn't have to do anything about any of that, I didn't have to then think of doing anything, it was just that insight ummm... that I got. I got an intellectual insight, I got an emotional insight, I got a physical energetic experience, and something shifted and... I didn't have to react in the same way anymore.

Elisabeth articulated the great personal meaning that accompanies these shifts in her experience:

So, for example, I'm thinking of a facilitation I had years ago, and I can't even remember how the facilitation arose but... I think we were playing around with something about the opposite of the inner critic and... the self that emerged was kind of like a... like a... oh I can't remember what I called it but it was sort of like a good... spirit or a helpful guardian or something like that... sort of different from a protector... was more like a sort of inner mentor I suppose in a way and it was a very grounded, encouraging voice inside myself and it was fantastic to discover and... and it was quite unexpected.

The Neutral Space of the Aware Ego

A space metaphor was used by participants to describe the experience juxtaposed to the animated experiencing of the sub-personality that precipitated it. The space was described alternatively as "clear," "expansive," "neutral," and located in the "centre." However, this space is perhaps more than just a metaphor as it seemed to occupy a physical space in the centre of participants' worlds. Also, this central space was described as located in relation to the different physical spaces moved into when seen from each sub-personality in order for them to play out their conflicts around it. As previously articulated, the task in Voice Dialogue is to introduce awareness to the ego by loosening its calcified position of identification with the primary selves. In a sense, the process is about ego plasticity. The intention is to introduce an experience of being more than the limited identity that any particular self [or cluster of selves] is able to provide. By introducing this awareness, an opportunity to function from a more expansive position is provided. In Voice Dialogue facilitation, once separation from a self has occurred and awareness is introduced, the middle position of the ego is referred to as the Aware Ego process, thus setting an intention to work creatively from this position.

The Aware Ego process was experienced by participants as distinctly different relative to the experiencing of the various individual selves. Sarah explained:

Aware Ego is very neutral. It's just observing what is without any judgement to it and being able to see the attributes of each side and what the energy has to offer and noting how powerful this energy is and how much it's in control or not in control. So it's just really a very neutral space.

A key characteristic of the Aware Ego process was neutrality. Participants tended to define their experience of this position in terms of the absence of other qualities, as Linda described:

So when I really know that I'm in an Aware Ego, it's a very neutral place where I have that expansion and that I am able to just be aware at arm's length at what happened in that dialogue. I'm not arguing with it, I'm not agreeing with it, I'm not recoiling from the information, I'm just ah... just feeling separate from it.

Other terms used by participants to reflect this experience of neutrality were "spacious" and "clear." Participants reported feeling "peaceful" in the Aware Ego process, contrasting it with their experiencing of the sub-personalities or selves, as reported by Catherine:

It often feels more spacious and um... more objective, it feels like a very clear space where I'm not feeling the influence of one self or another so much but just being able to observe or feel the energies that are around me or part of me, but in the centre, it's yeah a feeling of spaciousness... if I focus on them [the selves], or if there is still maybe rattling around a little bit but I can also just feel like, almost more like a peaceful state without the feeling of selves... a clear space for me there in the centre.

As an Aware Ego process is perceived to exist only in relation to the selves from whom one's identifications have separated; it is interesting to note that participants reported feeling the "energy" of these same selves next to them when occupying the Aware Ego position (after a self has been facilitated). Maartje provided an example of this:

It's very often when I go back to the Aware Ego there is more calmness, it's more calm, as if I... when you separate from an energy, moving out from a primary self you really leave the energy of that self next to you, so you move to a more neutral, a more quiet place.

Kaia described the Aware Ego process as characterized by "tenderness" devoid of any "sentimentality," her experience typified by acceptance rather than attachment:

Almost always when I come back to the centre, there's that quality that rushes in. A relief from having had to have been so hooked into that self and yet a kind of tenderness and appreciation of what that self is... it's a very quiet space for me... and there's a quality of... it's a kind of a dispassionate compassion. There is a kind of a tenderness without any kind of sentimentality. I really just accept that energy that I was in when I move into that awareness. But there's no sentimentality about it, there's no stickiness about it.

Maartje echoed a similar experience accompanied by positive affect:

When I hear a self talk to me and explain why that self is behaving the way it is, it's very often a moment of feeling love for a part of myself that I often maybe

don't like or want to ignore and these are moments that somehow I get a better relationship with that self.

While the Aware Ego process was consistently reported to be experienced as neutral, it was not always perceived to be a peaceful experience. When participants described working with selves that specifically hold *opposite* characteristics, the Aware Ego process, now in between them, maintained its neutrality in relation to these selves. However, "peaceful" was no longer the adjective of choice, when describing this position. Instead, a "tension" is described as reported by Kaia:

And actually, you know what's kind of... that's when I'm separated from one self, when I'm being facilitated, but if I actually have worked between a pair of opposites and now I'm in the middle, it is a very different kind of experience for me because then I'm ah, I'm working [laughs], I'm working to hold the umm... hold the paradox. It's like looking at red and green at the same time and they keep oscillating in your eyes. Like trying to hold an oscillation and feel the energy fields actually still available in my body and in my psyche and to hold those both at the same time and not to collapse into one or the other. And they both feel at that time, if I'm in the presence of two energies two opposites or two opposing energies I feel...it feels very umm... magnetic between the two and so umm to stay aware of them both and not to collapse into either one of them takes a real effort and also again, my experience of the flow of time really slows down in order to hold this larger perception.

