

Chapter 2

Dialogical Self Theory

'T is a verb dressed as a noun

Julian Baggini (Baggini 2011, 126)

Abstract

- 'To be' is 'to be related'.
- Getting access to '*self*' is a *relational* process.
- Dialogical Self Theory conceptualizes self in terms of a dynamic *multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions* in the (extended) landscape of the mind.
- Core of Dialogical Self Theory and Social Constructionism are permanently changing *relations, internally and externally*. At the heart of both views is self as 'a continuously changing process of relational co-creating and relational positioning and counter/re-positioning in space and time'.
- *Free energy* is the human capacity to move away from immanent natural patterns.
Without free energy, there is no self.
Without free energy, there is no dialogue.
- The Japanese word '*ma*' combines in one concept: *physical space, temporal space, relationship and silence*.
- The concepts of *creating 'ma'*—as a living pause—and *freeing energy* enable us to understand the processes of change and transformation.
- '*Transposing*' or '*transpositioning*' is a mental act to bring I-positions from one domain in life/work to another in order to create transformation in the position repertoire. The 'energy' of one I-position is brought to another.
- I-positions can be described as 'empty' concepts, which you can apply on a variety of situations.

In this chapter, the theoretical background of the Dialogical Self is our subject. We describe self as a *society of mind* (Sect. 2.1), and explore the role of *language, relational, social constructionism* (Sect. 2.2). Some of the *key concepts* of Dialogical Self Theory are explained, which will be consistently applied throughout the text (Sect. 2.3). *Energy, information and space* are defined as basic conditions for a dialogical self (Sect. 2.4). The concept of *transpositioning* is explained as a technique to create transformational space through dialogue *in the self and in*

relation with others (Sect. 2.5). This chapter is completed with a personal reflection, where I apply the concept of Dialogical Self to my own development through time.

2.1 Self as a ‘Society of Mind’

In 1992, Hubert Hermans co-created the Dialogical Self Theory.¹ Dialogue is a central concept in his view. As we live “in a world society that is increasingly interconnected and intensely involved in historical changes, dialogical relationships are required, not only *between* individuals, groups and cultures, but also *within* the self of one and the same individual.”² The leading message, and in my view the reason why the work was adopted well by scientists and practitioners, is the similarity between society at large and the individual mind. Hermans takes the self not as an entity in itself, but as emerging from social processes in relations and history. As a consequence our ‘selves’ are a constantly changing result of all kind of stimuli that influence us. He holds a view of self as a process of continuously changing internal and external relations.

Hermans considers the self as multivoiced and dialogical. Inspired by the original ideas of William James and Mikhail Bakhtin, Hubert Hermans, Harry Kempen and Rens van Loon wrote the first psychological publication on the “dialogical self” in which they conceptualized the self in terms of a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in the (extended) landscape of the mind. The self can be described as a microcosm of society—child, parent, partner, professional, worker—that has to relate to the wider society and network of others, to the context in which it must function. I-positions are both internal and external: a leader’s sense of his/her professional self (as a professional leader), for example, extends from ‘my role’—‘I the leader’—to ‘my reports’, ‘my organization’ and ‘my peers and colleagues’. As *positioned*, the self is localized in space and time, that is, part of a greater whole (global world, collective history), as *I* it has the potential to become part of a broader whole (as a *we*).³ In this conception, the *I* has the possibility to move from one spatial position to another in accordance with changes in situation and time. The *I* fluctuates among different and even opposed positions, and has the capacity to give each position a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story, involved in processes of question and answer, agreement and disagreement. Each of them have a story to tell about their own experiences from their own position in time and space. As different voices, these characters exchange

¹The concept Dialogical Self was coined in Hermans et al. 1992; Hermans and Kempen 1993.

²Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010; Hermans 2013.

³Hermans and Konopka 2010, 173. See also: Hermans and Gieser 2012.

information about their respective me’s and mines, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self.

Impact of Symbols in Self-narratives

Hubert Hermans is emeritus professor of Personality Psychology at Radboud University and was chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Han Fortmann Center at the Radboud University of Nijmegen. We met in 1986 in the context of the Han Fortmann Center, where western and eastern philosophical, religious and meditation practices were combined in lectures, courses and trainings. One of these courses was a workshop in the allegory of the cave in Plato’s *Politeia*. To explore the impact of symbolism and metaphors in self-narratives, we used the theory and method developed by Hermans and his group, Valuation Theory and Self-Confrontation Method.⁴ How can you integrate an insight or message, which you get by reflecting on a metaphor or symbol in your self-narrative? Topic for further research was to create a better understanding of the transformative role of symbolism in self-narratives. In an experimental workshop with the symbolism of the cave, we observed that the method of connecting people with symbolism in a holistic way was very impactful. Here we combined experiencing and reflecting, with dancing, conversation, listening to music, sharing theory about history of religion and philosophy, meditation and silence. Although we heard from all participants that the impact of the workshop was immense, we did not understand how it worked exactly. That was the beginning of my Ph.D. research project.⁵

2.1.1 Weaving Self and Dialogue Together

Dialogical Self Theory weaves *self and dialogue* together in such a way that a more profound understanding of the interconnection of self *and society* is achieved. Usually, the concept of self refers to something ‘internal’, something that takes place within the mind of the individual person, while dialogue is typically

⁴Before Hermans created the Dialogical Self Theory, he designed the Valuation Theory and the Self-Confrontation Method from 1974. The most accurate summary of this theory and methodology is written by Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995. *Self-Narratives. The Construction of Meaning in Psychotherapy*. The spirit of this work (combining idiographic and nomothetic approaches within the narrative paradigm) prepared the concept of Dialogical Self. In practice we observed clients verbalizing their self-narratives from multiple perspectives and positions, sometimes opposed, sometimes complementary.

⁵Published as Van Loon 1996. *Symbols in Self-Narrative. Interpreting by means of Self-Confrontation Method* [book in Dutch].

associated with something ‘external’, that is, processes that take place between people involved in communication. The spirit of the Dialogical Self can be understood by understanding that we are living in a *space*. This is an *external* space and an *internal* space. In this space we can feel *low* (sad) and *high* (happy), *close* to yourself⁶ (authentic) and *far* from yourself (inauthentic). Within our bodily boundaries, we continuously make *vertical* and *horizontal* movements. The space we live in is not only internal, it is also extended to the external world, it is beyond the boundaries of our bodily skin. Our mind is populated by many people about whom we are constantly thinking and feeling. That is the reason why Hermans uses the expression: ‘we live in a *society of mind*’. The self is a society of mind and at the same time part of a larger society. The composite concept ‘dialogical self’ goes beyond the self-other dichotomy by infusing the *external to the internal* and, in reverse, to introduce the *internal into the external*. In the figure the two spaces and the dynamics between internal, external, close, far, low and high, are visualized (Fig. 2.1).

In that society of mind we position ourselves in basically two different modes of I-positioning: internal and external. The self does not only include internal positions, but also external positions. As functioning as a ‘society of mind’, the self is populated by a multiplicity of ‘I-positions’ that have the possibility to entertain dialogical/monological relationships with each other. Examples of *internal I-positions* are: ‘I as the son of my mother’, ‘I as a dancing teacher’, ‘I as intuitive’, ‘I as rational’, ‘I as impatient’, ‘I as relaxed’, etcetera. Examples of *external I-positions* are: my father, my mother, my Latin teacher, Peter (my best friend), George (my enemy), etcetera. What they have in common is that they all have a sense of meaning for you, and are loaded with affect. In a society of mind happens what also happens in the outer societal world: there is a form of conversation (dialogue/debate/discussion) between different I-positions. Examples. The intuitive I continuously criticizes the rational I. The relaxed I encourages the ambitious I to take it easy, etcetera. In internal dialogues you can listen to other voices in yourself (I-position repertoire). Internal and external I-positions are simultaneously present. There is not always a sharp separation between the inside of the self and the outside world, but rather a gradual transition. When some positions in the self silence or suppress other positions, monological relationships prevail with the risk of

⁶What exactly is meant here? Is there an essence assumed? No, the expressions ‘close to yourself’ or ‘far from yourself’ refer to how we relate to where we are in that moment of place and time, it is by definition contextual. ‘I with my friend’ refers to a different meaning of closeness than ‘I during a lecture for psychologists’. For authenticity the same applies: it is relational, contextual, and internally and externally, dialogical. It is so difficult to express this accurately, as the daily use of expressions such as self have ‘container’-connotations (true self, deeper self, etcetera). Hermans in his book *Democratic Self* (2017, in press, n.p.) uses the word ‘elusive process’ to characterize self. “The metaphoric use of society works as ‘glasses’ that offer a sometimes surprising perspective that will allow to go deeper into the workings of this elusive process that we try to demarcate by the simple word ‘self.’”

