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The dialogical self as a time–space matrix: Personal chronotopes and ambiguous signifiers

Peter T.F. Raggatt*

Department of Psychology, James Cook University, Townsville 4811, Australia

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A B S T R A C T

Dialogical self theory makes explicit use of *spatial* metaphors. The self is conceptualized as a 'landscape' of decentralized 'I-positions'. While this captures the flux of our experience, our 'positioning' also has continuities over time – a requirement for the telling of history. Hence the dialogical self in its extension might be better conceived as a time–space matrix. Bakhtin called this matrix the "chronotope" and he used it to analyze literary forms. Here, I adapt the concept as a means to study the development of the dialogical self. A model for 'personal chronotopes' is proposed using 'dialogical triads'. Triads are comprised of an I-position, a counter-position, and an ambiguous signifier from the social domain (e.g., a powerful person). Ambiguous signifiers promote decentralizing movements in the self. I propose that personal chronotopes are comprised of a temporally organized string or sequence of dialogical triads. Their emergence is illustrated here using case material.

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The foundation metaphor for the dialogical self is a *conversation*. Beyond the obvious reference to a dyadic exchange, mind itself is taken to be structured like a conversation. As Bakhtin famously observed, our utterances are always addressed somewhere, and this idea applies to our inner speech or micro-dialogues, as well as to everyday social exchange (Bakhtin, 1981; see also Larrain & Haye, 2012). The most distinctive feature of this conversation metaphor is that it *creates movement*. It is 'decentering' or 'centrifugal' or 'distanciating'. The self is conceptualized as multi-positioned and therefore fundamentally *spatial* in its structural organization. Following this line of reasoning, Hermans and Kempen (1993) (see also Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) have defined the dialogical self as an extended repertoire or landscape of semi-independent 'I-positions'. This 'position repertoire' is comprised of 'internal' positions (e.g., I as adventurer, lover or artist); of 'external' positions that have been internalized (e.g., the imagined voice of my father, the view of a 'generalized other'); and of 'outside' positions (e.g., interlocutors). While this conceptualization explicitly links the self to the social and to movement in 'space', there is no reference to the continuity or fleetingness of positioning in the temporal domain. Hence, from a narrative and life-historical perspective the dialogical self in its 'extension' might also be defined as a time–space matrix. Bakhtin (1981) called this matrix the chronotope (literally meaning: 'time–space'). In this paper I use this idea to address the problem of conceptualizing life history from a dialogical self perspective.

The paper is organized into two parts. The first part is theoretical. The second is empirical. I begin with a short discussion of Bakhtin's (1981) concept of chronotope, which he used to interpret fictional narratives. I propose that a similar concept can be used to interpret life history data. In the ontological stance taken here the developing capacity to 'distanciate' subject ('I') from object ('Me') is taken as a fundamental reference point for the emergence of dialogicality in the self (Raggatt, 2010, 2012). However, these internal movements or 'position exchanges' (Gillespie, 2010; Gillespie & Martin, 2014; Martin & Gillespie, 2011) *ultimately have their origins in the social domain*. Alloyed to the I–Me dyad, therefore, we need a

* Tel.: +61 7 4781 4182/4118.
E-mail address: peter.raggatt@jcu.edu.au.

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third position anchored in the social. This 'other' may be a specific person, it may be a generalized other, or it may be some object in the world. Following this line of reasoning I propose to use 'dialogical triads' of the form 'I–Me–Other' as a means to 'map' the emergence of personal chronotopes. The personal chronotope is conceptualized as a thematically and historically organized string or sequence of dialogical triads. In the second part of the paper, case material from a life history is used to illustrate the formation of personal chronotopes using this triadic approach.