Kirstin described this tension as feeling "stretched":

I mean the Aware Ego isn't always calm because for example if I work with very strong polarities... when I do that work and I sit in the middle and I'm in an Aware Ego process that's not comfortable... so then you get that sense of what Hal Stone calls "sweating" the "sweat" from the Aware Ego space that has to carry both polarities, that makes me stretch....

Although working with opposites in the Aware Ego process has been highlighted as an uncomfortable experience, this discomfort is perceived to be the catalyst of new experience and is the stated goal of Voice Dialogue facilitation. It also seems that this Aware Ego process or position is profoundly transpersonal.

Conclusion

Our article has presented an overview of a transpersonal psychotherapy referred to as Voice Dialogue, and phenomenologically analysed experiences of a sample of Voice Dialogue psychotherapists. The essential experiential aspects found were: (a) each inner self had its own distinct qualities; (b) going across selves involved a felt shift or transformation; and (c) there was a felt neutral space for what could be seen as an Aware Ego.

As exploratory research, we used only a small and self-selected sample, and this restricts the range of extrapolations from our results. For example, most of our

participants in this study were female. Consequently, gender may have influenced the constituent themes we elicited. Future research may wish to extend the present study by sampling more males with the aim of investigating gender differences with regards to Voice Dialogue-induced phenomenology. Similarly, looking at many other possibly salient variables (e.g., socioeconomic status) would be desirable in future studies. However, we emphasize that the phenomenological methodology used in the present study is not intended to produce generalizations or any extrapolation of results. This methodology aims to facilitate as rich a description of the phenomenon being examined as is possible.

Second, the usefulness of retrospective reports may be compromised by forgetting, reconstruction errors and confabulation, and lack of independent verification (Pekala & Cardaña, 2000; Rock & Jamieson, 2014). Indeed, the current study's design did not control for the time elapsed between the participants' last Voice Dialogue session and the semi-structured interviews, and this could show a memory-fading process that introduced bias. Furthermore, use of real-time experience sampling might provide more accurate information than recall, and could be used in future research.

In addition, future researchers might wish to implement a pretest–posttest design with participants being randomly assigned to either a Voice Dialogue group or no treatment group. This design would allow one to test the hypothesis that, for example, the Voice Dialogue group will report higher well-being scores compared to the no treatment group, after controlling for pre-test scores.

Future researchers may also wish to supplement qualitative assessment (e.g., phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews) of the essential aspects of Voice Dialogue induced experiences with a quantitative evaluation using self-report instruments, such as the *Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory* (Pekala, 1991). The use of psychophysiological measures, such as electroencephalographic data while experiencing different selves, might also provide interesting perspectives (Krippner & Friedman, 2009). By triangulating diverse methods, one may be able to provide a more comprehensive account of Voice Dialogue induced phenomenology (for an outline of convergent research approaches that combine neuroscience and phenomenology see Jamieson & Rock, 2014; Laughlin & Rock, 2013).

In his discussion of the various ways of working with sub-personalities, Rowan (1990, p. 90) stated that Voice Dialogue is “perhaps the most ambitious and well worked out approach to personification yet devised,” and Rowan (2010, p. 61) further explained it has “a lot more to say than any of the others as to all the ins and outs of actually working with I-positions.” Since its inception, Voice Dialogue has been practiced by an increasingly large number of therapists, where it has become used as a coaching tool in corporate environments, as a professional development tool in the arts, and consciousness teachers have incorporated it into their work. The ideas underpinning the method are now taught globally in a variety of Voice Dialogue training institutions and in other varied educational settings worldwide. For example, the University of Siena in Bologna, Italy introduced Voice Dialogue to their graduate master's degree program in Communication and Interpersonal

Relations. Native American, Catherine Swan Reimer, has been teaching a culturally aware form of Voice Dialogue to indigenous Alaskans for the American National Indian Child Welfare Association. The “Hearing Voices program,” headed by Dutch psychiatrist Professor Marius Romme and researcher Sandra Escher, incorporates Voice Dialogue in their work with patients suffering from auditory hallucinations. Lama Drimed Norbu in his role as spiritual director of the Chagdud Gonpa, introduced Voice Dialogue into the practices at Rigdzin Ling Buddhist community in California and Genpo Roshi developer of The “Big Mind, Big Heart” process attributes the ideas underpinning his approach to Voice Dialogue. Despite its broad use and increasing pertinence to the practice of psychotherapy and current discourse (Carter, 2011; Rowan, 1990, 2010), there is a paucity of empirical research on its practice, so more research would, of course, be desirable. We hope that future research might be encouraged by our exploratory study and could establish a more refined evidence base for this innovative approach to transpersonal therapy.

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