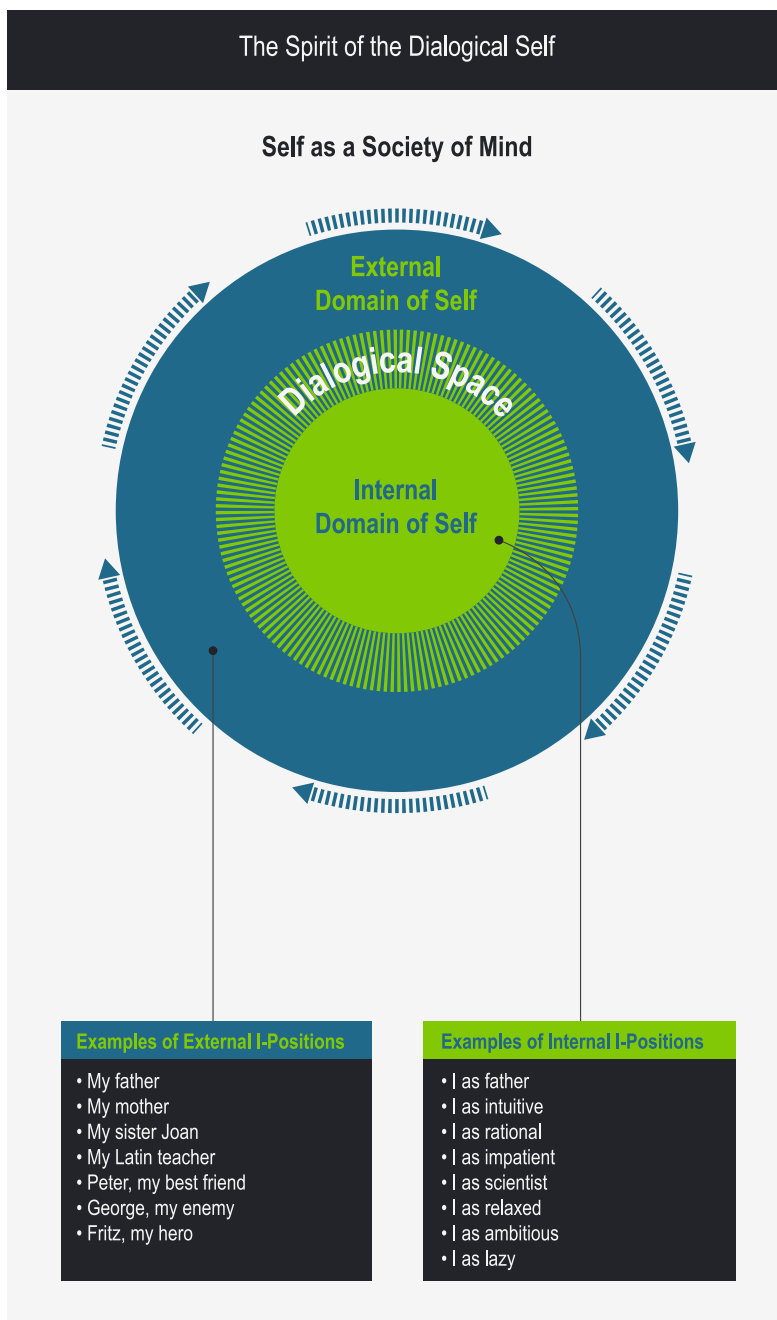


Fig. 2.1 The spirit of the dialogical self

radicalizing.⁷ When positions are recognized and accepted in their differences and alterity (both within and between the internal and external domains of the self), dialogical relationships might emerge with the possibility to further develop and renew self and other. The theory of the dialogical self is designed to describe and stimulate these internal and external conversations.⁸

Miranda's Story

This case study illustrates how Dialogical Self Theory provides some useful insights into the value of applying these principles in executive coaching. Dialogical Self Theory is, perhaps, best understood by thinking about the process someone goes through when faced with an important decision. He or she will likely weigh up the implications for their personal and professional lives and be influenced by a predisposition either towards optimism or pessimism, and by the example of a parent, employer, teacher or some other (positive or negative) role model—even though these people are not physically present. Our brains are stores of multiple thoughts and experiences—ours and other people's. We remember, and to an extent are shaped by, the words and attitudes and behaviors of others, in our present and our past.

Most of us manage this 'society of the mind' adequately, most of the time. We navigate between the I-positions fairly smoothly and fairly naturally—and we don't feel any strong sense of disintegration or that they're pulling us apart. At times, however, our ability to manage comes under threat—and with it our sense of security and identity. Some of the biggest threats occur in the workplace. People often find it hard to balance the demands placed on them by their employers with the demands placed on them in their domestic or private lives. The situation can be particularly serious where someone feels that their sense of identity has been compromised by the introduction of a new I-position—for example, I as leader or boss—and they're having to act in ways that aren't really 'them'. The challenge becomes how to integrate this new position successfully into the 'society of mind'. Dialogical Self Theory helps by encouraging someone to talk about their feelings and difficulties—and to try to open a dialogue in which apparently opposing positions are reconciled. One of the

⁷In his book *Celebrating the other* (2008), Edward Sampson suggests that we sustain our self-esteem through "self-celebratory monologues", stories about how good we are and how successful. To sustain these stories, we need other people who are less than good. We thus construct worlds in which others are irrational, unthinking, and sinful and so on. He spoke of these monological and self-celebratory constructions as being oriented around the notion of a singular and rational self, who is able to know the *other* as the other really (or probably) is, who can speak for and about others (followers, women, other ethnic groups). (Hosking 2011, 456). "Conventional wisdom tells us that each of us is like a small container, designed to prevent our "inner essence" from leaking out. We believe that in order to be a proper container, each individual must become a coherent, integrated, singular entity, whose clear-cut boundaries define its limits and separate it from similarly bounded entities" (Sampson 2008, 17).

⁸Inspired by a video of Hubert Hermans <http://www.dialogical-self.nl/>.

tenets of Dialogical Self Theory is that contradictions create opportunities for new meaning. A practitioner will, effectively, find ways of helping a client turn the conflict they face to their advantage and make something positive out of it. The following example will help to explain how.

Miranda is a fully trained engineer in her early 40s who returned to full-time work five years ago following a 'career break' to bring up her three children. She balanced motherhood with a part-time job at a local further education college, teaching engineering and mechanical constructing, so did not find the return to full-time employment a huge wrench. The past five years have been happy ones, overall—and Miranda has enjoyed her job.

Things are changing, however. The finance director at the company she works for is leaving and, much to her surprise, Miranda has been given his job. It's the opportunity of a lifetime—the kind of job she dreamed of before she had children—and it couldn't have come at a better time. Miranda's husband was made redundant six months ago and is finding it hard to get a new job. It's been agreed that he'll stay at home and take over from the childminder so Miranda can pursue her career. On the face of it, things are perfect. Miranda is a feminist who always wanted a career, and the increase in salary, plus the savings in childcare, mean financially they're much more secure.

There's a catch, though. Miranda feels uncomfortable in her new role. All the other members of the board are male—and one, the operations director, appears to take a particularly hard-hitting approach to business. Something she once heard her first boss Frances say keeps circling in Miranda's head: "The hard fact is that to succeed in business as a woman you have to become more like a man". The first board meeting is a disaster. Miranda finds herself spouting facts and figures purely to prove she has the same kind of analytical brain as a man. She has some concerns about the proposed growth strategy—the markets are under-researched—but she's reluctant to express them for fear of seeming too risk-averse and negative. She's floundering—unsure of who she is—and she's losing her confidence. She wants to walk away but doesn't feel she can. The implications for her family would be too serious. Besides, she feels she has a responsibility to the founder and managing director and to the team below her. What can she do?

The company has arranged for Miranda, as a new director, to be 'coached' by an external consultant who happens to have a background in Dialogical Self Theory. The coach understands Miranda's problem partly as an identity crisis and begins to help her integrate her new role into the 'society' of her self. She encourages Miranda to acknowledge and embrace the many I-positions that make up her sense of self. It's clear to the coach that Miranda has become so stressed by her situation that she's been unable to think clearly and that internal dialogue has broken down. What does Miranda the feminist (internal I-position) have to say to Frances the role model (external

I-position)? What can Miranda the mother and the teacher tell the operations director? Where's the reciprocal exchange?

Miranda is helped to understand that denial of who she is, is dangerous—both for her own mental and emotional health and for her professional development. She has lessons and strengths she can bring to the business—and many of them spring from the I-positions she's trying to suppress. If she remembers her roles as mother/carer and teacher she will become part of the repertoire of external I-positions of other directors—and help the sum of the board be greater than its individual parts. Her peers, in other words, will benefit from the insight and wisdom of a new 'voice'.

At the next board meeting, Miranda applies some of the insights she's learned as a teacher to challenge the proposed growth strategy—and receives support from the non-executive director on the board. The sense of reconciliation and resolution she feels gives her more confidence and she begins to settle into her new role. Thanks to this approach, she is better able to 'direct the energy' of the team she leads—and make the optimal contribution to the company. More than this, she's more likely to search her personal repertoire of beliefs and experiences when faced with new and different challenges. Miranda, through the 'lessons' of reconciling her I-positions, blazes a trail for emotional intelligence and authentic leadership—and her organization is the stronger for it.

2.1.2 *Dynamic Positioning of the Self*

Positioning makes the concept of the dialogical self dynamic as it enables us to *position* the self in space. *Space* is used in a double sense. On the one hand, it is the 'physical' space: *I am standing here, my father is standing there*. On the other hand, it is metaphorical: *my father's voice resonates in my 'I-position as a lawyer'*. This is in line with observations that people often use metaphorical language to explain how I-positions take place in their life. To give an example. One of my clients—Helen—said she struggled with low self-confidence in working-situations. Although she was perceived in her organization as very skilled and senior, internally she felt very insecure. One of her I-positions was *'I as riding my horse'*. In that position she felt highly self-confident and was able to act effectively, even in unknown and dangerous situations. By bringing the energy of the *physical* I-position of the horse-rider *metaphorically* to that of the business world, her level of self-confidence raised increasingly.

Professionally, my first experience with the impact of the concept of the Dialogical Self was with one of the participants in the research project for my Ph.D.⁹

⁹I have described this case in an article in a Dutch magazine *Speling*, titled *Symbols as a way for personal integration* (Van Loon 1990), 13–18.

A woman—Diana—participated in the workshop on symbolism of the *tree*. She spontaneously felt attracted to this symbol. Later she told me she did not dare to participate in the workshop on the symbolism of the cave, as this symbol frightened her intuitively. In exploring the impact of the meaning of symbols in self-narratives, Diana told a negative emotional story about her life. One exception: when she was crafting wood, she felt well. It was remarkable for her to experience that by intentionally strengthening this I-position (“I as crafting wood”), she became able to function in society in a more adjusted manner. After a few years, she was active as a dancing teacher. What she did was metaphorically transposing a physical I-position (‘I as crafting wood’) into other domains of her life (‘I as a dancing teacher’). My interest in this phenomenon was born.