1. Bakhtin's neglected concept of chronotope

How might the position repertoire of the dialogical self emerge over time? To address this question, I will consider Bakhtin's relatively neglected concept of time–space, or 'chronotope'. In his essay, *Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel*, Bakhtin (1981) offers no generic definition for the concept. With reference to the novel he defines it as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed…" (1981, p. 84). In the literary chronotope:

> …spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. (p. 84)

Can the kinds of time–space structures Bakhtin finds in artistic narratives find parallel formations in our own experience? Although he did not elaborate at length, for Bakhtin the fusion of time–space relations in the chronotope could be used to understand not just formations in the novel, but formations in human development (Holquist, 2002). A primary example is the chronotope of 'the road' as metaphor for the path of life in the adventure novel. Here I want to adapt Bakhtin's basic conceptualization – I will call it the 'personal chronotope' – to consider questions about multiplicity in the dialogical self over time. Note that while the chronotope of 'the road' signifies a form of temporal–spatial extension, the dialogical self, as we have seen, is itself already defined using spatial metaphors to denote positioning and movement. It follows that constructing a history of position formation for an individual might yield information about personal chronotopes. Below, I argue that the merging of time–space relations in the chronotope is driven by symbolic processes of mediation originating in the social domain. Positioning and movement are socially mediated. Mediation provides the grounds for the creation of human chronotopes.

To approach the topic of mediation, I want to consider first, processes involved in ontogeny. How do positioning processes first emerge in childhood? It will be helpful to examine the grounds for multiplicity in ontogenetic development because processes taking place there provide a foundation for the emergence of chronotopes.

2. Ontogeny and position exchange theory

Many readers will be familiar with the fundamental distinction that William James (1890) makes between the 'I' and the 'Me'. James described the Me as the 'social' or 'empirical' self, the self-as-object, and observed that there could be many of these. The 'I', on the other hand was the 'self-as-subject', given in the stream of consciousness and having powers of volition and agency. I think we can use James' distinction to examine the emergence of positioning processes in early development. As noted, Martin and Gillespie's (2011) 'Position Exchange Theory' (PET) (see also Gillespie & Martin, 2014) is useful for conceptualizing these processes. They propose that all abstract psychological positioning begins from the template of our social and physical positioning in the concrete world. They argue that position exchange is fundamental to the emergence of a wide range of human behaviors that have evolved in the context of social experience – from the first communications with caregivers, to walking and eating, children's make-believe play, advanced forms of role play, and complex coordinated group behaviors, such as team sports. In all these domains of experience some form of position exchange is taking place. Gillespie (2010) argues that it is the earliest socially mediated forms of position exchange which provide the kernels for the emergence of our intersubjectivity. We must learn the capacities for *identification* – "a movement out of one's own situation to empathetically participate in the situation of someone else", and *distanciation* – "a movement out of one's own situation to reflect upon one's own situation" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 3). Without the capacity to imaginatively move in both time and space beyond the concrete here and now, no extended notion of a self can emerge. Within the position exchange framework, James' I–Me distinction can be conceptualized as a form of distanciation. Looked at from this perspective, a number of questions about early development arise, e.g., when do the I and the Me emerge as linguistic markers of psychological position exchange? When do children first recognize themselves in a mirror, suggesting that a link between the I and the distanciated 'Me' has been formed? And what can we learn from looking into a mirror at our own reflection? I want to address each of these questions briefly here.

3. 'I' and 'Me' as markers of internal position exchange

In a recent paper on 'inner speech' Wiley (2006) speculates that the 'Me' emerges before the 'I', both ontogenetically in speech, and phylogenetically in the emergence of human consciousness. Wiley observed that the first person pronoun 'I' does not emerge until relatively late ontogenetically speaking – at around 20–24 months. Before that "…the small child not only thinks of him or herself as a Me, this person is also confined to the 'Me' niche of inner speech" (p. 325). However, Wiley reported no research evidence in support of these claims. In fact, a review of the language studies on this subject by no means yields a clear-cut answer, but the available evidence appears to suggest that the reverse situation applies. Work by Bretherton, McNew, and Beeghly-Smith (1981), Budwig (1995), and Imbens-Bailey and Pan (1998) all reported the emergence of the first person 'I' at around 18–24 months, but the distanciated 'Me' actually came later.

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