“One of the basic tenets of the dialogical self-theory is that people are continuously involved in a process of positioning and repositioning, not only in relation to other people but also in relation to themselves.”¹⁰ The verb ‘positioning’ is a spatial, relating one, it refers to ‘here’ and ‘there’. “When a person positions herself ‘somewhere’, there are always, explicitly or implicitly other positions involved that are located in the outer space around us or in the inner metaphorical space of the self.”¹¹ Between different I-positions, there can be a dialogical or monological relation. “The voice of my mother in me shouts to not take life so seriously and take it easy”. As I-positions result from relations in the past, they can be more or less internalized. The concept of positioning plays at several levels: in our ‘self-reflection and self-talk’, in our relations, in social order and in our cultural activities.

“Tiny Man Walking in an Empty Space”

In the artwork *A Map of Days*, Grayson Perry creates a self-portrait, which you can use to illustrate the basic concepts of the Dialogical Self Theory in a visual and creative way. Perry constructed his self-portrait like a town, a citadel, whereby the town walls can be interpreted as the skin. The ‘self’ is not a simple unchangeable thing, but a lifelong process of ‘work in progress’. What is remarkable in his drawing of the self is that the picture is an open space. Not a central, container, static point. Our ‘self’ consists of continually changing layers of experience. Grayson Perry, whose female I-position frequently appears as ‘Claire’, himself says “My sense of self is a tiny man, kicking a can down the road.”¹²

Having a look at some of the details in the middle of the picture, you see a tiny man (‘a sense of self’) walking in an empty space. Around this space, creative side, spiritual side, dark side, bright side. On the right, a female portrait with ‘the inner you’ (referring to Claire). On the left, ‘the real me’ with words as ‘the vast something’, ‘silent call’. On the right some additional

¹⁰Hermans and Konopka 2010, 7.

¹¹Hermans and Konopka 2010, 8.

¹²Exposition at Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, the Netherlands, 2016.

information: tinnitus, motorcycle license, Chelmsford 1960, bad back, kidney stones, ex-mountain bike racer, blonde hair, blue eyes, married, one child, grammar school, B.A. fine art, hyperopia, acid reflux.

Perry uses quite interesting distinctions: thoughts, concepts, and theories; guesses, speculation, and hypothesis; patterns, declaration, texture, contrast, metaphors, and interpretations. He visualizes internal and external dialogues, and monologues, that continuously took and take place in a beautiful manner. Accessible and easy to understand, as we—each of us—might draw an etch like this to describe our ‘self’ (Figs. 2.2 and 2.3).

2.2 Relationally Constructing Self in Language

Dialogical Self is a relational concept of self. In Hermans’ view, “the autonomy of the self is not constituted in an internal intra-individual negotiation made by one I-position with respect to another, but it is ‘intensely interwoven with external dialogical relationships with actual others.’”¹³ Moments of insight into my self and my actions are relational to others, nurtured or discouraged by them. The relational *self* can be positioned at the intersection of time and space lines: in the present between past and future; in the relation between self and other, ‘I’ is positioned in an internal and external spatial relation.

In the constructionist view, the self does not have an existence apart from its surrounding, it is co-created in relation with society. The external *dialogue* between person and other is *interiorized* in a *society of selves*. “Society, from its side, is not ‘surrounding’ the self, influencing it as an external ‘determinant’, but there is a ‘society-of-selves’; that is, the self is in society and functions as an intrinsic part of it.”¹⁴ In the concept of the Dialogical Self, *internal self* and *external dialogue* are mutually inclusive: external conversations contribute to an inner sense of self.

The self is constructed in the context of internal relations, interpersonal relationships and large social systems: “We participate in multiple relationships—in the community, on the job, at leisure, vicariously with television figures—and we carry myriad traces of these relationships.”¹⁵ Gergen puts relationship at the heart of human being. His central thesis is that mental processes are in relationships, not so much in the head of individuals. There is no reality or beauty without humans constructing a reality together in language, actions, symbols and metaphors. In our culture, we have defined human being as physically and mentally separated from other selves. Gergen’s attempt is to generate an account of human action that can

¹³Gallagher 2009.

¹⁴Hermans and Gieser 2012, 2.

¹⁵Gergen 2009; Gergen et al. 2001

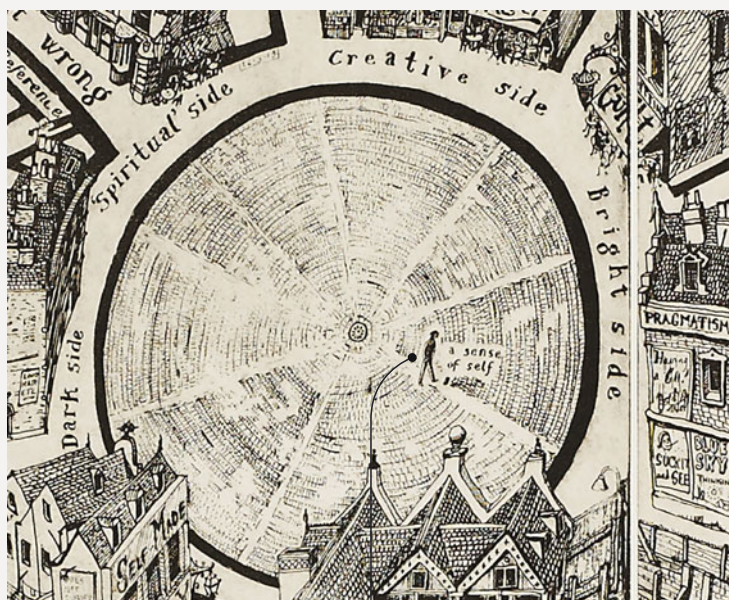
Grayson Perry, A Map of Days



Grayson Perry
A Map of Days, 2013
Etching from four plates
Sheet size: 119,5 x 161 cm
© Grayson Perry
Courtesy the Artist, Paragon Press and Victoria Miro, London

Fig. 2.2 Grayson Perry. A map of days

Grayson Perry, A Map of Days - Detail



Self as an empty space

"My sense of self is a tiny man, kicking a can down the road"

Grayson Perry
A Map of Days, 2013
Etching from four plates
Sheet size: 119,5 x 161 cm
© Grayson Perry
Courtesy the Artist, Paragon Press and Victoria Miro, London

Fig. 2.3 Grayson Perry. A map of days—detail

replace the assumption of separated selves¹⁶ with a vision of relationship. He demonstrates that virtually all intelligible action is “born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship.”¹⁷ Daniel Siegel describes our mind as constructing a linkage across time (past—present—future), and thus constructing ‘*our selves*’ across time.¹⁸

We are no longer limited by geographies, the world is real time connected. The positive and optimistic view of the constructionist orientation is expressed in the valuation of the dialogue as a tool for creating a better world: “If collaborative relationships are the source of inspiration and action within a group, it is essential that such relationships be used to reduce conflict across groups.”¹⁹ “Whatever is essential about human nature is to be found between people in a social dialogue, talk, conversation, debate and so forth, and not in the inner recesses of an individual abstracted from these ongoing transactions.”²⁰ This pre-supposes a level of *free space and free energy* in the relational conversation.

2.2.1 ‘Centering My High Note’

An example. In programs with leaders we stress the relational importance of verbal and non-verbal language. How do you express what you intend to say? ‘Do we *understand* each other?’ Are you aware of the words that you use? ‘Reaching out to grasp something’ ‘reaching out to comprehend something with your mind.’²¹ What kind of language is used here? It is a recurrent observation that people don’t *recognize* the difference until they actually *sense* it. As they want to articulate a change they would like to make, people don’t know how to find the right words. We recommend to use dynamic words, such as verbs, preferably in the gerund form (‘willing’, ‘doing’, ‘changing’, and so on) in combination with a noun. For one of our participants in a leadership program for IT professionals, it took a serious effort of several days to voice a core insight and action: ‘*centering my high note*’. The IT-leader explains what this means for her. She could only function at the highest level in the IT organization if she felt anchored, using the metaphor of the high note. She explained the metaphor. As a semi-professional singer, she knew that you can only sing a high note if you are well centered in your lower abdomen. She felt she was not centered enough in her working life. Once you discover the importance of expressing in a dynamic way, it makes people more precise in articulating what they want.

This example illustrates the importance of dynamic and accurate wordings *in relationships*. In two directions. For the IT-leader it was as important *for herself* to

¹⁶‘Bound self’ or ‘bounded identity’ implies being separated from other selves.

¹⁷Gergen 2009, xv.

¹⁸Siegel 2017, 18.

¹⁹Gergen 2009, 110.

²⁰Sampson 2008, 21.

²¹Siegel (2017) frames this ‘embodied language’ (21).

find exactly the right words, as she was not clear about what went on in herself, why she was so hesitant (internal dialogue). But also *for people around* her to whom she had to communicate about her uncertainty to accept a new role in the organization (external dialogue). By creating more clarity and expressing this in a dynamic way, she was able to understand what was going on *in* herself, and she could also communicate this more clearly than ever before. The fragment illustrates how language and use of words is affecting our view on reality, in a dual sense: internally and externally.

2.2.2 *Self as a Dynamic and Relational Verb*

Gergen reflects on this process in a beautiful way. How you express in wordings determines so much. Do you use as a noun or a verb? When he was writing his book *Relational Being*, he had “a strong urge in writing this book to use the phrase *relational self*, as opposed to *relational being*. This would have placed the volume more clearly in the long and estimable tradition of writings on the self. However, the term “self” carries with it strong traces of the individualist tradition. It suggests again a bounded unit, one that *interacts* with other distinct units. Further the “self” is a noun, and thus suggests a static and enduring entity. However, the term “being”, ambiguously poised as a participle, noun, and gerund, subverts the image of a bounded unit. In being, we are in motion, carrying with us a past as we move through the present into a becoming.”²² Gergen points out that we have to deal with language in its tendency to become static. This is also one of our most important roles in sessions where we work with leaders and transformation. To make people aware of the language they—often unconsciously—use, and the impact—often unintended—this language has on other people. If I say “*I rely on you*”, language defines *me* as separate from *you*. We have to deal with this characteristic of our language. We live in a world where we are born *in a language that already exists*. If we want to work and live in this world we have to deal with languages as pre-existing, already co-constructed actions of our human ancestors. I recommend people to experiment with language, or to learn a new language. By doing so, you enter a new relationally co-constructed world, that might make you more aware of your static worldview. And open our mind. “What if there were no nouns?” Experimenting with language can be exciting. The moment you try to articulate reality in terms of relation and movement your experience of the world surrounding you will completely change. Just try for one day. Using as many as possible relational and dynamic verbs. Gergen makes the thought provoking comparison of describing the world in terms of dancing. The romantic movie *August Rush* (2007) illustrates this. An orphanage boy, looking for his father and mother, starts unravelling the mystery of who he is. The theme of the movie is ‘*follow the music*’.

²²Gergen 2009, xxvi.

The heart of the story is that August Rush perceives everything in the world around him in terms of music, rhythm, beat, pulse. Every noise he hears, from rain to train, traffic and wind, he translates in terms of music and rhythm. The experiment to perceive reality through music is attractively visualized. This made me aware of how differently we experience the world we live in.

Sampson finishes his analysis of the self as social construction in a positive manner: “This dialogic construction of human nature will not reveal the essence of either party, but rather unfold an emerging, shifting and open horizon of human possibilities, which cannot be readily known in advance or outside the dialogue, but emerges as a property of the ongoing dialogue itself.”²³ This is an essential element of dialogue, as we will see later: *creating new knowledge and insights*. Sampson clearly demonstrates how much effort it takes to make relations truly dialogical and equal. I illustrate the importance with an example.

We worked with a leader, Chris, and his team as part of a larger leadership development program. At the beginning of the program, as a way of introducing the ‘open and equal’ atmosphere we wanted to create during the days of the program, the manager of the team shared a story with his colleagues. He opened himself up and he told about his private life. He told about his girlfriend and how he tried to influence her to buy a new car. He proudly told how he influenced her to buy a car she did *not* really want, but was more his preference. The audience sensed how Chris manipulated his girlfriend. Even when people in his team made some remarks, he felt proud about his way of influencing his girlfriend. Chris was not aware of any negative impact of his personal power over her and how his story affected the entire session very negatively. Nobody felt equal power or openness as a starting point for a conversation in the team. Nobody really opened in the group, it was merely politeness towards the leader. Was it a waste of time and energy? The leader apparently did not learn anything from these experiences. The team mistrusted him now even more than before. This is a main reason to have in-depth conversations with each of the participants, and the leader in particular, before starting a leadership transformation program. You have to establish a safe and secure basis as a starting point.²⁴

2.2.3 *Deriving Meaning from the Context*

This brings us to the point of context. Words we use derive their meaning in a context. The moment we isolate words from their contextual phrases, they might lose their meaning. “The meaning of a word is not contained within itself but derives from a process of coordinating words. Without this coordination the single words within a novel would mean very little.”²⁵ The next step to understand the

²³Sampson 2008, 24.

²⁴See also Kohlrieser et al. 2012.

²⁵Gergen 2009, 32.

implications of social constructionist view is that this also applies for acts. "...there is no action that has meaning in itself, that is, an action that can be isolated and identified for what it is. There are no acts of love, altruism, prejudice, or aggression as such."²⁶ It is impossible to define 'good' leadership, without knowing the context. Some people think good leadership is characterized by a specific set of personality traits and competencies. In my view this is impossible. You have to pay attention to the context. Words and actions derive meaning through reciprocity, and come to life or are destroyed in coordinated action. Let me illustrate this by an example. In one of the sessions with a team of leaders, a financial officer, Karl, stood up in the group and started telling a story about his way of working in a very precise rational and conscientious way. As a financial officer, he knew the importance of guidelines and following the rules, designed to bring the corporate values to life. At the same time, Karl described his way of working with his colleagues as very open for their feedback. His co-workers had the opposite feeling and harbored the perception that the CFO was *not* open for their opinion and continued on his own trail of thinking. While listening to questions and remarks of his colleagues in the meeting, Karl's non-verbal behavior changed. From using his hands openly in front of his body, he crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows. What his co-fellows observed was a closed non-verbal posture.

Without being consciously aware, the CFO in the example is impacted not only by the content of the words, but also by the 'atmosphere' around it. He was not aware of feeling resistance, but his bodily gestures changed unintentionally without him knowing consciously. In relational influencing, it is not about wording, but also about other elements such as the non-verbal behavior and the emotional atmosphere. Co-action is more than words alone. Speaking and writing are physical actions, as other bodily movements such as laughing, crying, and shuffling and so on. The distinction between verbal and non-verbal communication is false. They are mutually related. Experiment with listening to the verbal expressions without looking at the non-verbal behavior. Look at the non-verbal without listening to the words spoken. As in our example, it is one and the same and, if it is not congruent, it causes confusion. As "unified acts of coordination, with words, movements, facial expressions forming a seamless whole."²⁷

2.2.4 *Independency as Relationally Embedded*

In developing a relational view of human action, Gergen makes one further step in terms of causality. He describes the issue as "On the one hand there is *causal* explanation, favored by most social scientists. People change because of external forces impinging on them. As commonly said, for example, people can be

²⁶Gergen 2009, 33.

²⁷Gergen 2009, 34.

‘influenced’, ‘educated’, ‘rewarded’, ‘threatened’, or ‘forced’ to change their behavior. On the other hand there are explanations lodged in the assumption of *voluntary agency*, favored in our daily relations and in courts of law. For example, we say that people are free to choose between right and wrong, or to decide what they want to do in life.”²⁸ Both are not satisfactory. Gergen develops an alternative way of explaining human action: it is through collaborative action that meaning emerges. Causality and agency follow from relationship, historically determined and culturally specific.²⁹ What we traditionally identify as independent elements are mutually dependent for defining its meaning. Gergen gives the example of a man wearing a mitt, standing alone in the field. This does not define baseball. It is when we bring all the elements into a *mutually defining relationship* that we can speak about playing baseball. We can speak of the baseball game as “a form of life in this case that is constituted by an array of mutually defining “entities.”³⁰ Let me illustrate this. I had an in-depth dialogue with a leader, Derek, who characterized himself as extremely independent. Basically, he kept some core values in his heart that he did not allow to be violated in whatever way. During his private and professional life, he took tough decisions, such as not accepting shares of the family company. His independence was the most important good in his life. In our conversation, there was a phase where Derek became aware of this fixed mindset in relation to his wish to be truly independent. Confronted with the question if he was born with a fixed set of values in his mindset, he became silent. Step by step his awareness grew that he developed that attitude over time in his youth at home. The conversation made Derek think about his independency, and what this meant for his flexibility. In the organization, people characterized him as ‘inflexible’. He started looking at the relational field in his family and organization through different eyes and became aware that true independency is relationally embedded.

2.2.5 “To Be Is to Be Relational”

As a partner in dialogue, I bring the consequences of social constructionism to the table as a thinking exercise. I invite people to experiment with this dynamic way of looking at the world around them. In my own experience, this also caused a massive change in my worldview. I am educated and trained to believe in ‘the truth’. As a student in philosophy and a doctor in social sciences, I was predetermined for the truth. Often I was even thinking that I was a gatekeeper of that form of truth. Regularly, I shouted internally, “*that’s not true!*” Quite often, I express this verbally. And I observe many colleagues in business and academia doing the same. Since I deeply understand what it means to *be relational*, I have become more

²⁸Gergen 2009, 49.

²⁹Cf. *reticular causality* Libbrecht 2007, 96.

³⁰Gergen 2009, 54. He uses the term ‘confluence’.

prudent and careful. I would describe this process of change as a *paradigmatic transformation*. This way of using *theory in practice* is what Gergen wants to reach with his book *Relational Being*, using *it* as a living metaphor, as an open and unfinished, dynamic concept. “Thus, what is novel for us really is a novel *creation*, an *emergent*, something uniquely new that never has existed before and not just a re-arranging of already existing entities. Thus instead of patterns and repetitions, we must become oriented in our inquiries toward uniqueness, toward the noticing and describing of singularities.”³¹ “To be” is “to be related.”³²

What does this mean for our theory and practice? Core of Dialogical Self Theory and Social Constructionism are permanently changing relations, internally and externally. At the heart of both views is self as a *continuously changing process of relational co-creating and relational positioning in space and time*.

2.3 Key Concepts in Dialogical Self Theory

I-positioning can be external and/or internal positioning. As we have seen, positioning is relational, I-positions are—purposely, or by coincidence—‘co-created’ in the past and retained within the personal repertoire of I-positions. I-positions can be used to develop the self.

In the notion of *I-Position*, multiplicity and unity are combined in one and the same composite term: ‘I as ambitious’, ‘I as anxious’, ‘my father as an optimist’, ‘my beloved children’, ‘my irritating colleagues’ and so on. These examples³³ illustrate how by using *I, me or mine* unity and continuity are created in a multiplicity of different, even contrasting, aspects of the self as irritating versus beloved, and ambitious versus anxious. An example. A 45 year old sales director, Adam, uses the following words to describe the way he functions in the business and privately. ‘I as very result-oriented’; ‘I as thinking and acting very quickly’ as opposed to ‘I as impatient and restless’; ‘I as having no sincere interest in other people’. In terms of discipline, he characterizes his way of acting as ‘I as undisciplined in my thinking’ (especially those aspects where I have my doubts and don’t know the answer yet) versus ‘I as very disciplined’, where he refers to the performance he shows to other people.

2.3.1 An Act of Self-Reflection (Meta-Position)

In using *I*, we see there is a level of unity, and the expressions itself refer to a multiplicity. In the notion of *meta-position* “the *I* is able to leave a specific position,

³¹Shotter 2010, 3.

³²Krishnamurti (1895–1986) was a speaker and writer on philosophical and spiritual subjects. Many of his lectures are about the self and developing the mind Bohm 1996, 47.

³³Hermans and Konopka 2010, 9.

and even a variety of positions and observe them from the outside, as an act of self-reflection.”³⁴ The self touches an overview from which different positions can be reflected in how they are interconnected as a superordinate position—a product of two or more positions.”³⁵ To continue with Adam, in the conversation about this multiplicity of contrasting aspects of his self, he tries to comprehend and verbalize the unity, which he feels below his impatience. He expressed: “When I am driving my car, when I am jogging and when I have ‘open time’ (= no appointments in my calendar), I feel rest.” Articulating this pattern meant for him taking a meta-position as regards to his hasty life. He formulated a kind of conclusion: “I pass these states of rest (driving, jogging and ‘open time’) over into my daily functioning”.

In this example, meta-position refers to the moment and process of reflecting on his manner of thinking and acting. The notion of a *third position* refers to the process of reconciling two conflicting I-positions.³⁶ In creating a third position, the two original ones can be unified without removing their original differences and tension. Applying this on the example of Adam. If we follow him in the next step from the perspective of the *third position*, we observe primarily that there is a strong resemblance with the meta-position. But we make an essential addition. In the process of reflection, a *third position* was formed, as he understood how “I as deliberately disciplined in what I do *and* how I think” might bring more unity (rest and relaxation) to his functioning as a director and improve his performance.

By intentionally formulating an insight and an action, Adam combines discipline with his behavioral (sales) quality, added with discipline in his *behaving*, and, in his *thinking*. As Adam has both qualities, it is primarily about applying these, more than developing from scratch. What happened in the process is that space was created in the process of thinking and reflecting of Adam. In the conversation, his normal speed was *slowed down*, just by asking some questions that had a deeper reach than he was used to. And by not automatically reacting to his typical kind of ‘sales’ and ‘speedy managers’ behaviors and words. And by striving for answers that were real answers to the questions.

2.3.2 *Being (De-)Stabilized (Centering and De-Centering)*

Another important distinction is made between *centering* and *decentering* processes. *Decentering* processes are “centrifugal movements that differentiate or disorganize the existing position repertoire so that it becomes open to innovation.”³⁷ As an example ‘I as an engineer’ can be decentered by ‘I as a dancing teacher’. The rational engineer can be destabilized by allowing intuitive and

³⁴Hermans and Konopka 2010, 9.

³⁵Raggatt 2012, 31.

³⁶Hermans and Konopka 2010.

³⁷Raggatt 2012, 31. Innovation is here meant in the sense of ‘renewal’.

emotional ways of working as a dancing teacher. *Centering* processes are described as “centripetal movements that contribute to the organization and integration of the position repertoire.”³⁸ ‘I as a mountaineering guide’ integrates two opposing I-Positions (‘I as autocratic leader’ and ‘I as motivated to develop people’) and is an illustration of a centering process.

Most people are not aware of some of their I-positions as such, in relation to the issue/dilemma at hand. I-positions come to consciousness in relation. As an example: ‘I as a horseman’ is—of course—known as an I-position, but not in relation to ‘I as a change leader’. Connecting these I-positions in a new way can be the source of a fundamental shift. This might transform the self, positioned differently within a newly organized position repertoire. The process of positioning and repositioning is enabled by a generative internal and/or external dialogue, where people feel safe to make new connections in the position repertoire. In Chap. 6, several cases are given to further explain and illustrate the key-concepts of the dialogical self theory, such as centering and decentering, core-, meta-, third-, and promoter-position. Summarized:

- *Core-position*: a position on which the functioning of other I-positions depends.
- *Meta-position*: a superordinate position, the product of two or more I-positions.
- *Promoter-position*: an I-position which gives order and direction in the development of the position repertoire as a whole.
- *Third-position*: a mediator between two conflicting positions.
- *Centering and decentering*: integrating and disintegrating an I-position repertoire.

2.4 Information and Space in Positioning Self

We have to remember, that what we observe is not nature herself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.

W. Heisenberg³⁹

This step in the process of thought developed in this book requires some extra attention and effort to understand what is meant. Normally in a conversation this can be explained related to the level of understanding and experience of the other person. We want to understand what ‘*relational co-creating and relational I-positioning*’ means and how it works in practice, and how you can apply this yourself. Therefore we need to explore how human beings get information from the world they live in. Ulrich Libbrecht⁴⁰ designed a model that enables us to analyze and

³⁸Raggatt 2012, 31.

³⁹*Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (1958). Lectures delivered at University of St. Andrews, Scotland, Winter 1955–56.

⁴⁰Libbrecht 2007.

understand the way we try to comprehend the world around us. We explore the concepts *energy*, *information*, and *space* as Libbrecht describes them. The concept is visualized and used to describe how I-positioning works and how we use different sources (experience, knowledge, action). The concepts of *creating space* and *free energy* are critical to understand and apply these processes.

I first met Professor Libbrecht as a keynote speaker in 1987 at a Physical Science conference at the Radboud University named *Tao: the Way of Nature*. He is a mathematician, a sinologist and a comparative philosopher. After the conference, we invited him to lecture for a small group of students at our university. Here he explained his comparative model of philosophy. What helped me was his distinction between bound and free energy. The main message I got from the lectures of Libbrecht was: there are different sources to get information from the world around us and in ourselves: from your body as being bound to nature, through your rationality as knowledge you get from objective science and logic, and through your experience you learn about subjectivity, e.g. through literature, art and religion. Accepting that one exclusive mode does not exist is an insight, which I apply on a daily base in my work with leaders and members of organizations. How to reconcile the sources of physical acting with rational thinking and emotional experiencing. In my own practice, it was tough to reconcile my emotional experiences with my professional rational life as a managing director of our company at that time.

2.4.1 *Energy and Information*

Let's explore how Libbrecht's view can help us in understanding these three sources of information. He builds his concept, starting from two basic axes, derived from Chinese thinking about the cosmos: *energy* (*ch'i*) and *information*. Both are chosen as—in his view—they are paradigm free and all-pervading. "Energy provides a dynamic universe that can be considered a phenomenological *space*, i.e. a space that consists of events. Information transforms it into an epistemological *space*, i.e. a space that can be known and described."⁴¹ Information cannot exist without energy, as nothing can happen without energy. Energy without information has no epistemological meaning, as there is nothing more to say. It is as it is. Libbrecht suggests to use *energy* to describe every act, idea and feeling. Changes in the energy balances inform us about the worlds around and in us. These changes enable us to act instinctively (as bound to nature), to think more objectively (as in science) and to experience the *numen*, the mystery of life (as in religion and mystic). To give an example. You write or say 'Golden Gate Bridge' and "voila, energy has information—it stands for something other than the pure form of energy

⁴¹Libbrecht 2007, 93.

that manifested from a sea of possibilities to this one actuality.”⁴² Information expresses itself in the world by energy transformations, the unfolding of a potential into an actual something. Energy-as-information can be felt in your mental experience as it emerges moment by moment.

Libbrecht differentiates between bound and free energy. *Bound energy* designates “energy, which is confined to a fixed pattern.”⁴³ We can think here about so-called dead matter, from quarks to organic molecules, where there is no freedom. The behavior of such dead matter is predictable. Although many of us want to return to the state of natural, ecological innocence and happiness, this has become impossible for humans, as we created a world that is not only ruled by nature and instincts. But also by consciousness, in Libbrecht’s words *free energy*. Life is characterized by free energy in varying degrees: plants have a limited degree of freedom. They can turn to face light, which a stone can’t, they can very slow and gradually move towards the most favorable environment. Animals have a higher degree of free energy: they can move within their ecological environment, adjusting it by building nests, webs, dens, etcetera. They have a certain freedom in terms of choosing their food, habitat, partner, etcetera. As far as we know now humans have the highest degree of free energy: “We know this from the cultural creations developed in the course of human evolution. Culture is actually a collection of new behavioral patterns produced by labor. It made humans very mobile creatures, drastically changing their environment and also adapting to it.”⁴⁴ In this sense, humans have been able to create transformational space in history and change their lives fundamentally, from living in caves as hunters and farmers to living in cities, spending leisure time in shopping malls to working in global virtual teams on virtual tasks. Free energy expresses itself in increasing degrees of change. Free energy is conditional to develop a sense of self in the act of ‘kicking a can down the road’. Free energy is condition zero for dialogue, as we will demonstrate later.

2.4.2 *Free Energy*

What do we mean by *free energy*? Libbrecht distinguishes between immanence and transcendence, two important terms in understanding this process. “Immanence is derived from in + manēre, ‘staying in’; animals are nature’s captives but humans also have a considerable immanent dimension. Transcendence means ‘rising

⁴²Siegel 2017, 31. Siegel, too, comes to the conclusion that *energy and information flow* is the central element of a system that is the origin of the self (and the mind). He gives a nice example of how energy as information works. I am writing this fragment here in my book, and my energy was transformed in my nervous system, activated my fingers to type these words to send meaning to you, the reader of this text. In the flow change is involved, between you and me, change in location, and, change in time. (56).

⁴³Libbrecht 2007, 94.

⁴⁴Libbrecht 2007, 94.

above': in their culture, humans rise above nature. This does not, however, mean that humans are transcendent beings; they are not gods or pure spirits elevated above earth, they remain rooted in the earth: they cannot escape the need to feed, sleep and reproduce."⁴⁵ For our understanding dialogue and self, 'being rooted in nature, in the natural body'—with its immanent, bound energy processes—is an important aspect. People tend to underestimate their dependency of human *nature*, as in the fast moving and changing world we tend to think that we are able to adapt to whatever we want. *Free energy is the human capacity to move away from immanent natural patterns.* Without this our boundary would have been the pattern in nature, which works as it works, reticular, ecologic and cyclic. We would be continuously living in the present, without mindful awareness.

Libbrecht introduces the term *information* as our informative relation to the universe. "All energy that transforms itself into informative phenomenality comes from the cosmos."⁴⁶ Following Chinese philosophical intuition, Libbrecht defines the universe as an *energy (ch'i) space*. By defining space in this way, it allows us to look at space from different angles: as *energetic* space, as *informative* space and also as *ethical* space. For our purpose this is important, as *space* is a central element in the process of dialogue. Libbrecht gives a more detailed definition of each.

2.4.3 Energy Space

Energetic space is a complex whole of force fields: space is energy. One could compare this with a magnetic field, filling the entire space, not directly perceptible, but by its effects. "In a *ch'i* space, phenomena can influence each other from a distance because they are linked to each other by a force field."⁴⁷ Energetic means moving, changing continuously. Causal relations are like network relations, reticular causalities, instead B bilaterally being caused by A. Siegel formulates this as energy and information flowing within and between a self and other people *in patterns of communication*. "We can say that energy and information flow occurs between our body and the non-body components of the world—the world of 'others' and our environment—as well as within us—within our body, including its brain."⁴⁸

Informative space refers to how we acquire information from the world around us by getting in an epistemological relation with it as we are able to transcend nature, to deviate from natural predisposed patterns, to 'free energy'. In this relation we get information from and about the world, which we try to verbalize in language

⁴⁵Libbrecht 2007, 95.

⁴⁶Libbrecht 2007, 95.

⁴⁷Libbrecht 2007, 96.

⁴⁸Siegel 2017, 33.

and understand in concepts (science), translate in actions and interventions (technology, architecture, etcetera).

Ethical space means that not everything that is possible is also allowed. We can build a house, but we can also make a nuclear bomb, using our capability to move away from immanent natural patterns. So ethical and legal limits are placed on what man may achieve with his free energy. “Yet even with these ethical restrictions, the number of new patterns of order allowed remains extremely large, since I can always combine and recombine. This is expressed abundantly clearly in the number of cultural patterns, of which there are a great many varieties, and thereby also illustrates the wealth of human potential.”⁴⁹

2.4.3.1 Arrow and Field Energy

In this energetic-informative cosmos, the world in which we live, we are able to direct energy in different ways. In the process of ‘changing the world around us’ free energy can be *concentrated* and focused on a goal, like an *arrow* on a target. Cultural patterns—technological, architectural, artistic, and religious—are the result of *concentrated energy*. You deliberately try to reach something through focusing, and reaching a well-defined target needs a form of discipline. As an example, in sports we see that you need a strong will and hard discipline to become Olympic champion.

Free energy can also be *deconcentrated*, and released in a *field*. With field energy, you surrender to the effect of the field, which induces a particular experience in you, without knowing exactly ‘how’.⁵⁰ When we eat we destroy patterns of order constructed by nature, but this is to protect our body against entropic breakdown. Libbrecht gives an illustration of the magnetic needle: “Imagine I am some kind of magnetic needle: I can point the needle at a particular goal by tightening a screw; but if I release the needle it will be influenced by the magnetic field and will be subject to its particular effect.”⁵¹ An example: if you consciously try to reach something through sensing the atmosphere during a conversation in the room, you reach this by *non-focusing*. In terms of concentration and discipline, I call this *soft discipline*, where you reach something through *deconcentrating*. This quality of energy and will is important for understanding the transformational processes in dialogue. We will come back to this description in defining characteristics of dialogue in Chap. 4. A good dialogue can take both forms of free energy, concentrated and deconcentrated.

⁴⁹Libbrecht 2007, 98. See also Hickman 2016. Hickman brings the concepts of effective and ethical leadership together in her view on *good leadership*.

⁵⁰Siegel 2017, 33: “On the level of neuroscience, no one understands how neural firing might create the subjectively felt experience of a thought, memory or emotion. We just don’t know.” Brain scientists use the term *neural representation* to indicate a pattern of neural firing that stands for something other than itself.

⁵¹Libbrecht 2007, 99.

Let us have a closer look at the two forms information can take, *arrow* and *field energy*, and apply that to *consciousness*. I can concentrate my energy on the patterns of order of a particular object, analyze them and learn to understand their structure. I do not create the structure of the object, e.g. the DNA structure of the genes is developed by nature itself, revealed by man. We do not create the structure of an object, but we form or construct it in our mind. What we call science is “nothing but reading out patterns of order in nature.”⁵² We call this *knowledge*, objectivity, science. In the course of evolution life evolves in complexity and finally produced man. “It is important to note that not only the material structure becomes increasingly complex, but at the same time energetic binding loosens: energy is freeing itself. In man, part of it becomes free in what we traditionally call: mind.”⁵³ In *logos* (reason) the distance between the observer (subject) and the observed (object) is maximal. We use terms as objectivity, science, a statement is true or false (can’t be both), controlling, following the laws of logic and mathematics. This way of freeing energy has led to brilliant innovative discoveries, we are able to lead our lives as we do in our globalized culture thanks to this human faculty. On the other hand the global crises that we are confronted with nowadays refer back to the fact that we are not able to organize and control our life without mistakes. Man-made disasters lead back directly to this failing capability.

I can also deconcentrate my energy as a field of *experience*. “However, experiences cannot be made accessible by insight—no one can find out by analysis what the scent of a rose is, or love, a musical experience or a mystical experience. The word ‘experience’ derives from the Latin verb *experiri*, to ‘test or to try’.”⁵⁴ We have to go through an experience to know what is being referred to. And to undergo an experience you have to open up and become receptive. In a mystical experience oneness of subject and object are maximal. Here expressions are used as experiencing and subjectivity, which applies to art, religion, and literature. We use concepts such as authenticity, drama, symbolism and storytelling. A narrative can have more meanings simultaneously, being genuine and not corresponding to objective reality. Most people never reach the highest stages of knowing and experiencing. That is the reason why eminent science takes so much training, time and effort. The same for art, literature and religion. In Libbrecht’s comparative model he refers to the Buddhist tradition, where centuries were spent in perfecting the states of reaching mystic union. In meditation⁵⁵ the highest state is being mindful, without interfering, without ‘doing’. Like *thinking* (objectivity, science,

⁵²Libbrecht 2007, 101.

⁵³Libbrecht 2007, 74.

⁵⁴Libbrecht 2007, 101.

⁵⁵Ricard refers to an ethical component in mindfulness. To be fully aware of what goes on in and outside of us and to understand what is the nature of our perceptions opens the ethical dimension “to discern whether or not it is beneficial to maintain this or that particular state of mind or to continue to pursue whatever we are doing at the present moment.” (Ricard 2011, 67). In the act of slowing down in time and space, an ethical dimension of our being might emerge spontaneously. What we actively need to do is: slowing down.

logic), *experiencing* (subjectivity, religion, art, literature, dialogic) can be perfected in years of training with the right mixture of hard and soft discipline, concentrated and deconcentrated energy.

2.4.3.2 Nature, Knowledge, and Experience

In ‘perfect’ science, the relation between subject and object is independent from one another ($S \neq O$), the observation/experiment is replicable by another scientist with the same outcome. In a ‘perfect’ mystical experience, subject is *one* with the object ($S = O$).⁵⁶ This description is an ideal, most of our ‘scientific insights’ and ‘mystic experiences’ are somewhere between the two extremes. The message is that *both* sources of getting information from the world around us are appropriate, depending on context and objective. This is important for leaders, as they have to use all three sources in the process of influencing, leading and following (Fig. 2.4).

2.4.4 Creating Space in Dialogical Relations

Now we are ready to apply what we know about ‘space’ in dialogical relations. Masayoshi Morioka is a professor of Psychology in Kyoto. He uses the Japanese word *ma* (間) to describe what happens in a conversation and applies this to the dialogical self concept. The Japanese word *ma* has multiple meanings. “It can imply a space between two things, or it can indicate a space between one moment and another moment.”⁵⁷ So *ma* refers to both *space and time*. In Japanese culture, space is perceived “according to the dynamism inherent in the non-separation of space and time.”⁵⁸ The word *ma* is also used to describe the *quality of interpersonal relations*. The process of talking and listening creates unique *ma* between persons. The character *ma* also indicates *the space between you and me*, and the *creative tension in between*. Without this lively tension, *ma* between individuals might be lost. The relational aspect of *you and me* is represented in one and the same Japanese character. *Ma* can refer to both external relationships with others, but also with other voices in an internal dialogue. Lastly, *ma* can also refer to a pause, a—significant—*silence* in the internal and/or external conversation. In this silence, a process of distancing oneself from oneself might start, and new meaning can be generated. “The quality of time experience of ‘ma’ is not linear, such as past—present—future, but a non-linear condensed one.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶See also: Jaworsky 2012.

⁵⁷Morioka 2012, 398.

⁵⁸Morioka 2012, 398.

⁵⁹Morioka 2008, 105.

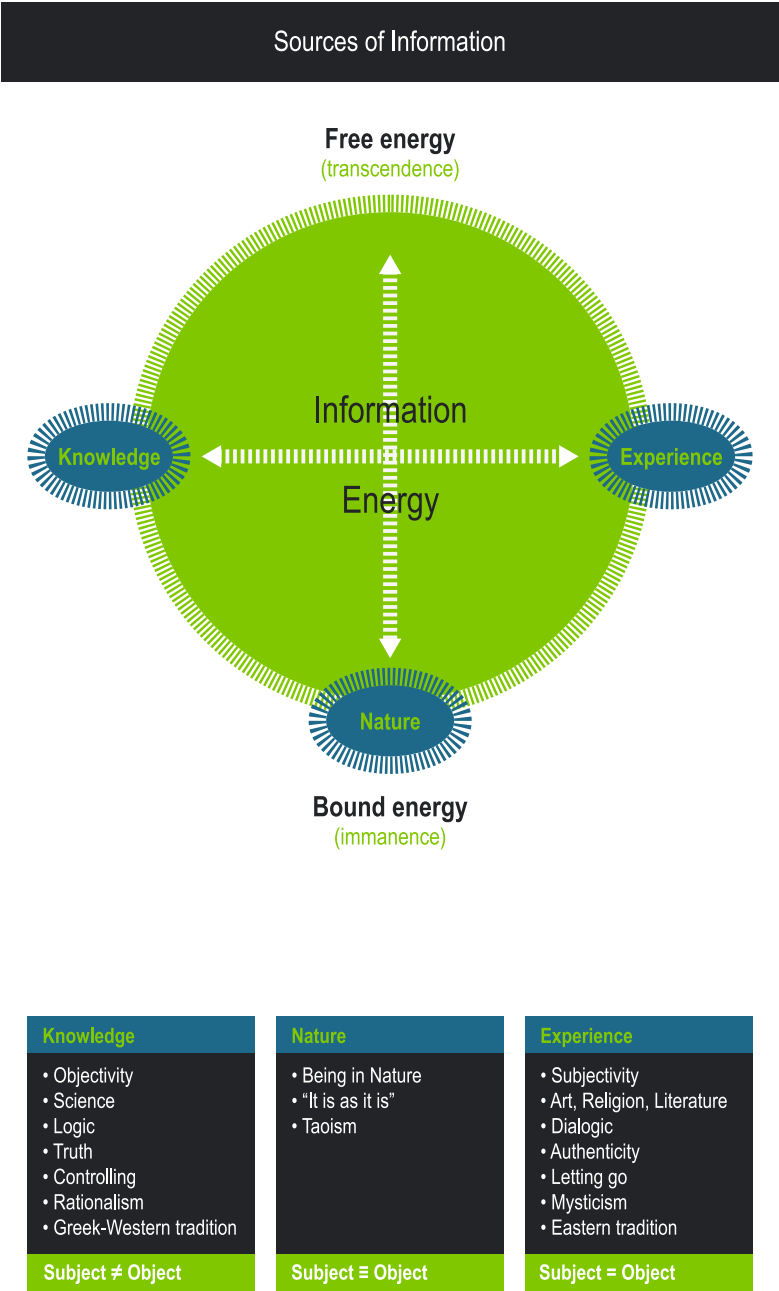


Fig. 2.4 Sources of information

The Japanese word *ma* combines in one concept: *physical space, temporal space, relationship and silence*. *Ma* can be ‘a living pause’ in a dialogue, where two minds are connected.⁶⁰ The concepts of *creating ‘ma’*—as a living pause—and *freeing energy* enable us to understand the processes of change and transformation. Heifetz also mentions the power of silence in case you have to work with wicked issues (adaptive challenges) and to convince people emotionally, not only rationally. His advice is to ‘allow for silence’ as “silence gives people time to absorb what you just have said. When you encounter resistance to a proposed intervention, remind yourself how hard it is for your audience to take in your message because it may be about losses they have to sustain.”⁶¹ Crossing a boundary and engaging in a dialogical uncertainty is part of that process. You don’t know the outcome beforehand. This applies to the levels of self, team and organizational and societal change, as we shall see later in the description of case-studies.

2.4.5 *Space as ‘Space Between’*

Intentional change and transformation presuppose a level of free energy as a necessary condition. This does not imply that there cannot be change processes *without free energy*, as nature is characterized by continuous change: those who continuously adapt to these constantly changing natural conditions survive as the fittest. Human beings are born as bound energy, with the possibility of freeing energy. In two extremes. We can do this *rationally*, by trying to analyze, master and control the world around us as much isolated as possible from our individual subjectivity. And we can use our free energy to *experience* the world around us *relationally* and as co-actions of fabricating a world with other people. Actuality shows that *both* are active in our daily life. From materialist and reductionist perspectives and also based on neuroscientific studies and the results of psychological experiments, numerous theorists argue that self-agency is an illusion. Characteristic for this view is that intentional self-action is positioned *in* the individual system, *or* it does not exist. Our answer here is that action has to be relationally positioned.

“If we view the self as something that emerges from intercorporeal and intersubjective interactions, and develops in social interactions with others, then we are forced to face the question of autonomy in a different way.”⁶² Meaning and emotional significance are co-constituted in the interaction, not in the private

⁶⁰Morioka 2015, 81.

⁶¹Heifetz et al. 2009, 267.

⁶²Gallagher 2009, 492; Gallagher 2012.

boundaries of your head. From the earliest point in our lives we are involved in interactions. Through all kind of embodied practices we build step by step an understanding of others, and also of our self. This allows us to think about the self-in-the-other and the other-in-the-self. This could help us in the process of reconciling independence and dependence. It enables us to relationally position ourselves in a space between me and the other, be it an individual, groups, a thing, etcetera. In this sense *space* is *space between*. We can describe space in conversation as *physical* (how is our non-verbal behavior?), as *logic* (how is our mode of arguing with one another?) and as numinous *field* space (how do we experience what is going on between us?). All three are inter-spaces on different levels, and as such important in being relational. For leaders all three levels of inter-spaces are important in the process of leading and following. You can't skip one of the three by saying that you exclusively work on the rational level, without being affected by the experiential and physical.

We assume there is an I that has the capability to free energy to transcend the immanent physical energy through reasoning and experiencing. A self, an *I*, that is able to consciously change natural patterns, that breaks through Nature as it is. This happens in dialogue, internally and externally (and of course in other type of human actions). Let us explore the concept of *transpositioning*, as the act of transposing an I-position from one domain of your life to another.

2.5 Transposing Patterns of Behavior

Information can be seen simply as energy patterns with meaning beyond the energy flow itself.

Daniel Siegel⁶³

In a conversation with one of my clients, we were talking about contributing to the common good, as one of the drivers of my partner to do the work he does. While he was sharing his experience of using the art of telling narratives to empower his management team, he said: "We want to transpose the behavior from one domain in our work to another". I had an 'eureka-moment', a new term emerged: *transposing or transpositioning*. As transposing the mindset (thinking, feeling and acting) of one domain of your work/life to another via the act of I-positioning.

We describe *transpositioning* as "*bringing I-positions from one domain in life/work to another in order to create transformation in the position repertoire.*"

- Transpositioning

We speak of transpositioning of I-positions if someone transposes a state of mind of being a 'fowler' in her private life to being a 'coach' in the company.

⁶³Siegel 2017, 319.

The ‘energy’ of one I-position is brought to the other. This might happen intentionally, and doesn’t exclude that it can also happen spontaneously.

- Transforming

Transpositioning is aimed at creating a transformation in how you think, feel and act in one or more I-positions.

As a boxer a man felt very relaxed under the heaviest stress situation in the ring during a fight. As a general manager he was easily brought out of balance and would become emotional if he got instructions that he did not like at first sight.

Let me give an example to illustrate this mechanism. I gave a lecture on Dialogical Self Theory for a management team of an organization. During the coffee break, I spoke with a program manager. She reacted on what I had said about people taking different I-positions in life, without intentionally connecting these with one another. She said she was a beekeeper in her private life. She recognized how her way of acting as a beekeeper could be transposed to her role as a program manager. How she ‘managed’ a program was very much influenced by how she worked with a swarm of bees. In the act of becoming aware of the similarity of the two situations, the process of transpositioning takes place. From now on she will be conscious of the two I-positions. The ‘state of mind’ when working with bees is—by having a short conversation in a coffee-break—consciously transposed to her job with programs and their managers.

2.5.1 *An Empty Self?*

Looking back on the central concepts we developed in this chapter, we need some reflection. First a scientific one. What needs to be explored further and demonstrated more clearly is *how* the Dialogical Self Theory is related to the body. Although we started with a strong emphasis on the embodied mind (*the body in the mind*),⁶⁴ there is still a lot of research to do in this domain. With this book I contribute to this discussion by developing a research concept based on the scientific work of Libbrecht: Nature (body), Knowledge (rational thinking), and Experience (subjective feeling). I pay attention to the non-verbal aspects of leading and following in my work. We propose to videotape conversations to get a clearer view on how new meaning emerges differentially in a dialogical or debate relation. Non-verbal, physical presence of partners in conversations is important. The same

⁶⁴Hermans et al. 1992. See also: Lakoff and Johnson 1999. See also Siegel 2017: “...our mental activities, such as emotions, thoughts, and memories, are directly shaped by, if not outright created by, our body’s whole state....and that our relationships with others, the social environment in which we live, directly influence our mental life.” (10–11). Siegel’s concluding remark and starting point for the rest of his book is that the mind (the self) can be seen as *relational* and *embodied*. The contribution of Siegel’s research is that he integrates brain research in his approach (which is out of scope for this book).

applies for the researcher. Can we develop a first-person research method, which we combine with objective data, gathered in the research process? And, in the terminology of Gergen, you cannot ask a question (on paper, on screen, face-to-face) without making a relational impact.⁶⁵ How to make this an integral part of our research methodology?

Secondly, reflecting on I-positions and the society of mind. What is the status of I-positions? Do they exist separately from being formulated in language? Are they constructs to make statements in narratives about myself and others? An I-position has no ontological status, i.e. an I-position does not have an objective reality, separately from the relation with 'me'. A tree or a mountain exists, independently from me, defining 'trees' and 'mountains' in words. An I-position has an epistemological meaning: it is a relational and dialogical construct (externally and/or internally) as part of a self-narrative. Theoretically, everything (word, object, metaphor, symbol, and etcetera) might get the function of an I-position in a self-narrative. You can describe I-positions as 'empty' concepts, which you can apply on a variety of situations. The meaning it gets, is dependent on the relational context in which it is co-constructed.

What we want to reach with the International Society for Dialogical Science and with the Dialogical Self Academy is to systematically train researchers and consultants/psychotherapists/leaders in applying the spirit of the Dialogical Self approach. With this book I hope to contribute to a more detailed description of how these internal and external dialogues take place. There is inherently a tension between a prescribed manual for an objectifying research project and this type of research, where the subject of the researcher is essential for relation with the other subject 'under research'.

2.6 Reflections on My Personal Narrative 1

In this chapter about the Dialogical Self Theory, I use—as a form of auto-ethnography⁶⁶—the development of my 'self' as a case of description and analysis. The first moment of applying self-reflection and dialogue systematically in my life was in 1987. At that time, I did my first self-investigation as part of the certification process in the Self-Confrontation Method with my supervisor at the university. The first phase consists in constructing your self-narrative in terms of 'valuations'. These are 'units of meaning' where you express in your own wording aspects of your self-narrative. You formulate as accurately as possible. The second phase explores these valuations affectively by scoring with a list of affect-terms. The last phase

⁶⁵By being present and asking a question (Presence) you cannot 'undo' your relational act as if it is an objective one (Absence). Ctrl-alt-delete doesn't exist in human interaction. You can forget. You can forgive. You can't delete.

⁶⁶Gergen 2009, 237.

consists in having a conversation with the psychologist to talk about the results.⁶⁷ Then follows a process of change, validating and re-constructing your self-narrative.

2.6.1 *Fragments of My Self-Narrative in 1987*

To give an impression of my self-narrative at the time, some valuations that were important for me in terms of their affective profile are exemplified here. These were aspects of my life I felt very positive about in that period (max = 100⁶⁸): “I recognized something of my essence in Tai Chi and Taoism that I further developed.” (90); “As a child I felt really happy with my mother: drinking tea together, helping her in the household.” (88); “As working principle in my life (inclusively work), I agree to take only ‘*what I truly understand*’.” (81). At the other end of the affective spectrum, the emotionally negative part of my self-narrative. “My mother has an attitude to me: ‘behave normal, don’t shine out’, ‘maybe you are not able to do that!’” (2); “To empower myself surviving in the ruthless competitiveness at boarding school, I lost contact in these six years with whom I truly am.” (10); “What I learned through negative experiences, is that you have to wear a ‘coat’ to not go down in society (as in the sphere of competitiveness at boarding school)”. (15); “Leaving home for boarding school as a twelve year old boy felt for me like being separated, as becoming homeless from my secure family environment.” (29).

In the analysis my supervisor and I made at the time, we concluded that for me ‘playing’ (“As a child I loved playing, losing myself in the play”) was very important, it was positively correlated⁶⁹ to a lot of positive experiences in my life: primary school, my mother, my wife, practicing Tai Chi, spirituality. The opposite extreme was ‘boarding school’, where my trust and safety were severely shocked. I most frequently scored feelings as trust, freedom, self-esteem, energy, strength; least frequent were feelings such as guilt, tenderness, despondence, anger and self-alienation.

2.6.2 *Becoming Aware of I-Positions*

In this self-investigation, I also formulated an I-position in the form of ‘my secret name’. I literally formulated: ‘my secret name gives direction to my attitude in my

⁶⁷Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995, 14–72.

⁶⁸General well-being is measured with the following formula: $Q = P/P + N \times 100$. P = sum of positive feelings; N = sum of negative feelings; Q = general positive quality. The higher, the more positive. To give you a sense of reference, my general well-being at this period in time (1987) scored 60.

⁶⁹A correlation (r) represents the extent of correspondence between the affective modality of two valuations, the profiles for any two rows in the affect matrix (for details: see Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995, 43).

personal and working life’. This name was affectively correlated with many aspects of my self-narrative, such as ‘relying on my intuition’, ‘true understanding as my working principle in life’. It also correlated with a sentence that could have been a dialogical self-statement: “I put on many coats, they all fit me well”. This name was the reason I wanted to do a Dialogical Self investigation later, when we were working on the article for the *American Psychologist*⁷⁰ on this topic. I was interested in getting more clarity about the impact on myself, from a personal and scientific perspective, as I felt this I-position had a positive influence on my life. I was curious how this worked (Fig. 2.5).

2.6.3 *Looking Back to My Earlier Self*

I make two observations here. The first one is that by means of the Self-Confrontation Method, you make an overview that is valuable as a ‘photo’, as a ‘still’ in time. A complete self-narrative, formulated in your own words and about topics that are relevant for you in a period of your life, is valuable as it gives you the opportunity to reflect (and look back) in a structured manner. The combination of words and feelings gives information you normally tend to filter out, as you are constantly moving in time.

The second observation is that the concept of dialogical self ‘comes to life’, once you make it part of your self-narrative. By bringing forward I-positions in the conversation with your partner in dialogue, it becomes an integrated part of the self-narrated story and can be connected with other parts of your self-narrative. There has to be a secure and safe basis of trust to bring your most private thoughts to the table. Your partner in conversation has to develop an intuition to hear I-positions in the narratives people tell. By asking a more specifying question about an—mostly unconsciously given—hint, you create the opportunity to share new information. By telling, by being listened to and thinking about questions, the first step in the process of relationally co-constructing meaning is made.

2.7 Questions for Further Reflection

- Describe your ‘self’ in terms of I-positions, using the two circle model.
- Firstly do this exercise for yourself: what are the most important I-positions for you? You can read the examples given in the text as a source of inspiration, but remember that you can find these by yourself. Take the time and be patient.

⁷⁰Hermans et al. 1992.

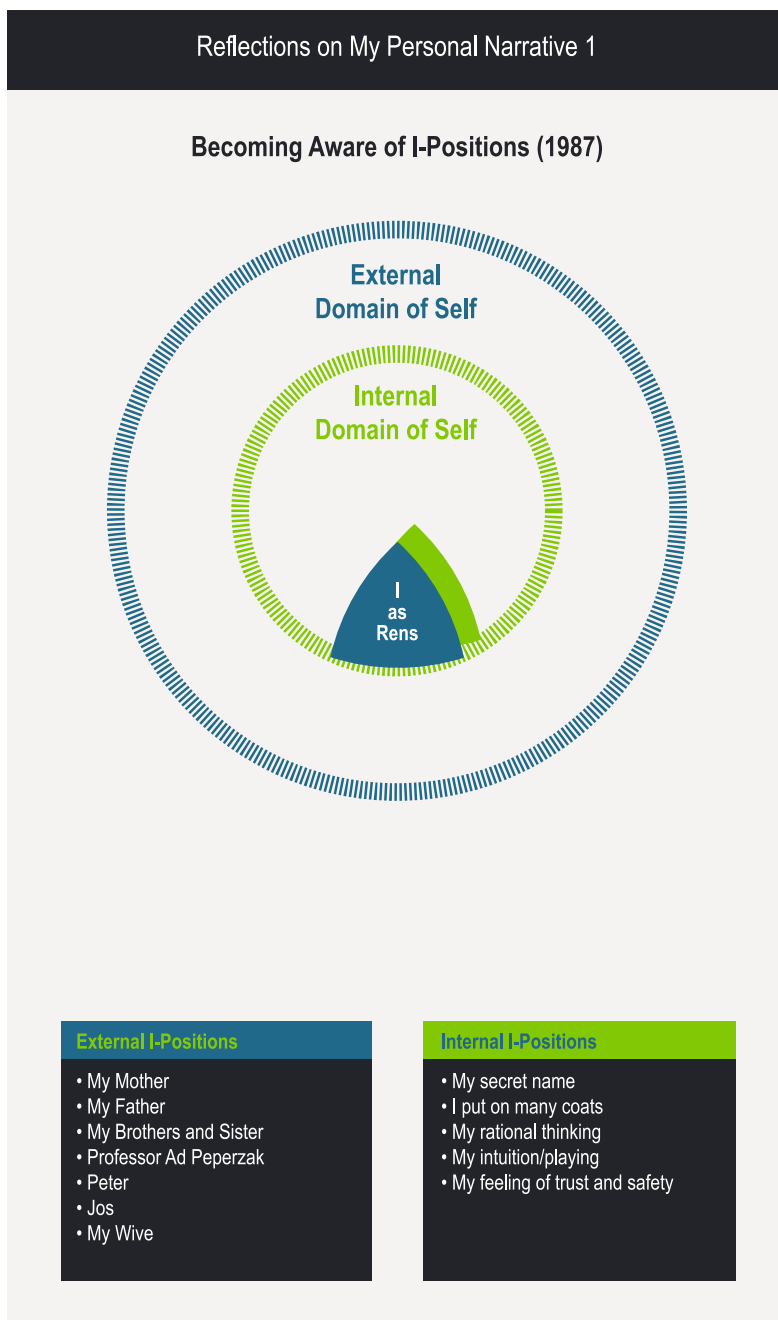


Fig. 2.5 Reflections on my personal narrative 1

- Secondly, have a conversation with a friend, do the same; help your friend to formulate his/her I-positions.
- Thirdly, have a similar conversation with a colleague in the workplace. Pay attention, in particular to I-positions in the workplace that are potentially conflicting and/or complementary.

Compare the outcomes. Think about the influence of your partner in conversation, while looking for personal aspects of yourself.

- Describe moments where you were able to ‘create free energy’ and intentionally changed a facet of your private/work life.
 - Did you reach something because you really did your utmost best, you used your will-power? What was/is the role of concentrated energy?
 - Did you reach something because it came naturally, without visible effort, it happened spontaneously? What was/is the role of deconcentrated energy?
 - Contemplate on how you keep these mechanisms active in your daily functioning, to concentrate, act as an arrow, and to deconcentrate, move in a field.

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